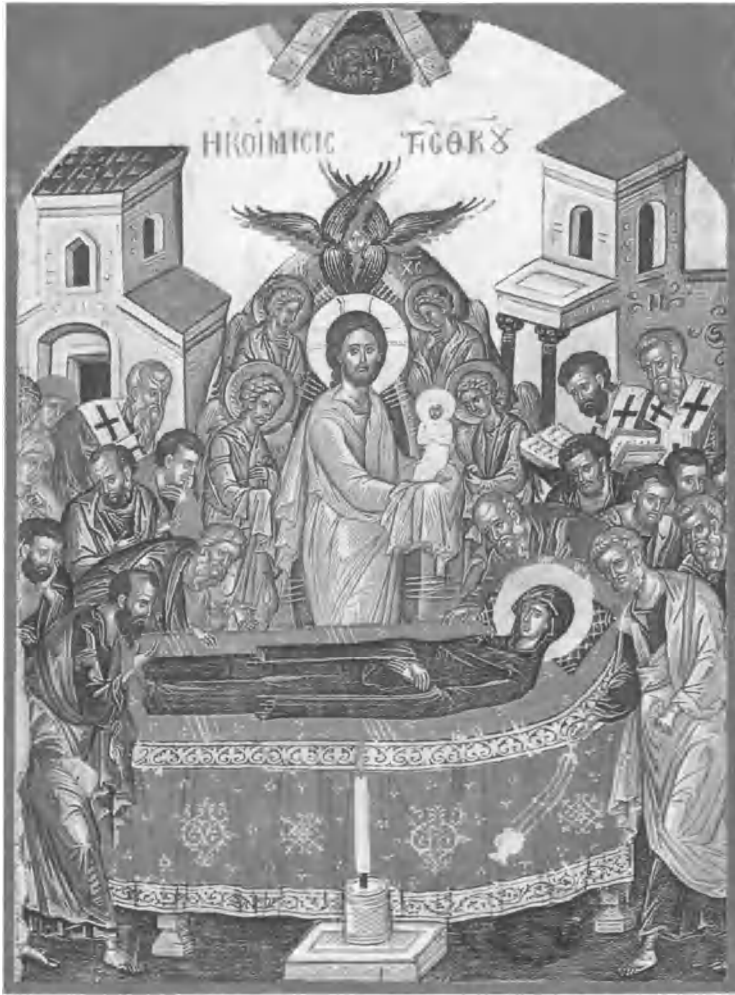


**On the 15^h of August, the holy Church commemorates
the venerable Dormition and Translation
of our most glorious Lady
the Theotokos and Ever-virgin MARY.**



The Dormition of the Theotokos

Introduction

After the ascension of Jesus Christ,¹ the Theotokos was the one consolation for His disciples, their joy in sorrow and their firm teacher in the Faith. All the words and wondrous events which she had laid up in her heart,

¹ Acts 1:9-11.

from the beginning, she then disclosed to them. She related to them the Archangel Gabriel's joyful tidings regarding the seedless conception and the incorruptible birth of Christ from her virgin womb. She strengthened her Son's disciples when she spoke to them about His earlier years prior to the Baptism by the Forerunner John.²

She was present at the ascension of the Lord and the day of Pentecost. The gifts of the Holy Spirit were also poured out upon the most blessed Virgin Mary, and in greater abundance than upon the apostles—just as a larger vessel can contain more water. The Theotokos was a vessel most rich in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, for she had been a worthy temple of Him before this, in which He constantly dwelt. The Theotokos was possessed of all the virtues in her blessed soul. She is higher than the apostles, prophets, and all the saints.³



The Pentecost

According to Saint Gregory Palamas (d. 1359), Mary's ultimate purpose, through the divine maternity, has a vastness which inclines all creatures in its influence and calls for the highest gifts in her person. "Mary is the cause of what had gone before, the pioneer of what has come after her; she distributes eternal goods. She is the thought of the prophets, the head of the apostles, the support of the martyrs, the certainty of the holy fathers. She is the glory of the earth, the joy of heaven, the ornament of creation. She is the source and the root of ineffable good things. She is the summit and the fulfillment of all that is holy."⁴

The idea of mediation on the part of the Theotokos is not open to doubt or question for Saint Gregory Palamas, who is quite explicit when he says, "No divine gifts can reach either angels or men, save through her mediation.

² "The Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady," *The Orthodox Teachings of the Mother of God*, translated from the *Menology* of Saint Dimitri of Rostov (Moundsville, WV: Father Demetrios Serges Publications), pp. 32, 33.

³ Annunciation, *The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church* (in Greek), 5th ed., Vol. III (Athens, GR: 1979), p. 500, 501.

⁴ Saint Gregory Palamas, "Annunciation," *P.G.* 151:177B.

As one cannot enjoy the lamp,...save through the medium of this lamp, so every movement toward God, every impulse toward good coming from Him is not realizable, save through the mediation of the Virgin. She does not cease to spread benefits on all creatures not only on us men but also on the celestial incorporeal ranks. ”³ * ⁵ Saint Gregory Palamas also says that Mary received gifts of knowledge precociously. The mutual love between her and Jesus was perfect.⁶

Hence, the Church chants with Saint George of Nikomedia (d. after 880): *O pure Virgin, thou art truly highly exalted above all!*¹ ⁸ Saint John of Damascus (ca. 676-ca. 750) writes: *Rejoice, O Bride of God, thou who art more sacred than the noetic hosts and higher than all created nature!*^{*}

After the Pentecost, at Jerusalem, she blessed Mary Magdalene to go to Rome and speak with Tiberius Caesar.⁹ The Virgin Theotokos dwelt in the house of Saint John the Theologian at Mount Sion.¹⁰ She influenced many and strengthened the desire for virginity in not a few. On account of her companionship, the Evangelist John spoke more than others of divine mysteries. She remained constant in her ascetic labor of fasting and prayer. She ever harbored a fervent desire to behold her Son.¹¹

Epiphanius the Monk (ca. 1015), in his writings, left us the legacy that the Virgin Theotokos “healed many sick people and freed those overcome by impure spirits; she gave alms and sympathy to the poor and to the widows. ”¹² Indeed, all who beheld the Mother of God considered themselves fortunate. Truly blessed were the eyes that beheld her and the ears that were granted to hear her most precious words, which renew us to the spiritual life; verily, what joy and grace they received! Elsewhere, Saint Ignatios (ca. 35-ca. 107) commented that “he who is devout to the Virgin Mother will certainly never

³ Saint Gregory Palamas, *Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas*, comp. by S. Oikonomos (Athens, 1861); “Horn. 37, on the Most August Dormition of the Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary,” *P.G.* 15L472A.

⁶ Idem, *P.G.* 15L478A.

⁷ November 21st, Feast of the Entrance, Orthros Canon, Ode Nine, Mode Four. Sacred hymns have been italicized in this notice for the Feast of the Dormition.

⁸ January 27th, Orthros Canon, Ode One, Mode Plagal Four.

⁹ See the Life of Saint Mary Magdalene, who is commemorated by the holy Church on the 22nd of July.

¹⁰ See the Life of Saint John the Theologian, who is commemorated by the holy Church on the 26th of September.

¹¹ “The Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God,” *Orthodox Word* 2, No. 3(9) (July-August 1966): 102.

¹² Theophanes, Monk and Presbyter, “Concerning the Life of the Most Holy Theotokos,” *P.G.* 120:212A.

be lost.”¹³ The Evangelist Luke, chief of the iconographers, depicted her image. She approved the making of sacred images, saying, “May the grace of Him Who was born of me, through me, be imparted to the icons.”¹⁴

Some ten years after the crucifixion, the Theotokos traveled abroad. Saint John the Theologian, believing it prudent to escape persecution, thought to flee with her. They departed Jerusalem for Ephesus, which was the lot that had fallen to the apostle. The Theotokos and the Apostle John spent some time in that city. She continued in prayer and meditation. Together, they did not confine their stay to Ephesus. They traveled to other cities, illuminating many with the light of Christian teaching. The Theotokos visited Antioch, where she visited with Saint Ignatios. The Theotokos did return to Jerusalem, to the house of Saint John the Evangelist. The all-powerful hand of God preserved His Mother from the plots of the synagogue of the Jews. After this period in Jerusalem, she journeyed to Cyprus. A storm blew her vessel off course to a divinely appointed destination: Athos. She went ashore with Saint John the Theologian. She also preached to the inhabitants of that peninsula.¹⁵ After praying for the new flock, she entered a ship and set sail for Cyprus and Bishop Lazarus, presenting him with vestments that she had sewn with her own hands. Following Cyprus, she returned to Jerusalem.

The Theotokos In Jerusalem

Amid the hatred and enmity of the Jews in Jerusalem, the Mother of God dwelt like a sheep among wolves and a lily among thorns. She often repeated the words of her forefather, the Prophet and King David: “The Lord is my light and my Savior; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the defender of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid? Though a host should array itself against me, my heart shall not be afraid; though war should rise up against me, in this have I hoped [Ps. 26:1, 3].” And, “‘Though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil [Ps. 22:4],’ for Thou, my Son and God, art with me.”

At this time, tradition tells us that Saint Mary Magdalene returned to Jerusalem after traveling to Rome, France, Egypt, Pamphylia, Syria, and many other countries preaching the Gospel. Straightway, she went and dwelt again with the Theotokos and told her about all her travels and the people of

¹³ Jill Haak Adels, compiler, *The Wisdom of the Saints* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 21.

¹⁴ Dionysius of Fournia, *The Painter's Manual*, trans. by Paul Hetherington (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1981, repr.), p. 4.

¹⁵ For the account of the visit of the Theotokos on Mount Athos, see the Life of Saint Eftymios of Iveron, who is commemorated by the holy Church on the 13th of May, in *The Great Synaxaristes*, under the subtitle “Brief History of the Iveron.”

the west. Saint Mary would remain with the Theotokos until her blessed dormition and glorious bodily translation.¹⁶

Saint Dionysios the Areopagite

When the Apostle Paul entered Athens in about A.D. 50-51, the Greeks brought him to the Areopagus that they might hear his new doctrine. One of the men in the audience, a member of the highest court in Greece, was Dionysios. He was a nobleman from a pagan family who, when he heard the words of the divine Paul, believed.¹⁷ Together with his wife, Damaris, his whole household was baptized. The divine Paul then consecrated Dionysios as Bishop of Athens. Then taking leave of his wife, sons and status, for the love of Christ, Dionysios traveled widely with the Apostle Paul and came to know the other apostles. Three years after his conversion, Dionysios had a strong desire to behold the Theotokos. Therefore, with the Apostle Paul's blessing, he visited Jerusalem.

Upon beholding the Theotokos he was filled with immeasurable spiritual joy, after which he wrote a letter to the holy Paul describing his visit: "I have seen with my own eyes the most holy Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, who surpasses in sanctity all the angels of heaven. By the grace of God, the good favor of the apostles, and the unutterable goodness and mercy of the gracious Virgin, I was granted this meeting. Again, I confess before the almighty God, before the grace of the Savior, before the great glory of the Virgin, His Mother, that when I was introduced to the beautiful and most pure Virgin, together with John—the first among the evangelists and prophets, who, while living in the flesh, shines like the sun in heaven—a great divine radiance shone about me from without and lit up my soul. At the same time, I sensed such a wonderful fragrance that my spirit and body could hardly bear this manifestation of glory and foretaste of everlasting bliss. From divine grace and glory, my heart and spirit were prostrated.

"I bear witness before God, Who dwelt in that most honorable virginal womb, that I would have taken her for the true God and would have honored her with the adoration due to God alone, if my newly-enlightened soul had not retained thy divine instructions and laws. No honor and glory of men can compare with that beatitude that I experienced, unworthy though I be. That moment in time for me was one of extreme happiness. I thank my most high and most gracious God, the divine Virgin, the great Apostle John, and thee,

¹⁶ Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos (d. 1335), *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene* [in Greek], Mother Magdalene, ed. (Athens [Kozanes]: Holy Convent of the Ascension, 1974), p. 141.

¹⁷ Acts 17:19-34.

O Paul, the adornment of the Church and invincible leader, for having mercifully granted me such a great blessing!”¹⁸

From Saint Dionysios’ letter, we, too, clearly see what divine grace must have been present in the face of the all-revered Mother of our God. During her lifetime, all those souls that beheld her were enlightened and their hearts were filled with spiritual joy. Saint Gregory Palamas adds: “Must not the one who was to give birth to the fairest among the sons of men have been comparable to Him in everything and been clothed by her Son with marvellous beauty? This Son, was in fact, to resemble her in every aspect so that whoever would see Jesus would at once recognize, because of this perfect resemblance, the Virgin, His Mother.”¹⁹

The sweet-voiced and immortal mouth of the Church, Saint John Chrysostom (354-407), cries out, “Consequently, in life, there is none other such as the Theotokos Mary. You may wander about the earth, look round about the sea, examine the air thoroughly, the heaven in thy mind, search all the invisible hosts, remember, and see if there be any other such miracle throughout the creation.”²⁰

One of the greatest of the Greek fathers, the priest-monk and hymnographer, Saint John of Damascus, clearly uninhibited in expressing his devotion toward Mary, writes: “What is sweeter than the Mother of God? She holds my mind captive. She has seized my tongue. Upon her do I meditate day and night. Since she is the Mother of the Logos (Word), she has words abundant.”²¹ Saint John had consecrated his mind, soul, and body to her...with psalms, hymns, and spiritual canticles, although he was convinced of the utter inadequacy of human language to describe her.²²

The Virgin at the holy places

Newly baptized men and women journeyed from all parts of the world to visit the Theotokos, and, as a true mother, she received all, without distinction or partiality. She bestowed upon all the bounties of her grace, by granting healing to the sick, health to the weak, and comfort to the sorrowing. She confirmed all in the Faith, strengthened their hope, instilled divine joy and love, and brought sinners to amendment. Thus, the pure Mother of God lived

¹⁸ “The Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady,” *The Orthodox Teachings of the Mother of God*, p. 38.

¹⁹ Saint Gregory Palamas, *Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas*, 6, 214.

²⁰ Minas Charitos, *The Repose of Our Most Holy and Glorious Lady the Theotokos*, trans. by J. Vlesmas (W. Brookfield, MA: Orthodox Christian Center and Mission), p. 18.

²¹ Saint John of Damascus, “Horn. III, on the Dormition of the Theotokos,” 1, *P.G.* 96: 753C.

²² Idem, “Horn. I, on the Dormition of the Theotokos” 14, *P.G.* 96:720CD.

among the first Christians for many years. She was filled with great spiritual joy at the spread of the Gospel of her Son throughout all the world. Indeed, within her own lifetime, she beheld the fulfillment of those words that she had uttered as a very young woman: “For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed [Lk. 1:48].” Indeed, for wherever Christians glorified Christ as God, they also blessed His most pure Mother.

In Jerusalem, as we mentioned, she remained in the home of the Apostle John. She was wont to frequent those places that her beloved Son had sanctified, by His footsteps and by His blameless blood. At times, she would visit Bethlehem where she had given birth to Christ. However, she especially favored those places where our Savior suffered His voluntary Passion. It was in these places, that the force of nature, that is, maternal love, caused her to weep. And then she would say, “Here, my beloved Son was scourged. Here, He was crowned with a crown of thorns. Here is where He walked carrying His Cross; here, He was crucified.”²³ At the holy sepulcher, the Theotokos would then be filled with ineffable happiness and, with tears of joy, cried, “And here He was buried; and on the third day He arose with glory!”²⁴

The Jews complain about the Mother of Jesus

The Jews often attempted to seize the Mother of God in order to torture and kill her; but they could do nothing. Then, at that time, some Jews reported to their chief priests and scribes that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, had the habit of daily visiting the places of the crucifixion and the tomb of her Son. They further informed them that she had the custom of kneeling, weeping, and burning incense at these sites. Moreover, she often was followed by other men and women. From this practise of the Mother of God, the pious custom of making pilgrimages to holy sites to offer up prayers had already begun.^{25 26}

In regard to her tormenters, Saint Ephraim the Syrian (ca. 306-383) puts these words on the Virgin-Mother’s lips: *All the chaste daughters of the Hebrews and the virgin daughters of the chief men are astonished at me! For Thee does the daughter of the poor meet with envy; for Thee, the daughter of the weak encounters jealousy.*¹⁶

Filled with malice and conspiring to murder, it was then decided that guards were to be placed before these sites so that no Christian might approach for veneration. If the Mother of Jesus was to approach, she was to be slain. Nevertheless, when the Theotokos came with a company of others to the holy

²³ “The Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady, ” *The Orthodox Teachings of the Mother of God*, loc. cit.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Saint Ephraim Syrus, “Hymn X,” *Hymns on the Nativity*, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd Ser., XIII.244.

sepulcher, God did not allow His Virgin-Mother or her company of followers to be seen by the guards. Therefore, after a considerable time of observing nothing, the guards departed the sepulcher and, with an oath, assured the chief priests and scribes that they saw no one at Jesus' tomb.²⁷

The Virgin is slandered

The enemies of Christ also aimed to defame the fair reputation of the most pure Virgin. Seeing that Christianity was spreading everywhere, they began to spread vile slanders about the Christian Faith. A common slander of the time was that Jesus was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier called Panthera, and that Jesus had come from a base and immoral environment.²⁸ Here, again, Saint Ephraim has the Theotokos say, *For Thy sake I, too, am hated, Thou Lover of all. Lo! I am persecuted who have conceived and brought forth one House of refuge for men.*²⁹ However, it was too evident that the rumor was a fiction and an ugly lie. It did not attract serious attention. The whole family of Joseph and Mary herself, in their time, were well known by the inhabitants of Nazareth and the surrounding countryside. In small towns, the family matters of everyone were well known. Indeed, a very strict watch was kept over the purity of married life.

Would people really have behaved with respect toward Jesus and called Him to preach in the synagogue, if He had been born of illegitimate cohabitation? To Mary, the law of Moses would have been applied, which commanded that such women be stoned to death. Would the scribes and Pharisees have missed such an opportunity to reproach Christ many times for the wanton conduct of His Mother? Would not His enemies have reproached Him if His birth were tainted; for in accordance with their law, "one born of a harlot shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord [Deut. 23:2]." But just the contrary was the case: Mary enjoyed enormous respect. At Cana she was an honored guest at the wedding. And even when her Son was condemned, no one allowed himself to ridicule or censure His Mother.³⁰

The Virgin at the Mount of Olives

Often the Theotokos ascended the Mount of Olives, where our Lord had ascended into the heavens before His Mother and His disciples. The site where He had ascended was marked by His footprint that had been impressed

²⁷ "The Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady, " *The Orthodox Teachings of the Mother of God*, loc. cit.

²⁸ Blessed Archbishop John Maximovitch, *The Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans. by Fr. Seraphim Rose (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1987), p. 19.

²⁹ Saint Ephraim, "Hymn IV," *Hymns on the Nativity*, Nicene, 2nd Ser., XIII:236.

³⁰ Blessed Archbishop John Maximovitch, *The Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, loc. cit.

into the rock. Kneeling down, the Theotokos would kiss the imprint. Ofttimes, she would pray to her Son and God that He might take her from among the living to Himself. How she yearned to depart and to be with her Son Christ. She frequently recited the words of the psalmist: “When shall I come and appear before the face of God? My tears have been my bread by day and by night [Ps. 41:2, 3].” She would then continue saying, “When shall I see my beloved Son? When shall I come to Him Who sits at the right hand of God the Father? When shall I stand before the throne of His glory? When shall I be satisfied with the vision of Him? O sweetest Son and my God!” And then she would utter, “‘Thou shalt rise up and have pity on Sion, for it is time to have compassion [Ps. 101:13]’ on me, Thy Mother, who, till now, am sorrowing at not beholding Thy face in the sorrowful valley of this world. Take my soul out of my body, as out of prison. ‘As the hart panteth after the fountains of water, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God [Ps. 41:1],’ that it may be delighted when Thy glory shall appear to me.”³¹

The Virgin at the Garden of Gethsemane

At the foot of the Mount of Olives there is the Garden of Gethsemane. At that time, there was a small plot belonging to the house of Zebedee, the father of Saint John the Theologian. The Theotokos would visit the very place where our Lord kneeled down and fell upon His face,³² praying to God the Father. She would prostrate herself on this spot and, watering the earth with her tears, she offered up fervent prayers. However, toward the end of her earthly sojourn, she received consolation from the Lord’s angel when he revealed her imminent departure to heaven.

The Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary

Preparation for life that knows no end

Saint John of Damascus writes: *If her Fruit, Whom none may comprehend, on Whose account she was called a heaven, submitted of His own will to burial as a mortal, how should she, who gave Him birth without knowing a man, refuse it?*³³

In accordance with divine providence, the Theotokos, having come from mortal loins, had a death conformable to nature for the consolation of all people, so that they too might not fear to proceed to heaven by the same gates of death through which the Queen of heaven passed, sharing the lot of all the

³¹ “The Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady,” *The Orthodox Teachings of the Mother of God*, loc. cit.

³² Mt. 26:39.

³³ Orthros Canon, Ode Four, Mode Four.

earthborn. Saint John of Damascus writes: “It was necessary that that which was composed of earth should return to earth and only then pass to heaven, having embraced on earth a most pure life through the subjection of the flesh. It was necessary that the body should be purified through death, as gold through fire, from every darkness and coarse burden of filth, and should rise from the grave incorrupt, pure and illumined by the light of immortality.”³⁴

*O pure Virgin, sprung from mortal loins, thine end was conformable to nature: but because thou hast borne the true Life, thou hast departed to dwell with the divine Life Himself*³⁵

Saint John of Damascus’ brother, the bishop and poet Saint Kosmas (8th C.), speaks of the Virgin’s death as *a crossing into a better and eternal life*, that is, it has translated her from *this mortal life to that which knows no end and is indeed divine*, where she may look with joy upon her Son and Lord.³⁶

The Theotokos prays for release from the bonds of the flesh

The Theotokos had now reached an advanced age. If she were born in about 20 B.C., when construction of Herod’s temple commenced, and Saint Dionysios the Areopagite came to visit her and received her blessing after A.D. 52, she had to be about seventy years old. As we know, she dwelt many years among the first Christians, for our Lord Jesus Christ intended to have her live among His disciples. It was their desire to behold her most holy countenance constantly and to receive strength, grace, and spiritual reinforcement throughout the afflictions, misfortunes, and adversities of life. Thus, through her personal presence, holy sayings, and sweet words, the apostles indeed received strength, energy, and consolation. They not only accorded her reverence but even glorified and blessed her.³⁷ With the rapid advance of the young Church, the Theotokos would rejoice over her Son’s boundless mercy. She was also thankful for the growing number of faithful and those who maintained reverential fear of Christ.³⁸

Nevertheless, her fervent and unceasing desire was to leave the body and to be with her beloved Son and God that she might behold His sweet face. She shed copious tears and prayed that the Lord might remove her from this

³⁴ “The Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God,” *Orthodox Word* 2, No. 3(9), (July-August 1966): 102.

³⁵ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Three, Mode Four, by Saint John of Damascus.

³⁶ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Four, Mode One.

³⁷ M. Charitos, *The Repose*, p. 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

vale of tears to the blessed abodes on high.³⁹ The Mother of God neither feared death nor sought to avoid it. She knew that death had already been overcome by her Son and God. One Church account records that she asked the Lord for one thing: “That I may not see the dismal sight of the demons.” Why? This is because they are vile and foul. It is natural for chastity and modesty to seek to avoid all contact and even proximity with those who bear filth, impudence, or shamelessness.⁴⁰

One account records the following: She would call to mind her Son’s words to her before His Passion, when she asked Him about many things and concerning her own future departure. She said to Him, “O most dear Son, I pray Thy holiness, that when my soul goes out of my body, that Thou wilt let me know on the third day before; and do Thou, O beloved Son, with Thine angels, receive it, and cause all the apostles to be present at my departure.” Christ answered His beloved Mother’s prayer, saying, “O palace and temple of the living God, O blessed Mother, O Queen of all saints, and blessed above all women, before thou didst carry Me in thy womb, I always guarded thee, and caused thee to be fed daily with My angelic food, as thou knowest. How can I desert thee, after thou hast carried Me, and nourished Me, and brought Me down in flight into Egypt, and endured many hardships for Me? Know, then, that My angels have always guarded thee, and will guard thee even until thy departure. Thou shalt see My Archangel Gabriel coming to thee with a palm which I shall send to thee from heaven. Know, then, that I shall soon come to thee, together with My disciples, angels, archangels, saints, and virgins. Know for certain that thy soul will be separated from the body, and I shall carry it into the heavens, where it shall never have tribulation or anguish.” Then the Theotokos rejoiced and exulted, and kissed the knees of her Son, and blessed the Creator of heaven and earth, Who gave her such a gift through Jesus Christ her Son.⁴¹

The Archangel cried, “Rejoice, thou who art magnified by the message of thy departure unto thy Son!”

