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Patriarch Daniel explains connection between Flight into Egypt and birth of monasticism: Christ turns exile into a blessing

His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel attended the Divine Liturgy at the historical chapel of his patriarchal residence on the Sunday after the Nativity of the Lord. His Beatitude explained the gospel passage's spiritual meanings about the Flight of the Child Jesus into Egypt in his homily.

Egypt, a country of idolatry and slavery, would become several centuries later the monasticism homeland, of the holy life.

Main teachings:

- God and His angels take care of children and protect them through their families and those around them, who are His merciful hands in their lives.
- The Saviour becomes a man of sorrow, a man of suffering even from His childhood.
- God turns suffering into victory, exile into a blessing, the pagan past into a Christian future.
- In the holy writings, the word anachorein is used for flight, which sends to the symbolism of the spiritual journey, the retreat to the self once with the retreat to the desert (the anachorites appeared for the first time in the desert of Egypt).
- The prophecy that “He will be called a Nazarene’ refers not only to Nazareth but also to a spiritual state of a righteous man, who dedicates his life to God, like the Nazarenes in the Old Testament.

“This flight into Egypt is a divine work, on the one hand, to protect the life of the Infant Jesus, on the other hand, to fulfil a prophecy and to fulfil a plan of God,” the Patriarch said.

Egypt as a land of slavery

The report that 14,000 babies were killed to kill Christ does not refer to an exact number it “means all the children who were then in Bethlehem and the surrounding lands,” the Patriarch said.

The mention of Rachel’s lament referred to “the mourning of old when the young men and children were carried away captive”: Rachel wept for those exiled to Babylon because those who were to be deported were gathered at Ramah.

“This gospel shows us that the Saviour Jesus Christ becomes a man of sorrow, a man of suffering, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah,” said the Patriarch of Romania.

The reception of the Holy Child sanctifies the realm of slavery

“Egypt was considered the place of slavery; there, the Jews were taken as slaves or captives.” But “the flight into Egypt of the Saviour Jesus Christ turns suffering into victory. The suffering of exile is transformed into a blessing,” the Patriarch underlined.

“So, Egypt, as a land of slavery and idolatry, (…) now becomes a land that receives the Infant Jesus and shelters Him. And so, the flight of the Child Jesus to Egypt somewhat transforms Egypt, because it receives the blessing of the Child Jesus,” explained the Patriarch.

“Therefore, a few centuries later, monasticism would flourish in Egypt. Those who have studied the biblical texts carefully have noticed that the Evangelist Matthew uses for the word “flight into Egypt / flee to Egypt,” a Greek word, anachorein, which means to flee elsewhere / flee from a given situation, from a given territory, elsewhere,” His Beatitude noted December 27.

“And this verb later gave the name of the monks, who called themselves anachorites, that is, those who fled from the world, from the selfish passions of the world, and devoted themselves to prayer and the pacification of the soul by fasting, prayer, feats, through much humility.”

The pursuit of immortality by fleeing into the wilderness

“Thus, Egypt was blessed by the Infant Anachorite who fled to Egypt, and the blessing was seen in the multitude of the Anachorites, the thousands of monks of Egypt.”

“In Egypt, the pharaohs built large tombs, pyramids whose top was facing the sky,” said Patriarch Daniel. “And these pyramids facing heaven with their tops were, in fact, a cry for immortality, for eternal life.”

“Well, the anachorites or monks found immortality not by looking to the top of the pyramid, but by deepening, lowering the mind into the heart, deepening the spiritual life, and renewing the spiritual life through unceasing prayer, fasting, feats, fighting selfish passions for the pacification of the soul,” the Patriarch continued.

The fruit of this spiritual work is as concrete and useful as possible for the community, the Patriarch also mentioned, because they, “after reaching a peace of mind, a perfect hesychasm, the world began to look for them” for advice.

“So, the exile of the Infant Jesus, an Anachorite in Egypt, became a blessing to Egypt, just as Babylon, which was a place of slavery for the Jews, was blessed by Christ, who received gifts from the Persian kings or magi,” he added.

Thus, the Patriarch stressed, “God transforms an oppressive past of wickedness and paganism into a Christian future, into a future of peoples seeking Christ for their salvation.”

Nazarene can also mean holy man

The Gospel also relates that the Saviour lived on his return to Nazareth, to fulfil the prophecy that he would be called a Nazarene.

But, “according to the interpretation of St. Cyril of Alexandria, Nazarene can mean a holy man, a spiritual man, a spiritual flower.”

“And the word Nazarene is not a simple inhabitant of Nazareth, but the Nazarene means a holy shoot or branch, of which the prophet Isaiah speaks, when he says that a branch will come out of the stump of Jesse and a shoot will bear fruit,” His Beatitude explained.

This offspring of the Tree of Jesse, King David’s father, is the Messiah Himself. “In Hebrew, nether means a branch, a branch, a holy shoot that grows out of the stem of Jesse,” said Patriarch Daniel.

“Therefore, the Nazarene here has the meaning not so much of the inhabitant of Nazareth as of the righteous man, who fulfils the law of the Lord and makes an oath to God and upholds it. At that time, there was a group of godly people, called Nazirites, who practised this godliness of faithfulness to the law of the Lord.”

“So, the prophecy does not refer to a specific prophet, but to a state of mind, that of fidelity to God, of faithfulness, godliness, and holiness. And Jesus Christ, the branch, or the shoot that came out of the stump of Jesse (…) is the Saint who will show people the way to the holiness of salvation and eternal life,” Patriarch Daniel concluded.

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