

Pilgrimage to the Holy Places of Romania and Ukraine

An Ascent to the Light of Mount Tabor

A GREAT BLESSING of God's mercy, our twelve-day pilgrimage to the Holy Places of Ukraine and Romania (July 27 - August 7, 2010 [Old Style]) was an opportunity for spiritual edification and a most profound experience of the Mystery of the blessed unity—and, at the same time, of the strengthening and demonstration of this unity—among the Sister Old Calendar Churches of Greece, Romania, and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad under Metropolitan Agafangel.

With synodal approval and the blessing of our ailing Metropolitan Cyprian, this pilgrimage took place under the leadership and guidance of Their Graces, Bishops Cyprian and Ambrose and with the participation of a dozen monks and nuns and around thirty-five lay brothers and sisters from Greece.

- On Monday, July 27 (Old Style), we left Athens by air for Bucharest, and then drove directly to the Old Calendar Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos, where we were warmly greeted by His Grace, Bishop Flavian of Ilfov, Abbot Eftimie, and brothers of the monastery. In the *Katholikon* (main Church), the Bishops exchanged greetings of a spiritual nature.

During the splendid *agape* meal that followed, the Bishops discussed various matters in a spirit of fraternal love, primarily regard-



ing the causes and consequences of the economic crisis in Greece and Romania. Bishop Cyprian stressed that the current crisis is theological in nature, since we have lost the Christian vision of poverty in Christ and seek an earthly paradise. Or-

thodoxy knows no despondency or discouragement; every crisis is a blessing and an opportunity for self-reproach, self-criticism, and repentance, that we might rediscover our true identity. History is in the hands of God, not in the hands of man, and our “hope shall not be put to shame.”

We were then given a brief tour of the monastery’s print shop, handicraft gift shop, marble and stone workshop, and the humble and compunction-evoking catacomb Chapel, dedicated to the Holy Apostle Luke, which also serves as a Baptistery.

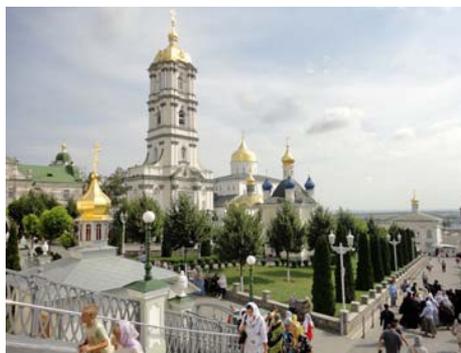
A tour of Bucharest followed, during which we made a stop in the city’s central square, where the headquarters of the Romanian Patriarchate and the Church of Sts. Constantine and Helen are located. Here, we venerated the incorrupt Holy Relics of St. Demetrios of Barsabov, the city’s Patron Saint (commemorated on October 27), and portions of the Relics of Sts. Constantine and Helen. We then visited our *Metochion* of St. Niphon, Patriarch of Constantinople.

- Late that afternoon, we flew to Suceava, Moldavia, in northern Romania, where we stayed overnight in a hotel. The next morning, we left by road for Ukraine. We might note that every day of our journey began with morning prayers. On the road, we would chant the Supplicatory Canon to the Mother of God, Vespers, and Matins, and discuss Patristic texts and other spiritual and historical matters with our two Bishops.

After crossing the border into southwestern Ukraine, we stopped in the city of Chernivtsi (Chernovtsy), where we visited the Convent of St. John the Hut-Dweller. We went down into the subterranean Church dedicated to the Saint, and venerated many Holy Relics in a cave.



On our way to Pochaev, Bishop Ambrose spoke to us about the history of this blessed but sorely-tried country, and Bishop Cyprian recounted the chronicle of the Lavra of Pochaev, this bulwark of Orthodoxy in Western Ukraine, which has long been plagued by incur-



sions from Uniates and Roman Catholics.

In the thirteenth century, several monks from the Kiev Caves Lavra, fleeing the Tartars, took refuge on Mount Pochaev, then uninhabited and covered by a dense forest. The Queen of Heaven, in the midst of flames (as in the Burning Bush) and with a scepter in her hand, appeared to two of the monks, who had climbed to the summit of this mountain in 1340. The Theotokos' right footprint was deeply imprinted into a rock on which she stood, from whence there sprang forth Holy Water with healing powers. Over time, a Brotherhood gathered in this

place, which became the Lavra of Pochaev.

