

An Unforgettable Spiritual Experience

**Pastoral Visit to Orthodox Georgia,
in the Caucasus, Where the
Apostles Once Trod**

The Lord, in His infinite compassion, blessed us to visit Orthodox Georgia, in the Caucasus, a land once trodden by the Apostles, from July 3/16 to July 8/21, 2009. The purpose of our visit was to maintain contact with our small ecclesiastical community there, the center of which is the newly-built Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa* in Gldani, a northern suburb of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. The leader of this Eparchy is Protopresbyter Basili Mkalavishvili, assisted by Father Vakhtang Mariani.

Beautiful and blessed Georgia came as a pleasant surprise to us. We were given hospitality in a country whose high level of civilization—particularly in terms of ethos—made us feel as if we were in Greece. In fact, it was even better than being in Greece, since the lively and demonstrative piety of the people has not yet allowed a spirit of secularization to penetrate deeply into their culture.

The spiritual presence of St. Nina (ca. †338), the Enlightener of Iberia (Georgia), and of the Holy Great Martyr George (St. Nina's cousin), as well as that of many other Saints, kings and queens, ascetics, and Martyrs, who have rendered fragrant this much-afflicted land, is vivid and strong.

The Icon of the *Panagia Portaitissa* (also known as the “Iberian,” which is treasured on the Holy Mountain [Mt. Athos, Greece]) is greatly venerated, and copies thereof can be found far and wide.



The Holy Apostles Andrew the First-Called and Simon the Zealot were the first Enlighteners of Georgia. The tomb of St. Simon, who was martyred here, is located in the ancient city of Nikopsi (Anakopi). St. Andrew left this country a wonder-working Icon of the *Theotokos*,

which is preserved to this day at the Monastery of the Nativity of the *Theotokos*, in Gelati.

The tomb of St. Nina, Equal-to-the-Apostles, is located in the Monastery dedicated to her in Bodbe, in the region of Kakheti. St. Nina's Divenly-wrought Cross, which was given to her by the *Theotokos* when the latter exhorted her in her missionary work, is treasured at the celebrated Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi. The chapel built over the cell in which St. Nina lived for years is preserved on the grounds of the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, in Mtskheta, the former capital. Our Lord's seamless Robe and the sacred mantle of the Holy Prophet Elias are also preserved in this extraordinary place. The Baptistery in which the first King and Queen, Mirian (265-342) and Nana, were baptized, as well as their tomb, are located in Mtskheta.

What an astounding country! Its civilization goes back to the influence of Greek colonies along the Black Sea (ancient *Pontos Euxeinos*), and, by way of Alexander the Great and the Romans, reaches all the way to Byzantium. Regardless of the day or time, monastery and parish Churches alike are virtually packed with faithful at prayer, especially women. The people, though poor and beleaguered (four wars have broken out in the last twenty or so years), are very pious, simple, good-hearted, hospitable, dignified, and full of life and hope. The tradition of monasticism in this country, which goes back to the sixth century (with many monasteries and lavras and thousands of monastics) shows hopeful signs of renewal.

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On Thursday, July 3/16 at 10:45 a.m., we—Bishop Cyprian of Oreoi (the author of this article), Bishop Ambrose of Methone, Subdeacon Antonios Hagiokyprianites, and our Georgian brother in Christ, Hilarion, who resides in Thessalonica—left for Tbilisi, via Constantinople, on Turkish Airlines flight 1846. We arrived in Constantinople after an hour's flight, and then departed for Tbilisi at 12:30, arriving at 3:50 Greek time (4:50 by Georgian time).

We were warmly greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Fathers Basili and Vakhtang and a group of faithful, and then headed directly for our Church dedicated to the *Panagia Portaitissa*. Here, we were accorded a traditional reception by the parishioners, while the chanters beautifully chanted "It is Truly Meet" in Greek. We exchanged greetings and were offered a light meal in a train car that serves as a temporary refectory.

