



# THE MOUNTAIN of SILENCE

*A Search for Orthodox Spirituality*

"A fascinating narrative that is . . . dialogue and meditation,  
history and politics, theology and navelogic." —LOS ANGELES TIMES

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never bored during the long morning services. During them I participated in a form of collective prayer meditation that affected my "bodymind" and transformed my experience of time.

I returned to the monastery just before they were about to shut the outer gate. That night during vespers I kept my eyes fixed on the icon of the *Panagia*, the central sacred relic of the monastery, which is believed to have miraculous properties. In the darkness of the night, with only a few candles lit, the monks chanted hymns to the *Theodorokos* [Mother of God] while continuously crossing themselves and making endless prostrations in front of Her icon. They then kissed the icon one at a time. I followed them.

**Connie's note:** The "I" in this chapter is Kyriacos Markides, originally from the island of Cyprus and now a spiritually-seeking professor in the U.S. His spiritual search took him to a Greek peninsula named Mt Athos that has been home to dozens of Orthodox monasteries for more than 1,000 years. There, he met a young monk named Father Maximos, who became his spiritual mentor and teacher. *The Mountain of Silence* recounts his conversations with Father Maximos.

My role as chauffeur to Father Maximos paid rich dividends. Driving him around the island for his various errands was a unique opportunity to spend many hours alone with him exploring various aspects of Christian spirituality. Dionysios, a young theologian and a novice, complained to me half-jokingly that I had spent more time alone with Father Maximos in a few days than he had during an entire year. Being alone with the abbot outside the more formal context of spiritual counseling and confession was considered a great privilege. I was therefore fully ready and energized when he asked me whether I could drive him at four in the morning to Saint Anna, a women's monastery. It would take us two hours to get there through mountain roads and he wished to start his work with the sisters no later than six in the morning.

Once a week Father Maximos made the long trip to Saint Anna, spending the entire day with the nuns who had adopted him as their elder. During this time he saw each one of them individually, a process that usually took until nightfall.

We started our journey when the fathers, as Father Maximos referred to his monks, began reciting the Six Psalms (King David's Psalms) at ex-

actly four in the morning, as was the custom. The air was cool and the stars were still bright in the dark, clear sky above. I kept my eyes on the winding mountain road as Father Maximos sat next to me in his customary casual and unassuming way. We would be together for two hours without any distractions, except for the occasional hare racing in front of us, confused and frightened by the car lights. I lost no time in starting up a conversation about spiritual issues and pushed the button on my minirecorder, which I routinely kept on the dashboard.

I began by reminding him of the talk he had given a few days before to a group of pilgrims from Greece, which I found quite informative. But several questions had lingered in my mind that I didn't get a chance to ask during that encounter. Father Maximos responded that this would be a good time to raise them. He warned me, however, that he had no idea what he had talked about. On a different occasion he had explained to me that he never prepared for talks. He surrendered to the discretion of the Holy Spirit after praying for the particular event.

"You mentioned in your talk that Christians are misguided to assume that Christ taught that we should be unquestioning believers; that it was a mistake to believe that we should exert no effort in searching for evidence of the reality of God. What did you mean exactly?"

"Oh yes, now I recall. That would be a gross misunderstanding. In fact, Christ urged us to investigate the scriptures, to investigate, that is, God," Father Maximos responded as he remembered to buckle up. "God loves, you see, to be investigated by us humans."

"So," I continued while keeping my eyes firmly on the road, "when Christians recite the Creed, that does not imply that we should accept God's existence blindly without testing whether in fact God is a reality or an illusion."

"That is absolutely true. It would be foolish to do so."

"For an academic like myself your words are very comforting. But the immediate question that comes to my mind," I continued, "is that if God indeed urges us to be inquisitive, how are we then supposed to conduct our research? Are we to turn to science, to philosophy, or to theology as our starting point?"

