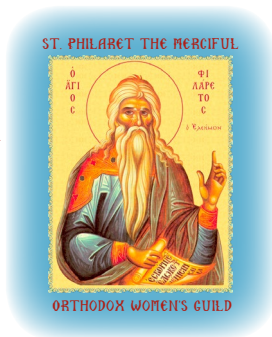


Pilgrimage to the Special Detention Center for Youth in Volos, Greece

Saturday, March 9, 2013 (New Style)



The pilgrimage to the Special Detention Center for Youth, in Volos, had been announced well in advance.



Owing to accounts of previous such excursions, there were many more participants on this occasion than usual, and thus, for the first time a second bus was needed. It was especially comforting and encouraging to see the large number of young people joining in alongside their

elders. Likewise, we were particularly heartened by the participation of esteemed representatives of the Municipality of Phyle: Mr. Constantine Skamantzouras, Ms. Paraskeve Liakou-Gangose, and Ms. Theodora Augeres.

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On Saturday morning there was a light drizzle. The cheerful bevy of pilgrims gathered and boarded the bus, with His Grace, Bishop Cyprian of Oreoi, Acting President of the Holy Synod, at our head. During the first part of our journey to Volos, His Grace prayerfully prepared his flock for what was to come by reading and analyzing specially chosen texts, with interludes during which the nuns provided melodious chanting.

Two shining examples stood out amid these inspiring texts:

- The Holy Martyr Telemachos (commemorated by the Church on January 1) who, by his courage and self-sacrifice, changed the course of history when, in the year 404, he brought an end to inhuman gladiatorial combats. And in our day as well, one small act of self-sacrifice could change the climate of the current economic crisis.

• The Syrian refugee Zihan, whose moving example serves as a scathing censure of contemporary Greek (but only Greek?) reality. One scene from her recent experiences shook us to the core: Upon arriving at the Greek coast on a raft with thirty other refugees during a terrible storm at sea, Zihan held up her four-year-old daughter—the youngest of her six children—high in the air, in an attempt, inspired by motherly love, to provoke pity in the stony hearts of the coastal guards, who would not permit their raft to land.



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Our journey continued with spiritual hymns, and after a quick stop and certain difficulties—which were only to be expected, since “wherever there is action, there is also reaction”—we arrived at our destination at noon.



Together with the sky, which suddenly opened and became clear and spring-like, the heavy iron doors of the detention center opened, and a smiling face met us, dispelling an oppressive feeling that had begun to overcome the more inexperienced among us. The director of the facility, Mr. Basileios Apostolakes, is a very engaging young man of great gentility, with a kind face and a “different” way of thinking regarding the handling of the unfortunate and “defenseless”—as he himself calls them—youth that he has under his supervision—or, one might say, under his protection. [The majority of the inmates are foreigners from war-torn or poverty-stricken homelands, and have been incarcerated for not having the proper papers or for petty crimes—*Trans.*]

“If you use force, you receive force in return,” he explained to us. “Whereas if you give love, you receive love in return...and we prefer the second method.”

The entire personnel was present, regardless of their work shifts, “as

a matter of honor,” as we later learned. The director then kindly invited Bishop Cyprian and those with him into his office. From his words of sincere gratitude, we understood how much he appreciates the work of our Church, through the activities of the St. Philaret the Merciful Guild.

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After a few minutes’ wait in the narrow hallway, the doors were successively unlocked and we went out into the facility’s small and gloomy square courtyard, which is surrounded by electric barbed wire. The inmates came out and stood looking at us with some reticence and puzzlement.

Bishop Cyprian addressed them a few sincere and heartfelt words of consolation and love, and the young men (aged fifteen to twenty-one) began to come forward to receive a small “care package” [containing items to meet their basic and personal needs—Trans.], and a great spiritual blessing from his hands. As always, His Grace embraced all of his “little sheep” with paternal affection and kissed them with genuine love. At this, the inmates’ puzzled, hardened, rebellious, aloof, and sometimes mocking faces were miraculously and instantly transformed into the happy smiles of innocent children, and they received with joy—and frequently with tears of emotion—not so much the care packages, as that which they were chiefly lacking: fatherly affection and selfless, “motherly” love.

The emotion gradually spread throughout the courtyard, and the Grace of God manifestly touched our hearts, leaving many eyes misted with tears during the two-hour long “ceremony.” The nuns chanted without interruption, and the Resurrectional *Troparia* brought a taste of Pascha to this earthly Hades.

Suddenly, one of the inmates raised his hand and expressed gracious and poetic words of gratitude to the pilgrims:

“We thank you for coming here and sharing this beautiful day with us. You know that we are in need of your presence; for us you are the most wonderful



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thing we see here in the prison. As you know, there are two paths one can follow in life: that of Light and that of darkness. We must always remember that Jesus Christ said: ‘I am the Light of the world, and whoever follows Me will not go astray in the darkness, but will have Light, which leads to Life!’”

Few were able to hold back their tears, and none their admiration, as everyone spontaneously burst into applause and cheers, which united us all as one. In conclusion, he gave us, on behalf of all of the other inmates, a wonder-

ful drawing depicting Christ the True Vine, which he had made in his prison cell just before our meeting in the courtyard!

Time had passed like lightning, and the youths, who had become our own brethren, called out their farewells to us as they returned to their gloomy prison cells.

But the final scene, which took place during our own departure from the courtyard, was the zenith of the entire astonishing experience. The young inmates, with their hands pushed through the iron bars of their windows, were waving at us, calling out all together in broken Greek, but also each in his own language (of twenty-two different nationalities): “We thank you! Have a good trip! Come back! See you soon! Don’t forget us!”

* * *

On our return trip to Athens—during which the images of our experience remained deeply engraved in our hearts and memories—the “shower” of blessings was completed with a visit to the historic Convent of the Panagia Xenias, near Almyros, Volos, where we venerated a portion of the Cincture of the *Theotokos* and the wonderworking Icon of the Mother of God (which dates back to the age of Iconoclasm).



Physically tired, but spiritually renewed and enriched, we arrived back at our base (the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, Phyle, Attica) around 9 p.m., having just completed Resurrectional Vespers for the Sunday of the Last Judgment. After embracing each other with love

in Christ, we went our separate ways bodily, though more profoundly united spiritually with the bonds of perfection: Christian love.

February 25, 2013 (Old Style)

Monk G.

