

HIS BEATITUDE THE POPE AND PATRIARCH OF ALEXANDRIA PERFORMED THE INAUGURATION OF THE HOLY CHURCH OF ST CHRISTOFOROS, EASTERN NIGERIA, ON HIS NAME DAY

On Friday 17th February 2012, the feast of the commemoration of St Theodoros of Tyre, on which His Beatitude Theodoros II, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa, celebrates his name day, he performed the inauguration of the Holy Parish Church of St Christoforos, in the town of Awo-Idemili in Eastern Nigeria.

His Beatitude arrived by air from Lagos on the afternoon of 16th February accompanied by Their Eminences Alexandros of Nigeria and Gregory of Cameroon, as well as the Very Reverend Archimandrite Panteleimon Arathymos, Chief Secretary of the Holy Synod.

On the day of the feast he performed the inauguration of the newly-built Holy Church of St Christoforos, which was built funded by the Brotherhood of Orthodox Missions in Thessaloniki. He also conducted the Divine Liturgy with the above-named hierarchs as concelebrants.

Before the end of the Eucharistic Synaxis His Beatitude awarded the offices of Archimandrite to Father Benjamin Ezieme and Father Ermas Opara and that of

Protopresbyter to Father Ioannis Okolo.

The local Metropolitan, His Eminence Alexandros of Nigeria, addressed His Beatitude, saying: "Today's Eucharistic Synaxis is a huge moment for the pious people of Eastern Nigeria, around you Your Beatitude, who heads the Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church of Africa, as the successor of the Saint Apostle and Evangelist Mark, the founder and first Bishop of Alexandria.

During today's Synaxis, you inaugurated the newly built Holy Church in the name of the Saint and Great Martyr Christoforos, a gift of love from the Brotherhood of Orthodox External Missions in Thessaloniki whom we thank from our hearts, praying that God will always support and guide them to new paths of missionary witness.

Today we offer to the Triune God "in Christ through the Holy Spirit" through you Your Beatitude, not only this Church, but at the same time, all the faithful people, each to his own personal repentance, but we each give our very selves for renewal and we ask you, in the image of Christ, to accept this offering. The inauguration of a Church is honoured only if the faithful are made new.

Here today, the dwelling place now of the one and true God, you performed the first Divine Eucharist and we all became "participants of the new creation of the vineyard"

Here today, in this Church of the Saint and Great Martyr Christoforos which means he who bears Christ, we too are Christ bearers. We renew our baptismal promise "joining ourselves to Christ" and we go forth with the hope of the final victory, based on the certainty of His Resurrection. On the Resurrection of Christ, on the Pascha of the Lord, we strive to build our own Pascha, a pascha of personal freedom and completeness, trying to overcome personal hurdles, personal temptations, cancellations, postponements.

Today, however, Your Beatitude, we also honour the memory of your Patron Saint, the Saint and Great Martyr Theodoros. Theodoros...Gift of God. And truly you are a gift from God for the Church of Africa! You do not source your greatness from the position with which God and His Church have honoured you. You draw it from your simplicity, your forbearance, your forgiveness, your boundless philanthropy, your tireless interest in and concern for the people of our suffering Continent, mother Africa. You draw it from your great heart which embraces everyone and everything without preconditions. The heart which knows how to rejoice with the happy and to cry with those who cry.

Please listen today to the struggle of the people of this country for justice and equality, for free access to the virtues of education, health and employment. For the right to free expression of political, philosophical and religious views and choices. For transparency and more democracy, just distribution of wealth, for a viable and healthy environment.

We welcome with joy your Honoured Entourage. My beloved brother His Eminence Gregory, metropolitan of Cameroon, the unassuming man of great culture and creative Hierarch of the neighbouring country. Also the Very Reverend Archimandrite Father Panteleimon, Chief Secretary of the Patriarchate and the Holy Synod, your valuable collaborator, the tireless servant of the Throne, my brother and friend.

Your Beatitude,

On the occasion of your visit here and especially on this your name day, please accept on behalf of the clergy of our Metropolis this small souvenir together with their dedication, love and prayers for many years, blessed and resourceful years on the Apostolic Throne of St Mark".

In his reply the Patriarch said: "With feelings of joy and spiritual jubilation I am amongst you on this

distinguished day, under the dome of the Holy Church of St Christoforos, whose inauguration and Bloodless Sacrifice we performed, participating in the Sacrament of Life through our mutual communion.

The inauguration of a Church is primarily an inauguration of man and entire creation into the New Life which began with the Resurrection of the God Man. The etymology of the word "inauguration" means incorporation into the new, the news brought by Christ to the world and is the offering of HIS Most Holy Body and Blood. The inauguration of a Church is also the dedication to God of a place, which is acknowledged and taken over by the Grace of God, through the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, who, although he "does not dwell in handmade temples" (Acts 17:24) still calls all "in the churches" to bless and glorify God, in order to receive an abundance of redemption, sanctification, purification, health (Prayer of the Great Sanctification of Water).

Therefore, today's historic event for the Ecclesiastical Community of Nigeria reminds us that the role and mission of the Church is to accept mankind and to transform him "in Christ", to renew him, liberating him from the bonds of mortality, creation and sin.