I went on to elaborate further what was on my mind. Do we begin our search for God by observing nature? This was Aristotle's approach. By observing nature and by using his mighty logic, he concluded that there must be a Creator, an "unmoved Mover," a primal cause that set everything into motion. His four proofs for the existence of God became the foundation of Western theology after Saint Thomas Aquinas incorporated Aristotelian philosophy into theology.

I noticed a smile on Father Maximos's face. Avoiding a direct answer, he proceeded instead to raise further questions. "Let's make things simple.

Let's assume that we wish to investigate a natural phenomenon. As you very well know, in order to do so we need to employ the appropriate scientific methods. If we wish, for example, to study the galaxies, we need powerful telescopes and other such instruments. If we wish to examine the physical health of our hearts, then we need a stethoscope. Everything must be explored through a method appropriate to the subject under investigation. If we, therefore, wish to explore and get to know God, it would be a gross error to do so through our senses or with telescopes, seeking Him out in outer space. That would be utterly naive, don't you think?"

"Yes, if you put it this way," I replied. "Can we then conclude that for modern, rational human beings, metaphysical philosophy like that of Plato and Aristotle or rational theology is the appropriate method?" As I raised the question I thought I knew what Father Maximos's answer would be.

"It would be equally foolish and naive to seek God with our logic and intellect. But we have talked about this before, have we not?"

I nodded as Father Maximos continued. "Consider it axiomatic that God cannot be investigated through such approaches."

"So, Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics are not the way to know God."

"But of course not. That's the message given to us by all the elders and saints throughout history. Logic and reason cannot investigate and know that which is beyond logic and reason. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes. That's what the mystics have been saying time and again. That God cannot be talked about but must be experienced. But what does that mean? Does it mean that God cannot be studied?"

"No. We can and must study God, and we can reach God and get to know Him."

"But how?" I persisted.

Father Maximos paused for a few seconds. "Christ Himself revealed to us the method. He told us that not only are we capable of exploring God but we can also live with Him, become one with Him. And the organ by which we can achieve that is neither our senses nor our logic but our hearts."

Father Maximos reminded me while I strained my eyes on the narrow road that according to the tradition of the holy elders, a person's existential foundation is the heart. In addition to being the indispensable physical organ that keeps the body alive, he claimed, the heart is also the center of our psychonoetic powers, the center of our beingness, of our personhood. It is therefore through the heart that God reveals Himself to humanity. This is what the holy elders have taught throughout the ages, that God speaks to human beings only through the heart, the optical organ through which one can experience the vision of God. Therefore, those who yearn

to see God cannot possibly do so through other means such as by reading Plato and Aristotle or by doing science. Great as their philosophy might be, it is not the way to God. It is only the cleanliness and purity of the heart that can lead to the contemplation and vision of God. This is the meaning, Father Maximos argued, of Christ's Beatitude, "Blessed be the pure at heart for they shall see God."

"Do you understand what that means? Those who wish to investigate whether God exists must employ the appropriate methodology which is none other than the purification of the heart from egotistical passions and impurities. If people manage to cleanse their hearts and still fail to see God, then they are justified by concluding that indeed God is a lie, that He does not exist, that He is just a grand illusion. Such people can reject God in all sincerity by saying, 'I followed the method that the saints have given us and failed to find God. Therefore, God does not exist.'

"Don't you think we would be utterly misguided," Father Maximos continued, "if we believed in a God for whom there was no evidence of existence, a God that was utterly beyond our grasp, a God that remained silent, never communicating with us in any real and tangible way?"

"But that means," I concluded, "that most believers are in fact blind believers, or as you called them 'religious ideologists,' that is, they believe in the ideas about God that they themselves concocted that may have little to do with God. No wonder there are so many problems with religion, so much religious fanaticism."

"Can you imagine how foolish we would be," Father Maximos expanded, "and how foolish the hermits and saints would appear, to carry on with their spiritual struggles simply because they believed in an imaginary God, or an utterly unapproachable and distant God? That would not be serious. In fact, one could call it pathological."

