

With One Accord, Together in Blessed Georgia

During the Fourth week of Great Lent (mid-March 2011), calling upon the prayers of our much-revered Elder, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle, the protection of the Mother of God, and the aid of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, His Grace, Bishop Cyprian of Oreoi, Acting President of the Holy Synod in Resistance, visited our ecclesiastical community in Georgia, accompanied for the first time to this country by a small group of faithful: Subdeacon Antonios Hagiokyprianites, two nuns from the Convent of the Holy Angels—one of whom served as translator—Irene Archontoule, President of the “St. Philaret the Merciful” Women’s Guild, and seven lay brothers and sisters. The purpose of our visit was to support and to strengthen our ties with our brethren belonging to the Orthodox Eparchy of Gldani, and also to visit various places of pilgrimage in Orthodox Georgia.

• On Monday, March 15/28, our small group took off at 10:30 a.m. for Tbilisi, via Constantinople, on a Turkish Airlines flight. We arrived in the Georgian capital at 4:20 p.m. Upon our arrival at the Tbilisi airport, we were immediately given a taste of the magnificence of Georgian piety: Alongside our Priests in this blessed country, Fathers Basili Mkalavishvili and Vakhtang Mariani, we were welcomed by Subdeacons, a choir of women chanters in special apparel, and many faithful, holding banners and bouquets of multicolored flowers, who chanted hymns in

Georgian and Greek as they embraced us with smiles and tears of joy.

We headed for the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa*, the center of the Eparchy’s ecclesiastical community. Between 1,000 and 1,500 faithful from the capital attend Church here, and the congregation reach-



es 3,000 faithful from all over Georgia on Great Feasts. The Church is now surrounded by a stone wall, and at the entrance a bell tower has been built, where the indefatigable Subdeacons began ringing the bells in a festive style as soon as they caught sight of us approaching in the distance.

After Bishop Cyprian was received in the Church, he asked our Georgian brethren to satisfy our spiritual hunger with a Supplicatory Canon to the *Panagia Portaitissa*. The choir took special care to chant verses and *Troparia* in Greek.



After the service, our Georgian brethren treated us to a handsome meal in a train car that serves as the parish's refectory, expressing their regret that we came during a fasting period!

His Grace spoke with the Priests about the program for our sojourn, stressing that, our desire to visit the holy places of Georgia notwithstanding, the purpose of our presence in their country was first and foremost to be together with the small flock of the Eparchy of Gldani as much as possible, praying, liturgizing, and receiving spiritual and material nourishment together. Thus, our program took shape around the life of the parish.

That evening, we checked in at our small hotel in the center of Tbilisi. Here, another surprise was awaiting us. The manager of the hotel and her assistants gave us a heartfelt welcome, reverently asking for our Bishop's blessing. We had a whole floor at our disposal, and the dining room on the top floor, with a panoramic view of the city, was also at our disposal late every evening, so that we could sit and discuss spiritually edifying topics together.

- On Tuesday, March 16/29, we left early in the morning for the Church of St. Shushanik (†475) and the 100,000 Holy Martyrs, which is located very close to our hotel. It was not yet open. We went down to the bridge, to the place where the inhabitants of Tbilisi were martyred for their faith and their refusal to obey orders to trample upon an Icon of the *Panagia*.

We then stopped by our parish to pick up Father Basili's Matushka and two Subdeacons, who were loaded down with everything necessary

for a picnic. Fathers Basili and Vakhtang remained at the parish to confess the faithful in preparation for the Holy Unction the next day.

We headed northwest of Tbilisi to the former capital of Iberia (Georgia), Mtskheta, located at the confluence of the Kura and Aragvi Rivers. Despite the unpropitious weather forecast, a pleasantly warm spring sun lit up the beautiful country.

Above the area where these rivers meet, opposite the capital, we visited the Monastery of the Cross, of which there remains only the extraordinary stone Church that was built on the spot where St. Nina had placed a large wooden Cross. The stone base of this Cross (which was transferred to the Cathedral Church of Mtskheta) is preserved to this day in the center of the Church.

