

The Inner Dimension of Pilgrimage to Mount Athos

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‘The great road is something that seems never ending:
it is like a human dream, the nostalgia of the infinite’

F.M. Dostoevsky, *The Devils*

All you have been, and seen, and done, and thought,
Not You but I, have seen and been and wrought:
I was the Sin that from Myself rebell'd:
I the Remorse that tow'rd Myself compell'd:
I was the Tajidar who led the Track:
I was the little Briar that pull'd you back:
Sin and Contrition—Retribution owed,
And cancell'd—Pilgrim, Pilgrimage, and Road,
Was but Myself toward Myself: and Your
Arrival but Myself at my own Door:
Who in your Fraction of Myself behold
Myself within the Mirror Myself hold
To see Myself in, and each part of Me
That sees himself, though drown'd, shall ever see.
Come you lost Atoms to your Centre draw,
And be the Eternal Mirror that you saw:
Rays that have wander'd into Darkness wide
Return and back into your Sun subside
(Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār, *The speech of the birds*).

To father Efrem

The inner dimension of pilgrimage is inextricably bound up with some notions belonging to the most ancient technical vocabulary of monasticism, particularly the Latin *peregrinatio* (Greek *xeniteía*), the condition of living while roaming as a stranger which, inherited by Stoicism,¹ takes *amerimnía* (Greek for ‘lack of worries’) and possibly *hesychía* (Greek for ‘spiritual peace’, Latin *quies*) as its goal.² Moreover, it is closely connected with the symbolism of the centre, a fact allowing us to understand the relationship between pilgrimage and the modern world, and some contemporary versions of the former.

The deepest aim of every pilgrimage is to find one's long-abandoned home once again. Christian life is pre-eminently a constant pilgrimage to the ‘lost homeland’, experienced primarily in one's own heart. The homesickness that every man carries in his eyes for the dramatic loss brought about by original sin

¹ A. Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien. Pour une phénoménologie du monachisme* (Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1979), p. 91. See also the similarities with the cynic philosophers (*ibid.*, 105).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 91 and 100.

– a feeling more or less concealed by external reality – can be effectively soothed by the light radiating from Mount Athos. I saw this light on the arrestingly sweet, delicate, and innocent faces of some Athonite monks, most especially on the face of a Romanian from St Paul’s monastery, who now lives in Lakkou skete. I shall return to the subject of the faces and looks of Athonite monks, in my opinion the most striking feature of the Holy Mountain.³

Pilgrimage, as a formalized – but never completely institutionalized⁴ – expression of the ancient idea of *peregrinatio*,⁵ is a form of individual and collective asceticism that aims at *metánoia* (Greek for ‘repentance’, ‘change of the *noûs*’). As an authentic *fuga mundi*, it is an effort and an offering of one’s self, a sacrifice leading to detachment from the ordinary categories of time and space. A victory over time, it manages to make the pilgrim feel, by way of the meeting with unknown brothers, the universality of the Church in space.⁶ The notion of *peregrinatio* was at one time widely known in Judaism, being directly founded on the Scriptures: in Genesis 12: 1, God asks Abraham to leave his country, his relatives, and his father’s home, and go to the land which he would show him. With the Diaspora, this tradition was to know the spiritualization of the condition of stranger, thereafter attributed to every member of the ‘people of God’. Philo of Alexandria⁷ interpreted Genesis 12: 1 as the migration of Abraham’s spirit (Greek *ekdemía*) from the sensitive to the intellectual plane – an interpretation that, by way of Anthony, influenced Cassian and led to the interiorized hermeneutics of *xeniteía*.⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons first used the verb *xeniteúo*,⁹ later passing the term down to Ambrose, Anthony, and Gregory of Nyssa. Moreover, it is fundamental to keep in mind that in one of the most significant texts of ancient Christianity, the *Letter to Diognetus*, the author said that ‘every foreign land is for Christians a country and every country is a foreign land [...] Christians live in the world, but they are not of the world’.¹⁰

In early Christianity, where *peregrinatio* had an essentially spiritual dimension, the ecclesial community was considered to be roaming in every place (Latin *Ecclesia peregrina*). On this subject, the Exodus into the desert, the chosen place of the *peregrinatio* – being at once empty and full of temptations – was one of the

³ Below, pp. 9–10.

