

## Contra Tollhouses: The Dormition of the Theotokos

It was Bright Monday of 2009 when the call came. I had just finished up the Divine Liturgy for that morning when the nurse informed me that I needed to get to my mother's apartment as soon as possible. Mom had been in home hospice care for two weeks as she slowly succumbed to end stage pulmonary fibrosis. She was actively dying. I arrived at mom's apartment, phoned my wife, and sat down with mom.

A few hours later, the strangest thing happened. The power went out around 1:25 p.m. The entire apartment complex was without power. Since it was a bright sunny spring day, we had the bedroom window open. I remember the utter silence. It was then that the nurse, having observed the changes in mom's breathing, said, "She's leaving us." I held mom's hand and told her it was o.k. to go. After a few minutes, she stopped breathing. The nurse got a stethoscope and we both confirmed that mom was dead. Seconds later, the power came back on, and the background noise levels returned like the tide rushing in. The power outage lasted less than ten minutes.

The nurse and I looked at each other in astonishment over the sequence of events. The nurse asked me, "Did things just happen the way I think they happened?" We both knew that we had experienced something deeply spiritual. As devastated as I was at the loss of my mother, I still felt an inner peace; something that only Christ can bring to a mournful soul.

It was at this point in my life when the icon of the Dormition of the Theotokos suddenly took on a new meaning. For me, that icon is a powerful reminder of the hope of our salvation in Jesus Christ. I thought of Christ coming for the soul of His departed mother and fathomed that my own mother must have experienced the same thing. At the Vesperal Divine Liturgy on Holy Saturday morning, we sing, "Let all mortal flesh keep silence and in fear and trembling stand, pondering nothing earthly minded. For the King of kings and the Lord of lords cometh forth..." To this day, I believe that the power outage and the utter stillness experienced at my mom's passing could only be explained by that icon and that hymn.

With that hope-filled concept in mind, how can Orthodox Christianity (and no other version/denomination of Christianity) have this bizarre teaching about the tollhouses? The tollhouse theory states that

...following a person's death the soul leaves the body and is escorted to God by angels. During this journey the soul passes through an aerial realm which is ruled by demons. The soul encounters these demons at various points referred to as toll-houses where the demons then attempt to accuse it of sin and, if possible, drag the soul into hell.<sup>1</sup>

Having witnessed my mother's peaceful passing, I can't imagine how one would think, let alone teach, that demons were lining up on the "path of ascent" to test her soul in the hopes of dragging it off to the fires of Hell. Then one day, I had a spark of inspiration – the icon of the Dormition of the Theotokos itself and the Church's teachings about that feast serve as a refutation against the tollhouse heresy. This is the inspiration for this manuscript which looks *exclusively* at the Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos itself as a refutation of the tollhouse teachings.

It is important that we clarify two things about the Theotokos before taking on the tollhouses: the first being her fallen humanity. The Orthodox Church has never accepted the Roman Catholic teaching of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. This dogma states that Mary was conceived by her parents, Joachim and Anna, without original sin. Two simple things refute this dogma. First, in the Magnificat, a hymn found in Luke 1:46-55, Mary states, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." (vs. 46b-47). If Mary was free of original sin, then why did she need God as her savior? If she was free of the corruption of original (or ancestral) sin, Mary would not, or could not, have died. However, turning to scripture we read that "...all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Adam sinned and his sin brought death into the world and all humanity is now in the image and likeness of fallen Adam (re: Genesis 5:3). "Infected" with this fallen nature, each and every one of us is subject to death, where sin itself reigns (re: Romans 5:12-21). The liturgical prayers of the Church offer further insight into this matter. In the anaphora of St. Basil the Great, we pray, "...so it seemed good unto Thine Only-begotten Son, Who is in Thy bosom, our God and Father, to be born under the Law, that He might condemn sin in his flesh, that they who were dead in Adam, might be made alive in Thy Christ."

Before moving to the second topic about Mary, there are two considerations from the Divine Liturgy that are relevant to this discussion. First, there is a prayer that is recited twice each Sunday, once during Orthros (immediately following the Matins Resurrection Gospel) and

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<sup>1</sup> Deacon Andrew Werbiansky, "Death and the Toll House Controversy," <<http://www.stlukeorthodox.com/html/evangelist/2000/deathtoll.htm>>, accessed March 12, 2013.

again during the Divine Liturgy (immediately after the priest's prayer during the Cherubic Hymn). This prayer states, "In that we have beheld the resurrection of Christ, let us worship the Holy Lord Jesus, *the only sinless One*." Second, and perhaps even more important, is what is done after the communion of the faithful. At this time, the priest places the chalice back on the holy table. He then adds the particles remaining on the diskos into the chalice. Those particles are not the Lamb that is consecrated as the Eucharist, but rather the particles placed on the diskos commemorating the living, the dead, the saints, *and* the Theotokos. As the particles are added, the priest prays, "Wash away, O Lord, by Your Precious Blood, the sins of those commemorated here, through the prayers of all your saints." In this beautiful liturgical act, we confess that the sins of all, including Mary, are washed away by the Blood of Christ.

This brings us to the second point about Mary, the tricky question of whether or not Mary really ever sinned. Clearly, she has the same fallen humanity that we all have.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that "...Christ's mother Mary is the image of perfect purity<sup>3</sup>," she needs her Son's broken body and shed blood for her salvation. But what about personal or venial sin? The Orthodox Church is divided on this opinion. There are those who profess and teach that Mary was completely free from personal or actual sins.<sup>4,5,6</sup> However, as with all things Orthodox, one can find a different viewpoint. There are those theologians who would say that Mary did have personal or venial sins.<sup>7</sup> Even St. John Chrysostom himself, a favorite of the fundamentalists (one who is often cited as having taught about the tollhouses), also taught that Mary had venial sins! He accuses her of the sin of vanity in his *Homily 21 on the Gospel of John*.<sup>8,9</sup> Obviously, the "venial" / "personal" sin question it is far beyond the scope of this article so let us continue on from here.

We cannot remove Mary from the context of the rest of humanity. The Orthodox Church does teach that Mary is

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<sup>2</sup> Fr. Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, trans. and ed. Seraphim Rose, (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1994), pg. 194.

<sup>3</sup> Fr. Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith*, Vol. 4: Spirituality (Syosset, NY: OCA, 2006), pg. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Fr. Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith*, Vol 3: Worship (Syosset, NY: OCA, 2006), pg. 144.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New Ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pg. 259.

<sup>6</sup> Pomazansky, pg. 194.

<sup>7</sup> Metropolitan Maximos of Pittsburgh, *The Dogmatic Tradition of the Orthodox Church* <<http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith8038>>, accessed February 8, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Metropolitan Maximos of Pittsburgh, *The Dogmatic Tradition of the Orthodox Church* <<http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith8038>>, accessed February 8, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 21 on the Gospel of John* <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240121.htm>>, accessed November 26, 2012.

... “all-pure” not merely because of her bodily continence, but also because of her spiritual soundness. Her heart was pure. Her mind was sane. Her soul magnified the Lord. Her spirit rejoiced in God her Savior. Her body was His spiritual temple.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, Mary is an “icon” of what every Spirit-filled Christian is called to be and an icon of redeemed humanity. The Church universally teaches that Mary is the great example, not the great exception. If this is true, then Mary, despite her purity and holiness, should have had some kind of encounter with the tollhouses (assuming they exist) when she died. As we shall see, the evidence clearly says, “No.” If the evidence is “no” for Mary, then the evidence is also “no” for us because the Church emphatically teaches that Mary is the great example of humanity redeemed in Christ.

One final important concept: The liturgical prayers and actions of the Church are fundamental to the thesis developed here. “In the liturgy of the Church, the Bible and the Holy Tradition come alive and are given to the living experience of the Christian people.”<sup>11</sup> If the Bible and Holy Tradition “come alive” in the liturgy, then the liturgy itself must be a source of doctrine for the Church. Fr. Thomas Hopko affirms this by stating that

...the texts of the services and sacraments provide a written source of doctrine in that they may be studied and contemplated by one who desires an understanding of the Christian teachings. According to the common opinion of the Orthodox Church, the sacramental and liturgical texts – the hymns, blessings, prayers, symbols, and rituals – contain no formal errors or deformations of the Christian faith and can be trusted absolutely to reveal the genuine doctrine of the Orthodox Church.<sup>12</sup>

If this is true, what does the feastday of the Dormition of the Theotokos teach “with no formal errors or deformations” about the tollhouses?

**Iconography:** The icon of the Dormition is complex and there are many different versions of the icon. Just do an internet search and see. In every icon, the Virgin Mary is shown in repose surrounded by the apostles and faithful of the Church. At Mary’s side is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who has come to receive the soul of Mary which is oftentimes shown as a tiny version of Mary oftentimes wrapped in a white (baptismal) garment. Along with Jesus,

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<sup>10</sup> Fr. Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith*, Vol. 4: Spirituality (Syosset, NY: OCA, 2006, pg. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Fr. Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith*, Vol 1: Doctrine (Syosset, NY: OCA, 2006), pg. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Hopko, *Doctrine*, pg. 19

there is an escort of angels. In the beautiful icon included in this article,<sup>13</sup> you can see some of the variations on the theme such as the Holy Spirit (in the form of a dove) accompanying Jesus, and Mary enthroned as the Queen of Heaven (re: Psalm 45) surrounded by the saints and angels. Neither in the icon shown here nor in any other icon of the Dormition will one see demons or tollhouses. If tollhouses were truly a part of the dogma of Orthodox Christianity, shouldn't the icon show such things? If Mary is the great example of the purity and holiness attainable by all of us, then why doesn't the iconography of the Church show the demons at the tollhouses turning away "empty handed?" The answer based on the festal icon is simple and straightforward. Tollhouses are not part of the true Tradition of the Church.



**Hymnography:** As already discussed, the liturgical hymnography of the Orthodox Church is a source of genuine doctrine. It would be prudent for us to search the hymnography of this feast to see what, if any, doctrinal statements about tollhouses can be found<sup>14</sup>.

From Little Vespers for the feast, the stichera at "Lord, I have cried" conclude with this hymn at the doxastikon:

She who is higher than the heavens and more glorious than the cherubim, she who is held in greater honour than all creation, she who by reason of her surpassing purity became the receiver of the everlasting Essence, today commends her most pure soul into the hands of her Son. With her all things are filled with joy and she bestows great mercy upon us.

This concept that Mary "...commends her most pure soul into the hands of her Son" is repeated throughout the hymnography of the feast. Four times in the hymnography for the Lity it states

<sup>13</sup> Icon of the Dormition of the Virgin by Zad Jabbour < <http://stgeorgegr.com/2010/07/dormition-fast-begins/>>, accessed February 8, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> All hymnography quoted here is from *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (South Caanan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1998).

that Mary “commends” and “delivers” her soul to her Creator, God, and Son. The phrase appears twice in the aposticha of Great Vespers. The ninth ode of the first canon sung at Orthros refers to Christ bearing the soul of his mother in His hands. Likewise, the fourth stichera at the Praises states that Jesus received his mother’s soul into His hands. What a beautiful concept! Upon her death, Mary’s soul is delivered directly into the saving hands of her son, Jesus Christ. If Mary is truly the great example, then likewise, upon our death, we will also commend our souls into the hands of our Savior. If Orthodox hymnography reflects true belief, it becomes clear that there is no place for the tollhouses.

The angelic escort is another concept that appears in the hymnography. At Great Vespers, there is the well-known doxastikon which is chanted in all 8 tones. In the tone 2 and 6 sections, it states:

The highest powers of heaven stood by with their own Master. Seized with dread, they accompanied thine inviolate body that had held God, and they went on high before thee, crying, unseen, to the hierarchies above: ‘Lo, the Queen of all, the Maid of God, is nigh.’

We see that not only does the Lord come for His mother’s soul, but is also accompanied by an angelic escort. Similarly, the fourth stichera of the praises for the feast states:

By thy holy Dormition, O Virgin Mother and Bride of God, thou who gavest birth to the Life hast been transported into immortal life, attended by angels, principalities, and powers, by apostles, prophets, and the whole creation: and thy Son received into His immaculate hands thy spotless soul.

Nowhere in the hymnography for this feast does one get any inkling that there are demons hovering around at tollhouses waiting to test Mary’s soul.<sup>15</sup> What we are presented with, based on the hymnography and the iconography of the Church, is that the Lord Jesus Christ and an angelic escort come for us at our death. The Theotokos, the “great example,” demonstrates the reality of the transformation of death by her Son’s life-giving death and resurrection. Jesus Christ did not come into this world to establish a series of tollhouses, but to conquer sin, the demons, and death.

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<sup>15</sup> The feast also refutes the notion commonly held by some fundamentalists that the soul wanders the earth for 40 days before being taken up (through the tollhouses). This discussion is beyond the scope of this article, but does warrant further study and refutation of that concept.

**Patristics:** Several 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century patristic homilies on the Dormition of the Theotokos exist and have been compiled into one book.<sup>16</sup> Of those homilies, seven out of twelve describe the departure of Mary’s soul from her body at death. The table below shows the variety of ways in which the homilists described how Mary’s soul departed her body. Some stated that Christ directly received Mary’s soul or that Mary committed her soul to her Son’s hands.<sup>17,18,19,20,21</sup> Two homilists include an angelic escort,<sup>22,23</sup> and one homilist even suggests (mirroring the fourth stichera of the Praises at matins for the feast) that Old Testament saints also come and escort her soul.<sup>24</sup> In one homily, a unique scenario is presented where Jesus received Mary’s soul and then placed it into the hands of the Archangel Michael.<sup>25</sup>

	Christ comes to receive Mary’s soul or Mary commits her soul to Christ	Angels escort Mary’s soul	Old Testament Saints come to escort Mary’s soul.
St. John, Archbishop of Thessalonica	X	X	
St. Modestus, Archbishop of Jerusalem	X	X	
St. Andrew of Crete	X		X
St. Germanus of Constantinople	X		
St. John of Damascus	X	X	

<sup>16</sup> *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, trans. Brian E. Daley, SJ. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998)

<sup>17</sup> St. John of Thessalonica, “The Dormition of our Lady, The Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary,” ch. 4, in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, pg. 51.

<sup>18</sup> St. Modestus of Jerusalem, “An Encomium on the Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady, Mary, Mother of God and Ever-Virgin,” ch. 11, in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, pgs. 97-98.

<sup>19</sup> St. Andrew of Crete: Homily II, “On the Dormition of our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God,” ch. 11, in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, pg. 129.

<sup>20</sup> St. Germanus of Constantinople, “An Encomium on the Holy and Venerable Dormition of Our Most Glorious Lady, the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary”, ch. 3, in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, pg. 172.

<sup>21</sup> St. John of Damascus: Homily I: “On the Dormition of the Holy Mother of God,” in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, pgs. 187 & 194.

<sup>22</sup> St. Modestus of Jerusalem, ch. 8, pg. 92.

<sup>23</sup> St. John of Damascus: Homily II, “On the Holy and Glorious Dormition and Transformation of Our Lady Mary, Mother of God and Ever-Virgin,” ch. 10, in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, pg. 214.

<sup>24</sup> St. Andrew of Crete: Homily III, “On the Dormition of our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God,” ch. 2, in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, pgs. 137-8.

<sup>25</sup> St. John of Thessalonica, ch. 12, pg. 63.

In all of these patristic homilies, we see the concord between the liturgical hymnography of the Church and the patristic writings. None of the homilies make any mention of the tollhouses.

