THEOTOKOS OR THE MOTHER OF GOD

St. Mary’s Maternity in the Bible

The Holy Scripture witnesses to St. Mary’s motherhood of the Son of God, for it calls her Son “God” ().

At the annunciation, angel Gabriel speaks of the Child St. Mary is to conceive as “the Son of the Most High”, “the Holy One” and the “Son of God”.

When St. Mary entered the house of her kinswoman St. Elizabeth and greeted her, the babe maturing within her womb leaped for joy () and she was filled with the Holy Spirit who led her to understand the mystery of the Divine Incarnation. The old woman, St. Elizabeth, wife of a priest and pregnant with a great prophet, belittled herself before the poor young orphan girl, as she discovered St. Mary her Lord’s mother. She said: “How did this happen to me, that my Lord’s mother should visit me?!” ().

While the whole world knew nothing about the annunciation to St. Mary, St. Elizabeth declared St. Mary’s motherhood of her Lord in the absence of any external sign of this divine event.

The wonder is, that all these marvellous things happened just as St. Elizabeth listened to St. Mary’s greeting, for the Son of God who was dwelling in her holy womb, spoke through her mouth and acted through her life.

St. Mary’s Motherhood in the Early Church

Through the Church’s combat with heresies, the dogma of St. Mary’s motherhood has been developed and declared, to emphasize two Christological facts:

A. Jesus was genuinely born of St. Mary. He was not a phantom, but took on real flesh from a real mother.
B. Jesus Christ born of St. Mary is the eternal Son of God, who has no beginning.
1. Gnosticism

Most of Gnostic systems were based on the distinction between the “Demiurge or the Creator God” and the supreme remote and unknowable Divine Being. In some systems the creations of the material universe is believed to result from the fall of Sophia (wisdom); this creation is viewed as evil.

Usually, they divide men into two or three classes:

A. The spiritual men (pneumatics), receive a spark of divine spiritual substance, and through “gnosis” (knowledge) and the rites associated with it this spiritual element is returned to its home in Divine Being.
B. Other people who are fleshly or material, (hylics) engrossed in matter, and given over to eternal perdition.
C. Some gnostics add a third intermediate class “the psychics” after (). They are other Christians who are not gnostics, and they attain only the middle realm of the Demiurge (Creator God) through faith and good deeds.

The function of Christ was to come as the emissary of the supreme God, bringing “gnosis”. As a Divine Being He neither assumed a properly human body nor died[1]. They refused to accept that the Redeemer became flesh, or was born of a woman.

One of the Gnostic forms was the ‘Docetism’, a heresy that threatened the young church. The Greek word ‘dokein’ means “to seem” or “appear to be”. The docetists believed that Jesus Christ was not a real man but seemed to be so and to have a body, but simply passed through the Virgin without being fashioned of her substance.

According to St. Irenaeus,[2] Saturninus (c.120) “declared that the Saviour was unborn, incorporeal and without form......

For to marry and bear children, he says, is of Satan”.

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Valentinus (2nd century) also taught that Christ united himself with the man Jesus who “was born through Mary and not of Mary”[3]. He passed through her as through a channel.

Marcion’s doctrine is: Jesus did not have a human soul nor an earthly body. He was not born of Mary, but appeared suddenly in Judea with imaginary flesh, a full-grown man ready to enter immediately upon his ministry[4].

Appeles conceded genuine flesh to Christ, but a celestial body. It came down from heaven into this world, and not of Mary.

The Fathers of the Church, such as St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Justin, St. Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen warned the Christians against such doctrines and many of them took up openly with those heretics, emphasizing St. Mary’s real motherhood, with the aim of declaring the mystery of Incarnation, the real humanity of Christ.

St. Ignatius wrote to the Christians of Trallia:

“Stop your ears therefore when anyone speaks to you who stands apart from Jesus Christ, from David’s scion and Mary’s Son, who was really born. ..”[5]

2. Manichaeism

Its founder is Mani, Manes or Manichaeus, of the third century.

Mane’s system was a radical offshoot of the Gnostic traditions of East Persia. It was based on a supposed primeval conflict between light and darkness, God and matter. The object of the practice of religion was to realise the particles of light which Satan had stolen from the world of Light and imprisoned in man’s brain, and that Jesus, Buddha, the Prophets and Manes had been sent to help in this task.