In the city of Mtskheta, we visited the Church of the Holy Apostles (called Svetitskhoveli [Sacred Pillar]). This was the first Christian Church built in Georgia, during the days of St. Nina, over the tomb of St. Sidonia (who reposed in the Lord clasping the seamless Robe of Christ in her arms). A men's monastery has recently been re-established around the Church.

We then visited the Convent of St. Nina (the Samtavro Convent), with the chapel that was built on the site of her first cell (*asketerion*), and the main Church, dedicated to the Transfiguration of the Lord, which was founded when the Saint was still living there. Inside the Church lie the tombs of Mirian and Nana, the first Christian monarchs of Iberia. We also prayed at the wonder-working tomb of a contemporary Georgian Saint, Elder Gabriel (†1995). Forty nuns now live at the convent.

Northwest of Mtskheta, we arrived at the Monastery of St. Shio, one of the twelve disciples of St. John Zedazeni, who had been sent, with twelve disciples, from Syria to Iberia by the Theotokos in the sixth century, in order to continue the work of St. Nina. In this solitary, majestic, and compunction-evoking landscape, with its mountainous backdrop acting as a natural wall, one can discern the innumerable caves that served as ascetic cells in the lavra that was later built on the site. Here, we visited the site of the Saint's first cell, where he was vouchsafed to





receive a visit by the Theotokos and the Venerable Forerunner, and also the cave where he later settled, at the bidding of the *Panagia*.

As we descended into this subterranean cave (which contains the Saint's tomb), bearing candles to light the rocky passageway, we heard the sound of chanting. Several Fathers were chanting a Supplicatory Canon at the tomb of the Saint: saintly figures and voices in the compunction-evoking light of the vigil lamps....

After the Saint's repose, a Church in honor of the Dormition of the Theotokos was built over the cave. At a certain spot inside the Church, there is an opening where the Saint would descend into his cave. From this opening, which is covered by glass, one can see the Saint's cave and tomb fifteen meters below. At a slightly higher elevation, the monastery's main Church and cells are being renewed by the fourteen monks who currently live there.

On our way back, Matushka set a plentiful fasting meal for us outdoors. Back at our hotel that evening, we had an edifying gathering, during which we discussed, among other things, the piety and dignity of our Georgian brethren.

• On Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent (this year, March 17/30), the service of the Holy Unction is performed, so as not to interrupt the order of the services of Great Wednesday (on which day it is normally performed in Greece), since between 1,000 and 1,500 people come to receive the sanctifying Grace of Holy Unction.

The service began at 10:30 a.m. and ended around 12:45 p.m., in a Church packed with faithful of all ages holding candles. Remaining upright (there are no chairs), they followed the service with great piety and attention, standing around the Bishop who, following the Slavic tradition, stands in the center of the Church, surrounded by Priests and Subdeacons.

At the end of the service, Bishop Cyprian anointed the Priests and the Greek visitors, and we departed, having first, of course, enjoyed yet again the hospitality and love of our brethren. Fathers Basili and Vakhtang remained until around 7 p.m., anointing the hundreds of faithful.

We had been planning on visiting the Monastery of St. John of Zedzeni, but the mud on the steep road caused by recent rains did not allow our bus to ascend the hill. Reproaching ourselves that we were not worthy to venerate this holy spot, we returned to Tbilisi, where other blessings consoled us. At the renowned Sioni Cathedral, we venerated the Cross given by the Mother of God to St. Nina and portions of Holy Relics of St. George. Here, just as at all of the places of pilgrimage, compunction, quiet, and prayer reign. When the Georgian faithful present at the Church saw our Shepherd anointing us with oil from the vigil lamp, they hastened to receive the same, and to kiss his *Enkolpion* and hand. We went on to visit the ancient Church of the Holy *Mandelion*, then the newly-built Church of the Holy Trinity, which serves as the headquarters of the Patriarchate. It is an enormous building one hundred meters in height, located on a hill in the center of Tbilisi.

We then went up to the Monastery of St. David, one of the followers of St. John. Here, two Fathers gave us a tour of the Church and the Saint's cave, wherein is a spring of holy water.



