

THE FEAST OF SAINT NIKOLAOS AT THE PATRIARCHATE

On Tuesday, December 6/19, 2023, the Patriarchate celebrated the feast of Saint Nikolaos, Bishop of Mira of Lycia the wonderworker.

On this feast, the Church commemorates Saint Nikolaos as the Father of the Church in the 4th century, “a rule of faith and an image of piety”, who participated in the First Ecumenical Council of Nice and defended the one essence of the Son with the Father.

This feast was celebrated:

1. At the town of Beit Jala, at the marvellous Church of Saint Nikolaos. The Divine Liturgy was presided over by H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos, with the co-celebration of their Eminences, the Archbishops Aristarchos of Constantina and Theodosios of Sebasteia, Archimandrite Nectarios, the Hegoumen of the H. Monastery of Saint George Al Khader Archimandrite Porphyrios, the Priests Boulos, Yusef and Elias and other Priests of the area and Hierodeacon Eulogios. The Service was attended by the full congregation of the town, the representative of the Greek Consulate General in Jerusalem Mrs Constantina Gyftou, and the representatives of the Palestinian State, Mr Houloud Dagiebes and Mr Riyad Hananie, and the Hegoumen of Beit Jala Archimandrite Ignatios who was responsible for the organization of the feast.

Before the Holy Communion His Beatitude delivered the following Sermon:

“For this God is our God forever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death” (Ps. 48,14) the psalmist proclaims.

Beloved Brethren in Christ,

Reverend Christians

Christ's Hierarch, Nikolaos the Bishop of Mira in Lycea has gathered us all in his Church, at the biblical town of Beit Jala to celebrate his sacred commemoration.

The Holy Church of Christ rejoices and is glad on the commemoration of its Saint Nikolaos, because he was a great shepherd who imitated the Arch-shepherd Christ, not only around his spiritual jurisdiction but for all the Catholic and Apostolic Church as Saint John of Damascus says. Thou the great shepherd and imitator of Arch-shepherd Christ in all things we implore thee O Nikolaos, from the sacred heights shepherd thine servants, saving all from the hardships of life.

Indeed, our Father Nikolaos became a great shepherd of the whole Church because he had our Lord Jesus Christ as a prototype; "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep... I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10,11,14-15).

In interpreting the Lord's words, Saint Cyril of Alexandria says: "Man distanced himself from God's love and was inclined toward sin. For this reason, he was cast out of the holy and divine courtyard, I mean the courtyard of paradise. And because he fell ill from this attitude of the devil, who cunningly cheated man and led him into sin, from which death sprouted, man became a victim of wolves who were indeed bitter and ruthless. But because Christ is the good shepherd for all men, He lay His life for us...and suffered in the Cross for us, so that by death He may abolish death, "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his

cross" (Col. 2,14) as it is written".

The holy and divine courtyard is no other than the Church, the earthly paradise, which God granted to us men so that we may have freedom, "which we have in Christ" (Gal. 2,4). "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5,1) Saint Paul urges us. The Son and Word of God became the First Shepherd "For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" (Ps. 95,7) the psalmist proclaims. God appointed Apostles and teachers to the Church (c.f. 1 Cor. 12,28), the successors of whom are the Bishops, sustained by the Holy Spirit, and they pastor the Church of Christ (c.f. Acts 20,28).

Saint Nikolaos was such a Bishop and shepherd, a successor of the Apostles and shone in the Church. His active participation in the First Ecumenical Council of Nice in AD 325 against the heretic teachings of Areus made Saint Nikolaos a "rule of faith" and "protector of the Church" as his hymnographer says: "A fervent protector art thou of the whole Church of Christ, most boldly destroying the ungodly teachings of all the impious heresies; and a rule of Orthodoxy wast thou to all men, interceding for all them that follow thy teachings and godly admonitions, O most merciful Nikolaos" (Matins, Kathisma 5).