At that time she still lived in the house of Saint John the Theologian on Mount Sion. She often went from there to the Mount of Olives, to the very spot

³⁹ “The Assumption of Our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God and Ever-virgin Mary,” trans. from the *Menology* of Saint Dimitri of Rostov (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1976), pp. 3, 4.

⁴⁰ Archbishop Nathanael of Vienna and Austria, “The Holy Righteous Abraham, Moses and Elias as Preparers of Man’s Salvation,” *Orthodox Life* 28, no. 6 (November-December, 1978): 45. Translated by Seraphim F. Englehardt from *Orthodox Observer* (Montreal), No. 27, July, 1959.

⁴¹ *Apocrypha of the New Testament: The Passing of Mary*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, VIII:592.

whereon took place the ascension into the heavens of her Son and Lord. There, in solitude, she would offer up her fervent prayers. As she was thus praying on the Mount of Olives that the Lord quickly take her to heaven, there appeared before her the Archangel Gabriel. It was the very archangel who had served the Virgin from her earliest childhood. For he fed her in the Holy of Holies, announced to her the good news of the birth of her divine Son, and constantly guarded her throughout her life on earth. With a radiant countenance, the celestial ambassador disclosed to the Theotokos the following: "Thus commands thy Son: 'The days are approaching when I will take My Mother unto Me.' Thus, my Mistress and my Lady, Queen of heaven, and the Creator's most immaculate Mother, thine only-begotten Son and God sent me to tell thee that He calls thee unto Himself, to His kingdom, to His ineffable glory, that thou mightest sit at the right hand of His throne. He awaits thee. Therefore, do not be troubled over these words, but receive them with delight, for thou shalt be translated to life eternal."⁴²

Thus the Virgin heard those much longed-for words which she received with gladness. The archangel then said, "Thy Son and our God, with the angels, archangels, cherubim, seraphim, and all the heavenly hosts, and the souls of the righteous, will receive thee, His Mother, into the heavenly kingdom that thou mayest live and reign with Him forever."⁴³ Tradition has it that this occurred on a Friday. Thus after three days, on a Sunday, she would depart and be with Christ. The archangel then told the Virgin the hour of her death. Again, as in her youth, he said that she should receive his words with joy, since she was being called to immortal life and to the eternal King of glory.

As a sign of the truth of all his words, the archangel gave into her hand a date palm branch from Paradise. It shined with the light of heavenly grace. It signified victory and that bodily death would not have power over her, just as spiritual death had not had dominion over her. She would merely fall asleep for a short time and, then, as if waking from sleep, would rise and shake off death like sleep from the eyes. She would then see in the light of the Lord's countenance the immortal life and glory to which she would go with shouts of joy and spiritual happiness. The archangel informed her that the branch was to be carried before the bier of her most honorable and pure body. Upon hearing these words, the Theotokos was filled with ineffable joy and spiritual rapture. For what could be more joyous and acceptable to her than life in

⁴² "Dormition of the Theotokos," *The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church* [in Greek], 5th ed., vol. VIII (Athens, 1977), 224; M. Charitos, *The Repose*, loc. cit.

⁴³ "The Assumption of Our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God and Ever-virgin Mary," Holy Trinity Monastery, op. cit., pp. 4, 5.

heaven with her Son and the happiness of contemplating His face? Then, falling to her knees she fervently thanked her Creator.⁴⁴ That the Virgin should receive in advance a pledge or assurance from Paradise will not be an unheard of occurrence in the history of the Orthodox Church. Others, too, have received gifts from Paradise, such as Saint Methodios, Patriarch of Constantinople, Saint Irene Chrysovolantou, and Saint Ephrosynos the Cook.

Saint Germanos (ca. 635-733), Patriarch of Constantinople, comments that this palm branch given to her was a symbol of victory, which was given to persuade her that, in leaving this life, she would overcome corruption, just as Christ conquered Hades. Such palms had the God-loving children of the Hebrews held when Christ was approaching His Passion, and was soon to become victorious over death.⁴⁵



The Theotokos praying

Then she uttered the following prayer to God: "I should not have been worthy to receive Thee, O Lord, into my womb, unless Thou Thyself hadst mercy on me, Thy slave. I kept the treasure entrusted to me and, therefore, I have the boldness to ask Thee, O King of glory, to protect me from the power of Gehenna. If heaven and the angels tremble before Thee, how much more man, made of the dust, who has nothing good of his own except what he has been given by Thy goodness. Thou, O Lord, art God and blessed forever."⁴⁶

The Theotokos also desired to behold the holy apostles who were then scattered throughout the world preaching the Gospel.⁴⁷ So when our Lady knelt and offered her petition and thanksgiving to her Creator, her prayer was accompanied by a wonderful manifestation: the olive trees growing on the Mount of Olives bowed with the Theotokos as though they were animate. When the Theotokos

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴⁵ Saint Germanos, "Sermon 3, On the Dormition," *P.G.* 98:364.

⁴⁶ "The Assumption of Our Most Holy Lady," Holy Trinity Monastery, pp. 5, 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

knelt, the trees bent down; when she arose, the trees straightened themselves out again. Thus, even trees revered and honored the Lady and Mistress of the cosmos.⁴⁸

The Theotokos returns to her home

After completing her prayer, the Theotokos returned to her home. Then by the invisible power of God, the Theotokos shone forth with the glory of God. Her lovely face, which always shone with the grace of God—more so than the face of Moses who spoke to God on Sinai⁴⁹—became even more radiant with indescribable glory.⁵⁰ The Theotokos then prepared for her repose. She told the matter to the beloved disciple John, who had taken her into his home as his own mother. She also showed him the flowering branch from Paradise and told him to carry it before her bier.⁵¹ ⁵² *The plant of chastity, the fragrant myrrh, ... O John the apostle, who hast lain on the bosom of the Master and made the word to fall on the world like rain, thou hast guarded the Virgin as the apple of thine eye.*⁵¹

Both Saints Sophronios (566-638) and Symeon Metaphrastes (ca. 1000) say, without any hesitation, that the Theologian never left the Virgin, but as a true son he served her and gave her shelter in his home till her repose. Occasionally, he visited for a very short time the surrounding areas, but he did this with her consent and blessing; and then he would return to her in Jerusalem. In his absence, the Theotokos was served by her stepson, Saint Iakovos (James), the brother of the Lord, who never left his diocese of Jerusalem.⁵³

The Virgin then disclosed her pending repose to the rest of the household and virgins: Mary Magdalene, Sepphora, Abigail, and Jael that dwelt with her; and they bewailed their orphanhood. But she consoled them saying that she would intercede for them and all the world. She then ordered that her bed and room should be decorated, and that incense and as many lamps as possible were to be lit therein. She then changed her clothes. Simply put, all necessary preparations for her burial were made.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Ibid.; “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church*, op. cit., p. 226.

⁴⁹ Ex. 34:35.

⁵⁰ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² May 8th, Saint John the Theologian, Lity, Mode One, by Andrew Pyros.

⁵³ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, pp. 31, 32.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 6,7; “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, pp. 226, 237; see also Saint Germanos, “Sermon 3,” loc. cit.

The faithful gather

Saint John the Theologian, at once, sent for the Lord's brother, Iakovos, the first Bishop of Jerusalem. John also sent for all their relatives and neighbors, informing them of the imminent repose of the Mother of God. Saint Iakovos, too, also informed all the Christians, both them that were in Jerusalem and in the surrounding towns and villages. Thus, a great multitude of the faithful gathered around the Theotokos.⁵⁵

Then, in the hearing of all, the most holy Theotokos told all those who had gathered of the message brought to her by the Archangel Gabriel concerning her translation into the heavens. In confirmation,



The Theotokos announcing to her companions of her imminent repose

she then showed them the date palm branch from Paradise which, like a ray of the sun, shone with the light of heavenly glory. Upon uttering these words, the faithful could not restrain their tears. The whole house was then filled with weeping and lamentation. All implored the merciful Lady, as the common Mother of all, not to leave them as orphans. The Theotokos, however, asked them not to weep for her, but to rejoice at her repose. She said that she would be able to pray to her Son with greater boldness after her death, for she would be standing nearer to the throne of God and gazing face to face upon her Son and God and would converse with Him. She promised that she would not leave them orphans after her departure, but that she would visit the whole world and attend to its needs and help those in trouble. These comforting words dried their tears and brought solace to their sorrow.⁵⁶

The Theotokos then made a will concerning her two garments. She desired that they be given to two poor widows who had faithfully served her and received their maintenance from her. With regard to her pure body, the Mother of God made her will known that it should be buried on the Mount of Olives, not far from Jerusalem, in the Garden of Gethsemane. There also were

⁵⁵ "The Assumption," Holy Trinity Monastery, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

interred her parents, the righteous Joachim and Anna, and her spouse, Saint Joseph. The tombs lay in the Valley of Jehosaphat between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives.⁵⁷



Detail of the Apostles traveling on clouds to the Theotokos

The choir of apostles is most wondrously brought together from the ends of the world

While the Theotokos was making these arrangements, all of a sudden a noise was heard similar to a clap of thunder. A cloud then encircled the home of Saint John the Theologian. By the command of God, angels had seized the apostles that were scattered to the ends of the world and brought them on clouds to Jerusalem. All, save the Apostle Thomas, were then transported to Mount Sion, before the door of the house where the Theotokos dwelt.⁵⁸ Some are of the opinion that Saint John the Theologian had also been caught up in a cloud like the others; no doubt it was from some place close by.⁵⁹

Why should we wonder at this miraculous occurrence of their transferral? We have read of this when the Prophet Abbakoum carried food to Daniel, who was in the lions' den in Babylon, and quickly returned to Judaea⁶⁰ or in the case of the Apostle Philip who, after baptizing the eunuch from Ethiopia, the Spirit caught him and brought him to Azotus.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ "The Assumption," Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.; "Dormition of the Theotokos," *The Great Synaxaristes*, p. 227.

⁵⁹ "The Assumption," Holy Trinity Monastery, p. 32. Some, for example, Bishop Meliton of Sardis, affirm that the beloved disciple John had been in Ephesus just prior to the Theotokos' dormition. Hence, he, like the other apostles, was caught up on a cloud and brought to his home on Sion. Ibid.

⁶⁰ Bel and the Dragon 1:33-37.

⁶¹ Acts 8:39.

Saint Kosmas, in describing the conveyance of the apostles, writes: *Carried to Sion as it were upon a swift cloud, the company of the apostles assembled from the ends of the earth to minister to thee, O Virgin!* Saint John of Damascus, also, makes mention of the purpose of the attendance of both the apostles and angels when he wrote that they might *minister in fitting manner at thy burial, O Lady!* In another hymn, we learn that *it was right that the eyewitnesses and ministers of the Logos should see the dormition of His Mother according to the flesh, even the final mystery concerning her. Hence, they might be witnesses not only to the ascension of the Savior but also to the translation of her who gave Him birth. Assembled from all parts by divine power, they came to Sion, and sped on her way to heaven the Virgin who is higher than the cherubim!*

Therefore, on seeing one another, the holy apostles rejoiced, but at the same time they wondered and said, “Why has the Lord gathered us together in this place?” Saint John the Theologian then went out to them and greeted them with joyful tears. He then informed them of the speedy departure of the most holy Mother of God. Then the holy Apostles understood that the Lord had gathered them from the various parts of the world to be present at the blessed end of His immaculate Mother, and for the honorable burial of her body, as is meet. Nevertheless, her departure from among them brought intense sorrow to their hearts.^{62 63 64 65 66}

Entering the house, they beheld the Theotokos wearing a joyful countenance, sitting upon her bed. Then, *Reaching thine immaculate body, the source of Life, they (the apostles) saluted it with mighty honor!* The holy apostles then greeted the Mother of Life with these words: “Blessed art thou of the Lord Who made heaven and the earth!” The immaculate Lady replied, “Peace to you, brethren, chosen by the Lord Himself.” Then she asked, “How did you arrive here?” The holy apostles revealed how, by the power of the Spirit of God, each of them was caught up from the place where he had been preaching the Gospel. Then when the Theotokos learned that Peter came from Rome, Mark from Alexandria, Matthew from a boat, and the others from diverse situations, she glorified God Who had hearkened to her prayer and fulfilled the desire of her heart to behold the holy apostles at the hour of her death.⁶⁷

⁶² August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Five, Mode One.

⁶³ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Three, Mode Four.

⁶⁴ August 15th, Lity, Mode One.

⁶⁵ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, pp. 7, 8.

⁶⁶ August 15th, Vespers Doxastikon, Mode Plagal One.

⁶⁷ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, p. 8.

Rejoice, honorable crown of the disciples!

Then during this conversation, the chosen vessel arrived—the holy Apostle Paul. Falling at the feet of the Theotokos he opened his mouth, praising and blessing her, “Rejoice, Mother of my life and my preaching! Gazing on thee now, I think that I see thy Son.” Already the divine Paul’s close disciples had arrived, that is, Saint Dionysios the Areopagite, Saint Hierotheos, Apostle Timothy, and other godly-wise hierarchs. Also present were the rest of the Seventy Apostles. All had been gathered by the Holy Spirit that they might be granted the blessing of Mary Theotokos. Moreover, their presence also increased the solemnity of her burial. Then the immaculate Lady called to herself each of the holy apostles by name, and she praised their faith and labors in the preaching of Jesus Christ. To each one, she wished everlasting beatitude and she prayed for the peace of the whole world.⁶⁸

After, with great joy, she said to them, “Stay awhile, my children, that I may bid thee farewell. For, today, I shall go to my Son, my Beloved. The Archangel Gabriel who announced the conception of my Son to me, again came and gave me this palm branch, saying, ‘Rejoice, O God-birthgiver, and know that after three days thou shalt be translated from earth to the heavens.’ And, thus, I thank my Son and God for gathering you all here that I may behold you.” Upon hearing this, they all wept.⁶⁹

Then she addressed them, saying, “The Lord has brought you here for the consolation of my soul which, as our mortal nature demands, is soon to be separated from the body. Already the time appointed by my Creator draws nigh.” In sorrow, they then replied, “During thy life on earth, O Lady, we were consoled by gazing upon thee as upon our Lord and Master Himself. But now, deprived of thy presence, how shall we bear the heavy sorrow that envelops our souls? But now, by the will of Him Who was born of thee, Christ God, thou art going away to the heavenly abodes, and it is impossible for us not to rejoice at the decision of God regarding thee, though at the same time we cannot refrain from weeping that we are to be left orphans; for we shall no longer see thee, our Mother and comforter.” At these words the holy apostles wept.⁷⁰

She then said, “Watch and pray with me, that when the Lord comes to receive my soul, He may find you watching.” Then all promised to do so. They prayed the whole night, with psalms and chants.⁷¹ Then the beloved disciple John said, “My Lady Mother of God and my Mother, thy beloved Son

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 9; “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, loc. cit.

⁶⁹ “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, pp. 237, 238.

⁷⁰ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, p. 8; “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, p. 227.

⁷¹ *The Passing of Mary*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, VIII:593.

had left thee as a consolation. And now shalt thou leave us? In all the world what will we humble apostles have as our consolation? Who will teach us and who will guide us? What else shall we have on earth to encourage us if thou shouldest leave us?"⁷² This, too, caused the Theotokos to weep, and she said, "Do not sorrow, my children, for you make me sad when I see you cry so. Although I shall be going to my Son, O friends of my Son, yet I will not be apart from you, nor from them that call upon me. Nay, I shall be an intercessor and mediatrix for all the Christians before my beloved Son.⁷³ Therefore, do not weep, O friends and disciples of my Son and God. Do not darken my joy by your sorrow and mourning. Much rather, rejoice with me, for I am going away to my Son and God. My body, which I have myself prepared for burial, commit to the earth in Gethsemane. Afterward, return again to the preaching of the Gospel appointed to you. If the Lord should will it, you shall see me after my departure."⁷⁴

Then the Apostle Paul spoke up and again said, "O Lady and Mother of God, I did not behold thy beloved Son, the Christ, while He was in the flesh on earth. But when I behold thee, it is as if I behold thy Son. Now thou too shalt leave me? Who will counsel me in my many temptations? Who will grieve with me in my reproaches? Whom will I, the lowly one, have to exhort and encourage me in my afflictions and torments?" Panagia⁷⁵ then said to him, "O Paul, friend of my Son and mine, my Son and my grace shall comfort thee and the other disciples."^{76 77}

*When the translation of thy most pure tabernacle was being prepared, the apostles surrounded thy deathbed and looked upon thee with dread. And as they gazed at thy body, they were filled with awe. In tears, Peter cried aloud to thee: "O undefiled Virgin, I see thee who art the life of all mankind lying here outstretched, and I am struck with wonder. For He Who is the delight of the future life made His dwelling in thee. Pray, then, fervently to thy Son and God to save thy city from harm."*¹¹

Peter wept and then said, "Lady Theotokos, earlier, I tarried here and did not venture to depart for fear that I might not see thee before thy repose. I always thought that thou wouldest be here to exhort and console me. But now thou shalt leave? The loss of thy Son was not enough, and now thou dost wish

⁷² "Dormition of the Theotokos," *The Great Synaxaristes*, pp. 237, 238.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁷⁴ "The Assumption," Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.

⁷⁵ Panagia or "All holy one."

⁷⁶ "Dormition of the Theotokos," *The Great Synaxaristes*, loc. cit.

⁷⁷ August 15th, Orthros Hymn sung after Psalm 50, Mode Plagal Second, by Byzas.

to depart?”⁷⁸ The Theotokos then said to him, “My beloved Peter, do not weep anymore. As thou hadst me with thee while on earth, thou shalt have me spiritually as a help and solace from this day. But thou, O Peter, art the eldest, therefore, thou must, for the time that remains, encourage the younger brethren. Thou must strengthen the weak. Cease being distressed at my death.”⁷⁹ Then the other apostles said to the Theotokos, “Indeed, O Lady, thou wilt be translated to the heavens! So then, at least, comfort us and leave us a word of counsel from thy holy mouth that thy slaves may have a remembrance.”⁸⁰

Saint Gregory Palamas comments here that “the precepts and encouragements which she gave to God’s heralds (the apostles) were sent throughout the whole world. Thus, she herself was both a support and comfort, while she was both heard and seen among men. She labored with the rest in every way for the preaching of the Gospel. In such wise, she led a most strenuous manner of life proclaimed in mind and speech.”⁸¹

In the famous Akathist Hymn to the Theotokos, we chant: *Rejoice, thou who dost fill the nets of the fisherman! Rejoice, thou who dost draw us from the depths of ignorance. Rejoice, thou who dost enlighten many with knowledge*⁸²

The Theotokos has been called the Church’s greatest theologian, for as Saint Kyril of Jerusalem (318-ca. 386) remarks, “the Virgin Mother of God is His witness.”⁸³ *

The Theotokos speaks a parable

Our Lady, the Theotokos, then spoke to them, saying, “My beloved children, hearken to my brief words and small instruction, for this I wish and seek. My children, do you see this world? It is a festival. God is as a king, and you, His servants, are the merchants of my beloved Son. Now listen to this parable. There was a great and powerful king who had two servants. The king then heard that there was a great fair where there would be very many goods and products that would bring great gain. Therefore, the king summoned these two servants and said, ‘Make great haste to go into this country where the fair is being held and, for one month, contract business. If any of you delay, he

⁷⁸ “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, loc. cit.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 238-239.

⁸¹ Saint Gregory Palamas, “Homily 37, On the Most August Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary [in Greek],” *P.G.* 151:464C; see, also, “Homily on the Dormition,” *Orthodox Life* 32, No. 4 (July-August 1982): 3-9.

⁸² Akathist to the Theotokos.

⁸³ Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, “Catechesis X, On One Lord, Jesus Christ,” *Catechesis, Vol. I, The Fathers of the Church*, 61:208.

will lose his life!’ Straightway, the two servants took money and went to the fair. However, one of them was senseless and foolish; he purchased items that were useless to the king, such as houses, shops, and fields. All these things the king had no need of, nor would they bring him any gain. Moreover, the undiscerning servant delayed in returning. It required time to sow the fields, as well as to refurbish and complete the shops and the houses, because they were in disarray. Thus, it took him about three to four months to return to the king. Now the other servant was prudent and purchased precious stones, and returned punctually to the king. The king honored and glorified this servant, for he found him trustworthy. As for the other servant, an order was issued that he be executed as one who was an enemy of the king.⁸⁴

“The same situation is also before you, O apostles of my Son. My beloved Son has sent you as merchants into the world of deceived mankind, to win those souls who will hearken to His name. Whichever of you, O my friends and children, is a friend of thy Teacher and my Son, He will honor in His kingdom. Those that will not obey the commands of the Teacher, he knows what he will suffer. On account of this, my beloved children, go and preach. Enlighten and guide those of the world that are led astray, and gain them and direct them to the kingdom of my Son.⁸⁵

“Always have love and peace among you, and rejoice and be glad for great will be your reward in the kingdom of the heavens. And, though, my friends, I go to the kingdom of my Son and God, I am ever with you; and I will strengthen and comfort you in your afflictions.” This and other things the all-holy one uttered to the apostles.⁸⁶

The Theotokos delivers her soul, full of light

It was the Lord’s day, and the 15th day of the month of August, when that blessed hour that all were awaiting drew near. It was the third hour of the day (nine o’clock in the morning). In the room a number of lamps were burning. The holy apostles were offering praise to God. Upon a beautifully adorned bed, the Theotokos was lying and preparing herself for her blessed end when her beloved Son and Lord would come to her.⁸⁷ She then greeted each apostle with a blessing.⁸⁸

She then stretched her hands heavenward and prayed, saying, “I revere, praise, and glorify Thy much to be praised name, O Lord, because Thou hast looked upon the low estate of Thy slave. For behold, from

“Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, p. 239.

" Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 239, 240.

⁸⁷ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, p. 9.

⁸⁸ Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos (ca. 1335), *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk. II, § 21, *P.G.* 145:812.

henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.”⁸⁹ After this prayer, she said to the apostles, “Cast incense and pray, because Christ is coming with a host of angels. And, behold, Christ is at hand, sitting on a throne of cherubim!” When they had prayed, there was thunder from heaven and there came a fearful voice, as if of chariots. Behold, a multitude of a host of angels and powers, and a voice, as if of the Son of Man was heard!⁹⁰

Then there shone in the room an ineffable light of divine glory which dimmed the lamps. Those that were granted this vision were struck awestricken. Many beheld the roof of the apartment open and the glory of the Lord descending from heaven. It was Christ the King of Glory with hosts of angels and archangels, and all the heavenly powers. Also



The Dormition of the Theotokos

with them were the holy fathers and prophets, those who prophesied of old concerning the pure Virgin. Together with them, there also approached Christ’s immaculate Mother all the righteous souls.⁹¹

Saint John of Damascus also mentions that some of the most famous and righteous prophets of the Old Testament were in attendance.⁹² The text of *Pseudo-John*, in describing the events, records that the Theotokos’ mother, Anna, and her cousin Elisabeth appeared with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David and all the choirs of saints, singing praising and venerating the body of the Mother of the Lord.⁹³

⁸⁹ Lk. 1:48.

