

THE MOTHER OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IN THE ORTHODOX HYMNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The Mother of the Lord Jesus Christ is the most significant person of all the saints, because she was well-pleased for the Son of God to take body from her and be born of her. The person of the Mother of the Lord is put in strict connection to her Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, highlighting her participation to His redeeming work. She is so glorified in the liturgical hymns of the Orthodox rite, that the stichera to her glorification adorn each page of our ritual books.

Keywords: *hymn; Virgin Mary; Mother of God; Theotokos; glorification;*

INTRODUCTION

Mother of the Lord Jesus Christ (Gr. *Teotokos*) is an attribute of the Virgin Mary, expressing the faith, both of the Orthodox Church and of the Roman-Catholic Church, that the Holy Virgin Mary gave birth to the Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity.

This doctrine or teaching was expressed in the time of the Third Ecumenical Council, held in Ephesus in 431 A.D. in response to the heresy of Nestorius, who was stating that two persons existed in Jesus Christ, the divine person of the Son of God, born from the Father, before all ages, and the human or historical person of Jesus Christ, born from the Virgin Mary. The heresy was called dioprosopism (two persons). The consequence of this heresy would be that the Virgin Mary did not give birth to the Son of God, but to Jesus Christ, the man, so that she is Mother of Jesus Christ and not Mother of the Lord (*Teotokos*) or Mother of God.

1. THE GLORIFICATION OF THE MOTHER OF THE LORD AS THE MOST GLORIOUS DURING THE FIRST CENTURIES

The Third Ecumenical Council denounced the heresy and affirmed that the Virgin Mary is Mother of the Lord (*Teotokos*) and affirmed, at the same time, her eternal virginity and her attribute of continually imploring God for us, namely of eternal mediator¹.

The quality of Theotokos (Mother of the Lord) was assimilated as well by the liturgical conscience of the Church, and all the hymns and prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary mention her with this attribute.

What gives us the most complete idea concerning the place held by the Most Holy Theotokos in the framework of the divine oikonomia and of the worship we ought to give her is her quality of Mother of God or God's Birth Giver², confessed by the Holy Scripture,

¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Maica Domnului ca mijlocitoare,” in *Ortodoxia* 1 (1952), pp. 79-129;

² Viorel Sava, “Învățătura despre Maica Domnului și reflectarea ei în cultul și imnografia ortodoxă”, „*În Biserica Slavei Tale*”. *Studii de Teologie și Spiritualitate Liturgică*, II, Iași: Editura Doxologia, 2012, pp.65-92.

defined as a dogma by the Church during the period of the ecumenical councils and versified in the hymns dedicated to her. During the first five centuries the teaching of the Church regarding the Mother of the Lord was comprised in the simple confession, based on the divine revelation, of the fact that Mary is the Mother of the embodied Logos and that she was a virgin. Based on these confessions she was glorified in an incipient cult³.

For example, the hymn “Virgin Mother of God rejoice...”, composed after an obviously biblical model (Lk.1: 28-42), is regarded as one of the oldest hymns, made of the angel's greeting to the Holy Virgin and Elisabeth's greeting to the Virgin Mary, after the Annunciation. The concluding formula is taken over from Saint James' Liturgy⁴. The introduction of this troparion in the liturgical service is attributed by the tradition to Saint Cyril of Alexandria, the hymn being, however, much older⁵. Here is the content of this hymn: “*O Virgin Mother of God, Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb; for thou gavest birth to the Saviour of our souls.*”⁶

In the texts of the books of worship we meet innumerable references that fight this heresy and show that Jesus Christ is not separated into two persons: “...being God by nature and becoming man by nature for our sake; *not that He was divided into two persons*, but that He is known in two unmingled natures...”⁷

The Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, 431) condemns Nestorius' heresy and formulates the *dogma of the hypostatic union*, namely of the union of the two natures, the divine one and the human one, in the one hypostasis of the Son of God: “Jesus Christ is perfectly God and perfectly man, from rational soul and body... The same, consubstantial with the Father according to the divinity and consubstantial with us according to the humanity”. The Holy Virgin Mary is Mother of God.

