



Speech on the Twentieth Anniversary of the Founding of the St. Philaret the Merciful Guild

Our Most Reverend Father, Metropolitan Cyprian:

We are gathered here tonight to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the “St. Philaret the Merciful Orthodox Women’s Guild,” which operates under the aegis of the Holy Metropolis of Oropos and Phyle. It was founded by our ever-memorable *Patera* [Metropolitan Cyprian



the Elder] († 2013) with much love for the purpose of helping our fellow human beings, whom he understood to need not only food and material assistance, but also the warmth of our support and fellowship.

Twenty years of Ministry, offering, and selfless love for our suffering brethren in need! Twenty years filled with blessings, emotion, and miracles, which brought light, joy, and hope to countless people, but also to each of us individually!

Everything began in the winter of 2003, when our beloved spiritual Father, the ever-memorable Metropolitan Cyprian, invited our Sister in Christ Eirine Archontoule to the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, so as to announce to her his decision to found a philanthropic guild for women dedicated to St. Philaret the Merciful.

By Divine Providence, the day he chose to announce this decision, without his remembering it at the time, happened to be the Feast Day of St. Philaret! When he was made aware of this, he told us that it was a sign—a blessing from God and our Patron Saint—confirming that this new ministry of ours would be fruitful and blessed.

The central component of our Guild is mercy, that special charisma that Christ granted to St. Philaret the Merciful. In other words, we are called to minister unto Christ in the person of each of our suffering brothers and sisters with genuine compassion and love, honoring the image of God.

Our joy was indescribable! With his characteristic wisdom, our ever-memorable *Patera* selected the founding members, and gave his blessing and guidance for the drafting of the Statutes and their filing with the Court of First Instance.

The wait for official recognition was a long one, but we did not lose hope. On May 8, 2004, our Guild acquired its legal status. With the blessing of His Eminence, we held our Guild's first General Assembly to elect the first Board of Directors, the President of which was our Sister Eirene Archontoule.

Our activities included the organization of fundraising raffles, excursions, appeals to large companies to donate food and other necessities, and the distribution thereof to our fellow human beings in need.

But our path was not always easy.

Shortly thereafter, when a serious health problem of our ever-memorable *Patera* confined him to his bed of pain, the activities of our Guild diminished considerably.

It was then that, in December of 2007, His Grace, Bishop Cyprian of Oreoi—the present Metropolitan Cyprian—invited us to a meeting of all the members of the Guild at the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, where he urged us with warmth, love, and vision to continue our endeavors, giving us his blessing and the strength to revive the work of the Guild.

“We should not let the flame become extinguished,” he told us. “The blessing of our Most Reverend Father and of St. Philaret are with us. For this reason, love for our fellow man should continue to permeate our actions.”

These words filled us with new strength and determination.

The approach he proposed to us was that of the early Christian period, where charity was a form of sincere and unpretentious application of the Gospel. It was on these principles that the foundations were laid for organized charitable activity.

Our Metropolis is small, and our Guild is likewise small. And yet, since then we have been experiencing the words of our Savior: “My strength is made perfect in weakness.”

■ **O**ver the course of the past twenty years:

1. With the guidance and blessing of our Bishop, our Guild initiated cooperation with other organizations, such as the “The Embrace” Association for the Protection of Unborn Children; the “Onesimos” Association for the Support of Prisoners; the Panhellenic Union of Friends of Multi-Child Families; the Piraeus Society for the Protection of Minors; and the “Theophilos” Association for the Protection of Multi-Child Families, so as to provide food, various necessities, and financial assistance for the needs of their beneficiaries.

2. At the same time, with the help of the Social Worker of the Korydallos Prison, the late Eleni (Nitsa) Koukoutse, we inaugurated a new ministry, that of visiting various prisons in our country, and personally offering to each of our brother prisoners, through the hands of our Most Reverend Metropolitan, parcels of basic and personal necessities. Amfissa, Domokos, Tiryns, Volos, Nafplio, Patras, Chalkida, Amygdaleza, Vlononas, were some of the prisons that we visited approximately every two months and where we felt that we were encountering our Lord in the face of our brother prisoners. Since being deprived of the help of the late Mrs Nitsa Koukoutse, however, we have been restricted to three prisons which permit visits by groups.

