

A Homily on the Dormition of Our Supremely Pure Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary

by St. Gregory Palamas

Both love and duty today fashion my homily for your charity. It is not only that I wish, because of my love for you, and because I am obliged by the sacred canons, to bring to your God-loving ears a saving word and thus to nourish your souls, but if there be any among those things that bind by obligation and love and can be narrated with praise for the Church, it is the great deed of the Ever-Virgin Mother of God. The desire is double, not single, since it induces me, entreats and persuades me, whereas the inexorable duty constrains me, though speech cannot attain to what surpasses it, just as the eye is unable to look fixedly upon the sun. One cannot utter things which surpass speech, yet it is within our power by the love for mankind of those hymned, to compose a song of praise and all at once both to leave untouched intangible things, to satisfy the debt with words and to offer up the first fruits of our love for the Mother of God in hymns composed according to our abilities.

If, then, "death of the righteous man is honorable" (*cf. Ps. 115:6*) and the "memory of the just man is celebrated with songs of praise" (*Prov. 10:7*). How much more ought we to honor with great praises the memory of the holiest of the saints, she by whom all holiness is afforded to the saints, I mean the Ever-Virgin Mother of God! Even so we celebrate today her holy dormition or translation to another life, whereby, while being "a little lower than angels" (*Ps. 8:6*), by her proximity to the God of all, and in the wondrous deeds which from the beginning of time were written down and accomplished with respect to her, she has ascended incomparably higher than the angels and the archangels and all the super-celestial hosts that are found beyond them. For her sake the God-possessed prophets pronounce prophecies, miracles are wrought to foreshow that future Marvel of the whole world, the Ever-Virgin Mother of God. The flow of generations and circumstances journeys to the destination of that new mystery wrought in her; the statutes of the Spirit provide beforehand types of the future truth. The end, or rather the beginning and root, of those divine wonders and deeds is the annunciation to the supremely virtuous Joachim and Anna of what was to be accomplished: namely, that they who were barren from youth would beget in deep old age her that would bring forth without seed Him that was timelessly begotten of God the Father before the ages. A vow was given by those who marvelously begot her to return her that was given to the Giver; so accordingly the Mother of God strangely changed her dwelling from the house of her father to the house of God while still an infant. She passed not a few years in the Holy of Holies itself, wherein under the care of an angel she enjoyed ineffable nourishment such as even Adam did not succeed in tasting; for indeed if he had, like this immaculate one, he would not have fallen away from life, even though it was because of Adam and so that she might prove to be his daughter, that she yielded a little to nature, as did her Son, Who has now ascended from earth into heaven.

But after that unutterable nourishment, a most mystical economy of courtship came to pass as regards the Virgin, a strange greeting surpassing speech which the Archangel, descended from above, addressed to her, and disclosures and salutations from God which overturn the condemnation of Eve and Adam and remedy the curse laid on them, transforming it into a blessing. The King of all "hath desired a mystic beauty" of the Ever-Virgin, as David foretold (*Ps. 44:11*) and, "He bowed the heavens and came down" (*Ps. 17:9*) and overshadowed her, or rather, the enhypostatic Power of the Most High dwelt in her. Not through darkness and fire, as with Moses the

God-seer, nor through tempest and cloud, as with Elias the prophet, did He manifest His presence, but without mediation, without a veil, the Power of the Most High overshadowed the sublimely chaste and virginal womb, separated by nothing, neither air nor aether nor anything sensible, nor anything supra-sensible: this was not an overshadowing but a complete union. Since what overshadows is always wont to produce its own form and figure in whatever is overshadowed, there came to pass in the womb not a union only, but further, a formation, and that thing formed from the Power of the Most High and the all-holy virginal womb was the incarnate Word of God. Thus the Word of God took up His dwelling in the Theotokos in an inexpressible manner and proceeded from her, bearing flesh. He appeared upon the earth and lived among men, deifying our nature and granting us, after the words of the divine Apostle, "things which angels desire to look into" (*1 Pet. 1:12*). This is the encomium which transcends nature and the surpassingly glorious glory of the Ever-Virgin, glory for which all mind and word suffice not, though they be angelic. But who can relate those things which came to pass after His ineffable birth? For, as she co-operated and suffered with that exalting condescension (*kenosis*) of the Word of God, she was also rightly glorified and exalted together with Him, ever adding thereto the supernatural increase of mighty deeds. And after the ascent into the heavens of Him that was incarnate of her, she rivaled, as it were, those great works, surpassing mind and speech, which through Him were her own, with a most valiant and diverse asceticism, and with her prayers and care for the entire world, her precepts and encouragements which she gave to God's heralds sent throughout the whole world; thus she was herself both a support and a comfort while she was both heard and seen, and while she labored with the rest in every way for the preaching of the Gospel. In such wise she led a most strenuous manner of life proclaimed in mind and speech.

