

Ἡ ΚΟΙΜΗΣΙΣ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΥ



The Falling Asleep of the Birthgiver of God, the Ever-Virgin Mary

TODAY'S APOSTLE READING

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden.

From Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians

(Phil 2:5-11) Brethren, have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the

likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

TODAY'S GOSPEL READING

From the Gospel according to Saint Luke

(Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28) At that time, Jesus entered a certain village; and a woman named Martha received Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to His teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to Him and said, "Lord, dost Thou not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her." As He said this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore Thee, and the breasts that Thou didst suck!" But He said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

PASTOR'S NOTE

To better understand the significance of Mary, the Birthgiver of God (in Greek, "Theotokos"), the Church has assigned as Epistle reading a section of Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians. However, the "prokeimenon" to this reading—that is, the verse that is "placed before" the text of the Epistle—is made up of words spoken by the Theotokos. More precisely, these words ("My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden") are part of the Virgin's hymn to God, which she

recited after being told that she was to become the Mother of the God-made-man. This a hymn expresses her humble submission to the mysterious work of the Lord.

Saint Paul also talks about humility. He sets forth Christ himself as a model of perfect obedience and humility: Christ **humbled Himself and became obedient unto death**. Although God, He accepted to take on the realities of his creatures; although almighty, He accepted to live within the confines of our human existence—even to the point of sharing our mortality, and even to the point of accepting the atrocious and humiliating death by crucifixion.

Who, then, is our model, Christ or the Theotokos? This way framing the problem is wrong. Consider the icons of the Theotokos: she is almost always portrayed together with Christ, often pointing at Him, urging us to direct our gaze to Him. The Theotokos, in other words, is our supreme model in being conformed to the model set by Christ. She humbled herself and was obedient in response to Christ's humbling Himself unto taking on our mortal flesh. She is the first reply, on behalf of all humanity, to God's quest for us, fallen and lost creatures.

We know that "the Lord He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden"—that is, He had regard for it, it did not go unnoticed. On the basis of her humility, God was able to come and be with us, so that we may be healed and returned to living in Him. The final chapter of this "regard" that God had for the humility of the Theotokos is seen in, precisely, her Falling Asleep.

We generally do not rejoice when somebody dear to us falls asleep. Why, then, "celebrate" the Dormition of Mary? Well, first of all, the icon shows the Apostles gathered for the funeral and, of course, *lamenting*. We do lament; but we lament her passing from this mortal life with a sense of *awe*. It is here, in the Dormition of the Theotokos, that the awe-inspiring descent of God into this world reveals its end. As we sing in the Troparion of the Dormition, Mary was "translated to life, being the Mother of Life"; or, in the Kontakion, that "neither tomb nor death could hold her" because "He Who dwelt in her ever-Virgin womb did translate her to life." Indeed, according to ancient tradition, she was raised from the dead, and her tomb was found empty. In other words, the point of Christ's incarnation is that humanity be returned from mortality to God's initial desiring for us: eternal life, true life from the Tree of Life. And the Theotokos is the first human being to experience this overcoming of death.

Christ is risen, Christ is ascended into the heavens. The Theotokos was raised and translated to heaven. What is the difference? In Roman Catholicism, especially at the level of folk piety, the difference is reduced to the point of making the Virgin Mary into a sort of parallel deity to Christ. Orthodoxy insists on marking the difference: Christ is risen as true God and Giver of Life; Mary, even though highest among all, is a creature who reaps the fruit of Christ's resurrection meant for all of us—she is raised from mortality just as all of us will be raised and changed and made similar to the risen Lord.

What about us, here and now, on earth, *today*? We find our hope depicted well in the icon of Dormition: the Virgin Mother who once held the baby in her arms, is now herself held in the arms of the Lord. Through the intercession of the Theotokos, who "is ever watchful in intercessions," may we also find resurrection and life eternal in the bosom of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ.



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