God's Silence and Its Icons: A Catholic's Experiences at Mount Athos and Mount Jamna

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This essay grows from a sense of bewilderment: A Catholic who encounters Orthodoxy starts wondering why there seems to be almost no room in contemporary Catholic spirituality for silence and isolation. Reliving two experiences, those of Mount Athos and Mount Jamna—the latter apparently a failed attempt by a Dominican monk to create a Catholic mount of solitude—I try to understand them from the perspective of an ordinary believer who happens to be familiar with philosophical language. Comparing the experience of silence at Athos, described in terms of an absence of Heideggerian dwelling, and Pascal's *divertissement*, with the much more ordinary life going on at Jamna, I seek to present them both using a theoretical scheme drawn from Plato that opposes participation, icons, and idols. Viewed through the incomplete metaphor that this scheme provides, Athos and Jamna emerge as two different realizations of an icon given to us by Christ himself, as human instruments, which we create to point to true participation in the Divine presence of the New Jerusalem. Though imperfect, they are still true icons because they lead to true sacramental participation while anticipating the transformative *θεωρία*, the view from the Mount which alters the one who has attained it. While similar in this respect, the two icons also differ deeply: whereas the Catholic experience tries to bring everyone into participation in the life of the New Jerusalem, the Orthodox Athos, in its silent uniqueness, testifies to a unique and ineffable transcendence.

Introduction

The image of the mountain is deeply embedded within our Christian way of speaking about human destiny. We would not be able to remove it from our language or our imagination, given its prominence in the New Testament. Christ chose to lead Peter, James, and John 'by themselves' to go to a 'high mountain', '*ὄρος ὑψηλὸν κατ' ἰδίαν*' (Mt 17:1, cf. NJB), in order to show them who He is. Then He died on a prominent rock—as tradition says, very close to the walls of the Jerusalem of his era. Pilgrims will forever see this place rising as a hill within the Mount of the Holy City, lower possibly only than the Temple Mount. Jerusalem herself, the Holy City topped with the Temple, raises her gaze above, in anticipation of the New Jerusalem, one which is to descend from Heaven, '*καταβαίνουσα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ*' (cf. Rev 21:2). In the religious imagery that we allow and use in our churches, we will always represent

some of the most important events of the Divine Economy as taking place on a mountain.

Nevertheless, a mountain cannot be perceived just as a static image, merely adorning our iconography. By the very nature of the fact that, while on this Earth, we are bound by gravity, when ascending a mountain, we strain our body much more than when walking on flat terrain. The long, steady effort of climbing is rewarded once we get to the summit. The satisfaction of achieving a difficult goal, the rest that brings calm to the heart, and the view that a mountain offers seem to encapsulate the teleology of human life. And naturally, the experience of climbing a mountain can hardly be removed from how we think of mountains, be they spoken of or represented. The image whose meaning is given to us in Revelation will be the very same image we learn through living it.

However, the living of it is not something that happens just as a matter of course. Even if a great many people want nowadays to reach the peak of the world at any price, most of us do not climb even much lower mountains every day, and many do not try it even once in their lives. Most summits are, for most days of the year, beautiful though empty places. Only one who is not afraid of staying alone, 'by himself', '*κατ' ἰδίαν*', and can be satisfied just by the view, the '*θέα*', will make the effort. Christians, however, do climb the mountains from time to time—even if, for reasons of convenience, the mountains on which various religious establishments are located are not usually the highest peaks. Catholics ascend their Calvaries (in southern Poland, these are seated on hills somewhat harder to climb than Jerusalem is). In the Eastern world, meanwhile, chapels and monasteries on mountaintops abound—much as Saint George's Cathedral crowns Ano Syros. We try to relive the experience of the Apostles and truly see, feel, and experience what they did.

I want here to tell a story of two such experiences, one in the East and one in the West, rather than theorizing about what mountains mean. First and foremost, this is probably what we need to do, given the nature of the image. Secondly, I do not feel authorized to offer any theological analysis of the meaning of the image of a mountain. As someone educated philosophically, who has spent much of his life studying texts of pagan Greek philosophers, I am, in matters of theology, a layman, and merely a simple believer. I do not feel competent to speak theologically about the vision at the top of the mountain, the *θέα* that makes possible *θεωρία*, contemplation of divine matters—one which those who escape to the solitude of mountains, or the solitude of the deserts, hope for, as I may have learned from my (mainly philosophical) encounter with Evagrius. I am hardly qualified, as a philosopher, to analyze any object, as Evagrius says, '*πρὸς τὸ ἀρχέτυπον βλέπων*'.[1] The path of a philosopher, in

[1] *Gnosticus* 50.1. All references to classical works are standard. I only give citations for quotations and less well-known texts from the tradition. Evagrius' *Gnosticus* is cited according to the edition *Le gnostique, ou À celui qui est devenu digne de la science. Édition critique des fragments grecs*, edited and translated by Antoine and Claire Guillaumont, Sources chrétiennes 356 (Paris: Cerf, 1989).

respect of knowing the archetype of all things, does not differ so much from the path of a simple Christian believer: I see and experience things of this world, and I have faith, hope, and possibly also, in my case, some theoretical conjectures, concerning the other world.

