

## Pastoral Visit to Sweden

### *The Feast Day of Sts. Constantine and Helen*

**W**ith the blessing of His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian, from May 17/30 to May 22/June 4, 2009, His Grace, Bishop Cyprian of Oreoi, Acting President of the Holy Synod, made his first pastoral visit to Sweden (where His Grace, Bishop Johannes of Makarioupolis serves as Exarch), in order to participate, among other things, in the Feast Day of the Church of Sts. Constantine and Helen, in Vårberg, Stockholm.

Accompanying His Grace were Father Jiří Ján (acting as translator), Hierodeacon Theochares Hagiokyprianites (who hails from Sweden), Subdeacon Antonios Hagiokyprianites, Nun Magdalene from the Convent of the Holy Angels (also acting as translator), Mother Justina from the Convent of Saint Paraskeve, and several lay men and women, making a total of fourteen persons. This was His Grace's first acquaintance with our faithful in Sweden.

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Sweden greeted us at its best when we arrived on Saturday, May 17/30, at 2 p.m., with brilliant sunshine, blue skies, and a temperature of 24°C. The green landscapes and flowering trees were fragrant in the midst of this luminous season, during which nights are almost non-existent, lasting from around 11 p.m. to 3 a.m.

A group of the faithful, together with Priest Anders Åkerström, Presbytera Britt (Birgitta), Deacon Father Stefan Jaerpenberg, and his wife Victoria, welcomed us with great joy and cordiality at the airport. We went directly to the Church of Sts. Constantine and Helen, in the suburb of Vårberg, south of Stockholm, where His Grace, Bishop Johannes and other faithful were awaiting us.

We then celebrated Great Vespers in Greek, Swedish, English, and Slavonic. At the conclusion, the two Bishops expressed their great joy over this visit and meeting. Bishop Cyprian conveyed the heartfelt wishes of our ailing Metropolitan Cyprian and said that he felt that "this parish expresses, and bears witness to, genuine Orthodoxy, in that it is 'crucified.' In a society where Orthodox Christians are a small minority,

this in itself already constitutes a Cross. Proof of the authenticity of this community's crucifixion is that it is increasing in numbers and bearing spiritual fruit, and has offered a number of its members to monasticism. Wherever there is corresponding monastic and parish life, there is also a genuine ecclesiastical ethos."

We should note, parenthetically, that this parish is made up of Swedish converts to Orthodoxy from Lutheranism and also of Orthodox faithful of Greek, Serbian, Arab, Russian, and Romanian extraction. Their lively faith, zeal, and thirst for the Truth remind one of the early Christian era. The faithful make sacrifices to come to Church from long distances, seeking healing for their suffering souls, consolation, light, love, confirmation, and nourishment for their spiritual struggle in this profoundly secularized country.

They live in a very difficult spiritual environment, since today's affluent society worships the flesh and is dominated by egotism. The Lutheran Church is Sweden's State Church. Its faithful are progressively dropping away, being led by their shepherds [both male and female; the Swedish Church has had women bishops since 1997—*Trans.*] ever farther from the basic principles of the Gospel. At the same time, there is an increasing number of Muslims, and Lutheran Churches are beginning to be transformed into mosques. Orthodox Christians belonging to other local Churches in Sweden are highly influenced by the syncretistic spirit of modernism and ecumenism.

After Vespers, we went to the house of Deacon Father Theochares' mother according to the flesh for bodily and spiritual nourishment. In the spiritual discussion that took place, Bishop Johannes recounted how the parish in Stockholm began and the miracles by which the Lord consolidated his missionary work. Bishop Cyprian gave edifying advice about *the meaning of the Cross, without which there can be no Resurrection or Ascension. Using Patristic texts, he underscored the benefit we receive from enduring sorrows and tribulations with joy.*

Part of the group from Greece was accommodated in rooms at the Church, while the other part was given hospitality in various homes of our Swedish brothers and sisters.

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**On the Sunday** of the Holy 318 God-Bearing Fathers of the First Ecumenical Synod, May 18/31, Bishop Cyprian concelebrated with Bishop Johannes, assisted by Fathers Anders and Jiří, Deacons Theo-



chares and Stefan, and a number of Subdeacons. The Church's mixed choir chanted in the presence of a large, multi-ethnic crowd of pious Orthodox Christians. A large number of the faithful communed.