The appearance of Adam was a counterplot to retain Light imprisoned,
through reproduction. Jesus, “the Brilliant Light” redeemed him by a vision[6]. The religious practices of abstaining from eating meat and of abnegating the sexual life are the means of continuing the process of gradual liberation.

It is no wonder that the Manichaeans assumed that Jesus Christ was in no sense the Child of Mary.

St. Alexander, Pope of Alexandria, defends the true humanity of Christ and hence the true motherhood of St. Mary, against the gnostics and manichaeans.

St. Athanasius did the same, saying: “The body of the Lord was real ... because it was the same as ours, for Mary is our sister”[7].

St. Ambrose also states: “The Virgin had something of her own which she transmitted; the mother did not give Him something foreign (to her), but she conferred on Him what was of her own flesh, indeed in an unusual way, but by a normal function. For the Virgin had flesh, which she conferred on the fruit”.[8]

### 3. Arianism

Contrary to the Gnostics and Manichaeans the Arians deny that Jesus, the Son of Mary, is the Uncreated Son of God, one with the Father in the divine essence. They deny Christ’s divinity and subsequently St. Mary’s motherhood to God.

For this reason, the Alexandrian Fathers such as SS. Peter, Alexander and Athanasius gave to St. Mary the title “OeotOKoc” (Mother of God), on confronting Arianism.

In his encyclical letter to the bishops (c. 319), St. Alexander announces the deposition of Arius and made the first indisputable use of the title Theotokos, as he writes[9]:

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“After this we know of the resurrection of the dead, the first fruit of which was our Lord Jesus Christ who in very deed, and not in appearance merely carried a body born of Mary, Mother of God (Theotokos”).

The word “Theotokos” flows from his pen so naturally, his use of it is so nonchalant, that it leaves an impression of everyday usage, long established and uncontroverted[10].

St. Athanasius, in his controversy with Arianism, stresses that Christ is born of the Father but took His humanity from “the unploughed earth”[11], ever-virgin[12] and Theotokos[13].

St. Ambrose of Milan, wrote the Christmas hymn which he taught his people to strengthen their faith in Jesus Christ, the true God, and their combat against the Arians:

“Come, Redeemer of the nations, show forth the birth of the Virgin. Let all the world marvel, such a birth befitted God!”

4. The Nestorianism

In the Basilica of the Theotokos, St. Cyril of Alexandria preached before the Fathers of the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.), saying:

“Hail…. to Mary, Mother of God, majestic treasure of the whole world, the lamp unquenchable, the crown of virginity, the sceptre of Orthodoxy, the indestructible temple, the dwelling of the Illimitable, Mother and Virgin ..

Hail to You, who contained Him, Who cannot be contained in your holy virginal womb”[14].
In fact, the controversy which raged between St. Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius was not centred upon the title of St. Mary “Theotokos” in itself, but was based on Christological concepts.

The circumstances which led to the intervention of St. Cyril in the Nestorian controversy must be briefly told[15].

It was on April 10, A.D. 428, that Nestorius, a priest of Antioch and disciple of Theodore was consecrated Bishop of Constantinople. He used the term Christokos (mother of Christ) for St. Mary, and not Theotokos. The battle lines were clearly drawn when one of his priests “Anastasius”, whom he took with him from Antioch, preached before him in December 428, saying:[16]

“Let no one call Mary “Theotokos”, for Mary was but a woman, and it is impossible that God should be born of a woman”.

This teaching Nestorius publicly approved, and he himself preached a course of sermons in which he drew a plain distinction between the man Jesus, born of Mary, and the Son of God Who dwelt in him. There were two distinct persons in Christ, the Son of Mary and the Son of God, who were united not hypostatically but only morally. Christ should be called not God, but “God-bearer” (Theoporon), in much the same way as the saints can be called, because of the divine grace given to them. Subsequently, Mary was not the mother of God, but the man Jesus in whom the God-head dwelt.

Nestorius and his followers criticised the Wisemen for their kneeling to the Child Jesus, and preached that the divinity was separated from the humanity at the moment of Crucifixion.

