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Life and Architecture on Mount Athos*

AIDAN HART

Be peaceful within yourself, and heaven and earth will be at peace with you. Be diligent to enter into the treasury that is within you, and you will see the treasury of Heaven: for these are one and the same, and with one entry you will behold them both. The ladder of the Kingdom is within you, hidden in your soul. Plunge deeply within yourself, away from sin, and there you will find steps by which you will be able to ascend.

SAINT ISAAC THE SYRIAN¹

Mount Athos is like a mine, where monks and pilgrims are descending deep within themselves to find the priceless treasure of which St Isaac speaks. The visible treasures of Athos are reliquaries which bear these spiritual jewels. The buildings, the icons, the chanting, the fragrances carry within themselves the divine life which has been mined with much sweat and labour from the caverns of people's hearts.

In this talk I want to describe in outline what this spiritual treasure is, the main tools used to dig it out, and the way the architecture corresponds to these spiritual riches. I am not really qualified to talk about these things since I am not an Athonite monk. But during a total of about two years living there I have come to know some Athonite monks, and it is this which gives me the temerity to say a few words about our subject.

But before we begin on our subject proper, let me briefly describe the outward aspects of the Athonite republic.

Athos is the easternmost of the three peninsulas of Chalkidiki, in south-east Greece. It is some thirty-seven miles long, and varies between five and seven miles wide. At its tip rises the holy mountain of Athos itself, six thousand feet high. Monks have lived on the peninsula from at least

* Adapted from a talk given 11 March 1997 at the Temenos Academy, London. It was one of a series of three on the theme of holy mountains.

1. Homily Two, translated by The Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, 1984.

the seventh century, but its present communal form is dated from the time of St Athanasius the Athonite, a thousand years ago. 2,600 monks dwell there at present, a number which has been increasing since the 1970s when there were only 1,000, most of them elderly. It is a monastic republic, in fact the only republic in the world where all its citizens are citizens by choice rather than by birth.

All three types of Orthodox monastic life exist on Athos. Firstly there are the coenobia where everything is held in common, under an abbot. There are twenty such monasteries. Each is independent, although decisions which affect all the Mountain are made by representatives in the capital of Karyes. Secondly there are the sketes. Most of these are like villages of houses or huts called kalyvia (the Romanian and the Russian sketes are designed like monasteries). Each such kalyve has its own chapel where the resident monks hold their daily cycle of services. On feast days all the monks of the skete gather for services at a central church called the kyriakon. There are twelve sketes on Athos. Thirdly, there are individual cells where hermits live. These are of varying types, ranging from houses to caves.

At the monasteries an average day runs approximately as follows: 2.00–3.00 a.m. prayer in the cells; 3.00–6.00 a.m. services, ending with the Holy Liturgy; rest or work until a meal at about 10.00; work; services from 4.00–5.30 p.m. followed by a meal if it is not a fast day; 7.00 Compline, after which the monks retire to their cells. Numerous times in the year there are all-night vigils, which are from six to twelve hours or more long.

THE HIDDEN TREASURE

So much for the observable aspects of life on Athos, for its body. But what of its soul? What lies at the heart of this life?

The monk's aim is to be united with Christ. This aim he shares with all devout Orthodox Christians. And surely union with God is the aim also of all the great spiritual traditions.

The monk knows that at his baptism and anointing with the oil of holy chrism he received the Holy Spirit. He is therefore already a God-bearer, a Spirit-bearer. The inner chamber of his being, his spiritual heart or inner sanctuary became at baptism a Paradise because it received the Tree of Life. He is a holy mountain with a hidden treasure.

But the monk-to-be also realizes that by the insanity of his egocentric

life he has not yet entered into this inheritance; he has not yet become what he is. He is in danger of dying before he knows what he is. He hides this light, and he does not let it shine through all his physical and spiritual faculties. He realizes that he remains outside the gates of this Paradise which is within himself. Indeed, he knows that even if it were possible to force himself into Eden he could not, in his dissolute state, withstand its intense glory.

The beginning of a person's monastic life is when, like the prodigal son, he 'comes to himself', comes to his senses. He remembers the Life which he received at his personal Pentecost, his chrismation, and decides to journey back. But this remembrance is not only of his chrismation – it is also of Paradise. He was in the loins of Adam and Eve in Eden, and so the human nature which he shares with them has a memory of Edenic bliss stored deep within itself. When God in His mercy grants him a glimpse of the divine and fragrant light which fills Paradise he feels both astounded and at home. This shaft of light might come to him through the compunctionate beauty of a church service, through meeting a saint, a visit to a monastery, a work of art – whichever way God uses. Having been granted this glimpse of the glory the ascetic is willing to undergo any hardship so that he may have this glory as his permanent state.

For the monk the field within which the treasure of the Holy Spirit is hidden is the monastic life. For the lay person the field is his or her service and prayer in the world. Each has his own field, but the treasure is one. For the monastic the purchase price for this field is the ascetic life of obedience, poverty and chastity. The treasure for a non-monastic is identical – it is only the field and the currency of the purchase price which differ.

When we speak of a price, it is not of course that we make an exchange with God and earn the treasure, that we can demand it as our right because we have paid the sum. The image of commercial transaction is only an image. It might be nearer the truth to say that the ascetic life is really a matter of getting out of the way, of letting go. The struggle is to convince us that what is mortal must be treated as such and not as though it were immortal and self-sufficient.

The monk wears black because he is mourning for his lost homeland. It reminds him that for all the joys of this present life only the glory of God's presence will satisfy him. Black is the absence of light. The monastic habit is therefore an earnest waiting, a continual prayer

to be clothed with that uncreated light of glory with which Christ shone on the mount of Transfiguration. A hymn for the Feast of Transfiguration says:

[Christ] was transfigured today upon Mount Tabor before the disciples; and in His own person He showed them the nature of man, arrayed in the original beauty of the Image.

(GREAT VESPERS)

This original beauty is our human nature transfigured, refulgent with light. The book of Genesis says that after Adam and Eve sinned they saw that they were naked. This means, according to many Orthodox commentators, that they had lost the garments of light which they had previously worn before their fall. They had become merely human, no longer clothed upon with divinity.

By following Christ's ascent to Golgotha, that other Holy Mountain, the monk seeks to regain this raiment of light, the light of Tabor. He can only have life through death, Tabor through Golgotha. 'Give God your blood and sweat and He will give you His Spirit' is a saying often used on Athos. 'God became man so that man might become God by grace' said St Athanasios the Great. The fourteenth-century St Nicholas Cabasilas wrote:

The human soul is hungry for the infinite. The eye was created for light and the ear for sounds. All things have their reason for being, and the soul's desire is to launch itself towards Christ.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Such is the *aim* of the monk's life: to receive God, to be united to Him. What is the *means* he uses to purchase this field and dig out the treasure? It is trust in God particularly expressed through the ascetic life. But before considering details of this life it is helpful to know the ascetic Fathers' teaching on what we might call the spiritual anatomy of the human person. It might also be called the architecture of the human person. This human architecture not only determines the monk's ascetic struggles but also informs church architecture. This is because the archetypal temple is the human person, the temple of flesh and blood wherein God dwells. Indeed, whatever architecture a culture

creates images that culture's view of the human person; it is an icon of its spiritual state, be it healthy or unhealthy.

