

## Marian Studies

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Volume 52 *The Marian Dimension of Christian Spirituality, Historical Perspectives, I. The Early Period*

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Article 10

2001

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#### Recommended Citation

Kimball, Virginia M. (2001) "The Language of Mediation in Eastern Liturgical Prayer," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 52, Article 10.

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THE LANGUAGE OF MEDIATION  
IN EASTERN LITURGICAL PRAYER:

The *Akathistos* and *Small Paraklesis*

Virginia M. Kimball\*

I. THEOLOGY OF THE LITURGY

From early Christian ages, the *Akathistos* hymn and the *Small Paraklesis* have demonstrated that the Virgin Mary's mission in the world is to be *mediatrix* of spiritual and physical life. This mediation is derived from the Virgin Mary's obedience to God. Obedient to God's will in the Incarnation, she continues to participate in God's plan as vessel of her Son's ongoing physical and spiritual gifts to humanity.

*Akathistos* (or the "Akathist") is usually chanted in eastern churches (Orthodox and Eastern Catholic) on the five Fridays of Lent. The *Small Paraklesis* is chanted on "the first fourteen days of August, as well as on many other occasions, and is one of the most popular services of the Orthodox Church."<sup>1</sup> These two services are the most well-known prayers to the Theotokos in eastern liturgical practice.

The beauty and mystical embrace of these hymns are not unknown to Roman Catholicism. In 1746, Pope Benedict XIV granted an indulgence for the recitation of the Akathist. In February 1988, *L'Osservatore Romano* reported that Pope John Paul II's *Redemptoris Mater* had influenced the decision of the Central

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<sup>1</sup>*The Service of the Small Paraklesis, Intecessory Prayer, to the Most Holy Theotokos = ΑΚΟΛΟΥΘΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΜΙΚΡΟΥ ΠΑΡΑΚΛΗΤΙΚΟΥ ΚΑΝΟΝΟΣ ΕΙΣ ΤΗΝ ΥΠΕΡΑΓΙΑΝ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΝ*, trans. and set to meter by Demetri Kangelaris and Nicholas Kasemeotes (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1984), vii.

Committee for the Marian Year to send a letter to the world's bishops urging them to participate in the prayer of the *Akathist*—on the occasion of the Feast of the Annunciation. The recommendation was urged in memory of "our common patrimony of faith and devotion with a liturgical text which belongs to the treasury of the undivided Church, composed as it were in the form of a commentary on, and in praise of the dogma of, the divine motherhood of Mary, defined by the councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451)."<sup>2</sup>

### A. Reading Liturgical Texts

In contemporary secular literature, there is an apparent inability to see Mary's mediation in early Christian hymns and prayers. Feminist scholars appear interested in establishing the Virgin as a goddess figure, or a mystical archetype of the feminine, rather than as the mother of Christ, intended by God to be one whose role is to nurture and care for believers. For example, Vasiliki Limberis maintains that the rise of the cult of the Theotokos in Constantinople, beginning in the fourth century, can be understood "by means of the hermeneutical presupposition that religion is fundamentally an expression of culture."<sup>3</sup> Limberis excludes any notion of mediation. She asserts that the queenly language of these liturgical texts, which can be found in hymns to female deities in the fourth and fifth centuries, provides evidence that the Virgin Mary was understood as a goddess. Excluding any possibility that the Scriptural texts have influenced the liturgical texts, she concludes:

The Theotokos has been released from the confines of exclusive Biblical language and metaphors, and has entered the Olympian pantheon by cultural association through the use of language that is

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<sup>2</sup>Central Committee for the Marian Year, "Letter to the Bishops of the World concerning the 'Akathist' Hymn," *L'Osservatore Romano*, weekly ed., 29 February 1988, no. 9, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994), 143.

heavy with a long history of connection with Mediterranean goddess veneration. As part of the process of making the Theotokos an object of public cult, the author of the *Akathistos* and Proclus [who proceeded its composition] experimented with new language and images for the Virgin that conjured up the traditional identities of Tyche, Demeter, and Kore, and Isis, goddesses who were part of the fabric of Byzantium and invested in its welfare.

Quite differently, Christian theologians view the *Akathistos* as a mystical meditation on the biblical event of the Incarnation, representing the prayed faith of the Body of Christ, "retold in such a way as to enable those who hear it to enter into it."<sup>5</sup> The reflection on the Incarnation can be understood in the texts of the *Akathistos* hymn as "a paradox bringing out the place of Mary, the Mother of God in the mystery of the incarnation: 'She opens the door—she the unopened gate through which Christ alone has passed.'"<sup>6</sup>

It is the human mother of Christ—the Son of God who was "born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4)—who is found in the early liturgical text. We do not find a philosophical ideal of the feminine, an earth mother, an eschatological disappearance of gender superiority, or the archetype of an ideal feminine entity. The liturgical text may use language of the goddess to express a mystery that is beyond human words. In borrowing the hyperbole of goddess hymns, early Christians attempted to address the mystery of this young Hebrew woman's experience. The contextual meaning of the Greek language of mediation, however, is derived from the New Testament and early Christian writings.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 132.

<sup>5</sup>St. Romanos the Melodist, *On the Life of Christ: Kontakia*, trans. with an introduction by Ephrem Lash (New York/San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), xvi

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., xx.

## B. *Lex credendi, lex orandi* : The Principle for Interpreting a Language of Mediation

The prayer texts of *Akathistos* and *Paraklesis*, borrowing Byzantine courtly panegyrics and goddess hymns, express the believers' perception of the miraculous, *dynameis* or revelation of God's power. From biblical times, apostleship and Christian life were manifested in signs, wonders and mighty works (2 Cor. 12:12).<sup>7</sup> The metaphorical language of the *Akathistos* and *Paraklesis* are a spiritual approach, attempting to touch the deep mystery of Christ and Christ's mother. Kallistos Ware explained the eastern approach to beliefs concerning the Virgin Mary as they appear anchored in "devotion," expressed in liturgical texts:

Our belief as Orthodox concerning the Mother of God is expressed above all through the medium of prayer and worship. *Lex orandi lex credendi*: our faith is disclosed through, and conditioned by, the way in which we pray.<sup>8</sup>

Liturgical prayer represents the early Christian *praxis*—beginning in the fourth or fifth century in Constantinople. The Theotokos, the *Panaghia* (Greek: "all-holy"), was identified as the "source" of God's grace and life-giving gifts. The *Akathistos* and the *Paraklesis* were derived from weekly services of supplication to the Virgin in Constantinople, which later developed into prayers of memorial for the dead on a weekly basis and on Good Friday.<sup>9</sup>

In the debate about the actual authorship of the *Akathistos* and *Paraklesis* hymns, scholars, like Nancy Patterson Sevckenko, have determined that they appear to be a collection of hymns and

<sup>7</sup>The Greek word for "miracle" is connected to three terms: *terata* (wonders), *dynameis* (divine power), and *semeia* (signs): see 2 Cor. 12:12; John T. Driscoll, "Miracle," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10338a.htm>, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup>K. Ware, "The Mother of God in Orthodox Theology and Devotion," in *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue*, ed. by Alberic Stacpoole (Middlegreen, Slough: St. Paul Publ., 1982), 180.

