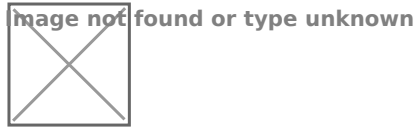


Homily by His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America At the Third Salutations to the Theotokos



Beloved faithful,

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This evening, gathered in this beautiful Sanctuary, we intone the Third Stanza of the Salutations to the Theotokos – the Akathist Hymn. Throughout this magnificent poem, there are more than the praises of the Virgin Mother of God. There are also calls to action for us – like this one:

Ξένον τόκον ἰδόντες, ξενωθῶμεν τοῦ κόσμου, τὸν νοῦν εἰς οὐρανὸν μεταθέντες.

Beholding this strange birth, let us estrange ourselves from this world, translating our minds unto Heaven. *

As in all of God’s interactions with His fallen world, when He sets things aright, it looks very strange to us. The “strange birth” is the miracle of the Virgin Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it is strange, because coming forth as a Perfect Man from a perfected Woman, in His very Body and Blood, the Lord reunites our human nature, and makes possible a new way of living for every human being.

And what is this new way of living? Well, it is nothing less than a “strange birth” within our hearts – a birth of capacities to love, to forgive, to be merciful, and to be compassionate.

That is why the Hymn enjoins us to “estrangle ourselves from this world.” This does not mean to forsake the world and all its pleasures and pains, but rather, to transform our lives while yet in the world. While our feet are planted firmly on earth, our minds are to be translated to Heaven itself. Such an elongation of the self is not a physical reality, but a simple stretch of our imaginations.

One of the most marvelous things about this precious human life that God has granted us is the ability that we have to reach beyond our immediate

environments. Our minds can travel across galaxies and can drill down to contemplate the smallest particles of matter. We have such capacities because they have been endowed upon us by our Creator. But these abilities are designed for more than enhancing our perceptions of the material universe. They are for the immaterial as well.

As we consider how God chose to save the world, we see in His “strange birth” the model for our activities in this world: humility, innocence, inclusion and, above all else, the mother’s love.

The embrace of the Panagia of her Divine Son is a call to each and every one of us to be as loving to one another, as a mother would be to her only child. And yet, our Panagia watched her Child perish on the Cross, fulfilling what Scripture says:

God so loved the world, that He gave His Only-Begotten Son to the end, so that all who believe in him might not perish, but possess everlasting life. †

The strength of her mother’s love allowed her to be present when her Son was crucified. And it cleared the way for her to receive the Good News of the Resurrection. For according to a tradition, the Lord appeared to His Mother first on that first Sunday of Pascha. ‡

And that, my friends, is how we traverse the strange path that leads from birth to death, and then to eternal life – by magnifying our love as we go.

This is indeed a strange way of living, redolent with the astonishing character of Pentecost, when we sing of ξένους ῥήμασι, ξένους δόγμασι, ξένους διδάγμασι, τῆς ἁγίας Τριάδος – strange utterances, strange beliefs, strange teachings of the Holy Trinity. And what makes them strange?

We choose love over hate.

We choose forgiveness over resentment.

We choose compassion over contempt.

We choose mercy over judgment.

Imagine if everyone in the world embraced this strange way of living? With feet on the ground and their minds in Heaven? It’s a stretch; I know it. But it is the worthiest of goals. One that we all can embrace. And when we do, we make of earth a Paradise once again. May we live to see it.

Amen.

* Akathist Hymn, Third Stasis, Ξ.

† John 3:16.

‡ Apolytikion of the Sixth Tone (Plagial of the Second).

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