

THE ASSUMPTION IN THE LITURGY OF THE EASTERN CHURCH

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IN the liturgical tradition of the Eastern Church the idea of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin includes the following incidents: the death of the Virgin, her burial, her rising again, her assumption, and finally her enthronement in heaven as Queen of all being. According to the eastern manner of thinking it is the first event, that is to say the death of the Blessed Virgin, which occupies the central position in liturgical prayer and meditation. This death is called the 'falling asleep' or 'dormition', whence comes the name of the feast of 15th August, 'The Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God and ever Virgin Mary'.

In preparation for this feast there is a period of fasting called the Lent of the Dormition which begins on 1st August. The 14th is the Vigil and the whole festival ends on the 23rd.

Originally the feast was observed locally, first in Palestine about the middle of the fifth century and later spreading throughout the Byzantine Empire between 588 and 602 during the reign of the Emperor Maurice. At Rome the feast was introduced by Theodore I (642-649). The material for the prayers and chants which compose the Office are culled from more or less legendary sources, a digest of which may be read in the Second Homily of St John Damascene on the Falling Asleep of our Lady which contains an account of the event current in the Christian Churches since the earliest times.

We have just said that the focal point of eastern meditation is precisely the death of the Blessed Virgin, which is called her falling asleep. In what sense is this to be understood in the Eastern Liturgy? Can we say, for instance, that the Church looks upon this death as a normal happening under the same conditions as that of men and women born under the yoke of original sin? Or does the Church rather consider this even as something extraordinary and miraculous? Can we say that according to the literal and general sense of the eastern texts her death is the result of her subjection to original sin? Does her death, however brief and provisory, affirm the victory of Satan through original sin, or does it rather indicate the overthrow of Satan and the destruction of the power of that sin?

Let us examine the texts. These express quite definitely the fact that the death of the Blessed Virgin was unique and quite out of

the ordinary. In all her liturgical texts the Church expresses herself as amazed at our Lady's death and, what is still more striking, she uses to this end the same images and expressions that she employs in the prayers and chants about the death of our Lord. According to these texts the death of the Blessed Virgin is overwhelming and unthinkable in the same way as was that of her divine Son upon the Cross.

The assembled angels were amazed to see you among the dead.
(*Office of the Burial of the Most Holy Virgin used at the Convent of Gethsemani on 17th August.*)

Why, in meditating on the death of the Blessed Virgin, does the Church profess herself astonished? The liturgical texts give us a clear answer. The Mother of the Son of God is a source of Life. How can a source of life die? But this has actually happened. If then the Blessed Virgin has tasted death like all other mortal beings, that death is an event outside the natural order, a miracle.

The prayers and chants of the Liturgy insist upon this:

O marvellous paradox. The Source of Life is itself laid in the tomb. (*Great Vespers, 17th August.*)

Behold a new and wonderful thing. How is it that the Virgin who bore Life itself comes to be placed in the grave? (*Ibid.*)

How can death carry off the All-Pure, she who brought Eternal Life into the world? (*Matins of the Vigil.*)

How can she who gave birth to Life and who was preserved from corruption undergo a death which corrupts? O Virgin, this is a wondrous thing which surpasses nature. (*Ibid.*)

This wonderful and mysterious thing which surpasses nature is expressed in the liturgy with admirable clarity. As far as death is concerned the Blessed Virgin obeyed the laws of nature, but she did so in a supernatural manner; that is, she died, although in no way obliged to be subject to death because mortality was in no way a necessary part of her being.

The miracle of the death of the most holy Mother of God is compared and contrasted with the birth of her divine Son. This birth is a miracle, and so is the death of the Mother of God, for ordinary death would be incompatible with the divine birth of the Son of God. She who brought God made man into the world could die no ordinary death.

