The Dormition of the Mother of God

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Chapter 13 of Mysteries of Eurasia (Moscow, Arktogeya: 1991)

Theological symbolism

The “Dormition of the Mother of God” is one of the most revered icons in Rus. It is this icon that was first miraculously delivered from Constantinople to Kiev where it consecrated with its divine presence not only the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, but all of Holy Rus, the new (and final) bastion of Orthodoxy.

In the traditional depiction of this icon, we see on the lower level the Virgin falling into slumber on her deathbed surrounded by saints, and on the middle level we see the figure of Jesus Christ standing, holding the soul of the Virgin Mary in the form of an infant in his hands.

In considering the symbolism of this depiction, it is necessary to immediately point to the reverse analogy between the central figure of the Dormition of the Mother of God and the classical “Mother of God” icon. If in the traditional depiction of the Mother of God (for example, the “Vladimir Mother of God”, “Kazan Mother of God,” etc.) we see the ‘adult’ Mother of God holding Jesus, then in the Dormition of the Mother of God we see the inverse: the ‘adult’ Jesus Christ and the ‘infant’ Virgin Mary. Explaining this contrast will help us discover the universal, ontological character of the Christian tradition which, like any fully-fledged tradition, in addition to a historical aspect bears a deeply metaphysical, supra-historical charge directly tied to the spiritual understand of reality at large.

Thus, the very fact of the Incarnation of the God-Word in the material, human universe necessarily implies a certain “diminishment” of the fullness of the second hypostasis of the Holy Trinity, not an essential “depreciation” (the Trinity always remains self-resembling), but an external, apparent, visible depreciation. Christ is described in the Gospel as “suffering.” In the First Coming, the true nature of the Son remains veiled, hidden, and can only be guessed by chosen disciples. But for subsequent generations of Christians, defining this divine nature becomes the basis of Faith – Faith, not Knowledge, since Knowledge is associated with the ontological obviousness of a certain sacred fact, and the obviousness of the Son’s divinity manifests itself only at the moment of the Second Coming, the Coming of the Sacred in Power, in Glory, i.e., in his original ‘non-diminished’ quality. Therefore, the classical image of the Mother of God with the infant has a symbolic meaning that is central to prayer and Church practice. In this icon, as in the sacred map of reality, a ‘diminished’ spiritual center is shown surrounded by the human or, more broadly, material cosmic nature which externally ‘surpasses’ this center, is ‘predominant’ compared to it, and is ‘bigger’ than it is. The Mother of God with the infant describes the ontological status of the world between the First and Second Coming where the Son is already revealed to the world, but in a ‘diminished’ quality thereby demanding Faith, personal effort, and spiritual devotion on the part of believers for ‘dynamic,’ willed transformation of Faith into Confidence.

The Dormition of the Mother of God icon presents us with the inverse proportion. Rising above the concrete historical fact of the Virgin Mary’s personal death, the Orthodox tradition here offers a prototype of an eschatological situation, valuably pointing to the meaning of the sacraments of the End Times. The depiction of Christ holding the infant Virgin in his arms describes the true proportions of the spiritual world in which the Center, the Pole of Being, the God-Word is presented not as diminished, but in its full metaphysical extent. In the heavenly world, the ‘diminished’ is the ‘material,’ the ‘earthly’ cosmic portion, while the Spirit itself appears in its entirety. Here the Word is omnipresent and obvious and all-fulfilling.But the material world is not simply destroyed in heavenly reality. It is transformed, it is ‘drawn’ to the spiritual regions and rises to its heavenly and supra-material archetype. Hence, in fact, the special term ‘dormition’ (a calque from Greek “koimesis,” or sleep, rest, lie; in Latin ‘assumptio”) in contrast to the usual word ‘death.’ Dormition means ‘solace’, i.e., the transition from the state of ‘unrest’ inherent to material, physical reality to a state of ‘peace,’ in which all things abide in the regions of Eternity. Thus there is not ‘destruction,’ but ‘final disappearance’ understood by the word ‘death.’ It would be interesting in this regard to pay attention to the Russian etymology of the word ‘uspenie’ (dormition), which is akin to the Ancient Indian term ‘svapiti’ (literally ‘to sleep’). This Indian term literally means ‘to enter oneself’ or ‘dive into one’s inner self.’ As follows, our word ‘uspenie’ etymologically means ‘entering the inner world’, the ‘inner ‘world’ being a synonym for the ‘spiritual’ or ‘heavenly’ world. In the troparion for the celebration of the Dormition of the Mother of God, it is said: “in falling asleep she did not forsake the world.” This refers not only to the compassionate participation of the Mother of God in worldly affairs after her departure, but also the fundamental ontological event of the ‘casting of the material world’ into the spiritual sphere as a result of a special, unique sacred event. What metaphysical event is symbolized by the Dormition of the Mother of God?

This event is the End Times. It is at this moment, the moment of the Second Coming, that happens the final affirmation of true spiritual proportions in correlation to the material and the spiritual. The ‘material’ (the Virgin Mary) turns out to be an infinitesimal point in the Infinity of spiritual Light, the Light of the God-Word, Christ. Consequently, the Dormition icon reveals to the Christian the deep mystery of the End Times, which is not a global catastrophe, not the destruction or disappearance of the physical world as is seen most often by those who are only superficially familiar with Orthodox eschatology, but the essential and total restoration of the normal, natural, harmonious ways of being where the spiritual, heavenly Light completely incorporates the physical, material darkness. Therefore, from a Christian perspective, the End Times is the single most important event of an entirely positive, salvational meaning. The End Times is not a catastrophe, but the end of catastrophe since, from a spiritual point of view, any ‘unrest’, ‘worrying’, or ‘movement’ is essentially catastrophic for the spirit and, in addition, signifies the triumph of inferior, Satanic forces. The End Times, the End of the World, and Judgement Day act as something repulsive and negative only for the enemies of God, only for those who identify their fate with the dark course of restless, demonic fate. For believers, on the contrary, this is salvation, a celebration, and transformation – the universal and final ‘dormition’ of matter together with the universal and final ‘awakening’ of the spirit.

