

## **Bishop Michael Leads Pilgrimage to Holy Sites of Russia**



His Grace with pilgrims outside St. Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod

From June 24 to July 6, His Grace, Bishop Michael of New York and the Diocese of New York and New Jersey made a pilgrimage to holy sites in St. Petersburg, Valaam, Novgorod, Pskov, and Moscow, in conjunction with a tour organized by Archpriest Ilya Gotlinsky of OrthodoxTours.

Over the course of the thirteen-day pilgrimage, His Grace – along with Fr. Ilya and 38 pilgrims from America, Germany, England, and Australia – witnessed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Church of Russia, which has experienced a miraculous resurrection following the fall of the Soviet regime and its official state atheism.

Though the journey was of a personal and unofficial nature, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, His Grace had the opportunity to engage in archpastoral ministry throughout the trip: meeting with hierarchs of the Russian Church, concelebrating the divine services, offering prayers before holy icons and tombs, and offering the simple gift of his consolation and blessings to the faithful he encountered in the churches and the streets. Throughout the stay in Russia, His Grace and the faithful of the Orthodox Church in America experienced the gracious hospitality of their Mother Church, for which they were extremely grateful.

The pilgrimage commenced in the city of St. Petersburg, with a prayer service and anointing with oil at the tomb of St. Xenia of Petersburg in Smolenskoye Cemetery, and prayers before the tomb of St. John of Kronstadt at the Monastery of St. John of Rila. The pilgrims benefitted from an educational journey through the city's historic sites, including the Fortress of Saints Peter and Paul, the

Hermitage Museum, and the major cathedrals of St. Isaac, Our Lady of Kazan, Christ the Savior “On Spilled Blood”, the amazing Church of the Resurrection at the Novodevichy Convent, and other significant temples.



His Grace surveys restoration work underway at Ss. Peter & Paul Cathedral, St. Petersburg.

The group then journeyed to the holy island of Valaam, where the faithful venerated the relics of Saints Sergius and Herman of Valaam, visited several monastic sketes, surveyed the significant restoration work being undertaken on the Holy Transfiguration Cathedral, and enjoyed the abundant hospitality of His Grace Bishop Pankraty of Troitsk, Igumen Mefodii, and Hieromonk Joseph, who was one of Bishop Michael’s former students at St. Tikhon’s Seminary.



His Grace meets with Bishop Pankraty and his former student Hieromonk Joseph.



His Grace venerates the relics of Ss. Sergius & Herman of Valaam.

Continuing on to Novgorod, the pilgrims surveyed the historic architecture of the city, including St. Sophia Cathedral, completed around AD 1050 and the oldest church in Russia. On Sunday, the Feast of All Saints, the pilgrims participated in the concelebration of the Divine Liturgy by His Eminence Metropolitan Lev of Novgorod, and His Grace Bishop Michael, at this historic cathedral.



Metropolitan Lev and Bishop Michael concelebrate the Divine Liturgy.



Faithful of Novgorod greet Bp. Michael and ask for his blessing following the Divine Liturgy.

The journey then continued on to Pskov, one of the most historic cities in Russia with dozens of 16<sup>th</sup> century structures intact throughout the city. Following the visit to the historic Holy Trinity Cathedral in Pskov, which interestingly features the tallest iconostasis in all of Russia, His Grace was hosted by His Eminence Metropolitan Evsevii of Pskov.



Bishop Michael and Metropolitan Evsevii meet.

While in Pskov, the pilgrims availed themselves of the opportunity to travel to the nearby Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery. Here, they were graciously hosted by the abbot, Archimandrite Tikhon (Secretariev) and guided through the tombs of the Pskov Caves by Hieromonk Lazarus.



Bishop Michael and Archimandrite Tikhon outside the Dormition Church of the Pskov Caves.



Praying in the Pskov Caves; faithful greet Bp. Michael and Archimandrite Tikhon.

