

Incongruent or The Burden of Bread

Incongruent. That's a term I first encountered in a high school geometry class. It means something like, "things don't line up," or "this doesn't make sense."

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A monk with streaks of gray in his beard peered into the dim red glow of an ancient woodfired brick oven in this Greek Orthodox monastery on the slope of Mount Athos. Huge round loaves of bread were browning perfectly. When Father Kallinikos turned to greet the three of us, we found ourselves in the beam of his headlamp, the kind of modern LED light a well-equipped backpacker would use. A remote digital thermometer monitored the temperature in an oven stoked by a man in an alb and apron. He asked us to join him in prayer as he prepared the next batch of dough for baking. Artisanal bread baked in this remote monastery on peninsula where only men are allowed is shipped to a mission in bustling Thessaloniki to be sold at exorbitant prices to wealthy housewives and indulgent urbanites to generate revenue to support the reclusive monks of Mount Athos. Anachronistic? Incongruent?

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We were on a seven-day pilgrimage hike on the Holy Mountain, a rugged spine of land eight miles wide jutting 35 miles southward from the mainland of eastern Greece into the Aegean Sea. The peak of Mount Athos, or Agios Athos as it is called by the Greeks, was obscured by clouds. What was it that had drawn us to the Holy Mountain where eighteen active Greek Orthodox monasteries persist among the ruins of nearly 200 sites once occupied by as many as 2000 monks?

Folded in my pocket was my diamonitirion, a permit issued in the Ecclesiastical Office in Ouranoupoli and required of all pilgrims who board the ferry that provides the sole access to the Holy Mountain. Only 110 pilgrims, all men, are permitted to arrive on the Holy Mountain each day, and of this number, only 10 visitors may be non-Orthodox. No women or children are allowed, nor are females of any species except wild birds and cats.

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“Have you had a metaphysical experience?” the guest master bluntly asked when we arrived at Vatopedi Monastery.

The question caught me unprepared. Not expecting an affirmative response from my two hiking companions, I replied optimistically “Not yet!” There was still time.

“What is your confession?” he asked as he reviewed our diamonitiria.

“Catholic,” I replied, unsure if this was what he was asking, and unsure if I am still a Roman Catholic now after two years of avoiding Mass.

“It says here you are Protestant,” he said, pointing to a line of Greek letters, undecipherable to me on the diamonatirion.

“I was a Protestant until I married a Catholic and then I became a Catholic. Is that OK?”

“That is not a problem,” he smiled reassuringly.

My companions, both Protestants, at least on paper, were listening. Obviously, we were not Orthodox. Nor were we typical pilgrims who are short thick men 50 to 60 years old with olive skin, dark hair, and stubby fingers on meaty hands. Those pilgrims wore comfortable casual leather shoes, slacks or jeans, shirts with buttons, and a light jacket. A few pilgrims were in their thirties and forties, not yet rotund nor receding. Nearly all pilgrims had arrived at Vatopedi much earlier by bus, a 30-minute ride from Karyes, the administrative capital situated centrally on the peninsula. Upon entering the *arhontariki* (the guest house) they had been given the traditional welcome; a glass of water, a shot of raki (an alcoholic spirit strong enough to evoke visions), a tiny cup of Greek coffee, and a cube of Turkish delight dusted with confectionary sugar. The three of us arrived too late for these amenities after a 6-hour hike from Karyes along narrow footpaths through the mountain forests. We stood before the guest master, faces grimy, shoulders sore from bearing backpacks, shirts and pants sweat-soaked and smelly, hiking boots dusty from the trail. No doubt about it. We were not the usual pilgrims. Un-orthodox.

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I had studied those typical pilgrims during our nearly two-hour ferry trip from Ouranopoli to Daphne. In looks and demeanor, they were ordinary men. Some were boisterous and animated, gesturing and laughing as they argued about some issue or engaged in banter with their fellow travelers. Others sat in quiet contemplation. Some sipped Amstel beer from bright red and yellow cans. Others nodded off, succumbing to serenity of the warm air and the bright June sun and blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea. What had they in common? Was it a desire to escape the toil of everyday life and the stress of work and family? Were they seeking a spiritual experience, rejuvenation, rededication, rest, relaxation? Most gathered at the railings as monasteries came into view along the coastline. I joined them there. Together we politely jostled for good camera angles, they with their point-and-shoots and me with my bulky SLR with interchangeable lenses. Maybe we were seeking similar things, similar experiences, though by different means.

