



*The Fast of the Theotokos in the Home*





## *Fast of the Theotokos*

OUR CHURCH YEAR alternates between feasts and fasts. There are two fast days in most weeks – Wednesdays and Fridays – as well as four fasting seasons (before the Nativity, Pascha, Ss. Peter and Paul and the Dormition of the Theotokos). Those who observe all these fasts are keeping approximately one-third of the year as days of fasting.

As we know, the Great Fast and the Great Week before Pascha are the most diligently observed fasts in the Church. After that, the most thoroughly kept fast is that before the Dormition, which in our Tradition lasts from August 1 through August 14. Like the Great Fast, the Dormition Fast has special services to set this time apart. In our Church an intercession service to the Mother of God, the Paraclisis, is held nightly.

This Fast also includes the Great Feast of the Transfiguration of Christ which is kept from August 6 to 13. This feast celebrates Christ as the radiant Light of the Father's glory while in the Dormition we see Christ, who trampled down Death by His death, take His Mother into the light of His resurrection. This period is so rich in opportunities for prayer and worship that it has traditionally been called our "Summer Pascha."

During the fasts we make a concerted effort to put God first in our lives through increased *prayer*. We seek to serve our neighbor through more intense *almsgiving*, sharing our time as well as our resources. Through *fasting* we try to distance ourselves from self-indulgence and open more of ourselves to God and to others.

The Fast of the Theotokos gives us several opportunities for worship: the Great Feasts of the Transfiguration and the Dormition as well as

the Paraclisis Service. At home, prominently displaying an icon of the Theotokos with a lit candle and flowers daily helps to keep the season in our minds. Praying part of the Paraclisis service every day, especially when there is no service to attend, is another way of observing this fast.

Use the following prayers and reflections every day, as much as you are able. Family meal times are considered the most accessible time to read and discuss the day's idea. Living out the season day by day is particularly important in families with children, who always need frequent reinforcement of any action or idea we wish to convey.

The hands-on activities included for use with children involve making posters out of two symbols associated with the season: grapes (blessed on the Transfiguration) and flowers (appropriate for the Dormition). Obtain a packet of multi-colored construction paper and markers before the fast begins. Encourage the children to design their own fruits and flowers but know that the discussions and prayers led by their parents will have the most lasting effect making this a memorable season in your family.

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*



## *August 1- Procession with the Cross*

Today we begin the Fast of the Theotokos, fourteen days of fasting which conclude with the Feast of her Dormition on August 15. Fasting is something Eastern Christians do regularly throughout the year. Most Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days, with a few exceptions. In the Byzantine Churches there are also four longer fasts, generally one in each season, and ending with a feast (before the Nativity, Pascha, Ss. Peter and Paul and the Dormition of the Theotokos).

Our main fasting practices are those mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and forgiveness. Committed Christians do these things all year long; they are not limited to one or another time of the year. During fasting seasons we simply do them to a greater degree.

During our four fasting seasons there are special Church services held to keep us focused on our Christian calling to put God first in our lives. In some parishes these services are held every day; in others they may be served once or twice a week. Every day we can make some of the prayers of this season part of our daily prayers at home.

The Fast of the Theotokos includes several such services. The Fast begins on August 1 with a special procession with the life-giving cross and a blessing of water. When Constantinople was the capitol of a Christian empire, it was the custom to carry the relic of the Holy Cross throughout the city every day of the Fast. In some parishes, a cross is taken from house to house in these days. In some places this season is a time of pilgrimage to a Marian shrine (“temple”).

Holy Water is blessed on August 1 in a special service called the Lesser Blessing of Water. This is an intercession service asking for the prayers of the Holy Virgin, particularly appropriate at the start of this Fast.

On most other days of the Fast a Paraclysis Service to the Theotokos is offered. Finally, this season includes the Great Feast of the Holy Transfiguration of Christ, August 6, which is celebrated until August 13.

- If you have not already done so, discuss this season in the family and decide how you will observe it, and which services you will attend.
- Place a cross in a place of honor for these fourteen days. Adorn it with candles and flowers, and pray before it daily.
- Sprinkle every room with holy water and drink some every day at your prayers during this Fast.
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper flowers for this season, with a petal for each day. For example make three flowers with five petals each. Each day let them write on one petal what they remember most about your reading and discussion on that day.
- Pray these verses to the Theotokos from the Lesser Blessing of Water:
  - O Virgin who was greeted with the Angel’s “Hail!” and gave birth to the Life-giver Himself, your Creator, save those who magnify you.
  - We sing of your Son, O Theotokos, and cry aloud: from all adversities save your servants, O Immaculate.
  - All my hope I place in you, O Theotokos; keep me by your intercessions.
  - Your Temple, O Theotokos, was shown forth as a priceless remedy for our ills – the consolation of our wounded souls.

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*



## *August 2- The Paraclisis*

One important way we observe the Fast of the Theotokos is by praying the Paraclisis, or Service of Intercession, to the Holy Virgin. While we sing the Memorial Service to pray for the departed, we chant a Paraclisis Service to pray for the living.

The most common Paraclisis Service invokes the help of the Theotokos, but this service may be sung to other saints as well. In a Paraclisis we ask the Theotokos or another saint to intercede with Christ for healing, guidance, or strength in any circumstance of life: in sickness or any need, when facing temptation or discouragement, or in the wake of any tragedy. In such times we cherish our connection with the Communion of Saints and ask the saints to pray with and for us to the Lord.