The dimensions of our parish Church are 24 by 18 meters, and it is 33 meters high. It is the second largest Church in the country, after the newly-built Patriarchal Church of the Holy Trinity in the center of Tbilisi, and was built *exclusively* by the women parishioners!

The interior tiling has been completed, and now they will begin lining the outer walls with a special type of Georgian stone. Inside the makeshift courtyard wall, there are various offices, workshops, and a candle factory (where they use pure wax). To the right of the Church entrance there is a Baptistry, where Baptisms are frequently performed. To the left is an assortment of Church supplies.

Despite the fact that Father Basili (63 years old) had been imprisoned for four and a half years on account of his strict stand towards the Georgian Patriarchate, work on the Church and parish continued through the admirable zeal of his pious flock—especially the women—and the prudence of Father Vakhtang.

Bishop Ambrose and I returned late in the evening to the center of Tbilisi, where, in a poor neighborhood, we stayed overnight at the house of the pious and wise Rusudan, a most Grace-filled woman and spiritual daughter of Father Basili. After dinner, we withdrew to our rooms, quite tired but very happy. Hilarion was accommodated at his family home.

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Friday, July 4/17, a swelteringly hot day, was devoted to visiting various very important shrines in and around Tbilisi.

We first headed for Mtskheta, the former capital of the country, around twenty kilometers northwest of Tbilisi, at the confluence of the Kura (Kur, Kuru, Mitsbari) and Aragbi Rivers.

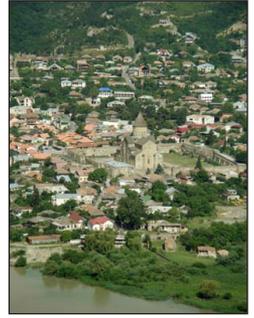
a. Opposite Mtskheta, above the area where the two rivers meet, is a hill, on the top of which an extraordinary stone Church, which dates back to the fifth century, was built in an architectural style influenced by Syria. Dedicated to St. Nina, it is located on the spot where the Saint demolished the idols through her prayers and replaced them with the Precious Cross.

During the first part of the fourth century, under St. Constantine the Great, the Geor-



gians were baptized in the Kura River, at the foot of this hill.

b. In the city of Mtskheta, we visited the equally extraordinary Church of the Holy Apostles, called Svetitskhoveli (Sacred Pillar), which had originally been built of wood on the location of a myrrh-streaming and wonder-working cedar in the garden of King Mirian. Under this cedar there lay the tomb of St. Sidonia, who had brought the most precious Robe of our Lord to this country in her arms! The tomb exists



to this day, near the middle of the imposing Church, with its superb iconography. Under the floor are tombs of past rulers who, out of humility, requested to be laid to rest there, where everyone would walk over them! This Church served as the See of the Patriarch of Iberia (Georgia).

c. Also in Mtskheta is the Convent of the Holy Trinity. We venerated the tombs of the Holy Monarchs Mirian and Nana inside the main Church. On the convent grounds, we prayed in the chapel that had been built on the site of the cell where St. Nina initially dwelt. We also prayed at the miracle-working tomb of a contemporary Georgian Saint, Gabriel the Fool-for-Christ (†1995), who was in agreement with our own Father Basili's attitude toward the Patriarchate and his stand against ecumenism.



Continuing our trek, approximately ten kilometers northwest of Mtskheta, we arrived at the renowned Monastery of St. Shio of Mgvime. St. Shio was one of the twelve disciples of St. John who had been sent from Syria to Iberia by the *Theotokos* in the sixth century, in order to consolidate the Christian faith there.

A multitudinous lavra (once comprising up to 2000 monks!) rose up around St. Shio's ascetic cell. Above the monastery, which is located in

the mountains, the holes that served as ascetic cells along the steep slopes evoke awe and compunction. The Saint's rocky, subterranean cave, in which his tomb is located, is still preserved, as well as his previous cell, where he was visited by the *Theotokos* (and the Venerable Forerunner), who indicated to him his new place of asceticism.



