

The Salutations to the Theotokos in Great Lent

Dear Beloved Brothers & Sisters in the Lord,

Our Holy Orthodox Church offers us the Great Lenten period each and every year to help us change our lifestyle in preparation for *Pascha*. It is a difficult time of self-examination and self-denial; a time for taking control of our lives and bodies. One hymn of our Church describes Great Lent as a time to “*. . . put away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, so that we may navigate the immense ocean of Lent*” (Hymn from Forgiveness Vespers). The Fathers of the Church teach us that this great “ocean of Lent” when lived properly and spiritually, can be a source of strength that will carry us throughout the year. Another purpose of the Great Fast is to give us a greater awareness of our dependence on God. It is a time to improve ourselves and our relationship with God and our neighbor. Like anything else in life, the more we understand what is happening, the more we indulge in the feast, the more we will experience God’s healing presence in our lives.

The worship life of our Church contains beautiful and solemn services, such as the Great Compline, Pre-Sanctified Liturgy, as well as the Salutations of the Theotokos which give us special strength during this period. Our Panagia, as we know, is the greatest intercessor to our loving God.

The reason why our Church has integrated the Salutations to the first 5 Friday evenings of Great Lent is due to her role in our lives as one who mediates on our behalf to her Son. As one theologian has stated: “Within this service, we all supplicate our Mother to support us in our struggle [of Great Lent]. To intercede for us to God for the salvation of our souls and for a happy ending to this struggle, that it may be peaceful and sinless, so that with pure souls we will experience the Holy and Awesome Passion of our Lord and then His bright Resurrection. And the presence of the Panagia in the world is great and salvific in our daily life...”

It is worth mentioning a historical event, as an example and proof of the salvific intervention of the Panagia in the history of the world:

In 626 A.D., while Emperor Heraclius with the Roman army were away campaigning against Persia, Constantinople was suddenly besieged by the Avars. The Avars had rejected every proposal for a ceasefire, and on August 6th they occupied the Church of the Theotokos of Blachernae. In collaboration with the Persians, they prepared for the final attack, while the Patriarch Sergios led a procession around the city walls with the icon of the Theotokos of Blachernae and encouraged the people in resistance.

That night, a fierce wind, which was attributed to divine intervention, created a storm at sea and destroyed the enemy fleet, while the defenders caused huge losses to the Avars and Persians, who were forced to withdraw, siege and leave empty handed. On August 8, 626, Constantinople was saved from its greatest, until then, threat in its history.

The people wishing to celebrate their salvation which they attributed to the assistance of the Theotokos, gathered in the Church of the Theotokos of Blachernae. Then, according to tradition, the standing crowd chanted what has come to be known as the “Akathist Hymn”, odes of thanksgiving to Panagia, ascribing to her the victory and with gratitude chanting: “Τη υπερμάχω...To you the Champion Leader...”

This is just one of the countless examples of Panagia's intervention in the history of the world.

Her mediation can redeem whole nations, let alone our soul, mediating to God on behalf of our salvation, redeeming us from our passions. Through her, “trophies of victory are raised” and “enemies are defeated” (4th Stasis). She is the “key to the doors of Paradise” (2nd Stasis) and the “bridge leading those from earth to heaven” (1st Stasis).

Tradition teaches us that the Akathist Hymn was established immediately following the aforementioned miracle in 626 A.D., out of deep reverence and gratitude to the Theotokos. This service has been divided into four stasis' following the letters of the Greek alphabet. The Service of Salutations is chanted in four parts during the first 4 Fridays of Lent, then on the 5th Friday of Lent the entire Akathist Hymn is chanted.

We offer glory to God that He has given us the most holy Theotokos to intercede for us and help us in our present condition. Let us take advantage of such a gift in our Lenten journey and be present physically and spiritually during these Friday evenings.

“You, all-laudable Mother who gave birth to the Logos Who is holiest of all who are holy: O accept this offering now, and from calamities all deliver everyone, and redeem from the future torments of hell those who cry out with zeal: Alleluia” (From the 4th Stasis).

(Excerpts of this article were taken from “The Salutations and the Role of the Theotokos in Great Lent” written by Sotirios Sarvanis).