



Pilgrimage to Bulgaria and Constantinople

By the Grace of God and with the blessing of our ailing Metropolitan Cyprian, the St. Philaret the Merciful Orthodox Women's Guild organized a successful pilgrimage to Bulgaria and Constantinople in mid-August of 2009.

The primary purpose of this pilgrimage, in which nearly fifty pilgrims took part, was to participate in the Patronal Feast of the Cathedral of the Dormition of the *Theotokos*, in Sofia, Bulgaria, belonging to our Sister Old Calendar Orthodox Church in this country under His Eminence, Bishop Photii of Triaditza. We also visited a number of other monasteries and convents in Bulgaria, after which we went to Constantinople, in order to become acquainted (or re-acquainted) with some of its masterpieces.

On Wednesday morning, August 13/26, 2009, we departed from the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, Phyle, Attica, on a tour bus. At the head of the group was the author of this article, His Grace, Bishop Klemes of Gardikion, assisted by Father Angelos Mourlas. Also participating was Mother Taxiarchia, Abbess of the Convent of the Holy Angels, Aphidnai, Attica, with one of her nuns.

At the recommendation of our courteous and helpful driver, we made a first, unscheduled stop at the Convent of Kato Xenias (in northern Magnesia), where a wonder-working Icon of the *Panagia Xenias*, portions of the Precious Cincture of the *Theotokos*, and many other Holy Relics are preserved. This special blessing confirmed our prayer and feeling that our pilgrimage was under the protection of our Lady the *Theotokos*!



In the early afternoon, we lunched in the parish hall of our Church of the Twelve Apostles, in Kymina, Thessalonica, where the serving Priest, Archimandrite Glykerios Hagiokyprianites, and his spiritual children served us a fasting *agape* meal.

Around 7 p.m., we passed the border into Bulgaria.

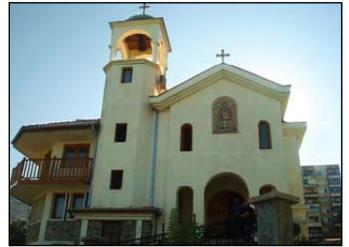
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Bulgaria

We spent our first night in a hotel in the city of Sandanski, where we were met by His Grace, Bishop Ambrose of Methone, who took over as leader of our pilgrimage. Bishop Ambrose had previously celebrated the Feast Day of our *Metochion* of St. Niphon (August 11) in Bucharest, Romania, from whence he travelled in order to join our group.

On Thursday morning, August 14/27, we visited the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of the Life-Giving Spring in Sandanski, where the Church's Rector, Father John, and his family offered us hospitality.

We then headed for the Monastery of St. John of Rila, the best-known monastery



in Bulgaria and its most popular place of pilgrimage. St. John, the first ascetic-hermit of the Slavic people, who lived in the tenth century, serves as an outstanding model of sanctity, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit wondrously made manifest in his life. His incorrupt Relics, as a fragrant source of blessings, draw Orthodox pilgrims from all over the world. We

venerated the Saint in the monastery's splendid *Katholikon* (main Church), and were then given the opportunity to explore this enormous monastic complex situated in the natural beauty of the mountains.



In the early afternoon, we arrived in Sofia and checked in at the Rodina Hotel, where we met up with Their Graces, Bishops Sofronie of

Suceava and Dionisie of Galați, who had arrived from Romania.

That afternoon, we went to the Cathedral of the Dormition of the *Theotokos* to take part in the festal Vespers and Matins services, according to the Slavic *Typikon* that is followed there, which differs in many ways from our own.



Bishop Photii entered the Church and Vespers began. Despite the fact that those of us from Greece were unacquainted with the language and manner of chanting, nevertheless the oneness of faith, the prayerful concelebration, and the bonds of Christian love united us with our Bulgarian brothers and sisters in hymning, “with one mouth and one heart,” the majesty of our Lady the *Theotokos* and Mother of our Church.

Bishop Photii presided at the services with unpretentious dignity, with the participation of four Bishops—two from Greece and two from Romania—Priests, Deacons, Subdeacons, and a truly large throng of faithful.



On Friday morning, August 15/28, we celebrated the Feast of the Dormition of the *Panagia* with a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy. Five Bishops took part, assisted by six Priests, three Deacons, and many Subdeacons. Holy Communion was served from three Chalices for no less than forty-five minutes!

