



ΙΕΡΑ ΑΡΧΙΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΗ ΘΥΑΤΕΙΡΩΝ & Μ. ΒΡΕΤΑΝΙΑΣ
ARCHDIOCESE OF THYATEIRA & GREAT BRITAIN

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Encyclical of His Eminence Archbishop Gregorios on the occasion of the anniversary of 28th October 1940

Duce is putting on his uniform, his tall hat with all his feather plumes, and during a moonlit night, he attempts to conquer Greece, the poor devil! (From the Songs of Victory by Sophia Vembo)

Summer 1940. The German Army is marauding unchecked across the European Continent, thus signifying the permanent elimination of the Versailles system and the actual nullification of the League of Nations. The multi-faceted crisis of the interwar period facilitated the ascent to power of totalitarian regimes in both Middle Europe and its Mediterranean counterparts, whose irredentist strategies led to the outbreak of WWII. So, Italy's decision to participate in WWII aiming at buttressing its hegemony in North Africa and control of the sea and air routes to the Eastern Mediterranean is inextricably connected to the subjugation of Greek territory intervening between Italy and its aimed targets. Benito Mussolini – a genuine dictator – assumes full control and responsibility in foreign policy issues and acting accordingly, he sends his Athens-based Ambassador, Emanuele Grazzi, bearing an unacceptable ultimatum of submission. The Greek Prime-minister, Ioannis Metaxas rejects the shameful ultimatum through his vibrant *Ohi* (NO), thus presaging the subsequent NOs from King George II, the military leadership and the People of Greece.

From that moment on, the recorder of history, moving at unprecedented speed, immortalizes the Greek Epic of 1940. Developments on the Albanian front are storming. Joined into a rarely seen single united front, the motherland is mounting an all-out defense for the sake of its sacrosanct heritage and advances victoriously towards an inimitable and paramount glory. Although militarily lacking but superior in strategic planning, the Greek Army, advances victoriously to the yet unliberated and Greek-inhabited territory of the Albanian hinterland. The taking and liberation of Korytsa (Korcë), Moschopolis (Voskopoje), Pogradec, Premeti (Permeti), Aghioi Saranta (Sarantë), Argyrokastron (Gjirokaster) and Chimara (Himarë) are greeted and celebrated by both the Greeks and the flabbergasted foreigners, friends and foes, allies and opponents, as milestones of a liberating campaign. The large-scale Italian counteroffensive, known also as the 'spring offensive', personally masterminded by Benito Mussolini, will also be crushed, causing the Italian army a bitter defeat.

Victory wreaths the Greek arms in glory. The Epic of 1940 and its shining aftermath constitutes a historical fact whose magnitude exceeds the narrow but also the wider geographical settings within which it took place. Greece's victorious stand against the fascist challenge created a decisive niche in the struggle of European People against the Hordes of violence and totalitarianism. It heralded the first sign of victory against the Axis Forces, boosting the Allies morale, and as the British officer Philip Noel Baker marked, Greece's acceptance of the Italian ultimatum would have resulted in Axis Powers' total control in Europe and naturally, the Eastern Mediterranean. The Near East oil fields would have been open to their disposal, the lower Caucasus pass would have been rendered open and unprotected and Great Britain would probably lose the war effort. The forces of 'darkness' would have prevailed and European Civilization would have moved on a different orbit. In Albania, the Greeks won the first victory of the Allies who had been intimidated from the victories and the swagger of the Axis Powers.

Today therefore, we are commemorating and celebrating this shining historical achievement of our motherland, dedicating a laurel wreath upon the sacrifices of our Ancestors and we are emphatically bequeathing it as eternal heritage to the new generation, who, immersed into the great messages conveyed by the heroic achievements of the Epic of 1940, ought to preserve it whole and unmarred, in exercising their exemplary duty as vigilant guards of the sacrosanct heritage of the race of the Greeks and a long-standing proof of the paramount glory of historical Hellenism.

Imbued by this Greek pride we are all called forth to celebrate the anniversary in private or in public, in Schools and Churches, in educational institutions and cultural Associations, commemorating and honouring the known and the unsung heroes fallen for our country, freedom and honour, fighting the ultimate fight over land and sea.

The Epic of 1940 will be celebrated in the Greek-Orthodox Diaspora in the United Kingdom and Ireland across its local Communities by means of celebrations in schools and thanksgiving masses in the churches. In London, this historic anniversary of the Epic of 1940 shall be officially celebrated by means of a celebratory *Thanksgiving* mass on Sunday 30 October in the Cathedral of the Divine Wisdom presided by His Eminence Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira and Great Britain, followed by the official address of the day delivered by the newly-appointed Ambassador for Greece, His Excellency Mr Demetriou- Karamitrou-Tziras. A speech of similar content will be given on Friday, 28 October by His Excellency Mr Photis Photiou, Presidential Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs and Overseas Cypriots, at the Cathedral of the Dormition of the Mother of God Wood Green, at 7:00 pm.

I am certain that you will all be present in those scheduled events to bestow the proper honour and commemoration owed to by all of us, and I remain with warm wishes and blessings in the Lord and honour.

London, 4 October 2016

Archbishop Gregorios
of Thyateira and Great Britain

Note: To be read from the Pulpit instead of a Sermon on Sunday 23 or 30 October 2016.