A Paraclisis Service resembles Orthros with an opening psalm, troparia, litanies, Gospel reading and canon. After each ode of the canon a special verse is sung; in a Paraclisis to the Theotokos it is: “Deliver your servants from all danger, O Theotokos, for to you, after God, we flee for shelter. You are our impregnable fortress, our intercessor.”

This service may be held most evenings during the Fast, using two canons on alternating days. The “Small Canon,” which is older, is often used at other times of the year whenever we wish to pray for our needs or the needs of others. The “Great Canon,” written by exiled Byzantine Emperor Theodore II in the thirteenth century, is only sung during the Fast of the Theotokos.

Another unique feature of the Paraclisis Service is a Megalynarion: a hymn of several verses sung while the priest incenses the church. This hymn is patterned after the verse to the Theotokos, “It is truly meet” and takes the place of the Great Doxology in Orthros.

In some parishes a Paraclisis to the Theotokos is sung almost every evening during the Fast. In other communities this service is held once or twice a week during these days. In some places individual families “take turns” sponsoring this service, providing flowers for the icon of the Theotokos, and hosting a coffee hour at its conclusion. There are parishes that hold a Paraclisis Service once a week or once a month throughout the year.

- Record the Paraclisis Service as conducted in your parish. Use the recording to learn how to chant this service.
- Play the “English Paraclisis Service” available on YouTube to hear another setting of this service.
- As a family make a list of those for whom you wish to pray during this Fast. Include anyone burdened by sickness, grief, or any need.
- Help children design a paper flower on what they learned about the Paraclisis Service. “Petals” might include “Paraclisis,” “Prayer for people in need,” and “Megalynarion.”
- Pray this opening troparion to the Theotokos from the Paraclisis Service:
  - To the Mother of God let us poor sinners run now diligently \* and fall down before her in repentance. \* Let us cry out from the depth of our souls: \* O Lady, in your compassion come to our aid! \* Make haste, for we are perishing \* under the multitude of our sins. \* Do not turn away your servants empty-handed, \* for you are our only hope.

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*



## *August 3- The Theotokos*

Every day our Church remembers one or more of its saints. And every day it asks the saints to pray to God for us, to add their prayers to ours as intercessors before the Lord. As proven members of the heavenly court, the saints are effective advocates for us before the Almighty.

No other saint is as powerful an intercessor with God as the Theotokos, the one whom He chose and pre-ordained to be the mother of the incarnate Lord. “Blessed among women,” she has been called the “new Eve,” reversing by her cooperation with God’s plan the desire for independence of the first Eve. As such she became the channel through whom our salvation came to be.

St Irenaeus of Lyons described it this way: *“Just as Eve, the wife of Adam yet still a virgin, became by her disobedience the cause of death for herself and the whole human race, so Mary too – espoused, yet a virgin – became by her obedience the cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race”* (Against Heresies III, 32, 1).

Little wonder that believers turn to her, confident that her prayers are effective before her Son.

The Paraclisis Service is a long series of hymns asking for the intercession of the Theotokos, often referring to her as “mediatrix,” an intermediary between humans and God. She was an intermediary in the history of salvation, bringing Christ into the world. She is now an intermediary, offering our prayers with her own for the needs of the Christian people. As St. Ephrem the Syrian said, *“After the Mediator, you are the mediatrix of the whole world.”*

Because He alone shares both the divine nature of God and our own human nature, Christ is by nature the mediator between God and man. We need no one else to bring humanity to the Father – that has been accomplished in Christ, who alone is both God and man.

Because of Christ we can approach God as Our Father, confident of His love for us. At the same time we can enlist the aid of the His Mother in our quest for God’s blessing and His saving care. As we pray in one of the hymns of the First Hour, “a Mother’s prayer is a powerful means of obtaining the Master’s favor.”

- The Holy Virgin is called “the new Eve” because of her obedience to God’s plan of salvation, expressed in her willingness to give birth to Christ. Read the story of her acceptance at the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38) and reflect on times that God has asked for your obedience in your life.
- Reflect on times in your life that you sought the help of a family member, friend, co-worker, etc. in securing a favor from someone. Compare this to asking the Theotokos and the saints to intercede for us.
- Help children design a paper flower on what they learned about the Theotokos. “Petals” might include “Intercessor,” “Blessed among women,” “the new Eve,” and “Mediatrix.”
- Pray the kondakion to the Theotokos sung in the Paraclisis Service and at the Divine Liturgy often through the year:
  - O never-failing protectress of Christians \* and their ever-present intercessor before the Creator: \* despise not the petitions of us sinners \* but in your goodness extend your help to us \* who call upon you with confidence. \* Hasten, O Mother of God, to intercede for us, \* for you have always protected those who honor you.

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*



## *August 4- Why Is It "Truly Meet"?*

Every service in our Church includes several mentions of the Mother of God. Practically every litany and every set of hymns concludes with a remembrance of the Theotokos. A few of these hymns have been found in manuscripts as old as the second century AD. Perhaps the most often heard is the following:

It is truly meet to bless you, O Theotokos – ever blessed and all blameless and the Mother of our God. More honorable than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim. Without defilement you gave birth to God the Word. You are truly Theotokos – you do we exalt!

When we remember the Holy Virgin, we are in fact fulfilling the prophecy that she herself made, according to St Luke's Gospel. In her canticle praising God for His goodness to her, she says *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, for He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; and behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed"* (Lk 1:47, 48).