Still, I believe a voice like mine has a place in a volume like this stemming from a conference devoted to 'Una Sancta'—above all because the unity of the Church we hope for will have to descend to the level of ordinary believers and imbue their imaginations, their practices, and their everyday expression of faith. Next to being an ordinary believer, due to my philosophical interests, I have also had to delve somewhat into the intellectual history of the Christian East and West, experience their physical realities, and acquaint myself to some extent with their close, yet different, languages. As a philosopher, I can offer the services we philosophers are probably best at: those of a conscientious translator, careful when it comes to noting both similarities and differences.

As such, I need to start with a caveat. Before I lead readers to the two mountains to show what can be seen there, I must state what kind of view should not be looked or hoped for. For even if I cannot claim to know what Christian contemplation turns its gaze to, I can be certain that it is not the *θεωρία* devised by Pythagoras, who according to testimony preserved by Cicero, compared himself to those who 'came [to the Olympic games] in order to watch and observed with zeal'.[2] The name given to the parties sent by cities to the games, and to their members, was '*θεωρία*'. This name, even if not mentioned explicitly by Cicero in his Latin, is undoubtedly implied in the story which Cicero recounts after Plato's student and contemporary of Aristotle, Heraclides of Pontus. By then, the contemplation of truth in the invisible '*οὐσία ὄντως οὖσα*' and in the pure Forms had been presented by Plato in the myth of the *Phaedrus* as the way in which the souls are nourished through their intellect (*Phaedr*. 247c7–e1). Such contemplation was embraced by Aristotle as the activity of the First Mover, one which is by itself 'the sweetest and the best', and which makes it divine (*Metaph*. Λ7, 1072b22–26). Aristotle considered our theoretical activity as only akin to the perfection of divine theory. Yet, as he believed, it is thanks to this kind of intellectual activity that humans can share in happiness (EN 10.7, 1178b20–24). It is in *Protrepticus* that he says without hesitation that wisdom, *φρόνησις*, is the goal of human life, and that its practice is the path of a Pythagorean contemplation of nature (cf., esp., fr. B17–20 Düring).[3]

This natural contemplation cannot be one that is practiced on a mountain climbed by Christians. One should not even mention, in this context, Plotinus' creative con-

[2] Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* 5.9.8–9: 'sed visendi causa venirent studioseque perspicerent'. Text according to the edition Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*, ed. Max Pohlenz, fasc. 44 of *M. Tulli Ciceronis scripta quae manserunt omnia*, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana (Leipzig: Teubner, 1918).

[3] Edition in Ingemar Düring, *Aristotle's* Protrepticus: *An Attempt at Reconstruction* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1961).

templation, such as is discussed in *Ennead* 3.8. Firstly, the object of any such contemplation, or at least the *θεώρημα* produced in the mind, is a purely formal, purely abstract reality. Secondly, this contemplation relies on natural potentialities, either of human or of a divine intellect, or of the soul—or even, in Plotinus, of nature as such. Pagan philosophers affirm, through their theories of contemplation, that the nature of intellect is both most perfect and most divine, and that intellect is self-sufficient. Contemplation, as discussed by them, and even by Plotinus, is possible because there is, in their world, no gap between the natural and the supra-natural. The divine and the mortals are parts of one and the same world, in which there is no division between creation and Creator. We can contemplate, and thereby share in, divinity because we are, at least potentially, divine. The image of the mountain, embodied in Mount Tabor, in Golgotha, and in the Holy City, teaches us something to the contrary: we need to be elevated above ourselves. Let us go, then, at least in words, through two experiences of this image, one proper to the East, and one to the West.

The First Experience

The first experience I want to recall is that of a young non-Orthodox pilgrim on Mount Athos. It must be admitted, this experience differs a little from what Orthodox pilgrims can encounter at Athos, but for someone who speaks some Greek, it is not totally different. Undoubtedly, it is an experience of being overwhelmed by the vastness of the non-human space, in which it takes time and effort to climb, or descend, to a human settlement. For even if a monastery is located somewhere just above water, a poor pilgrim still needs to go back to the era in which travelling actually exacted a toll on the heart and the legs. In this sense, the entire peninsula of Akte deserves the name of a Mount.

It is also, truly, a Holy Mount. For a non-Orthodox pilgrim, perceived sometimes possibly as a weird tourist spending hours in the narthex, the entire place testifies to an unseen truth. The way of life of an ordinary monk must be considered absolutely pointless if a worldly measure is applied. Everyday non-Lenten food seems to a Catholic not different from what we call fasting. Early-morning coffee, replacing breakfast, gives hardly any nourishment for the toil of the day. Long liturgy is followed by long prayers. There is nothing to satisfy everyday needs. If there is any sense to the place, it must lie beyond this world. Yet there must be a point in living there, since the place exists and is even being expanded.

More important, however, is the experience of void. The latter is not immediately perceived—as with any true void, for what we perceive is always something. This void consists, first and foremost, in an absence of human activity. Nature has been left alone at Athos to do the things it usually does. Athos is not a place abandoned after some cataclysmic war, as some areas in Poland still are 70 years after the end

of World War II. It is not a desert. It is a place where humans have chosen to limit their most distinctively human form of activity—that which Martin Heidegger calls dwelling (*Wohnen*), which involves, inevitably, turning the world into our own image.[4] For even if, as Heidegger holds, dwelling, which is the most basic character of inextricably mortal human being, consists in preserving the world, it is impossible without building—that is, creating—'things'. Heidegger believes that it is through 'things' that the world unveils its essence (*Wesen*) to us. He is right to connect human nature with the relentless activity of producing large objects, without which we do not have what we call 'space': the reality we can inhabit. He is even possibly right in emphasizing the role of the *τέχνη*: in saying that it is through our art that we can receive the directives of what he calls the 'Fourfold' of sky, earth, divinities, and mortals, he encapsulates the very fact that our knowledge of things is mainly instrumental. As mortal bodily beings, we know best that which we can put to use, or at least turn into an object of our own operations and experiments, without which we would be lost in pure speculation. But in Heidegger's Fourfold, each component brings about another one: when sky, earth, and divinities rule our art, it is an art of mortal human beings. The things we make, and that he describes, are just like us: they are measured by the size of our bodies, comply with the requirements of our bodies, tend to the needs of our bodies, imitate the structures of our bodies through a maze of ducts and roads for carrying materials, food, energy, and networks of data cables—and, as such, are likewise vulnerable and mortal.

At Athos, all this effort to understand the world through indwelling—of dwelling in it by assimilating it to us, of interiorizing the 'divinity' of this world by bowing to our mortality, of awaiting the impossible salvation of mortal life that, it is hoped, the 'divinity' of the Fourfold will give us—seems to have been abandoned as pointless. The few human constructions—farms, fields—are reduced to the bare necessities. Humans have left the world of nature, as much as they could, untouched, alien, and thereby deprived of the senses we create when using it and giving names to our tools; they have left it silent, at least if silence means the absence of human speech.

This void with respect to dwelling, reshaping, rebuilding, imposing onto the world our short-term goals, is accompanied by a void with regard to *circenses*, games, circuses, and *divertissement*. In consequence, it is also a void as regards all the things described by Pascal as the efforts we undertake in order to divert ourselves from ourselves, seeking in this way an impossible happiness. All those efforts—be

[4] The remarks made in this paragraph are inspired by Heidegger's essay *Bauen Wohnen Denken*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), originally published in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske) 1954, 139–56. In the terminology adopted, I mainly follow the translation Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). The only divergence is my preference for 'unveiling essence' as a translation of *Wesen*, rather that Hofstadter's 'presencing'. The essay, based on Heidegger's lecture given on 5th August 1951 in Darmstadt, is short, and my remarks allude to claims made over the course of its entire unfolding. Even so, they relate in particular to his statements on pages 149 [145 in translation], 151–3 [147–9], 156 [152], 159–63 [155–58].

it a futile conversation, a pleasure, scientific inquiry focused on one's own self-aggrandizement, politics, or war—are mere manifestations of the human misery that consists in not knowing how to stay at rest in one room: '*ne savoir pas demeurer en repos dans une chambre*'.[5] At least in the era in which I visited Athos, just before the advent of any mobile-phone technology, there was not much to distract oneself from oneself.