<sup>9</sup>Nancy Patterson Sevckenko, "Icons in the Liturgy," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 45 (1991):56. She states: "In virtually every monument I have found that depicts an icon in use, the icon has been a large processional icon of the Virgin. I have concentrated on two

poetic prayer taken from earlier sources, like processions and communal prayers for special causes. There is also an interesting correspondence between the *Akathistos* and texts in the Morning Prayer (*Orthros*) on the Feast of the Annunciation. The *Orthros* text includes a series of salutations of the Theotokos, which are similar to the salutations in the *Akathistos*, including the distinguishing phrase, "Bride Unwedded" (*nymphē anymphete*).<sup>10</sup> Both the Morning Prayer and the *Akathistos* appear to be taking material from earlier sources.<sup>11</sup>

Texts may be selected from the *Akathistos* and the *Paraklesis* to demonstrate that the Theotokos is mediatrix. However, as Ephrem Lash—in a translation and study of Romanos, the Melodist, who wrote many *kontakia*<sup>12</sup> concerning Christ and the Theotokos—explains: biblical allusions and liturgical images are not so much "proof texts" as gates into the mystery of Christ.

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of these: the two *Akathistos* images, since of all the examples, they seem to represent not only an icon in use, and not only the historical occasion of the feast, but the actual service in which the hymn was sung. This was a weekly Friday evening office in honor of the Virgin which in the twelfth century involved both a procession with large icons and an evening memorial conducted at the tombs."

<sup>10</sup>*The Festal Menaion*, trans. from the original Greek by Mother Mary [of the Orthodox Monastery of the Veil of the Mother of God, Bussy-en-Othe, France] and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (South Canaan, Penn.: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1998), 454.

<sup>11</sup>*The Service of the Akathist Hymn*, trans. from the Greek by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, Mass., 1991), 8: "Recent studies have indicated that even before the occasion of the enemy assaults mentioned above, the *Akathist Hymn* was already in use as the normal, prescribed service for the feast of the Annunciation, together with its *kontakion*, 'When the bodiless one learned the secret command' (Τὸ προσταχθέν), which has the Annunciation as its theme."

<sup>12</sup>*The Festal Menaion*, 554: "KONTAKION (Gk. κοντάκιον, from κοντός, 'pole,' 'shaft': hence a vellum roll wound round a stick of wood). Originally, the *kontakion* was a long poem, designed for singing in church. It consisted of a short preliminary stanza, followed by some 18-24 strophes, each known as an *ikos* (Gk. οἶκος): the preliminary stanza and every *ikos* concluded with the same refrain. In course of time the *kontakion* was displaced by the canon, and in the liturgical books today all that remains is the brief preliminary stanza (to which the title 'kontakion' is now more particularly attached), followed by the first *ikos*. These are to be found between Canticles Six and Seven of the canon at Mattins. The *kontakion*, without the *ikos*, is also read or sung at the Liturgy after the Small Entrance, and during the Hours. The most celebrated among the authors of *kontakia* is St. Romanos the Melodist (died 556)."

Similarly, Paul Claudel, reacting to the post-Reformation use of Scriptures as proof-texts, states that scriptural images are not so much an "arsenal as a treasury." This same thought should be applied to liturgical sources. All these images help us to understand the incomprehensible mystery of Christ; they set our feet on the path that leads us to "the unapproachable Light."<sup>13</sup> In the multiplicity of images and biblical allusions in these prayer hymns, the mystery of God's plan for Mary's mediation emerges.

### C. Mediation—The Continuing Motherhood in the Plan of God

In the *Akathist* and the *Paraklesis*, the mother of Christ is presented as *mediatrix* and nurturer of the people of her Son.<sup>14</sup> In the eastern theological tradition, she was understood from the beginning of the Christian ages to be an "advocate." In the third century, Irenaeus taught that the Virgin Mary, in her obedience to God, supplanted the disobedience of Eve and became our advocate to God.<sup>15</sup> In the fourth century, the Theologian (Gregory Nazianzus) related that the wise Justine, defending herself from the immoral attacks of the not-yet-Christian Cyprian, not only saved Susanna and supplicated God, but also supplicated the Virgin "to intercede for this virgin who is in danger."

In Eastern prayer, Mary is seen as the "prime intercessor with God" and is depicted in icons "in the same form as Christ, facing us and deified, holding her Son in her arms or in her womb as the Mother of God and the Mother of us all."<sup>16</sup> John Meyendorff ar

<sup>13</sup>St. Romanos the Melodist, *On the Life of Christ: Kontakia*, xviii-xix.

<sup>14</sup>In Catholic terms, the fullest meaning of the term "Marian mediation" is that Mary and her mediation on behalf of men, women and children must be seen as integral in the *economia* of God. "Therein the initiative lies wholly with God, and this initiative is seen in the mission of the Son. Mediation is linked with mission, and depends on it" (Michael O'Carroll, *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1982], 239). The mission of the Theotokos in the world is her "participation in the deification of humankind through the Incarnation."

<sup>15</sup>Constantine Callinikos, *Our Lady the Theotokos*, trans. and rev. by Rev. George Dimopoulos, Christian Orthodox Editions (Philadelphia, Penn.: West End Press, 1987), 128

<sup>16</sup>David M. Petras, "Mary in Eastern Liturgical Tradition," *Liturgical Ministry* 6 (Winter 1997): 11-20 (here, p. 20).

ticulated the mission of the Theotokos as viewed in Byzantine theology in terms of her motherhood directly related to body of the Church. He wrote:

And since the deification of man takes place "in Christ" she is also—in a sense just as real as man's participation "in Christ"—the mother of the whole body of the Church.<sup>17</sup>

Mediation is related to mission. The mission of the Theotokos is a consequence of Mary's role in the Incarnation. She is to bring mankind to her Son and to God's gifts of life.

