

Dormition of the Theotokos

On August 15 we celebrate the Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos. Christians have venerated the Theotokos from the earliest days of Christianity. The last act of Jesus Christ immediately before His death on the cross was to arrange for the care of His mother. Because He was her only son there would be no one to care for Mary after Jesus' death. He entrusted her to St. John, the beloved disciple. We read in the Gospel: "When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing beside her, He said to His mother, 'Woman, here is your son,' then He said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, He said (in order to fulfill the scripture) 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to His mouth. When Jesus received the wine, He said, 'It is finished.' Then He bowed His head and gave up His spirit." (Jn 19:26-30.)

The origin of the Feast of the Dormition is connected to the public veneration of Mary since the 4th century. In 431 AD the Council of Ephesus proclaimed her as the Theotokos.

In Constantinople, the Empress St. Pulcheria promoted devotion to the Blessed Mother and built three churches in her honor. She was present at the sixth session of the Council of Chalcedon (451) where she asked St. Juvenal of Jerusalem for some relics of the Blessed Mother to be enshrined in St. Mary's Church at Blachernae, near Constantinople.

The saintly bishop replied: "We have received from ancient and the most reliable tradition that at the time of the glorious Dormition of the Mother of God, the whole company of the Apostles were brought together in Jerusalem. So, amid divine and heavenly praises they commended her holy soul to the hands of God and, taking her God-conceiving body, they carried it in procession to Gethsemene and there placed it in a little tomb."

"For three days a choir of angels continued to sing above her tomb. After the third day, when finally St. Thomas arrived, (he had been absent and desired to venerate the body that had borne Christ God), the Apostles opened the tomb and found no trace of her blessed body. Taking the winding sheets, which were filled with fragrance, the Apostles closed the tomb. Wondering at this mystery, they could only think that He, Whom it pleased to be born of her in the flesh, the Lord of Glory, desired that after her departure from this life, her immaculate and all-pure body would be honored by incorruptibility, being translated to heaven before the universal resurrection of the dead." (Cyril of Scythopolis, The History of St. Euthymius III, 40, written about 515).

The solemn celebration of the feast was extended to the entire East during the sixth century. It was decreed that the feast would be celebrated on August 15. St. Modestus of Jerusalem (died 634) to whom is attributed the oldest homily of the Feast of Dormition, fully accepted the Jerusalem tradition concerning Mary's departure and the assumption of her purest body.

The Feast of the Dormition was introduced in Rome in the seventh century and gradually spread to the entire west. At the end of the eighth century the western church changed the name to the Feast of the Assumption.

In the East, St. John Damascene (died 749) became the main champion of the traditional belief in Mary's bodily assumption. St. John Damascene preaching at the Basilica of the Dormition in Jerusalem pointed towards Mary's tomb and said, "Her immaculate body was placed here, in this renowned and all-glorious tomb, from whence after three days it was taken up to the heavenly mansion." (Hom. On Dormition. 11,14)

Despite its widespread acceptance in the early church, the Dormition is not mentioned in Sacred Scripture. In light of this many Protestants challenge/attack the Church because they claim that Divine Revelation is only revealed in Sacred Scripture. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nowhere in the bible, Sacred Scripture, does it say that Scripture alone is the source of Divine Revelation. Holy Scripture says just the opposite.

The Gospel of John ends with the following lines: "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (Jn 21:24-5)

In John 16:12-14 it is written, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own but will speak whatever He hears and He will declare to you the things that are to come."

Bishop Fulton Sheen (1895-1979) wrote:

In this passage our Lord tells His disciples that the Holy Spirit, who is to come, will in the future reveal divine Knowledge that has been communicated to Him ... It is that same spirit who, in fulfillment of the promise, (When the spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth,) descended on the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost and became the soul of the Church. The continuous, unbroken succession of the truth communicated by Christ to His Church has survived to our own day – not because of the human organization of the Church, for that is carried out by frail vessels, but because of the profusion of the Spirit of Love and Truth over Christ's Vicar and over all who belong to Christ's Mystical Body, which is His Church.

And in Matthew 16:18-20 we read: "And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The Catholic Church alone traces its roots in an unbroken line to the Apostles. And so, the Church relies on Scripture And Holy Tradition in determining Divine Revelation.

