

A Rose inside the Gates (Melinda Johnson)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English

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Before my conversion to Orthodoxy, if I thought of monasteries at all, my thoughts were dark, a little horrified by images from western history, badly researched movies, and general ignorance. As I began to study Orthodox theology, I struggled with my pragmatic, former-Swedenborgian sense that no human being has worth unless he or she is directly useful to the rest of us. A fascinated voyage through Kyriacos Markides' *The Mountain of Silence* (Doubleday, 2001) fundamentally changed my understanding of monasteries. If I learned nothing else, I learned that Eastern and Western monasticism are not the same, and I learned that Orthodox monastics serve the world without living in its daily entanglements.

But I remained a little wary of the whole idea. My old prejudices on the subject still recurred occasionally during my doubtful moments when my grasp on the power of prayer became a little...doubtful. When I heard that a group of women from our church were going to make the trip over the mountains to St. John the Forerunner, a monastery near the small town of Goldendale in eastern Washington (<http://www.stjohnmonastery.org/>), I joined them out of plain old-fashioned curiosity. Perhaps I didn't realize how much I was hoping the monastery at

journey's end would be something I could believe in.



I drove more than three hours over the mountains with a friend and two cranky children, wearing long skirts and long sleeves, with head scarves at the ready and sensible shoes for the unpaved pathways and dirt roads around the monastery grounds. When we pulled in and found a gravelly spot by a tree for the car, I opened the doors and felt the stifled, grouchy air inside the car seeping away into an atmosphere like clear water in an unruffled lake. The little girls relaxed, and the head scarves went on without a murmur. I put my own on as if it were more than a scarf, a cloak, a curtain shutting out time and the long paved road we took to travel here. A nun found us and touched the little girls' heads in greeting, in blessing.

We were the first of the group to arrive, so we wandered. We visited the little farm, the goats and chickens, the large sleepy white dog. We played with the frisky kittens who run wherever they like (although the nuns do escort them out of the chapel and dining room when they hop inside an unguarded door). We smelled the roses and examined the monastery bells, hanging silently within reach.

We spent most of our time there taking a tour of the monastery with our group. We visited the chapel, but there was no service during our visit. There was a box of relics, tiny fragments of saints carefully embedded in small windows in the decorative metal casing. A scent like incense clung to the open box. I touched a relic with my fingers and then I kissed the box. I have read about relics and myrrh-streaming icons, and my tired western mind reacts with mingled cynicism and regret. But now I have smelled it myself and touched it. How I feel about that is a long corridor, back or forward, to a room I dimly remember or can dimly see ahead of me, by its light.

The nuns were quiet, friendly, and industrious. They were mostly young, younger than I am in many cases, and they seemed contented, absorbed in their work and the affairs of their world. What is their world? I pondered it, tasting the wonderful soup they made us for lunch, gazing at the beautiful icons they wrote for their chapel, walking slowly by the well-kept garden, taking pictures, wishing my husband could be with me to see it all and whisper about it with me.

I read once that monasteries exist in part to practice Orthodoxy in its purest form. Think about this. It's like knowing your mom is still there in the house you grew up in, wherever you go. Somewhere on earth, someone is praying each prayer, chanting each hymn, remembering each saint, writing each icon, polishing each holy treasure and holding them all in safekeeping for us while we travel that long paved road, far outside the monastery garden. No matter how ugly and difficult the struggle becomes, no matter how foolish and political we sometimes feel in church, the monasteries remain to us. We can leave the road and rest in the garden, watching and listening, until we remember how to go on again.

Near the end of our visit, a bus full of unexpected tourists stopped for coffee at the monastery's bakery and gift shop. My friends and I happened to be crossing in front of the bakery, and I looked up suddenly to find a few of the tourists looking back at me. I recognized the look. I grew up in Pennsylvania, and I have seen people watch the Amish in just that way, a little curious, almost nosey, a little scornful but still somehow fascinated. I realized they were looking at my headscarf and long skirt, thinking, "Oh, there goes one of them now, one of the Orthodox. I wonder why they dress like that..." I almost stopped in my tracks. In my memories, I was the one looking, on the outside, peering into someone else's spiritual world. Now, I was the one with a spiritual world. I am the one with a spiritual world. I am an Orthodox Christian woman who has visited a monastery, and I will go back again, as soon as I can.

By Melinda Johnson

Melinda Johnson is the blog chief of [The Sounding](#) at [Orthodox Christian Network](#) and the author of [Letters to Saint Lydia](#) released by Conciliar Press in 2010. Melinda created the popular «Orthodox Writers, Readers, and Artists» series, which first appeared on her blog, Saint Lydia's Book Club, before moving to The Sounding in early 2012. The Sounding features daily posts by more than 20 Orthodox writers, exploring every aspect of our Orthodox faith at work in everyday life. Melinda earned a Master of Arts in English Literature from The College of William and Mary and worked as an editor specializing in projects for non-native English speakers before becoming a full-time writer.