The whole ascetic tradition of monasticism aims to restore the pristine unity of the various human faculties. This constitutes a rebuilding of the human temple after God's revealed pattern. It is then ready to receive the glory of God, just as Solomon's temple received this glory when it was completed.

In the fallen person the various faculties war against one another, war against the material world, war against other people, and war against God. Holiness is simply a return to wholeness. As we shall see in more detail below, Orthodox church architecture and the whole arrangement of an Athonite monastery reflects a life which aims to be wholly dedicated to the love of God and love of humankind. We are made in the image of God, we are living icons, and so wholeness comes from growing in likeness to our divine archetype.

The human person is a union of body, soul and spirit, just as a church is a union of narthex, nave and sanctuary. The heart is the faculty which unites these three aspects, and corresponds to the altar (the Holy Table) in church architecture. Through this living altar God can dwell in the whole person. It is through the heart, or more specifically, through the eye of the heart, that we can know God, people and things directly, in an unmediated way. This all important 'seeing' faculty, virtually forgotten in our secular age, is called the spiritual intellect, or *nous* in Greek.

In distinction to the nous, the rational faculty of the soul or power of reason (*dianoia* in Greek) can only know *about* God, people and things. It functions by managing information. It analyses phenomena by compartmentalizing them and finding a unity in mathematical and logical patterns. Its God-given role is to formulate concepts or draw conclusions from information which it receives either through the bodily senses or from the nous. The power of reason has an important role, but nevertheless one subsidiary to the higher faculty of the spiritual intellect. As Philip Sherrard has so passionately asserted in his later books, one cause of the cultural and spiritual poverty which afflicts our secular society is the tyranny of this rational faculty over the spiritual intellect. Reason cannot comprehend anything outside logic; it was not created for this. If we enthrone it in place of the intellect it leads us into pride, so that we see the world only as an extension of our ego. Rationalism cannot transcend itself and so its rule creates an anthropocentric culture and architecture.

Anthropocentric cultures define beauty initially as order, measure, mathematical unity. But the human spirit eventually grows restless in this tidy prison. And so it tries to break out, first through the exercise of intense emotion, as in Romanticism, and ultimately through the anarchy of individualism, as in modernism. In this last phase secular art attempts to go outside itself through novelty, through 'the shock of the new' as the critic Robert Hughes calls it. But such individualism merely fragments its culture, leading it away from the very relationship with the Divine which alone will truly take man out of himself, or rather, will return him to his true self which is hidden in God.

A natural, inspiring architectural unity can therefore only be born from an architect's *experience* of unity, and this experience comes through the *nous* rather than autonomous reason. Reason's role for the builder is to implement this unity in architectural form, but it cannot itself experience the cosmic unity to be found in God.

In a properly functioning person – that is, in the saint – all the faculties mentioned above are united in the contemplation of God and love for His creation. For the saint nothing is dead, inanimate, meaningless, merely a thing, because with his or her heart he or she sees the names of God written on each of His creations, from stone to angel.

The nature of this contemplation of God in created things has been explained in detail in books such as the *Philokalia*. The writers teach that each thing is created and sustained by God the Word with a unique word or *logos* spoken by Him. The saint perceives these *logoi* within the universe like notes in a symphony of love written by the Divine Lover. These *logoi* are words of a poem written by the Spirit, declaring profound mysteries. With his bodily senses the saint sees the outer form of each logos – its crystallization in matter as it were – and with the eye of his heart he perceives the logos within it. The heart's eye is the eye of love longing to see her Beloved.

The seer might then be led to express this vision of God through his reasoning faculty and glorify Him in some material manifestation, such as through composing or singing a hymn, through spoken counsel, through writing, or of course through architecture. Herein lies the function of reason: it finds ways of expressing the vision of the *nous* through cultural means. In fact, the very word culture derives from the Latin *colere*, meaning not only to till but also to worship. The traditional meaning of culture is therefore the expression of worship through a sacramental cultivation or tilling of the material world. Put

in theological terms, authentic culture is the transfiguration of the cosmos.

It is clear from all this that inanimate matter's role is mediatory: God reveals Himself to humankind through matter, and humankind, when functioning properly, makes inanimate creation articulate in praise of the Creator. A stone church, and indeed any beautiful stone building, is stone praising its Creator.

Because creation was ordained to be taken beyond being merely created, Orthodox tradition says that we must release our grasp not only of the bad but even of the good – the beauty of the world and even our very own createdness. This is why the ascetics love wildernesses, why God appeared to Moses on Sinai, why the naked rock of Mount Athos draws the Athonite monk. The very word monk means 'one who is alone'. Only after the good has been released and returned to the Good can created things be transfigured and be made very good.

This is why icons of the Transfiguration show Mount Tabor to be barren. The beauties of the world like footprints have led the disciples to Beauty Himself. There on Tabor's summit the world is seen not as something lying upon the earth, but as Christ's garment, shining with His light. We and the whole cosmos are jewels whose true glory and unique colour are revealed only when permeated by the light of Christ. To use Gerard Manley Hopkins's term, our particular 'instress', our name, is revealed in this light.

As we shall see below, this theology of light, this union without confusion of God and man is central to traditional church architecture; churches' marriage of light and matter is an icon of the Creator's marriage with His creation.

But the experience of the saints sadly is not shared by most of us. Although the believer has the Spirit of God dwelling in his innermost chamber, the confusion that reigns in the other chambers of his mansion – the various faculties as described above – keeps the Spirit from filling his entire dwelling with divine fragrance and light. By ignorance and negligence I keep the light locked in the innermost chamber. Faith and the ascetic life are the means of returning order to this ramshackle mansion, so that the King of Glory can come out of his inner chamber and fill all its rooms and beautify it with love, joy and peace. And this ascetic life is a constant struggle, a war which ceases only at the grave.

THE ASCETIC LIFE

What then are the main methods used in the monk's ascetic struggle? The ladder of divine ascent, as this endeavour is sometimes called, is undertaken in stages – or rather, as it progresses there are different emphases. The first and the last means used is obedience, since the root of disorder is the will or volitional faculty turning away from God. Repentance means in the Greek a change of mind or *nous*, a change in how we see things. The will is the rudder for this change.

Perhaps surprisingly to us, monastics place obedience even before prayer. In a conversation Father George, the abbot of Gregoriou Monastery, repeatedly emphasized to me this need to put obedience before all else. 'Prayer and every other gift will come from joyful obedience,' he asserted.

