

Sunday, January 1, 2011

A Soul exalted to Heaven

The ladder that Jacob saw is one of the most important and beautiful symbols about St Mary in the Old Testament. God appeared to Jacob on his way to Laban his uncle as he was fleeing from his brother Esau. The scene depicts a ladder setup on earth and reaching to heaven with the angels ascending and descending upon it, and the Lord looks upon Jacob in great glory from the top of the ladder and speaks to him with words of peace, comfort, and blessing (Genesis 28).

Many of the Fathers of the Church interpret that **Saint Mary is the ladder through which the Lord descended to our world carrying peace, blessings, and salvation to us.** She is the human from which He took flesh and dwelled in her virginal womb for nine months so it became the throne of God who rests through His saints, and finally she offered to us God carried in her hands.

Saint Mary is the ladder that connected heaven to earth, or rather enabled the earthly to reach to heaven!

The eighth part of Saturday Theotokia talks about Jacob's ladder and starts with the magnificent hymn of "Areten;wn" [Aretenthonti] which means "you are likened to the ladder, which Jacob saw, rising up to heaven, with the awesome God standing above it." We also find some of the most profound and beautiful passages in the Greek exposition of the eighth part, some of which are:

+ Our father Jacob indeed saw you, O turtledove, like a ladder that has a soul exalted to heaven, and the Holy God enthroned above it.

+ For He made of your body a throne, and also made your virginal womb greater than heaven.

+ Hail to you from us, because from your sealed treasure you gave birth to whom who rests through the saints.

I would like to briefly pause at one magnificent phrase in which Saint Mary is described as a living ladder which has a soul that exalts, hovers and elevates until it reaches heaven, and the Lord sits and rests upon this soul in great glory. Likewise, saint Mary rose with her heart and all her senses to heaven so she deserved to be a place of rest for the Lord.

The exaltation of the soul obviously does not imply being above others, but rather lifting up one's soul above the worldly desires and earthly concerns until it reaches God and unites with Him.

In fact, we cannot be truly united with God without rising up high and going beyond the cares and worries of the world. This is what the church encourages us to do as She talks to us in every liturgy: "Lift up your hearts" meaning to elevate with our hearts until we meet with God, casting all thoughts of the evil imagination, and participating in praise with the heavenly hosts.

From a practical standpoint, this lifting-up is not an easy thing for it is against gravity, but to whoever becomes attracted by the love of Jesus, the crucified; this lifting-up becomes easy to him/her. This is because the drawing force of Jesus is much greater than that of earthly matters, therefore He assured us before the crucifixion and said: "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself" (John 12:32). This gives us an idea on how to achieve such elevation. When we look at the cross, contemplate on it and cling to it, the cross lifts us up to heaven.

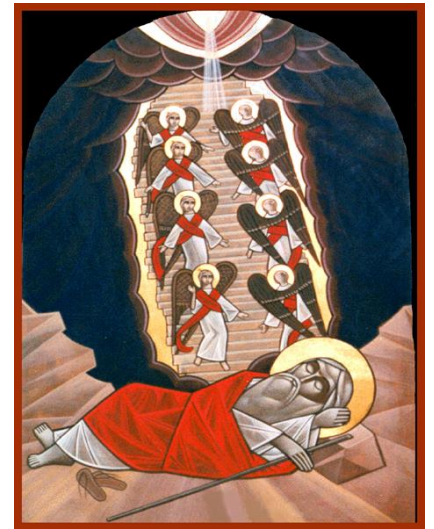
Many think that the cross is a heavy burden, which may break us down and brings us down to earth. The truth is that the cross is the most important means that liberates the soul from the earthly ties and lifts it up to heaven.

Jacob saw the ladder while fleeing, in a time of hardship and tribulation and did not see it while he was in the luxury of his father's house. Also, our Mother saint Mary carried the cross in her life with thanksgiving and submission, and accepted that the sword of passion goes into her soul. Therefore, her soul was elevated to heaven and became higher than the Cherubim and the Seraphim. Thus, the cross always prepares man to be elevated to heaven, and whoever follows Christ carrying the cross, he is on the ascending path to heaven.

Many conducts and engagements lower us to earth. If we want to be like our Mother saint Mary, elevated to heaven, we must give up on such matters, and be preoccupied with that which lifts us up to the height.

Meditating upon the words of the Bible lifts us up. Praise and singing to the Lord lifts us up. Repentance lifts us up. Serving others lifts us up. Reading the words of the church Fathers and their experiences lifts us up. Lifting up our hands in a quite prayer of the inner chamber lifts us up towards heaven. Attending midnight praise and the liturgy exalts us to heaven.

Finally, a soul exalted up to heaven is a soul full of peace, and the heavenly peace is always poured upon it, so it is not perturbed by the earthly troubles. Rather, it extends its joy, peace, and strength from the promises, blessings, and the care of heaven.



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