

2020: The Year of the WHO?

A considerable number of the Greek Orthodox immigrants of North Carolina were born in the region of the prefecture of Greece called Evritania, a rather mountainous and rough terrain located in western central Greece.

It is the least populated prefecture of western Greece due to its rough terrain, which may be perhaps the main reason for the mass emigration of its residents.

Undoubtedly, the greatest treasure of this rather unfertile region is the Monastery of Prousa, which hosts the miraculous icon of the Most Holy Theotokos (Birthgiver of God), written by the hand of St. Luke the Evangelist. The twelfth-century monastery is the central point of reference of this region and of one of the greatest pilgrimages in Greece and of the Orthodox Faith at large.

The residents of Evritania foster great love and reverence for their Heavenly Mother for her innumerable miraculous interventions over the centuries, and they show their gratefulness by building churches in her name worldwide.

Thus, it is not surprising that our beloved holy elder Ephraim of Arizona, while confessing our Orthodox faithful in North Carolina, was approached and asked to build a monastery in that region in the name of the Panagia Prousiotissa with the unwavering support of the Evritanes. The elder, who had a tremendous love for the Panagia, blessed the building of this monastery which serves the spiritual needs of the Orthodox in the Carolinas for several decades now under the spiritual direction of Abbess Agne, who is known for her modesty, wisdom and humility.

According to tradition, the miraculous Icon located in the Evritanian monastery of Prousa in Greece was stationed in one of the Churches of Prousa in Asia Minor. During an upheaval within the frenzy of the iconoclastic controversy, a pious young nobleman confiscated the Icon in 829 AD, abandoned his relatives, and brought it to safety in Kallipolis in Greece. Shortly thereafter, the Icon of the Panagia parted company with the young nobleman along the way, and transferred herself into a small cave at her present location. The disheartened nobleman was in great sorrow over his loss. However, he soon heard of the miraculous discovery of the Icon in the cave, in an area of Aitolia in Greece. He was thrilled to be reconnected with his miraculous companion, and vowed to never be separated from her again. He was tonsured a monk, and he built the first monastery for the Panagia of Prousa (hence the name Prousiotissa), in this harshly rugged mountainous region of Greece.

The magnificent presence of the most Holy Theotokos via hundreds of such miraculous Icons in the Orthodox Christian lands reassures all the generations that call her “the most blessed among women,” that “after her Dormition she did not abandon the world.”

Likewise, in this rocky and deserted region of Southwest Evritania thousands of pilgrims found consolation and refuge in the Directress, the “cause of all joy” and the protection of Christians, all through the centuries. The monastery was burned numerous times by the Ottoman Turks because it often became the hideout and refuge of the Greek patriots who were planning their liberation which finally took place after the Declaration of Independence in 1821. The generals of the Greek Independence were men of great faith and love for the “Megalochari”, (the one of

great grace); their faith in her intercessory power was such that they started the war of independence on the day of Her Annunciation by the Archangel Gabriel. The General George Karaiskakis had the Prousiotissa enveloped with gold and silver at his own expense.

In 1918, in the deadliest pandemic in history, the Spanish flu infected an estimated 500 million people worldwide—about one-third of the planet's population—and killed an estimated 20 to 50 million victims, including some 675,000 Americans.

It didn't take long for this indiscriminate killer to reach Agrinion in Greece, a town of 15000 (today it hosts a population of 95,000) located a few miles south of Evritania.

The panic-stricken town was burying 40 to 50 people a day. Most of the deceased were buried by hired workers who pulled the bodies on carriages to the cemetery in the absence of their fear-stricken relatives and not always in the presence of a priest, who under the circumstances would read a brief prayer at best.

Conditions were even worse in the neighboring towns of Mesologgi and Aitoliko. Medical Science once again was paralyzed and incapable of defending the infected masses from this vicious killer.