But why this emphasis on obedience? The word sounds in the western ear as something grim and restrictive. The Greek word *ipakoe* gives us some insight. Its literal meaning is to listen intently. True obedience is thus a listening that expands me beyond the ignorance of my enclosed self. Obedience leads me from the loneliness of individualism towards community and love. It is the beginning of my restoration to the likeness of God who, Christians believe, is both One and a community of three Persons. I enter into communion with those to whom I am obedient and become of one mind with them. Through this intense listening I see that my life is my brother and my sister, that Christ is in them. To the extent that I am able to meet it, another person's need is my obedience. Indeed any person on the spiritual path is called above all to be a listener, to discover God speaking in whichever person or circumstance he or she encounters.

Obedience for the monk is of course in the first instance to the abbot, but it is also given to all people inasmuch as this is possible – to the visitors as well as to the brethren. In fact the tasks a monk is given to do in a monastery are called his obedience or his service.

Having established a foundation of obedience the next emphasis in the ascetic training concerns the discipline of the body. The individual monk follows the fasting tradition of the monastery, and this fasting is inextricably linked with the cycle of liturgical worship. In the Orthodox Church fasting consists essentially of abstaining from all animal products, of being vegan. Most Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days for monastics, and just Wednesdays and Fridays for lay people. And then there are four Lenten periods in the year, which total over a

hundred days. The most intensive fasting is in the first three days of Great Lent; on Athos this 'trimeron' is particularly severe, when nothing at all is eaten or even drunk. In total the fasts entail a fare devoid of all animal products for a total of about fifty per cent of the year for monastics, and forty per cent for lay people.

The fasting is communal rather than something self-willed. Along with the festal periods, fasting is also a precursor of life in Paradise because the food eaten becomes more than just a means of physical sustenance: it is participation with others in a sacred ritual. The Russians have a term which can be translated as 'the art of liturgical living'.

Fasting is not only a discipline of the stomach, it is also a discipline of the lips. The ascetic tries to control speech. Words are sacramental, able to bear life to others, but also able to bear death. And so idle chatter and gossip are avoided, along with whatever distracts and dissipates prayer.

The length of the vigils, for all their beauty, also taxes the body. By stretching the body's natural limits one begins to learn that prayer can lighten the demands of the body. As your physical energy wanes you begin to reach out for Another energy. So these and other hardships are not a punishment of the body but a turning of it towards the light of Tabor, towards the fire of the burning bush.

Church architecture is an important material setting for this at times strenuous apprenticeship in the art of beautiful living. There is nothing violent in the gentle arches and domes of the church and chapels. The deep colours of the wall paintings help quieten the soul, and comfort it in its struggles. The chanting has a bright sadness. A good church architect does not want to show off, to shock, to impress and so hinder the concentration needed by the people in this struggle. Instead he wants his churches to encourage, he wants to harmonize his design with the nature of invisible things. He wants his churches to be icons of paradise, to be a foretaste of things to come.

Apart from the liturgical worship and fasting, each monk has a rule of prayer and prostrations (bows to the ground), which are performed alone in his cell. The basis of this rule is usually the recitation of the Jesus Prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me the sinner.' Again and again the pilgrim cries 'Lord, have mercy!' All the struggles have as their sole aim to throw the monk more passionately upon God's mercy, upon God's strength.

In at least its early stages the Jesus Prayer is said with the lips. Later

it is prayed with the mind, and then, if God blesses, with the heart. At first the active mind resists this reining in of its freedom to scurry about the world and to daydream. So the initial stage of the Jesus Prayer is as much a patient persistence against distraction by intrusive thoughts – both good and bad – as it is persistence in directing the mind to God. Thus begins the second stage of the prodigal son's journey, from the discipline of the body to the realm of thought.

The monk aims to learn watchfulness, *nipsis* in Greek, so that he can stop a bad thought growing into action. This is why one Greek term used to describe an ascetic is *niptic*. Another is *hesychast*, or silent one: they have stilled the rabble of their thoughts and learned to listen.

Whether done formally or informally, the confession of thoughts to one's spiritual guide is paramount in this respect. By opening his thought world, in all its admixture of good and bad, to a humble and experienced guide the monk begins to learn humility. He gains in self-knowledge and begins to learn the geography of his soul. He also learns the tactics of the demons in their attempts to deflect him from his path.

One important effect of this process is that the monk comes to consider everyone better than himself. He sees both his own sins and the virtues of others more clearly. And so he judges no one. He sees how he and the universe exist only by the mercy of God.

To the extent that his faculties are purified and humbled, the ascetic begins to perceive the inner essences within each created thing. Like Moses, he perceives everything burning with uncreated grace but not consumed. He realizes that God has created the world so that all its golden threads pass through himself, as its prophet, priest and king. As small as he is, he sees that the universe is contained within himself, a mere human, because he in turn is contained within the incarnate Word.

Then, having seen creation burning with divine grace, the pilgrim is called to ascend further up the holy mountain of Sinai like another Moses, there to commune with the Word Himself, the Word incarnate, face to face. But this is the lot of extremely few, not because it is not offered to all, not because it is not possible for all, but because we do not really believe it to be possible and so do not prepare ourselves to receive it.

On Athos this profound spiritual journey occurs within the small world of a few monastery buildings. But ultimately it occurs within the apparent limits of a human body, a small temple of flesh and blood. An

anchoress was once asked what she was doing cooped up in her tiny cell for so many years. 'I am on a journey' was her simple reply.

We can summarize the phases of this journey up the Holy Mountain using three terms which are often used by the Church Fathers. They call the first phase *practical theology*, where through 'praxis', through action, the various faculties are cleansed. Thus the ascetic begins to enter the second stage of ascent, that of *natural* or *physical theology*. Here he begins to discern the spiritual essences or *logoi* within the natural or physical realm. Thirdly, he can then enter *mystical theology*, communing with the Logos Himself, face to face. And this is a journey to which all people are called, monastic and non-monastic.

THE THEOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURE

As we would expect, the spiritual life we are describing is reflected in the design of the church and other monastic buildings. How is this life translated into stone and wood?

The abbot of Iviron monastery on Athos, Archimandrite Vasileios, very much involves himself in the design and fabrication of the new buildings and restorations at his monastery. Living there myself for twenty months I came to see that the theology behind this involvement is firstly his belief that church architecture is an icon, an image of heavenly realities, and secondly, that buildings made with love and sensitivity to the materials somehow emanate this love to others, like warmth from a stone that has basked in the sun. And this love aids the soul's journey towards God. Although such exterior things are not necessary for the soul's progress, they are a great help.

At Iviron most of the stonework is done by master masons from Albania. They work within an ancient tradition; for them their craft is like speaking their native tongue. It lifts the soul to see the curving and eddying roofs clad with the thick stone slabs which these masons have wrought so expertly by hand, with a simple hammer, or to appreciate the skill of their dry stone walling, or the brick domes of the new kitchen.

We spoke earlier about man's task of discovering the logos or unique essence of each thing. A true architect and builder will do this with his or her materials. He will draw out, literally *abstract* the unique character of each material used in the building. For example, the angled braces found under the wooden balconies on Athos are traditionally chosen from naturally curved trunks of wood (normally durable chestnut).

