

The island of visionaries

Two holy men are venerated on the Greek island of Patmos: one the author of Revelation, the other a prophet of integral ecology / **By CATHERINE PEPINSTER**

YOU CAN STILL only reach the island of Patmos by boat. Today, that boat might be a ferry from Athens or from a neighbouring island such as Kos or Samos, or a cruise liner or a billionaire's yacht. Byzantine refugees came across the sea after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and marauding Venetians sailed south down the Aegean to Patmos in the seventeenth century. The Italians took over the Dodecanese islands, including Patmos, in 1912; they became part of Greece after the Second World War.

But the most famous sea voyager of all to Patmos was John, the author of the Book of Revelation, who was banished to the island around AD 95 by the Roman authorities. There, in a cave, he began what was to be the

final book of the New Testament, and mentions the rock rising out of the sea: "I, John ... was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:9).

Many who travel to Patmos nowadays come as pilgrims, seeking to deepen their understanding of the Book of Revelation, its prophecies and its apocalyptic warnings of the end times. But among those coming down the gangplanks of the ferries are also those concerned about the catastrophe facing God's Creation because of humanity's destructive urge – and they are drawn to Patmos by another figure: a man described as Greek Orthodoxy's Francis of Assisi. While John urged people to make amends with God, and described the horrors that might befall the

Earth, Amphilochios Makris, canonised by the Greek Orthodox Church in 2018, had another message: cherish nature. Amphilochios was a native of Patmos, born in 1889, who entered the fortress-like monastery of St John the Theologian, which towers above the island, when he was 17. In a corner of Patmos lies an entrancing garden he created, a Garden of Eden to honour the God of Creation.

IT IS ENTIRELY CREDIBLE that John was ordered to Patmos from the coast of Asia Minor, a short distance away, at the time of the Emperor Domitian, one of the worst persecutors of Christians. Banishment was a known punishment for practices like magic and astrology – and prophecy, John's particular gift, was classed as such a practice. The Book of Revelation is in part a letter to the Churches of Asia Minor, combining prophecy and apocalyptic writing. The writer calls himself simply John and while tradition has it that this was the same John who wrote the fourth Gospel, it was probably someone else, writing at the time of Emperor Domitian, who insisted on worship of the imperial cult and persecuted Christians who did not comply.

Some of Revelation's passages are familiar – a woman clothed with the sun with a moon under her feet and 12 stars, from Chapter 12, read on the Feast of the Assumption, or the account of the new Jerusalem, from Chapter

Far from the madding crowd

A plan to develop the area around the oldest continuously inhabited monastery in the world into a centre for mass tourism threatens the isolation and silence which has drawn pilgrims to it for centuries / **By BEN ANDRADI and GEORGE TSOUROUS**

AT THE FOOT of Mount Sinai, amid one of the most dramatic desert landscapes in the biblical world, stands the Greek Orthodox monastery of St Catherine. For centuries, pilgrims have come here because this is a place associated not with noise, spectacle or crowds, but with encounter, silence, isolation and revelation. The desert has always been



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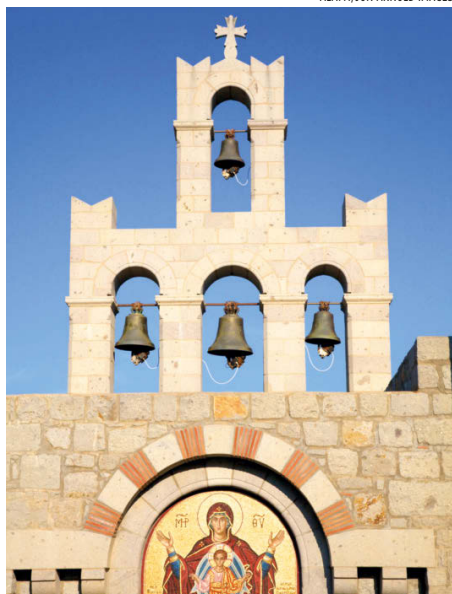
The walls of Justinian enclose the 1,500-year-old St Catherine's monastery at Mount Sinai

more than a backdrop. It is part of the spiritual meaning of the place.

Long before a single stone of the monastery was laid, Sinai had already become one of the most sacred landscapes in Scripture. On this mountain, Moses faced the mysterious bush that burned without being consumed and heard the divine name "I AM WHO I AM". Here God commanded Moses to remove his sandals because the presence of God had transformed the sand beneath his feet into holy ground. Later, on the same mountain, he received the Ten Commandments, establishing the covenant that would permanently shape the lives of Jews and Christians. Centuries later, after his dramatic confrontation with the prophets of Baal, Elijah fled into

the wilderness convinced that his ministry had ended in failure. Exhausted, discouraged and fearing for his life, he journeyed deep into Mount Sinai and he encountered the Lord in a way that perfectly complements Moses' experience. Moses met God amid thunder, fire and cloud. Elijah found him in "a gentle whisper". The contrast is deeply beautiful. God is revealed in both overwhelming majesty and in quiet intimacy.

THE SITE'S HOLINESS drew Helena, mother of Constantine, to build a chapel here in the fourth century, and in AD 548 the Emperor Justinian enclosed it within a fortress of granite walls nearly 15 metres high. Unlike almost every other ancient monastery, St Catherine's



Saved by the bells: the Evangelismos convent on the Aegean island of Patmos

21, often used at funerals. Then there is talk of dragons and serpents – terrifying visions. Some biblical scholars see the Book as a warning to early Christians, such as those John would have known in places such as Ephesus and Pergamon, to stand firm against Roman culture. Its use of the number 666 – now infamous as the number for Satan – was linked

to the Emperor Nero – and John's warnings could well have provoked the authorities to order his banishment. Or maybe the Book was a different warning – that the end times were not far off, and that the Churches of Asia Minor for which it was written should save themselves.

