ODE IN HONOUR OF THE HOLY IMMACULATE
MOST BLESSED GLORIOUS LADY
MOTHER OF GOD AND EVER VIRGIN MARY

Written on the Occasion of the Deliverance of
Constantinople from the Barbarians, A.D. 626
Translated from the original Greek, with a Foreword by

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FORWARD

NO APOLOGY IS NEEDED FOR INTRODUCING THE AKATHISTOS TO THE
Christian West. Indeed the West might well be apologetic about its neglect or ignorance of
such a liturgical and literary masterpiece.

If at present many western Christians find themselves out of sympathy with the
superlatives offered by this hymn to the Theotokos it is because they have drifted away even
from the western Lady-love which gave them Ave Maris Stella and Salve Regina.

Without a doubt the East had more reason than had the West for keeping Mary the
Mother of God in the forefront, we might almost say the battlefront, of its praise. The enemy who almost compassed the death of the Babe of Bethlehem and finally compassed the
death of Jesus of Nazareth pursued the infant Church with unabated zeal and intelligence.
In the Greek-speaking East he launched an attack in force first against the divinity of the
Son and then against the divinity of the Son made flesh. There were moments in the great
attack when the enemy of Christ seemed a conqueror. But finally at Ephesus his hundred years’ war against the Son of Mary was broken by the Greek-speaking East’s proclaiming the mother of that Son to be Theotokos, the Forth-bringer or Mother of God.

Such memories of victories won clung to the Mother, in whose arms her Son was safe, that their gentle highland Maid was looked upon a thing invulnerable—a tower of the hardiest ivory, the Tower of David. Thus it became a fashion of Christian faith and love to meet all attacks against the faith as Ephesus met them, by invoking the Theotokos. Such invocation was the highest act of faith, not in the divinity of the human mother, but in the divinity of her human Son. Two centuries of stress had not withered that faith when the Christian East in a day of deliverance from invasion chanted in Sancta Sophia the splendid praise which is now given here in the speech of our Lady’s Dowry.

Fr Vincent McNabb, O.P

An indulgence of fifty days has been granted to Catholics of both Eastern and Latin rites by Pope Benedict XIV, Ex auditu sancti Pontificis, 4th May, 1746, for each recitation of the Akathistos, and a plenary indulgence for its recitation on the day of the Annunciation of our Lady. For the Catholics of the Eastern rite the indulgence has been increased to ten years by the ‘Notificatio’ of the Sacred Congregation of the Eastern Church of 1943 (cf. Eastern Churches Quarterly, April, 1947, p.74).

ODE TO OUR BLESSED LADY WRITTEN ON
THE OCCASION OF THE DELIVERANCE OF
CONSTANTINOPLE FROM THE BARBARIANS.
A. D. DCXXVI.

Troparion

HE WHO was bodiless, having heard the bidding secretly in
his soul, went with haste to Joseph’s dwelling and said to the
Unwedded One:
He who in his condescension boweth the heavens down is
housed unchanged and whole within thee. I see him take the
form of a servant; and wondering I cry to thee:

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.
I

Kontakion

TO thee, unconquered Queen, I thy city from danger freed
an offering of thanks inscribe. O Forth-bringer of God! Yet
for thy unconquerable might free me from all hurt that I
may sing to thee:

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED

II

Oikos

AN angel chieftain was sent from Heaven to greet the Forth
bringer of God with Hail! Then seeing thee, O Lord, take
flesh he is wonder-rapt, and standing crieth out with no lips
of flesh to her:

Hail! by whom true hap had dawned.
Hail! by whom mishap has waned.
Hail! sinful Adam’s recalling.
Hail! Eve’s tears redeeming.
Hail! height untrodden by thought of men.
Hail! depth unscanned by angels’ ken.
Hail! for the kingly throne thou art.
Hail! for who beareth all thou bearest?
Hail! O star that bore the Sun.
Hail! the womb of God enfleshed.
Hail! through whom things made are all new made.
Hail! through whom becomes a Babe their Maker.
Hail! through whom the Maker is adored.

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.