"I have no doubt that most modern secular psychotherapists and psychiatrists would view the monastic, eremitic lifestyle as another form of psychopathology," I pointed out. Then in a more serious tone I asked: "Are we to assume that the philosophical quest for God, one of the central passions of the Western mind from Plato to Immanuel Kant and the great philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has in reality been off its mark?"

"Yes. Completely."

We remained quiet. Father Maximos gazed out the window as I became tense while driving over a narrow dirt road. I shifted to first gear and as the engine moaned we slowly began climbing a steep curve that was to link us with another road. The Troodos Mountains are crisscrossed by such dirt roads, created by the forest service. A prayer by a venerated holy man, I thought with some nervousness, would be most appropriate now.

Driving in the dark up an unpaved narrow passage at the edge of a precipice was definitely unlike cruising down Interstate 95 in Maine. But having Father Maximos sitting next to me gave me a feeling of reassurance. Heaven was watching.

"So, when during the liturgy we recite the prayer 'I believe in one God . . .,'" Father Maximos went on after I shifted to second gear, "we try in reality to move from an intellectual faith in God to the actual vision of God. Faith becomes Love itself. The Creed actually means 'I live in a union of love with God.' This is the path of the saints. Only then can we say that we are true Christians. This is the kind of faith that the saints possess as direct experience. Consequently they are unafraid of death, of war, of illness, or anything else of this world. They are beyond all worldly ambition, of money, fame, power, safety, and the like. Such persons transcend the idea of God and enter into the experience of God."

"But how many people can really know God that way?" I complained. "Well, as long as we do not know God experientially then we should at least realize that we are simply ideological believers," Father Maximos replied dryly. "The ideal and ultimate form of true faith means having direct experience of God as a living reality."

I went on to mention that experiencing God may be as "simple" as seeing God in the beauty and complexity of nature. Father Maximos agreed but pointed out, however, that the experience of God is something much more profound than that, impossible to pin down with words or poetical constructions.

"If this is true," I reasoned, "then the Creed within the Christian tradition does not mean what most people assume to be its message, that is, a blind faith in the idea of God."

"That's a popular fallacy with all its disastrous consequences. True faith means I live with God, I am one with God. I have come to know God and therefore I know that He truly is. God lives inside me and is victorious over death and I move forward with God. The entire methodology of the authentic Christian mystical tradition as articulated by the saints is to reach that stage where we become conscious of the reality of God within ourselves. Until we reach that point we simply remain stranded within the domain of ideas and not within the essence of Christian spirituality which is the direct communion with God."

There was an aura of authority around Father Maximos as he spoke those words. I felt that he spoke with the implicit assumption that he himself had had a taste of God, and that what he was telling me was not just the result of book learning and the assimilation within his mind of the spiritual tradition in which he found himself.

The morning light was beginning to break through the pine trees as I

noticed some snow on the ground, a leftover of winter. The monastery of Saint Anna's was on the western side of the Troodos Mountains toward Paphos and beyond the village of Prodromos. Therefore we first had to climb to a higher elevation, closer to the summit of Olympus where there is usually plenty of snow during the winter months, and then descend on the other side.

"My next question may be naive, but I need to ask it for the sake of clarity," I pointed out. "When you say 'we can see God,' you don't of course mean that we can see God as a person, with facial characteristics, as God is usually depicted in icons and religious paintings."

"Oh, that goes without saying. It is of course possible that under certain circumstances God may appear to us in the image of a human being. Of course, this has happened historically with the Incarnation. But God in His Essence is amorphous, beyond all images and anthropomorphic characterizations. He does not have a physiognomy. Yet at the same time God is a Person insofar as He has the possibility and power to commune with human beings on a personal basis. After all, that is why as the Christ Logos He came down to us in the flesh, fully God and fully Human.