Holy Tradition and Holy Scripture

For Holy Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the Divine Spirit, while Holy tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of Truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this Word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. (Vatican Council II Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)

On the basis of the Holy Scripture the Church establishes the oral Tradition, which in turn interprets and explains the Holy Scriptures. The oral Tradition is expressed through the teachings of the holy fathers, especially at ecumenical and local councils. For this reason, the Church teaches us to receive with faith and to respect both the Holy Scriptures and the oral Tradition. (Christ Our Pascha)

The term Holy Tradition is a term of art. It refers to the precise examination and study that the Church undertakes in determining if something is divinely revealed truth not mentioned in scripture. This is precisely what was done before November 1, 1950. On that date Pope Pius XII proclaimed the centuries-long belief that the "Immaculate Mother of God, the ever-Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory." (Apost. Const. "*Munificentissimus Deus*," n. 44) This solemn proclamation of the dogma of Mary's assumption into heaven fittingly describes the crowning event in the life of the most holy Mother of God, whose liturgical veneration originated in the East.

Our own Ruthenian Church played a major role in this great event as reflected in the Vatican documents.

The liturgical hymns extolling the wondrous dormition of the Blessed Mother were composed during the eighth and ninth centuries by renowned hymnographers. In their hymns, these inspired writers clearly revealed the traditional belief in Mary's "translation from earth to heaven."

Through these liturgical compositions, the general belief in the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven remained well-preserved and provided sufficient historical evidence for the proclamation of the dogma in 1950. The principal arguments from Byzantine tradition and liturgy in support of the dogma were collected by our Ruthenian theologian, Msgr. Nicholas Russnak, S.T.D. (1872-1952) and were submitted to the Holy See by Bishop Blessed Paul P. Gojdich, O. S. B. M. of Prjashev (1927-1960) on January 25, 1932. (ct. G. Hentrich-R. De Moos, *Petitiones de Assumptione Cororea B. V. M.*, Vatican 1942, Vol I, P. 770-779)

Concerning the petition of Bishop Gojdich, the authors write: "The importance of this petition is obvious since it comes from the Ruthenian Hierarchy, well-versed in the Greek and Old Slavonic liturgical texts which starting with the ninth century, are in constant use by both Catholics and Orthodox. And these texts 'clearly and absolutely' contain the doctrine of the bodily assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary." Thus we can conclude that the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, based

on the deduction from Holy Scriptures, is a logical development of the centuries-long tradition deeply rooted in the liturgical prayers and minds of the people.”

The Feast of the Dormition is one of the twelve major feasts of the Byzantine Church. Liturgically speaking, the feast has one day of pre-festivity and eight days of post-festivity during which time the mysteries of Mary’s wondrous death and glorious assumption to heaven are celebrated.

According to custom, flowers and medicinal herbs are blessed after the Divine Liturgy on the feast, most probably originally based on the traditional belief that after her glorious assumption into heaven, her holy tomb was filled with a “heavenly fragrance” and flowers. The herbs, used by our people as natural medicine, are blessed in commemoration of the numerous healings and extraordinary graces bestowed on the pilgrims at Mary’s tomb.

With boldness, the Church addresses the Mother of God, the first to be divinized by grace, with the words, “Most holy Mother of God, save us.” The Church does so with the understanding that it is God’s grace that saves and acts in her. Her peaceful death, tranquil as sleep in the fullness of grace, became an awakening into heaven itself; it is appropriately called the Dormition (Falling-Asleep). The dormition of the Mother of God is portrayed on the icon of the feast as a *birth* into heaven: Christ holds in His arms the soul of Mary, wrapped in swaddling clothes. In the celebration of the Dormition, the Church professes that in her death the Mother of God did not undergo bodily corruption, but has been “translated from earth to heaven,” “raised by body and soul into heavenly glory by the Lord.” From among the human race, the Mother of God was the first to be glorified in her body. This is an image of our own resurrection as well. The Mother of God, being the Mother of Life, was transferred to life; and “in her Dormition she did not abandon the world.”

Christ Our Pascha

Burial Service of the Dormition of the Theotokos

On the evening of August 14, we will be celebrating the beautiful and meaningful service of the Burial of the Theotokos. This service dates to the 15th Century and has been celebrated for 600 years.

The observance comes to us from the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. On the morning of August 14, a procession carrying the icon of the Dormition of the Theotokos would leave Jerusalem, cross the Kedron Valley and end at Gethsemene and the Tomb of the Theotokos. The procession passed under the icon and entered the church to venerate the burial shroud of the Theotokos. At the close of the feast, August 23, another procession returned the Dormition icon to the Patriarchate.

