

THE FAST OF THE THEOTOKOS

The first two weeks in August in the Byzantine tradition are set aside as a time of special observance called the Fast of the Theotokos. As with other fasting seasons during the year, this Fast is kept in preparation for the observance of a Great Feast. As the Great Fast prepares for the celebration of Pascha and Pentecost and the Advent Fast anticipates the feasts of Christmas and Theophany, this fast centers around the celebration of the Great Feasts of the Transfiguration of Christ (August 6) and the Dormition of the Theotokos (August 15).

Looking at these feasts we see why the Church highlights this time as a special season of celebration. Christmas and Theophany proclaim the presence of Christ in the world, His historic coming in the flesh. Easter and Pentecost celebrate the fulfilled purpose of His coming: the presence of the Holy Spirit by the power of Christ's resurrection. The feasts of the Transfiguration and Dormition show us how this resurrection life will be realized for us in human flesh: in the glorification of our bodies after the model of the transfigured Christ, a glorification already bestowed upon the Theotokos because of her unique role in the salvation of humanity.

When Christ was on the mountain, as the gospels record, His body participated in the glorification of His spirit: "... *His face changed its appearance and even His clothes became dazzling white*" (Luke 9:29). The same was true at His resurrection. His body did remain in the grave, but was transformed by the glory of His risen life.

The New Testament continually proclaims that we too will be raised at the end of history as Christ was raised that first Pascha:

"... *Christ the first fruits and then, at His coming, all those who belong to Him*" (1 Corinthians 15:23). The victory which death seems to have over us will be annulled. We shall be remade as we were meant to be: sharers in the glory of God.

While Scripture is constant in affirming the resurrection, it does not explain what the risen life will be like. St. John says that we simply don't know what awaits us, but that we shall be in such a close relationship with the Lord that "... *we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is*" (1 John 3:2). Our bodies, too, will be transfigured like Christ's, remade "*according to the pattern of His glorified body*" (Philippians 3:21). Thus our union with God in Christ will be so profound and complete that it will totally renew and recreate us in a way we cannot now begin to envision.

FEASTS OF GLORY

It is this physical glorification which we celebrate in the two Great Feasts of August. On the feast of the Transfiguration we look on the glorified body of Christ, the model of our future risen bodies. On the feast of the Dormition we celebrate Mary's glorification and realize that already one of our race share in that transfiguration which awaits us all in the kingdom to come.

According to the ancient Tradition of the Church, Mary died and was buried in the garden of Gethsemane, where Christ had prayed after the Last Supper. When her tomb was reopened soon after, it was found to be empty, a sign which the Church took to mean that the Lord had honored the body in which He had taken flesh by translating it incorrupt to glory before the universal resurrection of the dead.

Thus Mary already shares in the glory which awaits us all after Christ's second coming.

This process of glorification we call in the Eastern tradition **deification**, the "*becoming partakers in the divine nature*" (2 Peter 1:4) which is the goal of our life in Christ. "*God became man,*" the Fathers often said, "*so that man might become God*". The feasts of the Transfiguration and Dormition point out to us what the fulness of that divinization actually means: the transfiguration of our physical bodies that they too might share in the divine nature, as we are "*transformed from glory to glory into His very image*" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

rites of the season

As with the Church's other festal seasons, there are several special observances associated with this time of celebration:

- **Water Blessing** — On August 1 a special service to the Theotokos is held to begin the season. Water is blessed, a frequent sign of the transfiguration in Christ. As Christ (the cross) comes in contact with the water, it is transformed into a sign of His presence. We drink this water in anticipation of our complete transformation which we are recalling in these days. Obtain some of this water from church and keep it in your icon corner. Drink some daily during this fast and keep it for blessing the home on any occasion.
- **Paraklisis Service** — While we are celebrating this transformation, we know that as individuals we have a long way to go for that process to be complete. And so on each weekday of this fast, the Church serves Paraklisis, asking the

Mother of God to intercede for us in furthering our transfiguration: *“Quiet the storms within me, dispelling the surge of depression.”* we pray. *“Pacify the rise of my passions and quiet the stormy turbulence of my sins, you who have given birth to the merciful Lord”.* Attend the Paraklisis service in church as often as it is offered during these days. At other times you may choose to add an ode from the canon of the service to your daily prayers. The text of this prayer is found in “Publican's Prayer Book”.

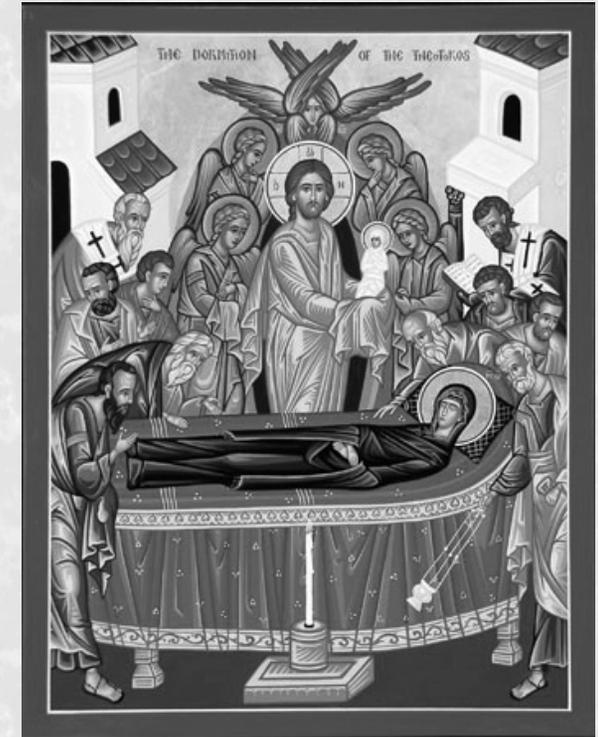
■ *Feast of the Transfiguration (August 6 – one of the Twelve Great Feasts)* — This feast, popularly called the ‘Feast of the Lord’ in the Middle East, celebrates the physical glorification of the body of Christ as described above. Traditionally it is the name day of all men, especially those whose names are not commemorated at other times on the Church calendar. The observance of this feast is highlighted by the **Blessing of Grapes**, another hint of the transformation awaiting us. The grape is a recognized symbol of transfiguration in Christian tradition. As the prayer of blessing reminds us, it is the grape which is transformed into wine and then, at the Divine Liturgy, into the blood of Christ. As we eat these blessed grapes, we are reminded once more of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit within us, leading us from one step of deification to another.

■ *Feast of the Dormition (August 15 – one of the Twelve Great Feasts)* — This feast, the feast of the Lady, recalls the physical glorification of Mary as she shares in the resurrection life of her Son. In some

Byzantine Churches herbs and flowers are blessed on this day, recalling the tradition that sweet fragrance filled the empty tomb of Mary when it was first opened. Use the flowers you receive in church in your icon corner to adorn the icon of the Theotokos whose glorification we are celebrating.

Since the liturgical celebration of this period so clearly points to our final transfiguration, the season offers a particular reminder to us of our call to cooperate with the Holy Spirit within us in furthering our deification. By observing the traditional practices of fasting seasons — increased prayer, especially attendance at the Paraklisis service, and the observance of a personal rule of fasting and sharing of earthly goods — we remind ourselves of that invitation ever ours to draw closer to the One who calls us to share His life and glory.

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