

## HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

AUGUST 15, 2021      THE FEAST OF THE DORMITION

### “THE FALLING ASLEEP OF THE HOLY THEOTOKOS”

In November, 1975, the freighter ship named the “Edmund Fitzgerald” was being prepared to haul iron ore across Lake Superior. Before getting on board, Chief Steward Robert Rafferty wrote a letter to his wife to mail before sailing. In the letter, he told her, “I should be home by November 8. However, nothing is ever sure.” How true his words were----nothing is ever sure. Especially when it comes to sailing on Lake Superior. You may remember the song by the Canadian singer Gordon Lightfoot about the disaster that befell the Edmund Fitzgerald. A huge storm came up and the ship went down. 29 of those on board died, including Chief Steward Robert Rafferty. He never did get home to see his wife again. (in “Our Daily Bread”, 10/15/05)

Robert Rafferty wrote “nothing is ever sure”. That is true about ships at sea. But in the big picture, one thing is actually very sure-----death. We all die. Even St. Mary, the Theotokos, the Mother of God. And today, August 15, we commemorate her death, her falling asleep, her Dormition.

Death is certain for each one of us. How we view that fact and respond to that fact can greatly affect our lives.

The prime minister of the Austrian Empire for part of the 1700’s was a man with the last name of Kaunitz. Minister Kaunitz’s response to the fact of death was extreme anxiety and horror. He developed a horrible fear that germs would kill him. So whenever he was with people or outside, he would tie a handkerchief around his face. Sometimes he would wear a specially made glass helmet over his head for better protection. He would never enter a room where someone was sick. And he banned the saying of the word “death” in his presence. What finally happened to Minister Kaunitz? You guessed it---he died. And his anxiety about death made his whole life a living death. (Universal History of the World, Vol. 9, Golden Press, 1966, p. 765)

As Christians, we should not be like Kaunitz----living lives of anxiety and misery because we know we will someday die. Instead, we should follow the example of St. Mary. We should get ready for inevitable death by lives of

love for our Lord Jesus Christ. Of course, death will come to each of us, but if we live fully for the Lord, then death is just a step to a new life that will be lived even more fully for God.

That's how the Theotokos lived----100% for her son. Her obedience, her spiritual beauty, her life of prayer-----in all of this, she grew in holiness and goodness throughout all of her life.

But no matter how holy she was, even she, even the Panagia, had to die. And that is what we commemorate today on this great holy day.

The story of this day is not in the Bible, but is in the ancient traditions of Christianity-----she became ill. As her death approached, the Holy Apostles gathered to see her one last time---to pray for her, talk with her, and be present for her funeral. Death came. She fell asleep in Christ. ("Dormition" means "to fall asleep".)

St. Thomas was late in getting there. He arrived after the funeral and burial were over. This was very upsetting to him as he loved the Mother of God so much. He asked the other Apostles to do him a favor and take him to her tomb and to open it up so he could see St. Mary one last time and venerate her holy body. They agreed to do so. But when they entered the tomb, there was no one there. Christ had already visited the tomb and had "assumed" (taken up to heaven) His mother's body. That is why this holy day is also called Assumption Day.

This was quite a unique thing---that God would resurrect someone and take to heaven a person who was already dead and buried. It may remind you of how God took up to heaven Enoch and Elijah in the Old Testament. But they never died---they were taken up alive--- no resurrection happened. St. Mary died and was buried and then was resurrected and her body taken to heaven.

But, of course, it was not totally unique. It had happened before one time--when Christ Himself was raised up at Pascha on the third day after His death on the cross.

And, still in the future, will come a day, the last day, when as St. Paul tells us, Christ will return and raise up all who are in Him, from their graves. Millions and millions of people will experience on that final day what the Theotokos experienced in her own Assumption almost 2000 years ago. (May God grant us to be among that happy crowd! When? We can't know---maybe soon, maybe still far away. It's going to happen!)

So what happened to St. Mary, what we are celebrating today, really was very far from unique-----she was just "ahead of schedule". Why? Because her son, Jesus, loved her dearly. He loved his mother deeply and he did her a

special favor. He did not wish for her body to remain in the grave until the end of the world. He just went ahead and raised her right away out of His deep affection for her. He did for her soon after her burial what He will do for us later, in the future, when this old world ends.

We don't know if the Theotokos had any inkling of this all happening ahead of time. But that didn't matter because she lived her life to be ready for death no matter what, no matter when. She had prepared for death by living her whole life for Christ.

So should we!

Back in the Middle Ages, kings had court jesters, often called "fools". These jesters served as entertainers for the king. They were very smart and witty and told great jokes. Some of them could also do acrobatics and juggling. Because the kings loved them so much, they could get away with saying things to the rulers that no one else dared to say.

One king was especially fond of his fool, his jester. He bragged to everyone that he had the greatest fool in the world. One day, the fool had made the king laugh so hard that he honored the jester by giving him his royal scepter and saying---"This is my gift to you because you are truly the greatest fool in the world. But if you ever find a greater fool than yourself, give the scepter to him."

Years later the king fell ill and was on his deathbed. The jester came to visit him and they talked. The king said, "Dear fool, I will see you no more. I am about to leave on a long, long trip from which I will never return." The jester asked, "Your Majesty, where are you going?" The king replied, "I don't know." "How long is the journey?", asked the fool. "Forever", answered the king. The jester then asked, "Have you prepared for this journey?". The king sadly answered, "No, not at all." Then the fool said, "Your majesty---you are going on a long journey from which you will not return, and you haven't gotten ready at all?!" The jester handed the king the scepter given to him years ago and said---"Here you go-----I am giving *you* the scepter because you are a greater fool than I am!" ("Credo", January, 1989, pp. 3-4)

Don't be foolish like the king. Instead, be wise like the Holy Theotokos.

We, too, have a long journey ahead of us---our deaths. It's a trip we cannot avoid.

And so we should prepare like the Theotokos did----by living totally for her son, our Lord.

And she will pray for you as you do so!