⁹⁰ *Apocrypha of the New Testament: The Book of John Concerning the Falling Asleep of Mary*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, VIII:589-590.

⁹¹ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.

⁹² Saint John of Damascus, “Horn. II, On the Dormition,” 3; *P.G.* 96:724.

⁹³ Paul A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami, Vol. I, Historical Introduction and Description of the Mosaics and Frescoes*, Bollingen Series LXX (NY: Pantheon Books, (continued...))

Rejoice, fulfillment of prophetic foretelling!

The theme of Mary as Theotokos and mediatrix is one of great emphasis for Saint Andrew of Crete (ca. 660-740). Nowhere in divinely inspired Scripture can one look without seeing some allusion to her. “Rejoice, Mediatrix of the law and of grace, seal of the Old and New Testaments, clear fulfillment of the whole of prophecy, the truth of Scriptures inspired by God, and the living and most pure book of God and the Logos!”⁹³ ⁹⁴

Saint Gregory Palamas also points out that the prophets and angels glorified God, Who was born of her, and that all creation renders her everlasting praise. “The Prophet Ezekiel was taken up by the spirit, and he heard, ‘Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place [Ez. 3:12].’ The Patriarch Jacob, beheld the ladder as a type, and exclaimed, ‘How fearful is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven [Gen. 28:17].’ The Prophet-King David, too, says, ‘I shall commemorate thy name in every generation and generation. Therefore shall peoples give praise unto thee for ever, and unto the ages of ages [Ps. 44:16, 17],’”⁹⁵

Let us listen to select verses of the Akathist Hymn of the Dormition:

Rejoice, thou who wast prefigured by the patriarchs!

Rejoice, thou foretelling of the prophets!

Rejoice, thou perfect scroll of the law and prophets!

Rejoice, O noetic ark, raised on the mountains above the flood of mortality!

Rejoice, O twig of the dove in the hands of Noah!

Rejoice, O heavenly ladder, foreseen by Jacob!

Rejoice, O bush unburnt, foreseen by the lawgiver (Moses)!

Rejoice, O rod of Aaron, sprouting forth incorruption!

Rejoice, O animate ark of holiness of the Lord!

Rejoice, O tabernacle overshadowed by the cherubim!

Rejoice, O holy of holies, spoken of by the seraphim!

Rejoice, O star of Jacob, prophesied by Balaam!

Rejoice, O fleece bedewed of Jesus, symbolized by Gideon!

Rejoice, O sun, dwelling of Christ, revealed by the psalmist!

Rejoice, O God-inspired flute of David, the ancestor of God!

Rejoice, O rising glory of his prophecy, psalter and harp most beautiful!

Rejoice, O throne of the great King, known to Solomon!

⁹³(...continued)
1966), p. 167.

⁹⁴ Saint Andrew of Crete, “Horn. IV, On the Dormition,” *P.G.* 97:865A.

⁹⁵ Saint Gregory Palamas, *P.G.* 151:469D.

Rejoice, O gate impassible, foreseen by Ezekiel!
Rejoice, O holy mountain, discerned by the man of desire (Daniel)!
Rejoice, thou who didst bring to fulfillment all the prophetic words
foretold of thee!
Rejoice, thou who didst bring to perfection the dispensation of the
Highest for the salvation of the world]⁹⁶
Rejoice, O sound of the prophet's words!
Rejoice, thou blest adornment of the apostles ' choir!⁹⁷



The Dormition of the Theotokos

“May it be to me according to Thy word!”

At the sight of the approach of her Son, the Theotokos cried with great joy unto her son, “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior [Lk. 1:46, 47],”⁹⁸ And, behold, a stream of light came upon the Virgin because of the presence of her Son, and all the powers of the heavens fell down and adored Him! He then said, “Mariam.” And she answered, “Here am I, Lord.”⁹⁹

Raising herself from her bed as if she were trying to go to meet her Son, she worshipped the Lord. Looking at her with love, He said, “Arise,

⁹⁶ Akathist to the Theotokos on Her Dormition, Ikoi 5, 7, 9.

⁹⁷ Canon of the Akathist, Ode Six, Mode Four.

⁹⁸ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.

⁹⁹ *The Book of John Concerning the Falling Asleep of Mary*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, VIII:590.

come my beloved, My fair one, My dove.¹⁰⁰ Arise from the dead with authority, because Thou art My Mother. Arise and come to My kingdom, for Thou art the Queen of all. Arise to receive My divine glory, O My sweet Mother. Arise and come unto Me, My fair dove, for thou art escorted by My angelic hosts. Take up thy soul on thy virginal, incorrupt and divine body that thou mayest soar to the heights of heaven, and go through My spiritual hierarchies, and come unto Me, that thou mightest sit at My right hand, in order to enjoy the throne of thy kingdom which is prepared for thee since the foundation of the world. Gird thyself with the glorious and gold-embroidered royal garment of thy virtues. Adorn thyself with the luminous glory of thy divine blessedness. Arise, come My beloved, My fair one, My dove,¹⁰¹ yea, come.”¹⁰²

Bowing, the Mother of God replied, “Blessed is Thy name, O Lord of Glory and my God! For Thou wast pleased to choose Thy humble handmaid for the service of Thy mystery. Remember me, O King of glory, in Thine everlasting kingdom. Thou knowest that I have loved Thee with all my heart and have kept the treasure entrusted to me. And now receive my soul in peace and defend me from all the snares of the dark power of Satan.”¹⁰³ The Lord then consoled His Mother with words full of love and persuaded her not to fear the power of Satan, which was already conquered by her. He called her with love to pass fearlessly from earth to heaven.¹⁰⁴

Saint Gregory Palamas comments on the love between Son and Mother, thus: “Therefore, she loves and is loved in return more than any other;...for He was her only Son. Moreover, she alone among women gave birth knowing no spouse, so that the love of Him, that was of her flesh, was twofold. Who will the Only-begotten love more than His Mother, He Who came forth from her in an indescribable manner, without a father, in this last age, even as One begotten of the Father without a mother before the ages? He Who came down and fulfilled the law, how could He not multiply the honor due His Mother above and beyond the law?”¹⁰⁵

And the Lord remained by her and said, “Behold, presently thy soul will be translated to the heavens, to the treasures of My Father in exceeding brightness, where there is peace and joy of the holy angels, and many other things.” Then the Mother of the Lord answered and said to Him, “Lay Thy right hand upon me, O Lord, and bless me.” Then the Lord stretched forth His

¹⁰⁰ Song 2:10.

¹⁰¹ Song 2:13.

¹⁰² M. Charitos, *The Repose*, loc. cit.

¹⁰³ “The Assumption of Our Most Holy Lady,” Holy Trinity Monastery, pp. 9, 10.

Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ Saint Gregory Palamas, “Homily 37,” *P.G.* 151:472C.

undefiled right hand and blessed His Mother.¹⁰⁶ She then took hold of His hand and kissed it, saying, “I venerate this right hand, which created the heaven and the earth. And I call upon Thy much to be praised name Christ, O God, the King of the ages, the Only-begotten of the Father, to receive Thy handmaid, O Thou Who didst deign to be brought forth by me, in a low estate, to save the race of men through Thine ineffable dispensation. Do Thou bestow Thine aid upon everyone calling upon, or praying to, or naming the name of Thy handmaid.”¹⁰⁷

While uttering this, the sacred apostles went up to her feet. They venerated her and said, “O Mother of the Lord, leave a blessing to the world, since thou art going away from it. For thou hast blessed it, and raised it up when it was ruined, by bringing forth the Light of the world.” The Theotokos then prayed and spoke thus, “O God, through Thy great goodness Thou hast sent from the heavens Thine only-begotten Son to dwell in my humble body, Who hast deigned to be born of me, humble as I am, do



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Thou have mercy upon the world, and every soul that calls upon Thy name.” And again she prayed, and said, “O Lord, King of the heavens, Son of the living God, accept every man who calls upon Thy name, that Thy birth may be glorified.” Then she continued shortly after, saying, “O Lord Jesus Christ, Who art all-powerful in heaven and on earth, in this appeal I implore Thy holy name: in every time and place where there is made mention of my name, make that place holy, and glorify those who glorify Thee through my name,

¹⁰⁶ *The Book of John Concerning the Falling Asleep of Mary*, Ante-Nicene, VIII: loc. cit.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

accepting from such persons all their offerings, and all their supplications, and all their prayers.”¹⁰⁸

Having thus prayed, the Lord said to His Mother, “Let thy heart rejoice and be glad! For every grace and every gift has been given to thee from My Father in the heavens, and from Me, and from the Holy Spirit. Every soul that calls upon thy name shall not be ashamed, but shall find mercy, and comfort, and support, and confidence, both in the world that now is and in that which is to come, in the presence of My Father in the heavens.”^{109 110}

Saint Kosmas then speaks of the Virgin interceding for us. *As she departed, the Virgin without spot, lifted up her hands—those hands that had held God incarnate in their embrace—and, with the boldness of a mother to her son, she said, “Keep unto all ages those whom Thou hast made mine and who cry aloud unto Thee, ‘We, who have been delivered, praise the one and only Creator and exalt Him above all forever.’”*¹¹⁰

She then rose up and blessed each of the apostles with her own hand, and all gave glory to God.^{111 112} Then addressing her Son and His disciples, she uttered, *O ye apostles, assembled here from the ends of the earth, bury my body in Gethsemane: and Thou, O my Son and God, receive my spirit.*¹¹² Then she uttered, “Ready is my heart, O God, ready is my heart [Ps. 107:2].” Then she said, “May it be to me according to Thy word!”¹¹³ She then lay down upon the bed.¹¹⁴

Feeling unspeakable joy at the sight of the radiant face of her Son and Lord, the Theotokos, filled with spiritual rapture out of love for Him, surrendered her pure soul into the hands of the Lord. And the Lord stretched forth His undefiled hands and received her holy and blameless soul. She felt no pain whatsoever, but it was as if she had fallen into a sweet sleep. He Whom she conceived without destroying her virginity and bore without pain, now received her soul from her pure body.¹¹⁵ Saint John of Damascus also speaks of how the Lawgiver fulfilled His law concerning mothers. *He Who, taking flesh, strangely made His dwelling in thy pure womb, Himself received thine all-holy spirit and, as a son paying his due, He gave it rest with*

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 591.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Eight, Mode One.

¹¹¹ *The Book of John*, Ante-Nicene, VIII: loc. cit.

¹¹² August 15th, Exaposteilarion, Mode Three.

¹¹³ Cf. Lk 1:38.

¹¹⁴ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, p. 10.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Himself.¹¹⁶ At once there began wonderful and joyous angelic singing repeating the former words of Gabriel: “Rejoice, thou who hast been shown grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women [Lk. 1:28].”^{116 117}

At this point, Saint Kosmas describes the scene in this manner. *The angelic powers were amazed as they looked in Sion upon their own Master, bearing in His hands the soul of a woman: for as befitted a son, He said to her who without spot had borne Him, “Come, honored among women, and be glorified together with thy Son and God.*”¹¹⁸

With such triumphant hymns did the heavenly hosts accompany the holy soul of the Theotokos as she went in the arms of the Lord to the dwelling above. The holy apostles, who were found worthy to behold this vision, followed the Mother of God with tender eyes, as once they had followed the Lord when He ascended from the Mount of Olives.¹¹⁹ For a long time now they looked steadfastly toward heaven as if they were in a swoon. When they came to themselves, the disciples worshipped the Lord Who had raised His Mother’s soul to heaven with glory, and they surrounded her bed with weeping.¹²⁰

*At a divine command the chief apostles hastened from the ends of the earth to bury thee. And when they beheld thee taken up from earth to heaven, they shouted with joy the words of Gabriel, and cried unto thee, “Rejoice, thou bearer of the Divinity! Rejoice, thou who alone by thy childbirth hast brought together earthly things and things on high!”*¹²¹

The apostles at the bier

The face of the Theotokos shone like the sun. Furthermore, a splendid and sweet perfume emitted from her most pure body. It was a scent that is impossible to find here on earth. With piety and fear, the holy apostles kissed the most pure body and were sanctified by contact with it.¹²²

Describing the thoughts and feelings of the apostles, Saint Kosmas writes that *the glorious apostles knew thee, O Virgin without spot, to be a mortal woman and, at the same time, beyond and above nature, the Mother of God. Therefore they touched thee with fearful hands, as they gazed upon thee shining with glory, the tabernacle that had held God.*¹²³

In their hearts they felt the activity of divine grace and were filled with spiritual joy. Then all the faithful reverently venerated her most pure body and

¹¹⁶ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Eight, Mode Four.

¹¹⁷ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.

¹¹⁸ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Nine, Mode One.

¹¹⁹ Acts 1:9.

¹²⁰ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.

¹²¹ August 15th, Orthros Praises, Mode Four.

¹²² “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.

¹²³ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Three, Mode One.

kissed it with awe. It was then perceived that from the precious relics of the Theotokos there emitted sanctifying power, which filled with joy the hearts of all who touched her. The sick received healing, the blind regained their sight, the ears of the deaf were opened, the lame were able to walk, and devils were driven out. In a word, every disease vanished completely, merely by touching the bed of the Theotokos. Then many others came, seeking to be cured of their diseases, who also obtained healing. Concurrently, there was unspeakable joy that day among the multitude of those who had been cured, as well as of them that looked on. All then glorified Christ our God and His holy Mother, and kept festival with psalms and spiritual songs.¹²⁴

*At thy departing, O Virgin Theotokos, to Him Who was ineffably born of thee, Iakovos the first bishop and brother of the Lord was there, and so was Peter, the honored leader and chief of the disciples, and the whole sacred fellowship of the apostles. In discourses that showed forth heavenly things they sang the praises of the divine and amazing mystery of the dispensation of Christ our God; and they rejoiced, O far-famed Virgin, as they buried thy body, the origin of the Life and holder of God.*¹²⁵

Describing the actions of the holy apostles, Saint Kosmas writes that *while standing round thy body that had held God, the choir of the apostles looked upon it with awe and saluted it, saying with clear voice: "As thou departest to the heavenly mansions to thy Son, do thou ever save thine inheritance."*^{126 127} And, *The inspired tongues of the apostles rang out louder than trumpets, as they sang in the Spirit the burial hymn to the Theotokos, "Rejoice, incorruptible source of God's life-giving incarnation, that brings salvation unto all!"*¹²¹

The solemn procession

In the midst of these events which had accompanied the dormition of the Theotokos, they began the solemn procession to inter her most honorable body. The apostles bore her bier aloft on their shoulders; toward the head were Saint John the Theologian and Saint Peter on the other side, then Saint Iakovos and Saint Paul opposite him.¹²⁸ The other apostles and hierarchs proceeded chanting, while Saint John the Theologian also carried the branch from Paradise, which shone brightly. The rest of the faithful, with lights and censers, walked close by, surrounding the bier.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ "The Assumption," Holy Trinity Monastery, pp. 9, 10.

¹²⁵ August 15th, Vespers Aposticha, Doxastikon, Mode Four.

¹²⁶ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Nine, Mode One.

¹²⁷ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Five, Mode One.

¹²⁸ "Dormition of the Theotokos," *The Great Synaxaristes*, p. 240.

¹²⁹ "The Assumption," Holy Trinity Monastery, p. 11.

All sang the funeral prayers. Then at the command of the Savior, the preeminent Apostle Peter began chanting one of the psalms of David: “When Israel went out of Egypt, and the house of Jacob from among a barbarous people. Alleluia. Judea became His sanctuary, Israel His dominion. Alleluia. .. [and the rest of Ps. 113],” together with the other apostles who sang with most sweet voices.¹³⁰

The solemn procession conveyed the sacred body of the Theotokos from Sion, through Jerusalem to Gethsemane. Hovering over the bier, and accompanying the procession, there appeared a circular cloud reminiscent of a crown which shone with a bright radiance. In the hearing of all, there resounded ceaseless angelic singing from out of the cloud that filled the air. Saint Theophanes the Poet (d. 1381) incites us to honor her with these words: *Come, let us crown the Church with song, as the ark of God goes to her rest.*¹³¹ **Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest, Thou and the ark of Thy holiness**¹³²

Saint Hesychios (ca. 451), giving attention to this verse, comments, “The ark of Thy sanctification is the Virgin Theotokos surely. If Thou art the Pearl,¹³³ then she must be the ark.”¹³⁴ Many have spoken of Mary as the ark, such as: Saint Romanos (ca. 490-ca. 556),¹³⁵ Saint Andrew of Crete,¹³⁶ and Saint John of Damascus.¹³⁷ Saint John of Damascus also writes, reminding us that in Old Testament times the ark of the Lord was transferred by way of Mount Sion to the most sacred village of Gethsemane.¹³⁸

The mob is roused

Many of the Jews who did not believe in Christ, on hearing the unusual chanting and witnessing the triumphant procession, left their homes and joined the multitude. They too, went along, following the procession out of the city. They were astonished at the glory and honor that was given to the most honorable body of the Theotokos. When the chief priests and scribes learned of this, they burned with the heaviest hatred. They began to reason frivolously. Indeed, they would become inflamed at anything that reminded them of Christ. They stirred up many of the people and sent temple servants and soldiers to overtake the procession and disperse it. They also ordered them to slay the

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ August 15th, Lity, Doxastikon, Mode Plagal One.

¹³² Ps. 131:8.

¹³³ Mt. 13:46.

¹³⁴ Saint Hesychios, “Sermon V, To the Theotokos Mary,” *P. G.* 93:1464.

¹³⁵ “Hymns,” in *Sources Chretiennes* (Lyons), 110, 122-3.

¹³⁶ Saint Andrew of Crete, “Horn. IV, On the Nativity of the Theotokos,” *P.G.* 97:869C.

¹³⁷ Saint John of Damascus, “Horn. II, On the Dormition,” *P.G.* 96:724.

¹³⁸ Ibid., “Horn. II,” 18, *P.G.* 96:749.

disciples of Christ and to burn the body of Mary, for they claimed that the nation of the Jews was ruined by this woman.¹³⁹

Then Satan entered and incited the mob. They quickly began to arm themselves as if for battle. Furiously, they hastened to overtake the procession.



The Dormition of the Theotokos

Gradually, they began to catch up with the faithful. Then, suddenly, the circular cloud that was floating in the air descended. It surrounded, like a wall of protection, the holy apostles and the rest of the Christians. Indeed, the pursuers only heard chanting, but could discern no one behind the wall of the cloud. Then the holy angels, invisibly hovering over the sacred relics and the Christians, struck the malicious persecutors with blindness.¹⁴⁰ Inflicted with blindness, the persecutors began striking their heads against the walls, and then hit each other. Others, not knowing where to go, looked for someone who might lead them.

The Jewish Priest Athonios

At that time there was a Jewish priest called Athonios (some texts give his name as Jephonias) was out on the road. When the cloud had lifted by the command of God, he beheld the holy apostles and a multitude of Christians who, with lights, were chanting about the bier of the Mother of Jesus. No tongue of clay could adequately describe the joyful procession. But Athonios was filled with envy. He was assailed by a storm of disbelieving thoughts. Then, with great malice in his heart, he blurted out, “Look, what honor surrounds the body of her who bore the imposter that destroyed the law of our fathers!”¹⁴¹ Being a strong man by nature, he rushed with mad fury through the crowd of Christians. Running up toward the bier, he attempted to cast the Virgin’s body to the ground. When the audacious hands of the priest barely touched the couch, an invisible angel

¹³⁹ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.; “The Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God,” *Orthodox Word*, op. cit., p. 104.

¹⁴⁰ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.; “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, loc. cit.

¹⁴¹ “The Assumption,” pp. 12, 13.

at once struck them off at the elbows with the immaterial sword of divine vengeance. Thus, Athonios' hands clung fast to the bed, while he collapsed to the earth wailing, "Woe is me!"¹⁴² The Jews that beheld this sight of their priest, then cried out, "Verily, He Who was brought forth by thee is the true God, O Mother of God, ever-virgin Mary!"¹⁴³

Let no profane hand touch the living ark of God!¹⁴⁴

*The Lord guarded with the glory of the Divinity the honor due to the living ark in which the Logos took flesh; and in His just vengeance He intervened to cut off the sacrilegious hands of the presumptuous unbeliever.*¹⁴⁵

This incident was prefigured in times of old when King David was having the ark brought to Jerusalem. Uzzah presumptuously reached out to steady the ark, but he was fatally smitten. His death was attributed to the violation of the sacred character of the ark, in that he presumed to handle the sacred object.¹⁴⁶ Saint Andrew of Crete, in his Great Canon, makes mention of this Old Testament incident. *When the ark was being carried in a cart and the ox stumbled, Uzzah did no more than touch it, but the wrath of God smote him. O my soul, flee from his presumption, and respect with reverence the things of God.*¹⁴⁷ Now David was greatly distressed at this incident, and immediately cancelled plans to enshrine the ark in Jerusalem. Instead, he deposited the sacred object in the home of Obed-edom (Abeddara the Gethite), where it remained for three months.¹⁴⁸ In like manner, we shall see the Theotokos' earthly tabernacle remain in the tomb for three days until she was bodily assumed into the Jerusalem on high by her Son.

Acknowledging his sin, Athonios repented and turned to the holy apostles and said, "Have mercy on me, servants of Christ!" The preeminent Apostle Peter then ordered the procession to stop. He then said to Athonios, "Now thou hast received thy just fruits. Know that 'the Lord is the God of vengeance; the God of vengeance hath spoken openly [Ps. 93:1],' and, thus, we cannot heal thee of thy wounds. Only our Lord Himself can do this, Whom you had unjustly rose up against, seized, and killed. Even He will not bestow

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁴³ *The Book of John*, Ante-Nicene, VIII: loc. cit.; "Dormition of the Theotokos," *The Great Synaxaristes*, loc. cit.

¹⁴⁴ March 23rd, Annunciation, Orthros Canon, Ode Nine, Mode Four, by Saint John of Damascus.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. 2 Kgs. (2 Sam.) 6:6, 7. August IS⁴¹, Orthros Canon, Ode Three, Mode One by Saint Kosmas.

¹⁴⁶ See 2 Kgs. (2 Sam.) 6:7; 1 Chr. 13:10.

¹⁴⁷ *Great Canon*, Ode Seven, Mode Plagal Second, by Saint Andrew of Crete, *The Great Canon*, trans. by Holy Trinity Monastery (Jordanville, 1976).

¹⁴⁸ 2 Kgs. (2 Sam.) 6:11.

healing upon thee, that is, until thou shouldest believe in Him with all thy heart and confess with thy mouth that Jesus is the true Messiah, the Son of God.”¹⁴⁹ Then Athonios cried aloud, “I believe that He is the Savior of the world foretold by the prophets—He is the Christ. From the very first we saw that He was the Son of God but, being darkened by malicious envy, we did not acknowledge the greatness of God openly. Instead, we delivered Him to death, though He was guiltless. But by the power of His divinity, He arose on the third day; thereby, He put us all to shame. We attempted to conceal His resurrection by bribing the soldiers, but we could do nothing, as the glory of the resurrection was manifest and spread abroad.”¹⁵⁰



The Dormition of the Theotokos

When Athonios uttered this confession and repented of his sin, the holy apostles and all the faithful rejoiced with the joy of the angels over a penitent sinner. The holy Apostle Peter then ordered Athonios to put the wounds of his severed arms to the limbs hanging on the bier. He then told him to call upon the most holy Mother of God with faith. Athonios did as he was instructed and,

¹⁴⁹ The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, p. 13.

at once, the severed arms were joined at the mark where they had been severed; only a red line remained about his elbows.¹⁵¹

Athonios then fell down before the bier, and worshipped Christ God Who was born of the Virgin Mary. He then blessed with many praises His immaculate Mother, the Virgin Mary. Next, Athonios began to recite prophesies from holy Scriptures that testified both to the Virgin and to the Christ. Therefore, all were doubly amazed at beholding Athonios' miraculous healing and hearing from him the wise words with which he glorified the Lord Jesus and praised the Mother of God. Following this, Athonios joined the procession, following behind the bier with the other Christians to Gethsemane. He was later baptized.

