

THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY OF THE THEOTOKOS IN SAHNEEN

On Wednesday, September 8/21, 2022, the Patriarchate celebrated the feast of the Nativity of our Most Blessed Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary.

On this feast, the Church commemorates that the Theotokos is a gift of God to her childless parents Joachim and Anna and to all humanity, because from her, the Redeemer of the world, Christ, was made flesh by the Holy Spirit.

This feast was celebrated in the Greek Orthodox Community of the city of Sahneen in Northern Israel, in the region of Acre – Ptolemais, in the magnificent and huge Holy Church of the Nativity of the Theotokos, erected by the Community with the significant financial contribution of the Patriarchate.

The feast was celebrated with a Divine Liturgy, the first in the Holy Church after the consecration ceremony, which was held by H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos, with the co-celebration of their Eminences, Metropolitan Kyriakos of Nazareth, Metropolitan Hesychios of Capitolas, the Elder Kamarasis Archimandrite Nektarios, Archimandrites Artemios, Meletios and Marcellus, many Priests from the North Galilee district of the Patriarchate and from other regions, the Head of the Russian MISSIA in the Holy Land, Archimandrite Alexander, Fr Issa Musleh, Archdeacon Mark and Hierodeacon Dositheos. The chanting was delivered by the Acre Byzantine choir under Archimandrite Philotheos as the service was attended by the representatives of the local authorities, the Spiritual Father of Saint Savvas Lavra, Archimandrite Eudokimos, the honorary presence of Mr Samer Khouri, son of Mr Said Khouri, who have been great financial donors of the construction of this Church, the former Mayor of Bethlehem Mrs Baboon, Mr Caesar Marjieh, the religious leader

of the Druze Mr Tarif, the Ambassador of Greece to Tel Aviv Mr Kyriakos Loukakis, the Ambassador of Russia, the Ambassador of Bela Russ, the Cypriot Mr Mihail who made the wooden ikonostasion, a group of pilgrims and many faithful Christians from Sahneen and other cities of Israel and Cana of Galilee.

On this very important occasion of the consecration, H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos delivered the following Sermon, which was read by Fr Issa Mousleh:

“How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. (Ps. 84, 1-2).

Beloved brethren in Christ,

Reverend Christians and pilgrims,

We rend glory and thanks to the Holy Triune God, who deemed us worthy today, to celebrate the consecration of this magnificent Church in your beautiful city of Sahneen, in honour and commemoration of the Nativity of the Most Holy Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, chanting along with Saint Andrew of Jerusalem: “In thee O Immaculate Maiden, is the mystery of the Trinity praised and glorified. For the Father was well pleased and the Word dwelt among us, and the Divine Spirit overshadowed thee” (Matins, Ode 6, 2nd canon, glory).

We begged this divine Spirit Who overshadowed the Virgin Mary, the living temple of God’s Word so that it would also overshadow this house of God.

“God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24), says the Lord. Nevertheless, “the place where thou standest is holy ground” (cf. Acts 7:33), namely the place of worship and gathering, where “I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee” (Hebrews 2:12, Ps.

22:23). And according to God-inspired Ezra: ““And now our God has chosen us to lead us to salvation and give us support in his sanctified place, enlighten our eyes and give life to children in the service of our passions”, (2 Esdr. 9,8). And according to our Lord Jesus Christ: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20).

During His incarnate Divine Providence, the Son and Word of God “hath filled all things with His light, and by His Holy Spirit, He hath renewed the whole world. For a house is founded to the Lord’s praise and glory, wherein Christ our God, for the salvation of mortals, doth consecrate and hallow the hearts of all His faithful flock” (Minaion Sept. 13, Kathisma 1 of Matins).

This glory of the Holy Triune God and the unity of faith in Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit, let us bless and praise every day in this holy tabernacle of the glory of the Lord, of this newly built Church, established in honour of the Nativity of the Blessed Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary, about whom the hymnographer Sergius of Jerusalem says: “Come all ye faithful, let us run to the Virgin. For behold, she is born who was foreordained before her conception to be the Mother of our God: the jewel of virginity, the rod of Aaron, that sprang from Jesse’s root, the preaching of the prophets, and the scion of righteous Joachim of Annal. She is born, and with her, the world is made new. She is brought forth, and the Church is arrayed with her proper majesty. She is the holy temple, the vessel of the Godhead, the virginal instrument, the royal bridechamber wherein was accomplished the wondrous mystery of the ineffable union of the natures that come together in Christ. As we worship Him, we praise the all-immaculate birth of the Virgin” (Great Vespers, Aposticha, Glory).