Those two external voids face one with the inner void. The mind, liberated from things apparently important—that is, from problems we ourselves create and strive to resolve—cannot find much nourishment, except for silence. Having ascended Athos, one cannot hope for the fullness of Plato's contemplation, nourishing oneself directly from that Essence that Essentially Is. The Forms of Justice and Order do not shine directly on us. If a pilgrim is filled with something, it is overwhelming silence, which does really take over both the senses and the mind. The silence of Athos is a densely sensuous silence of eye-piercing sun, the noise of waves battling over the rocks, the cold stones of the churches, and the quiet effort of monks, in which a pilgrim may sometimes join. Thus, somewhat strangely, the void that philosophers love to call 'potentiality' is not a painful experience. It is the void of me as I experience a world that is larger than me and that fills me with its own void with respect to signs. I am overwhelmed with a reality that does not speak in a language but is just there.

Living in a world which, as Jean Baudrillard emphasizes in his last essays, cannot but produce meaning from nothing,[6] we may either painfully accept this silence or run away from it into the *divertissement* we create for ourselves. And if we accept it, this silence starts speaking to us about the One who is ineffable. I do not know whether we can hope here for a different contemplation, for a different direct vision from that of void. If there is more, anyway, it cannot be spoken about. Such speech, entangled in signs we produce for things of this world, could not but divert us from what we see.

Readers will surely understand me when I say that I was tempted never to leave Athos. It was a temptation, doubtlessly, because one cannot ascend a Holy Mountain without taking upon oneself one's cross. The burden of the sins we have committed,

[5] Blaise Pascal, Pensées, Fragment Divertissement n° 4 / 7 = Brunschvicg 139 = Lafuma 136; http://www.penseesdepascal.fr/Divertissement/Divertissement4-moderne.php. Cited according to the electronic scholarly edition of *Pensées* (Clermont-Ferrand: Pôle de Recherche et d'Enseignement Supérieur Clermont Université, 2011), http://www.penseesdepascal.fr.

[6] I have in mind here, in particular, Baudrillard's essays 'The Spirit of Terrorism' and 'Requiem for the Twin Towers', published in English together as *The Spirit of Terrorism, and, Requiem for the Twin Towers*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002). By contrasting apparently senseless acts of terror with the production of meaning, which is the main characteristic of what he calls 'the system'—the organized capitalist production of goods, meanings, and values that are created for and through those goods— Baudrillard shows the destructive act, aimed at overwhelming global power, as the only truly meaningful event. As a matter of fact, he views humans as creators of what we call 'sense', but this sense is merely a self-enclosed set of circular references. The only true meaning seems to emerge when someone shows the void that is this self-referential network of things and symbols.

or of the so-called 'social evil' we have succumbed to, cannot be left aside. Some people are called upon to assume it when going to Athos, while others need to carry it when walking the path of their lives, as if their entire life consisted in climbing a steep hill. I understood that I should not hope for a resolution of all my problems by escaping from them. A Holy Mountain is a place of seclusion, but it cannot be a refuge from oneself. It cannot be viewed as a *divertissement*.

Athos still stays in my mind as an image, possibly an image of things-to-come. It also remains there as a question: Why do not Catholics have their own Athos? Well, it is true that we have the order known as the Camaldolese: very few of their monasteries survive to this era, but those that do will not, I think, be shutting their doors soon, as there are always people wishing to spend their entire life in silence. The monastery of Bielany in Kraków, located at Srebrna Góra (Silver Mountain, Mons Argenteus), towers over the valley of the Vistula and, nowadays, over the airport, taking the highest part of a forested chain of hills that splits the western outskirts of the city. Well visible from the airport, from trains, and from the freeway, it reminds us of a different kind of life—but its inner life is much more closed to Catholics than is the inner life of Athos. For most practical purposes, in order to experience the absolute silence of the Mountain, we need to visit our Orthodox brothers.

The Second Experience

The Mountain we can experience is usually much less silent. Even when a place of seclusion is aimed for, strangely, quite a different reality emerges. The second experience I want to tell about is the experience of the recently established Dominican monastery at Mount Jamna. One can view it as one would a failed attempt to create a hermitage, or one can treat it as a true experience of a Holy Mountain, only of a different kind. As I want to focus on this experience, I will not illustrate my discussion with pictures of the place. It is not how things look like that I want to ponder over.

One thing, however, must be recounted, and this cannot be shown in pictures: there is an impression that the entire compound has grown in the pattern of a wildflower, sprouting new stalks where it is able and willing to. There is no particular logic to how the compound is established, except for two things: while the monastery itself is located on a steep hill, both the church and the Way of the Cross occupy even more elevated places. The monastery sits on a saddle between two even more prominent points, one of which makes one think of Mount Calvary, the other of the Temple Mount.