In these praises we often refer to the Theotokos as "entirely spotless" or "all-pure." The Church Fathers, especially St. Gregory the Theologian and St. John of Damascus, taught that, because Mary had a unique place in the divine plan, God prepared her for becoming Theotokos by purifying her in advance. To carry the Son of God in her womb required that she be made pure to receive Him.

In Byzantine Churches the Great Feasts of Mary's Nativity (Sept. 8) and her Entrance into the Temple (Nov. 21) both celebrate how God continually prepared her for her role as Theotokos. Because of this

purification – worked by God in a hidden mystery – we celebrate her perfect holiness. In an absolute and unqualified way she is truly "full of grace."

This is why we can sing – as we do on the Feast of her Entrance into the Temple: "The most pure Temple of our Savior, his radiant Bridal Chamber, enters today into the temple of the Lord, ***bringing with her the grace of the Holy Spirit.***"

The Gospel story of the Visitation (Luke 1:39-56) tells how, "*when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit*" (v. 41). The unborn child, touched by God in the womb, would become John the Baptist, of whom Christ said: "*among those born of women there is no greater prophet than John the Baptist*" (Lk 7:28).

No wonder that the Holy Virgin and John the Baptist flank Christ on the icon screen and in the icons called "the Deisis." Touched by God in advance of their missions, though in different ways, they lead us in magnifying the Lord, both in worship and in life.

- When the Holy Virgin learned that her cousin Elizabeth was due to have a child, she went to assist Elizabeth in the process. It was there that Mary uttered her canticle of praise. Read the story of that visit in Luke 1:39-56.
- Call her "blessed" in a non-verbal way: keep a candle lit before her icon and adorn it with flowers and/or a decorative towel (rushnik).
- Help children design a paper flower on what they learned about the Theotokos. "Petals" might include "It is truly meet," "Savior's Temple," "All-Pure," "Purified in Advance," and "Blessed Mother of God."
- Pray the hymn to the Theotokos "It is truly meet."

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*



## *August 5 - The Transfiguration*

The first of the two Great Feasts we celebrate this month is the Holy Transfiguration of Christ, commemorated on August 6. As with every observance in our Church, this feast begins the evening before (this evening) with Vespers.

The Transfiguration of Christ is described in three of the Gospels. They tell how the Lord Jesus took His closest disciples, Peter, James and John apart, on a mountain. There He *“was transfigured before them; his face shining as the sun, and his garments became white as the light”* (Matthew 17:2), *“such as no launderer on earth can whiten them”* (Mark 9:3).

For a moment the apostles saw Christ as He really was, radiant with the light of God – a brilliance concealed from everyone during His earthly life. This image of light was an early and frequently-used way of illustrating the mystery of God. Church Fathers, like St. Ephrem the Syrian, compared the Holy Trinity to the sun. They described Christ as the light and the Holy Spirit as the heat originating from the sun (the Father).

This image was enshrined in the Nicene Creed where Christ is described as *“begotten of the Father from all ages: Light from Light.”* Even older is the depiction of Christ in our vesper hymn as the *“Radiant Light”* of the Father’s glory. At the Transfiguration we see that this is not merely an image thought up by poetic minds, but a concrete portrayal of Christ.

The apostles experienced another sign of God’s presence: *“a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were fearful as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!’”* (Luke 9:34, 35).

Why were these apostles given a glimpse of Christ’s glory at this time? The Gospels tell us it was in preparation for the events of Christ’s passion. Christ tells the disciples, *“Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead”* (Mt 17: 9). The Gospels observe that the apostles did not know what *“rising from the dead”* might mean. Only later would they realize what they had seen: the glory of the Son of God.

- Be sure to attend Great Vespers and/or the Divine Liturgy for this feast, one of the most important in our Church year.
- Read the Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration: Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-8 and Luke 9:28-36.
- Explore the icon of the Transfiguration, explained on most Greek Catholic and Orthodox Church web sites. There is also a thorough explanation at <http://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2012/08/an-interpretation-of-icon-of.html>.
- Help children design a paper flower or a cluster of grapes on what they learned about the Transfiguration. “Petals” might include “Transfiguration,” “Shining Face,” “Garments White as Light,” “My Beloved Son,” and “Peter, James and John.”
- Pray the troparion of the feast:
  - You were transfigured on the mountain, O Christ God, \* showing Your disciples as much of Your glory as they could hold. \* Let Your eternal light shine also upon us sinners \* through the prayers of the Mother of God. \* O Giver of light, glory to You!

*Glory to Your Holy Transfiguration, O Lord!*



## August 6 - The Transfiguration 99

There are several aspects of Christ's Transfiguration that show Him fulfilling the Old Testament:

1 – Two most important figures of the Old Testament appear with Jesus: Moses, the Lawgiver, and Elijah, the greatest of the Prophets. They represent the entire experience of Israel which is completed in Christ. The Fathers saw the verse of the prophets fulfilled here: *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord"* (Malachi 4:5).

2 – In Luke we read that Moses and Elijah *"appeared in glory and spoke of [Jesus'] exodus which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem"* (Luke 9:31). They point to Christ's death and resurrection as an exodus, recalling the Israelites' departure from Egypt. He would pass *"from death to life and from earth to heaven,"* our New Passover.