The matter came to St. Cyril, Pope of Alexandria, who took occasion in his annual paschal letter (A.D. 429), without any personal reference to Nestorius, to state the doctrine of the Incarnation in the clearest and simplest terms:- namely that the real, true and perfect manhood in Christ was united to His divinity in one divine Person. Again, four months later, he wrote another letter to the monks on the same subject. These letters coming to the notice of Nestorius stirred him to great wrath, and he
engaged one Photius to answer them[17].

St. Cyril sent two letters to Nestorius in which he explains the nature of Christ, as the Incarnate Son of God, one Person and declared St. Mary’s right to be called “Theotokos”.

In his second letter he writes:

“We do not say that the nature of the Word became flesh by undergoing transformation, nor that it was transformed into an entire man of soul and body; rather we say that the Word, in an indescribable and incomprehensible manner personally (hypostatically) united to It flesh animated by a rational soul and thus became man and was called Son of Man....”

Nor was He first born of the Holy Virgin as an ordinary man, in such a way that the Word only afterwards descended upon Him; rather He was united (with flesh) in the womb itself....

For this reason the (Holy Fathers) confidently called the Holy Virgin “Theotokos”; not meaning that the nature of the Word or His Godhead received its beginning from the Holy Virgin, but that, inasmuch as His rationally animated body, to which the Word was personally united, was born of her, He is said to have been born after the flesh.

I have thus written to you out of the love which I have in Christ, and I beseech you as a brother and “charge you before Christ and the elected angels”, thus to think and teach with us, that the peace of the churches may be preserved and the bond of unanimity and love between the priests of God may remain unbroken”[18].

Afterwards a local council was held at Alexandria, and a synodical letter was sent to Nestorius, clarifying the same doctrines mentioned in St. Cyril’s letters, and concluding with “The Twelve Articles or Anathemas”.

The first anathema is: “If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is God in truth and the Holy Virgin on this ground is the Theotokos, having brought forth after the flesh the Word of God, who became flesh – let him
be an anathema”.

In June 22, 431 the Third Ecumenical Council was held at Ephesus, over which St. Cyril presided. Nestorius was deposed and excommunicated, St. Cyril’s second letter to Nestorius was read, his twelve anathemas were confirmed, the Christological doctrine of Nestorius condemned and the title “Theotokos” solemnly recognized.

St. Mary’s Motherhood & the Incarnation

Fr. John Damascene summed up our belief in the “Theotokos” by saying, “This name contains the whole mystery of the Incarnation”[19].

St. Gregory Nazianzus declared the necessity of giving St. Mary her right of motherhood, as a result of our belief in the divine Incarnation:

“If anyone does not accept Holy Mary as Theotokos, he is cut off from deity”.

If anyone should say that Christ passed through the Virgin as through a channel, and was not fashioned in a way that is divine as well as human.... he is equally godless.

If anyone should say that he was fashioned and only afterwards did God dwell in him, he also is condemned.

If anyone should speak of the Son of God the Father as different from the son of Mary, and not the same person, so shall he forfeit his share in adoption ...”.[20]

Through the Incarnation, St. Mary did not give her Son His divine personality and nature, but, as St. Cyril clarifies, this in no way diminishes the rightfulness of her title. Other mothers, too, do not confer souls and personalities on their sons, yet they are no less truly mothers, not only of the flesh, but really of the human person, created by God, that subsists in this flesh. So, St. Mary is the Mother of Jesus who is God.[21]

Someone perhaps asks:
Why, instead of descending from heaven without a human body, or at least with a heavenly body formed by the hand of God, did the Word of God choose to be born of a mother? ()

1. By taking flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Son of God became not a merely man but a member of human race, a descendant of Adam, of the seed of Abraham and of the royal line of David. Through His true sonship to St. Mary, He integrated Himself with the humblest realities of our human existence....[22]

Through St. Mary’s motherhood our blood ran in His veins to be shed by Him for the remission of our sins.

2. Through the Virgin’s motherhood of God, the Redeemer united in Himself the two parties to be reconciled: God and man. He, as the Perfect High Priest and Mediator, willed to save us from within; not as a stranger, but as a Brother.