⁴ See E. Turner, *Preface* to V. Turner and E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York, 1978), pp. xiii–xiv (perhaps the opposition between ‘antistructural’ pilgrimage and religious institution has to be nuanced).

⁵ On the relationship between *peregrinatio* and pilgrimage, which tends to become confused from the ninth century on, see J.L. Voillot, ‘*Peregrinatio*. 3. Spiritualità della *peregrinatio*’, *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione* (Rome, 1983), vol. 6, p. 1433.

⁶ T. Špidlík, *La preghiera secondo la tradizione dell’Oriente cristiano* (It. tr. Rome, 2002), p. 385.

⁷ Bear in mind that Philo is influenced by dualism (he perceived the body and the earth as ‘strangers’).

⁸ A. Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien*, p. 94.

⁹ *Adversus haereses* 4. 5. 3–4.

¹⁰ Ch. 4. 5 (the English translation is mine, as is that of the following passages not originally written in English, unless otherwise stated).

most frequently recurring images to describe the itinerary of the Church in this world. However, the personal and eschatological character of the idea of *peregrinatio* is contained in Jesus' saying 'And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life' (Matt. 19: 29).¹¹ The ancient idea of *peregrinatio* – a sort of 'non-institutionalized monasticism', whereas monasticism can be thought of as an 'inner and never completely achieved *peregrinatio*'¹² – is connected with the themes of the Exodus, exile, 'quest' (for God, of the bridegroom for the Canticle, afterwards for the Holy Grail and the 'pure prayer', as in the case of the well-known Russian pilgrim),¹³ pilgrimage to holy places, renunciation, detachment, and *sequela Christi* (Matt. 16: 24).¹⁴ In particular, the Old Testament theme of the Red Sea crossing can be interpreted, in the light of St Paul, as an exit from the flesh. Moreover, the Apostles, after renouncing all possessions (Greek *apotagê*), practised *xeniteía* by scattering across different foreign countries, aiming to acquire the right ascetic disposition to proclaim the Gospel. Becoming a stranger because of God (Greek *xeniteúein dià tòn Theón*) means becoming estranged from all worldly passions in order to free oneself from the psychic 'encrustations' of the ego, thereby clearing a space for divine grace. From one standpoint, this highlights the negative dimension of spiritual existence – represented, in the words of St John Climacus, by the monk's 'unheralded wisdom', 'unpublicized understanding', 'hidden life' produced by *xeniteía*.¹⁵ From another, it stresses the substance of Christianity, a spirituality which turns the laws of the world upside-down in order to react against the reversal produced by the fall. From this point of view, the Eastern Christian and especially Russian 'mad for God'¹⁶ – mad because entirely devoid of worldly worries – are an illuminating example. The itinerant life of the monk-*peregrinus* generally gives rise to people's disdain and strengthens the relationship between walking on the *humus* (Latin for 'soil') and achieving *humilitas* (Latin for 'humility'). To cut furrows into the 'soil of humility' is the

¹¹ See also, on the scriptural foundation of *xeniteía*, John 4: 4, Ps. 39: 13, Ps. 44: 11–12, Ps. 119: 11, Heb. 11: 13.

¹² See A. Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien*, p. 104. See also V. Turner and E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, pp. 33–4: 'pilgrimage may be thought of as extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is introverted pilgrimage'; nevertheless, 'Pilgrimage has its inwardness, as anyone who has observed pilgrims before a shrine can attest; while mysticism has its outwardness, as evidenced by the energetic, practical lives of famous mystics such as St Theresa of Avila, St Bernard of Clairvaux, St Catherine of Siena, William Law, al-Ghazali, and Mahatma Gandhi'.

¹³ For an excellent Italian edition see *Racconti di un pellegrino russo* (4th edn., Rome, 2000).