A procession then took place around the exterior of the Church, ac-



According to the Slavic *Typikon* that was entirely unfamiliar to us (though not, of course, to Bishop Ambrose!), followed by a *Moleben* inside the Church. After 1 p.m. (!), it was time for the festal homily, which was delivered, with the blessing of Bishop Photii, by Bishop Klemes in Greek, and simultaneously translated into Bulgarian by one of the faithful well-versed in the Greek language.

Following the celebration, we went to the Convent of the Holy Protection of the *Theotokos*, in Knyazhevo, a suburb of Sofia, not far from the Cathedral, where we were greeted by the fifty-five nuns with reverence, honor, and cordiality. In the Church of the Holy Apostle Luke, Bishop Ambrose addressed some words of spiritual counsel to the sisterhood, after which a festal meal was served to the pilgrims from Greece. We then explored the grounds of this very beautiful Convent, located at the foot of a wooded hill with towering trees, picturesque footpaths, creeks, and small bridges. Laid to rest in the cemetery is the foundress of the Convent, the Russian Abbess Seraphima (†2003), who proved to be the veritable “soul” of the Convent for more than half a century.



The same afternoon, we were given a tour of the center of Sofia, during which we venerated the tomb of the Holy Hierarch Seraphim (Sobolev, †1950), a genuine Confessor of the Faith and wonderworker. We also visited the ancient Church of Holy Wisdom, the im-

mense Cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky, and the historic Church of St. Kyriake, which houses the incorrupt Relics of the Serbian King, St. Stefan Milutin († October 29, 1321), of the Nemanja dynasty.



That evening, we were joined by Archimandrite Gregory Hagiokyprianites, from Pyrgos, Eleia, Greece, who had arrived in Sofia by air.

On Saturday, August 16/29, we left Sofia, driving past Plovdiv (familiar to us as Philippopolis) and through Asenograd in order to visit the historic Monastery of the Dormition of the *Theotokos* in Bachkovo. Built in the eleventh-century by Georgian dignitaries under Emperor Alexios Comnenos, this Byzantine monastery serves as Bulgaria's second largest place of pilgrimage, after the Monastery of St. John of Rila. In the monastery's *Katholikon* there is an ancient wonder-working Icon of the Mother of God, which throngs of pilgrims line up to venerate.



We then headed for the border with Turkey. After entering Eastern Thrace, we traveled past Adrianople (Edirne) and reached Constantinople in the evening.

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Constantinople

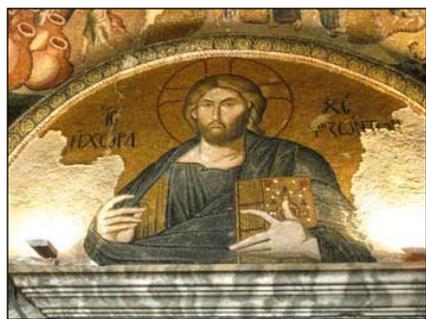
On Sunday morning, August 17/30, we travelled by bus along the walls of the City, marvelling at the beauty of the sea and land, with its many monuments and Churches. When Hagia Sophia suddenly came into view before us, stories from our childhood years sprang to our memory, and we were overwhelmed by religious and patriotic awe.

These are places of exquisite beauty, but what truly captivates one is the weight of a sublime historical memory, as well as a sense that everything is impregnated and somehow sanctified by the Spirit of God, centuries of spiritual alienation and the overwhelming presence of tokens and monuments of the Ottoman occupiers of the City notwithstanding.



We went with mixed feelings to the celebrated Convent of the Life-Giving Spring, located outside the city walls, in Baloukli. In the underground Church, we saw the tombs of Patriarchs and other eminent Church dignitaries, the majority of whom could evoke only unpleasant feelings in us, from an Orthodox point of view. We then entered the spacious Church for public worship, where we chanted hymns to our Lady the *Theotokos*, the Life-Giving Spring.

Our next stop was the Monastery of Chora (Kariye Camii), now a museum. The mosaics that have been preserved here, as well as the frescoes in the fourteenth-century burial Chapel, are among the best representatives of their type anywhere in the world. One's wonder before



this exquisite iconography, painted with dead materials, but with vibrant faith and artistry, knows no bounds. Christ, “the Land of the Living,” the *Theotokos*, “the Container of the Uncontainable,” scenes from the lives of Christ and the Mother of God, and the Saints as living images of the Living God, wordlessly proclaim the victory of Life over death. Moreover, the renowned and incomparable fresco of the Resurrection is painted here. One is captivated and astonished by every detail of these depictions, whose doxology entralls the soul and leads the mind from earth to Heaven.



