

**Experiencing the Fullness of Our Salvation:
Reflections on the Holy Dormition of the Mother of God**

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Adapted from a Homily given after Vigil on 8/14/20.

Our God is very patient with us. He is far more patient with us than we are with ourselves. We are often very hard on ourselves. His patience with us is not so much expressed in days and weeks, in months or even years, but in millenia. This is most beautifully expressed in his waiting for a young woman, whom we call the Holy Birthgiver of God, a young woman named Mary--to come into this world. He waited for thousands of years for her. He loved everyone, from the time of Adam and Eve, down through the ages, pouring out his love on all. But he was waiting for someone to receive that love, to receive it fully, without qualification, without hesitation.

It is hard to receive the gifts of God without hesitation. We want to examine, to calculate, to analyze; what's it going to cost me? We would like to have God's gifts *on our own terms*. But the Mother of our Lord, as Elizabeth calls her (Lk 1:43), received the word of God from the Archangel Gabriel, fully embracing it without hesitation. "Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). She was able to receive the *fullness* of the love of God, which is God himself because God is love (1 Jn 4:8,16). This simple yet profound act of the Mother of God--saying 'yes' to God's love, to his presence so fully and so perfectly--allowed God to take up residence in her womb. God does not act alone. Mary's response is the most perfect and most pure act of synergy, of cooperation, of a united divine-human effort, that has ever been expressed in human history. This totally surrendered cooperation with God made it possible for him to come and dwell among us--Emmanuel, God with us.

Her act of cooperation with God is always the foundation of our love for her. She is the one who brought to us the Savior of the world. She is the one who let God become man--by responding in this way to him. The Source of life made her the source of Life so that he could be brought into this fallen world to give us life by enlivening us with the indwelling divine Life.

Today we don't remember the event of the Holy Annunciation explicitly, though it is woven throughout all the hymns of every feast of the Mother of God, but we remember her repose, her falling asleep, as well as her almost immediate--within three days--resurrection. There are lots of things we can ask about her dormition, but one very simple question is why did she have to die? Elijah and Enoch didn't die. Why did she, being the most pure of all humans, need to die? St. Andrew of Crete, who has three very beautiful homilies on today's feast, asks this question, and he provides an answer that I did not expect. He says that she died so that she could

experience--and then he emphasizes, so that she could experience *first hand*, not by report from another or by reading in a book--*the fullness of her Son's saving work*. (See St. Andrew's three homilies "On The Dormition Of Our Most Holy Lady, The Mother Of God" in *On The Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Writings*, pp. 103-152, translated with introduction by Brian E. Daley, S.J. SVS Press, 1998.)

St. Andrew goes on to explain in this simple and penetrating way: When we die, our body and soul are torn asunder. We were created to be a most marvelous unity of the celestial and terrestrial, of the heavenly and the earthly, of the invisible and the visible, uniting the fullness of God's creation into a single creature. Death is a violent act because in death that body-soul unity is dissolved. Our body enters the grave and our soul descends into hades. As we read several times in the Holy Scriptures, and often hear in our hymns, our soul is bound in chains; the gates are locked; there is no way out; our reposed state is hopeless; for all eternity our body and our soul will be separated--except that Christ came to visit us through the cooperative gift of the Holy Theotokos. He came to be with us, Emmanuel, in every moment of our life--all the good times and all the bad times, all the healthy times and all the times of illness and injury. Most profoundly, however, he came to be with us *in our death*. He came to experience that same violent tearing apart of the soul from the body--his body entering the grave and his soul entering hades. He came to be with us where we are in our death--with our body in the grave and with our soul in hades.

From this position of total descent into the lowest parts of the earth, as we sing so continuously during the season of Pascha, hades could not contain him. The chains were broken; the gates, which could not prevail against the kingdom of God, were opened wide.

Saint Andrew teaches that for all of us, including the Mother of God, to really be able to *experientially* appreciate what God has done for us we must go to hades. We must be there with him--to die with him; to let him die with us. If we don't, then we will have only an abstract knowledge of the depths of our own salvation. We read about it in a book; we sang about it in the beautiful hymns and lamentations of the Church, even with great compunction of heart. But it remains distant from us. It wasn't here. It wasn't now. It wasn't mine. St. Andrew explains that she needs to die so that she can experience the fullness of her Son and Savior's love for all mankind, *including for her*--first hand, to experience it first hand. And, of course, he goes on to say that it is the same with all of us. Why must *we* die? Hasn't Christ trampled down death by death? Apart from dying, we will not be with him, where he is, in the tomb with the body and in hades with the soul.

There is so much fear about death. Satan loves to try to control and manipulate us with this fear of death (Heb 2:14-15). But in the Christian life not only are we delivered from the fear of

death, and thus from Satan's manipulative influence over us, but we even embrace death--as the martyrs throughout the ages so often did: to have the opportunity to die for the One who dies for them, and thus to experience first hand the fullness of his love. This martyric love is so great that St. Ignatius could say of his impending martyrdom that it was his birth into the kingdom. And from that time on, from the beginning of the second century, the Church has celebrated the feast day for the saints on the day of their repose, of their falling asleep in and with their Lord, for it is on this day that they are fully born into the kingdom, fully united with Christ in his death and burial so that they might also be with him in his resurrection to new life.

So it is with the Holy Mother of God. This is the day that Christ comes to bring her into the fullness of the kingdom. She dies so that she can experience the utter beauty of God's love, and she is raised so that the capstone of God's creation, the culmination of creation in the human being which unites the intelligible and material, the invisible and visible, the celestial and terrestrial, is manifest in the fullness of life of the Holy Mother of God in her resurrection.

And then finally we need to say that it is not simply bringing back together the body and the soul, being woven together into a single harmonious unity, but the fullness of the purpose of the human being is to be the Temple of the Living God. Our *body* is the temple of the Living God (1 Cor 6:19; see also, 1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21; 1 Pt 2:5). Not our *dead* body, separated from its soul, because that body can't offer itself to God as a temple. But it is the unified body and soul that can offer this flesh and blood for God to inhabit, to be present in his creation by our voluntary reception of him into our very being, into our hearts, his home (Rom 12:1-2; 6:12ff).

So the Mother of God becomes even more perfect, a more perfect tabernacle of her Son and Savior and God. This is the calling for each and every one of us, and we strive to follow in her footsteps, longing to say 'yes' as she said 'yes', longing to let ourselves be the receptacle of God's love as fully as we can experience him in this world, knowing full well that we are so often inclined toward sin, to hesitate, to qualify, to calculate, to question God's gifts to us. But he is merciful; he is patient. He waits for each of us individually even as he waited for generations for his people to bring about the Holy Theotokos. So he will continue to wait for us as we continue to strive to follow him--even as she followed him to the cross--so that when the time comes for us to die, we will die with him--just as his mother died with him. As St. Paul says, as was read at our baptism, if we die with him, we will be buried with him and be raised with him (Rom 6:3ff). And then we will truly be a complete human being, as we were created to be: the fullness of the Godhead dwelling bodily in us by grace even as it did by nature in the Son of God as he walked among us while here on earth (Col 2:9-10), and as he did in the womb and heart of his holy mother.

May the Holy Mother of our Lord receive our joy, our honor, and our thanksgiving for her life and death with her Son and our God; through her intercessions, may we make small steps toward living the life she lived, and dying the death she died.