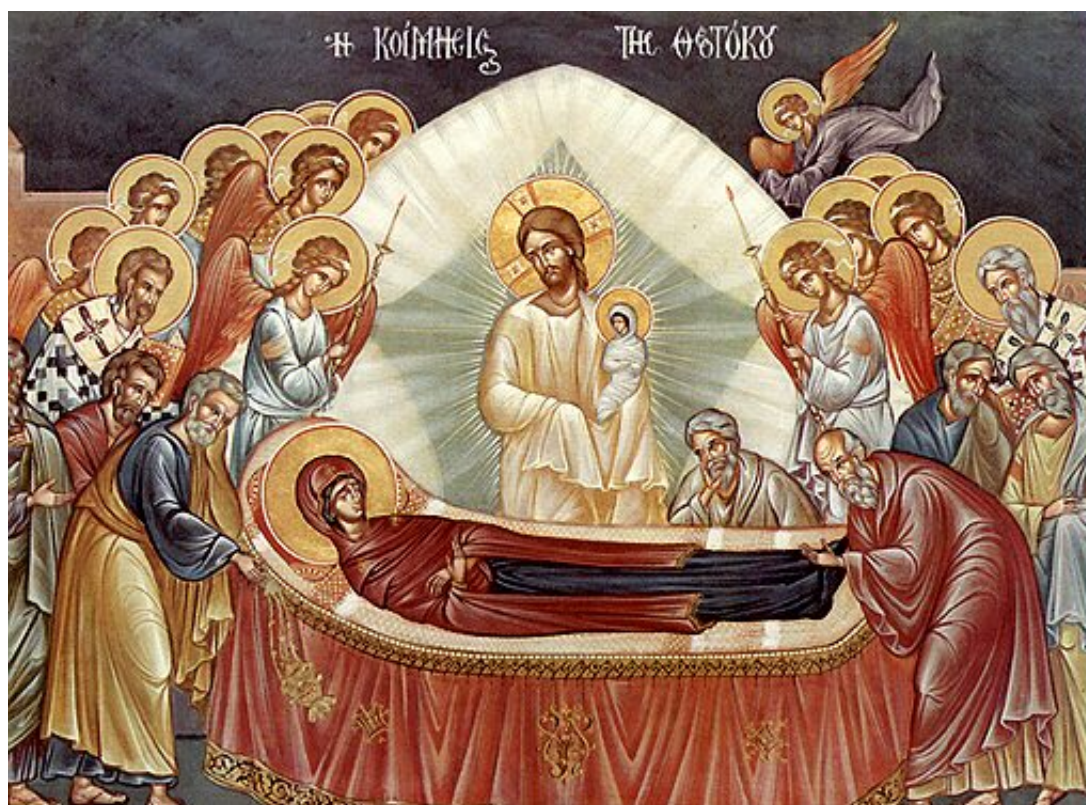




Why is the Death of the Theotokos a Feast Day? A Sermon on the Feast of the Dormition

It is possible to love Christ the way a loyalist, although he lives very far away, loves his king. He hasn't seen the king's face or looked into his eyes, but he loves him in his heart. He cuts out pictures from newspapers and hangs them on his wall. He refrains from work on royal holidays.



But to love the king's mother is possible only once one has entered into the royal chambers and drawn near to what is hidden from extraneous eyes: the life not only of the king himself, but of the royal family. It is necessary to be one of the king's own in order to love his mother and his other relatives.

We say these words in order to approach the theme of the veneration of the Mother of God from afar, to approach this truth by analogy, as if by a thread.

The veneration of the Theotokos is a familial deposit, a familial memory, a family tradition. He who honors the woman clothed in the sun, her who served for the mysterious incarnation of God, no longer worships the Lord from afar, but has drawn close to Him. We are not slaves, crying out praises from afar off. We are children of God's family when we honor His mother.

Her feasts are hidden. One can whisper about them into the ear. This is especially true of the Dormition. This is probably why monastics love this feast so much.

Approaching the luminous mysteries is like approaching a purifying fire. It reminds one of Moses, who hid his face as he drew near to the burning bush. (Exodus 3:6) Thus the Canon of the feast says: "Guard my



thoughts, my Christ, for I undertake to hymn the bulwark of the world, Thy pure Mother. Strengthen me upon the pillar of speech, and help me in difficult thoughts.”

Help me in difficult thoughts ... This is clearer to monastics than to others.

On the day of the Dormition of the Theotokos, we speak of the fact that Mother of the Light has died.

Let us pronounce this sentence again, and let us fully establish its meaning according to all the grammatical rules: The Mother of the Light has died.

