

## ❖ METROPOLIS OF OROPOS AND PHYLE

### ✂ Mission in Kenya

#### Our Small Flock

## Pastoral Visit to Kenya

This Exquisitely Beautiful Country in Eastern Africa

(January 14-20, 2011 [Old Style])

**K**enya, in Eastern Africa, approximately four times the size of our homeland, Greece (582,649 sq. km.), and with a population of thirty-five million, is an exquisitely beautiful country.



The equator passes through the middle of the country, which is bounded by Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, Somalia, and the Indian Ocean. Kenya is characterized by its beautiful and varied natural landscapes, pleasant climate, and the dignity and vitality of its approximately seventy ethnic groups. Even though each group retains its own language and culture, they all wondrously

manage to be united under the motto “coöperation and solidarity,” for the good of their homeland and the formation of a strong ethnic identity.

Formerly a British colony (1888-1963), Kenya’s official languages are English and Swahili. The Republic of Kenya has no official religion; around 66% of the population are Christians, 26% Animists, and 6% Muslims.

The terrain is largely composed of mountains and plateaus of volcanic origin. Thus, the capital city of Nairobi (population approx. 2,150,000) lies 1,675 meters above sea level. Our small flock mostly lives north of the capital, in the fertile and verdant region and city of Embu, on a plateau that stretches to Mt. Kenya, the highest mountain in the country, at 5,199 meters.

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We decided to visit our small flock in Kenya—which we have already visited many times since 1985—with a group of twelve people this year: two Hierarchs (Cyprian of Oreoi and Ambrose of Methone), one Priest (Archimandrite Gregory, from Pyrgos, Greece), one Subdeacon (Monk Antonios Hagiokyprianites), two nuns (the Reverend Mother Taxiarchia and Mother Myrophora, both from the Convent of the Holy Angels), and six lay brothers and sisters in Christ (two women and four men).

On Thursday, January 14/27, 2011, we flew to Nairobi, by way of Cairo, arriving at 3:41 a.m. (local time) on Friday. We were greeted at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport by the Very Reverend James Waruinge, our Episcopal Representative in Nairobi and Central Kenya. At 4:10 a.m., we left for Embu in two small buses. After a journey of 125 kilometers, we arrived in Embu at 7:45 a.m., and checked in at the beautiful Izaak Walton Hotel (4,900 feet above sea level).

After a brief rest, we left at 11:30 a.m. for our convent in Kaanja, Embu. The Convent of St. George was built only in 2005, yet has already shown remarkable progress.



The Abbess, Reverend Mother Christonymphe, a person of profound spiritual cultivation, has formed a fifteen-member Sisterhood of African nuns, with many more prospective sisters waiting to join. The future looks very promising.

At 1 p.m., the Greek pilgrims were given a decorous and heartfelt welcome at the convent. Our Kenyan Priests, Deacons, Nuns, and a few laypeople were present, led by our tireless and prudent Hierarchical Representative for Eastern Kenya, Father John Njue Njagi. We were lovingly served a light lunch of rice and lentils (dry and without oil), with bread baked at the convent and savory, fragrant mangos that resembled large apricots. The atmosphere was one of poverty in Christ, without electricity; everything was neat and tidy, dignified, and full of love and hospitality, underscoring the spirit of genuine monasticism.

At 2:30 p.m., a gathering of the clergy was held in the Church of St. Andrew, the convent's *Katholikon*. Bishop Ambrose, who has been working with admirable self-sacrifice for some twenty-five years in the missionary field of Kenya, served as interpreter. The purpose of the

meeting was for the clergy to make the acquaintance of Bishop Cyprian, the Acting President of the Holy Synod, and to submit requests and pose questions regarding practical, pastoral, and personal matters, for the progress of our local ecclesiastical community.

Following an introduction by Father John Njue—who received his theological training at the Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, in



Etna, California—our Priests and Deacons spoke for an hour about the following issues: problems arising from the proselytizing propaganda of heterodox confessions, which flourish in the area; the training of future clergy; the need for Orthodox theological and liturgical books for the foundation of a library; the building of a rectory at one of our parishes, and other matters. They warmly thanked us for our first group visit, which helped to boost their morale and strengthen our ties in Christ.

