

THE MOTHER OF GOD IN FESTAL ICONS: THEOLOGY IN COLOUR AND FORM

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Our subject is festal icons of the Mother of God, but I shall extend this to include all festal icons that include the Virgin.

We will look at how each icon type is a commentary on the theology expressed in its festal texts. We shall also make reference to the meaning of some of these events to the monastic life. Mary is the archetype for the monastic, perhaps particularly so for the Athonite since the peninsula is dedicated to her. It is the Garden of the Most Holy Mother of God. Like the Virgin, the monastic wishes to be wholly obedient to God. And to the degree he or she is obedient, they, like her, become a God-bearer, a theophoros.

But before we turn to our particular subject it will be helpful to summarize the icon's role in general, to put it in the context of the personal and liturgical life of the Orthodox Christian. It is only in this liturgical context that we can penetrate the deeper meaning of icons.

The role of icons: communion and initiation

Icons are more than teaching aids. They have two main functions, summarized in the words communion and initiation:

Communion

Icons are an aid to communion with the subject of the icon, be it a person or an event. Through venerating the image, we venerate the subject.

Festal icons are to be experienced in the context of liturgical life, when we sing or hear the liturgical poetry. Working together, the icon and liturgical texts of a feast reveal the deeper spiritual significance of the event.

Although a sacred event occurs in chronological time (*chronos* in Greek), its significance is experienced in divine time, *kairos*. And so the festal texts often use the word "today". Each event is unique, but it is also to be repeated in our own personal lives.

Today grace begins to bear its first fruits, making manifest to the world the Mother of God... (Nativity of the Virgin, Small Vespers)

Initiation

The style of the icon helps to initiate us into a spiritual way of seeing the world. Icons depict a transfigured world, drenched in the uncreated light of God. It is not just *what* icons depict that makes icons sacred, but *how* they depict their subject. They compel us to see the events and the world around us in a divine way.

"See with God's eye" writes St Maximus the Confessor

The images we surround ourselves with enter our minds and affect the way we see the world, for better or for worse. Icons are born of a spiritual way of seeing, and immersion in them helps us to see the world spiritually:

"When the mind receives the representations of objects it naturally copies them. When it contemplates them spiritually it takes on different forms of being according to the objects of its contemplation. When it is in God it dispenses any shape or form whatever." (Maximus the Confessor in Centuries on Charity, III, 97 (PG 90, 1048) quoted in Olivier Clement's "The Roots of Christian Mysticism")

Icons involve the whole person: our physical senses, our rational faculty, and our spirit, or more specifically, the eye of the heart or *nous* in Greek. Their aim is to gather everything into this nous, just like the Jesus Prayer. We see with our physical eyes, we recognize the event with our brain, but we experience the activity of the Holy Spirit through the nous.

Let us ascend Mount Tabor with Peter James and John that we may see Christ transfigured.

Especially in their perspective systems, icons throw our rational faculty off balance and thereby compel us to reach out to the spirit in order to regain balance and comprehend what we are seeing. Saint Paul prays for the Ephesians that the Father

... may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your heart enlightened... (Eph 1: 17)

The unspiritual (psikikos in Greek, i.e. "soul-ish") man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand (gnomai in Greek i.e. know) them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:14)

The very flatness of icons allows objects and people to be arranged to bring out the inner meaning of the feast; buildings become types or symbols as well as historical realities; things are arranged within hidden geometrical forms to suggest inner meaning; unearthly colour combinations are used to give a sense of paradisiacal harmony.

Festal Icons with the Virgin

1. Nativity of the Most Holy Lady the Mother of God (8th September)

Background

Readings: Phil. 2:5-11; Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28. The events of this feast come from the 2nd century Protevangelion or Book of James. Joachim is wealthy but childless. After his gift is rejected at the temple because of his childlessness, he goes to the desert to pray and fast for forty days. His wife Anna goes into her garden and prays, promising to "bring the child for a gift to God" if she brings forth a child. Both are told that their prayers are answered and in due course Anna gives birth to Mary.

