

Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos 2011

On this day, the Orthodox Church around the world celebrates the feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos. If you think about it for just a moment, the concept of the feast day is a bit strange to the average non-Orthodox person. Why on earth would Christians gather to celebrate the death of the Theotokos, the Virgin Mary and Mother of God? It might even sound a bit macabre to some. However, for those of us who are of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, this feast resonates with the Gospel message of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we all know, the story of the Gospel begins all the way back in the Garden of Eden. There, humanity, known to us as Adam and Eve, dwelt in a world very different from ours. The anaphora of the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil states:

... You had created man and had fashioned him in Your own image,
O God, You did set him in the midst of a paradise of plenty,
promising him life eternal and the enjoyment of everlasting good
things in keeping your commandments.

However, Adam and Eve did not keep God's commandments. They were deceived by Satan (in the form of the serpent) to disobey God. They ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result, Adam and Eve lost their communion with God, they fell from grace, they became mortal and subject to death. Adam and Eve lost it all. Hope turned to despair, joy became sadness, and life became death. All of the generations from Adam and Eve would no longer be in the image and likeness of God, but in the image and likeness of Adam – fallen and mortal (re: Genesis 5:3).

But a promise was made to Eve on that fateful day. In cursing the serpent, God said, "...I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3:15). In the late second century, St. Irenaeus of Lyons wrote that "the woman" is a reference to the Theotokos and "her Seed" is a reference to Christ.

Thus, the promise was made that Satan would ultimately be defeated through the male child of a “new Eve” and the failure of the first Eve would be redeemed.

That woman, the “new Eve,” is the Theotokos, the Virgin Mary. In Luke’s Gospel, the angel Gabriel comes to Mary to announce that she has been chosen to be the mother of the Son of the Most High God. Instead of the disobedience of the first Eve, the new Eve offers herself completely and fully to God. In her acceptance of this cosmic event, Mary exalts God and sings out, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Wait. Mary needs a savior? Yes, absolutely. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which teaches that Mary herself was conceived without – what they call – original sin or original guilt, the Orthodox Church recognizes that even as pure and holy as Mary was, the purest and holiest woman that ever lived, she was still a child of fallen humanity. She still needed a savior to free her from the ancestral curse of death brought on by Adam and Eve.

That savior was her son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The divine Word of God incarnate in her womb – the Word of God made flesh (re: John 1:14). Yes, Jesus is fully human; not as the early Gnostic heretics said, just God without flesh – some sort of divine “ghost” that only appeared human. Rather, to paraphrase our church hymnography, He knitted for himself a fully human body from the flesh of His mother. Yes, Jesus is fully divine: not merely a man as some heretics have claimed throughout the ages, or as proclaimed even today in the “scholarly” Christianity of the academic heretics. To be an Orthodox Christian is to believe without hesitation that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, without separation, confusion, mixture, or division.

Because He is divine and human, Jesus was able to offer Himself up for the salvation of the world. A final and perfect sacrifice was made when Jesus was nailed to the Cross and sin was once and for all condemned in the flesh (re: Romans 8:3). Quoting again from St. Basil’s anaphora we hear that Jesus:

...gave Himself as a ransom to death, whereby we were held, sold into bondage under sin. And having descended into hades through the cross, that He might fill all things with Himself, He loosed the pains of death and rose on the third day, making a way for all flesh through the resurrection from the dead.

Here lies the key for truly understanding today's feast - sin, death, Hades, and the Devil have been overthrown by Christ and as such mankind has been redeemed.

Nevertheless, the Virgin Mary, and all humanity is still subject to death. As the icon of today's feast portrays, her body was placed in a tomb and the Apostolic Church gathered from the far corners of the world to venerate and to say "farewell" to the one who gave birth to God. Interestingly, the Orthodox Church still does this. At the Great Vespers service on the eve of this feast we sing a lamentations service that musically and lyrically is nearly identical to the Lamentations Service of Great and Holy Friday. Instead of lamenting in song the death of Jesus, we lament in song the death of Mary. But the story does not end there.

The icon of the feast also shows her Son, the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, coming from the heavens to receive her soul in his hands. No longer can death separate the Theotokos from God. Her death is not a dead end, but a passage to the heavenly mansions. At the litiya during Great Vespers, the following hymn is sung:

Sing, O people! Sing the praises of the Mother of our God: for today she delivers her soul, full of light, into the spotless hands of Him who was made incarnate of her without seed.

Then, as legend has it, St. Thomas arrived three days late from India and asked that Mary's tomb be opened so that he might see her one last time. When he did, the tomb of Mary was empty - on the third day - just like her Son's. Mary had experienced her own Pascha; the Pascha of the faithful.

By celebrating this feast day, we ultimately celebrate the victory of Christ on the Cross and what that means for each and every one of us. St. Paul states:

...Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man [Adam] came death, by Man [Jesus Christ] also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's... (I Corinthians 15:20-23).

St. Paul also states that Jesus is the "...firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29). Additionally, the Orthodox Church teaches us that in all things Mary is the not the great exception but the great example. Jesus having risen from the dead, now extends that same resurrection to his own mother that He will ultimately bestow to us. Through Mary's example, we see the hope that belongs to those of us who have the Lord Jesus Christ as our savior and those of us who fill our souls with the divine light in the grace-filled sacramental life of the Church. Upon our death, no angels, and certainly no demons, but rather the Lord Jesus Christ Himself comes to receive our light-filled souls into His divine hands. Through Mary, we foresee our own empty tombs when the Lord comes again to resurrect the dead in a new and glorious body. Brothers and sisters, let us celebrate this feast with joy. For through Jesus Christ, the Seed of Mary the new Eve, the despair of death has become hope, the sadness of death has become the anticipation of joy, and death itself has become a passage to new life in the Kingdom of God. As we now prepare to offer the bread and wine to God so that it may become the soul-illuminating Eucharist, the medicine of immortality, let us commend ourselves and each other and all our lives unto the Holy Lord Jesus, to whom is due all glory, honor and worship together with His Co-eternal Father, and the All Holy and life-creating Spirit. Amen.