

THE DORMITION (FALLING ASLEEP) OF THE MOST HOLY MOTHER OF GOD

Mary lived in the house of St. John the Apostle for many years. One day, she went up to the Mount of Olives to pray, as she often did. There on the mount from which her Son had ascended into Heaven, she prayed to our Heavenly Father and to her Son. As always, she remembered the many great achievements of her Son, and tears of joy and thankfulness filled her eyes. While she was praying, an angel of the Lord appeared to her. He told her not to be afraid, saying that in three days she would be in Paradise with her son Jesus.

As the angel spoke to her, he handed her a branch from Paradise to be carried before her funeral procession. This was a date palm branch which shone with a heavenly radiance. "This will be carried before your holy body on the way to the burial place in Gethsemane," the angel said before disappearing. The Blessed Mother, filled with great joy, fell on her knees and thanked God for His great and heavenly mercy.

Before telling anyone about the angel's visit, Mary went again to the Mount of Olives to pray. As she prayed and did her prostrations, a great miracle occurred. Each time she bent to pray, the olive trees bent down in reverence to God and to the Mother of our Lord, who had lived a godly life, ministering to the poor and the sick and spending many hours in prayer each day.

Mary returned to the house of St. John and began preparations for her funeral. She lit candles in the house and invited John and all her friends and relatives, so that she could tell them about her departure from this world into the Kingdom of Heaven. They all wept at the news that their gentle, kind, and helpful friend, the Theotokos, would be leaving them. She asked that she be buried in Gethsemane, overlooking the Mount of Olives, where her parents and Joseph were also buried. (Today one finds a beautiful church built upon the site of the four tombs, and a Divine Liturgy is held each day on her tomb.)

While the most pure Virgin was making her last arrangements, a cloud descended about the house. At God's command, angels brought all the disciples, except for St. Thomas, from wherever they were preaching around the world, to be present at the burial of the Theotokos. Nothing is impossible to God.

St. John welcomed them, telling them that the Theotokos would soon die. Their hearts were filled with sorrow, and they too wept at this sad news. But the Holy Mother Mary said to them, "Do not weep and do not sadden the happiest day of my

life. I am not leaving you. I will always be with you in spirit, praying for you and helping you in your difficult journeys."

Then the angelic cloud also brought Paul with his disciples St. Dionysios the Areopagite, Hierotheos, and Timothy. St. Paul fell at the feet of the Holy Virgin and praised and blessed her.

The Virgin Mary called each of the apostles to her, praising their work and blessing them. She then lay upon her bed and prepared to depart. All the apostles and friends gathered about the bed holding lighted candles. Then the most Holy Mother surrendered her soul into the hands of her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, without pain or suffering. It was as though she had fallen into a sweet sleep. At once a wonderful angelic singing filled the air with the greeting of the angel Gabriel: "Rejoice, full of grace; the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." (Luke 2:28)

A radiant light covered Mary's face, and a wonderful sweet aroma came from her body, filling the room with its fragrance. All the faithful in the room kissed and venerated her holy body with great respect.

The funeral began with St. John carrying the palm branch and Peter carrying the censer leading the way. The apostles and a large crowd, all carrying lighted candles and singing sacred songs, followed the holy body of Theotokos. Healing power went out to all those who were afflicted. The sick became well, the blind regained their sight, the ears of the deaf were opened, the crippled walked, and devils were driven out. Every kind of disease disappeared when those afflicted touched the bier of the Most Holy Mother.

As the funeral procession moved toward Gethsemane, those who did not believe in Jesus tried unsuccessfully to break up the procession. Athonius, one of the Jewish priests, came near the bier and attempted to push her body off. Jesus could not permit anyone to treat His Holy Mother in this manner, so He sent His angel to cut off Athonius' hands with a sword. Athonius fell to the ground in terrible pain, crying out for help. Peter approached him, saying, "Do you believe that this is the Mother of Jesus, the Son of God?" Athonius replied, "Yes, now I do believe. Please ask God to forgive me and to heal my hands." Peter prayed, picked up Athonius' hands and placed them back as they had been, totally healed and without pain. Athonius followed the crowd, singing and praising the Mother of Jesus. Later he was baptized and tried to bring many converts to the Christian faith.

When the funeral procession reached Gethsemane, which was not far from John's house, they laid the body of Mary to rest, rolling a large stone over the entrance to the tomb.

The Church celebrates the Falling Asleep of the Virgin Mary each August 15.

THE ASSUMPTION OF THE THEOTOKOS

The Churches tradition and the hymns of the Church tell us that all the apostles remained in Gethsemane for a few days before leaving to preach in other cities. During those days they could hear the angels singing and praising the Mother of Jesus. On the third day, by the will of God, Thomas the Apostle who had not believed that Christ had risen until he touched Christ's hands and side was walking to Jerusalem when he saw a woman's figure ascending toward Heaven. As she passed near him, she dropped her belt to him.

When he reached Jerusalem, he learned that the Theotokos had died. He was overcome with grief and sorrow that he had not been there to say farewell to her. He begged the other apostles to roll away the stone from the tomb so that he could pay his last respects to her. They took pity on him and did as he asked. To their amazement, the body of Mary was not there. All that remained was the burial clothes and a beautiful fragrance which lingers in the tomb to this day.

The apostles prayed for God to reveal to them where the body had been taken. Later they looked up into Heaven and saw Mary in the air, surrounded by thousands of angels. She said to them, "Rejoice, for I will be with you always."

The Scriptures do not mention the Assumption of the Theotokos. However, this story has been preserved in the sacred tradition of the Church and has come down to us through church services and early icons depicting this event.

The Virgin Mary is in Heaven now, but her prayers and help are always available to us when we ask her in our need or sorrow.

Prayer:

O most glorious, Ever-Virgin Blessed Theotokos, present our prayers to your Son and God, and entreat Him that through you He may save our souls. Amen.

(A troparion from the Akathist Service)