With great love and respect, Bishop Cyprian exhorted them to take care—among other things—that they always remain in a state of spiritual vigilance, ever “rekindling the charism [of the Priesthood],” lest they end up, in a spirit of worldliness, experiencing this vocation as a mere profession. To this end, he told them, they would do well to celebrate the anniversary of their Ordination, thereby renewing their commitment to Christ our Archpastor and His rational flock.

At 4 p.m., following a delicious Kenyan tea, we left for the parish Church of St. Sophia in Embu, where we arrived after a journey of forty-five minutes. The stone-built Church was markedly destitute, both inside and out. We ascertained the parish’s major needs, wrote them down, and promised to help ameliorate the situation. At 5:35, we visited our other parish Church, that of St. James the Brother of God, where Father Simon serves as Rector. We were very warmly greeted. The needs here are similar. Next to the stone Church is the original wooden Church. The site on which it stands needs to be purchased (for 2,000 euros) in order for it to become a house for the Priest.

At 6:45, we arrived at our lodgings in Embu, fairly tired but full of

joy, because in the midst of the indescribable poverty of our brethren in this rural area, with its abundant tropical vegetation and immense green tea fields, we encountered Christ Himself, Who called the poor “blessed” and identified His Theandric Person with all of the poor and needy. We went to bed early, since we had a heavy schedule lined up for the next day.

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Saturday, January 16/29, our second day in Kenya, was rich in spiritual experiences, but also in opportunities for self-criticism and self-reproach.

At 8 a.m., we arrived at the Convent of St. George. On this day, the commemoration of the Veneration of the Precious Chains of the Holy Apostle Peter, we liturgized in the tidy, compunction-evoking *Katholikon*, with a large congregation in attendance, finishing at twelve noon. Both Bishops presided, with the participation of our Kenyan clergy, Archimandrite Gregory, and Subdeacon Monk Antonios. We were profoundly moved by the chanting of the choir of nuns and lay-people, which rose up, as a “voice of many waters,” to the Throne of the Lamb that was slain. The absence of electric lighting and microphones distinctly emphasized the mysteriological atmosphere.

During the Liturgy, after the Small Entrance, we celebrated the “Eighth Mystery,” that is, the Tonsure to the Great Schema of Sisters Mariam and Kypriane, two charming members of the blossoming Sisterhood of St. George. Their Abbess, Mother Christonymphe served as





their sponsor. The Mystery was performed by Bishop Ambrose in English, with Bishop Cyprian reading the final prayer in Greek.

Before Holy Communion, Bishop Ambrose spoke on a theme appropriate to the occasion. At the end of the Liturgy, Bishop Cyprian also addressed words of edification, distributed small Icons to the congregation, and displayed for veneration a sacred item brought from Greece: the Holy *Podea*, a gold-embroidered piece of fabric that lies on the tomb of Christ in the All-Holy Sepulchre and is bathed in the Holy Fire on Great Saturday, when the great miracle of our Faith occurs.

Before the “Through the prayers,” Bishop Ambrose also tonsured one of the young novices a Rasophore Nun, giving her the name Antonina (June 10).

This was followed by the customary monastic *trapeza*, which was richer and more substantial than that of the previous day, owing to the Mystical Nuptials of Mothers Mariam and Kypriane. In attendance were all of the visitors from Greece, the Kenyan clergy, and also a very pious Kenyan doctor, John Thyongo. A great supporter and benefactor of our Church, he is the son of a deceased Priest, studied in Poland, and occupies an important position in the Ministry of Health.

In the meantime, the large crowd of faithful was sitting scattered around the monastery courtyard, eating rice and lentils with makeshift utensils, served from a vessel that had been blessed by the Bishops. Countless small children, running about with smiles on their faces, hurried to taste the candies brought from Greece and, along with the rest of the faithful, to receive a kiss of love from the Greek pilgrims (who were extremely moved by the spectacle) and to be photographed with them. This was a veritable spiritual banquet! Unforgettable moments, full of affection, tenderness, and dignity....

The newly-tonsured Mother Kypriane’s parents and siblings, though Anglican, respected her decision to be baptized into the Orthodox Faith and to become a nun. They were now waiting in the courtyard with joy

and gratitude to offer to the Reverend Mother Christonymphe—despite their poverty—the dowry for their daughter’s spiritual wedding: a large plastic vessel (for water) and a gas cylinder with a mechanism to make a sort of primus stove. The Bishops greeted them warmly, congratulated them on the spiritual wedding of their daughter, and invited them to visit Greece.