At the conclusion, Bishop Cyprian spoke about *the unity of the Church, for which our Lord prayed,*

*and about the significance of our duty in this regard to keep the doctrines of Orthodoxy and to put them into practice in our lives (Orthopraxy), and especially to refrain from judging anyone. The unity of the Church is not broken only by heresy, but also by sin. When we deviate from the vision of the doctrines or the practice of a correct life in Christ, we separate ourselves from God and from the Church. He also stressed that we should not have heretical or excessively worldly books or magazines in our houses, since these prevent the Panagia [the Mother of God] from visiting us, and we thereby lose her protection and are separated from the heavenly world.*



Following the Divine Liturgy and the plentiful *agape* meal offered by the faithful in our parish, we left with some parishioners for a tour of the center of Stockholm. Walking through the narrow lanes of the old city, we marvelled at the historical and cultural wealth of the country. We then took a boat

tour of the waterfront of Stockholm, which is built on fourteen islands.

That evening, a Greek member of our parish, originally from Ioannina (in northwestern Greece), and his family provided us with a delicious meal at their restaurant on the waterfront. Bishop Cyprian took the opportunity to speak about *the importance of keeping the fast, especially on Wednesdays and Fridays, and about the necessity for us—and*

*especially the Shepherds—to take heed to set a good example for those around us by respecting the traditions of our Church.*

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**On Monday,** May 19/June 1, we went to the Convent of St. Philothei of Athens, located near Villberga, Grillby. Mother Philothei, a Swedish nun who was tonsured by her spiritual Father, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle, at the Convent of the Holy Angels (Aphidnai, Attica, Greece), has resided in this solitary *Hesychasterion* for around twenty years.

Bishop Cyprian celebrated a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy, assisted by Fathers Anders and Jiří and Hierodeacon Theochares. At Mother Philothei's request, Mother Justina and Mrs. Chrysoula Katsouda (both from Greece) chanted. Everyone communed.



In his homily, using examples from the Lives of the Saints, Bishop Cyprian explained *how true Christians experience the Cross in their lives and how they are suspended on the Cross*. This homily was especially strengthening for Mother Philothei, who bears the Cross of the monastic life and of bodily illnesses and pain while living entirely on her own.

Bishop Cyprian conveyed to her the prayers of our spiritual Father, Metropolitan Cyprian, who, though on his sickbed, nevertheless cares for and watches over his children throughout the world. He also gave her an Icon of the “*Panagia of the Angels*,” since she became a Nun at the Convent of the Holy Angels.

A festal meal followed outdoors, where Mother Philothei recounted to us how St. Philothei has supported and sustained her in her ascetic solitude.

We then visited the small city of Sigtuna, the country's first capital, where the remains of a Church dating back to the time of the Christian-

ization of Sweden (in the eleventh century) are preserved. This Church was built by Saint Olaf before the Schism, when the Christians of Europe were still united in Orthodoxy.

We dined at the house of our parishioners Laurence and Marjo (Maria), in a beautiful forest not far from Uppsala, with spiritual joy and lightness of heart.



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On Tuesday, May 20/June 2, Sweden presented its other side to us. We left at 8 a.m. for Uppsala in the midst of a downpour, while the temperature had dropped to 10°C. In Uppsala, a Divine Liturgy was served at the Church of the Dormition of the *Theotokos* by the Church's Rector, Father Anders, assisted by Father Jiří and Deacons Theochares and Stefan, with Bishop Cyprian in prayerful attendance. We all met at the Holy Chalice.

At the conclusion of the Liturgy, one of the parishioners told us about an Icon of Saint Theodosios, Archbishop of Chernigov (in Russia), which is located in the Church. This Icon had been hidden in the Soviet Union during times of persecution. Someone then brought it to Sweden, but since the Saint's face had strangely disappeared, he placed the Icon in a cupboard. Later, however, through the intercessions of the Saint, this person was cured of cancer, and when he took the Icon out of the cupboard, the Saint's face had reappeared!

