

The Feast of the Dormition

By Metropolitan George (Khodr)

In Christian terminology, it is the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God, and "dormition" is the eastern term for death. In the language of worship, the dead are called those asleep, in order to indicate Christ's victory over death. Their death is because they are embraced by God before the Resurrection on the last day. The origins of the feast are eastern. It was established in the sixth century in Jerusalem where her church stood in Gethsemane. The Emperor Maurice made the feast general throughout the empire. Pope Sergius I, who died at the beginning of the seventh century adopted the feast, and Pope Pius XII announced that the transport of the Virgin to heaven in body and soul is a dogma.

The Orthodox Church has not defined the transport of Mary into heaven as a dogma. Orthodox theologians are divided between those who believe in the assumption of her body and those who do not, since where there is not a synodally-defined dogma, the matter is left to freedom of interpretation. However, the services for the feast are clear in stating that she was transported ("You were transported to life, being the Mother of Life", that is of Christ). Also in the prayer for the feast we say "You arose after your death to be with your Son eternally" and even more clearly "God... preserved your body in the tomb and your glory is with Him in your divine transport".

The question that poses itself to eastern Christians is 'are the texts of the feast binding as dogma?' The general, basic answer is that worship services reveal a dogmatic position in general, but this does not mean that we are able to extrapolate a binding dogmatic position from the worship services, and so we remain with critical freedom as long as a clear definition is not issued at an ecumenical council made up of all the Orthodox churches.

Taking stock of both the Orthodox and the Catholic positions, we can say that Mary anticipated the Resurrection, that she will not be subject to trial or judgment, and that she abides in glory, that is the state in which we will be after the final resurrection. This is what Saint John of Damascus realized in the eighth century when he addressed her in one of the two sermons he wrote about the Dormition. He said, "I will not call your holy departure death, but rather a dormition or a journey but the best way to call it is an abiding. In leaving the realm of the body, you entered a more excellent realm".

I said that she abides in the divine glory and that she is not like us, subject to divine judgment on the last day. This is why we greatly magnify her. She is our ambassador to heaven.

She is full of grace, as the angel Gabriel told her at the moment of the Annunciation. That is, that she was free from all sin, submitting to God alone and prepared to accept every word from Him. This is what the angel meant when he said, "The Lord is with you, blessed among women." These words were the beginning of her path to glory. The beginning of the path is that from her and from the Holy Spirit the Word of God, who existed in the beginning, became incarnate. The angel's

greeting makes it clear to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will rest upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." There is no doubt that the angel Gabriel's use of the word "overshadow" points to the cloud that accompanied the People of God of old and which later became the temple in Jerusalem. The idea, then, is that Mary is the new temple of God or the first church for Christ and there is no church unless she dwells within it. In the first church, which gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem, where the disciples gathered "continuing with one accord in prayers and Mary the mother of Jesus was with them" (Acts 1: 14). So when the Holy Spirit rested upon them, it also rested upon Mary, just as it had rested upon her at the Annunciation in order for the Word to be made flesh. This Spirit accompanied her until the end of her life on earth. This is the life in glory before her being transported to the heavenly abodes.

There is no further talk about Mary after this in the Gospel, since it goes on to talk about the Holy Spirit's formation of the Church. The Virgin is an inherent part of the Church since she said, "From this moment all generations shall call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). Thus the words of the Gospel show that the humanity that relies on the Gospel as its scripture turns to the Virgin, through whom the Mighty One worked wonders (Luke 1: 49). Those who know of the place of Mary in glory address her, seeking her intercession.

The author of the Book of Revelation looked at her as an image of the Church. He said, "There appeared a great sign in heaven: a woman robed in the sun and the moon is under her feet and upon her head is a crown of twelve stars" (Revelation 1: 12). Byzantine art has a pattern by which she is drawn with the Child. She relies on Him for all her splendor. She has no power on her own. She is given what we receive from the Lord. If you love the Lord and go for all His splendors, then He is great in His saints and among them she is the first. Knowledge of Mary is a part of knowledge of Christ.

Perhaps this feast is an occasion for me to say that what is called the intercession or the entreaties or the meditations of the saints are words that do not cancel the single mediation of Christ. Salvation was achieved a single time in the person of the Savior. No one can add anything to that, since there is no power outside this salvation.

We Orthodox do not accept the view of Mary as a partner in salvation. No human can save humans. However, we believe that those in heaven pray, just like the people on earth, because Christ's Resurrection is active from this moment and by it Christ has trampled down the death of those who have tasted it. Those who have been transported to glory stand in prayer and are not mere bones and ashes. They are alive with their Lord, that is they speak to Him and we speak to them. We accompany them and they accompany us in the vale of tears in which we live. The Church in heaven and the Church on earth is one. Heaven is chanting after divine kindness in the saints. Is it right for you to say that those in heaven are silent and that Mary is absent from the glory of her Son and of her brothers and sisters in righteousness?! She is a word, after the Word dwelt within her and after He gave those invited to the wedding at Cana wine to enjoy.

What does it mean when some say "Can God not respond to us directly?" If you entrust grace with Mary, supplicate her, and receive an outpouring from her, is the Savior not working within you directly? In the Kingdom of Love above, what is direct and what is indirect? Are we not, with those great ones who preceded us in arriving at God's mercy, the single body of Christ, living together in the Holy Spirit?