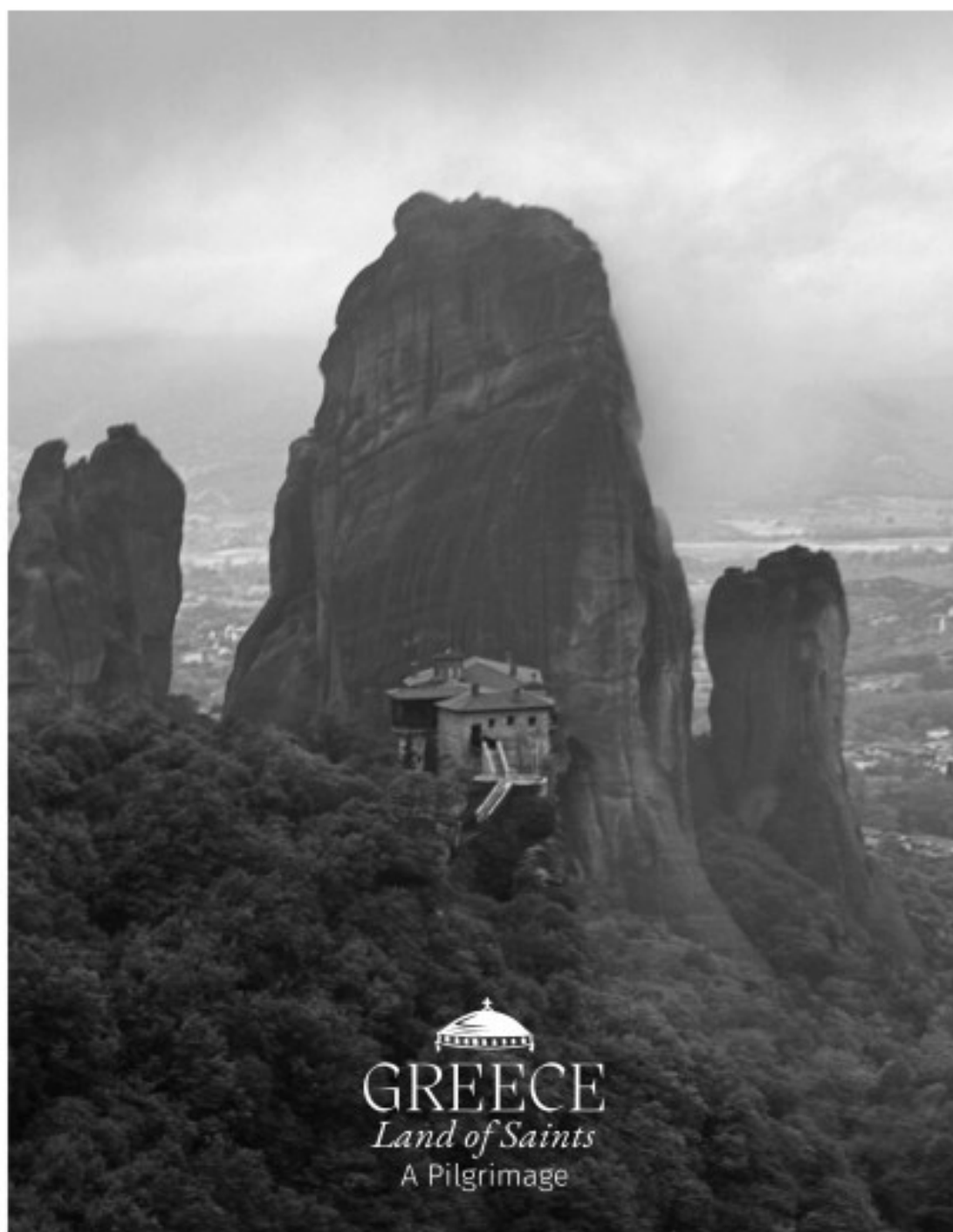


ST. NEKTARIOS NEWSLETTER

SPECIAL FEATURE



December 2025

Dear Reader,

From October 15–29 of 2025, a group of pilgrims from our parish explored the holy land of Greece, which, in considering a theme for our pilgrimage, I dubbed *The Land of Saints*. Having worked previously with Gerry Clonaris to undertake a pilgrimage to *the* Holy Land in 2023, I was eager to work with him again to set the stage for the next journey. Pilgrimages are by nature self-limiting, in that they are demanding on time, health, and finances. Nevertheless, I am so grateful to our Lord for the group that represented our parish, a fair mix from any angle: by age, ethnic background, sex, and length of time in the Church. Our excellent tour guide, Sophia, and bus driver, Dimitris, ensured that we could focus as much as possible on our objective: to gather jewels of experience to bring back home and adorn our beloved parish.

