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His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America - Homily for the National Day of Mourning over Hagia Sophia



His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros

Homily for the National Day of Mourning over Ἀγία Σοφία

Holy Trinity Archdiocesan Cathedral

July 24, 2020

New York, New York

Beloved Faithful and Friends around the world,

This day is a day, when grief and sorrow are mingled with faith and with hope. This day is a day, when our hymns to the Virgin Mother of God are chanted with urgency, as the very walls of our religious identity are being breached. This day is

our National Day of Mourning, for the confiscation of our Ἀγία Σοφία and its sacred precincts. Those who seek to reduce the Great Church from a symbol of the highest aesthetic and spiritual achievement, to a token of tribal triumphalism will never triumph in the end!

We do not mourn for only for ourselves. We mourn for the whole world whose loss this is. And we mourn for all people of faith and good conscience, for every faith and every conscience is being violated by this forced conversion.

If only the stones of Ἀγία Σοφία would be heard, for they long to cry out, even as too many around the world have held their peace, rebuked by fear. Our Lord Jesus Christ weeps over these stones, as He did over the Jerusalem of old. [\[*\]](#)

But given the chance, the stones of the Great Church would not lament. They would proclaim and sing with us the very the hymn we chant tonight:

Τῇ ὑπερμάχῳ στρατηγῷ τὰ νικητήρια,
ὥς λυτρωθεῖσα τῶν δεινῶν εὐχαριστήρια,
ἀναγράφω σοι ἡ πόλις σου, Θεοτόκε·
ἀλλ' ὥς ἔχουσα τὸ κράτος ἀπροσμάχητον,
ἐκ παντοίων με κινδύνων ἐλευθέρωσον,
ἵνα κράζω σοί· Χαῖρε Νύμφη ἀνύμφευτε.

To You the Champion, we your City dedicate
a feast of victory and than thanksgiving,
as ones rescued out of sufferings, O Theotokos.

But as you are one with might that is invincible,
from all dangers that can be deliver us,
that we may cry to you:

Rejoice, Bride unwedded!

Our Ἀγία Σοφία – and I say it again – **our** Ἀγία Σοφία will always be the Great Church of Christ. Our Ἀγία Σοφία will always be the witness of the true Orthodox Faith of Christ throughout the *oikoumene*. Our Ἀγία Σοφία remains untouched in heart, in soul, and in divine purpose.

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One thousand, one hundred and fifty-three years ago – on March 29th, which was the Great and Holy Saturday of that year, in the presence of the Emperors, during the Divine Liturgy within Ἀγία Σοφία, the Patriarch of Constantinople, Photios who is called “Great,” unveiled the magnificent, ethereal, and heavenly Icon of the Panagia that dominates the apse of Ἀγία Σοφία to this day. This was the first Icon to be placed in the Great Church after the painful period of Iconoclasm, when the Icons were attacked within the Christian Roman Empire.

In his Homily, the Patriarch quoted from the Holy Scripture:

Ἴδοὺ ἐπὶ τῶν χειρῶν μου ἐζωγράφησά σου τὰ τείχη, καὶ ἐνώπιόν μου εἶ διὰ παντός.

“Behold, I have painted your walls upon My hands, and you are ever before Me.” [\[†\]](#)

The Lord of Hosts declares that the very walls of Ἀγία Σοφία are ‘upon His hands!’ The icons that had been previously torn down by the Iconoclasts were not the end of the story. And the icons that were plastered over when the Great Church was first turned into a mosque were not the end of the story. And the icons that we will be blinded to us for a time once again, because our Ἀγία Σοφία is forced to go against her nature and her purpose, will not be the end of story.

For the Lord opens the eyes of the blind! Christian, Muslim, Jew, believer, non-believer. The Lord is the Light of the world and in His light we shall see light! [\[†\]](#) The painted walls of Ἀγία Σοφία shall never be silenced, for they speak of the presence of God in this world; they speak of the mercy of God; and they speak of love of God for every human person.