A wondrous place, completely tranquil and compunction-evoking....

The monastery is now being built anew, with ten monks and eight novices already living there. We venerated the holy tibia and portions of the blessed skull of St. Shio, as well as portions of the Holy Relics of St. Evagre, St. Shio's disciple and successor.

We then returned to Tbilisi, via Mtskheta. The scorching heat was an oppressive tyrant.... Nevertheless, we were refreshed by the piety of the people. As a rule, the women are modestly dressed. It reminds one of Athens in the 1950's. Poverty and dignity.... They stopped us on the streets to ask for our blessing, with palms cupped one over the other, as when the clergy commune inside the Altar. Others got out of their cars and hastened to ask us to make the sign of the Cross over them.

a. We visited the National Museum, which is the seminary building where Stalin studied to become a Priest, according to the desire of his pious mother!

Our most pious and courteous guide, the blessed French-speaking and philhellene Alexander (an Abkhazian) ensured that we paid no entrance fee for the section containing ecclesiastical treasures, which had been preserved there from the fury of the Communists as a national heritage.

Georgia's ancient and rich cultural heritage unfolded for quite some time before our astonished eyes and our prayerful hearts!

Priceless and indescribable treasures! Icons, mosaics, frescoes, articles of gold and silver, woodcrafts, etc., bear witness to a culture profoundly influenced by Greek and Byzantine civilization, while preserving its Georgian identity. It reached its zenith under the reigns of King David IV the Restorer (1089-1125) and Queen Tamar (1184-1213).

Mongols then laid waste to the country, and this devastation was followed by three centuries of decline.

b. In the former Patriarchal Church, the Sioni Cathedral, we had the heavenly blessing of venerating the Cross given as a gift to St. Nina by the *Theotokos*. Divinely-wrought of vine twigs, the Cross has now been silver-plated. We also venerated portions of the Relics of the Holy Great Martyr George. Here again, tombs of various eminent people have been placed under the floor. The Church was packed with faithful at prayer, the “inconvenient time” notwithstanding. To one side, a Priest was hearing confessions. A compunction-evoking Church, full of Grace, fragrance, and spiritual beauty, it dates to the beginning of the fifth century.



• **Beautiful** Tbilisi, a spiritual, cultural, and educational center of great importance, also hides many treasures. An ancient city of Eastern Georgia founded by King Vakhtang Gorgasali in 455, it was partly built on a picturesque ravine, through which the Kura River flows. Having its source in Mtskheta, this river passes through Azerbaijan and empties into the Caspian Sea. Tbilisi has around one million inhabitants.



c. In the old city, on the eastern shore of the Kura River, across from the remains of the old fortress, there is a marvelous ancient Church, in which is located the tomb of St. Shushanik (†475). A statue of King Vakhtang on horseback dominates the square below the Church.



We prayed at her holy tomb with compunction, while the Church was packed with people—mostly women, and young at that—who were chanting a supplicatory canon. They eagerly hastened to express their reverence and ask for our blessing, even following us all the way outside!

d. Precisely in the center of this marvelous Church is a colossal Icon of the 100,000 Holy Martyrs—the approximate number of inhabitants of Tbilisi in the thirteenth century, when Mongol barbarians under Genghis Khan destroyed the capital, razed all of the Churches, and mocked the sacred objects of the Christians, including the wonder-working “Sion” Icon of the *Theotokos*. The Mongols forced the inhabitants, after crossing the bridge over the ravine, to trample on this Icon. All refused and were beheaded, and their bodies were thrown into the Kura River. For forty days thereafter the region was enveloped in a luminous cloud!

e. The place where they were martyred lies directly below the Church of St. Shushanik. A beautiful chapel has been erected on this site, adjacent to the new bridge. There is also a holy shrine on the place of martyrdom of St. Abo, an Arab perfumer who came to believe in the Truth and was killed by his fellow Arabs, who had conquered Georgia (in the seventh century).