Behold the glory and richness of the God-human body of the Church, but also of its sanctification on earth, as the

hymnographer says, "heaven is the Church, shining with many lights, appeared everywhere, illuminating the faithful; in which we cry out; establish this house, Lord."

Indeed, the Church enlightens all believers by the power of the Holy Spirit, because as the Apostle Peter says; "But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you" (1 Peter 5:10). Moreover, in the house of God we are called to "offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51:17) the psalmist says. And Saint Paul entreats us, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1).

And this is so because the Church of God is a place of worship, that is, a place of a mystical converse between God and man, according to what is written in the Holy Bible, "And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend. And he turned again into the camp: but his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tabernacle" (Exodus 33:11). In other words, the house of God is a place of prayer, which according to Saint John of the Ladder, is in its quality a communion and union of man with God, and in its power, the conciliation of God, food of the soul, enlightenment of the mind, proof of hope and solution of sorrow.

On this solemn and historic day for the city of Sahneen and its inhabitants, on the occasion of receiving from the truly admirable and now consecrated house of God, erected on the initiative of the pious Rum Orthodox flock of ours, which enjoys a peaceful co-existence with its fellow-religious compatriots, we boast in Christ, and after Saint Paul: "By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we

stand and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope" (Romans 5:2-4).

The Godly zeal and the reverence of the people of God for the Theotokos and Mother of God, through whom the earth and the heavens are joined and the natives were regenerated and from decay we were renewed and we became gods, built a temple as a house of prayer; where we receive invisibly the grace of the Holy Spirit.

We express our warm gratitude to everyone who in various ways cooperated and contributed to the achievement of this important project, especially to the local Council of the city of Sahneen and its honourable Presidents, to the blessed Mr Said Khoury and his beloved son, Samer Khoury, to our sister Church of Moscow and the charitable Russian foundations and finally to the tireless dentist Mr Magid and his family.

Let this work be for the glory of God and the praise of the city of Sahneen and its peace-loving people. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). May it once again be the worshipful house of God, a symbol of faith, love, hope, peace, justice and security "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints" (1 Cor. 14:33), Saint Paul preaches.

Let us thank our Lord God, saying: "Christ the true light, the light that illuminates and sanctifies every man coming into the world, let the light of your face shine upon us, so that in it we may see the unattainable light; and direct our steps to the work of your commandments, by the prayers of our Most Blessed Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, whose nativity we celebrate and that of all the Saints". Amen.

The Head of this Community, Archimandrite Fr Andrean Aleme,

was awarded an honorary cross by His Beatitude.

At noon, the Community hosted a meal for His Beatitude and His entourage and many others, during which His Beatitude again spoke as follows:

“And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it” (Ps. 90:17).

Beloved brethren in Christ and Fathers,

Honourable Ladies and gentlemen,

Respected members of the Ecclesiastical Council,

Honourable Mayor and distinguished guests,

The city of Sahneen rejoices and is glad because the Lord God has enlightened the work of the hands of our pious Rum Orthodox Community. And we say this, because such works, like today’s magnificently consecrated Church, are on the one hand a jewel for the wider area of your city, on the other hand, they highlight the cultural progress of the religious communities living here peacefully and harmoniously. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

This magnificent Church, along with the other houses of prayer are a true testimony that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). The words emanating from God’s mouth are none other than divine love, peace, justice and mutual love and love for those who hate us, “love your enemies, bless those who curse us, do good to those who hate us”, (Matthew 5:44), the Lord orders.

The Run Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the mother of the Churches but also the first religious and ecclesiastical institution, has not ceased throughout the centuries to preach

and confess and promote the divine values and commands, which elevate the human being, the part that is made up of flesh and soul. The Lord says: "What is a man profited if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" (Matthew 16,26). For these reasons, we all greet all of you who honoured Us with your presence for this historical event of the Consecration of this house of prayer and from the bottom of our hearts, we thank the respected members of your Community for the Abrahamic hospitality they provided.

In addition, we pray that the Lord God through the prayers of the blessed Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary will overshadow and protect this city, its people and the Christian flock. Many happy returns, spiritual and fruitful. Amen".

After the banquet, His Beatitude visited the City Hall of Sahneen.

The Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary was also celebrated in an Episcopal Divine Liturgy at the shrine of the Theotokos' Tomb in Gethsemane, presided over by His Eminence Archbishop Aristovoulos of Madaba under the chanting of the newly arrived students of the Patriarchal School of Zion, led by Mr Vasilios Gotsopoulos.

After the end of the Divine Liturgy, the Hegoumen, His Eminence Metropolitan Joachim of Hellenoupolis hosted a reception at the hegoumeneion.

From Secretariat-General