

~ The Dormition of the Theotokos ~

For us Orthodox Catholic Christians the importance of the Theotokos is twofold. She is an intercessor in our relationship with Jesus Christ and she is the model of the perfect Christian disciple. That is why every worship service in our Byzantine Churches contains multiple references to Mary. She also is given the title of honor, established at the Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus (*anno Domini* 451), of «**Theotokos**» or «Birthgiver of God».

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann describes Mary's place in our faith in this way:

The veneration of the Virgin Mary is a necessary component of our faith: The image of the Virgin Mary, the Virgin Mother, stands [as] the image of infinite humility and purity, filled with beauty and strength; the image of love and the victory of love. **The Virgin Mary, the All-Pure Mother, demands nothing and receives everything. She pursues nothing and possesses all.** In the image of the Virgin Mary, we find compassion, tender-heartedness, care, trust, humility. We call her Our Lady and the Queen of Heaven and Earth, and yet she calls herself «the hand-maid of the Lord.» .. Christ said, 'Do not be anxious. Seek first the Kingdom of God' (Mt 6:33). Beholding this woman - Virgin Mother, Intercessor - we begin to sense, to know not with our mind, but with our heart, what it means to seek the Kingdom, to find it, and to live by it. THE VIRGIN MARY: THE CELEBRATION OF FAITH, pp. 21 - 22.

~ Sermon on the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos ~ by Saint John of Kronstadt (1829 - 1908)

*"Magnify, O my soul, the honorable Translation of the Mother of God from earth to heaven."
(Refrain for the 9th Ode of the Canon)*

Let us be happy, beloved brothers and sisters that we belong to the Holy Orthodox Church, worthily and rightly glorifying the Most Holy Sovereign Theotokos on this eminent day out of all the days of the year with special solemnity. There exists on earth many societies and entire governments that do not consider the need nor the obligation to call upon and glorify the Queen of heaven and earth, the Mother of Our Divine Lord Jesus Christ, and other saints and angels; to submissively serve Her lovingly, as the true Mother of God. Sadly in Russia nowadays we have heretics (among us) who actively dishonor the Mother of God, the saints, their icons, their relics and their festivals. O, if only they also unanimously with us glorified the worthy Queen of heaven and earth!

Today the Holy Church solemnly glorifies the honorable Dormition or translation of the Mother of God from earth to heaven. A wonderful translation - she died without serious illness, peacefully. Her soul is taken up in the divine hands of Her Son and carried up into the heavenly abode, accompanied by the sweet singing of angels. And then, her most pure body is transferred by the apostles to Gethsemane where it is honorably buried, and on the third day it is resurrected and taken up to heaven. You see this on the icon of the Dormition of the Theotokos. On it is represented the life-bearing body of the Theotokos laying on a bier, surrounded by the apostles and hierarchs, and in the center of the icon the Lord holding in His hands the most pure soul of the Theotokos. The translation of the Mother of God is a paradigm of the translation in general of the souls of Christians to the other world.

We say that our dead have "fallen asleep" or "passed away." What does this mean? This means that for the true Christian there is no death. Death was conquered by Christ on the cross. But there is a translation, *i.e.*, a rearrangement of his condition, *i.e.*, his soul is in another place, in another age, in another world beyond the grave, eternal, without end, that is what is meant by "falling asleep". It is as if it were a temporary dream after which, by the voice of the Lord and the fearful yet wonderful trumpet of the Archangel, all the dead shall live and come forth each to his place: either to the resurrection of life or to the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:29). This is what the Christian means by translation. We should be ready for this translation, for the day of the general resurrection and judgment, for this indescribable world event, recorded in the Holy Scriptures.

This preparation for the meeting of the heavenly King before the dread judgment seat, after death, is essentially the person's preparation throughout the whole of his life. This preparation means a change in all his thoughts, and the moral change of all his being, so that the whole man would be pure and white as snow, washing clean everything that defiles the body and spirit, so that he is adorned with every virtue: repentance, meekness, humility, gentleness, simplicity, chastity, mercifulness, abstention, spiritual contemplation, and burning love for God and neighbor.

