10/03/2025

The First Stasis of the Akathist Hymn to the Theotokos



In the evening of Friday, the first week of Great Lent, 22nd February / 7th March 2025, at the Catholicon of the Sacred Church of the Holy Sepulchre and within the framework of the service of the Small Compline, the canon of the Theotokos was chanted, with the First Stasis of the Akathist Hymn to the Most Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary was read by His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, who also presided over the entire service. The chanting was conducted by the Chief Cantor and Deacon Eustathios Tsoumanis, with the participation of a devout congregation of monks, nuns, and laity, in the presence of the Consul General of Greece in Jerusalem, Mr Dimitrios Angelosopoulos, and

members of the Greek Consulate.

During this service, His Beatitude delivered a sermon to the faithful, in Greek, which follows:

“An angel was sent from heaven, to say to the Theotokos: Hail! And with a voice that transcended the bodily form, beholding Thee, O Lord, incarnate, he was astonished and stood, crying out to her these words: Hail, O heavenly ladder, by which God descended; Hail, O bridge leading those from earth to heaven.”

Beloved in Christ,

Devout Christians,

The Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ calls us today to joyfully enter and pass through the stage of the immaculate Fast, the Holy and Great Lent. The sacred passions and the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ have formed the reason for the establishment of the fasts, especially the fast before Pascha.

The institution of fasting was prescribed by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who fasted for forty days with prayer as a means to combat the devil. “And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.” (Mark 9:29). Likewise, at His departure from this world, Jesus told the disciples of John the Baptist, “But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast.” (Matthew 9:15).

The deeper meaning of fasting is proclaimed by Saint Paul, who says: “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” (Galatians 5:17). Explaining these words of Paul, the commentator Zygabinos writes: “By ‘flesh,’ the Apostle refers to the fleshly mind… that which is occupied with worldly and material matters, and which drags the soul along; by ‘Spirit,’ he refers to the spiritual mind, the one concerned with the things of the Spirit, the lofty and divine matters. These two minds desire against each other, that is, they fight, one pulling towards the body and dragging the soul along, the other drawing the soul and pulling the body.”

Highlighting the great virtue of fasting, Saint Basil the Great says that fasting is the likeness of the angels, the fellowship of the righteous, the temperance of life, and the spiritual nourishment by which our inner man becomes perfect. “Fasting is the likeness of the angels, the fellowship of the righteous, the temperance of life… the spiritual nourishment by which the inner man is perfected.”

It is noteworthy that the “likeness of the angels” and the “perfection of our inner man” are nothing other than deification, the salvation of man, which was inaugurated by the mystery of the divine Providence—specifically, the pure blood of the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, the incarnation and taking on of flesh by the Divine Word and our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

“Behold, this is why the hymnographer of the Church cries out, saying: “Hail, O heavenly ladder, by which God descended; hail, O bridge leading those from earth to heaven.” Saint John of Damascus, following the renowned Father of the Church, Cyril of Alexandria, says: “Rightly and truly we call the Most Holy Mary Theotokos. For this name signifies the whole mystery of the divine providence, for if she who gave birth is the Theotokos, then He who was born of her is surely God and man.”

In other words, beloved brothers, the most blessed Mary, through her humility and especially through her obedience to the divine call announced by the angel Gabriel, was revealed as a co-worker in the mystery of the divine providence, that is, in the salvific work of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the hymnographer cries out, saying: “O Most Holy Mother, we bless thee through all generations, for thou hast become the propitiation for the world, having borne the Saviour and Creator without corruption.”

Indeed, the Theotokos Mary became the propitiation for the world, that is, a participant in the atonement and reconciliation for the sins of the world. And this is because the Virgin Mary, in her flesh, became the Mother of Jesus Christ, whom God, before all ages, ordained to be the means of atonement and reconciliation between humanity and God through faith, according to the wise Paul: “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood” (Romans 3:25).

Saint John of Damascus poetically calls the Theotokos “the living and abundant fountain,” referring to the divine gifts and blessings. If this, as the Lord said, is true for every believer who receives the grace of the Holy Spirit and becomes within themselves “a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14), how much more so for the person of the Theotokos, who became the vessel of the Holy Spirit at her Annunciation, when the angel said to her: “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee” (Luke 1:35).

Today, our holy Church, during the course of the Great Fast before Pascha, on the one hand, honours and venerates the Theotokos, who is “the global glory and the more honoured than the Cherubim, and far more glorious than the Seraphim,” and on the other hand calls upon her intercessions, for she participates in the divine glory of her Son and God, and intercedes for all who call upon her.

Therefore, we too, together with the hymnographer, say: “To thee, O Mother and Virgin of God, more holy than the Cherubim, we sing hymns with great voices, for in soul and body, we confess thee as the Theotokos, who truly gave birth to God incarnate. Intercede, O Most Holy One, for the salvation of our souls.” And we pray that we may be worthy to pass through the course of this holy Fast in repentance, confession, and temperance. Intercede, O All-Holy Theotokos, that we may be worthy to celebrate the glorious Resurrection of our God and Saviour Christ in peace, and may the fire cease in the Holy Land that is being tested, where the sacred feet of the Son and God, our Saviour, stood. Amen. Blessed fasting and a good Pascha. Amen. Many happy returns.”

From the General Secretariat























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