Also, on this distinguished day, our Holy Church celebrates the memory of St Theodoros of Tyre, a great Saint, who lived, preached his love for the True God and was martyred for Him at the end of the 3rd, beginning of the 4th century. When it was necessary for him to confess his faith in Christ the Saviour he did not hesitate to do so, which resulted in his dying as a martyr.

Beloved brothers and sisters,

Studying the life of the millions of saints we will undoubtedly come to the common conclusion that their steadfast faith was the driving force, both in the exposure to the

course of their life as well as in confronting even of death without ambivalence and hesitations. Of course, martyrdom is not the sole proof of faith. Every Christian has a duty to witness to his faith in Christ through their upright life according to the words of the Lord, not as a formal application of theoretical religious principles, but as a consequence of free will and choice which has the power to transform a human being into a living image of God, who overcomes death and destruction and attains sanctification and theosis, and the participation in His Eternal Kingdom. “ Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

However this priceless spiritual treasure is not an exclusive or “select” privilege of those who believe in Christ. “Go out into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15). This is the final heritage left by the Risen Lord to His disciples before His Ascension.

Our Apostolic and Ancient Patriarchate, dedicated to this Gospel command of the preaching of the faith of Jesus Christ to the world, builds souls and grants strength and hope to our African brothers and sisters. Our Church feels this duty to the nations of Africa, which stems from the compassion of God toward mankind, but also from the universality of the preaching of the humble Nazarene, which was addressed to every person from end to end of the universe. At the same time, our Patriarchate does not overlook the complete absence of necessary vital means, wherever they are incurred, for the treatment of which it is doing everything possible , with no distinction between language or origin. That is why its missionary witness to the blessed nations of Africa and its humanistic assistance to all people remains unfailing at all costs.

Dearly beloved,

With these thoughts, before the holy Altar I praise the All Holy Name of the Triune God, because today, the day on which this Holy Church is inaugurated and the day of the commemoration of St Theodoros of Tyre, whose name I bear, I have the great blessing and joy to be among you. This is the greatest gift for my name day, the taste of the love of the children for their father and the verification that the Church in Nigeria sacramentally participates in the glory of the glorified Lord. "It is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. And is children, then heirs, heirs of God, and fellow heirs with Christ..." (Romans 8:16-17).

The Eucharistic Community of this blessed country, as the Body of Christ and "child of God" (1 John 3: 2) overcomes every racial, ethnic, religious or other distinction, looking only to love, peace, reconciliation and unity which faith in the God Man Jesus offers. That is why in the contemporary turbulent world, where religious passions are deliberately stirred up and innocent blood is unjustly spilt – alas – in the name of the All-seeing God, the voices of the faithful must be lifted into voices of protest, protecting the holy garment of faith from its conversion into a robe of violence and bloodshed. Our business remains always timeless: our faith speaks of peace. Our holy texts praise peace. Consequently, only if the world follows the path of true and unadulterated faith, will genuine peace prevail.

I thank you for coming and participating in today's Holy Sacraments. I thank the good priests and workers of the spiritual efforts, the church Councils, the Councilors, the members of the choir, the teachers and all who contribute to the promotion of the service to the people of God.

I thank you for the love shown to our Holy Church and your outstanding Bishop, His Eminence Alexandros Metropolitan of Nigeria.

Your Eminence and holy brother,

From the first moment that you undertook your Hierarchal duties, utilizing the many talents that the Arch Shepherd Christ gave you, you gave yourself to an honest struggle of a strong foundation of the word of God in the pure hearts of our Nigerian brothers and sisters. The building of many churches, the establishment of multiple missionary centers and charitable institutions, the ordination of worthy and able clergy, especially the multitudinous presence of the Christians here, prove the productive results of your dedicated pastoral service in the Vineyard of the Lord. That is why the Patriarchal pleasure and the rightful praise of the Apostolic and Patriarchal Throne of St Mark are reliably given to you.

To you all, my precious brothers and sister, I paternally wish many and blessed years and the blessing of the Church through the words of its hymns, will seal this holy Church: "The Church is a heaven of many lights, shown to all, enlightening the faithful, wherever we are we shout: strengthen this House O Lord". Amen!

Closing his speech the Venerable Primate of the Church of Alexandria awarded the Lion of St Mark to eight local Orthodox workers of the local Church for their many years of productive contribution.

His Beatitude the Pope and patriarch of Alexandria was addressed on his name day also by the Very Reverend Archimandrite Chrysostomos Onyekakeyah, Hierarchal Vicar of the Imo region and Parish Priest of the newly-built church, representative of the Parish Councils, the local king and the mayor of the city.

Immediately thereafter he met privately with local officials, traditional as well as elective, as well as with the priests of the four Hierarchal Regions of Eastern Nigeria,

to whom he expressed his paternal love, praised the parish work they are doing under the inspired pastoral guidance of His Eminence Metropolitan Alexandros and gave them gifts and his blessings.

He then attended outdoor celebrations which were organised by the local officials, received the traditional gifts of the Ibo tribe from their king and visited the adjacent school complex of the Holy Metropolis of Nigeria, which is under construction and funded by the Christian Youth of Thessaloniki and the Russian Community of Lagos.