

Missionary Visit to Central Africa

*The “seed” of the Gospel has fallen, yet again,
into the animate furrows of the African Continent*

I. A Challenge and an Invitation

By the Grace of our Lord and the intercessions of the Holy Apostles, a new missionary journey has been added to the long series of similar endeavors on the part of the Holy Synod in Resistance to disseminate the Light of Truth and to strengthen a genuine Orthodox witness in the faraway countries of the African continent.

The mission to the vast Democratic Republic of the Congo [formerly Zaire] in Central Africa, which has been in existence for nearly fifteen years, and the mission to the neighboring Republic of the Congo [formerly Congo-Brazzaville], which was begun only a few years ago, are directed at regions with tremendous prospects for the development of a very lively new local Orthodox Church.

So many are the spiritual needs of these newly-established ecclesiastical communities, which have placed themselves under our care, that they constitute a powerful challenge and invitation for us to show concern and provide assistance.



Bishop Ambrose of Methoni with part of the clergy and laity of the mission to the Congo, in Kananga.

We are obligated to serve in the Lord’s Vineyard, working around

local restrictions, thereby shouldering so great a responsibility and so great a burden that, were it not for the presence of the One Who “calls things which are not, as though they were,” and Who chooses the “weak to shame the strong,” and if the Grace of the Comforter did not breathe upon and inspire us, it would not be humanly possible to accomplish even the smallest task, not only in Africa or in other parts of the world, but even in our native land.

Blessed is the “God of patience and consolation” (Romans 15:5), Who comforts the humble by His consolation!

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With the blessing of His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili, President of the Holy Synod in Resistance, who is noted for his unwavering and bold missionary conviction, His Grace, Bishop Ambrose of Methoni, accompanied by our indefatigable brother in Christ, Mr. Anastasios Vasilopoulos, who has worn himself out, in a spirit of self-sacrifice, on other missionary visits, made a twenty-day journey to Central Africa in July of 2004, which could only be characterized, in charitable terms, as an exploit.

Although missionary journeys, particularly in Africa, have always been difficult, this journey outstripped almost all of the previous ones in difficulty. The hardships and the privations of this journey, which are incessant in these cases and quite incredible for the average modern man in “civilized” countries, at times surpassed the limits of endurance of even the most hardened zealot for missionary service!

In the following short chronicle, we will present a mere outline of the most important points of this missionary visit, since we are unable to describe satisfactorily either the magnificent blessings of God or the deadly perils that dogged the steps of those engaged in this mission to Africa.

II. To the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Bishop Ambrose and his companion departed from Greece by air on 30 June 2004 (Old Style), with Cairo as their destination. From there, they were supposed to leave within a short time for Addis Ababa; but their problems had already begun. The airplane was delayed and they had to wait for six whole hours, in the night, at the airport in Cairo.



In front of the Church of St. Nectarios in Mikonga.

From **Addis Ababa** they arrived by air in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, on Wednesday, 1 July 2004 (Old Style). There, at the airport, they encountered a dreadful situation, though one somewhat familiar to them from other occasions. There was so much confusion, extortion, and exploitation, that it could only be characterized as “hell.” The passage through the “tollhouses” of this “hell,” with the utmost effort and agony, to be sure, was a great miracle in itself!

In the **capital** city, His Grace met with our Episcopal Representative, Father Theodore Lumpungu, after which accommodation was found in a rudimentary “hotel,” so that the visitors could rest, since they had by then been traveling for two nights without any sleep (with flights, delays, and time spent at airports).

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On **Thursday**, 2 July 2004, a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated at the Church of St. Nectarios of Ægina, in the region of Mikonga. Bishop Ambrose liturgized with two Priests, and during the service he tonsured two Readers.

The church is under construction: the walls are made of cement blocks, there are no doors or windows, just as there is also no roof! Makeshift coverings of rushes and tarpaulins take the place of a

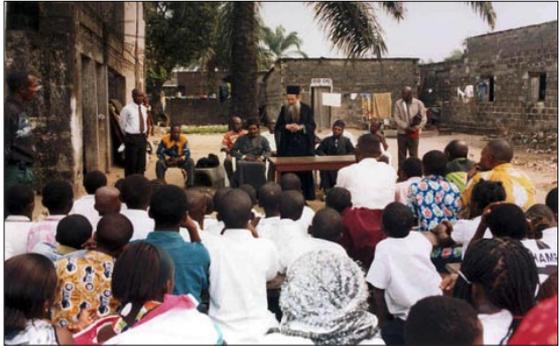
roof. It so happened, however, that during the Divine Liturgy on that day a windstorm arose, with the result that everything in the altar and the church was covered with sand! Many wishes were expressed that the church be roofed, although such a thing appears practically impossible for the time being.