## II. BACKGROUND OF AKATHISTOS AND SMALL PARAKLESIS

### A. The *Akathistos*—A *Kontakion*

As known and sung today, the *Akathistos* service consists of two parts with 24 strophes, arranged as an acrostic corresponding to the Greek alphabet. The first part is founded on the event of the Annunciation and childhood of Christ. The second part is theological, "and refers to the Incarnation and dual nature of Christ, at the same time lauding Christ and the Virgin."<sup>18</sup> Luigi Gambero, S.M., describes the *Akathist Hymn* as follows:

The mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God inspired this celebrated poetic composition, a unique masterpiece of Greek liturgical literature. Undoubtedly the most beautiful, the most profound, and the most ancient Marian hymn in all Christian literature, it sings of the Virgin Mother as the inviolate spouse of God.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. prtg. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983, c1979), 165.

<sup>18</sup> Euthymios Tsigaridas, "The Mother of God in Wall-Paintings," in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, edited by Maria Vassilaki, catalog of an exhibition held at the Benaki Museum, Athens, Oct. 20, 2000-Jan. 20, 2001 (Milano: Skira Ed., 2000), 135.

<sup>19</sup> Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 338.



The date of composition of the *Akathistos* is unknown and the identity of its original author is disputed.<sup>20</sup> The dating is not so simple, because there appears a series of additions to the original.<sup>21</sup> Because of its poetic style, most scholars credit the work to Romanos the Melodist.<sup>22</sup> "His greatness can be seen from the treatment of the material which he has taken over from his forerunners, and in that respect, Romanos surpasses all Byzantine hymn-writers."<sup>23</sup> Romanos, whose origins are in Syria, relied on Syriac sources in writing his *kontakion*, and perhaps the *Diatesseron*.<sup>24</sup> Scholars usually agree:

There can be little doubt but that Romanos' orientation was significantly in the direction of Syria; it certainly was not totally in that direction, but, nevertheless, Syrian works appear to have been—to the best of our knowledge today—one of, if not the, major source(s) used by Romanos.<sup>25</sup>

Ephrem Lash lists non-biblical influences for the *kontakia* of Romanos: the Apostolic Constitution, the apocryphal gospels, the

<sup>20</sup>Ibid. Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* attributes authorship to George of Pisidia (seventh century). Latin versions attribute the writing to Germanus of Constantinople (eighth century). However, recent studies move the date of its composition backwards, to as early as the late-fifth century.

<sup>21</sup>Egon Wellesz, "The Akathistos," A Study in Byzantine Hymnography," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, nos. 9-10 (1956): 154. He contends that the *Prooemium* (prologues) were composed at a later date—one on the occasion of the retreat by attacking Arabs in 719. He points to scholarship that connects the poetry of Romanos to Proclus and the writings of Ephrem the Syriac. The most striking prototype of the *Akathistos*, however, is the dialogue between Mary and Gabriel in the eleventh *Oratio de Laudibus Mariae* by Proclus of Constantinople (d. 447).

<sup>22</sup>Limberis, *Divine Heiress*, 92. The author bases her argument on Wellesz, agreeing that Romanos used Proclus; however, she then proceeds to make incorrect conclusions from this connection to Proclus: "In fact, in style and content the *Akathistos Hymn* is closest to Proclus' work, especially his sixth oration to the Virgin."

<sup>23</sup>Wellesz, "The Akathistos," 155.

<sup>24</sup>William L. Petersen, *The Diatessaron and Ephrem Syrus as Sources of Romanos the Melodist*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 475 (Lovanii: Peeters, 1985), 200.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 199.

Targums (the translations of the Bible into Aramaic used in synagogue worship), and significant Fathers of the Church.<sup>26</sup>

In the *Akathistos*, Mary's mediation is presented as a fountain flowing from the Incarnation. This representation is a characteristic feature of Romanos, for whom "Mary is not, however, only the very human mother of Jesus; she is also the mighty intercessor for all humanity."<sup>27</sup> The *chairetismoi* in the *Akathistos*, known as an extended hymn-sermon, are salutations to the Virgin. They constitute "a compendium of Byzantine Mariology,"<sup>28</sup> which include allusion after allusion to the mediation of the Theotokos.

### B. The *Paraklesis*—Sung Prayers of Petition to the Theotokos

The word *paraklesis* means "intercession," particularly that of the Theotokos. In the iconographic tradition, this is the word applied to the "conspicuous quality" attached to the Virgin.<sup>29</sup> Tradition ascribes authorship of the *Small Paraklesis* to Theosterictus the Monk (9<sup>th</sup> century). The *Great Paraklesis* includes a poem by Emperor Theodore Ducas Lascaris (13<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>30</sup> However, the tradition for supplication to the Lord and to His Mother dates to the early ages of Christianity—prayers offered on feast days, many

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<sup>26</sup>St. Romanos the Melodist, *On the Life of Christ: Kontakia*, 235-236. The list includes: the apocryphal gospels, the Apostolic Constitutions (incidentally showing some Arian influence), St. Basil the Great, Clement of Alexandria, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Ephrem, St. John Chrysostom, St. John of Damascus, St. Justin, the Odes of Solomon, Origen, St. Proclus, and the Targums.

<sup>27</sup>Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, Christian Classics (combined ed.; London/ Westminster, Md.: Sheed and Ward, 1985), 126.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>29</sup>Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 30.

<sup>30</sup>"Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia" web page, <http://www.cygnum.uwa.edu>. The *Paraklesis* is chanted every evening during the two-week fast preceding the Feast of the Dormition except on Saturday evenings, the eve of the Feast of Transfiguration and the eve of Dormition. The text for the Service is found in the Great Horologion, published by Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, Mass.). For more information, see "Southwest Region Clergy Brotherhood of the Antiochian Christian Archdiocese of North America," <http://www.networks-now.net>.

times during processions from shrine to shrine.<sup>31</sup>

Michel von Esbroeck has determined that the development of the *Paraklesis* texts had roots definitely as early as the sixth century, when processions took place in honor of the Virgin on every Friday night in Constantinople. This involved prayer events at sites connected to Marian phenomena, at Blachernai and Chalkoprateia—an imitation of a procession that took place in Jerusalem every Friday, which advanced from Mount Zion to Gethsemane. The transferal of the Virgin's robe and/or her veil from Jerusalem and its keeping in a *soros* (shrine of the relics) may have given rise to the idea of processions like those in Jerusalem. The *Akathist Hymn*, well-established by the seventh century, was incorporated into this type of ceremony.<sup>32</sup> Sevcenko states:

It is evident that the Akathistos feast was simply inserted into this preexistent ritual celebrating the Virgin on Friday night and Saturday morning in her two most important sanctuaries in Constantinople.<sup>33</sup>

Prayers of petition, lists of petitions known as *lite*, or petitional text called *presbeia*, were added to services surrounding the

<sup>31</sup>"Little Paraklesis," <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/ephrem/lit-parak.htm>. August in Constantinople was a month of disease and pestilence, and so it was the custom to carry the True Cross in procession through all the quarters of the city during the first two weeks of the month. The Office for the first of the month still commemorates this practice, as does the solemn blessing of Holy Water, which is performed in many churches on that day, although it is the normal Orthodox custom to do so on the first of every month. In Greek use, it is the custom to sing the Office of Supplication to the Mother of God each evening, during the first fortnight of August. This may well be a survival of the ancient practice in adapted form.

