

Reflect



JOURNEYS

A view of the Aegean Sea
from Simonopetra Monastery.

Discussed: Father John, Mount Athos, prayer, support, chanting and incense, quietness, waiting, openness, rope ladders, Patmos, spiritual battle, satanic spell, spiritual growth, core values, gift of time

Inside a Monastery, Inside My Heart

ons on an Adventist Pastor's Spiritual Journey to a Greek Orthodox Monastery

Text and photographs by John Hughson

It all began with a dream. I wanted time alone, away from the familiar, away from the busyness of the incessant “to do” list of pastors. I was hungry for an extended period of time for reflection, study, meditation. I felt God calling me to move deeper in my spiritual walk with him. Little did I know where it would lead. Persons on their deathbed often take an inventory of their lives. I didn't want to wait that long. I wanted to give God both access and time to fully accomplish his plan through my life and ministry. Doing it now would be challenging, yet liberating.

An opportunity to join a Greek Orthodox priest on his annual pilgrimage became the centerpiece of fulfilling my yearning for spiritual renewal. I joined Father John on his yearly journey from Edinburgh, Scotland, to northern Greece to the ancient monastic community of Mount Athos and the monastery of Simonopetra. Mount Athos, often

referred to as the Holy Mountain, is a peninsula ten miles wide extending thirty miles into the Aegean Sea. For more than one thousand years, this peninsula has been the principal center of monasticism in the Greek Orthodox Church. Dotted the mountains are twenty monasteries—along with many smaller settlements from simple



huts to caves—in which monks reside in search of complete isolation and rigorous asceticism.

So why would an Adventist pastor spend time at a monastery? I desired the spiritual stimulation that would come from an experience unlike anything in my education, training, and ministry. I sought to be open to other ideas and ways of seeking God, but not because I was unhappy with my own church. Rather, my desire was similar to M. Basil Pennington's as expressed in his book, *The Monks of Mount Athos*: "To enter more into their ways and traditions was not so much to practice or imitate but, in the light of a different way, to see my own way more clearly and fully and also to appreciate more and glorify God for what He is doing in their midst."

In preparing for this month away, I received the blessing of my conference president, senior pastor, and the local church board. The reactions from fellow pastors, family, and friends included amazement, support, admiration, and curiosity. The most significant reactions came from my wife and three adult children. They each wrote me thoughts and encouragement, which I put in the front of my journal.

As I embarked, my prayer was, "Lord, thank you for opening up the door and for preparing me for this trip. I give it to you to move in my life as you wish. Make it all my heart and mind want it to be."

When I entered the monastic life of Simonopetra, I stepped into a completely new world, a world of new sights, sounds, and smells. There were icons and relics, chanting and incense. Everything in the environment and daily routine of the monks witnessed to their total devotion to God. Mealtimes of vegetarian food were spent listening to readings about the lives of the church saints as we ate silently.

At the monastery, I was introduced to a whole new facet of the Christian life hardly existent in my own: inner stillness, listening, and reflection. I came to appreciate the benefits for spiritual growth that come from quietness, waiting, and openness. I learned about the power of repeating the Jesus Prayer—"Lord Jesus Christ Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." When the prayer becomes a regular part of your day as breathing in and out, it is like an inner fountain that springs up at the moment of temptation.

I began to understand a lot more what it means to

pray without ceasing. The power of the Jesus Prayer is that it succinctly expresses the good news of the gospel. It is rooted in the prayers of the tax collector and blind beggar recorded in Luke 18:13 and 38. Here the tax collector prays, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner," and the blind beggar calls out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Historically, there were variations of the Jesus prayer that developed with the rise of monasticism in fourth-century Egypt. From the sixth century to the present, it has remained a very important prayer for all devout Orthodox and other Christians.

An American-born Greek monk, Father James, became my spiritual mentor. We spent extended time together outside the monastery while looking out on the blue Aegean Sea. He shared his spiritual journey with me and told me the history of the monastery and Mount Athos. I shared with him from my life and talked about the purpose for my spiritual journey. He was used by God in answer to my prayer and my desire to make this experience life changing.

Father James made a little wrist prayer rope to help me stay focused during prayer. Before I left, he gave me another as a gift for my wife, and he sent her a letter. He wrote about our sharing and assured her that a monk on Mount Athos was praying for her and our family. In addition to my time with Father James, I enjoyed going alone to a gazebo above the monastery, a great place to look out on the sea. The view was so panoramic that I found it easy to put the issues of life in proper perspective.

I wrote in my journal that the holy mountain had become a holy mountain to me personally. Being there gave me a spiritual "second wind" as I push toward the finish line of my life. I left determined to make every day count in the last quarter of my life and ministry. This renewal was not only for the home stretch of my life here on earth, but also for eternity. I wrote, "I want it to be the final push to look into the face of God with joy unspeakable for his grace that got me there and the choices I made to accept his invitation."