Themes

Foreshadowing of the Incarnation

Mary's conception is a miracle, and in this sense foreshadows the incarnation; God's intervention was required to undo the sterility of Joachim and Anna, just as His grace was required to heal the spiritual sterility of the human race:

Ann's barrenness was transformed, thereby destroying the world's barrenness in good things; and this wonder plainly foreshadowed Christ's coming to dwell with mortal men. (Canon of Matins, Canticle Eight)

We see this parallelism in the icon: Ann reclines very much like the Virgin in the icon of Christ's nativity, and the child Mary is shown being washed by midwives, as in the Christmas icon.

Mary's and therefore Christ's true humanity

Whilst being miraculous, the conception of Mary is nonetheless radically different from that of Christ. It the result of a natural union of a man and a woman, which makes Mary fully human. The humanity that God is later to assume through Mary is our humanity, identical to our own. What is not assumed is not saved, in the words of St Gregory the Theologian.

While this icon parallels Christ's Nativity icon in some ways, in another respect it is very different: it is much more homely: the event occurs in a house, not a cave; there are no angels, Magi or shepherds, just a lot of mid wives and assistants fussing around. The Christmas icon is cosmic, including mountains, plants, animals, men rich and poor, and angels. By contrast Mary's Nativity is hidden, a preparation for Christ's coming.

Culmination

Mary's birth is the culmination of centuries of God's work with Israel. She is the result of a synergy of human and divine energies. The history of Israel is one of divine revelation, human sin and virtue, the Law, the Prophets, all working toward the coming of Christ. Christ was incarnate not just in the individual person of the Virgin Mary, but in the whole nation of Israel of which she was a fruit.

Today God who rests upon the spiritual thrones has made ready for Himself a holy throne upon earth (Great Vespers)

The theme of culmination is reflected in the fact that the ascetic life of an individual is the fruit of a long line of ascetic tradition. We draw on the wisdom and accumulated experience expressed in the Scriptures, in writings like the Philokalia, and spiritual direction of our spiritual father or mother. This is why monastery refectories and churches are filled with wall paintings of previous monastics and saints.

2. Entry of the Most Holy Lady Mother of God into the Temple (21st November)

Background

Readings: Heb. 9:1-7; Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28. The details derive from The Book of James. When Mary was three years old the time had come for Anna to fulfil her promise to offer her child to God in the temple. Joachim said to call virgins and have them carry lamps into the temple so the child Mary would follow and go joyfully. The priest received her and sat her on the third step of the altar. She danced with her feet and all the house of Israel loved her. She remained there "and received food from the hand of an angel". The feast was founded around 543, on the occasion of the dedication of the Basilica of St Mary the New in Jerusalem.

Themes

The three main themes of this feast are dedication, preparation, and Mary as the temple or dwelling place of God. Mary is given wholly to God, and her sojourn in the temple is a time of spiritual preparation to receive God the Word into herself.

Dedication

There are numerous images used in the festal texts which are often shown in icons:

Into the holy places the Holy of Holies is fittingly brought to dwell, as a sacrifice acceptable to God. (Small Vespers)

In the icon Mary is placed directly in front of the altar, as though a sacrifice offered upon it. The gates, like royal doors in an icon screen, are behind Joachim, to emphasize the sense of entry into the Holy of Holies. The dark door behind suggest the mystery of the Holy of Holies.

Preparation

A child in the flesh but perfect in soul, the holy Ark enters into the house of God, there to feed upon divine grace. (Canon of Matins)

St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) saw this time of the Virgin's sojourn in the temple as an image of the soul's ascent to God: it was her training in inner stillness, hesychasm. The inner stillness that she learned in her early life allowed her later to hear the word of God in the Annunciation. Christ said that she whose paps he sucked was great because she heard the word of God and kept it.

Mary is therefore the great hesychast, the greatest monastic the world has and ever will know. She became a God-bearer precisely because of her inner purity, her inner prayer, her mastery of hesychasm, her passionless. She was in the world but not of it. Behind every monk or nun who has had a profound effect upon people are many hidden years of prayer and asceticism, "feeding upon divine grace". The monk's cell is his Holy of Holies.

There are stages in the ascent towards God, hence the stairs we see in many icons that lead up to the throne of rest. Ascetic teaching in both the West and East identify three stages.

First is practical theology or purification, that is, active repentance, ascetical struggle, obedience. I recall Archimandrite George, the abbot of Gregoriou monastery, saying that the young monastic must put obedience before all else, even prayer, and then everything will be given to him, especially prayer.

Then there is natural theology or illumination, where to the extent of our purity we begin to behold the grace and light of God active in creation.

