

PATRIARCHAL DIVINE LITURGY AT THE HOLY SHRINE OF PANAGIA SOUMELA ON MOUNT VERMION – HOMILY OF HIS BEATITUDE

On 15th August 2012 His Beatitude Theodoros II, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa presided over the Divine Liturgy at the Holy Shrine of Panagia Soumela in Vermio.

Concelebrating during the Patriarchal Divine Liturgy were His Eminence Elder Metropolitan Petros of Aksum, His Eminence Panteleimon Metropolitan of Veroia, Naousa and Kampania, His Eminence Athenogoras Metropolitan of Iliou, His Grace Nikodimos Bishop of Nitria and His Grace Iakovos Bishop of Thavmakou.

Preaching the Divine Word His Beatitude mentioned: "In giving birth you preserved your virginity, in falling asleep you did not forsake the world, O Theotokos..."

"The aim is high, noble and unending is the wish to exceed the natural boundaries which ensnare human nature in corruption. The older and the more recent technological human achievements, speak of an internal movement towards the approximation of perfection and to surpass death.

The Marian feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos is the event humans can visit to see realized in it the wondrous and exceptional natural inevitability. Because in the most holy figure of the Mother of God, even when the faithful venerates it on her death bed, knows that the ancient beauty of Eve before the fall was reformed, which shone with the prospect of incorruptibility and death in the Garden of Eden.

The choice of the one "blessed among women" was an infallible step in the plan of Divine Providence. However the humble subjection of the pure Daughter of Nazareth to divine will, was a decision on behalf of man to acquiesce to God's love for the restoration of the sins of the Forefathers.

So, the Theotokos as the New Eve, apart from being a particular historic being, the Mother of Jesus, became the Source and Mother of Life and the spiritual nourisher of all of mankind.

In viable recognizing the above theological position in its innermost immortal soul, the Greek nation, placed the Most Holy Theotokos as a never ending source of strength and support in the navigation of the salty seas of national ordeals, through the ages, wherever Greeks found themselves. From Metropolitan Greece up to the Aeolian and Ionian lands the Theotokos was his refuge and consolation.

It was particularly Pontian Hellenism, that proud and indomitable Greek race, rooted from the 9th century on the shores of the Black Sea, that made Panagia Soumela a protector, as well as a point of reference of its historic life even when the sword of the ferocious conqueror penetrated the natural heart of its centuries-old existence on the blessed land of Pontus.

How can one forget the land of our unforgettable homelands of the millions of displaced Greeks of Cappadocia, Pontus, Ionia, Aeolis, and other regions of Asia Minor? How can we not mourn the burnt churches, the ruined grand buildings, the dug up ancestral graves?

How can we surrender to oblivion a millennial civilization whose shining figureheads gained distinction in enviable Hellenic history, from the ancient philosopher and astronomer Heraclides Ponticus (388-310 B.C.) and Strabo the famous historian and geographer (63 B.C. – 23A.D. as well as the heroic figure of the last Shepherd of Trabzon, Chrysanthos Philippides (1881-1949, who later became Archbishop of Athens?

How can one forget a native legacy which ended so tragically, steeped in the blood and the martyred torment of our Pontian brothers and sisters on this earth, where the Orthodox faith was the essential difference between them and other people?

The Church was their mother. And the icon of the Most Holy Virgin of Soumela, kept in her prestigious Monastery of the same name, close to Trabzon, was for sixteen centuries the nourisher and guardian of the proud Pontian fellow Hellenes. Under the inextinguishable light of her ever-burning lamp, they lived, maintained institutions and created an independent cultural life within the hostile and heathen milieu, thereby preserving the primeval roots of Hellenism in the broader Asian lands. Simple people, blessed Christians, who even if some of them spoke no Greek, knew by heart entire texts and hymns of the liturgical cycle of our Church, because their families were Churches a home. So they lived, survived, achieved great things and remained Greek.

That is why as they were leaving, uprooted from their ancestral homes, they clenched in their embrace and took with them whatever was most valuable to them, holy relics, Church appurtenances and the icons of the holy guardians of their cities, the main constituents of their identity to enfold around them their new homes on the free Greek land of their homeland, who accepted them with abundant love. Their versatile presence induced those hidden excitements which rejuvenated the blood and the spirit of our nation.