I invited our pilgrims to write a brief reflection on their experience, with the aim of sharing here, should they feel comfortable to do so. In the pages that follow are those reflections and some select photos from the journey. May they be a blessing to you, and may they inspire future pilgrimages—of any scale—and remind us that we are all pilgrims on this earth.

In Christ,

Fr. Andreas
Proistamenos



Pilgrimage organizer, Gerry Clonaris, and Fr. Andreas, with the misty pillars of Meteora in the background.

DEAR FELLOW PILGRIMS

Christ is in our midst!

This is what the dejected disciples Luke and Cleopas realized after walking on the road to Emmaus with the risen—yet hidden—Christ, once he broke bread with and for them. Hopefully, for our group, he will be an ever-present reality. And, yet, there is a sense in which the Christ with whom we shall travel is to some degree “hidden” from us, not as well known or present to us as he will be once we have completed our journey.

Is this not the hope and aim and proof of pilgrimage across generations? A pilgrimage is not a vacation nor a leisurely trip. It is a quest with an aim to spiritual growth, both in the course of the journey and in its completion.

Pilgrimages change people. A pilgrim upon his or her return is not the same as when the first steps were taken. As much as our shared experience will affect us each individually, and differently, these gifts are not just for us. “To whom much is given, much is required,” says the Lord. We shall have a responsibility upon our return to share our new understanding with our loved ones, our parish, and the world at large—much like the renewed Luke and Cleopas.

It is my honor to be in your company, and I express my deep gratitude to you for taking part in this endeavor. My sincere thanks go to Gerry Clonaris for his zeal and resourcefulness in making the pilgrimage materialize, and to Cloud Tours for their diligent services. I thank Fr. Panayiotis Steele for so capably minding the parish in my absence. Finally, I thank His Eminence Metropolitan Sevastianos of Atlanta for blessing and permitting our pilgrimage in the first place; I only wish that he could have joined and led us.

I pray that our time together will be fruitful, and that the good Lord will look favorably upon our pilgrimage, which we undertake to his glory.

In His Service,

Protopresbyter Andreas G. Houpos

WELCOME TO THE LAND OF SAINTS

There is no way I can explain what lies ahead of you—only that it will be an excursion of a lifetime. You will experience many things that most people will never have the opportunity to take part in. These pilgrimages started in 2010 when Metropolitan Alexios asked me to help him organize our first trip to Jerusalem. What an honor it was for me.

When Fr. Andreas became our new Proistamenos, it did not take long for him to call me into his office to inform me he wanted pilgrimages to be part of our Adult Religious Education program. Again, what an honor and a pleasure for me. To see the incredible reactions of all the participants as they walk in the very footsteps of our Lord and so many of our saints is more than anyone can ask for.

And you will be doing exactly that—St Andrew, St. Paul, St. Demetrios, just to name a few. We will see the baptismal site of St. Lydia, the first European Christian; the actual spot where the Holy Apostle Andrew was martyred; the cities mentioned in the New Testament—Corinth, Philippi, and Thessaloniki—and so much more.

I have many wonderful people to thank, but most of all I thank all of you: without you there would be no pilgrimage. Your gracious support for this program has assured the continual growth of our Pilgrimage Ministry. And for this we thank all of you.

I recall on our first pilgrimage the following words from Metropolitan Alexios:

“Do not think too much about the how and why, but focus on absorbing what you are seeing.”