"The spiritual methodology developed by the saints," Father Maximos explained, "aims at offering us the possibility of the direct vision of God. When that happens, as I have said many times, it is no longer a matter of belief in the existence of God but a direct recognition of the eternal and unbroken relationship that exists between God and humanity.

"And of course, the essence of that relationship," he added, "is Love, which first emanates from God to humans and then from humans to God. It may sound scandalous to some people, but the full flowering of that relationship is the attainment of a deeply erotic relationship with God that lies far beyond the most intense and the most passionate erotic rapture between human beings. That state of ecstasy is what Saint Maximos the Confessor called the *eros maniakos* [maniacal eros]. Do you know what I am speaking of?" Father Maximos asked and turned toward me with a quizzing look on his face.

"I am afraid I don't," I said softly. Having been blessed only with the experience of human *eros*, I could not possibly fathom what the *eros maniakos* might feel like. I could only imagine such a state intellectually. I could accept, for example, that all erotic relationships at all levels of intensity from the grossest to the most sublime are different manifestations of the all-consuming love of the absolute God. It is like the sun emanating its rays. Human *eros* is the experience of the rays. *Eros maniakos* must be the entrance into the sun itself.

I remember that when I first encountered that idea, my reaction was one of bafflement. How could Christian saints who deny *eros* in their per-

sonal lives establish an *eros maniakos* with God? Father Maximos's answer was simple. It is a matter of shifting your energy exclusively in the direction of God. Then through continuous prayer and spiritual practices something begins to happen within the consciousness of the praying person. One of his elders from Mount Athos described such a state in an autobiographical essay as follows:

When Grace is energized in the heart of the one who prays, then the love of God floods his entire being to such an extent that he may not be able to take more. Then this love is transferred to the love of the world and the human person. His love becomes so powerful that he asks to take upon himself all the suffering and unhappiness of the others so that they themselves may be relieved. He suffers with those who are in suffering even for the suffering of animals, so much so that he sheds bitter tears when he becomes aware of their pain. These are attributes of Love. But you must keep in mind that it is prayer that energizes them and causes them. That is why those who have advanced in the prayer never stop praying for the World.<sup>1</sup>

[When I returned to Maine, I discussed this notion with my artist friend Mike Lewis during one of our walks. He suggested that perhaps the experience of *eros maniakos* was best captured in stone by Bernini in his portrayal of the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, stabbed through the heart by an angel, symbolizing divine love. She surrendered in his arms in a state of ecstatic rapture.]

It was daylight by the time we reached Prodromos and began the descent on the western slope of the Troodos Mountains. The monastery of Saint Anna was now only a few miles away. As we continued our conversation on how to know God, Father Maximos claimed that whatever existential angst human beings may suffer from comes to an end once God manifests Himself in their hearts. Any doubts, questions, philosophical dilemmas, and puzzlement about God's existence that are "natural to the fallen state" simply evaporate with such direct contact. Fortunately, he said, the tradition of the saints survived through the centuries, showing us the method and the way to know God. The saints provided us with the tools to purify the heart from its illnesses so that it can experience the vision of God and attain its ultimate therapy.

After the split of humans from God, Father Maximos said, after the Fall, the heart was invaded by illnesses, the real meaning of original sin. We as human beings, by virtue of our humanity, carry as our inheritance these illnesses that are an integral part of our human condition. He then pointed out that the Christian Church, the *Ekklēsia*, must function and be

seen as a spiritual hospital for curing the maladies of the heart that obstruct our vision of God. And the *Ecclesia* has as a proof of its therapeutic efficacy the experience and the life of saints, those human beings who have, through arduous efforts, purified their hearts and were therefore able to heal the split between themselves and God. The Bible, Father Maximos claimed, would be inadequate by itself to lead us toward God. Without the experience and the testimony of the saints about the reality of God, the Bible would be an "empty letter."

