

# ST. CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA

An article by: Heba Hrimat

She is often shown seated at a desk upon which is an open book. Other books and a celestial sphere at her feet, to indicate her extensive knowledge and wisdom she received on the hands of the finest philosophers and teachers of antiquity.

St. Catherine or Agia Aikaterini whom we celebrate today, combined an uncommon beauty, knowledge and wisdom. She utterly vanquished the passionate and unbridled soul of Maximian, the tyrant of Alexandria. And by her eloquence, she stopped the mouths of the so-called philosophers who had been gathered to dispute with her.

## **Her entry to Christianity:**

The Orthodox tradition narrates that many young men from the wealthiest families of the empire sought the hand of the beautiful Catherine, but none of them were chosen. Catherine declared to her parents that she would agree to enter a marriage only with someone who surpassed her in illustriousness, wealth, comeliness and wisdom.

The spiritual father of her mother, who was a saintly elder pursuing prayerful deeds in solitude in a cave not far from the city, knew of such youth, who surpassed Catherine in everything, such that "His beauty was more radiant than the shining of the sun, His wisdom governed all creation, His riches were spread throughout all the world – this however did not diminish but rather added to the inexpressible loftiness of His lineage". The image of the Christ produced in the soul

of the holy maiden an ardent desire to see Him. Before leaving his cave, the elder handed Catherine an icon of the Mother of God with the baby Jesus on Her arm and bid her to pray with faith to Mary for the bestowing of the vision of Her Son.

Katherine prayed all night and was given to see the Most Holy Virgin, who sent Her Divine Son to look upon the kneeling of Katherine before Them. But the Child turned His face away from her saying, that He was not able to look at her because she was ugly, of shabby lineage, beggarly and mindless like every person – not washed with the waters of holy Baptism and not sealed with the seal of the Holy Spirit. Catherine returned to the elder deeply saddened. He lovingly received her, instructed her in the faith of Christ, admonished her to preserve her purity and integrity and to pray unceasingly; he then performed over her the sacrament of holy Baptism. And again, Saint Catherine had a vision of the Most Holy Mother of God with Her Child. Now the Lord looked tenderly at her and gave her a ring – a wondrous gift of the Heavenly Bridegroom.

### **Catherine's encounter with Maximian and the wisemen:**

During that time, Emperor Maximian was in Alexandria for a pagan feast. Because of this, the feast was especially splendid and crowded. The cries of the sacrificial animals, the smoke and the smell of the sacrifices, the endless blazing of fires, and the bustling crowds at the arenas filled Alexandria. Human sacrifices were also brought – because they consigned to death in the fire the confessors in Christ, those not recanting from Him under torture. The Saint's love for the Christian martyrs and her fervent desire to lighten their fate impelled Catherine to go to the pagan head-priest and ruler of the empire, the emperor-persecutor Maximian.

Introducing herself, the saint confessed her faith in the One True God and with wisdom denounced the errors of the pagans.

The beauty of the maiden captivated the emperor. In order to convince her and show the superiority of pagan wisdom, the emperor gave orders to gather 50 of the most learned men (rhetoricians) of the empire, but the Saint got the better of the wise men, such that they themselves came to believe in Christ. Saint Catherine shielded the martyrs with the sign of the cross, and they bravely accepted death for Christ and were burnt by order of the emperor.

Maximian, no longer hoping to convince Catherine, tried to entice her with the promise of riches and fame. Having received an angry refusal, the emperor gave orders to subject the saint to terrible tortures and then throw her in prison. The Empress Augusta, who had heard much about the saint, wanted to see her. Having prevailed upon the military-commander Porphyry to accompany her with a detachment of soldiers, Augusta went to the prison. The empress was impressed by the strong spirit of Saint Catherine, whose face glowed with Divine grace. The holy martyrs explained the Christian teaching to the newly arrived, and they in believing were converted to Christ.

On the following day they again brought the martyrs to the judgement court where, under the threat of being broken on the wheel, they urged that she recant from the Christian faith and offer sacrifice to the gods. The saint steadfastly confessed Christ and she herself approached the wheels; but an Angel smashed the instruments of execution, which broke up into pieces with many pagans passing nearby. Having beheld this wonder, the empress Augusta and the imperial courtier Porphyry with 200 soldiers confessed their faith in Christ in front of everyone, and they were beheaded. Maximian again tried to entice the holy martyrs, proposing marriage to her, and again he received a refusal. Saint Catherine firmly confessed her fidelity to the Heavenly Bridegroom – Christ, and with a prayer to Him she herself put her head on the block under the sword of the executioner.

The relics of Saint Catherine were taken by the Angels to Mount Sinai. In the VI Century, through a revelation, the venerable head and left hand of the holy martyrs were found and transferred with honor to a newly constructed church of the Sinai monastery, built by the holy emperor Justinian (527-565).