After leaving Mount Athos, I spent a Sabbath visiting three of the six monasteries of Meteora, which means "in the air." The monasteries there were built on top of huge natural sandstone towers that rise as high as twelve hundred feet. Originally, the only way to reach them was by climbing rope ladders or being hoisted up in a

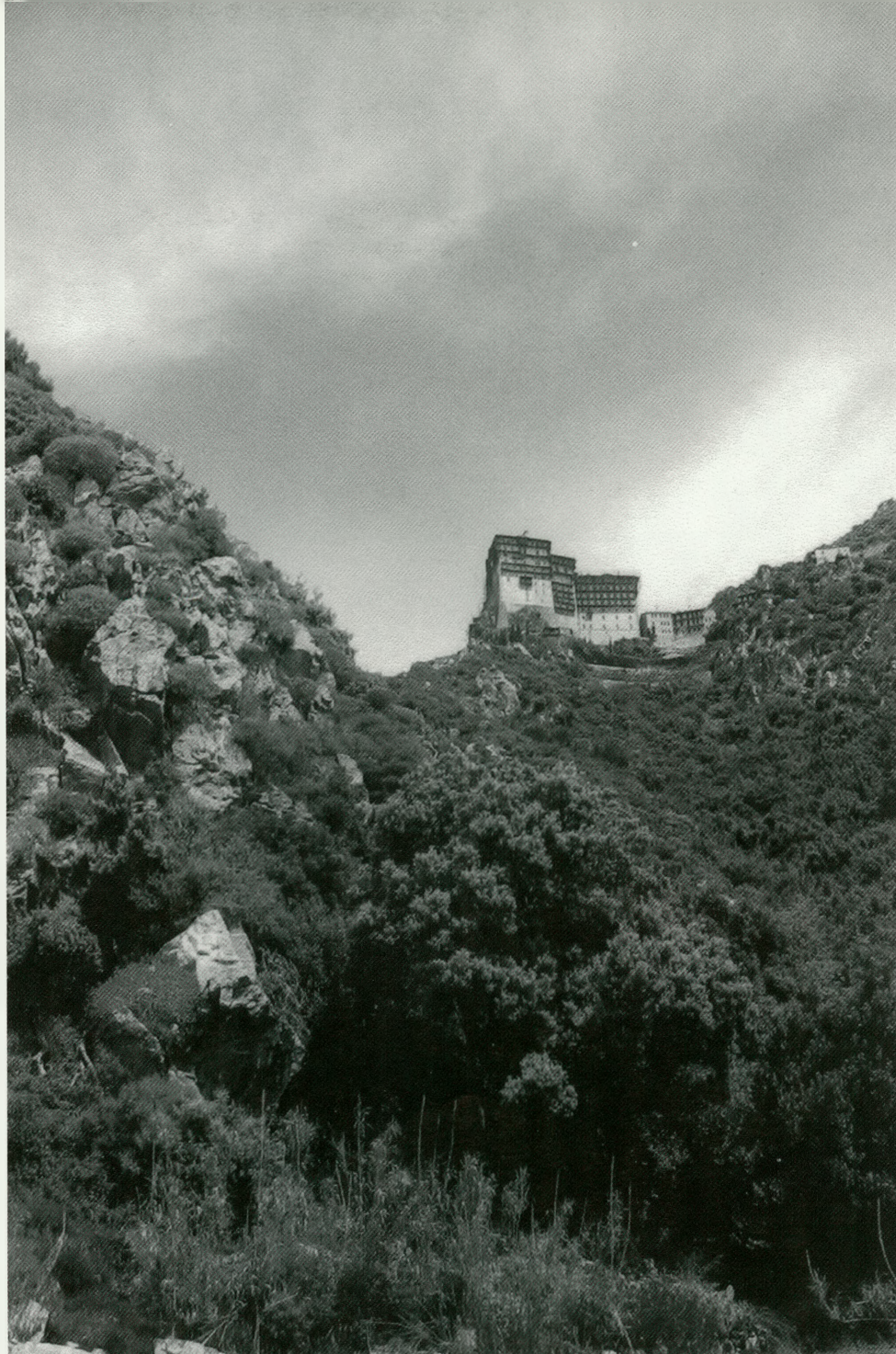
basket or net. These monasteries were built for advanced asceticism! It made a profound impression on me to be in such an incredible place, where obedience is practiced, the will disciplined, and faith and character formed. I was inspired to aim higher in my own walk with God.

From Meteora, I traveled by train and boat to the island of Patmos. Ever since childhood, I have wanted to visit John's prison. In preparation for my visit, I read several passages from Revelation. As I sat in the cave where John is believed to have lived and written Revelation, I read again his message to the seven churches and his description of the new earth.

I could look out on the sea where John might have looked when he wrote that in the new earth there will be "no more sea." This no doubt expressed his loneliness over being separated by the sea from friends and loved ones. As I viewed the hills of the island, I wondered if John had walked to the top of them. He might have looked longingly in the direction of his homeland. Yet he knew that his real home was being prepared for him. I found myself more confident than ever of seeing John and telling him about my visit to Patmos.