When Father Maximos made these comments about the Bible, I realized how radically different his position about its value was from both religious fundamentalists as well as secular Bible scholars. The former confuse the letter for the truth, while the scholars focus exclusively on the Bible's historical accuracy, never tiring of unearthing contradiction after contradiction between the four gospels. But for Father Maximos the Bible had to be seen first and foremost as a tool, a guidebook on how to conduct our lives so that we may be helped to reestablish our connection with God. He once quoted John Romanides, his former American-born professor at the University of Thessaloniki, a celebrated and controversial theologian and an ordained priest, who gave the example that if you wish to evaluate the importance of a medical text on surgery, you don't give it to a group of butchers. You must send it to well-trained surgeons. They are the ones qualified to offer an expert's opinion. Likewise, the role of the Bible must be seen as a therapeutic tool to heal our existential alienation from God. And those who can offer an expert's opinion about its worth as a handbook for union with God are neither the fundamentalists nor the Bible historians, but the saints who have extensively put it to practice. Furthermore, Father Maximos added, the Bible by itself is not adequate as a guide to reach God. One must take into consideration the entire experience of the *Ecclesia*, the entire corpus of the spiritual tradition as articulated in the lives, aphorisms, homilies, spiritual methodologies, and written testimonies of the saints. And this tradition is being tested and retested by the experiences of the saints. The Russian Athonite elder Saint Silouan, one of Father Maximos's spiritual heroes, went as far as to claim that even if all the sacred books and written records of the Christian religion including the Bible were lost in a massive earthquake or fire, they could be rewritten because they are stored deep in the hearts of the saints and can be brought out anytime when conditions permit it.<sup>2</sup>

"I would like to know more about what you mean by the 'illnesses of the heart,'" I asked as I turned the last curve in the road. The monastery of Saint Anna appeared in front of us, surrounded by a thick forest of pine trees.

"That will have to wait for some other day, perhaps tomorrow," Father Maximos responded as I stopped the car outside the tall, weathered,

wooden gate. It was past six when I turned the engine off. A happy looking, black-dressed, elderly nun, the abbess, and two younger nuns who had been waiting for Father Maximos's arrival welcomed us with the usual warm hospitality as the rest of the nuns continued on with services that had begun at four in the morning.

As their elder, Father Maximos had set up a program of spiritual practices for the nuns that was identical to the one followed at the Panagia monastery. Spiritual work, Father Maximos told me once, requires a program which must be based on one's personal situation and capacities. A spiritual program for monks and nuns is different from a program for laypeople who live in the world and have to face the vicissitudes of everyday life. Even among monks and nuns there are idiosyncratic differences that an experienced elder must take into account when setting up their individual regimen of spiritual exercises. Too many exercises for too long a period at a time may lead, Father Maximos explained to me, to the complete abandonment of the struggle for union with and knowledge of God. In order to have results, what is important is that whatever the program might be, it should be followed diligently, never allowing any other activities or negligence to interfere with it.

Father Maximos spent the entire day, with a brief lunch break, seeing each nun individually for confession, counseling, and to monitor their program. I spent the day mostly in the library browsing through the books and taking long walks through the woods. During the afternoon Sister Athanasia, a former social worker from Athens, showed me around the monastery and the vegetable gardens that provided a big portion of the nuns' daily sustenance. As at the Panagia monastery, their food consisted mostly of vegetables, fruits, bread, and, on special occasions, fish.

It was not until eight-thirty in the evening that Father Maximos completed his work, a total of more than twelve hours of continuous counseling. Just before we were about to depart, all the nuns, happiness radiating from their faces, surrounded Father Maximos in the yard for a farewell. I will never forget that scene of adoration. It was as if they had in their midst a living saint. All of them escorted him to the car, carrying along packages of food and sweets that they made especially for their "brothers," the monks at the Panagia monastery. I was packing the food in the trunk when the abbess approached me and placed a book in my hand. She had heard that I was a professor studying Orthodox spirituality and wanted to offer me a small gift. "It will be useful for your work. You will like this book," she said. "It is about the extraordinary life of eldress Gabrielia." I briefly perused the newly published book, thanked her profusely, and then placed it in the back seat of the car. I promised to read it.

