



## “For the Edification of the Church”

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■ Holy Diocese of Stockholm

## The Feast of the Nativity in Sweden: Together With Our Small Flock

December 23-27, 2014 (Old style)

**With the prospect** of further strengthening our small flock in the newly-established Holy Diocese of Stockholm, as its Locum Tenens we decided—by the Grace of God and with the blessing of the Holy Synod—to visit Sweden for the third time this year, in order to take part in the celebration of the Great Feast of the Nativity of Christ.

Over the course of five days, with the especial aid of the Theotokos, Sts. Constantine and Helen, and St. Philothei of Athens, we lived in an atmosphere of heartfelt joy and Christian fellowship with our multinational Orthodox community of Greeks, Swedes, Russians, Ukrainians, Serbs, Romanians, Ethiopians, and Eritreans: “All of the nations”!

We participated, by means of prayer and the Eucharist, in the Great Mystery of the Wedding of Christ the Bridegroom with His Bride—our human nature—in the Unique Person of the God-Man. We took part in the immaculate embrace between God and man, the Uncreated and created—eternal Love in the Holy Trinity.



Episcopal residence

Glory to God, this third pastoral visit proved to be a very beneficial one, despite its brevity, and it truly was well worth the sacrifice of being absent from the flock in Greece during these festive days—an absence which is not, to be sure, a simple or easy matter for a Shepherd and Father.

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**A. On Monday, December 23, 2014 (Old Style),** we left behind a Greece draped in snow and its

attendant difficulties, bound for Sweden, fearing cold temperatures and various problems, in a country where, in the heart of winter, there is almost no daylight. Sweden, however, gave us a glad welcome and rewarded us for our efforts: the weather was mild, with temperatures fluctuating between  $-5^{\circ}$  and  $0^{\circ}$  C, minimal snowfall, and crisp, dry air. The final day, in fact, was beautifully sunny, with a clear blue sky!

Together with the Reverend Father Jiří Ján and Subdeacon Antonios Hagiokyprianites, we arrived in Stockholm at 7:47 p.m. (local time), where we were warmly greeted by Fathers Anders Åkerström and Stefanos Jaerpenberg, together with Hierodeacon Theochares and one of the laymen who helps out at the Episcopal residence.

We drove to the Episcopal residence in Vårberg, where we were received according to ecclesiastical order. Together with a group of faithful, we went to the bedside of His Grace, Bishop Johannes of Makarioupolis—who has been seriously ill for a number of years—received his blessing, and sang festal hymns for him.

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**B. On Tuesday, December 24 (Old Style),** the Eve of the Nativity, we experienced an outstanding miracle: for the first time, the Service of the Royal Hours was celebrated at the Cathedral



Church, and that in Swedish. This was followed by Vespers (again in Swedish) and the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil, with Fathers Anders, Stefanos, and Jiří concelebrating.

Months of work had been devoted to translating into Swedish all of the Nativity services (Royal Hours, Vespers, Orthros), which were then published on the Internet so that all Orthodox Christians in Sweden would be able to make use of this opportunity. Indeed, a number of New Calendarist Orthodox publicly thanked us for our efforts.



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**C. On Tuesday evening** (8 p.m.), with some seventy faithful in attendance, the Agrypnia (Compline, Orthros, Divine Liturgy) began. This was the first time that the Vigil would be served in its entirety, since—owing to a lack of suitable translations—the service of Orthros has been hitherto practically unknown in our parishes in Sweden.

The chanting was in Swedish, Church Slavonic, Greek, and English, with the participation of the nuns from the Convent of St. Philothei: Mother Magdalene (a native Swede) and Sister Lydia (originally from the USA).

During the Communion of the Clergy, Father Anders read the Synodal Encyclical in Swedish. Many of the faithful communed. At the end of the Liturgy, we addressed words of solace to the congregation, exhorting it, at this time, when we venerate our

Savior in the stable, to direct our gaze to the Cross and the Resurrection. With the Incarnation of Christ, a new journey begins, which leads to Pentecost; for the Incarnation was accomplished by God's ineffable love for mankind, that we might acquire anew the Holy Spirit, the Soul of our souls.

