

ON THE DORMITION OF THE MOTHER OF GOD¹

—Commemorated August 15th—

During the feast day of the Dormition of the Theotokos,² we revere the holiest person, the holiest woman: our Panagia.³ Our Panagia remained incorrupt during her lifetime; she remained incorrupt during death as well. The birth of her Son did not corrupt her virginity, sin did not corrupt her soul, and death did not corrupt her body. Just as the body of Christ remained incorrupt when He died upon the Cross, similarly, the body of our Panagia remained incorrupt when she passed away.

Since in the Orthodox Church we have and venerate incorrupt bodies of saints, how much more so was it natural for the God-bearing body of the Mother of our Lord and God to remain incorrupt! Moreover, would it ever be possible for her body to remain on the earth? No! It was transferred to Heaven. Our Panagia entered the Holy of Holies during her entrance into the temple of Solomon, whereas with her Dormition, she entered with her immaculate, exquisite soul and her glorious, incorrupt body into the Holy of Holies in Heaven.

If for other people physical death results in decomposition of the body, for our Panagia it became a life-giving event. Of course, during the universal resurrection at the Second Coming all the faithful will receive incorrupt bodies; however, for our Panagia, this transformation took place three days after her burial. Her departure toward the Lord was the beginning of a second, eternal state of being for both her soul and body. It was not possible for death to detain her whom had been “entirely united with God.”

We experience profound reverence for our Panagia during the feast day of her Dormition. Who exalted her? Her Son, God, and Savior of the world. If Saint John the Baptist was the Forerunner of Christ’s advent to the earth, Christ was the Forerunner for the Theotokos’ journey to Heaven. Christ was first to conquer

¹ This is an excerpt from a talk given by Elder Ephraim of Arizona, from the book *The Art of Salvation*.

² Theotokos is a Greek word that means “the birth-giver of God.”

³ Panagia is a Greek word that means “all-holy,” and is used as a noun to refer specifically to the Mother of God.

death, and with His incorrupt and divine body He ascended to Heaven and became the Forerunner for our Panagia. Christ was the first born amongst the dead; He ascended to prepare the way for the faithful to pass into Heaven. This is how the Apostle Paul expresses it: **“Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever, according to the order of Melchizadek” (Heb. 6:20).**

The Virgin Mary received in Her womb the God-man, the Son and Word of God, Who assumed His human nature from the Virgin Mary and united it with His Divine nature in one hypostasis. Christ brought her into Heaven fully intact: both with her soul and her body. When our Panagia received Christ the God-man in her womb, she became wider than the heavens. We see her depicted in certain icons as “the Platytera.”⁴ She received Christ, she carried Him in her womb, and she gave birth to Him. Now, Christ receives the holy soul of His Mother the Theotokos in His arms, in the palm of His hands. Saint John of Damascus marvels, “How does the Word of God, Who on account of ineffable compassion became her son by concession, now minister to His most-holy and godly Mother and receive her blessed and sacred soul into His Almighty hands!” Our Panagia attended to and cared for our Jesus Christ as long as He was a child. Now the Son receives His Mother as a Queen in Heaven: **“The queen stood on thy right hand, clothed in vesture wrought with gold, and arrayed in diverse colors” (Ps. 44:9-10).**

The Apostles hastened to honor our Panagia. Instantly they all assembled in Jerusalem to bury the body of the Theotokos, the Mother of their Teacher. Holy Tradition tells us: **“Apostles from the ends of the earth are here assembled together....”** Let no one doubt how it was possible for the Apostles to come together from the ends of the earth. The Apostles are the eagles of the Spirit. How did they span the entire globe? Who gave them winged feet to race all over the earth? God’s power did. This same power now takes the Apostles from the ends of the earth and brings them to Jerusalem. He who gave a chariot of fire to the prophet Elijah the Thesbite to ascend high above (4 Kings 2:11), He who took

⁴ “Platytera” is an abbreviation for “Platytera ton ouranon,” which means “Wider than the Heavens.” God is greater than the universe; yet He was contained within the womb of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the Theotokos is indeed wider than the heavens.

the Apostle Philip from Gaza and brought him to Azoto (Acts 8:39-40), this same God also sent a special vehicle for each Apostle—not like the ones that we use, but a luminous cloud—that transported each one of them to Jerusalem.

The Apostles paid tribute to the Mother of the Lord, and on the third day they were filled with amazement and wonder when they discovered that her body was missing from her grave in Gethsemane. The angels in Heaven also honored our Panagia. They received her at the time of her dormition, accompanied her, and took her to visit all the heavenly dwellings and mansions. Awestruck, they beheld her ascend higher than the Cherubim and Seraphim, according to the megalynarion: **“More honorable than the Cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim.”**⁵ This was a surprise for the angels! They witnessed the first human body ascending into Heaven and being glorified in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Just as the angels were awestruck during the Ascension of our Christ when they witnessed God and man (united in one God-human hypostasis) ascending—whereas when He descended to become incarnate He was only God—similarly they now are astounded with the conveyance of the Theotokos into Heaven. Up until that time, they were accustomed to receiving only sanctified souls who had been liberated and saved. Now, however, during the Dormition of the Theotokos they received a body as well. It is the immaculate body of the Theotokos, which **“the grave and death were not able to detain.”** Just as we marveled when we saw the first astronaut soaring high above the earth and walking on the moon, similarly, the angels were dumbfounded when they saw a human being setting foot in the Holy of Holies of Heaven. Our Panagia is the first female “astronaut” to soar above even the angels.

There is an event that took place during her Dormition, as you are probably aware, which is mentioned by Saint John of Damascus. As you know, Saint John of Damascus was a great ascetic. The cave he dwelled in is found within the

⁵ In Greek, the word megalynarion means “magnification.” The megalynarion is a hymn used specifically to extol or praise the Lord, the Mother of God, or His Saints, and it is customarily chanted after the ninth ode of the Parakesis service, after “It is truly meet...” in the Divine Liturgy, or instead of the ninth ode during the Orthros service on feast days of the Lord and the Panagia.

monastery of Saint Savva the Sanctified in Palestine. Saint John recounts that as the Apostles and the faithful of the first church were proceeding to bury the body of our Panagia (which was laying upon a bier), a certain Jew suddenly leapt forward to grab the body and knock it to the ground. However, he was unsuccessful. His hands were severed invisibly by an angel of God, and they remained stuck to the body of the Theotokos. This event and the excruciating pain brought the Jew to repentance, and he asked for forgiveness from our Panagia. Immediately another miracle occurred: His hands were restored to their original position.