

The All-Venerable Dormition of the *Theotokos* Consolidates and Reinforces the Unity Between Greek and Bulgarian Anti-Ecumenists

BY THE strengthening, guidance, and protection of the Immaculate *Theotokos*, and with the greatly esteemed blessing of our Elder, Metropolitan Cyprian, His Grace, Bishop Cyprian of Oreoi visited our Old Calendar Orthodox brethren in Bulgaria under His Eminence, Bishop Photii of Triaditza, from August 14/27 to 16/29.

With synodal approval, this fraternal visit was planned to coincide with the great Feast of the Dormition and Translation of the *Theotokos*, which is the Feast Day of the Cathedral in Sofia. It was also organized with the prospect of consolidating and reinforcing the unity between the two Sister Old Calendar Orthodox Churches.



From every viewpoint, this visit proved most profitable, by the Grace of Christ our Savior, through the intercessions of the *Theotokos*, giving forth abundant spiritual fruit and veritably sealing the memory and conscience of Greeks and Bulgarians with the seal of love, unity, and interdependence.

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A. On Wednesday, August 14/27, after a ninety-minute flight, Bishop Cyprian, together with Subdeacons Demetrios Giatrakos and Apostolos Phykias, landed in Sofia at 9:45 a.m. Bishop Photii and Father Valentin Todorov welcomed them with heartfelt warmth.

We arrived at the Bishop's residence—located in the city, near the Cathedral—around 11 a.m., and were given the customary ecclesiastical reception in the Chapel of St. Mark of Ephesus.

• **The Bishop's** residence is located in an unpretentious and quiet area of the capital, which is embellished by greenery. It includes a ground floor (with the chapel, refectory, reception room, and offices),

two upper floors (with the Bishop's and monks' cells and guest rooms), and an attic. The building serves as a small *Hesychasterion*, which for the time being houses three monks—Fathers Sophrony, Euthymius, and Panteleimon. It celebrates its Patronal Feast twice a year (January 19 and June 23). We were particularly impressed by the heartfelt love and hospitality shown to us by His Eminence and the Fathers, and also by the truly remarkable order, tidiness, and cleanliness!

• **Following** a brief siesta, we left at 4:50 p.m. for the beginning of the cycle of Feast Day services to be held in the Cathedral of the Dormition of the *Theotokos*, this splendid and immense House of the Panagia.

Bishop Cyprian arrived first and was accorded a festal reception, at which he blessed the people. Soon after, the local Bishop arrived and was vested with the *Mandyas*, since he was to preside.

• **The evening** service, following the Russian practice, included Vespers, Matins, and the First Hour, which concluded at 8:45 p.m.

These services were truly heavenly and unforgettable. Perfect order reigned, the chanting from the choir loft was superb, and the Priests, Deacons, and Subdeacons served faultlessly.

Following a special *Typikon*, during the *Polyeleos* chanted at Matins, the two Bishops were clothed in full Hierarchical vestments, in the Altar, after which they proceeded to a podium before the Icon of the Dormition in the middle of the Church, and Bishop Photii censed all of the people and the Church. This was followed by the reading of the Gospel by the Bishop from the podium. One of the Bishops then anointed



the people as they came to venerate the Icon, while the other distributed the blessed bread. Many faithful were present, especially women and children. Finally, the Bishops entered the Altar, where Bishop Cyprian was unvested; Bishop Photii remained in his vestments until the end of Matins.

His Eminence spoke briefly after the First Hour, and then we departed, as the faithful piously saw off their Shepherds to the ringing of bells.

Following a light dinner back at the Bishop's residence, we withdrew to our rooms for some rest, since the celebration the next day would be long and arduous.

B. On Thursday, August 15/28, we arrived at the Church around 8 a.m. The Divine Liturgy began around 9:15, after the reading of the Third and Sixth Hours.



• **The Church** was filled to capacity, and the *Typikon* was impeccable. Even though we would finish completely around 1 p.m., we wished that the Liturgy would never end. It was as if the Immaculate *Theotokos* had translated us with her to the Heavenly Tabernacles! How painful would be our return to earthly reality....

The *kollyva*, embellished with fruit, and the bread for distribution were blessed before the Holy Icon in the middle of the Church. An innumerable multitude of faithful received the Immaculate Mysteries from three Chalices.



• **After** the dismissal, Bishop Cyprian delivered a brief homily, entitled: “Through the *Theotokos* and with the *Theotokos*: ‘The Name of My Son and My Own Name,’” which was simultaneously translated into Bulgarian by one of His Eminence’s devout spiritual daughters.



• **It was** by now 12:40 p.m. A procession was made around the Church with the Holy Icons, the Precious Cross, the Holy Gospel, *hexapteryga*, banners, and candles, accompanied by the chanting of the Supplicatory Canon to the *Theotokos*. The procession stopped four times for the offering up of petitions, the reading of the Gospel, and the blessing of the four points of the compass by one Bishop with the Cross, while the other Bishop sprinkled Holy Water.



