

Robert Marshall, Mt. Menoikeion

Journaling the main themes, 2016 — transcribed from paper

July 2—

Today I met the monastery after haven woken up from a nap, the kind of nap that is necessary in order to prevent motion sickness when ascending the winding roads. Yet that sleep was also a like a gentle teleportation from Thessaloniki to somewhere distant, hidden and vibrant. And alive at monastic pace.

Our first encounter with the sisters was a reminder that, though isolated, distant and antique, the monastery was a member of the Serres-region community: there was a baptism underway upon our arrive. We therefore took the back entrance. To the left was the green of the mountains, to the right the steep walls. Straight through, the door.

The few moments after first entering the monastery was like a teasing purgatory, for we men waited in the dark kitchen for the women to make their way through the monastery proper; we soon regrouped. We then proceeded to have greek coffee, slightly sweet, in a square room finished with antique icons painted on the ancient stone. This room—it had a calming smell and always seemed to allow more daylight to pour in than was physically possible—was half new too. In this sense, it was an apt metaphor for the monastery: tradition not tarnished by the modern, but enhanced.

July 3—

Liturgy: thus began the second day, and the theme of the seminar—sense and spirituality—was laid before me. To describe the monastery's Sunday morning service (and presumably many other Greek Orthodox services) would like trying to explain the color "red" to the profoundly blind. I can however report that from the narthex I witnessed an event—I can think of no noun more concrete than this without being dishonest in my presentation—that was the manifestation of spirituality at once raw and refined. The Greek chants of the sisters filled the stoney rooms of the church, and the incense replaced the air. To breathe in that holy odor was like being teleported to the pre-Constantinian Mediterranean arena, where Orthodox Christianity was but a sect among sects; where the total being of a Christian was lodged in that precarious existence. If the liturgy aimed to be redolent of Christianity past, it succeeded. If the liturgy aimed to invite reflection on what a devoted spiritual life might be like, it succeeded. If the icons and detailed depictions of what-is-to-come serve to prod one so to see their life as with respect to the eschaton, it succeeded at that too.

July 4—

The food was fresh, vegetables crisp. Most everything was grown and prepared by the sisters themselves. What wasn't prepared by them, was bought from families in the region. Each meal was had outside, on the loading port of the kitchen. There would be fresh coffee, sometimes tea.

July 5—

There are four altars in the main church—the main, ancient altar plus three secluded. Two were below, lying on the same plane as the buried corpses; the other above, under a small rotunda. This rotunda had recently been cleaned and was therefore a bright blue color. The walls featured

numerous icons, giving this small chapel a crowded feel. But the image of the chapel that I remember most vividly was as it appeared on this day moments before vespers. Flanking the main altar are two large icons, one depicting Christ and the other Madonna and Child. They are gold. But at that particular moment, they glowed too. For the sun was just rightly positioned so that, through the opening in the ceiling, its beams of light narrowly shined in, directly hitting the faces of these two icons. The church was otherwise only dimly lit, but here the gold of the sun gave life to the gold of the icon.

July 6—

The seminars were half presentation, half conversation. Sense and spirituality was the overarching theme governing the topics of each lecture. Topics included: wax, Cy Twombly, Plato, Hawthorne, incense, theater, and more. I presented on the Jesus Prayer on this day.

July 7—

We left today Would I return soon.