

PATRIARCHAL LITURGY AT THE RIZAREIOS ACADEMY IN ATHENS

On 9 November 2014, the day of the Feast of St Nektarios, Bishop of Pentapolis, Director of the Rizareios Ecclesiastical Academy and patron saint of Ecclesiastical Education, His Beatitude Theodoros II, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa, conducted the Divine Liturgy at the Rizareios Academy, of which he himself was a spiritual fellow. Concelebrating were Their Eminences Metropolitans Damaskinos of Velestino, Eusebius of Samos, Seraphim of Zimbabwe, Alexios of Carthage, George of Guinea, Chrysostomos of Halkida, Emmanuel of Kavasos, Nikodimos of Memphis, and Theodoros of Heliopolis. Lecturers of the Academy were present, as were Archons of the Patriarchate of Alexandria and many lay people. During the Divine Liturgy, His Beatitude performed the ceremony of the wearing of the cassock for the students of Rizareios. Responding to the address by the President of the Institution, Mr. Christos Massalas, His Beatitude said: The experience of forty years of priesthood, shows me that valuable help on this journey of ministry to God and mankind, were not the abstract thoughts that nest in books, but faith and adherence to the ethos of people present and past: their works, their words, the inextinguishable flame of their hearts, the modest fortitude of their souls. This ethos provided me with the confidence that I was not alone even when I found myself on unexplored paths. It gave me the strength to hold on to my roots, even when there were crosswinds in life. Like a hidden compass, it gave me guidance even when the next step seemed undefined. This ethos, this natural substance which God gave us, gave rest to the effort, made thoughts productive and made the desert bloom. It is to the ethos of these people, that in due gratitude, forty years late, I come as a pilgrim to pay tribute and to remember. I am returning to the starting point of my priestly journey, the Rizareios Ecclesiastical Academy, to honour the magnanimity, generosity and humanity of the Great Benefactors Manthos and George Rizaris. The brothers, from Epirus, emigrated, started from scratch, but managed to follow successful economic and social paths. However, they did not forget their homeland. They actively supported the Filiki Etaireia (Society of Friends) and the struggle of the Greek Revolution. They spent the surplus of their labour to create in the newly established Hellenic State, a place for learning sacred writings, an ecclesiastical academy, the most important after the Theological Academy of Athens. They elevated benefaction to a vector of ideological, institutional and social transformation, undertaking works of beneficence which manifests practically their altruism to their fellows. Forty years later I am returning to the Rizareios Ecclesiastical Academy to pay tribute to Saint Nektarios who, as Director, inspired the students with his humility and led them to the grace of God. He taught by the example of his life that one needs to love, to serve and to show genuine concern for the people you manage. The humble hierarch became an example for pious priests as well as for so many other people in the years that followed. With the love of Christ, with paternal affection, with great circumspection, with tireless interest and continuous prayer, he raised the prestige of the Rizareios Academy and made it a radiant spiritual institution. I always keep in my heart his words: "Know that priests are the soldiers of Christ, those who labour for salvation ... do not be bowed in your labours of patience and affliction, so that you do not forfeit the honour bestowed upon you". Forty years later I am returning to Rizareios, to pay tribute to the teachers who helped me to form a self-existent personality, independent and complete, able to cope with the demands of a life in Christ. They awakened and developed in me my spiritual strengths. They formed attitudes and values in me and raised my personal support bases, founded in responsibility and conscientiousness. Finally, I am returning to Rizareios, forty years later, to pay tribute to my fellow students; my brothers in becoming acquainted with the evergreen tradition of

Orthodoxy; my companions on the experiential acceptance of the truth graces of faith; my comrades in the struggle for our ontological completion in the Holy Spirit.

When I graduated from Rizareios, I took with me two noetic pieces of luggage. The first was the wish expressed by the Apostle of the Nations in today's Epistle reading: "Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14). The second was the encouragement of our Lord, as treasured in today's Gospel extract: "Do not fear, only believe" (Luke 8:50). Today, forty years later, the only token of gratitude that I have to offer is forty years of serving God and ministry to mankind and of these, thirty years of contribution to our African brothers and sisters. They are years which reflect what I was taught at Rizareios: the truth that our meeting place with Christ is none other than the face of our brother, of the unjustly treated and of the stranger, which is what we need. The driving force behind my every effort is humanity. Humanity which knows no narrow-minded considerations, defies everything, is inventive, resourceful, takes risks and is resolute. Humanity which involves selflessness, sacrifice, constant identification with others, as they exist in the image of God. Humanity which patiently treads the uphill path of the dynamic forging of the image, into the likeness, of God. It is only this ministry of humanity that I have to place before you and I only have one humble hope from knowing God to express: "You have kept my word and not denied my name" (Rev. 3:8). Amen!