

The Importance of Mount Athos and Monastic Revival

Dr Graham Speake

Holy fathers, brothers and sisters in Christ,

I am deeply honoured to be invited to address you today. I have corresponded with your Abbot, Fr Paul, for ten years since he first joined the Friends of Mount Athos, but for most of that time he was in Peru and in fact we have only met today for the first time. And indeed this is my first visit to your monastery here in Hereford.

What I propose to do this morning is tell you something about Mount Athos – what it is and what is happening there at the moment – and then try to suggest some reasons why I think it matters and why it is important for us in the West.

I am going to talk about some recent developments in the monasteries which I find rather exciting. A major revival is taking place, and I will present you with evidence for it that is both statistical and circumstantial, the latter based on my own experience. I can try to tell you how the revival started, when it started, where it started, and how it is progressing. As to *why* it started, it is less easy to say, though *you* might have some thoughts on that and perhaps it is something that we might pursue in discussion later.

First I think we should remind ourselves of the basic facts about Athos. It is the principal centre of monasticism for all the Eastern Orthodox Churches, that is the group of churches that owe allegiance to Constantinople. It is a peninsula in northern Greece, in Macedonia to be precise, the most easterly of the three prongs of Chalkidiki, about 35 miles long and not more than 5 miles wide. It is in Greece, therefore; but it is not Greek. It belongs to the world of Orthodoxy. Like the Patriarch of Constantinople, within whose spiritual jurisdiction it falls, it is truly ‘ecumenical’.

There are today twenty so-called ‘ruling’ monasteries, the earliest of which were founded more than 1000 years ago. Of the twenty, seventeen are predominantly Greek; and there is one each for Russians, Serbs, and Bulgarians. They are called ‘ruling’ monasteries because each sends an elected representative to the parliament of Athos which meets twice a week in the town of Karyes and which governs the Mountain. There are also many other sorts of monastic establishment on the Mountain including sketes, cells, and hermitages, and two of the sketes are reserved for

Romanians. Every single establishment, from the largest skete to the humblest hermitage, belongs to one of the ruling monasteries.

The population of the Mountain has fluctuated a good deal over the centuries. At the start of the nineteenth century, for example, there were about 2000 monks, but there were only 925 in 1833 after the Greek War of Independence. When the British military surveyor William Martin Leake visited the Mountain in 1806, he described its inhabitants as consisting 'chiefly of men in the decline of life, who retire hither from motives of piety, or more commonly for the sake of securing the remainder of their days from the dangers of Turkish despotism'. It also depended on who was doing the counting. In the sixteenth century, for example, when the abbot of the Russian monastery made a survey, he came up with a total of 2831; but when the Ottoman authorities took a census for taxation purposes, the monks managed to reduce themselves to 1442.

Gerasimos Smyrnakis was abbot of the monastery of Esphigmenou and he published detailed figures for the population of the Mountain in 1902. I have photocopied them on the handout next to the map. He lists the ruling monasteries in the order of their seniority in the hierarchy, and in the first column he gives the numbers of monks actually resident in each monastery. The subsequent columns give the numbers of monks living in the dependencies as well as the monasteries and he breaks them down by nationality. The total population of the whole Mountain was then 7432 with Russians more numerous than Greeks. Numbers at Panteleimonos (which is the Russian monastery) then fell from 1928 (1902) to 651 (1926) to 125 (1951) to 22 (1972). After the Revolution of course it became impossible for monks to leave Russia, so the numbers on Athos gradually grew older and fewer. Now the situation in Russia has changed; but the Greeks have long memories and are anxious not to see a repeat of the 1902 situation, so only small numbers of other nationalities are admitted to the Mountain today.

On the other side of the sheet you will find some more recently published statistics for the numbers of monks, listed according to the same hierarchy. These figures include monks living in the sketes and cells as well as the monasteries. Megiste Lavra owns most of these dependent houses which is why its numbers are so much higher than those for the other monasteries. It is worth examining these figures in some detail because they in fact tell us a great deal about the revival.