The time then came for us to go to Hagia Sophia. As we entered, we marveled at this sublime edifice, in which the majesty of the heavenly world gently caresses the earth, enabling the faithful to detach themselves from the weight and lure of this world and to be lifted, along with the physical elements of the Church, on high: “Let us lift up our minds and hearts!”

This monument, a symbol and ark of the sacred and holy objects of



our nation, this New Jerusalem of the Orthodox, is today a museum, constantly swarming with a large number of visitors from all over the world. A portion of the Church is undergoing renovation and is covered. Symbols and appendages of the Ottomans have largely altered the character of the place, given that the Church served as a mosque for nearly five hundred years. Nevertheless, the Orthodox soul can not remain unmoved by its majesty or unshaken by grief at what it has undergone over the course of time.

Speechlessly, we examined the skeleton of the Church and the little that has been preserved therein, which hints at its past glory and liturgical use. We also saw some points of legend: the “petrified” south door; a horse’s hoof and saber (of Mehmed the Conqueror?) imprinted on a column; a handprint (of the *Theotokos*?) on another column; a column that “perspires” in the northwest corner of the Church; and a closed trapdoor that leads to the unseen world under the Church.



We proceeded to the upper gallery by means of a special “ramp” with six turns and found ourselves in an enormous space: the entire Church is able to fit twenty-five thousand people! We saw the Empress’ gallery; the hall for Synodal meetings in the right wing, with the famous twelfth-century *Deisis* mosaic; to the east, the two mosaic compositions depicting the Emperor and Empress to the right and left of our Lord and the *Theotokos*; and the left wing, from which we descended to the northwest corner of the main Church, thereby unwittingly exiting it.

Behind the Church is the entrance to the famous Ottoman Topkapi Palace. In the inner courtyard, in the midst of a fantastic landscape, one sees the exterior of the renowned Church of Hagia Eirene (Holy Peace), in which (in its previous form) the Second Ecumenical Synod took place.

In the afternoon, we went on a short cruise along the Bosphorus on a

special caique that we had chartered. We saw historic sites and monuments on the European side of the City, as far as the Rumeli Hisari (fortress), at which point we returned along the Asian side, which impresses one with its natural beauty and the rapidity with which it has been developed.



That evening, in Taksim Square, we saw the exterior of the Church of the Holy Trinity and the Greek educational institutions of Zappeion and Zographeion. Outside, the traffic was unbelievably heavy.

On Monday, August 18/31, we travelled to the scenic Princes Islands (Kızıl Adalar) on the Sea of Marmara (ancient Propontis), eventually landing on the island of Halke, where we visited the Monastery of the Holy Trinity. The Patriarchal Seminary was housed here from 1844 to 1971, with a few interruptions, and is now being restored. It is worth recalling that the Confessor and Hierarch Chrysostomos Kabourides of Madytos (†1955), who subsequently became Metropolitan, successively, of Imbros, Pelagonia, Paramythia, and Phlorina, and finally, leader of the Old Calendar movement, graduated from this school. Since the beginning of the twentieth century the school has become, through the majority of its faculty, a hotbed of ecumenism, in line with the policy of the Œcumenical Patriarchate.



We visited the Church of the Holy Trinity, which contains beautiful old Icons, including one of superb artistry, the wonder-working Icon of the *Panagia Pausolypos*, the Reliever from Sorrow.

From Halke, we travelled by boat to the nearby island of Prinkipo, the largest and most beautiful of the cluster of Princes Islands, where special carriages convey one around the city or the island, with its natu-

ral physical beauty and stately mansions. Here, we visited the renowned Monastery of St. George of Koudounas, which dates back to the second half of the tenth century. We venerated the wonder-working Icon of St. George in the *Katholikon*. In this place, one encounters the uncommon phenomenon of thousands of Turks thronging to seek the help of St. George, whom they deeply revere. The monastery has been restored and includes monks from the Holy Mountain. Outside, we marvelled at the landscape and enjoyed the spectacular view.



We returned by steamboat to Constantinople in the afternoon and headed to the Patriarchal Church of St. George, in the Phanar, which dates back to 1600. When we arrived, the Vespers service for the Indiction, according to the New Calendar, was ending. Patriarch Bartholomew



was presiding, so we discretely headed for the left aisle of the Church, where we venerated the incorrupt Relics of Sts. Euphemia the All-lauded, Solomone, the mother of the Maccabee Youths, and Theophano the Empress, as well as the pillar against which our Lord was scourged, the wonder-working Icon of the *Panagia Phaneromene* of Cyzikos, the mosaic Icon of the Venerable Forerunner, and other objects of veneration. The mosaic Icon of the *Panagia Pammakaristos* had been placed in the center of the Church on the occasion of its Feast, so we were not able to venerate it.