WHAT COULD HAVE caused such vivid visions? John talks about being in a trance. Something that could cause hallucinations is the plant *artemisia*, commonly called wormwood, native to the Mediterranean. There is a reference to it in Revelation, as the name of a star which falls into water, rendering it bitter, as wormwood is. But could John have known the plant and experienced its powers? While John warns against those who abuse drugs in Chapter 22, he also writes in the same chapter that “the leaves of the tree serve as medicine for the nations” – and *artemisia* was traditionally used in medicine.

You might find *artemisia* on Patmos if you look hard enough, and the lush plants of the Mediterranean – bougainvillea, oleander, fig and olive trees – can be found in hotel gardens. But much of the island is arid and stark under a glaring sun.

Not so the Annunciation, or Evangelismos, convent, founded by Amphilochios in the 1930s and surrounded by terraced gardens of flowers cascading down to the sea. Amphilochios, appointed abbot of St John

the Theologian in 1935, founded the convent at a time of hardship in the Dodecanese islands, when the Italian occupiers had banned the Greek language.

As abbot Amphilochios resisted the Italian authorities, professing monks without their approval and setting up knitting workshops for children as a cover for teaching Greek – the original “knit and natter”. While John of the Revelation was banished by the Romans to Patmos, in 1937 the Italians banished Amphilochios from Patmos to Athens. He returned in 1939, dying there 30 years later. People still recall that when someone confessed a grave sin to him, the penance he gave was to plant a tree. Like the *poverello* of Assisi, Amphilochios urged people to love both God and all he created. He understood the importance of humanity living in harmony with nature through his family's work as farmers and shepherds.

An icon of Amphilochios at Evangelismos is garlanded by the nuns with the flowers they grow there, along with keeping their bees and tending their olive groves. Visitors flock to his tomb overlooking the sea, surrounded by the gardens that are the true memorial of his vision: a new Heaven and new Earth, rather like John, but this one created out of the rock of Patmos.

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has never stopped functioning: the divine liturgy is sung there day and night.

Within the 1,500-year-old monastery precincts grows a modest bramble bush that has drawn pilgrims for centuries. According to ancient tradition, this is the burning bush through which God called Moses. In later Christian tradition, the burning bush became a sign of the Virgin Mary. The bush burned with fire but was never consumed; Mary held the divine, the all-powerful God without being harmed.

The monastery's treasures are extraordinary. The library contains thousands of ancient manuscripts, exceeded in importance only by the Vatican's collections; it has the oldest surviving collection of Christian icons, including the celebrated sixth-century Christ Pantocrator, the earliest known depiction of the adult face of Christ, whose strikingly asymmetric face has long been read as suggesting both compassion and judgement.

The monastery bears the name of St Catherine of Alexandria, the young Christian virgin and martyr who, according to tradition, refused to renounce her faith before the Roman Emperor Maxentius. Her relics transformed it into one of the great pilgrimage centres of the Christian world. The monastery tells two stories at once: it recalls the place where Moses encountered the living God, and it honours a young woman who remained faithful even when confronted by the might of the Roman Empire. Moses stood before Pharaoh armed only with God's call and

Catherine stood before an emperor armed only with her faith. Both stories remind us that throughout history God has delighted in using those whom the world considers powerless to bear witness to his truth.

THE MONASTERY has witnessed the rise and fall of empires, the birth of nations, the spread of Christianity across continents, the coming of Islam, the Crusades, the Ottoman Empire and the vicissitudes of the modern Middle East. According to longstanding tradition, the Prophet Muhammad visited the monastery and granted it a charter of protection, the Ashtiname. A small mosque still stands within the monastery walls, a striking reminder of centuries of coexistence between the monks and their Muslim neighbours.

Yet the greatest threat facing St Catherine's today may not be persecution, war or even the harshness of the desert. Ironically, it may be its success. For centuries, isolation was the monastery's greatest protection. Reaching Sinai was difficult. The journey itself became part of the pilgrimage. The desert prepared the soul before the monastery came into view. The silence was not accidental; it was integral to the experience. Today that isolation is rapidly diminishing.

The government of Egypt has, understandably, sought to revive and expand tourism, a crucial part of its economy. Improved roads, visitor facilities and hotels can bring real benefits, not least to local Bedouin communities whose livelihoods are closely connected with

pilgrimage and tourism. Better access also enables older and less mobile pilgrims to visit a site that once required considerable physical effort. But there is a profound difference between pilgrimage and mass tourism. The government's Great Transfiguration Project aims to turn the area around the monastery into a major centre for religious and cultural tourism. The danger is that, in making Sinai easier to visit, the very qualities that make it sacred may be weakened.

These are not arguments against visitors. Hospitality has been part of St Catherine's vocation for centuries. But hospitality is not the same as commercialisation. There is an awkward irony here. The monastery survived empires, armies and religious upheaval. It may now have to survive coach parks, luxury hotels and the modern tourist industry. The monks of Sinai have never tried to compete with the noise of the world. Their calling has been the opposite: prayer, continuity and stillness. That witness matters precisely because modern life offers so little silence. The future of St Catherine's matters beyond Egypt and beyond the Greek Orthodox Church. It raises a question for all Christians: do we still believe in that solitude and silence?

Ben Andradi's pilgrimage to Mount Sinai was organised by JC Tours (www.jcjourneys.com); **George Tsourous** is Archdeacon of the Archdiocese of Great Britain and Thyateira and a trustee of the Saint Catherine Foundation.