II

Kontakion

THE holy one seeing herself in chastity said greatly darin;
unto Gabriel: Thy dark saying seems hard to my mind.
What birth of a seedless begetting dost thou name?
Crying out:

ALLELUIA.
II

The Virgin yearning to know the knowledge unknowable
made clamour to the servitor: from a maiden womb how
may a Child be born? tell me. To her he said, fearing
yet crying out:

Hail! initiated into God’s unspeakable counsel.
Hail! keeper of things best kept by silence.
Hail! of Christ’s wonders the beginning.
Hail! of his mysteries the head.
Hail! heavenward Ladder by which God came down.
Hail! earthly Bridge carrying the earthborn unto heaven
Hail! much sung marvel of the angels.
Hail! of the demons much dirged wounding.
Hail! who unspeakably hast the Light forth-brought.
Hail! who the HOW to none hast taught.
Hail! wisdom of the wise outsoaring.
Hail! light on faithful minds outpouring.

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.

III

THE Maid of the God-bearing
womb hastened unto
Elizabeth; whose babe, knowing straightway her greeting,
rejoiced and with stirrings as if with song cried out to God’s
forth-bringer:

Hail! vine of an unwithering Shoot.
Hail! yielder of untainted Fruit.
Hail! thou whom this man-loving Husbandman has tended.
Hail! thou who unto life hast brought him who bringeth
death to life.
Hail! field with mercies harvest-rich.
Hail! board with load of pities spread.
Hail! flower-strewn meadow.
Hail! thou who the soul’s safe anchorage preparest.
Hail! grateful incense-cloud of prayer.
Hail! the whole world’s offering of peace.
Hail! God’s goodness unto men.
Hail! man’s trustfulness in God.

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.
IV

Kontakion

LOOKING on thee, O Unwedded One, and dreading a hidden wedlock, O Sinless One, the chaste Joseph was riven in mind with a storm of doubts; but having learned that the begetting was of the Holy Ghost, said:

ALLELUIA.

IV

Oikos

THE shepherds heard the Angels extolling the Christ coming in the flesh; and running as to a shepherd they see him as a Lamb unspotted being fed on Mary’s breast, to whom they carolled, saying:

Hail! Mother both of Lamb and Shepherd.
    Hail! fold of rational sheep.
    Hail! against unseen foes defending.
    Hail! the heavenly gateways opening.
    Hail! for the heavens with earth rejoice.
Hail! for things earthly with things heavenly chorus.
    Hail! of Apostles never-silent mouthpiece.
    Hail! of the Martyrs strength undaunted.
    Hail! of Faith the firm foundation.
    Hail! of Grace the shining token.
    Hail! by whom hell is despoiled.
    Hail! by whom we are clothed with glory.

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.

V

Kontakion

THE Magi, having seen the God-heralding star, following its shining, and helped by it as by a lantern sought by its aid the mighty King, and having reached the Unreachable they rejoiced, crying out to thee:

ALLELUIA.
The children of the Chaldees seeing in the virgin hands him whose hands made men, and knowing him as Lord even though he had taken the form of a servant, hastened to worship with their gifts, and cried out to her who is blessed:

Hail! Mother of the unsetting Star.
Hail! Splendour of the Mystic Day.
Hail! thou who hast quenched the fire of error.
Hail! thou who enlightenest the initiates of the Triune.
Hail! who from his seat has driven the foe of man.
Hail! thou who hast shown to us Christ the merciful lover of man.
Hail! thou who hast redeemed us from pagan rites.
Hail! thou who rescuest us from works of mire.
Hail! thou who hast quenched the cult of fire.
Hail! thou who savest us from passion's flame.
Hail! leader of the faithful in ways of self-control.
Hail! Joy of all Generations.

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.

The Magi being made heralds God-inspired went back to Babylon, having done thy bidding; unto everyone they preached thee as Christ and left Herod as if he were raving, unable to sing:

alleluia.
VI

Oikos

HAVING shed in Egypt the beams of thy truth thou didst chase the darkness of untruth; for its idols, O Saviour, unable to meet thy strength, fell down; and as many as were freed from them cried out to God’s forth-bringer:

Hail! thou who raisest mankind up.
Hail! thou who castest demons down.
Hail! thou who the cheat of lies hast trodden ’neath thy feet.
Hail! thou who the fraud of idols hast reproved.
Hail! sea the mystic Pharaoh drowning.
Hail! rock refreshing such as for life are athirst.
Hail! pillar of fire in darkness guiding.
Hail! shade of the world wider than a cloud.
Hail! unfailing manna-food.
Hail! server of hallowing delights.
Hail! land of promise,
Hail! from whom flow milk and honey.