In his homily, “The Dormition of Our Lady, the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary,”<sup>26</sup> St. John, Archbishop of Thessalonica, creates a scene featuring a dialogue between Mary and the Apostles as well as a scene featuring a dialogue between Mary and Jesus. In her pre-death dialogue with the Apostles, Mary makes reference to something that could be interpreted, rather loosely, as a reference to the tollhouses.<sup>27</sup> Mary expresses her fears about demons coming for her at her death. She states:

I am only afraid of the enemy who makes war on everyone. He can do nothing, of course, against the righteous and faithful; but he defeats the unbelieving and sinners, and those who do their own will—he does in them whatever he desires! But he does not overcome the righteous, because the angel of wickedness finds nothing in them, but draws back from them in shame. For two angels come to meet each human being: one an angel of righteousness and one of wickedness, and they encounter him at the moment of death. And when death besieges the soul with anguish, the two angels come and grasp his body. If he is someone who has done works of righteousness, the angel of righteousness rejoices over him, because the wicked one has nothing in that person. Then several angels come to the soul, singing before him all the way to the place of the just. Then the angel of wickedness is grieved, because he has no share in him. But if the person is found to be one who has done evil deeds, that angel rejoices, and brings with him other wicked spirits, and they lay hold of the soul and pluck it out for themselves. Then the angel of righteousness grieves deeply. So now, fathers and brothers, help each other, that nothing evil may be found in our company.<sup>28</sup>

Here, Mary describes a battle between two angels (one a demon, one holy) over the body at the moment of death. The demon is defeated if the person has done works of righteousness and the angels escort the soul to the place of the just. One can only imagine what is done with the unrighteous soul. Because it does describe a battle between angels of good and evil at the moment of death, tollhouse supporters can use this as evidence for the tollhouse scenario. Further examination of this homily demonstrates otherwise.

Any notion of tollhouses in the passage above is refuted by the words of our Lord Jesus Christ in this same homily. As she prayerfully prepares for her death, Mary asks Jesus, “What

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<sup>26</sup> St. John of Thessalonica, pgs. 47-67.

<sup>27</sup> Recently, I received a document entitled *The Theotokos and the Tollhouses* by Dr. Adnan Trabulsi (no publication information was provided). In this document, he further develops the exact same concepts that I have discussed here and elsewhere in this manuscript and arrives at the same conclusion as I do.

<sup>28</sup> St. John of Thessalonica, ch. 5, pg. 52.

shall I do to escape the powers that will confront my soul?”<sup>29</sup> Just before this, however, Mary recalls her Son’s words, “Do not weep – neither angels nor archangels will come against you, nor cherubim nor seraphim, nor any other power, but *I myself will come to meet your soul.*”<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, Mary is still concerned for her soul and leaves us wondering: Who is right? What will happen?

At the time of Mary’s death, she lays down on her pallet surrounded by the Apostles and others. Then,

...about the third hour of the day, there was a great clap of thunder from the heavens, and a sweet fragrance, which caused all those present to be overpowered by sleep, except for the Apostles alone, and three virgins, whom the Lord appointed to stay awake so that they might be witnesses of Mary’s funeral rites and her glory. And behold, the Lord came on the clouds, with a multitude of angels beyond number. And Jesus himself and Michael entered the inner chamber where Mary was, while the angels sang hymns and remained standing outside her chamber.<sup>31</sup>

In this scene presented by St. John of Thessalonica, Jesus appears and he greets and embraces both Mary and the Apostles. Mary then blesses her Son saying, “I bless you, for you have not grieved me with regard to the things you foretold. You foretold that you would not allow angels to come again to seek my soul, but that you would come for it yourself.”<sup>32</sup> Mary then gracefully dies at which time St. John says, “...the Lord took her soul and placed it into the hands of [the Archangel] Michael.”<sup>33</sup>

There is an underlying theme presented that challenges any notion of tollhouses. Mary does express a fear over the angelic powers that she believes are coming for her despite the fact that Jesus tells her that no such thing will happen. We see Mary’s fears assuaged when Jesus himself, not demons and tollhouses, comes for Mary’s soul. St. John of Thessalonica puts a refutation of the tollhouses into the very mouths and actions of Mary and Jesus. By doing this, he provides us with an insight to the Christian ending of our lives – blameless, peaceful, and tollhouse free.

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<sup>29</sup> St. John of Thessalonica, ch. 4, pg. 51.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* Emphasis mine.

<sup>31</sup> St. John of Thessalonica, ch. 12, pg. 62.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> St. John of Thessalonica, ch. 12, pg. 63.

St. Modestus of Jerusalem speaks of both angels and Jesus coming for Mary's soul at her dormition.<sup>34</sup> In making a comparison between Mary and the Ark of the Covenant, he states "She is not carried like Moses' ark of old, drawn by oxen, but she is escorted and surrounded by an army, heaven's holy angels."<sup>35</sup> In another place, he repeats this concept by saying, "Think of it! Holy angels were sent by God to his holy and glorious Mother...to receive her with everlasting glory and to let her enter into the ineffable joy of the Lord, who was born of her."<sup>36</sup> In his homily on the Dormition of Mary, St. Modestus describes a scene where the holy angels of God come and surround Mary like an army keeping watch over her. Then,

...Christ, our good God, according to his promise, did not disdain to 'be in their midst' (Matt. 28:20) and to appear to his Mother, in a way known only to him. And that blessed one, gazing upon him and deeply moved, as always, by the holy yearning of the divinely maternal heart, left her body behind and "committed into his hands (Psalm 30:6 [LXX]) her blessed holy soul."<sup>37</sup>

St. Modestus does not speak of angelic battles, nor does he speak of tollhouses. Instead he describes a scene like we see and venerate in the icon of the Dormition of the Theotokos. Jesus and the angels come for the soul of His departed mother and immediately take it to the heavenly realm.

St. Andrew of Crete has left us with three homilies on the Dormition of the Theotokos.<sup>38</sup> In *Homily II*, St. Andrew teaches that the "...mother of God has committed her soul to him in whose hands all our souls rest..."<sup>39</sup> Again, we have another early patristic homily that makes the case for the direct handing over of our souls to Christ at the moment of death. What hope and joy for all Orthodox Christians knowing that in death *all* of our souls find rest in the hands of Christ who "...as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12 NKJV).

While St. Andrew does not mention the presence of angels, he adds something new to the mix in *Homily III* by saying that the saints provide the escort for Mary's soul. He states, "It is fitting, after all, that the souls of those who have finished their lives and are now made like God should gather near the queen of our nature, to go before her on her way – to lead her and be her

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<sup>34</sup> St. Modestus, Archbishop of Jerusalem, in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, pgs. 83-102.

<sup>35</sup> St. Modestus, ch. 4, pg. 88.

<sup>36</sup> St. Modestus, ch. 8, pg. 92.

<sup>37</sup> St. Modestus, ch. 11, pg. 98.

<sup>38</sup> St. Andrew of Crete: Homilies I-III, "On the Dormition of our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God," in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, pgs. 103-152.

<sup>39</sup> St. Andrew of Crete: Homily II, pg. 129.

escort, and to begin the final hymns in her honor.”<sup>40</sup> Whether these Old Testament saints are only with Mary for the funeral procession or they are escorting her soul is unclear. What is clear is the absence of the tollhouses.

St. Andrew’s homilies make another connection between Mary’s death and the death of all Christians. He says that it “...fully befits him to work this new wonder in his Mother; for thus he not only shows her to be his mother by nature, but gives credibility to the saving plan he has realized through her...”<sup>41</sup> St. Andrew also emphasizes the idea of Mary as the “great example” when he states, “The mystery of the Virgin, now being accomplished, is your work! For it is a mystery, even if we consider our own end: this is our lot, after all, set aside for human nature from the beginning!”<sup>42</sup> This is huge! The Dormition of the Theotokos is the proof of our salvation bought with the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ on the Cross. The promise given to Orthodox Christians is that death is a rest “...which calls forth our hope for resurrection...”<sup>43</sup> It most certainly is not the arena of demons and tollhouses with little chance of salvation.

St. John of Damascus describes the ascent of Mary’s soul to heaven in his first homily on the Dormition.<sup>44</sup> He states, “See how the maker of all things receives into his own hands her holy soul, now separated from the tabernacle that received God.”<sup>45</sup> As with so many of his contemporaries, St. John of Damascus puts forth the thesis that Christ himself comes to receive his mother’s soul. St. John gives credence to the idea that this is the hope of all Christians when he adds, “...if, as divine Scripture says, ‘The souls of the just are in the hand of the Lord’ (Wis. 3:1), will not she, all the more, have commended her soul into the hands of her son and her God? *The argument is beyond all contradiction.*”<sup>46</sup> The Dormition of the Theotokos demonstrates for us that the souls of Christians are presented into the hands of their Lord and Savior at death. What is so striking is St. John’s proclamation that any teaching to the contrary must be rejected! The tollhouses are clearly a contradiction of what the feast truly teaches. Therefore, the tollhouses must be rejected, and rightfully so!

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<sup>40</sup> St. Andrew of Crete: Homily III, ch. 2, pg. 138.

<sup>41</sup> St. Andrew of Crete: Homily I, ch. 5, pg. 109.

<sup>42</sup> St. Andrew of Crete: Homily II, ch 5, pg. 140.

<sup>43</sup> St. Andrew of Crete: Homily II, ch. 2, pg. 119.

<sup>44</sup> St. John of Damascus: Homily I, pgs. 183-202.

<sup>45</sup> St. John of Damascus: Homily I, pg. 194.

<sup>46</sup> St. John of Damascus: Homily I, pg. 187. Emphasis mine.

In chapter 11 of *Homily I*, St. John describes at length the joyous and triumphant journey of Mary's soul to heaven. St. John also states that, "The angels and archangels carried you there. The unclean spirits of mid-air trembled at your departure."<sup>47</sup> The unclean spirits may be a reference to the principalities and powers of the air that St. Paul mentions in Ephesians 6:12. This deserves further comment since there are some misguided persons who use that verse as biblical proof-text for tollhouses. However, a close reading will show that is not so. Putting that verse into its proper context by reading all of Ephesians 6, St. Paul is telling the Ephesians to "suit up" for the spiritual battles they are to undergo in this life as Christians fighting the world, the flesh, and the devil. These same angelic beings are also mentioned in Ephesians 2 and identified as the ones who work in the "...sons of disobedience" and seek to lead people away from a Godly life. St. Paul is referring to the ongoing spiritual battle we Christians undergo in our post-baptismal life now, not the tollhouses. Tollhouse supporters ignore another relevant verse, Romans 8:38 (NKJV), where St. Paul writes,

...I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 6:12 is an invalid proof text and does most emphatically not support the idea of tollhouses, an erroneous interpretation of what St. Paul was actually talking about.<sup>48</sup> As do all tollhouse teachings, it makes a blasphemous mockery of Christ's salvific death and resurrection.

In his second homily on the Dormition of Mary, St. John of Damascus again describes what happens to Mary's soul at her death.<sup>49</sup> First, Jesus comes to receive his mother's soul. St. John states,

Just then, it would seem to me, something must have happened that fit these circumstances and that would naturally follow them. I mean that the King must have come to the one who gave him birth, to receive her soul into his pure and holy hands, her soul so upright and spotless.<sup>50</sup>

Next, an angelic escort came and

...the elements of nature were stirred up and altered, that there were sounds, crashes, rumblings, as well as remarkable hymns from angels who flew before

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<sup>47</sup> St. John of Damascus: Homily I, pg. 196.

<sup>48</sup> I hope to one day soon write an article on the complete absence of the tollhouses in the Holy Scriptures.

<sup>49</sup> St. John of Damascus: Homily II, pgs. 203-230.

<sup>50</sup> St. John of Damascus: Homily II, pg. 214.

her, providing her with an escort and with companions on the way. Some of them would have acted as a guard of honor for her spotless, holy soul, and would have ascended with it on its way to heaven, until they had brought the Queen to her royal throne.<sup>51</sup>

The homily concludes with a final scene where St. John compares the entrance of Mary into the Holy of Holies in heaven with the entrance of the ark into the temple as described in 1 Kings 8:1-6.<sup>52</sup> For the Orthodox Christian, these images should be sources of hope and joy in Christ. Endowed with the Holy Spirit given to us at our chrismation, we might consider ourselves all “little arks” of the Covenant as well as the children of God by adoption (re: Romans 8:12-17). If Mary is the great example, then the path to heaven for all of God’s children is a path free of tollhouses - straight, gentle, and easy – with an angelic escort to the kingdom of heaven.

