

Letter from Crete

Many of you know that, for five or six months every year, I have made a village in Crete my home. I have become part of the village community, including the clergy who are, of course, orthodox. Many things in Orthodoxy are different to protestant or catholic beliefs, but some things are closer to Protestantism than to Catholicism. The village priests, for example, apart from being men of the church, lead ordinary lives. They have their sheep and chickens, are working in their fields and vineyards and are leading happy family lives. Papa Manousos and Papa Manolis, the two village priests, are good friends of mine and even allow me to take part in communion.

Today we celebrated the name day of St. Anthony in a tiny old church built into a cave in a secluded valley in the middle of nowhere. Whoever built that church certainly wanted to get away from the world! The church would not hold more than half a dozen people but a great crowd came to commemorate the Saint. It was lovely to have a service in this modest little chapel and listen to the Byzantine liturgy sung by Papa Manousos and two other men – one being the son of Papa Manolis and the other being his grandfather. Many people had come with gifts of “Artos”, special bread which was blessed by Papa Manousos and was later distributed among the congregation.

After the service, everybody was invited for a follow-up celebration with meat, bread, rice, salad, wine and Raki (locally produced spirit) to the house of a local farmer who, on this day every year, remembers how his father’s life was saved by Saint Anthony. His father had been felling a tree which fell on him, but wonderfully he was left unharmed. Is believing in and praying to Saints faith or superstition? You may decide for yourself. I am impressed to see however, that people here still have a strong – some might say simplistic - faith, which seems to have disappeared so often in our own society. There also still exists a strong community spirit which is happily extended to “ξένοι” (xeni) like myself, proving that the ancient value of Filoxenia, the hospitality to the visiting stranger, still lives on. This goes back to the story in Genesis Chapter 18, where Abraham extends hospitality to three strangers, not realising that they were angels. This story still has a significant place in biblical teaching in Greece and is often portrayed in churches.

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