In 1559, Metropolitan Neophytos of Constantinople gave a certain noblewoman, Anna Goyskaya, as a token of gratitude for her hospitality, an ancient Byzantine Icon of the Theotokos, which began to perform miracles and would appear from time to time bathed in Divine light. When Anna's crippled brother Philip was miraculously healed in 1597, Anna decided to donate the Icon to the Lavra, and thenceforth the Icon received the name "Pochaev." To this day, this Icon works innumerable miracles.

After spending the night in Ternopil (Ternopol), we headed for the Lavra of Pochaev on Wednesday morning, July 29 (Old Style). As we approached, Bishop Cyprian reminded us that we were about to visit a monastery in which God, the Theotokos, and the Saints have made them-





selves manifest in astonishing ways over the past centuries. He thus urged us to prepare ourselves with silence, prayer, self-reproach, and an awareness of our sinfulness, that we might be vouchsafed to hear the “voice” of God.

In the monastery’s majestic *Katholikon*, dedi-



cated to the Dormition of the Theotokos, we venerated the fragrant stone with the footprint of the *Panagia*, which is covered by a cloth, and drank of the Holy Water which drips from this spot. We then had the blessing of venerating the wonder-working Icon of Pochaev, which

is lowered every morning in front of the Beautiful Gates from its place on top of the *Templon* (*Iconostasis*).

Passing through a hallway with frescos of the Saints of Russia from its Baptism to this day, we arrived at the Church of St. Job of Pochaev. St. Job reposed in sanctity in 1651, and in 1659 his Holy Relics were found incorrupt.

Near his Relics, one of the monastery Fathers placed the Saint’s metallic cap on each pilgrim’s head. We did not dare enter the cave in which the Saint lived in asceticism, on account of its narrowness and the crush of the crowd. Moreover, there is a tradition that whoever has unconfessed sins is not able to exit it!



We also had the especial blessing of venerating the Relics of the Confessor and Wonderworker Staretz Joseph (1894-1971)—named Amphilochios in the Great

Schema—who underwent many tribulations and tortures at the hands of the Communists.

We were struck by the spontaneous piety of the faithful, who thronged all the places of worship and rushed to receive the blessing of our Bishops, to the point that we were forced to intervene in order to “liberate” them....



At 12:30 p.m., we left for Kiev. Halfway to our destination, the All-Immaculate Theotokos had yet another soul-stirring gift in store for us at the Convent of the Holy Trinity, in Koretsk. In the *Katholikon*, we were profoundly moved to see the *original* of the wonderworking Icon of the *Panagia* “the Surety of Sinners,” who seemed to want

to assure us of her protection for our journey.

- On Thursday morning, we began a guided tour of Kiev, the Mother of Russian cities. At the Cathedral of St. Vladimir, we were able to venerate the Relics of the Great Martyr Barbara and of St. Michael, Metropolitan of

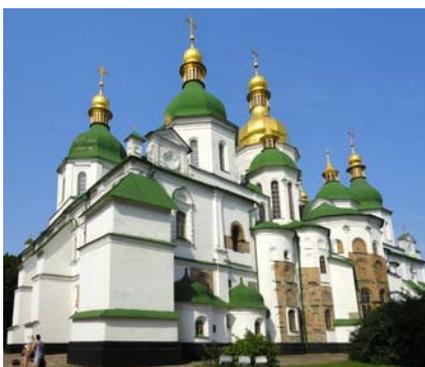




Kiev, who was killed by the Tartars.

We then visited the Church of the Holy Wisdom, built in the eleventh century, which is the only ancient Church not demolished by the Bolsheviks. Stalin forced academics to sign a statement that ancient Churches

possess no historical value, and the only person who objected paid for it with his life! Thanks to the remonstrances and actions of a celebrated French writer, however, the Church of the Holy Wisdom was not demolished, because Stalin wanted to remain on good terms with France. For many centuries, this famous historic Church served as the Cathedral of Kiev, following the example of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Inside its walls, we admired the ancient mosaics.



After visiting the Churches of the Archangel Michael and of the Holy Apostle Andrew, we went on to the cradle of Russian monasticism, the renowned Kiev Caves Lavra, dedicated to the Dormition of the Most Blessed Theotokos. St. Anthony of Kiev is considered its founder.

