

it of course came the first motorized vehicles ever seen on Athos.²³ Such concessions to modernization were deeply shocking to many of the monks. And they were right to suspect that the trend would not stop there.

SEEDS OF RENEWAL

Numbers of monks continued to fall throughout the 1960s and it was only in the early 1970s that the trend was finally arrested. In 1972 the population rose from 1,145 to 1,146—not a spectacular increase, but nevertheless the first to be recorded since the turn of the century. Until the end of the century the upturn was maintained in most years and the official total in 2000 stood at just over 1,600. The following table shows the numbers for each monastery including novices and those living in the dependencies:

<i>Monastery</i>	1972	1976	1978	1980	1982	1986	1988	1990	1992	2000
Lavra	380	355	348	325	326	329	309	317	345	362
Vatopedi	71	65	60	54	50	48	55	50	75	142
Iviron	54	63	52	52	51	53	53	61	61	78
Chilandar	57	64	69	43	48	52	45	46	60	75
Dionysiou	42	37	35	54	56	59	59	59	50	58
Koutloumousiou	61	61	66	57	80	75	73	73	77	95
Pantokrator	80	71	63	63	62	69	57	66	50	70
Xeropotamou	30	26	22	47	46	37	38	40	34	40
Zographou	12	9	13	11	16	12	11	15	11	20
Dochiarion	14	13	11	32	29	31	31	32	32	27
Karakalou	28	16	13	18	20	16	16	19	26	37
Philotheou	28	80	81	63	66	79	82	79	74	70
Simonopetra	23	59	61	60	72	79	78	80	78	73
St Paul's	95	91	87	81	87	116	85	91	85	104
Stavronikita	37	35	43	40	41	40	40	28	33	45
Xenophontos	37	26	39	41	46	47	50	57	46	48
Grigoriou	22	40	57	63	71	62	72	70	77	86
Esphigmenou	38	49	41	35	48	38	40	42	56	101
Panteleimonos	22	29	30	30	31	23	32	35	40	53
Konstamonitou	16	17	16	22	29	20	26	30	27	26
Total	1,146	1,206	1,217	1,191	1,275	1,285	1,255	1,290	1,337	1,610

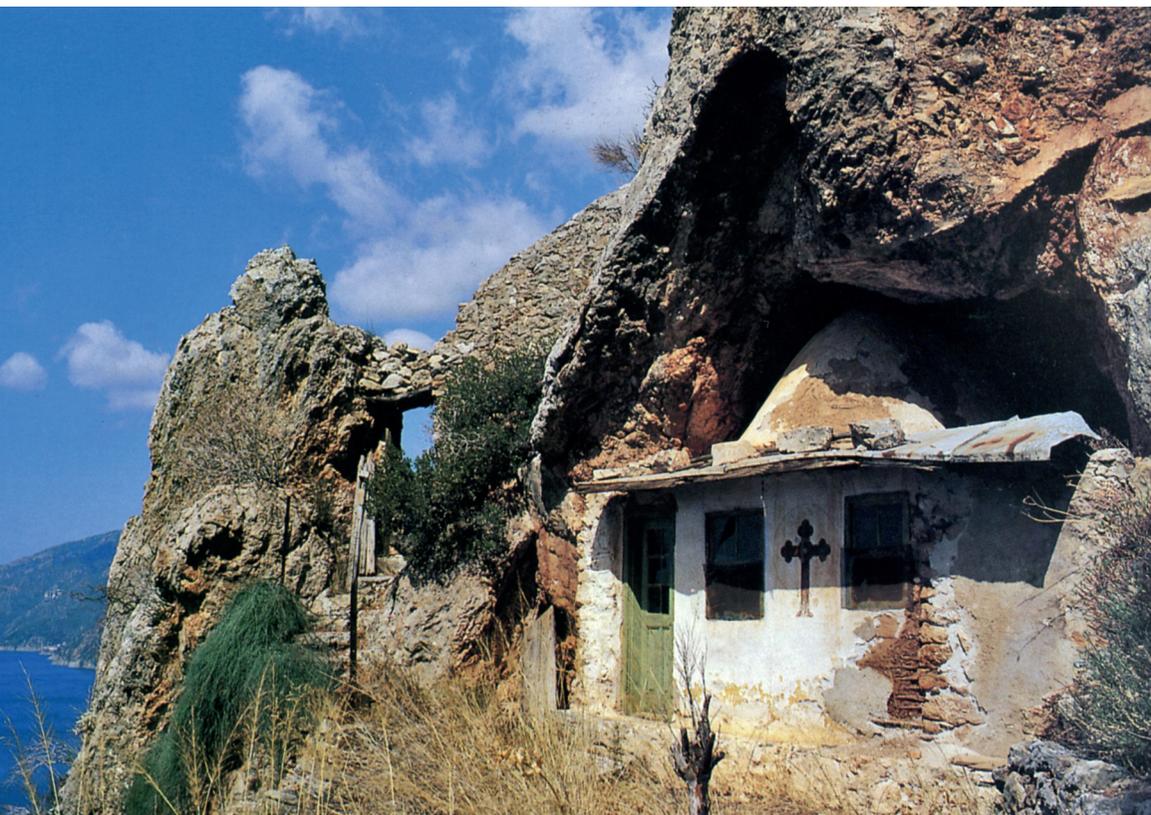
These figures tell us a great deal about the revival and we shall examine