• **We returned** to our lodgings late in the afternoon, laden with blessings and rebaptized in Georgian piety. Our hospitable hostess, Rusudan, generously and warmly attended to us.

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On Saturday, July 5/18, with the oppressive heat wave still in sway, we visited the village of Father Basili. Nakhshirgora is a mountain village, approximately 850 meters above sea level and around forty-five minutes west of Tbilisi. Its inhabitants have left it for urban centers, on account of the prevailing poverty. Only four families have remained!

The village was gratifyingly cool. We chanted the Supplicatory Canon to the *Theotokos* in the beautiful Church of St. George located on one of Father Basili’s properties. During times of persecution and oppression by the Communists, Father Basili erected this Church, replete with Icons, over the ruins of an old one. The



property is enclosed and includes a guest house and a newly-built bell tower. Father Basili intends to start a convent here.

A group of about ten of us ate in the cool shade of the pine trees. It

was a touching experience—traditional Georgian hospitality at its best.

We also visited the village cemetery, where we performed a memorial service at the grave of Father Basili's parents. According to local custom, graves are sprinkled with Holy Water and tables are placed next to the tombs, where relatives eat and pray for the reposed (as in funeral suppers).

• **We left** for Gldani so as to be in time for the evening service, which includes the Ninth Hour, Vespers, Matins, and the First Hour.

We began the service around 3:30 p.m. and ended around 6:30 p.m. Quite a few of the faithful were in attendance, mostly women. There are no seats (of the theater variety) in the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa*. The chanting by the women's choir filled the Church with vibrant warmth, and the congregation showed great piety and spiritual joy.

Bishop Ambrose presided. The *Typikon* is similar to that of the Russians. During the *Polyeleos*, the faithful venerate the Precious Cross and are anointed with oil and sprinkled with Holy Water. During the long service two Baptisms were performed in the Baptistry next to the Church entrance.

Back at our lodgings, blessed Rusudan once again greeted us openheartedly.

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On Sunday, July 6/19, the commemoration of St. Sisoës the Great, we liturgized in the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa* and then visited the city center.

a. After the Third and Sixth Hours, we began the Divine Liturgy around ten in the morning. Bishop Ambrose and I concelebrated, assisted by our two Priests and many Subdeacons.

The women chanted very devoutly, dressed in their special apparel (married women in black and red, unmarried in blue and white). A good deal of Greek was used in the Liturgy: *Lord, have mercy; Grant this, O Lord; Holy God; It is Truly Meet; Our Father; And to Thy spirit; Eis polla ete Despota*, etc.





Despite the summer vacation, the immense Church was full of faithful, the majority of them young women, modestly dressed and with heads covered.

Before the conclusion of the Liturgy, Bishop Cyprian gave a homily, based on the Gospel and Epistle readings of the Day (Sixth Sunday of St. Matthew), about genuine hope, which must be characterized by patience and love. This hope in Christ will bring about our resurrection from spiritual, and sometimes bodily, paralysis. Likewise, it will bring about a national resurrection, so desired by the Georgian people, since this amazing, historic country lies paralyzed by recent tribulations. Blessed is the people that is tried, yet hopes in Christ, since it accepts its tribulations as a gift of God. We must delve ever more deeply into the meaning of pain in our lives.

At the conclusion, gifts were offered as a blessing to Father Basili: a precious Icon of the *Theotokos* and one of St. Cosmas of Aitolia. Then, while the choir chanted for quite some time, the faithful venerated the Cross, were sprinkled with Holy Water, and received *antidoron* and a small Icon.



Around 1 p.m., in the train car-cum-refectory, we were offered delicious Georgian treats and gave small gifts as blessings to our Priests, Father Basili's Matushka, and to the women who served with such alacrity.

b. One of our Georgian spiritual daughters, who lives in Greece but who happened to be in Tbilisi at the time, offered to treat us to a meal at a restaurant in the city center. The visitors from Greece, our two Priests,

and six other Georgians partook of the meal. The food was specially chosen to introduce us to traditional Georgian cuisine. It was indeed superb.