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.

VII

Kontakion

UNTO Simeon about to leave this deceitful world wast thou brought as a Babe; but to him wast thou known as the infinite God; wherefore marvelling at thy unspeakable wisdom he cried out:

ALLELUIA.
THUS did he show himself as the new Creature when he, the Creator, revealed himself to us who were made by him; and, blossoming from a seedless womb he kept its unsullied purity, so that we the wonder knowing might hymn her and cry out:

Hail! flower unfading.  
Hail! crown of chastity.  
Hail! flashing token of resurrection.  
Hail! mirror of the life of Angels.  
Hail! tree of glorious fruit to feed the faithful.  
Hail! wood of grateful shade where many shelter.  
Hail! womb bearing the Guide of all who stray.  
Hail! forth-bringing the Redeemer of all bondsfolk.  
Hail! tireless pleader with the just judge.  
Hail! help-bringer to sinners many.  
Hail! cloak of those bare of hopes.  
Hail! love outrunning all desire.  

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.

SEEING this Pilgrim Babe let us be pilgrims in this world by fixing our heart in Heaven. To this end did the God of Heaven appear on earth as a lowly man, because he wished to draw heavenward all those who cry to him:

ALLELUIA.
VIII

Oikos

WHOLLY present in the things below yet not wholly absent from the things above was the infinite Word; a divine con
descension not a change of place was the child-bearing of
this God-filled Virgin who hears these words:

Hail! thou who didst comprehend the incomprehensible.
   Hail! gate of hallowed mystery.
   Hail! word hidden from unbelievers.
Hail! chariot most holy of the One above the Cherubim.
Hail! dwelling-place most glorious of the One above the
   Seraphim.
Hail! who hast welded into one things opposite.
Hail! who hast woven maidenhood with motherhood.
   Hail! by whom was loosed our sin.
Hail! by whom was opened Paradise.
   Hail! Key of Christ’s Kingdom.
   Hail! hope of eternal boons.

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.

IX

Kontakion

ALL angel-kind marvelled at thy great work of flesh-taking;
they saw the inaccessible God accessible to all as a man,
dwelling with us and hearing from all:

ALLELUIA.
IX

Oikos

MEN the most eloquent we see become as dumb fishes before thee, O Forth-bringer; helpless to say in what way thou, being still a maid, wast able to bring forth. But we, marvelling at the mystery, cry out in faith:

Hail! casket of God’s wisdom.
Hail! treasury of his providence.
Hail! confounder of the wisdom of the wise.
Hail! making babble of men’s eloquence.
Hail! for the deep thinkers are made foolish.
Hail! for the makers of myth have failed.
Hail! thou who rendest the word-webs of Athens.
Hail! thou who fillest the nets of the fishers.
Hail! thou who liftest from the deeps of unknowing.
Hail! thou who enlightenest many in knowledge.
Hail! barque for those who seek salvation.
Hail! harbour of this life’s seafarers.

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.

X

Kontakion

BEING minded to save the world, the Maker of all came willingly into it and, shepherd because God, to us and for us did he appear a man; and having called like unto like, as God he hears:

ALLELUIA.
UNT0 all maidens and unto all who fly to thee thou art a
wall, O maiden Forth-bringer; the Maker of heaven and
earth has prepared thee unto this, dwelling in thy womb
and teaching all to sing unto Thee:

Hail! pillar of purity.
Hail! gate of safety.
Hail! beginning of spiritual new-making.
Hail! leader of godly living.
Hail! thou who didst bring to a new life those who in sin
were born.
Hail! thou who healest the minds of mentally stricken.
Hail! thou who castest down the corrupter of minds.
Hail! thou who didst bring forth the Sower of Holiness.
Hail! maiden bride-chamber.
Hail! thou who joinest to their Lord the faithful,
Hail! fair nursing-mother of virgins.
Hail! bridesmaid of holy souls.