2. THE SUPRANATURAL BIRTH AND EVER-VIRGINITY OF THE MOTHER OF THE LORD

For the Eastern Church, the quality of Theotokos of the Mother of the Lord is so intimately united to Christology that our entire salvation stands or falls together with the teaching that the Most Holy Ever-Virgin Mother of God is God's Birth-Giver. Jesus Christ saves us but the work accomplished by Him has a real and universal value only because He is truly God and perfectly man at the same time.

The foundation of the quality of Theotokos of the Most Pure Mother, namely the merit of having given birth to the embodied God, consists in the union according to hypostasis of the two natures in the eternal person of the embodied Son of God. In her was

³ A. Maloney, “Mary and the Church as seen by the Early Fathers”, *Diakonia*, IX (1974), pp. 6-19.

⁴ Vasile Mitrofanovici, *Liturgica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Cernăuți, 1929, p. 292.

⁵ Ene Braniște, *Liturgica generală*, București: Editura Basilica, vol. II, 2015, p. 457.

⁶ Troparion sung at the breaking of the bread (Great Vesper), *** *The Hieratikon*, digital edition available at https://old.tsu.ge/data/file_db/anthim/9.pdf, p. 22. See also the Greek version: „Mother of God, hail, blessed Mary, the Lord after you, blessed are you as a woman, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, that you are the Savior of our souls”, in *HIERATIKON - THE DIVINE LITURGIES* of John Chrysostom, King of the Great and Pre-Hiasmen, Edition of Apostolic Ministry of the Church of Greece, 'Edition E', 1995, p. 24.

⁷ Dogmatic Theotokion, plagal second mode, *** *Vespers as chanted on the Holy Mountain*, Florence, Arizona: St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery, 2006, (digital edition available at: <https://music.samonastery.org/Vespers.pdf>), p. 282.

accomplished the great miracle that “One of the Trinity”⁸ was made into what we are. She is “the door” and “the stairway” uniting heaven and earth, creating within the limits of our space and time a redeeming opening and bringing henceforth in another world “those which are above the world”: *“To the One in the Trinity, Born of the Father from before all ages, to Him you gave birth, most glorified Mother, by ineffable miracle, by the shadowing of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, with Gabriel’s voice, we call out to Thee: rejoice, Thou by whom joy rises, rejoice, Thou by whom the curse is erased, rejoice, the Lord is with Thee”*⁹.

The birth of the Savior was of a “seedless” conception¹⁰ and He was delivered from Virgin Mary’s womb “without corruption”¹¹, “without destroying the Lord’s Mother’s virginity”¹². To express this truth, again the Byzantine hymnography is our best testimony: *“Seedlessly and of the Divine Spirit, and by the will of the Father, didst thou conceive the Son of God, Who from the Father, existed before the ages without mother. And thou hast brought forth in the flesh Him Who, for our sakes, came forth from thee without father; and thou hast suckled Him as a babe. Wherefore, cease not to intercede that our souls be delivered from perils.”*¹³

Therefore, the sense of the Mariological dogma needs to be interpreted as follows: the Virgin Mary is God’s Birthgiver to the extent to which she gave birth not to the divine nature but to the Man-God, she gave birth to God according to His humanity, united to God the Logos.

The Church then confesses that the attribute of God’s Birthgiver is also a consequence of the hypostatic union, in connection to which is the ever-virginity of the Mother of the Lord or the supernatural character of Christ’s birth, as the hymnographers reveal to us this miracle: *“How can we not marvel at thy theandric Offspring, O allrevered one? For without experience of wedlock, thou, O allblameless one, hast brought in the flesh a fatherless Son, Who was born motherless of the Father before the ages, and Who in no way suffered change or intermingling or division, but preserved in their entirety the properties of*

⁸ This formulation belongs to the Patriarch Proclus of Constantinople (5th century): “One of the Trinity became embodied” (Cf. Anton I. Adămuț, *Literatură și filosofie creștină*, vol. I, Iași: Editura Fides, 1997, p. 44).