Moving ahead several centuries, St. Gregory Palamas (+1359 A.D.), in his homily “On the Dormition of the Mother of God,” makes no reference at all to any concept of tollhouses.<sup>53</sup> Rather, he reiterates the hymnography of the Church and states,

“The Lord of Hosts, meanwhile, the Son of the Ever-Virgin, was invisibly present, honouring His Mother’s departure. Into His hands she entrusted her God-bearing spirit, and through Him her body, her spirit’s companion, was soon translated into a heavenly place of eternal life. (...) For if a soul which has the grace of God dwelling within it goes up to heaven when released from this world, as we believe and is evident on many accounts, how can that body which not only received within it the pre-eternal, only-begotten Son of God, the ever-flowing fount of grace, but was also plainly seen to bear Him, fail to be taken up from earth to heaven?”<sup>54</sup>

St. Gregory mentions the Mother of God placing her soul into the hands of her Son. This is in harmony with the extant hymnography of the Church and earlier patristic writings, as already discussed above. He goes on to make another important statement that a soul with the grace of God dwelling within goes to heaven upon death. St. Gregory gifted the Church with the elaboration of the difference between “essence” and “energies.” Simply put, his teachings included the concept that grace is equal to the “divine energies” of God. Orthodox Christians receive God’s grace through the sacraments. Thus, each and every Orthodox Christian, who partakes of the sacramental life of the Church is a temple of the Holy Spirit, has real physical

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<sup>51</sup> St. John of Damascus: Homily II, pg. 214.

<sup>52</sup> St. John of Damascus: Homily II, pg. 216.

<sup>53</sup> St. Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, trans. Christopher Veniamin with the assistance of The Monastery of St. John the Baptist, Essex, England. (Waymart, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009.)

<sup>54</sup> St. Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, pg. 292.

communion with Christ, and is filled with the grace/divine energies of God. We can all look to the Dormition of the Theotokos as the “great example” of the end of a sacramental and grace-filled Orthodox Christian life.

My mother was an Orthodox Christian. She never visited a monastery, never read copious volumes of obscure monastic or patristic works, and never underwent extreme ascetism. She read her bible, prayed, fasted, attended Church, partook of the sacraments, tried to follow the Lord’s commandments, and believed in Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. In the end, is that not enough for a “good defense before the awesome judgment seat of Christ?” The Dormition of the Theotokos gives us the hope that at the hour of our death, as with that of His own mother, Jesus comes with the holy angels to personally escort us to the heavenly realms.

In conclusion, the Dormition of the Theotokos functions as a useful refutation of the tollhouse heresy. Absent from the iconography, the hymnography, and the patristic sources are those things that could unquestionably indicate the existence of tollhouses. As one author points out, the development of the feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos centuries ago is concurrent with the rise of the tollhouse theory and may have even served as a refutation of that teaching.<sup>55</sup> If tollhouses were a real and genuine part of our Orthodox theology, then one would expect to see them expounded in great detail on this feast day as a way to exhort the people to follow Mary’s example of holiness and purity. The silence on the subject of tollhouses on this feastday speaks volumes. Instead the feast day tells of Christian death in the light of the Paschal joy. Even though we will walk through the valley of the shadow of death the Lord is with us (re: Psalm 23). There are no evils or tollhouses to be feared in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ “...who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4 NKJV), who through the Cross forgives us of our sins, and has “...qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light” (Col. 1:12 NKJV) in the never-ending day of His Kingdom. Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

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<sup>55</sup> Michael George Tsichlis, *For the Hope of Humanity: The Doctrine of the Dormition of the Theotokos in Orthodox Christian Tradition*, (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, Inc., 2011), pgs. 32-37.