

American Exarchate News

Visit to the Convent of the Holy Protection in Bluffton, Alberta, Canada

For three days, from August 18 through August 20, 2013 (Old Style), His Grace, Bishop Auxentios made a pastoral visit to the Convent of the Holy Protection of the Mother of God, located in Bluffton, in far northern Alberta, Canada, accompanied by Archbishop Chrysostomos. They made the long journey by land.

The eight nuns and a new novice, ranging in age from a sister in her late teens to the 92-year-old Schema-nun Varsanofia, are ably guided in their truly ascetic spiritual life by their Abbess, the Very Reverend Schema-nun Ambrosia. The convent is served by the Very Reverend Protosindjel Dionisije (Dimitrijević), who lives in the Priest's residence on the convent grounds (some eighty acres of isolated forest land, covered with pines and birches) and serves Liturgy three times a week and on weekends and Feasts.

Mother Ambrosia is a gifted monastic guide who, having benefited from the counsels of such spiritual luminaries of the Russian Ortho-



The historical Church and belltower at the Convent of the Holy Protection of the Mother of God, Bluffton, Alberta, Canada.

dox Church Abroad as Bishop Nectary of Seattle and Bishop Savva of Edmonton (who is buried at the Bluffton Convent), and rising above appalling calumny of the kind that so besmirches the Church today, has worked miracles in establishing a vibrant community living in the austere climes of the foothills of the Canadian Rockies. She and her biological mother, the late Mother Theodora, who received their monastic training in Australia, moved to the convent in 1993, at the request of Metropolitan Vitaly, and began its complete restoration, after it was abandoned in 1990.

The exact dates of the founding of the Bluffton community are confused by conflicting reports, since its founder, Archbishop Ioasaph (later Archbishop of Argentina and Paraguay) was forced to leave Canada for the U.S. for a short period because of problems with his initial application for residency. Nonetheless, it is generally acknowledged to be the first Orthodox monastic community established by the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in North America. The monastery Church, completed around 1930 or 1932, was built with logs from the monastery property, which was acquired between 1928 and 1930. Over the years, it was first a male monastic community, then a monastery for women from 1950 until 1990, and then, after 1993, revived as a convent.

On Sunday, August 19 (Old Style), the Feast of the Martyr Andrew and those with him, Bishop Auxentios and Father Dionisije, with Archbishop Chrysostomos in prayerful attendance, celebrated the Divine Liturgy, sung in Slavonic (the convent follows the Slavic *typikon*) and English by the convent choir in beautiful and contrite style. A small group of visitors was present, since the convent receives regular pilgrims throughout the short summer months, when the roads are acces-



The Convent residence, refectory, and (at the far right end), winter Chapel. This large, two-story complex and separate housing for visitors were constructed by Mother Ambrosia and her nuns after 1993.

sible. All present (*see below*) participated in the *Agape* meal following the Divine Liturgy.



During their visit, the two Hierarchs took confessions and spoke at length with the nuns about spiritual life in general; the importance of obedience to their spiritual Mother; the urgency of maintaining Holy Tradition in its fullness in the immature and innovative Orthodoxy that prevails in America; the high calling of monastic life; the danger of placing ethnic concerns and fantasies before the life in Christ; and the necessity of avoiding the gossip and unChristian atmosphere of contemporary Orthodoxy, and especially in view of the pernicious materials, unrefereed and without any sort of spiritual peer review, that abound on the Internet.



At left, one corner of the historical cemetery at the convent; at right, the gravestone of Bishop Savva of Edmonton of blessed memory.

The Hierarchs departed from the convent inspired by the life of its nuns and by the sacrifices and challenges that they face, not the least of which is an ongoing attempt to seize their property by an individual acting on behalf of an ecclesiastical jurisdiction not yet clearly identified. One can only hope that this sadly hostile distraction from their exemplary spiritual struggles, as well as the significant drain on their limited financial resources, will ultimately strengthen and not discourage this elect community.

On their return from Canada to California, Bishop Auxentios and Archbishop Chrysostomos spent time visiting with Father Joseph and Presbytera Barbara Miller on Bainbridge Island, WA. Father Joseph, a retired psychologist who, at 92 years of age, no longer serves as a Priest, is, despite suffering some of the infirmities of age, like his wife a mentally active, perspicacious observer of Church life. Both constantly provide good counsel and moral support to our Exarchate clergy and faithful. They have also known Mother Ambrosia for many years, when she, educated in music, was a choir director, as a layperson, at one of the Russian parishes in nearby Seattle.

