

The Falling Asleep of our Lady, the Theotokos

Thy Dormition is now glorified by dominions, powers, principalities and thrones, authorities, cherubim and the dread seraphim; the earthborn are filled with joy, adorned with thy divine glory and majesty; and kings worship, falling down with all the angels and archangels, and they sing: Maiden Full of Grace, rejoice thou, with thee is the Lord our God, Who abundantly granteth His Great Mercy to the world through thee.

—Vespers of the Dormition of the Theotokos

Let us explore further the theme of the Theotokos as our example in her Falling Asleep (Dormition). In the Divine Liturgy we pray God would grant us, “a Christian ending to our life, painless, blameless, peaceful; and a good defense before the dread Judgment Seat of Christ.” In her death, Our Lady exemplifies *par excellence* a Christian ending to our life and all it entails.

At the appointed time, the Theotokos fell asleep. Truly it was sleep for she, full of grace, experienced death in a painless, blameless, and peaceful manner. While her life was marked by the suffering of her Son (Luke 2.35, John 19.26), she experienced true rest in death. The accounts handed down tell that the Apostles were caught up and gathered around her in her last days. However, St Thomas was providentially delayed and arrived three days after her passing. (Recall Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared to disciples on the Day of Resurrection (John 20.24).) He asked to see where she lay, and it was revealed that her body was no longer in her tomb, having been taken up into heaven. As our Lord was resurrected into a renewed and glorified body (1 Corinthians 15.42, 49), so he resurrected our Lady, full of his grace. Because the Theotokos represents the Church, her resurrection prefigures our resurrection (1 Corinthians 15.19-23), insofar as we are in Christ’s Church.

The icon for this feast presents resurrection and rebirth mystically by picturing Mary’s soul held by Jesus beside her death bed. Her soul is imaged as an infant to show her (and our) birth into eternal life (John 3.3), as the process of being born again and sanctified is not completed in this life, but in the life to come (Romans 6.7).

She who is full of grace is typologically the Church (Apocalypse 12) as Christ dwelt in her womb and dwells in our midst. Every statement about our Lady speaks to who our Lord is. She serves as our great example in death and an inspiration for us to live in a manner worthy of our calling (2 Thessalonians 1.11) dying to self with our life hidden in Christ (Colossians 3.3). This is what it is to have “a good defense before the dread Judgment Seat of Christ”: to be hidden in Christ and fully participate in him. Therefore, let us imitate the disciple whom Christ loved and take the Theotokos as our own (John 19.27).

*How, O Mary, canst thou die
thou who art the life of faithful ones
and how can the tomb contain thy body
which contained the One Who cannot be contained?*

...

*Ev’ry generation
to thy grave comes bringing
its dirge of praises, O Virgin.*

—from the Lamentations Service echoing the Lamentations Service of Christ