

THE THEOTOKOS, CREATION, AND THE MODERN WORLD

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IN CHOOSING to explore an aspect of marian piety which is particularly orthodox, I began this paper with the intention of showing the influence of orthodox belief about Mary on the role of women. This seemed a particularly important question to me, for I have always had a very close personal devotion to Mary, and in recent years have been extremely interested and actively involved in the discussions among orthodox in the United States concerning the debate about the role of women in the Church. But this eternal division and analysis, this constant separation into women and men does not apply here, in fact it is a divisive issue with which I am becoming impatient.

I believe that the larger, more important aspect of Mary's influence in the Church, and truly a crucial one for us today, is not her relevance to women, but her relationship to all creation and what that means to us, men and women, right now. As the late Fr Alexander Schmemmann, an eminent orthodox theologian observed, 'Mary is not the representative of the woman or women before God, she is the icon of the entire creation, the whole of mankind as response to Christ and to God'.¹

Mary is real. She is not an idea, a symbol, a myth, a thought, a concept, a possibility, or an intellectual proposition to be analyzed. She is a person. She was and is Jesus's mother. It is this reality which is important to us today; for otherwise my paper is simply an intellectual word game.

The reality and relevance of Mary begin with the understanding of Mary's love for the world. Orthodox tradition teaches that Mary loved the world and the human race even before the Incarnation and grieved at the sorry state it was in. This belief holds that she prayed for the salvation of the world. This is described by Gregory Palamas, archbishop of Thessalonica when he talks about Mary's experience as a young Jewish girl in the temple. That experience led her . . . to

learn the nature of the sin of Adam, and to realize that 'no one could stop the murderous rush which was bearing away the human race'. And when the angel appeared to her to announce that she was to be the mother of God, she spoke to him of her faith in the coming of the Spirit 'to further purify her nature, and give her the strength to receive the child of salvation'.²

Just as Mary is real, so too her love for our world is real, and it is natural and real³ to wonder how this applies to us today.

There are two significant themes which recur in orthodox thought about Mary. The first is her role in the Incarnation effecting a reunion of Creator and creation, which had been severed by the Fall. The second theme is her Dormition or Assumption, in which, with Christ, she is a revealer of the 'last things', a preview of our own resurrection. These two statements about Mary dramatically oppose two of the enormous crises of the modern world — the first is the fragmentation of life and the second is the misunderstanding or ignorance of why we are in this world.

It is through these two themes and two crises that I will explore the relevance of Mary to the modern world. I believe that a proper understanding of Mary and her relation to God can provide us with insight into these troubling questions. It is her life which presents us with the authentic vision of God and his relationship to us and the rest of creation. Mary, in accepting to be the bearer of God the Word from the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit, reunites the human race with God, restores us and all of creation to our original relationship with God. She also provides the eschatological dimension to human life, for her Dormition or Assumption and Christ's Resurrection combine to provide a preview of our own final bodily resurrection. However, before this understanding of Mary can be applied to the modern world, I would like to concentrate on the two problems of the modern world, the fragmentation of life and the misunderstanding of the purpose of life. Then I will show specific elements of orthodox belief about Mary which are relevant to these modern problems.

The first and certainly the most disturbing aspect of this fragmentation to all of us here is the separation of the churches. But there is also the estrangement of nations, of rich and poor, of aged and young, of women and men. There is that all-pervasive secularism which separates the religious part of our life from the everyday 'real' life, when in fact, the 'real' life is the religious part. Related to this is the division of life into material and spiritual. The

inclination of the twentieth-century mind is to disbelieve anything which cannot be quantified or scientifically demonstrated. This is due partly because it truly *is* technology which runs our day-to-day world, but also because the thrust of much of today's education is geared towards skills which help the graduate to earn a living rather than to understand life or be a better, fuller person. This is natural; economics dictates many things and this is one. However, this decline of the liberal arts-trained mind has resulted in an abysmal ignorance on the part of the population in general about its own cultural heritage which, for the most part, has been shaped by Christianity.