Some, who were part of the rushing mob that were struck with blindness, also acknowledged their sin and penitently approached the honorable bier and touched it with faith. When the apostle touched their faces with the heavenly palm branch,¹⁵² they regained their bodily sight together with the eyes of their soul. Thus, the merciful Mother of all, our most holy Lady, as by her birth she had given joy to the whole world, so at her falling asleep she did not wish to sadden anyone. As the good Mother of the good King, she mercifully consoled even them that were her enemies with gracious gifts.¹⁵³

The initiates and eyewitnesses of the Logos then continued to hear the angels singing lofty hymns. They, too, desirous to give honor pleasing to God, cried aloud, *Rejoice, thou who didst swiftly avenge the evil boldness of the Jew! Rejoice, thou who didst grant healing to the same! Rejoice, thou who didst turn the unbelief of Athonios into belief! Rejoice, thou who didst receive his faithful confession!*¹⁵⁴

Saint Gregory Palamas writes that her “death was also life-bearing, translating her into a celestial and immortal life.” And that her falling asleep was “a joyful event and festivity for the entire world. It not only renewed the memory of her wondrous deeds but also added the novel delivery from faraway nations of the sacred apostles to her most holy burial.” We learn also that the apostles and hierarchs composed their God-revealing hymns and encomia. “The presence of the angelic choirs was standing by, aiding and presiding. Together with the apostles, the incorporeals went on before, followed after, assisting, opposing, defending, and being defended. Both celestial and terrestrial beings labored and chanted together to their uttermost with them who also venerated her life-originating and God-receiving body. For

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

¹⁵² “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, loc. cit.

¹⁵³ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, p. 14.

¹⁵⁴ Akathist to the Theotokos on Her Dormition, Ikos 4.

she is the healing and saving remedy of our race and the majesty of all creation. But they (the angelic hosts) strived against and opposed with a concealed hand those Jews who fought against God, by rising up against and attacking that body. Nonetheless, the Son of the Ever-virgin and Lord of Sabaoth was present Himself. Into His hands she commended her God-bearing spirit, through which and with which its yoke-fellow, her body, was translated into the celestial regions, as was meet.”¹⁵⁵

**Angelic hosts stood at Sion
guarding their Master, directing a female soul**

Saint Kosmas the Poet also confirms that, at the burial of the far-famed Theotokos, *The spiritual hosts that dwell in heaven attended thy divine body in Sion;*¹⁵⁶ as they stood by with their own Master.¹⁵⁷

We learn that the celestial hierarchies came to escort the Theotokos’ soul as it was transported into the heavenly realms and eternal life. *The dominions and the thrones, the rulers, the principalities and the powers;*¹⁵⁸ *the cherubim and the fearful seraphim glorify thy dormition;*¹⁵⁹ Also, with them were the prophets, and the whole creation: and thy Son Who received into His immaculate hands thy spotless soul.¹⁶⁰

Among the prophets in attendance, we find the Theotokos’ ancestor David. Cry out, O David: what is this present feast? And he said, “Christ has translated into the heavenly mansions her who bore Him without seed, of whom I sang in the book of Psalms, calling her daughter, child of God, and Virgin.¹⁶¹ Therefore, mothers and daughters and brides of Christ, rejoice and cry, ‘Rejoice, thou who art translated into the heavenly kingdom!’”¹⁶²

Saint John of Damascus comments that “it was fitting that the Bride whom the Father had espoused should dwell in the heavenly bridal chambers.”¹⁶³ Saint Gregory Palamas writes: “Today we celebrate her holy dormition or translation to another life. While being ‘a little lower than the angels’ (referring to her mortality),¹⁶⁴ by her proximity to the God of all... she has ascended higher than the angels and the archangels and all the hosts that

¹⁵⁵ Saint Gregory Palamas, *P.G.* 151:464CD, 465A.

¹⁵⁶ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode One, Mode One.

¹⁵⁷ August 15th, Vespers Doxastikon, Mode Two.

¹⁵⁸ Rom. 8:38; Col. 1:16.

¹⁵⁹ August 15th, Vespers Sticheron, Mode One.

¹⁶⁰ August 15th, Orthros Praises, Mode Four.

¹⁶¹ Ps. 44.

¹⁶² August 15th, Orthros Sessional Hymn, Mode Four.

¹⁶³ Saint John of Damascus, “Horn. II, On the Dormition,” *P.G.* 96:741B.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Ps. 8:5.

are found beyond them.”¹⁶⁵ In accordance with the hymnography of the Church, the gates of heaven were lifted, and the angels sang. *Open wide the gates and receive above the world the Mother of the everlasting Light.*¹⁶⁶

**Glorious are thy mysteries, O pure Lady;
today thou art translated from earth to heaven**

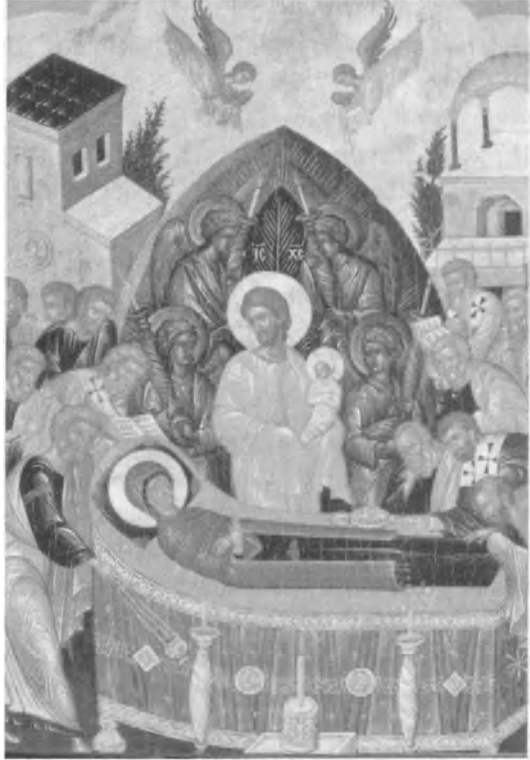
Meeting the Queen, the cherubim stood behind with rejoicing and the seraphim glorified her with joy. Saint Kosmas chants: *The gates of heaven were opened wide and the angels sang, as Christ received the virgin treasure of His own Mother. Cherubim withdrew before thee in thine exultation, while seraphim glorified thee in thy joy.*^{167 168}

Saint John of Damascus continues writing and saying that *the spiritual powers received her with the honors due to God.*¹⁶⁸ Then the heavenly mansions of God fittingly received the Queen. *Joyously adorned as a bride without spot, thou standest beside our King and God.*^{169 170}

Saint Theophanes also mentions the conduct of the incorporeals. *The hosts of angels, present with the fellowship of the apostles, gaze in great fear at her who bore the Cause of life, now that she is translated from life to life.*TM

**Rejoice, O beauty at the right hand of the Lord,
who dost embellish all the heavenly dwellers who bless thee!**

Before the angelic hierarchies, she is closer to God and deemed worthy of greater audience, according to Saint Gregory Palamas. The Prophet Esaias



The Dormition of the Theotokos

¹⁶⁵ Saint Gregory Palamas, *P.G.* 151:461AB.

¹⁶⁶ August 15th, Vespers Doxastikon, Mode Three.

¹⁶⁷ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Four, Mode One.

¹⁶⁸ August 15th, Lity, Mode Two.

¹⁶⁹ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode One, Mode Four.

¹⁷⁰ August 15th, Lity, Doxastikon, Mode Plagal One.

wrote: “And seraphs stood round about Him...[Is. 6:2]”; yet David speaks concerning her, “at Thy right hand stood the Queen [Ps.44:8].” Saint Gregory comments, “Do you see the difference in station? From this you may comprehend the difference in the dignity of their positions. The seraphim are round about God, but the Queen of all is solely beside Him....God Himself proclaims her by the mighty deeds enacted with respect to Him. And, as it said in the Song of Songs: ‘Thou art fair my companion [Song 6:3],’ for where Christ ‘sat down on the right of the Majesty in high places [Heb. 1:3],’ there, too, she takes her stand, having ascended from earth to heaven. She is truly His throne, and wherever the King sits, there His throne is set also....The prophet also wrote that ‘I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne... [Is. 6:1],’ thus declaring that the position of the Mother of God far transcends that of the heavenly hosts.”¹⁷¹ For her excellence is past understanding.¹⁷² *For through her the salvation of all mankind has come. We have not the strength to look upon her, and are unable to render honors worthy of her.*¹⁷³

Continuing his explanation, Saint Gregory Palamas writes that “throughout the course of ages, she will never cease from rendering benefactions to all creation—not only terrestrial creatures but celestial also.” He brings forward the Prophet Esaias to show that only through her both the heavenly hosts and we partake of and touch God. To better perceive this, Saint Gregory reminds us that Esaias beheld the seraphim take the coal from the altar not without mediation, but with tongs, by means of which the coal touched the prophetic lips and purified them [Is. 6:6, 7], Moses, too, beheld “the tongs” of that great vision of Esaias, when he beheld the bush aflame yet unconsumed. “Indeed, who does not know that the ‘tongs’ and the ‘bush’ are the Virgin-Mother? She conceived the divine Fire without being consumed;... and through her, He touched mankind. Thus, by that ineffable touch and union, He cleansed us. Therefore, she is the frontier between created and uncreated nature. No man shall come to God unless he is truly illumined through her, the lamp radiant with divinity. Thus says the prophet, ‘God is in the midst of her, and she shall not be shaken [Ps. 45:5],’”¹⁷⁴

Saint John of Damascus supports this vision: “She stands at His right as the real Queen, with much boldness, clad, according to prophecy, in a vesture interwoven with gold and embroidered with various colors [Ps. 44:9]. Yea, she stood by the throne glittering as the glorious Queen of heaven and earth, and shining inside and outside with the lightings of the gifts of the Holy

¹⁷¹ Saint Gregory Palamas, *P.G.* 151:469BC.

¹⁷² August 15th, Vespers Doxastikon, Mode Four.

¹⁷³ August 15th, Vespers Doxastikon, Grave Mode.

¹⁷⁴ Saint Gregory Palamas, *P.G.* 151:472AB.

Spirit, as the ever-illuminating Bride and Mother of the heavenly King of glory, Jesus Christ, our God and Savior. Ever since then she stands at the right side of the Son. She is embroidered in the virtues and gifts of purity, of holiness, everything beautiful, chosen, innocent, as the holiest of all saints and the noblest of the cherubim. Indeed, she is incomparably far more glorious than the seraphim and of all the heavenly hosts, being thus, next to God, venerated, glorified, and praised above all beings in heaven and earth.”¹⁷⁵

Also, Saint John of Kronstadt (1829-1908), speaks in similar florid terms of the exalted position of the Theotokos and writes: “Our Lady, the Mother of God, is the most beautifully adorned temple of the Holy Trinity.



The Dormition of the Theotokos

She is, after God, the treasury of all blessing, of purity, holiness, of all true wisdom, the source of spiritual power and constancy.”^{176 177}

*Rejoice, O all-desirable and sweet vision of the saints! Rejoice, O gateway to the paradisiacal dwellings of the righteous! Rejoice, O beginning of man’s salvation! Rejoice, O fulfillment of all good desires! Rejoice, O Theotokos and Queen, who dost reign after God the King! Rejoice, O Lady and Sovereign, who dost rule after the Lord our Master!*¹¹¹

The Garden of Gethsemane, the sacred abode of the Theotokos

The tomb in the Garden of Gethsemane is east of Jerusalem, across the Kedron Valley. Finally, the holy apostles with all the multitude of the Christians reached the Garden. When they laid down the bier with the most precious body, again the Christians began to weep. All bewailed their

¹⁷⁵ M. Charitos, *The Repose*, pp. 9, 10.

¹⁷⁶ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, trans. by E. E. Goulaeff (Jordanville, NY: Printshop of Saint Job of Pochaev, 1984), 232.

¹⁷⁷ Akathist to the Theotokos on Her Dormition, Ikos 6.

orphanhood at the loss of such a treasure. In giving the last kiss, the Christians prostrated themselves before the body of the Theotokos. Kissing it, they shed copious tears, so that only toward evening could the most honorable body be placed in the new tomb.¹⁷⁸ Her sacred relics were interred with the greatest honor, while chanting and weeping took place. When the apostles stepped before her bier to bid her farewell, each according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they uttered psalms of triumph and thanksgiving and chanted prayers.^{179 180}

Rejoice, embellishment of hierarchs and goodness of priests!

However, of all the hymns of praise (encomia). Saint John of Damascus comments that the most exquisite was that composed by the Athenian, Saint Hierotheos. He was the close friend of the Apostle Paul and Saint Dionysios the Areopagite. Saint John of Damascus records that Saint Hierotheos was *wholly beside himself and transported; his whole self consecrated to God, the chosen vessel of the Lord surpassed himself in hymns to thee, O far-famed Theotokos and Virgin. And in the sight of all he proved himself to be in the very truth inspired by God.*¹⁸⁰ According to tradition, his divine singing and heartfelt joy proved him to be greatly inspired. The apostles themselves esteemed his words and retained them in their memory.¹⁸¹ An extract of Saint Hierotheos' encomium, we present here:

“When was such a wonder of wonders ever seen by men? How does the Queen of all lie breathless? How has the Mother of Jesus reposed? Thou, O Virgin, wast the preaching of the prophets; thou art heralded by us. All the people venerate thee; the angels glorify thee. Rejoice, thou who art full of grace, the Lord is with thee, and through thee, with us! With Gabriel we hymn thee; with the angels we glorify thee; and with the prophets we praise thee, for they announced thee.

“Abbakoum beheld thee as an overshadowed mountain, for thou art covered with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Daniel beheld thee as a mountain from whom, seedlessly, the solid and strong King, the Christ, issued forth. Jacob saw thee as a ladder upon whom Christ came down to eat and drink with us. And although we, His slaves, contemplate ascending into the heavens, yet thou hast ascended before all. Rejoice, O Virgin, for Gideon beheld thee as a

¹⁷⁸ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.

¹⁷⁹ “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, loc. cit.

¹⁸⁰ August IS⁴¹, Orthros Canon, Ode Five, Mode Four.

¹⁸¹ “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, p. 241; Saint Hierotheos, s.v. “October 4th,” *The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church* [in Greek], 5th ed., Vol. X (Athens, 1978), 120; see. Saint Dionysios, *The Divine Names*, iii, 2.

fleece! David saw thee as the virgin daughter of the King. Esaias called thee Mother of God, and Ezekiel a gate. All the prophets prophesied thee!¹⁸²



The Dormition of the Theotokos

“What shall we call thee, O Virgin? Paradise. It is meet, for thou hast blossomed forth the flower of incorruption, Christ, Who is the sweet-smelling fragrance for the souls of men. Virgin? Verily, a virgin thou art, for without the seed of man thou gavest birth to our Lord Jesus Christ. Thou wast a virgin before birth, and virgin at birth, and still a virgin after. Shall we call thee Mother? This is meet too; for as a Mother thou gavest birth to Christ the King of all. Shall we name thee Heaven? This thou art also, for upon thee rose the Sun of righteousness. Therefore, rejoice, O Virgin, and hasten to thy Son’s rest and dwell in the tents of His beloved! Hasten there and make ready a place and remember us and all thy people, too, O Lady Mother of God, for both we and thyself are of the race of Adam. On account of this, intercede in our behalf. For this cause supplicate thy Son, Whom thou hast held in thine embrace, and help us in our preaching; and then afterward that we may find

¹⁸² “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, loc. cit.

rest in our hopes. Go forward, O Virgin, from earth to heaven, from corruption to incorruption, from the sorrow of this world to the joy of the kingdom of the heavens, from this perishable earth to the everlasting heaven. Hasten, O Virgin, to the heavenly light, to the hymns of the angels, to the glory of the saints from all the ages. Hasten, O Virgin, to the place of thy Son, to His kingdom, to His power, where the angels chant, the prophets give glory, and the archangels hymn the Mother of the King, who is the lit lamp stand, wider than the heavens, the firmament above, the protection of Christians, and the mediatrix of our race.” Thus, with these words of praise he bid farewell and embraced the body of the all-holy one, the Panagia.¹⁸³

Saint Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople, in a simple narrative, writes that “... the body was placed in the tomb, and also a linen cloth upon her body, leaving her hands uncovered.”¹⁸⁴ Saint John of Damascus marvels, saying, “O! the lightnings that did shine that night. O the angelic attendance that adorned the repose of the life-giving Mother! O the apostolic orations that blessed the burial of the divine body!”¹⁸⁵ Then, even after an enormous stone had been rolled into place before the mouth of the tomb, the faithful did not wish to depart, held by their intense love for the Mother of God. Thus, the holy apostles also tarried by her tomb and did not leave Gethsemane for three days, chanting psalms continually. During all this time, there could be heard in the air the wonderful chanting of the heavenly hosts that were praising God and blessing Christ’s immaculate Mother.¹⁸⁶

Descent into Hades

The soul of the Theotokos was then received into the hands of her Son. Panagia then asked her Son if she could visit Hades to see where He Himself had gone to deliver the forefathers.¹⁸⁷ Then radiant angels escorted the soul of the Theotokos to this region.^{188 189 190} Saint John of Damascus makes mention of this in a hymn from the office of Orthros during the feast, chanting, *A strange wonder it was to see the living heaven of the Ruler of all descend into the hollows of the earth.*¹⁸⁹ Elsewhere, we hear, *Rejoice, O thou who didst trample upon the all-destructive Hades! Rejoice, thou who didst open the gates of Paradise to the Christian race who ever blesses thee!*¹⁹⁰

¹⁸³ Ibid., pp. 240,241.

¹⁸⁴ Saint Germanos, “Horn. III, On the Dormition,” *P.G.* 98:369-372.

¹⁸⁵ M. Charitos, *The Repose*, pp. 8, 9.

¹⁸⁶ “Thg Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.

¹⁸⁷ Pe. 3:19.

¹⁸⁸ “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, p. 240.

¹⁸⁹ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Four, Mode Four.

¹⁹⁰ Akathist to the Theotokos on Her Dormition, Ikoï 10, 12.

From his *Spiritual Psalter*, Saint Ephraim entreats: “O my Lady, do not leave me in the terrible hour of death, but hasten to my aid and deliver me from the bitter torments of the demons. For if thou choosest, thou hast the power to accomplish this, for thou art truly the Mother of God, who dost reign over all.”



The Dormition of the Theotokos

Icons of the Feast of the Dormition

Icons of the Feast of the Dormition depict Christ in glory, surrounded by a *mandorla*, looking at the body of His Mother stretched on a litter, which is a richly draped bier. The Virgin is clad in her red and blue garments. We see Christ holding, in His arms, a small figure of a child clothed in white and crowned with a halo; it is the all-luminous soul of Mary, represented as a newborn infant, that He has just taken to Himself.

By the end of the eleventh century, the dormition scene had begun to appear in representations of the Orthodox Church cycle of feasts, which adorn the walls and vaults of Byzantine churches. Some of the earliest wall paintings of this feast may be seen above the entrance of the Monastery of Daphne and the Perivlepto of Mystra, which date from the fourteenth century. As in the Monastery of Chora (Kariye Djami), the icon usually took its place on the west wall of the nave above the entrance door. As in so much of Christian art, the iconography of the dormition is based upon literary sources, of which the most

important is the Greek apocryphal text of the fourth or fifth century, entitled, *The Discourse of Saint John the Theologian Concerning the Dormition (Keemeesis) of the Holy Mother of God*.¹⁹¹

In thy falling asleep, death was without corruption¹⁹²

It must be remembered that it is not the assumption that the Holy Orthodox Church observes on the 15th of August, but the Feast of the Dormition (*.Keemeesis* or *Koimisis*) or “falling asleep” of the holy Virgin. This most sacred feast marks the falling asleep of the Mother of God, which was followed by the translation of her sacred body three days later into heaven. This feast, therefore, marks her soul being commended into her Son’s hands and the short sojourn of her body in the tomb. Death is not the annihilation of our existence, but a passage from earth to heaven.¹⁹³

It was Saint Juvenal (5th C.), Patriarch of Jerusalem, who related to Saint Pulcheria the earliest traditions concerning the translation of the relics of the Theotokos.¹⁹⁴ At the end of the sixth century, Emperor Maurice (582-602), dated the Virgin Theotokos’ august dormition as the 15th of August. He ordered that the feast be celebrated throughout the universe. Unlike the resurrection of Christ, the mysterious character of her death, burial, resurrection, and ascension were not the subject of apostolic teachings, or at least there are no extant epistles; yet it has been revealed to the inner consciousness of the Church. Inaccessible to the view of those outside the Church, the glory of the Theotokos’ dormition can be contemplated only in the inner light of Tradition. The glorification of the Virgin-Mother is a result of the voluntary condescension of the Son Who- is incarnate of her and made “Son of Man,” capable of dying. The Mother of God is now established beyond the general resurrection and the last judgment, having passed from death to life, from time to eternity, from a terrestrial condition to celestial beatitude. Hence, the feast of August 15th is a second mysterious Pascha, since the Church celebrates, before the end of time, the secret firstfruits of its eschatological consummation.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, p. 164.

¹⁹² August 15th, Orthros Sessional Hymn, Mode Three.

¹⁹³ M. Charitos, *The Repose*; Preface; “The Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God,” *Orthodox Word*, p. 105.

¹⁹⁴ “The Life and Struggles of Our Holy Father Among the Saints, Juvenal, Patriarch of Jerusalem,” s.v. “July 2nd” in *The Lives of the Saints of the Holy Land and the Sinai Desert*, trans. by Holy Apostles Convent (Buena Vista, CO: Holy Apostles Convent Publications, 1988), 286.

¹⁹⁵ Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. by G.E.H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983, repr.), 213.

O marvellous wonder! The source of life is laid in the tomb, and the tomb itself becomes a ladder to heaven. Thy glory is full of majesty, shining with grace in divine brightness,¹⁹⁶



*The Translation of the Theotokos,
and the Apostle Thomas receiving her cincture*

The Theotokos is Bodily Translated on the Third Day The holy Apostle Thomas

While Thomas was enlightening the lands of India by preaching the Gospel, the honored dormition of the Mother of God took place. All the apostles had been caught up from various lands on the clouds of heaven, and were transported to Gethsemane, to the bier of the all-blessed Virgin. By ¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ August 15th, Vespers Sticheron, Mode One.

God's special arrangement, Thomas was not brought hither. This was permitted by the will of God, that the faithful might be assured that the Mother of God was bodily translated into the heavens. For just as they were more greatly assured of the resurrection of Christ through the disbelief of Thomas, so did they learn of the bodily translation into the heavens of the all-pure Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, through the delay of Thomas.¹⁹⁷



*The Apostle Thomas receives the cincture
and joins the other apostles*

On the third day after the burial, Thomas was suddenly caught up in a cloud in India. He was transported to a place in the air above the tomb of the

¹⁹⁷ See the Life of Saint Thomas, who is commemorated by the holy Church on the 6th of October.

Virgin. From that vantage point, he beheld the translation of her body into the heavens, and cried out to her, “Whither goest thou, O all-holy one?” And, removing her cincture, she gave it to Thomas, saying, “Receive this, my friend.” And then she was gone.¹⁹⁸

Thereafter, he descended to find the other disciples keeping watch over the sepulcher of the Theotokos. He sat down beside them, with the cincture in his hand, greatly saddened that he had not been there when she reposed, as had been the other apostles. Hence, he said, “We are all disciples of the Master. We all preach the same thing. We are all servants of one Lord, Jesus Christ. How, then, is it that you were counted worthy to behold the repose of His Mother, and I was not? Am I not an apostle? Can it be that God is not pleased with my preaching? I beseech you, my fellow disciples. Open the tomb, that I also may look upon her remains, and embrace them, and bid her farewell!”