⁹ „The Second Chapel to the Most Holy Theotokos” (included in Ceaslov of St. Jer. Grigorie Dascălul, Metropolitan of Wallachia), *Ceaslov*, București: Editura I.B.M.B.O.R., 1973, p. 585, Exapostilarion VIII, Theotokion, *** *The Octoechos: The Hymns of the Cycle of the Eight Tones for Sundays and Weekdays: Vol. IV: Tones VII & VIII*, translation by Reader Isaac E. Lambertsen, Liberty, Tennessee: The St. John of Kronstadt Press, 1999; Vezi și Theotokion: “We praise thee, we bless thee, we venerate thee, O Mother of God: for thou hast given birth to One of the undivided Trinity, thy Son and God (*that of the inseparable Trinity, you begotten the one Son and God*), and thou hast opened the heavenly places to us on earth.” (Theotokion, Cantic/Ode 7, Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, Tuesday in the First Week, Great Compline, *** *The Lenten Triodion*, translated from the original Greek by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, South Canaan, Pennsylvania: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2002, p. 226); Cf. *Triodion, Publication of the Apostolic Ministry of Greece, in Athens*, 1994, p. 653.

¹⁰ “Thou givest birth and art a virgin, and in both thou remainest by nature inviolate. He who is born makes new the laws of nature, and thy womb brings forth without travail. When God so wills, the natural order is overcome; for He does whatever He wishes.” (Theotokion, Cantic/Ode 4, Mattins, Thursday of the Great Canon, *** *The Lenten Triodion*..., p. 394); Cf. *Triodion*..., p. 641).

¹¹ Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Ambigua*, P.G. 91, 1341 C – 1349 A. See also the Romanian translation by Fr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ambigua. [Tâlcuiri ale unor locuri cu adânci înțelesuri din Sfinții Dionisie Areopagitul și Grigorie Teologul]*, translation, introduction and notes by Fr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, în col. „Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești” (P.S.B.), vol. 80, București: Editura I.B.M.B.O.R., 1983.

¹² *Ibidem*, col. 1276 A.

¹³ Aposticha Theotokion, third mode, *** *Vespers as chanted on the Holy Mountain*..., pp. 152-153.

each essence. Wherefore, O Lady, Virgin Mother, do thou entreat Him that the souls of them that, in Orthodox manner, profess thee to be God's Birthgiver may be saved."¹⁴

Jesus Christ as a man comes into existence, like Adam, by an act of divine creation, so unblemished by the sin of voluptuousness. And on the other hand, Christ remains in continuity as well with Adam's successors arrived into existence by natural birth¹⁵: "*Unto Him Who is God over all, the Son Who without seed willingly became incarnate of the Virgin, and by His divine power preserved her who gave Him birth as a pure virgin even after birthgiving...*"¹⁶

The Mother of the Lord has been so honored in our liturgical hymns that the stichera unto her praise adorn each page of the ritual books.

Thus, we meet at first hymns containing Old Testament prophecies regarding the Virgin Mary. In essence, all the Old Testamentary pre-figurations of God's Birthgiver are related to Christology. The Church hymns relate them directly to Christ, either repeating them, or giving them another symbolical interpretation. So:

"The shadow of the Law is passed away with the coming of grace; for *as the bush was not consumed when it was burning, thus as a virgin didst thou give birth, and a virgin didst thou remain.* In the stead of a pillar of fire, there hath arisen the Sun of Righteousness, in the stead of Moses, Christ the Salvation of our souls."¹⁷

The entire Old Testament, preparing the oikonomia of salvation, also prepares the home, the temple¹⁸ in which God's Son was to be embodied, as "the Virgin, epitomiz[ed] all the saintliness of the Old Testament"¹⁹. The angel Gabriel himself is amazed at the all-wonderful purity of the Virgin: "*Awed by the beauty of thy virginity and thine all-radiant purity, Gabriel, marvelling, cried out to thee, O Theotokos: «What praise can I bring which is worthy of thee? What shall I call thee? I am at a loss and filled with awe! Wherefore, as I have been commanded, I cry unto thee: 'Rejoice, O thou who art full of grace!'*"²⁰