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The guest master at Vatopedi continued his gentle questioning. “Is this your first visit to Holy Mountain?”

“Yes,” we replied in unison.

“And what are your names and occupations?”

“I’m Peter Schmunk,” my colleague began. Peter had organized this trip. He explained that all three of us are professors at Wofford College, a small liberal arts college of about 1350 students in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

“Where is South Carolina?” the monk inquired.

“In the southeastern United States, near Atlanta,” Peter said.

“Ah, close to Florida,” the monk guessed.

“Yes,” Peter said. He continued the introduction by stating that he is a professor of art history with a strong interest in Renaissance art, especially painting and architecture. He teaches a variety of courses in Art History and has recently grown more fascinated with Byzantine art. He has long known that the Mount Athos peninsula, recently designated as a World Heritage Site, is a fabulous repository of Byzantine fresco and icon paintings and has seen pictures and read descriptions of

the buildings comprising the monasteries and hermitages. He explained that all three of us share a love of art, a passion for photography, and a fondness for outdoor adventure. We expect this pilgrimage hike to allow us to simultaneously enjoy all those things while learning more about the Orthodox faith and monastic life. Nearly all pilgrims travel by bus on dirt roads to visit a series of monasteries. Peter described our intent to hike the trails that weave across ridges and through ravines, connecting the monasteries where he had made reservations for us months in advance.

“I was chemist for most of my career,” added Dave Whisnant “but now I’m an administrator responsible for computers at the college.” Dave is 65 years old and worries that the limitations of his aging body may soon prevent him from physical challenges of this nature. At age 51, I already have those same concerns although I managed today’s tortuous trails without my usual knee braces.

“I’m a biologist,” I spoke in turn. The guest master nodded slowly in approval and amusement.

“Yes,” he said “the diamonateria indicate that you are professors. What an interesting combination. We have many visitors who are interested in art, but it is rather unusual to have a chemist and biologist visit Holy Mountain. Most scientists are suspicious of religion.”

“Many of our colleagues are,” I offered, hoping that further explanation, including an expression of my personal views would not be required.

“Well, we are happy to have you as guests,” he concluded. “I will tell you about our simple rules before I show you to your room. Pictures are not allowed. You must dress appropriately at all times. No shorts. No bare feet. Not even as you go from your room to the showers at the end of the hall. You will hear the *simandro* at 3:30 in the morning. Matins begins at 4 a.m. in the katholicon. At the services you may sit in the first room only. You need not attend the entire worship which concludes at about 7 am. You are free to come as early as you wish and stay as long as you like. You have had a long hike today. Maybe you will need to sleep later in the morning. If so, someone will come by your room at 6:30 to wake you. Breakfast is served in the trapeza shortly after the service ends. You will take your meals there with the monks and pilgrims. There is no talking during

the meal. A monk will read from the scripture or the life story of a saint while you eat. The meal ends when the reading ends and a bell sounds. You will immediately rise and wait for the monks to process out and then you will follow. Afterwards you may join the pilgrims on a tour of the church. At that time you may venerate the holy relics.”

Even though Peter and Dave had learned about the monastic routine by reading guidebooks and the webpages of men who had written accounts of their experiences here, we were relieved to have some clarification of the schedule and what was expected of us. The guest master, who by now had demonstrated a mastery of the English language easily surpassing my own, had managed to make us feel warmly welcomed. He rose from his desk to lead us to our room. We shouldered our backpacks and followed him down a long wide hallway with a high ceiling and gleaming wood floor. He opened a door to a room furnished with three low single beds, a large window with a view across the courtyard to the *katholicon* (monastic church), and a large elaborate fixture occupying an entire corner that might have been a shrine or altar.

“You will find the toilets and a shower at the end of the hall through a door to the left,” he motioned. “Enjoy your stay,” he said, ever the gracious host. We thanked him profusely as he left us.

I collapsed on the bed by the window, too exhausted by the strenuous hike from Karyes to do anything else.

Perhaps a vivid metaphysical experience was just what I needed.