Only then can we begin to behold the Lord face to face, the third and final stage called mystical theology in the East, and union in the West.

Perhaps the building on the left in our icon represents the active life, day to day obedience in the house of our daily lives; on the right is natural theology, beholding the angelic unseen

world active in the physical world, and in the centre is the altar where we are wholly taken up into Christ, where the Spirit descends and we through communion become Christ's body and blood. Alternatively, the opening behind the gates on the right is the Holy of Holies, which is the life of union.

Mary as Temple

The all-pure Temple of the Saviour, the precious Bridal Chamber and Virgin, the sacred treasure of the glory of God, is led today into the house of the Lord... She is indeed the heavenly Tabernacle (Kontakion)

...Let the gate of the temple wherein God dwells be opened: for Joachim brings within today in glory the Temple and Throne of the King of all..." (Small Vespers)

We see all these indicated in the icon. The altar and "royal doors" evoke the temple. The curtained baldachin or ciborium over the altar suggests the bridal chamber. Mary is seated on a Throne, fed by an angel.

We note that most of the images associated with Mary the God-bearer are static and involve an empty space inside: temple, house, throne, ark and so on. Similarly, the monastic life is in a sense the life of rest in the midst of the active struggle of asceticism. The monastic journey involves the apparent inactivity of sitting on a stool saying the Jesus Prayer. There is a movement, but it is inward not outward, not so much an ecstasy as an instasy. Active service in the world may result from this intense inward life, as it did for example for Father Porphyrius in Athens, or Father Paissius seeing hundreds of pilgrims a week. But if it does happen it is a fruit of this inward stillness, of being a throne, of an inner "emptiness", a stillness without agitation. The Chinese sage Laotse wrote that

The vessel is useful because of the space within...The room is useful because of the space within...Usefulness comes from what is not there.

("Tao Te Ching", 11, translation by W. Rogpei and W. Puffenberger, 1996)

3. Annunciation (25th March).

Background

Hebrews 2:11; Luke 1:24-38. The details come of course from the Gospel account. But the icon tradition draws also on additional material from the Protevangelion of James, which states that Mary was spinning the thread for the veil of the temple when Gabriel appeared.

Themes

Discernment of spirits

Sin entered the world through a person not testing the false promises of a fallen angel, and salvation now enters the world through a woman testing and then believing the promises of a righteous angel. "Do not beguile me with deceit, for I have not known pleasure" she says, testing the words of the angel.

I am filled with joy at thy words, yet I am afraid: I fear lest thou deceive me, as Eve was deceived, and lead me far from God. Yet, lo, thou cries out: O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord. (Canon of Matins)

In the icon, Mary draws back, not impulsively grasping at the angel's promise. She looks away from Gabriel, pondering and weighing up what he has said to her.

This discernment of spirits and sobriety are critical in the monastic life. A phrase often heard on Athos is *prosechi* (prayer) and *prosechi* (attentiveness). Test every spirit, don't seek visions and dreams, seek only obedience.

Humility

Related to discernment is humility. As we have seen, the Virgin is often shown drawing back from the Archangel, or at least showing surprise. Her hand is lifted as though to say, "Surely not me." Usually also she is shown dropping the spool of red thread that she is spinning at the time of the Annunciation. One tradition suggests that she had a pre-Annunciation at a well. With fright she ran inside, where Gabriel appeared to her again (red

cloth draped on buildings in icons indicates that the event occurs inside). This pre-Annunciation is sometimes depicted in wall paintings or mosaics, as at Moni Chora, Constantinople.

it is a dangerous thing for a monastic to expect or seek visions. It has been said that God is not displeased if someone out of humility does not accept an authentic vision for fear of being in delusion.

Mary as temple

...Hail, Throne. Hail, Ladder and Gate. Hail, divine Chariot; hail, swift Cloud. Hail, Temple; hail, Vessel of gold. Hail, Mountain; hail, Tabernacle and Table. Hail, thou release of Eve. (Exapostilarion of Matins)

As we have seen in the feast of Entrance, the liturgical texts draw extensively on types and images from the Old Testament, especially the temple. The Virgin is the throne of God. She is the veil through which God enters the world and man enters the Holy of Holies. She is the living temple. Many of these types are suggested in the building behind the Virgin shown in the icon. We see the temple, the parted veil, and the throne. The numerous footrests suggest steps.