Fragmentation is the modern evil which we all must endure, a fragmentation which removes the poor, sick and old from our midst and places them where we must make appointments to see them. It places a strain on relationships of all kinds. We are all extremely busy, and in a way, tortured by the noise, the fast pace and the broken relationships which modern life imposes upon us. It has damaged our relationship with God, and as a result all of our relationships are out of kilter.

There is a pervasive belief today, in the United States at least, which implies that serious intellectual growth, particularly for a woman, is not compatible with growth in a family. This has had a deleterious effect on families and there is no doubt that the epidemic of broken families in our society is one of the most serious contemporary problems. There is another even more dangerous value that we are not truly worthwhile and respectable members of society unless we have well-titled, high-paying jobs. This has always been a burden for men, but many women are now also measured by this rule since in the United States they compose at least half of the labour force. I think we are obsessed by structures and titles: we often judge people by what they do, not by what they are. How often, when we meet someone, do we miss her name, but we do hear that she is a doctor or a lawyer, or that her husband is, or that her daughter goes to Oxford. She may be a perfect cad, or even a wonderful person, but we do not know because we do not care for the person but for the external form.

These opinions are particularly evident to me because although I read books and write articles and even give papers when people ask me to, I consider my primary responsibility, and I would go as far as to call it my 'job', the care and nurturing of my husband and three sons. This is not a valued job any more, in fact, the home is

considered to be a boring, empty place, not worthy of someone who is clever enough to do anything else.

Closely related to fragmentation, which we have just discussed, and probably both the result and the cause of it, is the second crisis, complete lack of understanding of why we are in this world. Modern life is too complex, too fast, too demanding to be easily understood. Instead of being left with more time to pursue the really important questions, such as, 'How can I serve God?' or 'What does God want me to do with my life?' or 'What is the purpose of life?' We have forgotten those questions and simply run from one thing to another.

We live in extremely confusing times with instant news coverage, thousands of books to read, too much undirected leisure time. It is as if contemporary men and women have been tricked by the modern world. Having been freed from the tyranny of the sweat shops and farm work of the nineteenth century, we are captured by the more tiring and less satisfying tyranny of the twentieth century of going places, of car pools, running to meetings, concerts, movies. I have a friend who is put into a frenzy every summer by getting her two teenage boys to all of their activities. They must change clothes in the car as they leave swimming practice and drive to tennis lessons. Then they must eat in the car on the way to baseball practice.

How many families have to fight for a single night at home together and how many families have abandoned even that? How many families never talk to each other because it is easier to leave the television on? There is an incredible lack of common sense, particularly among highly educated intellectuals. The modern man and woman are so enlightened and so liberated, so open-minded, as to believe nothing. It is good to have an open mind, but as Jeff McNelly, a nationally syndicated cartoonist in the United States says, 'Keep an open mind, but not so open that your brains fall out'.

Do we not all spend a lot of time wishing we were someone else or somewhere else? Whether it is to be the Mother of God, a doctor, a clerk in a store, a priest or teacher, a good husband or wife, father or mother, if we really believe that God is in charge of our lives, then we will have the humility to accept, as Mary did, whatever life brings us, whether it is fame or obscurity, fortune or modest means. It is the wonderful ability to 'let go' of our lives to say, as Mary did, 'Be it unto me according to thy word' (Lk 1,38).

As book review editor for *The Orthodox Church* newspaper, I sometimes receive as many as a dozen books in the mail each week. It is overwhelming. How can we keep up, be informed, keep abreast of

the changes in our profession, understand world events? It's crazy. That is just it, it *is* crazy if we have forgotten why we are in this world and what we are supposed to be working for. This has been well stated by an orthodox priest in the Soviet Union, Fr Dmitrii Dudko, in response to a question about the Incarnation:

Eternity exists, the Kingdom of Heaven exists. The atheists smirk at these words. 'Oh well, eternity and the Kingdom of Heaven — these are abstract concepts', they say, 'but in fact people want to live today, in the *real* day'. But eternity and the Kingdom of Heaven aren't just abstract concepts. They're reality and they exist, whereas if we consider it seriously 'today' is an abstract concept. It's water flowing through our fingers, a shadow which appears for a moment and then vanishes.⁴

Fr Dudko's statement sums up the answer to the dilemma of that second crisis — a misunderstanding of why we are in this world.

