

The Nativity and Dormition of Our Lady, our Great Example

This is the day of the Lord; wherefore, rejoice ye nations; for behold the chamber of Light, the scroll of the Word of life hath come forth from the womb; the gate facing the east hath been born. Wherefore, she awaiteth the entrance of the High Priest. And she alone admitted Christ into the universe for salvation of our souls.

—From the Vespers Stichera for the Nativity of the Theotokos

“Neither human tongue nor angelic mind is able worthily to praise her through whom it is given to us to look clearly upon the Lord’s glory.” Thus St John of Damascus begins his three-part sermon series on the Mother of God. The Feasts of the Nativity (September 8) and Dormition (August 15) of the Theotokos bookend our Liturgical Year. Fr Alexander Schmemmann of blessed memory said, “Mary is the great example, not the great exception.” Let us then see what we can learn from her birth and death to follow after her path.

Her Nativity

Our Lady was born to Righteous Joachim and Anna, who were elderly and barren. Indeed, the story of her childhood parallels that of the Prophet Samuel (1 Kingdoms 1–2). Similarly, the Theotokos served in the Temple from soon after she was weaned. She was ministered to by angels and choose a life of holiness from the earliest age. Indeed, she was only able to give her response to the Archangel Gabriel, “Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word,” (Luke 1.38) because of the holy life she cultivated.

The Orthodox doctrine of Ancestral Sin is that humans are born in weakness and frailty because of Adam and Eve’s sin (Romans 5.12-21). The Western view of Original Sin wrongly adds that we are also born guilty of that sin. Because of this, the West has tended to either separate Mary from us by an immaculate conception (Rome) or have downplayed her holiness (Protestants). As a result, the Theotokos is no longer the great example; we are not encouraged by her life and we no longer see by God’s grace what humans can become.

Her Dormition

In her death, the Blessed Virgin is also our example, dying in Christ and being received by him. The icon for the feast shows Mary’s soul pictured as an infant held by Jesus, reminiscent of the icon where Mary holds the infant Jesus. Our Lady prefigures all those who trust in Christ. After her falling asleep she partook of the Resurrection (Romans 6.5). Though a sword pierced her soul (Luke 2.35), she was nourished by God and overcame the dragon by her holy life (Apocalypse 12).

Let us then conclude with the words of Fr Thomas Hopko of blessed memory:

“Finally it must be stressed that, in all of the feasts of the Virgin Mother of God in the Church, the Orthodox Christians celebrate facts of their own lives in Christ and the Holy Spirit. What happens to Mary happens to all who imitate her holy life of humility, obedience, and love. With her all people will be ‘blessed’ to be ‘more honorable than the cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim’ if they follow her example. All will have Christ born in them by the Holy Spirit. All will become temples of the living God. All will share in the eternal life of His Kingdom who live the life that Mary lived.” (*The Orthodox Faith*)

All we the generations ever call thee blessed, the only Theotokos.

The bounds of nature are overcome in thee, O immaculate Virgin; for thy childbirth is virginal, and thy death is the espousal of life. O thou who after childbirth art virgin, and who after death art living, do thou, O Theotokos, ever save thine inheritance.

—Ninth Ode of the First Dormition Canon