ALL GLORY TO GOD

Gerry Clonaris

Pilgrims

Chad Asvestas	Kim Leatherman
Kristin Asvestas	Jacob Leatherman
Emily Asvestas	John Lowen
Silva Awaimrin	Caroline Mellekas
Gene Borowski	Kay Morgan
Emilio Brambila	Luidmyla Pankiv
Gerry Clonaris	Chris Pappas
Helen Clonaris	Rita Pappas
John Couchell	Leslie Pitt
Stavroula Couchell	Renner St. John
Michael Dixon	Charles Saleh
Svitlana Dixon	Mary Saleh
Sophia Dixon	Theodora Sexstone
Lilian Evans	Sandra Stanar
Despina Gallis	Stephen Soterakis
Jim Keown	Dimitri Triantafyllides
Vasilios Koutsoupas	Susan Triantafyllides
Ioanna Koutsoupas	Georgia Tsurutis

Fr. Andreas Houpos

GREECE

Ελλάς · Hellas



This was the tenth pilgrimage I've had the honor of helping to organize. For some strange reason, it was on this last trip that I realized that everyone was totally immersed and spiritually moved by what they were witnessing. I can honestly say that everyone, including me, experienced something that brought at least a tear to their eyes.

Seeing this, I know that whatever efforts that went into organizing the trip were well worth it. This program literally changed people's lives. I also realized that being in the presence of our incredible saints was so much more impactful than sitting in my classes watching slide presentations. It was overwhelming, seeing how many faithful people there are in this world praying for us daily.

Everyone should join these pilgrimages. There is no other experience that can match the impact they have on our lives. It shouldn't be surprising that I'm looking forward to our next pilgrimage.

My thanks to all who participated, and a special thank-you to Fr. Andreas for his thoughtfulness in making pilgrimages part of our Religious Education program. All glory to God!

— *Gerry Clonaris*



Organizer & Pilgrim Gerry Clonaris, St. Andrew's Church in Patras.



Pilgrim Lilian Evans, Meteora.

Our Christian faith is real, and we are blessed with a great Orthodox heritage! This is what our pilgrimage has shown me!

To be in the presence of the relics of St. Andrew, the first apostle that the Lord called, and the cross on which he was crucified was beyond what I can describe.

Hebrews 11 is known as the "Hall of Faith" of the Old Testament saints, but as a newly illumined in 2025, I did not know the multitude of saints that form and continue to form the "Hall of Faith" of the New Testament. I was introduced to a few during this pilgrimage.

By the saints' lives, their deaths—most of them by martyrdom—and their continued intercessions, they preserved the faith that was passed on to us...passed on to me.

Now, the question is: How am I living my life to pass on this great orthodox heritage to my children, family, friends, coworkers, etc.?

— *Lilian Evans*

My husband, Graham, has difficulty walking, and so arranged with Gerry Clonaris for me to go on the pilgrimage for the both of us.

Our blessed patron, St. Nektarios, intensified this gift through his wondrous care for us, by opening miraculous doors to sacred experiences for us pilgrims. I felt his presence mystically with us, and have returned home with a more profound connection of love and gratitude for him.

Venerating the saints was a totally new experience for me. Through them, we had encounters with the victory of Christ, who conquered death by death. We were moved by the manifestations of their obedience, humility, virtue and, often, martyrdom. These people were sanctified through their pure love for Christ.

Our relationships with these precious saints were enhanced as Father Andreas shared their powerful stories with us prior to reaching the sacred ground of their repose or relics. Their existence has become etched in my soul as I now engage with them through their icons.

Many of us experienced “scales falling from our eyes” (Acts 9:18; Isaiah 35:5) as we beheld the beauty, purity, and virtue of these wondrous ones, whose relics remain with us, while they themselves are mystically present with us, fully engaging in heavenly worship, adoration, and intercession for the world and for our needs.

During the journey we also acknowledged layers of noise, distractions, cares, and concerns of this world being stripped from our spiritual sensitivities during the twelve days of intentional prayer, reflection, repentance, and veneration. We were enveloped by the illumination of icons as windows into the heavenly realm. Through our eyes they witness to our souls.

As a group we have discussed our desire to contribute toward funding the ongoing beautification of our own temple, making possible the addition of more of these “windows” that unveil transformational spiritual truth and reality.

May this pilgrimage continue, may we meditate on its lessons, may the blessed Theotokos protect and preserve the seeds planted, and may the entire congregation experience benefit from its fruit.

— *Leslie Pitt*



Pilgrim Leslie Pitt, with Simonopetra Monastery (Mt. Athos) in the background.



The *Land of Saints* pilgrimage was an absolutely delightful experience for me. Every single day we were immersed in the mysteries and miracles of our faith. Learning more about the saints and their sacrifices to spread the good news that Christ has conquered death filled me with wonder and gratitude.