There was despair and hopelessness everywhere, and the disheartened masses were counting their days and expecting the worst. During such crucial times, the only refuge is in the Divine, but the daily spectacle of dead corpses and cries of despair weaken the faith of the average unseasoned believer, often characterized by an infantile and inorganic faith. But there also were those faithful "who held fast to His Name" (Rev. 2:13), in season and out of season: the blessed yeast, those who had the name of the Lord and His Most Holy Mother on their lips from sunrise to sunset. These were the blessed grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the pious souls who had lived through another intercessory miracle of the Panagia Prousiotissa 64 years prior. These pious elders reminded the priests and the lay officials of the miraculous salvific intervention of the Panagia when the Pandemic of Cholera (1854) had decimated the residents of this area. This was enough to spark everyone's faith and they all agreed that the presence of the icon of the Panagia was their only hope. Yet no one dared to go and make this request to the abbot of the Monastery of Prousa. They were all convinced that this pandemic was God's way of purifying the wickedness of his children who went astray, and as children of wrath, they further considered themselves too sinful and polluted to touch the *Megalochari*, the "One of Great Grace". In the aftermath of heated deliberations, they chose a three-member committee to convene with the ascetical Metropolitan Ambrosios of Nafpaktos to petition the transfer of the Holy Icon to the city of Agrinion.

The first committee resigned the next day, and a second committee thus reluctantly made it to Nafpaktos. The holy Metropolitan reminded the members of this committee about the seriousness of this mission and the importance of repentance and spiritual preparation prior to this holy endeavor. After the Metropolitan's handwritten permission and blessing the men of the committee exited the Metropolis with a troubled and compunctionate heart. Instead of heading toward the mountains, they instinctively changed direction and found themselves on the benches of a nearby sand beach of Nafpaktos. They needed a brief retreat of inner peace and solitude to contemplate and enter the deep heart, to carefully search for any impediments and

past spiritual dark spots that would render them unworthy to approach the Spotless one. They were torturing themselves for hours with humble thoughts of penitent self-accusation.

Yes, the Metropolitan gave his blessing, but are they worthy to draw near the Panagia (the All-Holy)? Is she going to accept their petition? Is she going to intercede on behalf of such sinners who have the audacity to intervene for the plight of their city?

A day later, on the 22nd of October, after an exhausting and prayerful journey, the three elderly “ambassadors” entered the doors of the Monastery [after having handed the Metropolitan’s letter to the doorkeeper] and rushed and knelt before the Holy Virgin to thank her for giving them the strength to complete this journey (in the midst of this real pandemic). In a few minutes, the talanton (alarm) of the monastery summoned its prayer warriors in the Catholicon (main church of the monastery). Elder Constantine began the canon of the Paraklesis/ Supplication to the Panagia, while the three Agrinian ambassadors remained on their knees, shedding tears of repentance.

In the morning, a Doxology was offered, and so in the evening, an all-night Supplicatory Vigil. The preparation and transfer of the Holy Icon was scheduled on the morning of the 24th after the Orthros service. The great news of this Litany (Holy Journey) had reached the faithful of Agrinion, the night before, it spread like fire; and after a Paraklesis at the Metropolis of Agrinion thousands of people from the city and all the surrounding areas -disregarding all fear of the killer flu- hurried through the goat paths and treacherous ravines to welcome the Panagia and to participate in this most solemn litany. They journeyed through the night, and the following morning an army in excess of 5,000 prayer warriors, full of tears and contrition, met the Panagia at the highest peak of the Arapokefala Mountains. According to the testimony of those present and still alive, the contrition during that event was unimaginable. There, on the top of the mountain, the priests began the first Great Paraklesis to the Queen of Heaven with thousands of the penitent and tearful faithful, praying on their knees.

After this Great Supplication, the holy Journey of the Prousiotissa continued, with thousands of her devoted children chanting and praying through the mountainous paths. Twenty-four hours later, they reached the village of Prostova and prayed a Paraklesis service at the village church.