A light meal followed at Father Anders' house, where His Grace spoke about the *lofty position of a Presbytera in a parish, since she participates to some extent in the Priesthood of her husband and helps him in his pastoral work. He also spoke about the role of the Deaconess in the ancient Church and the unwritten tradition of showing respect to sacred books, Holy Scriptures, Icons, Antidoron, etc., such that we do not take hold of them carelessly or set them down just anywhere (e.g., on chairs or alongside other worldly objects).*

Father Anders then gave us a tour of Uppsala, a well-known university town, which is considered the ecclesiastical capital of Sweden. At the “Domkyrka,” the Lutheran Cathedral, we were shown the new “Holy Table,” placed near the center of the Church. Since Protestants do not recognize the holiness of the Relics of the Saints, during the Consecration of the Church they placed an ecumenical prayer for the “Unity of Churches” inside the “reliquary,” signed by various Protestant and Roman Catholic leaders, as well as by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.



That evening, we were offered a meal at the house of Sister Magdalene’s parents according to the flesh, who are not Orthodox but who very much love and respect our Church. His Grace spoke about *the vision of sanctity in Orthodoxy and about the joy and peace that deification brings to our lives. He also spoke about the place of the Panagia in our Church and Faith and about her wonder-working Icons.* Father George recounted his own journey towards the true Church: After a long, painful search, he felt repose of spirit at the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, and was thus baptized into Orthodoxy.

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• **On Wednesday**, May 21/June 3, the Feast Day of Sts. Constantine and Helen, Equals-to-the-Apostles, the Church in Vårberg, Stockholm, celebrated its Patronal Feast with a Divine Liturgy. Taking part were Their Graces, Bishops Cyprian and Johannes, two Presbyters, Fathers Anders and Jiří, two Deacons, Fathers Theochares and Stefan, many Subdeacons, and a large crowd of faithful.



Bishop Johannes spoke about the Church's mission to spread the Gospel of Truth and thanked the visitors from Greece for their fraternal and supportive presence. Many of the faithful partook of Holy Communion, after which a procession took place around the Church. Bishop Cyprian then spoke about *patience and thanksgiving in times of tribulation and about the inner beauty of the Holy Church, the Bride of Christ. He expressed his gratitude for the moving hospitality shown to the Greek delegation, and also about his joy over the progress of the ecclesiastical life of our missionary communities in Sweden.* Finally, he presented a precious Icon of the *Theotokos* as a gift to Bishop Johannes.

We chanted "Christ is Risen" in Greek, Swedish, Slavonic, and Arabic, and Bishop Cyprian distributed small gifts as blessings to the faithful. A festal meal followed in the parish hall in a warm atmosphere of fraternal joy and love. Bishop Cyprian read aloud a *Prayer to our Panagia to grant us love for our brother*, which was then distributed to the faithful in Swedish translation.

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• **On Thursday** morning, May 22/June 4, at 6:20 a.m., Bishop Cyprian and his travelling companions returned by air to Athens, via Denmark, with joyful thanksgiving for the fraternal hospitality and mutual love of our faithful in Sweden, as well as for their zeal for our holy and true Faith.

This visit was of particular importance since nine years have passed since Metropolitan Cyprian's last visit to Sweden, and also because this last year was an extremely difficult one for the two shepherds, Bishop Johannes and Father Anders, on account of serious health problems that they both confronted.

The presence of Bishop Cyprian, the clergy, and the group of faithful from Greece renewed and strengthened the bonds of love and unity in Christ with our brothers and sisters who constitute the "small flock" in faraway Sweden.

Glory to God for all things!

Sister Magdalene

### Postscript:

Letters subsequently sent to us by the people we met in Sweden informed us of the profound impression created by our visit to their parish. One writes: "The parish of Sts. Constantine and Helen has undergone a

permanent change for the better. The parish was veritably bombarded by love and blessed by your presence.”

Lutherans with whom we came into contact write: “We are proud of our contacts with you, the Orthodox,” and “we were made very happy by the meeting. One woman remained awake all night reflecting on this wonderful encounter.”

S.M.