Mary as the Veil of flesh

The image of Mary as the veil between the Holy Place and the Holiest of Holies is a particularly important one. It is from Mary that God takes on our humanity. She is the veil of the flesh which the Word assumed so that He can pass from the Holy of Holies (heaven) into the world, and we in turn pass from the world into the Holy of Holies.

By tradition, derived from the Protevangelion of St James, the lot had fallen to Mary to prepare the purple and scarlet material for the veil of the temple. It is this she is spinning at the time of the Annunciation.

The Virgin is invariably depicted in an earth-red outer garment. This symbolizes the humanity that she gave to the Logos. It is the same colour as Christ's undergarment. Gabriel is by contrast an angel, without a fleshly body, and so is often depicted in colours reminiscent of light, as in the silvery hues of the famous icon from Ochrid.

The most common theme found on the Royal Doors is the Annunciation. It is only because of Mary's consent and the Incarnation that we can receive the Body and Blood of Christ, which passes out to us from the altar through these doors.

Although the monastic life is sometimes called the angelic life, it is lived by humans not angels. Ascetics need food, need sleep. They keep these things to the level of need and not luxury. Nevertheless, the body and matter is made by God and therefore good, a potential means of union with God and not a hindrance. Matter is constantly used to the glory of God in the monastic life. In Orthodox worship all the senses are used: the fragrance of incense, the taste of communion, the seeing and kissing of icons, the hearing of hymns. Meals in the Trapeza are part of the liturgical celebrations of a feast; we process from the church to the Trapeza and back in again in an unbroken celebration.

Angel as servant and messenger

The buildings behind the angel are simple, and sometimes as in the case of the Ochrid icon, stepped down to show the angel's descent from heaven.

The angel is shown active, straining forward, one wing raised and head band flapping as He swiftly descends from heaven to earth in obedience to God's command. He is the *angelos*, the messenger. Mary by contrast is still, receptive, active in her discernment, receptive in her obedience.

Monastic parallels

The Virgin Mother is a model for both monastic and lay to follow. As God-bearer she epitomises the end to which both monastic and lay aspire. The word Christian means a small Christ, and each and every person is called to be a Christ bearer, a *Christophoros*.

A monastic prepares him or herself for this especially through prayer, and a life of obedience to the spiritual father or mother. And Mary's life in the temple and as a Virgin is a type of this monastic way.

But she was also a mother, living in the world, and as such she is a type and model for lay people. A Christian in the world seeks this union through doing what is required of them in a spirit of obedience as unto Christ and not unto man, through almsgiving, through preserving inner peace in the midst of surrounding worldliness, and considering all better than himself.

4. Nativity of Christ (25th December)

Background

Readings: Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:1-12

The great majority of the details in the Nativity icon derive from the Gospel accounts. The only additional material is the presence of the midwives, mentioned in the Protevangelion of James.

Themes

Union

The Nativity of Christ is very much the feast of union: "Heaven and earth are united today" says one hymn. Christ brings back together things divided by the fall, and goes beyond even this and effects man's union with God. The epistle reading affirms that

God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Mary features very large in most icons, particularly the Russian, where she is usually shown lying diagonally. This pose simultaneously suggests the vertical and the horizontal unions effected through her giving birth to God: union of heaven and earth, and the union of man with man. This "horizontal" union is suggested by the presence of the Magi on the left and the shepherds on the right. The Magi are Gentiles, rich, and learned. The shepherds are Jews, poor and unlearned. And yet both are present, worshipping Christ.

Christ is depicted in the centre, all created beings and things are around him. Also, there are three bands. The upper band contains the heavenly realm, depicting the star and the angels. The lower band emphasizes the physical and human; here we find Joseph doubting the Virgin birth, and the Child Jesus being washed. The middle band mediates. Here we have Christ in whom all things are united, and His Mother, through whom this was possible. And we have representatives of the mineral, vegetable, animal and human kingdoms.

Recreation

One reading for Vespers is Genesis 1 i.e. creation. Eve is the second Eve, Christ the second Adam. There is a strange polarity between the first and this, the second creation. In the first creation, Eve was taken from Adam's flesh. Here, Adam is taken from Eve's flesh; the tiny Christ child is indeed shown next to Mary's womb to make the point.

