

The Falling Asleep of the Mother of God

Dear Friend,

The word "Dormition" means "falling asleep." This phrase, "falling asleep," is how Eastern Christians refer to "death" in accord with its usage in the NT (cf. St. Matthew 27:52; St. Mark 5:39; St. John 11:11-14; Acts 7:60, 13:36; 1 Corinthians 15:6,18,20,51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15, 5:10; 2 St. Peter 3:4). So the "Dormition of the Theotokos" is a remembrance of not just her Assumption into Paradise but also, her death and departure from this world. As the Orthodox Father Thomas Hopko once said, the feast of the Dormition is also our "Good Friday" of the Holy Virgin.

The liturgical texts from the Eastern (or "Byzantine") Tradition shows a number of things to demonstrate this. While looking at these, keep in mind the maxim "Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi" which means "the law of prayer is the law of faith." In other words, we pray as we believe and our faith is contained and expressed in our Liturgical prayer. In looking at these texts we see:

1. In the Feast of the Dormition, we remember her death (a.k.a. falling asleep) and burial in the Sepulcher, by the Holy Apostles:

"...Anthonius saw the God-bearing Apostles reverently bearing the all-pure body of the Mother of God to the tomb..."

"Upon hearing the angels lifting their song at the burial of the body which bore God, the mystical Apostles and only beholders of the Word sought to offer honor acceptable to God..."

2. Miraculous events which surrounded this burial. E.g., the Apostles see the Lord Jesus in Paradise holding the soul of His Holy Mother in His Divine hands while they mourn beside her body on the funeral bier. Of course the separation of soul and body results in death. This image is clearly depicted in the Icon of the Dormition.

"All the reason-endowed beings together with the foremost among the heavenly host accompanied their King who, in His life-creating hands, received the soul of His mother, while Peter, in his fervent faith, tearfully cried out to her..."

"Those who had beheld God beheld their Master holding the soul of His mother in His hands; knowing Him to be the Lord, they hastened with divine hymns to praise the blessed one..."

3. One of the Apostles (Thomas in Byzantine tradition, Bartholomew in Armenian) who missed the placing of the Theotokos' holy body in the tomb is miraculously brought there (most traditions say three days later). When he arrives at the tomb it is then that they all discover her Body is gone and has been assumed into paradise as her Son had promised.

"The disciple thus understood that it was through God's will that he had not been present with the others at the burial of the Mother of God."

"The tomb was opened for Thomas, who bowing down to see within, came to know that she had ascended into heaven."

The Armenian Church's tradition is very similar to the Byzantine (if not identical). Thus we sing in the Divine Liturgy for the Assumption of the Mother of God (which is also called in our Church "the Translation of the Mother of God" because she was translated from earth to paradise):

"Having led a spotless life in the flesh, thou wast this day shrouded by the apostles, but at the behest from above thou wast translated into the kingdom of thy Son and our God. O intercessor for us confessors, we magnify thee."

I hope this helps to explain the Eastern Churches' approach to this great Mystery of the Falling Asleep of the Mother of God.

In Christ's Light,
Wm. DerGhazarian
(12-16-02)

original question:

I found this e-mail very thought-provoking and filled with poetic beauty in the prayers of the Eastern Church. I do have a couple of questions:

I thought the Eastern Church believed in the "Dormition" of Mary which precludes (I think) actual death and implies a lifting to the heavens.

Thanks, Your friend in Christ,
N.

Appendix:

The Tradition of the Dormition and Assumption of the Mother of God

Kontakion:

Neither the grave nor death could contain the Theotokos, the unshakable hope, ever vigilant in intercession and protection. As Mother of life, He who dwelt in the ever-virginal womb transposed her to life.

A Reading: Concerning the Dormition of the Theotokos,

This is what the Church has received from ancient times from the tradition of the Fathers. When the time drew nigh that our Savior was well-pleased to take His Mother to Himself, He declared unto her through an Angel that three days hence, He would translate her from this temporal life to eternity and bliss. On hearing this, she went up with haste to the Mount of Olives, where she prayed continuously. Giving thanks to God, she returned to her house and prepared whatever was necessary for her burial. While these things were taking place, clouds caught up the Apostles from the ends of the earth, where each one happened to be preaching, and brought them at once to the house of the Mother of God, who informed them of the cause of their sudden gathering. As a mother, she consoled them in their affliction as was meet, and then raised her hands to Heaven and prayed for the peace of the world. She blessed the Apostles, and, reclining upon her bed with seemliness, gave up her all-holy spirit into the hands of her Son and God.

With reverence and many lights, and chanting burial hymns, the Apostles took up that God-receiving body and brought it to the sepulcher, while the Angels from Heaven chanted with them, and sent forth her who is higher than the Cherubim. But one Jew, moved by malice, audaciously stretched forth his hand upon the bed and immediately received from divine judgment the wages of his audacity. Those daring hands were severed by an invisible blow. But when he repented and asked forgiveness, his hands were restored. When they had reached the place called Gethsemane, they buried there with honor the all-immaculate body of the Theotokos, which was the source of Life. But on the third day after the burial, when they were eating together, and raised up the artos (bread) in Jesus' Name, as was their custom, the Theotokos appeared in the air, saying "Rejoice" to them. From this they learned concerning the bodily translation of the Theotokos into the Heavens.

These things has the Church received from the traditions of the Fathers, who have composed many hymns out of reverence, to the glory of the Mother of our God.