A celebratory feast of commemoration is annually held at her monastery in Sinai, which is often led by His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III, and another feast takes place in the chapel named after her in the Old City of Jerusalem, just a stone's throw from the Patriarchate.

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## **SYNAXIS OF THE ARCHANGELS**

*An article by Heba Hrimat*

Several years before the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, and during the early years of the fourth century, the local Laodicean Council established for the first time what we know and celebrate today as the Synaxis of the Supreme Commanders Michael and Gabriel, along with Raphael, and of the other bodiless and heavenly orders of the Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Powers, Authorities, Principalities, Archangels and Angels.

*Synaxis*, which means the gathering of believers to celebrate a feast or to make a remembrance of a saint, holds a special meaning during this feast as it is the gathering of both the humans and the angels, as they stand in fear in front of the Creator.

It was due to the heretical worship of angels as gods and rulers of the world, which became a popular belief during the early ages of Christianity, the 35<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Council of Laodicea was quick to condemn and denounce these beliefs, influencing instead a more proper Orthodox veneration of the Angels to be affirmed.

### **How November 8<sup>th</sup> was chosen:**

In accordance with the nine ranks of Angels, a feast day was established in November, the ninth month from March (with which the year began in ancient times). The eighth day of the month was decreed for the intended assemblage of all the heavenly powers; in conjunction with the day of the dread or the last judgement of God, which the holy fathers called the "eighth day". After this age, in which the seven days of creation have elapsed, will come the eighth day and then "shalt come the son of man in His glory and all the holy Angels together with Him," (Mt 25:31).

### **The three hierarchies of angels according to Church tradition:**

What many do not know is that these nine ranks of Angels represent three hierarchies. In the highest hierarchy stand the flaming and fiery six-winged Seraphim, the many-eyed outpouring of wisdom and enlightenment Cherubim, and the servitors of the uprightness of God's justice Thrones.

In the middle angelic hierarchy stand the Dominions over the successive ranks of Angels, the Powers fulfilling the will of God, and the Authorities who quell the power of the devil.

The Lowest Hierarchy include the Principalities who have command over the lower angels, the Archangels who announce about the great and most holy, and finally the Angels, who are

closest of all to people as they proclaim the intent of God, guiding people to virtuous and holy life.

The leader over all the previously mentioned nine ranks is the holy and faithful servitor of God, Michael. His name in Hebrew means "who is like unto God", wherein he hurled down from Heaven the arrogant Lucifer together with the other fallen spirits.

According to Church tradition, Michael participated in many Old Testament events and defended Israel in all its misfortunes. Most prominently, during the time of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, he went before them in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Through him the power of the Lord was made manifest, annihilating the Egyptians and Pharaoh who were in pursuit of the Israelites. The Archangel Michael also prevented the devil from displaying the body of the holy Prophet Moses to the Jews for idolization (Jude 1:9).

Therefore, our Patriarchate dedicates each 21 November / 8 November to celebrate the feast of Archangel Michael and the Other Heavenly Bodiless Powers in the small church assigned for them in the Old City of Jerusalem, as well as in the church of Archangel Michael and Gabriel by the sea in Jaffa, which is normally led by His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III.

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# JAMES THE JUST, BRETHREN OF THE LORD

An article by Heba Hrimat

He is a first rank figure of the apostolic church and the first ever Bishop of Jerusalem, but his identity is sometimes confused with that of Apostle James, son of Alphaeus.

James the Just did not only head the great mother Church of Jerusalem and was an acknowledged Saint whose sanctity and life of prayer and intercession were proverbial, but he was also regarded with warrant by many in the early Church as the font of all episcopacy, presided over the first Church council, authored Scripture, and was as celebrated a martyr as any martyr of his time.

The New Testament mentions James (the Just), either by name or in association with the rest of the Lord's brothers, in distinction from the Apostles. For example, after the resurrection of Jesus, the Lord appeared to James in a separate revelation (1 Cor. 15:7).

James became the leading figure of the Church of Jerusalem and took a strong hand in deciding the matter of requirements for Gentile converts to Christianity, during the Council of Jerusalem "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood..." and he went on to formulate a policy that became the policy for the whole Church (Acts 15:13ff).

Speaking of his early visit to Jerusalem, Paul stated that he received the "right hand of fellowship" from "James, Peter and John" (Acts 21:18); a listing of names in which James is given precedence.

By all accounts, James was an outstanding example of godliness. He was known as 'the Just and Righteous' and was a consecrated ascetic familiar figure in the Temple, whose knees had grown 'hard like a camel's' through his constant intercession for the forgiveness of the people.

James the Just died in 62 AD, after suffering martyrdom for the same reason as our Lord Jesus Christ.