Returning from the Church of St. Nectarios.

In the meantime, there is a plot of land for sale beside the church, and Father Theodore expressed a desire to purchase it and to build an Orthodox elementary school there—but how? Our brethren in the Congo are in general praiseworthy for their great optimism, in spite of their very evident and desperate poverty! Our return from the church, just like our arrival there in the morning, was accomplished on foot.

There followed a visit our St. Cyprian Mission School in the district of Limete. Although they were by then on vacation, many children gathered for a ceremony marking the visit of the Bishop from Greece; there were talks, exhortations, discussions, etc. This school continues to function thanks to the contributions from our Metropolis in Greece.



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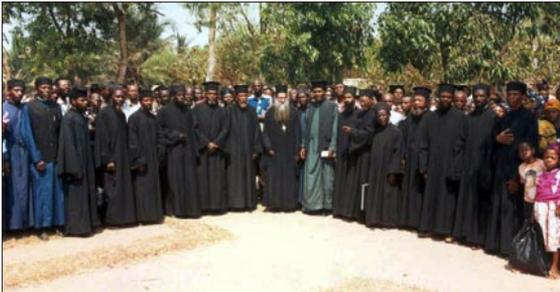
On Saturday, 4 July 2004, the mission team had of necessity to pass yet again through the “hell” of the airport, in order to travel by air to Kananga, the region with the bulk of the Faithful in our mission.



A scene from the warm welcome in Kananga.

However, the journey to Kananga was not made in a regular airplane, but in a so-called “cargo-plane,” an aircraft without windows, in which the hapless passengers were “thrown” among sacks and strange objects of every kind, and in which indescribable filth and stench prevailed. This extremely tiring flight of many hours was truly, as Bishop Ambrose laconically put it, something “terrifying”!

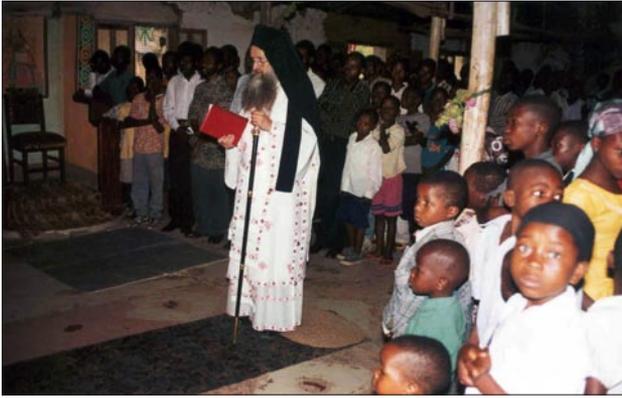
In Kananga, Bishop Ambrose was given an enthusiastic welcome by the clergy under the Episcopal Representative, Protopresbyter Chrysostomos Bakua-Tshibusu, and by hundreds of Faithful, who, in their uniquely African way, gave intense expression to their heartfelt joy. After some years His Grace was once again in their midst!



Bishop Ambrose with mission clergy in Kananga.

Here, for nearly a week, amid heat, dust, and a lack of water and other basic facilities vital for human life, Bishop Ambrose had to perform a great many Church services and pastoral ministrations.

The welcoming ceremony took place in the mission center at the Church of the Holy Apostles. Speeches and responses were



From the Divine Liturgy in the Church of the Holy Apostles, Kananga.

made and, following this, Resurrectional Vespers was served, in the course of which the church choir chanted beautifully, as it did at all of the liturgical services held during those days.



On Sunday, 5 July 2004, a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated in the same church. His Grace liturgized with the nearly twenty Priests and Deacons of the mission, amid a large crowd of the Faithful,



in an atmosphere of spiritual joy and compunction, and Ordained a Priest and a new Deacon.

These Ordinations, like all those that took place in the succeeding days, had been awaited for a long time, given the objective of meeting the extensive pastoral needs of a large flock in an area very wide in terms of both geography and population.

After the Divine Liturgy and *agape*



meal that followed it, the Bishop and the clergy went on foot to a hill about one kilometer away, where the local tribal chief had provided

them with a forty-five acre plot of land for the construction of a new Church of the Holy Apostles, the plans for which have already been prepared by Mr. Peter Kamboto, an architect and a devout son of our Church, and the foundations of which have already been excavated.