Traveling with our family of thirty-five happy, faithful, and loving Christians was quite humbling. My fellow travelers and our good shepherd leaders make me want to be a better person. Finally, and most of all, the journey inspired in me a renewed joy for living in appreciation of the truth, beauty, and goodness of God’s creations, and of his Church.

— *Renner St. John*



Pilgrim Renner St. John with a furry friend, in front of the trusty tour bus.

For Orthodox Christians, a pilgrimage is much more than visiting a historical Christian site or holy place. The continuity of faith from the Apostles, who spread the Gospel to the Christians they left behind, to the Martyrs that shed their blood without renouncing their faith, to the monastics and lay people that have preserved the sites and relics of the saints: all serve to collapse time and space, uniting us to these early Christians and Christ's incarnation and resurrection.

This trip was a great reminder that ours is a living faith. The monks and nuns with which we interacted offered a glimpse into the spiritual peace we all seek. I pray this experience encourages me daily to pursue the pilgrimage into my heart to find Christ.

— *Dimitri Triantafyllides*

This pilgrimage was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. I consider each pilgrim on the trip a true friend. Sharing these experiences was amazing, bonding us in such a beautiful way.

The places we visited—and the access we had to monasteries, monks, nuns, and holy relics—were not available to mere tourists. The holy people we encountered radiate the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit; you feel closer to God just being in their presence.

A visual learner, I loved the iconography, especially the many scenes of saints' lives. We saw the beautiful icons of the baptism of St. Lydia, the first European convert, scene by scene, just as it is described in Acts 16. We also saw icons of the tortures many saints endured for love of Christ.

I discovered that Orthodoxy is not the *traditional* religion I had always perceived it to be. Rather, it is the most *modern*, as we have saints from all centuries very present in our lives. Many of us experienced fragrance from their relics. People can still be baptized in the same stream where St. Paul baptized St. Lydia. Finally, the mystery of the Eucharist is celebrated in all our Churches, since ancient times.

I am incredibly thankful for everyone who planned and attended this pilgrimage.

— *Susan Triantafyllides*



Pilgrims Dimitri & Susan Triantafyllides, at Meteora.

There are many ways to describe our experience on this pilgrimage. We could talk about the sites, the relics, the monastics, and even the food.

No matter what thoughts or images come to mind, the only way to explain it is as an answer to prayer. The prayers of our community allowed us to experience heaven on earth. We received love at every site, being carried by the hands of one saint after another. And who could ever forget the experience of monks from Mt. Athos boarding our boat? We were so close to holiness.

Who we were when we arrived in Athens on October 16 is dead and gone; all the "dirt" we didn't even know we had is gone. Now we pray that it stays gone. For all this we are so grateful to Fr. Andreas, Gerry, and Helen, and for our community that prayed for us continually. Glory be to God!

— *John & Stavroula Couchell*



Pilgrims John & Stavroula Couchell, Ormylia.

When the opportunity arose to embark on a pilgrimage in Greece, I eagerly signed up. Years ago, I had visited several locations on the itinerary and was thrilled to revisit them and to discover new ones.

However, what I didn't anticipate were the profound "God moments" that would unfold. God's presence permeated every aspect of our journey, from the spiritual people we encountered to the events that transpired that were not coincidences. I had many personal experiences so powerful and meaningful that I often found myself overwhelmed and unable to contain my emotions.

I am eternally grateful for the privilege of participating in this unforgettable journey of faith.

— *Rita Pappas*



Fr. Andreas blesses pilgrims Chris & Rita Pappas, on the occasion of their anniversary.



Pilgrim Silva Awaimrin on the Aegean Sea.

All I can say is, "Praise to God!" The pilgrimage exceeded all my expectations!

I had such a peaceful feeling while visiting the monasteries and other holy sites.

A favorite memory will be all of us at our last pilgrimage stop, in Veria, where St. Paul preached.

— *Silva Awaimrin*



When one is given the gift of Orthodoxy, it is very easy to take our faith for granted and go through periods of what I call Orthodoxy "cruise control" or "autopilot". We need a major event in our life to wake us up, something like the birth of a child, death of a loved one, a health crisis, etc.

