

## Dormition and our pursuit of holiness

### Pursuing holiness is a reliable “rule of thumb” for life.

SYNOPSIS: During two prison visits on the 2nd day of the Dormition fast, I sang the Small Paraklesis and preached on the Gospel from Luke appointed for it, about the Theotokos and holiness. Christians should pursue holiness. It is the entire goal of our life, because God is Holy. We discuss the difference in the understanding of what salvation is for an Orthodox Christian vs. other Christian faiths, and about the pursuit of holiness and how the Theotokos is an example of holiness, and why we talk so much about her. Since our goal is to become holy, we come up with a "rule of thumb" to evaluate everything we do in life. Luke 1:39-49,56 2019-08-16

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Today is the first day of the Dormition fast and I sang the Small Paraklesis twice in the 2 different prisons that I visited today and preached on the Gospel, that beautiful gospel from Saint Luke about Mary going out to the hill country and visiting her kinswoman Elisabeth and Saint John the Baptist leaping in her womb for joy. It's a very beautiful gospel and I read it every single day during the Dormition fast because we serve the Small Paraklesis every single day, and it impresses me about how important holiness is.



In Orthodoxy we stress holiness above everything. God is holy. God made us to become holy, not just to save us. When I was Protestant it was about being saved, it was about a contract with God. Now, it was a benevolent contract; God wants to save us and so He saves us because of this this thing that we do, where we ask Jesus to come into our heart, and therefore we are saved from being judged for our sin. In Orthodoxy that's not how we describe salvation. We describe salvation as the perfection of the soul in union with God, and how can you have those things without holiness? Therefore, Orthodoxy has this beautiful emphasis on holiness.

That's why our hymns speak so much about the Theotokos, who is holy. She became holy by the Grace of God, by bearing God in her womb, and God enlightening her in her earthly life, and then bringing her to heaven body and soul. Because she was - in a way you could say - the beginning of the resurrection. She bore the One Who would be resurrected, and so He honored her role in our salvation by bringing her to the heavens in body, and soul - that is what we celebrate in the Dormition. We talk about the Mother of God's holiness all the time, and in fact we even call her "Panagia", which means "all holy", and that freaks people out- they think "how can we say she's 'all holy'"? Literally that wouldn't be true - the only Holy Being in the entire universe is God, but we are to become holy like God and approach His holiness.

It's very important to meditate on holy things, and when you read this Gospel from Saint Luke about Mary going in the hill country, and the whole narrative about the Annunciation and the birth of Christ, there's so much holiness there. Imagine a 14 or 15 year-old girl who is told that she will bear a child. She knew that she would be a virgin; somehow, she had a vow that she had made and knew God would honor, and yet, she was told she would bear a child! So, she's curious and says "How shall this be". And yet she didn't say; "How am I going to make it? How will I escape being stoned? What will I tell Joseph"? She just wanted to know "how shall this be", and she was told that it would be through the Holy Spirit. What a brave woman and what a holy woman! - to submit herself to God like that - to make herself possibly an object of derision and even of stones. And from that point on she had Christ in her womb, for 9 months, and many changes must have happened in her soul. Your body changes; when you have a baby it's

amazing; you get 25 percent more blood circulation, more veins and arteries, so imagine what happens to the soul of the God-man Jesus Christ abides in it.

So, she became very holy woman, not perfect by any means: you can tell the Gospel she made some mistakes in judgment, but after the resurrection she was the mentor and the conscience of the apostles and helped them in many ways. She knew them all personally very well and she inculcated in them this love of holiness, and the church has this. We treat things with reverence: relics of saints, the trip wasn't, the Holy Mysteries, the vessels that we use, the altar table. We treat things with reverence because they are holy. It is not because of any kind of superstition or anything but because they are holy and we should recognize holy things.

I was recently reading something about Archbishop Anthony of blessed memory, of San Francisco, and there are many stories about him that are just beautiful, he was a holy man, humble. He was a little eccentric. He would not sleep much and he'd be excited about something and he would call of his priests about something at 3 or 4 in the morning and then he would say "Oh father, forgive me I forgot - you know it's late and you must've been sleeping", but the very fact that he called his priests personally so often is an amazing thing anyway. There were some Gospels that were in a box and somebody was moving the box with their foot, and he said "Oh no that won't do - pick it up you should never move the gospels with your foot.", because a foot on this is not considered to be a nice way to do things. He was saying you must to go to the extra effort and pick it up and move it because of the fact that the Gospels are holy.

So, we have to have an emphasis on all these things and the entire Dormition fast we're emphasizing holy things.

You can have a rule of thumb that will work pretty well in life: if you can do something and it is holy, then do it - if you can't, then don't. Now, I'm not talking about whether or not you get yourself dirty or whether you are involved in a conflict or anything else. We have to do things - life is messy - but if your disposition is one of peace and love and patience - all these things are aspects of holiness - then you can go ahead and do it, if you can't do it with this sort of disposition, then you're sinning. It's pretty easy! We should always aim for what is holy and the Mother of God teaches us that. May God help us to become holy. Amen.

Priest Seraphim Holland

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