

The Confessor's Tongue for August 15, 2010

12th Sunday After Pentecost: Dormition of the Theotokos

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

August 15: Dormition of the Theotokos

After the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven, the Most Holy Virgin, remaining, according to the will of the Son, in the care of St. John (John 19: 26-27), constantly abided in the spiritual effort of fasting and prayer and in the living desire to meditate on the Son, sitting at the right hand of God. According to the ordering of the Providence of God, the Holy Virgin Theotokos, "sprung from mortal loins", "died conforming to her nature", for the joy of all people, that they also would not be afraid to pass over into Heaven by the same gates of death through which the Heavenly Queen passed, sharing a part with those born on earth.

"It is necessary", says St. John of Damascus, "that which is made of earth also returns to earth, and then ascends into Heaven, having accepted on earth the purest life through the laying aside of the flesh. It is necessary that the body through death, is like gold through fire in the furnace, being cleansed from all the dark and dirty heaviness of clay, arises from the grave incorruptible, pure and shining with the light of immortality".

The day of the death of the Most Holy Theotokos was revealed to Her from the Lord three days prior to Her Dormition through the appearance to her (not far from the Mount of Olives) of the Archangel Gabriel with palm branches in his hands and announcing to her the time of Her departure from the present world. The repose of the Holy Virgin Theotokos was marked by miracles which the Holy Church hymns. For the day of the Dormition of Heavenly Queen, the Apostles were carried on the clouds from the different countries of the earth and are placed in Jerusalem. "It is fitting", sings the Holy Church, "for the eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word to see the Falling Asleep of His Mother according to the flesh", "that they might not only see the Ascension of the Savior from the earth, but also be witnesses to the Translation from earth of her who bore Him. Therefore gathered from all parts by divine power, they came to Zion".

Preparing herself for her departure to heaven, the Most Holy Virgin ordered to beautify her chamber and prepare her bed and to burn incense in the censer and to light candles. She gave instructions about her two tunics, and other things (most of which were the work of her hands), that they be given to the widows and virgins who were living with her; and also she bequeathed her most pure body to be buried near Jerusalem in Gethsemane, between the graves of her righteous parents and St. Joseph her betrothed. All those gathered who filled the chamber crying and sobbing she encouraged and strengthened with words of love and blessing, promise and consolation, and having promised, even after her departure to Her Son and God not to leave them orphans, but to visit and to watch over all, to pray for all and to help all.

Calling everyone to herself, she blessed all, wishing everyone everlasting blessings and works for them in prayer to God. Having prepared to the last minute her blessed exit, the Most Pure Theotokos honorably laid down on her decorated bed, awaiting her departure to Heaven. Suddenly an extraordinary light enveloped the house and the Lord Jesus Christ, seen by all, with an assembly of angels and saints, descends to the bed of the Mother of God and accepts Her most pure soul in His hands. The Most Holy Theotokos, "ineffably with gladness and as if with sweet dreams fell asleep, commits her all pure soul into His hands. And in such a way her soul is being triumphantly led to the heavenly high place, being carried in the arms of the Lord. Having been led through this they with apostolic eyes were vouchsafed to see this most glorious sight".

Then, in the words of the Holy Church, "the heavenly gates were raised, and the Angels sang in praise"; having met the heavenly Queen, "the Cherubim withdrew before Her with gladness and the Seraphim glorified Her with joy". The person of the Mother of God "was sanctified with the goodness of Divinity, and shone with the glory of divine virginity" and from Her body poured out a wonderful sweet fragrance. Kissing the most pure body of the Mother of God with reverence and fear, the holy apostles were sanctified from touching her, and feeling in their hearts the action of the grace of God were filled with spiritual joy. Having begun the burial of the most pure body of the Theotokos, the holy apostles carried the bier on their shoulders while singing the sacred hymns to the place of burial. A broad bright circle of clouds in the likeness of a crown appeared in the sky above those present and accompanied the procession. Sent by the rulers of the Jews, who were inflamed with envy and vengeance to everything that reminded them of Christ, directed those who accompanied the body of Mother of God to upset the majestic procession, but the light bearing cloud surrounded the procession like a wall, and falling upon them a part became blind, and a part were dispersed by the power of God. Having met the solemn procession, one Judaic priest, Athonius, inflamed with evil even furiously rushed the bier of the Mother of God with the intention of plunging it to the ground, but hardly had he touched it with his hands, "when suddenly divine judgment cut off his sacrilegious hands" and the upper part of them were left hanging from the bier. So that no one would be afflicted at her departure from the world, the Most Holy Theotokos, granted, after the prayers of the holy apostles, healing to the blind enemies, and even to the audacious Athonius (who later was baptized). Having placed the most pure body of the Theotokos in a cave, the holy apostles sealed its entrance with a large stone. For three days the holy apostles and other believers did not leave the tomb of Mother of