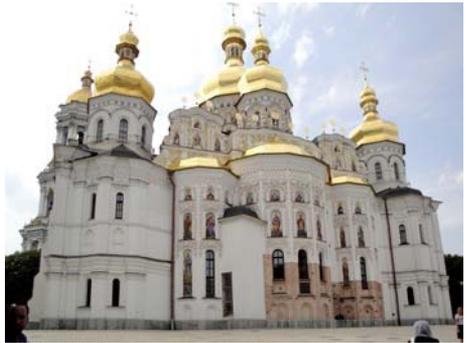


St. Anthony was born in the early eleventh century in the city of Lubetsk. Desiring the ascetic life of monasticism, he left for Constantinople at a young age, and eventually became a monk in the Monastery of Esphigmenou on the Holy Mountain (Mt.

Athos). In 1051, Abbot Theoktistos, illumined by God, sent the Saint back to his homeland to bring the blessing of the Holy Mountain to that land. The Saint settled in the cave where St. Hilarion had once lived in asceticism, before being appointed Metropolitan of Kiev. Shortly thereafter, St. Nikon asked St. Anthony to take him under his spiritual guidance, followed later by St. Theodosios. A Lavra eventually developed around them, with a glorious and wondrous history. Multitudes of Saints have shown forth here, a great number of whose Holy Relics now lie incorrupt in the Caves.



After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the huge Lavra lay desolate. Only in 1988 did the Soviet authorities give the lower part of the Lavra back to the Church. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the *Katholikon* was rebuilt. Herein is preserved the wonder-working Icon of the Dormition, which the Most Blessed Theotokos herself had entrusted to the Greek builders from Constantinople, when she sent them to Kiev to construct her Church.



We hurried on to the Caves, which close at 5:30 p.m. We first descended, candle in hand, into the “Near Caves,” where St. Anthony and his original Brotherhood lived in asceticism. Walking through the dark and narrow passageways, in the suffocating heat and dampness, we marveled at the superhuman struggles of the ascetics who once lived in these caves, and whose incorrupt Relics are kept

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in wooden Reliquaries, covered with a cloth and glass, and placed on stone benches carved into the walls on both sides of the passage. We were especially struck by the small openings behind which were located the cells of the recluses, who preferred to be “buried alive” in this life so as to gain the Kingdom of Heaven.



In the “Far Caves,” where St. Theodosios went when the Brotherhood grew, are preserved the Saint’s first grave (located in his cell) and the Relics of fifty other holy ascetics, as well as those of St. Vladimir, Metropolitan of Kiev, who was martyred in 1918 by the Communists, and St. Philaret (†1857), another Metropolitan of Kiev, known for his piety, wisdom, and great pastoral work. One can also venerate the myrrh-gushing skulls of a number of unknown Saints, and a portion of the skull of St. Clement, Pope of Rome. According to the ineffable Will of God, however, the Holy Relics of Sts. Anthony and Theodosios remain hidden.



- On Friday morning, July 31 (Old Style), our first visit was to the Monastery of Kitaievo, the “Holy Mountain” of Kiev, located outside the city, where St. Dosithea and St. Feofil the Fool-for-Christ once lived in asceticism. The monastery’s simplicity and beautiful old Iconography were a great relief to us, in

contrast to the heavy Baroque style of the city. Inside the Church, we venerated the Relics of St. Feofil, and outside, next to the apse, the tomb of St. Dosithea, who is so beloved of our Most Reverend Father, Metropolitan Cyprian. In 1926, her tomb was opened by the Communists, and the whereabouts of her Relics remain unknown.

After World War II, the Soviets organized a “Home for Invalids” here, and a number of families settled on the grounds. Only in 1991 were the monastery’s buildings given back to the Church, though the families remain, since the government is not able to allot them other places to live. The Brotherhood today, nevertheless, numbers some fifty monks.

After climbing up to St. Dosithea’s cave, located on a densely-wooded hill, we headed for the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, which was founded by St. Jonah—also greatly beloved of our spiritual Father—who was a disciple of St. Seraphim of Sarov and who received many visits from the Queen of Heaven with great simplicity and familiarity. This monastery was also closed after the Revolution and returned to the Church only twenty years ago. The thirty-member Brotherhood engages in philanthropic work, visiting hospitals and prisons. In the crypt under the Church, we venerated the Relics of St. Jonah and also his first “coffin,” which he built himself, in which various items belonging to the Saint



have been placed.