3 – Peter, *"not knowing what he said"* (Luke 9:33) asks Jesus to build *"booths"* for Him, Moses and Elijah. In the autumn Jews celebrate a harvest festival, the Feast of Succoth (*"Booths"* or *"Tabernacles"*). They would erect shelters in the fields and live in them while they harvested their crops. Later this feast commemorated the Exodus from Egypt and these shelters were given a new meaning: *"...every native Israelite among you shall dwell in booths, that your descendants may realize that, when I led the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, I made them dwell in booths"* (Lev 23:42-43). And so Peter's *"three booths"* are another allusion to the Passover.

4 – Over the centuries the Jews began to think of the Feast of Tabernacles as a foretaste of the messianic age, when *"my people will live in a peaceful country, in secure dwellings and quiet resting places"* (Is 32:18). Thus Jews decorate these booths with branches of palm, myrtle and willows, eating and sleeping in them the week of the feast. At the end of their morning service for this feast there is a procession when they wave these branches and sing *hosanna* in response to supplications. The messianic age, we believe, was ushered in with just such a procession. We call it Palm Sunday.

Our Feast of the Transfiguration also includes a harvest: grapes in the Mediterranean area and other fruits in more northern regions. Grapes are especially significant on this feast because the grape is a sign of transfiguration. The grape may become wine, and wine may be transfigured into the blood of Christ at the Divine Liturgy, transfiguring us in turn.

- Prepare a basket of grapes to be blessed after the Liturgy. Include as many varieties as are available. Share them with friends who were unable to attend the Liturgy.
- Include (blessed) grapes in your meals today and throughout this feast (It lasts until August 13).
- Place three candles (one white and two colored) before an icon of the feast or of Christ to represent the Lord, Moses and Elijah.
- Help children design a paper flower or a cluster of grapes on what they learned about the Transfiguration. "Petals" might include "Moses," "Elijah," "Booths," and "Grapes."
- Pray the kondakion of the feast:
  - On the mountain You were transfigured, O Christ our God, \* and Your disciples beheld as much of Your glory as they could hold \* so that when they would see You crucified \* they would know that You suffered willingly \* and would proclaim to the world that You are verily the Splendor of the Father.

*Glory to Your Holy Transfiguration, O Lord!*



## August 7 - In God's Image

At Christ's Holy Transfiguration His divine glory, concealed in His humanity, was glimpsed by His disciples Peter, James and John. They saw Christ as a man transfigured by the divine light within Him. His completely human body reflected His completely divine spirit. His transfiguration did not add anything to Him. He was not changed, but manifested. He was, in fact, revealing humanity as it was meant to be: reflecting the image of God.

The original purpose of humanity was that we reflect the image of God in creation, as we read in the book of Genesis: *"God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...' So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them"* (Genesis 1:26, 27).

Some of the Fathers, commenting on this passage, distinguished between "image" and "likeness." "Image," they said, refers to the qualities in our nature that distinguish us from other beings, such as the ability to reason and to love.

Others have noted that our capacity for communion is the greatest sign that we are in God's image. We are created to complement one another ("male and female"), made to be in a relationship with God and with others. In that way we reflect God the Holy Trinity, who is in the eternal relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

"Likeness," these Fathers taught, refers to the resemblance to God's character: His purity and holiness. *"You shall be perfect,"* the Lord Jesus told His disciples, *"just as your Father in heaven is perfect"* (Mt

5:48). We reflect a likeness to God when we manifest what St Paul calls *"the fruit of the Spirit"* – love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22, 23). We not only "look like" God (image), we "act like" Him ("likeness").

*"You will be like God,"* the Tempter told Adam (Gen 3:5) – not by remaining in a communion of love with God, but by following the temptation to be independent. As a result, Genesis teaches, the image of God in us was scarred, our likeness to God was lost, and there was nothing we could do about it. Only God could restore in us the likeness which had been lost.

That likeness was manifested in Christ at His transfiguration. As St. Gregory Palamas teaches, "Through the fall, our nature was stripped of divine illumination and glory. But the Word of God had pity on our disfigurement. In His compassion He took our nature upon Himself, and on Tabor He manifested it to His chosen disciples, clothed most brilliantly once again. He shows what we once were, and what we shall become through Him in the age to come if we choose to live our present life as far as possible in accord with His ways."

- Read the apostle's reminiscence of the Transfiguration in 2 Peter 1:16-18.
- Read this teaching from an elder in our Tradition: "All men are made in God's image; but to be in His likeness is granted only to those who through great love have brought their own freedom into subjection to God." How does this apply to family life?
- Help children design a paper flower or a cluster of grapes on what they learned about our nature in God. "Petals" might include "Image," "Made like God," "Likeness" or "Act like God."
- Pray the following verse for this feast:
  - You have put on Adam completely, O Christ; and changing his once darkened nature, You filled it with Light, divinizing it as Your countenance was transfigured.

*Glory to Your Holy Transfiguration, O Lord!*



## *August 8 - Theosis*

By joining His divinity to our humanity in the Incarnation, the Son of God became the Perfect Man in continual communion with the Father. At His Transfiguration Jesus' relationship with His Father would be manifested in His flesh as Light.

What Christ is by nature, His followers are meant to be by grace. The Church Fathers understood that the purpose of Christ's coming in the flesh was to restore that communion with God which constitutes His likeness in us. The Church Fathers expressed it in a startling way: "God became human so that humans might become divine."