Therefore, the death of the Theotokos was also life-bearing, translating her into a celestial and immortal life and its commemoration is a joyful event and festivity for the entire world. It not merely renews the memory of the wondrous deeds of the Mother of God, but also adds thereto the strange gathering at her all-sacred burial of all the sacred apostles conveyed from every nation, the God-revealing hymns of these God-possessed ones, and the solicitous presence of the angels, and their choir, and liturgy round about her, going on before, following after, assisting, opposing, defending, being defended. They labored and chanted together to their uttermost with those who venerated that life-originating and God-receiving body, the saving balsam for our race and the boast of all creation; but they strove against and opposed with a secret hand the Jews who rose up against and attacked that body with hand and will set upon theomachy. All the while the Lord Sabaoth Himself, the Son of the Ever-Virgin, was present, into Whose hands she rendered her divinely-minded spirit, through which and with which its companion, her body, was translated into the domain of celestial and endless life, even as was and is fitting. In truth, many have been allotted divine favor and glory and power, as David says, "But to me exceedingly honorable are Thy friends, O Lord, their principalities are made exceeding strong. I will count them and they shall be multiplied more than the sand" (*Ps. 138:17*). And according to Solomon, "many daughters have attained wealth, many have wrought valiantly; but she doth exceed, she hath surpassed all, both men and women" (*cf. Prov. 31:29*). For while she alone stood between God and the whole human race, God became the Son of Man and made men sons of God; she made earth heavenly, she deified the human race, and she alone of all women was shown forth to be a mother by nature and the Mother of God transcending every law of nature, and by her ineffable childbirth-the Queen of all creation, both terrestrial and celestial. Thus she exalted those under her through herself, and, showing while on earth an obedience to things heavenly rather than things earthly, she partook of more excellent deserts and of superior power, and from the ordination which she received from heaven by the Divine Spirit, she became the most sublime of the sublime and the supremely blest Queen of a blessed race.

But now the Mother of God has her dwelling in Heaven whither she was today translated, for this is meet, Heaven being a suitable place for her. She "stands at the right of the King of all clothed in a vesture wrought with

gold and arrayed with divers colors" (*cf. Ps. 44:9*), as the psalmic prophecy says concerning her. By "vesture wrought with gold" understand her divinely radiant body arrayed with divers colors of every virtue. She alone in her body, glorified by God, now enjoys the celestial realm together with her Son. For, earth and grave and death did not hold forever her life-originating and God-receiving body -the dwelling more favored than Heaven and the Heaven of heavens. If, therefore, her soul, which was an abode of God's grace, ascended into Heaven when bereaved of things here below, a thing which is abundantly evident, how could it be that the body which not only received in itself the pre-eternal and only-begotten Son of God, the ever-flowing Wellspring of grace, but also manifested His Body by way of birth, should not have also been taken up into Heaven? Or, if while yet three years of age and not yet possessing that super-celestial in-dwelling, she seemed not to bear our flesh as she abode in the Holy of Holies, and after she became supremely perfect even as regards her body by such great marvels, how indeed could that body suffer corruption and turn to earth? How could such a thing be conceivable for anyone who thinks reasonably? Hence, the body which gave birth is glorified together with what was born of it with God-befitting glory, and the "ark of holiness" (*Ps. 131:8*) is resurrected, after the prophetic ode, together with Christ Who formerly arose from the dead on the third day. The strips of linen and the burial clothes afford the apostles a demonstration of the Theotokos' resurrection from the dead, since they remained alone in the tomb and at the apostles' scrutiny they were found there, even as it had been with the Master. There was no necessity for her body to delay yet a little while in the earth, as was the case with her Son and God, and so it was taken up straightway from the tomb to a super-celestial realm, from whence she flashes forth most brilliant and divine illuminations and graces, irradiating earth's region; thus she is worshipped and marvelled at and hymned by all the faithful. Willing to set up an image of all goodness and beauty and to make clearly manifest His own therein to both angels and men, God fashioned a being supremely good and beautiful, uniting in her all good, seen and unseen, which when He made the world He distributed to each thing and thereby adorned all; or rather one might say, He showed her forth as a universal mixing bowl of all divine, angelic and human things good and beautiful and the supreme beauty which embellished both worlds. By her ascension now from the tomb, she is taken from the earth and attains to Heaven and this also she surpasses, uniting those on high with those below, and encompassing all with the wondrous deed wrought in her. In this manner she was in the beginning "a little lower than the angels" (*Ps. 8:6*), as it is said, referring to her mortality, yet this only served to magnify her pre-eminence as regards all creatures. Thus all things today fittingly gather and commune for the festival.

