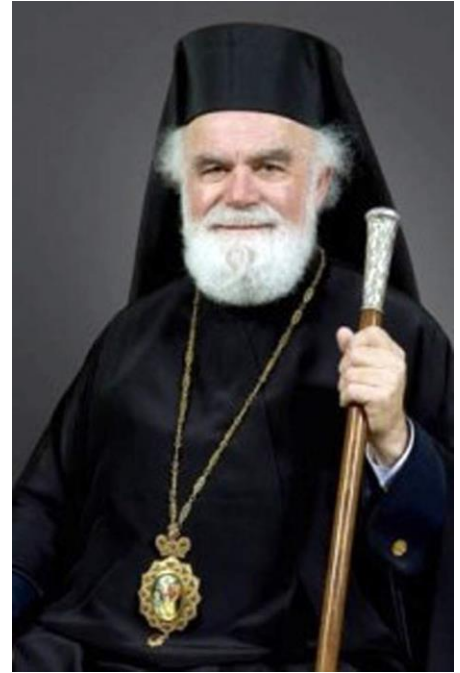


My Beloved Ones,

Today, I am at the Diakonia Retreat Center, spending time with our Faithful young people who are attending the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of our St. Stephen's Summer Camp.

This week, I wish to speak to you of one of the miraculous icons of our Faith; one that has especially great meaning for me, as it is an important part of the Vatopadi Monastery where I spent my early years as a Monk. This icon is the blessed and miraculous Panagia Vimatarissa, and it has been a part of the monastery since it was discovered on the land where the Monastery would eventually be established.

However, by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the icon was in danger of being stolen by the pirates, who regularly sought to steal from the monasteries of the Holy Mountain. In order to prevent this, the monk responsible for the Holy Altar decided to place the image of the Theotokos in the well. However, though this Hierodeacon was taken captive by the Turks, the icon was safe, and eventually forgotten. 70 years later, now free, the Monk returned to the monastery and instructed the new Abbot to open the well. The icon was indeed there, untouched, and floating at the very top.



This is indeed a powerful reminder of the ways in which God protects His Church, but I tell you this story for a very special reason. This coming fall, September 29<sup>th</sup> 2018, we will be blessed with a unique opportunity, for the Abbot of Vatopaidi has agreed to provide the Panagia Chapel at our Diakonia Retreat Center with a replica of the blessed and miraculous Panagia Vimatarissa icon. I am so pleased and proud that this sacred image of our Most Holy Theotokos will come to reside in this magnificent and beautiful Chapel that we have also built in her honor.

Therefore, it is only fitting that we all welcome this sacred object with all the veneration due to our ever-Virgin Mary. The events of that Saturday (which we have already begun to plan) shall provide all the faithful who attend a unique opportunity for prayer. Together, we shall process with the icon; we shall give glory to God through worship; we shall honor all those who made this day, and our blessed Panagia Chapel, a reality; and we will be given an opportunity for fellowship with all our faithful brothers and sisters of Metropolis of Atlanta.

Though more information is still to come, I wish to express my joy, as well as my great hope to see as many of you there as possible. Indeed, beyond my own personal devotion to this image, it is a great rare thing for a Metropolis to be so honored with a replica of this type, and so we should all do our very best to be together, welcoming the sacred image, and the pious Monks who shepherd it here safely.

I pray that throughout the summer, you keep not only the event in mind, but the story of the miracle as well. We would all do well to remember the love our Creator has for the Theotokos, and the power that her intercessions have on the lives of the Orthodox faithful.

**+ALEXIOS**

Metropolitan of Atlanta