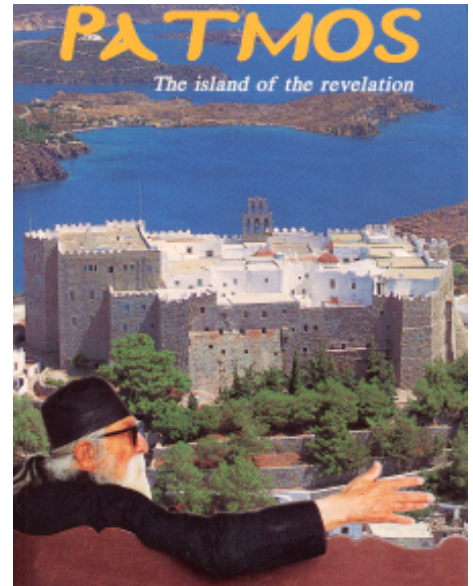


Taking time to discover timelessness

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As a college student, busily trying to master life by collecting information, I long ago had a "desert dialogue" with an elderly monk. He lived at the Greek Orthodox monastery at the Mount of Temptation, above the ruins of Old Jericho. It was there, tradition says, that Satan inflicted his three temptations upon Jesus Christ.



Our paradigms of the "spiritual life" collided. I came from the hectic, indulgent, swirling urban world. He spoke out of an asceticism practised for decades in an unchanging wilderness.

I'd been taught to commodify time -- "save it or lose it," "make it," "kill it" and even convert it into money. He was absorbed in sanctifying time in an endless cycle of daily prayer. I judged him. He discerned me. And ironically, as time has passed, what I once dismissed as irrelevance, has worked into my rule of life.

More recently, celebrating my 50th birthday, I answered "the call of the desert" by taking a personal pilgrimage to the holy island of Patmos.

The sliver of volcanic rock in the northeastern Aegean Sea has long been a destination for pilgrims, scholars and tourists seeking its peace. Visiting Patmos is a voyage through time. The fortress Monastery of St. John the Divine, dating from the 11th century, stands atop an ancient acropolis, where in antiquity the inhabitants paid homage to Artemis. Between the goddess's day and the monastery's, the site was occupied by a basilica dedicated to St. John.

In the Christian imagination, Patmos is a sacred space, where time and eternity once converged. Two millennia ago, an aged apostle, exiled there for his faith, received a vision that interpreted events in his time and depicted the end of time.

As a guest of Abbot Antipas, I was blessed to live in the monastery and join the life of its monks, centred in the centuries-old Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. To escape the West's temporal tyranny, my body and soul needed to adjust to a daily rhythm of prayers, from 3 a.m. to 9 p.m. I slipped into a quiet schedule of communal worship, solitary meditation, two daily meals with the monks, strolls in the villages of Hora and Skala, and visits with the islanders.

I slowly lost my sense of "measured time." The boundaries between minutes, hours and days evaporated. The monks' long, predawn periods of chanting found a timelessness in me (though I couldn't understand their Greek). Standing in a darkness broken only by flickering candles, the ancient song stilled my soul.

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I was drawn unexpectedly into a life review. Past seasons collapsed into epiphany moments, insights into the import of forgotten events. Reasons surfaced for unfulfilled longings, followed by hints of the future. I beheld a spiritual beauty and devotion unknown to much of the Christian West.

After mid-afternoon vespers, the monastery returned to an audible silence. Awaiting the return of the darkness where the day began, I sat pensively in the courtyard, studying the icons on the church walls. The saints' eyes stared out impassively, testifying to a transfigured existence beyond the confines of time and space. They'd entered eternal rest in a vast company of the faithful in a world of numinous light. They seemed to invite me to join them -- at least until the call to dinner.

Patmos itself was timeless. The parched hills, dropping into the sea, gave the impression nothing has ever changed.

On my last day, desiring a deeper bonding with the land, I hiked to the sandy beach of Psili Ammos, where some scholars believe the author of Revelation had his vision of the beast rising from the sea (Rev. 13). The deserted beach, bordered by jagged cliffs, was an inspiring setting for reading Revelation, itself a vision of history punctuated by timeless worship. The sunlight danced on the sea and brisk breezes whipped up into my face the fine golden sand, alluded to in the biblical text (Rev. 13:1).

Oblivious to passing time, I mused on the various endtime scenarios that might bring the consummation of our linear time -- while at the same time recalling the timelessness of the monks' morning prayers.

I now saw them for who they are. They are not antiquated relics of a bygone Christian empire. Rather, they are faithful witnesses to the timeless presence of a more mysterious reality. My days on Patmos confirmed there is indeed for everything a time and a season -- even for a personal journey from time into timelessness.

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