I thank my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are fairly new to the faith, who made the extraordinary effort to sign up for this pilgrimage, who showed such passion, focus and zeal to embrace it and move their love for Orthodoxy to the next level. Their efforts not only allowed them to be enlightened, but also those "cradle" Orthodox such as myself.

Also, I thank them for sharing their beautiful stories about their respective paths to Orthodoxy. Hopefully they and I, through our interactions on this pilgrimage, will be able to appreciate, cherish and live our faith with renewed and everlasting peace and love.

— *Gene Borowski*



Pilgrim Gene Borowski. Varlaam Monastery, Meteora.

No words can express what it was like to venerate a fragment of the True Cross, a piece of the belt of the Theotokos, or the relics of so many profound saints. These are things I had never experienced outside of Orthodoxy, and I've never felt more alive in my faith!

Additionally, the monastics, clergy, and pious laypeople we encountered humbled me with their kindness, faith, and welcoming spirit. Their example is one I hope to live by every day.

Glory to God for these precious gifts!

— *Kim Leatherman*

Every time someone asks me how the pilgrimage was, I can only reply that, “it was like a second baptism”.

It doesn't take long to find someone in our own parish who has experienced astounding miracles. In Greece, a land where both the spatial density and temporal breadth of the Faith are so much more abundant, the mind can only absorb and communicate but so much. There's a point where one must simply accept the experience of inexpressible holiness, a reality expressed in the words of the Cherubic Hymn:

“Let us, who mystically represent the Cherubim and who sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity, now lay aside every worldly care. So that we may receive the King of all”.

— *Jacob Leatherman*



Pilgrims Jacob and Kim Leatherman.



Pilgrim John Lowen pets a local cat in the shadow of Varlaam Monastery, Meteora.

The *Land of Saints* pilgrimage was a true blessing.

Walking in the footsteps of St. Paul and visiting the places where he preached left a profound impression on me. I now approach the Book of Acts, and Paul's epistles to the Corinthians and Philippians, with a deeper appreciation for the life and faith of those ancient communities.

The monasteries we visited were equally awe-inspiring. The iconography was breathtaking; some pieces have endured for centuries, a miracle in itself. Meteora stood out in particular, with its towering monoliths and stunning natural beauty that seemed to echo the spiritual heights within.

Venerating the relics was deeply moving. I was especially touched by the opportunity to venerate the hand of St. John the Baptist, the hand of St. Paraskevi, and a fragment of the True Cross. It was humbling to receive these blessings, especially knowing that monks from Mount Athos traveled by boat to share these sacred treasures with us.

One of the most cherished aspects of the trip was the camaraderie we shared. Though I knew most of the pilgrims beforehand, this journey allowed for deeper, more meaningful conversations than we typically have over coffee hour. A special bond now connects us—one rooted in shared experience, faith, and grace.

— *John Lowen*

Seeing Greece through the lens of a pilgrim deepened my faith in ways expected and unexpected. I expected to be in awe of the holy persons, places, and objects. I did not fully expect to encounter the peace and grace bestowed by them.

The Holy Monastery of Prousos gave me pause. I felt so blessed to venerate the icon of the Panagia, but also to be physically embraced by a monastery that is a testimony to our deep, and ancient faith.

A visit to the babbling brook that was the baptismal site of St. Lydia, the first European convert to Christ, deepened our gratefulness to the sacrifices of the early women saints.

The cruise around Mt. Athos was significant because of its great beauty but, more importantly, the visit by the monks, via dinghy, of Dionysiou Monastery. They were so happy to see us and to share the holy relics for veneration and blessings.

Much can be said for our group of pilgrims—all on different paths, all with different lives, but all on the same journey. Along the way, I found a caballero, a Charalambos, and a “dancing in the aisle” OXI day celebrant. They were grand. I am blessed.

— *Theodora Sexstone*



(L to R) Pilgrims Theodora Sexstone, Despina Gallis, and Presvytera Sandy Stanar, at the Ouranopolis waterfront.

As I unpacked icons, incense, and holy oil from the monasteries and churches we visited, I intensely felt what I had felt while I was on pilgrimage: the peacefulness, the serenity, and the blessing of being in the presence of saints. The pilgrimage was an opportunity to step away from life as I know it for two weeks, and to devote my thoughts and attention to my spiritual journey. Of course, this brought on all kinds of emotions. It gave me a chance to reflect and dive deeper as an Orthodox Christian, and to see that we do not face these challenges alone; there are others just like us, who also struggle on their journey. It was a very humbling experience. It was also a blessing to have our priest with us, to turn to with numerous questions that arose throughout the pilgrimage. I returned with close bonds made with the other

pilgrims and a deeper love for my faith. And being in Greece was just the icing on the cake!