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Some monasteries, including the largest, Magistis Lavras, are lapsing into disrepair because there are too few monks to keep the structures properly maintained. At others such as Simonopetra where we spent our final night on Holy Mountain, the number of monks is increasing and the buildings are well-kept. At most monasteries only a few of the structures are occupied. The unused portions, to various degrees dilapidated and deteriorating, are exceptionally photogenic. Recognizing the historical importance of these 1500-year-old monasteries and the urgent need for preservation, the European Union has allocated huge sums to support the maintenance and rebuilding of these World Heritage sites. Secular

funds for sacred sites. Tasks that the monks are unable to manage are done by cheap laborers from Romania and Albania who stay for months at a time and live in simple quarters outside the walls. We saw many modern cranes projecting incongruently above those high stone walls which spoiled photographic opportunities but nevertheless provided reassurance that work was underway to conserve these unique structures.

We conversed with Father Maximos in the dark intimate Cave of Saint Simon. He was unsatisfied as an academic theologian at Harvard University. Now he greets pilgrims and is the librarian at Simonopetra. Father Maximos confidently speculated that monks sense they don't fit in the world. In a monastery they find a place to belong, to serve, to share, to support. They seek and find congruence in brotherhood.

We met a man who left a career as an electrical engineer in Germany to become a monk at Simonopetra where he designed a system for electricity that switched automatically from hydroelectric to solar to diesel. Incongruencies in abundance!

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We followed a trail on our map to a dot labeled Kerasia, which translates as "cherry." That's where we found Father Kallinikos in the bakery. When we introduced ourselves to Father Kallinikos, he beamed, not just from his headlamp. He was obviously delighted to encounter a biologist and a chemist by profession. Perhaps he believed the two of us held the answer to his prayers for a fuller understanding of the science of baking. This holy man inundated me and Dave with detailed questions about the biochemistry of fermentation. Incongruent or merely ironic?

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Later Father Kallinikos asked, "Would you like some cherries?" By now we had grown accustomed to monastic hospitality. "Yes," we said in unison. We did not expect Father Kallinikos to hand each of us a wicker basket and lead us to a grove to pick cherries.

That evening we had a simple meal with the monks. Wine, pasta, and freshly-baked bread from Father Kalliniko's oven, of course.

The next morning, we awoke to the sound of the *simandro*. We attended the worship serviced (well, to be honest, the last hour or so) seated in the first room where non-Orthodox men are allowed. We joined the brothers for breakfast, expressed our gratitude and bade our farewells as we hoisted our backpacks. Father Kallinikos insisted we delay for a moment. He returned with a loaf of bread about ten inches in diameter and three inches thick at the peak of its perfectly baked crust.

“A gift for you, my friends!” he said with more enthusiasm than one might expect from a holy man.

We thanked him profusely. I looked at Peter, who was looking at me. We were thinking the same thing: Such a thoughtful gift, but our goal today is to summit Mount Athos starting from Kerasia, an ascent of 4770 feet. From the summit, we would descend 5686 feet to the Skete of Agia Anna. That’s 10,456 feet of elevation change in eight trail miles in one day. That might be the most challenging hike we’ve ever attempted. Neither of us wanted to carry an ounce more than would be essential on our strenuous hike.

I stuffed the loaf which must have weighed a couple of pounds into my already full backpack, crushing a bag of cherries that had been given to us. On the trail we were grateful for the generosity of a well-meaning monk but literally burdened by the gift. Incongruent.

That hike to the summit of Mount Athos was an intensely physical experience, but not quite metaphysical. Despite my state of utter exhaustion after 10,456 feet of elevation change over eight trail miles, I slept poorly that night. How could I be so tired and yet unable to sleep? Another incongruency.

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Does it make sense for three skeptical Americans to travel so far at such expense to experience the art and simplicity of monastic life with men whose faith we do not share?

From geometry class to the monasteries of Mount Athos to the present moment, I welcome incongruencies. Life would be so much less interesting if everything “lined up” and “made sense.”

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Onward,

GR Davis Jr

28 October 2025 based on notes from a June 1-6, 2008 pilgrimage hike.

Postscript: Peter and I gained 4770 feet of elevation from Kerasia (1900 ft) to the summit of Mount Athos (6670 ft) where we rested briefly in The Chapel of the Transfiguration. We descended 5686 feet to the Skete of Agia Anna (984 ft). That's 10,456 feet of elevation change in eight trail miles in one day! When we arrived at Agia Anna, I collapsed on the stone pavement just inside the gate, too tired to take another step.

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GR's labeled photographs from this pilgrimage are at

https://grswordsandpictures.com/mount_athos/index.html