As we were leaving, we heard the Ecumenical Patriarch addressing, in Italian, a Roman Catholic clergyman



from Italy, in the notorious unionist spirit of our age, and in the presence of monks from the Holy Mountain, at that! This bitter taste served as a confirmation of our necessary and consistent anti-ecumenical stand and witness.

On Tuesday, August 19/ September 1, we visited the Church of St. Paraskeve in Pikridion (Hasköy), to venerate the tomb of the Holy New Martyr Argyre of Prousa (†April 5, 1721). The account of her martyrdom is extremely moving; she is commemorated on April 30. This lovely Church, a three-aisled Basilica with beautiful Icons, is in traditional Byzantine style and was restored in the first half of the eighteenth century by the Prince of Moldo-Wallachia, Constantine Brancoveanu, who himself subsequently underwent martyrdom in Constantinople with his four sons. Before the south aisle, in front of the *Templon*, lies the tomb of St. Argyre with all of the Relics that were preserved after their desecration by vandals in 1955. The Church is used today as a parish by the Romanian community of Constantinople; the Romanian rector told us about the Church's history.



In the Church courtyard, we venerated the first tomb of St. Argyre, where she was placed after her martyric death. A few years later, her Holy Relics were found to be incorrupt and fragrant when they were transferred to a new tomb.



We passed the bridge over the Golden Horn to the northeast side of the City in order to visit the *Panagia* of Blachernai, which constituted the greatest and most renowned place of pilgrimage dedicated to the *Panagia* since the fifth century, when it was built by the Empress St. Pulcheria to house the Precious Robe of the

Theotokos. A small and humble chapel (built in 1867) now stands in its place, which contains the Holy Water fount, a spacious courtyard, and other buildings, all restored and in good shape.



In the Church of Blachernai, the Akathist Hymn was first chanted in 626, on the occasion of the unhoped-for preservation of the City from the barbarians. All-Night Vigils were held here every Friday evening, and the sick and ailing came to be healed by the Mother of God. The festal procession celebrating the Triumph of Orthodoxy over Iconoclasm, in 843, set forth from this Church. It was here, also, that St. Andrew the Fool-for-Christ saw a vision of the Holy Protection of the *Theotokos*, and here St. Gregory Palamas was consecrated a Bishop, etc.

While most of the pilgrims in our group then went to the famed Kapalı Çarşı (a covered bazaar) to shop, a few of us hurried through the rain, with the small amount of time left to us, to visit as many Churches as possible.

From the outside, we saw the former Byzantine Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Mark (now a mosque). We then came across and —after insistent-ly knocking at the locked outer door—entered the historic Church of St. Demetrios, known as “Xyloporta,” which temporarily (1597-1600) served as the Patriarchal Church after the Fall of Constantinople. This recently restored Church evokes profound compunction with its humble majesty.



The parish school, located in the spacious courtyard, is now closed, as is the case with almost all of the other Greek Churches in the City, since only 1800 or so Greek inhabitants remain, the overwhelming majority of them elderly.

We then spent quite some time puffing up steep, narrow roads in search of the Church of the Archangels, located at 21 Agian Street. in Balata, above the Phanar. A recent study, which we believe to be well-founded, suggests that the renowned Convent of Chrysobalantou, where the great St. Irene of Cappadocia shone forth in asceticism, was most likely located here. The family that takes care of the present Church

(built many years later) knew nothing about St. Irene or the Convent, nor are there any Icons of the Saint in the Church. Yet somewhere here, nearly 1100 years ago, lived this beloved Saint of peace and love, who is renowned throughout the world for her innumerable miracles. May she some day be honored yet again in this Church, and may it become a shrine for Orthodox Christians visiting the City!

Zealously continuing our trek along the rough back streets of Constantinople, we arrived with some relief at the *Panagia Pammakaristos*, which housed the Patriarchate, after the Fall of the City, for 130 years (1456-1587). Built in the thirteenth century, this Church is a rare example of refined Byzantine architecture. Today, only a portion of it serves



as a museum—the burial Chapel, with its marvelous mosaics rivalling those of the Monastery of Chora—while the *Katholikon* continues to serve as a mosque; the whole interior has been altered. The museum Chapel captivated us with its architecture and the adornments that have been preserved. The Enthroned Christ is painted in the apse of the Altar, with the inscription “Ho Hyperagathos.” This depiction did a great deal to soothe our pain. We felt something paradoxical: consoled inconsolably, and inconsolably consoled!

