

The Censer

SUMMER 2011



Ecumenical Patriarchate-Orthodox Metropolitanate of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia



Protopresbyter Dr. George Dragas

On the Feast of the Dormition

The Feast of the Dormition (Koimesis): The Feast of the Dormition (Falling asleep) of the All-holy Theotokos, celebrated on the 15th of August every year is the greatest among several others which commemorate her Blessed person and life. As such, this Feast marks the completion of her earthly life as her full participation in the salvation and eternal life which the Lord God established for us human beings through Christ. But one may ask. Is this not a contradiction in terms? Does not falling asleep imply death? The answer is Yes and No. Yes, because she truly died. No, because she did not remain in death. The Icon of the Feast of the Falling-asleep of the Theotokos depicts her body resting breathless in a bed while her soul, wrapped in swaddling clothes like a new-born baby, is upheld in the arms of the Risen and glorified Christ who stands behind the bed. This icon is the reversal of the usual icon of the Theotokos which depicts the Virgin holding Christ in her arms. Christ holding the Virgin's soul in his arms indicates her entry into the Kingdom of Heaven which the Incarnate Christ opened up for us through his saving life and work. It indicates in the most concrete way St. Athanasius' well known dictum: "God became human that we (humans) may be made di-

vine." Christ the Savior taking the soul of his Mother to Heaven marks the first resurrection, which Christians experience when they die, thanks to our Lord's redemptive work. The full resurrection of our humanity, i.e. the resurrection of the body, will take place at the second coming of Christ which will be accompanied by the general resurrection and the last judgment of all human beings.

What happened to the body of the Theotokos? The Feast of the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin does not end with her first resurrection, which is the entry of her soul into heaven. There is another mystery also connected with it which refers to her holy body. What happened to the body of the Theotokos? Why there is no tradition in the Christian Church both in East and West that mentions any bodily relics of the all-holy Mother of God, but there are traditions only about her girdle (zone) and garments (estheta and maphorion)? Apparently, according to ancient traditions, her body too was miraculously translated into heaven after its burial in Gethsemane, and was united with her soul. Indeed her tomb was found empty shortly after the burial. This tradition of the translation of the body of the The-

otokos from the tomb to heaven (metathesis or metastasis in Greek, transitus in Latin) is very strong in the Orthodox Church as liturgical practice and many and important patristic texts bear witness, although sources do differ on details.

References about the Falling Asleep in the Lord of the Blessed Virgin Theotokos we can find in the works of John of Thessalonica, Theoteknos of Livias, Modestus of Jerusalem, Andrew of Crete, Germanus of Constantinople, John the Monk of the Old Lavra, John Damascene and Theodore the Studite. To these texts one could go on and add several others from the later Byzantine fathers and ecclesiastical authors of the second millennium, such as Leo the Emperor, John of Euchaita, Isidore of Thessalonica, Philotheos of Constantinople, Gregory Palamas of Thessalonica, Nicholas Cabasilas, Damaskenos Stoudites, etc. These texts point to a common tradition, although one observes differences in the details as scholars argue. They all agree, however, that the tomb of St. Mary in Gethsemane, where the body of the Blessed Virgin Mary was buried by the holy Apostles, was found empty when they opened it three days later. Here is how this 'tradition' is presented by Patriarch Juvenal of Jerusalem to Empress Pulcheria of Constantinople at the time of Chalcedon (AD 451) who asked for the relic of the Theotokos to be transferred from Jerusalem to Constantinople.

"There is nothing in the holy, inspired Scripture about the death of Mary, the holy Theotokos; but we know from an ancient and truest tradition that at the time of her glorious falling asleep, all the holy Apostles, who were traveling the world preaching salvation to the nations, were in an instant lifted up and brought to Jerusalem. As they stood before her, they saw an angelic apparition, and a divine chanting was heard from the higher Powers. And so, in a state of divine and heavenly glory she placed her soul into God's hands in an ineffable way. Her body, which had received God, was carried with angelic and apostolic hymns, was prepared and laid to rest in a coffin in Gethsemane. It was there and for three days that the angelic choruses and hymns continued unceasingly. After three days, however, the angelic hymnody ceased. The Apostles were there, and since one of them—Thomas—who had been absent from the burial, came after the third day and asked to reverence that body which

had received God, they opened the coffin. They could not find anywhere her much-praised body, and since all they could find were her burial swaddling-clothes and the ineffable fragrance that came out of them and filled their bowels, they closed the coffin again. Amazed by the miracle of this mystery, they could only think this: that the One who willed to be incarnated and become human from her in his person, and to be born in the flesh he who is God the Word and Lord of Glory, and who preserved her virginity incorruptible after the birth, he was also the One that was well-pleased to honor her immaculate and spotless body, after her departure from this world, [by endowing it] with incorruptibility and with a transposition (metathesis) [to heaven] before the common, and universal resurrection."