<sup>32</sup>Averil Cameron, "The Early Cult of the Virgin," in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. by Maria Vassilaki (Milan, 2000), 13: "According to later tradition the Akathistos was first sung after the deliverance of Constantinople from the siege of 626, and composed by Patriarch Sergios himself (alternatively by Patriarch Germanos after the siege of 717-718), but the substance of it probably took shape earlier, some time in the sixth century."

<sup>33</sup>Sevcenko, "Icons in the Liturgy," 51.

Akathistos.<sup>34</sup> We see the tone of begging for forgiveness in terms of God's judgment at "11<sup>th</sup> hour services" conducted for the dead at tombs. Sevcenko tells us:

One poetic element of this eleventh-hour service was a special kind of canon called a *parakletikos kanon*, a supplicatory canon, characterized by fervent, first-person appeals to the Virgin and other saints to intercede with Christ on behalf of an individual troubled by sin, despair, or fear of death.

The *presbeia* service developed as a "cross-fertilization" of somber services at the monastery with the folk devotion in the church. At the *Pantokrator* in Constantinople, with the monastery *katholikon* at one end and the church at the other end—joined in the middle by tombs, the *presbeia* became "a hybrid service, combining elements of the old cathedral liturgy of the Great Church of Constantinople with all its processions and pageantry, banner and icons, with the sober monastic practices concentrated around supplications of the eleventh hour."<sup>35</sup>

### III. SEEING MEDIATION IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE LITURGICAL TEXTS

When taking a closer look at the actual vocabulary of mediation in these sung prayer texts, we find a critically important collection of Greek words (and their relative root meanings) used to refer to the care and intervention of Christ's mother. They collectively point to life-giving graces originating from God that provide health, salvation, security, and fullness of Christian life. Each of the related

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.: "Other twelfth-century sources give us some more specific information. Kedrenos, for example, speaks of a 'lite called "*presbeia*" performed every Friday at Blachernai and concluded at the Chalkoprateia.' He is clearly referring to the same set of services, but now gives it a name: *presbeia*, a term evidently derived from a *kathisma* addressing the Virgin as *πρεσβεία θερμή, καὶ τεῖχος ἀπροσμάχητον*."

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 53-54: "The weekly *presbeia* and the daily version outlined by Isaac Komnenos correspond to what is known today as the *akolouthia*, or order of service, of the *mikros parakletikos kanon*, an office that is not a part of any regular *cursus*, but designed to be used in times of trouble and despair. In the Russian Church, this office became the *moleben*, again a service of supplication for special occasions."

words in Greek describes a particular aspect of "salvation" and "care," which are components of mediation.

### A. A Glossary of the Language of Mediation

1. **κραυγάζω** (κραυγή)—"to scream, shriek"<sup>36</sup>; a cry for help.
2. **ἐλευθερώ** (ἐλεύθερος)—"to set free, deliver, release: to free from blame, acquit"<sup>37</sup>; freeing the petitioner from harm.

In the New Testament (NT), "*eleutheria* . . . is freedom from sin (Rom. 6:18ff.), the law (Rom. 7:3-4; Gal. 2:4), and death (Rom. 6:21-22, 8:21). It is freedom from an existence that in sin leads through the law to death. . . . Freedom, then, means freedom from the law as well as from sin, i.e., from the need to seek justification by the law. . . . Finally, the freedom that the NT proclaims in Christ is freedom from the death which is the end of human self-seeking in sin. . . . How do we bring this freedom to expression? The answer is: in love, i.e., not in isolation but in a life with others."<sup>38</sup>

Used in the Marian liturgical text, then, it is undeniably obvious that the role of the Theotokos in leading the faithful to freedom from sin and the law is an act of love, flowing from her relationship to the lives of all the faithful.

3. **ἱλαστήριος** (ἱλάσκομαι)—"propitiary—τό ἱλαστήριον, propitiation or the mercy seat."<sup>39</sup> Virgin Mary as a "seat of mercy."

The New Testament use of the word (as in Heb. 9:5), relates the mercy seat (*hilastērion*) to the image of the ark of the temple (Ex. 25:16 ff.).<sup>40</sup> This makes a magnificent connection to the image of the Theotokos as the ark. In Paul, *hilastērion* describes God's righteousness and the offering of redemption. "God himself is the sub

<sup>36</sup>A *Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 392.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid. 215.

<sup>38</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. and abridged in one volume by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1985), 225-226. Hereafter, this source will be referred to as Kittel.

<sup>39</sup>A *Lexicon*, 329

<sup>40</sup>Kittel, 366.

ject of the action, so that divine expiation rather than human propitiation is the point." It is Jesus who is the *hilastērion* in Paul.<sup>41</sup> Specifically, the *hilastērion* in the Septuagint (LXX) is "a golden *kappōret* over the ark (Ex. 25:17 ff.). The cherubim are at the ends with their faces toward it (v. 20). God meets Moses there (v. 22; cf. Num. 7:89; Lev. 16:2)." <sup>42</sup>It is in this sense, that the Marian liturgical text refers to the Theotokos as the "seat of mercy." God "is the subject of the action," and the phrase speaks "of agent rather than place of expiation."<sup>43</sup>

4. **καταλλάγη** (καταλλασο)—"to become reconciled."<sup>44</sup>

Biblically, it is only Paul who uses the term to show the state of the divine-human relationship. "*Katallássein* denotes a transformation of the state between God and us and therewith of our own state, for by it we become new creatures (2 Cor. 5:18), no longer ungodly or sinners, but justified, with God's love shed abroad in our hearts (Rom. 5:6ff.). God has not changed; the change is in our relation to him and consequently in our whole lives."<sup>45</sup> Clearly, then, it is the work of God who finds reconciliation with the faithful through the mother of God's Son.

