

PROTECTION OF THE MOST HOLY MOTHER OF GOD

Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28

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On a Sunday in the tenth century, on October 1, at the fourth hour of the All Night Vigil at the Church dedicated to the Mother of God in Blachernae on the Golden Horde, St. Andrew the fool-for-Christ and his disciple St. Epiphanius beheld a wondrous vision of the Mother of God. A fleet of Slavic barbarians (this was before the conversion of Russia) was threatening the great city of Constantinople. The Saints beheld, surrounded by divine light, the Holy Mother of God hovering above the worshippers. She removed her head covering (maphorion¹) and held it stretched out over the people, symbolizing her protection over everyone, and over the city. Constantinople was saved, through the protection of the Most Holy Theotokos.

From the time that we were infants, hasn't our mother always been a source of great comfort and protection for us? How many times and for how many different reasons have we sought solace, protection, and some kind of help from our mothers? And how many times, without our even asking, have our mothers generously covered us with love and protection, giving to us abundantly in so many ways? Isn't a mother's love so great that she would give everything, even her very own life, for the sake of her children? Is it any wonder then, in the natural order of things, that besides our earthly mother, that we should all share a common heavenly Mother as well, who spiritually and in a divine manner shows us the same love, generosity, and protection? Don't we daily turn to our heavenly mother seeking solace, comfort, love, and protection? Don't we daily ask her to intercede on our behalf with her Divine Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, on our behalf? Don't we daily turn to the Holy Mother of God, inspired by her purity and seeking her help so that we may emerge victorious in our struggles with sin and temptation? There is nothing more stirring and exhilarating than a church filled with worshippers chanting in unison the great hymn "To Thee the Champion Leader" (Τη Υπερμάχῳ). This hymn is chanted every Friday evening during Great Lent when we serve the Akathist to the Holy Mother of God. This hymn was the national anthem of the Byzantine Empire. The words to this hymn are the following: "To Thee, the Champion Leader, we Thy servants dedicate a feast of victory and of thanksgiving as ones rescued out of sufferings, O Theotokos: but as Thou art one with might which is invincible, from all dangers that can be do Thou deliver us, that we may cry to Thee: Rejoice, O Bride Unwedded!" It is impossible after this tearful hymn to walk away without complete trust and faith in the protection of the Holy Mother of God.

In the seventh century while the Emperor of Byzantium Heracleios was on an expedition to fight the aggression of the Persians on their own grounds, there appeared outside the walls of Constantinople a fleet of barbaric hordes, mostly Avars. The siege lasted a few months, and it was apparent that the outnumbered troops of the great city were reaching desperation. However, as history records, the faith of the people worked the impossible. The venerable Patriarch Sergius and the clergy continuously marched along the great walls of Constantinople with an Icon of the Theotokos in hand, continuously chanting "To Thee the Champion Leader". This bolstered the faith of the defenders of freedom. The miracle came soon after. Unexpectedly, a great storm with huge tidal waves destroyed most of the fleet of the enemy, and full retreat ensued. The faithful of Constantinople spontaneously filled the Church of the Theotokos at Blachernae, and with the Patriarch Sergius officiating, they prayed all night, singing praises to the Mother of God.

The Mother of God herself, appearing to the Saints has said: "I will love, I will protect, and I will shelter every faithful person who greets me every day with the beautiful hymns of my Salutations, and who lives in accordance with the law of God. And on the last day of his life, I will defend him before my Son." Most Holy Theotokos, save and protect us! Amen!

1. The maphorion (μαφόριον) was a loose sleeveless hooded outerwear mantel, cloak or shawl, worn by women outdoors in public. It is incorrectly referred to as an “omophorion” in Russian (омофор), which is the mantel worn by a hierarch as part of his episcopal vestments.