Taking pity on him, the apostles then did as Thomas requested and opened the tomb that he might at least behold and venerate the sacred relics. The holy apostles then rolled away the stone and opened the tomb. All were aghast when they discovered that her remains had vanished, not realizing that just moments before she had been bodily transported to Paradise. All that remained were the burial clothes, which emitted a wonderful fragrance. Thus they stood in amazement and then each of them kissed the burial clothes which were lying in the tomb. They then prayed to the Lord that He would reveal to them where the body of the Theotokos had been transported.¹⁹⁹



The Theotokos is brought to the tomb.

Three days later the tomb is found empty.

¹⁹⁸ “Dormition of the Theotokos,” *The Great Synaxaristes*, pp. 242, 243. Note: The Holy Monastery of Vatopedi, the second largest on the Holy Mountain, possesses a gem-inlaid jewel box containing the precious treasure of the Virgin’s holy cincture.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, p. 15.

Saint Gregory Palamas comments that “it was right, therefore, that the body which brought forth the Son should be glorified with Him in divine glory,



The tomb is found empty

world, and is venerated, revered, and hymned by all the faithful.

“It is as though God wanted to set up an icon of everything good and, in so doing, to display His own image clearly to angels and men; and thus He made her so truly beautiful.²⁰¹ Bringing together all the various means He had used to adorn all creation, He made her a world of everything good, both visible and invisible. Or rather, he revealed her as the synthesis of divine, angelic, and human loveliness, a nobler beauty to embellish both worlds, originating from earth but reaching up, through her ascension now from the tomb to heaven, to the heavens and beyond. She united things below with things above. She embraces the whole of creation with the wonders surrounding her. The fact that she tasted death meant she was a little lower than the angels, as I mentioned earlier, but this only increases the universal excellence of the Mother of God. That is why all things rightly join together to rejoice at the celebration today of this event.

“It is fitting that she, who held Him Who fills all things and is above all things, should herself outstrip all, and become higher than all in her virtues and great honor. She embraces in their entirety the virtues which, distributed

²⁰⁰ Saint Gregory Palamas, *P.G.* 151:4650.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, *P.G.* 151:468AB.

among the noblest of every age, were sufficient to make them great, and the various gifts with which angels and men have individually been favored by God, and perfects them all in herself alone with inexpressible excellence. Also, she is superior to everyone in that after death she became immortal, and she alone lives in her body with her Son and God in heaven.²⁰² Thence, she pours down grace on those who honor her and bestows on them the possibility of reaching up to her, the receptacle of such great gifts, who lavishes the highest benefits upon us in her goodness....She is a living icon of all goodness and kindness. She is so much closer to God than others who draw near to Him that she is able to intercede more powerfully than any of them, and by this I mean not just humans but even all the ranks of angels....She is more brilliant than light....It is fitting that she stands not just beside God, but on His right. For where Christ sat in heaven, namely, on the right of the Majesty in high places, there she now stands, having ascended from earth to heaven. Nor is this solely because no one longs for Christ as she does, and no one is so longed for in return, which would be in accordance with the laws of nature, but because she is truly His throne; and where the King sits, there stands the throne.”²⁰³ ²⁰⁴

The cincture of the Virgin

Now let us speak about the significance of the keepsake that the Theotokos entrusted with the Apostle Thomas. In biblical times, the cincture or girdle was made of leather or cloth. It is significant that the Virgin left her cloth cincture to the Apostle Thomas and, subsequently, to the Church. The girdle, placed around the middle and the loins, wherein is the seat of desire, signifies the mortification of carnal desires. We know that the immaculate Virgin-Mother subdued the passions. We chant during the service of the Deposition of the Cincture of the Theotokos (commemorated on the 3P^c of August) that *thy cincture as the garment of thy virginity and bridehood, is truly shown to be a most honorable wedding chamber, O Theotokos.*²⁰⁴ Saint Joseph the Hymnographer (ca. 812-886) understood that the precious relic of the Virgin’s cincture or belt was left to us as a surety of her mediation and assistance to Orthodox smugglers for purity and chastity. Hence, he chants: *The heart is renewed which touches the sacred cincture of the Virgin with fervent faith, for it is girded about with invincible power against impure*

²⁰² Ibid., P.G. 151:468D.

²⁰³ Saint Gregory Palamas, “Horn. 37, on the Most Venerable Dormition of Our Exceedingly Pure Lady, Mother of God and Ever-virgin Mary,” *The Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas*, Vol. 2, ed. by Christopher Veniamin (South Canaan, PA: Saint Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2004), pp. 175-178. See also “Homily on the Dormition,” *Orthodox Life* 32, No. 4 (July-August 1982): loc. cit.

²⁰⁴ August 31st, Orthros Canon, Ode Nine, Mode Four.

*passions and remains unscathed by incorporeal foes,*²⁰⁵ Thus, it is meaningful when, in the taking of the Great Angelic Habit, the candidate receives the girdle and is told to “gird his loins with the power of truth, for mortification of body and renewal of spirit, and for courage and caution, in fulfillment of Christ’s commandment.”²⁰⁶



Detail of the Dormition

The Queen goes to dwell with her Son and to rule with Him forever²⁰⁷

It is noteworthy that the zealous pastor, Saint Gregory of Tours (538-594), in his *Book of Miracles*, testifies to his belief in the dormition of the Virgin—the first of its kind in the west: “Finally when blessed Mary having completed the course of this life, and was to be called from the world, all the apostles gathered to her house from their different regions. And when they had heard that she was to be taken from the world, together they kept watch with her. And lo, the Lord Jesus came with His angels! Taking her soul, He gave it to the Archangel Michael and withdrew. At dawn the apostles raised her body with a pallet and they placed it in a vault and they guarded it awaiting the

²⁰⁵ August 31st, Orthros Canon, Ode Three, Mode Plagal Four.

²⁰⁶ N. F. Robinson, *Monasticism in the Orthodox Churches* (NY: American Review of Eastern Orthodoxy, 1964), pp. 136, 168.

²⁰⁷ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Seven, Mode Four, by Saint John of Damascus.

coming of the Lord. And lo, a second time the Lord stood by them! He ordered the holy body to be taken and borne aloft to Paradise. There, having rejoined the soul, she is exultant with His elect, enjoying the good things of eternity which shall know no end.”²⁰⁸ Again, using the imagery of the Apocrypha, Saint Gregory of Tours speaks of Mary’s body being “taken up and borne on a cloud into Paradise where, now, reunited with her soul and rejoicing with the elect, she enjoys the good things of eternity which shall never come to an end.”²⁰⁹

Saint Joseph the Hymnographer, confirming her bodily translation, writes that *thy tomb declared that thou wast buried, and it now openly shows that thou hast been bodily borne to the heavens.*²¹⁰ Saint Kosmas, also speaking of her bodily translation, writes: *The Lord and God of all gave thee as thy portion the things that are above nature. For just as He kept thee virgin in thy childbirth, so did He preserve thy body incorrupt in the tomb; and He glorified thee by a divine translation, showing thee honor as a son to his mother.*²¹¹

The great doctor of the dormition, Saint John of Damascus, writes: “‘But even though, according to nature, thy most holy and happy soul is separated from thy most blessed and stainless body, and the body as usual is delivered to the tomb, yet it will not remain in the power of death and is not subject to decay.’ For just as her virginity remained inviolate while giving birth, when she departed from life, her body was preserved from destruction.”²¹² Continuing, he writes: “It was fitting that she, who in childbirth had kept her virginity undamaged, should also, after death, keep her body free from all corruption.”²¹³ ²¹⁴ He then speaks of the benefit of her translation. *For Christ translates her, as His own Mother, into a dwelling far better and more divine, the Holy of Holies.*^{2TM}

In his first sermon on this feast, he asks, “O how does the source of life pass through death to life? O how can she obey the law of nature, who, in conceiving, surpasses the boundaries of nature? How is her spotless body made subject to death? In order to be clothed with immortality she must first put off mortality, since the Lord of nature did not reject the penalty of death. She dies according to the flesh, destroys death by death, and through corruption grants incorruption, and makes her death the source of resurrection. O how does almighty God receive with His own hands the holy disembodied

²⁰⁸ Saint Gregory of Tours, *Libri Miraculorum*, in *P.L.* 71:708.

²⁰⁹ *De gloria beatorum many rum*, 4, in *P.L.* 71:70B.

²¹⁰ Saint Joseph the Hymnographer, “Hymns,” *P. G.* 105:1001 A.

²¹¹ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Six, Mode One.

²¹² Saint John of Damascus, “Horn. I, On the Dormition,” *P.G.* 96:716B.

²¹³ Idem, “Horn. II, On the Dormition,” *P.G.* 96:741B.

²¹⁴ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Nine, Mode Four.

soul of our Lord's Mother! He honors her truly, whom being His servant by nature, He made His Mother, in His inscrutable abyss of mercy, when He became incarnate in very truth. We may well believe that the angelic choirs waited to receive thy departing soul. O what a blessed departure this going to God of thine! If God vouchsafes it to all His servants—and we know that He does—what an immense difference there is between His servants and His Mother. What, then, shall we call this mystery of thine? Death? Thy blessed soul is naturally parted from thy blissful and undefiled body, and the body is delivered to the grave, yet it does not endure in death, nor is it the prey of corruption. The body of her, whose virginity remained unspotted in childbirth, was preserved in its incorruption, and was taken to a better, diviner place, where death is not, but eternal life.

“Angels with archangels bear thee up. Impure spirits trembled at thy departure. The air raises a hymn of praise at thy passage, and the atmosphere is purified. Heaven receives thy soul with joy. The heavenly powers greet thee with sacred canticles and with joyous praise, saying, ‘Who is this most pure creature ascending, shining as the dawn, beautiful as the moon, conspicuous as the sun? How sweet and lovely thou art, the lily of the field, the rose among thorns; therefore the young maidens loved thee. We are drawn after the scent of thine ointments. The King introduced thee into His chamber.’ There powers protect thee, principalities praise thee, thrones proclaim thee, cherubim are hushed in joy, and seraphim magnify the true Mother by nature and by grace of their very Lord. Thou wert not taken into heaven as Elias was, nor didst thou penetrate to the third heaven with Paul, but thou didst reach the royal throne itself of thy Son, seeing it with thine own eyes, standing by it in joy and unspeakable familiarity. O gladness of angels and of all heavenly powers, sweetness of patriarchs and of the just, perpetual exultation of prophets, rejoicing the world and sanctifying all things, refreshment of the weary, comfort of the sorrowful, remission of sins, health of the sick, harbor of the storm-tossed, lasting strength of mourners, and perpetual succor of all who invoke thee.”²¹³

Saint John declares that her “tomb is more precious than the tabernacle of old, receiving the real and life-giving receptacle of the Lord, the heavenly table, not the loaves (showbread), but of heaven, not material fire, but her who contained the pure fire of the Divinity. This tomb is holier than the ark of Moses, blessed not with types and shadows, but the truth itself. It showed forth the pure and golden urn, containing the heavenly manna, the living tablet,

²¹³ Saint John of Damascus, “Sermon 1, on the Dormition of the Virgin,” trans. by Mary H. Allies (London: Thomas Baker, 1898). See online at [www.http://www.balamand.edu.lb/theology/Jodorm.htm](http://www.balamand.edu.lb/theology/Jodorm.htm).

receiving the incarnate Logos of God from the impress of the Holy Spirit, the golden censer of the supersubstantial Logos. It showed forth her who conceived the divine fire embalming all creation....So it was necessary that what was made of earth should return to earth, and thus be assumed to heaven. It was fitting that the earthly tenement should be cast off, as gold is purified, so that the flesh in death might become pure and immortal, and rise in shining immortality from the tomb. Today she begins her second life through Him Who was the cause of her first being.”²¹⁶

Saint Modestos of Jerusalem (d. 634), confirming her everlasting bodily incorruptibility, writes: “As the most glorious Mother of Christ, our Savior and God Who is the Giver of Life and immortality, she has been endowed with life by Him. She has received an everlasting incorruptibility of the body, together with Him Who has raised her up from the tomb, and has taken her up to Himself in a way known only to Him.”²¹⁷

Saint Neophytos the Recluse (1134-1220), also, speaks of her bodily translation, writing: “That pure and holy body, placed by the apostles in the sacred place of Gethsemane, was borne to the God of the apostles and delighted in those things which ‘eye hath not seen, and ear hath not heard, and neither hath it entered into the heart of man [1 Cor. 2:9].”²¹⁸

Under the presidency of the great Patriarch Dositheos, a statement was made at the Synod of Jerusalem, in 1672, that “though the immaculate body of Mary was locked in a tomb, yet, like Christ, she was assumed and translated into the heavens on the third day.”²¹⁹

After the Dormition: She entreats Him without ceasing to grant the inhabited earth peace and great mercy

In describing her rank and authority in the heavenly realms, let us listen to the following hymn. *By thy deathless dormition, thou hast sanctified the whole world. Thou hast been translated to the places above the world, there to perceive the beauty of the Almighty and, as His Mother, to rejoice in it exceedingly. Thou art attended by ranks of angels, O pure Virgin, and by the souls of the just.*²²⁰

Saint John of Damascus describes the conduct of the heavenly host at her translation. *At thy translation, O Mother of God, the angelic hosts, in fear*

²¹⁶ Idem, “Sermon 3, on the Dormition of the Virgin,” at <http://www.balamand.edu.lb/theology/Jodorm.htm>.

²¹⁷ Saint Modestos, “Encomium on the Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary,” *P.G.* 86(B):3278-3312.

²¹⁸ *Marianum* 36 (Rome, 1974), 282.

²¹⁹ Rev. Michael Azkoul, *The Teachings of the Holy Orthodox Church* (Buena Vista, CO: Dormition Skete Publications, 1986), f.n. 35.

²²⁰ August IS*, Small Vespers Sticheron, Mode Two.

and joy, with their holy wings covered thy body, that had been spacious enough to harbor the Divinity.²²¹ Elsewhere, we sing: Seized with dread, they (the powers of heaven) accompanied thine inviolate body that had held God, and they went on high before thee, crying, unseen, to the hierarchies above, “Lo, the Queen of all, the Maiden of God, is nigh!”²²²



Church of the Dormition, Jerusalem be, what joy of applauding angels when she is found wor-

thy of dwelling in heaven who lived on earth a heavenly life! Then, too, Miriam (the sister of Moses and Aaron), taking up her timbrel, shall stir up choirs of virgins singing to the Lord, because they have passed through the sea of this world, without suffering from the waves of this world.²²⁴ Then each shall rejoice, saying, ‘I shall go in unto the altar of God, unto God Who giveth gladness to my youth [Ps. 42:4]’; and, ‘Sacrifice unto God a sacrifice of praise, and pay unto the Most High thy vows [Ps. 49:14],’²²⁵

Our Lady’s role in heaven, as it was on earth, is intercessory. The kontakion of the feast, today, speaks of her as an unfailing hope and mediation. *The grave and death could not hold the Theotokos, who is sleepless in her intercessions and an unfailing hope in her mediations. For as the Mother of Life, she was translated unto life, by Him Who dwelt in her ever virgin womb.*²²⁶

Saint John of Damascus comments upon the victory she has obtained for us. “Through her, our reconciliation with God has been consecrated, and peace and grace have been bestowed;... she has won for us all good things.”²²⁷ And, “Thus thou art also the fountain of true light, the inexhaustible treasury

²²¹ August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Four, Mode Four.

²²² August 15th, Vespers Doxastikon, Mode Plagal Two.

²²³ *Can. 4, 5, apud E. Follieri*, 109.

²²⁴ Ex. 15:20.

²²⁵ Saint Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins*, Book II, Ch. 2, Nicene, 2nd Ser., X:376.

²²⁶ August 15th, Kontakion of the Feast of the Dormition, Mode Two.

²²⁷ Saint John of Damascus, “Horn. II, On the Dormition,” *P. G.* 96:744C.

of life itself, the most fruitful source of blessing, who has won for us and brought us all good things—though for a while thou wast covered corporeally with death. Nonetheless, thou dost pour out pure and inexhaustible streams of immense light, immortal life and true happiness, rivers of grace, fountains of healing, and everlasting blessing.”²²⁸

Thus, *From all generations we call thee blessed, O Virgin Theotokos. . .Blessed also are we in having thee as our succor: for day and night thou dost intercede for us, and the scepters of kings are strengthened by thy supplications,*²²⁹

Saint Andrew of Crete associates great things with Mary, writing: “Blessed in heaven, and glorified on earth, every tongue piously and with grateful sentiment preaches thee, glorifying thee as the Mother of Life. Every creature is filled with thy glory. All things have been made holy by the odour of thy fragrance; through thee the occasion of sin has been abolished; the woes of the first parent have been transformed into joy. Through thee all the angels sing with us, ‘Glory in heaven; peace on earth.’ ”²³⁰ And, “Mary is the first of the divinely re-created, to enter the kingdom of the heavens standing at the right hand. She enters because she is the Church, the divinized body of Christ. If she were not welcomed before the throne of God, body and soul, then neither could those identified with her as children to their ‘virginal’ Mother stand before Him in the age to come. What has been done for the saved in the age to come has been accomplished in the Theotokos. She has passed into the ‘Church Triumphant.’ Thus, now she is beyond death, beyond the resurrection, and beyond the last judgment.”

The custom of the “Panagia”

The Virgin also appeared to the holy apostles after her repose, as did her Son. After the ascension of our Lord, whenever the apostles shared a meal together, it was their custom to leave a place at their table for the Master Christ.

Now after her bodily disappearance from the tomb, it was toward evening and they sat down in order to refresh themselves with a little food. As was their custom, they would cut a cube of bread and place it at the head of the table as Christ’s portion. And when they finished the meal and offering thanks, they would elevate this portion, proclaiming, “Great is the name of the Holy Trinity! O Lord Jesus Christ, help us!” And each would partake of a small

²²⁸ Saint John of Damascus, “Horn. I, On the Dormition,” *P. G.* 96:716C.

²²⁹ August 15th, Orthros Hypakoe, Mode Plagal One.

²³⁰ Saint Andrew of Crete, “Horn. III, Oration 14, on the Dormition,” *P.G.* 97:1100.

piece thereof as a blessing.²³¹ This custom continued not only when they were together but even when they were far from one another.²³²

At this particular meal, however, they spoke and thought of nothing but of the Virgin's empty tomb. Now when they had finished eating and had come to the conclusion of their prayers, they again followed their custom of lifting up the portion of bread put aside to honor the Lord and glorify the Trinity. Suddenly, they heard angelic singing. Raising their eyes, they beheld standing, in the air, the Theotokos, who was surrounded by a multitude of angels. She was suffused with an ineffable light, and said to the apostles, "Rejoice, for I am with you all the days of your lives!"²³³ Indeed, she is not only with her Son's apostles, but she is also with all the faithful and devout Orthodox Christians of all the ages.

Upon seeing her, they were filled with joy and were crying aloud, "All-holy Mother of God, save us!" This is what they exclaimed instead of the usual, "Lord Jesus Christ, help us!" Thus they were all convinced that the Mother of God, like her Son, had risen on the third day and had been translated bodily into the heavens. Ever since then, a piece of bread has also been set aside in her name, hence the appellation, Panagia, or All-holy (one).²³⁴ Following this scene, the apostles returned to the tomb. Desiring a precious keepsake, they took the shroud for the consolation of the sorrowful and as authentic evidence of her rising from the tomb.²³⁵ Thus, they were convinced that the Mother of Life, although she died, yet she rose like her Son to eternal life; and that her body, having been raised, was lifted up to heaven by Jesus, her Son and the Savior of our souls.

Thus, in the pure Virgin, vanquished were the laws of nature. Her virginity was preserved in birthgiving, and life was united with death. And remaining a virgin after giving birth, and alive after death, she prays unceasingly, as our Mother, for her inheritance. Then, Peter, in fervent faith and abundant tears, exclaimed:

Rejoice, Mother of the Creator, ascending to the world on high!

Rejoice, thou who wast taken above the heavens, being more spacious than heaven!

Rejoice, thou who hast brought gladness unto the heavenly hosts with thy passage above!

Rejoice! thou who art received into the most splendid Jerusalem on high.

²³¹ "Dormition of the Theotokos," *The Great Synaxaristes*, p. 243.

²³² "The Assumption," Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.

²³³ Ibid., p. 16.

²³⁴ "Dormition of the Theotokos," *The Great Synaxaristes*, loc. cit.

²³⁵ "The Assumption," Holy Trinity Monastery, p. 16.

Rejoice, thou who art entering most joyfully the temples not made with hands!

Rejoice, Queen of the cherubim and seraphim!

Rejoice, refuge and deliverance of the faithful!

Rejoice, help and defense of thy heritage!

Rejoice, O intercessor unto God for all the Christian world!

Rejoice, O all-good bestower of all that is good!²²⁶

As we know, through divine providence, the Apostle Thomas was not present during the funeral procession. Having thoughts within himself, he also rejoiced in her dormition and translation, and cried out:

Rejoice, thou who wast taken from the earth in the hands of thy Son!

Rejoice, thou who didst ascend on high to enjoy His glory!

Rejoice, thou who wast escorted above by all the leaders of the angels!

Rejoice, thou who wast extolled with majestic hymns at the gates of heaven by the superior hosts!

Rejoice, O earthly heaven raised up unto the tabernacle on high!

Rejoice, O throne of the Lord, who ascended from earth into the heavenly kingdom!

Rejoice, O our intercessor and strong defense!

Rejoice, intercessor of sinners unto salvation!

Rejoice, Queen of those who call themselves by thy Son's name and, who, after God, art the hope of the heavenly kingdom!

Rejoice, Mother of Life who, after the Lord, art unto us hope of eternal life!²²¹

Then the same cloud, by which the apostles had been brought, carried them back each to his own place. Thus, they were *witnesses not only to the ascension of the Savior but also to the translation of her who gave Him birth.*^{236 237 238} Each apostle then continued preaching and telling the great things of God, and praising our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Rejoice, thou whose incorruptible body
is glorified together with the soul!**

From that time, the tradition of the holy Orthodox Church affirms the bodily translation of the Theotokos into the heavens on the third day after her burial. We observe two things from this occurrence: that it was not fitting that the Mother of Life should remain in the tomb and partake of corruption; and that the Lawgiver proved a doer of the law that children should honor their

²³⁶ "Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos in Honor of Her Dormition," *Orthodox Life* 34, No. 4 (July-August 1984): 19-27 (Ikos 2).

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, Ikos 3.

²³⁸ August 15th, Lity, Mode One.

parents. Hence, He bestowed upon His Mother the same honor as Himself. As He was raised on the third day in glory, thus He raised His Mother with glory on the third day and took her to Himself.²³⁹

Saint John of Damascus rejoices, saying, “The earth could not bear her divine body and dissolve it, as with other mortals. Nay, though necessary that it be delivered to death, yet, three days thereafter, her relics were delivered incorruptible into angelic hands. She becomes incorruptible, rises, and is translated to heaven. There, she stands before Her Son and God in a living body.”²⁴⁰ This same glorious Saint John also writes: “The Theotokos, today commences a second existence, which is the resurrection by Him Who gave her the commencement of the previous existence.” And again the same writes: “For thy soul was not forsaken in Hades, neither did thy flesh see corruption; nor was thine immaculate and pure body taken by the earth, but by heaven. The Queen, the Lady, the Mistress, the Birthgiver of God, the true Mother of God, is translated.”²⁴¹

Our holy God-bearing father, Germanos (ca. 635-733), Patriarch of Constantinople, in his encomium asserts: “How could the dissolution of the flesh turn thee to earth and dust, which through thy Son’s incarnation has delivered man from the corruption of death? Impossible... Thou didst become one of us, and thereupon wast unable to avoid the common human death, even as thy Son, and God of all, Who died on behalf of the human race, also tasted of the same death. He shall glorify thy tomb also in death....For the death-corrupting and dissolving earth could not contain thee, the God-containing vessel. Since the God Who emptied Himself in thee, was even from the beginning everlasting Life, it behooved Him to have the Mother of Life also the companion of Life. And as thou didst fall asleep on thy dormition, even so hast thou risen and been translated unto life.” He then continues saying that “she has filled Paradise with her glory and has her rest in the heavenly life. She is also the co-dweller of God in His contentment.”²⁴²

The defender of Orthodoxy, Saint Mark of Ephesus (1392-1444) chants in one of his odes: “For thou wast dead and art risen again, as the Lord’s Mother, to the assurance of the last resurrection whereunto we hope.” And again, “The Mother of Life welcomes death; and having been put in the grave, she arises forever gloriously on the third day, reigning with her Son, entreating the forgiveness of our faults.”²⁴³

²³⁹ “The Assumption,” Holy Trinity Monastery, loc. cit.