Thus, we can now distinguish three levels in this spiritual teaching manifesting such abundant wisdom in the icon of the Dormition.

Historically, this icon tells of the death of the Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ and her subsequent mercy for the believers and suffering of this world.

Ontologically, it embodies the affirmation of true spiritual proportions of material reality in the larger picture of being, where the spirit fills everything while physical reality is ‘diminished’ to an infinitely small point.

Eschatologically, it points to the meaning of the End Times, i.e., the restoration of true existential proportions and the affirmation of the absolute triumph of the Heavenly, Divine element. The ‘diminishing’ of matter in the End Times does not mean its destruction, but its ‘induction’ into the fullness of light and peace.

Universal symbolism

The symbolism of the Dormition icon (if we juxtapose it to the Mother of God icon) also has analogies outside of a Christian context. The clearest such similar spiritual concept of the structure of being is reflected in the Chinese symbol of Yin-Yang, in which the white dot against the black background signifies the diminishing of the spirit in matter, while the black dot against the white background is, conversely, matter in spirit. However, the Chinese tradition is characterized by contemplation and and the absence of an eschatological orientation. Thus, the Chinese are inclined to consider this symbol as a sign of eternal harmony while Christians see ontological plans in an historical and eschatological perspective, hence Christianity’s distinctly ‘dynamic’ character supposing the personal, volitional engagement of man in the outcome of the fate of the spirit. The Chinese believe that this volitional aspect is not so important insofar as the Tao ultimately arranges everything in the best way. Undoubtedly, similar symbolism can be found in many other traditions in reference to the correlations between the material and spiritual worlds, but the Chinese example represents something so clear and comprehensive that all similar parables can be reduced to it.

The sacred sign of Russia

The fact that the icon of the Dormition of the Mother of God was the first to be miraculously brought to Russia and the fact that its presence graced the Kiev-Pecharsk Lavra (which was the first center for the spread of Orthodoxy in Russia) leaves one to believe that Russia is under the special patronage of this icon. The Russian Orthodox tradition and Russian Church believe this. If we take into account all of the theological and ontological, as well as eschatological content of this icon’s message, then it is only natural to associate it with the sacred mission and spiritual fate of Russia itself.

On a historical level, such symbolism, applied to Russia, points to the constant participation of the Mother of God in the history of the Russian state, not only during periods of its fully-fledged Orthodox existence, but also during the dark periods of neglect and decline. As if it were a fulfillment of predestination that began with the spread of the Orthodox faith throughout Russian lands, approximately over the thousand years following the founding of the Kiev-Pecharsk Lavra to the moment of the collapse of Orthodox order in Russia, the Mother of God was a believer and declared that ‘henceforth She takes responsibility for Russia and sovereign Power therein.” The icon known as “The Sovereign” is dedicated to this. “And in falling asleep she did not forsake the world.”

On an ontological level, our symbolism might very well explain the cultural and psychological specificity of Russian Orthodox civilization, which was always contemplatively-oriented, drawn by the spirit to the heavenly sphere where true proportions are set once and for all, while sometimes neglecting earthly, practical, material things which seemed to the religious consciousness of Russians to be just as infinitesimal as the tiny figure of the Mother of God in the hands of the Savior.

Finally, on the eschatological level, the idea of Russia’s mission being tied to the End Times is clearly present in Orthodox thought. Hence, in particular, the rise of the idea of “Moscow as the Third Rome” or “Last Rome” who is destined to stand until the final moment of earthly history. If the Dormition icon ontologically describes the ideal essence of the Russian Orthodox soul, then in eschatological terms it points to the active side of Russian civilization, the mission it is destined to fulfill in human history. This mission is, without a doubt, connected to the realization of the End Times and the providential preparation of the Second Coming.

It is also important to recall the omens sent to Saint Anthony of Kiev before the construction of the first and main temple of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra in honor of the Dormition of the Holy Mother of God. Anthony prayed to God to send him a sign pointing out the place where a church should be built. In the morning, all of the ground was covered with dew, but in one place the earth was left completely dry. The next day, the miracle was repeated, but in the reverse order. The dew was nowhere to be found other than in the place where there had been no dew the day before. Finally, when the saint was gathering firewood, Fire rained down from the sky and set it alight. After this, no doubts remained as to the place to be chosen.

All three of these miracles have a strictly symbolic and doctrinal interpretation connected to the spiritual meaning of the Dormition. The dry place of the future Church in the middle of the dew-covered space is symbolically identical to the icon of the Mother of God in the which the fiery, dry, light element, Christ, is surrounded by the wet, earthly element, the Virgin Mary. The next day, the opposite occurs, which is the essence of the Dormition icon in which the dryness (i.e., fieriness, spirituality) of the earth surrounds a small, wet space (matter). The third miracle directly concerns the secret of the End Times, when the prepared firewood (the Church of true believers) will be lit on fire and transfigured by heavenly light force, the force of the Second Coming.

In this mysterious story of the founding of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra is captured the deepest prophecy of the fate of Russia, the fate of Christianity and Orthodoxy, and its glorious and great future.