¹⁴ E. Lanne, 'Peregrinatio', *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione* (Rome, 1983), vol. 6, pp. 1424–6. For the similarity between *peregrinatio* and monasticism (and for the assimilation of the former to the latter) see J.L. Voillot, 'Peregrinatio', p. 1432.

¹⁵ *Patrologia Graeca* 88, 664 AB. Compare this to the idea of 'envelopment' in A. Scrima (below, p. 7).

¹⁶ On this see E. Montanari, *La fatica del cuore. Saggio sull'ascesi esicasta* (Milan, 2003), pp. 99 and 121 n. 157.

main objective of the monk, and it is noteworthy that soil and humility – the latter being best represented, in the Christian tradition, by the Virgin – are two eminently feminine realities, as well as being connected in Latin by an obvious etymological relationship.

Monasticism, which emerged when the institutionalization of the Church risked denying its real character by making it worldly, makes use of the condition of living as a stranger (Greek *xenos*, Latin *peregrinus*; Symeon the New Theologian said that a monk had to be a ‘stranger to the world’, Greek *xenos toû kosmou*)¹⁷ in order to cut all human and profane relationships, which risk separating the monk from God, and to obtain spiritual liberation from subjection to worldly things and passions. St John Climacus’ definition of *xeniteía* as ‘an irrevocable renunciation of everything in one’s familiar surroundings that hinders one from attaining the ideal of holiness’¹⁸ is in this respect illuminating. From the monastic perspective, reaching God can only be achieved by eliminating all that is ‘familiar’ and, therefore, ‘passionate’, plunging into an environment where one does not have relationships. As A. Guillaumont said about the uprooting of the individual from his birthplace as a means of conversion, ‘le changement de vie est lié à un changement de lieu’.¹⁹ This is the ‘strait way’ of the Gospel (Matt. 7:14), a form of ‘spiritual warfare’ comparable to the Islamic *jihād al-akbar* (Arabic for ‘great holy war’). The warlike character of this form of asceticism²⁰ is clearly shown by the military origin of the term *xeniteía*:²¹ what is a positive attitude for ordinary people – affection for their homeland – turns out to be a ‘passion’ for monks, not an evil in itself but an obstacle in the way to God. In this sense, *xeniteía* is in opposition to *parrhesía*,²² ‘familiarity with the world’ or ‘falling into habit’,²³ which inexorably and secretly erodes the *kénosis* (Greek for spiritual ‘emptying’) of the person; for example, John of the Ladder defined *xeniteía* as a ‘disposition without familiarity’ (Greek *aparresíaston ethos*).²⁴ One of the most eloquent forms of *xeniteía* was that of Maximos of Lampsakos, an Athonite monk who continually burnt the huts he lived in (hence his sobriquet *Kafsokalivítis*, ‘burner of huts’) to escape the sin of pride caused by the fame he enjoyed among the faithful.²⁵ From the comparative point of view, it is significant that the first degree of ordination for Buddhist monks is called *pabbajja*, ‘the departure’, the

¹⁷ *Chapitres théologiques, gnostiques et pratiques*, 3, 15, *Sources Chrétiennes* 51, 84.

¹⁸ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, tr. C. Luibheid and N. Russell (Mahwah, NJ, 1982), p. 85, step 3, *Patrologia Graeca* 88, 664 A.

¹⁹ A. Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien*, p. 89.

²⁰ See the words of Nilus in A. Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien*, p. 98.

²¹ A. Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien*, p. 90.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 112. *Parrhesía* is a Greek term which can also mean the ‘freedom of speech’ to God achieved by the experienced monk (see Eph. 6: 19).

²³ A. Scrima, *Il padre spirituale* (partial It. tr. Comunità di Bose [Bi], 2000), p. 64.

²⁴ *Patrologia Graeca* 88, 664 BC.

²⁵ On the potential dangers of the practice of *xeniteía* without firm spiritual discipline, noted by Egyptian and, later, Benedictine monasticism, see A. Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien*, pp. 108–11.