The clergy, a crowd of people, the chief who had donated the land, and also the former Mayor of Kananga were present



at the service for the blessing of the foundation of a church, at which Bishop Ambrose presided.

The expenses required are enormous, particularly on account of the cost of transporting materials to this distant and in many ways



inaccessible region, but the hope placed by the Faithful of our mission in the mercy of God and in well-disposed people who will offer assistance is truly very great and strong.

On Monday, 6 July 2004, a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated in the Church of St. Charalambos in Katoka, during which a Priest and a Deacon were Ordained, in the presence of a large crowd of Faithful in the shack that serves as their church.

On the same day, a courtesy visit was paid to the Deputy Prefect of Western Kasai in Kananga. The meeting was conducted in a friendly atmosphere.

On Tuesday, 7 July 2004, Bishop Ambrose celebrated the Divine Liturgy yet again, together with many of our clergy in the Church of Sts. Athanasios and Cyril in Nganza, at which He Ordained another Deacon to the Priesthood.

This was followed by a visit to the Church of St. Nicholas in the same community, which is under construction. It is built of



brick and has been roofed in a very rough and ready way with foliage. The parishioners fervently implored the Bishop to send help, so that they could cover their church with a tin roof.

That same evening, a consultation was held with all of the clergy of this administrative region, at which various matters were discussed, with special reference to the practical difficulties arising from the extreme poverty of the clergy, which impedes them from performing their pas-

toral duties effectively.



For example, although some years ago we had sent them money so

that they could acquire bicycles for getting around, they did, in fact, purchase them, but were subsequently forced to sell them in order to pay their children's school fees! And let it be noted that most of our clergy, just like the overwhelming majority of people there, have many children!

How much prayer, patience, and ability to comfort are needed to boost the morale of these heroic clergymen, who are certainly endowed with ardent faith, fervent zeal, and a spirit of self-sacrifice; and, indeed, they do not cease to struggle hard, as men, on a daily basis, to provide for their large families, while at the same time they must support and serve their even larger spiritual family, i.e., their flock.

On Wednesday, 8 July 2004, after an eventful journey of about fifty kilometers through the jungle, a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated in the Church of the Prophet Elias in the village of Mikalagi, to the great joy and spiritual consolation of the devout parishioners.

During this Liturgy, Bishop Ambrose Ordained a Deacon for the parish. The church is earthen, with straw for a roof, but full of Grace and blessings. The parish Priest, Father Mark, is an indefatigable clergyman, who labors with Apostolic zeal to spread the word of God in a very large area, which he frequently traverses on foot and in prayer.

On Thursday, 9 July 2004, at the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Kananga, Bishop Ambrose Ordained yet another Deacon. Likewise on Friday, again in the Church of the Holy Apostles, a Deacon was Ordained to assist the very active parish Priest, Father Prodromos, who also travels on foot through the large area for which he has pastoral responsibility.

Next on the schedule was a journey by air to the city of Tshikapa, but the government had commandeered the only aircraft in the fleet to transport supplies to a battlefield in another region of the country, where civil disputes and conflicts are raging.

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On Saturday, 11 July 2004, an airplane was supposed to show up



The tonsure of Readers at the Church of St. Anastasia, in the region of Tshikapa

at eleven o'clock in the morning at the airport for the flight which had been postponed the previous day, but there was a “small” delay, and thus it only arrived at five o'clock in the afternoon—the ultimate test of one's patience!

Finally, Bishop Ambrose traveled with three Priests to Tshikapa, the so-called “city of diamonds,” in which, however, there is not so much as a road paved with asphalt and the airport runway is made of gravel!

The Faithful of the city gave the visitors a very warm welcome. After that, the visitors checked in at a “hotel,” but it was impossible for them to get even the smallest amount of rest, on account of the din and hubbub that went on throughout the night!

On Sunday, 12 July 2004, without any respite, Bishop Ambrose had to celebrate the Divine Liturgy in the Church of St. Anastasia. In order to reach this church, it was necessary to undertake a very eventful and also extremely hazardous journey.

Thus it was that the mission team, in a special vehicle, embarked on some “roads” that were in appalling condition. At one point, they came to the great River Kasai, over which there was a rickety wooden bridge! However, they had to cross it at all costs, and only those who have traversed this bridge can know what they felt. Once again, the laconic expression of Bishop Ambrose speaks volumes: “A frightful spectacle”!

After the miraculous crossing of this “bridge,” the “roads,” con-

sisting of sand and stones, that they encountered were sufficient to make the group's last vestiges of courage, strength, and hope evaporate.