The arch allows flexibility in the advent of an earthquake: a straight pole would tend to shatter under the sudden compressive force. And this supremely practical and simple device is also aesthetically pleasing, since it harmonizes the horizontal line of the balcony with the vertical line of the wall more successfully than would a straight brace. Furthermore, since a machine saw or planing machine could not square off such a curved trunk, it must be done by hand, with an axe. The imperfection of an adzed surface is what makes it perfect. Father Vasileios has a favourite saying: 'There is a perfect imperfection and an imperfect perfection.' The irregularity of something handmade is what graces it with warmth, whereas the mathematical perfection of machine-made things can make them imperfect to the soul.

I am stressing the importance of the builders' relationship to the material before passing on to the overall design of buildings, because this relationship parallels what we have discussed above, concerning the ascetic's proper relationship of his soul to his body. I believe that the heart of our present dilemma in modern architecture is precisely this: by alienating ourselves from God, we alienate ourselves not only from ourselves, for we are made in God's image, but also from the material world itself. We then reflect this inner disintegration in the buildings which we make. If we abuse our own bodies, we will abuse the materials from which we make our buildings. If we do not live a life of love we will not have sympathy with our building materials. We will even invent new materials whose deadness and coldness correspond to our own spiritual inertia. To make beautiful buildings we must make ourselves beautiful.

I once went with a painter friend to a certain saintly hermit of Athos, Father Paissios. John asked how he could best serve God as an artist. Father Paissios recommended that he study the *Philokalia*, a collection of writings by Church Fathers on the inner life, and try to put it into practice. '*Philokalia* means love of beauty,' Father Paissios explained. 'If you want to give beauty to people through your paintings, then you yourself must become beautiful through repentance, through drawing near to God who is the source of all true beauty.'

I am an icon painter and carver, and through study of master icons I am discovering that an inspired icon is the fruit of love: of love between the painter and the saint whom he is painting, of love for the people who will pray before the icon, and of love for the materials themselves. Leontius of Cyprus (7th century) wrote:

The creation does not venerate God directly by itself, but it is through me that the heavens declare the glory of God, through me the moon worships God, through me the stars glorify Him, through me the water and showers of rain, the dew and all creation venerate God and give Him glory.

In this sense, the Orthodox church architect sees him or herself operating as a priest or prophet. He is making stone and wood articulate in the praise of God. He is not so much inventing as mediating. And, like the icon painter, he works within a tradition. He is aware that his task is to make an icon of heavenly worship, and he can receive this heavenly pattern through the inspired tradition of the Church. Far from stifling his individual creativity and gifts, this reception of a heavenly prototype through tradition stretches his creative powers to the limit. Economic limitations, the specific needs of the worshippers, the available building materials and other such variables all demand a creative response from the designer so that within the given contingencies the fullest possible reflection of the revealed archetype might be built.

ATHONITE ARCHITECTURE

Having said something about raw materials, let us now turn to Athonite architecture. We will begin with the terrain itself, and then pass on to the scattered kellia, then to the monasteries, and finally to the katholikon which lies at the heart of the monasteries. We will go on a little pilgrimage.

The Mountain

The nakedness and the height of the holy mountain itself – Athona – stands as a symbol of monasticism. It stands as a visual reminder to Athonites of their purpose. As we have said, the very word monk, *monakos* in the Greek, means 'one who is alone'. Living as though God alone existed, the true monk begins to see all things in God and through God. He leaves parents, homeland, everything, for Christ's sake. But he knows that he will regain all these things a hundredfold, and in another, more profound manner. All the culture of Athos – the magnificent buildings, the beautiful icons, everything made by human hands – is a path to this seemingly naked mountain of life in God. But is it naked?

At the top of the mountain is a massive iron cross and a chapel dedicated to the transfiguration of Christ. The Gospel account of Christ's transfiguration tells us that not only did Christ's face shine, but also that 'His raiment became dazzling white'. This shows us that the disciples not only glimpsed Christ Himself shining with the light of His divinity, but that they also beheld the material creation shining with the glory of God – Christ's material body and the linen garments He wore. Christ's transfigured garments are a prefiguration of the whole cosmos shining with uncreated light. Through her sacramental life, which includes her architecture, the Church gathers the raw flax of created things, and weaves them into a garment of beauty for herself, the Body and Bride of Christ. For this reason the Apostles' vision on Tabor was a fuller vision than Moses's vision of the burning bush on that other holy mountain, Sinai.

But a cross is found on the top of Athos as well as the chapel of Transfiguration: the experience of glory goes hand in hand with experience of the cross. In the end all human culture only has value inasmuch as it dies to itself, goes beyond itself and enters into this nakedness which makes it shine with uncreated light. It must go through a tomb in order to reach Pentecost.

There is a tradition that at any one time there are about twelve ascetics living on the upper regions of Mount Athos itself. They live in the open or in caves, sustain themselves on whatever edible wild plants they find, and flee the company of men. They are grazers or 'voski'. Sometimes a priest is providentially led to one to give him communion. To live as though God alone lives remains the ideal for every monk, for then he will see everything in God and so love all creatures without distraction from the One. Then the whole cosmos is experienced as a single temple, a church created for the worship of God, a garment worn by his Beloved.

The Terrain

Athos is not just the buildings but is also the land itself: the verdant forests, the sun-parched reaches of the south western side of the peninsula, the cliff faces, the coves and beaches, the rivers, the shrub-covered expanse of Provata. Athos is called the Garden of the Mother of God because tradition has it that she was blown ashore here on a journey to Ephesus. She was so enamoured of its beauty and serenity that she asked her Son to grant it to her as her garden.

This tradition of the holy garden, the paradise, reflects the great regard the Orthodox Church has for the environment. Her theology views the earth not as an inert, neutral setting, a dispensable theatre backdrop, and still less as a treasury to be plundered at will. It reveres it as a gift of God, a nuptial garden whose beauty and wise ordering inspires love of its Creator and Giver.

Reverence for the land does not however preclude wise use of it. A great deal of the timber used in the present restoration of Athonite monasteries comes from their own woods. Because of its durability chestnut is the most commonly used. Interestingly, the trees are managed by the coppicing system, once so common in Britain but now sadly almost entirely abandoned. This system preserves the soil better than a fell and replant regime.

But one must not be left with the impression that all is well on Athos. Mistakes have been and are being made in the management of the land. Some time back a monastery leased a large acreage of its forests to a toilet paper-making firm, who felled the trees and replanted, not very successfully, with an introduced species spaced in rigid straight rows.

The Paths

We come now to one of the most basic forms of man's architecture: paths. One of my greatest joys is to walk the Athonite paths. How many thousands of hours in labour and perspiration have been expended on making these wonderful cobbled ways! How much accumulated wisdom there is in their design. Every few feet, for example, there is a rib of raised stone which stops the mules from going too quickly and deflects rain water to the side. And the edges are strengthened by heavier stones. The stone bridges, gracefully arching over ravines and streams, are feats of engineering.