If you look at the bottom line, you will see the total population of monks on the Mountain. The lowest point for the twentieth century occurred in 1971. Numbers of monks had been falling steadily since the turn of the century. People both on and off the Mountain had been growing very despondent about the future. The Greek government was seriously considering proposals to turn the whole place into a glorified Byzantine museum, to open it up for tourism, and even to convert the monasteries into casinos. In 1966 John Julius Norwich wrote: ‘Athos is dying—and dying fast... The disease is incurable. There is no hope.’

Then in 1972 the population actually rose—by one—from 1145 to 1146. Since then there has been a steady progression in most years, and there are now about 2000 monks on the Mountain. Not a vast increase, you will say. But let us look a bit more closely at some of the figures.

The figures for Megiste Lavra are complicated by the fact that it owns so many sketes. But if we look at Vatopedi, you will see a steady decline to 50 monks in 1990. This is one of the great monasteries, yet it was attracting fewer and fewer novices. In 1990 it took the decision to return to the cenobitic way of life. Since the late Middle Ages many of the monasteries, including the biggest and richest of them, had departed from the cenobitic rule, by which all property is held in common and monks contribute their wealth and the results of their work to the community, and had become idiorrhhythmic. Idiorrhhythmic houses allowed individual monks to retain their own wealth, to do as much or as little work as they pleased, to eat in their own quarters, often quite spacious apartments with their own servants, and to live very much according to their own rhythm. During the period of Ottoman rule this system had certain advantages and enabled the monasteries to recruit wealthy monks who might be able to protect the monasteries against oppression. In recent years however it has appealed less and less to prospective monks, and by the 1960s the idiorrhhythmic houses were receiving almost no novices. As the remaining monks grew older, they were faced with a dilemma: either to close, or to return to the cenobitic rule. All have now adopted the latter alternative. There is now not a single idiorrhhythmic monastery left on Athos.

The moment that Vatopedi took this decision in 1990, it received an influx of young monks, together with a new abbot and a new spiritual father, mostly from Cyprus. By 1992 they had risen to 75. They now number about 160, which is the

highest that they have been since the 1950s. I shall have more to say about Vatopedi later because it is the monastery that I know the best.

Iviron also turned cenobitic in 1990 and received an influx of monks, this time from another monastery on the Mountain. If you look down at Stavronikita, you will see that its numbers have been rising steadily since 1971. This was the first monastery to be revived. When John Julius Norwich went there in the 1960s he found 8 monks. The ‘new blood’ arrived in 1968. But if you look along the line to 1990 you will see a sudden drop in numbers from 40 to 28. That is because a group of monks from Stavronikita, including the abbot, moved a few miles down the coast to colonize the newly cenobitic Iviron.

Chilandar is the Serbian monastery and its numbers look quite healthy. But when I was there last May, I found that the number of monks in the monastery itself had fallen to 25 and that most of the 75 recorded in the table for 2000 in fact live outside the monastery. But that is a special case, seriously affected by the problems back home in Serbia and also by the devastating fire that destroyed half of the monastery’s buildings in March of last year. It is to be hoped that, when stability returns to the countries of former Yugoslavia, it will be reflected in a revival at this monastery.

Dionysiou received its injection of ‘new blood’ from within the Mountain in 1980. Likewise Koutloumousiou in 1982. Pantokrator, note, continued to fall to a low of 50 in 1992. That was the last surviving idiorrhythmic monastery, and in 1992 it took the decision to become cenobitic. Since then it has seen modest growth and its numbers now stand at 70.

Xeropotamou received its new blood in 1980—this too from another monastery on the Mountain. Philotheou had been one of the first to be revived—in 1973. But in 1980 you can see that its numbers fell from 81 to 63. That is because a splinter group went off to colonize the newly cenobitic monastery of Xeropotamou.

