

■ On the Occasion of the All-Venerable Dormition and Translation to Heaven of the *Panagia* (15 August)

The Most Blessed *Theotokos*: A Teacher of Orthodox Asceticism*

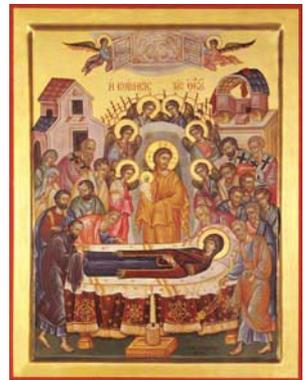
“Let mercy always be preponderant within you...”

COME, blessed Christians!
Let us gladly take up, with faith and piety, the prophetic invitation: “Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord!”¹

Let us ascend the “shady and densely wooded mountain”² of the Mother of God, by means of *praxis*; that is, Orthodox asceticism.

And if our asceticism is genuine, we will then be vouchsafed to behold and to magnify the *new* and *extraordinary wonders* of the *Theotokos*.

In the All-Pure Maiden the most unprecedented things came to pass. “All things pertaining to” Mary, the Birth-Giver of God, “are extraordinary”³: she incorruptibly carried our Savior in her womb; she proved to be a Mother who knew not man; she lent flesh to the Creator Who is in need of nothing; she became a vessel of the One Who cannot be encompassed and a confine of the boundless and unconfined Word; and, finally, her immaculate body was preserved incorrupt and was raised, assumed, translated, and glorified by her Son and God!



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All things pertaining to the Immaculate Mother of God are truly *new* and *extraordinary wonders*, and give rise to awe, astonishment, and *theoria*.

Especially after the Ascension of her Son, our Lady the *Theotokos* continued her **asceticism**, which was also a *new* and *extraordinary wonder*, in conjunction with **love**.

The *Mother of God*, “on account of the great gifts that God bestowed upon her, was herself zealous and earnest to struggle in fasting, prayer, prostrations, and every kind of asceticism,” “and in prayer and diligent care for the whole world.”⁴

In this way, the Most Blessed One has passed on to us a *model*, educating us as an infallible teacher of genuine **Orthodox asceticism**.

Within the confines of the Orthodox Church, *asceticism* does not constitute an end in itself, nor does it have any value in and of itself; *asceticism* is a means by which our self-love is gradually brought under control until it is obliterated, such that we are rendered capable of loving; *asceticism* is a heroic *exodus* from the *boundaries* of our own selves and an offering of sacrificial love for our neighbor.

We see that the *Theotokos*, being profoundly conscious of the supernatural gifts of God to her, conducted herself with **grateful asceticism** for the rest of her life; hence, *asceticism* is revealed to us as a Divine gift, which is subsequently offered to our neighbor and to all of creation.

This explains the profound truth that, even if Orthodox *asceticism* is a cross, nevertheless it ultimately gives birth to life, joy, and freedom.

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When our *asceticism* is genuine, it is dominated by **mercy**. Any ascetic labor that is not accompanied by **mercy**—that is, a merciful and compassionate attitude—is truly in vain, if not in danger of being exploited by evil spirits.

The Saints are unambiguous and absolute on this crucial matter of life in Christ: “Let mercy always be preponderant within you, until the moment that you feel within you the compassion that God has for the world.”⁵

Let us never forget that *asceticism*, as a constant battle against self-love, egocentrism, and self-esteem, by the Grace of God unshackles

and liberates our *mind* from the sinful tyranny of the passions and leads it to the rediscovery of its lost beauty, to illumination, and to divinization.

In this supernatural state, **light** prevails in our hearts: “for the *mind* is immersed in Thy light / and is made radiant and is rendered light / like unto Thy Glory.”⁶ **And mercy** prevails as well: “a burning of the heart for all of creation, for people, for the birds, for the animals, for the demons, and for all of creation.”⁷

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May light and mercy, O All-Hymned Mother, be unceasingly poured out upon our lowly existence, which is on the *cross* of *asceticism*, by the Grace of Christ our Savior.

May light and mercy never cease to be poured out; for thou art the “steward and guardian of all the treasures and gifts of God, the Heavenly King, not that thou alone mightest enjoy them, but rather that thou mightest transmit and share them with all of creation, both noetic and sensible!”⁸

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* **Source:** *Άγιος Κυπριανός*, No. 339 (July-August 2007), pp. 57-58

- 1) Isaiah 2:3.
- 2) Cf. Avvakoum 3:3.
- 3) **St. Andrew of Crete**, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCVII, col. 1084B/ Discourse 13, “On the Dormition of our Most Holy Lady, the *Theotokos*, (Discourse II on the Dormition).
- 4) **St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite**, *Κήπος Χαρίτων* [Garden of Graces], (Thessaloniki: Ekdoseis B. Regopoulou, 1979), p. 217b, note (with a reference to St. Gregory Palamas).
- 5) **Abba Isaac the Syrian**, *The Complete Extant Ascetical Works* [in Greek], Discourse 34, “On Prostrations...” (Athens: Ekdoseis Ch. Spanos), p. 151.
- 6) **St. Symeon the New Theologian**, *Works*, Vol. III, “Hymns of Divine Love,” 39, cols. 61-63, (Thessaloniki: Ekdoseis “Orthodoxos Kypsele,” 1990), p. 295.
- 7) **Abba Isaac the Syrian**, *op. cit.*, Discourse 81, “On Various Virtues...” p. 306.
- 8) Cf. **St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite**, *op. cit.*, p. 217a.