- Thursday, March 18/31, was devoted to a pilgrimage to the Convent of St. Nina in Bodbe, in the region of Kakheti, where the Saint spent the last years of her life. Her wonder-working tomb is located in the Church of the Great Martyr George at this convent (which numbers thirty nuns and novices). The Grace of the Holy

Enlightener pours forth in abundance in the side Chapel containing her tomb, which filled our souls with gratitude and self-reproach. We then went down the sharp descent to the spring of Holy Water dedicated to the Saint. Though the trees were still bare, the diverse flowers in the forest proclaimed springtime. We prayerfully partook of the Holy Water and then had a quick meal, enjoying the beauty and blessed stillness of the place.

- Friday, March 19/ April 1, was devoted to the life of our parish. Bishop Cyprian, assisted by our two Priests, Monk Antonios, and many other Subdeacons, served a Hierarchical Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts (10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.). The choir chanted prayerfully, and many faithful partook of the Immaculate Mysteries. The compunction and

spiritual joy engendered by our common participation in prayer and the Lord's Supper filled all of our hearts.

Following the Divine Liturgy, we once again enjoyed the hospitality of our Georgian brethren (a fasting meal without oil, but what a meal!).

Bishop Cyprian then had an important meeting with our Priests, during which they informed him about the progress of their work and their difficulties and needs. His Grace strengthened them in their struggles and encouraged them in their goals and visions.

At Father Basili's request, Bishop Cyprian, Monk Antonios, and the two nuns accompanied him to his village of Nakhshirgora. There, after we had visited the newly-built Chapel of St. George (the design of which Father Basili had drawn up while in prison), we went to the place that is being prepared for the foundation of a convent. In the Church, dedicated to the *Panagia*, we chanted a short Supplicatory Canon.

As we left the Church, Father Basili led us to the guest house. Here, his Matushka, his two grandchildren, and a Subdeacon had found time (when?) to prepare plentiful fasting refreshments for us. Incomparable Georgian hospitality!



Upon returning to the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa*, where our lay Greek friends were awaiting us together with the faithful, we chanted the Akathist Hymn to the Mother of God. Georgians, and Slavs in general, do not normally follow the tradition of chanting the Akathist Hymn every Friday during Great Lent. Our friends nevertheless agreed with pleasure to Bishop Cyprian's proposal to perform the service according to the Greek order and followed along with great joy and contrition. The

Georgian women's choir bonded even more closely with the nuns and lay sisters, who undertook the chanting.

At the end of the service, Bishop Cyprian discussed the meaning of the verse: "Rejoice, thou who didst bring to naught the corrupter of minds." He described the endeavors of the Enemy to darken our minds, making reference to the prayer of St. Gregory Palamas, "illumine my

darkness,” and the succor of the Theotokos against the demons, especially during times of prayer (see the Life of St. Niphon).

- On Saturday, March 20, April 2, we left in the morning for the Monastery of St. Anthony. The weather was rainy and chilly, but the Merciful Lord allowed us to ascend the dirt road to the renowned and truly extraordinary Monastery of St. Anthony (one of the disciples of St. John): majestic buildings, beautiful landscapes, but also great poverty in Christ. As soon as we arrived and the presence of our Bishop was discerned, the bells began ringing, and novices and postulants came to receive his blessing as they knelt in the mud. In the Church, where we were led, the Abbot, Father Benjamin, together with other brothers, were preparing for the Divine Liturgy; they had just finished the *Proskomide*. The Abbot interrupted the service to give us a tour. We venerated the tomb of St. Anthony, who fills the entire Church with spiritual fragrance every year on his Feast Day. Father Benjamin took an enamel Icon of St. Anthony off the wall and gave it to Bishop Cyprian as a gift. In the monastery’s extremely modest gift shop, the Father in charge wanted to make us a present of everything that we asked to purchase.

Profoundly moved and condemning ourselves, we returned to the capital. We arrived at the parish, where they were awaiting us for dinner, at the same time that a funeral was taking place. Bishop Cyprian immediately decided that we should take part in the funeral before the meal. Thus, the soul of the reposed servant of God Nana was vouchsafed to have a Hierarch read the prayers of forgiveness over her. Shortly thereafter, we learned that she had been Father Basili’s devoted personal physician for many years.