We then visited the Convent of the Holy Protection of the Theotokos, the most prominent convent in Kiev, with three hundred nuns! We were welcomed with great warmth, and one of the Sisters told us the life of the convent’s foundress, St. Anastasia (†1900). In the world Princess Alexandra von Oldenburg, she was the former wife of Grand Duke Nicholas, brother of Tsar Alexander III. The Saint founded the

convent. She was a great lover of the Holy Scriptures and the lives of the Saints. She was also a great lover of the poor and the sick. She founded a hospital and a school for the poor. She was a great example to all of us.

convent in 1889, where she lived as a nun in great humility. Having secretly received the Great *Schema*, she lived until the end of her life as Novice Alexandra, and with perfect self-denial attended to the sick whom she sheltered in the convent hospital. The convent Sisters lovingly prepared a monastic meal for us and saw us off with many gifts and spiritual mementos.

- Saturday morning, August 1 (Old Style), we left the blessed and sanctified city of Kiev by road for Odessa, accompanied by the Rev.



Mother Alexandra, Abbess of the Convent of St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco, located fifty kilometers outside of Odessa. Mother Alexandra was born in Russia, raised in Germany and America, and was a spiritual daughter of St. John—who had directed her towards monasticism in her youth—and St. Philaret, First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. Formerly married, later in life she started a *Hesychasterion* in Siberia, where she was appointed Abbess under Bishop Evtikhy (ROCA). The Sisterhood did not accept the union with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007, however, and found refuge near Odessa, under the *Omophorion* of His Eminence, Metropolitan



Agafangel, who continues the ROCA's confessional mission even at the risk of his life. With many difficulties and privations, the sisters (thirty in number, though some serve in *Metochia*), have managed, in only five years, to build a convent, with a Church dedicated to the Nativity of the Theotokos, according to the desire of St. John, in an area of great tranquility and scenic beauty. The sisterhood supports itself chiefly by its beautiful Iconography.

In the Church, Bishop Cyprian told the assembled Sisterhood that the purpose of monastic life is the acquisition of a compassionate heart, in order that we might be united with the God of Compassion and Mercy. He stressed that we must never forget that all of our ascetic acts, both bodily and spiritual, are only *means* to help us arrive at this end. Again, during the meal, Bishop Cyprian expressed his pleasure at the convent's poverty in Christ, frugality, and simplicity, and expressed the wish that the sisters continue to live conscientiously in this spirit, without losing the essence of monasticism.

After taking part in the evening service, which consisted of Great Vespers and Matins, according to the Russian *Typikon*, we left at 8 p.m. for Odessa, profoundly moved by the Sisterhood's sincere and spontaneous love and self-denial. May the Most Blessed Theotokos and St. John protect this small and



blessed isle from the fierce storms plaguing the Russian Church today.

- On Sunday morning, August 2 (Old Style), we all went to the newly-built Church of the Archangel Michael, the headquarters of His Eminence, Metropolitan Agafangel, First Hierarch of our Sister Church, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. The original Church of the Archangel was demolished by the Communists. In recent years,





the site was handed over to His Eminence, who gradually built the new Church and other necessary buildings despite many difficulties.

After a fraternal welcome by His Eminence, the Third and Sixth Hours were read, followed by the Divine Liturgy, during which we were impressed by the impeccable chanting and the piety of the clergy and faithful. At the conclusion, Metropolitan Agafangel delivered a brief homily based on the Gospel reading of the day. He expressed his humble joy over the communion between our two Synods, which allows him to seek counsel, receive help, and avoid making human mistakes.

Bishop Cypryan responded with the wish that the long-standing unity between Greeks and Russians become ever more profound and strong. He also spoke, on the occasion of the commemoration of the Archdeacon and Protomartyr Stephen, about the two dimensions of the Church: ministry and martyrdom. Finally, he expressed the wish that we continue to struggle together against Sergianism—which remains alive even after the fall of Communism—and ecumenism, which is steadily spreading.



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authorities deprived him of the Church that he served in the center of the city and gave him a basement room, which he has turned into a Church and which is reminiscent of the ancient catacombs.

The Synod of our Russian brethren is under great pressure from the authorities and the Moscow Patriarchate. To our great surprise and dismay, for example, outside a number of Churches in the city we saw special notices, posted by the local Church authorities, with the photograph of His Eminence crossed out, which exhorted the faithful to guard themselves against the “pseudo-Metropolitan Agafangel.”

Finally, we visited the Monastery of the Prophet Elias, a *Metochion* of the Skete of the Prophet Elias on the Holy Mountain. In the Church lie the incorrupt Relics of the Sainly Archimandrite Gabriel (†1901), who served as *Dikaios* [Superior] of the Skete until he was put in charge of the *Metochion* in Odessa, around five years before his holy repose. Years ago, the monastery Brothers heard knocking coming from his tomb. When they opened it, they found his Relics in a state of incorruption, which thenceforth began to perform many miracles.