Zographou is a very sad story. This is the Bulgarian monastery. In 1902 Smyrnakis says it had 155 monks. In 1994 they were down to 8; though they have now risen to a slightly more viable total of 20. There seems to be little enthusiasm for the religious life in Bulgaria. Those few that would like to come to Athos are not made welcome by the Greek authorities.

Simonopetra also was revived in the 1970s. It jumped from 23 in 1972 to 59 in 1976. In 1973 a whole new brotherhood had arrived, including its abbot, Fr

Aimilianos. There is now such pressure on their rather limited accommodation that they have a waiting list and they have had to build a new wing to house the additional monks.

Finally, St Panteleimonos, the Russian monastery, has been rising very gradually. There has been no dramatic influx there; but at least the movement is in the right direction; and happily the trend continues. But the Greek government will ensure that the influx remains a trickle. During the 1990s two sketes that were formerly Russian houses were colonized by Greek monks, in both instances at the behest of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

So I think we can see a pattern emerging from these figures, at least in the Greek monasteries. Numbers fell steadily until a point was reached at which, in order to survive, in order to attract recruits, the old idiorhythmic monasteries were forced to change their ways. Some time between the late 1960s and early 1990s 'new blood' arrived, either from another monastery or from off the Mountain. The increase was not dramatic; but the trend has been maintained.

Another statistic I can give you which is not shown on this table is the average annual intake of new monks. In the five years from 1972 to 1976 143 new monks arrived, giving an average of 29 a year. In the decade from 1977 to 1986 284 new monks came, at the same average rate of 29 a year. But the decade from 1987 to 1996 saw the arrival of no fewer than 609 new monks, yielding an average of 61 a year. So it is clear that the influx has been more than sustained; and it has actually increased by more than 100 per cent in the last ten years or so.

Let us now turn to the circumstantial evidence which I can illustrate with my own slides. What is really far more important than the increase in numbers is the change in the way of life for most monks on the Mountain.

First some examples of the traditional picture of Athos.

1. A peaceful view of the east coast with the mountain itself catching the last rays of the setting sun. Views like this remain unchanged.
2. I wonder how many of you know that there was once a Benedictine monastery on Athos? This is all that remains of it today. But in the second half of the tenth century monks from Amalfi were drawn to the Mountain by the charismatic reputation of its spiritual fathers and in 985 they were given permission to found a monastery of their own, dedicated to the Mother of God. This was a house of

some substance, with estates in Macedonia and the right to keep a large ship enabling the monks to be in touch with their compatriots in Constantinople. It was ranked fifth in the hierarchy in the eleventh century and it endured for more than 300 years. The fact that it survived not only the exchange of anathemas in 1054 but also the Fourth Crusade and the Latin Empire of 1204-1261 is a tribute to the truly ecumenical nature of Athonite monasticism at the time. It was eventually absorbed by the Great Lavra in 1287, but its tall lonely tower still stands as a forlorn reminder of this once great Latin monastery.

3. An icon of the Mountain under the protection of the Mother of God. This icon is a great favourite with the monks as it shows the Virgin dressed as an abbess, symbolizing her role on Athos.
4. A fishing boat setting out—traditionally monks have been drawn mostly from a peasant background, so skills like fishing, farming, and forestry were second nature to them. The new breed of Athonite monk is very different. Most are young men from an urban background and are highly educated, many being university graduates. They no longer have the skills of the peasant, so things like fishing, as here, have to be done by lay workers.
5. This farming monk was at Pantokrator before it was revived in 1992.
6. He was very good with the pigs; but you won't see sights like this on the Mountain today. Cenobitic monasteries do not permit the eating of meat on any occasion. This is now a historic photo.
7. A traditional mule track. A network of such tracks, many of them centuries old and well made with a stone base, criss-crosses the Mountain. They are a delight to walk; but sadly many have either become very overgrown or have been destroyed altogether to make way for new roads. At the instigation of HRH the Prince of Wales the Friends of Mount Athos embarked on a new project five years ago to restore what remains of these footpaths as well as any associated wayside shrines and fountains. Every year the Prince himself gives up a whole day to be with the team and work alongside them at clearing a path. The project will continue for the foreseeable future.
8. Here is a traditional mule train passing the entrance to Vatopedi. But notice the monster behind it. HGVs are now much commoner than mules and many roads have been built for them. The reason is that the revival is underfunded. In order to pay for the new facilities required by the expanding population, the monasteries

are having to exploit their forests. There has been a timber industry on the Mountain since the start of last century and I believe it supplies the telegraph poles for most of Greece. But conservationists are worried that the forests are now being cut too drastically. The Duke of Edinburgh has taken a personal interest in this, and the World Wide Fund for Nature, of which he is international president, has instituted a programme of land conservation at several of the monasteries.

9. Meanwhile increased vehicular transport brings with it its own nasty forms of pollution.
10. And builders are not always the most careful people when it comes to the disposal of waste. The answer at Xeropotamou is to tip it down the hillside immediately below the monastery.
11. The renewal exacts its price on the seclusion of the Mountain. The silence, the stillness, which has moved so many visitors to Athos, is now disturbed by chain saws, pneumatic drills, and helicopters.
12. This is downtown Karyes, capital of Athos, population about 300. The flags are flying in honour of the visit of the late Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I in 1990.
13. And here is His All-Holiness emerging from the great church of the Protaton. He came partly to set his seal of approval on the revival that was by then in full swing.
14. But this is where the revival began—the southern tip of the peninsula, the most inhospitable environment of all, the so-called desert of Athos.
15. You would not imagine that men could exist in situations like this.
16. But they do. This is where it started—in cells and hermitages like this, not in the monasteries.
17. Here in the 1960s at New Skete a number of gifted teachers and holy men took up residence, where many had been before for centuries, and they began gathering around them groups of disciples. While the monasteries were in some cases near to closing for lack of novices, it was places like this that were bursting with new life and new vocations. But one should be careful when using the word ‘new’ because really there was nothing new about it. It is the way the Mountain has always regenerated itself.
18. Here, for example, is the cell where the great Russian *staretz* Fr Sophrony lived on Athos during the Second World War. He is perhaps best remembered for having founded the monastery of St John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights in Essex

which is by far the most dynamic centre of Orthodox spirituality in Britain today. The cell was ruinous when I took this picture in 1998, but I have recently heard that it has now been restored and is no doubt once again serving as a hermit's refuge.

19. Stavronikita was the first monastery to be revived. As I said, when John Julius Norwich was here in the 1960s, he found only 8 monks, living a miserable existence according to the idiorrhythmic system. Rather than close down, they chose to revert to the cenobitic rule—the first to do so in recent years. And they invited Fr Vasileios, a hermit from the desert, to come in to the monastery as its abbot and to bring with him his group of disciples. Vasileios had studied in Western Europe, and was aware of the more liberal understanding of the monastic vocation that had grown up recently in the Roman tradition. He is the author of many books, perhaps the best known being a study of liturgy and life in the Orthodox Church called *Hymn of Entry*. In his Foreword to the English edition Bishop Kallistos has written that it ‘offers nothing less than a fresh vision of theology, the Church and the world—a vision that is both original and yet genuinely traditional’. ‘Both original and genuinely traditional’ are words that one might apply to the monastic revival itself. As a result of Vasileios’s influence the brotherhood at Stavronikita is more intellectual than most.
20. But careful attention has also been given to the restoration of the buildings.
21. The refectory is in use again where there are fine frescos such as this Feeding of the Five Thousand by Theophanes the Cretan.
22. Comfortable quarters have been provided for visitors, and it is a delightful place to stay.
23. Meanwhile the ambitious Fr Vasileios has moved on to another monastery—Iviron—taking with him a group from Stavronikita and injecting new blood into this much grander establishment.
24. Iviron has large buildings, such as the refectory shown here. But they were horribly run down before; and there was certainly a need for the new kitchen which is here being constructed.
25. Not Athos at all, but Meteora in Thessaly! Cenobitic monasteries had flourished here since the fourteenth century. But like other parts of mainland Greece they were unprotected from the scourge of tourism. In 1973 the monks could bear it no

longer. To a man, they packed their bags and decamped to Athos, together with their spiritual father, the charismatic Fr Aimilianos.