We have looked at the two crises of modern life — the fragmentation and the misunderstanding or ignorance of why we are in this world. For a moment, before I discuss the two themes in orthodox thought which counter them, it is important to be aware of the place which Mary has in the consciousness of an orthodox believer. She is everywhere. In the services she is mentioned over and over again. In fact, she is mentioned more than a dozen times in every divine liturgy. At matins, vespers and compline, the week-day services of the Church, there are specific hymns about her which change with the day or with the liturgical season. There are four major feasts of the *Theotokos*, rich in hymnography praising her and contemplating her. Some of the hymns are poetical meditations on Mary and some actually carry dogmatic teaching about her in the living tradition of the Orthodox Church. These are called 'dogmatikons'. It is important to be aware of this distinction.

Mary is present visually in icons which fill the churches and homes of orthodox faithful. It is true to say that Mary is always present in orthodox worship, piety, and prayer. She permeates the entire life of the Church. In the words of Fr Alexander Schmemmann, 'The veneration of Mary is a dimension of dogma as well as piety, of christology as well as ecclesiology'.⁵

Yet it is also true to say that she is taken for granted. By that I mean, she is celebrated, loved, honoured, revered, but not analyzed. In fact, there really is no specific orthodox mariology, if the word mariology means a separate set of intellectual questions concerning Jesus's mother.⁶

It is only in recent years, in response to meetings such as this, that orthodox theologians have begun to write specifically about Mary. These articles are few and they are very unlike the systematic studies on Mary which have abounded in catholic and some protestant journals.

Mary is not part of the preaching of the Orthodox Church, but of its inner life. Once you accept Christ, then you enter into that personification of all that is good and human in christian life, which is Mary. She is frequently referred to as the supreme example, not the supreme exception, of human life. She is the expression of all of us.

The only doctrinal statement accepted by the Orthodox Church about Mary was that made at Ephesus in 431 at the Third Ecumenical Council. As you know, it concerned the term *Theotokos*. That statement, in fact, is a christological statement, for its purpose was to counter the nestorian teaching which separated the person of Christ into human and divine, maintaining that Mary was the mother only of the human part of Christ. The Council's basis for this judgement against the nestorian teaching actually was biblical:

They pointed out that such a teaching was in contradiction to the words of the Archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation: 'thou shalt . . . bring forth a Son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be called the *Son of the Highest* . . . that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called *the Son of God*' (Lk 1,31-32).⁷

At this point, I would like to say a word about orthodox use of the term *Theotokos*. I believe it is important for the Orthodox to be aware of the shocking effect which it sometimes has upon other Christians who no longer use it, particularly when it is translated as 'Mother of God'. It might seem to imply the introduction of a sort of parallel deity, or that exaggerated honour is given to Mary, a human, which should be reserved for God, or that it is not biblical. But such is not the case:

In reality, an expression which means exactly the same thing as 'Mother of God' is to be found in the New Testament. St Luke, after recording the story of the Annunciation tells us that Mary went to see her cousin Elizabeth, who was in the sixth month of her pregnancy. When Mary greeted her, the babe leaped in her womb for joy, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. This inspiration of the Holy Spirit enabled her to say: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that *the Mother of my Lord* should come to me?' (Lk 6,36-43). Who was Elizabeth's Lord but God himself? Mary had only

conceived the infant Jesus, and Elizabeth, because of the Holy Spirit's coming to her, was able to identify the child that would be born of her cousin with the Lord.⁸

By the same token, it is important for other Christians to realize what the term *Theotokos* did mean for the early Church, and what it continues to mean for the Orthodox today. The name *Theotokos*, more precisely translated as 'God-bearer', is a description of Mary's relationship to God. In fact, the greatest human being created by God, a woman, is honoured not for herself, but for her service, her relationship to God.

