



HOLY DIOCESE OF GLDANI GEORGIA



Once again in the blessed land of St. Nina
and of the Panagia Portaitissa

Second Pastoral Visit to the Holy Diocese of Tbilisi, Georgia September 25-30, 2015 (Old Style)

Glory to God for all things!

The Grace of the *Theotokos* and of St. Nina so strengthened us that, without a rest after our sojourn in Sweden (September 18-23 [Old Style], we made yet another pastoral visit to the Holy Diocese of Gldani, Tbilisi, Georgia, in our capacity as *Locum Tenens*.



The Convent of St. Nina,
in Mtskheta

Eighteen months ago, our Holy Synod, under His Beatitude, Archbishop Kallinikos, entrusted us with this ministry, which is assuredly quite a demanding one, insofar as our small flock of Genuine Orthodox Christians in Georgia is facing specific problems

of divers kinds.

On Thursday, September 25 (commemoration of the Holy Nun-Martyr Euphrosyne), following the Patronal Feast of the Convent of the Panagia Myrtdiotissa in Aphidnai, Athens (Greece), we traveled by air to Tbilisi with our coworkers and fellow ministers, the Reverend Father Jiří Ján and Subdeacon Antonios Hagiokyprianites, hoping for a fruitful five day sojourn, by the Grace of God.

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The Community and Brotherhood of the *Panagia Portaitissa* and the Precious Cross, Zedazeni

After a long and rather uncomfortable journey, with a stopover in Constantinople, we arrived at the Tbilisi airport at 5:30 p.m., where we were struck by a first "wave" of deep astonishment and gladness in Christ: A large throng of our faithful—larger than in the past—bearing Icons, Crosses, banners, and flags, and chanting Greek and Georgian hymns

with joy, emotion, and enthusiasm, veritably fell upon us in their desire to express their love and respect for their fellow Orthodox brethren from blessed Greece.

At the head of the faithful were our local clergy: the Reverend Archimandrite, Father Gregory and the Reverend Presbyters, Fathers Gabriel and Vakhtang. To our distress, we learned that the Episcopal Representative, Father Basili, was absent because of an emergency heart operation he had undergone the previous Sunday, rendering him bedridden at the hospital.

We all headed for the Cathedral Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa* in Gldani, where we were received according to ecclesiastical order. After brief prayers of thanksgiving, we conveyed a message of unity from our Holy Synod and our brothers and sisters in Christ in Greece, and also an appeal for a spirit of humility, love, and self-sacrifice, that the bonds between the members of our Church might remain unbroken.

After the meal, we visited Father Basili in the hospital, in order to comfort and strengthen him in his affliction, and we read over him the pertinent prayers for the sick. We were especially and pleasantly surprised by the deep piety and respect shown by the young nursing team to the clergy from Greece: with slight bows, they modestly and humbly asked for the blessing of the clergy!

It was getting rather late by the time we returned to our hotel after a physically tiring day, yet one rich in spiritual experiences.

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Friday, September 26 (commemoration of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian), had in store for us more

wonderful surprises and an abundance of Divine blessings.

Together with Fathers Gregory and Vakhtang and a group of faithful and chanters, we went to the Zedazeni mountain, (twenty-five kilometers outside of Tbilisi), at the top of which (1,200 m.), the Community and Brotherhood of the *Panagia Portaitissa* and the Precious Cross was established two decades ago.



This sacred mountain greeted us wrapped in its majestic autumnal garment of dense fog. In the simple and penurious Church of the Community, which numbers thirteen members, heated by a wood stove, we liturgized with Fathers Vakhtang and Jiří, with Monk Antonios as Subdeacon.

It had the appearance and atmosphere of a catacomb. The chanters, the closeness of space, the use of Greek, Georgian, and Slavonic, the absence of basic liturgical objects, the common recitation of the Creed and of the Lord's Prayer, the simplicity and the tear-filled eyes, the distinctive local Icons (some quite large), the absence of chairs and the patient standing, the participation of the majority of those present in Holy Communion (after an intermission during which our two Priests heard confessions), the concise catechetical homily on love (it being the Feast of the Dormition of the Apostle John, the "Disciple of Love"), among other things, produced a sense of the *Upper Room at Pentecost*....

