

His Eminence
The Most Reverend
Metropolitan JOSEPH

The Right Reverend
Bishop THOMAS



Archbishop of New York and
Metropolitan of
All North America

Diocese of Oakland, Charleston,
and the Mid-Atlantic

ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ARCHDIOCESE
OF NORTH AMERICA

August 2019

Beloved in Christ,

I greet you as we celebrate these most joyous feasts, the Transfiguration of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos! These feasts coincide with the holy fast of the Dormition, and appropriately so, since we are accustomed to prepare for great feasts of the Church through the necessary and salvific ascetical practice of fasting.

The great modern elder of the Church, Saint Justin Popovic, wrote,

Orthodoxy is asceticism and life, which is why it's only through asceticism and life that preaching and mission are accomplished. The internal mission of the Church ought to be to cultivate asceticism - personal and general - among our people. Parishes should be converted into ascetic centers, but that can be achieved only by an ascetic priest. We have to strengthen prayer with fasting, to cultivate good order in church, because this is one of the main ways in which Orthodoxy has a regenerative effect on people. But all this depends on our priests and monastics becoming ascetics themselves.

“In Thy light, we shall see light” (Psalm 36:9). Asceticism is the manner in which we are transformed and enter *theosis* or union with God. In the Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John perceive the true nature of the Lord Christ shining in all His divine glory. It is through asceticism and the acquisition of the Holy Spirit that we become by grace what He is by nature.

From Image to Likeness. *“The expression according to the image indicates that which is reasonable and endowed with free will, while the expression according to the likeness denotes assimilation through virtue, in as far as this is possible”* (St John of Damascus). The human person is called upon to realize all of his creative abilities in 'tilling' the world, in creativity, in virtue, in love, so that he can be assimilated to God. For, as St Gregory of Nyssa says, *“the limit of a life of virtues is the assimilation of God.”*

The Most Holy Theotokos is the paradigm of what transpired on Mount Tabor in the Transfiguration. In one of his sermons on the feast of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos, Saint John of Kronstadt writes,

Today the Holy Church solemnly glorifies the honorable Dormition or translation of the Mother of God from earth to heaven. A wonderful translation-she died without serious illness, peacefully. Her soul is taken up in the divine hands of Her Son and carried up into the heavenly abode, accompanied by the sweet singing of Angels. And then, her most pure body is transferred by the Apostles to Gethsemane where it is honorably buried, and on the third day it is resurrected and taken up to heaven. You see this on the holy icon of the Dormition of the Theotokos. On it is

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

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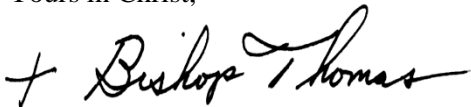
represented the Life-bearing body of the Theotokos lying on the bier, surrounded by the Holy Apostles and hierarchs, and in the center of the icon the Lord holding in His hands the Most Pure soul of the Theotokos. The translation of the Mother of God is a paradigm of the translation in general of the souls of Christians to the other world.

We say that our dead have 'fallen asleep' or 'passed away.' What does this mean? This means that for the True Christian there is no death. Death was conquered by Christ on the Cross. But there is a translation, i.e., a rearrangement of his condition, i.e., his soul is in another place, in another age, in another world beyond the grave, eternal, without end, by the voice of the Lord and the fearful yet wonderful trumpet of the Archangel, all the dead shall live and come forth each to his place: either to the resurrection of life or to the resurrection of condemnation (St. John 5:29). This is what the Christian means by translation. We should be ready for this translation, for the day of the General Resurrection and Judgment, for this indescribable world event, recorded in the Holy Scripture.

Our holy Orthodox faith consists in this - the holy light of Tabor shines through the darkness of human misery and sin, conquering death so that death is no more. The Lord Christ revealed this mystery to the three disciples on Mount Tabor and the Most Holy Theotokos experienced it in her most holy dormition.

May we implore the Most Holy Theotokos that we may be filled with this Light and so become by grace what Christ is by nature. May God bless you and give you strength!

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bishop Thomas". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rt. Rev. Bishop THOMAS (Joseph)
Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Oakland, Charleston, and the Mid-Atlantic

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