After the meal, the service of Vespers and Matins began, according to the Slavic *Typikon*, during which one of the two Priests confessed the faithful and performed a Baptism.

We once again returned, profoundly moved, to our hotel, marvelling at the ethos, piety, modest dignity, and love of our brethren.

- On Sunday, March 21/ April 3, the Fourth Sunday of Great Lent, (St. John of the Ladder), the entire day was once again devoted to the parish. The Hours began at 9:30 a.m., followed by the Divine Liturgy at 10:00. Bishop Cyprian, Fathers



Basili and Vakhtang, Monk Antonios, and many Subdeacons took part. The choir invited the visiting nuns to take part in the chanting.

Despite the various difficulties arising from the differences between the Greek and Georgian *Typika*, the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great was celebrated in a peaceful manner, and a large crowd of faithful partook of the Immaculate Mysteries. Before the conclusion, Bishop Cyprian spoke about the Gospel reading of the day and the mutual influence of fasting and prayer, which sustain and strengthen one's faith. At the end of the Divine Liturgy, he offered Fathers Basili and Vakhtang Icons of Sts. Cyprian and Justina and of St. Panteleimon.

At 3 p.m., we ate in the train wagon-cum-refectory. Everyone expressed their gratitude to the God of love and their sense of profound fraternity, and promised fidelity to our bonds in Christ.

At 6:30 p.m. we were once again at the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa*, where the tireless chanters and Subdeacons had prepared the Church for the parish *Synaxis* (gathering) to which Bishop Cyprian had invited all of the parishioners who were able to attend. During this *Synaxis*, His Grace exhorted us to examine our consciences—this being the middle of Great Lent—as to how we had traversed the stadium of the Fast thus far. He exhorted us to study Patristic texts and to turn in prayer to the Most Holy Theotokos so as to increase our zeal. To this end, he invited us to read three texts together, that we might come to understand three impediments to our journey in Christ: judging others, remembrance of wrongs, and grumbling in times of tribulation.

The faithful participated with great interest in this *Synaxis*, posing many questions to our Shepherd. As we were leaving, they expressed their enthusiasm, spiritual thirst, and gratitude with tears in their eyes.

- On Monday, March 22/ April 4, after saying goodbye to our hostess at the hotel, who offered us gifts as she expressed her joy over our stay and her reverence for the person of our Bishop, we visited the house of a spiritual daughter of Bishop Cyprian who lived for many years in Greece and who had helped us organize our stay in Tbilisi. Here again, we were very moved by the warm hospitality.

We then went to the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa* to venerate the Icons, receive the Mother of God's blessing for our return trip, and say goodbye to our Georgian brothers and sisters. Here, they showed us a large collage of photographs from the years when the Georgian faithful belonging to the Holy Synod in Resistance were undergoing harsh persecution at the hands of the ecumenists.

The emotion culminated when we addressed our goodbyes to one another. We promised to return soon and invited our Georgian brethren to Greece. They hastened to take one last blessing from our Bishop and asked him to make the sign of the Cross over them with his *Enkolpion*.



Many of them, together with the Priests, accompanied us all the way to the airport. Here, we had one final astonishing experience. All of the personnel, including the members of the police force, came and knelt with piety before our Bishop to receive his blessing and a small Icon of the Mother of God.

We were, to be sure, visitors from the holy places of Greece, this sanctified country where the Apostles Paul, Andrew, Luke, and so many other Saints once trod. We possess the language of the New Testament, of the Holy Fathers. Yet, a question pricked our hearts: what would these people feel if they saw the Greece of today?

Returning to Greece with this unforgettable image of Georgian piety in our hearts, we would like to express our gratitude to Christ for everything we experienced during our stay in this “second homeland” of ours and to make a fervent prayer: May the Mother of God, who blessed the introduction of Orthodoxy in Georgia, protect this country by her Grace and not allow secularization to destroy what invaders and atheists did not manage to eradicate: the faith, Christian simplicity, dignity, genuine love, and piety of our brethren; and may she grant us as persons, as an ecclesiastical community, and as a nation, a blessed return towards our sole common Homeland.

*Nun Seraphima,
Convent of the Holy Angels*