5. **καταφεύγω** (κατέφυγον)—"to flee for refuge, or betake oneself to, to have recourse to."<sup>46</sup> Seeking a place of refuge.

6. **λιμήν**—"a harbour, a haven." A harbor for boats, a safe haven.

7. **λύτρον** (λύω)—"the price paid: 1. A ransom, price of redemption . . . 2. An atonement."<sup>48</sup> Also, the person who participated in the recapitulation of life.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 365-366.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 365.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>A *Lexicon*, 356.

<sup>45</sup>Kittel, 40-41.

<sup>46</sup>A *Lexicon*, 363.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 414.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 420.

8. **ρύομαι**—"1. To draw out of harm's way, hence to rescue, save;  
2. To free, redeem, deliver." Related to this word is **ρύσιος** (delivering, rescuing)<sup>49</sup>; the sense of being drawn away from and out of harm's way.

In the biblical sense, "the word is uncommon in the NT. In the Gospels, it occurs only in Mt. 6:13,<sup>50</sup> 27:43; Lk. 1:74; in Paul only three times in Romans, three in 2 Cor. 1:10, and once each in Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, and 2 Thessalonians (cf. also three times in 2 Timothy and two in 2 Peter)."<sup>51</sup> This would indicate that the word has a particular meaning which is always "to save' with God as subject and persons as object. In seven instances [of the use in the NT], there are OT quotations or allusions."<sup>52</sup> There is an eschatological sense to the word which indicates "salvation is ultimately eternal preservation . . . so that in the very prayer for deliverance evil is overcome by the divinely conferred affirmation of God's will."<sup>53</sup> Thereby referring to OT sense, that God "saves according to his mercy (Neh. 9:8), for his name's sake (Ps. 79:9), and as he wills. . . . It means preservation in God's gracious presence; hence faith or trust is demanded on the human side (Ps. 22:4-5). This faith has ethical implications; it goes hand in hand with obedience (cf. Ps. 34:19). . . . The understanding in terms of will or person tends to expunge the Greek distinction between 'protect' and 'deliver' and to rule out the use of the term for salvation by things . . ."<sup>54</sup>

9. **σκέπη**—"a covering shelter"<sup>55</sup>; a place of shelter.

10. **σώτειρα** (σώζω)—"a particular form of the verb 'to save' meaning 'to bring one safe to,' to keep one alive"<sup>56</sup>; also, the woman who saves.

The particularity of this word denotes a saving from physical harm—

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 627.

<sup>50</sup>It may be significant to note that Luke's version of the Lord's prayer does not use this same word for "deliver."

<sup>51</sup>Kittel, 988.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 989.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 988.

<sup>55</sup>A *Lexicon*, 638. A connection may exist here with the tradition of the Virgin at Blachernae, "The Virgin of Protection."

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 687-688.

the saving of physical life. In the synoptic gospels, the meaning appeals to the concept of the whole person—both physical and spiritual. When a physical healing comes from the action of Jesus, the person's faith is at the center. Physical healing is intimately connected to one's faith and union to Christ. "As regards physical life, the group [of NT words related to this root] refers only to salvation from acute danger. . . . Paul limits the group to the relationship with God; he uses *rhýomai* for rescue from other perils. What is saved is the whole person or the *pneúma*. Unlike justification or remission or reconciliation, salvation is a future term (1 Cor. 3:15, 5:5; Rom. 13:11; 1 Th. 5:8ff); it thus has a comprehensive sense. The goal of Paul's work is salvation (Rom. 10:1). Some people may save others (Rom. 11:14; 1 Cor. 9:22). . . . But positively it is endowment with divine glory that comes with the redemption of the body (Rom 8:24; Phil. 3:20-21) and conforming to the image of the Son (Rom. 8:29). . . . Salvation may be future but it also extends into the present (1 Cor. 15:2; 2 Cor 6:2). Thus in Rom. 8:24 the content is eschatological but the aorist shows that *sōtēria* has come already with the receiving of the gospel."<sup>57</sup> According to use by the apostolic fathers, the term "means physical well-being or preservation, but a reference to eternal salvation may also be found."<sup>58</sup> The eschatological sense of preservation that is connected to the future and yet is also in the present encompasses the very mystery of the work of the Theotokos. She is the intermediary for preparing the whole person, body and soul, for eternal life. Therefore, many times in liturgical prayer, the Theotokos is addressed: "*Soter, sozon imas*," meaning that she is the Savior but the one who works in the economy of salvation.

11. **βουλή, (βούλημα)**—a project, plan, intention; counsel, advice;<sup>59</sup> a rescue that is planned by God.

In the New Testament, "the content of the apostolic message" is *boule*. In Luke, "divine counsel" is the main issue. For instance, "Jesus was delivered up by God's definite plan (Acts 2:23)." The word infers a "consultation leading to a plan" [Acts 27:42]. . . . *boule* . . . strengthens *thélema*; all God's economy is linked with it (cf. Acts 20:27)" ["For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God"].<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup>Kittel, 1135.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 1136.

<sup>59</sup>A *Lexicon*, 134.

<sup>60</sup>Kittel, 109.



12. **προσδράμωμεν**—"Running" for help [τρέχω].

"1 Clem[ent] 6.2 combines faith and the *drómos* more closely by speaking of the course of faith which the martyred women have successfully run, thus winning the imperishable crown of victory."<sup>61</sup>

13. **σπλαγχνισθεῖσα** (*splanchnízomai* in the Synoptics). Compassion, mercy.

"The verb occurs in the NT only in the Synoptics. In three parables it denotes human attitudes. Thus in Mt. 18:27 the lord has pity on the servant, in Lk. 15:20 the father has compassion on the prodigal, and in Lk. 10:33 the Samaritan has compassion on the man who has fallen among thieves. In all these instances the term reflects the totality of the divine mercy to which human compassion is a proper response."<sup>62</sup>

14. **προεβούσα** is used to indicate intercession, as by a revered ambassador (προέβεια indicates "age, seniority" and "ambassador").<sup>63</sup>

15. **Προστασίαν**, a word meaning "protection," is used many times in the *Small Paraklesis*. (προστᾶσία indicates "being at the head of, a presidency").<sup>64</sup>

16. **μεσίτριαν** [μέσος]<sup>65</sup>; mediatrix.