God. On the third day after the burial of the Mother of God, the Apostle Thomas, who was not present at her death, came to her tomb with cries and tears turned to the tomb in the cave, bitterly grieving that he was not worthy of the last farewell with the Mother of God. With fervent compassion for him the holy apostles opened the cave so that he would be consoled and for him to venerate the remains of the Most Pure Virgin. But, rolling the stone from the tomb, they saw that the body of the Most Pure Theotokos was not in the tomb, and only Her robes laid there, from which poured out a wonderful sweet fragrance, and were convinced that the Mother of life even though "She died but arose to everlasting life like Her Son", and that Her body, "was raised up to Heaven by Jesus Her Son and the Savior of our souls".

The Church always believing that the body of the Most Holy Theotokos was taken up to heaven praises Her so in hymns: "the laws of nature are overcome in you, Pure Virgin, for in birth virginity is protected, and death is betrothed to life: Virgin after bearing child, and alive after death; may You always save Your inheritance, O Theotokos".

That evening the believers were comforted by the appearance of the Theotokos, Whom they have seen standing in the sky, surrounded by the Angelic powers with gleaming unspeakable glory. The short-term stay of the body of the Mother of God in the grave and the resettlement of Her soul and body in Heaven was also the reason for the name of the feast of the Dormition ['falling asleep']. The feast is established for the glorification of the Mother of God and Her Dormition. The Holy Church, singing the glorious Dormition of the Mother of God, invites the believers to approach "the tomb of the Mother of God" and to embrace it "touching it sincerely with the lips, eyes, and brows of the heart". The church glorifies the Mother of God, as more honorable than the Cherubim and without compare more glorious than the Seraphim, Who now, as Queen, stands at the right hand of the Son, and, takes under Her protection the human race, and intercedes for the good heartedness of the Master for it. Together with this event of the Dormition of the Mother of God the Church teaches us, that death is not the destruction of our life, but only transition from earth to Heaven, from corruption and destruction to eternal immortality.

Another reason from the fourth century also comes together for this basic purpose, that is, to overcome the error of the heretics who denied a human nature to the Most Holy Virgin and therefore asserted that even talk about the death of Mother of God is impossible. Such was the error of the Collyridians, heretics of the sixth century. The feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God goes back to the most ancient times of Christianity and in the fourth century is already universal, as is evident from the witness of Gregory of Tours and especially that it is mentioned in all the most ancient calendars. In the fifth century stichera for this feast were written by

Anatolius, Patriarch of Constantinople and in the eighth century two canons attributed to Cosmas of the Holy City and John of Damascus were written. Originally the feast was celebrated on August 18, however that did not prevent its celebration in places on August 15. The common celebration of the feast on August 15 was established by the will of the Emperor Maurice (since the year 582). *From the Bulgakov Handbook, Fr. Eugen Tarris, translator.*

The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great

It happened one day that one of the brethren in the monastery of Abba Elias was tempted. Cast out of the monastery, he went over the mountain to Abba Anthony.

The brother lived near him for a while and then Anthony sent him back to the monastery from which he had been expelled. When the brothers saw him, they cast him out yet again, and he went back to Abba Anthony saying, 'My Father, they will not receive me.' Then the old man sent them a message saying, 'A boat was shipwrecked at sea and lost its cargo; with great difficulty it reached the shore; but you want to throw into the sea that which has found safe harbor on the shore.' When the brothers understood that it was Abba Anthony who had sent them this monk, they received him at once.

Anthony Saying 21 Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Commentary: This saying of Anthony could be summed up with the words 'Don't shoot your wounded.' While we should never come to an easy toleration of sin in our lives, we must remember that the Church is a hospital for the spiritually sick and wounded. People will stumble. This should not surprise us or scandalize us. The question for us is: how should we react to the temptations and stumblings of others? By shunning, by casting out? Thought this is a natural reflex, to avoid the sinner, this is not to be our response. No, so long as there is a desire to do God's will and a repentant heart, there is hope, and we must extend aid and patiently endure one another's failings. Only when someone becomes hardened in sin so that he is a scandal and an enduring bad example to others is exclusion from fellowship the proper treatment of the sinner—and note that the goal of exclusion is to make him ashamed and bring him to repentance, not just to get rid of a sinner.

Fr. Justin Frederick

Upcoming Events 2010

15 August: Dormition of the Theotokos
6 September: Labor Day Picnic, noon to five
26 September: Annual Meeting, 11:30 a.m.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!