

Pastoral Visit to Georgia and South Ossetia*

With the blessing of His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian, President of the Holy Synod in Resistance, Bishop Ambrose of Methoni, one of his Assistant Bishops, was sent as the Metropolitan's representative to the Orthodox flocks in resistance in the countries of the Caucasus, in order to strengthen their Orthodox life and witness. Bishop Ambrose was accompanied by our brother in Christ, Anastasios Vasilopoulos.

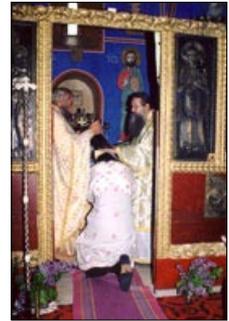
• On Wednesday, 15 May 2003 (Old Style), Bishop Ambrose arrived by air in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi, where he was given an enthusiastic welcome by Protopresbyter Basili Mkalavishvili and members of the zealous anti-ecumenist Georgians belonging to the "Orthodox Eparchy of Gldani," which, since 1996, has been under the jurisdiction of the Holy Synod in Resistance.

On Thursday, 16 May 2003 (Old Style), a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated in the beautiful Church of the Nativity of the *Theotokos* in Narsilgori, Father Basili's birth-place. During the Liturgy, Bishop Ambrose Ordained Father Archil Avanashvili, a married man and one of Father Basili's spiritual children, to the Diaconate.

On the afternoon of the same day, Vespers and Orthros were served in the newly-built Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa*, with

the participation of many hundreds of Faithful. This magnificent Church, which is already functioning, is located in a suburb of Tbilisi.

On Friday, 17 May 2003 (Old Style), during the Divine Liturgy in the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa*, Bishop Ambrose Ordained Deacon Father Archil a Presbyter and Gabriel Neberidze, also married and a spiritual son of Father Basili, to the Diaconate. On the same day, His Grace visited the historic Monastery of



Ananouri and other important monuments and sights of Georgia.

On the Sunday of the Blind Man, 19 May 2003 (Old Style), a festal Divine Liturgy was celebrated in the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa*, Tbilisi, in the presence of more than a thousand Faithful. Bishop Ambrose Ordained Deacon Father Gabriel a Presbyter. Father Alexey Aristinov, a Priest of Greek descent from South Ossetia, also took part in the Liturgy. The spiritual joy of all in attendance was overflowing.



- On the same day, Bishop Ambrose, together with Father Alexey and Mr. Vasilopoulos, went by car to the capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, to visit for the first time the sizeable Orthodox community of this autonomous region of the Caucasus, which recently joined the Holy Synod in Resistance.



His Grace was given a warm welcome in the Cathedral of the Nativity of the *Theotokos* by Igumen George (Pouchaev),

Deacon Father Iakov Kstatourov, and many Faithful, and a *Paraklesis* was served. This was followed by a discussion between Bishop Ambrose and the clergy of the region, Father George, Father Alexey, and Deacon Father Iakov, about the prospects of improving the organization of the “Orthodox Eparchy of Alania,” as this Eparchy is officially called. Its rich history goes back to its origins in the missionary endeavors of the Holy Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos of Constantinople at the beginning of the tenth century. Churches and monasteries of great historical and artistic value from that era and the centuries immediately following were preserved down to present times.

However, during the past century, and particularly during the period from 1923 to 1988, no Church was open anywhere in this region, which numbered nearly 150,000 inhabitants. The Churches were, in fact, demolished by the atheists; only five were left, and these were in a deplorable state. Only now are efforts being made to restore them, though with insufficient means and resources. The whole situation was aggravated by the civil war in the area, from 1991 to 1992, with the result that the Church was literally reborn from the ashes.



On Tuesday, 21 May 2003 (Old Style), a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated on the Feast Day of the Church of Sts. Constantine and Helen, a tenth-century edifice in Tskhinvali, where Father Alexey Aristinov is rector. During the Liturgy a Reader was tonsured.



On Wednesday, Bishop Ambrose visited the Churches of the city, and in the afternoon he was given an especially cordial welcome by the local government of South Ossetia. Among those present were the Prime Minister, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Justice, Religions, *et al.* Issues pertaining to the reorganization of the local Church were discussed in a spirit of understand-

ing and coöperation.

On the Thursday of the Ascension, a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated in the Cathedral of the Nativity of the *Theotokos*, a building that dates from the thirteenth century, with the participation of the local clergy and a large number of Faithful.



This was followed by a visit to the Orthodox *Gymnasium* in the capital, where Father George and Father Iakov teach religion, and to the school's youth center, where an interesting meeting took place with its teaching staff and students.

His Grace also visited

ancient Churches and monasteries in mountainous regions, such as the Church of the Holy Hieromartyr Athenogenes, the Church of St. Theodore the Recruit, and a thirteenth-century monastery, which at one time numbered more than a hundred monks, but was destroyed during a Persian incursion.

On Friday, 24 May 2003 (Old Style), a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated



in the Church of the Holy Great Martyr George the Trophy-Bearer in Chetongourovo. This is an imposing and magnificent edifice dating from 1123 A.D. Bishop Ambrose also visited Tigva, in Western Ossetia, where a church from the twelfth century is preserved. This church was once the headquarters of the Bishop of



Alania. That same evening, members of the local government held a reception for His Grace. The Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and other high-ranking officials were present.

On Saturday, 25 May 2003 (Old Style), Bishop Ambrose visited the Cathedral of the Archangels in Ikorta. This church, a marvelous work of craftsmanship from the twelfth century, is now being restored by UNESCO. It is located in an extremely secluded spot, and the Church is hoping, with God's help, to turn it once again into a functioning monastic institution, either for men or for women.



On the Sunday of the Fathers of the First Œcumenical Synod, 26 May 2003 (Old Style), a

Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated in the Cathedral of the Nativity of the *Theotokos* in Tskhinvali, again with the participation of the local clergy and hundreds of Faithful.

• On Tuesday, 28 May 2003 (Old Style), Bishop Ambrose departed by air from Tbilisi for Greece, after bringing a pastoral mission still fraught with difficulties to a favorable conclusion with rich spiritual fruits, to the glory of God.

* Source: *Άγιος Κυπριανός*, No. 314 (May-June 2003), pp. 240-243.