In that year, certain authorities in Jerusalem, perhaps frustrated in their attempts to get at Paul earlier, maneuvered James into a public confrontation about acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. Perhaps hoping he would back away from the Christian confession and thereby neutralize some of James' strong Christian influence on the people, they were frustrated by his bold confession, which had an effect on a number of the people gathered there. They tried to make the best of the situation and cried out, "Oh, oh, even the just one has erred." At this point some men threw Saint James down from a parapet of the Temple, and seeing that the fall had not killed him, a crowd stoned him. According to the counts of Eusebius of Caesarea (a historian of Christianity).

James continues to be revered in the Church of Jerusalem till this day. A special liturgy headed by His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III is held each 5 November to celebrate the righteous' great legacy and unmatched teachings, inside the beautiful church designated for him, adjacent of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

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# EIGHTY YEARS OF 'OXI' PRIDE

An article by Heba Hrimat

“Well, this means war” was the iconic moment when former military general and Prime Minister of Greece Ioannis Metaxas refused to give in for an ultimatum made by Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini, an ally of Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, to allow Italian forces to occupy strategic locations in Greece during World War II.

Although having taken a stance against the Italian demands meant that the country would soon enter war, the Greeks stood by their leader's decision and soon the Greek press introduced 'Oxi' to the world.

The word 'Oxi' (pronounced Ohi, meaning No) was first presented as a title in the main article of the newspaper 'Greek Future' of N. P. Efstratios on October 30, 1940. Soon afterwards locals all over the city of Athens marched through the streets yelling “OXI”!

Today, Greeks worldwide celebrate the spirit of bravery represented by Oxi Day each 28<sup>th</sup> of October. They commemorate the sacrifices of their army, whom unbeknownst to the Axis forces turned out to be a formidable force, holding the Axis back from entering Greece for almost six months.

Despite the fact that Greece eventually fell under the Axis' occupation, the rare light of hope given by the Greeks that time made people all over the world admire their bravery during key battles especially the Battle of Crete, which inspired the rest of the world. That was the first time a country stood up to the Axis powers with any amount of success. Greece gave the rest of the world hope that the Axis could, in fact, be defeated.

U.S. President at that time, Franklin D. Roosevelt famously

said, "when the entire world had lost all hope, the Greek people dared to question the invincibility of the German monster raising against it the proud spirit of freedom."

Similarly, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Sir Winston Churchill praised the spirit of the Greek fighters by saying "hence we will not say that Greeks fight like heroes, but that heroes fight like Greeks."

Our Jerusalem Patriarchate commemorated yesterday, 28 October the Greek national day of 'Oxi' through a special ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

"Undeniably, the heroic resistance against Hitler's armed forces was the victory of the spirit over material things, of freedom over slavery, of right against the unrighteousness of the modern civilization, of the barbarity, and finally, of Christ's light over the darkness of the devil," His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III said during his celebratory speech at the main hall of the Patriarchate.

Special celebration is normally held during the evening of Oxi Day at the Patriarchal seminary school of Zion, where the students act different plays and recite poems commemorating the day. This year, as a precautionary procedure following the government's rules of social distancing, the celebrations had to be cancelled for the safety of the students and everyone attending.

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# TRANSLATION OF THE RELICS OF SAINT SABBAS: A JOURNEY BACK HOME

An article by Heba Hrimat

26 October, 1965 marked the most important event for the Holy Lavra of Saint Sabbas in recent years. The relics of the great Saint, which were longing for their original and rightful resting place for centuries, were finally brought back from Italy to their home in the desert monastery near Bethlehem. It was during the reign of the Crusaders in the 12th century that the sacred and holy relics (whole body) of Saint Sabbas were taken to Constantinople and later to Venice. For over 800 years, the relics were kept away from the Orthodox monastery Sabba founded himself, which currently houses around 20 monks, who continue to follow in his footsteps, embracing his legacy.

This great event was the fruit of brotherly negotiations and combined efforts between the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Latin Catholic Church in Rome, which were preceded by the historic visit of Pope Paul VI to the Holy Land in 1964, where he met with Patriarch Benedictos I of Jerusalem and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I. As a gesture of good will towards the Orthodox Church, the Pope decided to return the relics of Mar Saba to the Holy Land.

Those who attended the event that year recalled that it put on 'a celebratory character'. And according to Dr. John Tleel, author of 'I Am Jerusalem' he noted "the translation of Mar Saba's holy relics was an event the Holy City had not seen in recent times."

The journey home to the monastery of Saint Sabbas began from the church of St. Anthony in Venice, Italy, where the relics were kept. Passing through the rivers of the city by a gondola

reaching Rome where awaiting was Pope Paul VI and the Greek Orthodox delegation of clergymen headed by Archbishop Vasilios of Jordan, the chief secretary of Jerusalem Patriarchate at that time. Soon the relics arrived to the Katholikon of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where they stayed there for a week to allow people to venerate, before transferring them one last time to their final resting destination at the Lavra of St. Sabbas near Bethlehem.

