

## The Mother of God and the Mystical Theology of Childbirth

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote, “Properly understood, Mariology is . . . the ‘locus theologicus’ par excellence of Christian anthropology.”<sup>1</sup> In a different article, Schmemmann made the following profound statement regarding the place of Mary in understanding creation: “She—Mary—is the ultimate ‘doxa’ of creation, its response to God. She is the climax, the personification, the affirmation of the ultimate destiny of all creation: that God may be finally all in all, may fill all things with himself. The world is the ‘receptacle’ of his glory, and in this it is ‘feminine.’ And in the present ‘era,’ Mary is the sign, the guarantee that this is so, that in its mystical depth the world is already achieving this destiny.”<sup>2</sup>

Without Mary, a theology of the human person remains abstract and theoretical.<sup>3</sup> Karl Rahner<sup>4</sup> replied, when asked what he thought was the reason for the decline in Marian devotion: “Too many Christians, whatever their religious obedience may be, tend to make Christianity an ideology, an abstraction. And abstractions do not need a mother.”<sup>5</sup> The *Theotokos* makes Christianity tangible in part because Mary was a woman, an embodied human person, with whose humanity one may identify. Women can identify with Mary as the prototypical mother; men can identify with her as the model of what it means to become a *theophoros*, or bearer-of-God. As the “ultimate ‘doxa’ of creation” she “informs” all of life.

In this paper I explore the ways in which Mary facilitates theosis through her very central role in a theology of the body. In particular I examine Mary as the prototypical birth-giver and childbirth as a mystical experience which can lead one, through theosis, to the Theotokos and back to God.

### The Theotokos and a Theology of the Body

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<sup>1</sup>A. Schmemmann, "Mary, the Archetype of Mankind," *The University of Dayton Review*, 11, no. 3 (Spring, 1975): 83.

<sup>2</sup>See "On Mariology in Orthodoxy," *Marian Library Studies (New Series)* 2 (1970), 31.

<sup>3</sup>Fr. Donald Calloway, *Theology of the Body and Marian Dogmas, Part II*, <http://www.motherofallpeoples.com/2005/09/theology-of-the-body-and-marian-dogmas-part-ii/>

<sup>4</sup>Karl Rahner, S.J. (March 5, 1904 – March 30, 1984), was a German Jesuit priest and theologian who, alongside Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthazar, and Yves Congar, is considered one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the 20th century.

<sup>5</sup>Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens, "Mary and the World of Today," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition) June 15, 1972. p.4. The original article by Suenens appeared as "Marie et le monde d'aujourd'hui," in *La Documentation Catholique* (3 Octobre 1971), 878-880.

Christianity is about the body insofar as Jesus Christ is God incarnate; without a proper understanding of the body, Christianity cannot be fully understood. The whole key to the meaning of redemption is contained in the incarnation of the God-man as enabled by a woman. As Meyendorff pointed out: "The hypostatic union of divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ is the very foundation of salvation, and therefore of deification: in Christ, humanity has already participated in the uncreated life of God because the 'flesh' has truly become 'the flesh of God'."<sup>6</sup> Met. Kallistos wrote: "Man is a unity of body and soul, and since the Incarnate Christ has saved and redeemed the whole man, it follows that 'man's body is deified at the same time as his soul'."<sup>7</sup> In that divine likeness which man is called to realize in himself, the body has its place. "*Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit,*" wrote Saint Paul (1 Cor. 6:19). "*Therefore, my brothers, I beseech you by God's mercy to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to God*" (Romans 12:1)."<sup>8</sup>

Mary's body became the *actual* temple of the Holy Spirit, after which all humanity would model itself in the future. She conceived the eternal Logos, nourished Him in her womb, felt His quickening and was aware of His intrauterine growth and development. The Holy Spirit was literally in Mary - not just in her heart or her mind, but living and growing in her *body*. As the foetus Jesus grew week by week during her gestation, Mary felt her body growing and transforming conjointly with her deepening awareness of her self as she transformed into a *new* mother and wife, The Holy Mother and the Bride of Christ.

If it is indeed true that "man is really and truly corporeal in all his dimensions,"<sup>9</sup> it follows that the body is not merely the person's object to be used or to be inhabited, but something which the person *is*. Our bodies render us present to the world and make the world available to us. We exist in the world united in body, soul and spirit, not just as one or another aspect. The human person, being created in the image of God the Trinity, is similar to the latter in also manifesting a triune being. The body can be distinguished from the self in its wholeness, yet still maintains a radical unity with the self. Just as there is no such thing as an imageless thought for us, so too our

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<sup>6</sup>J. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, p.182.