Orthodox and Roman Catholic Doctrine: This is not the place to present in detail all the variable patristic accounts of the falling asleep of the Theotokos and assess their conclusions. In spite of differences, it is clear that they all point to the glorification of the Blessed Theotokos at her death, which marks her entry into Heaven and taking a place closer to Christ than any other heavenly or human being. The mystery of her bodily transposition which is warranted by the empty tomb is a matter of faith and piety and is based on the mystery of the Incarnation. Based on this logic that pertains to the mystery of Christ and the unique place of the Blessed Virgin Theotokos in it, it is also logical to assume that she too has experienced the resurrection of the body as a unique anticipation of the general resurrection of all humanity in the end of time. In spite of this, the Orthodox Church has not accepted the Roman Catholic dogma of the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, which was promulgated by Pope Pius XII on 1 November 1950 through his Bull *Munificentissimus Deus*. The reasons for this rejection have been both theological and historical. The Roman Catholic Dogma of the Assumption is based on the earlier Marian dogma of the Immaculate Conception (that the Virgin was born immaculate, free from original sin), which was promulgated by Pope Pius IX on 8 December 1854 through his Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*. In effect this meant that being sinless she could not and did not die but was assumed into heaven both in body and soul. For the Orthodox these Roman Catholic Marian Dogmas are rather rationalizations of piety and are not clearly warranted in the Holy



The Tomb of Theotokos in Gethsemane, Jerusalem



The entrance of the Church in Gethsemane

Fr. George Dragas



Protopresbyter George Dion. Dragas, Ph.D., D.D. (Hon.), is Professor of Patrology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts

Tradition of the Church. Orthodox piety and faith preserves the mystery of the blessed Theotokos along with the mystery of Christ the Incarnate God and Lord of Glory. The festal hymn of the Dormition proclaims this most clearly: "In giving birth you kept your virginity. In falling asleep you did not abandon the world, O Mother of God. You passed over into life, for you are the Mother of Life, and by your intercessions you deliver our souls from death."

Theotokos Girl's Orphanage

Kolkata, India



Housing one hundred residents (with a capacity for 200 residents), ranging in age from toddlers to college-aged women, the Theotokos Girls' Hostel provides a full range of services to young women during their years of growth. The hostel's staff is facing what has come to be known as "the girl problem" in India. Female babies are much more likely to be aborted in India. An estimated 4 - 12 million girls have been aborted using "selective abortions" in the past three decades in India (NYT, 2011).

Adolescent girls often resort to begging, abusive forms of labor, or prostitution to make a living. With an education, the prospects for a young woman are much brighter. The PSOC* seeks to ameliorate the struggles of young women who are orphaned and abandoned at a young age. Through the generous donations of international supporters, many of our high school graduates have obtained acceptance from the most rigorous Universities in the city. In the future, some of the girls want to take on administrative and teaching positions within the PSOC, helping meet the dream of sustainability. Others will obtain jobs in the private and public sectors, and will be well equipped to pursue each of their personal goals.

*Philanthropic Society of the Orthodox Church (Kolkata, India)



News from Indonesia



EAST JAVA

In June, Fr. Timotheos celebrated the Divine Liturgy in Jember, East Java. In Jember there is a new small Orthodox Community which needs to build a small chapel.



SUMATRA

In June, Fr. Chrysostomos baptized 19 Catechumens in Lae Rias, Sumatra

BOYOLALI

At the end of July Fr. Methodios baptized four Catechumens in Boyolali, Central Java.



Fr. Methodios visited the small Orthodox Community in Perengan, Central Java and celebrated the service of Vespers. The Orthodox Community needs to build a small chapel.

News from Philippines



Photos from the Orthodox Community in Sorsogon, Philippines. The Orthodox Community needs to buy land and to build a Church.



The feast of Dormition of the Theotokos in Boyolali, Central Java.



The feast of Dormition of the Theotokos in Singapore.



The feast of Dormition of the Theotokos in Hong Kong.



704 Universal Trade Center, 3 Arbuthnot Road, Central Hong Kong

Tel: (+852) 25738328 Fax: (+852) 25738379

Email: office@omhksea.org Website: www.omhksea.org