

Patriarchal and Synodal Encyclical

*on the occasion of the celebration of the 1400th anniversary
of the solemn chanting of the Akathist Hymn while standing
for the deliverance of the Queen of Cities
from the siege of the Avars and the Persians*

Prot. No. 265

ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE

+ BARTHOLOMEW

BY GOD'S MERCY

ARCHBISHOP OF CONSTANTINOPLE – NEW ROME

AND ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH

TO THE PLENITUDE OF THE CHURCH:

GRACE AND PEACE FROM GOD



*“To You, our Champion Leader, we, Your City, ascribe hymns of victory and
thanksgiving, for having been delivered from calamities, O Theotokos!”*

This year marks fourteen hundred years since, in honour of the Theotokos, the Kontakion now universally known as the “Akathist Hymn” was solemnly chanted in church, with all the faithful standing. It is an exalted and triumphant poem which, with singular richness and elegance of expression, refers both historically and theologically to the divine economy of the Incarnation and to the unique role of the All-Pure Mother of God within it.

Through this Kontakion, the faithful at prayer reverently greet the Panaghia with the repeated echo of the first salutation addressed by the Archangel Gabriel, herald of grace and joy, to the one full of grace: the word “Rejoice.” Through this word, the “mystery hidden from all ages” is made manifest, and “the sum of our salvation” is brought to fulfilment. The repetition in this hymn of the word “Rejoice” one hundred and forty-four times in address to the All-Blessed Virgin clearly bears a mystical meaning. It

recalls the one hundred and forty-four thousand pure saints of the Revelation, who sing the “new song” with their harps before the throne of God and “follow the Lamb wherever He goes.”¹ As the people of God are purified in both life and doctrine, wholly devoted to the incarnate Word of God and indissolubly united with Him, they hymn the saving divine economy and at the same time salute, in songs of praise and sacred melody, the All-Glorious Mother of the Lord and Mother of the Church, as well as her mighty protection over the Church’s devout flock.

The opening of the Kontakion, its *Prooimion* (prelude), was originally the well-known hymn, “Having mystically received the command in knowledge...,” which refers exclusively to the Annunciation of the Theotokos. This shows that the entire hymn properly belongs to that great feast, for which, even to this day, the whole service of the Salutations forms a beautiful and richly flowered crown of forefeast and afterfeast. In the course of time, a new introductory hymn became established — “To you, our Champion Leader, we ascribe hymns of victory” — in order to express the grateful thanksgiving of the people to her “through whom trophies are raised” and “through whom enemies are overthrown.”

The salvation of the City and of the whole Empire from the terrible assault of the Avars and the Persians, during the absence of Emperor Heraclius and his army, who were far away striving to recover the precious Cross of Christ, was rightly attributed to the mighty protection and help of the Most Holy Theotokos, to whom the founder, Equal-to-the-Apostles Emperor Constantine the Great, had reverently dedicated New Rome. Receiving the unceasing and anguished supplication of clergy and people from the depths of their hearts, the Mother of God not only strengthened the resolve of the few defenders, but also wrought a great miracle: by the swirling of storm winds she brought about the total destruction of the besiegers’ fleet, after which they were driven into disorderly flight, and thus the City was saved. Rightly, therefore, “having been delivered from calamities,” the City of the Theotokos inscribed its hymns of victory to the Panaghia, whom it thenceforth named its “Champion Leader,” and as such it called upon her again and again throughout the turbulent history of Orthodoxy, each time tasting sweetly her love and her mighty protection.

The historic Church of Blachernae, where, according to ancient tradition, an all-night vigil was celebrated each week in honour of the Mother of God, often in the

¹Rev. 14:1-5.

presence of the Emperor, received on the night of 7 August 626 the crowds of the God-fearing people who had been saved. Deeply moved and with tears of gratitude, they offered her veneration and chanted the Kontakion with its new *prooimion*, as fitting thanksgiving and a debt of glorification to God and to her who, in the words of Saint Andrew of Crete, “holds the second place after the Trinity”² — the Deliverer and Protectress of the City and of the whole realm.

From that hour, the “Akathist Hymn” — this radiant masterpiece of ecclesiastical poetry, this incomparable monument of the Greek language and most intricately woven work of art of God-inspired theology — became the most beloved hymn of our liturgical life, the Christians’ sweetest delight. Long ago, it was translated into many languages. Bishops and priests chant it with compunction. Monastics recite it daily, and the faithful often throughout the year. Theologians analyze its lofty dogmatic ascents. Scholars of language and literature plunge into the beautiful depths of its expressive refinement and poetic grandeur. Poets and painters draw inspiration from its luminous lyrical images. Iconographers depict lovely scenes from its abundant content. Masters of ecclesiastical music clothe it in elaborate sacred melodies. Yet the “Akathist Hymn” always remains, above all, the God-befitting prayer of the Church — the voice of the devout heart of Christians, at once glorification, thanksgiving, supplication, and entreaty to Him who “for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man”; and at the same time, an appeal to her who possesses maternal boldness before God and who, in manifold ways and at all times, abundantly bestows her mighty help and protection upon the devout Orthodox faithful.

The Akathist Hymn calls every believer to vigilance, to remain upright and steadfast, in humility and prayer, before the great challenges of our age, in these grievous days of upheaval and war through which humanity is now passing. Let us pray fervently that the Mother of the “Peace of God,” moved by the prayerful offering of her “Akathist Hymn” by all the faithful in compunction and reverence, may once again act as “Champion Leader” of all who are wronged and endangered, and as the mighty Protection of the children of the Church throughout the world, granting to the human race the true Peace of her Son, that peace “which surpasses all understanding.”³

On the 27th day of the month of March 2026 A.D.

²Theotokion, Plagal First Tone, Sunday Vespers.

³Phil. 4:7.

Indiction III

Bartholomew of Constantinople
supplicant in Christ

- + Emmanuel of Chalcedon, supplicant in Christ
- + Ambrosios of Karpathos and Kasos, supplicant in Christ
 - + Apostolos of Miletus, supplicant in Christ
 - + Joseph of Proikonnesos, supplicant in Christ
 - + Meliton of Philadelphia, supplicant in Christ
 - + Athanasios of Koloneia, supplicant in Christ
 - + Theoleptos of Iconium, supplicant in Christ
 - + Joseph of Buenos Aires, supplicant in Christ
- + Cleopas of Sweden and All Scandinavia, supplicant in Christ
 - + Kyrillos of Imbros and Tenedos, supplicant in Christ
 - + Constantine of Denver, supplicant in Christ
 - + Grigorios of Ankara, supplicant in Christ