You pass someone. 'Evlogite! Bless!' you say. 'O Kyrios! The Lord blesses!' he replies. There are little shrines along the way, a cross, a spring where you can refresh yourself, a path to some hermit's cell.

These uneven cobbles teach you that it is not the arriving which counts as much as the spirit in which you travel. They demand a certain attention so you don't trip, and this watchfulness helps prayer.

But alas, increasingly you now have to be watchful not only for cobbles, but for cars and trucks. Until the 1960s there were no roads at all; only the cobbled mule tracks and the Mediterranean offered means of transport. Now the landscape is lashed by roads. They are dirt roads

on the whole, often bulldozed over the ancient paths. This leaves large scars of exposed soil above and below the roadway. And the sandy texture of the soil means that erosion is a constant problem. Those who justify them say that the roads are needed to help fight forest fires and to enable the restoration of monasteries and kellia occasioned by the revival of Athonite monasticism. It is perhaps the number of them which is open to criticism.

Karoulia

After the stone paths the next most developed form of Athonite architecture is the adapted cave. I mentioned earlier the 'voski', the 'grazers' who live in the wild. The nearest to them in primitiveness of life are those hermits who reside in these clefts of the rock. The cave mouth is usually walled up, or has a little extension added.

The traditional spot for these cave dwellings, until recently, has been the extreme tip of the peninsula called Karoulia, a virtual cliff face falling straight into the sea. Access is usually extremely arduous, if not dangerous, via ladders, chains and precarious narrow paths. Sadly the tourist boats with the amplified voices of their tour guides blasting forth now come close to these cliffs, and have driven virtually all the hermits away from their birds' nests. One of the few left is a Serbian prince, who lives off the making of church incense.

None the less, cave-dwelling remains an accepted form of monastic life. It is perhaps less common than it was, but is certainly not considered eccentric. A litany in one of our services specifically commemorates 'those who live in holes of the earth and caves'.

Kellia

Most monks living alone or in very small groups dwell not in a cave but in a kelli, one of the hundreds of cells dotted all over Athos.

Each kelli has a small chapel or *pareklession* where the brother holds his daily services. These chapels are usually visible as a swelling of the stone roof. Most kellia are made from the surrounding stone, either left exposed or plastered. The roofs also are traditionally made of a thick stone, laid on boarded roofs, held by their own weight, and traditionally sealed with clay. More recently however, rising costs have often compelled the monks to use ceramic tiles in repairing or building new cells. Their orange colour does not harmonize so well.

The Sketes

Next in the scale of organized life and architecture are the sketes. These are really villages of kellia with a central church called a kyriakon, where the monks gather for the services of Sundays and other feast days. Otherwise, each kelli is self-sufficient, occupied either by a single monk called a keliote, or by a small group comprising an elder, called the Geronda, and his fellow brethren. Access is by foot, boat or donkey – and sometimes now by vehicle.

In all the above monastic forms of building the architecture reflects and reinforces the spiritual aim of life – the worship of God. The chapel or church is as near as possible to being the geographical centre of the building or the building complex. Furthermore the building materials are traditionally local, so that the heavenly life is firmly rooted in, and is an offering up of, the physical earth. In this way the architecture is integral with the process of Christ transfiguring the world through and in the Church. These buildings are not then just a shell, but are part of the linen garment of Christ which shines with uncreated light, that same glory which the disciples saw on Mount Tabor.

Karyes and the Protaton

We come now to the administrative capital of Athos, called Karyes. It is found high up near the centre of the peninsula. In its midst is the oldest extant Athonite church, the Protaton, built a thousand years ago by St Athanasius the Athonite. Beside it is the administrative building. Around these are clustered shops and offices which cater for the needs of the monks and pilgrims. There are also the dwellings where representatives from each of the monasteries stay during the sittings of the Athonite councils.

A little further out is the large and not very beautiful St Andrew's Skete. This was built at the end of the nineteenth century to cater for the growing number of Russian monks, who could not be accommodated in the already enormous monastery of St Panteleimon's. Along with that monastery, St Andrew's architectural design is somewhat ponderous and lacking in human scale. It reflects the secular and militaristic architecture which predominated in Russia at the time. This stands as a graphic warning against the adoption of a style just because it is current; discernment is needed to perceive the spirit behind a given style of architecture before it is used for ecclesiastical buildings.

Unfortunately not all restoration work on Athos is sympathetic either.

The Protaton, with its remarkable wall paintings by the thirteenth-century Panselinos, has suffered particularly from unsuccessful restoration. More damage has been done to the frescoes since the structural changes done in 1960s than in the previous six centuries. A concrete roof was installed in place of the old wooden one, an impervious synthetic layer was sprayed on the apse exterior wall, and a concrete drain which acts more like a moat was installed around the periphery. All this has forced moisture into the frescoes and is rapidly destroying them. In place of a breathing structure, the modern alterations and materials have created a moisture trap.

The Greek love affair with concrete has sadly left its offspring on Athos in other quarters as well. In the sixties and seventies some monasteries made ugly concrete additions, such as the concrete pillars at Gregoriou monastery so visible from the shoreline. More sensitivity and stricter supervision means that now one does not see such work being done on the twenty monasteries. But not so with newly constructed sketes and kellies, where concrete and rendered brick is becoming the norm. Perhaps the main reason here is economical. Unlike the monasteries, the kellies do not so easily attract financial grants to cover the higher labour costs incurred when traditional materials and methods are used.

The Monasteries

We come now to the coenobia or twenty monasteries of Athos. A number of factors give them their distinguishing architectural features. First, they have been built mostly on or near the shoreline. This is largely because, in the absence of roads and with practically no direct link with the mainland, the sea was then the chief means of transport. Second, because of the ruggedness of much the coastline, especially in the south-eastern end of the peninsula, some monasteries are virtual continuations of the rock face. Simonopetra and Gregoriou are the most spectacular examples of this.

Third, because of the threat of pirate attack the monasteries were built as veritable fortresses, sheer faces of stone with windows only higher up. All follow the basic design of an at least four floor high perimeter of living quarters, usually rectangular, with one or more churches in the central courtyard. As threats of attack decreased, the fashion developed of extending wooden balconies and rooms from the outer wall. At Simonopetra this means that you need a head for

heights when you walk out of your room along the balcony, looking down a hundred or so feet through the cracks in the boards below your feet.

Fourth, because of the centrality of church services to daily life, the main church or catholikon is usually in the geographical centre of the monastery. It is literally at the hub of the building complex.

Fifth, a variety of needs spawns a complex of buildings outside the monastery proper, forming a virtual village. These buildings are often of considerable architectural interest. There is the need for workshops such as sawmills, and houses for workers in the employ of the monastery. Sea-side towers called 'arsena' are a particularly distinctive building. These were traditionally used as refuges, arsenals and viewing points for sea attacks, but most have now been adapted as boat houses, workshops, libraries or treasuries-cum-museums called 'skevophilakia'. There are also numerous chapels scattered around – the cemetery chapel and others, it seems, built just for the joy of it. Further out there are also what are called *kathismata*, literally 'sitting places'. These are like *kellia*, where monks stay during intensive working periods such as the grape and olive harvests.