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.

XI

Kontakion

NO hymn that seeks to weave into one thy many mercies is
worthy of thee; were we to bring thee, O holy King, odes
many as the sea sand we should do nothing worthy of what
thou hast given to us who sing to thee:

ALLELUIA.
XI

Oikos

WE see the Blessed Virgin as a lamp of living light shining upon those in darkness; she enkindleth an unearthly light to lead all unto divine knowledge; she, the Radiance that enlighteneth the mind, is praised by our cry:

Hail! ray of the spiritual Sun.
Hail! ray-flash of never-waning light.
Hail! lightning-flash illumining souls.
Hail! thunder-clap frightening foes.
Hail! Thou who sendest forth manifold splendour.
Hail! who wellest forth a many-streamed river.
Hail! who imagest Siloam’s pool.
Hail! who cleansest the stain of sin.
Hail! cleansing-vat that lavest the conscience.
Hail! loving-cup brimming with gladness.
Hail! odour of Christ’s sweetness.
Hail! life of the mystic feasting.

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.

XII

Kontakion

WHEN he who payeth all men’s debts was minded the ancient debts to pay, self-exiled he came to them who were exiled from his grace and, tearing up the bond, he heard from all:

ALLELUIA.
ALL we who psalm thy Son give praise to thee as to the living temple, O God’s Forth-bringer; when within thy womb dwelt the Lord who holdeth all in his hand, he hailed, honoured thee, and taught all to cry to thee:

Hail! tabernacle of God and the Word.
Hail! holy beyond all holy ones.
Hail! ark gilded by the Holy Ghost.
Hail! unfailing treasure-house of life.
Hail! precious diadem of godly Sovereigns.
Hail! worshipful honour of a worthy priesthood.
Hail! the Church’s unassailable tower.
Hail! indestructible wall of the Kingdom.
Hail! thou whereby war-trophies are set up.
Hail! whereby foes are stricken.
Hail! my body’s healing.
Hail! my soul’s saving.

HAIL! BRIDE UNBRIDED.

Kontakion

O MOTHER whom all must hymn, O thou who hast brought forth the Word most holy beyond all the holiest, take our present offering, keep all from every hurt, and deliver from all wrath to come those who cry to thee:

ALLELUIA.

Our Lady of Częstochowa
The Akathistos Hymn is an office in honour of our Lady sung in churches of the Byzantine rite (whether Catholic or Orthodox), in parts on the first four Saturdays of Lent and in its entirety on the fifth, which is accordingly called ‘Akathistos Saturday’. It is also in use at all times of the year for private devotion. It consists of twenty-four stanzas (οικοί), alternately longer and shorter, whose initial letters are the successive letters of the Greek alphabet. Each shorter stanza ends with ‘Alleluia’, and each longer one consists of an opening verse leading to thirteen (in the first one, fourteen) apostrophes of our Lady, each preceded by the salutation ‘Hail!’ The last apostrophe is always the same: ‘Hail, Bride unbrided!’ The whole is begun by a verse (called a Kontakion) which sums up the spirit and occasion of the office.

The shorter stanzas are sometimes all called kontakia and the longer ones oikoi. This facilitates reference, and is used here. The text is printed in the liturgical book called the Horologion. When celebrated in church, the priest vested in epitrachelion (stole), stands before a picture of our Lady enthroned amid candles in the middle of the church and chants 24 stanzas; the choir or people respond ‘Hail, Bride unbrided’ and ‘Alleluia’.

When the Akathistos is sung entire it is divided into four staseis, or standing parts, between which are interpolated psalms and hymns during which alone the faithful may sit. This is why the office is called ‘The Not-sitting Hymn’; or perhaps because the clergy and people passed the whole night before the fifth Sunday of Lent standing in church to sing our Lady’s praise, in imitation of the traditional first occasion on which it was sung.