Life was germinated within you without violating the seals of your virginity; how then could your pure and life-giving body be subject to the ordeal of death? (*Matins of 15th August.*)

You are above the laws of nature, O Queen. How then can you be subject to them and suffer the ordeal of death as we do? (*Office of the Burial. 1st part.*)

By your Motherhood you held up the threatening advance of death. Why then do you now give way to its attack? (*Ibid.*)

Here is the answer:

You submit to the laws of nature by passing above them. (*Matins of 15th August.*)

By her death or dormition the most holy Mother of God shares in our lot as human beings, but not of necessity; if she dies, this in no way means that she is obliged to do so. It comes to pass on a supernatural or miraculous level like the virginal conception of her Son and her own motherhood as a virgin. The Troparia of the feast brings this out:

In motherhood you have preserved virginity and in your falling asleep you have not abandoned the world.

We may ask the purpose of this miracle, the end for which God, our Lord, includes in the scheme of our salvation the supernatural and miraculous death of the source of our life, the life-bearing Virgin Mother of God who should not die. We find the answer to this question in the doctrine of the Incarnation of which the Blessed Virgin was the instrument. Having taken human flesh from this most holy and immaculate Mother, our Lord received it with all its imperfections and sufferings, sin alone excepted. If he had tasted death and gone to the tomb while his Mother had remained immortal, how could we have spoken of the reality of his human nature and in consequence of the reality of the Incarnation?

Christ, to assure us of the truth of the hypostatic union in his one theandric Person of both human and divine natures, died as man and rose again as God. The most holy Mother of God also submitted to the laws of nature. She too died in order that the scheme of our salvation which was shown by the Incarnation of her Son might not appear false.

O Mother of God, thy Son Jesus shows that in truth he has two natures, for he dies like man and rises again like God. He has decreed that you too, O Mother of God, shall die according to the laws of nature so that the plan of our salvation shall not seem like an illusion to the infidels. (*Vespers of 16th August.*)

Here then is the reason why the Mother of God must die. She is not constrained to it by any natural necessity, but in a supernatural and free manner she imitates her Son in playing her part, by her motherhood, in enacting the Incarnation, the work to which she was called. Listen once again to the liturgical texts:

She who is Queen of us all wishes to render up her soul into the hands of her Son. (*Vespers, 14th August.*)

God was placed in the tomb and so too was the Mother of God. God descended into the shades and so too did his Mother. (*Office of the Burial. 1st part.*)

If the Fruit she bore, the Fruit which passes all understanding, by whose favour she passes to heaven, freely endures the tomb in so far as he is mortal, how can she refuse the tomb, she who unwedded bore the Child? (*Matins, 15th August.*)

She will not refuse because she imitates her Son in all things. She will not refuse because she shares in his work, the salvation of the human race, because she is the instrument by which God became man.

In bringing God into the world you wrested the victor's prize from nature, O Pure One. You surpassed nature, too, when imitating your Son and Creator you submitted yourself to nature's laws. (*Matins, 15th August.*)

The death of the Mother of God is not, however, a real death; it is but a falling asleep, that is to say, a death without corruption which must be followed by resurrection, assumption into heaven, and enthronement there in regal dignity. That is why the falling asleep is called 'deathless' and like the death of Christ bears as fruit the sanctification of all mankind.

In your deathless falling asleep, O Virgin, your body did not experience corruption in the tomb. (*Burial Office, 1st part.*)

You have been asleep, but now you are dead no longer. (*Ibid.*)

By your deathless falling asleep you have sanctified all mankind. (*Little Vespers, 15th August.*)

Her body, even when dead, remains incorrupt and a source of life. (*Great Vespers, 15th August.*)

This sanctifying of mankind is done through the tomb, even as the tomb of her divine Son gives life. It is by her burial that the Blessed Virgin gives expression to her work as Co-redemptrix and shares in the work of salvation, delivering the world from original sin.

The earth which God once cursed he later sanctified by his own burial in it, and today it is again blessed, O Mother, by thy burial. (*Burial Office, 1st part.*)

The incorruptible body of the all-holy Mother of God whose death imitates that of her divine Son must needs rise again. In the *Kontakion* of the Feast of the Church sings:

The Mother of God, untiring in her intercession and supremely confident in her pleading, was subdued neither by the tomb nor by death, for even as she was the Mother of Life itself, so he who dwelt in her ever virginal womb brought her through to life again.

