

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
(Revelation 11:19; 12:1-6. 10 / Luke 1:39-56)
15.08.2019

This Solemnity which the Latin Church celebrates as the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary our Orthodox brothers and sisters celebrate as the Dormition of the Theotokos.

While the Latin title would have us lift up our eyes to *Mary assumed into heaven*, the Orthodox appellation of the mystery commemorated, referring to her *Dormition*, would have us look to her life rooted with us on here on earth.

To hold the two titles together and to think of Mary's *Dormition* leading to her *Assumption* helps refrain us from thinking of the woman we celebrate exclusively in *other worldly* terms.

To think of Mary in other worldly terms does her no service and it renders us no real service either. It only serves to distance Mary from us and to cut off from her.

If the thought of Mary's *Assumption* has us consider her welcomed into the glory of Her Son and now living in the heavenly courts, that of her *Dormition* – without in any way detracting from Mary's now living in glory with the Risen Christ – recalls for us how, at her parting from this world, Mary was surrounded by the affection of the community of the Beloved Disciple of which she was part.

You will recall how, before His death upon the cross, Jesus had confided Mary to the Beloved Disciple. We are told that the Beloved Disciple *made a place for her in his home from that moment onwards*. By extension, we can take it that Mary was welcomed by the whole of the Johannine community and given a place among them.

To speak of today's feast as the *Dormition* serves as a reminder to us that Mary is still held in great affection and love by the pilgrim Church here on earth, to which she remains attached, even while totally assumed into the life of her Son. More than that we can say that it is precisely because Mary is assumed into the life of her Risen Son that she remains close to us. Just as Jesus left this world promising to remain present to it, so we can think of Mary in the same way – as present to us. Remember, the Church is Christ's Body! I believe we can say that our belief that Mary has been assumed into Christ's own life makes her all the more one with the Church here on earth. Mary is as much one with us, as Church pursuing our earthly pilgrimage, as she is one with those in glory, the Church Triumphant, now exalted and reigning with Christ.

From the point of view of helping us hold the different aspects of Mary's testimony together, I find the Orthodox icon of the *Dormition* presented for our veneration in the abbey church today is particularly helpful. I hold it before my eyes as I speak to you and invite you to do the same. As the popular saying goes: *an image can speak a thousand words*. So let's *read the icon*, if I can put things that way. Surely if we speak of icons being *written* rather than being painted, then we can also speak of them as being offered to our *reading*.

The icon of the Dormition depicts Mary falling asleep in the Lord surrounded by the faithful community of the disciples – those holy men and women whom she knew and with whom she had been associated in her lifetime. If we look closely, we will see that other saints are also there – saints not of Mary's own lifetime. It is as if the whole Church is shown to be near to Mary. Likewise, Mary is shown to be near to the whole Church.

This is not all that the icon depicts.

Right on top of the icon Mary is seen to be lifted up in glory. Indeed, she is depicted as enrobed in the same aureole of light as the glorified Christ is depicted to be encircled in icons of His Transfiguration and of His Resurrection. Looking at Mary here we cannot but think of this glimpse into her assumed state in heaven in terms other than those of that famous vision

recorded for us in the chapter 12 of the Book of the Apocalypse. Even if not depicted literally in this way, the exalted Mary of the icon seems to us to correspond to the maiden whom John gazed upon in his vision: *one adorned with the sun, standing on the moon, a crown of twelve stars upon her head.* (The Latin Church has always associated this Scripture text of Apocalypse 12 with Mary – or rather associated Mary with it. This text is always read at the liturgy of today's feast. At the abbey we will read this passage of Scripture evening at Vespers) But, once again, there is more to be seen in the icon than this.

