



■ Manifold blessings of the Theotokos and Saint Nina

**Pastoral Visit
and Pilgrimage
to the Holy Land of Georgia**
August 11-18, 2017 (Old Style)

Under the Protection of the *Panagia Portaitissa* and of St. Nina, the Enlightener of Iberia, His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle, in his capacity as *Locum Tenens* of the newly-established Holy Diocese of Gldani, made his customary pastoral visit and pilgrimage to the sanctified country of Georgia on the occasion of the Great Feast of the Dormition of the *Theotokos*.

Our Archpastor was accompanied this time by the Reverend Father Soterios Gioules, Subdeacon Christos Katsoudas, two nuns from the Convent of the Holy Angels, and eight laypeople.

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On Thursday, August 11 (Old Style), around 4.30 a.m., the Priests of the Diocese welcomed their Shepherd at the airport of Tbilisi, accompanied by many faithful bearing Icons and banners, one of them with the inscription "Καλῶς ὠρίσατε" ["Welcome"] in Greek. Chanting hymns in Georgian and Greek, they accompanied the Greek pilgrims in procession all the way to the exit of the airport.



Everyone then went to Gldani, a suburb of Tbilisi, to our Cathedral dedicated to the *Panagia Portaitissa*, where His Eminence conveyed to the faithful the best wishes of His Beatitude, Archbishop Kallinikos and of the Hierarchs of our Holy Synod.



That afternoon, accompanied by Father Vakhtang, the group of pilgrims visited Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Georgia, in order to receive the blessing of St. Nina and of the first Christian Monarchs of Iberia, Sts. Mirian and Nana, at the places where the Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles embarked on her missionary activities: the Holy Cross Church of Jvari, the Church of the Twelve Apostles and of the Life-Giving Cross, and the Samtavro Monastery, with the bush and Chapel on the site of St. Nina's first cell, and also the tombs of the Holy Monarchs inside the main Church.



Finally, just as the sun was beginning to set, the pilgrims arrived at the famed Shio-Mgvime monastery complex (6th century), located in a narrow limestone canyon, on the steep sides of which one can discern the natural caves once inhabited by the innumerable fellow ascetics of St. Shio, one of the original twelve disciples of St. John of Zedazeni. In the cave where the Saint lived as a recluse the last fifteen years of his life, they venerated his Grace-filled tomb.

When they left the monastery, the imposing silence of the night had already enveloped the surroundings in its prayerful sanctity.



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Friday, August 12 (Old Style) was dedicated to a pilgrimage to Bodbe, where St. Nina spent the last part of her life. Father Vakhtang and several of our Georgian brothers and sisters joined the pilgrims, with whom they shared the gifts of the Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles, both in the chapel built over her holy tomb, and again after descending through the woods in prayer, to the spring of Holy Water.



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On Saturday, August 13 (Old Style), the Apodosi of the Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord, Metropolitan Cyprian and his fellow pilgrims went to the Zedazeni mountain in order to celebrate the Divine Liturgy at the Community of the Precious Cross.

The ascent was rather precarious, since the engine of the pilgrims' small bus overheated as it climbed the steep and rough dirt road....

His Eminence presided at the Divine Liturgy, assisted by Fathers Basili, Soterios, and Hieromonk Father Grigol. The members of the Brotherhood confessed and communed together with the Greeks.

In his sermon on the Gospel reading of the day (the healing of the two blind men in Jericho), Metropolitan Cyprian spoke about our spiritual blindness and the obstacles that we encounter in





prayer—that cry of our heart to God that He touch and heal our noetic eyes. He stressed that the primary impediments are not external, not other people, but rather we ourselves and our passions. Thus, he advised us to keep the following precept in our struggle: Whatever Gods sends us for our salvation—people, studies, counsels—we should accept with "fear and trembling" and take pains to put into practice what we learn from them with a healthy introspection and attention to the inward movements of our heart, that our heart might attain purity and be vouchsafed to see God.

After the Divine Liturgy, the members of the community served an *agape* meal. Responding to their spiritual thirst, His Eminence spoke about the sanctity of the monastic—and, in general, Christian—*trapeza*, and also about the passion of self-justification, which has a ruinous effect not only on the person possessed by it, but also on the life of a community as a whole.

After this twofold Synaxis, the pilgrims visited the nearby Monastery of St. John of Zedazeni, located slightly higher up the same mountain, where they venerated his blessed tomb.

This is where St. John and his twelve disciples, the Holy Assyrian Fathers, lived in the sixth century, having been sent to Georgia by the Mother of God and St. Nina in order to revive the missionary work of the first Enlightener of Iberia.

These Fathers had the "mind of Christ": they began their work in stillness, prayer and tears, fasting, and a total lack of possessions. The centers of their mission were their hermitages and caves.



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On Sunday, August 14 (Old Style), the Forefeast of the Dormition of the *Theotokos*, a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy was celebrated at the parish Church of the Resurrection in Tbilisi. Our Most Reverend Archpastor was the principal celebrant, assisted by Hieromonk Father Grigol and Father Soterios. Many of the faithful were in attendance, the majority of whom communed of the Immaculate Mysteries.

In his brief sermon on the Gospel reading about the wealthy young man, His Eminence spoke about the direst form of "wealth," to which most of us are bound: we are very "full of ourselves," as some people confess with self-awareness. This fullness of our ego (self-love, self-justification, conceit, etc.) does not leave room for the Grace of God to enter our heart and grant it freedom. Let us, then, each struggle, in prayer, repentance, self-reproach, and deeds of love, to "empty" ourselves, that we might be filled with love for God and our neighbor.