After Father Maximos blessed each one of them individually, we set off. A young nun opened the outer gate of the monastery for us to pass. As

I waved at her, Father Maximos turned toward me and murmured: "That's Rosa." I was ready to step on the brakes for a better look but he dissuaded me and signaled that I should move on. "She is fine now," he said.

It was about nine in the evening as we headed off for the two-hour drive back to the Panagia monastery. We remained mostly silent as we enjoyed the shadows created by the rising moon glittering through the pine trees. Father Maximos had talked all day long and I did not wish to burden him with my unquenchable appetite for questions and conversation. He needed a rest and he showed it.

There was no traffic, no other car, no soul in sight as we headed back. After a few casual remarks Father Maximos pulled a tape out of his briefcase and pressed it into the cassette player. For the next hour we listened to chants recorded at Simonopetra, one of the better known Athonite monasteries, famous for its Byzantine choir. But a few minutes after the tape stopped my heart rate shot up and all the soothing effect of the chants instantly evaporated.

"What on earth is going on?" I gasped, slamming on the brakes as we came face to face with a roadblock of armed men. Their powerful searchlight blinded me. The era of mountain guerrillas was long gone, I said to myself, thinking of the height of the armed rebellion against the British in the 1950s. "Who are these men?" I muttered. Father Maximos grabbed my arm and tried to soothe my anxiety. "Don't be afraid. It's nothing. I should have warned you."

Before he had time to explain, a rough looking fellow with a long, twisted, black mustache, a protruding belly, and a fearsome shotgun in his right hand pecked into the car, trying to get a better glimpse at us. "Father, it's you!" he exclaimed with an expansive smile, revealing a glittering golden tooth. My heartbeat went down to its normal tempo. "What on earth are you doing out here at this hour?"

"Good evening Pavlo," Father Maximos replied calmly. "I forgot to warn Kyriacos here that you fellows sometimes set up checkpoints."

Pavlos signaled to his companions and the searchlight was mercifully turned off. The others walked toward our car. When they discovered who sat next to me they extended their hands with eagerness and joy in their faces. The mountain "guerrillas" were rural constables guarding against night poachers going after hares. Not surprisingly they were also regular patrons of the monastery, with Father Maximos as their confessor.

"You got scared, didn't you?" Father Maximos said teasingly as we drove off.

"For a moment I did," I admitted. "It brought to mind so many painful memories of the past. There were plenty of armed guerrillas roaming around these mountains then."

The episode with the roadblock and the armed constables ended our

silence and got us talking about the ongoing, chronic problems with the Turks, problems triggered by the E.O.K.A. (National Organization of Cypriot Fighters) rebellion of the 1950s. It was interesting to me to notice that Father Maximos, unlike most of the people I met on the island and true to his Athonite training and tradition, showed no anxiety or worry whatsoever about Cyprus's unstable political impasse. To him, all troubles and difficulties that we confront, personal or social, must never lead us to bitterness and despair, but must be seen as opportunities for spiritual development. I on the other hand could see the political crisis only from my worldly vantage point and had difficulty refraining from indulging in bitter criticisms of political personalities and institutions that I considered responsible for the tragedy. And that nocturnal incident gave me the opportunity to bring out what was on my mind concerning the destructive political role of the local church and its higher clergy.

Unlike the island's clerical hierarchy, Father Maximos steered clear of local politics and focused exclusively on his spiritual mission. Politics are matters of this world, and Father Maximos, as an Athonite monk, was schooled and trained to direct his energies only on matters beyond this world and only on goals of everlasting value. Therefore, when I became animated as I reflected on the political situation during the last leg of our trip, I was the one who did most of the talking while he listened with admirable patience.

