

THE FEAST OF THE ANNUNCIATION OF THEOTOKOS AT THE PATRIARCHATE

On Wednesday, 25 March/7 April 2021, the Patriarchate celebrated the feast of the Annunciation of our Most Holy Lady Theotokos in the city of Nazareth, at the holy shrine where this event took place.

On this feast, the whole Church and especially the Church of Jerusalem in joy and gratitude towards God, commemorates according to Saint Luke the Evangelist (Ch. 1:26-36), that Archangel Gabriel was sent by God to the Virgin Mary and announced that She was going to conceive by the Holy Spirit and bear in the flesh His Only Begotten Son. With Mariam's reply, "behold the maiden of the Lord, let it be done unto me according to Thy word", the Bodiless was made flesh, He became incarnate, for the sake of the rebirth, renovation and salvation of the humankind from the corruption of death.

This feast was officiated by H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos, with co-celebrants their Eminences: Metropolitan Kyriakos of Nazareth, Archbishop Aristarchos of Constantina, Metropolitan Joachim of Helenoupolis, Hagiotaphite Hieromonks with first in rank Elder Kamarasis Archimandrite Nectarios, Arab-speaking Priests, Archdeacon Mark and Hierodeacon Simeon. The chanting was delivered by the choirs of Nazareth and Acre and the service was attended by as many faithful as possible within the covid-19 restrictions, and the Consul General of Greece in Jerusalem Mr Evangelos Vlioras.

Before the Holy Communion His Beatitude delivered the following Sermon:

"O sing unto the Lord a new song: sing unto the Lord, all the earth. Sing unto the Lord, bless his name; shew forth his

salvation from day to day" (Psalm 95:1-2), Prophet-King David chants.

Beloved Brethren in Christ,

Noble Christians

"Today there is the true joy and gleefulness of the whole world," Saint John Damascene says, praising the Annunciation to the Theotokos by Archangel Gabriel, in the holy place where the grace of the Holy Spirit has gathered us all to celebrate in Eucharist the annunciation of the "salvation of God", the joyful message of the incarnation of God the Word by the pure flesh of the Ever-Virgin Mary in the city of Nazareth.

"Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women" (Luke 1:28) the Archangel Gabriel exclaimed. The interpreters of Evangelist Luke's testimony on this say: "because God told Eve she was going to bear children in sorrows, Eva's sorrow is dispelled through this joy". "Through 'Hail', Christ came to dispel the sorrow". "He called her 'full of grace', as she was granted the grace beyond logic". And "because the snake brought Eve the sorrow, rejoice, because the Lord is with Thee". "One should know that at the time of the annunciation the Virgin conceived immediately paradoxically".

This great and paradoxical mystery of the Virgin Mary's conception is preached by Saint John the Theologian in his Gospel, saying: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1), and "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Interpreting these words, Saint Cyril of Alexandria says: "The Evangelist appropriately said "and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). So, when you realise that this means two things, the dweller and the one in whom He dwells, then you will not think

that He [the Word] was turned into flesh, but rather that He dwelt in the flesh, using His own body as a temple, which He received from the Holy Virgin. "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9), as Saint Paul says.

This theological truth is also testified by Saint John Damascene, referring to the Prophet Isaiah's words: "Rejoice O Thou in whom dwelt in the flesh the One who told Isaiah: "I am God at first, and after these" (Isaiah 44:6 in Septuagint). Again, Saint John Damascene says: "We preach the Holy Virgin as Theotokos especially and truly...and we call her by that name. This name encompasses the whole mystery of the providence. For if the one who bears is Theotokos (Mother of God), perfect God is the One born from her and perfect man".

The perfect God and perfect man Who was born from the Virgin is no other than the Son of God, as foretold by the Prophet Isaiah, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). "Sing unto the Lord, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day" (Psalm 95:2) the psalmist proclaims. And "the salvation of God the Father" is "the joy that has been announced to us with the Nativity of Jesus Christ" by the Virgin Mary.