Now it is necessary to take a selective look at some of the services and icons to show how the Orthodox Church expresses its belief about the *Theotokos*. The two themes of reunion are stated in the hymns of Christmas and Holy Week. It is in this hymnography, always present in every orthodox service, that the events of the particular feast are commemorated and depicted. The hymns have been written throughout the history of the early church by theologians such as John of Damascus, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, and Andrew of Crete. They differ greatly in content, depending upon the particular feast commemorated, and its aspects of christian salvation, but they share a common approach to the events they contemplate. That common approach encompasses the two themes mentioned above, the reunion of the heavenly and the earthly, and the reality of life beyond the grave.

The second theme in which Mary with Christ is the first to participate in that final glorification is present in the Holy Week service, the lamentation of the Mother of God. This is celebrated immediately following Vespers on Holy Friday and specifically concentrates on Mary's suffering as she followed Jesus through his suffering and death. The hymns of this particularly moving service leave no doubt about the depth of Mary's sorrow, but they also carry a foretaste of the joy of the resurrection, Christ's, Mary's, and our own.

The other element which makes a visual statement of those same beliefs expressed in hymns is icons. A very important dimension of mariology is to be found in iconography. There are literally dozens of different icons of Mary depicting events of her life with Christ. In iconography she is rarely shown alone, but is almost always shown holding Christ in her arms.

Mary's place on the icon screen in every orthodox church points to her role in reuniting heaven and earth. On the iconostasis, or screen which supports the icons, there is always an icon of Christ the

Saviour to the right of the altar and, to the left, an icon of the Mother and Christ child, actually an icon of the Incarnation:

Although, on the one hand, it is a screen dividing the divine world from the human world, the iconostasis at the same time unites the two worlds into one whole in an image which reflects a state of the universe where all separation is overcome, where there is achieved a reconciliation between God and the creature, and within the creature itself.⁹

The Christmas icon, called the Nativity of Christ, has Mary as its central figure. She is surrounded by representatives of the whole world, the angels, the heavens, the wise men, shepherds, the earth. She is the central figure of the icon which, in its details, attests to the basic dogma of the Christian faith, the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, who was both God and man. It also shows us the effect of this event on the natural life of the world. 'Through the Incarnation of God, the whole of creation acquires a new meaning, lying in the final purpose of its being — ultimate transfiguration. So all creation takes part in the event'.¹⁰

Having considered selected liturgical references to Mary, the Marian hymns and the icons, what do they say about the *Theotokos*? What is the effect of what they say on the orthodox Christian who hears the references to Christ and his Mother in every service, hears her mentioned in the scriptures, sees icons of her and Christ at church and at home?

If I had to choose one word to convey the impression, it would be joy, great joy, overwhelming joy, that Mary, in her *fiat*, made possible the Incarnation of the Son of God through her special relationship with the Holy Spirit.¹¹ Why joy? This question returns us to those two themes mentioned in the beginning — the reunion of creation with the Creator, and the last things.¹²

Both of these realities imply the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, a sharing of God's goodness and glory, the perfection of which was somehow destroyed in the fall. This concept in orthodox theology is called 'deification', and means inner glory and purity of soul, but also a transfigured and glorified body. This deification is what we all seek to obtain by living according to God's will.¹³

It has been written about by many of the Church fathers, but was most simply stated by St Irenaeus and then St Athanasius, who said, 'God has become man in order that man might become God'. A close examination of this apparently simple statement reveals a

dramatic relationship between the Incarnation and the Holy Spirit, and as a result, between the *Theotokos* and the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

This relationship was personified in the life of St Seraphim of Sarov, who lived in Russia in the eighteenth century. He lived a life of great simplicity and asceticism. His peaceful existence and harmony with nature and wild animals are reminiscent of St Francis of Assisi. St Seraphim had a great devotion to Mary, and received many visions of her. His personal piety and holiness, his mystical experiences of the uncreated light of God, and his closeness to Mary are bound up in this single quotation of his advice to those in his spiritual care: 'The true end [of life] is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit'.¹⁵ This is really merely another way of saying 'God has become man in order that man might become God'.

