

# THE THEOTOKOS IN THE ORTHODOX TRADITION AND RUSSIAN THOUGHT

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VENERATION OF the most blessed Virgin Mary takes a prominent place in the life and consciousness of the Orthodox people. Some of them even claimed a special relationship with her. The Russians who received Christianity from Byzantium via Bulgaria a millenium ago used to call their land a 'House of the Most Holy Mother of God'. Among many apocryphal writings which came to Russia, one was particularly liked by the newly converted people. It was 'The Visitation to the Torments by the Mother of God' (the descent into hell). Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* of F. M. Dostoevsky, before telling the content of the story to his brother Alyosha said, 'there is, for instance, a poem (of course, from the Greek), "The Wanderings of Our Lady through Hell" with descriptions as bold as Dante's'.<sup>1</sup>

The blessed Virgin wanted to see those who suffer in hell and the Archangel Michael led her through the torments. Anguished by their sufferings she besought God, 'Have mercy, O Lord, upon the sinners, for I have seen them, and I could not endure. Let me be tormented together with them'. When God points to the hands and feet of her Son, nailed to the cross, and asks, 'how can I forgive his tormentors?' she bids all the saints and angels to fall down with her before God and pray for mercy on all in hell. Finally, they receive some respite from their sufferings (albeit, just from Holy Thursday to Pentecost annually).<sup>2</sup>

The image of the mother of God as presented in this work, greatly influenced the russian religious mind and was reflected in medieval russian *vitae*, spiritual songs, and icons, as well as in later literature.

Two of the best-known russian saints, St Sergius of Radonezh in the fourteenth century (the Abbot of the russian land, as he was called affectionately, by the people), a contemporary inspirer of the iconographer Andrey Roublev, and St Seraphim of Sarov in the

nineteenth century, the first-known representative of the new institution of *startzy* (monks as the spiritual guides of laymen, described in *The Brothers Karamazov*), had mystical visions of our Lady.

In popular belief Mary is the very conscience of the people. The sixteenth-century Russian Tsar Boris, in the tragedy of Alexander Pushkin, *Boris Godunov* (opera by Mussorgsky), encountered before the cathedral, on the Kremlin square, a 'fool for Christ's sake', Nikólka, who had been abused by young ruffians. The Tsar, haunted by the image of the prince-child Dimitry, assassinated on his orders, commanded that Nikólka be given alms and asked the fool to pray for him. 'No, no! One cannot pray for the Tsar Herod, the Mother of God does not allow it', Nikólka pronounced his judgment in the face of the stunned Tsar and his *boyars*.

Even now a contemporary Soviet writer Vladimir Soloukhin, the author of the book, *Searching for Icons in Russia*, in his poem, 'A Fairy Tale', writes:

And in that Church, behind her heavy vestments,  
Behind the ruby eye of the votive light,  
For the fifth century the Virgin Mary sorrowed,  
Bending her face above the Infant Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Years passed; in a revolutionary fervour the village church was closed, the bricks plundered, the icons burned in the local school oven. But this particular icon was taken by a faithful woman to her hut. One day a young man interested in Russia's historical traditions (as many of them now are) stopped at the hut for a cup of water. He saw the icon, appreciated its beauty and artistic value and suggested that it should be put in some renowned museum. But the woman retorted: ' . . . You can cut me into pieces, burn my eyes out with an iron rod, but I won't give up the virgin Mary, our holy Mother, to those devils for desecration'.<sup>4</sup>

There are very many icons of the *Theotokos*. All orthodox churches and private homes of the faithful are adorned with the icon of our Lady. In Russia alone there are more than three hundred so-called 'revealed' icons, that is the icons which, according to pious tradition, appeared in some miraculous way. They have their own feast days and special liturgical texts; for example 'Our Lady of Vladimir', 'Our Lady of Kazan', 'Our Lady of Smolensk'. Affectionate love and adoration of the blessed Virgin is expressed also in rich hymnology, liturgical poetry (*akathistoi*) and in the

sermons of St John of Damascus, St Andrew of Crete, St Theodore of Studios and many others. Four of the twelve major feasts (outside of the Easter cycle) are dedicated to Mary: The Nativity of the *Theotokos*, 8 September; the Presentation of the Virgin Mary, 21 November; the Annunciation, 25 March; the Dormition, 15 August. There are also a number of lesser feasts of our Lady, in addition to the already-mentioned numerous feasts of the icons of Mary. Each cycle of liturgical prayers, daily, weekly, yearly, includes a special prayer addressed to Mary who is lauded as:

More honourable than the Cherubim  
 And more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim:  
 Without defilement you gave birth to God the Word:  
 True *Theotokos*, we magnify you.

