

SYNAXARIA OF THE TRIODION

by Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos

FIFTH SATURDAY of LENT

On the same day, the Fifth Saturday of the Fast, we celebrate the Akathist Hymn of our Most Holy Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary.

Verses

With unsleeping hymns doth thy city gratefully
Hymn her Protectress, who is unsleeping in battles.

Synaxarion

When Herakleios was ruling the Roman Empire, King Chosroes of Persia, seeing the extreme humiliation to which the Roman state had been reduced by the tyrannical Emperor Phokas, sent one of his satraps (generals), Sharbaraz by name, with many thousands of troops to subjugate all the East to him. For Chosroes had previously succeeded in destroying one hundred thousand Christians, whom the Jews had purchased and slain. After laying waste to the entire East, Sharbaraz, the Chief Satrap, reached as far as Chrysopolis, which is now called Scoutari. Emperor Herakleios, lacking public funds, melted down the sacred vessels of the Churches and converted them into coinage, in order to increase his revenues, crossed the Black Sea in ships, and invaded Persian territory, which he destroyed. Chosroes, with the rest of his army, suffered a crushing defeat. Shortly thereafter, Shiroes, the son of Chosroes, rebelled against his father, assumed control of the Empire, and, having killed Chosroes, made peace with Emperor Herakleios.

Now the Khagan, that is, the ruler, of the Mysians and the Scythians (Avars and Slavs [Bulgars]), on learning that the Emperor had crossed over the sea into Persia, broke his treaty with the Romans and, at the head of countless hordes, invaded Constantinople from the west, sending up blasphemous cries against God. At once, the sea became full of ships, and the land was filled with innumerable infantry and cavalry. Patriarch Sergios made many appeals to the people of Constantinople not to fall into despair, but to place all their hope wholeheartedly in God and His Mother, the All-Immaculate Theotokos. Bonus, a Patrician, who was governor of the city at that time, made suitable preparations for warding off the enemy; for, together with help from on high, we, for our part, must do whatever we can. Along with the entire populace, the Patriarch, carrying the holy Icons of the

Mother of God, went around the upper walls, thereby ensuring their security. When Sharbaraz from the east and the Khagan from the west began to set fire to the outskirts of the city, the Patriarch bore the Icon of Christ “Not Made with Hands,” the pieces of the Precious and Life-giving Cross, as well as the Precious Robe of the Mother of God and went around the walls. The Scythian Khagan launched an attack on Constantinople via the land walls with a countless multitude of soldiers, so great that for every Roman there were ten Scythians fighting against him. But the invincible Champion, with the very few soldiers who were in her Church of the Life-Giving Spring, destroyed a very large number of the enemy. Encouraged by this and rejoicing over it, the Romans, under their invincible leader, the Mother of God, continued to inflict heavy defeats on them. The people of Constantinople sought to make peace, but their offer was rejected, for the Khagan issued this proclamation: “Do not be deceived by the God in Whom you believe; for I will assuredly occupy your city tomorrow.”

On hearing this, the citizens stretched forth their hands to God. The Khagan and Sharbaraz came to an agreement, and attacked by land and by sea with siege-engines, eager to capture the city. But they were so severely defeated by the Romans that there were not enough men left alive to burn the dead. As the enemy ships, filled with heavily-armed troops, sailed down through the Horn towards the Church of the Theotokos in Blachernai, they were destroyed along with the rest of the enemy fleet when a violent storm suddenly fell upon the sea. And hereupon a miraculous feat of the All-Pure Mother of God could be seen: she cast them all up on the edge of the sea at Blachernai. The people, flinging open the gates as quickly as possible, killed every single one of the enemy, and even women and children fought against them like men. Their leaders returned, weeping and lamenting. The God-loving people of Constantinople, ascribing the victory to the Mother of God, sang the Akathist Hymn throughout the night to her who had kept vigil for their sake and had accomplished a triumph over the enemy by her supernatural might.

Ever since then, in commemoration of such a great and preternatural miracle, the Church has, by tradition, dedicated such a feast to the Mother of God in the present season, when she wrought her victory.

After some forty years had elapsed, during the reign of Constantine Pogonatos, the Hagarenes mustered an enormous army and attacked Constantinople. They laid siege to the city for seven years and, while wintering in the regions around Cyzicus, lost many of their own soldiers. Then, giving up and withdrawing with their fleet, they reached Syliaion, where they all drowned at sea, by the mediation of the All-Pure Mother of God. Again, a third time, during the reign of Leo the Isaurian, the Hagarenes, numbering very many thousands, first destroyed the Persian Empire, and then invaded Egypt and Libya, India, Ethiopia, and Spain. After that, they advanced against the very Queen of cities, with the additional support of 1800 ships. They surrounded the city and waited to take it by storm. The holy people of

the city, bearing the hallowed Wood of the Precious and Life-giving Cross and the venerable Icon of the Mother of God *Hodegetria*, went around the walls, tearfully propitiating God. Thereafter, the Hagarenes decided to separate their army into two divisions: one division marched against the Bulgarians, but more than twenty thousand of them were slain in the fighting; the other division remained behind to capture Constantinople. However, they were prevented from so doing by a chain that extended from Galatia to the city walls. Retreating, they reached the Sosthenian Strait, where most of their ships were smashed and destroyed by the onrush of a north wind. The survivors were stricken with a terrible famine, to the point that they cooked human flesh and even ate dung. They then fled, but when they reached the Aegean Sea, almost all of their vessels sank with all hands into its depths; for a hailstorm suddenly fell from the sky, causing the sea to seethe so much that it dissolved the pitch that held the ships together. Thus, that innumerable fleet was destroyed, and only three ships survived to report what had happened.

We celebrate the present feast on account of all these preternatural miracles of the All-Pure Mother of God. The hymn is called “Akathist” because at that time all the people chanted it to the Mother of the Word while standing throughout the night; and also because, while we are accustomed to sitting down when such hymns are chanted on the other Feasts, on the present Feast of the Theotokos, we all stand and listen to the hymn.

By the intercessions of Thy Mother, our invincible Champion, O Christ our God, deliver us also from the calamities that beset us, and have mercy on us, for Thou alone lovest mankind. Amen.