We are meant to be transfigured by our union with God: so completely joined to God "that we may become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). The Fathers called this total participation in Christ *Theosis*, or deification.

Our transformation begins when we "put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27), and have the Spirit of God dwelling in us (see 1 Corinthians 2:12 and 3:16) in baptism. If this life matures in us, our actions may come to reflect God's purity and holiness in us.

It may take years of struggle for a believer to fully mature as a partaker of the divine nature, but the journey of *theosis* has begun, meant to lead us to eternal life. "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor 3:18).

We see in the lives of some saints that this union has matured in remarkable ways. Some of them have been physically transformed, reflecting in their bodies the life of their spirits within them. They are the "proof" that the life in Christ can transform those who live it, transfiguring our humanity even here on earth.

- Read 1 Jn 3:2, St. John's image of eternal life. How might the Transfiguration have colored that image?
- Read Philippians 3:20-21 which speaks of the transformation of our bodies in Christ.
- The story of the Fall reminds us that, while God wants us to be in union with Him, we often want to replace Him. Encourage family members to learn the following verse then render it as a visual (poster, hanging, screen saver, etc.).  
Adam of old was deceived:  
Wanting to be God, he failed to be God.  
God becomes man, so that He may make Adam god.
- Help children design a paper flower or a cluster of grapes on what they learned about theosis. "Petals" might include "Theosis," "Deification," "Putting on Christ" or "Being transformed."
- Pray the following verses for this feast:
  - Coming as God and man You dwelt among us, \* and You mystically illumined the world with a multitude of wonders. \* With the blazing glory of Your Godhead \* You shone forth supremely on Tabor Your unapproachable light.
  - The Sun of glory has appeared! \* Going up to Tabor He has blazed forth the rays of the Godhead on those in darkness. \* Let us honor His light-bearing coming.

*Glory to Your Holy Transfiguration, O Lord!*



## *August 9 – Mother of the Light*

During this week our Church continues to celebrate the Feast of the Holy Transfiguration of Christ. At the same time it is also focusing on the Theotokos, by chanting the Paraclisis Service in preparation for the feast of her Dormition. One title of the Holy Virgin repeated during this service bridges these two observances: we call her the Mother of the Light.

We hear this title even more frequently in our Church. At every Orthros service the ninth ode of the canon is introduced with these words: “Let us magnify with hymns the Theotokos, the Mother of Light” – that Light, of course, is Christ.

The Lord Himself gave us this image of Himself: “*I am the light of the world,*” He told the Pharisees. “*He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life*” (Jn 8:12). At the Transfiguration His divine light, concealed by His humanity, was manifested graphically: “*His face shone like that he sun, and His clothes became as white as the light*” (Mt 17:2).

When Christ revealed Himself to St Paul on the road to Damascus it was in “*a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me*” (Acts 26:7). And so the apostles saw with their own eyes that Christ was “Light from Light.” Ever since, Light has been the main image of Christ in the worship of the Church.

Calling Mary “Theotokos” and “Mother of the Light” focuses on the reason the Church honors her above all. It is because of her role in the

incarnation of Christ that she is “more honorable than the cherubim” and “more lofty than the heavens.” This is why it is rare to see Mary shown in icons without Christ, either in her womb or on her arm. She is, more than anything else, the one who made the incarnation possible by her consent.

- Read Mt 5:14, where Christ proclaims that His followers are “the light of the world.” Reflect on any Christians who you think have been a light to the world.
- What opportunities do you have to shine light on those in darkness? How can you best do so?
- Help children design a paper flower on what they learned about this theme. “Petals” might include “Light,” “Brighter than the sun,” or “Mother of the Light.”
- Pray the following verses for this feast from the Great Paraclisis:

My humble soul is troubled by a rising storms of afflictions and woes; and clouds of misfortunes overcome me, bringing darkness to my heart, O Bride of God. But since you art the Mother of the Divine and Eternal Light, shine your gladsome light and illumine me. (*Ode 1*)

The storm clouds of grievous sorrows and distress shroud my unfortunate heart and soul in affliction, and have filled me with their gloom, O Virgin. Yet, since you brought forth the Light Unapproachable, be quick to drive them far from me with the breeze of your holy entreaties, O Maiden. (*Ode 6*)

Illumine my way, for I am darkened by the night of many sins, O Theotokos. You brought forth the Light, and are truly the blameless and undefiled vessel of light; hence with love do I praise you (*Ode 7*).

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*



## *August 10 – Theotokos the Healer*

The Paraclisis Services contain frequent mentions of afflictions, woes, troubles and misfortunes. This should not surprise us, because both services were composed in times of trial.

The Small Canon was written by a monk of the Studion monastery in Constantinople named Theosterictos, in the ninth century. The city was in the midst of the iconoclastic controversy when many, often with imperial support, rejected the veneration of icons. The Studion was the most important monastery in Constantinople and its monks were frequently harassed and even exiled a number of times for their defense of icons.

The Great Canon was the work of Byzantine Emperor Theodore II in the thirteenth century. In 1204 Western Crusaders had sacked Constantinople and installed Latins as emperor and patriarch. The Byzantine rulers were exiled to Nicaea and it is there that Theodore II succeeded to his throne. The Byzantines did not recapture Constantinople until 1261, a few years after Theodore's death.

The Church prays these services today interceding for people in various kinds of trials, both physical and spiritual. We often pray for the sick, asking the Holy Virgin's intercession for their healing as one of the titles for the Theotokos popular in the Christian East is "the Healer" (Giatrissa).