Our preparation for meeting the heavenly King, and for the inheritance of eternal life in heaven, should consist of these things. The heavenly King desires souls

adorned with immutable virtue, souls prepared so that the very Lord Himself could abide in them. Do not marvel that the very Lord wants to live in us. In fact the human soul is more spacious than the heavens and the earth, for it exists in the image of God. And if one removes sins from the soul, the Lord of all will settle in it and will fill it with Himself. “We will come to him and make our dwelling with him” (John 14:23), says the Lord about the souls who love Him.

And so, you participants in the Christian feasts, and especially the present feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God, you who are brightly adorned with every virtue and translated to the heavenly kingdom, to Her Son and God, proclaim to each and every one about preparing their souls to be the dwelling place of the Lord, about continual repentance, and about the incorruptible adornment of Christian virtue. Let your death also be unashamed and peaceful, serving as the pledge of a good answer at the dread judgment seat of Christ. Amen.



Why is it that in all the icons of Christ our Lord’s inner garment is always blue and the outer one red? Why don’t iconographers use others colors? Why aren’t they more creative in their color scheme, more imaginative? The following is adapted from the book by Michel Quenot entitled *The Icon, Window on the Kingdom* translated from the French by a Carthusian monk. «Our church requires that all iconographers conform to a collection of Canons (measuring sticks) which are at once guides and safeguards intended to guarantee a spiritual continuity and a doctrinal unity that are valid beyond all national boundaries. According to these sacred Canons, the themes of icons are traditional, *i.e.*, canonically established and defined; they are not simply the result of the artist’s personal creativity or imagination. Iconic themes can never be the fruit of intellectual speculation, because the icon directly reveals and reflects the sacredness of the mystery it portrays. It «lives», moreover, by that reality and can thus be understood only within the spiritual realm, raising a corner of the veil to show us the spiritual reality which remains above and beyond any verbal formula. Clothing styles and their colors are fixed in iconography, as are gestures and numerous other details.»

Over the next few inserts we will look at the various colors that are used in our icons and learn their meaning. «Color for the physicist is a radiation having a certain wave length, as does light. So then it is not surprising that we are affected or

transformed by its effects on us, as the ancients already believed. Color is present in the rhythm of the seasons – the colors of the leaves, the flowers, the fruits, *et cetera* – so that we witness the colorful cycle of season varying between darkness and brightness. Three colors: blue, yellow, and red, mixed with care, permit us to obtain all the colors modified as to their intensity, brightness, and saturation».

Let us now look at the color WHITE: «The opposite of black, white is not strictly speaking a color but sums up all the colors if they are to be considered colors originating from light. Indeed, nothing is more luminous than white light. It is, therefore, only normal that white symbolizes light which has the property of diffusing itself and flashing through space. A symbol of the eternal, white belonged to the gods of earliest antiquity. The Tibetan word *hot-tkar* means «white and One,» a reference to the unity of God. Virgil describes the god Pan – meaning “All” – who was the principle of life, as being «white as snow» (Georgics III. 391). Celtic priests or druids were clothed in white. The ancient Egyptians thought that white was joyful and sumptuous. They wrapped their dead in white linens because death separates light from darkness and the soul from the body. White is the color for mourning among native Africans, who also use it to avert and banish death.

Among the first Christians, baptism was called «illumination». The newly baptized were vested in a robe of pure white as a sign of their birth to true life. White became the color of revelation, grace, and theophany. Mountain tops imply a stronger light. God revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai in a display of lightening, and our Lord was transfigured in blinding light on Mount Tabor. We find that same dazzling whiteness of Christ’s robe in the Transfiguration icon and in numerous icons of the Resurrection. White is the color of those who are penetrated by Divine Light: the angels at the Lord’s tomb and at the Ascension, as well as the elders of the Apocalypse. Even the nimbus or halo of saints is often white – except when gold has been used instead.

But each color also has a certain ambivalence. According to experiences in psychoanalysis, the snowfield of a glacier recalls death, just as white horses seem to predict it. In the icons of the Nativity, the white of the New-Born against the black of the cave, or that of Lazarus in the icon of his resurrection, also remind us of the tomb and death.

White is also the color of purity: «Your sins will become as white as snow» (Is. 1:18). It is the color of Divine Wisdom and of complete knowledge; it likewise expresses joy and happiness».