— *Despina Gallis*

I have been Orthodox for 70 years, and this Pilgrimage made God, the Theotokos and the Saints more real to me than I have ever experienced. I will cherish and give thanks for it forever. Our pilgrimage also opened my eyes and my heart to the role of monastics as protectors and defenders of our faith. This challenged me to develop my own “monastic” practice to keep God, the Theotokos and the Saints alive and with me while at the same time being alive and present to each other now and into eternity.

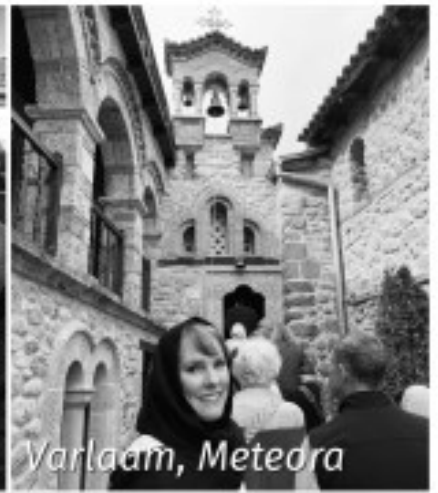
— *Pres. Sandy Stanar*



Athens, Areopagus



Ferry to Aegina



Varlaam, Metedra



Athens



Athens Acropolis



Athens



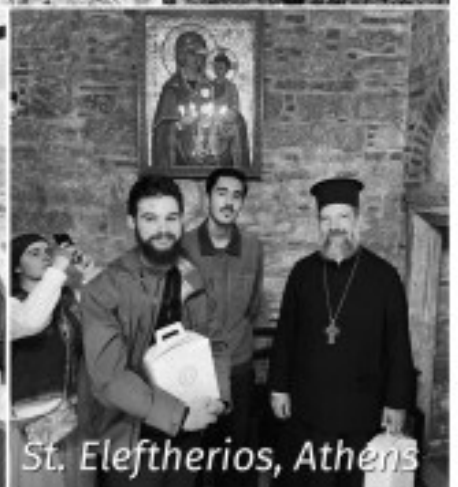
Metedra



St. Demetrios



Acropolis Museum, Athens



St. Eleftherios, Athens



Aegina



Mt Athos



Corinth



Prousos



Ouranopolis



Ormylia



Mt. Athos



Varlaam Monastery, Meteora



Philippoi



Kavala



Souroti



With Met. Philotheos of Thessaloniki



Vergina



St. Lydia Baptistery, Philippoi



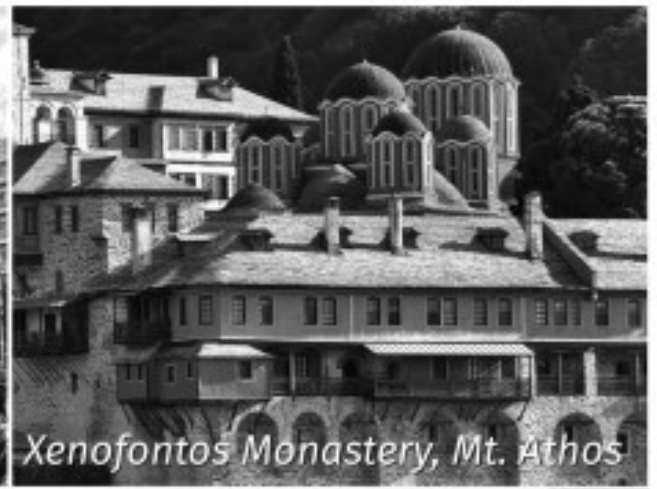
Aegina



Thessaloniki



St. Demetrios, Thessaloniki



Xenofontos Monastery, Mt. Athos



Panagia Prousiotissa Monastery, Prousoi



St. Andrew, Patras



St. Nektarios, Aegina



Dionysiou Monastery, Mt. Athos Peninsula

GLORY TO GOD

