

Visit to the Holy Protection Convent, Bluffton, Alberta

From June 12 through June 14, 2011 (Old Style), His Eminence, Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna and His Grace, Bishop Auxentios of Photike visited our Exarchate Convent of the Holy Protection of the Mother of God in Bluffton, Alberta, Canada. His Grace, Bishop Auxentios celebrated the Divine Liturgy on the Sunday of the Holy Fathers of Mt. Athos together with Hieromonk Dionisiye, who is the serving Priest for the sisterhood, with Archbishop Chrysostomos in prayerful attendance. His Grace also celebrated Liturgy on the following Tuesday



The sisterhood with His Grace, Bishop Auxentios and, on his right, Abbess Ambrosia and, on his left, Father Dionisiye.

morning, serving as a Priest. On both occasions, the Liturgy was beautifully sung in both Slavonic and English by the convent choir.

During their stay, the two Hierarchs enjoyed the wonderful hospitality of the nuns, who are under the able guidance of their gifted Abbess, Schema-nun Ambrosia, a spiritual daughter of Bishop Sava of Edmonton, the founder of the convent, and Bishop Nectary of Seattle. Both Hierarchs commented on the wonderful progress in the order and liturgical life of the sisterhood—now eight in number—which has been substantially helped by a skete rule that is focused on the Eucharistic life and that, since the appointment of a Priest to serve the community, now includes Liturgy and Holy Communion four times a week.

Twice during the visit, with the blessing of Mother Ambrosia, His Eminence, Archbishop Chrysostomos convened monastic synaxes in which he spoke to the sisterhood about spiritual matters. In the first of these, he addressed the necessity of avoiding fanaticism and a spirit of false righteousness in undertaking resistance to the innovations and defilements of Holy Tradition that we see in so-called “world Orthodoxy” today, emphasizing that “outrage at such things must be tempered by moderation and love, realizing that we are preserving the traditions of the Faith in order to save, not just ourselves, but in fact, primarily, others.” He decried the “hateful attitudes that are found between Christians today” and “the slander and nastiness that mark ecclesiastical disagreements.” He counselled the nuns to stay far away from such things, even when defending the Faith without compromise.

In the second synaxis, where he also fielded various questions from the nuns, His Eminence placed stress on the necessity of accepting, in an increasingly secular world, the disdain and hatred of the world for spiritual life, and especially the innocent and pure life of monasticism. At the same time, he emphasized that spiritual life must be absolutely true to tradition, contain no falsity or inauthenticity, and accept that, in today’s world, “an artificial spirituality, centered on ego, ethnicity, and worldly benefits and honor,” will inevitably sully and discredit true spiritual life. He pointed out that only the cultivation of humility, obedience, repentance, and love will suffice to preserve genuine monasticism and the spiritual life of the laity, as well, in times such as these. He also encouraged the sisterhood to draw on the rich spiritual wisdom and experience of their “remarkable spiritual Mother.” In both synaxes, the Arch-

bishop's words were eagerly followed by those present, including the convent's serving Priest.

The members of the sisterhood range in age from their late teens to the oldest nun, Mother Varsanofia, who is ninety. Mother Ambrosia has rescued several of the sisters from difficult conditions and life experiences, forming a community of true strugglers. Against slander, enmity, and the harsh weather and austere and isolated conditions of the Canadian plains, she has, over a period of eighteen years, built up an exemplary spiritual center. Unfortunately, with the union of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) with the Moscow Patriarchate, which she rejected as a violation of her confession of Faith, and the splintering of others who also resisted that union into a number of factions, the convent is threatened by a takeover of its property by one of these factions, which acquired the property through the personal will of the former First Hierarchy of the ROCA, Metropolitan Vitaly.

After nearly two decades of rebuilding what was, at the time that Mother Ambrosia and her biological mother—Schema-nun Theodora, who was tonsured a nun somewhat late in life—were sent to Bluffton, a defunct monastic community, it would be an unthinkable tragedy to see the convent's spiritual life totally disrupted. Because it is one of the oldest monastic communities established by the Russians in exile in North America, those seeking to deprive the sisterhood of its spiritual home, (nuns who in fact have their own convent) have rejected any settlement on the basis of what they call “the principle” involved (i.e., the historical significance of the convent). We solicit the prayers of our faithful that, as His Grace, Bishop Auxentios has expressed it, “something akin to common decency and ‘spiritual principle’ might prevail” and this inspiring community “might be saved from those who know not what they do and what, one hopes, voracious, evil forces they serve.”