• **After** their return to the *Solea*, Bishop Cyprian offered Bishop Photii a precious Icon of the *Theotokos*, stressing that she constitutes a **symbol of unity**, since in her the Uncreated God was united with created man, and he prayed that the All-Immaculate Mother preserve the unity between Greek and Bulgarian anti-ecumenists. Bishop Photii, in turn, offered Bishop Cyprian a very beautiful Icon of the *Theotokos*, and spoke about our unity, for which we must pray to the Mother of God, who is **truly a symbol of unity**.

Particularly moving was the expression of profound piety on the part of the faithful towards the Bishops, to whom they offered flowers and

Icons, seeking their blessing with warmth, joy, and compunction.

- **Around 1:30**, we returned to the Bishop's residence, where we ate lunch, at 2:30, with only His Eminence and the two Subdeacons. The meal was light and tasty, and the discussion about current ecclesiastical matters. We then retired for a noon rest. At 4 p.m., Subdeacon Demetrios Giatrakos left for the airport, since he had to return to Greece for work.

- **Bishop Photii** served Vespers at the Bishop's residence at 7 p.m. The chanting and reading were compunction-evoking and quiet. The Chapel of St. Mark "is a small piece of Paradise," remarked His Eminence. "But in every piece is contained the whole of Paradise," replied His Grace.

- **We should** note that the Divine Liturgy is celebrated every morning at the Dormition Cathedral, and the All-Night Vigil (Vespers, Matins, and the First Hour) takes place every afternoon. The Church has four serving Priests and two Deacons, with the Priests from surrounding Parishes serving in rotation.

- **At 8:30 p.m.**, we left with Bishop Photii and Subdeacon Apostolos for Father Valentin's house. His pious wife, Matushka Evgenia, had prepared a beautiful dinner for us, during which we discussed very interesting spiritual matters, while their charming children (Elizabeth, Julitta, and Theophania), opened windows to Paradise for us... We returned to the Bishop's residence around 10:30 p.m.

C. On Friday, August 16/29, we departed at 7:45 a.m., without His Eminence, for the Convent of the Holy Protection of the Theotokos, in Knyazhevo, a suburb of Sofia, in order to attend Liturgy and commune.

The Convent is located near the Bishop's residence and the Cathedral, in beautiful natural surroundings. It was founded in 1951 by the most holy Archbishop Seraphim (Sobolev), and now houses fifty-five nuns. The Convent *Katholikon* is dedicated to the Holy Apostle Luke.

The Liturgy was celebrated in the Chapel of the Holy Protection by Hieromonk Seraphim, a humble, devout, simple, white-haired Priest.

- **The sisters** gave Bishop Cyprian a simple and unpretentious, though deeply reverent and heartfelt, reception in the chapel. After the Liturgy, they asked him for some words of monastic wisdom. With Nun Margarita (fluent in Modern Greek) interpreting, His Grace spoke on the ever-timely theme of the **Crucified Monastic**: what a crucified monastic is and how he is sanctified through life on the cross and opens his being to Divine Grace, at which point God reveals his heart to him and leads him to *theoria*.

• **After** the light meal, Bishop Photii arrived, as did many clergy and laypeople, since there was to be a memorial service for the repose of Nun Seraphima on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of her repose (1921-1998). She was second in order after the ever-memorable Abbess Seraphima (†2004).

The cemetery is exquisitely beautiful, amidst the greenery and flowers. We took part in the lengthy service. Clergy, nuns, and laypeople gathered around the tombs, carrying candles. Psalter readings, psalmody, prayers, liturgical exclamations, incense, compunction... His Eminence spoke eloquently at the end, followed by some words from His Grace.



The service ended around 12:30 and was followed by a simple, though very tasty meal for everyone. The nuns were very pleased. They were distinguished by a gentility and nobility in their appearance and manners.

• **Finally**, we returned to the Bishop's residence around 2 p.m. Following a brief noon rest, we left for the airport at 4:30. The new, and truly remarkable Sofia airport has one thing that sets it apart: there is complete order and quiet; that is to say, there is no music blaring from the speakers—not even soft music. This is no small surprise, when one compares it to the deafening, neo-barbarity that prevails at the international airport of Athens....

Bishop Photii and Monk Panteleimon accompanied us up to the last moment with touching love and courtesy.

• **Around** 8 p.m., we arrived in Athens, but our hearts remained in Sophia. It was difficult to return to earth from the heaven of the love of our Bulgarian brethren, and from the heavenly flow of their worship to the reality of another order, which one labors night and day to render heavenly in the hope of resurrection unto eternal life....

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We offer our gratitude to the Divine Founder of the Church and thanksgiving to the Immaculate Theotokos. This was a most edifying visit, to the glory of God and for the increase of unity. Glory to God for all things!

August 23, 2008
†Bishop Cyprian of Oreoi