It was meet that she who contained Him that fills all things and who surpasses all should outstrip all and become by her virtue superior to them in the eminence of her dignity. Those things which sufficed the most excellent among men that have lived throughout the ages in order to reach such excellency, and that which all those graced of God have separately, both angels and men, she combines, and these she alone brings to fulfillment and surpasses. And this she now has beyond all: That she has become immortal after death and alone dwells together with her Son and God in her body. For this reason she pours forth from thence abundant grace upon those who honor her-for she is a receptacle of great graces-and she grants us even our ability to look towards her. Because of her goodness she lavishes sublime gifts upon us and never ceases to provide a profitable and abundant tribute in our behalf. If a man looks towards this concurrence and dispensing of every good, he will say that the Virgin is for virtue and those who live virtuously, what the sun is for perceptible light and those who live in it. But if he raises the eye of his mind to the Sun which rose for men from this Virgin in a wondrous manner, the Sun which by nature possesses all those (qualities which were added to her nature by grace, he shall straightaway call the Virgin a heaven. The excellent inheritance of every good which she has been allotted so much exceeds in holiness the portion of those who are divinely graced both under and above heaven as the heaven is greater than the sun and the sun is more radiant than heaven.

Who can describe in words thy divinely resplendent beauty, O Virgin Mother of God? Thoughts and words are

inadequate to define thine attributes, since they surpass mind and speech. Yet it is meet to chant hymns of praise to thee, for thou art a vessel containing every grace, the fulness of all things good and beautiful, the tablet and living icon of every good and all uprightness, since thou alone hast been deemed worthy to receive the fulness of every gift of the Spirit. Thou alone didst bear in thy womb Him in Whom are found the treasures of all these gifts and didst become a wondrous tabernacle for Him; hence thou didst depart by way of death to immortality and art translated from earth to Heaven, as is proper, so that thou mightest dwell with Him eternally in a super-celestial abode. From thence thou ever carest diligently for thine inheritance and by thine unsleeping intercessions with Him, thou showest mercy to all.

To the degree that she is closer to God than all those who have drawn nigh unto Him, by so much has the Theotokos been deemed worthy of greater audience. I do not speak of men alone, but also of the angelic hierarchies themselves. Isaiah writes with regard to the supreme commanders of the heavenly hosts: "And the seraphim stood round about Him" (*Isaiah 6:2*); but David says concerning her, "at Thy right hand stood the queen" (*Ps. 44:8*). Do you see the difference in position? From this comprehend also the difference in the dignity of their station. The seraphim are round about God, but the only Queen of all is near beside Him. She is both wondered at and praised by God Himself, proclaiming her, as it were, by the mighty deeds enacted with respect to Him, and saying, as it is recorded in the Song of Songs, "How fair is my companion" (*cf. Song of Songs 6:4*), she is more radiant than light, more arrayed with flowers than the divine gardens, more adorned than the whole world, visible and invisible. She is not merely a companion but she also stands at God's right hand, for where Christ sat in the heavens, that is, at the "right hand of majesty" (*Heb. 1:3*), there too she also takes her stand, having ascended now from earth into the heavens. Not merely does she love and is loved in return more than every other, according to the very laws of nature, but she is truly His Throne, and wherever the King sits, there His Throne is set also. And Isaiah beheld this throne amidst the choir of cherubim and called it "high" and "exalted" (*Isaiah 6:1*), wishing to make explicit how the station of the Mother of God far transcends that of the celestial hosts.

For this reason the Prophet introduces the angels themselves as glorifying the God come from her, saying, "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His Place" (*Ezek. 3:12*). Jacob the patriarch, beholding this throne by way of types (*enigmata*), said, "How dreadful is this Place! This is none other than the House of God, and this is the Gate of Heaven" (*Gen. 28:17*). But David, joining himself to the multitude of the saved, who are like the strings of a musical instrument or like differing voices from different generations made harmonious in one faith through the Ever-Virgin, sounds a most melodic strain in praise of her, saying: "I shall commemorate thy name in every generation and generation. Therefore shall peoples give praise unto thee for ever, and unto the ages of ages." Do you see how the entire creation praises the Virgin Mother, and not only in times past, but "for ever, and unto the ages of ages"? Thus it is evident that throughout the whole course of the ages, she shall never cease from benefacting all creation, and I mean not only created nature seen round about us, but also the very supreme commanders of the heavenly hosts, whose nature is immaterial and transcendent. Isaiah shows us clearly that it is only through her that they together with us both partake of and touch God, that Nature which defies touch, for he did not see the seraphim take the coal from the altar without mediation, but with tongs, by means of which the coal touched the prophetic lips and purified them (*cf. Isaiah 6:6-7*). Moses beheld the tongs of that great vision of Isaiah when he saw the bush aflame with fire, yet unconsumed. And who does not know that the Virgin Mother is that very bush and those very tongs, she who herself (though an archangel also assisted at the conception) conceived the Divine Fire without being consumed, Him that taketh away the sins of the world, Who through her touched mankind and by that ineffable touch and union cleansed us entirely. Therefore, she only is the frontier between created and uncreated nature, and there is no man that shall come to God except he be truly illumined through her, that Lamp truly radiant with divinity, even as the Prophet says, "God is in the midst of her,

she shall not be shaken'(Ps. 45:5).

If recompense is bestowed according to the measure of love for God, and if the man who loves the Son is loved of Him and of His Father and becomes the dwelling place of Both, and They mystically abide and walk in him, as it is recorded in the Master's Gospel, who, then, will love Him more than His Mother? For, He was her only-begotten Son, and moreover she alone among women gave birth knowing no spouse, so that the love of Him that had partaken of her flesh might be shared with her twofold. And who will the only-begotten Son love more than His Mother, He that came forth from Her ineffably without a father in this last age even as He came forth from the Father without a mother before the ages'? How indeed could He that descended to fulfill the Law not multiply that honor due to His Mother over and above the ordinances of the Law?

Hence, as it was through the Theotokos alone that the Lord came to us, appeared upon earth and lived among men, being invisible to all before this time, so likewise in the endless age to come, without her mediation, every emanation of illuminating divine light, every revelation of the mysteries of the Godhead, every form of spiritual gift, will exceed the capacity of every created being. She alone has received the all-pervading fulness of Him that filleth all things, and through her all may now contain it, for she dispenses it according to the power of each, in proportion and to the degree of the purity of each. Hence she is the treasury and overseer of the riches of the Godhead. For it is an everlasting ordinance in the heavens that the inferior partake of what lies beyond being, by the mediation of the superior, and the Virgin Mother is incomparably superior to all. It is through her that as many as partake of God do partake, and as many as know God understand her to be the enclosure of the Uncontainable One, and as many as hymn God praise her together with Him. She is the cause of what came before her, the champion of what came after her and the agent of things eternal. She is the substance of the prophets, the principle of the apostles, the firm foundation of the martyrs and the premise of the teachers of the Church. She is the glory of those upon earth, the joy of celestial beings, the adornment of all creation. She is the beginning and the source and root of unutterable good things; she is the summit and consummation of everything holy.

O divine, and now heavenly, Virgin, how can I express all things which pertain to thee? How can I glorify the treasury of all glory? Merely thy memory sanctifies whoever keeps it, and a mere movement towards thee makes the mind more translucent, and thou dost exalt it straightway to the Divine. The eye of the intellect is through thee made limpid, and through thee the spirit of a man is illumined by the sojourning of the Spirit of God, since thou hast become the steward of the treasury of divine gifts and their vault, and this, not in order to keep them for thyself, but so that thou mightest make created nature replete with grace. Indeed, the steward of those inexhaustible treasuries watches over them so that the riches may be dispensed; and what could confine that wealth which wanes not? Richly, therefore, bestow thy mercy and thy graces upon all thy people, this thine inheritance, O Lady! Dispel the perils which menace us. See how greatly we are expended by our own and by aliens, by those without and by those within. Uplift all by thy might: mollify our fellow citizens one with another and scatter those who assault us from without-like savage beasts. Measure out thy succor and healing in proportion to our passions, apportioning abundant grace to our souls and bodies, sufficient for every necessity. And although we may prove incapable of containing thy bounties, augment our capacity and in this manner bestow them upon us, so that being both saved and fortified by thy grace, we may glorify the pre-eternal Word Who was incarnate of thee for our sakes, together with His unoriginate Father and the life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto the endless ages. Amen.

The End and Glory Be to God

