

November 21, 2011

Theotokos Entrance into the Temple Feast Day

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Feast of the Entrance, Nov. 21, 2011

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every Feast of the Mother of God during the year is another opportunity to speak of our beloved and All-Holy Mother, and of what she means to us and how much we love her, as Orthodox Christians, as Orthodox monastics, and, especially to us here at this humble Skete, which is dedicated to her and today's Feast of The Entrance into the Temple.

In the Gospel account of the encounter between Christ and the Samaritan Woman at the Well, we read this verse:

["And Jesus answered and said unto her, 'If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water'."](#)

Brothers and Sisters, There is one who knew this gift of God, one who did not lose one particle of it, one who was so pure, so luminous that she *seemed* to be the Light itself. This was, of course, the Virgin Mary, the Mother of our God, Jesus Christ. I love to compare her to a stained glass window in one of the old cathedrals of Europe. The richly colored glass is there, and through it shines the bright light of the sun, which illuminates the interior of the church. In the same way, the Theotokos permitted the Son of God, He who was the "Light" itself that came into this world, to "shine" through her and bring light to all of us living in the darkness of this world.

She was one whose life was so simple, so lost in God that there is very little we can say about *personally*—that is, about her personality, except that she was, to use the Latin phrase, *Virgo fidelis*, that is, "Faithful virgin, "who kept all these things in her heart."

She remained so little, so "recollected" in the seclusion of the Temple, that she drew down upon herself the delight of the Holy Trinity. Again, to use her words in Scripture: "Because He has looked upon the lowliness of His servant, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed!"

By the way, the English term, "recollection", which isn't often used in Orthodoxy, is a actually a very useful word and, in respect to the spiritual life, it means attention to the presence of God. It means the withdrawal of the mind from external and earthly affairs in order to attend to God and Divine things. It is an interior solitude. In this sense we can certainly say that the Virgin Mary was a totally "recollected" person, beginning when she entered the Temple of Jerusalem. In my lifetime I personally have known one other person who could be described

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as completely “recollected,” and that was Gerondisa’s and my spiritual father, Fr. Seraphim of Platina. I think Gerondissa, however, has known some others through her monastery in Greece. But in this country they are few and far between. Fr. Seraphim would have said that St. John Maximovitch was completely and utterly “recollected” because he was so serenely indifferent to the opinions of others about him.

When the Theotokos was presented by her parents in the Temple the High Priest led her into the Holy of Holies, where she herself became the literal and physical “holy of holies”, the living tabernacle that was to eventually contain the Bread of Life. This is *why this morning’s appointed Epistle speaks of the tabernacle in the Old Testament:*

“¹ Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. ² For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; ³ and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, ⁴ which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; ⁵ and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.” (Hebrews 9:1-7)

Now, the tabernacle in the Old Testament was a portable Temple—actually a very large and elaborate tent—constructed by the Hebrews to house the Ark of the Covenant during their forty years sojourn in the wilderness. The Ark and Tabernacle were a mystical dwelling place for the presence of God. In a fulfilled sense, then, the Virgin Mary becomes the “new tabernacle”, for she herself will contain the Lord God. She knew this long before the Annunciation, for the Archangel Gabriel, whom ministered to her in the Holy of Holies in the Temple had revealed many things to her about coming events.

So, she was so “recollected”—that is to say, so absorbed in her humble contemplation of God, and in her deep inner longing to see the Messiah--that the Holy Trinity bent down to her, this beautiful-of-soul-woman, and willed that she be the Mother in time of Him who exists in eternity, Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Savior of mankind and the Judge of the world.

As a result of this profound “recollection,” the Spirit of love, which presides over all of creation, came upon her not long after her years in the Temple were completed, and the Virgin spoke her great “yes” to God: “Behold the handmaiden of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word,” and in this manner the greatest of mysteries was accomplished. But already from the moment of her entrance into the Temple as a young girl, she had chosen

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to live within God, in the depths of a bottomless abyss, and this prepared her to receive the greatest of all gifts, the Son of God, into her very womb.

This Feast reminds us that, like the Mother of God, we too must become fitting tabernacles for her Divine Son. We do this, of course, every time we receive Him in Holy Communion, but only if we have properly prepared, through repentance and humility. If our preparation has been inadequate or non-existent, then the Lord does still come, but immediately departs from us, so that we are not harmed, and in this way we fail to become tabernacles of the Eucharistic Lord.

But even if we have made proper preparation to receive Jesus, then we must make special efforts to “hold on” to Him in the tabernacles of our hearts, just as the Virgin Theotokos continued to be completely spiritually united to her Son after He was born. Her close union with Him never ceased at any time. But we, who receive Communion, often take the Lord for granted and as soon as the Liturgy is ended we begin to talk of worldly things. In other words, instead of keeping vigil with Christ in our hearts, we are quick to desert Him for unworthy concerns and activities.

On the contrary, however, what does the example of saints and righteous ones tell us about this? Many of the saints spent a long time after Liturgy in thanksgiving, not just listening to the short Post-Communion Prayers, or reading them oneself, but being very reluctant even to leave the church. This is why the Bishop who ordained me used to routinely tell people at the end of the Liturgy: “Be not quick to spill out the grace you have just received.”

You might say, well this was easy for the Virgin Mary—after all, she was special--, but it’s very hard for the rest of us. This is a delusion! The Theotokos was fully human, just like you and me, and she endured distractions, temptations and trials and afflictions of all kinds, just like we do. She suffered anguish over her child, just as we suffer over our own offspring; she grew weary and, ultimately, also died, just as we will. She was not a “special creation” and was not supernaturally preserved from sin. Rather, she simply did what you and I must do: *cooperate supremely with the grace of God*, in order to keep ourselves mindful of her Divine Son, and to keep ourselves from sin, as she did. And, as St. John of Kronstadt once said, “If we could live just one day without sin, we would already have a foretaste of heaven!” When her Son comes to us in Holy Communion He comes *fully* to us—body, soul and divinity—with all that that means, and with all of the power and divine energy that is necessary for us to follow the example of the Panagia and the saints.

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True, we honor her; we bless her--especially in our prayers and on her Feast Days. But she desires something more from us. She wants above all for us to imitate her and unite ourselves closely to Christ, as *she* united herself to God, beginning even in the Temple. In other words, she wishes us, too, to become tabernacles—resting places, homes—for the Lord.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.