In the evening hours of the same day, when the procession had reached the city limits of Agrinion, the entire city suddenly became deserted. Only a few teenagers remained behind to man the bell towers and to continually ring the bells expressing the city’s inexpressible joy. This holy procession was now directed towards the city center, to the Church of the Holy Trinity, for a Doxology and Great Paraklesis for the quick dismissal of this menacing pandemic. When the Mother of God entered the church, priests took turns to offer Paraklesis for the groups of people who took turns to enter the temple all through the night. Those properly prepared partook of the Holy Mysteries during the morning Liturgy.

Shortly after the entrance of the Megalochari into the city, a huge health restoration was at hand. The effects of this evil disease vanished. Dozens of the infected and up to now bedridden were rising at once and, fully healed, were heading towards Holy Trinity to offer their Mother of mercy their thankful tears.

The city of Agrinion was miraculously saved and freed from this pandemic which unfortunately continued its deadly course in all the surrounding areas. The deaths in Mesologgi and Aitoliko

were so many that there were not enough priests to pray the funeral service for the deceased. Both of these cities sent committees to request the immediate transfer of the Prousiotissa to their city; meanwhile in Agrinion, there was a feud as to which city would be visited first- not to mention that the Agriniotes were reluctant to let Panagia's saving grace depart until every one of the residents had venerated the Holy Icon of the Mother of God, and then not until a great Doxology had been offered to her. The intervention of the abbot and some of the more sober citizens kept the altercation from turning violent, but as the negotiations progressed the Agriniotes were increasing their demands. They now demanded that their Holy visitor must be liturgized in every one of the city churches. Thus, on October 27 the compunctionate service for the Processional Litany was chanted at the centrally- located church of The Holy Trinity and afterwards a holy procession with thousands of people moved through the main streets of the city and headed towards the old church of Saint Christophoros located on a hill at the outskirts of Agrinion. Another great Paraklesis was prayed, and afterward Abbot Constantine offered a sermon and explained that this tribulation was connected to the abandonment of the Faith of our fathers. The miraculous intercession of the Panagia absolved the Agriniotes from this disciplinary punishment of God, but this comes with the condition and the responsibility to amend their evil ways and to return to the path of repentance. The parishioners were venerating the Holy Virgin for 24 hours; and after this the Icon spent another five days in the major parishes of Agrinion, St. Dimitrios and Life-Giving Spring, where the entire population confessed and received Holy Communion [all from the same Holy Chalice and Laveda-Holy Spoon]. Life in Agrinion was back to normal. The disease was eradicated for good and everyone was glorifying God and His Holy Mother.

A few miles way, the picture in Mesologgi and Aitoliko appeared more than dismal; corpses, cries and hopelessness filled the air. A committee received a mandate from Metropolitan Ambrosios to process the Prousiotissa to Mesologgi, and the official letter was taken to Agrinion. On the morning of November 1st our Holy Icon was set to reach Mesologgi via train. The news of her arrival sent spiritual chills up the spines of hundreds of believers, who ignored the torrential rain and kept vigil all night at the train station. These lovers of the Theotokos ignored and dismissed the scientific knowledge of the city officials and of the medical doctors and scientists, who were insisting that unless the crowds return to their homes the deaths in the city would triple! The faithful held their ground, and they waited with great patience. As the train approached they began to chant a Paraklesis, and they then formed a procession to welcome the Panagia into their city. Soon enough the Holy Mother interceded for another great miracle, witnessed by all residents of Mesologgi.

During the midnight vigil a powerful gust of wind uprooted dozens of trees in the city, but it also blew away all infectious viral agents in Mesologgi thus far responsible for the untimely death of 30 to 40 people on a daily basis.

On the morning of November 2, 1918, there was not a single death in this city. Its grateful residents came and fell before Panagia and Her Holy Icon with unprecedented devotion, chanting Her Paraklesis and offering all that was precious to them-gold rings, silver ornaments and other gifts-as a token of their appreciation to the almighty Mother of the Almighty God.

In the meantime dozens were still dying daily in the neighboring city of Aitoliko. The Holy Icon was now prepared to leave Mesologgi to continue Her healing work at Aitoliko. The entire city,

led by Mayor Constantine Stamos and its priests and theologians, gathered around the train station to honor and thank the ultra-fighting commander [ti eipermahō stratigō] for granting them victory over this menacing pandemic. The day-by-day events of this miraculous divine intervention were recorded by the ever-memorable High School principal of Agrinion, Mr. George Pastras.