The celestial vision in the apse of Ἀγία Σοφία, of the Theotokos Mary holding her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, has spoken to untold millions through the centuries. Now, she will be veiled in an act of desecration, because it is the Mother of God who makes the space sacred. But that space is now desacralized in order to make room for a strange purpose and a foreign understanding.

Many of us alive today have seen this wondrous icon that is suspended in the apse of Ἀγία Σοφία, which connects the light-filled dome of heaven with the powerful

stones of earth that ground this Temple of the Holy Wisdom of God. Listen, for a moment, to the words of the Saintly Patriarch Photios, when he unveiled her presence for the **first time** in history:

“With such a welcome does the representation of the Virgin’s form cheer us, inviting us to draw not from a bowl of wine, but from a fair spectacle, by which the rational part of our soul, being watered through our bodily eyes, and given eyesight in its growth towards the divine love of Orthodoxy, puts forth in the way of fruit the most exact vision of truth. Thus, even in her images does the Virgin’s grace delight, comfort and strengthen us! A virgin mother carrying in her pure arms, for the common salvation of our kind, the common Creator reclining as an infant – that great and ineffable mystery of the Dispensation! A virgin mother, with a virgin’s and a mother’s gaze....”[\[§\]](#)

My beloved Christians and Friends:

Can there be a more exalted vision? Can we allow it to simply disappear? On this night, as we gather from coast to coast and chant this Akathist with fervor, devotion, tears, and love, are we willing, are we committed to be the “Children of Memory” that our Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has called us to be?[\[**\]](#)

The Lord does not triumph by destroying others, but by destroying death by His own death.

We do not conquer with the sword, but with the truth. And ultimately, we are victorious because we remember. We remembered where the Tomb of the Resurrection was even after the Romans buried it beneath tons of rock and pavement. We remembered where the Cave of Bethlehem was even though it was defiled by alien sacrifices. And we will forever remember – until the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ – what our Ἁγία Σοφία is. In her essence, in her stones, in her walls, in her icons, and in her heart which can never be taken away!

Beloved and Dear People of God:

Tonight, as we leave our churches and return to our homes, as we leave this service of the Akathist and return to our lives, let us not leave behind our Ἁγία Σοφία. Let us enshrine the Shrine of Holy Wisdom in our hearts and minds and souls. Let us make of our bodies a sacred space for the Great Church. Let us become λίθοι ζῶντες, “living stones,”[\[††\]](#) for God.

Let us become the very walls that are painted upon the hands of God, that we may offer, as Saint Photios says, “the most exact vision of truth” that leads to “the divine love of Orthodoxy.”

Finally, let us be wise and inspire wisdom in others. For as the Prophet says:

Wisdom has built a House for Herself;

She has carved out seven pillars;

She has sacrificed Her own offerings;

She has mingled Her own wine in the chalice.

She has prepared Her own table. [\[††\]](#)

Let us be the House of Wisdom. Let our Seven pillars be the virtues of love, kindness, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, patience, and humility. Let us offer at every time and in every place the Offering that was sacrificed for the life of the world, mingling the Blood of the grape[\[§§\]](#) to receive the Divine Eucharist from Wisdom’s own table of the Holy Altar.

Thus, my beloved, we will overcome the grief of this present moment, and attain the vision of God that Great Church is, and shall ever be. The Kingdom of God upon earth. The Kingdom of Peace. The Kingdom of Joy. The Kingdom of Love.

Through the prayers of the All-Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, may we attain this Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Who is glorified and worshipped, unto the ages of ages. Amen!

[\[*\]](#) Cf. Luke 19:39-41.

[\[†\]](#) Isaiah 49:16 (LXX).

[\[‡\]](#) Cf. Psalm 35:10 (LXX).

[\[§\]](#) Homily XVII, *The Homilies of Photius Patriarch of Constantinople*, English Translation, Introduction and Commentary by Cyril Mango, Dumbarton Oaks Studies Three (Harvard University Press, 1958), page 290.

[**] "'*Mnemosyne*' and the Children of Memory," Address at the British Museum, November 12, 1993.

[††] I Peter 2:5.

[‡‡] Proverbs 9:1,2 (LXX).

[§§] Cf. Genesis 49:11.

Source