The historical lesson in the Byzantine office for this day assigns the observance to the year 626 when, Heraclius being emperor and Sergius patriarch, Constantinople was attacked by the Persians and Avars and was in the greatest danger. The patriarch led his people (the emperor was absent from the capital) in procession round the city walls, the clergy carrying the image (εἰκών) of our Saviour ‘not-made-with-hands’ (St Veronica’s veil), the image of our Lady, the great relic of the true Cross, with other pictures and relics, all calling on our Lord and his all-holy Mother to protect their sacred city, the ‘New Rome’. Encouraged by this, the defenders made more and more daring sallies, whose success was confirmed by a mighty wind which arose and scattered the enemy fleet, casting up its vessels on the shore near the church of the Mother of God at Blachernae. In thanksgiving the people spent the whole night standing and singing hymns of praise and gratitude. ‘From that time, therefore’, says the Office, ‘the Church wished this day to be a festival in honour of the Mother of God in memory of so great and divine a miracle’. The observance also commemorates the deliverance of Constantinople from the Saracens in the time of Constantine IV Pogonatos (673) and Leo III the Isaurian (717).

This origin of the Office seems clearly indicated in the preliminary kontakion (‘To thee, unconquered Queen, I thy city from danger freed, an offering of thanks inscribe...’) and it is pretty generally accepted. But that the Akathistos as we know it was actually sung in Constantinople on that night of 626 is another matter. Some have denied both things, on the ground that the hymn could not have been composed in one day and that there are no allusions to such an occasion in it. On the other hand A. Petrovsky in the Orthodox Theological Encyclopaedia claims to find several references to the traditional circumstances, over and above the one just quoted: e.g., to the predecessor of Heraclius, the bloodthirsty Phokas, ‘the foe of man’; to the destruction two years earlier of the temple of the fire-worshippers in Armenia, ‘Thou who hast quenched the cult of fire’; to a threat from barbarian idolators, ‘Thou who dost redeem us from pagan rites’ (all in the fifth οίκος). And in ‘Thou who hast reproved the fraud of idols’ (sixth οίκος) he sees an answer to the boast of Bayan Khan: ‘Trust not in your God; for tomorrow will I take your city and make it a desert’. Less doubtful are the allusions to sacred history and doctrine made in the first part of each οίκος and in the kontakia; these are all clear to any Catholic, except possibly the beginning of the sixth οίκος, which refers to the legend that when the Holy Family, fleeing into Egypt, came to Sitone (On, Heliopolis, today Matarieh, near Cairo) all the three hundred and fiftyfive idols in the temple fell down and were shattered, in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaias, ‘Behold! the Lord will go up upon a swift cloud and will enter into Egypt. And the idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence’ (see the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, 22-3).
It has been suggested that the first kontakion (‘To thee, unconquered Queen’, etc.) is the only original part of the hymn immediately related to the victory of 626, which was added to an ensemble of hymns, psalms, etc., already known to the people (or built around it later?). Many of the praises appear to be borrowed from the Marian hymns of St Ephrem the Syrian (Doctor of the Church, called the ‘Harp of the Holy Ghost’, d. c. 378), and others can be traced to the great Greek hymnographer Romanus the Singer (sixth century) and to St John Chrysostom (d. 407). The authorship of the office is a matter of uncertainty, but two names stand out as likely among several suggestions. Many scholars, including Bardenhewer, favour the claims of Sergius I who, as we have seen, was patriarch of Constantinople at the time when the Avars and Persians were repulsed. He was the hierarch who in an effort to conciliate the monophysites fathered the short-lived monothelite heresy, which taught that in Jesus Christ there was but one single divine will or source of energy. The other principal candidate is George Pisides, a deacon and contemporary of Sergius, who was archivist and sacristan of the Great Church (the Holy Wisdom, St Sophia) at Constantinople. Among other works he wrote a poem on the events of 626, in which he attributes the safety of the city to the intercession of our Lady. Some scholars have discerned a resemblance in style as well as in theme between the writings of Pisides and the Akathistos Hymn.

The Hymn has of course been translated into all the liturgical languages used in the Byzantine rite (Church Slavonic, Rumanian, Arabic, etc.), and also into Latin (many times), Italian, German, Russian, French, and Ukrainian. Among English versions may be mentioned that of Mr W. J. Birkbeck and the Rev. G. W. Woodward (Longmans, Green & Co., 1917), and another made by Miss Anita Bartle and Dr John Christopher (Art & Book Co., 1922).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


-D.A.


-Ed.