

REMARKS AT THE FESTAL LUNCH IN CELEBRATION OF THE 1.700TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE EDICT OF MILAN.

Nis, 6 October 2013

Your All-Holiness, Patriarch Bartholomew,

Your Holiness, Patriarch Irenej,

My Brother Patriarchs and Primate,

Beloved Concelebrants in the Lord,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Reverend Fathers,

Dear Monastics,

The Precious Faithful of the Orthodox Church of Serbia,
Esteemed State and Civic Leaders,

On the occasion of this great celebration of the 1 700th anniversary of the Edict of Milan, we greet you with joy and with the blessings of the Holy Tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we bring with us the prayers and best wishes of your fellow Christians in the Holy Land, with whom the Orthodox Church of Serbia has had a relationship that is generations old.

We recall the words of Saint Paul in the Letter to the Romans:

“If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom. 6:8-9).

This is the glorious message of the Holy Tomb, the Light that shines forth to all nations. It is in this Light that we rejoice today in our gathering of the Primate of the Holy Orthodox Churches of Christ in this City of Nis, in our communion in Christ in the Patriarchal Liturgy that we have just celebrated, and in this wonderful festal meal.

Our joy and happiness are full when we remember that it is the Emperor Saint Constantine the Great, who was born in this city, who has brought us together. His native city of Nis takes justifiable pride in this great anniversary – and not this city only, but also the whole country of Serbia and the Orthodox Church of this land. And as we celebrate his birthplace, we also recognize that Jerusalem became his spiritual home. There the name of Saint Constantine will be forever attached to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was found, raised up, and honoured by Saint Constantine’s mother, Saint Helena.

Our sense of pride in Christ for Saint Constantine the Great is absolutely justified. For when he received the full assurance of faith from above through the sign of the cross, like the Apostle Saint Paul, he abandoned the ignorance and the disrespect of his forebears, and took to heart the teaching of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He received baptism, and in the year 313 he issued his justly famous Edict of Milan, the anniversary of which we celebrate today.

This edict has left an indelible mark for all time on the history of the Church and of the world. For this edict liberated the Church from the darkness of the catacombs, brought our life into the full light of day, and so helped the Church to be spread throughout every land, building great

churches and monasteries. Among the first are the Church of the Anastasis in Jerusalem, and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Because of this edict the Christian religion, once it had been set free, became gradually the official religion of the Romano-Orthodox Empire.

The first Ecumenical Council was summoned and presided over by Saint Constantine. After his death the Church recognized his achievements, and with his mother, the Empress Saint Helena, the Church came to venerate them both as Godly-crowned sovereigns, Equals-to the-Apostles, and great saints of the Ecumenical Church.

In the person and work of Saint Constantine, we Orthodox Christians not only take pride; we also take him as our example, living as we do today in a society that is composed of a multiplicity of ethnicities, languages, and cultural traditions and customs. From this great cultural richness we complete each other as members of the one, integral, undivided body of the Orthodox Church.

Let us listen to the words of Saint Constantine himself, who speaks to us across the ages:

“By guarding the divine faith, I partake of the light of truth. By being guided by the light of truth, I advance in the full knowledge of divine faith.”

(Eusebius, Life of Constantine 4.9)

This is our vocation and mission today as Orthodox Christians, and our anniversary celebration is an encouragement to us to renew our efforts to be true to this inheritance of faith.

We commend to the prayers of the Most Holy Mother of God and Blessed Virgin Mary, the Godly-crowned Emperor Saint Constantine and his mother, the Empress Saint Helena, equal-to-the Apostles, the opportunities and challenges that lie before our sister Church of Serbia, as you work to overcome

the difficulties that are placed in your way by powers that are opposed to the Gospel. And we pray that all our Orthodox Churches may grow in the bond of peace, so that we may increase and bear true witness to our Triune God in the entire world.

May God bless the Orthodox Church in this beloved land, and all her peoples.

Thank you.

HIS BEATITUDE

THEOPHILOS III

PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM