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THE PSALMS OF KIAHK

Introduction:

The readings assigned by the Fathers of the Church for the Sundays of Kiahk are a masterpiece. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Fathers arranged the various readings for the four Sundays in such a way as to prepare us for the advent of our Lord, which we celebrate on the 29th day of the month of Kiahk.

We often meditate on the Gospels of the Sundays of Kiahk in the sermons we give during that month. At other times we choose to meditate on the Pauline epistle or the Catholic epistle for that purpose. We seldom choose the Psalm verses as the subject of our meditation.

The Psalms assigned to be read for each day of the Coptic year are truly wonderful. One who attempts to meditate on them is struck with awe at the wisdom of the Fathers who, guided by the Holy Spirit, chose those verses. I discovered the beauty of these verses, while translating them from the Coptic at the request of one of our servants, who was not very satisfied with the currently available translations.

The following meditations are based on two sermons I gave on the second and fourth Sundays of the month of Kiahk for the current year of the martyrs, 1723.

Father Athanasius Iskander

MEDITATIONS ON THE PSALMS OF KIAHK

THE FIRST SUNDAY:

Evening Psalm:

Until when, then, O Lord, wilt Thou forget me,? for ever?
Until when, then, wilt Thou turn away Thy face from me?
Behold and hear me, O Lord my God: enlighten my eyes.

When I meditate on this Psalm, I could see our father Adam in Hades. And in case you don't have an idea about what Hades is, let me give you an approximation in as much as our language can describe the hidden mysteries. I want you to imagine a basement, built underground, with no windows, and the door to that basement is shut and the key to in is in the hands of Satan! There are no furnishings or any amenities there. Imagine our father Adam sitting on the cold floor, his hands are shackled to the wall behind him and his ankles are shackled to the floor beneath him. It is very dark and depressing.

Adam is tormented by his memories. Memories of his formal happiness in Paradise, when God was his friend. When he had everything and lacked nothing. He had authority over all of God's creatures. God gave him this authority.

He reminisces about the worst day of his life when both he and his wife Eve exercised the divine gift of free will given to them by God, to disobey God; their creator and their friend.

He recalls the words he heard from God on that awful day:

Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree of which I commanded thee, saying, "Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." (Ge 3:17-19)

Adam and Eve were condemned to a life of sorrow, at the end of which they had to die and then go to Hades to be prisoners of Satan, who convinced them that they will be “like God” if they listened to him.

Beside the doom and the gloom of these word, Adam remembers another word of God that gave him a glimmer of hope. And I could almost hear him crying out to God: “Lord, Thou hast promised us that one day, the Seed of the Woman shall come to bruise the head of the serpent, that serpent that deceived us and robbed us of our eternity.” I could also hear him saying, “Lord it has been thousands of years since that promise and we have been waiting in this awful place: *Until when, then, O Lord, wilt Thou forget me,? for ever? Until when, then, wilt Thou turn away Thy face from me?*”

Then, pleading with the Lord Adam adds: “*Behold and hear me, O Lord my God: enlighten my eyes.*” You see, For all of these years God had turned away His face from the supplication of Adam, and now Adam is asking God to look upon him and hear his prayer. He is asking God to enlighten his eyes. Isaiah the prophet who was in the same place with Adam, must have told him about God’s promise that “*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.*” (Isa 9:2)

God’s promises for the future are usually put in the past tense, as if they have been already fulfilled. And in this prophesy God is promising that those in Hades, the place of “darkness and the shadow of death” will one day, see the True Light shining upon them. This indeed was fulfilled after the Lord died on the Cross, when His soul, united to His divinity, descended into Hades to release the souls imprisoned there and bring them to Paradise. It is for this reason that we call Great Saturday, “Saturday of the Light” for in it the True Light did shine upon those who were sitting in darkness and the shadow of Death.

Morning Psalm:

The LORD looked down from heaven upon the earth: To hear the groaning of those in fetters. To declare the name of the LORD in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem.

It seems to me that the morning psalm is the answer to Adam’s prayer. The Lord, who for thousands of years had turned His face away from

the fallen human race, has finally decided that the time has come to save Adam and his children from the bondage of the enemy. God now looks down from heaven, *“To hear the groaning of those in fetters.”* Those in fetters are those souls imprisoned in Hades, and they have been groaning for thousands of years, awaiting for the salvation promised by the Lord of old.

Now, the time has come *“To declare the name of the LORD in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem.”* “Zion” and “Jerusalem” are to be taken in the prophetic sense as referring to the Church,. The bride of Christ. Now the time has come to declare the name of the Lord in Zion! Now is the time for the fore-runner to come *“To declare the name of the LORD in Zion”* to tell the people of Zion: *“Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”* (Jn 1:29-30) Now the time has come for the angel Gabriel to go to Zachariah the priest to bring to him the good news of the salvation of the Lord.

The Liturgy Psalm:

Thou shalt return, and have compassion upon Zion: For it is time to have compassion upon her, For the LORD will build up Zion, and shall appear in his glory.

This Psalm is a continuation on the same theme: the time has come for the salvation promised by the Lord to be manifested. For His mercy to be fulfilled to Adam and to his children. Of course, not all of the children of Adam could benefit from this promised salvation. Only those who believed the promise of God and had hope in Him would be saved. Those who despaired from their salvation, like Cain would not benefit from the salvation that the Lord offers freely to all. *“For it is time to have compassion upon her”* Someone once said, God’s timetable is so different from ours! We often ask for things from God and want them right now!

Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth must have been praying for years asking the Lord to give them a child. The question must have come to their mind, why does the Lord not answer our prayer? What they did not know is that God will answer their prayer in the appointed time. God knew that they will be given not an ordinary son, but one who is the greatest among those born of women! But his coming to the world

has to wait until the Lord decides that the time to have compassion on Zion has come; for John will be the herald of this compassion!

“For the LORD will build up Zion” Indeed the time has come for the true Zion to be built up, not by the hands of men but, by God Himself. This Zion that the Lord will build is not the earthly Zion of the Jews, which became a harlot, going after strange gods, but the new Zion, the Church of God made both of Jews and Gentiles.

“... and shall appear in his glory.” Indeed, the time has now come for the Lord to appear in His glory. The glory that the angels declared at His manifestation by saying: “Glory to God in the highest!” For indeed, The baby in the manger was glorified by men on earth and in the same time by the angels in heaven. Some interpret this versicle as a prophesy about the transfiguration when the chosen disciples beheld His glory on the holy mountain.

THE SECOND SUNDAY:

Evening Psalm:

Bow thy heavens, O LORD, and come down: touch the mountains, and they shall smoke. Send down Thine hand from on high: Rescue me and deliver me.

As I meditate on this psalm, I could see David the Psalmist, who inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote this Psalm a thousand years before the coming of Christ. To David was given a privilege that few prophets had, for his psalms have more prophesies about the birth, the passion and the resurrection of the Messiah than any other Old Testament Book.

No wonder he cries out asking the Lord to hasten His coming to Earth: *“Bow thy heavens, O LORD, and come down!”*

David, like many of the Jews, thought of the coming of the Messiah to be associated with the same phenomena that took place when the Lord descended on Mount Sinai to give the Law to Moses. No wonder he adds: *“touch the mountains, and they shall smoke!”* He pleads with the Lord to deliver him from the misery of Hades by saying: *“Send down Thine hand from on high: Rescue me and deliver me.”*

David, speaking by the Holy Spirit, had earlier made a prophesy:

“For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell.” (Ps 16:10) And even though this prophesy was said concerning Christ, yet David must have taken it as pertaining to his own deliverance from Hell. I could imagine him pleading with the Lord: Lord, Thou hast promised not to leave my soul in Hell (Hades, Amenti) and it’s been a thousand years since you made that promise to me, So, *“Send down Thine hand from on high: Rescue me and deliver me.”*

Morning Psalm:

He shall descend like rain upon a fleece: and like drops dripping upon the earth. In his days shall righteousness flourish: and abundance of peace.

It seems to me that this versicle is a response to David’s plea that the Lord come down from heaven! Except that the Holy Spirit is now directing David to another Psalm given to him that describes the manner in which the Lord will make His appearance on Earth.

Unlike the descent of the Lord on Mount Sinai which is described to us in Exodus 19:18: *“And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire”*, the coming down of the Lord in order to save the whole race of Adam will be inconspicuous! *“He shall descend like rain upon a fleece.”* Fleece is the fluffy stuff that people get when they shear lambs. It is what wool is made of. The Holy Spirit speaking through David tells us (and him too) that when the Lord comes down from heaven, it will be like rain falling on a fleece, almost imperceptible.

Indeed, His coming was most un-notable. Only a few poor shepherds knew about it because the angel announced His coming to them. His coming was also revealed to The Three kings, who saw His star in the East, and this was done in order to fulfill the prophesy of another Psalm, the Evening Psalm of Christmas: *“The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of the Arabs and Seba shall offer gifts.”*

The Psalm continues: *“In his days shall righteousness flourish: and abundance of peace.”* Indeed in His days righteousness flourished because He was a teacher of righteousness, and a doer of righteousness. *“and abundance of peace.”* that peace which was announced to us by the

angels in their hymn: *“peace on earth and goodwill toward men”* Indeed the coming of the Lord ushered peace between heaven and earth. The Liturgy of Saint Gregory describes this beautifully: “Thou hast reconciled the heavenly and the earthly, and made the two into one.”

The Liturgy Psalm:

Hearken, O daughter, and see, and incline your ear: and forget your own people, and your father's house Because the King has desired your beauty: for He Himself is your Lord.

The Gospel reading that follows this Psalm is about the visit of the angel Gabriel and his annunciation of the good news to the holy Virgin Mary. And the Psalm that prefaces this Gospel is a prophesy about this. *“Hearken, O daughter”*: It seems to me that David the Prophet is addressing the holy Virgin Mary. He rightly calls her “daughter”, for indeed, the church calls her the “daughter of David” He asks her to hearken or listen carefully.

After attracting the attention of his daughter according to the flesh, David continues: *“And see,”* See, not only with your eyes but with all your heart and soul, for behold, an archangel will be sent to you! He is one of the seven angels standing before God (Rev 8:2), so look carefully, *“and incline your ear.”*: be obedient to the message he brings to you for it is from the Most High.

The Psalmist prepares the holy Virgin for a major change in her life by saying: *“forget your own people, and your father's house.”* For though she was born of Jewish parents and raised as a devout Jew, yet in a little while, she will become the mother of all Christians.

David now gives the Virgin a hint about the contents of the message to be revealed to her by the angel: *“Because the King has desired your beauty”* The King is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, who chose to be born of the holy Virgin. He has chosen her above all the women that were ever born for he desired *her beauty*. Not her physical beauty, but rather her inner beauty, the beauty of her soul.

Another Psalm that speaks of this inner beauty of the holy Virgin is the Morning Psalm for the first day of Pachons; the birthday of the holy Virgin: *“All the glory of The king's daughter is within: clothed with gold-fringed garments, adorned in varied ways.”*

The Psalm speaks of her as “*The king's daughter* “, for indeed, she is the daughter of King David. The Psalm tells us that all her glory is *within*, an inner glory. For indeed on the outside she was a poor teenager, an orphan, given to espouse an older man because she had no one to look after her. But she was “*clothed with gold-fringed garments, adorned in varied ways.*” Not literally, for a poor girl could not afford gold fringed garments. Those gold-fringed garments, according to the Fathers, are her virtues. She is “*adorned in varied ways*”: adorned with all sorts of virtues that the saints wrote volumes about. It was this beauty that the King had desired when He chose her to be His Mother.

But, lest she should think pridefully that she will become the mother of the King, David her father adds: “*for He Himself is your Lord.*” The same King that will be born of you, *He Himself is your Lord.* The holy Virgin must have memorized and understood this Psalm, for when the angel told her what was prophesied a thousand years earlier, she responded: “*Behold, the handmaid of the Lord.*” (Luke 1:38)

THE THIRD SUNDAY:

Evening Psalm:

For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation. Here will I dwell; for I have desired it. Her widow with a blessing will I bless.

Zion was the old name of Jerusalem. It belonged to the Gentiles but King David took possession of it and renamed it Jerusalem, which means “the vision of peace”

In the scripture, the word Zion can be understood in many way. It refers to Jerusalem as the city of David but also the city of God, where God dwells! Psalm 9:11 reads: “Sing praises to the LORD, which dwelleth in Zion.”

It also refers to the Jewish nation as a whole; God’s chosen people and the church of the Old Testament.

In the prophetic scripture it also refers to the church of the New Testament, which inherited all the promises given to the old Zion. The church of the New Testament is often named “the daughter of Zion.”

Theologically, it refers to the holy Virgin Mary, who became the

dwelling place of God the Logos, and “the holy city of the Great King”, as we call her in the Sunday Theotokia.

Spiritually, it refers to the human soul, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and thus a dwelling place of God.

The current versicle is meant to be interpreted theologically as referring to the holy Virgin Mary.

“*The LORD has chosen Zion*”: Indeed the Lord has chosen the holy Virgin above all the women ever born to be His Mother, the new Eve, who was to be given as a mother to all Christians, when the Lord told the beloved disciple: “Behold, your mother” (Jn 19:27)

“*He has desired it for his habitation. Here will I dwell; for I have desired it.*”: The Lord has desired the beauty of her soul and the purity of her body as a place where He can dwell. He has desired her “*more than all the dwellings of Jacob.*” (Ps 87:2) Saint Theodosius, the 33rd Pope of Alexandria, interprets the “dwellings of Jacob” as the choir of the saints. This means that she was preferred over all the saints, to be Mother of God.¹

Please note that the same Psalm is used in the Liturgy of holy Baptism. The priest pours the holy Myron into the water in the font, then, he stirs the water while reciting the appropriate versicles of the Psalms. The stirring of the water in the baptismal font is in the likeness of the angel that descended into the pool of Bethesda and stirred the water, and whoever went into the water first was healed from any disease. (Jn 5:4) The analogy is clear, for whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved (Mark 16:16)

The Psalm versicles recited by the priest while stirring the water are all prophetic references to Baptism. The last versicle to be recited is the same: “*The LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation.*” This refers to the one baptized becoming “Zion” the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver-of-life.

All Psalm quotations in this article were translated from the Coptic

¹Sermon de Theodose: in *REVUE DE L'ORIENT CHRETIEN*
1923

VENERATION OF THE VIRGIN

A sermon by Father Athanasius Iskander

To venerate means to publicly acknowledge someone's virtues or good deeds. The person may be alive at the time, but mostly veneration is done after a person passes away. Veneration of the saints has very strong Biblical roots and is well steeped into Christian tradition.

We have many Biblical examples of veneration of the saints and I would like to share some of them with you.

Perhaps one of the Oldest instances of veneration is found in an ancient book of the Old Testament, the Book of Job. Here we find Job venerated by non other that God Almighty:

And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that fears God, and shuns evil? (Job 1:8)

The Book of Deuteronomy venerates Moses the Prophet: "And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face." (Deut 34:10)

The Book of the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach has a whole section at the end devoted entirely to the veneration of the saints of the Old Testament:

Enoch pleased the Lord, and was translated, being an example of repentance to all generations. Noah was found perfect and righteous; in the time of wrath he was taken in exchange [for the world;] therefore was he left as a remnant unto the earth, when the flood came. An everlasting covenant was made with him, that all flesh should perish no more by the flood. Abraham was a great father of many people: in glory was there none like unto him; Who kept the law of the most High, and was in covenant with him: he established the covenant in his flesh; and when he was proved, he was found faithful. (Sirach 44:16 -20)

The New Testament has many examples of the veneration of the saints, St. Paul speaks about the cloud of witnesses in very high regard:

And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (Heb 11:32-38)

The Gospel according to Saint Luke gives us two marvellous examples of veneration:

Luke 1:28 And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

Luke 1:42-45 And (Elisabeth) spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.

Perhaps the most impressive example is the Lord himself venerating John the Baptist: “Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.” (Matt 11:11)

In another instant the Lord not only venerates the woman who anointed him, but also decrees that a memorial shall be made to her: “*Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.*” (Matt 26:13)

Here we have a direct order from Christ not only to venerate the saints, but also to commemorate them in our public worship. This is why we say at the beginning of the Commemoration of the Saints in the Liturgy, “As this O Lord is the command of Thine only begotten Son that we share in the commemoration of Thy saints.” It’s a command of the Lord!

WHY DO WE VENERATE SAINT MARY?

St. Mary was venerated by Archangel Gabriel, and by St. Elisabeth speaking by the Holy Spirit, as we mentioned earlier.

She was venerated by an unborn baby! For St. Elisabeth tells her “For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed, for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.” (Lk 1:41-44). Notice that as soon as St. Mary saluted St. Elizabeth, not only was Elisabeth filled with the Holy Ghost (Lk 1:41), but also John, still in his mothers womb was filled with the Holy Ghost, according to what the angel Gabriel predicted, that “He shall be filled with the Holy ghost, even from his mother's womb.” (Lk 1:15)

She was venerated by the woman who said, “Blessed is the womb that bare thee and the paps which thou hast sucked.”

She was venerated by the Lord Jesus, who, answering the same woman said, “Yea, rather blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it.”, which is what the blessed Virgin did, according to the testimony of the Gospel (Luke 2:19,51)

She herself prophesied, by the Holy Spirit, that she will be venerated by men from the time she was chosen to be the Mother of God and until the end of time, “For, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.” (Lk 1:48)

You see, she was venerated by God, by angels, and by men, isn't that reason enough that we too should venerate her?

THE VENERATION OF THE VIRGIN BY THE FATHERS:

The Fathers of the church esteemed the Virgin very highly. Here are some examples:

Saint Gregory the wonder worker, who is mentioned in our commemoration of the saints, left us some wonderful examples of the veneration of the holy Virgin Mary:

She proved herself prudent truly in all things; neither has any woman been born like her in all generations. She was not like the primeval virgin Eve, who, keeping holiday alone in paradise, with thoughtless mind, unguardedly hearkened to the word of the serpent, the author of all evil, and thus became depraved in the thoughts of her mind; and through her that deceiver, discharging

his poison and refusing death with it, brought it into the whole world; and in virtue of this has arisen all the trouble of the saints. But in the holy Virgin alone is the fall of that (first mother) repaired.¹

This comparison between the first Eve and the Virgin, the second Eve was very popular among the Fathers. In the same homily, he compares the Virgin to the saints of the Old Testament, showing her to be much greater than they:

Thou knowest, O Mary, things kept hid from the patriarchs and prophets. Thou hast learned, O virgin, things which were kept concealed till now from the angels. Thou hast heard, O purest one, things of which even the choir of inspired men was never deemed worthy. Moses, and David, and Isaiah, and Daniel, and all the prophets, prophesied of Him; but the manner they knew not. Yet thou alone, O purest virgin, art now made the recipient of things of which all these were kept in ignorance, and thou dost learn the origin of them.

He continues to venerate the Virgin extolling her virtues:

For of all generations she alone has risen as a virgin pure in body and in spirit; and she alone bears Him who bears all things on His word. Nor is it only the beauty of this holy one in body that calls forth our admiration, but also the innate virtue of her soul. Wherefore also the angels addressed her first with the salutation, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

And since the angels venerate her, St. Gregory invites all the faithful to join in venerating the holy Virgin:

Come, therefore, beloved brethren, and let us take up the angelic strain, and to the utmost of our ability return the due meed of praise, saying, "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee!" For it is thine truly to rejoice, seeing that the grace of

¹First homily on the Annunciation to the holy Virgin Mary.

God, as he knows, has chosen to dwell with thee--the Lord of glory dwelling with the handmaiden; "He that is fairer than the children of men " with the fair virgin; He who sanctifies all things with the undefiled."

FIGURES OF THE HOLY VIRGIN:

The ancients saw many types and symbols of the Virgin in the Old Testament, one of these is the Arc of the Covenant:

Come, then, ye too, dearly beloved, and let us chant the melody which has been taught us by the inspired harp of David, and say, "Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest; Thou, and the ark of Thy sanctuary." For the holy Virgin is in truth an ark, wrought with gold both within and without, that has received the whole treasury of the sanctuary.

Like many of the ancient fathers, St. Gregory uses many metaphors to describe the Virgin:

She is the ever-blooming paradise of incorruptibility, wherein is planted the tree that gives life, and that furnishes to all the fruits of immortality. She is the boast and glory of virgins, and the exultation of mothers. She is the sure support of the believing, and the helper of the pious. She is the vesture of light, and the domicile of virtue. She is the ever-flowing fountain, wherein the water of life sprang and produced the Lord's incarnate manifestation. She is the monument of righteousness; and all who become lovers of her, and set their affections on virgin-like ingenuousness and purity, shall enjoy the grace of angels.¹

Saint Gregory even tells us that all creatures venerate the holy Virgin with us:

Thy praise, O most holy Virgin, surpasses all laudation, by reason of the God who received the flesh and was born man of thee. To

¹Gregory the wonder worker: second homily on the annunciation

thee every creature, of things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth, offers the meet offering of honour. For thou hast been indeed set forth as the true cherubic throne. Thou shinest as the very brightness of light in the high places of the kingdoms of intelligence; where the Father, who is without beginning,, and whose power thou hadst overshadowing thee, is glorified; where also the Son is worshipped, whom thou didst bear according to the flesh; and where the Holy Spirit is praised, who effected in thy womb the generation of the mighty King.¹

In another homily, St. Gregory gives us his own meditations on what the Lord God might have told the Angel Gabriel, when he ordered him to announce the Good News to her:

Go thou, therefore, to the Virgin Mary. Pass thou on to that animate city whereof the prophet spake in these words: 'Glorious things were spoken of thee, O city of God.' Proceed, then, to my rational paradise; proceed to the gate of the east; proceed to the place of sojourn that is worthy of my word; proceed to that second heaven on earth; proceed to the light cloud, and announce to it the shower of my coming; proceed to the sanctuary prepared for me; proceed to the hall of the incarnation; proceed to the pure chamber of my generation after the flesh. Speak in the ears of my rational ark, so as to prepare for me the accesses of hearing. But neither disturb nor vex the soul of the virgin. Manifest thyself in a manner befitting that sanctuary, and hail her first with the voice of gladness.²

Note the beautiful metaphors the Church Fathers used to describe the holy Virgin, “the city of God”, “the rational Paradise”, “the gate of the east”, “the second heaven”, “the light cloud” ...

Now St. Gregory meditates on what might the angel Gabriel have told God:

¹Gregory the wonder worker: second homily on the annunciation

²Gregory the wonder worker: third homily on the annunciation

But how can Mary sustain the fire of the divinity? Thy throne blazes with the illumination of its splendour, and can the virgin receive Thee without being consumed?" Then the Lord says: "Yea surely, if the fire in the wilderness injured the bush, my coming will indeed also injure Mary;¹

Now you know why we call the holy Virgin "the fiery Bush that Moses had seen in the wilderness"

Saint Methodius, who lived in the second half of the third century (260-312) left us this beautiful "Oration concerning Simeon and Anna on the day they met in the temple."

For if to the ark, which was the image and type of thy sanctity, such honour was paid of God that to no one but to the priestly order only was the access to it open, or ingress allowed to behold it, the veil separating it off, and keeping the vestibule as that of a queen, what, and what sort of veneration is due to thee from us who are of creation the least, to thee who art indeed a queen; to thee, the living ark of God, the Lawgiver; to thee, the heaven that contains Him who can be contained of none?

That bush which could not be touched, which beforehand shadowed forth thy figure endowed with divine majesty, bare God without being consumed, who manifested Himself to the prophet just so far as He willed to be seen.

The golden pot also, as a most certain type, preserved the manna contained in it, which in other cases was changed day by day, unchanged, and keeping fresh for ages.

Blessed art thou, all-blessed, and to be desired of all. Blessed of the Lord is thy name, full of divine grace, and grateful exceedingly to God, mother of God, thou that givest light to the faithful.

¹Ibid

Note how he calls her the golden pot as we do in our midnight praise, and also Mother of God. This is amazing, since it was only after the third ecumenical council that the word Theotokos or Mother of God used in describing the holy Virgin Mary, but here is a man who died before even the first Ecumenical council was convened calling the Virgin: Mother of God.

Thou hast lent to God, who stands in need of nothing, that flesh which He had not, in order that the Omnipotent might become that which it was his good pleasure to be. What is more splendid than this? What than this is more sublime? He who fills earth and heaven, whose are all things, has become in need of thee, for thou hast lent to God that flesh which He had not.

Hail! hail! mother and handmaid of God. Hail! hail! thou to whom the great Creditor of all is a debtor. We are all debtors to God, but to thee He is Himself indebted.

If I would say this today, I would be called a heretic! But look how bold they were in venerating the Virgin even then in the third century.

For the hymns which we offer to thee, O thou most holy and admirable habitation of God, are no merely useless and ornamental words. Nor, again, is thy spiritual laudation mere secular trifling, or the shoutings of a false flattery, O thou who of God art praised.

Note that even that early, hymns were already in use in venerating the holy Virgin. We were told that these hymns started to be written after the third ecumenical council, but here is proof that they were used in the Church much earlier. So sweet is his justification of this praise by us mortals by the fact that she is praised by God.

Hail to thee for ever, thou virgin mother of God, our unceasing joy, for unto thee do I again return. Thou art the beginning of our feast; thou art its middle and end; the pearl of great price that belongeth unto the kingdom; the fat of every victim, the living altar of the bread of life. Hail, thou treasure of the love of

God. Hail, thou fount of the Son's love for man. Hail, thou overshadowing mount of the Holy Ghost.

Wherefore, we pray thee, the most excellent among women, who boastest in the confidence of thy maternal honours, that thou wouldest unceasingly keep us in remembrance. O holy mother of God, remember us, I say, who make our boast in thee, and who in hymns august celebrate the memory, which will ever live, and never fade away. And do thou also, O honoured and venerable Simeon, thou earliest host of our holy religion, and teacher of the resurrection of the faithful, be our patron and advocate with that Saviour God, whom thou wast deemed worthy to receive into thine arms.

See how he asks the Mother of God to remember us, and see how he asks Simeon the elder to be our patron and advocate with our Saviour since he was deemed worthy to carry Him in his arms.

May we be steadfast in our tradition of venerating the saints and asking for their prayers, their protection, their patronage and their advocacy on our behalf and glory be to God forever. Amen.

PAROUSIA is a publication of St. Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church, Cambridge, Ontario, Canada. It is sent free of charge to over 750 readers all over the world, including Ethiopia, Mexico, Spain, Barbados, India and Taiwan.

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SAINT MARY'S CHURCH RETREAT

The conceptual design for this important project (published in last month's *Parousia*) was presented to the congregation of Saint Mary's Church in Kitchener on Sunday December 3, immediately following the conclusion of the divine Liturgy. A vote was taken by secret ballot, and after the votes were counted, 134 approved and 4 disapproved of the concept.

When the results were announced to the congregation gathered in the church hall, there were loud cheers and clapping of the hands. Since the Sunday on which that historical vote was passed coincided with the feast of the Twenty Four Priests, Father Athanasius suggested to the congregation that the chapel which will be included in the new building be dedicated to the Twenty Four Priests.

Acting on the vote by the congregation, the Board of Deacons, passed a unanimous motion authorizing Father Athanasius to sign a contract with the Architectural firm "*The Ventin Group*" making them officially the architects for the new project.

Soon after, *Conestoga and Rovers*, our environmental consultants came back to us with a comprehensive report about the water and sewage management systems they recommend. This is currently being studied by the Building Committee appointed by the Board of Deacons to oversee the project.

A visit to the township office by father Athanasius to discuss the proposal was very positive. The officials in the Township said that they will support such a project. Three other jurisdictions have to give their approval before the project can go ahead: The Regional Municipality of Kitchener-Waterloo, the Grand River Conservation Authority, which has jurisdiction over the wetlands and the ponds on the property, and The Ministry of the Environment. We will be working hard to obtain their approval over the next few months.

In the mean time, the actual design will proceed, and God willing, we hope to start building in the summer of 2007.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE:

Besides building a retreat centre and an indoor-outdoor activity facility that is sorely needed for the Copts in the surrounding area, we have a grand vision for the future of this very significant piece of Real

Estate. There are still 12 secluded cabins, nestled among the trees, that we chose not to renovate at this time. We hope that some day, we may be blessed by developing them into Canada's first Coptic Monastery.

The zoning of the property also allows for one more residential building to be built on the property. This would be a very important future consideration, should His Holiness decide to appoint a bishop for Southwestern Ontario. A proper residence can then be built for the bishop on a secluded part of the 90 acre site. The site of the property is ideal for this, since it is geographically right in the middle of our congregations in Southwestern Ontario.

GROUND BREAKING CEREMONY:

If things work according to our hope in the Lord, we may be able to have a small ground breaking celebration sometime in the spring of 2007. We will be working on inviting one or more of our fathers the bishops to attend.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

We will approach our Bank for financing the project, but as we all know, any bank will require a healthy down payment before committing money to such a project. Since we mailed details of the project in last months' *Parousia*, we had a healthy response from our readers, both from the K-W area and from outside. Various churches have sent us contributions, and even some of our reverend priests in the area have sent personal contributions. We ask our Lord to reward all a hundred fold in this life and eternal life in heaven as He promised.

Our church is unique in the fact that out of every dollar we receive in contributions, close to 20 cents is directed towards assisting the poor (mostly in Egypt). We are the only Coptic Church that donates money towards the important missionary work of Father Silas in Northern India, the only Coptic mission in India at this time.

Our congregation is small (one hundred families) but it has a big heart. Our people are very generous in giving, but we still need a lot of our readers' prayers and financial support in fulfilling our mission.

To contribute, please use the enclosed envelop. Please mark your check "Retreat Project"