

The Fast of the Holy Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos

By His Eminence, Archbishop JOSEPH

During this time of the Holy Dormition Fast, we remember the repose of our Lord Jesus Christ's mother, the ever-blessed Virgin Mary. Some may wonder why we would have this fasting period prior to the commemoration of someone's death, since the other Great Fasts (i.e. Pascha and the Nativity) precede a joyous celebration. Why should we fast? What use is this feast to us?

The Fast of the Holy Dormition is a reminder to us that mankind (even the Mother of the Son of God) will face death in this age. No matter how close we reach to God, we shall all pass through the gate of bodily death. Though we consider the Virgin Mary the greatest Theologian (a theologian is one who hears the Word of God and, as the Scripture says, 'keeps it'), this is not enough to avoid the natural consequence of the Fall of Adam.

We must all remind ourselves that the time of our death grows nearer each day. Are we ready? Are we prepared? Perhaps some of us have unfinished business: apologies that need to be made, words that need to be said, forgiveness that needs to be given. Do we wish to pass out of this world and into the presence of God with so much left undone?

The time of this fast is established by the Church to help us recognize our sins and repent of them before we take this journey. It is not 'morbid' to prepare for one's death any more than it is 'morbid' to have a check-up by a doctor. After all, we go to the doctor to prevent a physical illness from overtaking us, knowing that we can become sick at any time. We think about physical illnesses, are we therefore 'morbid?' Certainly not! Rather, we are considered wise for having routine examinations of the body. So we must also have routine examinations of our soul through Confession. The fast is a 'check-up,' a time to examine ourselves to see if there is some unknown spiritual malady lurking in our hearts. We humans are clever, and can hide our guilt and resentment even from our own consciences. However, just like the beginning of any disease, just because we don't 'feel sick' does not mean we are not. Rather, we can be physically sick unto death and feel quite well. The same is true of illnesses of the soul. Through Confession and self-examination with a spiritual director, we can diagnose our spiritual illnesses and begin treatment. Our goal is to pass from this life with a healthy soul, one full of God's love and mercy, so that we can enjoy all eternity in the presence of our Father. Our enemy is denial, and if we deny our illnesses, they will only worsen us and deny us the joy of the Heavenly Kingdom.

Sin is a preventable disease. Though we cannot help but sin (just as we cannot prevent all forms of bodily illness), we can treat sin in its early stages and remove it before it kills us (i.e. totally removes us from God). Through regular 'check-ups' with our Confessor, we can monitor our symptoms and take the right treatments. We cannot be cured of our propensity to sin, but we can live healthy lives if we remain disciplined in regularly examining our deepest thoughts and emotions.

We live in an unhealthy world. Sin is very contagious, and so we must constantly be on our guard. Just as an unhealthy person, physically weakened by other diseases, is more likely to become sick, so we are likely to fall prey to more and more sin if we refuse to treat the sins we are already afflicted with.

Let us use the Paraklesis Service (Supplicatory Prayer) as a tool to remind us of our spiritual afflictions, and ask the Great Physician to enter into us and heal us. As we sing hymns extolling the Virgin Mary, let us beg for Her intercessions for us. We must awaken to the reality of our sins and have confidence that God desires to heal us. The Theotokos is with us, and is a ready aid to strengthen us in the difficult task of repentance.

The Holy Dormition Fast is vital to our spiritual well-being, and it is my fervent prayer that all of us take full advantage of the mercy we are offered in it. By being healed by God, we will be given the gift of grace that will allow us to emulate the wondrous virtue of the Most Holy Virgin.

I pray, with supplication to the Mother of God, that all of us, clergy and laity, men and women, adults and children, emulate Her example and ask for Her intercessions.

Most Holy Theotokos, save us!