

Mary, Mother of God: Bridge to Unity?

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*Note: Liturgical texts are quoted from **The Festal Menaion**, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), and the **Liturgical Calendar and Rubrics for the Year 2001** (Orthodox Church in America)*

Good evening. It is an honor to be here for this event and to share some insights on Mary as the mother of God and a bridge to unity. Unity has unfortunately eluded Christian communities from the apostolic era until today, and the causes of division are numerous and complex. For Catholic and Orthodox Christians, the causes of division are well-known. We disagree on several issues, including the procession of the Holy Spirit, or *filioque*, how the Holy Spirit consecrates the Eucharist, the issue of clerical celibacy, and most importantly, papal primacy and authority in the Church. Our disagreements often carry a spirit of divisive intensity and seem insurmountable, to the point where many Catholics and Orthodox agree on one point only: it is preferable to remain divided.

The reality of our current situation, however, clearly violates the Gospel commission, as Jesus sends his disciples to baptize all nations. St. Paul confirms the Gospel commission in a passage from his letter to the Galatians, still sung as the introit on some Orthodox feasts:

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:27-28)

The Church has always emphasized Jesus as the person who unites all peoples, especially those who have the gift of the Holy Spirit. Hilda Graef, a Marian scholar, believed that the Jesus we meet in the Gospels differs from the Jesus defined by the ecumenical councils. The carpenter who taught with authority and in the common language of the people, who continuously amazed his disciples and the crowds who gathered to hear him, became a supremely divine being, the divine *image* and *word*, *homoousios* with his Father,. These new images of Jesus attempted to protect the fullness of his two natures, but for many people, they also restricted access to him as the mediator who is like us in every way, as described in Hebrews 4:15. Jesus' equality with his father became so accentuated that theologians adopted an *apophatic* approach to speaking of him, meaning we can only say what his nature is *not*: he is ineffable, beyond understanding, not created. A Jesus whom we cannot understand is not a Jesus who is very present to us. With Jesus more distant than ever, a gap emerged for Christians: To whom could people turn with their troubles and fears, with whom could people entrust their prayers, requests, demands, and pleas?

For many centuries, it was one's favorite local saint, usually a martyr who reminded one of Jesus. But eventually Mary, projecting a caring, protective, nurturing persona, filled this gap in the devotional life of Christians. She provided access to the divine Christ God, and gave the common people hope when God seemed distant. Coincidentally, Mary's role and title were also recast as the ecumenical councils defined Jesus' identity in person and nature. In 431 CE, the Council of Ephesus defined Mary as *Theotokos*, she who gave birth to God, a deeply impersonal title illustrating the unity of Christ's two natures, wherein the human agent of the mystery is Mary. By the fifth

century, feasts remembering Mary's life began to populate the Church's liturgical calendar. Perhaps more importantly, civil authorities, imperial and Church leaders, and faithful Christians increasingly turned to her as their hope and salvation.

Liturgy

Since Orthodox turn to Mary for help, what is it that we believe she has done for us? We can learn a great deal from our liturgy, since liturgy, the *lex orandi*, or "law of worship," is the primary source for all theology, and is thus our best source for understanding how Orthodox remember and honor Mary. I will present select components from two Orthodox feasts honoring Mary: her birth, celebrated on September 8, and her falling asleep (Dormition), celebrated on August 15. I will also draw from cultural ideas about Mary to provide a more complete picture of the way Orthodox embrace her.

The Birth of Mary

In Orthodox liturgy, the birth of Mary is celebrated much like other major feasts in the liturgical year. It is a great feast, like a Catholic solemnity, ranked alongside the dominical feasts of the Lord. In Orthodox liturgical practice, chanted hymns occupy a privileged and prominent role. Hymns are the vehicle of the best patristic preaching. They synthesize ideas from the sermons of the holy fathers, and in a poetic fashion, they explain meaning, establish moral prerogatives, prick our consciences, and glorify God. Several hymns from the feast of Mary's birth contain surprising ideas, and here are two examples:

This first hymn addresses Adam and Eve:

Rejoice with us today: for if by your transgression you closed the gate of Paradise to those of old, we have now been given a glorious fruit
Mary the Child of God, who opens its entrance to all.