The blessed Nikolaos, as the hymnographer says, "was sanctified as a great initiate of the divine Grace of God" (Kontakion), because he kept the divine commandments and worked righteousness at all times, just like the psalmist says: "Blessed are they that keep judgment, and he that doeth righteousness at all times" (Ps. 106,3). Behold, therefore, why Saint Nikolaos was called a wonderworker.

Our Father Nikolaos did not write any writings because the Gospel of Christ was written in his heart, and he kept a clear consciousness of the mystery of faith (c.f. 1 Tim. 3,9). God

shone in Nikolaos' heart the light of the knowledge of God's glory in Jesus Christ (c.f. 2 Cor. 4,6) as Saint Paul preaches. Moved by the enlightening power of God's glory, Saint Nikolaos became a shepherd of the Ecumenical Church and a teacher of Orthodoxy, that is, of the doctrines of truth, as the hymnographer says: "Going about amidst the beauties that eye hath never seen, thou didst perceive that glory which is awesome and fearful; wherefore, thou, O holy of holies, dost tell us the heavenly oracles of those eternal and true visions seen on high, O most sacred Hierarch Nikolaos" (Praises, Troparion 3).

In other words, my dear brethren, the Shepherds of the Church are the instruments of the Holy Spirit and they have been appointed with the care of the Churches, while Christ is the First Shepherd, that is why Saint Peter says: "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world" (1 Peter 5,7-9).

The God-bearing Nikolaos, who had visited the holy land of Palestine, calls us to this cause, to remain steadfast in the faith that we have received from our God and Saviour Jesus Christ through His holy

Apostles and their successors, the holy God-bearing Fathers of our Church. This faith is no other than the great mystery of the Divine Providence, the Incarnation of God the Word, and His condescension toward the humble and feeble humanity, which took place at the Grotto of Bethlehem.

This means that God is close, near us, as the psalmist says, "Thou art near, O Lord; and all thy commandments are truth" (Ps.119,151). And elsewhere, according to the prophet Jeremiah, "Am I a God at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God

afar off?" (Jeremiah 23,23). This God, Who is near, is the Sun of Righteousness and the God of peace, born of the Father without seed and became incarnate from the Virgin at the end of times.

Yes, my dear brethren, our neighbouring Bethlehem is preparing to receive in its cave the Saviour and Redeemer of the world, from the pure flesh of the Ever-Virgin Mary and Most Blessed Theotokos. Let us also prepare the "cave" of our hearts to receive the God of love and peace in the Holy Spirit. And along with Saint John of Damascus let us say: "To thy servants' hymns incline O Benefactor, bring low the haughty pride of the adversary; O Blessed One, that lookest down and seest all; Keep us above sin, whoever sing Thy praises, steadfast and unmoved on the foundation of faith" (Christmas Matins, Ode 3, 2nd Rule, Heirmos). [In other words, Lord, the benefactor Who sees everything in our lives and are truly blessed, consent to Your servants' hymns. Humble our pride enemy the devil and lead us who praise You to rise above sin, keeping us steadfastly on the foundation of faith]. Amen. Many happy returns and a blessed Christmas!"

The Divine Liturgy was followed by a procession inside and around the Church.

A meal was offered at noon, which the Priests and carers of the Church attended.

2. The feast was also celebrated at the Holy Church of Saint Nikolaos in Jerusalem near the Patriarchate.

Great Vespers on Monday afternoon and the Divine Liturgy on Tuesday Morning were officiated by His Eminence Metropolitan Isychios of Capitolas, with the co-celebration of the Elder Dragoman Archimandrite Mattheos, Archimandrite Claudius and Priest Nectarios. The chanting was delivered by His Eminence Archbishop Dimitrios of Lydda, Archimandrite Christodoulos and

the Patriarchal School of Zion students. The Services were attended by many faithful Christians and representatives of the Greek Consulate General in Jerusalem.

After the Divine Liturgy, the renovator and good keeper of the Church Archdeacon Mark hosted a reception for all at the Hegoumeneion and the courtyard of the Holy Church.

From Secretariat-General