

HIS BEATITUDE IN THE BORDER CITY OF ALEXANDROUPOLIS

On the afternoon of 12th May 2014, His Beatitude Theodoros II, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa, accompanied by His Eminence Alexios Metropolitan of Carthage, the Very Reverend Archimandrite Meletios Koumanis, Abbott of the Holy Patriarchal Monastery of St Savvas the Sanctified in Alexandria, and the learned Professor of the University of Thrace, Mr. E. Barbounis, Archon Archivist of the Patriarchate, arrived in Alexandroupolis to participate in the celebration of the 94th anniversary of the Liberation of this border city. He was met at the Dimokritos Airport by Their Eminences Metropolitan Anthimos of Alexandroupolis, and Metropolitan Panteleimon of Maroneia and Komotina, the Deputy Regional Governor of Evros Mrs. Nicolaou, the Mayor of Alexandroupolis Mr. Lambakis, the Deputy Commander of the 12th Division Brigadier Mr. Kavour, and other representatives of the local authorities. Speaking to the local television media, His Beatitude thanked the local Metropolitan Anthimos for the wholehearted welcome and addressed to all the people of Thrace the Resurrection greeting, emotionally emphasizing the fact that he is in Thrace, the birthplace of his mother, after 38 whole years.

On the afternoon of 13th May 2014, the official welcome of His Beatitude took place at the Holy Cathedral of St Nicholas, where the Great Festal Vespers was conducted, officiated by His Beatitude, supported by Their Eminences Metropolitans Alexios of Carthage, Damaskinos of Didymoteichos, Panteleimon of Xanthe and Anthimos of Alexandroupolis, and in the presence of His Excellency the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. K. Gerontopoulos. Prior to the dismissal His Beatitude was addressed by the local Metropolitan His Eminence Anthimos, who said amongst other things:

When almost 100 years ago, the then national merchants met and place borders on the souls of people, at that time, in our district, the Consul of Greece in Dedeagatch, Ion Dragoumis, was attempting to guarantee as a given and to prove internationally our national Hellenic conscience, he wrote: "Here in Dedeagatch, where... all sorts of people live...the women who bring their husbands to the Church of St Nicholas, are making a national effort and I am grateful to them". In this majestic for those times Church, the Protocol of Liberation of our city was signed on 14th May 1920.

For 70 years we endured the national vicissitudes of our country, as our distance from the Capital made them more tragic. During the final decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, we experienced the widening of the surrounding horizon through the geopolitical "opening up" which untied us culturally and commercially with the Balkan hinterland and the Black Sea States. For 4 years now, the so-called economic crisis, which arose "as an Egyptian plague", probably paves for us a peculiar influence of redistribution which forecasts also a change of borders. Obviously it is this that you described 5 days ago, addressing the European Conference of the European Council, as "travails.....of historic transformation...with implicit results...in the broader region of the South Eastern Mediterranean".

In the territory of Thrace of the 3 counties of Xanthe, Rodope and Evros, we have incurred the results of this situation, in the ugly face of unemployment, low birth rate and our dehydration of scientific and working manpower. Despite all this, our noble and proud people remains pious and steadfast on the Orthodox tradition of their forefathers, respects the Armed Forces, trusts Justice, looks forward to Education and remains democratic in its convictions. The century long coexistence with our Muslim compatriots can become a standard for Europe, before it starts to act spasmodically dangerously in its fear of the circumstances.

Theodoros II, Pope and Patriarch of the Great City of Alexandria, Libya,

Pentapolis, Ethiopia, the entire land of Egypt and All Africa, is compelling evidence of the beneficial common course of Christianity with Hellenism for mankind, and an exceptionally and a sound proposal for a peaceful European path, equipped with:

- The burden of the two thousand year institution which substantializes,
- The gilded and bloodstained history which it conveys,
- The painful experience which it multifariously endures,
- The excellent manner in which it proves its ministry.