²⁴⁰ M. Charitos, *The Repose*, p. 9.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 15.

Nikephoros Theotokes (18th C.) also wrote that her body was awarded a great exception: “For it joined the soul before the common resurrection. It was translated from earth and ascended to the heavens incorruptible. Such a glory and exception was awarded only to the divine body of the God-Man Jesus. Such a glory, superior to all glories, was received by the Theotokos, so that she became incorruptible before the common resurrection. She became incorruptible before the time of incorruptibility. She was examined and glorified before the judgment. She received her recompense before the day of recompense. Finally, she was honored with prerogatives such as her Son’s.”²⁴⁴ Saint Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain (d. 1809) also agrees to this, saying, “Not only was she translated, but...her all-illuminating soul was again united to her body.”²⁴⁵

Saint Gregory Palamas believes also that Mary was bodily assumed, “for there was no need for her to remain on the earth, except for a short while, as did her Son and God for forty days. Therefore, she ascended immediately on the third day from the grave to the heavenly space.”²⁴⁶

The manifold gifts of grace which God lavished upon the Virgin Mary, before and after her childbearing, do not alter the fact that death, which came from Adam, could not be vanquished except in the body put on by the hypostasis of the Son of God.²⁴⁷ Saint Gregory recognizes the bodily glorification of the daughter of the righteous ones, Joachim and Anna, as a consequence of the divine maternity: “If a soul in which grace dwells rises to the sky when it has separated itself from things here below,...how could the body which received in itself the eternal and unique Son of God, the inexhaustible Source of grace, and which even gave birth thereto, fail to be lifted up from earth to heaven?”²⁴⁸

Saint Gregory Palamas affirms that “it is meet that the Mother of God now has her dwelling in heaven; for this is a suitable place for her. She now stands at the right hand of the King of all, ‘arrayed in a vesture of inwoven gold, adorned in varied colors [Ps. 44:8].’” He comments that the verse the vesture wrought with gold is to be understand that she is adorned with every virtue. She alone, in her body, glorified God and now enjoys the celestial domain with her Son, the King of all. From the supercelestial realm, she

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Saint Gregory Palamas, *P.G.* 151:468A.

²⁴⁷ John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, trans. from French by George Lawrence (London: Faith Press, 1964), 236.

²⁴⁸ Saint Gregory Palamas, *P.G.* 15L465C.

flashes forth radiant and divine illuminations and spiritual gifts upon the earth; thus is she rightly venerated and hymned by all the faithful.^{249 250}

Thus, we are correct to beseech her intercession for light and grace when we chant in the Dismissal Hymn for the Transfiguration of Christ on the 6th of August: *Shine forth Thou on us who are sinners all Thy light ever unending, through the prayers of the Theotokos, O Light-bestower, glory to Thee!*¹⁵⁰



*The Theotokos in Paradise,
flanked by the Archangels Gabriel [L.] and Michael [/?].*

Rejoice, for thy maternal entreaty moves God to relent!

Saint Gregory Palamas aptly glorifies the Virgin Theotokos when he writes that “she cooperated and suffered with that divine emptying (kenosis) and condescension in His incarnation, when He took the form of a servant.”²⁵¹ She also rightly is glorified and exalted together with Him... After her ascent into heaven, she rivaled her former great works that were through Him and that had surpassed mind and speech, by mighty and many-faceted labors through her prayers and her zealous and earnest attention for the world.”²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Saint Gregory Palamas, *P.G.* 151:465D.

²⁵⁰ August 6th, Dismissal Hymn, Grave Mode.

²⁵¹ Phil. 2:7.

²⁵² Saint Gregory Palamas, *P.G.* 151:464B.

And, Saint Gregory expounds further, saying, “In truth, many were vouchsafed divine favor, glory and power, however, Prophet David writes: ‘But to me, exceedingly honorable are Thy friends, O Lord; their principalities are made exceedingly strong. I will count them, and they shall be multiplied more than the sand; I awoke and am still with Thee [Ps. 138:16, 17].’ And according to Solomon: ‘Many daughters have obtained wealth, many have wrought valiantly; but thou hast exceeded, thou hast surpassed all [Prov. 31:29].’ For while she stood between God and the whole human race, God became the Son of Man and made men sons of God. She made earth heavenly. She divinized the human race. She alone of all women was shown forth to be a mother by nature and the Mother of God transcending every law of nature, and, by her ineffable childbirth, the Queen of all creation....Hence she has exalted them under her through herself. She partook of a more excellent power because, while on earth, she hearkened and obeyed heavenly things rather than things earthly. By the divine Spirit, she received ordination from out of the heavens and became the most sublime of the sublime and the blessed Queen of a blessed race.”²⁵³

Saint John Maximovitch (1896-1966) comments in his Orthodox treatise on her veneration that “the end of the earthly life of the Theotokos was the beginning of her greatness. Being adorned with divine glory, she stands and will stand, both in the day of the last judgment and in the future age, at the right hand of the throne of her Son. She reigns with Him and has boldness toward Him as His Mother, according to the flesh. She is one in spirit with Him—as one who performed the will of God and instructed others.²⁵⁴ Merciful and full of love, she manifests her love toward her Son and God in love for the human race, which she intercedes for before the merciful One. Going about the earth, she helps men, as one having experienced all the difficulties of earthly life. She sees every tear, and hears every groan and entreaty directed to her. Especially near to her are those who labor in the battle with the passions and are zealous for a God-pleasing life.”²⁵⁵

Through the Theotokos alone did the Lord come to us and appear and live on earth among men, being invisible to all before this time. The Virgin Mother is incomparably superior to all. “Likewise,” says Saint Gregory Palamas, “in the endless age to come, without her mediation, every emanation of illuminating divine light, every revelation of the mysteries of the Divinity, every form of spiritual gift, will exceed the capacity of every created being.

²⁵³ Saint Gregory Palamas, *P.G.* 151:464D-465.

²⁵⁴ Mt. 5:19.

²⁵⁵ Blessed Archbishop John Maximovitch, *The Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, p. 53.

However, she alone has received the all-pervading fullness of Him that fills all things. Through her, all may now attain it, for she dispenses it according to the power of each, in proportion and to the degree of the purity of each. Thus, she is the treasury and presides over the riches of the Divinity.”²⁵⁶

Saint Gregory then finishes his *Homily on the Dormition*, thus: “It is through her that as many as partake of God do partake, and as many as know God understand her to be the enclosure of the uncontainable One, and as many as hymn God hymn her together with Him. She is the cause of what preceded her, the protectress of what came after her, and the patroness of things eternal. She is the subject of the prophets, the chief (*archee*) of the apostles, the steadfast base of the martyrs, and the foundation (*kreepis*) of teachers. She is the glory of the earthborn, the sweetness of the heavenly beings, and the adornment of all creation. She is the beginning and the fountain and the root of all those ineffable good things. She is the summit (*koreefee*) and consummation of all that is holy.”^{257 258}

Rejoice, O joyful one, who in thy dormition has not forsaken us!

Together then with Saint Theophanes the Poet, let us chant, *Forget not, O Lady, thy ties of kinship with those who commemorate in faith the Feast of thine all-holy Dormition*TM

Saint John of Damascus, in his second sermon, sums up this momentous day: “Today the spotless Virgin, untouched by earthly affections, and all heavenly in her thoughts, was not dissolved in earth, but truly entering heaven, dwells in the heavenly tabernacles. Who would be wrong to call her heaven? She meets death without fear, who conceived death’s destroyer, if indeed we may call her holy and vivifying departure by the name of death. For how could she, who brought life to all, be under the dominion of death? But she obeys the law of her own Son, and inherits this chastisement as a daughter of the first Adam, since her Son, Who is the Life, did not refuse it. As the Mother of the living God, she goes through death to Him. For if God said, ‘Behold, Adam hath become as one of Us, to know good and evil; and now lest at any time he should stretch forth his hand and take of the tree of the life and eat, even he will live unto the age [Gen. 3:22],’ how shall she, who received the Life Himself, without beginning or end, or finite vicissitudes, not live forever?

“Of old the Lord God banished from the garden of Eden our first parents after their disobedience, when they had dulled the eye of their heart through their sin, and weakened their mind’s discernment, and had fallen into deathlike apathy. But, now, shall not Paradise receive her, who broke the

²⁵⁶ Saint Gregory Palamas, *P. G.* 151:472D.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, *P. G.* 151:472D-473.

²⁵⁸ August 15th, Lity Doxastikon, Mode Plagal One.

bondage of all passion, sowed the seed of obedience to God and the Father, and was the beginning of life to the whole human race? Will not heaven open its gates to her with rejoicing? Yes, indeed. Eve listened to the serpent, adopted his suggestion, was caught by the lure of false and deceptive pleasure, and was condemned to pain and sorrow, and to bear children in suffering. With Adam she received the sentence of death, and was placed in the recesses of Hades. How can death claim as its prey this truly blessed one, who listened to God's word in humility, and was filled with the Spirit, conceiving the Father's gift through the archangel, bearing without concupiscence or the cooperation of man the Person of the divine Logos, Who fills all things, bringing Him forth, without the pains of childbirth, being wholly united to God? How could Hades open its gates to her? How could corruption touch the life-giving body? These are things quite foreign to the soul and body of God's Mother. Death trembled before her. In approaching her Son, Death had gained and had grown wiser. The gloomy descent to Hades was not for her, but a joyous, easy, and sweet passage to heaven.

"Then Adam and Eve, our first parents, opened their lips to exclaim, 'Thou blessed daughter of ours, who hast removed the penalty of our disobedience! Thou, inheriting from us a mortal body, hast won us immortality. Thou, taking thy being from us, hast given us back the being in grace. Thou hast conquered pain and loosened the bondage of death. Thou hast restored us to our former state. We had shut the door of Paradise; thou didst find entrance to the tree of life. Through us sorrow came out of good; through thee good from sorrow. How canst thou who art all fair taste of death? Thou art the gate of life and the ladder to heaven. Death is become the passage to immortality. O thou truly blessed one!'"

"All the company of the saints exclaimed at her ascension, 'Thou hast fulfilled our predictions. Thou hast purchased our present joy for us. Through thee we have broken the chains of death. Come to us, divine and life-giving receptacle. Come, our desire, thou who hast gained us our Desire.'"²⁵⁹

Appendix I: Mary Theotokos and the Church

From what we have previously read, we see that the Virgin Mary is more than an example of piety. She is more than a saint. She is "All-holy," "Ever-virgin," and "Mother of God." She is the Church's greatest theologian. She is the one human—body and soul resurrected, united divinized person who is "more honorable than the cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than

²⁵⁹ Saint John of Damascus, "Sermon 2, on the Dormition of the Virgin," at <http://www.balamand.edu.lb/theology/Jodorm.htm>.

the seraphim.” “In her,” writes Saint John of Damascus “the whole mystery of the divine economy” is personified.^{260 261}

As we have seen, the Scriptures say more about the Theotokos than most people perceive, albeit, in a hidden manner, revealed only to the faithful through holy tradition and the writings of the holy fathers. If a general silence about her in the early Church ensued, it was intentional, to avoid comparisons with the pagan religions which provide anti-typical divine mother and child similarities, such as the Egyptian Isis and Serapis or the Oriental Cybele and Attis. Only later, during the fourth and fifth centuries, did circumstances demand an elucidation of the Virgin Mary’s role in the plan of salvation.

Since Mary Theotokos is one flesh with her divine Son, she is, therefore, necessarily the Mother of those baptized into His body, the Church. Not without purpose does Saint Epiphanius of Cyprus (ca. 315-403) write that she is “the holy Jerusalem, Virgin of Christ, His Bride”; for what is granted in the flesh to the Virgin is granted spiritually to the Church. Let us see how, in the writings of the holy fathers, the Theotokos is, among other things, portrayed as the Church. For as Saint Andrew of Crete chants, *She is the living city of the King and God, in which Christ has dwelt, and worked our salvation.*¹⁶¹

Saint Kyril of Alexandria (d. 444), in his famous litany of praise spoken after the Ephesian Synod, where he was a dominant figure, concludes with these words: “Let us give glory to Mary, ever-virgin, that is to the holy Church, and her Son and immaculate Spouse; to Him be glory forever and ever.”²⁶²

Clement of Alexandria (d. before 215) points to the Mary-Church parallel, saying, “O mysterious wonder! There is only one Father of all, only one Logos of all, and the Holy Spirit is also one and He is everywhere. There is but one Virgin Mother. I like to call her the Church... She is both virgin and mother—immaculate as a virgin and loving as a mother. She calls her children and feeds them with holy milk: the Logos, a child.”²⁶³

Therefore, in giving birth to the body of Christ, Mary gave birth to the Church, the unity of all them that are incorporated into Christ. She is the progenitress of the Christian race, that is, the historical Church which is forever united to divinity.

²⁶⁰ Idem, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Bk. III, Ch. XII, Nicene, 2nd Ser., IX.

²⁶¹ December 25th, Orthros Praises, Mode Four.

²⁶² Saint Kyril of Alexandria, *P.G.* 77:996C.

²⁶³ *Paedag.* I, 6, 21, in *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1897), 12, 115; Clement of Alexandria, *P.G.* 8:300, 301.

Saint Ildefonsus (d. 667), Archbishop of Toledo, affirms that “the form of our Mother the Church is according to the form of the Lord’s Mother.”²⁶⁴ The mysteries of the Virgin’s life are daily renewed in the Church; for, as one wedded, she is at the same time immaculate. As a virgin, she conceives us by the Spirit—yet brings us forth without pain, so the venerable Bede (ca. 673-735) was to write.²⁶⁵ The influence of Saint Ambrose is also evident here. “Mary is truly espoused but a virgin, because she is a type of the Church which is immaculate but wedded.” And, “What was prophesied of Mary was as a type of the Church.”²⁶⁶ In another place, he writes: “How beautiful are those things which have been prophesied of Mary under the figure of the Church.”²⁶⁷ In other words, she is the Church because she is the Mother of Christ, even as she is Mother to all Orthodox, His “brethren.”

Since Mary Theotokos is the Church, the perpetual virginity of Mary also signifies the “perpetual virginity” of the Church, that is, her (the Church’s) inviolate fidelity to Christ. Deny the one, and one must deny the other. The Church and the Theotokos stand together. Ecclesiology and Mariology safeguard each other. Thus, too, the Orthodox Church insists upon the “all-holiness” of the Virgin Mary, for the same reason that she speaks of the Church as “holy.” She is Panagia or “All-holy,” because she is the Church.

The types of the Virgin are everywhere associated with the types of the Church. It may seem strange that she, the Virgin, is sometimes cast in the role of Mother, Sister, Daughter, Bride, and Child of Christ—but those are the relationships found in old Israel between God and His people. This explains why the Church (the Virgin), the new Israel, is depicted as the “Bride of Christ” while, at the same time, His body.

Saint Paulinus (353-431), Bishop of Nola (near Naples) writes: “What a great mystery was this, by which the Church became wedded to Christ and became at once the Lord’s bride and His sister! The bride with the status of spouse is a sister... .So she continues as Mother through the seed of the eternal Word, alike conceiving and bringing forth nations. She is sister and spouse because her intercourse is not physical but mental, and her Husband is not man but God. The children of this Mother comprise equally old and infants; this offspring has no age or sex. For this is the blessed progeny of God which springs from no human seed but from a heavenly race.

²⁶⁴ Saint Ildefonsus, “In Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” VIII, *P.L.* 96:269D.

²⁶⁵ In *Lucan II*, in *Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina, Turnhout (1953), 120, pp. 48, 49.

²⁶⁶ Saint Ambrose, *Luc. II*, 7, *P.L.* 15:555; *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (Vienna, 1866), 32-IV, p. 45.

²⁶⁷ Idem, *On the Institution of Virginity*, XIV, 89, *P.L.* 16:326A.



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“This is why the teacher Paul says that ‘there is neither male and female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus [Gal. 3:28],’ and ‘there is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye also were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism [Eph. 4:4, 5].’ For all of us who acknowledge Christ as head of our body are one body, the Church,²⁶⁸ and are all Christ’s ‘members severally [1 Cor. 12:27].’ Because we have now all put on Christ and stripped off Adam, we are at once advancing toward the shape of angels. Hence, for all born in Baptism, there is the one task: both sexes must come ‘to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of the Christ [Eph. 4:13].’ Christ is given to be ‘the head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him Who filleth all things in all [Eph. 1:22, 23].’ He must be our common head, our King Who hands over His limbs to the Father in the kingdom. Once all are endowed with immortal bodies, the frail condition of human lives forgoes marriage between men and women; ‘for in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven [Mt. 22:30],’”²⁶⁹

²⁵⁸ Col. 1:18.

²⁶⁹ Saint Paulinus of Nola, “Poem 25,” *Ancient Christian Writers*, 40:250, 251.

Appendix II. The Theotokos as Mediatrix

“Thy name, O Mary, is a precious ointment, which breathes forth the fragrance of divine grace. Let this ointment of salvation enter the innermost recesses of our souls”—so entreats Saint Ambrose.^{270 271}

What then of Mary Theotokos as Mediatrix? What is the significance of Orthodox Christians chanting hymns such as the following from the *Paracletike*: *Unto thee do I ever ascribe my salvation; in thee do I hope to be saved, O all-holy Virgin. Do thou, therefore, snatch me out of every harm, corruption, passion, and unexpected evil*²⁷¹ The answer arises from the life and practise of the Church, for historical evidence will be found in the inspired writings, hymns, and iconography of Orthodoxy. All the saints held the common truths of the Faith about the Theotokos and cherished devotion toward her. In each case, greater or less emphasis arises from temperament, character, vocation, and circumstance. Yet, there was always a universal consciousness of her personality and power.

A mediator or mediatrix, in religion, is one who acts as an intermediary between God and man. Christ is the perfect Mediator as the Son of God and true Man, for He partakes of both natures. Saint John Chrysostom comments that “Christ would no longer be a mediator, if He were connected with one (nature) but separated from the other.”²⁷²

However, Christ also works and rests in His saints, thus, vouchsafing them the role of mediator or mediatrix. Therefore, when we read the words of Saint Paul that “there is one God, and one (*eis*) Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, Who gave Himself a ransom for all [1 Tim. 2:5, 6],” we understand the use of the word “one” as emphasizing our Savior’s transcendence as a Mediator. The word “one” was translated from the Greek word *eis* meaning the numeral “one,” and not *monos* meaning “only” or “alone.” We also must understand the context of this verse by the apostle’s verses preceding it. Saint John Chrysostom remarks that the divine Paul is referring to the salvation of the heathen,²⁷³ when he wrote: “(God, our Savior), Who willeth all men to be saved and to come to a full knowledge of the truth [1 Tim. 2:3, 4].” Hence, when the apostle is speaking of the perfect Mediator, he is referring to the unique value of Christ’s redemptive death. Christ, since He is true God and true Man, is the only ransom for the Jew and Gentile alike. Saint Peter, also referring to Christ’s relationship with the uninitiated, says that

²⁷⁰ J. Adels, *The Wisdom of the Saints*, p. 20.

²⁷¹ *Paracletike*, Thursday Vespers Sticheron, Mode One.

²⁷² Saint John Chrysostom, “Horn. VII,” *Galatians*, Nicene, 1st Ser., XIII:430.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

“neither is there another name under the heaven which hath been given among men in which it is necessary for us to be saved [Acts 4:12].”

Therefore, the practise of addressing the Theotokos as a mediatrix or the saints as intercessors, need not be impeded by either text, since their relationship is to those of the Church. Hence, throughout Church history, to Mary Theotokos, the word mediatrix or *mesitevsasa* (in Latin translations, mediatrix) will be used. Thus, we chant to the Virgin-Mother: *We praise thee, the Mediatrix for the salvation of our race, O Virgin Theotokos; for thy Son and our God hath deigned to endure the Passion in the flesh taken from thee, and hath redeemed us from corruption, since He is the Friend of man.*^{11*}

O Mistress of creation, make entreaty unto the One born of thee!

How do the holy Fathers of the Church perceive the Theotokos as an intercessor? We shall examine, chronologically and briefly, a few of their writings.

The first one thousand years after Christ

Saint Irenaeos (ca. 130-ca. 200), in a highly rhetorical passage, writes also that the Virgin Mary had become the patroness or advocate (*advocata*) of the virgin Eve.^{274 275} “For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the Virgin Mary set free through faith.”²⁷⁶

The corpus of Mariology is substantial in the works of Saint Ambrose. Studying the Greek fathers, he saw the link between the incarnation and redemption when he wrote: “Alone Mary has worked the salvation of the world and conceived the redemption of all.”²⁷⁷ Through her, “salvation was given to all.”²⁷⁸ Saint Ambrose also attributes to Mary a share in the overthrow of Satan’s power, saying, “Mary, who gave birth to the Victor, has defeated thee (Satan). Without her virginity being lessened, she brought forth Him Who, when crucified, would defeat thee and, when dead, would bring thee into subjection. Thou art conquered today so that the woman should defeat his attacks.”²⁷⁹

By the fourth century the Eve-Mary doctrine was expressed by the great biblical scholar, Saint Jerome (347-420) thus: “Death through Eve, life through Mary.”²⁸⁰ The use of the preposition “through,” in all languages hereafter, will always have some reference to a mediating role.

²⁷⁴ *Octoechos*, Resurrection Theotokion, Mode Three.

²⁷⁵ Saint Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Bk. VI, Ch. 19(1), Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:547.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk. III, Ch. 22(4), Ante-Nicene, 1:455.

²⁷⁷ Saint Ambrose, “Ep. 49,” 2, *P.L.* 16:1154.

²⁷⁸ *Idem*, “Ep. 63,” 33, *P.L.* 16:1198.

²⁷⁹ *Idem*, *De Obitu Theo.*, 44, *P.L.* 16:1400.

²⁸⁰ Saint Jerome, “Ep. 22,” 21, *P.L.* 22:408.

In the greatest Marian sermon of antiquity, the preeminent father of the Church, Saint Kyril of Alexandria, related the mediation of the Virgin to her office as Mother of God and her relationship with the most Holy Trinity. “Rejoice, Mary Theotokos, venerable treasure of the whole world, light unextinguished, crown of virginity, scepter of Orthodoxy, indestructible temple, which contains the uncontainable!...It is through thee that the Holy Trinity is glorified and adored; through thee, the precious Cross is venerated and revered throughout the whole world; through thee that heaven is in gladness, that angels and archangels rejoice, and that demons are put to flight; through thee that the tempter, the devil, is cast down from heaven; through thee that the fallen creature is raised up to heaven; through thee that all creation, once imprisoned in idolatry, has reached knowledge of the truth, that the faithful obtain Baptism and the oil of joy, churches have been founded in the whole world, and that peoples are led to conversion.”²⁸¹

Saint Proklos (d. 446), Patriarch of Constantinople, spoke of Mary as “the glory of virgins, the joy of mothers, the support of the faithful, the diadem of the Church, the model of the true Faith, the seat of piety, the dwelling place of the Holy Trinity.”²⁸² Elsewhere, he writes that “she is the nuptial chamber wherein the Logos wedded the flesh, the burning bush of nature, which did not burn in the fire of divine travail, the handmaid and Mother, the Virgin and heaven, the only bridge between God and man, the fearful web of providence whereunto was the garment of unity ineffably woven.”²⁸³ ²⁸⁴

In the sixth century, Saint Romanos the Melodist, sets the doctrine of Mary’s mediation in a distinctive relationship to Adam and Eve. He dramatizes figuratively the Theotokos speaking to Adam and Eve: *End your lamentations, I shall be your intercessor (presbis) before my Son. And restrain your tears, receive me as your mediatrix with Him Who is born of me.*^{1M}

This theme is also brought out in every Resurrection Orthros service in the Evlogitaria: *By giving birth to the Giver of Life, O Virgin, thou didst rescue Adam from sin, and thou didst grant Eve joy instead of sorrow; for the*

²⁸¹ Saint Kyril, “Horn. IV, Ephesian Declaration to Nestorios,” *P.G.* 77:992BC-E. Schwartz, ed., *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* (Strasburg, 1914), 1, 1, 8, 104.