Μεσίτης (mediator): Although not used by Jesus, "the concept is present in his demands (Mt. 10:37 ff), his claims (Mt. 11:27), his remission of sins (Mk. 2:1ff.), and his relating of human destiny to confession of himself (Mt. 10:32-33). The Sermon on the Mount reflects Moses' giving of the law at Sinai, and the Last Supper has

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 1190.

<sup>62</sup>Kittel, 1068.

<sup>63</sup>A *Lexicon*, 583.

<sup>64</sup>A *Lexicon*, 606. Concerning the verb, to command, *hypotássō*, the root word speaks of the Christian idea of a person submitting his/her will for the good of others: "The general rule in NT exhortation is that there should be mutual readiness to renounce one's own will for others. Even when believers owe secular subjection, this takes on a new aspect and has a new basis with the common subjection to Christ. The demand for mutual subjection shows that Christian *hypotássomai* bears a material relation to Christian *tapeinophrosynē*?" (comment by G. Delling, in Kittel, 1160).

<sup>65</sup>A *Lexicon*, 435.

the exodus as its background. The main form of Jesus' sense of mediatorship is messianic divine and human sonship but in a unique combination of majesty and humility that is strongly oriented to the Servant of Is. 53 (cf. Mk. 10:45).<sup>66</sup> (Applied to the Theotokos, "mediatrix" means that her "mediation" is understood as a convergence of her existence in heaven with her humility on earth that continues to involve her in the life of the members of the Body of her Son, who taught all Christians how to find joy as a "suffering servant.")

## B. The *Akathistos*

We have seen that the history of composition for this "hymn sermon," as it is sometimes called, occurred over time. An iconographic theme of the "Akathist cycle" gradually developed. For example, in a fourteenth-century Balkan icon entitled "Glorification of Mary," there are "24 tablets" encircling the central image, representing the poetic structure of the Akathist Hymn. In this icon, the acrostic construction follows the Greek alphabet, forming "the Twenty Four Houses of the Mother of God" (corresponding to the 24 verses of the hymn).<sup>67</sup> At the center, we see her seated on a throne of the court, approached by both church and civil officials along with the faithful. Moses offers the tablets of law and Christ the ladder to Heaven. In this spirit, let us look at the text of the *Akathist*.

### 1. The General Structure of the Hymn

The *Akathist* hymn, itself, includes 24 stanzas known as *oikos* (or *ikos*).<sup>68</sup> These are stanzas or strophes that flow immediately upon a *kontakion*. The *kontakion* was "originally a long poem, de-

<sup>66</sup>Kittel, 588.

<sup>67</sup>K. Onasch and A. Schnieper, *Icons: The Fascination and the Reality* (New York: Riverside Book Co., 1997), 6-7 (and *Mother of God*, ed. by M. Vassilaki, 381—Benaki Museum, Plate 212, from the State Museum of Moscow, Kremlin). "The earliest representation of the Akathist Hymn is found on a fresco in the Pantanassa Church in Mistra, dated 1238-1241" (Onasch and Schnieper, 7).

<sup>68</sup>*The Festal Menaion*, 554.

signed for singing in church. It consisted of a short preliminary stanza, followed by some 18-24 strophes, each known as an *ikos*." The poem utilizes the acrostic formulary with each of the 24 strophes or stanzas following the order of the Greek alphabet. Twelve of the stanzas are long and end with the notable, "Hail, O Bride Ever Virgin" (sometimes translated "Bride Unwedded"). The other twelve are short stanzas and end with "Alleluia," a Hebrew acclamation: "Praise the Lord."<sup>69</sup> The whole hymn is divided into four main parts. The first six stanzas (stanzas 1-6) describe the Angel's message from God to Virgin Mary in the Annunciation, which form the basis of reflection for the whole hymn. In this first section, the hymn recalls Mary's purity, her visit to Elizabeth, and the reaction of Joseph. The second part (stanzas 7-12) describes the shepherds, the Magi, the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, and the Presentation of Jesus in the temple. The third section (stanzas 13-18) describes the "New Creation" brought about by the Incarnation, the invitation for humanity to ascend to the place of the Transcendent God, Christ's bringing of Heaven on Earth, and the foiling of philosophers who would seek to explain this mystery. The fourth section (stanzas 19-24) describes the Theotokos as protectress, God's coming to bring the faithful into His realm, the humble realization that God's mercies are "countless," that God has provided the healing for mankind's sin, and finally the ability<sup>70</sup> for the faithful to approach the Theotokos for life and nurturing.

## 2. Words of Mediation in the Akathistos

Let us turn to the texts of the *Akathist* to see these words in context. The preliminary service, before the hymn, begins with the *apolytikion*, the last hymn chanted at Vespers which traditionally begins a morning service (appearing here in the *Akathist*, an independent liturgical service). It sets the central theme of the

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<sup>69</sup>The *Akathist Hymn*, preceded by the Brief Compline, Greek and English texts; original Greek with a new English translation & Introduction by Fr. George Papadeas (Daytona Beach, Fla.: Patmos Press, 1997), i. (Hereafter, this source will be referred to as Papadeas.)

<sup>70</sup>Papadeas, i-j.

*Akathist*, the coming of Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary with a message from God:

When the bodiless [Angel Gabriel] learned of the secret command, he came in haste to Joseph's house and said to her who knew not wedlock: He who bowed the heavens by coming down is contained wholly and unchanged in you.<sup>71</sup>

The canons of the *Akathist* service then follow, prior to the heart of the hymn and its 24 strophes. Papadeas describes the term "canon" as "a lengthy series of poems, separated into groups under the category of 'odes.'" Others might describe canons as songs; in any event, they utilize the esthetical nature of fifth-century poetry, as noted earlier. Throughout these introductory canons are a multiplicity of mediatory phrases. The following are a few examples:

a. The Mighty Act of Mary—Her "Yes"

Rejoice, O vessel of joy through whom the first mother's curse shall be broken. (Ode One of the Canon)<sup>72</sup>

Χαῖρε, χαρᾶς δοχείον, δι' ἧς τῆς Προμήτορος, ἄρα Λυθήσεται.

Here the mediatory word comes from the root word, λυῶ the root word found also in the ancient prayer, *Sub Tuum Praesidium*. (Cf. #7 in Glossary above.) Eve's curse is thus dissolved, broken up and has disappeared.

b. The Theotokos Is "Savior"

Rejoice, O Bride Unwedded, the world's salvation. (Ode One)<sup>73</sup>

Χαῖρε, ἀπειρόγαμε, κόσμου διάσωμα.