During the meal, we intensely felt our common Faith, our in many ways common civilization, and our common ethos, which made us feel as if we were in Greece. When, during our toast, we said that on Tuesday “we will depart from Greece in order to return to Greece,” our Georgian table companions broke into enthusiastic applause.

c. We then visited the immense new Church of the Holy Trinity, which is now the Patriarchal Cathedral. Located in an open space together with other buildings, this is an extraordinary complex. The golden dome on the one hundred-meter-high Church towers majestically over the entire city.



Upon entering, we were once again pleasantly surprised to see a crowd of people at prayer! Psalmody, marvelous Icons (entirely uninfluenced by the West)... Holy *Myron* was flowing from a large Icon of Sts. Kerykos and Julitta. Under the Church, there are other spacious rooms and another Church. The faithful hastened to meet us and ask for our blessing and advice. They recounted miracles to us. This Church bears witness to the victory of the Triune God over the

fury of the atheistic regime.

d. We then went up to an area in the mountains, on the western shore of the Kura River, where we visited the sixth-century Monastery of St. David. The Fathers at this wondrous shrine received us with great love and courtesy, and led us into a most compunction-evoking Church and to St. David’s



place of ascesis among the rocks, from whence flows abundant Holy Water. In our discussion together, they showed interest in spiritual matters and expressed their desire to learn Greek.

From the Monastery of St. David, one is provided with a panoramic view of the entire city of Tbilisi, which spreads towards the east, beyond the river.

e. We arrived at the humble apartment of our Georgian spiritual daughter, where, along with her family and friends, we stayed quite late, discussing edifying matters. There was an atmosphere of great spiritual thirst, love, and heartfelt hospitality, nobility and dignity, indescribable poverty (theirs is an apartment measuring seventeen square meters for three people, in a shabby Soviet-era building), national pride and nostalgia, and Georgian singing, accompanied by the piano.

• **Rusudan**, our hostess back at our lodgings, was waiting up for us to greet us upon our return, around midnight, with pitchers of cool water in her hands and a maternal smile on her lips.

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Monday, 7/20 July, the commemoration of the Holy Martyr Kyriake, our last day in Georgia, was devoted to a major pilgrimage: to the holy tomb of St. Nina.

After a two-hour drive eastward through mountainous Kakheti (87% of Georgia is mountainous terrain), we arrived at the Convent of St. Nina, in the village of Bodbe. It is a marvelous complex, where order and cleanliness reign, in perfect harmony with the equally marvelous natural surroundings.

There is an area for public worship—which includes the renowned Church of St. George (dating to the middle of the fourth century), in which is located the wonder-working tomb of St. Nina—and a monastic cloister, where approximately thirty nuns live.

The Saint's tomb is located precisely on the spot where her ascetic hut once lay, in which she lived during the last years of her life, praying and instructing others. Here, she completed her Apostolic mission, re-



posing on January 14 (ca. 338), at the age of sixty-seven.

With profound compunction and awe, we venerated the Saint's tomb, which, according to her desire, has never been opened. The Church of St. George and its interior adornment engenders contrition of heart and prayer for the whole world.

We then made a long descent, through dense woods and vegetation, before arriving at the Saint's spring of Holy Water, in which the faithful bathe and are cured of their ills.

There were already many pious pilgrims there—especially young women—who were bathing in two separate areas for men and women under the Church, with simple joy and prayer.

Following an arduous, yet joyful, ascent, we visited the convent's beautiful cemetery, where we prayed, quietly reflecting with self-reproach.

During our return trip to the capital, we stopped to eat in the dense forest, glorifying God for the greatness of His love for mankind.

• **We arrived** in Tbilisi early in the afternoon to rest, have a light meal, and prepare for our trip to Constantinople. Our vigilant hostess Rusudan—always eager to help and with a smile on her face, with her wonderful Georgian cooking, an intelligent and amiable interlocutor, with her multitudinous knowledge and dynamic personality, yet modest and careful—is truly an aristocratic woman!