The history of this place is, besides, more important than its geography, and defines geography itself. Before World War Two, the village of Jamna, located on the hilltop, was much larger than it is now, even if, as nowadays, it was enclosed by forests. The Pre-Carpathian hills are lower at this place in southern Poland, just

south of Tarnów, than similar hills around Kraków. The latter, however, are densely populated, while the entire region of Pogórze Ciężkowickie, just north of the Little Beskids, still remains to a large extent woodland. It does take time and effort to reach the hilltop, even if the most taxing physical exertion is usually delegated to the engine of a car. The inhabitants of the village were massacred by the Nazis in 1944 on account of their support for partisans, and its population has never recovered. Jamna is a place of seclusion not because humans sacrificed a piece of their land, but because they destroyed its human way of life.

When this was happening, one family decided that God does not allow the harming of good people. The father took an icon of the Virgin Mary, and carrying it before him, led the entire family out of the carnage. As the local legend tells, German soldiers either did not see them or preferred not to notice them. Historians believe, however, that the family was killed. The icon they carried, a very simple image of the type printed in large numbers in the 1930s, is now located under the altar of the chapel of Saint Hyacinth House, the first building in the compound.

No other buildings were initially planned. While for all pilgrims the place is a monastery and a sanctuary, in terms of ecclesiastical law it is merely 'Saint Hyacinth Academic Pastoral Center', a dependency of the Dominican Monastery in faraway Poznań, and only two friars live there. They are helped by a number of lay people, and by some nuns from the Congregation of the Sisters of Merciful Jesus, who live in a separate building, the most remote in the compound. Indeed, the place, according to the intentions of the late Dominican who devised and established it, was to be devoted to spiritual retreats for the leaders of his youth ministry. As usual, however, this friar had other aims as well. Jan Góra, whose family name means, in Polish, 'Mountain', was a man of many talents and a forceful presence. Tens of thousands used to come to the celebrations he organized. Jamna was, for him, both a place to focus on God and a place from which Christ's message could be spread. It was also to be a kind of home, possibly for him, possibly for some of his dearest friends, where they could retire later on in their lives. He was proud that 'mountaineers gave a mountain to Fr. Mountain', and he developed the retreat into a sanctuary.

Thus, the compound has grown. Saint Hyacinth House is now surrounded by the blessed Czesław House, with a new kitchen and a new library, a 'café hut', an art gallery hut, living quarters with so-called 'Rector's rooms', another set of newer living quarters for friars and pilgrims, a stable for oxen, horses, and goats, two other houses for pilgrims, a wooden home for the nuns, and two open-walled huts for barbecuing. There is a flagpole, and there are multiple memorials, including a separate memorial and chapel for war remembrance and reconciliation at the location of the 1944 massacre. Rosary paths were created in the forests, and a rosary garden was built for those who do not like forests. A small chapel informally known as 'Our Lady of Skiers' sits above a steep slope descending to the compound. Most importantly, the densely forested hill on the northern part of the saddle in which

the compound sits became a Calvary, while the southern hilltop was crowned by a beautiful modern wooden church.

This church is the sanctuary of Our Lady of Infallible Hope. The church was preceded by the Icon it hosts. It was painted to commemorate the carnage of Jamna and the peasants who trusted in God. The Virgin Mary resembles a peasant girl, while the face of Jesus was inspired by a child whose mother died in childbirth . The Icon, remote in its simplicity from traditional Catholic painting, is revered as miraculous, in spite of being only some twenty years old.

There is only one building which remains empty. This building is the hermitage, a stone hut without electricity or running water, built in the forest close to the top of the Calvary hill. It was to be occupied by Father Góra. No one spends any time there, even if invitations are frequently extended. Apparently, no one feels a need to live in a true *σκήτη*. This kind of life does not fit the two modes in which Jamna functions.

If a pilgrim comes there on a festive day, even on an ordinary Sunday, he or she may be shocked how many people are there. Groups and individuals, tourists and pilgrims, march all over the place in large flocks, absent only from the thickly wooded paths outside the compound. The carpark fills with cars, and the church with local people from across the entire region who, apparently, prefer the mass at Jamna to that celebrated in their own parish churches. While the church has no organ or choir, there is usually a musical group there to sing. And this festive atmosphere culminates in large commemorations, gatherings, even a yearly ball.