There are shrines to the Holy Virgin all over the world celebrating her intercession for the healing of the sick, with numerous reports of unexplainable cures received. An icon at one such shrine, in Moscow's Alexeev Monastery, depicts the Holy Virgin standing over the bed of a sick man. According to St. Dimitri of Rostov, a certain chanter had

developed a cancerous growth on his tongue which immobilized him from the pain. He prayed to the Theotokos, who appeared to him and completely healed him. He immediately got up from bed, went to church and took his place on the kliros to the amazement of all.

- Compile a list of any sick relatives or friends for whom you will pray at the Paraclisis Service and ask the priest to remember them. Keep a copy of your list and remember them daily in your own prayers as well.
- Reflect on the experience of serious illness. A person suffering from a specific condition, such as cancer, may also experience loneliness, depression, anxiety, or family trials. Pray for healing of these ailments as well.
- Help children design and make (or choose and purchase) cards for those whom you are commemorating.
- Pray the following verses for the sick from the Small Paraclisis in the name of the sick you have commemorated:

O you who alone are Theotokos \* and Mother of the Good One, \* Take away from me all disease: disease of my soul and of my body \* and make me worthy of God's assistance and your care. (*Ode 1*)

I am struck down by sickness \* and by distressing passions. \* I request your aid, O pure Virgin: \* hurry and help me now, for I know well that you are \* a ready treasure of healings \* perfect and abundant, O all-blameless one. (*Ode 3*)

Behold, now, how ill I am and sick in bed! \* There is no healing for my sick body! \* I come to you and implore your great mercy \* for you gave birth to the Savior of all the world. \* Deliver me from my disease, \* raising me from this bed of infirmity. (*Ode 6*)

A flow of healings \* you pour upon those who hymn you \* with assurance, O all spotless Virgin, \* praising and exalting \* your birth-giving forever. (*Ode 8*)

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*



## *August 11 – Help with Our Passions*

In several hymns in the Paraclisis Service we pray that the Holy Virgin calm the surging of our passions. In ordinary speech, passion means enthusiasm: “I am passionate about my work!” In the Church the word has another, negative meaning.

In our Tradition, the word “passion” refers to our natural tendencies which have been distorted by the Fall. Food, for example, is a gift from God for our nourishment; we are meant to use it in a nourishing way and with gratitude. Gluttony is the passion for abusing God’s gift in distorted ways – such as overeating, or eating unhealthy foods – while ignoring the Giver.

Man and woman were placed in the Garden (see Genesis 1) to care for God’s creation. Greed is the passion in which we try to make the material creation “mine” rather than “God’s” or even “ours.” Because of the Fall our use of sexuality has been distorted as lust, ignoring God’s purposes. Envy or wrath distort our God-given ability for relationships (“It is not good for man to be alone”) into abuse of others. Our need for rest has been distorted as sloth.

At the root of all the passions is pride. We know that we are children of God become partakers of the divine nature in Christ, meant to be divinized and to share His glory throughout eternity. Pride debases our sense of self-worth, making it a matter of “I’m better than you.” I deserve the best foods, more money, and the finer things in life as well as a trophy wife (or husband) because I’m smarter, better looking, more talented, etc. than anyone I know. This passion so distorts our vision that we see everyone and everything as a commodity we are entitled to enjoy.

Our distorted passions drag us away from an authentic relationship with God. People seeking to know Him realize that they must submit their passions to God for healing. Those who wish to love God, to keep His commandments will try to reflect the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) – rather than give free reign to the passions.

In that struggle the Holy Virgin is our loving helper. In the words of St. John Maximovitch: “Especially near to her are those who labor in the battle with the passions and are zealous for a God-pleasing life.” The Paraclisis Service is, in part, a cry for that help.

- Review the traditional list of the passions: gluttony, lust, envy, wrath, dejection, despondency, vanity, and pride (St. John Cassian). Which of these are actually promoted by our culture? Which ones are recognized as harmful?
- If you feel bound by any of the passions, seek out a confessor or elder who can assist you in the struggle against them.
- Help children memorize and understand the list of the passions which beset us all.
- Pray the following verses from the Small Paraclisis:  
My passions upset me with their assaults; \* discouragement fills my soul. \* Blessed Virgin, O Spotless One, \* restore tranquility to my disturbed soul. \* Grant me the peace of your Son, the peace of your God. (*Ode 1*)

Pacify the surge of my passions \* and quiet the storm and turbulence of my sins, \* for you are the blessed Bride of God \* and have given birth to the merciful Lord. (*Ode 4*)

Heal the misery \* of my passions, O Spotless One, \* and make me worthy of your gracious care, \* and grant me health \* through your constant and unfailing prayer. (*Ode 5*)

O favored Virgin, \* you drive away the temptations \* and the sudden attacks of my passions; \* so I sing your praises \* forever and ever. (*Ode 8*)

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*



## *August 12 – Our Fortress and Haven*

In earlier centuries, towns were often built in the shelter of a fortress. Some were military bases, some were castles, some were even monasteries. In times of peril people would take refuge within the walls of this citadel which offered them shelter until the danger was past.

In the Paraclisis Service the Theotokos is often described as our “Shelter,” “Protection,” and “indestructible Wall.” She is called our “Refuge” and our “Harbor:” the one who would defend us from whatever assails us.

