



“For the Edification of the Church”

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Pilgrimage to Georgia

The following account was originally written for the publication of the Holy Diocese of Stockholm, “Ortodoxt kyrkoliv,” by a Serbian parishioner of the Church of Sts. Constantine and Helen, in Vårberg, Sweden.

If you would like to experience a true Orthodox country, you should definitely visit Georgia!

My son Savo and I, Marinela Tusic, decided to travel to this gem nestled between the Black Sea and the majestic Caucasus Mountains to celebrate my 50th birthday.

We planned our trip to coincide with the visit of Metropolitan Kyprianos. Every year in August, the Metropolitan and a group of faithful from Greece go to Georgia to celebrate the Dormition of the Mother of God with our Georgian faithful. The Dormition of the Mother of God is celebrated with great fervor in Georgia, where the Mother of God is venerated with services and festivities throughout the country. This year we had the honor of celebrating with them.

There is so much to tell about this wonderful country and our memories there, but I must especially emphasize the piety and humility of the Georgian people.



Seeing so many beautiful Churches and people proudly showing that they are Orthodox filled us with joy. The Churches were always full of devout believers and you could see families with children playing in front of the Churches. We understood that it is so natural for them to go to Church and learn about the Christian faith from a young age.

We were welcomed with love and joy at the parish of the *Panagia Portaitissa*, a beautiful Church belonging to our Synod on the outskirts of the capital city of Tbilisi, where we celebrated the feast of the Dormition with our brothers and sisters.



Metropolitan Kyprianos presided at the services. We had the honor of meeting Father Basili Mkalavishvili and all of the clergy, and we made new Georgian friends. We also met the nuns who belong to our Synod. It was a beautiful, sunny day, and the large Church could not accommodate all the faithful. Walking around the church in procession with the faithful was a wonderful feeling. It was a great blessing that we both received Holy Communion in Georgia on the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God, after they understood that we belonged to the same Synod.

The day after the celebration, we went with the group of faithful from Greece to the Monastery of St. David Gareji, which is on the border with Azerbaijan. It is a very old and authentic monastery where the relics of St. David Gareji are preserved.

Savo and I went to the mighty Caucasus Mountains and on the way we visited Ananuri, a historic fortress magnificently situated on the Aragvi River. Inside the fortress are two beautiful Churches



Ananuri

dedicated to the Mother of God and it is the most photographed place in Georgia. We also visited the famous ski resort of Gudauri, where tourists from all over the world stood with their cameras and photographed the amazing views. Since this was a private tour, where only Savo and I went with a private driver, it was interesting to note how the driver followed us into the Churches, lighting candles and praying with us.

The two of us also took a day trip to see the tomb of St. Nina and other sights in the Kakheti region, which is famous

for its wine production. Georgia was the first country in the world to start producing wine, and of course is now renowned for its fine vintage wines. On the way to the Bodbe Monastery, where the tomb and relics of St. Nina are located, we saw kilometers of fertile valleys with vineyards.

In Bodbe Monastery we venerated the tomb of St. Nina, a great apostolic Saint known as the Enlightener of Georgia. She is the Patron Saint of Georgia. In the 3rd century she healed the queen of the country with the help of a Cross made of vine branches, given to her by the Mother of God herself. After a series of events, the king decided that his entire nation should be baptized. St. Nina is greatly revered in Georgia, along with St. George. According to some sources, St. Nina was a relative of St. George. An interesting tradition in Georgia to this day is that one of the girls in the family should be called Nino and one of the boys Georgij.

The next day, our Georgian friend Ilarion (who speaks fluent Serbian in addition to Georgian and Greek) took us to Mtskheta, the historical capital of the country, also called the "second Jerusalem" (Ilarion). There we visited a number of famous sites and Churches, and from the hill where the Jvari Church is located, we saw the confluence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers. It was here that the collective baptism of the Georgian people took place in the 3rd century. It is also worth mentioning that long before St. Nina spread Christianity in Georgia, the Apostles Andrew was active in the country and the first Christians in the area date back to the apostolic period. Relics of the Apostle are venerated in Georgia.

In the evening of the same day we were invited to the All-Night Vigil at the Convent of the Holy Prophetess Hannah (located on the outskirts of Tbilisi), during which one of the nuns was tonsured to the Great Schema.



It was the first time we witnessed such a blessed event and the experience was indescribable. Metropolitan Kyprianos presided at the service. When we went outside at the end of the service, we felt a great sense of peace, the stars were shining in the sky, and we were filled with spiritual joy. It was after 3 a.m. and we just wanted to go to the hotel and rest, but the Metropolitan and the nuns insisted that we stay and eat with them. It was very festive in the dining room and everyone stayed for the agape meal. Surprisingly, everyone knew who we were and it felt like we had known each other all our lives. They knew that we were originally from Serbia, their Orthodox brother country, and we told them about Sweden and our Swedish parish. They were happy to hear that there are Orthodox in a country in the far north who also belong to the same Synod as they do. We are truly one in Christ.

We were well cared for, experienced true love in Christ from our brothers and sisters, and made friends for life. Our brother Ilarion and Sister Kristina deserve special mention. Our brothers and sisters in Georgia are praying for us and we are all welcome to be their guests and experience true love, Christian piety and humility.

Marinela Tusic