26. This is where they came to—Simonopetra—a monastery which some have said bears comparison with the remarkable physical setting of the monks' previous abode.
27. Notice the scaffolding. The house is now full and they are building a new wing to accommodate more monks. Spiritually this is the most dynamic community on the Mountain today. It is also one of the most cosmopolitan with monks from Western Europe, North America, and Australia.
28. Every possible surface has been terraced for growing crops.
29. This is a coffee break during the preparation of the Easter feast. The monks are very welcoming and open to visitors of all ages.
30. This is Karakalou, where a stricter rule prevails. The revival takes different forms in different houses. Here, for example, the non-Orthodox are not normally allowed into the body of the church during services, and in the refectory they are made to wait until the monks have finished eating. Some pilgrims are deeply offended by such rules. But it is the monks' way of demonstrating how special Orthodoxy is to them. And in every other respect they are as welcoming a community as you will find on Athos.
31. This is Dochiariou where a smaller community have worked phenomenally hard and have undertaken nearly all the restoration work themselves.
32. The date 1987 proclaims the completion of work on this wing. The abbot here is known to be a real slave-driver. A few years ago a group of monks rebelled against his rule and, flouting their vow of obedience, left the monastery. It is not a very happy story.

Now let us look at some of the non-Greek houses.

33. St Panteleimonos, the Russian monastery—an enormous complex of buildings, many of them deserted. This is the monastery in which at the turn of the last century there were 2000 monks. Now there are about 50.
34. Whole acres within the monastery have a desolate air about them. But at least the numbers are increasing slowly; they seem to have found a number of wealthy Russian benefactors; and the paint pot and the concrete mixer are much in evidence (though whether there is a matching spiritual revival there is another

question). In fact this monastery is now playing an important role in the regeneration of monasticism within Russia itself. Since the end of the Soviet era monasteries are being revived at such a rate that there is insufficient expertise to support them. Monks are therefore coming to St Panteleimonos for short periods to undergo a crash course in how to live the religious life and then returning to Russia to disseminate the knowledge they have gained.

35. The Romanian skete of Prodromou, St John the Baptist. Here a community of fewer than 20 monks have transformed the buildings and created an impressive example of Athonite revival in very difficult circumstances. Attempts have regularly been made to convert this skete into a monastery; but the request has always been refused on the grounds that the number of ruling monasteries may not be increased beyond 20.
36. And this is the other Romanian skete, Lakkou, which lies at the head of a beautiful verdant valley overshadowed by the towering peak of Athos itself.
37. Here a group of twenty Romanian monks, led by their prior, Fr Stefan, have worked wonders in bringing new life back to decaying buildings. There are now about 100 Romanians on Athos and they form the largest of the ethnic minorities.
38. Chilandar, the Serbian monastery. Its numbers have fallen recently, but it is to be hoped that they will rise again when the situation in Serbia is stabilized. It is a large monastery with many acres under cultivation. This is what its courtyard looked like in 1994.
39. Today it looks like this. In a single night in March of last year more than half the monastery burnt down in a fire that started by accident. Mercifully none of the fathers was hurt and they have now embarked on the daunting task of rebuilding. Current estimates are that it will cost 20 million euros and take at least ten years to complete.
40. Its church is one of the most beautiful on Athos. It stands alone in the middle of the courtyard and thankfully it was untouched by the fire. The monastery possesses a fine collection of treasures, including some magnificent icons.
41. Saddest of all is the Bulgarian monastery of Zographou, surrounded by a gloomy forest which seems to threaten to overwhelm it. Its buildings are vast and neglected.
42. Revival here seemed a distant prospect until recently. But they have just elected a vigorous young abbot of whom much is expected.