²⁸² J. Adels, *The Wisdom of the Saints*, p. 21.

²⁸³ Saint Proklos, “Encomium to the All-holy Theotokos Mary,” *P.G.* 65:681 A; M. Charitos, *The Repose*, p. 18; Michael O’Carroll, C.S.Sp., comp, and ed., *Theotokos*, 3rd ed. (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1988), 240.

²⁸⁴ “Hymn for the Nativity,” cited in *Sources Chretiennes* (Lyons), 110, 103; Saint Romanos the Melodist, “On the Nativity (Mary and the Magi),” *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*, Vol. I, trans. and annot. by Marjorie Carpenter (MO: University of Missouri Press, 1970), Strophe 10, Mode Plagal Two, p. 18.

*God and Man Who was incarnate of thee guided back to life those who had fallen away therefrom.*²⁶⁵



Icon of “In thee, of full of grace, all creation doth rejoice!”

Again, the great Byzantine melodist Romanos then writes: *For I [Theotokos] am not simply Thy Mother, O merciful Savior, ...but I supplicate Thee on behalf of all men. Thou hast made me the pride and boast of all my race [cf. Judith 15:9-11]; for Thy cosmos considers me as a powerful protection, rampart, and stay. May those that were cast from the joys of Paradise look to me that I may direct them to a perception of all things! Grant this to me who gave birth to Thee, a newborn babe, the preeternal God.*^{1*6}

The Akathist Hymn has been assigned by some to Saint Romanos, but others to Patriarch Sergios of Constantinople (7th C.)^{286 287} or George from Antioch in Pisidia (610-640), a deacon under Patriarch Sergios, who was distinguished for composing iambic verses. The inspired hymnographer of the Akathist Hymn uses language both profound and eloquent. Pure lyricism, philosophical thought, and theological and dogmatical teaching are all part of these verses written in honor of the Theotokos who miraculously preserved the great city of Constantinople from attack by Arians and Persian barbarians. It was adopted for liturgical use, wherein it expresses the idea that Mary is one through whom certain spiritual benefactions were achieved.

Rejoice, thou through whom creation is renewed!...

Rejoice, thou through whom and in whom the Creator is adored!...

Rejoice, heavenly ladder, through whom God has descended!...

Rejoice, bridge leading those on earth to heaven!...

Rejoice, supplication before the righteous Judge!...

O thou who didst bear the world's Salvation, through thee are we raised from earth to heaven's heights!...

Rejoice, O fiery pillar that doth lead all mortal men to the life on high!

In the eighth century, the great trio of eastern fathers. Saints Andrew of Crete, John of Damascus, and Germanos of Constantinople taught the doctrine of Mary's mediation in an explicit and plenary manner.

Saint Andrew of Crete called her, "Mediatress of the law and grace," saying also, "She is the mediation between the sublimity of God and the abjection of the flesh, and becomes the Mother of her Maker."²⁸⁸ He also

²⁸⁶ Saint Romanos, "On the Nativity (Mary and the Magi)," *Kontakia of Romanos*, Strophe 23, Mode Three, p. 11.

²⁸⁷ Codex of Paris, no. 212; Codex of the Library of Saint Mark in Venice, no. 14; Savas J. Savas, *Hymnology of the Eastern Orthodox Church* (MA: Byzantine Melodies, 1983), p. 67.

²⁸⁸ Saint Andrew of Crete, "Encomium on the Nativity of the Theotokos," Sermons I and IV, *P.G.* 97:808, 865.

wrote the *prosomion* (a special hymn) to her that begins, as follows: *Rejoice with God, ranking second only to the Trinity* Z²⁸⁹

Saint John of Damascus called Mary “Mediatress.” He introduces the concept with a favorite Old Testament image which he liked to apply to her: Jacob’s ladder. Addressing the Theotokos, he wrote: “By fulfilling the office of mediatress (*mesitevsasa*), and being made the ladder of God descending to us, that He should assume our weak nature, and join and unite it to Him,... thou hast brought together what had been separated.”²⁹⁰ He also said that “to serve Mary and to be her courtier is the greatest honor one can possibly possess; for to serve the Queen of heaven is already to reign there, and to live under her commands is more than to govern.”²⁹¹

Saint Germanos, who spoke of himself as our Lady’s slave (*doulos*),²⁹² is the doctor of the Theotokos’ universal mediation. In an oration in her temple on the sacred belt, he calls her “truly a good mediatress for all sinners.”²⁹³ In his second homily on the dormition, he writes: “Man was made spiritual when thou, O Theotokos, didst become the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. No one is filled with the knowledge of God save through thee, O most holy one. No one is saved except through thee, O Theotokos. No one is ransomed save through thee, O Mother of God (*Theomeetros*). No one secured a gift of mercy save through thee, who holds God... .Thou canst not fail to be heard, since God, as to everything, through everything, and in everything, behaves toward thee as His true and unsullied Mother... .In thee, all peoples of the earth have obtained blessing; for there is no place where thy name is not held in honor.”²⁹⁴

Saint Theodore of Studios (ca. 759-826), who defended the sacred icons of the Theotokos, has a devotion that is evident in his homilies and anti-iconoclastic writings. “Mary enjoys in heaven royal power which through her authority as Mother she obtained from the Lord of all.”²⁹⁵

Saint Tarasios (d. 806), Patriarch of Constantinople, clearly taught Mary’s role in the universal salvation, for she is the “abyss of miracles, the

²⁸⁹ Prosomion after Canon for Sunday, Mode Plagal One, by Saint Andrew of Crete, taken from the *Theotokarion* of Saint Nikodemos [in Greek] (Volos, GR: Sot. Schoina, 1979), p. 107.

²⁹⁰ Saint John of Damascus, “Horn. I, On the Dormition,” *P.G.* 96:713A.

²⁹¹ J. Adels, *The Wisdom of the Saints*, loc. cit.

²⁹² Saint Germanos, “Oration IX, On the Holy Zonee of Mary,” *P.G.* 98:38IB.

²⁹³ Idem, “Oration V, On the Annunciation of the Most Holy Theotokos,” *P.G.* 98:320-340.

²⁹⁴ Idem, “Oration V,” *P.G.* 98:321; and “Oration VII, On the Dormition,” *P.G.* 98:352, 353.

²⁹⁵ Saint Theodore the Stoudite, “Encomium on the Dormition of the Theotokos,” *P. G.* 99:725C.

fount of good things, the untarnished supply of riches.”²⁹⁶ She is “the cause of salvation of all mortals,” “the reconciler in the second regeneration with God,” “the restoration of the whole world,” “the expiation of Adam’s curse, price of Eve’s debt,” and “the one who frees us from the curse pronounced against our first parent Eve.” Consequently, she is Queen of the whole universe, “the mediatrix of all who are under heaven.”^{296 297 298 299 300 301}

Saint George, Metropolitan of Nikomedia (d. ca. 880), a friend of Saint Photios, when writing about the Virgin’s intercession, chants: *Lady, I dedicate to thee my understanding and my counsel, my expectation, my body, soul, and spirit. Deliver and save me from grievous adversaries and temptations, and from every threat to come;*^m and *O Virgin, thou who hast born the Light that no man can approach, with thy light-saving radiance, do thou disperse the darkness of my soul: do thou take me by the hand and guide my life into the paths of salvation.*^{l *l}

The liturgical poet, Joseph the Hymnographer, hymns: *O Theotokos, thou art more glorious than the cherubim and seraphim and all the heavenly hosts. With them, O Virgin undefiled, entreat Him Who took flesh from thee, God the Logos from the Father without beginning, that we may all be counted worthy of eternal blessings.*³⁰⁰ And the same wrote: *O pure Virgin, through thee, our earthly and corruptible nature is made heavenly: By thy fervent intercession, bring our prayers and petitions before thy God and King of all men.*¹⁰¹

Saint Photios (d. ca. 897), Patriarch of Constantinople, a scholar of encyclopedic knowledge, speaks of the Theotokos in his homilies writing: “The Lord is with thee, delivering through thee the whole race from its ancient sorrow and curse”;³⁰² and “...for she, the descendant, was able to repair the ancestral defeat, who brought forth the Savior of our race by a husbandless

²⁹⁶ Saint Tarasios, “Sermon on the Entrance of the Most Holy Theotokos,” *P.G.* 98:1495.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, *P.G.* 98: 1499.

²⁹⁸ *Triodion*, Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, Orthros Canon, Theotokion, Ode One, Mode Plagal Two.

²⁹⁹ *Triodion*, Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, Orthros Canon, Theotokion, Ode Four, Mode Plagal Two.

³⁰⁰ *Triodion*, Sunday of the Prodigal Son, Orthros Canon, Theotokion, Ode Seven, Mode Two.

³⁰¹ *Triodion*, Monday in the First Week of Great Lent, Orthros Canon, Ode Eight, Mode Two.

³⁰² Saint Photios, “Horn. VII: The Annunciation,” *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople*, trans. by Cyril Mango (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Dumbarton Oaks Studies Three, 1958), 143.

birth, and molded His body.”³⁰³ In the saint’s homily, entitled “Attack of the Russians,” he prays to the Theotokos with characteristic Byzantine trust in the mediatrix: “Let us set her up as our mediatrix (*mesitis*) before her Son our God, and make her the witness and surety of our compact; she who conveys our requests and rains down the mercy of her Offspring, and scatters the cloud of enemies, and lights up for us the dawn of salvation.”³⁰⁴

Saint Andrew (d. 956), the Fool for Christ, beheld the Virgin in the Church of Vlachernai. This church was the depository of Panagia’s robe, veil, and part of her cincture (belt). Together with his disciple, Saint Epiphanius, He beheld the majestic Theotokos advancing toward the ambo, escorted by Saints John the Baptist and Saint John the Theologian, and several other saints with the choirs of angels. On reaching the center of the church, the Theotokos knelt down and remained long in prayer, and her face was bathed in tears. When she prayed yet again before the holy Table, she removed her veil which shone like lightning.³⁰⁵ Then with great solemnity, she held her veil high up and extended it over all the people present in the church. However, only the holy Andrew and Epiphanius were vouchsafed to behold her visitation and the veil that shone like the glory of God. An Orthros sticheron of the Feast of the Holy Protection of the Mother of God exclaims: *As they beheld the Queen of all... with outstretched arms in the air, she prayed for the peace of the world, the confirmation of Orthodox Christians, and the salvation of our souls.*³⁰⁶

The second thousand years after Christ

The summit of Byzantine Marian theology, however, was to be found among the Palamites. The mediation of the Theotokos was part of their vision of the cosmic Christ, the center and purpose of creation. The incarnation was brought about in her and by her; the person of Christ is inseparable from that of His Mother.

Saint Gregory of Palamas saw her standing alone between God and the whole human race, making God the Son of Man and men the sons of God. He is not thinking of the person of Mary taken by herself but of her who begat God in the flesh. Thus, for Saint Gregory and for the whole tradition of the Orthodox Church, this Mariology asserts both the full divinity and full humanity of Christ; without Mary, this union could not have been realized in the person of Jesus. He will write that the Mother of God “is the source and

³⁰³ Ibid., “Horn. IX: The Birth of the Virgin,” *The Homilies of Photius*, p. 175.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., “Horn. III: The Russian Attack,” *The Homilies of Photius*, p. 95.

³⁰⁵ See the Life of Saint Andrew, who is commemorated by the holy Church on the 28th of May. See also the Feast of the Holy Protection of the Mother of God, commemorated on the 1st of October.

³⁰⁶ October 1st, Theotokion after the Polyeleos, Mode Plagal Four.

root of the race of liberty”;³⁰⁷ her body, the temple of God, is “the saving balsam for our race”;³⁰⁸ and “the Virgin Mother alone dwells on the frontier between created and uncreated natures, and those who know God recognize also in her the habitation of the infinite.”³⁰⁹

However, the Palamite, Saint Theophanes, Bishop of Nicaea, also known as “the branded” with his brother Theodore, is unequalled in all literature as an exponent of the Theotokos’ universal mediation. He sees the entire cosmos turning around the Theotokos, when he wrote: “It cannot happen that anyone, of angels or of men, can come otherwise, in any way whatsoever to participation in the divine gifts flowing from what has been divinely assumed, from the Son of God, save through His Mother.”³¹⁰

Saint Theophanes used the metaphor of the neck to express her place in the Mystical Body: “so that the sacred neck is the only way leading to the Head of all.”³¹¹ Mary Theotokos, for this brilliant confessor and hymnographer, was the “dispenser and distributor of all the wondrous uncreated gifts of the divine Spirit.”³¹² As the fountain, the beginning of life, “she receives wholly the hidden grace of the Spirit and amply distributes it and shares it with others, thus manifesting it.”³¹³ All things were created for her and are governed through her. No one attains the fullness and the goal of life in Christ without her cooperation or without the Spirit’s help.

He then speaks of her spiritual motherhood over us, saying: “The Mother of Him—Who through His unspeakable goodness willed to be called our Brother—is the dispenser and distributor of all the wondrous uncreated gifts of the divine Spirit, which make us Christ’s brothers and joint heirs not only because she is granting the gifts of her Son to His brothers in grace but also because she is bestowing them on these as her own true sons, though not by ties of nature but of grace.”³¹⁴

A latter-day father, Saint John of Kronstadt, writes in his memoirs, the following: “Holy Virgin, our Lady! Thou, whose love toward Christians surpasses the love of every earthborn mother, of every wife, hear our prayers

³⁰⁷ Saint Gregory Palamas, “Horn. 14, On the Annunciation,” *P.G.* 151:169C.

³⁰⁸ Idem, “Horn. 37, On the Most August Dormition of the Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary,” *P.G.* 151:464D.

³⁰⁹ Idem, “Horn. 14,” *P.G.* 151:177A; cf. “Horn. 53,” cited in *Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas*, comp. by S. Oikonomos (Athens, 1861), pp. 156, 162.

³¹⁰ Saint Theophanes, “Sermon on the Mother of God,” cited in *Marianum* (Rome, 1964)4, p. 55; 15, p. 205.

³¹¹ Ibid., 10, p. 133.

³¹² Ibid., 4, p. 55; 15, p. 205.

³¹³ Ibid., 14, p. 195.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 15, p. 205.

and save us! May we constantly remember thee! May we always pray fervently to thee! May we ever undoubtingly and unfailingly take refuge beneath thy holy protection!”³¹⁵

Saint John also writes that it was “through the incarnation of the Logos that the all-holy Virgin has been given to us as an all-powerful intercessor, who protects us from sins, misfortunes, and disasters. Praying for us day and night, our Queen, whose power no enemy visible or invisible can withstand, truly is our Mother by grace in accordance with the words uttered by Christ on the Cross to the beloved disciple, ‘Behold thy Mother!’ and to her, ‘Behold thy son!’”³¹⁶ He also writes: “To all who have recourse with faith and love to her powerful protection, she soon speedily gives both peace and love... She is the highest of all creatures, the mediatrix for the whole race of mankind. Strive to train thyself in the spirit of humility, for she herself was more humble than any mortal, and only looks lovingly upon the humble. Recall what she said to her cousin Elisabeth, ‘For He looked upon the low estate of His slave [Lk. 1:48].’”³¹⁷ He adds: “We pray to the all-merciful and most pure Mother of God—and she prays for us. We glorify her—she who is above all glory—and she prepares eternal glory for us. We often say to her, ‘Rejoice!’ and she asks her Son and God, ‘My beloved Son, give them everlasting joy in return for greeting me with joy.’”³¹⁸

Brief summary of New Testament examples

The Virgin-Mother was to be the “instrument” of His first public miracle and, again by her intercession, a countless procession of miracles would ensue through the ages. At the marriage in Cana, she said to her Son, “They have no wine [Jn. 2:3].” “Jesus saith to her, ‘What is it to Me and to thee, woman? Mine hour is not yet come.’ His Mother saith to the servants, ‘Whatsoever He saith to you, do it [Jn. 2:4, 5].’”

Her response is not that of one who was either rebuffed or thrust aside. Although the word “woman” might appear disrespectful in modern English, yet it was not an unusual form of address in the ancient east. The word “woman” was the name given to our first mother Eve; for Adam said, “This now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman [Gen. 2:23].” Now the Mother of Christ is the new Woman of whom the New Adam was born seedlessly. The term “woman” or *gynai*, in the east, was one of respect, not equivalent to our casual use of “woman.” In the Greek

³¹⁵ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, p. 90.

³¹⁶ Idem, *Spiritual Counsels of Father John of Kronstadt*. Select passages from *My Life in Christ*, edited and introduced by W. Jardine Grisbrooke (London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1967), 59.

³¹⁷ Idem, *My Life in Christ*, p. 179.

³¹⁸ Idem, *Spiritual Counsels*, loc. cit.

tragedians, the term *gynai* is constantly used in addressing queens and persons of distinction. Augustus addresses Cleopatra (1st C. B.C.), Queen of Egypt, as *gynai*. In this same Gospel, when dying on the Cross, Christ again addressed His Mother as “woman” and entrusted her to His beloved disciple [Jn. 19:26],

Saint John Chrysostom then writes that “she knew that He did not refuse from want of power, but because He was retiring; and neither did He wish to appear to hasten to perform this wonder.”²⁹ Saint John Chrysostom further explains this verse saying that “Christ was not yet known to those present, nor did all immediately realize that the wine was failing. He wished them to be fully apprised that there was a need, and then they would appreciate more the benefit received.”²⁵

Here, Saint Kyril of Alexandria remarks, “The Woman, having, as was fitting, great authority over the Lord, her Son, persuades Him to work a miracle. She also prepares the way for it, bidding the waiters of the feast to be at hand, and to have prepared that which the Lord will presently command.”²⁸ Saint Kyril, furthermore, analyzes the interplay of petition and response between Mother and Son, and the respect that Jesus showed His Mother: “Besides, Christ shows that the greatest honor is due to parents when, through reverence for His Mother, He undertakes to do that which He did not yet wish to do.”³¹

Saint Romanos puts these words into Christ’s mouth: “But now, contrary to order, before the teaching, thou hast asked for miracles. It is for this reason that I delayed a short time in answer to thee, O Mother. But since it is necessary that parents be honored by their children, I shall pay observance to thee, O Mother, for I am able to do all things.”²⁴

Later, in the Gospels, we read: “And it came to pass, as He was speaking these things, a certain woman out of the crowd lifted up her voice and said to Him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore Thee, and the breasts which Thou didst suck.’ But He said, ‘Yea rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it [Lk. 11:27, 28].’” Saint Chrysostom assures us that “He did not say this as repudiating His Mother, but to show that His birth would have been no gain to her unless she was also good and faithful in all things....Bless me, what honor, what virtue! Unto what a height does she lead up him who follows after her! How many women have called the holy Virgin blessed, and her womb, and prayed that they might become such mothers, and give up all! What then is there to prevent? For behold, a wide path has been marked out for us, and it is granted not to women only, but men also....”³¹⁹

³¹⁹ Saint Chrysostom, “Horn. 44,” *Saint Matthew*, P.G. 57:469 (col. 466).

Therefore, the eastern fathers, using the Apostle Paul's word *mesitis*, borrowed it without stirring the slightest fear that the dignity of the One Mediator or *Mesitis* would be compromised. Although throughout the centuries the context of the word varied, yet certain essential aspects are clearly distinguishable: the role of the Theotokos in the work of salvation and her ceaseless and heavenly activity in our behalf. The following well-known hymns bring out her role:

*Seeing that we have no boldness on account of our many sins, do thou beseech Him that was born of thee, O Virgin Theotokos; for the supplication of the Mother availeth much to win the Master's favor.*¹²⁰

*As the treasury of our salvation, O all-hymned one, do thou lead forth from the pit and abyss of offenses them that hope in thee; for those who were guilty because of sin hast thou saved by giving birth to Salvation, O thou who before childbirth wast virgin, and in childbirth wast virgin, and after childbirth against remainest virgin.*²²¹

No mediation is greater than that made in our behalf by the Theotokos, the Mother of all the saints, living and dead. Orthodox Christians also honor the saints as vessels of grace and examples for us. We seek their mediation, for we read in the epistle to the brother of the Lord, Iakovos: "The entreaty of a righteous man hath much strength when it is energized [Jas. 5:16]." Hence, in the kontakion for the Feast of All Saints, we chant: *To Thee, the Planter of Creation, the world doth offer the God-bearing martyrs as the firstfruits of nature. By their supplications, preserve Thy Church in perfect peace, through the Theotokos, O greatly merciful One*²²²

Saint John of Damascus writes that "the Master Christ made the relics of saints to be fountains of salvation to us, pouring forth manifold blessings and abounding in the oil of sweet fragrance. Let none doubt it. Therefore, in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, in contrition and pity for the needy, let us believers venerate the saints, as by this God is most worshipped. Let us raise monuments to them and visible icons, let us ourselves become, through emulation of their lives, living icons and monuments of them. Let us give honor to her who bore God, as being strictly and truly the Mother of God,... the Prophet John, as Forerunner and Baptizer,...as well as to the martyrs ... holy fathers, the God-possessed ascetics... the patriarchs... prophets... in order that we may be sharers with them in their crowns of glory."^{320 321 322 323}

³²⁰ Theotokion troparion of the Sixth Hour.

³²¹ Kontakion of the Resurrection, Grave Mode.

³²² Mode Plagal Four.

³²³ Saint John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Bk. IV, Ch. XV, Nicene, 2nd Ser., IX:86, 87.

Placement of the icons of the Virgin Theotokos

The special importance given to the universally accepted icons of the Virgin, by placing them to the right of Christ, finds its justification in Scripture. The Virgin Mary is said to have “found grace with God [Lk. 1:30]” and to have been overshadowed by the power of the Highest,³²⁴ and to have miraculously conceived and given birth to the Son of God, Jesus Christ.³²⁵ And, we also learn that “at Thy right hand stood the Queen [Ps. 44:8].”

When the two brothers and disciples of Christ, Saint Iakovos and John requested of Christ, “Grant to us that we might sit, one on Thy right and one on Thy left, in Thy glory [Mk. 10:37],” Christ answered, “To sit on My right and on My left is not Mine to give, but it shall be given to those for whom it hath been prepared by My Father [Mt. 20:23].”³²⁶ *Enthroned as Lord, thy Son hath placed thee (O Virgin) at His right hand, for thou art arrayed in the gold-embroidered raiment of the holy virtues; and He giveth thee the honor that is due thee, O immaculate one,*³²⁷

In most Orthodox Church domes, the Mother of God is depicted just beneath and to the east of the main icon of Christ, the Pantocrator, “Ruler of All” or the “Almighty.” In an attitude of prayer, she is on the same plane as the angelic host and Saint John the Baptist. If there is another dome in the same church, she is depicted holding Christ as a child. This too is justified in the hymnography of the Church, when we chant the composition of the Archangel Gabriel and Saint Kosmas the Poet: *It is truly meet to call thee blest, the Theotokos, the ever-blessed and all-immaculate and Mother of our God. More honorable than the Cherubim, and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim, thee who without corruption gavest birth to God the Logos, the very Theotokos, thee do we magnify.*

The icon of the Platytera

Second only in importance to the central dome of a church, is the icon in the main eastern apse. In accordance with ancient tradition, the dominant figure in the semi-dome is that of the Virgin-Mother, known as the *Platytera ton ouranon* or “She who is more spacious than the heavens.” We chant: *The heavens were astonished and stood in awe, and the ends of the earth, O Maiden, were sore amazed, for God appeared bodily to mankind as very man. And lo, thy womb hath proved to be vaster and more spacious than heaven’s*

³²⁴ Lk. 1:35.