Iviron Monastery

Since I am best acquainted with Iviron, we will now concentrate on its architecture. We will start from the outside and work toward the inside, ending with a more detailed consideration of its *katholikon* design.

I had the privilege of living at Iviron for about one-and-a-half years, and have since visited it most years for about a month at a time. My work there allowed me to understand something of the design and construction process. I first operated the sawmill, then as monastery artist worked closely with the abbot, Archimandrite Vasileios, on designing and making silverwork, icons, wood and stone carvings, cabinetwork and embroideries. This showed to me the intimate connection between theology and art and architecture.

Iviron was founded a thousand years ago, on the site of an older and smaller monastery named after St Clement. The purpose of this expansion was to cater for Georgian monks (Iviron is Greek for Georgian). Many elements, chiefly the *katholikon* and the neighbouring chapel of St John the Baptist remain from this period, although, as with all the monasteries except the Great Lavra, it has suffered from fires. The last, in 1865, destroyed much of the monastery. However, with moneys

especially from Russia and Rumania it was quickly restored, except for the south wing which has only recently been rebuilt.

The Garden

Father Gabriel, the gardener when I was living at Iviron, said to me that he loved to make the vegetable garden look beautiful, to make it a work of art so that it was pleasing to look down upon from the monastery high above. These extensive gardens wrap round two sides of the monastery and therefore constitute quite a large part of the view from the cells. For Father Gabriel nothing is dead; everything can be made into a gift of love. I once asked him to show me some of the wild plants that were edible. He brought a patch of 'weeds' and grass to life, pointing out all manner of plants which could be cooked in such-and-such a way or eaten raw as a salad.

Last year a number of young people from around the world spent two weeks at the monastery to work on the land. Father Gabriel was showing them how to prune the trees. When one of them asked advice on some finer point Father Gabriel simply replied, 'Ask the tree.'

It is theologically pertinent that Paradise is a garden and not a wild jungle. The word paradise means an enclosed royal garden. On Athos, the Mother of God is the Queen, and everything is tended for her. And this works for the benefit of the land. When man works sensitively with the world, he enhances creation, he brings out the logos of the surroundings through the buildings he erects. Even the simple garden wall and gate is evidence of such a successful marriage. The cross is everywhere in Athos, even above the garden gates and at the end of vegetable rows. A rough cross is placed on a building throughout its construction; I have even seen it scratched onto the first layer of render, to be covered but to remain underneath. The ubiquity of the cross declares that there is nothing inherently profane or secular; it is only our impoverished thinking which makes such a division.

Workers' Houses and Craftsmanship

Outside the monastery walls are various buildings, some to house workers and some as workshops. Perhaps the first thing which distinguishes these traditionally built Athonite buildings from the average modern structure is their irregularity. This irregularity gives great joy. Once a friend took some eminent ecological scientists to see the Father Paissios whom we mentioned earlier. They asked if he could say something to

them about ecology. 'When modern man makes his street lights,' he said, 'what does he do? He makes them all the same size, colour, brightness, and places them the same distance apart. This tires the eyes and soul. But when God made stars to illumine the night He made them of different sizes, colours, intensities, and placed them at different distances from each other. This rests our eyes and gives joy to the soul.'

In the workers' houses irregularity reins. You will see undulating plaster walls; wooden beams either adzed or simply debarked and left uncut; stone-clad roofs which softly sweep around convexities and concavities; weathered limewash; chimney tops of infinite variety, the plaything of builders.

So much of modern architecture fails because the designers have no experience of working with the raw materials. Design has become the tyranny of pen and ruler over the stuff of building. Georgios, the master builder for much of the current restoration work, has along with the Albanian masons developed an intuitive sense of design through their intimate contact with the raw materials. For this reason Father Vasileios and the architect leave them a lot of freedom to work out details themselves, such as the chimneys. Georgios first looked at other chimneys on Athos, and combined and finely adjusted the designs which he found to make the new ones. Each chimney pot is a bit different, but there is continuity; each shows a sympathy for the materials, and an understanding of what a chimney is supposed to do. And they are just plain fun. You feel the builder was enjoying playing houses with these miniature structures.

The North Gate

The nineteenth-century rebuilding of Iviron was generally done sensitively, especially where local materials were used and Athonite architectural traditions were respected. The problem came with the entrance gate, where the designers chose to follow the then current European fashions. The result is the somewhat ludicrous temple façade in bright white marble which we have at present. And the massive cast bronze doors bespeak more an atmosphere of monolithic institutions than of a monastic family. All this is an example of work done in the secular style of the times, without sympathy for the ethos of the monastic life.

This contrasts with the entrance recently constructed on the opposite side to facilitate the rebuilding of the south wing. Though newer, this local stone and wooden gate already looks older and more blended

into the whole. The gates are certainly large, but they are of wood and so are broken up into humanly proportioned planks. And the ironmongery is largely hand forged, which again lends things a human scale.

The Kitchen and Refectory

To the west of the katholikon is the refectory or trapeza. The proximity of refectory and church in Orthodox monasteries has a theological, liturgical basis. The material aspects of the monk's life, including meals, are all considered part of the spiritual life. In fact the meals are part of liturgical worship. On a feast day, towards the end of the vigil, the abbot, choir and monks process singing from the church to the trapeza. There, more prayers are sung and the food blessed. During the meal there is no talking, while some text is read. There are more prayers and hymns when we have finished eating, and then all process back into the church for the ending of the service.

This liturgical continuity is reflected in the fact that most trapeza have wall paintings; they are an extension of the church. The present Iviron structure is barrel vaulted with an apse, like many ancient churches. It is due to be frescoed soon.

The other aspects of daily monastic life are similarly considered part of a seamless whole. The various jobs performed are part of the single act of worship, part of serving others, part of one's repentance. This is one reason why the cells and workshops are built around the katholikon like a rim around a hub. There are little phrases often used by Athonites which reflect this sacramental view of work. If asked to do some task you reply: 'May it be blessed'. Or if you wish to bless someone after they have done something for you, you say: 'May the Lord forgive' – that is, for this deed done in the name of Christ may all your sins be washed away. And when you meet or pass someone you say: 'Bless', and the other replies: 'The Lord blesses.' The task given the monk at the beginning of the year is called his obedience, or his service (*diakonima*, whence 'deacon'). You wish your brother monk 'good strength' when he receives a new obedience for the year. When someone is tonsured a monk he is wished 'good endurance and patience' through all the different obediences and trials he will be given.