This was followed by a visit to a tea processing plant, where we were given a tour from the stage when the tea arrives, fresh and green, from the plantations, to the stage at which it is placed in sacks in its final form for market (export). Tea is one of the country’s most important agricultural products, alongside coffee, sugar cane, wheat, corn, rice, tapioca, and bananas, among other things. The director of the plant is one of our faithful from the nearby parish Church of the Archangel Michael.

We then went to his Church, where Hieromonk Theophanes, a brother of our Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina (in Greece), is the serving Priest. Following the welcome, we chanted the Great Doxology and offered up prayers of petition to the Lord. Bishop Cyprian spoke to the faithful primarily about almsgiving, which is our common duty, even if we are poor ourselves.

The stone Church of the Archangel Michael was built in 1984, during the lifetime of the ever-memorable Metropolitan George (†1987), under the direction of the virtuous Priest, Father Micah, who is now seventy-eight years old, active and vigorous, and a zealous participant in the Church’s missionary work. He gives the appearance of a man in his fifties. Until recently, he would travel to faraway small parishes by bicycle, but now he goes on foot!

Small gifts were distributed as blessings to the faithful in an atmosphere of joy, love, affection, and a profound sense of Christian community. The Rector, with genuine simplicity, offered us a meager meal in his extremely ascetic dwelling. We had an opportunity to speak

about memory of death, which is so repulsive to today’s “civilized” man. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, reconciles us with memory of death, such that it ultimately becomes a source of the renewal and emergence of a person’s true self from the innermost depths of his being.



At 7:30 p.m., we were back at our friendly hotel, filled with thoughts and feelings of guilt. There is such indescribable poverty in these agricultural regions, at a time when so many of us thoughtlessly waste money on the most ridiculous and vain things—all the while complaining, at that, and downing antidepressants to deal with our sundry “privations”! Our Kenyan brethren are poor, yes, but dignified, hospitable, and always cheerful, wearing their hearts on their sleeves, and optimistic. And the most important thing: They remain steadfast within anti-innovationist Orthodoxy, despite various propagandist pressures on the part of heterodox Western Christians. We did not neglect to exhort them not to be overcome by the temptation of Western materialism, even should they be in deprivation and suffering. These Kenyans are experiencing the *freedom of poverty in Christ* in their lives, they have bright faces and many children, a source of joy and hope.

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On Sunday, January 17/30, the commemoration of our Holy Father Anthony the Great, we were scheduled to liturgize at the Church of the Holy Apostle Paul in Kaanja, Embu. This is our most central, largest, and best organized parish, where the venerable Protopresbyter John Njue serves as Rector. The stone Church was consecrated by our much-revered Elder, Metropolitan Cyprian, in 2003. It is tidy enough, as are the parish buildings surrounding it, though its poverty and deficiencies cannot, of course, be hidden.

At 7:30 a.m., we arrived at the Church, from which we departed only at 12.30 p.m. The Reverend Mother Christonymphe had come from the Convent of St. George with some of her nuns. Innumerable faithful were in attendance, with a sea of children. The chanting was in Swahili and Kikuyu.

All six of our Priests and two of our Deacons were present, so that we could take liturgical joy in our unity and mutual love and respect.





Blacks and whites, Africans and Europeans, called together in the unity of the Divine Paraclete, without regard for ethnicity, color, language, or culture....

The two Bishops addressed words of paternal counsel to the thirsty Kenyans: words of consolation, catechism, support, and encouragement. This was a veritable festival of joy, enthusiasm, love, and... traditional dancing!

After the light noon meal on the Church grounds, we held a gathering with the clergy and laypeople in the enormous parish hall from 3:15



to 5:50 p.m. Father Theophanes served as translator. An introduction by Bishop Cyprian was followed by a question and answer session. Priests, laypeople, and Mother Christonymphe broached issues regarding the Orthodox Faith and ethos that they encounter in surroundings that are slowly but steadily becoming urbanized, which brings its own temptations and problems with it.

At 7 p.m., we were back at our lodgings. The temperature was mild,



with a summer breeze. (January and February are summer months in this region, with highs between 25° and 30°C.) The hotel's beautiful garden, with its abundant tropical vegetation, helps you relax, contemplate, draw comparisons, condemn yourself, and pray. The clouds of dust on the dirt roads were a real trial for all of us. The clouds of our ruminations, however, were perhaps even thicker and more vexing. May God bless and protect the people of Kenya!

