

The Dormition and our Falling Asleep

Let me know how fleeting I am

Introduction

A large part of the human experience is coming to realize we have an expiration date, and we do not know when it is. This is echoed in much of human literature, and the Psalms often meditate upon this. For example, Psalm 38 requests, “O Lord, make me know my end / and what is the measure of my days / let me know how fleeting I am!” Every time we participate in the Liturgy, we pray “that we may complete the remaining time of our life in peace and repentance...[for] a Christian ending to our life, painless, blameless, peaceful, and a good defense before the fearful judgement of Christ.” Right after this petition, we call to mind “our all-holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorious Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary”

Our Most Blessed Lady shows us in her Dormition how to approach death. She offers us aid to die to ourselves so that our death may be a new beginning — one where we are refashioned by Christ.

The Tradition of the Dormition

Let's start with a short account of Mary's death, which I've adapted from the Dormition Matins:

That the world-saving Maiden died is no marvel,
Since, after the flesh, the world's Maker died also.
God's Mother liveth forever, though she died on the fifteenth.

The Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary and revealed to her that within three days she will find rest and exit this life. She returned to her home with great joy, desiring in her heart once more to see in this life, all of the Apostles of Christ. The Lord fulfilled her wish and all of the Apostles, borne by angels in the clouds, gathered at the same time at the home of St John on Zion. After seeing them, the Theotokos peacefully gave up her soul to God without any pain or physical illness. The Apostles took the coffin with her body from which an aromatic fragrance emitted and, in the company of many Christians, bore it to the Garden of Gethsemane to the sepulcher of her parents, Saints Joachim and Anna. Only the Apostle Thomas was absent, according to God's Providence, in order that a new and all-glorious mystery of the Holy Theotokos would again be revealed. On the third day, Thomas arrived and desired to venerate the body of the Holy All-pure one. But when the Apostles opened the sepulcher, they found only the winding sheet and the body was not in the tomb. That evening, the Theotokos appeared to the apostles surrounded by a myriad of angels and said to them: “Rejoice, I will be with you always.”

The Theotokos, Our Great Example

In her death as in her whole life, our Lady, the Theotokos is our model for steadfast faithfulness to God. The archdiocese's theme for the conferences this summer was "let it be to me according to your word." While this is recorded of Mary during the Annunciation, she did not only say this then, but lived her whole life according to this principle. She is full of grace, fully cooperated with God at all times from her youth to her death. Mary uniquely heard the Word of God and kept it as we hear in the Gospel reading of the feast.

At the Lamentations we sing "In a grave they laid Thee / O my Life and my Christ / and now also the Mother of Life / a strange sight both to angels and men." Death came to her as it does for us all, as St John of Damascus sang, "If her Fruit, whom none may comprehend, on whose account she was called a Heaven, submitted of his own will to burial as a mortal, how should she, who gave Him birth without knowing a man, refuse it." She so identified with her son, that the feast of her Dormition strongly resonates with Paschal themes. She exemplifies how to live and die, being united to Christ. The Wisdom of Sirach says remembering our death is a great aid to living righteously. As we reflect on our death, let us remember hers and strive to imitate her, for she points us to the Way which is Jesus.

The Theotokos, Our Great Protection

But to die the death we request in the Liturgy, painless, blameless and peaceful with a good defense before the fearful judgement seat of Christ, we need to truly die the death we were baptized into. We need to learn how to die to this world, and to our sinful selves. Not once, but daily, throughout our whole lives. We must learn that the comforts and pleasures sin offers us are shallow and hollow. Instead by God's grace we need to embrace a new way of living in the Resurrection, deep and hallowed, for this is true life and Joy. We begin this new life by taking up our cross and following Christ. We can start with simple things, praying our daily prayers, reading Scripture, showing compassion, and frequent confession. A life of self-denial is crafted in moments and not obtained in one instance.

Our Lady is our indefatigable ally in our Christian life. Because Mary fully embraced Christ, she is able to help those who struggle in this life. She is able to banish the devils that impassion us and calm the passions which bedevil us. As we just sang in the paraklesis service:

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

O entrust me not, I pray, to any human protection, O our Lady, holy one, but do thou accept the prayer of thy supplicant. Sorrow hath fettered me, and I am unable to endure and bear the demons' darts; a shelter have I not, neither place to run, I, the wretched one; embattled from all sides am I, and no consolation have I but thee. Mistress of creation, protection and hope of faithful ones: turn not away when I pray to thee; do that which will profit me.

and

From thee is no one turned away ashamed and empty who doth run to thee for refuge, O pure Virgin Theotokos; but he asketh the favor and receiveth the gift from thee, unto the profit of his own request.

The transformation of the afflicted and the relief of those in sickness art thou in truth, O Virgin Theotokos; save thy people and thy flock, thou who art the peace of the embattled,

and who art the calm of the storm-driven, the only protectress of those who believe.

We ask of our Lord and our Lady to ‘do that which will profit us’. But what truly profits us? I, like most people, just want comfort and to have an easy life. But this is not what the Epistles, the memoirs of the Apostles, tell us is beneficial. No, rather St Paul says in Romans 5:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faithfulness into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, *but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame*, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

And St James, the brother of God, opens his letter with:

Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Apart from Christ, no one suffered more in this life than the Mother of God, who saw her Son nailed upon the Tree. Truly a sword pierced her heart, as St Simeon foretold. Therefore, let us ask her aid; she is close to us and invites us to seek for her as our Mother. As we struggle and suffer to participate in the works of God, we die to ourselves and come to know true joy in Christ. If we are faithful, we will find the tomb is not the end of our lives, but a transition into life. As we sing at Vespers, “O strange wonder, great and marvelous! For the fount of life is laid within a tomb; and the small tomb becomes a ladder to Heaven’s heights.”

Fr John Behr writes, “Death is no longer death in the way in which we knew of death before knowing Christ, the fate to which we are all bound from the moment we are thrown into this world, no matter how well we live our lives. Death is no longer the end, but a transition, a falling asleep to arise with Christ — a beginning.” (*The Cross Stands, while the World Turns*)

Conclusion

Returning to the Psalms and our services, we find solace and hope in the Lord. Psalm 38 asks,

“And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?
My hope is in you.
Deliver me from all my transgressions.
Do not make me the scorn of the fool!

Our funeral hymns echo this truth:

O thou who of old didst create me from nothingness, and didst honor me with thine image divine, but because I transgressed thy commandments hast returned me again unto the earth from which I was taken: Bring me back to that likeness, to be reshaped in that pristine beauty.

We who are in Christ, who have lived faithfully, will find by his grace our end to be a Christian ending. As we give our whole life and death over to the Living God and are dissolved back into the earth, we find ourselves ready to be refashioned by him, just as in the beginning he fashioned Adam from the dust of the ground.

Appendix: Resources for Q&A

St Ignatius to the Romans, chapter 5

Now I begin to be a disciple. And let no one, of things visible or invisible, envy me that I should attain to Jesus Christ. Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones; let cutting off of members; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me: only let me attain to Jesus Christ.

Philippians 3:7–21

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (ESV)

Oikos of the funeral service.

Thou art immortal, who hast created and fashioned man. For out of the earth shall we return again, as thou didst command when thou didst fashion me, saying unto me: Earth thou art, and unto earth shalt thou return. Whither, also all mortals wend our way, making our funeral dirge the song: Alleluia.