I lamented that Cyprus would have been different and perhaps more peaceful had the spirit of Athonite spirituality dominated the Cyprus church, particularly during those turbulent years of the 1950s. But, alas, there was none of that among the higher clergy. On the contrary, the then Archbishop Makarios ("the Blessed One"), ignoring Heaven completely, turned out to be more of a nationalist warrior than a man of God. For historical reasons that go back to the four centuries of Ottoman rule which preceded the British, the then archbishop was also the *Ethnarch*, the religious and national leader of the Greek Cypriots, an anachronistic and in retrospect destructive role reminiscent of the warrior popes of medieval Europe. As *Ethnarch* he led the *Enosis* movement with vigor but without any trace of the Gandhian spirit of nonviolent resistance. Worst of all, ignoring the essence of the Christian message, it was he who conspired to clandestinely bring to the island a Cypriot-born Greek colonel with a well-known violent past to set up E.O.K.A. and wage a guerrilla campaign against the British colonial government. It was a grim, corrupting legacy that opened a Pandora's box, poisoning the lives of generations of Cypriots.

I went on unleashing my critique about these matters not only because I was emotionally and academically entangled with the Cyprus problem, but also because I had a feeling that someday Father Maximos

might be called upon to play an important role on the island, perhaps more than he himself could imagine at the time. I felt that given his rising popularity among spiritual seekers, he could potentially shift the energy of the local church from its catastrophic and corrupt focus on power politics and wealth toward its ancient mystical roots of spiritual regeneration and healing. Perhaps, I thought, that is the reason why elder Paisios insisted on pushing him out of Mount Athos and back to Cyprus.

Just before we reached the monastery I wrapped up my long and non-spiritual monologue while Father Maximos tried to calm me down. He reminded me of how important it was to differentiate the *Ecclēsia*, the teachings, that is, of the saints and holy elders on how to know God from the personalities that compose the organizational structure of the worldly Church. Furthermore, he reminded me to take heart that nothing happens in the world outside of God's providential will, though it must forever remain a mystery to human reason.

It was past eleven when Father Maximos turned the six-inch-long, ancient iron key of the monastery's front door. The squeaky sound disrupted the total silence that prevailed at that hour. By three-thirty in the morning every member of the monastic community including visitors would wake up for the start of the *orthros*, the morning prayer service. Given our late arrival, Father Maximos urged me not to wake up so early and try to get my sleep.

Yet I could hardly fall asleep that night as the ideas we had discussed on how to know God kept dancing in my mind. So I decided to read the book that the abbess of Saint Anna had given me. Once I started, I could not put it down. It was about the life of an extraordinary Greek woman, a podiatrist, who practiced her profession in London during the Second World War. Following an inner calling, she traveled to India where for several years she took care of lepers. At the age of sixty she returned to Athens, became a nun, and soon developed a reputation as a charismatic elderess, similar to the reputation of contemporary elders like Paisios. Before falling asleep I jotted down one of elderess Gabriela's aphorisms relevant to the day's discussion with Father Maximos: "There is only one form of Education: to know and love God."

he following morning, after services, I reminded Father Maximos that our conversation on illnesses of the heart remained unfinished. Father Maximos reassured me that he had not forgotten and invited me to sit next to him on a bench outside his cell for a chat. While enjoying the warm rays of the sun, he went on in his customary, casual way to answer my questions. As we talked, the other monks went about their assigned tasks. Some worked in the kitchen, others labored in the vegetable gardens, some cleaned the church, and others worked with computers in the accounting office.

"The most basic illness that the holy elders talk about," Father Maximos began, "is ignorance. In their language, however, ignorance does not mean lack of the right kind of information or the right kind of intellectual knowledge. What they really mean is the heart's ignorance of God. And this lack of direct experience of God renders human beings incapable of knowing what it means to live apart from God. Consequently, they are not conscious of how abysmal their deprivation and predicament is."

"What you don't know you don't miss," I added. "I suppose it is analogous to people who are content to live in polluted cities. They are per-