

Visit to South Ossetia and Georgia

In early September, His Grace, Bishop Ambrose of Methoni accomplished yet another ecclesiastical mission abroad, as the representative of His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili. He traveled to the Caucasus in order to visit the newly-established Holy Diocese of Alania, which has its headquarters in Tskhinvali, capital of the Republic of South Ossetia, and also to visit the Orthodox Eparchy of Gldani in Georgia.

He was accompanied by the Rev. Father Vitalios Almanides, a Georgian, who for a number of years already has been the rector of our Holy Metropolis' Church of All Saints in Katerini.

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A. BISHOP Ambrose and Fr. Vitalios departed by air on Monday, 5 September 2006 (Old Style), and arrived in Tbilisi, via Constantinople, early the next morning, where they were welcomed by the Rev. Father Vakhtang Mariani and a fair number of the Faithful.

After a brief rest, Bishop Ambrose and Fr. Vitalios went by ground transport to Tskhinvali, capital of South Ossetia, where they were given a particularly heartfelt reception by our Holy Synod's Bishop in the region, His Eminence, Bishop George of Alania. Bishop George had, in fact, just returned to his See, quite weakened after an ordeal of many months with his health, during which he underwent treatment in hospitals in Russia.

• **The two** Bishops then attended a special anniversary celebration at the capital's assembly hall, which included speeches and folk presentations. Members of the local government and a large crowd of people were also present.



• **On Wednesday**, 7 September, 2006 (Old Style), a meeting was carried out with Prime Minister Morozov and members of the government in the government building, during the course of which topics of common interest

were discussed in an especially friendly atmosphere.

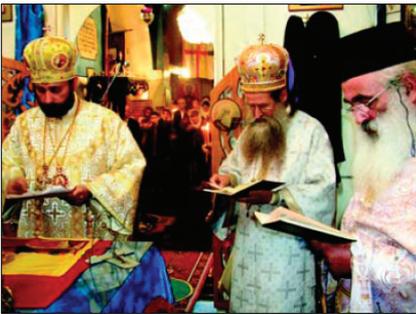
Later, two infants were Baptized, one of which was the child of the local Priest, Fr. Iakov Khetagourov. This was followed by a visit to the renovated Church of Sts. Constantine and Helen in Tskhinvali.

Late in the afternoon of the same day, Vespers and Orthros were served at the Cathedral of the Nativity of the *Theotokos*, which was celebrating its Feast Day.

• **On Thursday** morning, 8 September 2006 (Old Style), His Eminence, Bishop George of Alania celebrated the Festal Divine Liturgy, with Bishop Ambrose and the Priests, Fathers Alexey Aristin-



nov, Iakov Khetagourov, and Vitalios Almanides concelebrating, before a large congregation that included Prime Minister Morozov and government members. The hymns were rendered by two choirs: a male choir chanted in Ossetian and a mixed choir chanted in Slavonic.



Following another meeting with the government for an exchange of gifts and mementos, and after various other necessary visits and meetings, they returned by ground transport to Georgia.

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B. There, on Friday morning, 9 September 2006 (Old Style), a visit was made to the city of Rustavi, where the founder and leader of the Orthodox Eparchy of Gldani, Fr. Basili Mkalavishvili, is being held in custody since, as is well known, he was sentenced to imprisonment two years ago on account of his participation in, or support of, acts of violence against heresies and sects that are active in Georgia, always according to the country government's official view of the case.

Bishop Ambrose managed to meet with him and discuss matters of local Church life. It is possible, God willing, that he will be released this November for the remainder of his sentence, being obliged simply to present himself at his district police station. We very much hope that this will come about, so that this much-afflicted Church Eparchy will be brought back to canonical order, given that the absence of Fr. Basili has caused various problems and difficulties.

- **On Saturday**, 10 September 2006 (Old Style), a tour was made of the region of Tsalka, the birthplace of Fr. Vitalios, which is scattered with many Greek villages. A general image of abandonment reigns everywhere, however, with very few Greek residents remaining—and those being elderly—since the majority has emigrated primarily to Greece, in search of more suitable living conditions and a better future.

In Fr. Vitalios' village, Yedikilisa, only four of the four-hundred Greek families have remained! It was with difficulty that Fr. Vitalios located his parents' grave, where he served a *Trisagion* with deep emotion.



- **On Sunday**, 11 September 2006 (Old Style), a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated at the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa* in the outskirts of Gldani, Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. Bishop Ambrose liturgized with the rector, Fr. Vakhtang, Fr. Vitalios, and the Russian Hieromonk Arseny (Yarkov). At least three-hundred pious Orthodox Georgians were in attendance.

- **The next** day, Bishop Ambrose and Fr. Vitalios returned once again by air, via Constantinople, to Athens.

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THIS WAS a fruitful and successful visit, by the Grace of God, to our sorely-tried brothers of the Orthodox Resistance in the historic region of the Caucasus, which strengthened our bonds of love in Christ and boosted their godly zeal, for the continuation of their Martyrdom and Witness.