The Eucharistic Canon of the Holy Communion service is concluded with a hymn to Mary. All liturgical celebrations as well as private devotions always end with an address to the *Theotokos*.

The orthodox veneration of the *Theotokos* is most fully expressed in liturgical and devotional literature and in iconography rather than in specific theological treatises. However, since the Russian religious renaissance at the beginning of this century, various articles written by Russian theologians have appeared in Russia and abroad, mostly in the context of ecclesiology. All of them point out that this veneration has a basic christological orientation. With very few exceptions almost all orthodox icons of the blessed Virgin Mary depict her with the child Jesus. The second day of Christmas in the Orthodox Church is dedicated to the *Theotokos*. The christological character of the veneration of the *Theotokos* is expressed particularly clearly in *dogmaticons*, special canticles devoted to Mary and sung at vespers. For example this is the Saturday great vespers *dogmaticon* of the eighth tone:

In his love for mankind, the king of Heaven appeared upon earth and dwelt among men. For he took flesh of a pure virgin, and thus incarnate he came forth from her. The only son is he: twofold in nature, but not in person. In proclaiming him perfect man and perfect God indeed, we confess Christ our God. Beseech him, O Mother without wedlock to have mercy upon our souls.<sup>5</sup>

The christological orientation of orthodox mariology with its particular stress on the mystery of the Incarnation is to be referred

directly to the third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus, A.D. 431. This Council in its deliberations on the nature of Christ, the second person of the holy Trinity, the only-begotten Son of God consubstantial with the Father, called Mary the true *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. 'The name *Theotokos* stresses the fact that the child whom Mary bore was not a "simple man", not a human person, but the only-begotten Son of God, one of the holy Trinity, yet incarnate. This is obviously the cornerstone of the orthodox faith.'<sup>6</sup> Thus, the veneration of the *Theotokos* is inseparable from the magnification of Christ, the Incarnate God, the Word.

The dogmatic decisions of the third Ecumenical Council were expanded by the fourth Council at Chalcedon in A.D. 451, which stressed that Christ was true God and true man. That, being born of the Virgin Mary, Christ fully assumed humanity which 'was saved and deified by its union with the divine nature of the Logos in the unity of his hypostasis'.<sup>7</sup> The rich orthodox hymnology mentioned above is primarily based on and derived from the teachings of the Church on incarnation as defined by those ecumenical councils, rendering them in poetic form.

In the view of the Church's worshipping members, the *Theotokos* acquires the significance of a living witness to the authenticity of the mystery of the Incarnation, and in particular to its certainty. In reality the Mother of God, as the human, earthly Mother of our Lord through her fleshly maternity, is an indisputable witness to the realization of the Incarnation of the Word and to the oneness of the divine hypostasis of the Logos which joined divine and human natures without change, without confusion, without division or separation.<sup>8</sup>

The theme of the *stavrotheotokia*, the blessed Mary standing at the cross and lamenting her crucified son appears often in regular Sunday services and particularly during Holy Week: 'Today the blameless virgin saw thee suspended upon the cross, O Lord. She mourned within herself and was sorely pierced in her heart. She groaned in agony from the depth of her soul'. (*Service of Holy Friday Matins.*) Besides compassion of the Church for the sorrowful Mother, this theme also includes, very prominently, the verification of the mystery of the incarnation. 'The Mother's genuine grief for her Son verifies the Son's true suffering, his true humanity, and finally its true effectiveness for the salvation of mankind.'<sup>9</sup>

The Mother of God is the true mother of the whole of mankind.

When the fulness of time came, in her and through her, mankind was deemed ready to receive the Saviour and Redeemer promised by the prophets. At that moment she represented the whole of creation, as she was the best fruit of it through her own efforts which met with the grace of God. 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word' (Lk 1,38). By her complete obedience to the will of God she restored the possibility of direct communication between the Creator and his creation, broken by sin and disobedience, and became a 'bridge from earth to Heaven' (*The Akathistos*). In fact, correcting the misdeed of the first Eve, Mary became the second or the new Eve bringing mankind back to Christ, the new Adam: 'thou, far famed, hast paid back the old debt of Eve by the new Adam appearing for our sake' (*Sunday Matins, tone 1*). Or, in the words of another canticle: 'In past times the serpent trampled me and put me to death through our mother Eve: while now he who fashioned me, has through thee, O pure Virgin, called me up from corruption' (*Sunday Matins, tone 8*).