Mary's compassion

Mary is often shown looking away from Christ and encouraging Joseph, who is doubting the virgin birth. This stance can also be understood as proving the humanity of the Christ child; she is tired after giving birth. Despite her exalted position as Mother of God she never loses compassion.

Reversal of idolatry

Every creature offers thee thanks. (Feast of Nativity)

Representatives of all creation are shown worshipping Christ. The icon shows the reverse of the fall, when man worshipped created things. The ox and ass recognize their maker; the wealthy Magi offer gold, from which idols were once made, and frankincense and myrrh, which were once offered to idols; animals and trees are there, honouring their maker as best they can; the angels from heaven sing their praises; the poor and simple shepherds offer their wonder. This icon is an icon of paradise, where the new Adam and Eve do what the first Adam and Eve failed to do.

Through the incarnation, nothing in God's creation is insignificant. This is why Athosites are called to care for The Garden of the Mother of God. What makes Athos special is not just

the people, but also the place, the mountain, the forests, the walkways, the deserts, the flowers the sea.

5. The Meeting (or Presentation) of Christ in the Temple (2nd February)

Background

Hebrews 7th-17; Luke 2:22-40. This event is described in the Gospel account. In Jewish practice, the first born belongs to God and must be presented in the temple on the fortieth day after birth, and then redeemed with an offering, a pair of turtle doves if the parents are poor. Righteous Simeon and the prophetess Anna receive Christ, prophesying of his greatness.

Themes

Mary discloses to the world Christ as the fulfilment of the Law

The theme of this feast is Christ as the fulfilment of the Old Testament; it is a meeting of the Old and New Covenants. Christ is the fulfilment of the prophecies, the priestly ministry, the Law, the Temple, the sacrifices. This is the theme of the Epistle reading, which states that Christ is the new High Priest and King, "a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."

The icon suggests Christ's role as sacrifice as well as priest by placing him in front of the altar or holy table. There is even a chalice on the altar to emphasize the point.

The presentation of Christ by Mary and Joseph makes possible the first public revelation of Christ's role through the prophecies of Symeon and Anna.

*Today the holy Mother who is higher than any temple, has come into the temple, disclosing to the world the Maker of the world and Giver of the Law.
(Small Vespers)*

Hands

Hands and offering are an important theme in both the icon and hymns:

Christ the coal of fire, whom holy Isaiah foresaw, now rests in the arms of the Theotokos as in a pair of tongs, and He is given to the Elder. (Small Vespers)

...upheld in the arms of the ever-Virgin Thou hast been committed to the hands of Simeon, the receiver of God, O Thou who upholdest the whole world in Thine hand. (Lauds)

Joseph holds the two turtle doves in offering; Mary's hands are empty having offered up her only Son; Symeon receives Christ in his arms; Anna holds a scroll inscribed with her prophecy.

6. The Crucifixion (Holy and Great Friday).

I Corinthians 1:18-2:2; the Gospel is a collection of texts

The martyrdom of compassion

Either side of the crucified Christ is always shown the Virgin and the Apostle John (sometimes also the myrrh bearers and Longinus the centurion who converted).

Unlike most of the other close followers of Christ, the Mother of God and John did not suffer the martyrdom of literal death. They instead suffered the martyrdom of compassion, of identification with Christ as He hung upon the cross. They co-suffered with Christ while the other disciples fled and abandoned Him. We remember the warning words of Symeon to Mary, that "a sword shall pierce your heart".

The word martyrdom means witness, and here Mary and John witness with their own eyes the mystery of God's love for man. Rarely is intense grief expressed in icons - the crucifixion, deposition and entombment are the exceptions.

Martyrdom as ecstatic love

Martyrdom is the ultimate form of intense, ecstatic love for God. The martyr loves God more than his own life. You are willing, even desirous, to die so you can be with the object of your love. This is what is shown in the icon. A hymn of Great Friday puts the following words into the mouth of the Virgin as she beholds her Son dead:

[Gabriel] called Thee King and God and Son of the most High, and now, O my sweet Light, I behold Thee naked, wounded, lifeless. Release me from my agony and take me with Thee, O my Son and God. Let me descend also with Thee, O Master, into hell. Leave me not to live alone, for I cannot bear to look upon Thee, my sweet Light. (Canticles of Compline, Great Friday)

Some Greek Fathers use the term *eros* to describe God's love for man and man's possible love for God. Intense longing for God is a characteristic of monastic life. This divine *eros* must be tempered with sobriety, but when done so this thirst for God helps the monastic count the pleasures of the world as nothing and to endure the hardships of asceticism.