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On Monday, August 15 (Old Style), the celebration of the Great Feast of the Dormition of the *Theotokos* took place, a Feast which is also one of Georgia's national holidays.

His Eminence liturgized, assisted by the Reverend Fathers Basili and Vakhtang (Rectors of the Church), Father Soterios, and Father Grigol, and many Subdeacons.



The women's choir once again invited the nuns from Greece to the chanters' stand to add some Byzantine hymnody to the Georgian liturgical tradition.

Throngs of faithful of all ages came

forward to partake of the Immaculate Mysteries.

At the end of the Divine Liturgy, His Eminence spoke about the All-venerable Person of the Mother of God, the Bridge and Prototype of all those who wish to be saved. By the height and



depth of her humility, she was vouchsafed to become a dwelling-place of God. For us sinners, the path to the acquisition of humble-mindedness is obedience to the commandments of the Gospel, struggling against self-justification, and self-reproach. In the soul that strives in such a way, calling upon the aid of our Most Holy Mother, God will find a place of rest and will make His dwelling, filling it with the charisms of the Holy Spirit.

The customary procession around the Church followed, with stops for petitions, readings from the Gospel, and sprinkling with Holy Water, according to local tradition.

At the *agape* meal, which was abundant in every respect, the Fathers and laypeople made various toasts, following Georgian custom.

Our brethren yet again expressed their gratitude to His Beatitude, Archbishop Kallinikos, to the Most Reverend *Locum Tenens*, and to Metropolitan Cyprian of blessed memory (†2013) for their pastoral care for the Genuine Orthodox Christians of Georgia. They also expressed their best wishes and heartfelt thanksgiving to the Georgian clergy.

That afternoon, the faithful from Greece went to the historic center of Tbilisi, where they visited the Sion Cathedral (which houses the Cross of St. Nina and portions of the Relics of the Holy



Apostle Thomas), the Metechi Bridge of the Holy Martyrs, the Church and Tomb of St. Vasilissa Sou-sanik, and the immense Patriarchal Church of the Holy Trinity.

All of the Churches were filled with life and the light of the innumerable candles piously lit by the faithful.

During this time, His Eminence had a pastoral meeting with Father Grigol and a believer from Russia.



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Tuesday, August 16 (Old Style), was dedicated to a pilgrimage to the Monastery of St. David Gareja, where Father Grigol and a group of faithful met up with the Greek pilgrims in order to venerate the Grace-filled Tomb of the Saint.

It was an extraordinary experience, similar to those one encounters in the Holy Land. The monastery is located in the desert of south-eastern Georgia, near the border with Armenia. The hour-long journey takes one across desert landscapes bereft of trees, and with very sparse and dry vegetation.

This is where St. David, one of the twelve disciples of St. John of Zedazeni, and St. Lucian settled, by Divine command, in the sixth century, with complete self-denial and immeasurable hardships, nourishing themselves with greens in the winter and the milk of deer, sent by Divine Providence, in the summer.

From there, by the rays of their holy life and the miracles of Divine Grace, they fulfilled their mission of evangelizing the Iberian people.

The hermitage became a monastery, which drew throngs of





holy ascetics. Believers of all classes came to it; even kings would remain there from time to time to live in silence. The confessional and ascetic spirit permeated the ethos of the Iberian-Georgians, who offered multitudes of martyrs and

monastic Saints to the Church of Christ over the centuries.

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On Wednesday, August 17 (Old Style), the final day of the pastoral visit, Metropolitan Cyprian and his travelling companions went with Father Grigol to Martqopi, to the Monastery of St. Anthony the Stylite, another disciple of St. John of Zedazeni.

Even though the landscape was very different from that of the Monastery of St. David, since the mountainous region is covered with dense forests, the history of the two monasteries is similar: here also, St. Anthony began by founding his missionary work on complete isolation, silence, great deprivation, and Divine yearning.



And here again, at this truly astonishing monastery, the Orthodox Faith shone forth and enlightened the people of Georgia in its most genuine, ascetic, and uncompromising form, culminating in the decision of St. Anthony, moved by Divine love, to spend the last years of his life as a stylite, in accordance with the tradition of Syrian stylites.



Back in Gldani, where the Greek pilgrims returned so as to take farewell of the Church of the *Panagia Portai-*

tissa, they tasted one last time of the love and legendary hospitality of our Georgian brothers and sisters.

After midnight, the group left for the airport of Tbilisi, accompanied by the Georgian clergy and some of the faithful. Others arrived at the airport, in order to see off their Shepherd and his companions with deep respect, and to express their profound gratitude.



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The pilgrims returned to Greece with feelings of glorification and thanksgiving to the Theotokos, St. Nina, and all of the Saints of Georgia, for this especially blessed visit.

Throughout the course of this pilgrimage, bonds of love in Christ were cultivated ever more profoundly with our Georgian Brothers and Sisters, who serve as models for us of Orthodox Confession and piety.

During the blessed days of our sojourn in the beautiful country of Georgia, we were given the opportunity to come into close contact with our clergy, to discuss prevailing pastoral problems, to explore in greater depth our common Confession of Faith, and to work in a way that was constructive and consoling amidst the Small Flock of this Holy Diocese of our Church, to the glory of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!