Our texts tell us that the resurrection of the Virgin took place the third day after her death, as happened with Christ.

You have slept, O Virgin, but now you are no longer dead, and after awakening to a better and never-ending life you are once again enshrined in your body. (*Office of the Burial, 1st part.*)

After death you rise again to live for ever with your Son. (Matins. 15th August.)

This resurrection is, of course, accomplished by the hand of God:

Your body, the temple of God, even when laid in the tomb, could not remain there but was by the power of God brought back to life. (*The Burial Office. Part 1.*)

The body of the Mother of God, brought back to life, was born to heaven; she had served as the dwelling-place of Jesus Christ in all his divinity, so it is not to be wondered at that she passed to heaven complete, both body and soul. The Church sings:

Jesus, Lord of divine glory, born of thy womb, has himself raised thee, body and soul, from the earth. (*Matins, 14th August.*)

How wonderful it is and how awe-inspiring that she who bore in her womb the King whom none can contain is laid in the tomb. The assembled angels and apostles, filled with fear, laid at rest her body, the honoured dwelling-place of God. Then Jesus her Son, the Saviour of our souls, brought it to life again and made it rise up to heaven. (*Great Vespers, 16th August.*)

Your body, O Virgin, never knew corruption in the tomb. You passed with your body complete from earth to heaven. (*Burial Office. 1st part.*)

She who is of the race of David, through whom we have been made Godlike, is received into the embrace of her own Son and Lord. (*Great Vespers, 15th August.*)

In the Assumption of the most holy Mother of God the Church sees a movement in the opposite direction to that of the Incarnation of the Son of God. The Holy Mother of God is of our world, or rather she is herself a world, a virgin world which has never been sullied by anything unclean, a new world which has produced a new Adam, Creator of the first Adam our ancestor. Earth comes from earth; she has not come down from heaven like her Son to take flesh, so in order to be enthroned in heaven she has to mount up. Even as the descent of the Son of God was a humiliation to his divinity, so the raising of the Blessed Virgin, in the Assumption, was an exaltation of humanity.

The Virgin, fellow worker with God, has not descended from heaven but has mounted up there, for she brought the King of heaven into the world. (*Burial Office. 1st part.*)

What is the life of the Blessed Virgin in heaven like? The Church replies thus:

Now you stand before the three Persons of the Godhead, contemplating them face to face where even the seraphim are obliged to cover their faces. (*Burial Office. 1st part.*)

In heaven she contemplates the beauty of the All-powerful and rejoices in it. (*Little Vespers, 15th August.*)

This heavenly life, this possession of the beatific vision which is more complete, deeper and more intense than that enjoyed by any other created being, even than that of the angels, places the holy Mother of God above all other creatures and makes her share in the royal dignity of God.

After her glorious Assumption the Mother of God and Ever Blessed Virgin Mary becomes the true Queen of all the world both visible and invisible, thus sharing in the royal power of her divine Son. Even at the very moment of her falling asleep she was already the Queen destined to reign:

Even if today, O Virgin, you die like us you are the Queen of all things *because you have conceived the Creator of all.* (*Office of the Burial. 1st part.*)

She is already Queen when she mounts up to heaven:

On earth it was the apostles who surrounded thee; in heaven the angelic powers greet you for you are sovereign both of angels and of men. (*Ibid.*)

At her Assumption she is already 'Daughter of God and Queen of all things' and this is how she appears before God:

Clothed and adorned with grace you present yourself before the Lord as Queen and Mother of God. (*Burial. 1st part.*)

The heavens, the dwelling-place of God, receive thee as a living heaven, O All-Pure One. Rejoice like a bride clad in shining raiment before your King and God. (*Matins, 15th August.*)

Then comes the triumph of the final meeting between the Queen Mother and the King her Son.