Still, what most people come there for is the liturgy. One flock comes for the main liturgy, sometimes known as the 'liturgy according to Jan Góra'. To be sure, this is a liturgy celebrated according to the new rite and, measured by the standards of Western Europe, free of any excesses. For the critics, it sounds noisy and seems infantile. Many gestures are exaggerated. The communal aspect is emphasized, or even overemphasized, through a long improvised Prayer of the Faithful and a Sign of Peace in the form of an all-inclusive human chain. Such gestures are not unknown to anyone familiar with various Catholic communities and brotherhoods. The main difference is that at Jamna all of the faithful are invited into the community, with the energy of celebration simply coming across as utterly sincere.

Another flock comes in the afternoon, to the Extraordinary Rite, the Tridentine Liturgy celebrated with all due diligence, and accompanied by Gregorian chant performed by a professional cantor. The very strict practice of this liturgy, paralleled by the very strict practicing of pre-Tridentine Dominican liturgy on weekdays, shows the faithful clearly what the only thing is that matters in this liturgy: giving praise to, and showing reverence for, the Trinity. Here, there is no room for innovation, for an exaggerated gesture, or for an omitted gesture. The cantor proceeds in parallel with the liturgy already delivered by the priest, while the priest waits quietly, with no organ music and no peri-liturgical hymns or chants, so that throughout the

time when the priest is praying *secreto* there is no sound whatsoever to be heard in the church, making this celebration a celebration of silence.

The non-festive mode is that which Jamna lives most of its time. Not so many people happen to experience it, though. The entwining of prayer and work, known to anyone who has witnessed a typical day's arrangement in Catholic Orders, is modified a little at Jamna, as the Mass is said in the evening, together with Vespers, to allow occasional pilgrims to participate. The life of the Liturgy of the Hours, with common meals for all inhabitants that bring together friars, nuns, lay workers, lay volunteers and guests, and that interrupt otherwise incessant daily duties and errands, have, apparently, nothing special about them, and are, as everywhere, mixed with challenges and sorrow. Still, for a pilgrim, the place seems strangely happy. This is because the burden of life can somehow be felt there to be lighter. This burden is not lighter by itself, but it feels easier to carry. One can see there more clearly that this burden is not everything we can have. There is, every day, some time set aside for anticipation of the life to come, celebrated together, but also revered in silence, as everyone has time for silent prayer and Eucharistic adoration. The pilgrim feels invited to this prayer and is shown, just through example, that the time of silence, prayer and adoration is not time lost.

Undoubtedly, on weekdays, one has the impression that Jamna is secluded from the world. The world comes to visit it, and its caretakers need to visit the world, but Jamna lives a life of its own. No matters of church, society, and politics disappear there, are passed over silence, or are even distant. If there is a distance at Jamna, it is different from the physical sort: it is the distance of warm irony. All matters human just seem less important there, because what matters is our true aim and the path we walk, the path which is our Lord himself.

If a pilgrim ascends Mount Jamna and takes the time to look around and see beyond the beautiful landscapes, what they will see is this truth: that our life, by its very nature, moves us beyond this reality. Life, in all its exaltations, pains, and sorrows, can be lived only because it begins rather than ends. Life can be lived, in spite of exaltations, pains, and sorrows, because Christ is Life, now and forever. Life can be lived because He is present, tacitly, when we invite Him to live with us. This is the view that Jamna gives to someone who ascends it. This is the *θεωρία* and the contemplation that we encounter as a gift for us to receive when we go there: a *θεωρία* in anticipation, a contemplation of things to come which we now know only in faith.

A Contemplation: Two Icons

One may wonder whether the way the monastery at Jamna has grown, abandoning its hermitage, testifies to the impossibility of establishing, in contemporary Catholicism, a true place of seclusion. No answer to this question, however, can even be proposed if we do not understand what actually occurred during its short history.

Coming to an understanding of such a mixture of matters human and divine is no easy task to complete. In trying to accomplish this, I will propose something which might be dubbed a 'conceptual scheme', but is probably closer to what Byzantine authors, like Saint Maximus the Confessor, would have called a *θεωρία*: an interpretation of matters of faith, expressed in human language that has, at least in part, been borrowed from what philosophers have offered up as a theory of human affairs. I must emphasize that once this small 'contemplation' is completed, the question of whether or not the story of Jamna is one of failure may emerge as unwarranted.

