



A Heartrending Visit to the Central Prison for Women

Tuesday, January 23, 2008 (Old Style [commemoration of the Holy Martyrs Clement and Agathangelos and St. Dionysios of Olympos]) is a day that will remain deeply engraved in our hearts.

On this day, it was as though Christ Himself opened the doors of the ward for minors and teenage mothers at the Korydallon Prison for Women, welcoming us into His divine garden: a garden of wildflowers, condemned by our own sins, to wither in the shadow of a high wall protected by barbed wire.



The blessing of our Father and Archpastor, His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle, opened the path to us for a sojourn of sympathy and assistance among our imprisoned sisters in pain. Thus, at the exhortation and with the guidance of the Acting President of the Holy Synod (the Metropolitan's proxy), His Grace, Bishop Cyprian of Oreoi, the St. Philaret the Merciful Orthodox Women's Guild organized and carried out this moving visit.

Bishop Cyprian led a delegation of ten people, composed of four nuns from the Convent of the Holy Angels (Aphidnai, Attica), two laymen, and three members of our Guild, to this garden. We were awaited by eyes reflecting pain, by wounded hearts, and by embittered lips, which asked us:

“Why? Half of us are still children—adolescents forcefully misled by crafty exploiters to live this martyrdom. Our hearts want to take flight, far from this barbed wire, but they do not allow us. And the other half of us gave birth to, and raised, our children in a cell, behind high walls that hide the sun of joy and freedom from them.”

As Bishop Cyprian began to speak to the inmates in a spirit of Christian love, he made a full prostration to them, as if beholding Christ Himself before him. He asked their forgiveness and told them that all of *us* deserved be in their place of martyrdom, and *they* out in the world. He stressed that our own sins had resulted in this tribulation of theirs, too, and that our love, prayers, and thoughts are with them.

At this, a number of the young women began to cry, as their wounded hearts were illumined and their embittered lips began to smile. They drank in our Bishop’s words like thirsty deer. Before them they obviously saw someone whom they could trust, and they responded with enthusiasm.

Forty-six young women and fourteen small children received from Bishop Cyprian, along with his blessing, a packet of gifts that we had prepared for each woman individually. The four nuns in our group handed out bouquets of fragrant flowers, prepared with love and care, together with a variety of sweets. One by one, the young women took these gifts of love from their hands, embraced them, and felt that the sisters were their “own sisters.”

And then the young women began to ask to speak personally with Bishop Cyprian—to “confess.” This was truly joyous. Tears of joy, love, and repentance filled the prison hall, while smiles redolent with optimism, hope, and patience spread from one face to another.

Some of the inmates spontaneously embraced the nuns as they conversed with them. Others spoke with the members of our Guild, who also tried to express their own support and care. Everyone was especially moved when a twenty-year-old inmate, speaking on behalf of everyone, thanked us, first of all, for remembering and visit-

ing them, and, secondly, for making them feel that they had brothers and sisters who cared about them and loved them!

Bishop Cyprian's response was direct and clear: "*It is we who thank you; for today we have received more love from you than we gave to you!*"

For nearly three hours, this place of "martyrdom" for the imprisoned women was turned into an "upper room," where the Grace of the Comforter granted life, hope, love, light, and consolation.

The personnel of the Korydallon Prison for Women, which greeted us with great love and respect, offered us their assistance throughout our entire visit. Deeply touched, each one individually asked to visit the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina and to have a private meeting with Bishop Cyprian!

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This marvelous journey of love reached its end and it came time to say goodbye. All of the young women gathered together to bid us farewell. Their faces were brighter now, more hopeful. Joy gave way to the sorrow of departure. As they embraced us one by one, they asked us to come back.

And we will; we will not forget them. We will remain with them in spirit! Our thoughts, our love, and, above all, our prayers will be with them always!

Irene Archontoule,
President of the Guild

January 30, 2008 (Old Style)

† The Holy Three Hierarchs