Let the vaults of heaven vibrate with the echo of angelic trumpets, let the hills rock and the holy apostles rejoice, *for the Queen is once again united to her Son to reign with him.*

Yet none of these privileges belongs to the Blessed Virgin as her own. They all come to her from her loving Son. He it is who has exempted her from the yoke of original sin, freed her from the pains of childbearing and of death, made her mount to heaven and become Queen of the world. Our texts express this clearly:

He has granted you favours which surpass those of nature, for in Child-bearing he preserved your virginity and in the tomb he preserved your body *incorrupt, giving you the glory of a heavenly Assumption and doing all this as a Son to his Mother.* (*Matins, 15th August.*)

We can see then that according to the liturgical texts of the East the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is based on her Immaculate Conception. This is not stated explicitly but is presupposed by her exemption from death. A detailed objective analysis of the liturgical texts of the feasts of the Conception of the Virgin (8th

December), her Nativity (8th September), and her presentation in the Temple (21st November) cannot but confirm what we say.

The Immaculate Conception of the All-Holy Mother of God is completely bound up in the redemptive work of her Son and her own part in it as Co-redemptrix, for the Word of God wished to save the world by means of his Mother. That is why the ordinary invocation of the Mother of God in the Eastern Church is 'Most Holy Mother of God, save us'. She is 'Co-redemptrix of the world'. 'She is of the race of David and it is through her that we have been exalted.' (*Great Vespers, 15th August.*)

If this is so, it is evident that the work of salvation which is always going on through the application of the fruits of Redemption to the human race was only accomplished through the mediation and everlasting intercession of the Mother of God. She is Queen and all mankind has been entrusted to her. She reigns with her Son. But in speaking of her reign we mean that she is always begging with the authority and standing of a Mother from her Son the salvation of mankind.

Listen to the eastern liturgy on this point:

Before passing away the All-Pure raised on high her hands, those hands which had really fondled God in the flesh, and like a Mother cried to her Son with all a Mother's authority: 'Protect down the ages those whom you have won for me and who cry to you: "Let us praise the Creator who has redeemed us and let us exalt him for ever".' (*Matins, 15th August.*)

That is why the Assumption, so far from diminishing the humanity of the Virgin, cannot but strengthen the bonds which unite mankind on earth with its Queen.

In your motherhood you preserved your virginity. In your dormition you did not abandon the world, but passed over to life itself and by your prayers you will save us from death. (*Troparia.*)

Evidently one cannot be near to Christ and share in his life without sharing too in that of his most holy Mother. This comes about through the practice of the Christian virtues which are the very essence of the life of the Blessed Virgin:

On the feast of the Holy Dormition we shall celebrate with joy in honour of her who is above all creatures, offering all the glorious resplendent gifts which make her so fair, her faith, her confidence, her trustful love, her purity, her holiness, her truthfulness, and all these virtues with which she is blessed and which she deigns to let us share with her and through which she opens to us the heavenly kingdom. (*Great Vespers, 20th August.*)

Such is the kingdom of the Queen of Heaven. That is why the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is the joy and happiness at the same time both of heaven and earth, and the Assumption of the All-

Pure unites both men and angels. The tomb of the Virgin is in truth a stepping-stone to heaven.

This is brought to mind at each Mass. During the preparatory part of the Liturgy called after St John Chrysostom or St Basil the Great the priest cuts off a little piece of bread in honour of the Virgin, places it on the paten on the right of that which represents Christ and says:

The Queen stands at thy right hand robed in a garment shining with gold and many colours.

The Assumption of the Virgin is intimately bound up with the Ascension of her divine Son. Even as the two angels appeared to the Apostles and foretold his glorious second coming (Acts 1, 10-11), so too the Eastern Church, celebrating the Assumption, reminds the faithful of this:

Soon we shall go out to meet our Saviour when he comes again from heaven. (*Burial Office. 1st part.*)

This approaching reunion makes us think of the Apocalypse. (ch. 12).

Most Holy Mother of God, save us!