

THE AKATHIST HYMN TO THE MOTHER OF GOD

On the fifth Saturday of the Great Fast, the Byzantine Catholic Church sings the Akathist Hymn to the Mother of God. “Akathist” comes from a Greek word meaning “without sitting;” it is customary for the congregation to sing the 24 stanzas of the Hymn while standing. This custom recalls several moments in the history of the Church when the Akathist Hymn was sung as a desperate cry for the Mother of God to intervene and save Constantinople (Byzantium) from pagan invaders—first from the Persians (626), next from the Arabs (717) and finally from Slavs (in 860; ironically, they would soon be converted to Byzantine Christianity). On each occasion, the faithful kept a prayer vigil all night in the church that held a famous icon of Mary and the precious relic of her belt and, on each occasion, the city was spared. Although we do not know who composed the Akathist Hymn, we can be certain that it was composed soon after the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (431) at which Mary’s title Theotokos (the one who gave birth to God) was upheld as orthodox faith. This was a period in which devotion to the Mother of God blossomed with new shrines and feasts in her honor and with eloquent hymns and sermons composed by the greatest writers in the Christian world. The Akathist Hymn is the finest product of this period, without doubt the most sophisticated piece of Christian poetry ever composed in the Greek language.

The 24 stanzas of the Akathist Hymn follow the order of the Greek alphabet; the first word of the first stanza begins with alpha, the first word of the second with beta, and so on. The even stanzas are short while the odd stanzas are expanded by a series of twelve exclamations, all of which begin with the word “Rejoice!” (the Latin “Hail”) the first word spoken to Mary by the Archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation (Luke 1,28). In fact, the first twelve stanzas of the Hymn follow the events in Mary’s life from the moment she agreed to be the Mother of God, through her conversations with St Joseph, Jesus’ birth, the adoration of the shepherds, the visit of the Magi, the flight into Egypt and the encounter in the Temple with Simeon. The final twelve stanzas celebrate Mary’s role as mother of the faithful (John 19,25-27) and invite us to imitate Mary’s acceptance of God’s plan for our lives. Each of the even stanzas ends

with the refrain “Alleluia,” (Hebrew for “Praise ye the Lord!”)—a hymn always connected with the earthly or the heavenly Jerusalem (Psalms 111-118; 135-136; Revelation 19; Tobit 13,18). The odd stanzas end with a paradoxical exclamation to Mary: “Rejoice unbridled Bride!” a reference to the mystery of Mary’s virginal motherhood. The exclamations are poetic masterpieces that weave together dozens of images from the Old and New Testaments and apply them to Mary in complicated rhymes.

The paradox that the Akathist celebrates is the heart of Christian faith. We believe that God became man and that a virgin was His mother. These are not just abstract ideas for theologians to ponder. The fact of Jesus Christ’s real human nature totally changes what it means to be human and what human beings can hope for. Christ gives us the possibility to be united with God for all eternity. Mary’s role was a unique event but her “yes” to God’s invitation is something each of us must imitate in our own way. Stanza 14 of the Akathist sums it up this way: “Having seen a strange birth, let us estrange our mind from the world and turn toward heaven. For this is why God Most High appeared on earth, a lowly man, desiring to draw up to the heights those who cry out to him: Alleluia!

The struggle to turn our minds from earthly things to our heavenly home is the real meaning of the Great Fast. The Akathist Hymn encourages us in that struggle and refreshes us with the experience of a rich but purely spiritual beauty. In its final stanzas, the Akathist accomplishes something like a reconciliation and restoration, gathering the Church together into a single voice to sing “Alleluia” in anticipation of Christ’s glorious Second Coming.

Pope John Paul II of blessed memory had a great devotion to the Akathist Hymn and he repeatedly encouraged Roman Catholics to learn to sing it. He himself presided at celebrations of the Hymn on several occasions in the Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome.

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