²³ When Constantine Cavarnos visited Chilandar in 1958, however, he was informed by Fr Domitian, 'We now have a tractor, too. It was sent as a gift to our monastery by Premier Tito.' *Anchored in God*, p. 140.



43. The cell of Fr Sophrony near St Paul's monastery before its recent restoration. The great Russian elder lived here for only a few years during the Second World War but his memory was kept alive by means of some photographs and icons.

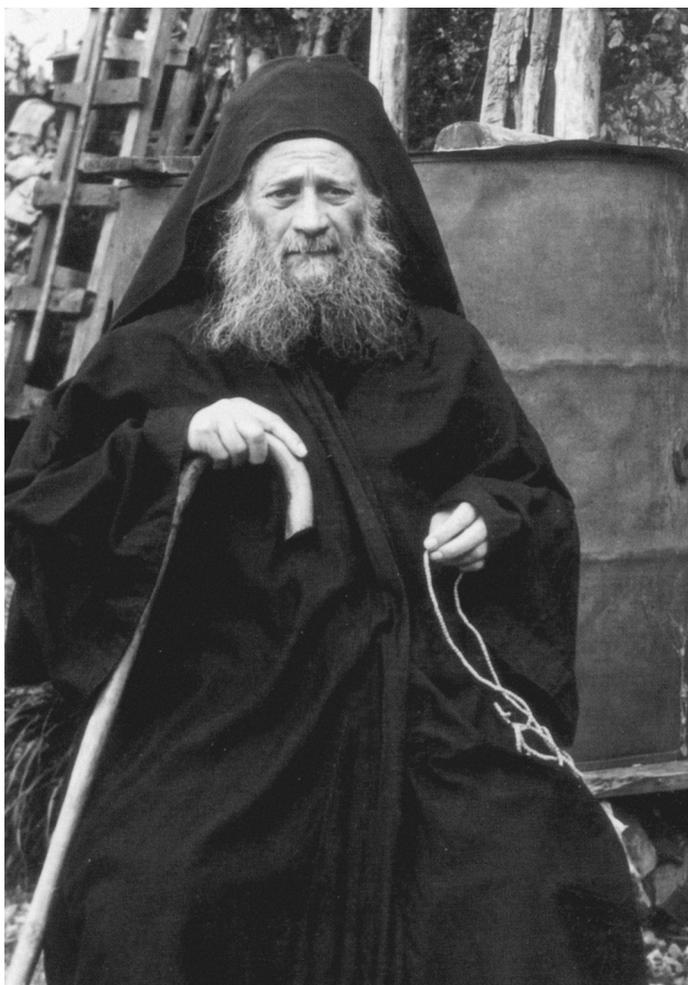
them in some detail shortly. But what they do not tell us is that the revival did not in fact start in the monasteries themselves but in the cells and hermitages, down at the southern tip of the peninsula, in the most inhospitable environment of all, the so-called desert of Athos. There in the middle decades of the twentieth century a number of gifted teachers and holy men took up residence, where many had been before for centuries, and they began gathering around them groups of disciples. While the monasteries were in some cases near to closing for lack of novices, places like New Skete were bursting with new life and new vocations. But one should be careful when using the word 'new' because really there was nothing new about it. It was the way the Mountain had always regenerated itself. Near St Paul's, for example, overlooking the sea and overhung by a sheer cliff, is the cell where the great Russian *starets* Fr Sophrony, whom we have already met as the disciple of St Silouan, lived during the Second World War. He is perhaps best remembered for having founded



45. The chapel of St John the Baptist at Little St Anne where Elder Joseph the Hesychast and his companion Fr Arsenios lived in caves from 1938 to 1951 after leaving St Basil. Even though they were short of space, from 1947 they were joined by a growing group of disciples.

the monastery of St John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights in Essex which is the most dynamic centre of Orthodox spirituality in Britain today. Fr Sophrony's cell was ruinous until recently, but it has now been restored and occupied by another ascetic.