3. In addition, our frequent visits to children’s institutions—such as the Voula Department of Recovery & Rehabilitation of Children with Disabilities and the Piraeus Center for the Protection of Families of Juvenile Delinquents, where we come into contact with the little wounded angels and offer them care packages of love—have filled our hearts with strength and courage every time we see their pure smiles and sweet gazes!

We have organized:

4. weekly distributions of meals, and also daily distributions of bakery products to nearly 350 families in need;

5. weekly distributions of sandwiches, juice, pastries and basic necessities to our destitute homeless brethren, some of whom are addicts, that congregate on Koumoundourou Square in Athens.

6. For two years, we distributed food on a daily basis to our homeless brethren at the “Anakoufisi” Homeless Center of Piraeus. With great joy, we also served them hearty meals during the Holy Days of Christmas and Pascha, with the presence and participation of our Most Reverend Metropolitan, monks, nuns and a number of lay people.

7. We also distributed food on a daily basis to the needy children of the Hellenic Red Cross in Piraeus and periodically to their families. The

Hellenic Red Cross awarded our Metropolis and our Guild for having done this.

8. At the same time, we distributed 20-30 meals on a daily basis to needy people at our Guild's Offices.

9. We provided housing for twelve homeless families, and until they found work, we paid their rent and bills in full.

10. Where possible, we have facilitated the release of a number of prisoners through the payment of financial penalties.

11. In cases of great need, we have paid for the legal, educational and medical expenses of our fellow humans who were completely destitute.

12. We organized a big Charity Concert in collaboration with our Municipality and with the gracious presence of the renowned music composer Mrs. Evanthia Reboutsika at the Indoor Stadium of Zofria

13. Every year, during the Christmas period, we organize a Charity Gift Shop, the proceeds of which go towards helping dozens of people.

14. We organized a large charity exhibition of iconography with the participation of more than fifty talented iconographers, who donated important works from their collections completely free of charge. The proceeds of the exhibition were used to help our fellow human beings in need.

15. Every year we organize nine lectures by eminent scholars on topics related to the family, children, marital relationships, major social problems, and the great historical and religious events of our country.

16. Three times a year we organize blood drives, with the participation of up to fifty blood donors.

17. We have organized pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Kiev, Romania, Moldavia, Moscow and St. Petersburg, Constantinople, Bulgaria, and to many places in our own homeland.

And all this without state subsidies, but rather with the intercession of our ever-memorable and beloved *Patera*; the blessing, prayer and guidance of Metropolitan Cyprian the Younger, our spiritual Father; and with the proverbial widow's mite: contributions from members, donations from companies and individuals, modest financial help—chiefly from abroad—as well as the proceeds from the Charity Shop and pilgrimages.

Of course, despite the increasing financial difficulties, all these activities continue, by the Grace of God and with the help of our Saint! We are encouraged by the motto of the hummingbird who *does his part!*

Twenty years have now passed, however. Several of the Members, who have been active “on the front line” for many years, with enthusi-

asm and self-sacrifice, no longer have the physical strength to remain active in the Ministry.

Please pray, Your Eminence, that St. Philaret will bring new members that will embrace the great Vision of Compassion and join the heroic efforts of our volunteers in our Ministry to our Brothers and Sisters!

May all of us who have the blessing of serving our suffering brethren remain united in obedience to you, our spiritual Father, working together in humility and love, practicing patience and forbearance, that this charitable work may progress and continue through the years, alive and well, in the face of adversity.

Finally, on behalf of our Board of Directors, I would like to express a heartfelt “thank you” to our Sisters Eirene and Despina, to the members of the previous Boards of Directors, and to all those, present and absent, who have supported us and are supporting us in any way.

With you, and on behalf of all of you, I would like to express the greatest gratitude to our ever-memorable *Patera*, and to you, our Most Reverend Father, who, with your patience and perseverance in Christ, awaken us and strive to cultivate in us the true ethos of the Gospel, that of mercy, in order to lead us from the image to the likeness of our All-Merciful God.

Above all, glory and thanksgiving are due to our All-Good God, Who we pray will continue to bless our humble efforts, through your holy prayers. Amen!

*Athena Choriatopoulou,
President of the
St. Philaret the Merciful Guild*



**TO OUR GOD
GLORY AND THANKSGIVING!**