

The Paschal Mystery in the Feastday of the Dormition of the Theotokos

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With the incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the entire race of mankind has been granted the hope of salvation and life eternal with God. The Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians makes an important statement about Jesus Christ that "[h]e is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent."¹ In other words, as the eschatological priest, prophet, and king, Jesus Christ is the first person to be resurrected from the grave and the first to be translated to heaven. Everything involved in this Paschal Mystery (PM) of Christ has implications for us human beings who wait in hope of salvation.

It is important to remember that in the early Church, the PM meant more than just a celebration of the Resurrection of Christ as we often think today. The PM entailed the celebration of the entire Christian mystery - Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost² - with the overall theme of the new creation in Christ.³ Only later, over time, were these aspects of the Christian mystery segregated out into different feastdays in the Church year.

The concept of the PM is celebrated in the Church in the feastdays of the Theotokos. Everything related to the PM that applies to us as human beings baptized into Christ has already

¹Col. 1:18, RSV.

²Jean Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, (Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1956) pg. 319.

³Danielou, pg. 303.

happened to the Theotokos and is seen via the liturgical life of the Church. What has happened to the Theotokos will happen to us. It is the purpose of this essay to look at the hymnography and textual readings of the Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos (August 15) and parallel these with the PM of Christ.

Themes of the Incarnation abound throughout the hymns and readings of the Dormition. The "Lord I Call" stichera of Vespers⁴ state, "...thou didst appear as a throne to the high One..." referring to the fact that the Lord dwelt for nine months in her earthly womb. In the Litiya, a hymn states, "...let us crown the Church with songs on the falling asleep of the ark of God (...) who gave birth to the One whom all cannot contain." Again, we see a reference to the Incarnation with reference to Mary as the antitype of the Old Testament ark of the covenant. This theme of incarnation is again repeated in katavasia # 4 of the canon which states, "...the prophets, O Christ, and their symbols explained clearly thine Incarnation of the Virgin..." The hymnography of this feastday reminds us that the whole PM began with the Incarnation.

The readings of Vespers for this feast are the same readings as are done at Vespers of the Nativity of the Theotokos (Sept. 8), as well as other Theotokos feasts. The first reading is Genesis 28:11-17 - Joseph's dream. Liturgically, this is used to speak of the Theotokos, who is the divine ladder through which Christ was able to become incarnate. The second reading is Ezekiel 43:27; 44:14 which, besides referring to the eschatological eighth day, presents the temple - whose gate is shut because of the entrance of the prince - as a type of Mary and her ever-virginity. The third reading is Proverbs 9:1-11. Again, this is an incarnational reference since Wisdom in the Old Testament is the very Word of God in the New Testament. Wisdom building her house can be interpreted as a reference to the Incarnation and the bread and wine she mixes is

⁴All citations of hymnography from Seraphim Nassar, *Divine Prayers and Services of the Orthodox Catholic Church of Christ*, (Englewood, NJ, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, 1993).

a reference to the very broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Death and passage to new life are another one of the themes of the PM that are apparent in the feast of the Dormition. The stichera of Vespers state, "[t]he Fount of life hath been laid in a grave and the tomb hath become a ladder leading to heaven." Later on the stichera state that the heavenly ranks "glorify thy falling asleep." At the Litiya one hears, "...let us crown the Church with songs on the falling asleep of the ark of God..." At the Vespers aposticha it states, "...the multitudes of angels in heaven and men on earth do bless thine all-honoured falling asleep...." The third kathisma of Matins states, "as for thy falling asleep, it was death without corruption." It is in this hymnography that we see that Mary, like all of us humans, died the same death that all of us will die, but given a new meaning because of our baptism into Christ's death.⁵

The theme of death is thus connected with the theme of new life. The praises of Matins state (poor translation?), "...virgin Mother, who didst give birth to Life, thou hast removed, by thy solemn falling asleep, to immortal life...." Shortly after this, the kontakion of the Liturgy states, "...being the Mother of Life, he who dwelt in her ever-virgin womb did translate her to life." Thus, in the hymnography, one sees that Mary's death, is not an end, but a passage - a passover - into new life with Christ in heaven. This is the hope that we all have.