3. ST. Augustine states that if the Son of God refused to be incarnated in the womb of the Virgin, women would despair as if they are defiled creatures. His sonship to St. Mary restored that sex and declared the goodness of all creatures.

**Her Motherhood & The Word of God**

St. Augustine states:

“Mary conceived in her mind before she conceived in her body”. [23]

Indeed St. Mary is blessed for she was chosen as the Mother of the Word of God, but before she bore Him physically she had borne Him spiritually through her faith. She was a typical hearer of the Word; listening to it; obeying it, keeping and pondering it in her heart.

In the words of St. Augustine[24] , “Mary’s motherhood would have been of no profit to her if she had not joyfully borne Christ in her heart”.

**The Soul’s maternity:**
St. Mary, as the mother of God, represents the Church, whose members spiritually bear God in their hearts. The holy Fathers of the Church look to the spiritual life of the Christian after baptism as the growth of Christ Himself within their motherly hearts[25].

- Just as an infant is formed in the womb, so it seems to me that the Word of God is in the heart of a soul, which has received the grace of baptism, and thereafter perceives within itself the word of faith ever more glorious and more plain.
- It would be wrong to proclaim the Incarnation of the Son of God from the Holy Virgin without admitting also His Incarnation in the Church… Everyone of us must, therefore, recognize His coming in the flesh by the pure Virgin; but at the same time we must recognize His coming in the spirit of each one of us.

  *Origen*[26]

- ‘That which happened to the stainless Mary, when the fullness of the Godhead which was in Christ shone out through her, is also fulfilled in every soul that leads, as a rule, a virgin life. No longer, indeed, does the Master come with bodily presence: “we know Christ no longer according to the flesh” () - but spiritually He dwells in us and brings His Father with Him, as the Gospel somewhere tells.
- This birth comes from God. And it is fulfilled everytime the immortality of the spirit is conceived in the living substance of a man’s heart: for then he is giving birth to wisdom, to justice, to holiness and to utter purity. Thus every Christian can become the mother of Him who is essentially all these things. For our Lord Himself says: Whosoever shall do the will of my Father in heaven, is my mother (, ).

  *St. Gregory of Nyssa*[27].

- (Every Christian) conceives God in his heart.

  *St. Augustine*[28].

- Like the blessed Mary, who was of such purity that she deserved to
be the Mother of God, you too can be a mother of the Lord.

St. Jerome[29]

- When the soul then begins to turn to Christ, she is addressed as “Mary”; that is, she receives the name of the woman who bore Christ in her womb; for she has become a soul who, in a spiritual sense, gives birth to Christ.
- Watch that you do the will of the Father, so that you may be the Mother of Christ.

St. Ambrose[30]

- He is above all the Mother of Christ, who preaches the truth; for he gives birth to our Lord, who brings Him into the hearts of his hearers.
  And he is the Mother of Christ, who through his words inspires a love of our Lord in the spirit of his neighbour.

Pope Gregory (the Great)[31]

Hear this, o shepherds of the Churches,
O shepherds of God;

All through time the angel comes down and announces to you that today and every day the Redeemer is born, that is Christ the Lord!

Origen[32]

The Church is in labour and travail, until Christ is formed and horn within us, so that everyone of the saints, in so far as he shares in Christ, is Christ born again.

Methodius[33]

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[5] Ad Trallianos 9, 10 PG 5:681


[7] St. Athanasius: Epist. to Epictetus 7

[8] St. Ambrose: De Incarnationis Dominicae Sacraments 104


[12] Or. 2:70 PG 26:292 B


[14] Schwartz: Acts conciliorum oecumenicorum 1, 1, 2 p. 102 Palmer: Mary In the Documents of the Church, p. 50


[16] Socrates: H.E. 7:32


[19] De fide Orthodoxa, lib 3, 12. PG 94:1029


[22] McNamara: Mother of the Redeemer, p. 71

[23] Sermon 215:4


[25] Hugo Rahner: Our Lady and the Church, p. 72

[26] Hom. on , De Sargiusga 8:2

[27] De Virginitate 2, 13. PG 46:324, 380

[28] Sermon 181:4

[29] Epist. to Eustochium 22:8


[31] Hom 3 on the Gospels

[32] Hom on

[33] Symposion 8:8

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