- On Monday morning, August 3 (Old Style), after saying goodbye to our grateful Russian brothers and sisters, we departed for Romania by bus. After a good deal of beneficial hardship (which afforded us the opportunity, for example, of getting a foretaste of the aerial tollhouses awaiting us after death, since we were held up for a total of four hours at the borders between Ukraine and Moldavia and Moldavia and Romania!), we arrived in Suceava at 8:30 p.m.



- On Tuesday, we left for southern Moldavia, to the spectacularly scenic region of Bukovina, where we visited the Monastery of Putna, greatly beloved of the pious King of Moldavia, Stephen the Great (reigned 1457-



1504), who was a great champion of Orthodoxy. Built in the fifteenth century, the monastery now numbers sixty monks, who live a coenobitic life.

Two miles from the monastery, we visited the cave of St. Daniel the Hesychast (commemorated December 18), which he carved out of a large boulder, taking him eleven years. Born in the early fifteenth century, St. Daniel became a monk at sixteen. To flee the glory of men, he lived for twenty years in this cave, practicing unceasing noetic prayer. He was vouchsafed the gift of tears and clairvoyance, and eventually undertook the



spiritual guidance of thousands of monks. He reposed in 1469 and is buried in the Church at the Monastery of Voronet, where he had been enthroned as Abbot in accordance with the desire of Stephen the Great.



We then visited the historic Monastery of Sucevița, built in 1581 and dedicated to the Resurrection of our Lord. It now houses sixty monks, and is famous for its marvelous interior and exterior frescoes.

Our last stop was the Convent of Dragomirna, dedicated to the Descent of the Holy Spirit, which gave hospitality to St. Paissy (Velichkovsky) when he returned to his homeland from the Holy Mountain, between 1763 and 1775. Sixty nuns now live in this convent, which was restored in 1961 to its original form. A wonderworking Icon of the *Panagia* of Dragomirna is preserved in the *Katholikon*, along with a portion of the Relics of the Holy Great Martyr James the Persian.



- On Wednesday morning, 5 August (Old Style), at the main Cathedral of Suceava, we venerated the Relics of the Holy New Martyr John of Trebizond (commemorated June 2), who is regarded as the Patron Saint of Bukovina.

After a drive of two and a half hours, we arrived at the Monastery of the Venerable Forerunner in the region of Vatra Dornei,

which was the paternal home of the late Bishop Cosma (Lostun, † 2002). In 2003, His Grace, Bishop Iosif of Botoșani began to build a Church and develop the land here. (As an aside, in the nineteen-member family of Bishop Iosif, six children became Hieromonks, four nuns, and two Priests!) His Grace is



the Superior of a Brotherhood of seventeen monks. We were moved by the warm welcome of Bishop Iosif and Bishop Dionisie of Galați, who came all the way down to the main road to meet us and escorted us to the top of the hill, at a height of 1000 meters, where the monastery is located. We were served a very fine meal of regional products.



From there, we drove through the picturesque countryside to the Monastery of the Transfiguration of our Savior in Slătioara, headquarters of our Sister Old Calendar Church of Romania. In the *Katholikon* lie the Relics of the Holy Hierarch and Confessor Glicherie (†1985).

At 6 p.m., the open-air evening service began, according to the Romanian *Typikon*, which resembles the Russian, with Great Vespers, Matins, and the First Hour. His Eminence, Metropolitan Vlasie was the principal celebrant, and the two Bishops from Greece were present, along with the ten other Romanian Hierarchs. Forty Priests and ten Hierodeacons also took part. His Eminence, Bishop Photii of Triaditza from Bulgaria was unable to attend, owing to circumstances beyond his control, but he was represented by a group of clergy and lay people.

The Byzantine Choir of twenty young men chanted the festal hymns superbly. This amazing choir is the fruit of the toils of Father Simeon Movila, who began a School of Byzantine Music several years ago.

- The next morning, Thursday, August 6 (Old Style), we arrived at the Monastery gates, where we were welcomed by Metropolitan Vlasie and all of the Romanian Hierarchs and clergy. They led us to the *Katholikon*, where



we venerated the Relics of St. Glicherie.

After the Third and Sixth Hours, the festal Divine Liturgy began around 9 a.m., in the monastery's open-air courtyard. His Eminence, Metropolitan Vlasie, President of the Holy Synod, was the principal celebrant with ten other Romanian Hierarchs



concelebrating (Bishops Demosten of Neamț, Ghenadie of Bacău, Sofronie of Suceava, Teodosie of Brașov, Iosif of Botoșani, Flavian of Ilfov, Antonie of Ploiești, Glicherie of Iași, Dionisie of Galați, and Evloghie of Sibiu) along with the two Hierarchs from Greece, Their Graces, Bishops Cyprian and Ambrose, dozens of Deacons and Priests, and many Subdeacons. An enormous crowd of pious faithful and pilgrims was in attendance, as well as the Mayor of the region.

At the end of the Divine Liturgy, 11:20 a.m., Metropolitan Vlasie delivered a festal homily on the meaning of the Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord. He stressed that the Mystery of the Transfiguration, like the Incarnation of our Lord, is the result of God's love for man. We are God's most beloved creation, and we must never believe that God has abandoned us. The Uncreated Energy of the Holy Trinity, the Light which welled forth from the Theandric Heart of our Savior, has brought us hope, joy, peace, and an invisible power whereby we may fight and struggle against our passions.



His Eminence then asked Bishop Cyprian to say a few words. His Grace explained the reasons for which he came again this year with a large group of faithful to the Mt. Tabor of Slătioara: 1) to express his heartfelt best wishes to Metropolitan Vlasie on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his Consecration; 2) to offer thanks to God, Who has shown forth the Old Calendar Church of Romania as a genuine, true, and living Church, which serves as a model for us Greeks, since it lived for many years as a crucified Church and has

passed from a state of Transfiguration to Resurrection; 3) to pray all together for the preservation of unity among the Romanian, Russian, Bulgarian, and Greek Old Calendarist faithful, that this unity might become stronger and deeper in the Uncreated Light of the Transfiguration; and 4) to address a humble, fraternal entreaty and exhortation to our Romanian brothers on behalf of His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian, not to yield to the temptation of descending from the Cross onto which they were placed by the Grace of God in the times of persecution, and not to fall in step with the world. He also stressed that the throne and glory of the Church is the Cross, and that the greatest danger is that of laxity. Finally, he expressed the wish that they continue to preach Jesus Christ Crucified.

Bishop Demosten also delivered a brief sermon, in which he urged us not to forget that we were still in the midst of the Fast in honor of the *Panagia*, who ever remains our succor and intercessor before her Son, such that no one who flees to her for refuge with faith in her compassion is “turned away ashamed.”

A procession was then made around the monastery *Katholikon*, preceded by the Holy Relics of St. Glicherie the Confessor, which were carried by Priests and which exuded a fragrance. The piety of the faithful who sought to receive the blessing of the Hierarchs was most impressive



At the abundant festal meal that followed, Metropolitan Vlasie and Bishop Cyprian exchanged spiritual messages full of love, affection, and brotherhood. Bishop Cyprian presented a gift to the Metropolitan, expressing his respect and appreciation. The Byzantine Choir then sang patriotic folk songs, the *Polychronion*, and a rendition of *Axion Estin* in Greek, with feeling and verve.

The Greek faithful had the blessing of visiting the small and humble cell of St. Glicherie and were given a tour of the large new Church that is under construction outside of the monastery precincts.

During the drive back to Suceava, we visited:

- the Old Calender Convent of the Holy Myrrh-Bearers (with thirty nuns) near Slătioara, where we were received by the Reverend Mother Amfilohia (eighty-two years old);



- the Church complex in Poiana, in the region of Neamț, where we were welcomed with great love by Father Simeon Movila, the Rector and founder of this impressive complex;



- the Old Calendar Church of Sts. Constantine and Helen, in the city of Fălticeni. Its Rector had been our beloved Protopresbyter Vasile Sidu, who was suddenly killed in a car accident last summer. We were welcomed by the new Rector, Father Sebastian Mogârzan, his wife, Presbytera Claudia, and a few members of the Byzantine choir. As was the case everywhere we went, we were treated to generous refreshments. Before



leaving, we chanted a *Trisagion* at the grave of the ever-memorable Father Vasilie, near the Church.

- Very early Friday morning, August 7 (Old Style), we left Suceava by air for Athens, via Bucharest. A little before noon, we landed in Greece. Our hearts remained in Moldavia, however, where Golgotha and Mount Tabor meet, and constitute a wellspring of our Savior, from which we continuously draw forth light, peace, and joy.

*The Convent of the Holy Angels,
Aphidnai, Attica, Greece*

