

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Christ is in our midst.

Today, we complete the 14 day Dormition fast. Too often people have a misunderstanding of the purpose of fasting. There is a perception that we should fast when we want something, as though the act of fasting somehow appeases God, and seeing us “suffer” gets Him to grant our request. Nothing can be further from the truth. It is not our fasting that pleases God, it is the fruits of our fast that pleases God. We fast, not to get what we want, but to prepare ourselves to receive what God wants to give us. The purpose of fasting is to bring us more in line with Mary, the sister of Lazarus, and away from their sister Martha, who, in today’s Gospel, we heard was “anxious and troubled about many things.” Fasting is intended to bring us to the realization of “the one thing needful.” It is to help us put God first and our own desires second, if not last. As such it serves to prepare us to be instruments of God’s will, as with Moses in his flight from Egypt and on Mt. Sinai, as well as our Lord’s fast in the wilderness. Fasting turns us away from ourselves and toward God. In essence it helps us to become like the Theotokos, an obedient servant of God, who heard His word and kept it better than anyone else has or could.

Tomorrow the Holy Orthodox Church solemnly glorifies the honorable Dormition or translation of the Mother of God from earth to heaven. A wonderful translation since she died without serious illness and peacefully. Her soul was taken up in the divine hands of Her Son and carried up into the heavenly dwelling, accompanied by the sweet singing of angels. And then, her most pure body is transferred by the apostles to Gethsemane where it is honorably buried, and on the third day it is resurrected and taken up to heaven. We see this on the icon of

the Dormition of the Theotokos that is on the cover of today's bulletin. On it is represented the life-bearing body of the Theotokos laying on a bier, surrounded by the apostles and hierarchs, and in the center of the icon the Lord holding in His hands the most pure soul of the Theotokos.

The translation of the Mother of God is an example of the translation in general of the souls of Christians to the other world. We say that our dead have "fallen asleep" or "passed away." What does this mean? This means that for the true Christian there is no death. Death was conquered by Christ on the cross. But there is a translation, a rearrangement of his condition, i.e. his soul is in another place, in another age, in another world beyond the grave, eternal, without end, that is what is meant by "falling asleep". It is as if it were a temporary dream after which, by the voice of the Lord and the fearful yet wonderful trumpet of the Archangel, all the dead shall live and come forth each to his place: either to the resurrection of life or to the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:29 ). This is what the Christian means by translation. We should be ready for this translation, for the day of the general resurrection and judgment, for this indescribable world event, recorded in the Holy Scriptures.

This preparation for the meeting of the heavenly King before the dread judgment seat, after death, is essentially the person's preparation throughout the whole of his life. This preparation means a change in all his thoughts, and the moral change of all his being, so that the whole man would be pure and white as snow, washing clean everything that defiles the body and spirit, so that he is adorned with every virtue: repentance, meekness, humility, gentleness, simplicity, chastity, mercifulness, abstention, spiritual contemplation, and burning love for God and neighbor. Our preparation for meeting the heavenly King, and for the inheritance

of eternal life in heaven, should consist of these things. The heavenly King desires souls adorned with immutable virtue, souls prepared so that the Very Lord Himself could abide in them.

Do not marvel that the Very Lord wants to live in us. In fact, the human soul is more spacious than the heavens and the earth, for it exists in the image of God. And if one removes sins from the soul, the Lord of all will settle in it and will fill it with Himself. “We will come to him and make our dwelling with him” (John 14:23 ), says the Lord about the souls who love Him.

Finally, it must be stressed that, in all of the feasts of the Virgin Mother of God in the Church, the Orthodox Christians celebrate facts of their own lives in Christ and the Holy Spirit. What happens to Mary happens to all who imitate her holy life of humility, obedience, and love. With her, all people will be “blessed” to be “more honorable than the cherubim and beyond compare, more glorious than the seraphim” if they follow her example.

All will have Christ born in them by the Holy Spirit. All will become temples of the living God. All will share in the eternal life of His Kingdom who live the life that Mary lived. In this sense everything that is praised and glorified in Mary is a sign of what is offered to all persons in the life of the Church. It is for this reason that Mary, with the divine child Jesus within her, is called in the Orthodox Tradition the Image of the Church. For the assembly of the saved is those in whom Christ dwells.

Each of us is tormented with the question: what will happen to us and what awaits us after death? A sure answer to this question we cannot find by ourselves. But

Holy Scripture, and first of all the word of our Lord Jesus Christ, reveals the secret to us. We need to understand why the death of the Most-Holy Theotokos and Virgin Mary is called “Dormition”. The apostle John, in the 20th chapter of the Revelation speaks of the first and second death.

The first death, which alone is inescapable to all men, also awaits the saints and righteous ones. But the second, the fearsome and eternal death, awaits the great and unrepentant sinners, who denied the love and the righteousness of God and are condemned to eternity in communion with the devil and his angels.

In the Gospel of John, we read the words of Christ, which are very closely associated with those written in the Revelation: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24 ).

Do you hear this, do you understand this? I think that this probably strikes you as strange, that all those who are obedient to the word of Christ and believe in the Heavenly Father Who sent Him passes immediately after death to eternal life. There is no reason to judge those who have living faith in God and who follow his commandments. And to the twelve apostles, our Lord Jesus Christ said: “Amen, I say to you that you who follow Me, in the age to come, when the Son of Man sits upon His throne of glory, you will also sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28 ).

The Apostles of Christ will be judges and condemners during the Terrible Judgment of God, and of course, we are totally unable to imagine the Most-Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary being judged, along with the John Baptist, the

great Prophets of God, Elias and Enoch whom God took to Heaven alive, all the countless martyrs of Christ, the holy hierarchs and wonderworkers who were glorified by God. We are unable to pass the thought from our minds that they would be judged, they who heard from the mouth of Christ: “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21 ).

In those great strugglers of Christ, as if in precious temples, dwelt the Holy Spirit. And while they were alive on earth, they were in close communion with God, for thus Christ said: “If anyone loves me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.” (John 14:23)

The Most-Holy Virgin Mary was the spotless temple of the Savior in which dwelt the Holy Spirit, and from her most-holy womb the Son of God received His human body, He Who descended from the Heavens. Because of this, bodily death is not death, but a dormition, in other words, an immediate passage from the Kingdom of God within to the Kingdom of the Heavens and to eternal life.

This sign tells us: death is not the final end of the human being. We are not lastly, as the philosopher Heidegger thought, only “being-unto-death.” Finite time and death are not our ultimate horizon. The mother of Jesus was “translated unto life.” This sign tells us: a “heaven” of pure spirits is not our last estate. Christians are not Platonists! The body is not the soul’s prison, a cocoon to be sloughed off for the “true self” to emerge like a butterfly. Plato was wrong: our true person, as God intended it, is not just soul, but also body. Salvation of the person means salvation of the body. This sign tells us: through the resurrection of Jesus, each one of us will rise again in our body, restored, as we were also once conceived in our mother’s womb: as male or female.