

Dormition 2009

In my nearly 10 years as an Orthodox priest, I am always amazed, year after year, about the way our calendar of feasts works. It is clearly an act of the Holy Spirit working ceaselessly in the Church all these centuries. It seems to me no random coincidence that the feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos follows immediately after the feast of the Transfiguration. What I hope to share with you this morning is the message of peace and hope that is found in these two great feasts. A message that is especially important when we are confronted with the death of a loved one.

First of all, let me begin by stating that the Dormition of the Theotokos and particularly the icon of the feast have taken on a completely new and very personal meaning to me. I lost my mother just four months ago. She had become seriously ill and on Bright Monday she died. I had the privilege of being at her side when she passed. Without going into the details – because it will probably make me cry – I have to say that Mom’s passing was one of the most deeply spiritual experiences I have ever had. I am convinced that the circumstances surrounding her peaceful painless passing demonstrated the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to receive my mother’s soul into His precious hands just as He received the soul of His own mother. The icon of the Dormition has brought great me peace and comfort in the months after mom died because I know in that icon is a message of hope and salvation for us all; a message that teaches us how to approach death.

The feast that we celebrated last week, the Transfiguration of Christ, tells us an important fact. From the stichera on “Lord, I Call” from Great Vespers we hear:

Before Your Crucifixion, O Lord, taking the disciples up into a high mountain, You were transfigured before them, shining upon them with the bright beams of Your power: from love of mankind and in Your sovereign might, it was Your desire to show them the splendor of the Resurrection. Grant that we too in peace may be counted worthy of this splendor, O God, for You are merciful and love mankind.

This hymn tells us that Christ wanted to show the disciples the splendor of not only of His divinity, but also of His resurrection. Then the hymn asks Jesus that we too may be made worthy of that splendor. The feastday gives us a look at our own resurrection and we see the splendor that his faithful servants will one day be graced with.

This is the same promise that we find in the Holy Scriptures. In chapter 15 of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, he gives a lengthy discussion about the resurrection. He begins by comparing death and resurrection to the sowing of seeds. A tiny seed is planted in the ground and it is raised up as a new and glorious thing. Continuing on, St. Paul states:

“So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body (vs. 42-44).”

The good news for us is that this mortal flesh will be raised in glory and re-fashioned into that which God had intended for us from the very beginning.

And now the bad news – we have to die first. Which brings me to today's feast of the Dormition. Even the most holy and pure Theotokos had to succumb to old age and die because she too was of the fallen race of Adam. But in this feast about the Virgin Mary, there is a profound message of resurrection for all of us. From one of the canons of the feast sung at matins we read:

Your death, O pure Virgin, was a crossing into a better and eternal life. It translated you, O undefiled, from this mortal life to that which knows no end and is indeed divine: and so you look in joy upon your Son and Lord.

In addition we read:

O pure Virgin, you have won the honor of victory over nature by bringing forth God; yet like your Son and Creator, you have submitted to the laws of nature in a manner above nature. Therefore, dying you have risen to live eternally with your Son.

This tells us that death is not the end of all things. It is a passage into a better and eternal life. And what joy for the Theotokos, and for us, to be able to enter into eternal life with the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the events surrounding her death and the fact that three days after her death that her tomb was found empty, speak even further of a promise not only for the Virgin Mary, but also for each and every one of us – Resurrection.

Referring once again to the stichera at “Lord, I call” from Great Vespers we read:

Glorious are your mysteries, O pure Lady. You were made the Throne of the Most High, and today you are translated from earth to heaven. Your glory is full of majesty, shining with grace in divine brightness.

Jesus was resurrected from the dead and now we see that Mary – a human being like us – is also raised physically and bodily to new life. But the story doesn't end there either, because the feast tells us that after dying we too will be raised bodily from our tombs; we too will shine with the grace in divine brightness. Orthodox Christians call this theosis. The original beauty of our nature will be restored and we will become by grace what God is by nature as His divine light shines in us.

This joyful condition, is not just reserved for Jesus and His mother, but also for all of us. Allow me to share with you a passage from chapter 3 of the Wisdom of Solomon, a wonderful text found in the Orthodox Christian Old Testament. In it we read:

...the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torture will ever touch them. In the eyes of the undiscerning they seemed to have died, and their departure was considered to be misfortune, and their passage from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in man's view they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Though chastened in a few things, great kindness will be shown them, for God tested them and found them worthy of Himself. He tested them like gold in a furnace and accepted them as a whole burnt offering. In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and they will run about like sparks through straw. They will judge nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord shall reign over them unto the ages. Those who trust in Him will understand truth, and the faithful shall continue with Him in love, because grace and mercy are upon His elect.

And this brings me to my take home message. Orthodox Christians do not view death like other people do. Truly, death is a sad and terrible consequence of our fallen and corrupt nature. But by the Cross, Christ has conquered sin and death. Death is not the end; it is just the beginning for those of us who bear the name "Christian." When someone you know and love dies, it is acceptable and normal to cry and be sad because that person has left this life. No more are they with us in this place bound by time and space, but for now, their souls have been carried away by Christ and are in the presence of God. Take the time in your sorrow to meditate on the icon of today's feast and to remember the promise: If we love the Lord Jesus Christ and commit our lives to following Him, if we love the Church, if we love each other, and if we partake in the fullness of the sacramental life of the Church, then after death and

the separation of the soul from the body the Lord Himself will come for us to take us to the place that He has prepared for us. Then, like His mother, He will raise us from the dead in a new and glorious body. Our departed loved ones will be there with us once again in the heavenly kingdom where we will all look with joy upon our Lord and shine forth with the light of Christ's Transfiguration. This glory shall be to all His saints.

To Him who has conquered death and through His own mother has shown us the hope of the resurrection into life eternal, Jesus Christ our Lord, to Him be glory, honor, thanksgiving, and worship, always now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.