‘exit’ from the previous ‘secular’ condition. Moreover, in the same context the transformation of a person into an ascetic comes about through ‘the departure from home in the direction of a way without home’.²⁶

Pilgrimage is a ritual and a radically centripetal act, a quest for the spiritual centre without which life has no meaning or is reduced to a fruitless tramping about. As westerners, we have almost completely lost the meaning of the symbolism of the centre.²⁷ The fact that, when some primitive people moved away from their land of extraction, they brought a pole with them, in order to be always at the ‘centre’ of the world, is almost incomprehensible to us; they had understood that *eccentricity produces eradication*. Many contemporary Western literary and artistic works bear witness to this dramatic loss. In particular, the ‘obsession for travelling’ – eminently expressed by J. Kerouac’s words ‘we have to go’ – and the tendency towards uprooting shown by American beatniks in the 1950s – linked with the theme of ‘voluntary exile’ as a form of asceticism – are noteworthy examples of a trend consisting in a sort of heterodox drift partially deriving from the Christian roots of the society in which the ‘beat’ generation emerged. Moreover, the American myth of the frontier – which strongly influenced the beats – represents the unconscious profanation of human inwardness through movement that is potentially boundless and devoid of a superior orientation. In this instance it is correct to talk, not so much of ‘roaming’, but of ‘vagabonding’, a degeneration of the spiritual technique of *xeniteía*, since modern Western nomads, not prepared for an ascetic use of roaming, follow their own will and only want to leave in order to fill an existential void. For them, travel is simply a substitute for the drugs and image-producing creations of our civilization. On the contrary, the *peregrinus* knows the object of his *peregrinatio* or pilgrimage, and he is only superficially a vagabond. The modern obsession with travelling is partly a degeneration of the *peregrinatio*, being often just a sterile reaction to the alienating and anaesthetizing atmosphere of contemporary life or, in the worst cases, an escape from one’s own responsibilities. On the other hand, a marvellous example of spiritual pilgrims in continuous movement are the Russian *stranniki* (‘strangers’, ‘pilgrims’),²⁸ who spend their lives visiting sanctuaries, monasteries, and churches, a prime example being the above-mentioned Russian pilgrim and his ‘initiatory journey’.²⁹ The Russian pilgrim seems to belong to the category of the *Problemwanderer* (German for ‘[spiritual] problem solvers’): the

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 115–16 (notice also the similarities with Hinduism).

²⁷ On the symbolism of the centre see R. Guénon, *Simboli della scienza sacra* (It. tr., 4th edn., Milan, 1997), pp. 63–71 and 81–8.

²⁸ On the figure of the *strannik* see M. Evdokimov, *Pèlerins russes et vagabonds mystiques* (Paris, 1987), and N. Kauchtschischwili, ‘Il pellegrinaggio in Russia e in Occidente’, in E. of Vladimir *et alii*, *Optina Pustin’ e la paternità spirituale* (It. tr. Comunità di Bose [Bi], 2003), pp. 215–16.

²⁹ On the ‘initiatory journey’ see E. Montanari, *La fatica del cuore*, pp. 120 and 196. More generally, Turner maintains that ‘there is undoubtedly an initiatory quality in pilgrimage. A pilgrim is an initiand, entering into a new, deeper level of existence than he has known in his accustomed milieu. Homologous with the ordeals of tribal initiation are the trials, tribulations, and even temptations of the pilgrim’s way’ (*Image and Pilgrimage*, p. 8). From this point of view, we can consider the pilgrimage a sort of *via crucis*.

stranniki ‘take the *great road* not only to accomplish a *podvig* [Russian for ‘great spiritual effort’], but to ease the anxiety harassing their existence’.³⁰ This bears witness to the fact that the pilgrim-stranger needs to incessantly break the worldly relationships through a continuous *iter* which is an endless inner progression, to use Gregory of Nyssa’s words an *epéktasis* (a Greek word meaning a sort of ‘infinite tension’ directed towards achieving Christian perfection), with the unattainable end being ‘He who is present at the beginning, along the path and at the end of the world’.³¹