It is this union with God and with one another, made possible by the Incarnation, that we must seek all during our lives. It is this union, called deification, which overcomes the fragmentation we experience in our lives and gives us an understanding of why we are in the world. It reunites us with the Creator and gives us a taste of the last things. It is also this deification which gives an eschatological dimension to this world,¹⁶ and in fact, puts all of the crazy things we have to do everyday into perspective, for it links us with the end of time.

The link between the deification and the last things is exemplified by the orthodox belief about the Dormition of Mary:

The Orthodox Church does not 'explain' what happened when Mary died. It simply states that her death signifies the 'morning of a mysterious day', that Mary, in virtue of her total love for God and surrender to him, of her absolute obedience and humility, is the beginning of that common resurrection which Christ announced to the world.¹⁷

It is Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit, who fills the Church with the joy of existence. Since Mary consented to be the Mother of God, we as humans can also rejoice with her joy in our humanity, for God thought enough of it to take it upon himself. In Mary, the deification which we all seek, that purity and inner glory of soul, was fully realized.

We believe, according to scripture, that in the final resurrection, we will be redeemed and deified, both body and soul, that our bodies as well as our souls, will arise, transfigured and glorified.

By God's special decree she has passed beyond death and judgment and lives already in the age to come, thus constituting (with her

Son) the first-fruits of the transfigured creation . . . every Christian, by virtue of his baptism, lives already in some degree in the age to come; and that same bodily glory which the Mother of God already enjoys, all of us hope one day to share.¹⁸

By her role in the Incarnation, the *Theotokos* restored the original order of creation, made deification possible, and provided the first fruits of transfigured creation. In considering her life and her place in God's plan for us, we can gain some insight into how we should live.

NOTES

Unfortunately because of shortage of space we have been unable to print this paper in full.—Eds.

¹ Schmemmann, Alexander: *Mary in eastern liturgy* (monograph, no date), p 81.

² Meyendorff, John: *A study of Gregory Palamas* (The Faith Press, London, 1974), p 235.

³ Bulgakov, Sergius: *The orthodox Church* (Three Hierarchs Seminary Press, Maitland, Florida, 1935), p 163.

⁴ Dudko, Dmitrii: *Our hope* (YMCA-Press, Paris, 1975), p 236.

⁵ Schmemmann, Alexander: 'On Mariology in Orthodoxy', *Marian Library Studies* 2 (1970), p 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Bishop Dmitri (Royster): 'The Doctrine of Christ', *The Dawn* (Newspaper of the diocese of the South, Orthodox Church in America [December 1983]), p 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Regretfully, because space is not available, from here on cuts have been made which involve detailed liturgical illustration.—A.J.S.

⁹ Ouspensky, Leonid, and Lossky, Vladimir: *The meaning of icons* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1982), p 157.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 157.

¹¹ Schmemmann, Alexander: 'Our Lady and the Holy Spirit', *Marian Studies* 23 (1972), p 70.

¹² Lossky, Vladimir: *The mystical theology of the eastern Church* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1976), p 141.

¹³ Ware, Timothy (Bishop Kallistos): 'The Communion of Saints', *The Orthodox Ethos*, vol 1, ed. A. J. Philippou (Holywell Press, Oxford, England, 1964), p 148.

¹⁴ Lossky, Vladimir: *Orthodox theology* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1978), pp 92f. To pursue this relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Incarnation in orthodox thought, see Bulgakov, Sergius: *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. Nicholas Zernov and James Pain (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1976), pp 92-96; and chapter 'The Wisdom of God', pp 144-56.

¹⁵ Zander, Valentine: *St Seraphim of Sarov* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1975), p 85.

¹⁶ For further discussion of this, see Meyendorff: *A study of Gregory Palamas*, 155 and Zander, p 97, n 2.

¹⁷ Schmemmann, Alexander: 'On Orthodox Mariology', pp 28-29.

¹⁸ Ware, *op cit.*, p 148.