Your Eminences, lords and ladies who love your nation and our saints,

Being here today before this holy and celebrated icon of Panagia Soumela on Mount Vermion in renowned Macedonia, which the will of the Greek State under the Cretan Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos and the burning faith of the last of the refugee brothers of the most ancient Monastery, Ambrosios Soumeliotes, brought to Greece, we fervently pray for the spiritual and moral lifting of the Greek nation.

At this point in time circumstances are again critical in our country, which in a different manner, arising from incorrect choices as well as foreign expediency, primarily goes against its value system.

Tracing back the four hundred years of slavery under the foreign and heathen yoke, we ascertain that the conditions for survival of the Greeks was incomparably more difficult than those of today, sometimes even nightmarish. It was the same during the years of great national disasters. But in all these dramatic circumstances and in every collective historic affliction, Greeks never stopped finding support for life in their Greekness; to salvage the certainty that they deserved to be Greeks. Not with abstract psychological boastings, but with an incarnate "courtesy" of their privileged origins in practice: in language, in historic memory, in collective conscience, in folklore and in the deep religious belief and piety: a treasure trust!

"The Lord works wonders through worthy people" (Basil the Great, Epistle 67 to Athanasius the Great). Before our eyes we have a mighty historic

example, the resurrection of Pontian Hellenism! Panagia Soumela is its imaginary ark experience, its knowledge and its observations. It is she who healed the wounds of the painful loss of the ancestral homes. It is she who revived from the ashes of destruction the certain hope of another creative future on the land of our mother country. It is she, in short, the foundation itself of the national status of our Pontian brothers and sisters, revealing their historic continuance as it was retained through the springs of their unfaltering Orthodox faith.

Thinking with a shrinking heart of the contemporary socio-economic stalemate in our country, and turning our eyes imploringly to the Protector of our nation, let us become conscious of our historic responsibility, let us collect our strengths and programme our actions wisely and with fellowship, in a spirit of humility and self-criticism, harmony and self-sacrifice, in order to once more overcome the storm of the historic moment: our rebaptism into the values and ideals of our nation as they were taught to us in practice by the Pontian and general Hellenism of the lands that gave birth to Saints, Pontus, Cappadocia, and Ionia; we humbly consider that it is the only safe way out of the gravity of the times.

Your Eminence Panteleimon, Metropolitan of Veroia, Naousa and Kambania,

“In this glow of the incomparable light – the “Summer Pascha” – we celebrate today with you following your fraternal and most kind invitation, the Dormition of the Eternal Ever Virgin Mother, of this beautiful pan-Hellenic shrine which has its feast today.

We celebrate together with you today the double anniversary of the completion of sixteen centuries of the constant historic presence of this symbol of Pontian Hellenism and six decades from the founding of the New Panagia Soumela on the slopes of Mount Vermion.

Together with the blessed plenitude of your God-saved and historic Metropolis, and the thousands of pious pilgrims, we sing the triumphant hymn “neither the tomb, nor death, could hold her, for being the Mother of Life she has translated to life...”.

We honour our forefathers “who were made perfect in fire, steel and the gallows, in exile and bitter slavery earned their livelihood”. We pray with you for the future of our country and our people who are tormented, but who know how to struggle with honour and to conquer insurmountable imaginary mountains. And we bend our knee in prayer before the most venerable and wondrous icon of the Mother of God, for the rich productivity of our immaculate faith in Africa, the continent of the future, which today also praises the intercessor to the all merciful God in the pure hearts of her people.

“Hasten to intercede, make speed to entreat Your Son and God! Become our protector and supporter and help and Champion Leader! Hear us Lady, incline Your ear and do not forsake your suffering faithful and pious Hellenic nation. For the prayer of a Mother has much strength! Amen!

His Beatitude was honoured by His Eminence Panteleimon as Chairman of the Holy Shrine of Panagia Soumela with the Great Cross of the Great Comnion of Trabzon in memory of his visit, and His Beatitude returned the honour by awarding His Eminence the Order of the Commander of St Savvas the Sanctified of the Patriarchate of Alexandria.

The Venerable Primate of the Throne of St Mark awarded the gold medal of Panagia Soumela to the bronze medal winner in judo at the London Olympics, Elias Eliades.

The great procession of the icon followed and the trisagion at the monument of Alexandros Ypsilantis.