

PARTICIPATING IN THE GLORY OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

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In the month of August, the Church celebrates two great feasts: the Transfiguration of the Lord and the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos. Both feasts fall within a two-week lenten period, and the fast serves to increase the anticipation of their celebration in the hearts of the faithful. All four fasts in the Orthodox Church prepare the faithful for a feast, and the August lenten period is no exception. The fast is sometimes called *Uspenskij Pist*, or Dormition Fast, since the Dormition is celebrated at its end. Among Orthodox of the Kyivan tradition, however, the fast is more frequently called *Spasivka*, or the Lent of the Saviour, linking it directly to the feast of the Transfiguration, which is the second feast of the Saviour in the month of August.

The feast of the Transfiguration of the Saviour has been the object of theological reflection of the Fathers of the Church since early times. More importantly, the Fathers became co-participants in the glory of the Transfiguration, and this is what rendered them competent to theologize about it. Indeed, the position of the Orthodox Church has always been that every Christian is called to participate in the glory of the Transfiguration. This determines the goal or objective of our celebration of the feast, as revealed by the words of the festal troparion: *Let your everlasting light also shine upon us sinners*. Clearly, the Church is doing much more than simply commemorating an historical event. While the Orthodox Church certainly defends the historicity of the event, the emphasis here is on an *experience* of the Transfiguration.

One might well pose the question, “How is it possible for the people to experience an event that took place some two thousand years ago?” The answer to this question is contained in the troparion in the words we have just seen, and that is that the light in which we are called to participate is *everlasting*. It is everlasting because it is uncreated, and Christians in every generation may participate in it as did the three Apostles. The great Father of the Church St. Gregory Palamas expressed this truth eloquently, but in so doing he only summarized the teaching of the Fathers who preceded him. The Church, in turn, loudly and joyfully proclaimed his teaching to the whole world. Those who do not have direct access to the writings of St. Gregory Palamas may, however, hear the same teaching sung in the liturgical services of the Church. In asking the Lord to allow us to participate in His uncreated light we pray: *Let your everlasting light also shine upon us sinners*. And it is precisely on *sinners* that the Lord graciously agrees to shine His light – in other words, upon you and me. We do not come before the Lord with any pretension of being righteous in His sight but, made bold by His infinite mercy, we come to ask Him to do what He has willed to do and what we could never achieve on our own: *to be made participants in His glory!*

Each of us is called to partake of the glory of the Lord, but each of us does so according to his or her capacity. The first words of the troparion confirm this: *You were transfigured on the mountain, O Christ God, revealing as much of your glory to your disciples as they could bear*. We are unable to bear the full weight of the Lord’s glory, so

He restrains His glory in order that we not be destroyed by it. More than that, He lovingly conforms the experience of His glory to the capacity of each person to share in it. This means that, while we are all called to share in the Lord's glory as the Body of Christ, there are as many experiences of the one glory of the Lord as there are members of the Church. Furthermore, each Christian's experience of the Lord's glory changes as he or she grows. The experience is personalized, but never privatized, since it is the inheritance of the whole Church.

The Church has many titles for the Lord. The one given Him at the feast of the Transfiguration is of special interest: *Giver of Light*. Christ is the source and giver of light, and therefore we cannot speak of the glory of the Lord apart from His divine-human person. Many people in the world claim to see some kind of "supernatural" light. Some say that this is an experience of a "higher" power. Others attribute some other kind of significance to their experiences. Christians pay no special attention to these claims, and should be careful not to be distracted or deceived by them. The Giver of Light has revealed Himself to us, and we have been counted worthy to know Him. He has become man, been crucified and raised for our salvation. An Orthodox Christian does not pursue light, but Christ. The Lord Himself then grants us a share in His glory. While some like to call the Orthodox Church "mystical," what the Church teaches in fact is simply what the Lord gave, the Apostles preached and the Fathers of the Church safeguarded: the good news of salvation. It is neither esoteric nor exotic. It is what the Church has always believed. What causes it to stand out so prominently in our contemporary context is the sad fact that many have forgotten that glorification is and has always been the destiny of every Christian.

Many in Orthodox parishes remain unaware that the feast of the Transfiguration has direct relevance to their spiritual lives, beyond attending a service for a great feast day and bringing fruit to church to be blessed. The feast needs to be presented to them in all its glory, beauty and power. Our people need to understand that they are called to glorification, which the Fathers of the Church also call deification. We all need to grasp the truth that Christ did not come only to make us better, nicer or even more moral. The Lord came to give us a new life, not an improved one, and that life is offered to us in His Body, the Church. Clearly this will express itself in joyful observance of the commandments, but it is not through a sustained effort on our part to be good that we will experience salvation. We must give our lives to Christ and receive from Him His own very life. Since His life is revealed in glory, it is only natural that those who share in His life will also share in His glory. This is why Christ is glorified in Orthodox worship as both *Giver of Life* and *Giver of Light*. To worship Him with a pure heart is to know Him and experience His glory. The feast of the Transfiguration is an invitation from the Lord Himself to participate in His glory. If we come to receive it as such, then we will know the Transfiguration as nothing less than a feast of our salvation.