The annunciation of this joy which is ceaseless until the end of time, and of the world, is the Church's confession of the unspeakable mystery of the hypostatic union of the divine with the human nature through the Holy Spirit, in Virgin Mary; "In this, without alteration union, we confess the Holy Virgin to be the Mother of God [Theotokos], for the fact that God the Word was made incarnate and became man through her conception, to unite Himself with the temple He received from her [the human body]", the established Holy Church Fathers teach.

This incomprehensible mystery of God the Word's incarnation by the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary refers to the whole humankind, as Saint Luke the Evangelist says, calling upon Prophet Isaiah: "And all flesh shall see the salvation of God"

(Luke 3:6, Isaiah 40:5).

Interpreting this verse, Saint Cyril of Alexandria says: "In these, the word 'flesh' refers to a perfect man, and this should be understood by all people. In this manner, every flesh shall see the salvation of God. Not only Israel but every flesh. For the Saviour and Lord of all, neither has His kindness within limits nor did He save only one nation; rather, He included everything under the sun". This very fact is chanted by David, Saint Cyril continues, by saying: "All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name" (Psalm 86:9).

Through the Annunciation of Theotokos Mary "The Lord hath made known his salvation: His righteousness hath he openly shewed in the sight of the heathen" (Psalm 98:2). This knowledge of the salvation of the Lord and the revealing of His righteousness, through the Most Blessed Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, is celebrated by the Church of Christ and especially the Church of the Martyrdom of the Cross and Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Christ. Therefore, along with Saint John Damascene, it says: "Rejoice, Thou who art full of grace, for none other than you has received by God such a name, nor has any other received such a glory".

"And prolong your mercy, Most Pure Lady, to those who know you, and look favourably upon your servants and the works of your hands, and guide everybody to the path of peace, for the eyes of all people are turned in hope to you, and we have received your conciliation and intercession to your Son and God, to who belongs all glory and the might, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit of the same nature, now and forever and unto the ages of ages. Amen."

The Liturgy was followed by a procession and concluded with a meal by Metropolitan Kyriakos. There, His Beatitude addressed all present as follows:

“Your Excellency Consul General of Greece Mr Evangelos Vlioras,

Your Eminence Metropolitan Kyriakos of Nazareth,

Your Excellency President of the Church Council Mr Basim,

and reverend members,

Dear Associates,

The Feast of the Annunciation of the Ever-Virgin Theotokos Mary in this holy place announces to us people the infinite love and philanthropy of God.

The Holy Church of Jerusalem which was the first to receive this Annunciation of Archangel Gabriel’s joyous message: ““Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women” (Luke 1:28), is the true eye-and-ear witness of this universal and historic event which refers to the chapter of the salvation of the humankind.

This historic event of the Annunciation of the people’s salvation is testified throughout the centuries by the unceasing presence of the “noble remnant” (Romans 11:5) of Christians in the Holy Land and in Nazareth.

The Apostolic and Patriarchal institution of the Church of Jerusalem, the Mother of Churches, has become the natural and spiritual ark of the safeguarding and preservation of the Christian Rum Orthodox identity and tradition of old, for the noble remnant of Christians who live here. This is clearly depicted by the holy worship and liturgic work of our Church, where there is a strong projection of the God of love, philanthropy and infinite mercy. “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another” (John 13:34). “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44).

“Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you” (Luke 6:22).

This redeeming word of God’s love is evangelized to all of us today by the holy feast of the Annunciation of our Most-Blessed Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, “from whom Christ God, our Salvation hath assumed our nature, restoring it to Himself” (Vespers Glory; both now, end of service). Therefore, let us exclaim to the Theotokos; Rejoice, O Thou who art full of grace, the Lord is with Thee”.

Many happy returns and Happy Easter!

Finally, we warmly thank all of you, especially His Eminence Metropolitan Kyriakos of Nazareth and His Excellency, the President of the Church Council, Mr Basim, and the Council members, for the Abrahamic spiritual and material hospitality offered to Us, the hospitality of love, peace and synergy. Amen.”

For this feast, the Divine Liturgy was also celebrated at the Holy Shrine of the Theotokos’ Tomb in Gethsemane, by His Eminence Metropolitan Isychios of Kapitolias, and at the Holy Church of the Annunciation in the town Rafeidia, near Jacob’s well, led by the Hegoumen of the community, Archimandrite Leontios.

From Secretariat-General