

Pastoral Visit to the War-Torn Caucasus

South Ossetia–Georgia

IN EARLY September 2004, His Grace, Bishop Ambrose of Methoni, with the blessing of His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili, once again visited the populous parishes and communities in the region of the Caucasus under the jurisdiction of the Holy Synod in Resistance.

South Ossetia

On Tuesday, 3 September 2004 (Old Style), His Grace, Bishop Ambrose arrived by air in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. From there he headed by ground for the city of Tskhinvali, capital of South Ossetia, where he was given a warm reception by the head of the Orthodox Eparchy of Alania, the Very Reverend Archimandrite George Pukhaev, and quite a number of the Faithful at the Church of the Nativity of the *Theotokos*.



In this region, owing to the recent wartime conditions, the inhabitants are in a constant state of preparedness and alertness. Bishop Ambrose was given hospitality in the house of the State's Deputy Minister of Justice and was assigned a guard for his personal safety.

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The pious Faithful recounted many miraculous instances of people surviving, by the Grace of God, during the recent wartime events. The most moving incident, however, concerned a twelve-year-old boy who had begged his parents for two weeks the preceding July to give him permission, being a minor, to be Baptized. Finally, the child was Baptized by Father George at the beginning of August with the name Athanasios. Just one week later, the boy was killed during bombardments that were taking place. He and three others were the only casualties of this wartime tragedy.

The soul of the newly-illuminated Athanasios flew in purity to Heaven and began to appear in a shining white garment of incorruption to the members of his family in the days immediately following his death, assuring them of the gladness and bliss that he was now enjoying! As a result, the remaining members of the blessed child's family sought Baptism from Father George!

Great art Thou, O Lord our God: no word shall suffice to hymn Thy wonders!

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On the morning of Friday, 4 September 2004, His Grace visited the Orthodox School in Tskhinvali and spoke with the teachers and pupils. The main topic, as was to be expected, was the recent tragedy of



the massacre in Beslan, in neighboring North Ossetia. Many of the children who were killed had been Baptized by Father George and were acquaintances and friends of the children of Tskhinvali. The pain for everyone is great and the grief heavy.... The comforting words of His Grace were much-needed and beneficial.

The population of Tskhinvali is currently 25,000, whereas just recently it had been 45,000. Of the many former Greek inhabitants there remain barely ten families!

The uncertain future in this unstable, turbulent, and much-suffering region impels people to take flight, and at the same time increases the already very specific pastoral needs of all who remain, so that they can cope with the difficult conditions of insecurity and fear.



On Sunday, 6 September 2004, Bishop Ambrose served Liturgy at the Church of the Nativity of the *Theotokos* with Archimandrite George and Deacon Father Iakov. Our other Priest in that region, Father Alexey Aristinov, was away in Russia owing to the ill health of his mother. During the Divine Liturgy, which was attended by several hundreds of the Faithful, the pious Deacon Father Iakov was Ordained to the rank of Presbyter.

That same afternoon, Bishop Ambrose confessed many pupils of the Orthodox School and many soldiers.

On Tuesday, 8 September 2004, the Church of the Nativity of the *Theotokos* in Tskhinvali celebrated its Feast Day. Present among the

multitude of the Faithful at the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was the President of South Ossetia, the Honorable Mr. Kokoity, together with members of the government.

On the same day, visits were made to the other Church celebrating its Feast Day in the village of Chetongourovo, and also to the Faithful in that region.

On Wednesday, 9 September 2004, His Grace visited the small ancient Church of the Holy Myrrhbearers on the hill that overlooks the capital city of Tskhinvali and performed the Blessing of the Waters for the Ossetian and Russian soldiers stationed at the frontier.

In the afternoon of the same day, a group Baptism of 120 catechumens of all ages was performed in a river near the Church of the Nativity of the *Theotokos* in Tskhinvali. Bishop Ambrose anointed the catechumens on the river-bank and the Priests, Father George and Father Iakov, Baptized them in the river. Finally, at the Church they were Chrismated with the Holy *Myron*.



Georgia

In the evening of the same day, 9 September 2004, Bishop Ambrose arrived by ground in Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia, where he was given a warm reception by the Priests, Father Archil and Father Gabriel, and a great crowd of pious Georgians at the large newly-constructed Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa*.

On Thursday, 10 September 2004, His Grace had a discussion with the clergy concerning the difficult situation which had been created by the arrest and imprisonment last March of the head of the Orthodox Eparchy of Gldani, Tbilisi, Father Basili Mkalavishvili. Existing prospects were also discussed.

Later on, His Grace was able to greet the imprisoned Father Basili at his cell window from the road, at a distance of one hundred meters. He was able to speak with him, though only by telephone, as visits to him are strictly prohibited, even to his Presbytera (wife)!



Father Basil and a few other Faithful were sentenced to three months detention awaiting trial; but already, after six months, the awaited trial has been postponed seven times!

On the following days, His Grace was able to meet with the Faithful



and make several visits. On Sunday, 13 September 2004, a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated at the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa*. Bishop Ambrose celebrated with Father Archil and Father Gabriel. The five hundred worshipers present

received great spiritual comfort.

On Monday, 14 September 2004, the Feast Day of the Exaltation of the Precious and Life-giving Cross, a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was once again celebrated at the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa*, with several hundred of the Faithful attending.

On the same day, His Grace, Bishop Ambrose departed by plane for Greece, which he reached late in the afternoon, having completed yet one more delicate, significant, and hopeful pastoral visit and mission for the support of the Faithful and to the glory of God.

