

DORMITION



Story

Do you know how certain older members of the family tend to tell the same stories over and over again? Usually, these stories are about some even in their lives that really made an impression on them and may have changed the way they live. They want to tell you all about it because they want you to remember it too and benefit from the same lessons they learned from it.

There was a man named Dionysius the Areopagite who lived at the time of the Apostles who wrote down a lot of things about that time period. Having witnessed the event himself, he wrote about the Dormition, or “falling asleep” of the Mother of Jesus. There was also a venerable Bishop named Meliton of Sardis who lived then too and wrote about what he knew of the event. These primary sources are the basis of our belief that after her death, the mortal body of the Mother of Jesus wasn’t left upon the Earth to be buried, but was transported into heaven. Here is what they tell us about that event. After the Holy Spirit had descended upon the apostles and the Mother of God at Pentecost, they all lived together as a family for about ten years. The apostles would often listen to her stories and learn from her, and they grew to love her as their own mother. One by one, they each left to begin their missionary work, bringing the Gospel to people all over the world who didn’t know about Christ and His kingdom, and soon only John the Theologian and Mary were the only ones left.

It wasn’t long after the Resurrection that the persecution of Christians began under King Herod and John realized that, as the mother of Jesus, the Theotokos was in danger so he took her away to Ephesus to protect her in the year 43 AD.

She was so sad to have left her home and all the sites which brought back memories of life with her Son. She often liked to visit Jerusalem in secret to pray at the site of the Resurrection and once, while she was there in prayer, the angel Gabriel appeared to her and told her that the time had come when she would soon be reunited with her Son in heaven.

When she heard the news she was so eager to go that she quickly took to her bed in Jerusalem and awaited her transition into eternal life! While she was lying there in prayer her thoughts turned to St. John the Theologian who was back home in Ephesus. What would he think when she failed to return home? Oh, how she wished he could be there with her! She began to pray to her son about it when suddenly, and much to their surprise, he appeared before her! How could that be? What a mystery! But for God, all things are possible and Jesus so loves his mother that whatever she asks, he will do for her! So then she began to pray about all of her other priest-sons, the apostles who had gone to preach all over the world, and one-by-one, they each began to appear before her as she lay there in her bed! St. Paul was there too and St. Dionysius the Areopagite who later wrote about it for us so we could read his account and believe. They all were amazed at what had just happened to them and began to praise God. What a wonderful gift! Each apostle and friend had the opportunity to speak with Mary and express their love and their last farewell. She prayed with each one in turn that their preaching may be successful and that the whole world might come to know and love God as Jesus had wished.

This vigil lasted until 9 o’clock in the morning when everyone present saw Christ descend from a brilliant cloud that appeared above the bed with a multitude of angels and departed souls of patriarchs and prophets! As he drew near to collect the soul of His mother, she prayed the same words she said when his soul descended to her for the first time at the Annunciation,

“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...”

The Theotokos then appeared as if she had fallen asleep as her soul was taken up to heaven by her Son. At that moment, the angels began to sing joyfully as they did when she said YES to God at the Annunciation...

“Hail, Full of Grace, the Lord is with Thee, blessed art Thou among women! For lo, the Queen, God’s Maiden comes, lift up the gates, and with the Ever-Existing One, take up the Mother of Light; for through Her salvation has come to all the human race. It is impossible to gaze upon Her, and it is impossible to render Her due honor”

When the soul of their mother had departed, the apostles and all who were present with them had noticed the overwhelming fragrance of flowers had filled the air around the body of the Theotokos. They had begun, as was their custom, to prepare the body for burial and carried it on a stretcher to the tomb near the garden of Gethsemane. The people sang sorrowfully and carried incense and candles as they accompanied the body of Mary. They were somewhat afraid because of the ongoing persecution of Christians. They knew that there were many who would upset the procession if they realized that the body was that of the mother of Jesus, but they were comforted when they noticed a circular cloud that had accompanied them, crowning the casket, and that the sound of angelic choirs had joined them in the singing of the funeral hymns.

Suddenly, there were soldiers approaching to arrest them. They froze in amazement when they realized that although they could see the soldiers, the startled soldiers could not see them! They took a few more steps when a man they knew, a Jewish priest named Anthonios ran toward them with the intention of pushing the casket to the ground! Before they knew what to do, an angel of the Lord appeared to defend the body of the Theotokos by cutting off the arms of the man with an invisible sword! At once, Anthonios repented and was healed. He later converted and became a great supporter of the Church.



Finally, the procession had reached the burial place and the body of the Mother of God had been placed into the tomb unharmed. There it remained for several days when Thomas arrived. Once again, he had missed all of the activity. He was heartbroken at the thought of never being able to see his mother again and had begged the others to open the tomb so that he could pay his last respects. When they did, they were met with a great surprise. The body of the Theotokos was not there, but in its place were bouquets of beautifully fragrant flowers! This is why we gather fresh flowers and bring them to church to be blessed on the feast of the Dormition. Everyone rejoiced when they realized that her body, like that of her Son, was assumed bodily into heaven.

Later that evening, when the apostles and friends had all gathered together for dinner, they began to recount the events of the day. As they were eating, the Theotokos appeared among them! They were delighted and overwhelmed at her appearance and offered her their hospitality and some of their bread. Many monasteries today still carry on the tradition of setting aside a portion of their bread for her. She told them she loved them all and that she would always be among them. Remember this when you bring your flowers to Church to be blessed on the feast of the Dormition. Our mother, the Theotokos, is with us always!