(Cf. #10 of Glossary above.)

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<sup>71</sup>The *Akathist Hymn and Small Compline*, trans. by N. Michael Vapouris and Evie Zachariades-Holmberg (Needham, Mass.: Themely Publications, 1992), 7. (Hereafter, this work will be referred to as Vapouris and Zachariades-Holmberg.)

<sup>72</sup>Vapouris and Zachariades-Holmberg, 8. These verses (with English translation) and all verses used in this section are the translation of Vapouris and Zachariades-Holmberg.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

## c. The Theotokos Is "Intercessor"

Rejoice, O warm mercy seat, our fervent intercessor. (Ode Three)<sup>74</sup>

Χαῖρε, θερμὸν **ἱλατήριον**.

(Cf. #3 of Glossary above.)

## d. She Is the "Seat of Mercy."

Rejoice, mercy-seat of the world. (Ode Four)<sup>75</sup>

Ἰλαστήριον τοῦ κόσμου

(Cf. #3 of Glossary above.)

e. She Is "Refuge"<sup>76</sup>

. . . and refuge of all. (Ode Four)

καὶ ἱερὸν **καταφύγιον**.

Here she is a "fortress and citadel, a protective wall—a place of refuge." (Cf. #5 in Glossary above.)

## f. She Is "Savior"

. . . who saved the world from the flood of sin. (Ode Five)<sup>77</sup>

**Σώσασα** κόσμον.

The Virgin Mary is the one who brings the world to safety. (Cf. #10 in Glossary above.)

## g. She Is "Intercessor"

.. who reconciles with God all those who bless you . . . (Ode Five)<sup>78</sup>

Πάτων πρὸς Θεὸν **καταλλαγὴ**.

The Theotokos is the one who can effect reconciliation with God. (Cf. #4 in Glossary above.)

## h. She Is a "Safe Haven"

Become for us a harbor and haven, . . . (Ode Six)<sup>79</sup>

**Λιμὴν** ἡμῶν γενοῦ.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 12.

The Theotokos is our safe haven, a place to find safety. (Cf. #6 in Glossary above.)

i. She "Delivers Us"

Rescue us from temptation, . . . (Ode Nine)<sup>80</sup>

. . . **ρῦσαι ἡμᾶς πειρασμοῦ**

Notice the connection to the Our Father. This sense of "rescue" is a protection that draws us away from evil and ills, to the source of life, Christ. (Cf. #8 in Glossary above.)

j. She Offers Salvation to the Community

After these opening Odes, the *Akathist* service moves to the hymn itself, which begins with the *Kontakion* (probably written by Sergios, later than the hymn's origins, as noted):

O Champion General, we your faithful inscribe to you the prize of victory as gratitude for being rescued from calamity, O Theotokos.

But since you have invincible power, free us from all kinds of perils so that we may cry out to you:

Rejoice, O Bride unwedded.<sup>81</sup>

Τῇ υπερμάχῳ στρατηγῷ τὰ νικητήρια.  
'Ὡς λυτρωθεῖσα τῶν δεινῶν εὐχαριστήρια,  
'Αναγράφω σοι ἡ Πόλις σου, Θεοτόκε.

'Αλλ'ὥς ἔχουσα τὸ κράτος ἀπροσμάχητον.  
'Εκ παντοίων με κινδύνων ἐλευθέρωσον,  
'Ἵνα κράζω σοι.

Χαῖρε, νύμφη ἀνύμφευτὲ.

At the very core of this sung prayer, the *Akathist* centers the appeal of the faithful around the "invincible power" that will release the world from its binding in sin and separation from God. The world is set free from bondage and has the opportunity to find God's salvific life-giving presence in the care of the Theotokos. (Cf. #2 in Glossary above.)

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 15. Note the connection through this Greek word with the "Our Father."

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 16.

### 3. Petition for the Virgin's Mediation Is Both Private and Communal

Not only does the individual approach the Virgin Mary in private devotion for help, but the *Akathistos* demonstrates a collective petitioning to the Theotokos. Historically, the developing cultic ritual included a portable icon used for processions from one church to another. Petition was public, involving the entire ecclesial community, civic leaders, the faithful—all gathered for the Service.<sup>82</sup> These icons from the later centuries of the Marian devotion in Byzantium, recall a tradition of prayer for the Virgin Mary's help and care — both physical and spiritual.

At the beginning and end of the *Akathistos*, the faithful appeal to the Virgin as "Champion" of Protection for the city, namely Constantinople. One understands that, when threatened so seriously, the inhabitants stood all night (hence the term *akathistos*, not sitting) singing the hymn they knew from ages past, appealing the help of the Theotokos. For this reason, now centuries later, the faithful continue to pray to the Theotokos, because she is now the bearer of victory in the battle against ignorance, poverty, and foreign attack—all elements seen in Mary's *Magnificat* ("And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation . . .").<sup>83</sup>

In the stanzas at the heart of the *Akathistos* we find a small collection of words, the core trilogy of images of Virgin Mary, the one who nurtures the faithful and leads them to her Son. In the first group, we find her as the "place of the holy," the Second Eve, the world's protection:

Rejoice, initiate of ineffable counsel.<sup>84</sup>

Χαῖρε, Βουλῆς ἀττορρήτου μύστις

<sup>82</sup>*Mother of God* (Benaki Museum, Plate 105), "Stanza 24 of the *Akathistos Hymn*," MS gr. 429, fol. 33v, State Historical Museum, Moscow.

<sup>83</sup>Lk. 1:50-53: "... He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."

<sup>84</sup>Vaporis and Zachariades-Holmberg, 17.

(Here, the word **Βουλῆς** connotes that the Theotokos is a place to encounter the Transcendent, a person in whom there is a knowledge of the will of God. Cf. #11 in Glossary above.)

In the second group of stanzas, we find:

... deliverer from the mire of sin.<sup>85</sup>  
 η τοῦ βορβόρου **ρυομένη** τῶν ἐργῶν.

(Note a connection with the Our Father, in the root word **ρύομα**—"deliver us from evil"; cf. #8 in Glossary above.)

and, in the *economia* of God:

..., protection of the world ...<sup>86</sup>  
 Σκέπη τοῦ κόσμου.

(Here is the title of the Theotokos, Virgin of Protection; cf. #10 in Glossary above.)

The faithful, who "run" to the Theotokos for help, parallel God's messenger who "runs" to the young Hebrew woman with his message of God's plan. It can be inferred that the motion of these actions indicates the passion of God in loving mankind and, in turn, the depth of human emotion in seeking God's help.

