

H.B. SPEECH ON THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY OF THEOTOKOS AT SAINT NICHOLAS IN JOENSUU, FINLAND.

An Address on the Feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God during the Divine Liturgy at the Church of Saint Nicholas in Joensuu at the beginning of the Academic Year

His Beatitude Theophilos III

8 September 2010

Your Eminence, Archbishop Leo

Your Eminences,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On this great feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God, we bring to you, dear brother Archbishop Leo, and to all the faithful of the Finnish Orthodox Church, the greetings of your fellow Orthodox Christians of the Holy Land. We are especially glad to convey to you the blessings of the Holy Tomb of Jesus Christ and the Tomb of the Mother of God, where we have just recently celebrated the feast of her Dormition.

Today the grace of the Holy Spirit has made us worthy to celebrate in this Eucharistic synaxis her blessed Nativity. As the apostles were miraculously gathered from the corners of the world to be by her side at her death, so we have been gathered here with you to honour the Mother of God at her birth. She is the Mother of the Church, and therefore the Mother of us all.

This is a special day for us. Not only are we celebrating in this holy place, but this is the first occasion – and we hope not the last – that Jerusalem bears her witness in Finland in and through our presence with you. This is a great joy, because in this Eucharist we realize the fruits of our unity, a unity that is grounded in the fullness of our common faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ, and that is supported by the prayers of his All-Pure Mother.

This is also a suitable day on which to be making the beginning of a new academic year, for the Virgin Mary was not only the Mother of our incarnate Lord; she was also the first disciple. So she embodies for the faithful Christian a model of true learning. Her life as a disciple began in the humble town of Nazareth at the Annunciation, when, having been chosen by God, she was proclaimed the *Theotokos*. And so she has taught to us all who seek to follow in her footsteps as disciples to say willingly and obediently “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to our word”. (Lk 1:38).

As the simple girl, Mary of Nazareth, entered into the mystery that had been hidden from the beginning of the ages, she attained to the highest knowledge. In a similar way she is the sign to us that we are given the potential by the grace of the Eucharist to attain to the *theoria* – the contemplation – of the glory of God, that is to say, the knowledge of God, and to union with him in true *theosis*.

As the Virgin Mary is for us the *naos*, the temple, of the Holy Spirit, so we may say she is the first spiritual academy. She teaches us where true and eternal knowledge is to be found, and she is our patron today as we begin this new academic year. So we are all students of the divine knowledge.

May this year be for all of the pupils in the schools and the students at the universities here a year of deep learning and true devotion, and may it be for all their teachers and professors a year of attentive teaching and fruitful research. For, as Scripture says, “you shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free”. (Jn 8:32).

We thank you, Your Eminence, for your kind invitation to make this fraternal visitation of the Finnish Orthodox Church and for your warm welcome, and we ask the prayers of the Mother of God for you, or our brother bishops, for the Orthodox faithful, and for all the citizens of this country.

Amen.