It was an extremely moving experience, which continued at the *agape* meal that followed. Once again the simplicity and plainness matched the poverty and artlessness of it all. The warmth of the generous hospitality, the chanting, the words of spiritual edification, centered on the glory and honor to which the Lord and His Gospel raised women in the person of the *Theotokos* (at the Annunciation and Pentecost, and in the eschatology of the Holy Apocalypse), the discussion that developed on this theme, the distribution of gifts, etc., all served to strengthen the sense of the *Upper Room of Pentecost*.

The Divine Liturgy finished by 1:30 p.m., and we departed at 4:30 p.m. to visit the nearby historic and renowned monastery

of St. John of Zedazeni, where his grave is located. This place and the sixth-century building engender a feeling of sacred awe and spontaneous hymns of grateful doxology to our Lord and God, Who rests in His Saints.



We then visited a location in the village of Akhatani, thirty-five kilometers from Tbilisi, where Father Gregory has purchased a piece of property that would be suitable for the foundation of an *Hesyhasterion* (small monastery). We looked at the land and the existing building in order to get a sense of and record the necessities of such a serious undertaking, as well as its prospects

During our return to Tbilisi, we had the blessing of making a pilgrimage to two historic places of great importance. First, we visited the Holy Cross Church of Jvari, built on the place where St. Nina cast down the idols by the power of her prayers and where the Cross of our Lord was erected (the base of which still exists), and below which there flows a river in which the Georgians were baptized in the fourth century. We then visited the astonishing Church of the Holy Apostles (known as the Svetitskhoveli, or "the Living Pillar"), in the ancient capital of Mtskheta, which has served as the See of the Patriarchate of Georgia since the fourth century. The tomb of St. Sidonia and the Holy Robe of our Lord are associated with this Church. The nearby Convent of St. Nina, which houses the tombs of the first Holy Monarchs, Mirian and Nana, and the site—now a chapel—where St. Nina the Enlightener and Equal to the Apostles initially dwelt, was still open (at 7:30 p.m.), glory to God. We prayed there and, filled with blessings, grace, and thanksgiving to God, returned to the capital.

Over the course of the day, we discussed various ecclesiastical matters with Father Gregory, who brought us up to date on a variety of issues. We decided on the program for the following days, and also entrusted Father Gregory with compiling a list of Georgian Saints that we will publish on our website, since we believe that the Saints throughout the ages constitute the soul of every local Church.

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On Saturday, September 27 (commemoration of the Holy Apostle Aristarchos and of the Holy Martyr Kallistratos), we had the blessing of liturgizing at the parish Church of the Dormition of the *Theotokos* in the region of Gldani, the founder and Rector of which is Father Gabriel (since 2005).



The Church of St. Nina
in Mtskheta.

The Divine Liturgy, which we celebrated with Fathers Gabriel and Jiří, with Monk Antonios as Subdeacon, and Father Gregory and other faithful chanting, ended at 11:30 a.m.

An *agape* meal followed, at which the atmosphere was very warm and fraternal, with a very interesting and edifying discussion. We then held a meeting in which we discussed at length matters of canonical order involving ethnic concerns (the Diocese of Tbilisi and the Diocese of Alania) and also the situation that developed subsequent to the extremely hostile comments by the Patriarch of Georgia against our Church in Greece.

Around 3:30 p.m., we went to the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa* for Vespers, Matins, and the First Hour, according to the Slavic *Typikon*. Some thirty faithful were in prayerful attendance, while the large choir shone at the *analogion*, dressed in their special attire.

After the light parish meal, we again went to the hospital to visit Father Basili, who was doing better and who, it was hoped, would be able to return to his home within the next few days, albeit not to his ministry. We were once again utterly astonished by the unaffected modesty and piety of the nurses, all of whom were women, as they asked for our blessing one by one. Their manners were such that one wondered if they were women or Angels.



The fatigue of the day was once again great, but such heartfelt interaction with our clergy and laity was the primary purpose of our visit to Georgia, and this, despite the various difficulties, was palpably achieved, glory to God.

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On Sunday, September 28 (commemoration of St. Chariton the Confessor), all of our clergy, apart from Father Basili, took part in the Divine Liturgy, which was celebrated at the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa*. This was a source of great joy for us, since this was the first time since the Union (March of 2014) that our

clergy in Georgia celebrated together.

The enormous Church was filled to the brim. The chanting and petitions were in Georgian, Slavonic, and Greek. Inside the Altar there were many Altar boys, whom Monk Antonios has begun to train systematically. At the *analogion*, as always, the excellent choir was composed of women with good voices and musical training.

