

Meaning in the Dormition Icon

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It is common to find an icon of Mary with her son Jesus in the prominent position, front and center, in the apse of an Orthodox church (“apse” being the architectural name for the altar’s area). This icon is known by the name “*Platytera ton Ouranon*” which is Greek and means “More Spacious than the Heavens.” It is also common to find an icon of Mary with her son Jesus in the center of a church’s west wall. This would be the wall opposite to the “*Platytera*” icon. In this way, anyone entering or exiting an Orthodox church will simultaneously have prominent icons of Mary and her son directly in front of and behind them.

The prominent placement of these two icons is a strong testament to the importance and significance that the Church expresses about these two people, Jesus and Mary. However, the Church displays Jesus and Mary in such conspicuous ways not merely because they are “important” but because they are the reason for the Church’s existence and in fact they are the very Church itself.

In the “back” of the church (or the west wall) is the prominent icon of the “Dormition” or “Falling Asleep” of Mary. It is an icon that is easy to read in its details with a few possible exceptions. To understand this icon more deeply it is helpful to understand the icon of the *Platytera* first. In the *Platytera* Mary’s arms are open wide in a gesture that, when looked at one way, is an offering of her son to the world. Looked at another way it can be seen as a welcome to everyone who would wish to be received.

[At Saint Philip’s (in Souderton) and in other historical Orthodox churches around the world, the traditional Deisis format is used and not the *Platytera* format. A Deisis (as one can see) is a term for a setting that features Jesus in the center of a composition while He is flanked by Mary and John the Baptist on each of His sides. Both the Deisis and *Platytera* compositions emphasize the preeminence of Mary by way of her inseparable relationship to Jesus. And although the Deisis and the *Platytera* format are different depictions of Jesus and Mary, they both offer many of the same messages. The key similarity of the Deisis and the *Platytera* format for our understanding of the Dormition icon is the way that Mary is defined by Her relationship to Her Son.]

Getting back to the icons... with an emphasis on the *Platytera* for a moment...

The *Platytera* [like the Deisis] is often of such a large scale that it overwhelms and overshadows in emphasis the other icons in a church. This can present a rather odd first impression especially to a non-Orthodox visitor. Even to Orthodox Christians it may present a bit of a dilemma. How is it that in a Christian church, a place where life centers around Christ, an image of His mother Mary would appear to have dominance? In reality, Christ is found in the *Platytera* at bull’s eye center on Mary’s lap. His presence is small in size and sublime in nature. These things show Jesus’ humility. At the same time it is a balanced image in that it does not forget or omit Mary. It is a delicate theological balancing act that is perfectly articulated and resolved in the *Platytera*.

This is slightly less of a dilemma for a Deisis composition since Jesus IS more prominently front-and-center and Mary IS to the side. However, Mary IS, still, challengingly prominent in the Deisis!

Both of these traditional Apse icons effortlessly present the beliefs of the Church. These icons present the perfectly balanced view of the place and role of Mary. These beliefs, found in Holy Scripture, echo the Tradition of the Church, which is that Mary is never separated from her relationship to Jesus.

When Orthodox Christians have pondered Mary they have come to the conclusion that Jesus could not have been born without Mary's free consent, on the one hand, while on the other, She is made significant by the One she bore. Mary provides the throne. She provides the womb and nourishing breasts. She provides the loving care to a fragile infant. Mary washed, fed and changed the diaper of the One who was God become man! These acts and characteristics reveal her humility, and the *Platytera* and Deisis icons glorify Her because of it.

Mary is a significant figure to Orthodox Christians in a personally impactful way. She is significant to us as an example of our own personal potential. This example shows us that the way to fulfill our magnificent potential is a result of free-will, informed, not blind, submission to God's goodness. By example we see that She is indispensable to God's birth. Without Mary, Christ's birth could not have taken place. And for us, Her example shows us that without submission we cannot have Christ in us. By submission She becomes a home and a temple of God. She bears Jesus in her womb. By free-will, informed, not blind, submission to God's goodness we can have Jesus in us too.

And Mary, by having Jesus ACTUALLY within her, becomes the first, true, flesh and blood, temple of God. She is the first but not the last. When Mary became the first, true, flesh and blood, temple of God She opened the flood gates for **all of humanity**. When She said "*be it to unto me according to thy word*" (*Luke 1: 38*) we, all humans, were shown the excellent and perfect way! NOW we know how to be temples! NOW anyone can be, like Mary, a temple of God. We do not have to travel to a special place. We who are believers ARE the special place when we say and believe and live "*be it to unto me according to thy word.*"

And this is exactly what happens at our Chrismations, which are our personal Pentecosts and our personal Annunciations. At Pentecost and at the Annunciation the Holy Spirit takes action and comes into those who submit and believe. These are wonderful things that happened at these events. At the Annunciation the Holy Spirit came to Mary! At Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes to all of the Church! The thing which happened initially with Mary was revealed even more powerfully to be a possibility and a reality for everyone at Pentecost! Just as Mary had God ACTUALLY within her, we can ACTUALLY have God within us. This IS what happens at our Chrismations. We become temples of the Holy Spirit!

Mary was and is a temple. We see this clearly in a *Platytera* icon. It is implied in a Deisis icon. And when we see these icons of Mary we are reminded of the human potential to be a temple. When a person's faith allows them to say "*be it to unto me according to thy word*" they become a temple of God just like Mary!

The idea that everyone has the potential to have God dwelling in them would have been a radical, new and different concept to the Jews before Christ. They saw God's throne as a physical structure, the Temple BUILDING in Jerusalem. [This is the temple depicted, intentionally and purposefully on the west arch in Saint Philip's opposite to the Apse!] The concept that God's home was or could be a temple building was morphed when Jesus was born and God became incarnate. Jesus' birth showed Mary's womb to be THE TEMPLE! Her womb is a temple "more spacious than the Heavens." The idea of "temple," now, is elevated by way of Mary. And with Mary a new pattern is set. This new pattern is now not a temple made of brick and mortar. This new temple pattern is human! And by this NEW, FLESHY, pattern ALL believers who follow Mary's example become living, human temples of God. All believers can be and are like Mary. She is the first and most excellent example of what Saint Paul discusses as the *"temple of the Holy Spirit" (in 1 Corinthians 6:19)*.

Becoming a temple, like Mary, is what we experience personally at our Chrismations. And the fulfillment and understanding of becoming a temple at our chrismation is helped along by pondering icons of Mary. And when we ponder icons of Mary we should be able to hear her "words of wisdom" by making her words to be our words when we can respond to God, *"be it to unto me according to thy word."*

Since Mary is the prime and perfect example of being *"a temple,"* the wisdom of a prominently placed icon of Her in the apse of a church is confirmed to be appropriate and right. When we ponder Pentecost, Christmas and Annunciation we will begin to ponder where it is that God lives. When we see Mary prominently displayed in a church's iconography we are nudged to remember and ponder exactly that. Where DOES God live? And then maybe we will ponder the question... Can God live in me?

And as we ponder how it is that God literally lives in us believers we can turn our attention to the Dormition icon. It will give us additional insight into how it is possible that God lives in us and what this might mean to us. The Dormition icon is wonderful for many reasons but perhaps the most wonderful reason of all is found in a small, surprising detail. This detail contains a message God's personal, tender all-encompassing love! It is a message worth discovering. It is a message front-and-center just like a *Platytera* or Deisis is front-and-center.

The Dormition icon depicts the "Falling Asleep" of Mary (Dormition being a word from the French word "dormire" which means "to sleep"). This title word, right away, brings a new way to look at the death of believers. To believers and followers of Jesus Christ death has become something alien. It is such a different thing than it was before Christ's victory over it. It is so different that the old word "death" does not really work anymore. Believers, like Mary and the Apostles, experienced firsthand the power of Christ's resurrection and His destruction of death. This experience made it impossible to use that word, "death," in the same way any longer. How could believers talk about Mary's "death" when they knew she was alive in heaven with Her Son? They could not. They knew that with her, as with all mankind, there was something else happening. And this "happening" is the thing depicted in the Dormition icon and this new "thing," this new "happening," is best described as a kind of "sleep" since there are no other adequate words. Hence, "Dormition"! This is why this event (and icon) is called "**Dormition** of the Mother of God," because the word "death" simply does not apply.

With this in mind let's take a look even closer at the icon...

