



## Whose Notice Matters?

3.26.06 by Scott Cairns

### Article:

Recently, during a year of research leave from my university, I made a series of journeys—pilgrimages, actually—to Mount Athos, Greece. Known to some as "the Holy Mountain," this isolated part of the world is virtually unknown to all but Eastern Orthodox Christians, and not all that well known to most of *them*.

On this narrow peninsula—a mere 150 square miles of hushed forest and rugged mountain terrain extending into the Mediterranean Sea—several thousand Christian men labor and pray in relative anonymity. Young and old, they are here to seek what they call *lives of prayer*. Men like them have been doing much the same thing in this very place for more than twelve hundred years. Occasionally, people with an uncommon interest in the spiritual resources of our Christian faith may come across writings from some of them—Saint Gregory Palamás, Saint Nicódemos of the Holy Mountain, Saint Silouan the Athonite—but, for the most part, these men have retreated from public life, shunned public notice, and withdrawn into the obscurity of this wilderness to "work out their salvation" and to pray for ours.

In an era when so much is made of material acquisition and celebrity, the humble pursuit of prayer, and of a life of prayer, may strike some as archaic or unhealthy. If so, I'm guessing such an appraisal says more about us than it says about the humble men whose longing is to pray, as Saint Paul says, "without ceasing."

One such man lived as a monk more than a century ago at the monastery of Vatopaidi—one of twenty established monasteries on Mount Athos. In 1842, when the community was reorganizing the ossuary of their cemetery chapel, they made an amazing discovery. Behind the many bins of bones, at the end of the vault farthest from the entryway, they found the skeleton of a monk, sitting upright, holding in his arms an icon of the Theotókos who, in her arms, holds Christ.

By all appearances, he had come here to die, and to do so without causing the least bit of notice. In other words, he chose to die just as he had chosen to live—in absolute obscurity, praying.

According to their records, when the monks found him, they found an intact skeleton draped in the remnants of monastic garb. The bones were the color of beeswax and filled the air with the odor of frankincense and myrrh.

They had no idea who he was, nor even when exactly he had "fallen asleep in the Lord." Having no record of his name, they called him Saint Evdótimos, which is to say, the man who prospers, succeeds, thrives. Honored now among the "saints of Mount Athos," he is remembered for both his devotion to the life of prayer and for the remarkable humility with which he pursued that life. More than this, he is surely remembered by the One whose notice matters most, the Christ in whom he continues to live and move and have his being.