³²⁵ Constantine Cavarinos, “Iconographic Decoration of Churches,” *Orthodox Iconography*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1980), pp. 26, 27.

³²⁶ Mk. 10:40.

³²⁷ Resurrection Canon to the Mother of God, Ode Nine, Mode Plagal One.

*heights! For this, O Theotokos, the choirs and assemblies of men and angels magnify thy name,*³²⁸

In this icon she is depicted in one of two ways: (1) She is shown half-stature with her arms outstretched in prayer. In front of her is the Christ Child, Who is blessing with two hands. (2) The Theotokos is shown enthroned, holding the Christ Child in her lap. He is blessing with His right hand and holding a scroll in His left hand. This icon may also have full-length angels on either side. Often the Theotokos will be flanked by the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, to her right and left respectively. The placement of the Platytera icon in this section of the church, which unites the roof of the church with the floor, allegorically symbolizes her uniting heaven and earth. She hovers over the earth, as it were between heaven and earth. And as we recite in the Akathist Hymn, the Theotokos is *the heavenly ladder, whereby God has descended and the bridge leading those on earth to heaven*. Thus, the Theotokos stands between heaven and earth as the intercessor of our race by means of the divine Child in her arms.³²⁹

Also, the rubrics in the celebration of the Eucharist contribute to her placement in the main eastern apse. During the divine Liturgy, the celebrant, at various times, will face and bow before the eastern wall or apse, uttering the following prayer: “Blessed art Thou on the throne of Thy glory.” Thus, the celebrant is addressing Christ and His “throne,” the Virgin.

The Icon of the Deisis

The word *deisis* in Greek means entreaty. Thus this icon of entreaty frequently is seen with Christ enthroned, and on either side of Him are the Virgin to His right and Saint John the Baptist to His left—both in postures of supplication, as intercessors. We see the Virgin-Mother as the Bride of God and Saint John the Baptist as the “friend of the Bridegroom [Jn. 3:29],” who in the plan of salvation had central parts to play. Later icons will depict others in the company of the Virgin and the Baptist interceding for humanity at the judgment seat of Christ.

The Icon known as Odegitria or Directress

The reverence and honor rendered to the Theotokos is not idolatrous. She is not the Lord, but the Handmaid of the Lord. She is not the King, but the Throne of the King. She is not the self-illuminated Sun, but the Moon which reflects the Sun. She is not the Fountain, but the Conduit. She is not the bank of the River, but the Bridge which carries people to the other side. She is not

³²⁸ The Great Supplicatory Canon to the Theotokos. Eirmos of Ode Nine, Mode Plagal Four.

³²⁹ Constantine D. Kalokyris, “The Content of Orthodox Iconography: Art of High Theology,” *The Essence of Orthodox Iconography*, trans. by Peter A. Chamberas (Brookline, M A: Holy Cross School of Theology, 1971), 23.

the One Who saves, but she is the one who leads the people to Him Who saves; thus she is aptly named “the Directress” or “Odegitria.”³³⁰

This type of image, according to tradition, was originally painted from life by the Evangelist Luke. The blessed Virgin bears the Christ Child on her left arm, and supplicates and points with her right hand to Christ, Who said of Himself, “I am the way [Jn. 14:6].” This kind of depiction never appears without Christ, thus conforming to Orthodox belief, which stipulates that the Theotokos is the “Pointer of the Way” to heaven or as a “Preparer of the Way to salvation” in conjunction with her Son. It is this style of icon, on the iconostasion, where the Mother of God stands before us as a symbol and type of the Church and the Christian vocation: to point away from self to Christ. The Virgin and the Church point to Him with holiness, gentleness, love, firmness, and inner conviction.³³¹

*Rejoice with God, ranking second only to the Trinity,
thou recipient of the divine gifts, thou art the fulfillment of all,
who transmits this grace to the angels and mankind! O Bride
of the Father, immaculate Mother of the Son, and holy and
resplendent temple of the Holy Spirit! O most chaste of all
creation, most suitable to His ultimate purpose, on this
account the cosmos was created and, by thy birth, was the
eternal will of the Creator fulfilled.*³³²

Appendix III: Erroneous Papal Definition of the Assumption

“In 1950, when the Roman Catholic Church adopted the doctrine of the bodily Assumption of the Mother of God as an official dogma, there was a flaming issue surrounding it. But it was not a question of her bodily assumption as much as whether she died first or was taken up without having died at all. This controversy had to do with classic Latin theology versus the dissident views that were held by many non-traditionalist Roman Catholic theologians. Classic Latin theology taught that God created death to avenge Himself for the offense of Adam and for the sins of his descendants who come into the world bearing inherited guilt of Adam’s ‘original sin.’ The true Faith of Christ has no such legalistic notion of inherited guilt of ‘original sin.’ Even the term itself is foreign in the vocabulary of the Orthodox. The Church refers to Adam’s sin as the ‘ancestral sin’ (*propaterikon amartema*). It is the Adamic

³³⁰ Constantine Callinicos, *Our Lady the Theotokos*, trans. and rev. by Rev. George Dimopoulos (Upper Darby, PA: Christian Orthodox Editions, 1987), pp. 129, 130.

³³¹ John Baggey, *Doors of Perception* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988), 106.

³³² Saint Andrew of Crete, *Theotokarion*, Mode Plagal One.

sin; for the Greek word *amartema* means a specific, concrete sin, rather than *amartia*, the abstract idea of sin as implied in the concept of original sin. As descendants of the first Adam, we share the same fallen nature—the tendency toward sin—but not his guilt. Every creature and every subatomic particle have existence in His constant providence. This is God’s creative and sustaining wisdom and power that keeps all things [that is, all of creation] intact, as the Church chants in the Orthros of the Dormition of the Mother of God. Nothing in the universe exists independently as its own source of life. Only God is self-life or *autozoos*. Man’s tendency to sin is borne in his fallen nature. It is a tendency away from participation in God, away from the Source of Life, a tendency of his entire fallen being to return to nonexistence from whence he came. This is the corruptibility of man and all creation. Salvation for Orthodoxy means restoration of the whole man to incorruptibility and to participation in the life of the Holy Trinity by grace—that is to say, *theosis* or divinization by the uncreated energy of God.

“For the Latin Church, salvation, in essence, meant being saved from God. A grotesque divine justice demanded blood and revenge. God required satisfaction and payment of man’s offenses against the law. According to this mentality death was God’s revenge and punishment upon man—a doctrine of virtually all of Western Christianity today. This created a dilemma for the Latins. How could the Mother of God bear the divine Savior if she had inherited guilt of original sin? She must have been born free of inherited guilt—so they reasoned—or she would also have transmitted it to her Son. Thus, the doctrine of the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception was adopted a century earlier than the Assumption doctrine; that is to say, she was exempt from original sin from the moment she was conceived. It is not related to the manner of her conception or of Christ’s conception. So, given the doctrine of Immaculate Conception, the traditionalist Latin theologians argued that she could not have died before being taken up bodily into heaven, because death is a punishment by God for sins. This was the view of most of the hierarchy as well. But many papal theologians did not agree. They believed that she actually died. Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) did not answer the flaming question directly. He decreed the dogma of the Assumption, but he did not address the specific issue of whether or not the Virgin actually died. Instead, he left the answer to be worked out from classic Latin theology, that is, from the presuppositions of the Immaculate Conception. In effect, this was a tacit confirmation of the Latin notions that she could not have died, that God would not have punished her with death since she could not have inherited the guilt of original sin.

“The Orthodox Faith clearly says with the Scriptures that ‘God created not death. Neither hath He pleasure in the destruction of the living... .For God

created man to be incorruptible and made him to be an image of His own eternity. But death came into the world through the envy of the devil [Wis. of Sol. 1:13; 2:23, 24].’ Man began to die when, having first sinned, he did not repent—even though God gave him a great deal of time and opportunity by ‘searching’ and ‘calling’ for him when he was hiding in the garden after he sinned. Instead, Adam passed blame along to Eve, and even to God Who gave him his mate. From that moment he began to die because he separated himself from the Source of Life. God permitted this consequence because even death has an aspect of mercy in that, as the saints tell us: it prevented evil from becoming eternal. The Orthodox Faith believes the Theotokos truly died.³³³ But her death is called ‘a falling asleep,’ because death is not permanent. The Lord received her soul at the moment of her death, on a Friday afternoon. On Sunday, the third day, she was bodily resurrected in the same manner as the resurrection of her Son and was lifted up to the heavens as the firstfruits of her Son’s complete saving works.”³³⁴

**On the 15th of August, the holy Church remembers
the great and unsurpassed love of mankind shown by GOD,
through the mediation of our most
holy Lady THEOTOKOS and ever-virgin MARY,
in turning back and putting to shame the godless Hagarenes.**

In the year 716, at the commencement of the reign of Emperor Leo the Isaurion, also known as Conon, the Saracens rose up and mounted an attack by sea against Constantinople. These same enemy forces had brought down the king of the Persians; they also vanquished Egypt and Libya. The conquerors promised the Christians that if they submitted to them, they would in no wise ravage or transgress the Orthodox faith. The godless barbarians did not keep their promises. The Christians suffered chastisements to the extreme, that they might be coerced into denying the Christ. Many became martyrs since they refused to trample upon the honorable Cross of Christ.

After the Saracens plundered diverse nations, including the Indians, Abyssinians, and the peoples of Ethiopia, Libya, and as far as Spain, they directed their malevolent gaze toward the queen of cities: Constantinople. They campaigned to bring her into captivity. Leo thought to pay them off with

³³³ Orthodox teaching recognizes the taking up of only two men from the earth without their having died. They are the Old Testament Prophets Elias and Enoch. But this is only a temporary state for them, since the Scripture teaches that both shall return to the earth in the last days to preach Christ to the Jews and to expose the Antichrist, who will have them executed in Jerusalem.

³³⁴ George Gabriel, “On the Papal Definition of the Assumption of the Mother of God versus the Orthodox Doctrine,” Supplement to *The Ark*, No. 3.

money. The Saracens were not content with tribute alone, they wished to leave their own garrison in the city.

In 715/716, Masalmas made an expedition against Constantinople. He sent in front of him Souleiman, leader of the Arabs with a land army, dispatching Oumar (Oumaros) by sea, while he himself followed them with much military equipment. They entered Amorion, Cappadocia, and then Pergamon. After the latter city was delivered up to the enemy, the following year 716, when it was heard that the Saracens reached Lazica, the army of Rhomaioi and the Armenians took flight and returned to Phasis. Saint Theophanes the Confessor records in his *Chronographia*, that “Masalmas, after he had wintered in Asia, was awaiting Leo’s promises. But when he had received nothing from Leo and realized that he had been tricked, he moved to Abydos. He then crossed over to Thrace with a considerable army, and advanced toward the imperial city. He also wrote to the Caliph Souleiman’s that the latter should come with the fleet that had been fitted out in advance. After devastating the Thracian forts, Masalmas laid siege to the city on 15th of August.

“The Arabs fenced the land walls all round by digging a wide trench and building above it a breast-high parapet of dry stone. On the 1st of September of the first indiction (A.D. 717), Christ’s enemy Souleiman sailed up with his fleet and his emirs. He had enormous ships, military transports, and *dromones* (warships)³³⁵ to the number of 1,800. He put in between the Magnavra, in the suburb of Hebdomen, and the Kyklobion. Two days later a south wind blew, and they set out from there and sailed past the city. Some of them crossed over to the suburbs of Eftropios (outside of Chalcedon) and Anthemios (on the Asiatic side of the Bosporos), while others put in on the Thracian side, from the fort of Galata all the way to the Kleidion. Since the big ships were heavily laden and moved slowly, some twenty transports protected the rear, each one of them guarded by a hundred men clad in corselets. These found themselves becalmed in the midst of the current and, when a slight breeze blew down the straits, they were pushed back.

³³⁵ The *dromones* or *dromons* (that is, “runners”) were the most important warships of the Byzantine Navy from the 6th to the 12th C. They were propelled by both oar and sail. They had a central tower near the main mast, from which the marines could use bow and arrows, or spears, or other projectiles. There were at least three varieties of *dromones*. The first carried one hundred men; the second had a crew between 120 and 160 men. The third, the *dromon* proper, which had a crew of two hundred, fifty on the lower bank, and one hundred on the upper bank in two files, together with fifty marines.

“Straightway, the pious emperor sent against them the fire-bearing ships from the Akropolis.³³⁶ With divine help, they were set on fire. Some of the adversaries were cast up burning by the sea walls, others sank to the bottom with their crews, and others were swept down flaming as far as the islands Oxeia and Plateia. As a result, the inhabitants of the city took courage, whereas the enemy cowered with fear after experiencing the efficacious action of the liquid fire. For the enemy had intended to beach their ships that evening by the sea walls and set their steering paddles upon the battlements. But God brought their counsel to nought through the intercession of the all-pure Theotokos. That same night the pious emperor stealthily drew up the chain, the one guarding the Golden Horn, on the Galata side. The enemy, however, thinking that the emperor had drawn it aside with a view to entrapping them, did not dare move in and anchor on the inside of Galata. Instead, they sailed up to the bay of Sosthenion and made their fleet secure there.

“On the 8th of October, their leader Souleiman died and Oumar became emir. That winter proved very severe in Thrace, so much so that for a hundred days the earth could not be seen beneath the congealed snow. As a result, the enemy lost a multitude of horses, camels, and other animals. In the spring Souphiam (Sufyan) arrived with a fleet that had been built in Egypt. He had four hundred transports laden with corn as well as *dromones*. Having been informed of the efficacy of the fire of the Rhomaioi, he sailed past Bithynia and crossed to the harbor of Kalos Agros (near the mouth of the Gulf of Nikomedia, at mod. Tuzla) and he anchored there. Shortly thereafter, Izid, too, arrived with another fleet that had been built in Africa. He had 360 transports, a store of arms, and provisions. He had received the same information about the liquid fire. He, therefore, put in at Satyros (Kucukyah) and Bryas (Maltepe), all the way to Kartalimen (Kartal).

“Now the Egyptian crews of these two fleets took counsel among themselves. Then, by night, after seizing the skiffs of the transports, sought refuge in the city and acclaimed the emperor. As they did so, the sea, all the way from Hiereia to the city, appeared to be covered with timber. When the emperor had been informed by them of the two fleets hidden in the Bay of

³³⁶ Although the phrase “Greek-fire” is widespread in English and most other languages—except for the Greek language!—early sources still call it “Byzantine fire” or “Roman fire” or “sea fire” or “liquid fire” or even “artificial fire” as it is termed in Byzantine military manual. This as a burning-liquid weapon used by the Byzantines, especially in naval battles, as it could burn even on water. The real formula is still not known, as it was a highly protected secret. It was a devastating invention that even when pouring water upon the flames, the water served to intensify or spread them. The first use of an incendiary chemical substance at sea by the Byzantines dates from A.D. 513. Theophanes records that the concoction was invented ca. 670 in Constantinople.

512
Nikomedia, he constructed fire-bearing siphons which he placed in *dromones* and *biremes* and sent these against the fleets. With God's help, thanks to the intercession of the all-pure Theotokos, the enemy was sunk on the spot. 'Our men took the enemy's supplies as booty and returned in joyous victory.'

"Furthermore, while Mardasan was raiding with his Arab army from Pylai to Nicaea and Nikomedia, the imperial officers who, like Mardaites, were concealed with their foot soldiers at Libos (on the road from Nikomedia to Nicaea) and Sophon (mod. Sapanca), suddenly attacked them and broke them in pieces and so forced them to withdraw from those parts. In this way the seacoast on the other side gained a short respite, so that ships could go out of the city and obtain plentiful provisions. Likewise, fishing boats were not prevented from catching fish near the islands and the city walls.

"The Arabs, on the other hand, suffered from a severe famine, so that they ate all of their dead animals, namely horses, asses, and camels. It is said that they even cooked in ovens and ate dead men and their own dung which they leavened. A pestilence fell upon them also and killed an infinite number of them. Furthermore, the Bulgarian nation made war on them and, as well-informed persons affirm, massacred twenty-two thousand Arabs. 'Many other calamities befell them at that time and made them learn by experience that God and the all-holy Virgin, the Mother of God, protect this city and the Christian Empire, and that those who call upon God in truth are not entirely forsaken, even if we are chastised for a short time on account of our sins.'"³³⁷

The Great Synaxaristes (in Greek) also reports what took place when the Saracens came outside the city. As was meet, she punished the invaders after they sported with the city's cathedral. For while the Saracens were by the city walls, they kept blaspheming Christ and denouncing the city. As for the city's cathedral, Hagia Sophia or the Church of the Holy Wisdom, one of them shouted derogatory remarks at the church, not calling it Hagia Sophia, but simply Sophia to show their disdain of that sacred precinct. Divine vengeance overtook him when he fell from his horse and lost his vile soul. Then when their crier mounted a lofty wooden post in order to preach his loathsome and unclean prayer, he immediately fell down headlong and expired.

As Saint Theophanes reports, the crucial role of the barbarians against the Saracens brought about the slaughter of twenty thousand of the enemy. The Theotokos also permitted the enemy ships to be consumed by liquid Byzantine fire. After many of the Saracens perished from starvation or disease from eating mice, unclean reptiles and animals, and even human excrement, they came to the walls of the city on land. They entered into the Constantinopolitan suburb of Sykai, that is, Galata. They were approached by a certain Rhomaios,

³³⁷ *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6209 [A.D. 716/717J, pp. 545, 546.

one who had been accused of a number of crimes. He took recourse in his people's enemies. The Saracens received him and proclaimed him king of the Rhomaioi. They provided their puppet king with retainers and bodyguards. After they came into agreement, they went to the city wall, praising and acclaiming the newly ordained king; for they held a coronation that was repugnant to the Faith of the Christians. But the Saracens, hoping to win over to their side those Byzantines disgruntled with Leo, were to fail miserably. Now the leader of the Saracens, Souleiman, requested to enter the city. His actual purpose, however, was to scout the area. After he received permission, he mounted his steed and galloped along the Bosporos. He sat proudly and took on an air of arrogance and disdain. While all his retainers passed through the city gate with a respectful demeanor, he was unable to enter the city as he sat erect on his horse and lifted up his heels. His mind filled with blasphemous thoughts against the Orthodox Faith, Souleiman was halted in his tracks. He was startled and bewildered at the phenomenon. He then looked up higher, atop the city gate. There was a mosaic of the Theotokos. Our Lady was enthroned with the Lord Jesus, the Christ Child, upon her lap in her embrace. He understood immediately that he needed to dismount. He did so and only then was he able to walk into the city unhindered. He blamed himself for his previous blasphemies. The mission did not succeed, for the barbarians were warring against God and His Mother, the Theotokos. Eventually, the invader vanished out of hunger or death in the deep of the Aegean Sea.

Saint Theophanes, again, describes the tempestuous scene at sea. "When Oumar had become master of the Arabs, he ordered Masalmas to turn back. Then, on the 15th of August, the Hagarenes moved off in great shame. As their fleet sailed away, a God-sent storm fell upon them and scattered them through the intercession of the Mother of God. Some sank by Prokonnesos and the other islands, others by Apostropha and the adjoining shores. The remainder were going through the Aegean Sea when a terrible calamity came over them; for a fiery hail fell upon them and brought the sea-water to a boil, and as the pitch of their keels dissolved, their ships sank in the deep, crews and all.³³⁸ Only ten of them escaped, and this by God's providence, so as to proclaim both to us and to the Arabs the divine prodigies they had experienced. Some of our men chanced upon them and were able to seize five of them, while the other five escaped to Syria to announce God's mighty deeds."³³⁹

³³⁸ The miraculous destruction of the Arab fleet is mentioned in a contemporary homily by Patriarch Germanos. The report of boiling waters in the Aegean may well be connected with unusual volcanic activity, which culminated in the eruption of Thera. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6210 [A.D. 717/718], p. 551, note 9.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 550.

Hence, the Saracens campaigned against Constantinople on the 15⁰¹ of August. After the passage of one year, on the same date, they took flight in abysmal shame.³⁴⁰ So we shout aloud with David: “What God is as great as our God? Thou art God Who worketh wonders [Ps. 76:13].” For Thou art our God Who delivers Thy people and Thy city by Thine immaculate Mother.

**On the 15th of August, the holy Church commemorates
the holy Hieromartyr CHRESTOS, New-martyr of Ioannina.³⁴¹**

Chrestos (Xgɟjaroc;, Christos), the sacred hieromartyr and confessor of the Faith, was slaughtered for Christ and the Gospel after the following events. In August of 1823, the Turkish military unit at Ioannina undertook to carry out the devious plan contrived by Sultan Mahmut II to exterminate the Christians of that town. The Turks were informed that a certain priest-monk, named Chrestos, was comforting and encouraging the subjugated Greeks by preaching the kingdom of Christ. Therefore, he was arrested and brought before the court of the judge (*kadi*). The priest-monk was asked concerning his faith in the Lord Christ, which he confessed by proclaiming His nativity, the incarnation foretold by the prophets, His death, resurrection, and kingdom which will have no end. Afterward, he was questioned about Mohammed, and remained silent. The judge then rent his garments and ordered that Chrestos be beaten with rods and condemned him to death by crucifixion.

At the time when the martyr was delivered into the hands of the executioners, the Orthodox Church was celebrating the dormition of the most

³⁴⁰ See also *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* [ed. H. Delehay, *Propylaeum ad A4SS Nov.* (Brussels, 1902)]. CP 904.17. If this indication is correct, the siege lasted exactly one year to the day—on the major feast of the city’s patroness: the Dormition of the Theotokos. Nik. 54.5, however, it gives the siege a duration of thirteen months, which may indicate that they began coming on the 15th of July but did not attack until the city would be busily engaged in their feast a month later. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6209 [A.D. 716/717], trans. by Mango and Scott (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 548, note 16. The account is also mentioned and remembered by the holy Church on the 11th of May, when the holy Church commemorates the inauguration or consecration of the City of Constantinople, specially dedicated to the protection of our all-immaculate Lady, the Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary.

³⁴¹ The account of New-martyr Chrestos was recorded by the Honorable Francois Pouqueville (b. 1770-d. 1838), French diplomat, writer, explorer, physician, historian, and member of the Institut de France. He was first the Sultan’s hostage, then he served as Napoleon Bonaparte’s general consul at the court of Ali Pasha of Ioannina. He traveled extensively throughout Ottoman-occupied Greece from 1798 to 1816. See “Martyrdom of Hieromonk Christos of Ioannina,” *New Martyrs of the Turkish Yoke* (Seattle, WA: Saint Nectarios Press, 1985), pp. 262, 263.

holy Theotokos. On this joyous feast day, they wished to mock the holy Passion of Christ and embitter the Christians by reviling the sacraments of their holy Faith. They placed on the martyr's head a crown of thorns. The priest of the Most High God was then dragged down the streets of Ioannina, amidst the shouts and jeers of a wild Turkish mob who believed they were ridiculing Chrestos by calling him Christ. Finally, he was led up to the area of the plane trees at the Kalou Tzesme, the customary site of executions, a veritable Golgotha.

Once there, the priest-monk was stripped and spat upon. Chrestos was placed upon a cross, where they drove nails into his hands and feet. Then, as Chrestos hung on the cross, he sanctified the wood by his pure blood. Meanwhile, Hieromonk



Saint Chrestos

*[Courtesy of Convent of Saint Elizabeth,
Etna, CA]*

Chrestos prayed for his executioners, who sat crosswise at the foot of the cross and told him to appeal to Christ to save him. As they continued to taunt him, the martyr grew physically weaker. One Turk pierced his side with a sabre, and immediately Chrestos surrendered his blessed soul into the hands of God, from Whom he received the undying crown of a martyr. The frenzy of the infidels did not cease at this point. Some gypsies coated the martyric body with tar and burned him completely to ashes. They did this in imitation of Nero who used the bodies of Christians as lamps in his garden, inviting gladiators and eunuchs to his macabre feast!

Through the intercessions of Thy Saints,
O Christ God, have mercy on us. Amen.