This miracle of the Panagia Prousiotissa is celebrated every year on August 23 (on the leavetaking of the Dormition) in the Church of The Holy Trinity in Agrinion, where a replica of the Holy Icon has been kept since 1918 to remind all generations of the love of our Panagia for all mankind, and particularly those who listen to and obey her Son.

Translated, edited and adapted by CZ - Assisted by Peter Howe

Editor's reflections.

Holy Fathers, brothers and sisters in Christ,

The main preoccupation and the central focus of the world community in the Year 2020 unquestionably was the epidemic of COVID-19. The world authorities and governments needed to enforce some necessary measures, bequeathed to them by past scientific knowledge and experience, for the physical well-being of the world population.

This is expected of and understandable for secular leaders to enact, which leaders ever use their knowledge and shrewdness well in their capacity as managers of this age (Luke 16:8).

The leaders of the light, however were not as shrewd and did not deal as well with their children-most of whom unfortunately have ended up isolated, divided, perplexed, hurting, scandalized and even despondent.

Truly, how many of our Orthodox Church leaders and Greek Christians imitated the actions of the Orthodox Christians of Agrinion, Mesologgi and Aitoliko in 1918 nearly a century ago? More specifically, why did the vast majority of the seventy-some Greek bishops who undoubtedly have venerated this miraculous Holy Icon of Panagia, miserably failed to imitate the Faith of their predecessors, the Faith that saved Agrinion, Mesologgi and Aitoliko, the Faith once and for all entrusted to the saints, the Faith that cleansed the lepers, gave vision to the blind and raised the dead?

We acted as if the year 2020 was not the Year of the Lord, but the Year of the WHO. WHO then ever heard of closed churches in the Pandemic of 1918? WHO then ever heard of Orthodox faithful being forbidden to kiss Holy Icons? WHO then ever heard of social distancing in the Presence of the Panagia in 1918? WHO then ever heard of priests wearing plastic face shields in the Pandemic of 1918, a pandemic that was 50 times more murderous than COVID-19? WHO then ever heard of (tremble, O ye elements of the heavens!) bishops and patriarchs tolerating and condoning separate Holy Communion spoons?

Lamentably, one thing is for certain. The mystery of lawlessness was by far victorious in the vast majority of the local Orthodox Churches in the year of the WHO.

We have missed a great opportunity to proclaim to the world that Jesus is the Lord and Master of our lives; and as Greeks, we have humiliated and dishonored the memory of the thousands of souls that participated in the Prousiotissa miracle of 1918. We acted as the secular church, as those who are found in the outer court of the temple and unworthy of being measured (Rev. 11:2).

Hence we can discern the answer to the question of Luke 18:18, the question that personally ever has been vexing me to this day: "Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

No, He will not find faith on the earth should we continue to live as secular Christians of the perilous end times as prophesied by the Apostle Paul (2 Tim. 3:1), or should we continue to boast about our outer garb of Orthodox traditions but deny the very core and power of our Faith. The Son of man will look for the organic, transformative and deifying faith that changes us from being children of wrath to being Christ-like. He will be looking for the faith of Zacchaeus and of the penitent tax collectors, the faith of the Publican (Luke 18:10-14), the faith exhibited in the parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8), the organic faith of the grateful Samaritan leper who wished for a deeper connection with Christ (Luke 17:12-19), and the persistent and steadfast faith of the blind man of Jericho (Luke 18:35-43). If we energize this Faith entrusted to us in our Holy Baptism by continual fruitful repentance, then-and only then- we will hear the most consoling words of the Lord when we forever close our eyes to this temporal earthly life: "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord; thy faith hath saved thee".

Blessed be the New Year of the Lord 2021

I was writing on January 30, 2021,

On The Feast of the Blessed Commemoration of the Three Hierarchs: Basil the Great, Saint John the Chrysostom and Saint Gregory the Theologian.