The Cross as the Tree of Life

The crucifixion icon, surprisingly, can be seen as an image of paradise: through the coming resurrection the cross of death is to become the Tree of Life. Christ is the source of the rivers of paradise, water and blood flowing from His side.

Thy life-giving side, O Christ, flowing as a river from Eden, waters Thy Church as a living Paradise. (Service of the Twelve Gospels)

The Mother of God and John represent the whole Christian people, the new race of Adam and Eve recreated, gathered around the Tree of Life in paradise regained. In the new order of things, the second Eve is recreated from the pierced side of the New Adam. At the same time John is told by Christ to behold his new mother, the Virgin Mary, and she is told to behold her son, John.

Mary as all womankind

St Maximus the Confessor says that Christ united man and woman, divided by the fall. This is graphically illustrated in this icon, and is particularly stressed in the hymns of that other feast of the cross, The Exaltation of the Cross:

"...creation rejoices and keeps feast, glorifying Christ, who in his surpassing goodness through thee (the cross) has joined together that which was divided (Exaltation of the Cross, Great Vespers)

7. Ascension (forty days after Pascha)

Acts 1:1-12; Luke 24:36-53.

The Virgin's role within the Church

The Ascension icon can be seen as an image of the Church and the Virgin's role within it:

- Christ is shown central, high up as the head of the Church, enthroned in heaven but His hand still raised in perpetual blessing upon His Church on earth. The Ascension is also a shadow of Christ's Second coming in power and glory.
This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come again in the same way as you saw him go into heaven (Acts 1:11)
- Angels accompany Christ in His ascent into heaven, but they are also on earth, ministering to His Church.
- On earth are the twelve disciples (including Paul, not yet even a Christian, but included as one of the twelve). Together with the Mother of God they represent the Church entire throughout time.
- Mary stands in the midst of the Church, a hidden treasure, not preached to the world, but treasured. She raises her hands in the orans, in intercession for the world. Some Apostles gesticulate, pointing to Christ: they are the Church witnessing to the world. Other Apostles contemplate Christ: they are the Church hesychastic.

Ascension and deification

The Ascension and Pentecost are the basis of our deification. In the Ascension, Christ raises our human nature to sit with God. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends to sit enthroned in human persons:

Christ has graciously born on high our fallen nature, and hast sat down with the Father” (Vespers)

“The angels marvel, seeing a man exalted over them” (Vespers)

We note that the apostles do not have haloes. Why? Pentecost is yet to come, and so they do not yet have the Holy Spirit dwelling within them. But icons do show Mary - along with Christ and the angels - with a halo. This is perhaps because the Virgin has already received the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation, when the Word was conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The union of all things in Christ

St Maximus speaks of Christ uniting male and female, the inhabited world and paradise, the material world and the heavenly, man and angels, and creation and Creator:

“And with us and for us He embraced the whole creation through what is in the centre, the extremes as being part of Himself, and He wrapped them around Himself, insolubly united with one another: Paradise and the inhabited world, heaven and earth, the sensible and the intelligible...” (St Maximus the Confessor)

In the icon we see altogether Christ, angels, men, women, mountains and trees, heaven and earth.

8. Dormition (August 15th)

Background

Phil. 2:5-11; Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28.

The tradition of the Virgin's death is based on a variety of apocryphal texts. These say that at the time of her death she was living in the Apostle John's house in Zion. God brought all the apostles except Thomas from the corners of the world on clouds to be with her at her death. St Paul was also there, along with bishops James brother of the Lord and first bishop of Jerusalem, Dionysius the Areopagite, Hierotheos and Timothy, some also say Ignatius the Godbearer.

When the Mother of God died, they saw Christ descend and take her soul with him into heaven. During the funeral procession to Gethsemane a Jew tried to upset the bier; an angel cut his hands off, he repented, and they were later healed.

The third day after the burial Thomas arrived, and they opened the tomb so he could say goodbye to her, but they found her body absent; Christ had raised her body in anticipation of the general resurrection.