The text by your predecessor St. Athanasios the Great, "Against Greeks" immersed forever into the marshes of the Nile, the miserable and mist-shrouded Hellenism with its deterministically doomed pagan way, at the same time consolidating the international and universal Hellenism which in a lightning flash became the backbone of the vast empire. The philosopher Hypatia in fact "died" tragically in Alexandria "in a secular manner" and was reborn "in Christ" as St Catherine. This is what the Cappadocian refugees of our city recall, in celebrating in Caesarea the martyr Hypatia on the 25th November.

The Alexandrian School was not afraid to raise the "great pride of the Hellenicized and philosophical Judaism" about whom to this day international intellect wonders ultimately who was right, Filon or Plato. The Alexandrian poet parodied the ruler "from West Africa", who when he visited the city "took on a Greek name, dressed like the Greeks, learned to more or less behave like the Greeks: and he trembled in case he spoilt the rather good impression, speaking Greek badly, and the Alexandrians would poke fun at him, as was their habit, the awful people". Cleopatra was of course the last Greek Pharaoh, yet, at the gateway to your See, to this day, the inscription "ALEXANDREIA" written in Greek, remains.

So, the value of the historic and ecclesiastic beacon which you guard, is that it added to your grandiose identification: "Father of Fathers, Shepherd of Shepherds, Archpriest of Archpriests, Thirteenth of the Apostles and Judge of the Universe".

Yet, the brilliant past, is not a place of rest, it is a springboard. Many times "heavy and visible" you do not fare there "standing around and keeping warm".

Your Beatitude, we have seen you,

- Being a political tightrope walker to African leadership
- Organizing the Dark continent in a Missionary manner
- Bridging perennial divides diplomatically
- Addressing conferences of Nations
- Conversing easily with Presidents of State
- Holding cultural discussions with Tribal Chiefs of people
- Caressing children suffering from cholera, leprosy, Aids, Ulgere de Buruli and Nile worms
- We have seen you decorated with shining medals, but also covered in mud in thatched huts
- We have seen you in your tiara, as well as bear-headed, beside building materials, in your cassock

In other words, briefly, we have seen you bringing Christ and Greece to every sundrenched and sunless corner of Africa.

- Conforming the Orthodox faith, Christian worship and Ecclesiastical workmanship, to the measure of the indigenous people
- Teaching Greek dancing and songs in schools and Universities which you constructed and operate
- Dressing the poor in clothes and giving the competent ones technology
- Feeding the hungry with food and giving knowledge to those who thirst for it
- Tending tombs in Cairo, of great names of entrenched Hellenism which was wrongly persecuted

Geronta, many and prolific things, for which Nelson Mandela defined you as "his good friend", but which to us also reveal an "Orthodox ecclesiastical conviction and a genuine Hellenic spirit".

For all of these we welcome you, Your Beatitude, genuflecting deeply.

Your words, your glance, your spirit, your manner, your policy, your technique, your discrimination, your foresight, versatility which define you, are all that we too are in need of, now more than ever, now that we are losing in our Country and in the broader region, the following three things:

- The unconcern regarding religious givens
- The stability regarding national issues, and
- The illusion regarding pure cultures

Your personal progress, in the footsteps of your ancient Patriarchate, is expressed proficiently by our Nobel Prize winning poet, as "the long river, which emanates from the large closed lakes, deep in Africa and was once a god and then became a path and a donor and a judge and a delta; which is never the same...yet still remains the same body, the same layer... the same orientation".

In his reply, His Beatitude thanked Metropolitan Anthimos for the amenable and uncomplicated address and as a token in return, he gave plenteous his Patriarchal distinction to the Holy Metropolis and to His Eminence for the assistance to the Missionary effort of the Patriarchate through aid in the construction of Churches and Schools on the African continent. He blessed the youth, the pious people of Alexandroupolis, the Army and Security Forces, the Clergy, the Authorities and the watchtower of Greece, the island of Samothrace, praying for the success of the efforts, the sacrifices and the hopes of all who participated in the celebration,

Commemorative gifts were then exchanged as well as the honorary reward of the Teacher of Mathematics in Secondary Education in Evros, Mr. G Lergios, as a token of recognition of his contribution to the operation of Greek schools in Kinshasa in the Congo. In conclusion the procession of the holy icon of the Panagia Eleftherotria, with many people present.

NB – The photographs were kindly given by Mr. Ai. Polygenis