She is the restoration of Adam and the recalling
of Eve, the fountain of incorruption and the release from corruption;
through her we have been made godlike and delivered from death.

Think about these claims for a moment. Mary reopens paradise, closed by humanity's fall in the second Genesis creation story; Mary delivers Christians from death. The second hymn mentions Adam's restoration and Eve's recalling; one can imagine a typical Orthodox icon of the resurrection where Jesus defeats death and destroys Hades by his cross, depicted by his raising of Adam (and sometimes) Eve. The only difference is that this hymn credits *Mary* with this victory! In this case, Jesus is not even part of the picture; Mary has accomplished all the work herself, and it is a work of salvation. If we attempt to frame Mary's birth in the larger picture of salvation history, it is as if salvation begins with Mary. Thus, the *lex orandi* of Mary's birth, celebrated as the first major feast of the Orthodox liturgical year, confirms that salvation does begin with her.

Mary's Falling Asleep

Mary's death (called "falling asleep" in Greek) is the last major feast of the liturgical year, celebrated on August 15, and is similar in its solemnity to the Catholic celebration of the Assumption. I am happy that my colleague, Fr. Llywelyn, will speak about the image of Mary projected by the Catholic celebration of the Assumption. The Orthodox liturgy of the Dormition contains several special components. First, a fourteen-day fasting period precedes the feast. Second, in its fullest form it is a striking imitation of Orthodox Holy Week, including a burial procession and Vigil with an ornate burial sheet made of fine cloth of Mary in her death, which we call an *epitaphios* or *плащаница*. For Orthodox, Mary's death is a summer Pascha, or Easter. The icon of the Dormition feast shows Jesus himself appearing at her grave to escort her soul to heaven;

according to the hymnography, Mary's tomb was empty on the third day and she ascended to heaven.

The Orthodox liturgy makes a strong statement about Mary's encounter with death. The following hymn sung at Matins in John of Damascus' canon attests to Mary's victory over death:

O pure Virgin, you have won the honor of victory over nature by bringing forth God; yet like your Son and Creator, you have submitted to the laws of nature in a manner above nature. Therefore, dying you have risen to live eternally with your son.

Likewise, the burial rite celebrated at Mary's tomb confirms her death as having many of the same characteristics as Christ's. Here is a sampling of hymns from the burial rite:

Even in the tomb, o Virgin, your honorable body did not see corruption, but you have passed with your body from earth to heaven.

Your Son, the God of glory, o Pure One, has received you as His Mother and has seated you at His right hand.

The Orthodox believe that Mary has entered into Christ's Pascha, that she has risen, body and soul, to be at Christ's right hand in heaven. Mary has been given the highest of all honors, to receive the promise of the resurrection. Her ascension to heaven is an enthronement. Here is just a small sampling of additional titles given to Mary in the Orthodox Domrison hymns of Vespers: "Throne of the king"; "holy place of God"; "Palace of the King"; "Ark of holiness"; "Gate of God"; "Bride of God"; and "Queen." Many of these titles evoke images of Mary as Jesus' mother, since she contained God in her womb. But the use of titles such as *bride* and *queen* bestow royalty upon her and suggest that she has a unique intimacy with God, and also rules, or perhaps co-rules over a group of people. Thus, the Orthodox do not stop at honoring Mary as a contributor to

God's salvation of humankind; the *lex orandi* of the Dormition feast explicates salvation as ongoing with Mary, now, who continues to rule.

The image of Mary as the mother who rules over and protects the Orthodox people is rooted in history. Constantinople adopted Mary as their patron as early as the fifth century. Constantinopolitans endured numerous woes, including invasion, earthquakes, and plagues. The struggle of war, disaster, and disease quickly paved a path for an intercessor, and the imperial authorities promoted devotion to Mary, placing an icon of Mary on the gates of the city, with her image also appearing on coinage and bronze weights. They carried her icon into battle, with the expectation that she would protect them. Ironically, one such icon was taken from Constantinople by the invading Crusaders in 1204, and the icon still resides in Venice. So while Mary did not protect the Orthodox Greeks and her image went into captivity, the Venetian captors adopted her as their protector. This is a reverse instance of a religious "*transfer of power,*" the opposite of what was common to the Ancient Near East, when the conquerors forced the defeated people to adopt the victorious god; in this instance, the conquerors adopted the defeated protector as their patron. The defeat to the crusaders increased the divisions between Western and Eastern Christians, a hurt felt to this day; the hurt is so deep that Pope John Paul II apologized on behalf of all Catholics to the Greek people for the Crusade in 1204 when he visited Greece in 2001. If anything, Mary's "involvement" in the Crusade served to further divide West and East, even if she was an involuntary participant.

The humiliating defeat at the hands of the crusaders did not stop the Orthodox from viewing Mary as their protector. Mary also has several military titles. The celebrated *Akathistos hymn* of the sixth century contains numerous military images of

Mary. The twelfth stasis contains the following verses: "Rejoice, O you through whom the trophies are raised!", and "Rejoice O you through whom the enemies are routed!" Furthermore, the Kontakion for the Annunciation feast celebrated on March 25, also sung at Sunday morning prayer by the Orthodox, states: "O victorious leader of triumphant hosts! We, your servants, delivered from evil, sing our grateful thanks to you, O Theotokos! As you possess invincible might set us free from every calamity so that we may sing: rejoice, o unwedded bride!" It is convenient to attempt to explain the protection motif in this hymn as a defense from attacks of evil spirits, but there is no doubt that these liturgical texts absorbed Constantinople's identity as the people who looked to Mary for help, an instance where the people's *lex vivendi* (law of living, or spirituality) influenced the Church's *lex orandi*, or law of worship.

Eastern Slavic Orthodox people also adopted Mary as their mother and protector. Devotion to Mary is particularly strong in Orthodox Ukraine, especially in its monastic strongholds of the Pecherska Lavra in Kyiv and the Pochaiv monastery in Volhyn'. The most celebrated saint in the history of the Pochaiv monastery is St. Iov Zalizo, the abbot of the monastery for a good portion of the seventeenth century, who died in 1651. Turkish and Tatar invaders attacked the monastery in 1675, but were repelled by an appearance of Mary herself, who defended the monastery with angels bearing shields, the venerable St. Iov Zalizo alongside her. The legend of Mary's defense of Pochaiv is so dear to Ukrainians that it has become immortalized in a folk song. The song "Ой зійшла зоря," "A star appeared," is well-known to Ukrainians, and can be found performed by choirs on numerous recordings. The text states:

- 1) In the evening, a star rose and settled on Pochaiv. The Turkish army approached, like a black cloud.
- 2) The Turks with the Tatars laid about the gate,

to attack the monastery. The Pochaiv mother of God will rescue us! 3) Fr. Zalizo came out from his cell, and moved with tears (cries): Help, Help, Mother of God, save the monastery. 4) The Mother of God approached and stood on a cross, turning in a circle, she killed the Turks, and saved the monastery. 5) And let all of us people, Christians, give thanks to God, and offer a prostration to the Pochaiv Mother of God.

How seriously do Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox see Mary as a protector? My paternal grandfather was one of many Ukrainians who fought for Czar Nicholas II in the White army with Kuban Cossacks. Living in Chicago in the 1950's and 60's, during the annual feast of the Protection of Mary on October 14, he and his fellow émigré Cossacks assembled at the Church in full uniform to receive blessings from Mary, their protector.

