

In the Land of the Living

(22/8/2021)

In the Synaxarion for the Feast of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos, there is a particularly moving account written there. At the age of about 50, The Holy Virgin received a divine message that in three days, she would depart for Heaven. She then invited her relatives and neighbors to her home in order to reveal this message and to say goodbye. It was a surprise to them, and naturally, there were many tears. The Virgin Mary comforted them, saying that she would intercede for not only them, but for the whole world. This is evident in the countless blessings that the intervention of Our Lady has brought for all those suffering and asking her help.

After God, it is truly the Blessed Mother who can console better than anyone else those who are in pain and sorrow. This is especially true for those who are mourning the departure of their loved ones. Our Lady, who suffered as much as any mother watching her Son suffer on the Cross, truly understands the grief of every mother who has been deprived of her child – many times prematurely – and all those who have been deprived of parents, spouses, relatives and friends.

We can discern the special grace that God granted the Virgin Mary in order to endure the suffering at the Cross, in that she knew that her Son was the Son of God, and that whatever they did to Him, He would emerge victorious over death.

So we have an assurance that our loved ones are not lost. Their souls are eternal, and after the separation from the body, the soul continues to live and feel as before, with full awareness of its own existence (with all memories intact). Due to Holy Baptism, the soul is sanctified and united with Christ and His Holy Church. As long as they live on earth, they belong to the “**Church Militant.**” However, after leaving the body here on earth, it moves to the heavenly “**Church Triumphant.**” Here in the world we struggle, and suffer injury, disease and innumerable sorrows. In the triumphant Church in Heaven, those who have lived by faith and repentance enjoy the fruit of their victory, having successfully completed their earthly struggle. In short: *“If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”* (Romans 14:8).

Some people overcome by grief may claim that the soul of their loved one has “left them behind,” and they are unable to see them anymore. This is answered by considering this: All baptized Christians are united with Christ, and through Christ united with each other. There is no real division or “separation” between the “Church Militant” and the “Church Triumphant.” This is clearly seen in our communion with the Saints, who are part of the triumphant Church. In our various needs we ask for their help and intercession before God, grateful for “the miracle of the Saint.” If the Saints cannot hear us, then why does the Church teach the importance of their intercession, and more than that, the intercession of the Mother of God? Just as the souls of the Saints hear our words when we address them, so too do our loved ones, by the grace of God, rejoice when we pray for them.

In particular, we are united with our loved ones in Heaven during the Divine Liturgy. In the Holy Office of Oblation, the Priest, when presenting the offering, takes out portions for the Virgin Mary and the Saints, as well as the faithful (living or dead) whose names were given to him earlier.

In this way, the whole One Church of Christ with the entire faithful are present, those on earth and those in Heaven. In the consecration of the Divine Communion, the Priest unites in the Holy Chalice the Holy Body of Christ, the portions of the Virgin Mary and the Saints, as well as the portions of the faithful, both on earth as well as those in Heaven.

So it is as our Church teaches us, that through our Lord Jesus Christ, we are in communion with our loved ones who are in Heaven, and we rejoice with them together. Let us not forget that prayer is not one way, and that just as we pray for our loved ones in Heaven, they also pray for us. It is through these prayers to God that we maintain the bonds between us.

My dear brothers and sisters, dealing with this separation from those we love is very painful. Due to lack of time, let us close with just a few teachings from the Church Fathers on this subject:

- No one is exempt from the separation of the soul from the body. Let us be prepared.
- When our loved ones depart, it is natural to suffer, but it is not beneficial to feel excessive sorrow like non-Christians, who have no hope (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13).
- God calls every person to be close to Him for their own good, so that during their life everything happens for the best interest of the soul. We cannot fully understand this.
- The separation of the soul from the body is not the end, but the beginning of genuine life.
- One day we will all meet in heaven, and finally after our souls have been united with incorruptible bodies, we will all live together, eternally, in the joy of the kingdom of God.

Amen.