43. The skete of the Prophet Elijah, a Russian house until 1992 when its entire brotherhood was expelled in a disgraceful display of force by the Greek police. The pretext for this episode was that the monks were zealots—which means that they regarded the Ecumenical Patriarch as a traitor to Orthodoxy for his meetings with Anglican and Roman Catholic divines, and they refused to commemorate him in their services. The house has now been colonized by Greek monks who toe the patriarchal line.
44. But the zealot monastery of Esphigmenou, which is Greek, is enjoying revival along with all the other Greek houses. The brotherhood living inside the monastery is in fact the largest of any on Athos. You will not hear them commemorating the name of Bartholomew either. Here you see their famous banner proclaiming ‘Orthodoxy or Death!’ Three years ago the Ecumenical Patriarch took action against them and ordered them to leave. They appealed to the Council of State, the highest administrative court in Greece, and just ten days ago the court found against the monks. Their future is now uncertain.
45. This is another skete that was once a Russian house, St Andrew’s at Karyes, known as the Serai for the size and grandeur of its buildings.
46. Parts of it are untouched since the last of the Russians died in the 1970s, such as the charnel house...
47. and the apothecary’s shop.
48. But the Patriarchate was afraid that ‘new blood’ from Russia would soon arrive to reclaim it and so the parent monastery, which happens to be Vatopedi, was ordered to colonize the buildings with Greek monks. Greek monks were duly found in the shape of a team of expert conservators; and the crypt of the church became a state-of-the-art workshop for the conservation of icons and other treasures.
49. Finally Vatopedi. This is the monastery that I know the best, so I thought I should spend a little more time on it and place it last. It is one of the oldest, one of the biggest, and traditionally one of the wealthiest of all the monasteries on Athos. Its situation is most attractive being beside the sea in a sheltered bay. It is surrounded by its own dense forest; but it has a large area for cultivation which is now irrigated by a man-made lake which you can see here in the foreground.
50. The abbot, Archimandrite Ephraim, is from Cyprus, as are most of the monks. He is relatively young, still in his 40s, and he radiates warmth which endears him to

monks and visitors alike. Here he is holding a reliquary containing the girdle of the Virgin Mary which is the holiest relic that the monastery possesses. This photograph was taken in October 1997 when the abbot was about to take the girdle to Thrace for the faithful to venerate.

51. Here is the abbot again, this time performing a most important function. He is tonsuring a new monk. The occasion was the vigil for the Nativity several years ago. Half-way through the vigil two new monks were tonsured, that is to say they ceased to be novices and became fully professed monks, a rite of passage symbolized by the cutting of a lock of hair from the head. At this moment they received new names which were pronounced for the first time by Fr Joseph on the left of the picture. Fr Joseph is the principal spiritual father of the monastery. The new monk is Fr Justin. Like several members of the brotherhood at Vatopedi he comes from France.
52. Fr Joseph has played a pivotal role in the revival at Vatopedi. He was another of these hermits, one of a large group of disciples of the famous Fr Joseph the Hesychast (whose biography he has written) who lived together at New Skete and who between them have been responsible for the current revival now taking place at many of the Greek monasteries on Athos.
53. He is now an old man, over 80 years old, and he lives in seclusion in a house that has been specially built for him outside the walls of the monastery. The house, like the revival, could be described as 'both original and genuinely traditional'. The monks describe his way of life not as secluded but as 'hesychastic'. Hesychasm derives from *hesychia* which means stillness or tranquillity and has been a feature of eastern monasticism from its first beginnings. It is particularly associated with the theology of the fourteenth-century mystic St Gregory Palamas and it is central to the monastic revival taking place today. One of its most conspicuous elements is the recitation of the Jesus Prayer on which subject I see that my friend Fr Silouan was speaking to you only yesterday. Monks like to do their tasks together; but they will not usually converse while doing them. I remember shelling broad beans, for example, for at least an hour in a large group. Not a word was spoken, because they were all saying the Jesus Prayer as they worked.
54. While we are still at Fr Joseph's house I will show you a photograph of my closest friend on the Holy Mountain. This is Fr Isidore, and I will tell you something

about him because I suppose he may be regarded as a typical example of the new breed of Athonite monk. Like most of the monks at Vatopedi he is from Cyprus. His father is a vet in Limassol and the family is quite well-to-do. Isidore, whose secular name was Herodotus, has a degree in economics from an American university and was once a seriously promising tennis player. He is in his forties and has been at Vatopedi for fifteen years.