But the blessed Virgin, the Mother of God and the new Eve is also called the Bride of God in church poetry: 'Wearing the spiritual beauty of the most fair soul, Thou hast become the Bride of God, sealed with holy virginity and shining upon the world the joyful light of purity' (*Sunday Matins, tone 6*).

From the human point of view the designations 'Mother' and 'Bride' do not go together. However, as Fr Sergius Bulgakov points out, this incompatibility disappears in the spiritual realm which is different from the divided and broken life of fallen humanity.<sup>10</sup> Overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, Mary conceives and gives birth to the *Logos*, and becomes *Theotokos*. As a human, created being, representing the whole of mankind she is the handmaid of the Lord, and his chosen Bride: 'The bridegroom finding thee, only lily among the thorns, shining forth with the brightness of purity and the light of chastity, O Virgin, took thee to be his bride, O thou who are without spot' (*Sunday Matins, tone 7*).

Here we come to the link between Mary and the Church. The Church too is called the Bride of Christ: ' "I know no God save Thee", cries the Church aloud to Thee, "Thou hast chosen me from the unbelieving nations to be thy Bride" ' (*Sunday Matins, tone 7*). The Church is also the Body of Christ and mother of all Christians. Thus, Mary is the icon of the Church, she represents the Church and the Church is fulfilled in her. 'For the mystery of Mary is precisely the mystery of the Church. *Mater Ecclesia* and *Virgo Mater*

are both birthgivers of the new life.<sup>11</sup> The Church is a new life of the renewed and transformed people of God, a passage from this world to the eternal kingdom. The basic energies of this new life are responsive love and voluntary obedience to the Word. 'As life, the Church is a *she*, the Bride of Christ, the one who is called from eternity to be "a chaste virgin to Christ"' (2 Cor 11,2).<sup>12</sup> Christ is the head of the Church; Mary is its heart and conscience.

The blessed Virgin became a habitation of the Holy Spirit. The regenerating operations of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the lives of its members are manifested in her. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, Mary gave birth to Christ. By the grace of the Holy Spirit the faithful have communion with Christ and thus share in the life of the Church and the motherhood of Mary. 'The Church and Mary each bear the same relation alike to Christ and Christians.'<sup>13</sup>

Fr Paul Florensky, a leading figure of the Russian religious renaissance in the beginning of this century, adds another dimension to the relationship of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary from the sophiological point of view:

The Holy Spirit manifests himself in creation as *virginity*: as inner Chastity and humble Purity: these are the main gifts received by a Christian from the Holy Spirit. . . . Sophia is the Virgin Purity itself. However, the bearer of the Virgin Purity, the *virgin* in the real and exceptional meaning of this word is Mariam, the Virgin full of Grace, filled with grace by the Holy Spirit, endowed with his gifts. She is the true Church of God, the true Body of Christ. . . .<sup>14</sup>

These tremendous gifts were given to Mary at the Annunciation, when the Holy Spirit descended upon her and the power of the Highest overshadowed her, and when, it has to be repeated here again, she freely and voluntarily accepted the vocation set before her, thus actively participating in God's plan for mankind. Therefore, this feast in the words of its *troparion* (collect) marks not only the greatest event in Mary's life but also the turning point in the history of salvation: 'Today is the crown of our salvation and the manifestation of the mystery that is from all eternity. The Son of God becomes Son of the Virgin . . . '.

In orthodox consciousness and theology the free and voluntary acceptance by Mary of her special vocation is inseparable from her sharing with humanity in conditions of natural birth, including original sin, thus being a true representative of mankind, albeit the best one. The orthodox east does not know the dogma of Immacu-

late Conception. As to the Assumption of our Lady, known in the east as Dormition or falling asleep, the Orthodox Church has not scrutinized it in formal theological terms. It affirms with faith and love that, 'in giving birth, O *Theotokos*, thou hast retained thy virginity, and in falling asleep thou hast not forsaken the world' (the Dormition *troparion*). 'The wonderful thing about her is not that, having no original sin, she did not have to die, but that her death itself was filled to capacity with life in God, and therefore, changed into "blessed assumption"'.<sup>15</sup>

To this brief and sketchy account of the orthodox veneration of the blessed Virgin Mary, based mostly on byzantine tradition and hymnology in their russian interpretation, one more important consideration may be added. The sacrament of the Eucharist occupies the central place in the life of the Church. The whole Church including all her members everywhere, whether alive or fallen asleep in the Lord, are gathered together at every time and place when the Eucharist is celebrated. It is manifested particularly clearly and vividly in the special ritual of preparation of the eucharistic bread and wine immediately preceding the Orthodox Divine Liturgy (the Holy Communion Service).

The upper central part of the paten is occupied by a squarely cut piece of bread called the Lamb. A small triangular particle cut out of another piece of bread is placed on the right side of the Lamb. While doing this the priest says: 'In honour and memory of our most blessed lady *Theotokos* and ever-virgin Mary. Through her prayers, O Lord, accept this sacrifice upon thy heavenly altar'. And then the priest adds the words of Psalm 45 (v 9), 'the Queen stood on thy right side, arrayed in golden robes, all glorious'.

Similarly nine particles of bread are placed on the left side of the Lamb in honour of prophets, apostles, martyrs, and other saints. More particles are put in front of the Lamb for bishops, rulers, and all the living and dead.

In the pre-Pentecost days, the Church with the apostles and Mary together in prayers and supplications (Acts 1,14) expected its inauguration by the Holy Spirit. Since then the Church with Mary and with all the rest who had been there from the beginning is gathered around the Lord praying and glorifying him.

Mary has an exalted and special place in the Church due to her humility, obedience to God and capacity to love. At the same time it would be wrong to regard her as a 'co-redeemer' and/or the 'only hope'. The risen Lord is our Redeemer and our only hope. But the

blessed *Theotokos* is the strongest and the purest link of humanity with him. So many misunderstandings and wrong aspirations in contemporary christian life and society could be avoided if only more people could unite their will with her will, in their sincere search for higher wisdom and guidance.

In conclusion I would like to quote the closing words of the devotional address dedicated to the Mother of God given at the end of a symposium of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius in England in 1948:

We think that we remain true to the evangelical mind if our praise of Mary goes, before all, to the humble and obedient servant of the Lord and if we repeat with predilection the words: ' . . . He hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden' (Lk 1,48). And as we do not wish to withdraw our own voice from the concert of Christian generations, we shall join with them in fulfilling the words of the *Magnificat*: 'For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed' (Lk 1,48).<sup>16</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Dostoevsky, F.: *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans C. Garnett (New York, 1950), p 293.

<sup>2</sup> Zenkovsky, Serge A.: *Medieval Russian Epics, Chronicles and Tales* (New York, 1974), p 153.

<sup>3</sup> Soloukhin, V.: *Zhyn'tna z'emlie* (Poems), trans N. Chordas (Moscow, 1965), p 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> This and other texts from Sunday services are quoted from the *Octoechos*. The translation from the original Greek was made at the Orthodox Monastery of the Veil of Our Lady, Bussy-en-Othe, France.

<sup>6</sup> Florovsky, G.: 'The Ever-Virgin Mother of God', in *The Mother of God, A Symposium*, ed by E. L. Mascall (Westminster, Md, 1949), p 52.

<sup>7</sup> Kniazeff, Alexis.: 'The Great Sign of the Heavenly Kingdom and its Advent in Strength', in *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Vol 13, no 1-2 (1969), p 55.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p 55.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 56.

<sup>10</sup> Bulgakov, Sergius: 'The Burning Bush', in *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed J. Pain and N. Zernov (Philadelphia, 1976), p 94.

<sup>11</sup> Florovsky, G.: *op. cit.*, p 63.

<sup>12</sup> Schmemmann, A.: 'Mary in Eastern Liturgy', in *Marian Studies*, Vol XIX (1968), p 81.

<sup>13</sup> Bulgakov, S.: *op. cit.*, p 95. See also Schmemmann, A.: 'Our Lady and the Holy Spirit', in *Marian Studies*, Vol XXIII (1972), pp 69-78.

<sup>14</sup> Florenskii, P. A.: *Stolp i uverzhenie istiny* (Moscow, 1914), trans by Grigorieff, D., as *The pillar and ground of the truth* (England, 1970), p 351: Cf also Florenskii, P. A., *op. cit.*, p 326, on 'Sophia, the wisdom of God'.

<sup>15</sup> Schmemmann, A.: 'Mary in Eastern Liturgy', *loc. cit.*, p 82.

<sup>16</sup> Gillet, L.: 'A devotional address', in Mascall, *op. cit.*, p 80.