Not only do we see Mary falling asleep and ready to be transported, as well as Mary already lifted up; in between these two depictions of the Theotokos *we see another very important image of Mary worth considering.* This image of her is certainly the most important of the three. I think of the image of Mary at the centre of the icon: there we are shown Jesus, the glorified Christ, holding a new born infant Mary in His arms. What is signified here is that Mary's death was her entry into new life – new life in the glory of heaven, where eternal youthfulness will be restored to us and to all the living. Paul teaches clearly that with our death we will all be brought to *new life with Christ.* The iconographer shows us that this is what has happened for Mary. The depiction of an adult Jesus holding an infant Mary in His arms goes further than that. What Jesus is actually seen to be doing here parallels what many icons depict the Virgin Mother as having done with the Infant Christ. Jesus is portrayed to be presenting Mary to the world, just as Mary previously presented Him to the world. (If the gospels speak of Mary presenting the child in the temple, we can also think of her presenting Him to the world at that moment and in many other instances.) In the icon we contemplate it is as if from its centre Jesus is saying to us: *Look at this infant and see in her the one whom I give to you.* John's gospel had Jesus give Mary to us in those words He spoke to the Beloved Disciple who represented all of us on Calvary's Hill: *Behold your Mother.* Like the Beloved Disciple we are all called to make room for Mary in our homes; to give her a place in our hearts. Carthusian monks signify this making a place for Mary in their hearts rather quaintly by having an empty space in their hermitages which they think of as a place reserved for her – thus reminding themselves of Christ's injunction to John, the Beloved, and through him to all of us.

What we see here at the central place in the icon leads me to want to reflect with you for a moment on something I want to draw to your attention today: Mary as one called to serve as a bridge between earth and heaven, just as, in her lifetime, she was clearly chosen to serve as a bridge between heaven and earth. I believe that to see and speak of Mary as *a bridge* is a valid way of understanding her specific mission in God's plan of salvation. The icon of the *Dormition/Assumption* before our eyes hints at this vision for me. So, let's tease out a little the image of Mary as a bridge.

Pope Pius XII who proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption spoke of Mary as being *joined to Jesus in a unique and definitive way by the fact that she bore Him in her womb.* He went on to argue that *because of this extraordinary privilege the grace was offered to her to share in her Son's heavenly glorification as no other creature – which is to be understood as meaning just this: as no other creature already does here and now.* It would be an error to think of Mary alone being lifted up. What is already true for Mary will be true for all of us one day. Our great aspiration as Christians is that *we shall all one day come to share fully in Christ's glory.* Our Orthodox brothers and sisters go as far as to talk of our ultimate calling in life, as Christians, to be none other than this, nothing less than this: *divinisation.* By this they mean our becoming one with the God in Christ, who became one with humanity through Jesus, born of Mary.

What the dogma of the Assumption amounts to is this: Mary has preceded us to where we shall all live eternally. Just as we can say, in echo to the apostle, *where Christ has gone, we too will follow*, so we can say, where Mary has preceded us, the day will come when we shall be there too, united with her and with all the saints. We can speak of Mary as our *forerunner into glory*. She is what the French would call a *tête de pont* – a bridgehead; one who has gone before us to where we are beckoned in our turn. Mary is, as Vatican II reminds us, *the perfect image of the Church*, which is the eternal communion of all those who live and die in Christ. Like Mary, all the baptised will be *raised up in Christ* and exalted to the same glory to which God has raised and transformed not only Jesus, but the whole of fallen human nature, through Christ's saving, life-giving, death.

Assumed into heaven, Mary is a prophetic image of the glorified life that awaits all those who bear Christ in the inner depths of their being. Just as Mary bore Jesus, in a unique way, in her womb – which our Orthodox brothers and sisters sing of as *more spacious than the heavens* because it *contained the uncontainable One* – so she now lives in Christ. There too we are called to live. Mary has paved the way to heaven, forming a bridge, as it were. There she awaits us. Just as Mary lived one with the Church here on earth, so the Church will live one with her in heaven. Mary is nothing other than a model of the common destiny of all Christian people.

It is important for us to remember on this day that Mary's having been assumed into heaven does not take away from her solidarity with the Church which continues its pilgrim way here on earth. Mary remains a member of the Church. The Church presents her to us as such. We are reminded that Mary accompanies us as Christian people at every step of our journey, offering us her incessant prayer and love.

While we celebrate today Mary's Dormition and her Assumption – her falling asleep to life in this world and her being raised to life with God – we should refrain from thinking of either of these states of being (her sleeping or her exaltation) as having led her to forsake the community of believers of which she remains an integral part.

Mary remains as the Acts of the Apostles depict her, one *constant in prayer with the disciples*. She is also, as we like to call her in our monastic family, the *Mother of Holy Hope* and as such she beckons us today to walk the path she walked... the path that has led her to be with God for all eternity.

Like Mary we are all called to be with Christ... to be held by Him in glory, where we will all have our infant beauty in *God's own image and likeness* restored to us.

Amen.