Neither the tomb nor death had power over the Theotokos, who is ever watchful in her prayers and in whose intercessions lies unfailing hope. For as the Mother of Life, she has been transported into life by Him who dwelt within her ever-virgin womb. (Kontakion)

Themes

Mary as the ark of the covenant

In the icon, much is made of the Virgin being the ark, the bearer of God:

Come O gathering of those who keep the feasts, come and let us form a choir. Come, let us crown the Church with songs, as the Ark of God goes to her rest. (Lity of Great Vespers)

Thy Son, O Virgin, has truly made thee dwell in the Holy of Holies as a bright candlestick, flaming with immaterial fire, as a golden censer burning with divine coals, as the vessel of manna, the rod of Aaron, and the tablet written by God, as a holy ark and table of the bread of life. (Canon of Matins).

The story of the man who touched the bier and was consequently struck by an angel is sometimes included in icons. This event parallels the Old Testament story of those struck

dead when they tried to steady the carriage bearing the ark of the Covenant. We see also a candle in front of the bier, and Peter swings a censer.

The God-bearer is now borne by God

We see a reversal of roles in this icon, where instead of Mary holding the infant Christ, Christ the Saviour holds the soul of Mary, depicted as an infant in swaddling clothes. In the incarnation Mary is the gate through whom God enters the world; in the Dormition, Christ is the gate through which the Virgin enters heaven. Some icons indeed show the gates of heaven being opened.

Let the gates be opened wide that the Gate of God may enter with abundant joy, she who asks without ceasing for great mercy on the world. (Sessional Hymn of Matins)

Death as completion

The Virgin's death and her bodily resurrection are a foretaste of every righteous person's destiny. This is why the icon is often depicted in fresco or mosaic on the west wall of the nave, so that the faithful pass under it on leaving church. Through death we enter life.

The Dormition is the last feast of the church calendar, which ends on August 31st. It is a fulfilment of all the others, as we celebrate a soul being fully united in soul and body to her creator. It is an icon foretelling the general resurrection when all will be raised in the flesh.

Monasticism can be described as a constant, sober and joyful remembrance of death. Death is the only certainty of life, and it is for this certainty that the monastic tries to prepare himself. This remembrance explains the black garments, the cross and instruments of the Lord's passion embroidered the great schema, the frequent references in the hymns to repentance.

9. Protecting Veil (October 28th Greek, October 1st Russian)

Background

Hebrews 9:1-7; Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28. Although founded in Byzantium, this feast is now commemorated in a bigger way in Russia. The feast was instigated in Constantinople in the 10th century to commemorate a vision of the Virgin seen by St Andrew the fool for Christ and his disciple St. Epiphanius in the church of Blachernes during threat of a barbarian invasion. She was seen escorted by Saint John the Baptist and John the Evangelists and other saints. She prayed for a long time, weeping, then removed her shining veil and lifted it up over all the people on church. The icon also represents a 6th century saint commemorated on the same day of the year, St Romanus the Melodist.

Themes

Intercession

We are told that in the vision the Virgin prayed for a long time, and with tears. This shows us that even though she herself is in the bliss of heaven, her compassion for those suffering on earth continues.

*Today the Virgin stands in the midst of the Church
and with choirs of saints she invisibly prays to God for us... (from the
Kontakion)*

This is a continuous theme in the monastic life. The monastic's departure from the affairs of the world for the sake of prayer increases, not decreases the monastic's love for his fellow humans. As the kontakion for the Dormition feasts says,

*...in Thy falling asleep thou hast not forsaken the world, O Mother of God.
Thou hast passed over into life, thou who art the Mother of Life, and through
thine intercessions dost deliver our souls from death.*

An image of the worshipping Church

*...Angels and bishops worship,
apostles and prophets rejoice together,
since for our sake she prays to the pre-eternal God. (from the Kontakion).*

This icon is an image of the Church. It depicts those on earth - the congregation with Saints Andrew and Epiphanius - gathered together as one with those in heaven - the Virgin accompanied by many other saints in heaven.

Even though St. Andrew is the ascetic *par excellence*, the fool for Christ who has no home and lives for prayer, he is found worshipping with all the faithful in church. Though sometimes despised and misunderstood by many, the ascetic remains communal.

It is significant that this vision occurs during worship, for it is above all in the act of worship as a community that the oneness of the Church is revealed. As Christ said,

When two or three of you are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.