With this icon, as with all icons, we are meant to be drawn in. We are meant to be a part of this event and, more importantly and powerfully and poignantly, we are meant to relate this icon to ourselves personally. The hope of relating personally to the Dormition icon brings us back to why we first considered the Deisis and *Platytera* icons. In these apse icons of Mary, as with all icons of Mary, She holds (or is near to) Jesus. The image of mother with child is an emotional touchstone for most people. We all came from the wombs of our mothers. And while the complexities and shortcomings of human reality make this, at times, a difficult or even unpleasant reality, it is still something we all have in common. As such we all, on some level, hope and desire for our basic, childlike needs to be satisfied. It is then common and natural, when we look at the icon of The Perfect Mother offering and supplying perfect love, for us to want that love too! The love She gives to Jesus is the love we want! On some level we hope and desire and need for THAT love to be OUR love! We want to be loved perfectly by our mommies! Gratefully, by grace and mercy, in some mystical way this love IS available. And this is the great joy of being an Orthodox Christian, because these hopes, desires and needs ARE satisfied. And we experience them and feel them personally when we believe it to be so.

With the belief that Mary, THE Perfect Mother, loves us we can experience things like being fed... with the "Bread of Life" (*John 6:35*); being dressed... with a "garment of incorruption" and a "robe of righteousness" (*Isaiah 61:10*); being washed... of our sins (*Acts 22:16*); having our thirst quenched... by "The Fountain of Life"; being protected and sheltered... "under the shadow" of her wings (*Psalms 17:8*); and being given a place... to find "rest for our souls."

These needs being met are what help us to relate to God and His Mother and they help us to build and to strengthen our faith. They help us to believe, truly, deeply and unwaveringly, because faith becomes a lived experience. When we are bathed and fed and clothed in Church then we cannot help but simply KNOW that we are loved. And this is what we see in icons of Mary. We see an unconditionally loving Mother who is always ready and waiting for us. She is ready to embrace us! She is ready to tend to our needs! She will wash, clothe, and feed us!

Now, in the Dormition icon we see the favor returned. In contrast to all of those icons that show Mary holding little baby Jesus, we now see Jesus holding little Mary! With everything that is happening in the action packed, people-filled Dormition icon, one could easily miss this most significant detail of Jesus holding Mary. Everyone's attention is on the "sleeping" Mary. This is why this small detail could be missed. But it is perhaps the most important detail of the whole icon. A foundational and poignant mystery is revealed in this detail. It is the mystery that Jesus comes from Heaven to receive His mother's soul!

In the overall composition of a Dormition icon Mary is lying in state. She is surrounded, left and right, by the Apostles. Just behind Mary's funeral bier is Jesus. Jesus is enveloped by a sort-of bubble. This "sort-of bubble" depicts His mystical presence at the event. Above Jesus the gates of Heaven are wide open. They are open and ready to receive the newly departed soul of Mary. Just as Mary's arms are

wide open and ready to receive us in a *Platytera* icon, the gates of Heaven are wide open and ready to receive too.

Mary's soul, held tenderly by Jesus, is depicted as a swaddled, little baby. It is a twin or rather mirror-like or flip-flopped, image that contrasts with the abundant and familiar icons of Mary with child. It is as if Jesus now, as He holds little Mary, is returning all of the favors and all the care that His mother gave to Him. There are no rules or covenants or laws that force Jesus to "return the favor." He does this out of love. And this reveals in perhaps one of the most easily accessible ways with "down to earth" theology the exact way that Grace takes place. Things that should not be, are. Heaven and earth should not be together. Death should not be a passage to life. But here it is! It is God's mercy depicted in front of our eyes ready for us to absorb this new reality that God loves us so much that he will come when we are dead and reveal our deaths to be merely sleep!

And this is also what this icon means for us! It means that we need not fear death since it is merely sleep... just as it is merely sleep for Mary! This is a significant way that we can make this icon be personal to us.

Additionally, if we are meant to relate to and be drawn into icons and if the detail of Jesus holding little Mary is THE significant detail of the Dormition icon, then how are we supposed to relate to this? The answer is simple enough. We can see that this is exactly what is in store for us. Jesus' loving work by way of His death on the cross and harrowing of hell and His Resurrection from the dead all comes to this very personal moment. We, all of mankind, will be held like little babes in the arms of our loving God! And in fact, this reality has already begun when we believe and submit. And who would not want to be held in the loving arms of Jesus like a little babe?

So here we have it depicted, God's eager love doing what cannot be done. What is Jesus doing "outside" of Heaven? Did He not already come and fulfill and accomplish everything? Nonetheless, there He is; even though He has already accomplished the impossible with His crucifixion and resurrection, He goes even beyond all of this and holds Mary, HOLDS US, against His bosom and carries us to heavenly peace.