

THE DORMITION OF THE THEOTOKOS: ECHOS OF PASCHA

The years of life seem to pass so quickly, the pace of time quickening as the years advance, and no person can escape the relentless currents that carry each of us to life's twilight and to the inevitable encounter with the specter of our own mortality. This world, this life that progresses ruthlessly towards the next, has been conditioned by the arrogance of Adam and Eve in that Ancestral Sin with its dark consequences of pain, suffering, and death. Even the Most Holy Theotokos, the Birthgiver of God and the Ever-Virgin Mary was subject to the ravages of time and the destiny of her mortal flesh. – yet hers would be a different passing, an unexpected ending that we celebrate joyfully in the Great Feast of her Holy Dormition.

As St. John of Damascus notes in his Second Sermon on the Dormition: "Today the life-giving treasury and abyss of charity is hidden in immortal death. She meets it without fear, who conceived death's destroyer, if indeed we may call her holy and vivifying departure by the name of death. For how could she, who brought life to all, be under the dominion of death? But she obeys the law of her own Son, and inherits this chastisement as a daughter of the first Adam, since her Son, who is the Life, did not refuse it. As the Mother of the living God, she goes through death, back to Him."

In her advanced years, the holy Theotokos was in the care of St. John the Theologian, that same Beloved Apostle who stood with her during her darkest hours when a sword pierced her heart at the foot of the Cross. Only a mother who has lost a child could even begin to comprehend the pain and anguish she experienced as she beheld her Son and her God nailed to the tree, waging that cosmic warfare between life and death – with hope in the balance. The Apostle John was committed to faithfully fulfilling this sacred trust from his Lord and diligently cared for the Holy Virgin to the end of her earthly life.

The living memory of the Church, her Sacred Tradition, sketches for us the events surrounding the repose of the Mother of God. Three days before her Dormition, as she prayed on the Mount of Olives, the Archangel Gabriel, the same messenger of God who announced that she would be the vessel of the Incarnation, appeared and revealed that within three days time, according to the will of her Son and God, she would be called into the blessed repose of the righteous. As a symbol of the victory won by Jesus Christ over the grave, and of the promised inheritance soon to be hers, the Archangel presented the Theotokos with a palm branch, reminiscent of the emblems of victory with which the children of Israel welcomed their King as He made His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.

It was St. Gregory of Tours, in his *Book of Miracles* who described the final moments of the Theotokos on this earth: "Finally when blessed Mary having completed the course of this

life, and was to be called from the world, all the Apostles gathered to her house from their different regions. And when they had heard that she was to be taken from the world, together they kept watch with her; and lo, the Lord Jesus came with His Angels. Taking her soul, He gave it to the Archangel Michael and withdrew. At dawn the Apostles raised her body with a pallet and they place it in a vault and they guarded it awaiting the coming of the Lord. And lo, a second time the Lord stood by them and He ordered the holy body to be taken and borne to Paradise; there having rejoined the soul exultant with His elect, it enjoys the good things of eternity which shall know no end."

The icon of the Feast beautifully shows the Mother of God laying in repose, peaceful as if asleep, with her delicate hands crossed gracefully over her chest. The holy Apostles are in attendance at her bedside, weeping and distraught over the loss of the Mother of Life. Especially anguished and grief-stricken is St. John, the Beloved Apostle, who loved and cared for the Virgin Mary through her waning years as if she were his own mother. Also present are the ranks of angels and Saints, those multitudes who accompanied the Lord Jesus Christ as He came to receive the soul of His adored Mother. He stands in the glory of His divinity, escorted by the heavenly hosts, holding what appears to be an infant, clothed in white. In truth He holds the pure, radiant soul of His holy Mother, newly born and received into the Kingdom of Light. How accustomed we are to seeing the Mother holding the infant Christ. Now we see the Son and Lord embracing the soul of His Mother, ushering her into the fullness of life. She was entombed, only to be found as gone when the Apostle Thomas, three days after her burial, opened the vault.

The Apostles greatly rejoiced at what came to be known as the dawn of a Second Pascha. Indeed, Holy Mary has made that great Passover from death to life. The Mother of Life has been raised to life, body and soul reunited, and translated into Paradise. This day the heavenly table, she, who contained the bread of life, the fire of the Godhead, without knowing man, was assumed from earth to heaven, and the gates of heaven opened wide to receive the gate of God from the East. Our holy Father St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco, rejoicing in this feast, once preached: "Today the living city of God is transferred from the earthly to the heavenly Jerusalem, and she, who, conceived her first-born and only Son, the first-born of all creation, the only begotten of the Father, rests in the Church of the first-born: the true and living Ark of the Lord is taken to the peace of her Son. The gates of heaven are opened to receive the receptacle of God, who, bringing forth the tree of life, destroyed Eve's disobedience and Adam's penalty of death"

Having given birth to the Savior of the world, the Theotokos is our hope, the model for our piety, the pledge of our regeneration, the promise of things to come. She is our intercessor before the very Throne of Grace, strengthening us, encouraging us, calling us to repentance and purity of heart that we too may be so blessed as to see God. We

proclaim in the Kontakion of the Dormition: *“The tomb and death had no power over the Birthgiver of God, who is ever watchful in her prayers and in whose intercession lies unflinching hope. For as the Mother of Life she has been transported into life by Him who dwelt in her ever-virgin womb.”* We know not what the progress of time will bring to each of us in terms of physical and spiritual trials. This all rests in the hands of our merciful God who directs all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Whatever His will, we take courage and find strength in the Most-Holy Theotokos who is the “comfort of the sick, protectress and patroness of the weak, staff of the elderly.”

As we journey together toward that inevitable encounter, that point in time when we cross the threshold between time and eternity, we cling to our faith and our hope of resurrection to eternal life, remembering, as the Holy Apostle Paul instructs us, that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). And we rejoice in her Holy Dormition as a preview of our own regeneration, not only regeneration but resurrection from death. Christ’s promise was verified in Mary’s own passing -- body and soul – into the Heavenly realms. As St. Peter wrote: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:3-5). Let us echo the fervent prayer, from St. Nilus of Sora, to the victorious and ever-Virgin Mary, our tainted nature’s solitary boast:

“Wherefore, at the time also of my death, stand before me, O my helper, and be not then ashamed of me. For I know, O Virgin, that I am guilty of many sins, and I, the wretched one, tremble, contemplating that hour. But you, my Joy, reveal unto me then your presence, work your mercy marvelously upon me, O Intercessor for my salvation. Rescue me, O Mistress, from the cruelty of the evil one, and from the fearsome and terrible trial of the spirits of the air, and deliver me from their malice, and transform all that grief and sorrow into joy by your enlightenment and grant me to pass unharmed through the principalities and powers of darkness and to attain to worship at the throne of glory before Christ our God Who reigns there with His Eternal Father and All-Holy Spirit. Amen”

Faithfully yours in the Mother of God,
Fr. Dimitrios