Mount Athos is undoubtedly one of the main vessels of traditional Christianity, broadly speaking a discrete but very strong ‘spiritual centre’. In this respect, the Romanian monk A. Scrima (1925–2000) spoke brilliantly of a

topology of concealment: there are places, centres, in which tradition has its sources, with custodians, vigilant sentries, men invested with a special responsibility: places jealously ‘preserved’ [...] The consciousness [...] and the testimony of such a region [of the sources of tradition] integrate orthodoxy [...] in what I call *Eastern tradition*, which spreads as far as the borders [...] of Asia. They are specific assonances coming from their common orientation, in an awareness of the centre which exists, *mutatis mutandis*, in other traditions situated under the sign of the East.³²

I have no doubt that while writing this passage Scrima was thinking, in relation to the Christian tradition, also of Mount Athos.

The inner dimension of pilgrimage was subtly highlighted by the Romanian monk, who in his book *Țîmpul Rugului Aprins* (Romanian for *The time of the Burning Bush*) stated that ‘the monk is an envoy on the way, setting off on this path without having in mind a precise terrestrial destination to reach in order to settle down permanently. The monk is *essentially* an envoy, a foreign envoy’.³³ Besides having come into this world as a stranger who ‘has nowhere to lay his head’ (Matt. 8: 20), the name of ‘stranger’ is explicitly attributed to Christ after his resurrection: ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem...?’ (Luke 24: 18), a characteristic which is closely connected with the continuous revelation of further spiritual significances. The ‘ontological, irreducible excess’ Christ carries in himself describes his quality of ‘stranger’ and is ‘compensation’ for constitutive human weakness, the imposing of His knowledge onto those who did not recognize him.³⁴ *The ‘found seekers’ find God because he finds them first*: the disciples were searching for Jesus and, before they found him, he found them. According to a part of a Muslim *hadith*, God said: ‘He who loves me searches for me. He who

³⁰ N. Kauchtschischwili, *Il pellegrinaggio in Russia e in Occidente*, p. 233. From this point of view, a problematic but interesting comparison with the beats is possible (see above, p.00).

³¹ A. Scrima, *Il padre spirituale*, p. 58. Compare this expression with the above-quoted passage from Farid al-Din ‘Attār’s *Mantiqu’ t Tair* (above, p. 1).

³² A. Scrima, *Il padre spirituale*, p. 92.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5.

searches for me, I have found him'.³⁵ Moreover, 'the pilgrim, the monk, and the foreign envoy are both travelling and sedentary, the ones who "stand firm". This is precisely the hesychastic posture, opening towards others and, above all, opening itself towards the zenith. Such an interpretation actualizes the very posture of the hesychast: *sedebit solitarius et tacebit*. He stands still and is, simultaneously, in perpetual passage. This is by no means an oxymoron, but an absolutely necessary juxtaposition in our condition of finitude in space and time. Given the structure of our physical condition, *in order to be stable we must be in movement*: "He who stands must be careful not to fall". "Stability" in this sense means an inner fulfilment, not only inside the personal being, but inside the spiritual being. As such it means a spreading in the spirit beyond the limits of the individual person; it is, at one and the same time, an *envelopment* and a *development*'.³⁶ Here the author is concerned with a point central to the spiritual hermeneutics of the pilgrimage which is, as already stated,³⁷ a symbol of the Christian life and most especially of monasticism: the relationship between *peregrinatio* and *stabilitas*,³⁸ movement and stability, well represented in the figure and function of the spiritual father (Greek *geron*, Russian *starec*, Arabic *shaykh*, Sanskrit *guru*), who stands as an envoy, in accordance with a paradoxical combination of itinerancy and immobility: 'the monk is stable only when he keeps in motion [...] refusing every [...] solidification ([...] herein lies the difference between the spiritual father and the classical confessor, the latter being of necessity more stable, "established")'.³⁹ The compatibility of *peregrinatio* with *stabilitas* is possible if the former is considered from a spiritual perspective: the idea of a *peregrinatio in stabilitate*, well known in medieval Latin monasticism,⁴⁰ is the result of the process to interiorize *xeniteía*, realized in Egyptian monasticism.⁴¹ In like manner, the need to spiritualize the *peregrinatio* corresponds, in the words of P. Evdokimov,⁴² to the need for an 'interiorized monasticism' in the 'desert of the contemporary cities'.⁴³ The becoming is a form, a manifestation of the Being: from another point of view, 'existence is but a movable image of stability'.⁴⁴ Paradoxically, stability in God can be reached

³⁵ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76 (my italics).