All those prophetic prefigurations: "Heaven of the Tree of life", "stairway of James", uniting heaven and earth, "the burning bush", which, though fully fire, is not consumed, "the bright Cloud", which shows the way, "the Tent of the testimony", "the Vessel of the heavenly manna", "the Arch of the Law", "the Virgin who gives birth" (Isaiah 7: 14), "The temple of the Lord's glory with the door closed, sealed" (Ezekiel 44: 1-4), "the House of God's wisdom" (Prov. 9: 1), all these, according to their spiritual meaning and according to the explanations of the Holy Fathers and of the hymnographers, refer to the All-pure Virgin, as chosen vessel full of grace of the divine embodiment. "*About the Virgin Mary, God's Birthgiver, the conscience of the Church and even the angels in heaven confess*

¹⁴ Dogmatic Theotokion, third mode, *** *Vespers as chanted on the Holy Mountain...*, pp. 146-147

¹⁵ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, Sibiu, 1943, pp. 120-121.

¹⁶ Theotokion, Canon of the Cross & Resurrection, Ode III, tone I, Sunday Matins, *** *The Octoechos: The Hymns of the Cycle of the Eight Tones for Sundays and Weekdays: Vol. I: Tones I & II*, translation by Reader Isaac E. Lambertsen, Liberty, Tennessee: The St. John of Kronstadt Press, ²1999, p. 14.

¹⁷ Dogmatic Theotokion, second mode, *** *Vespers as chanted on the Holy Mountain...*, pp. 70-71.

¹⁸ Condacul din ziua 21, *Mineiul pe noiembrie*, București: Editura I.B.M.B.O.R., ⁵1983, p. 330: „*Prea Curat Templu al Mântuitorului...*“.

¹⁹ Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology. An Introduction*, translated by Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978, p. 89.

²⁰ Kathismata 1, Theotokion, tone 3, Sunday Matins, *** *The Octoechos: The Hymns of the Cycle of the Eight Tones for Sundays and Weekdays: Vol. II: Tones III & IV*, p. 11.

that she exceeds even the angelic hosts closest to God in purity and knowledge, as the one who carried in her innocent womb the Son of God made man.”²¹

The Holy Fathers and the creators of Church hymns illustrated and defended this dogma, because it is the basis of our salvation. If the Virgin Mary did not give birth to God but only to a simple man, then God would not have come to us and we would not have been lifted up to Him, would not have gotten deified.

3. THE DIVINE MATERNITY

The Orthodox hymns testify everywhere that Christ's coming in the world was supernatural. “The embodiment was achieved by a leap outside the natural development of man's life and yet within its framework”²², says a contemporary theologian, as if inspired by the hymns of Saint Andrew of Crete. “*Thou givest birth and art a virgin, and in both thou remainest by nature inviolate. He who is born makes new the laws of nature (ὁ τεχθεὶς καινίζει νόμους φύσεως), and thy womb brings forth without travail. When God so wills, the natural order is defeated; for He does whatever He wishes.*”²³

Because the Savior had a *coming to life* radically different from the familiar biological *coming to life* (gr. *genesis*) called *birth* (gr. *gennesis*) He was free from all the biological limitations subsequent to the falling into sin and, implicitly, free from death. These, He received them willingly by His real birth – free to a certain extent and outside the law of the coming to life posterior to the fall²⁴, namely free from “the conception by seed and the birth through corruption, which nature drew upon itself after having disobeyed the commandment”²⁵ – to crush them.