55. Some years ago he became a great schema monk and here he wears the regalia of the schema. It means that he has taken final vows and will spend the rest of his life as a monk of Vatopedi. This does not mean that he is forbidden to leave the Mountain. He gave a talk at the AGM of the Friends of Mount Athos in Oxford in 1996 and we saw him in London again in 1998 together with the abbot.
56. Vatopedi is a large monastery...
57. more like a small medieval town surrounded by walls.
58. The main church or Katholikon dates from the time of the foundation in the late tenth century.
59. It contains a magnificent programme of frescos that date from the early fourteenth century.
60. In addition there are nineteen other churches or chapels within the walls of the monastery.
61. The refectory was originally built in the fourteenth century; but the massive marble tables are older and were said to be second-hand at the time of the foundation. The food and wine are I think among the best on Athos.
62. Vatopedi has more than 2000 icons. They use them all, but not all at once; so they have built an icon museum to house those that are not in use.
63. The library contains some great treasures. There are nearly 2000 manuscripts, most of them liturgical, some of them beautifully illuminated. This is a page from an illuminated gospel which is dated 948, which means that it is older than the monastery.
64. It is amazing how much has been achieved in the last fifteen years or so. A new vineyard has been planted and the monastery is almost self-sufficient in wine.
65. It is already self-sufficient in vegetables and olives.
66. Powerful new generators have been installed in what used to be the stables.

67. But happily they are still using these splendid wood-burning stoves which were made in Russia in the nineteenth century and are a very effective method of heating as well as being a handsome feature of most rooms.
68. I hope I have given the impression that Vatopedi is a monastery where things are happening. The brotherhood is first and foremost devoted to the cenobitic way of life and extremely serious in the way they practise it. At the same time they are dynamic, energetic, and determined to restore the monastery to its former glory. Thanks to the presence of inspiring spiritual fathers it is attracting a steady flow of recruits, from all over the world. They currently have thirteen novices.
69. Large numbers of visitors are received and made to feel welcome regardless of whether they are Orthodox. Occasions like this, where pilgrims participate fully in the activities of the monks, are everyday occurrences. But make no mistake about it. The renewal is genuinely traditional. It is just like being back in Byzantium!

So what is important about what is happening on Mount Athos and why does it matter to us? Athos is a great place for tradition and I have emphasized the traditional nature of the current revival. The visitor to Athos today will encounter an atmosphere bursting with dynamism and creative energy in all spheres – spiritual, intellectual, and material – but this creativity is taking place in a context that has scarcely changed for a thousand years. What I think is important about this is that with God’s guidance you can experience genuine renewal without shaking the foundations or moving the goalposts. In fact I would suggest that it is the traditions that are the basis for the renewal and that without them it would not be taking place at all. I would single out four traditions in particular that I think deserve attention.

First there is a liturgical tradition. Much has been written on this topic, but I particularly commend to you the writings of Fr Aimilianos. ‘Athonite monasticism’, he writes, ‘is an endless *synaxis* – an assembly – a gathering in one place, a life in which human individuals are respected and develop as “individual members” of the one Body of Christ, a communion enjoyed in love and service, in meditation and prayer, in ceaseless joyful confession of thoughts, in common participation in worship. All this gives rest to man and elevates him above the world by real and inner obedience to the spiritual father.’ Monks have been doing what they do on Athos for more than a thousand years. We are privileged to be invited to join them. It behoves us to respect that tradition and to derive whatever we can of value from it. If we take

the trouble to listen, it will speak to us. The great Serbian theologian, Fr Justin Popovic, used to say that the essence of Christianity is monasticism and where there is a regeneration of monasticism, there will be a regeneration for the whole body of the Church. Well there is certainly a regeneration of monasticism on Mount Athos. Whether it will ever embrace another Latin-rite brotherhood is hard to say; but if it has done so once, why should it not do so again?