Not far from there, a street child led us to the Church of the *Panagia* of Mouchliou, the only Byzantine Church that remained a Christian Church after the Fall of the City without being turned into a mosque. We venerated beautiful old Icons and felt compunction and Grace.



Changing direction, we took a taxi to Ypsomatheia, at the other end of the City, where we visited a number of other Churches. All of the Churches in the district, except for the Church of the Ascension, were destroyed during the grievous events of September of 1955.* They were later restored, thanks to the Greek work force that still existed at the time, but which is now clearly diminishing. One must, however, commend those in office at the Patriarchate—the good should be praised wherever it is found!—because, despite the lack of manpower, they have found ways to preserve the majority of the Churches in very good condition—a ray of hope in a dying organism.



Finally, we arrived at the dilapidated *Katholikon* of the Venerable Forerunner at the renowned Stoudios Monastery. One is not able to enter on account of ongoing maintenance work. We studied the exterior of this monument, made so renowned by St. Theodore, whose *Typikon* has had such great influence on the entire liturgical and monastic life of the Church. St. Symeon the New Theologian also lived in this monastery, in submission to his Elder, St. Symeon the Pious.



From there, we traveled back to Peran by taxi, to Taksim Square. We entered the immense Church of the Holy Trinity, which testifies to the prosperity of the Greeks at the end of the nineteenth century, but also to their lack of Orthodox sensibility in architecture and adornment. Emphasis has been placed on making an external impression, to the detriment of a sense of the refined and the spiritual. The same can be said for the Church of Sts. Constantine and Helen, which we also visited in Peran.

After a visit to the massive and desolate Church of the Annunciation, we returned to our hotel, where we said goodbye to our Romanian

brothers, Bishops Sofronie and Dionisie, who would be departing early the next morning for their homeland.

On Wednesday morning, August 20/ September 2, we left Constanti-nople with the hope and prayer that we would see it again some day.



Driving through eastern Greece, we stopped at Nea Karbale, where we venerated the Relics of St. Gregory the Theologian. Late in the afternoon, we arrived in Thessalonica, where we venerated the Relics of the Holy Great Martyr Demetrios and of St. Anysia, as well as other objects of veneration in

the splendid Church of St. Demetrios.



On Thursday, August 21/ September 3, we visited the Church of the *Acheiropoietos*, with its wonder-working Icon of the *Panagia Reumatokratousa*; the Church of Holy Wisdom, where the Relics of St. Basil of Thessalonica are preserved; the catacombs





of the Venerable Forerunner; the Church of St. Theodora, which houses the Relics of St. David of Thessalonica and of St. Theodora of Thessalonica; and the Church of St. Gregory Palamas, with Relics of that Holy Father.

At our driver's recommendation, we also made a stop at the Convent of St. Ephraim the Syrian, in Kontariotissa Pieria, where we venerated



a portion of the Relics of St. Ephraim and marvelled at the convent's outstanding architecture and splendid adornment and at the wondrous natural beauty of the surroundings.

Late in the afternoon, we arrived at our monastery in Phyle, and our magnificent pilgrimage came to a blessed end, by the Grace of God and the intercessions of the *Theotokos*.

Glory to the infinite condescension of our Savior, Who loves mankind!

†Bishop Klemes of Gardikion

* A reference to the genocidal anti-Greek riots that took place in Istanbul on September 6, 1955. “[T]he Greek population of the city was attacked in a wild orgy of violence by the Turkish population, which was joined in its immoral fury by the troops and police who were sent out to quell the riots. The offices of the three major Greek papers in Constantinople were completely destroyed. Every Greek school was razed. Of eighty functioning Greek Churches in the city, nine were left standing. The interior of the Theological School of Halki was vandalized. Two thousand three hundred Greek shops were destroyed. Of the hundreds of Greek factories, two survived. And, as a single example of the human toll of this barbaric rage, we recount the fate of the elderly Abbot of the historical Mone Baloukle, whose monastery the Turks completely destroyed: The Abbot was hit over the head with a Cross, set afire, and subsequently buried alive! No wonder, then, that the 120,000 Greeks who lived in Constantinople in 1955 have now been reduced to only several thousand” (Archbishop Chrysostomos, “Pages from Unwritten History,” *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XVI, No. 2 [1999], p. 10).