<sup>7</sup> from St. Maximus the Confessor, *Maximus, Gnostic Centuries*, 2, 88 (P.G. 90, 1168A).

<sup>8</sup>Bishop Kallistos Ware: *The Orthodox Church. Faith and Worship* (excerpts)  
<http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/11/1/6.aspx>

<sup>9</sup>Jorg Splett, "Body," *Encyclopedia a/Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. by Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 158.

deepest desires give rise to feelings and efforts towards fulfilment. It is intrinsic to our very personhood that we be incarnate.<sup>10</sup>

It would have been a very empty doctrine if we regarded the Virgin Mother merely as a physical instrument of our Lord's taking flesh. Such a misinterpretation is formally excluded by the explicit teaching of the Church, attested from the earliest date: she was not just a channel through which the Son of God has come, but truly the mother of whom he took his humanity. St. John of Damascus precisely in these very words summarizes the Church's teaching: He did not come as through a pipe, but has assumed of her (from her), a human nature consubstantial to ours (*On the Orthodox Faith*, 3:12)<sup>11</sup>.

### ***Virginitas in Partu***

Mary's hard-won title of *Theotokos* implies by definition that she did, after all, *give birth* to God. That Mary, while yet a virgin, conceived Jesus in her womb by the Holy Spirit, is not doubted by east nor west. Yet her status as *Virginitas in partu* is still debated, and continues to be defended, especially in Catholic circles. This spurious dogma teaches that Mary not only conceived as a virgin, but that she remained a virgin even during childbirth, that the birth process did not "alter" her physically. Some Catholic theologians suggest that in order to avoid emphasis on Mary's "divine maternity," the emphasis has instead been put on two other Marian aspects - her influence on Christology and on Ecclesiology:

Theologians today are more inclined to include the Mary-Church analogy within the main Marian idea of fundamental principle of mariology. In so doing, they avoid the extreme of identifying the 'divine maternity' as the central mariological principle in such a way as to make it an artificial abstraction of biological motherhood isolated from Mary's conception in holiness, virginity, and role in redemption. This interpretation does not do justice to any experience of human maternity, let alone to the motherhood of God incarnate. For to conceive and bear a child is essentially a human action and not an expression merely of the vegetative-reproductive and animal-sexual dimensions of a woman's nature.<sup>12</sup>

Certain (notably Catholic) theologians are ready to ignore the question of her birth experience, while wholeheartedly calling attention to her body as temple and her entire holy being as symbol of the Church, as if one is possible without the other.

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<sup>10</sup>Jelly, Frederick M. (1983) "Towards a Theology of the Body Through Mariology," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 34, Article 15.

<sup>11</sup>Tertullian (d. 220-230) maintains that Valentinus, a Gnostic leader, taught that Jesus' heavenly body only passed through Mary but Jesus took nothing from her: "...He came into existence through her, not of her-not experiencing a mother in her, but nothing more than a way." In other words, Jesus passed through Mary like water through a pipe. She contributed nothing from herself. Tertullian appeals to the Letter to the Galatians asserts that Jesus was not born "through a woman" but "of a woman." (Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, xx, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 538.)

<sup>12</sup>Jelly, op cit, pp 36-37.

## Mary, childbirth and mystical Experience

Paul Evdokimov characterizes Western anthropology as essentially a “moral” anthropology, in which the goal of Christian life is the beatific vision of God, whereas Orthodox anthropology is “ontological”, with a central concept of deification (*theosis*), or the spiritualization of the human being.<sup>13</sup> This distinction is particularly evident in their respective relationships toward Mary. Met. Kallistos points out, regarding the western dogma of the Immaculate Conception:

For Christ to enter the world, it is required - as we have already seen - that his mother should first freely consent to her election; yet, according to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, before she gives her free consent she already enjoys the fruits of her son's redemption. Is this not an example theologically of the fallacy of *petitio principii*?<sup>14</sup>

A similar charge can be made regarding the western interpretation of Mary's experience of childbirth. Childbirth is, above all, a transformative experience. The woman in her last week of pregnancy cannot be *transformed* unless she has gone through *labor*.

