



## Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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### *The Synergy of Salvation: The Birth of the Theotokos* September 20, 2020

**Brothers and Sisters in Christ,**

**Christ is in our midst! He is and every shall be!**

*So then, the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it. Amen.*  
(Mark 16: 20).

This is one of my favorite texts from the New Testament. We hear it at Matins whenever the Third Eothinon, the Third Gospel Text, is appointed. It gives me pause every time I read it, and I find myself coming back to the words of this Gospel again and again. St. Mark describes how our Lord appears to His disciples after His Resurrection from the dead; how He instructs them to go and proclaim the Gospel throughout all the world; and how He is taken up in heaven in His Divine Ascension to take His place at the right hand of the Father. Then, *after* His Ascension – not before! – the second evangelist says that the disciples went forth to do His will and that “the Lord worked with them.”

“The Lord worked with them” even after His Ascension into Heaven. This always impresses me when I read it, because it says precisely what we do not expect. After His Ascension we expect

that He is gone. But, no; He continues to work with the disciples, even as they continue to work with Him. He is present among them after His Ascension just as truly and really as He was present among them before. The Grace of the All-Holy Spirit is poured out upon them and upon all flesh, and through the Spirit, He is present. He is there as the disciples work with Him. This truth of His presence with us as we work with Him and as He works with us is acknowledged throughout the writings of the Holy Apostle Paul as well. In the Orthodox Faith we refer to this cooperative effort on the part of the disciple with the Lord as “synergy.” It is a dogma we easily forget or misinterpret, and it is at the very heart of the message of our current Feast, the Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos.

The Mother of God did not spring from the forehead of God like the mythological Athena did from the forehead of Zeus. Her parents, Joachim and Anna, were pious Jewish people, who sought to do the will of God in their lives. Unfortunately, however, they had not been blessed with children, and their “barrenness” as a married couple in the sight of God caused them much pain and anguish. The Protoevangelium of James describes how Joachim was chided by the other men when he went to the temple to make sacrifice, how he went into the wilderness to pray and to fast for God’s intervention. Anna wept at the foot of a laurel tree when she saw a nest of sparrows, lamenting how such honor had been given to them in the birth of their young, and in anguish praying to the Lord for His intervention on her behalf as well. God heard the prayers of Joachim and Anna, and the Mother of God was born.

The story in the Protoevangelium goes on to describe how they reared their child Mary. It describes how they brought her up in purity and in observance of the Divine Law and how they offered her as a true sacrifice to the Lord, taking her when she was three to dwell in the Temple in the company of the temple virgins and priests. The Mother of God did not come into life different in any way from other human beings, but she was prepared by her pious parents to become the one person who could say to the angel Gabriel sixteen years after her birth with selfless conviction, “May it be done unto me according to your word!” Her parents had worked with the Lord; they first sought His intervention with humble prayers; they received His grace and the supreme gift of a child with gratitude and with joy; and, they offered her back in self-giving sacrifice. This, Brothers and Sisters, is the very essence of synergy, cooperation with God, working with the Lord; and, it is the very example and meaning of sacrament.

The Birth of the Mother of God reminds us of all of these things. Even after His Ascension, the Lord Jesus Christ waits to work with us who are willing to work with Him, just as the parents of the Most Holy Theotokos asked the Lord to intervene and then worked with the Lord to rear their daughter in purity and in faith. Their synergy, their cooperation with Him, brought about the greatest miracle the world has ever known, the birth of the Savior Jesus Christ. Such a wonder would not have taken place unless the parents of the Most Holy Theotokos had

cooperated with the Lord in their lives of piety and selfless giving. This is how it is with us, Brothers and Sisters! Those are saved, St. Gregory the Theologian said, who are united to God. We become united with God only insofar as we cooperate with Him. He stands ever ready to work with us through the power of the Spirit, as St. Mark's Gospel reminds us in its closing words. We cannot save ourselves, but conversely, He will not force anyone to be joined to Him without their cooperation. We are all saved through the Divine synergy of His Grace and our submission. This is one of the lessons of the Birth of the Holy Theotokos, and it is one of the central dogmas of our Faith.

Like Joachim and Anna, let each of seek His intervention at every moment of our Lives; let each of us receive His freely given Grace with joy and gratitude; and, let each of us offer whatever He freely gives us back to Him in humble self-giving. We too will be overwhelmed with the bounty and magnitude of what He gives us in return. This is the way of synergy and the essence of life as sacrament.

Fr. Elias

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