At this time, we also distributed a catechetical periodical and small beaded Crosses that were handmade by prisoners whom we had recently visited in Greece (Saturday, December 14/27), so as to give them a kiss of love and hope.

This historic Agrypnia was followed by a festal Agape meal, which drew to a close around 3 a.m., in a warm atmosphere of love, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

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**On the evening** of the Feast Day (6:30-9 p.m.), a parish Synaxis was held in the meeting hall of the Episcopal residence. All of our clergy also participated, with Mother Magdalene serving as interpreter.

By way of a truly soul-stirring text, "The Elect Man of God," we delved together into the essential meaning of the Great Feast, which we characterized as a "Feast of Responsibility" (the responsibility of God to man, and the responsibility of man to his fellow man). The text elicited a number of profound questions and a great deal of discussion.

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**D. On Thursday**, December 26 (Old Style), we went to the Convent of St. Philothei, Villberga (northwest of Stockholm), where our Priests concelebrated in the convent's small main chapel.

An Agape meal followed, during which we discussed matters of a spiritual, theological, and edifying nature, in this place of peace and holiness, with its wondrous natural environment, where the grave of the convent's foundress, Mother Philothei





(†2012) also lies.

Our sojourn in this holy place until noon of the following day afforded us the opportunity for common prayer, partaking again of Holy Communion, mutual edification, and mutual service (e.g., taking care of various matters, communication with Greece, etc., by modern electronic means).

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**E. On Friday, December 27 (Old Style),** our brethren, ever courteous and hospitable, drove us to the Arlanda Airport. The weather continued to be surprisingly mild, though with a certain tinge of melancholy.

As further proof of spiritual progress, our faithful gave us a large sum of money for the indigent in Greece, which money they had saved up coin by coin during the course of the preceding Nativity Fast, since—as their pastors exhorted them—fasting should be accompanied by almsgiving.

The outdoor work for which instructions had been given during our previous visit (September 2014) had indeed progressed, and especially the more urgent matters—an admirable effort, given the unfavorable winter conditions.

Our contact with several non-Orthodox Christians—including a Lutheran Pastor (in a discussion that lasted an hour and a half)—demonstrated that there is fertile ground for a substantial Orthodox presence in Sweden, which seeks the genuineness of early Christianity: the genuine Church of the Fathers and the Holy Œcumenical Synods. It is interesting to note that 45% of the Lutheran clergy at this time in Sweden are female priests, and 70% of those studying for the priesthood are women; moreover, three of the fourteen Bishops are women,



Convent of St. Philothei



Convent of St. Philothei

with the female Archbishop of Uppsala at their head.

We were quite struck by the frugality of the meals; a discrete abstemiousness

generally prevailed,

which was noticeable during previous visits as well. The ethos of our Church is—and is not only said to be—ascetic.

We were especially pleased by the careful and sober way in which Monophysites (Copts, Armenians, Ethiopians, and Syrian Jacobites) are dealt with. These people are drawn to our parish by the fervor of our Faith and Tradition, but, believing themselves to be Orthodox, they desire to commune of the Immaculate Mysteries. Hierodeacon Theochares (who is of Syrian descent) and Father Anders explain to them, with love and consideration, that it is not permitted for them to do so. A number of them, after appropriate catechism, have become members of our Church by means of a special ceremony and Chrismation.

Our Holy Synod has a sense of duty and responsibility steadily to cultivate a dogmatic conscience in its people, and especially in our small flock in Sweden, which lives in a decisively syncretistic environment, where Truth is relativized. Our endeavor to cultivate such a dogmatic conscience is already bearing fruit.

His Grace, Bishop Johannes of Makarioupolis, our clergy, monastics, and laypeople in Sweden were very glad when we conveyed to them the best wishes of His Beatitude, Archbishop Kalinikos and of all of the Hierarchs in our Holy Synod, and asked us to convey in return their own greetings of love and respect.



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**Glory** to God for all things! By the Grace of God, this pastoral visit strengthened our brothers and sisters, further consolidated our bonds of Christian love, and increased hopes that the message of Orthodoxy will spread in this country, where secularization is steadily and rapidly gaining ground.

*December 27, 2014 (Old Style)*

*† The Holy First-Martyr Stephen*

*† Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle*