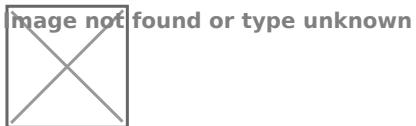


Archbishop Elpidophoros Homily at the Second Salutations to the Theotokos



Beloved and Faithful Christians,

Tonight we sing to the Virgin:

Χαῖρε, ὅτι τὰ οὐράνια συναγάλλεται τῇ γῇ!

Χαῖρε, ὅτι τὰ ἐπίγεια συγχορεύει οὐρανοῖς!

Rejoice, for the things of Heaven rejoice with the earth!

Rejoice for the things of earth join chorus with Heaven! *

We are called to “rejoice” in the Virgin. This is the change in perspective that the Akathist Hymn offers us, even in difficult times. In faith, and through faith, we can look beyond our present circumstances and glimpse into the divine reality of Heaven and earth.

In the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, Heaven and earth united in her womb. She is the meeting place of God and every human being, because she is the place where the encounter becomes incarnate. This was prophesied again and again in the Old Testament, and perhaps nowhere so beautifully, as in the story of the Prophet and Patriarch Jacob, who dreamed of the Ladder that reached from earth to Heaven itself.

This is the first time that we read of a Ladder that reaches unto Heaven, and the Angels of God ascending and descending on it.† And in last Sunday’s Gospel reading from the Evangelist John, we hear the Lord say the following to Nathanael:

“Amen, amen, I say to you. From this moment on, you will behold the Heavens open, and the Angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man!” ‡

The dream of Jacob, that points to our Panagia, is ultimately fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Living Ladder unto Heaven. Therefore, Jacob says on arising from his dream:

“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” §

Οἶκός Θεοῦ – Πύλη Οὐρανοῦ!

My beloved Christians:

That is what the Church is – the House of God and the Gate of Heaven. It is the place where “the things of Heaven rejoice with the earth,” and “the things of earth join chorus with Heaven.” The Virgin Herself is the icon of the Church, for just as she contained the Lord within Her womb, the Church encompasses the Lord through the Mysteries, the worship, the hymns and the sacred readings.

In the Holy Icons, you see how the “things of Heaven” pour out of the celestial mansions and make their presence known to us. We see the Saints. We see the miracles of the Lord. We behold the great moments of our salvation history: Incarnation, Baptism, Transfiguration, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost.

And in the Church, we who are on earth “join chorus with Heaven!” We sing; we chant; we read the Holy Scriptures. We make magnificent liturgical processions with icons, with banners and torches and incense. All of the hymns and movements of the Church are mystical in their essence. They transport us spiritually into the choir of the Angels, as initiates of Heaven, and participants in the celestial Liturgy.

Even tonight, as we chant the praises of the Virgin with these Χαίρετισμοί, we join with the heavenly chorus and enter into the heart of the Church. We are in the presence of Christ, as He promised, where the two or three are gathered together.**

That is why we call for joy, we summon gladness, even in the midst of this season of repentance. We rejoice in the presence of the God Who is with us, Emmanuel. We rejoice that we are in the bosom of the Church, and joined together with the chorus of Heaven. We rejoice that the Ladder of Heaven has reached down to us, and that we have access to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, as Saint John Climacus advises us, whom we shall commemorate on the Fourth Sunday of the Fast:

"Ascend, brethren, ascend eagerly, and be resolved in your hearts to ascend. And listen to the One Who says: Come and lets us go into the House of our God." ‡‡

May we ever be so blessed to always gather here in the House of the Lord, the Gate of Heaven, and ascend in our hearts, filled with His love and His mercy.

Through the prayers of the Holy Theotokos and all the Saints, may we complete these days of the Great Lent with such inspiration, and attain the Holy Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

* Akathist Hymn, Second Stasis, H.

† Genesis 28:12.

‡ John 1:51.

§ Genesis 28:17.

** Cf. Matthew 18:20.

†† Cf. Isaiah 8; Great Compline Μεθ' ἡμῶν ὁ Θεός

‡‡ The Ladder of Divine Ascent, summary at the conclusion.

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