Nevertheless, glory to God, although exhausted, they finally reached their destination; but Bishop Ambrose had to liturgize! They encountered a primitive church made of palm leaves and sheet-metal. At the Divine Liturgy, Readers and Subdeacons were tonsured. The parish Priest, Father Kosmas, and the parishioners were very gladdened and moved. Also present was the tribal chief of the region.

Afterwards, the mission team quickly returned in the same indescribable manner and flew back to Kinshasa in a Russian aircraft (!), without any special difficulty this time (thanks be to God!).

III. To the Republic of the Congo

On Monday, 13 July 2004, the mission team departed from Kinshasa, bound for the Republic of the Congo, the other important stop on this missionary visit.

These two nations, and specifically their capitals (Kinshasa and Brazzaville), are separated, in essence, only by a river, the Congo, though crossing it is no easy undertaking at all! In truth, a grave new



Preparation for the Baptism of Catechumens
in a river in the Republic of the Congo

ordeal was awaiting the visitors from Greece at their departure from Kinshasa: they had to pass through yet other dreadful and inexorable "tollhouses," where they encountered overt and covert "thievery" of every kind, such as to defy one's imagination and expectations. The situation was reminiscent of that in the airport.

In the Republic of the Congo, where conditions were clearly better than those in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bishop



Father Kyrillos and part of the congregation in the Church of St. George, in the Republic of the Congo.

Ambrose was welcomed by Father Kyrillos Bissiafami and several of the Faithful, after which he visited the beautiful and spacious newly-built Church of the Great Martyr George, on

which quite a lot of work remains to be done.

Because Father Kyrillos suffers from an eye disease (he has lost his sight), no substantial expansion of the mission in this area has hitherto been possible. For this reason, without any delay, Bishop Ambrose Baptized fifteen adult Catechumens in a river and married five couples in the church.

On Tuesday, 14 July 2004, the Blessing of the Waters was celebrated in the Church of St. George, followed by Matins and the Divine Liturgy, during which His Grace Ordained a faithful spiritual son of Father Kyrillos, Emmanuel, to the Diaconate.

Bishop Ambrose then visited the Church's school and orphanage, where twelve orphans are provided with accommodation. The school is attended by around one hundred thirty children, who were away for the holidays.

Afterwards, Kyros, a pious physician, who had just arrived from Paris, and his wife Paulina, were Baptized in a river and their mar-



Bishop Ambrose with the new clergy in the Republic of the Congo.

riage was blessed in the church.

On Wednesday, 15 July 2004, at the Divine Liturgy in the Church of St. George, Bishop Ambrose Ordained Deacon Father Emmanuel to the Priesthood and a devout parishioner, Prodromos, to the Diaconate. The two new clergymen, who will now assume responsibility for developing the mission in the Republic of the Congo, are married.

IV. Back to Kinshasa and the Return Home

On the same day, the mission team returned by river to Kinshasa, where they underwent the now familiar and inevitable ordeal.

On the morning of Thursday, 16 July 2004, Bishop Ambrose made vitally important visits to the General Secretary for Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Justice and to his counterpart in the Ministry of Public Works, in Kinshasa, to sort out various legal matters pertaining to the presence of our mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Thereafter, he visited the homes of the Faithful, where he celebrated various services.

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On Friday, 17 July 2004, an additional passage through the “tollhouses” of the airport proved quite successful and relatively painless!

Then, after an extremely tiring flight that lasted for many hours, Bishop Ambrose and his companion, Anastasios, arrived in Addis Ababa, literally exhausted.

On Saturday evening, they departed by air from the Ethiopian capital and arrived in Cairo, the capital of Egypt, by way of Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, in the very early hours of Sunday, 19 July 2004.

They were immediately conveyed to our *Metochion* of All Saints, where a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated. This was followed by visits to churches in old Cairo and, also, to the homes of friends and acquaintances.

Bishop Ambrose and his companion arrived in Athens by a night flight, and in the early hours of Monday, 20 July 2004, the Brotherhood of the Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and



Justina, together with His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian, welcomed those who had labored in a superhuman way, “insomuch that they despaired even of life” (cf. II Corinthians 1:8), praying from the depths of their hearts that their harvest would, in due time, be abundant.

O Holy, glorious, and all-laudable Apostles, bless the “seed” of the Gospel that has fallen, yet again, into the fecund furrows of the African Continent!

Glory to God for all things!

Divine Liturgy at the
Chapel of All Saints, in
Cairo.