Once I asked a monk of Iviron to tell me what he thought was central to the spiritual life. He replied that to him it was important that there were no divisions into sacred and secular – all was part of the one life of repentance and worship. 'I get up at night, do my cell rule, go to

church, do the cooking, go for a walk and see my friends the animals [the wild snakes and turtles come to his beckon and play with this Father], eat, rest; all these are different aspects of the one spiritual life.'

Recently the kitchen was restored and extended. It is stone walled with two beautiful brick domes, one new, one old, roofed with stone slabs and each surmounted by a chimney. These domes are a wonder to behold inside. And it is difficult to tell the new one from the old. The process of design and building naturally led to these new buildings uniting with the old: the architect, abbot, foreman and masons all studied the other domed buildings of the monastery before and during the construction of this kitchen.

This compels reflection on modern architecture. What strikes one about the greater proportion of Athonite architecture is the same ethos of sensitivity which has continued throughout the many changes over the ten centuries of its existence. This is not due to an artificial conservatism, but to a continuity of purpose. Because life with God has remained the guiding principle on Athos there is natural architectural unity.

If today our architecture generally fails to comfort the soul, to rest it, to enrich our life, it is because our world view is at fault. One error made in this respect concerns the understanding of personhood and tradition. For a Christian, to be a person is to be in relationship with others; my uniqueness is discovered in relationship with others rather than in competition, aggression, fear. In fact the very word 'person' in both the Latin and the Greek means face, and what are faces for if not to see, speak with, smell, hear the other? This in part explains the Orthodox Christian's love for holy tradition. Far from being a fearful conservatism or a romantic pining for the past, this love for the Church's tradition is born of the belief that God, who is the source of all beauty, reveals Himself through the saints. Tradition keeps us in relationship with all those who have lived before. G. K. Chesterton said that tradition gives our forbears a vote.

Respect for tradition also has a practical foundation for the architect. It means that he is not restricted to his own limited experience, but receives a wealth of accumulated experience from his predecessors. A forty-year-old architect can then be a thousand years old in experience.

The New South Wing

With money from the E.U. the south wing, burned down in the nineteenth-century fire, was completed a few years ago. It includes a library for the old manuscripts, a treasury for liturgical valuables, and a room for the synaxi, or meetings of the monks with the abbot. It is a very successful blend of old and new construction techniques. Reinforced concrete has been used in some structural parts, such as the basement and lower floors, but visible parts are built in stone or other natural materials. The chief walls are made in the traditional Roman way, as massively thick stone walls with cement infill. Most ceilings are brick vaulted. The roof is of hand-fashioned grey schist stone, akin to the English Cotswold stone roofs in thickness.

The Katholikon

We now come to the heart of the monastery, the *katholikon*. An eighth-century patriarch of Constantinople, Germanus, wrote that 'the church temple is the earthly heaven; in these heavenly spaces, God lives and walks about.' The church is not just a shelter. It is not just a teaching tool. It is a mountain where God and man meet. This is why most Orthodox churches are of the cross-in-square type. The more or less cubic nave represents earth. This becomes a cross as one rises, which then, through the pendentives, turns into a drum, which in turn supports the heavenly dome on which Christ is depicted. Taken as a unity the church building thus represents the union of Creator and creation in Christ and His Church. All these shapes not only reflect what is happening spiritually, but actually help the worshippers to experience it.

Moving from west to east, the different sections of the most fully constructed church are as follows: the *exo-narthex* (like a covered porch), the *narthex*, the *lity*, where the service of the *lity* is performed, the nave, with its central dome, and the sanctuary area with its curved apse. From the time of St Athanasios of Athos (who died 1003) most Athonite *katholika* were built with curved ends on the northern and southern arms of the cross. Beginning from the west end let us consider in turn each part of the *katholikon*.

First, the *courtyard*. In a real sense, the courtyard with its fountain or *phiale* can be considered part of the church. In fact, until the latter part of the first millennium most churches had a portico or stoa, often called paradise. It was a *temenos*, an interface between the world

outside and the heaven within. To enter the mysteries of life in God we must proceed by degrees, giving time for purification and to adjust our spiritual eyes to the brilliance of His light. The portico, with its colonnade around, participates both in what is outside and what is within, and is the first stage of entrance into the nave.

On Athos we can extend the borders of the church even further than this courtyard. Indeed, the whole journey to Athos and to a particular monastery there can be considered a journey through a temenos: the boat trip, walking on the ancient paths, entering the monastery gate, the sweets, water and coffee given as hospitality – all these are part of the threshold preparations. The gatekeeper at Iviron once said to me how different the attitude tends to be between the pilgrims who come in a hurry by bus and those who arrive by foot. Often the first words of the former are: 'When does the next bus leave?' The walkers by contrast have had time to quieten their heart during the walk and exclaim: 'How good it is to be here!' One is living in the future, the other in the present.

We now, at Iviron, enter the *porch or exo-narthex*. As a rule this space, (or whichever space one enters first, which might be the narthex in a simpler church) has paintings from the Old Testament. Iviron includes depictions of the last three Psalms, the Praises: 'Praise Him sun and moon, praise Him all you shining stars ...!' As we draw near to God we, as priests of the universe, are called to carry the universe with us. But to do this, we must be purified. The Last Judgement is therefore also commonly depicted in this first chamber.

It is interesting that in the narthex of the Portaitissa chapel adjacent to the katholikon there are depictions of eminent ancient Greeks, such as Plutarch, Aristotle and Plato. They are there because they helped prepare the Greek people to receive the Gospel; they were to the Greeks what Moses was to the Israelites.

This raises an important point about most Orthodox churches: whenever finances have permitted their entire interior surfaces are covered in murals or mosaics. As we have noted with the exo-narthex, the themes of these wall images theologically relate to the architectural spaces in which they are found. Although there is variation throughout the Orthodox world in the schema of wall paintings, the theology is always the same: everything leads towards the age to come, towards the spiritual east from where Christ will return.

The next area is the *narthex*. In Greek the *narthix* is a plant with a

hollow stalk, a type of reed. It was used variously as a splint for the healing of broken limbs, as a container for unguents, as a cane by school masters, and by Prometheus to convey fire secretly from heaven to earth. I do not know the historical reasons for the church narthex being named after it, but all the above uses for the plant provide rich images to explain the roles of the narthex. Father Vasileios said that the darkness of the narthex acts as a splint to the monk: it helps the inner stillness which is so necessary for the healing of his inner disorderliness. The apparent darkness of a monk's renunciation of life, a plain and seemingly dead reed, is in fact the container for heavenly myrrh, the sweetness of the Holy Spirit dwelling within. The narthex is where funeral services are held: remembrance of death is like a cane which reminds the monk of this life's transitoriness and spurs him on to study how to live an angelic life. In the humility, in the plainness of the monastic daily rhythm, the monks steals heavenly fire into his soul.

Further in we come to the *lity*, so called because the service of the Lity or intercessions is held here. At Ivron both the narthex and the lity have murals of ascetics, placed there as inspiring exemplars of repentance and prayer.

At the north and south ends of the lity we have two chapels, in which are held some of the week-day liturgies. These are simpler and shorter than the festal liturgies, which are held in the main part of the church.