During the 1950s a particularly dynamic brotherhood gathered around the renowned desert father Elder Joseph the Hesychast (also known as the Cave Dweller). After many years living in conditions of extreme privation at St Basil's, Elder Joseph had eventually settled at New Skete, where he earned fame as a teacher and spiritual father. His teaching was based on St Paul's injunction, 'Pray without ceasing' (1 Thess. 5: 17), and on the cultivation of inner stillness (*hesychia*) and prayer of the heart; and this was the direction followed by all the leaders of the recent Athonite revival. He died in 1959, but no fewer than six Athonite monasteries were revived by his spiritual children. These included



46. Elder Joseph the Hesychast shortly before his death in 1959. As a young man he had attached himself as a disciple to the Elder Daniel of Katounakia (1846–1929).

Fr Ephraim, subsequently to become abbot of Philotheou, Fr Charalambos, subsequently abbot of Dionysiou, and Elder Joseph of Vatopedi, who was one of the leading lights in the revival of that monastery.²⁴

Another figure worthy of special mention is Fr Vasileios Gontikakis. He had studied in Western Europe and had become aware of the more liberal approach to monasticism that had sprung up in the Roman tradition. By the 1960s he was living as a hermit in a cell attached to Vatopedi at the time when the monastery of Stavronikita was so short of monks that it was threatened with closure. When John Julius Norwich visited Stavronikita in 1964, he had found only eight monks, living a miserable existence according to the

²⁴ See especially the biography by Elder Joseph of Vatopedi, *Elder Joseph the Hesychast: Struggles—Experiences—Teachings* (Mount Athos, 1999).

idiorrhhythmic system. In 1968, when the site had actually been abandoned, the civil governor of the Mountain invited Fr Vasileios to take charge of the monastery. He accepted the invitation on condition that the monastery reverted to the cenobitic rule and that he was appointed abbot by the Holy Community. This was agreed, and with the approval of the ecumenical patriarch Fr Vasileios became abbot of Stavronikita later in 1968. He brought with him a group of disciples and together they revived the monastery. Fr Vasileios is author of many books, perhaps the best known being a study of liturgy and life in the Orthodox Church entitled *Hymn of Entry*. In his Foreword to the English edition Bishop Kallistos has written that it 'offers nothing less than a fresh vision of theology, the church and the world—a vision that is both original and yet genuinely traditional.'²⁵ 'Both original and genuinely traditional' are words that might be applied to the monastic revival that began at Stavronikita in 1968. Although Fr Vasileios later moved on to Iviron, the brotherhood at Stavronikita, as a result of his influence, is more intellectual than most and places a greater emphasis on academic study.

Two other monasteries were revived in 1973, as is indicated by the increase in numbers in the table above. Philotheou, like Stavronikita, had become very depleted in numbers and was still following the idiorrhhythmic way of life when Fr Ephraim from New Skete, a former disciple of Elder Joseph the Hesychast, was invited to become abbot and bring his group of disciples to repopulate the monastery. Archimandrite Ephraim has since moved to North America, where he has founded a great many monasteries in recent years. But his influence remains strong at Philotheou, where the brotherhood is regarded as strict and sees itself as upholding the purest form of Orthodoxy. This is the reason why they require non-Orthodox pilgrims to progress no further than the narthex during services in the katholikon and to wait until the monks have finished before eating in the refectory. Regulations of this sort would never have been imposed in the 1960s and are among the less attractive features of the recent revival.

The other monastery to enjoy revival in 1973 was Simonopetra, but its 'new blood' came not from within Athos but from Meteora in Thessaly. Cenobitic monasteries had flourished there since the fourteenth century, but as in other parts of mainland Greece they were unprotected from the scourge of tourism. In 1973 the monks of the monastery of the Transfiguration could bear it no longer. To a man, they packed their bags and decamped to Athos, together with their spiritual father, the charismatic Fr Aimilianos, to whom they were entirely devoted. The beetling heights of Simonopetra's location—quite the most spectacular of any Athonite house—have often been compared with the remarkable physical setting of the monks' previous abode. The monastery was soon full and, despite the addition of a new wing to accommodate more

²⁵ Archimandrite Vasileios, *Hymn of Entry* (New York, 1984), p. 9.

monks, there is a waiting list for novices. Spiritually and intellectually, this is the most dynamic community on the Mountain today. Several of the monks are theologians of international renown whose works may be read in many languages. The Simonopetra choir has played a major role in the revival of Byzantine chant and their disciplined voices have been recorded on numerous CDs.