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On Monday, 18/31 January, we departed at 6:30 a.m. for a lengthy road trip. At 11 a.m., we arrived at the Mt. Kenya National Park, which is 716 square kilometers and houses a great variety of large animals. The lower 3,200 meters of Mt. Kenya (5,199 m.) are covered by dense



forests. As you pass through these regions, the view of the mountain in the background is truly spectacular!

Our passage of many hours through the national park was breathtaking. While remaining in our small bus for safety reasons, we came across elephants, buffalo, zebras, antelopes, giraffes, hippopotami, baboons, apes, etc.

By 8:45 p.m., we had returned to our hotel. We had to pack our things, since the next day we would begin our journey home. In Nairobi, we had to arrange the safest way back. The popular uprising in Cairo and the explosive state of affairs hardly encouraged us to return to Greece by way of Egypt. What would happen? What were our options? What did the Greek Embassy in Nairobi have to say? Would Egyptair fly to Cairo? We prayed, placing all of our hope in the Theotokos, through the prayers of our Elder and Metropolitan.

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On Tuesday, January 19/February 1, we left for Nairobi. Approximately one kilometer beyond Embu, Dr. John Thyongo drove us to the plot of land that he has offered to our Church for the construction of a men's monastery. On the plot's two hectares, there are already suitable monastic accommodations, a Chapel, and livestock facilities, and they are cultivating the land, which includes a rice plantation, among other things.

The monastery, dedicated to the Dormition of the Theotokos, is for the time being in the care of Father John Njue and the nuns from the Convent of St. George. One of our Kenyan brothers is a novice at our Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, where he is being trained in the monastic life



before being sent back to begin a Brotherhood. A group of young postulants is waiting for him so that they can dedicate themselves fully to the All-Holy Mother of God.

When we arrived in Nairobi, we were met with a situation of utter chaos, at least in the area where we were stuck, for over an hour, while trying to arrange our return trip to Greece. By Greek standards, the situation was completely inconceivable: noise, traffic, heat, pollution, disorderly and reckless driving, poverty, various perils—quite an explosive combination.

It was an enormous relief for us to visit a park, in the dense vegetation of which innumerable monkeys live and play with the visitors. It was an oasis.

We then headed for Karuri, seventeen kilometers from the capital, to the village and parish of Father James Waruinge. We ate and rested, since at 3:46 a.m. our flight would take off—not for Cairo, but for Constantinople! The Theotokos had worked her miracle, such that we would be able to venerate the sacred sites of our Greek nation before returning to Athens.

At the Church of the Holy Protection of the Theotokos and the house of Father James, we were pleasantly surprised to have the opportunity to meet with a fair number of the faithful, mostly women, to listen to their problems, their pain, their extreme difficulties owing to their poverty, etc. A bond of genuine love and compassion developed, which was expressed in an immediate and practical way: We “adopted” several children, in the sense that we promised to pay the expenses of their schooling. It was a



very blessed and fruitful meeting.

At 11 p.m., we left for the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. Early the next morning, Wednesday, January 20/February 2, our Turkish Airlines flight took off for the capital of Roman Hellenism, Constantinople, where we landed at 8:15 a.m.

The bright, sunny day, despite the low temperatures, allowed us to visit some sacred places of pilgrimage during the six hours allotted to us before our departure for Greece.

We visited the Convent of the Life-Giving Spring in Baloukli, the Church of Blachernai, the Patriarchal Church of St. George, Hagia Sophia, and the Imperial Cistern. Our feelings were mixed and our prayers fervent, pondering the splendor of the City of the Theotokos and the yearnings of our nation...



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At 5:30 p.m. that day, we flew to Athens, calling upon the protection of our Lady the Theotokos, and landed an hour later. We were met by our beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, who were thirsty to hear all about our adventurous pilgrimage. Over the next few days, we had numerous opportunities to recount our impressions and experiences of our meetings with our Kenyan brothers and sisters, who with spiritual hunger and thirst raise their hands to Orthodoxy, crying out in supplication: “Come over into Kenya, and help us!”

Glory to God for all things!

Bishop Cyprian of Oreoi,  
Acting President of the Holy Synod