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On **Tuesday, July 8/21**, we left at 2:30 a.m. for Tbilisi's impressive airport. A good number of our faithful, along with our two Priests, Fathers Basili and Vakhtang, were awaiting us with great love and respect to see us off. It was very difficult to say goodbye. How strong are the ties of Christian love!

At 4:30, we left for Constantinople on Turkish Airlines flight 1387. After two hours, we arrived in the *Capital of Roman Hellenism*, the City of our dreams. We had the especial blessing of staying nearly ten hours in the City.

• **Around** 7 a.m., yet again in the oppressive heat, we began a brief tour of the foremost places of Orthodox veneration, which all-subduing time has not obliterated, by the Grace of God, so as to bear witness to the greatness of our nation.



a. We marvelled at the Pantokratoros Monastery (in Peran), prayed outside the renowned Church of St. Theodosia (now the Mosque of the Rose [Gül Camii]), and visited the Holy Water fount of St. Nicholas (in the shadow of the City Wall, near the Golden Horn), and the Patriarchal Church of St. George at the Phanar:



the closed Gate of St. Gregory V, the complete Relics of Sts. Euphemia, Solomone, and Theophano Augusta, portions of the Relics of the Holy Patriarchs of Constantinople, Sts. Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostomos, and part of the pillar against which our Lord was scourged, among other things.

b. Our itinerary continued with a visit to the Convent of the Life-Giving Spring (in Baloukle), with the tombs of the Patriarchs and the wonder-working Holy Water fount, along with the renowned, new Church (*cf.* the Friday of Bright Week). We then went on to Blachernai, with its Holy Water fount (*cf.* the Holy Protection of the *Theotokos*, St. Andrew the Fool-for-Christ, and the Deposition of the Robe of the *Theotokos*). Afterwards, we visited the astonishing Monastery of Chora (Kariye Camii, now a museum) with its marvelous mosaics:



Christ, “the Land of the Living,” and the *Theotokos*, “the Container of the Uncontainable.” This was followed by a visit to Pikridion (Chaskioï), with the renowned Church of St. Paraskeve, in the cemetery of which is located the tomb of the Holy New Martyr Argyre (†April 30, ca. 1725); her Holy Relics are preserved inside the Church. Final-

ly, we passed by the crumbling Monastery of St. Theodore the Studite and the splendid Church of Sts. Sergios and Bacchos.

c. At 1:10 p.m., we found ourselves outside the *Acropolis of Roman Hellenism*: our renowned Hagia Sophia!

Awe, compunction, and tears.... You try, as you wait in line to enter (it is now a museum with throngs of tourists from all over the world), to embrace with your glance this masterpiece of Byzantine architecture, thereby embracing the history of a millennium of Patriarchs, Synods, Saints, Emperors, and miracles.



All that is most restrained, yet simultaneously unrivalled in aesthetic plenitude, is revealed to you when you finally enter into this, our nation's soul-stirring place of worship!

Now you understand the words of the bedazzled Emperor Justinian: "Glory to God, Who has vouchsafed me to bring about such a work. O Solomon, I have surpassed you!"

Sorrow, self-reproach, repentance, and prayer! This resplendent monument of the glorious architects Anthemios and Isidore has been transformed into a museum, impiously tramped through by careless and immodest mobs of tourists, while Christians are not permitted to express their spontaneous reverence even by simply making the sign of the Cross, or by a prostration to the floor, or by kissing something sanctified by the Grace of the Holy Spirit...!

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• **Time** presses.... At 5:40 p.m., we left on Turkish Airlines flight 1849 for Athens. After one hour, at the Athens airport, a whole *history of five days* was compressed in our hearts, constantly calling forth to our restless memory a civilization from Colchis, on the Black Sea, on the west coast of Georgia (sixth century B.C.), to the City of St. Constantine the Great and of Hagia Sophia....

Glory and thanksgiving to the Giver of all good things, to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit!