³⁷ Above, p. 2.

³⁸ On the 'stability of the monk' see I. Hausherr, *Hésychasme et prière*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* series no. 176 (Rome, 1966), p. 197, and, concerning Eastern Christianity, E. Herman, 'La *stabilitas loci* nel monachesimo bizantino', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 21 (1955), 115–42.

³⁹ A. Scrima, *Il padre spirituale*, p. 40.

⁴⁰ In the Benedictine rule *stabilitas* and *peregrinatio* are opposed in favour of the former, while Irish monasticism reconciled the two.

⁴¹ A. Guillaumont, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien*, p. 113.

⁴² P. Evdokimov, *Sacramento dell'amore: il mistero coniugale secondo la tradizione ortodossa* (It. tr. Sotto il Monte [Bg], 1966), pp. 108–11; *id.*, *Le età della vita spirituale* (It. tr. Bologna, 1981), pp. 143, 246ff.

⁴³ E. Montanari, *La mistica: fattore di comunione nel cammino ecumenico* (Rome, 2002), typed, p. 10.

⁴⁴ Scrima, *Il padre spirituale*, p. 65.

through continuous roaming which refuses every relationship and compromise with the world, especially since detachment from ordinary life makes dangers more obvious – and, consequently, dependence on God more perceptible. Movement and stability are respectively represented by the complementary but radically distinct symbols of the circle and of the square, ‘the two essential figures of the appearance of the world’, which refer to the dynamism and to the firmness of reality.⁴⁵

Traditional pilgrimage to Mount Athos is constantly threatened by the penetration of modern conveniences, which discreetly but profoundly make life on the Holy Mountain more and more comfortable – and therefore less and less directed to man’s awareness of his radical dependence on God.⁴⁶ To this end, technology may be thought of as a modern form of Titanism based on the misinterpretation of Genesis 1: 28. Back in 1977, Philip Sherrard, known mainly for his excellent translation of the *Philokalia* from Greek into English (in collaboration with Gerald Palmer and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware), appealed against this improper modernization, saying that ‘the paths of Athos – those venerable paths over which the feet of countless monks and pilgrims have walked for a thousand years and more – are disappearing.’⁴⁷ By a process dating back to the 1950s, new means of transportation, which to a large extent replaced the traditional mule tracks or footpaths, led to ‘the whole rhythm and pattern of movement on Athos’ being ‘completely changed’.⁴⁸ Sherrard’s words ring clear: because of the introduction of modern technologies on Athos,

the sense, the possibility itself, of the pilgrimage is undermined, if not destroyed. There is a whole psychology, even a whole doctrine, of pilgrimage [...] a pilgrimage is not simply a matter of getting to a particular shrine or holy place. *It is a deliberate sundering and surrender of one’s habitual conditions of comfort, routine, safety, convenience* [...] the pilgrim sets out on a quest which is *inward* as much as outward, and is, in varying degrees, into the unknown. In this sense, he becomes the image of the spiritual seeker [...] Of this spiritual exploration, inward and outward, *walking is an essential part*. His feet tread the earth from which he is made and from which he is usually so cut off, especially in the more or less totally urbanized conditions of modern life [...] The crucial point in all this is that a *pilgrimage is a process which must not be hurried*.⁴⁹

Here the opposition between pilgrimage and modern travelling⁵⁰ – and the incompatible psychological dispositions at the root of the two – is very evident: while pilgrimage is a spiritual and physical effort, a sacrifice, even an *áskesis*

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 82 n. 36.

