



The following is the full text of His Eminence Metropolitan Alexios of Atlanta's remarks delivered upon the arrival of the Panagia Vimatarissa icon to the Panagia Chapel at our Diakonia Retreat Center, on September 29, 2018:

“Then Solomon said, “The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have built thee an exalted house, a place for thee to dwell in for ever.”
(2 Chronicles 6:1-2)

Today is a celebration! For, by the Grace of God, we are blessed to witness a new era—not only for the Metropolis of Atlanta, but for all Orthodox Christians who are citizens of this wonderful country, the United States of America.

Today is a celebration, because we have received from Mt. Athos the miraculous icon of Panagia Vimatarissa.

Father Superior Ephraim, Geronda and Spiritual Father of the Brotherhood of Vatopaidi Monastery; Brothers of the flag led by Father Superior Ephraim; Fellow Clergymen of the Metropolis of Atlanta; Deacons, Monks and Nuns; Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate; Members of the Metropolis Council and Philoptochos; Choir members and chanters; Acolytes; our GOYANS and Greek Dancers; and all the Metropolis of Atlanta and Orthodox Christian faithful: Good Morning! Welcome to this stunning Church of our Most Holy Lady, which today is opening its doors for the first time to all the faithful members of the Holy Church of Christ.

I have already begun by proclaiming that we are blessed to witness a significant historical event, but I would like to explain just what I mean. Certainly, we as Orthodox Christians have heard examples of those whose faith was so great, that in their distress—whether physical, spiritual, or material—they called out to the Lord, asking for the intercessions of His Mother and the Saints, and were comforted. We know the phrases: “Panagia made me well! Panagia blessed me with this child! Panagia saved my spouse, my parent, my sibling!”

Those who have been blessed are known to make *tamas*: promises to visit and pray before the blessed icon. Every year at the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God, thousands venerate the icon of Panagia Soumela in Macedonia; Panagia Prousiotissa in Evrytania; Panagia Gierokomion in my home of Patras.

The Orthodox Church in America is a young Church. In the measurement of 2,000 years of Christianity, we are infants. We do not have in America the legacy of many saints and their venerable relics. Neither do we have the legacy of this close, physical connection with the icons I have just described. It is for this reason that we are blessed to receive

this miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary. This icon is so treasured by the Monastery of Vatopaidi, that, despite the presence of many miracle-working icons, only the Panagia Vimatarissa has been placed within the Holy of Holies, the Altar.

This is the magnitude of what we are celebrating today. And as our hearts are full of joy, they are also full of thanks to Father Ephraim and the Brotherhood, who not only willingly made the decision to give this icon to us, but also chose to visit us, helping us to dedicate the icon of Panagia Vimatarissa within this place we call the Panagia Chapel—where the icon will remain forever; so that future generations may come to venerate, to reflect, to offer prayers, and to ask for her intercessions on our behalf.

I can only hope and pray that an extraordinary blessing such this can be repeated with different icons: the Panagia Paramythia, the Panagia Hodegetria, the Panagia Gierokomitissa. In this way, these icons shall make this Chapel like a forest, where people may find spiritual shelter.

I would like to thank the Monks of the Brotherhood, who by practicing their obedience to you, Father, are here today, in order participate in this historical event: chanting as Athonites and offering up prayers on behalf of all of us, sinful persons living in the world. As Monks, you understand that it is only by the Wisdom and Power of God we can overcome our weaknesses. You yourselves also understand that in prayer, it is not enough to understand how to pray, but that we must understand what to pray for: that most precious wish, which reflects God's will in our lives.

Truly, as a Brother of Vatopaidi myself, this moment is an especially moving one. I am moved because of the memories and positive thoughts seeing each one of you, my brothers, brings to my mind. I am moved because your presence here today helps to make monasticism a real, physical thing; a phenomenon which many American Orthodox Christians hardly ever experience directly. And of course, I am moved because the presence of the Panagia Vimatarissa was a source of great comfort and strength to me during my time in the monastery. Truly, she was and is the Mother of us all. And now I am so proud to think of a future where all who gather in this place shall be under her protection forever.

Geronda, in your presence, I also wish to thank the Metropolis Council, under the leadership of Mr. Nick Moraitakis; the Diakonia Retreat Center Council, under the leadership of Mr. George Matthews. They, along with the assistance of my Chancellor, the Very Rev. Fr. George Tsahakis— and my fellow coworkers within the Metropolis of Atlanta: Mrs. Ethel Gjerde, Ms. Monica Gjerde, Mr. Nick Kostopoulos and Ms. JoAnne Mertzanis— all came together, joining me in prayer and discussion. Together we were able to think on those individuals who would be able to assist us tremendously in realizing this dream of a church dedicated to our Ever-Virgin Mary.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank my brother, not only in the Spirit, but also in the flesh: Mr. George Panagiotopoulos, who when he heard of our intentions to build this church, used his knowledge as an engineer in both Greece and America, to assist me in not only finding the materials, but also creating the wonderful team of engineers and

architects. This team, run by Mr. Thimios Tsaparas and his wife Anna, was made up of a group of dedicated masons and builders, who left behind their families and friends to help bring this wonderful sanctuary to life.

I am also grateful to those who have resided in the Diakonia Retreat Center, and who have been such an important part of its ministry. I am referring to Fr. Vasile Bitere, to Mr. and Mrs. Felix and Rodica Buta, to Mr. and Mrs. Alfonso Hernandez Junior and Senior, and to Fr. Constantine Carros. All of these have provided the means to allow these builders to accomplish their work with the Chapel.

Later, I will ask these people who heard the call so clearly, to share their thoughts and feelings about what motivated them to participate. I pray that the testimony of these individuals and families will inspire others to follow their examples, receiving the satisfaction of knowing they are part of endeavor that is a blessing of God's Grace upon all in this area.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, I close today reflecting on what a blessing it is to be in the presence of this most sacred icon, a reflection of our beloved Panagia that could neither be forgotten nor destroyed. It fills my heart with peace and gratitude that generations of young people will know the love I feel for the Blessed Panagia Vimatarissa.

I echo the words of the Righteous King and Prophet Solomon, with which I began my remarks: may the Lord God—through the intercessions of His All-Holy Mother, whose icon we offer proper veneration—dwell in this house forever. May He have mercy on us, and save us, Amen.