The conceptual scheme I would like to have recourse to is one of Plato's, and not foreign to ecclesiastical tradition. I want to apply it in its original Platonic arrangement. In *Republic* 10, Plato opposes Forms of things, established by the Divine Gardener, or Father of Nature, to things themselves and their images and imitations (*Resp*. 10.1–2, 596a10–597e2). Forms are true realities of what things are, but things, both those that emerge by nature and those which are created by humans, are not 'false' or 'untrue'. They are truly what they are thanks to the relationship of participation: a form is partially, yet truly, present in an object.[7] Images, imitations, and idols only pretend to be what they are, and are usually made by humans as similar to things rather than to Forms. The difference between things and their images is, however, not merely one of degrees of similarity. If one considers other texts by Plato, such as the *Phaedo* or the *Cratylus*, one realizes that participation and similarity are one and the same thing. According to the *Cratylus*, if things are so similar that they do not differ at all, they are one and the same thing.[8] In the very same Book 10 of the *Republic*, mentioned just above, Plato argues for the unity of Forms, claiming that there can only be one Form for each thing (*Resp*. 10.2, 597c1–d4). It is so because a Form, in its pure essentiality, is precisely that which is the determining factor in and of something, one which makes it such and such, and in so doing makes it precisely as it is. Therefore, a Form simply does not differ from the very reality that is being such and such a Form. 'Being bed' is only one and always identical with itself.

Thus being merely similar, and not identical, is what distinguishes things from Forms in the *Phaedo*. Ostensibly, this is also what distinguishes images from things—as one might conclude somewhat hastily from various passages of *Republic* 10. Images, however, are not merely cases of imperfect similarity to Forms. The way that similarity works in them creates only the apparent presence of the Form. They do not fully participate in a Form, they are not in-formed so as to be something, but they are sufficiently similar to remind us of that thing and its Form. As such, they can show us what a thing is, and be an *εἰκών* – that is, an image or a simile. They

[7] The bed that a craftsman makes is not 'that which bed is' and is something 'dim with respect to truth', yet it still deserves the name of 'some bed'. Cf. *Resp*. 10.2, 597a2–11.

[8] Cf. *Crat*. 432a8– d3 and *Phaedo* 74c11–e5.

may pretend to be something else and be a *μίμημα*. Ultimately, they may cheat us, pretending and deceiving us about what they are. These are *εἴδωλα*.[9]

This Platonic construal of the distinction between the thing itself, the icon, and the idol can also be applied, to an extent, to the case of both Mounts. Obviously, the Platonic distinction has no direct relevance for divine matters. We can make use of the scheme through a metaphorical movement involving an incomplete metaphor, in which one term can be known, but another is impossible to be directly spoken of. Such a metaphor speaks more about the *terminus comparationis* than about its true reference. What it says about the true object is, however, not tantamount to pure verbiage. So far as the proper object of the metaphorical language has been recognized as related to what we can experience directly, the conceptual scheme that *terminus comparationis* involves makes it possible to utter claims about realities which are, by their nature, absolutely unique, not known directly, or veiled in and by what we can easily know and experience.

Such a veiled reality is Divine presence. We express our hope of coming face to face with this presence in our efforts ascending the Mountain. Facing this presence, experiencing it, is what we look for in the metaphor of *θέα*, the vision that we acquire as we climb. Our *θεωρία*, then, is our state, pertaining to mind, senses, emotions, and will, as we interiorize this *θέα* and let it change us. *Θεωρία* thus requires the true presence and givenness of its object. Givenness, however, is not mere external presence, 'next to us'. What gives itself to us needs to transcend the boundary between things. In the physical world, this transcendence is both ordinary and mysterious: it is the presence of the same forms, repeated in the air as sound waves, repeated in space as electromagnetic waves of light. The name for this presence—both ordinary and mysterious—of identity across different media and across matter comes from Plato: it is participation.

What we hope for, thus, in ascending a Holy Mount, is participation, not in the light and sounds of the world, which a mountain-top allows for, but in Divine presence. And while God is veiled, His presence is not. We believe, both in the East and in the West, that there is such true presence and that it was granted to us in the Sacraments. Sacraments are true Divine presence in this world, and can be accounted for, however imperfectly, in terms of participation. In turn, a simile of this presence, if not misleading, can be called an icon, but if misleading, an idol.

'Misleading' is an important word here, for the distinction between an icon and an idol is not a matter of degree of similarity. We make both of them as similar to a true Form, and both are created when participation is less essential or impossible to achieve. Something is thus an idol if it turns us away from the truth. Deception and misguidance, one should remember, are more important than just inaccuracy in

[9] Cf., e.g., *Soph*. 265b1–2 as opposed to 235d6–36b3; and *Resp*. 2.20, 382a1–c5, 10.2, 598b1–8.

what in Greek is called *ψεῦδος*, for we always speak in an imperfect and inaccurate way but do not thereby have to lead our interlocutors astray.

Undoubtedly, this way of defining the words 'icon' and 'idol' differs from the definitions of Christian theology. I hope, however, that it does not distort the theological usage too much, while allowing one to look for icons made by humans not merely in pictorial material. And one can easily see, in Mount Athos and Mount Jamna, these kinds of icon. A pilgrim's experience is, in itself, a kind of depiction of the things to come, of the transformative *θεωρία* we may hope for once we leave this world.