In both East and West the Theotokos is often depicted as spreading her protecting veil over the Christian people. The Byzantine image depicts a tenth-century appearance of the Holy Virgin at the Blachernae Palace church, near the walls of Constantinople. The city was being threatened by barbarians when worshippers saw the Virgin, St. John the Forerunner and other saints appear during a Vigil service. The Theotokos spread her veil over the people as a sign of protection. The danger was averted and the city was spared from invasion. The Feast of the Holy Protection of the Theotokos (October 1) remembers this event.

Do we need protection? What dangers threaten us? Besides physical illnesses and the passions, already discussed, we may think of the social ills which infect our society. We may call upon the Theotokos to shelter us and our loved ones from the dangers to health such as addictions and the overuse of unnecessary medications. We may

invoke her aid in protecting our families from the immoral influences of today’s world such as the consumerism often denounced by Pope Francis or the often immoral values promoted by certain media and endorsed in many public schools. We may seek her aid in keeping us secure in times of economic upheavals.

We know that parents alone cannot protect their children, clergy alone cannot shelter their faithful from all the influences of a broken world. Those who seek a haven in the Theotokos can be assured of her help.

- Many Christians believe that, when the dying Lord commended the Virgin and St. John to one another (see John 19:26-27), He was entrusting the world to His mother’s protection. Read this passage and reflect on that interpretation.
- List any threats to their health or well-being which your family, friends and parish community may be facing. Indicate any of the movements or trends in our society which you feel might challenge their faith. Remember these intentions at the Paraclisis Service.
- Help children design a paper flower on what they learned about the Virgin as our Refuge. “Petals” might include “Fortress,” “Shelter,” “Protection,” “Haven” or “Harbor.”
- Pray the following verses from the Small Paraclisis. In that service they are often sung after each ode of the canon:

Deliver your servants from all dangers, O Mother of God \* for to you, after God, we flee for shelter. \* You are our protecting fortress, our intercessor.

O Mother of God, worthy of all praise, \* look down with compassion upon the ills of our afflicted bodies \* and heal the infirmities of our souls.

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*



## August 13 – She Shows the Way

A highpoint of the Paraklisis Service is the Megalynarion, a hymn of several verses sung after the canon. It includes the following verse:

May the lips of all heretics be sealed because they refuse to bow before your all-holy icon which is fashioned after the blessed Hodegitria, depicted by the holy Luke the Apostle.

This verse raises several questions.

**Who are “the heretics”?** – The Small Paraklisis was composed during a time that iconoclasm infected the Church in Constantinople. The veneration of icons in worship had been growing since the sixth century. Iconoclasts thought to return to a “purer” Christianity by removing images from the churches. During the 150 years when they were in power icons were defaced and those who supported them were persecuted. Iconoclasm was finally defeated in 842, the “Triumph of Orthodoxy” which we celebrate on the First Sunday in the Great Fast.

**What is the Hodegetria?** – The most venerated icon in Constantinople, it depicts the Child Jesus sitting enthroned, as it were, on his Mother’s left arm. He is holding a scroll (symbol of teaching) and blessing the viewer. With her right hand the Theotokos points to Him as if to say, “Here is the Way, the Truth and the Life.” Hodegitria literally means “She who shows the way.”

This icon was enshrined in a fifth-century monastery built by the Empress Pulcheria, who supported calling Mary “Theotokos” and was influential at the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. For centuries it was brought out in procession every Tuesday and carried through the

crowds who came to venerate it. The original icon was lost when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453.

**Painted by St Luke?** – The tradition that St. Luke painted the first icon of Christ and the Theotokos probably dates from the eighth century. One view is that an ancient painting of the Virgin’s face was incorporated into the icon, giving rise to the tradition. Perhaps St. Luke is described as the iconographer because his Gospel gives us the most detailed picture of the Theotokos in the Bible, describing the Annunciation, the Visitation, and all the events of Christ’s infancy and youth in which she figured.

- The Lord taught His disciples that He is “the way, the truth and the life”: the image of the Father. Read John 14:6-10 and reflect on how Christ has fulfilled these images in your lives.
- One custom concerning this icon is to place it above or near the door to your home. Kiss it on leaving with the prayer that your comings and goings may be in the spirit of Christ.
- Help children design a paper flower on what they learned about the Virgin as Hodegitria. “Petals” might include “Christ the Way,” “She Shows the Way,” “Protection,” “St. Luke” or “Iconoclasm.”
- Pray the following verses from the Megalynarion:

Let us sing the praise of the Virgin more lofty than heaven \* and more pure than the shining stars. \* Let us praise, O faithful, the Queen of all creation \* who has delivered us from our ancient curse.

O Lady and Mother of the Savior, receive now the humble prayers \* of your poor unworthy servants. \* Intercede, we beg you, before your Son our Savior \* and be our Mediatrix, Queen of the universe.

May the lips of all heretics be sealed because they refuse to bow \* before your all-holy icon \* which is fashioned after the blessed Hodegitria, \* depicted by the holy Luke the Apostle.

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*



## *August 14 – A Peaceful Repose*

The last mention of the Theotokos in the New Testament is in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 1. There we read that, after Christ's ascension, the Apostles went back to Jerusalem and gathered for prayer in the upper room "with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers" (Acts 1:14). The rest of the New Testament is concerned with the spread of the Gospel. The Virgin had already played her part.