Resurrection themes are also obvious in the hymnography of this feast. The "Glory" after "Lord I Call" at Vespers quite interestingly states, "[l]ift up the gates and receive super-earthly-wise the Mother of everlasting Light." The Vesperal aposticha (first stichos) state, "[a]rise O Lord, into thy resting place: thou and the ark which thou hast sanctified." These themes of lifting up gates, etc. should immediately remind one of the Paschal Matins where the priest outside of the church knocks on the doors and does the dialogue of verses from Psalm 23. This should fill

⁵Romans 6:3 and Colossians 2:12.

us with the hope that we too, like Mary will partake in a resurrection like Christ's.⁶

Ascension themes are numerous throughout the hymnography of this feast day. Limitation of space allows only the most obvious and important ones to be discussed. Several passages in Vespers and Matins refer to the translation from earth to heaven. The stichera of "Lord I Call" state, "...today thou art translated from earth to heaven." The hymn at the Litiya states, "...today doth heaven open its bosom to receive her...." The first kathisma of Matins states, "...Maiden of God and Virgin, hath been translated by Christ, who was born of her without seed, to yonder abodes." The second kathisma at Matins refers to the angels who sing "...praising thy solemn assumption, which we celebrate in faith." The ninth ode of the Canon states, "...O Theotokos, since thou departest to the heavenly abodes to thy son, thou shalt ever save thine inheritance." A second canon for this feast refers to those in heaven and on earth "...celebrating the noble assumption of the Theotokos." The praises of Matins state that the Apostles "...saw thee [the Theotokos] ascending from earth to heaven...." Thus, we see that the Theotokos likewise has ascended bodily into heaven, as did her Son, and provides the model for our resurrection and glorification at the end of the ages.

Pentecost themes are also present in the readings of this feast day. The Gospel reading at Matins is Luke 1:39-56. Besides an obvious link with the Incarnation of Christ - Mary is pregnant -there is also a link with Pentecost. When Mary enters the house of Zacharias, Elisabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and she prophesies. This should remind one of the Pentecost where the Holy Spirit is poured out on all flesh and they shall prophesy. Also, one should be reminded that as the Holy Spirit descended upon Mary and she bore the Son of God, similarly, through the descent of the Holy Spirit at baptism/chrisamation are we to made sons of God and if sons then

⁶Romans 6:5

heirs of the promise⁷.

Lastly, the readings at the Divine Liturgy deserve separate attention. The epistle reading (Philippians 2:5-11) and the Gospel reading are the same readings as for other Theotokos feasts such as the Nativity of the Theotokos. This passage in Philippians, long thought to be an early Christian hymn, speaks not of Mary but of the whole PM. In this passage one hears of the Incarnation, the Passion, the Resurrection, and the Exaltation (Ascension) of Christ. The Gospel reading is Luke 10:38 to end; 11:27-28. Here we read about Christ's visit to Mary and Martha and of the woman in the crowd who exclaimed, "Blessed is he womb that bore thee, and the paps that gave thee suck." Obviously a reference to the Theotokos, but Christ responds by saying, "...rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God, and keep it." Therefore, just like Mary the Theotokos, we who hear the word of God and follow Christ become his mother, brother, and sister⁸. In doing this, then we are able to live in the hope of a blameless death, a passage to the kingdom, and our own personal resurrection and ascension, the Theotokos being the paradigm of this hope.

In conclusion, the PM presents for us the Resurrected and Glorified Jesus Christ who is coming again to resurrect the dead and grant us new glorified/deified life. The promise for us has been established by Jesus Christ who is the *prototokos* (firstborn) of God and from the dead. The fact that the PM applies to all of us is illustrated in the feastsdays of the Theotokos. In the celebration of the Dormition of the Theotokos, the various themes of the PM are referred to - from the Incarnation to Pentecost. On top of that, we see that Mary has become for us the archetype of our hope in this PM. Mary has become the living example that because of the PM that we to can live in the hope of being a child of God, an heir to the promise, and that one day

⁷Galatians 3:29.

⁸Mark 3:33.

Jesus will come for us, as he did for his Mother, and translate us to that Resurrected and Glorified life in the never-ending day of His kingdom.