The strength of Marian devotion in Orthodox liturgy and culture is enormous. The Orthodox venerate not only the events of her life, but are so devoted to her memory that they occasionally modify the narrative of salvation history proclaimed in liturgy to make *Mary* the main character. One would think it is audacious enough to see Mary as a contributor to humanity's salvation, but Orthodox also see her as a living commander and protector, someone they can call on when they are in serious danger.

Mary's impact on Orthodox worship and devotion is larger than it might seem in an initial appearance. First, the New Testament and the traditional soteriological narrative of the Church claim that Jesus Christ is the alpha (beginning) and omega (end) of life as Christians know it. Christians die and are born with Christ in Baptism, die in Christ when their bodies physically expire, and have received the promise to rise again to eternal life at the end of all things—Christ's second coming, which has yet to come to pass, though all Christians pray for it. In some ways, the Orthodox *lex orandi* has made *Mary* to be the alpha and omega of all things, because in the rhythm of worship, the Church remembers Mary as the beginning of salvation with her birth, and the end of salvation with her death.

The Orthodox image of Mary was shaped by a complex synthesis of doctrinal ideas, cultural needs, and shifts in popular piety. A detailed study integrating sociological trends with shifts in liturgical piety would help us better understand why Mary has become so central to Orthodox worship. I will now reflect on how Mary can become a bridge to unity for divided Christians.

Conclusion

In concluding, let me begin with a brief synthesis of this presentation. The Orthodox honor and venerate Mary as an essential contributor to salvation history. Her contribution to Jesus' salvation of humankind is so great that she is the queen of heaven and has already received the gift of resurrection. Her saving activity continues today as Orthodox worldwide approach her for protection and deliverance from their enemies.

But how can Mary become a bridge to unity for Eastern and Western Christians? The Orthodox identify Mary as someone who sympathizes with their positions and have not historically approached her in a spirit of ecumenism. As I stated in the introduction, there are many who see our divisions as insurmountable, and would prefer to remain in division. Certainly, the issues dividing us are complex, and there is no easy theological medicine that heals ancient wounds.

In our own efforts to bolster and defend our positions, it can become easy to neglect God's perspective. Every day, every week, every Lord's Day, we gather in our isolated churches and we ask God to send his Spirit to us, to unify us in his son, Jesus Christ. We then eat and drink of this gift we do not deserve. Have we considered the possibility that God looks beyond our ecclesial divisions and sees millions of people who

have received his gift and have thus been united to him and each other at the mystical Eucharistic table, even though they don't know it and won't admit it?

We have to consider the possibility that we rely solely on *negative anamnesis*, remembering and sustaining issues, events, ideas that divide us when God himself ever seeks to unite us. Let us ask this question: would the prospect of seeking reconciliation with one another be more *dangerous* than the proposition Mary accepted from God, the invitation to bear a son without a human father who would be pursued his whole life, suffer humiliating death, and even pierce her own heart? We do not know much about Mary's internal struggles, but we know that she heard God and followed his will. Perhaps the time has come for Orthodox to lay aside the image of Mary as a military commander and restore a simpler image of Mary we *share* with our estranged Catholic brothers and sisters: the image of a young woman who followed God even though it ended up costing her greatly. The New Testament presents this image of Mary to us, and it is *present* in the Orthodox *lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, and *lex vivendi*, though often buried.

Orthodox and Catholics alike identify Mary as their mother. Mary is the mother of renewed humanity, the mother to all who bear Christ by the grace of Baptism and Chrismation. Like Mary, we have free will when it comes to planning the future. Every time we remember what Mary did for us and the price she paid, and then invoke her to act on our behalf, let us evoke an image of her as a mother who loves and nurtures all of her children, whoever they are. Through her intercession on our behalf, may God bestow grace on our ears, eyes and hearts, so we can hear and see *truly*, and learn how to forgive and love our separated brothers and sisters, especially when they reach out to us, which they frequently do. After all, this is probably what our mother would like us to do.