Today our Patriarchate celebrates this historical event on an annual basis, through an all-night vigil which starts on the evening of 25 October and ends at the early hours of the next day, 26 October. This year, the vigil will be less crowded as the Patriarchate carefully follows the government safety rules as the world continues to suffer from the on-going pandemic of COVID-19. On this holy occasion, His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III raised his prayers for all people and families suffering from the virus, praying to God to lift their suffering and for life to go back to normal.

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## **His Beatitude joins local heads of the churches to discuss WCC proposal**

**By Heba Hrimat**

His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III virtually joined 19 October fellow Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem and representatives of the World Council of Churches to discuss matters related to WCC and their regional office in Jerusalem

(JIC).

The meeting, which had to be carried out via Zoom following the general rules and restrictions forced by COVID-19, was mainly attended by Bishop Giacinto-Boulos Marcuzzo from the Latin Patriarchate, Bishop Hosam Naoum from the Episcopal Church, Bishop Ibrahim Azar from the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the interim general secretary of the World Council of Churches Ioan Sauca.

Main points discussed during the meeting were the WCC proposal of restructuring all parts of their work in Jerusalem including their main office here (JIC) and their EAPPI program (Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel), all that while combining efforts and receiving support from the Heads of the local Churches in Jerusalem.

The matter was much stressed in the past, and His Beatitude thanked WCC for bringing it up just in time for the central committee meeting in early November. Therefore, it was decided with the Heads of the Churches to first discuss the matter between themselves and then provide WCC with the common concerns and interests.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) which is based in Geneva, Switzerland has its own office in Jerusalem under the name JIC (Jerusalem International Center). It provides global volunteers to help and support the local ecumenical and inter-faith relations in the Holy Land. While the EAPPI program (Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel) is devoted for facilitating and reconcealing relations between Palestine and Israel.

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# Saint Thecla: A symbol of chastity, asceticism and perseverance

*An article by Heba Hrimat*

She's widely celebrated and equally venerated and respected among the different churches of the world including the Orthodox, the Catholic and the Coptic. Saint Thecla whom we venerate today (September 24/October 7) is an apostle and a protomartyr among women who's equal-to-apostles in sanctity.

In the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Saint Thecla's day is joyfully celebrated inside the small beautiful church dedicated for her within the main monastery of the Patriarchate. His beatitude Patriarch Theophilus III normally leads the liturgy every year, where many pilgrims and local believers attend to take the blessings of the great saint.

Having been born to wealthy parents and engaged to a noble man, it was not easy nor acceptable for Thecla of Iconium (modern Konya, Turkey) to choose chastity over marriage and asceticism over nobility. However, no matter how hard her mother and fiancé tried to convince her -to the point of endangering her life- to alter her decision and live up to the family's name, Thecla never settled and remained patient as her teacher St. Paul urged her to be.

## *Her encounter with St. Paul*

Thecla's first insight to Christianity was through St. Paul. The earliest record of their encounter was when St. Paul was offered hospitality at the house of Onesiphorus (2 Timothy 1:16), adjacent to her window. Three days and three nights she

spent by her window, listening to Paul's sermon praising virginity, explaining that the eternal reward awaits those who live a chaste life. That was the turning point of Thecla's life where she was determined to leave her family, fiancé and the noble life behind to follow St. Paul.

### *Thecla's faith put to test*

Seeing the effect St. Paul left on her daughter, Theoclia along with Thamyris (Thecla's fiance) gathered a group of citizens who took Paul to the local magistrate and accused him of influencing the people with unnatural teachings.

Awaiting for his trial, Thecla sneaked her way into St. Paul's cell by bribing the guards with some jewelry, to receive further teachings. Her actions caused further rage to her mother, who demanded from the governor for Paul to be whipped and expelled from the city.

Theoclia wanted to set an example for "all the women who have been taught by this man" to be afraid so she insisted to condemn her own daughter to be burned alive in the theatre. Taken to the theatre, Thecla was stripped naked and tied to a pole. Thecla found comfort in a vision of Christ who bore a resemblance to Paul. The pyre was set blazing around her. Miraculously, a hailstorm from heaven extinguished the fire causing many of the observers to be killed. Thecla escaped and started to search for St. Paul.

### *On the road with St. Paul*

Six days later, Thecla was able to find St. Paul and followed him. Despite his many warnings that she would face another tribulation, worse than the first, Thecla remained her grounds and continued to follow him. She asked to be baptized in order

to resist temptation and endure this trial, St. Paul however, asked her to be patient.