We do know that there was a church existing at what was believed to be the tomb of the Virgin in the 5th Century. Some people believed that there was actually a church built there by St. Helena in the 4th Century. Documents show that St. Juvenal, the first Patriarch of Jerusalem, at the request of the Empress Pulcheria had taken the veil of Mary from the shrine and sent it to her after the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

We know from Holy Scripture that at His crucifixion, Jesus entrusted the care of His mother Mary to St. John, the Evangelist and beloved disciple. The Protoevangelium of James contains many stories about Mary including information on her life after the death of Jesus. We read that she traveled, she spent much time with the disciples praying with and encouraging them. During the final years of her life, it is generally accepted that she was living in Jerusalem with St. John and frequently visited the sites important to Jesus. She often went to Gethsemene to pray. Gethsemene is located across the Kedron valley from Jerusalem. The distance from the Temple Mount (site of the Jewish Temple in Jesus' time) to Gethsemene is approximately 1 ½ miles depending on the route taken.

The Protoevangelium recounts that Mary lived in the house of St. John for many years. One day as she went to the Mount of Olives (the site of the Ascension) to pray, an angel appeared to her saying that in three days she would be in Paradise with her son Jesus. Mary was filled with great joy. She returned to the house of St. John and began preparations for her funeral. She asked that she be buried in Gethsemene, overlooking the Mount of Olives and where her parents were buried. While she was making her last arrangements a cloud descended about the house. Angels brought all the disciples, except for St. Thomas, including St. Paul and Timothy from wherever they were around the world, to be present at the burial of the Theotokos. Mary told them not to weep and sadden the happiest day of her life. She praised them for their work and blessed them. She surrendered her soul to her Son, without pain or suffering. It was as though she had fallen into a sweet sleep. An angelic singing filled the air with the greeting of the Angel Gabriel, "Rejoice, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." Light covered Mary's face and a sweet aroma came from her body filling the room with fragrance. St. John and St. Peter led the crowd that had gathered singing sacred songs. Many were cured of their afflictions when they touched her funeral bier. When they reached Gethsemene they laid her body to rest in a crypt and rolled a large stone over the entrance.

Three days later Thomas came to Jerusalem and asked to venerate Mary's body. When they opened the tomb, it was empty except for the veil of Mary. The tomb was filled with a sweet aroma. Thomas said, "Why do you number the living among the dead? She is risen for she is the one who gave birth to God."

At the burial service we celebrate on August 14 we remember these events and sing ...

“O, what a wonder! The Source of Life Itself is placed in a tomb; the grave becomes a ladder to heaven. Rejoice, Gethsemene, holy chamber of the Theotokos. Let us cry out with Gabriel: Rejoice O woman full of grace, the Lord is with you...

The holy Apostles were taken up from every corner of the world and carried upon clouds by the command of God. They gathered around your pure body, O Source of Life, and kissed it with reverence. As for the most sublime powers of heaven, they came with their own leader to escort and to pay their respects to the most honorable body that had contained Life itself. Filled with awe, they marched together with the Apostles in silent majesty, professing to the princes of heaven in a hushed voice: Lift up your gates and receive with becoming majesty, the Mother of the Light that never fades, because, through her, salvation was made possible to our human race. ... O most pure Theotokos, forever alive with your Son, the Source of Life, do not cease to intercede with Him that He may guard and save your people from every trouble...

Because the disciples had been both the eyewitnesses and servants of the Word, it was also fitting that they should witness the final mystery, the Dormition of His mother according to the flesh. They not only saw the Ascension of the Savior but they also were witnesses of the translation of the Mother who bore Him. ... With them let also bow low before the one who intercedes for our souls.

O Virgin Theotokos at the time you were carried up to the One born of you, in a manner beyond understanding ... the whole college of Apostles was also there ... the most holy angelic powers were wrapt in wonder at the sight of this miracle...

Why O disciples do you mingle joy with tears? Thomas came, enlightened from above and explained ... behold her garments and understand: The Virgin is risen from the tomb. The disciple, who doubted the Resurrection of your Son, now assures others about your rising...

The heavenly gates opened wide, and the heavenly choirs sang as Christ welcomed the virgin treasure of His own mother ... For He who dwelt in the womb of the Ever Virgin transferred to life the mother of life. ... The heavenly choirs were astonished as they beheld their master in Zion holding the soul of a woman in His hands ... He spoke to her and said: Come and share the glory of your Son and your God.”