The trend gathered pace. In July 1974 it was the turn of Grigoriou to receive an influx of monks from Euboea (Evia) led by Fr George Kapsanis, an academic theologian who had been a professor at the University of Athens. The next year another band of monks left New Skete, this time settling at Koutloumousiou with their elder, Fr Christodoulos. And in 1976 a second group migrated from Meteora, moving to Xenophontos under the leadership of Fr Alexios. In 1979 Dochiariou abandoned the idiorrhhythmic system and received an influx of young monks from off the Mountain. The next year, 1980, saw no fewer than four monasteries being revived. Both Xeropotamou and Konstamonitou received their new blood from Philotheou, whose numbers can be seen to drop from 81 to 63 in that year. Dionysiou also took in a group of new monks from within the Mountain, led by Fr Charalambos, another disciple of Elder Joseph the Hesychast. Most significant of all, the Lavra abandoned the idiorrhhythmic system on its own initiative.²⁶

DECLINE OF IDIORRHYTHMIC LIFE

By the start of the 1980s it had become evident that a revival was taking place.²⁷ But it was not simply a fact that numbers were rising again for the first time for many years. Far more important than sheer numbers were the changes taking place in the Athonite way of life. Most of the new recruits were young men; quite suddenly the majority of beards were black rather than white and the average age of monks was soon brought down to a much healthier level. Most of them also were well educated, and many were university graduates. This represented a marked change from the traditional community where the majority of monks had been drawn from a peasant background and had received little or no formal education. The newcomers were attracted by the presence on the Mountain of so many gifted and charismatic teachers and holy men, men such as Elder Joseph, Fr Ephraim, and Fr Vasileios. They came to sit at their feet and learn, but they also came to devote themselves to a life of service to God in strict obedience to their abbots. What appealed to them was the fully fledged

²⁶ See Hieromonk Alexander (Golitzin), *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁷ The first notice of the revival in English, so far as I am aware, was an article by Bishop Kallistos entitled 'Mount Athos Today' in *Christian*, 3:4 (1976), 322–33, followed by an article by Garth Fowden entitled 'The Orthodox Monastic Revival on Mount Athos' published in *The Times* on 8 January 1977.

monastic ideal of the cenobitic way of life in its purest, most hesychastic form. Not for them the *laissez-faire* lifestyle of the idiorrhhythmic houses.

During the 1980s several of the grander monasteries still clung to their idiorrhhythmic ways, and as long as this comfortable way of life remained a realistic option, the monks were resistant to change. But the fact was that, unlike their cenobitic neighbours, they were not receiving any novices at all; and the differences soon became apparent. Their earlier grandeur now gave way to a rather squalid decadence, and one by one they were forced to accept the inevitable demands of the newcomers and abandon the idiorrhhythmic life. As we have seen, the Lavra made the change, in name at least, as early as 1980; but it has to be said that the change was very slow to be implemented there. Many of the monks, while paying lip-service to the cenobitic ideal, continued much as before. As a result the community has not seen very much growth and the monastery still presents a somewhat sad and vacant appearance. By contrast, Vatopedi and Iviron, both of which made the change in 1990, have gone from strength to strength and are homes to exemplary cenobitic brotherhoods. Last, and most reluctant, to change was Pantokrator. In 1992 a new cenobitic brotherhood was introduced on the orders of the patriarchate and it too now bears all the hallmarks of a truly revived monastery.

Thus ended a system that had been in place intermittently on the Mountain for 700 years. Grudgingly given imperial sanction when the Byzantine empire was fighting for its life, the idiorrhhythmic system undoubtedly contributed to the survival of Athonite monasticism at crucial moments during the Tourkokratia. By the second half of the twentieth century, however, it had lost its appeal²⁸ and become unworkable. Scorned and rejected by a new generation of monks, the idiorrhhythmic system died a natural death in the monasteries and retreated to the sketes and cells to which it is best suited and where it flourishes alongside many of the humbler traditions of the ascetic way of life.

CONSEQUENCES OF GREEK MEMBERSHIP OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Greece joined the European Community (as it then was) in January 1981. The next two decades saw a transformation of Greece's economy, its domestic political system, and its standing in the world. The change was most evident in the countryside where living standards improved visibly, stemming the depopulation of rural areas. At the same time the position of the democratic government that had been in place since 1974 was stabilized and Greece acquired greater credibility in global affairs in general and among its Balkan

²⁸ But perhaps not universally. Sir Steven Runciman, President of the Friends of Mount Athos until his death in 2000, once told me that if he were to retire to an Athonite monastery he would have preferred it to be an idiorrhhythmic one.