The Liturgy began at 10 a.m. and ended at 12:45 p.m. The majority of the faithful communed of the Immaculate Mysteries, which took a very long time. Such a great participation in Holy Communion was indeed a very pleasant surprise.

During the Communion of the clergy, we spoke about the Gospel reading of the day, focusing on the ever-timely theme of repentance — its basic characteristics and how it is expressed in practice as humility, self-reproach, and love. We read a very edifying text from the lives of the Fathers which helped us to analyze the terrible passion of self-justification and the salvific and redemptive virtue of self-reproach. The homily was translated from Greek into Russian by Father Jiří Ján and then into Georgian by Father Gregory.

On account of our sins, however, we had to undergo a temptation: Towards the end of the Liturgy we began to feel unwell, and soon a fever developed, combined with physical exhaustion and unpleasant symptoms through the remainder of the day. We nevertheless com-



pelled ourselves to take part that afternoon in a *Synaxis* (gathering), followed in the evening by a meeting that lasted until midnight, with the help of the *Theotokos* and of St. Nina.

That afternoon, 5:30-7:00 p.m. the parish Synaxis took place. At our invitation, a small group of faithful gathered at the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa* to discuss various



spiritual matters. Our faithful lack such opportunities to learn more about our Faith. We focused on the necessity of having a correct perception of God, since the quality of our relationship with Him depends on this. Is God, we asked, One Who *punishes severely*—an *inexorable Judge*, Who demands *retribution* in order to forgive us? Or is

He a sympathetic and compassionate Father, Who magnanimously forgives us when we repent and return to His embrace? We should ask ourselves: is our relationship with our Lord that of a slave to his Master, of a hired servant to his employer, or of a son to his Father? It is very dangerous to have a lowly image of God; we should not bring God down to a low level.

Later, from nine until midnight, we had a meeting with a small group of seven of our faithful (three men and four women), who set forth to us their problems and doubts regarding various matters pertaining to our Holy Diocese in Georgia. The atmosphere was



irenic and cordial. We offered explanations and guidance, insisting that we must preserve a spirit of love, unity, respect, and moderation at all times, acting with circumspection and wisdom. Let us continue praying, we urged them, until we return after Pascha, God willing, whereupon we will take further steps to preserve the unity of the clergy and faithful.



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The Convent of St. Nina,
in Bodbe.

On Monday, September 29 (commemoration of St. Kyriakos the Ancho-rite), a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy had been scheduled at the parish Church of the Ascension of our Lord, in the region of Gldani, where Father Gregory is Rector, followed by a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Nina in Bodbe, east of Tbilisi.

This all took place, by the Grace of God, but without our personal participation, since our sudden illness forced us to remain sequestered in our room so as to avoid aggravating our condition in view of the fatiguing return journey to Greece on Tuesday, which would be followed by the Patronal Feast of our monastery (Thursday, October 2).

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On Tuesday, September 30 (commemoration of St. Gregory the Enlightener of Armenia), at 11:15 a.m. (local time), we flew to Constantinople. The weather was spring-like, as were the blessed people who accompanied us to the Tbilisi airport. Together with a number of laypeople were our clergy, Fathers Vakhtang, Gabriel, and Gregory. Beforehand, we visited the Church of the *Panagia Portaitissa* in order to thank her for the blessed hospitality we were shown in her country and to pray for a safe journey back to Greece. We also visited Father Basili one last time in the hospital.

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This was indeed a significant pastoral visit, notwithstanding the fatigue and bodily human weakness involved. The essence of a visit of this nature—which aims, *inter alia*, with a spirit of self-sacrifice, to strengthen our bonds of love by assisting our clergy and laity to emerge from their isolation and introversion and to cultivate mutual trust and reciprocity—lies in the miracle: "My strength is made perfect in weakness."

Glory to God for all things!

Our four hour stopover in Constantinople, the "City of our Dreams," once again enriched our hearts and brought back

"memories of Romeosyne." When we approach history, our past, with self-reproach and repentance, then our inner vision functions; then our priorities change....

We give thanks yet again to Christ, "the Land of the Living," and to the *Theotokos*, "the Container of the Uncontainable One,"

October 1, 2015 (Old Style)

† *The Holy Protection of the Theotokos*

Holy Apostle Ananias

† *Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle*