



## Holy Places and Relics of Georgia

### Sermon by Patriarch Ilia II of Georgia

Every nation, as well as each person, has its own treasure. Our great Saint Ilia the Righteous (Chavchavadze) preached that the Georgians protect three sacred treasures: faith, tongue and the native land.

Numerous holy places speak to the might and strength of our nation's faith, which represents Georgia's greatest single treasure.

I would like to remind you of the story of Moses the Prophet, when he delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. Before reaching Palestine, the Jews were compelled to wander through the desert for forty years. On Mount Sinai, Moses saw a blackberry bush engulfed in flames, but which did not burn. Moses, who was exceedingly surprised, heard God's commandment: "Take off the shoes from thy feet, for the place on which thou standest is a holy ground." Moses immediately did so. Truly, this was a place where God's power dwelt and continues to dwell, the everlasting realm of Almighty, which is divine for all Christians. As the holy fathers put it, the unburned bush represents a "pre Savior and Redeemer of humanity.

His Eminence Archbishop Constantine (Melikidze) and I have had the privilege of putting our feet on the blessed land of the Sinai Desert and seeing this bush with our own eyes. As the monks of the Saint Katherine Monastery told us, they had attempted to replant the sprouts of the bush but they could not succeed in growing it anywhere else. The given spot is the only location throughout the whole Sinai Desert where the bush grows. People from different countries of the world come in endless waves to see the holy place and the Biblical burning bush; they all desired to pick at least a small leaf from this sacred plant and

therefore, the monks were obliged to build a huge protecting wall around it.

It is true that God dwells everywhere, yet there are places where the grace of the Holy Spirit and God's might are manifested in a particularly palpable way.

The same spirit is conveyed in the Psalms of the Prophet David, in which we read: "For the Lord has chosen Zion, He has desired it for His habitation" (132, 13).

We had these words inscribed on the iconostasis of the [Sioni Cathedral](#).

Why the Georgians have called this holy cathedral "Sioni and what does "Sioni" mean? This word needs some clarification. "Sioni" is of Hebrew origin and translates as "sunny." There is a mountain in Jerusalem of the same name that is a sacred place particularly distinguished and loved by God. David the Prophet often mentions it in his psalms and King David himself, as well as his son Solomon, are buried on that very mountain. This divine place is the spot on which the Savior held the Last Supper. Right next to the hall where the Last Supper took place, stood the house of Saint John the Apostle, who after the crucifixion brought the Holy Virgin, Mother of God there. Jesus appeared twice before his disciples here; the Garden of Gethsemane is also nearby.

Therefore, it is after this blessed place that the Georgian people have named the holy cathedral where our kings and the Catholicos Manglisi, who by the Georgian Church has been canonized as a saint, also rests in the Sioni Cathedral. History tells us that the last King of Georgia, Giorgi XII, while ill, after touching the holy remains he recovered from his illness. The Holy Cross of Vine [given to St. Nina by the Virgin Mary], the greatest sacred object of the Georgian Church, bringing with it the blessings of the Virgin Mary, is placed here; the skull of the Apostle Saint Thomas is also kept in this church.

I am telling you all this because on entering the Cathedral we must feel the presence of all these relics, just like Moses the Prophet was aware of it when he bared his feet thus expressing adoration for the holy place. We must make our entrance into the Cathedral with great spiritual humility and as one of the psalms commands, on entering this sanctuary we must abandon all the worldly routines outside, while inside the Cathedral we need only to contemplate on how to establish contact with the Almighty.

You have certainly noticed an inscription above the gates of the Cathedral:

"Let me enter your house, worship your holy temple with awe and reverence to you."

Let us remember [Svetitskhoveli](#), the most precious and holy place for our nation and our church. Here lies the robe of our Lord Jesus Christ and the mantle of Elijah the Prophet.

[Lake Paravani](#) in Javakheti is yet another place of worship for our nation. It was at this very spot that God appeared before Saint Nino and delivered to her a book, "containing ten words, like the ones on the stone tablets before" (*The Chronicle of Conversion of Kartli*). The virgin saint was ordered to deliver this book to the King of Kartli in Mtskheta. Saint Nino, who is equal to the Apostles, asked the shepherds the way to Mtskheta and they instructed her to follow the route along the river, which took its source from the Paravani

Lake. This route, they said, would bring her to her destination. Therefore, the road from Paravani to Mtskheta, taken by Saint Nino is considered a holy road too. I am deeply convinced that our ancestors have trodden this route with prayers more than once.

The Georgians, fully imbued with the Orthodox faith, have developed a love for sacred things from ancient times. It is for this reason that even at the cost of their lives our ancestors defended and protected these spiritual treasures, which shed their divine light and God's grace onto the whole country. In different epochs, through God's miraculous will, more than one sacred object has been brought to Georgia, remaining with us as a true sign of a very special honor granted to Georgia, which is a country of the oldest Christian culture and traditions.

Back in the epoch of the Old Testament, in the 6th century BC, the Jews who came to Mtskheta brought with them the holy mantle of Elijah the Prophet which had been delivered by him to Elisha the Prophet, exactly at the time of the Ascension. Right after the Crucifixion, in the 1st century AD, Elioz of Mtskheta brought the sacred robe of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem, which is also buried in Mtskheta. It is on this very spot where the holy robe is now, that one of the first Georgian Christian Cathedrals, with the name of Sioni (or Svetitskhoveli) was erected, which is titled as the Mother Church of all other churches existing in Georgia.

The icon of the Virgin Mary, brought to Georgia by the Apostle Andrew, and the arrival of Saint Nino with the Vine Cross in her hands, was followed by the introduction of numerous other holy objects into our country and thanks to God's grace, this has proved to be an ongoing process for our country even at present.

In Saint Nino's times, in order to baptize the Georgian people, Emperor Constantine sent John the Bishop and other clergy; together with the icon of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Cross of Life, they brought with them the footboard and the nails of our Savior. Later on, Georgia has become rich with other sacred objects too. Among the most significant are the robe of the Holy Mother of God, the finger of Christ's forerunner John the Baptist, the knee bone of Saint George, the holy parts of Saint Barbara the Martyr, the skull of Saint Eugenia, the "Stone of Grace" brought from Jerusalem to Georgia by Saint Father David of Gareji and many other sacred objects including a number of unique crosses and holy icons. The graves of the Saints who met their glorious death in Georgia, the tombs of God's Apostle Simon the Zealot, Saint Maximus the Confessor, holy kings and queens, the radiant sepulchers of Georgian martyrs and Assyrian Fathers established churches and monasteries with their holy treasure in which our nation and the church truly take pride.

Source: <http://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2010/07/holy-places-and-relics-of-georgia.html>