Childbirth is a process, with successive stages, one flowing into another, each more challenging than the previous. The labouring woman anticipates the process coming to fruition, in the “fulness of time” (Gal. 4:4). Childbearing reflects divine cosmic law: human gestation last nine months or three times three. Even the uterus contracts in multiples of three: a new contraction begins every three minutes and at their peak of intensity last 60-90 seconds. Labor is like spiritual struggle; the birthing woman is given opportunity with each successive contraction to practice acceptance, meekness, humility, long-suffering. She longs for the culmination of her labor yet “forgets” in her conscious mind what it is she is suffering for, so taken “out of herself” is she, that her only possible stance in the face of a superior force is submission. She is as if holding onto the roof of the caboose of a train, which is travelling at untold speed around sharp turns and through narrow tunnels, and all she can do is hold on until the train comes to a stop. In birth a woman traverses all levels of the creation of the world - its inception, development, demise, and resurrection. She passes through the gamut of spiritual states from despair to reconciliation.

St. Maximus the Confessor defines a mystic as “one who best of all exhibits the birth of the Lord”, since contemplation make “the fertile soul at once a virgin and a mother”, and St. Ambrose adds, “Every believing soul conceives and gives birth to the Word of God (Logos) by faith, and Christ is the fetus of us all, thus we are in essence the *mother* of Christ”. These words throw considerable

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<sup>13</sup> Evdokimov, Paul. Orthodoxy. 1959.

<sup>14</sup> “The Sanctity and Glory of the Mother of God: Orthodox Approaches,” *The Way*, Supplement 51, Papers of the 1984 International Congress of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1984), 79-96.

light on the gospel episode (Luke 1:19-21) and remove that pejorative sense inferred to it by classical Protestant exegesis. **The emphasis is made not on the Virgin, but on man:** “My Mother is the essence of he who hears the word of God and keeps it” - every person is given the grace to give birth to Christ in his or her soul and to become likened to the *Theotokos*.<sup>15</sup>

The experience of giving birth has the potential to be a mystical experience which further likens one to the *Theotokos* and facilitates theosis. Childbirth is a process reflecting an archetypal foundation which proceeds from the divine-universal to the feminine-particular. As Paul Evdokimov asserted, “A woman is not maternal because her body is able to give birth but it is from her maternal spirit, from the particular feminine charism, that her physiological and anatomical capabilities are derived. Woman’s charism is to give life and to care for it and, above all, ‘to bring forth Christ in the souls of human beings’.”<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

Mary, as prototypical Mother and archetype of the feminine, finds resonance within embodied human experience. God’s providence allows women to enter into the “holy of holies” via the gate of childbirth. Vladimir Lossky best described mystical experience in relation to theology:

The eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology; between personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogma affirmed by the Church. The following words spoken a century ago by a great Orthodox theologian, the Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, express this attitude perfectly: ‘none of the mysteries of the most secret wisdom of God ought to appear alien or altogether transcendent to us, but in all humility we must apply our spirit to the contemplation of divine things’. To put it in another way, ***we must live the dogma expressing a revealed truth, which appears to us as an unfathomable mystery, in such a fashion that instead of assimilating the mystery to our mode of understanding, we should, on the contrary, look for a profound change, an inner transformation of spirit, enabling us to experience it mystically*** [emphasis mine].<sup>17</sup>

Mary “lived the dogma expressing a revealed truth”. Mary’s experience of parturition, and her Divine Son’s as well, was a bodily experience, undergone in the earthly realm, and it was the prototype for all further theology regarding Mary: in particular, the ecclesia-typical aspect of Mariology. Mary could not have become the Holy Mother of the Church which gives birth to the Kingdom of God on earth had she not been transformed into the mystical body of Christ through giving birth to Him physically, through a woman’s body, in the way a woman gives birth. The “projected” reality that believers experience about the Church reflects the prototype of the

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<sup>15</sup> Evdokimov, *Orthodoxy*.

<sup>16</sup> Evdokimov, Paul, *Woman and the Salvation of the World*, p. 224.

<sup>17</sup> Lossky, Vladimir, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke & Co., LTD), 1957.

*Theotokos*. Furthermore, what a woman experiences in childbirth can inform us about the prototype, since not only Mary's, but our flesh was changed and made new after the Incarnation.

A theology of the body is about the nuptial union of God and the created order through the Incarnation, a marriage of heaven and earth that begins in the conception of Christ in the womb of the virgin Mary. Mary, therefore, is the temple in which God and humankind are reconciled. Mary became the Holy Mother of a *new, redeemed* humanity when flesh was redeemed through her giving birth to the Logos. We are daughters and sons of Mary, the *Theotokos*, no less than we are children of God the Father. Mary was the *first* to pave the way back to God - the Most Holy Primipara - and we have "inherited" her gifts: the Son, in whom we live and Who lives in us; and the mystical transforming experience of parturition which has the transformative potential to lead us even closer back to God.

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