I came to realize that the corollary of a spiritual journey is spiritual battle. The enemy of our souls opposes anyone who takes determined steps to engage in a serious spiritual quest. He is quick to threaten with fear as to whether commitments will last. He can taunt with doubts that change isn't really needed in one's life.

Here is what I wrote in my journal, "A key goal of a spiritual journey is to break the satanic spell or delu-



Simonopetra Monastery on Mount Athos, Greece.

sion we are all under as fallen creatures. We are all fooled and taken in by the lies and myths of the evil one. We don't see the reality of sin and temptation for what they really are. Our culture does so much to dis-





From the Monastery to the Aegean Sea.

tort reality; our fallen-ness makes us vulnerable in so many ways. But once the spell is broken you can no longer be deceived and fooled. Once you see through his attacks, seeing the sick reality behind them, he has nothing left. His foothold in your life is broken.”

At so many points in my journey, God brought Scripture passages to me at just the right time. One of the most important was Revelation 2:17, from John’s message to the church in Pergamum. John’s words to the victorious at the end hit me with new meaning: “And I will give to each one a white stone, and on the stone will be engraved a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.” Additional texts that played a very significant role were Ephesians 6:10–18, which reminds us how real the spiritual battle is, and Psalm 17, a prayer of David that expresses how he was no match for his enemies and his enemies no match for God.

As I plan my follow-up to this amazing spiritual journey, I have very specific plans and objectives for how I want to live the remaining years of my life. I realize that spiritual growth means a lot more than simply being busy and active in my ministry. It also means seeking proactively times of stillness, waiting, listening, and reflecting. It means reviewing, evaluating, and recentring my life regularly.

As an Adventist and pastor, I have been—perhaps unwittingly—conditioned to consider contemplative disciplines unnecessary or wasteful; that to be on fire for the Lord means to be always on the go, planning program after program. In fact, I thought the monastic lifestyle of a monk was the epitome of wasting time. I equated religious busyness with being spiritual. This has always been an easy trap in which humans get caught.

Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. For the pastor, the unexamined life results in an unbalanced life. In the Bible story of the sisters Mary and Martha, it was difficult for Martha to slow down and appreciate the benefits of sitting at the feet of

Jesus. The contemplative side of the Christian life has always gone against our activist natures.

John's counsel to Laodicea in Revelation 3:15–19 focused on increasing the Laodicean's spiritual devotion. Paul's message in Ephesians 6:10–18 was to put on the whole armor of God in order to survive the spiritual battle. Both John and Paul put emphasis in these two vital passages on deepening one's commitment—not on getting busier—as the way to greater spirituality.

All too often, pastors neglect taking time for stillness, for listening and being open, for waiting upon the Lord. We certainly need balance. In order to be effective as Christians and pastors, we must live and minister from the overflow of a satisfying spiritual life. In his book, *Seize the Day with Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Charles Ringma quotes Bonhoeffer, "To be silent does not mean to be inactive; rather it means to breathe in the will of God, to listen attentively and be ready to obey."

Ringma continues in his own words: "Speaking is seldom one of our problems—listening is. Action and busyness are usually the norm for our lives—quietness and reflection seldom are. Such reflection is not for the purpose of withdrawal from life. It is the way in which we engage life with a new-found energy and courage. Silence is the mother of speaking. Quietness is the seed bed for action. Reflection is the impetus for new direction. If we don't engage in quietness and reflection, we may remain busy, but our activity will hardly be creative."

A pastor's greatest need is not to fill up when reaching "empty," but to stay filled up by taking periodic sabbaticals. These may be extended times alone or just a couple days. When you are deadly serious, God will spare no support in making it successful. He may allow some critical attacks from the enemy as the only way to bring you to where he knows you need to be. Be prepared for tears, pain, and discomfort, but also be prepared for breakthroughs, growth, freedom, and pure joy.

Conferences should

adopt policies that make a sabbatical experience possible for ministers. Without such experiences, a heavy price may be paid in pastors being burned out and even leaving the ministry. It could be argued that a minister is free to do this during vacation time, but a sabbatical signifies something far different from a mandated work break with one's family.

Sabbatical time is an endorsement and encouragement for pastors to seek a sanctuary in time and place for spiritual growth. It implies care for the inner person, the part that cannot be measured in conference reports. It says that private accountability before God is directly related to public ministry. Perhaps many pastors could be saved and others made stronger with new direction, energy, and creativity if personal renewal was viewed as every bit as significant as church renewal.

My purpose for this journey was fulfilled many times over. It gave me the rare gift of time to review my life year-by-year from birth, to evaluate my core values, to recenter my life more fully on Christ, and to identify and correct areas of drift. It was a thrilling and challenging time. As a result of this spiritual journey, I feel more free and confident than ever. I am ready to make the final years of my ministry and life the best ever!

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