While they were in Pisidian Antioch (cp Acts 14:21), Thecla was tested again, this time by Alexander. This provincial high priest was struck by her beauty and wanted her for himself. When she resisted him, he sentenced her to be eaten by wild beasts. Waiting for her punishment, Thecla was permitted to stay with the rich and powerful Queen Antonia Tryphaena, a relative of Caesar. In their short time together, Tryphaena grew fond of Thecla.

The day of execution arrived. Thecla was tied to a fierce lioness and paraded through the city, she was then stripped and thrown to beasts. Lions, bulls, seals and different types of aggressive animals were unleashed and ready to swallow her, and she was saved from death each time. The books record that a lioness protected Thecla and fought against her male aggressors. Thecla was then protected by a series of miracles until finally the women of the city and Queen Tryphaena intervened. To the joy of the women of the community, Thecla was released and stayed with Tryphaena for eight days. During that time, Thecla is believed to have converted the entire household.

### *Seal of Christ, Thecla is baptized*

According to chapter nine of the book of 'Acts of Paul and Thecla', it is mentioned that while Thecla was at the arena, she saw a vat of water that contained seals/sea-calves. Since she thought it might be her last chance to be baptized, she jumped into the vat and proclaimed that she was baptizing herself. A miracle occurred and all the seals/sea-calves were killed by lightning before they could eat her.

## *Her last years*

Upon returning to Iconium, she learned that Thamyris had died while her mother still had hardened her heart and remained immune to her message. After leaving Iconium, she went to Seleucia where she lived inside a cave for 72 years, ministering to many and living as a hermit performing miraculous cures. Until the district physician became upset with her, because people began to seek her out instead of going to him. In response, he hired a group of people to ravish her. Hearing this, Thecla fled and went into a rock that miraculously opened and closed her in, never to be seen again.

There are few shrines around the world that are connected to the life and miracles of St. Thecla, these happen to form a top tourist attraction for pilgrims from across the world. Two of which are the most venerated: Tomb of Saint Thecla in Silifke/Turkey and Tomb of Saint Thecla in Maaloula/Syria. The others are Monastery of Saint Tecla near Larnaca, St. Menas in Cyprus and Catacomb of Saint Tecla in Rome.

\*The book of 'Acts of Paul and Thecla' is counted by the church as a non-canonical book, therefore the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church edited by F. L. Cross clears that "these acts contain a nucleus of genuine history, though it remains difficult to separate fact from legend."

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# **CORONA VIRUS IN THE HOLY LAND: A GREEK ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE**

Link: CORONA VIRUS IN THE HOLY LAND: A GREEK ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE , by Anna Koulouris – LSE Religion and Global Society blog, June 2020

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## **THE PATRIARCHATE OF JERUSALEM PARTICIPATES IN THE TWO-DAY CONFERENCE OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF GREECE**

A two-day conference was held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece, from 28<sup>th</sup> February to 1<sup>st</sup> March 2019, with the topic: “Religious –Ecclesiastical diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” / “Depicting Political Principles and suggestions for a Strategic course for the exercise of Religious and Ecclesiastical Diplomacy”.

In this conference the Patriarchate of Jerusalem was represented by the Patriarchal Commissioner in Constantinople Most Reverend Archbishop Nectarios of Anthedon with his speech titled: “The Patriarchate of Jerusalem as a stability and dialogue factor in the Middle East” which follows below;

**THE PATRIARCHATE OF JERUSALEM AS A STABILITY AND DIALOGUE FACTOR IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, or otherwise "Deir Rum," is an unbroken historical chain of holiness, martyrdom and lasting struggle for the Church of Christ and its Christian congregation, as well as of the preservation of the holy shrines, while preserving their Roman character of many centuries.

The founding of the Church of Jerusalem dates back to the day of the Pentecost and the first Bishop was the Hieromartyr Apostle Saint James the Brother of God († 62 AD).

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem is active in the area of the Holy Land, the wider Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the Arab Emirates.

In its long history, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem was first found under three state and governmental powers and authorities whose interests are on the contrary opposite. This is the difficulty both of the Patriarchate and of the Patriarch, for suddenly the Patriarchate was at the centre of political conflicts, not of local and political conflicts but of political conflicts concerning the global community.

Its presence in the Holy Land is a daily miracle, for both His Beatitude and the Holy Brotherhood are inspired by pure ecclesiastical thought, always invoking the help of God, namely the Incarnate Word of God.

The historical patrimony of the Patriarchate, its powerful theological and cultural beliefs, and its experience of living with other religions make it not only remarkable, but also a force of decisive importance in inter-Orthodox developments, interfaith dialogues, but also in every peace effort in the Middle East.

The Order of the Studios, founded by St. Helen, whose evolution is today's Hagiotaphite Brotherhood, has taken on the protection, preservation and ministry of the Holy Shrines, as well as the pastoring of its logic flock through the

religious, social, and philanthropic activity.

However, the great challenge of the Patriarchate is its coexistence with the Jewish and Arab world, and its mission and role as a factor of equilibrium, bearing in mind that Jerusalem is a city in itself religious, inextricably linked to the Sacred History of Christianity, but also to the other two monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam.

And here is the real dimension of both the role of the Patriarchate and the Patriarch, as well as of the leaders of the other two monotheistic religions for the prevalence of peace in the region. Religions play a key role in this area.

The problem of international diplomacy and of politicians is that because they do not have a deep understanding of religion issues, they try to ignore the role of religion on a global scale.

Moderately, however, they recognize that where there are conflicts of a political nature, in most cases the causes are purely religious, although they try to emphasize more the political or the national part.

Unfortunately, in recent years warfare in the Middle East region and the resulting problems have led to an even greater decline in the Christian population, yet the Church of Jerusalem does not abandon its mission of guiding its logical flock and also by maintaining the liturgical character of the Shrines, in which, souls seeking the truth, both locals and pilgrims, find their Good Shepherd, where He, through His Cross and Resurrection, " Worked Salvation in the centre of the earth".

Apart from its purely religious spiritual role, the Patriarchate has invested in the field of Education and Social Welfare. It is historically established that the first schools and hospitals were founded by it, and today it maintains schools within the State of Israel, the Palestinian Authority

and Jordan.

Through Education, it contributes precisely to the coexistence of religious entities, but also to the expansion of religious fanaticism, since Christians are a minority in the Holy Land and in the wider Middle East region.

As a result, the Patriarchate schools particularly host mostly students who are not Orthodox Christians but followers of other religions. This has the effect of contributing to the mutual understanding of the persons and, on the other hand, to the mutual understanding of the religious beliefs and symbols of each one.

And this, of course, is recognized by all, since the Patriarchate has a particular relationship with the Arab Islamic world, and in many cases acts as a bridge between the West and the East.

At the same time, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem with many efforts and sacrifices maintains at the Zion Hill the Patriarchal School of Zion, the Ecclesiastical High School of Lyceum, attended by students, many of whom after graduation remain in the Holy Land, and which acts as a nursery for the members of the Hagiotaphite Brotherhood. Unfortunately, due to the particular situation that prevails, the number of pupils is small and it would be desirable to increase it.

Great efforts are also being made to reopen the Theological School of the Holy Cross, one of the earliest Greek Educational Institutes abroad, from which great theologians, both laity and clergy, graduated, who served in Orthodox Churches of the East.

His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, during the 1st International Conference of the Non-Governmental Organization "Romiosini", which was founded by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, underlined that the purpose of the NGO is the promotion of our of the Communion in Christ of

the Greek-speaking with the Arabic-speaking Roman-Orthodox Christians on the one hand, and the other Orthodox Christians on the other. Besides, this is one of the main goals that His Beatitude has set since the beginning of the practice of His pastoral ministry.

During His speech, he also pointed out that “the special position of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, under the governmental authority of the State of Israel, the Palestinian Autonomy and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the Principality of Qatar, makes its recognized ab antiquo institutional Religious and Ecclesial Establishment as extremely important both for the unity of the Orthodox Churches and for the coexistence of the neighboring peoples in the area of its jurisdiction “.

Given the prominent role that can be played by the religion in general and consequently by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, due to the special religious significance of Jerusalem as a holy city for the Jews, Christians and Muslims, the Patriarch of Jerusalem was invited to a Conference on the relations between the American and Islamic world in Doha, Qatar, in February 2010. In the work of the Religious Leaders Department, H.B. the Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos stressed the close relation between religion and politics within the cultural context of the Islamic countries, especially the Middle East countries.

Being aware of their enormous responsibility and mission in the Middle East, the Heads of the Orthodox Churches of the region and the Archbishop of Cyprus re-established the Council of Churches of the Middle East, working together to provide support to the tested Christians in the region, as well as all kinds of spiritual relief and support in the political and religious drama that has evolved for years in the hottest region of the world.

Also, appreciating the important role played by the

Patriarchate of Jerusalem in the Muslim world, the current President of the Turkish Republic, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, invited His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III as speaker at the International Conference on "The Arab Spring and Peace in Middle East – Muslim and Christian Perspectives "in September 2012 in Constantinople.

In short, due to the limited time, I tried to present the importance of the presence and mission of the Venerable Patriarchate of Jerusalem in the Middle East, hoping that a dim light illuminated its great work over the centuries.

Finally, on behalf of His Beatitude my Father and Patriarch, Theophilos and the Hagiotaphite Brotherhood I would like to thank, for all the years, the unstoppable interest of Greece towards the Patriarchate of Jerusalem in every possible way, and culminating in this interest was the valuable help of the Hellenic State in the restoration of the Sacred Edicule of the Holy Sepulchre.

At the same time, however, Greece understands that the Patriarchate of Jerusalem is a stronghold and a spiritual extension to the most sensitive area of the planet.

By concluding this little suggestion, it would be better to refer to the formulations of His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, at the meeting of the Heads of the Orthodox Churches of the Middle East.

"Today, all political diplomats, etc., have become aware of the importance and role of religious leadership in the peaceful coexistence of people. For this reason, all religious leaders are invited to participate in any negotiations or dialogues. Their contribution is necessary and let it not seem strange to you if you look in the long run for political and international authorities in the religious leadership to find a solution to the issue of Jerusalem.

If a solution to the Jerusalem issue is found, then all

problems will be resolved both regionally and globally, because the whole world crisis is based on Jerusalem. So if World Peace can ever prevail, it will again depend on Jerusalem. ”

**From Secretariat-General**

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# **THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AND CHURCHES OF BEIT JALA**

By Heba Hrimat

This city of Beit Jala, where olive oil is equally expensive to gold, and the origin of its name is as old as history, meaning ‘grass carpet’ in Aramaic, is located only 1.8 km away from Bethlehem the town of the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and belongs to Bethlehem’s governorate (Source: ARIJ institute).

Beit Jala has five main districts: al-Sama’na, al-Sarar, al-Iraq, al-Deir, and al-Kneis with approximately 15,000 residents. The most densely inhabited is Al-Sarar. Father Yousef al-Hodali, a well-respected Orthodox Priest in Beit Jala, says that the Orthodox community there is the largest,

with around 8000 people, followed by the Latin Catholic community with 1500-1700 people, and about 500 of Anglicans, while the rest of the residents are Muslims.

The numbers of Christians in Beit Jala are undoubtedly among the largest in the West Bank. However, these numbers could have been hundreds of thousands more, but due to the high migration rate this city witnesses, which perhaps precedes any other Palestinian city, their numbers have come down to only 10,000. If we track the history of migration, we find that it had begun years back, in the 1870s, during the times of the Ottoman rule on Palestine, and has lasted to this day. Political instability, weak health services and the unemployment have majorly contributed to migration. Almost half a million people from Beit Jala have chosen to migrate to Chile. This trend however, seems to have shifted recently more towards Australia, Canada and the United States of America.

Despite the ongoing migration, Beit Jala is quite stable and rich when it comes to associations and institutions. There are 26 active charitable institutions in the city, the most prominent of which are:

1. Arab Orthodox Benevolent Society (al-Ihsan association): It is a religious association that initially emerged from the Church. It was founded 111 years ago and it is considered to be one of the oldest charities in Palestine and the largest in Beit Jala. The current president is Mr. Fakhri Ghneim and the administrative body consists of 11 elected members representing the five districts of the city. Its charity works include all people of Beit Jala, and it mainly focuses on providing and caring for the poor, the sick and orphans.
2. The Orthodox Cultural and Educational Center\*: It is headed by Father Yousef al-Hodali and was established in 2002. It aims to explain and deepen the Orthodox beliefs and knowledge to both children and young people of the

community, and discourage the emigration of the younger people. Some of the significant activities the Cultural Centre in Beit Jala provides are:

- The Byzantine Music Choir: It was formed about three years ago, and currently has 22 members. They were initially trained by monk Simon of Mount Athos and now they attend religious events and Liturgies, where they perform according to the Byzantine music, which is a novelty in Palestine.
  - Youth Centre – University level: This is exclusively for young men and women who are university students. A variety of social and religious activities are held successfully, including: the 'Children's Week Camp' where children have religious games and competitions, the number one Easter Festival in cooperation with the Orthodox Sports Club, they also hold the '1000 Presents' festival where Christmas presents are distributed to all children of the city.
  - Sunday school: Every Sunday after the Divine Liturgy, children up to the age of 12 attend the Sunday school where they meet and learn religious and recreational activities.
3. The Arab Orthodox Group (The Scouts): This group of 350-400 young people is led by Khaled al-Qasis, who is also the Head of the Orthodox Scouts in Palestine. Scouts attend several events including certain festal Liturgies, they also contribute to the young people's education by organizing educational courses in the city. The Scouts are very popular, especially to children who can barely wait to reach the appropriate age to start training and become members of the group.
  4. The Arab Orthodox Sports Club: Founded in 1923, it mainly supports sports and the youth in the city. It has held a number of sports and entertainment festivals.

5. Nikolaos Care Association for Elderly: This charity centre was founded in 1976 and is responsible for sheltering and caring for the elderly.

There is also an ongoing housing project to establish a residential complex for newly married couples and young families from the Orthodox community in Beit Jala, on a land property (estimated around 37000 m<sup>2</sup>) offered by the Jerusalem Patriarchate to encourage the people to create such a project.

In addition to providing the land for the housing project, there are quite a few activities and support the Patriarchate of Jerusalem provides for the Arab community in Beit Jala such as:

- \*The aforementioned Orthodox Cultural and Educational Centre, is a subsidiary of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The services it provides and the activities it holds are services and activities of the Patriarchate itself.
- The Patriarchate also provides scholarships to study in Greece for students who wish to study Theology and become Priests. The Scholarships are available not only for the students of Beit Jala, but also for all students from the cities and regions of the Patriarchate's jurisdiction.
- The Patriarchate also provides working permits [which are necessary to enter Jerusalem and Israel] to help providing an income for those who can't find employment opportunities in the West Bank, to prevent them from emigrating.

As for the Holy places in the city, there are four Orthodox Churches: the Church of Theotokos, the Church of St. Nikolaos, St. George's Chapel, and the Church of Archangel Michael. Churches that belong to the other Christian Doctrines are: the Church of the Annunciation for the Latin Catholic community,

and the Anglican Church for the Anglican community. There are also two Mosques for the Muslim community in the city.

- The Church of Theotokos: This Church was inaugurated in 1862, it is located on the main street in the city centre, and it is considered to be one of the largest Churches in the West Bank. The Divine Liturgy is usually celebrated in this Church on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.
- The Church of St. Nikolaos: This Church provides a distinctive landmark in the city with its two high brass domes. It can be considered as a relatively modern Church if compared to the Chapel underneath. That Chapel was built in the 4th century; opposite the Sacred Altar there is a small cave with a low ceiling, containing a 4th century mosaic. The tradition suggests that when St. Nikolaos came for pilgrimage in the Holy Land, he stayed in this Cave for a period of time. Although this Chapel relates most to St. Nikolaos, it is dedicated to St. George, like most Churches in the Holy Land, as this Saint is considered to be the 'guardian' of Churches. The Divine Liturgy is celebrated in this Chapel on Tuesdays, Thursdays and every second Sunday.
- The Church of Archangel Michael: This was inaugurated in 1908 and is located in the cemetery. The Divine Liturgy is celebrated there on Mondays.

Beit Jala is thought of as the 'hometown' of St. Nikolaos the wonder worker, who according to numerous testimonies has healed diseases and barrenness, helped the sailors and prisoners, and protected the city from missiles and military attacks during various war periods. There are quite a few holy traditions linked to some icons which are kept at the Orthodox Churches of Beit Jala, for example:

- There is a stone in the Church of the Virgin Mary (see photo 5): Tradition has it that our Lady Theotokos hid behind that stone when the Holy Family was attacked by a

group of thieves upon their escape from King Herod.

- An icon of St. Nikolaos in the Church of St. Nikolaos (see photo 9): This was originally among stolen icons and antiques that were traded illegally. A week after a man had bought it at a very expensive price, returned it to the trader telling him that St. Nikolaos had appeared in his dreams several times and ordered him to return the icon. In his dream the Saint said "Return me to my house in Beit Jala. There may be many Churches around the world bearing my name, but my home is in Beit Jala. Bring me back there."
- A second icon of St. Nikolaos also kept in His Church (see photo 7): This icon was a present from a faithful Roman female pilgrim to the Saint after he appeared to her in a dream asking her to visit his house in Beit Jala since she visited the Holy Land numerous times but never went to his Church in that city. It is said that this icon was impossible to finish and the painter had so much trouble trying to paint it, until Saint Nikolaos himself appeared to the painter in his dreams and asked him to draw him looking 'furious' just like he was during the First Ecumenical Council. After two days only, the icon was ready. The Church of St. Nikolaos also contains a piece of his relics and a small oil bottle which belonged to the Saint (see photo 8).
- The third icon of Saint Nikolaos is a miraculous one. According to Father al-Hodali, many people from all over the world come specifically to pray and ask for help in front of this icon of the Saint inside the sacred cave in the Chapel of St. George (see photo 12).

The caretakers of the previously mentioned Churches and for the community in Beit Jala are four Priests: Archimandrite Narkisus [the Patriarchal Vicar], Father George Shehwan, Father Yousef al-Hodali, and Father Paul al-'alam. Ministering is also Deacon Elias Zu'rab, who will be ordained a Priest soon.

Usually, on the Feast day of St. Nikolaos the wonder worker [December 6th/19th] His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos leads the Divine Liturgy, He also occasionally officiates the Feast of the Nativity of Our Most Holy Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary [September 8th/21st] at the Church dedicated to her in Beit Jala, where cameras are installed for live broadcasting of the Divine Liturgy and the weekly Church services, for people to watch online.

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