Taking an overnight train from Pskov, the pilgrims arrived in Moscow on the morning of July 3, where they began their stay with a visit to the Stretensky Monastery. They also undertook a tour of the churches of the Moscow Kremlin, including the landmark Pokrov Cathedral (also known as St. Basil's) and the historic Dormition Cathedral, where many of Russia's monarchs were crowned. Among the highlights of Moscow was the visit to the Patriarchal Cathedral of Christ the Savior, where the faithful had the opportunity to witness the awe-inspiring reconstruction of the Cathedral, and venerate the many relics enshrined there. Other notable moments of the pilgrimage in Moscow were a visit to the Tretyakov Gallery, where several of St. Andrei Rublev's icons are preserved.



His Grace teaching about the Hospitality of Abraham Icon by St. Andrei Rublev

On July 4, His Grace celebrated Independence Day by attending festivities hosted by the United States Ambassador to Russia, Michael A. McFaul. The event, which drew hundreds of dignitaries from the embassy, the military corps, and other governmental personnel, was held at Spaso House, the residence of American ambassadors in Moscow since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and the then-Soviet Union in 1933. Bishop Michael did speak briefly with Ambassador McFaul during the reception, prior to the formal program which included the Presentation of Colors and renditions of the Russian National Anthem and the Star Spangled Banner by two renowned bands and the famous Minin Choir from Moscow.

Among the final visitations in Moscow was the Donskoi Monastery, where His Grace was welcomed with a reception at the monastery trapeza by the Igumen Paramon, who governs the monastery on behalf of its honorary abbot, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill. At the monastery, His Grace surveyed the extensive restoration work to the monastery's main cathedral, and visited the 'old cathedral' of Our Lady of the Don, where the Russian Church consecrates its Holy Chrism. Here, the pilgrims prayed before, and venerated, the relics of Saint Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow. His Grace also intoned Memory Eternal at the grave of noted author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

While at the Donskoi Monastery, His Grace was greeted by the Rev. Igor Yakimchuk, Secretary of Inter-Church Relations of the Department of External Church Relations (DECR).



His Grace receives an icon of St. Tikhon before his relics; a greeting from Fr. Igor of the DECR.

Outside of Moscow, the pilgrims had a profound experience visiting the killing fields of Butovo, one of perhaps a hundred such execution sites around Moscow where thousands of dissidents – including many Orthodox Christians – were murdered during the height of the Soviet purges. Among the mass graves of some 20,000 victims, including over 300 canonized saints, His Grace led the faithful in the singing of a Panikhida for the victims, and the Paschal Troparion, which is a year-round custom at Butovo.



His Grace leads a Panikhida at Butovo; praying before the site of Fr. Alexander Men's murder.

The group also visited the village of Semhoz and prayed at the site of the assassination of Fr. Alexander Men, and continued on to Sergiev Posad where they visited the Holy Trinity – St. Sergius Lavra. The monastery is undergoing a massive restoration project, but despite the scaffolding protecting many of the architectural wonders, the pilgrims were greatly edified by venerating the relics of St. Innocent of Alaska and St. Sergius of Radonezh.



Archimandrite Alexander greeting Bishop Michael at the doors to St. Catherine's Church.

The pilgrimage came to its close with the visit to the OCA Representation Church of St. Catherine, where His Grace was greeted by Archimandrite Alexander (Pihach). His Grace, Fr. Alexander, and all of the pilgrims joined in celebrating a Molieben of Thanksgiving on the occasion of their safe completion of their journey. The group enjoyed a reception on the grounds of St. Catherine's, and on the following morning departed for their respective homes, giving glory to God for the wondrous things they experienced during their sojourn in Russia.

Fr. Ilya is currently planning a similar trip in the summer of 2014. More information can be found at [orthodoxtours.com](http://orthodoxtours.com)

A comprehensive photo-report and presentation of the journey will be posted as soon as it is available.



Bishop Michael with clergy accompanying him on the pilgrimage, at Christ the Savior Cathedral.