After these words and this meaning, a feast is possible only if a certain something has come to pass. Otherwise, this special feast would not be. We would continue to celebrate the Entry into the Temple, the Annunciation and the Nativity. We would honor her numerous icons. But the Dormition would not fall into this bright list. It would rather be remembered alongside the commemorations of the reposed righteous ones, apostles and martyrs. It would be remembered in the same way as we remember, for example, the martyric deaths and glorious names of Peter and Paul.

All the saints, having been separated from their bodies, await the resurrection of the dead. They are already rejoicing before the face of God, and they do not fear the future, which hides nothing terrible from them, but only the resurrection, the increase of glory, and a full entry into the Kingdom. They are all rejoicing, but only in soul. The entire man does not continue to live, and as long as the unity of the soul with the flesh that is to be resurrected has not been restored, this is still a joy “not entire,” “not the whole joy.”

Thus it would be also with the Mother of God if, after the meaning of the sentence about Her death, nothing else had happened. But this is a feast, and if it is a great one, this only because the tomb, no longer holding the body of the Theotokos, is empty. Peter and Paul await the resurrection of the dead. All the saints await the resurrection. But the Mother of God is not awaiting anything for herself.

Her tomb is empty with that holy emptiness that marks the tomb of her Son, Christ the Savior.

The stomach is satisfied when it is full. A rich house, when it is full of all kinds of goods. But a tomb is holy when it is empty.

And it is empty not by the hands of thieves, defilers or grave-robbers, but rather through the unconquerable power of the resurrection!

Just so is the tomb of Christi empty, that fount of the common Resurrection. Empty also is the tomb of Mother of Christ. This is why the feast of her Dormition is a great one. It is not even called the day of her death, but of her falling asleep, since this sleep of death was not a long one.



She was given a special education, and her soul felt early, very early the desire not to depart from God in thought even by a jot. Through the narrow gate of struggles that are invisible to the eyes of men, she entered into the view of revealed mysteries. She was granted the sweetness of a special motherhood. It was given to her to be unknown throughout her lifetime, and to dwell in the shade of her Divine Son. The weight of maternal concern for Him was laid upon her shoulders, and of following after Him without murmuring. Her heart was torn to pieces by all of the nightmares that are brought to mind during Passion Week. She was unspeakingly informed of the news that her sweetest Son was alive! Would not the hour of her meeting with coldness of death be marked by a special interest?

For all the modesty with which she is passed over in the pages of the Gospel, she — Mary — is yet something entirely special.

The kings and great ones of this earth can indeed punish many, almost as if they were celestial beings or earthly gods, while in fact they live the lives of ordinary sinners. They gossip, they fear, lie, commit adultery and slander. They die unable to grasp the future, and the remembrance of many of them is washed away as quickly as dirt is washed from the pavement by a garden hose. True greatness is clothed in simplicity and anonymity.

“For the Mighty One has done great things to me, and holy is His name,” sang Mary, when she had conceived Christ by the Spirit.

The Mighty One also did great things for her on the day of her death.

On the one hand, she died just as we all do. On the other hand — which is something entirely different — she did not remain in the tomb.

Her Son took her to Himself. Clearly then, that love of His which reigns over the redeemed He willed in no other way than together with her who served the mystery of Redemption more than any other.

The tradition about this feast tells us in detail about Gabriel, about the Apostle Thomas, and about a certain bold Jew named Athonius. The tradition even tells us what Psalm the Apostle Peter sang as he headed the burial procession of the Theotokos. All of this is found in the hymnody and iconography of the feast. But we needn't always enumerate all of the precious dots and tittles of this great occurrence. Some times it is enough to concentrate on the most important thing.

The most important thing is that the Door through which the All-Highest One came into the world has left us through the door of death.

At first she left us only in soul, as befits the dead, but then she was resurrected by her Son and left the world with her body. Her tomb is empty!

She left, but did not forsake us. The Troparion of the feast repeatedly reminds us of this truth: “In giving birth thou didst preserve thy virginity / In thy dormition thou hast not forsaken the world, O Theotokos.”

We, among millions of other baptized souls, turn our gaze to her and offer prayers. Those who love her are numbered in hundreds of thousands, even millions. Those who have been saved by her intercession are



practically innumerable.

Finally, we shall all die. It would not be fitting for us to expect the Archangel Gabriel to come to our bed on that day. But it is fitting to pray to the Mother of God.

The bed of one dying is like the bed of one being born, since the one who is dying is painfully born into a different life. Our Heavenly Mother often stands at both of these beds in order to alleviate suffering and to help. The canon for those who are having a difficult death is particularly addressed to the Mother of God.

Therefore the feast of her Dormition is also the feast of our common hope in her future help at that terrible hour, when there shall no other help be present.

Thus in the Troparion it is also said: “Thou hast been translated unto life, since thou art the Mother of Life, and by thy prayers dost thou deliver our souls from death.”

Translated from [the Russian](#)

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