Some of the simplest elements of both depictions are, by the very nature of the image, similar. We need to depart, at least to a degree, from the everyday course of our efforts. We come to be separated, at the top, from our temporal concerns. Both Mountains offer the pilgrim a degree of seclusion from those concerns. Alongside that, both Mountains show how those unescapable concerns need to be lived: as a part of a path that leads upwards. And what we find at the top of the Mountains, possibly unregistered by those who actually live there, is a human icon of the New Jerusalem—of the reality to come and the fullness of life that awaits us there.

Mount Athos, through the radical abandonment of *divertissement*, brings pilgrims to themselves. Through the abandonment of dwelling, of producing signs, creating sense, and marking spaces, it leaves the pilgrim, who cannot but focus on what is important, focused on absence and silence. Absence and silence speak, in turn, about what cannot be spoken of. It is the only way we can speak about the existence of the ultimate Mystery we are to see, about the light of the Lamb that shines in the New Jerusalem. Such an icon, in the simplicity of its silence, does not allow anything else to be spoken of.

In Jamna, a pilgrim encounters two visible icons, and also one that is still more important but invisible. The visible icons, the mountains over the Mountain, depict the Calvary and the Mount of Transfiguration. The Calvary at Jamna is not particularly different from other Catholic Calvaries, with maybe one exception: leading him or her through a dense forest, it gives the pilgrim the idea that the Way of the Cross is not just a painful experience, but one of feeling alone and abandoned.

On the other hilltop, the pilgrim encounters Christ in the Eucharist. The manner in which the liturgy is celebrated makes it clear that things that happen every day in every church are miracles greater than all kinds of religious wonders we hope for. People go to this church to avoid the grim experience of priests rushing their way through the liturgy, passing quickly through the greatest mystery that has been given to us, in order to finish the mass on time and apply their due diligence to parish announcements. Someone who comes to Jamna is told by the gestures, attitudes, and diction there that what is happening in the moment of Transubstantiation is actually the most important part of the Catholic Liturgy. Faith in the real presence of our Lord in front of us and in us is, simply, not at all undermined by the physicality

of the celebration, by the physical icon—one created by the manner in which the liturgy is focused on and celebrated. For someone looking from outside, the fact that two liturgies, the new one and the old, have to find a frequently uneasy cohabitation at Jamna, speaks most eloquently: the Lord's feasts with his disciples, truly celebrated in the 'liturgy according to Jan Góra', is completed by the silent celebration of the Mystery present in this feast. While liturgies celebrated with dignity and faith can be experienced in a number of places in the reality of Polish popular Catholicism, this strange connecting up of the best of the new and the old in the observance of the greatest Mystery that we encounter on Earth makes Jamna an accidental, or possibly a providential, icon of reverence.

As a whole, however, Jamna is the icon of the Life to come. This life is to be a fullness of community, a fullness of celebration, and a fullness of the Lord's presence. Its fullness is not merely imitated by the festivities and the gatherings. It is truly depicted in the experience of pilgrims, because all that depiction surrounds and leads to the most important experience: that of participation. Participation which is true yet comes in a veil seems to be in need of an image, and it makes this image an icon of truth.

Jamna is not a failed attempt to create a place of seclusion. It is a true, even if imperfect, icon of things to come. It is not mere chance that has shaped it: the needs of people that live around it and the needs of the time have given a peculiar shape to the Christian icon of the Mountain. No less true is the icon that Athos gives us. Hence, just as the reality to come is unique, so is this icon made of silence yet animated internally and invisibly for many pilgrims by prayer and the Eucharist. It is as unique as the truth it expresses is one and simple. Jamna is in many ways different: it is a truly catholic icon, for it tries to welcome and teach everyone, conforming to the needs of those who come and showing them where they should turn their gaze. Both Mounts are icons of *θεωρία* to come, and both are its anticipations, for they give a place to true participation in what is to come. So long as they remain focused on making room for this true participation, so long as they are instruments that winnow out all that diverts us from this true participation, there can be no danger of them becoming idols, revered in themselves as cultural symbols of Christianity. Yet the two Mounts are also deeply different, thereby testifying to the imperfection of all images and icons we make, even if the type of the icon of the Mountain was given to us by the Lord himself. And indeed, it does seem very difficult for us to preserve in one place, in one spirituality, and in one liturgy, the two apparent extremes: both the fullness and the ineffability of the Life to come.