Virgin and Mother! It is one of the antinomies of the Revelation²⁶, along with others “hard to receive by the soul”, as the Christian conscience reflects: “*Virginity is alien to motherhood, and childbearing is a thing strange to virgins: yet in thee, O Theotokos, both are to be found. Therefore we and all the nations of the earth, without ceasing call thee blessed.*”²⁷

Divine maternity is a synonym of the virginity of Mary, in the sense that one is intertwined with the other, that we cannot have one without the other: Mary has the quality of mother of God because she gave birth to the Son of God, but this birth did not touch the virginity of the Birth-Giver, making her a mother in the human sense of the word. In this given situation the keeping of the virginity means that He Who was born was God, whereas the losing of the virginity would have meant that He Who was born was not God²⁸.

²¹ Ionuț Chircalan, *Creator și creație. Părintele Dumitru Stăniloae - valorificator al scrierilor areopagitice*, București: Editura Universitară, 2021, p. 179.

²² Ilie Moldovan, “Învățătura despre Sfântul Duh în Ortodoxie și preocupările ecumenice contemporane”, Teză de doctorat, *Mitropolia Ardealului*, 7-8 (1973), p. 758.

²³ Theotokion, Canticle/Ode 4, *Another Canon*, Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, Thursday in the Fifth Week, *** *The Lenten Triodion*..., p. 394, Cf. *Triod*, p. 461.

²⁴ See also the description and profound analysis of this law in St. Maximus the Confessor: Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Răspunsuri către Talasie*, 21, în „Filocalia românească”, vol. 3, translation, introduction and notes by Fr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Sibiu: Tipografia Arhidiecezană, 1947 (P.G. 90, 312 – 313 A).

²⁵ Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Ambigua*, P.G. 91, 1341 C.

²⁶ Ioan G. Coman, „*Și Cuvântul Trup s-a făcut*”. *Hristologie și mariologie patristică*, Timișoara, 1993, p. 395.

²⁷ Canticle/Ode Nine, Second Canon, *Irmos*, *** *The Festal Menaion*, translated from the original Greek by Mother Mary and Archmandrite Kallistos Ware, with an introduction by Archpriest Georges Florovsky, London: Faber and Faber, 1969, p. 124.

²⁸ Ioan G. Coman, „...*Și Cuvântul Trup s-a făcut*“..., pp. 394-395.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the Orthodox Church, desiring to keep the balance of the theological values, always gave priority to the truths of faith from the Evangel. For this reason, the Orthodox Church abstained from imposing any dogmatic formulation concerning the Holy Virgin Mary (as for example the *immaculate conception* or the *ascension with the human body to heaven*)²⁹, except for the fact that the Orthodoxy strongly upheld that the Virgin Mary truly and really was God's Birthgiver (*Teotokos*) and "Mother of God". No doubt, this striking title, made necessary by the logic of Cyrillian Christology, justified her daily liturgical acclamation as³⁰: "*More honorable than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim! Without corruption you gave birth to God the Word. True Theotokos, we magnify you!*"³¹

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²⁹ Nicolae D. Necula, "Adormirea Maicii Domnului în cultul Bisericii Ortodoxe", *Glasul Bisericii* 5-8 (1997), pp. 27-34; Gh. Tilea, "Maica Domnului după cărțile noastre de cult. Însemnări de mariologie ortodoxă", în *Glasul Bisericii*, 1-2 (1971), p. 82.

³⁰ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, New York: Fordham University Press, 21979, p. 149; Henri Barri, "La Royauté de Marie pendant les neuf premiers siècles" *Recherches de science religieuse*, tom. XXIX, 2, 1939, p. 147; Pr. Dr. Gh. Tilea, „Maica Domnului după cărțile noastre de cult...”, pp. 81-82.

³¹ From the *Dismissal*, "Chapel," Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, *Daily Orthros (Matins)*, <https://www.goarch.org/-/daily-orthros> (Accessed April 2, 2023) *** *Theon Prosefharion*, Issued in alimony and under the supervision of Bishop Oinois, eleventh edition, Athens, 1992, p. 24. This second part of the Sunday axion is due to Cosmas the Melodist, while the hymn "De tine se bucură", namely the axion in the Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great is composed by Saint John of Damascus (Pr. Petre Vintilescu, *Despre poezia innografică din cărțile de ritual și cântarea bisericească*, București: Editura Pace, 1937, pp. 113, 177-179).

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