During festal celebrations, towards the end of Vespers, there is a procession to the lity. The curtain is closed, and the Lity service is performed. The chandelier has been lit, and we beseech the prayers of all the saints for the world – the heaven of the nave moves out into the world, symbolised by the lity, through compassionate prayer.

We come now to the *nave*. The essential geometry of the nave is that of a cube surmounted by a dome. The cube represents the created realm – the four corners of the earth, the four elements. The nave with its hemispherical covering functions like a womb, and the glory of God experienced in this life is the placenta which nurtures us to the point when we are ready to be born into the age to come. Father Vasileios often says concerning the church services that we simply need to be there, as in a womb, and imperceptibly we will grow in likeness to the Creator. He is fond of quoting the reply which a hermit gave to someone who asked what he did in his kelli: 'I live here' was Father Timtheos's simple response.

Orthodox church architecture has historically gravitated towards designs with continuous surfaces in the interior, like the cross-in-square, rather than those with a sharp meeting of ceiling with wall, as in basilicas. This is largely because these designs offer more satisfactory surfaces for iconography. As we have noted, different sections fulfil different theological functions. There is a dual movement in church iconography – a vertical one of God incarnating Himself, and a horizontal one of man moving toward Him in repentance. Let us briefly consider the vertical scheme of iconography.

In the dome is depicted Christ the Pantocrator, since the perfection of a sphere represents the Divine and it is of course also in the highest place. Below it and united to it is the cube which represents the created world. This means that the world is not sufficient unto itself, but is ordained to be married to its Creator, to be bathed in His glory.

The dome is usually supported on a drum. In the spaces between its windows are depicted the angels, first created of all creatures. (Sometimes, as in Ivron, these angels are instead painted around the base of the hemisphere itself.) Below the angels are the prophets. The pendentives, those curved triangular shapes created by the joining of the drum to the cube, carry depictions of the four Evangelists. Through their four Gospels the light and life-giving words of Christ are communicated to the world, to the nave. In the upper regions of the cube's vertical surfaces are then shown scenes of Christ's life on earth. Below are the various saints, the fruit of Christ's work. Along the bottom are frequently depicted the soldier martyrs, like George and Dimitrios. As we have said, Paradise means a walled, enclosed garden and these martyrs are the walls.

Gothic cathedrals are typified by verticality and an upward thrust. Their verticality and pointed arches point outside of themselves. By contrast, most Orthodox churches are typified by the rounded arch, the dome, the cube and undulating surfaces covered in images of saints. They thus point to their interior. They are incarnational rather than ecstatic. Even a church as vast as Agia Sophia does not crush you; you want to take a deep breath and inhale its glory, for this glory is within the space, and you are within this glory. You feel at home. If there is a sense of going out of oneself, it is through an instasy rather than an ecstasy.

The traditional architect of Orthodox churches never works solely with mass, but rather seeks the marriage of light with mass. The greatest

architectural achievement in this respect is Agia Sophia in Constantinople. Describing this wonder of the world, the sixth-century historian Procopius writes:

... it abounds exceedingly in gleaming sunlight. You might say that the [interior] space is not illuminated by the sun from the outside, but that the radiance is generated within, so that a great abundance of light bathes this shrine all round.

Because most of the monastic services are performed at night, the light comes more from the many candles and the oil lamps than from the sun. These little points of light are multiplied by reflection off the polished brass and silver candlesticks, icon coverings, chandeliers and lamps. The worshipper feels that he is simply joining in the ceaseless worship of heaven rather than beginning a service, and that these sparkles of light are icons of the angels who in truth surround him. The humble, ascetic, intense gaze of the saints in the wall paintings show that they too are present.

Nothing in the architectural design is blank, opaque – everything acts in some way as a window between heaven and earth. Even the floor at Iveron, with its remarkable thousand-year-old marble mosaic, is an icon in geometry. Worn uneven by the thousands of pilgrims' and monks' feet it is prayer crystallized in stone. It also unites liturgical movement with architectural immobility in that the different circles in its design are markers for the servers and clergy when they process out and stand in their respective positions.

We come now to the *iconscreen* or iconostasis which is at the interface of nave and sanctuary. This has gone through many stages of development, beginning in the first centuries of the Church merely as a three-foot-high partition. By the tenth century it had developed columns surmounted by an architrave. Soon icons were placed in the resulting spaces. The restored screen in the Protaton, the oldest surviving Athonite church in Karyes, is of this type. However, by the fifteenth century the iconostasis had grown to great heights – too high most now believe – so that in Russia it often even fills the entire opening to the apse.

Situated as it is between the nave and the sanctuary the iconostasis serves as both a wall and a door. It is a wall to remind the faithful that they are not yet in heaven, that they are still on a journey (nave means

ship). But the iconostasis is also a door in that it has icons of Christ, the Virgin and saints: through God becoming man, the way from earth to heaven has been opened.

In the middle of the iconscreen we see doors, with depictions of the four Gospel writers, the Annunciation, or Saints Basil and John Chrysostom who wrote the two Liturgies which are used. During the Liturgy through these doors are processed the Gospel and, later, the Holy Gifts about to be consecrated. After the consecration the Gifts are brought out to the faithful through these same doors. All this says that the Pantocrator in the dome is the one who has become man through the Mother of God who is depicted in the womb-like apse, and comes to us who are in the nave through the Gospels and through Holy Communion.

We mentioned earlier the depictions in the exo-narthex of the Psalms of Praises, where all created things, including the stars, are exhorted to praise their Creator. One of the most awesome moments in the all night vigils is when the chandeliers are lit and swung. The single-chained central chandelier, called the *polyeleos*, swings with a circular motion, whereas the *choro* chandelier, held by a number of vertical chains, oscillates backwards and forwards. In their slow, majestic dance you feel that the stars really are dancing in praise of God. You feel that in the Liturgy, celebrated within the four walls of the church, is being fulfilled what the Christmas hymn says of Christ's nativity in a cave:

What shall we offer You, O Christ, who for our sakes has appeared on earth as man? Every creature made by You offers You thanks. The angels offer You a hymn; the heavens a star; the Magi, gifts; the shepherds, their wonder; the earth, its cave; the wilderness, the manger: and we offer You a Virgin Mother. O pre-eternal God, have mercy upon us.

Finally we come to the *sanctuary* and the *altar* or Holy Table. This is the centre of the world, the ladder which joins heaven and earth, the upper room where the fire of Pentecost descends to earth. It is the Tree of Life, for it is the place where the God-man is sacrificed so that divine life might be given to the Adams and Eves of the present age.

The very word altar means 'high place', *alta ara*. A married friend visiting Athos asked one of the brethren toward the end of his two

weeks there how he could apply his experiences on Athos to his life as a married man in the world. 'The holy mountain is not ultimately a place, but the Holy Liturgy', replied the monk. 'Where you have the Liturgy, you have the Holy Mountain.'