Secondly, and highly relevant to this last question, we find a cultural tradition. From its earliest beginnings Athos has been home to spiritual traditions of all the Eastern Orthodox Churches. As I said, it is in Greece, but it is not Greek. Like the Patriarchate in Constantinople, it is truly ecumenical and belongs to the world of Orthodoxy. Look, for example, at St Panteleimonos, the Russian monastery. Its very size is eloquent of the strength of Athonite pan-Orthodoxy. As Abbot George of Gregoriou has written, ‘All Athonites are united by their common Orthodox faith, which prevails over any national differences or occasional conflicts. All Orthodox peoples regard Mount Athos as their own, as they consider the Holy Land their own too... On Mount Athos we find an exalted form of society of men, with a great variety of distinct endowments, characters, ages, levels of education, social background, and national differences. Both within a single coenobium and throughout the Athonite state, diversity and unity are wonderfully combined.’

Thirdly we find an ecological tradition, a natural environment of incomparable beauty – densely forested slopes, a profusion of wildflowers, the majesty of the mountain itself. The sheer variety of the Athonite landscape never ceases to amaze me. And together with the landscape I associate the silence of Athos. Despite the helicopters and chainsaws, and the building works that are in progress in nearly every monastery, there is still a unique silence on Athos. Many people have been struck by the quality of Athonite silence. No one has written more movingly and more persuasively about it than the late Gerald Palmer, a British convert to Orthodoxy who loved the Holy Mountain. ‘This stillness,’ he wrote, ‘this silence, is far more than a mere absence of sound. It has a positive quality, a quality of fullness, of plenitude, of the eternal Peace which is there reflected in the Veil of the Mother of God, enshrouding and protecting her Holy Mountain, offering inner silence, peace of heart, to those who dwell there and to those who come with openness of heart to seek this blessing.’ Such natural beauty and such silence are, I suggest, uniquely conducive to prayer.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, we find a spiritual tradition: holy men possessed of real wisdom, not necessarily intellectual giants – many of them, like the Elder Joseph of Vatopedi, are simple men of little formal education – but renowned for their gifts as teachers, their qualities as spiritual fathers and confessors. These are the men who have acted as magnets and attracted younger men to follow their example and pursue the angelic life. As Bishop Kallistos has written, ‘There are in a sense two forms of apostolic succession within the life of the Church. First there is the visible succession of the hierarchy, the unbroken series of bishops in different cities... Alongside this, largely hidden, existing on a “charismatic” rather than an official level, there is secondly the apostolic succession of the spiritual fathers and mothers in each generation of the Church – the succession of the saints.’ This is the succession of the Athonites, the ‘golden chain’ of the saints that stretches back unbroken to St Athanasius the Athonite, to St Antony, and, before him, to Pentecost and Christ Jesus Himself. This is the way in which the Mountain has always renewed itself and happily it is doing so again now with results in which we can all rejoice and participate.

These, it seems to me, are the principal traditions at work on the Holy Mountain. They are all there for the taking; thanks to the current revival they are all in reasonably good shape; and it is up to us to make what use we can of them. I suggest that it is the combination of these traditions, speaking to each of us in varying proportions, that merits our attention, perhaps not least because for those of us who are laymen in the world they are all of them conspicuous by their absence in our own lives. As Abbot Ephraim of Vatopedi has written, ‘Athonite monasticism is both a signpost to Heaven and a bridge over which pass true spiritual provisions for the world.’ These are the ideals for which Athos stands, the fruits that it invites us to taste, the reasons for its very existence. When we come to realize that they are there for us, for you and me to take advantage of, then we have begun to understand something about Athos and something about ourselves.