⁴⁶ P. Sherrard, ‘The Paths of Athos’, *Eastern Churches Review*, 9: 1 (1977), 106.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 101.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 101–2 (my italics). On the involuntary contribution of monks to the ‘modernization’ of Mount Athos and its causes see *ibid.*, pp. 103 ff., where the author talks about the infiltration of ‘a form of Manichaeism’ on the Holy Mountain.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 102.

(Greek for ‘exercise’), modern travelling is generally comfortable and undertaken simply out of aesthetic curiosity for the exotic and what we have just called ‘loss of the centre’.

In conclusion, I would like to devote a few words to my personal experience as a pilgrim to the Holy Mountain. In 2005, between late August and early September, I had the privilege to make my first journey to Mount Athos. Beyond the marvellous liturgy and art of Athos, there were two unforgettable ‘highlights’ of the journey. The first was a ‘pilgrimage’ to Kafsokalivia. Accompanied by two friends, I took the path from St Anne’s to the very isolated skete located in the area known as the ‘Athonite desert’, at the southern tip of the Athonite peninsula. Seven hours were needed, and to say that getting there was exhausting is a gross understatement. Initially I felt great disappointment at its run-down atmosphere and the indifference shown by the monks. However, having adapted to the alien environment and met an icon painter and an aged Hesychast – Kafsokalivia is considered one of the main centres of iconography and Hesychasm on the Holy Mountain – something dawned on me. I realized it was not a question of indifference, but of detachment. I would like to return to Kafsokalivia, a place where I found a delicate, discreet presence, something I cannot even say of Athos itself.

The other highlight was the movements, gestures, faces, and looks of some of the monks met *en route*. In Hesychasm, the devotee, invoking a formula endowed with sense for ascetic ends, in a context characterized by an ‘affective’ (but not sentimental) connotation, aims to establish a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The notion of ‘person’, established by Roman jurisprudence, received substantial theological and anthropological contributions from Christianity. On the basis of Boethius’ classical definition as ‘*rationalis naturae individua substantia*’,⁵¹ it has rendered more and more explicit its own constitutive features of relationship, incommunicability, self-consciousness, freedom, duties, rights, and inalienable dignities.⁵² The *face* of God, which is the *person* of the Son,⁵³ could be thought of as a ‘protection’, ‘covering’ of the unattainable apophatic level of the transcendent. Therefore, personality defines itself, in the Latin origin of the term (which means ‘mask’), as the *face of God turned to man* – which results in the possibility of a concrete relationship between the two⁵⁴ – and, at the same time, as the *mask of the inaccessible divine essence* (Greek *ousía*). In traditional exegesis, ‘face’ and ‘look’ refer to the biblical notions of ‘image’ and ‘resemblance’: the look being, according to P. Florensky,

⁵¹ Boethius, *De duabus naturis et una persona Christi*, *Patrologia Latina* 64, 1343 D.

⁵² G. O’Collins and E. Farrugia, *Dizionario sintetico di teologia* (It. tr. Vatican City, 1995), pp. 278-9.

⁵³ G. Bunge, *Vasi d’argilla: la prassi della preghiera personale secondo la tradizione dei santi padri* (It. tr. Comunità monastica SS. Trinità, Magnano [Bi], 1998), p. 10. On the relationship between ‘person’ (Greek *hypóstasis*) and ‘face’ (Greek *prósopon*) see C. Schönborn, *L’icona di Cristo. Fondamenti teologici* (3rd edn., Cinisello Balsamo [Mi], 2003), pp. 34–6.

⁵⁴ See Bunge’s penetrating comments on the connection between the notion of relation, personality, and face (*Vasi d’argilla*, pp. 10–12).

‘the resemblance to God caught on one’s face’.⁵⁵ On Athos I found the proof of what that great Orthodox theologian once wrote: ‘saints bear witness to God through mysterious action, they bear witness *through their looks*’.⁵⁶

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⁵⁵ P. Florenskij, *Le porte regali. Saggio sull'icona* (9th edn., It. tr. Milan, 2004), pp. 43–4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.