There are a number of early writings that pick up the story of Mary after Pentecost. Since Christ had entrusted His Mother to the care of St. John the Theologian, it is assumed that she remained with him until her death.

Writing in the fourth century, St. Epiphanius of Salamis reported one tradition that Mary fled Jerusalem with John during Herod's persecution of the first Christians (see Acts 12: 1-3) then returned to Jerusalem where she died. Some say that she accompanied John to Ephesus, others believe that John only went to Asia after her death.

The Church's celebration on August 15 points to two aspects of her repose. The first is her death itself, which it calls a Dormition (falling-asleep). The early Church used this word to describe a peaceful and painless death, in contrast to the struggles of the martyrs. Our liturgy also describes the deaths of St. Anne and St. John the Theologian as dormitions.

Several later writings say that an angel told Mary of her impending death and that she prepared herself to be reunited with her Son. As one text tells it, "Without any bodily suffering, as though in a happy sleep, the Most Holy Virgin Mary gave up her soul into the hands of her Son and God."

Some early writers record the tradition that Peter and James, the Lord's brother, buried Mary; others hold that most of the apostles were present. The Christians of Jerusalem buried her with such ceremony that it offended a Jewish priest who tried to disrupt the funeral procession. As one text records, however, "...an Angel of God invisibly cut off his hands, which had touched the bier. Seeing such a wonder, Aphthoniah repented..." Some icons depict this priest, his hands cut off, kneeling before the body of the Theotokos.

The Theotokos' tomb is at the foot of the Mount of Olives, adjoining the Garden of Gethsemane, in what was a first-century cemetery. A shrine was built over it and, in the fifth century, a church as well. The church was destroyed and rebuilt many times; today only the crypt of this church remains and is maintained by the Greek and Armenian Churches.

- Read the story of Jacob's dream, Genesis 28:10-18. The last verse gives us a clue as to why we hear this passage at vespers today. Reflect on how this verse applies to the Theotokos.
- The second reading at vespers is Ezekiel 43:27 - 44:5. What does its image of the sanctuary gate tell us about the Theotokos?
- Attend Great Vespers for the Feast this evening. Some parishes combine it with the Divine Liturgy or the Burial Service for the Theotokos.
- Help children design a paper flower on what they learned about the death of the Virgin. "Petals" might include "Dormition," "August 15," or "Gethsemane."
- Pray the following verses from the hymns at the Virgin's tomb:

In a tomb, were you placed, O Pure one, \* as the woman who contained God within your womb \* and ineffably gave birth to Him on earth.

Mary, as the Mother of the Giver of life, \* how can you now die and dwell in a sepulcher, \* since your Son has raised the dead out of decay?

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*



## *August 15 – Death Is Not the End*

St Paul describes the risen Christ as “*the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep*” (1 Cor 15:20). The rest of the “crop” will be gathered at Christ’s second coming (v. 23). This is the resurrection of the dead which we await. But from the first century the Church has also pointed to a “proof” that St. Paul’s claim is true: the body of the Theotokos was taken to glory.

This is the second aspect to our feast of the Dormition. The Church teaches that Mary’s body was not allowed to decay, or even to remain in death. The Lord restored her soul to her body and glorified them both with Him. The Holy Virgin entered eternal life fully intact. As we sing in the kondakion of the feast, “Christ, who dwelt in her ever-virginal womb, lifted her up to eternal life.”

Mary’s participation in eternal life is unique because her relationship to Christ is unique. She is not awaiting the return of her Son; she alone is fully sharing in His resurrection and stands as proof that human beings can be transformed physically into the image of the risen Christ.

One tradition about the Dormition is chanted at vespers on this feast: “The holy Apostles were taken up from every corner of the world and carried upon clouds by order of God. And they gathered around your pure remains, O Source of Life, and kissed them with reverence. As for the most sublime Powers of Heaven, they came with their own Leader to escort and pay their last respects to the most honorable body that had contained Life itself. Filled with awe, they marched together with the Apostles in silent majesty, professing to the Princes of heaven in a hushed voice: “Behold, the Queen of All, the divine Maiden, is coming!” Lift up your gates

and receive with becoming majesty the Mother of the Light that never fades, because through her salvation was made possible for our human race. She is the one upon whom no one may gaze, and to whom no one is able to render sufficient glory. For the special honor that made her sublime is beyond our understanding. Wherefore, O most pure Mother of God, forever alive with your Son, the Source of Life, do not cease to intercede with Him that He may guard and save your people from every trouble, for you are our intercessor. To you we sing a hymn of glory with loud and joyful voices, now and forever.”

- The Fast is over – celebrate with a festive meal, especially if there is a Mary in your family. It’s her nameday.
- According to one tradition, when the tomb of the Blessed Virgin was opened on the third day, it was found to be empty except for sweetly fragrant flowers. Put flowers before your icon of the Theotokos for the feast.
- Attend the Divine Liturgy today. If flowers are blessed in your parish, bring some to church, then take the blessed flowers to someone who could not attend the celebration.
- Help children design a paper flower on what they learned about the glorification of the Virgin. “Petals” might include “Apostles,” “Forever Alive,” or “Flowers.”
- Pray the troparion for the feast:

In giving birth you have preserved your virginity, \* and in falling asleep you did not forsake the world, O Mother of God. \* You have passed to life, being the Mother of Life. \* Through your intercession, preserve our souls from death.

*Most holy Theotokos, save us!*