

The Ecumenical Patriarch visits the Holy Patriarchal and Stavropegial Monastery of Saint John the Baptist in Essex



His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew presided at the Divine Liturgy on Sunday, 20 September, at the Church of Saint Sophrony the Athonite, at the Holy Patriarchal and Stavropegial Monastery of Saint John the Baptist in Essex.

In attendance were the Hierarchs accompanying His All-Holiness, Their Eminences Elder Metropolitan Dimitrios of the Princes' Islands; Metropolitan Maximos of Selyvria; and Metropolitan Ioakeim of Lambi, Syvritos and Sfakia; His Grace Bishop Maximos of Melitene, representing His Eminence Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain; the Abbot of the Monastery, the Very Reverend Archimandrite Peter, who had earlier welcomed the Patriarch at the entrance of the magnificent Katholikon; the Consul of Cyprus, Mr Pieros Pieri; as well as a multitude of faithful

and friends of the renowned Orthodox Patriarchal and Stavropegial Monastery from throughout Great Britain.

In his address, the Patriarch expressed his particular emotion at once again visiting the Monastery founded by Saint Sophrony.

“Feelings of sacred love and paternal affection fill our heart, both for the Fathers of the men’s community of the Monastery and for the Sisters of the women’s community. We therefore warmly thank the All-Holy God, Who has deemed us worthy to come among you once again, not only to enjoy the sight of your beloved faces and to bestow upon you our Patriarchal blessing and prayer, but also to venerate the tomb of the Founder, Saint Sophrony, this great Patristic theologian and neptic ascetic of our times, who wondrously combined God-pleasing practice with sacred hesychia and sublime contemplation, and to seek his precious intercessions before God for us and for the Mother Church!

“The divinely inspired wisdom of your venerable Elder and Founder, Saint Sophrony, together with his sacred zeal, led him to establish this Monastery on British soil as a continuation and new blossom of the ancient monastic tradition of the British Isles. This tradition could readily be compared with that of the ancient Palestinian, Syrian and Egyptian deserts, or of Asia Minor, both in the strictness of its asceticism and way of life, its sacred hesychia and progress in prayer and love, and in the multitude of distinguished Saints whom it produced. Yet the passage of time, combined with the progressive distancing over the centuries of the peoples of the British Isles from Orthodoxy, led this tradition to be almost entirely forgotten, to the extent that, regrettably, the many Saints of these lands are today absent from the Synaxaria and Menaia currently used by the Church, with only a few exceptions. Saints Ninian, the founder of monasticism in the British Isles; the many divinely minded Columba, Cædmon and Brendan; Gildas the Wise; as well as Cainnech, Finnian, Cadoc, Teilo, Bede, Enda and Winwaloe; the great Patrick and many others; and women such as Brigid the merciful and wonderworker, Ita, Monenna, Melangell, Dwynwen and so many others—to confine ourselves only to monks, cenobites, hermits, anchorites and founders of important monastic establishments. For alongside them there is certainly a corresponding number of Hierarchs, missionaries, martyrs and confessors, foremost among them, of course, the Holy Martyr Alban.”

The Patriarch continued: “Such being the case, this Monastery of the Holy Forerunner in the County of Essex came into being as an organic continuation of the ancient tradition of this land. It is also a contemporary showcase of this entire sacred spiritual heritage of the ancient centuries of the glorious Orthodox presence

and life of the British Isles, combined moreover with a contemporary Athonite experience and a corresponding Patriarchal experience of the Mother Church. Through its presence and its liturgical and spiritual life, the consoling and strengthening words of the Brotherhood, and the divinely wise writings of Saint Sophrony, it reminds the contemporary peoples of the Anglo-Saxons and Celts of their deep and sacred roots, from which they are called even today to draw 'life, and life more abundantly'!



"Your Monastery is 'a city set on a hill' and 'a lamp upon a lampstand' for Western Europe, shining forth the gentle light of sound spirituality and ecclesiastical consciousness, the light of the lived experience of Orthodoxy and right practice, extending, of course, far beyond the County of Essex! And many are the seekers, from every race and national background, of the ancient wine of Grace, who come here and satisfy the thirst of their souls!

"All this is a cause of great joy for the Mother Church, which takes pride in her blessed children! Personally, we take pride for yet another reason: because most of the ordained members of the Monastery who worthily stand before the holy altar of Grace were ordained by our Modesty, some here and others at the Phanar, and

they constitute a golden link in the sacred relationship between the Monastery and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, between the Brotherhood and the Patriarch! May the Lord bless, strengthen, sustain, preserve, increase and sanctify this chosen flock of His unto the ages!"

On the occasion of the recent Feast of the Universal Exaltation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord, His All-Holiness emphasised the central place occupied by the Cross in the lives of Christians, and particularly of monastics, observing that "a Christian life without the Cross is utterly inconceivable!" More specifically, he said:

"From last Sunday, beloved ones, until today, with 14 September naturally being the culminating day, our Church places at the centre of the church and of her entire worship the Precious and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord, 'the foundation of our salvation,' as Saint John Chrysostom calls it, as we heard yesterday in the reading during the evening meal. Liturgically, she experiences its great Mystery, 'which manifests the economy of the Lord's presence in the flesh and contains within itself the whole mystery thereof,' and proclaims its message, which, according to the divinely inspired Paul, 'is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.'

"Christians, and much more so monastics, having willingly come forward and taken up their personal cross according to the word of the Lord, 'Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me,' today venerate the Precious Cross and the Lord of Life Who was nailed upon it, and from it we draw grace, strength, sanctification and every blessing! At the same time, we realise that our own position as Christians is not simply 'beside the Cross,' but 'in the Cross' and 'upon the Cross'! A Christian life without the Cross is utterly inconceivable! This is precisely what is most clearly manifested by the Great and Angelic Schema, with which you monks and nuns were clothed at your tonsure and which you always wear as a permanent reminder!

"Since we Christians await 'the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come' in Christ, the path through Golgotha is the only path! For this reason the heaven-traversing Apostle says that 'those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires,' while Saint Sophrony similarly emphasises: 'We monks are crucified beside the Crucified Christ.' And Paul goes even further: 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me'! This was also the lived experience of your Father, Saint Sophrony, as it was of all the Saints from antiquity until today, and as it shall remain until the consummation of the age!

“On the radiant day of Pascha, and indeed every Sunday, we honour and celebrate a Pascha of the Cross and Resurrection! The glory of Christ, in which we are called to participate, is not only His Resurrection from the Tomb on the third day, but also His Cross! Indeed, first and foremost, His Cross! ‘The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified,’ He Himself said to His Disciples when speaking of His impending Passion and Cross. And again, at the Mystical Supper, regarding His Immaculate Passion as already being accomplished, He said: ‘Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him.’”



He then continued, referring to the Mother Church of Constantinople:

“This glory, at once cruciform and resurrectional, has been experienced for centuries by the venerable Mother Church of Constantinople! For centuries she has remained upon the Cross, bearing thorns, pierced by the spear, enduring the reproach of Christ and bearing His wounds, yet always living, standing with head held high, filled with hope and strength, and worthy of proclaiming with a mighty voice to contemporary humanity, ‘Rejoice!'; of announcing that ‘behold, through the Cross joy has come into all the world'; and of imparting Life and Resurrection!

“And you, beloved children in the Lord, are ‘bone of her bones and flesh of her flesh,’ participants in this same lived experience, sharing the same good hopes and proclaiming through deed and word the same message! ‘Let us not then be ashamed of the Cross of Christ,’ according to the exhortation of Saint Cyril of

Jerusalem! Neither should we be ashamed of the cross of the Mother Church, especially whenever she receives insults and blows from ungrateful and matricidal false brethren!

“There is no other common boast of Christians apart from the Cross of Christ! ‘But God forbid that I should boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,’ says Paul as he concludes his Epistle to the Galatians. And we boast in the Cross of Christ and in the cross of our Mother, the Byzantine Church! And in boasting and taking pride therein, we do not cease to ‘preach Christ, and Him crucified’! And from the depths of our soul and heart we proclaim: ‘We venerate Your Cross, O Master, and we glorify Your Holy Resurrection!’

“However, we do not wish to weary you further. We shall conclude with something particularly moving. Shortly before departing for eternity, Saint Sophrony wrote to his Patriarch and Bishop, as though bidding him farewell: ‘In blessing, bless the humble sheep of my fold, and never cease to embrace with your loving care and goodwill this place, small, poor and insignificant though it may be, yet founded with many tears, deep sighs, blood and sweat.’

“We have observed this faithfully until this day! And continuing in this same spirit, we convey to you the abundant affection of the Mother Church. We raise our Patriarchal hands and wholeheartedly bless each and every member of the Brotherhood and your sacred struggle in the monastic life, as well as the Monastery and its God-pleasing endeavours for the benefit of all those who, thirsting spiritually, reverently visit it as pilgrims, and all those who in various ways support and generously benefit it, foremost among them His Eminence Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain, who has a particularly deep love for the Monastery of Essex!

“May the mighty protection of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross preserve and sanctify your good and in every respect worthy Abbot, and each and every one of you! ‘Finally, brothers [and sisters], rejoice, be perfected, be comforted, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.’”

Earlier, His All-Holiness was welcomed with an address by the Abbot of the Monastery, the Very Reverend Archimandrite Peter.

On Saturday afternoon, His All-Holiness, together with his entourage, venerated the tomb of Saint Sophrony and attended Great Vespers prayerfully, at which His Eminence Elder Metropolitan Dimitrios of the Princes’ Islands, presided.

On Sunday afternoon, the Ecumenical Patriarch departed by air for Aberdeen,

Scotland, where on Monday morning he was scheduled to hold a private meeting













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