...for all who run to you for refuge.<sup>87</sup>  
 Καὶ πάντων τῶν εἰς σὲ **προστρέχόντων**.

In addition to spiritual help, the *Akathistos* always demonstrates that the Mother of Christ welcomes those in critical need—physical ills, a city in peril, a soul in distress. The poetic prayer reaches its crescendo in a description of Virgin Mary as "inexhaustible treasure of life" (τῆς ζωῆς ἀδαπάντε). Before the final reiteration

<sup>85</sup>Vaporis and Zachariades-Holmberg, 20.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 25.



of the *kontakion*, "O Champion General . . .," the faithful pray:  
 . . . rejoice, my soul's salvation.<sup>88</sup>

Χαῖρε, ψυχῆς τῆς ἐμῆς σωτηρίᾳ.

(The connection here is to the "salvation" offered by Virgin Mary, presented in the Greek word which indicates being brought to safety in God's grace; cf. #10 in Glossary above.)

... deliver everyone from all calamities,	Ἀπὸ πάσις ρῦσαι συμφορὰς ἀπανταῖς,
and deliver from future punishment	καὶ τῆς μελλούσης λύτρωσαι
those who cry out: Allelulia. <sup>89</sup>	κολαμσεως τοὺς σοὶ βοῶτας.

(In one final prayer, we see two words of mediation from powerful roots combined—*ρύομαι* and *λύω*—the mother taking the faithful out of harm's way and bringing them to the new creation in which she played the primary role in redemption by being the mother of God's incarnate Son; cf. #7 and #8 in Glossary above.)

#### 4. Connections Seen in the "Lord's Prayer" and the "Sub Tuum Praesidium"

Assimilating all these meanings, we see that the *Akathist* cries passionately to the Virgin, asking her to set the faithful free from the bond of sin. She is the seat of mercy, the one who participated in the price of redemption. She is the mother who will take the faithful from harm's way, ill health and sin. She "saves" the faithful by bringing them to her Son.

Let us examine the stanzas to see the mediation words in context. There is a poignant connection of two of these words, *ρύομαι* and *λύτρον* (*λύω*), that appears to stand as the nexus of the many of Virgin Mary's titles of mediation. The first, *ρύομα*, is the word utilized in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew's version only) in the phrase, "but deliver us from temptation" (*ἀλλὰ πῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ*).

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

The second, *λύτρον* (λύω), stands central to the petition of the most ancient hymn to the Theotokos, *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, possibly written as early as the second century: "but from danger free us" (ἀλλ' ἐκ κινδύνου λυτρωσαι ἡμᾶς).<sup>90</sup> The obvious parallel construction of the concluding line of the "Our Father" and this ancient petition to the Theotokos is evident. The verb of mediation, however, shifts in sense, from being "drawn away" from sin and harm to being freed from the capture of sin and physical ills. Also, in the *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, we find the faithful hastening (flying) to the Virgin (a sense of motion and a sense of crying out for help).

### C. The Small Paraklesis

In many other ways, Virgin Mary is considered to be the mother of good succor, the one to whom people flock for help. Through the ages, the tradition of the Virgin Mary as the one who seeks help from God for the faithful took many forms. The Christian faithful had recourse to the aid of the Theotokos, the mother of all who suffered. For example, Slav Christians venerated the icon titled "Joy of all who suffer."<sup>91</sup> Many of the substantive verses which eventually found their way into the *Akathist* hymn are understood to have come from very early petitions made by Christians. These form the clearest "proof" of the recognition of Virgin Mary as

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<sup>90</sup>According to P. F. Mercenier, the Greek Byzantine version has been constructed to read as follows: ὑπὸ τὴν σκέπην τῆς εὐσπλαγγνίας σου καταφεύγομεν, ὦ Θεοτόκε τὰς ἡμῶν ἱκεσίας μὴ παρ εἰδὸς ἐμ περιστάσει ἀλλ' ἐκ κινδύνου ρῥῳσαι ἡμᾶς σὺ ἡ μόνη ἀγνή καὶ ἡ εὐλογημένη. The original parchment which Mercenier reconstructed, on the other hand, appears to use PYCAIHMAC [ρυσαιμας] instead of λυτρωσαι, showing that early Christians may have considered the two words interchangeable. The verb ρυσαιμας in the original would also connect it more directly to Matthew's version of the "Our Father" (P. F. Mercenier, "L'Antienne mariale grecque, la plus ancienne," *Le Museon* [1939]: 233.)

<sup>91</sup>Onasch and Schnieper, 176, has the image of "The Mother of God, Joy of All Who Suffer" (Russian, around 1800), with the following text: "The original icon, which shows Mary as the refuge for all sufferers, came from Moscow, where it was placed in the Ordinka Church in 1643. In 1711 it was brought to Saint Petersburg, after obtaining notoriety through the healing of a sister of Patriarch Joachim in 1688. This illustration

mediator—emanating from the hearts and souls of the faithful, as traced in Christian sacred images and prayers.

### 1. The Context of "Paraklesis" in Ancient Iconographic Tradition

There is a standard iconographic tradition that accompanies the prayer of petition, the *Paraklesis*, showing the Theotokos without the child, turned toward Christ and extending the petitions to Him.<sup>92</sup> She often holds a letter to God, or a list of petitions, as was once visible in the icon from Spoleto Cathedral. And, like all humanity, the Virgin turns to God in prayer. A magnificent example of the *Paraklesis*-style icon is seen in *Hagia Sophia* in Istanbul. Already at the foot of the cross, the traditional Byzantine icon shows the mother of Christ petitioning her Son. This position is replicated in many churches as a triad, Christ on the cross with the Theotokos petitioning her Son (on his right) and the Beloved Disciple or John the Baptist standing at his left.

The prayerful position of supplication to God by the Virgin, the *Paraklesis*—appears in the architecture of the *deesis*<sup>93</sup> of eastern Christian churches. She is the Virgin of the iconostasis, usually to the left and facing the Royal Doors, albeit petitioning Christ. The iconographic design that surrounds the altar on the *iconostasis* speaks clearly of a triad of "petitioning and supplication." The

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shows a small . . . icon of Mary with the child. Jesus on her arm, standing in front of an egg-shaped aureole in the middle of the portrayal, with a medallion of the Trinity above them. Those seeking help have written their ailments on banners; angels and saintly helpers in need support them in their invocation of the Mother of God."

<sup>92</sup>*Mother of God*, ed. by M. Vassilaki, 333 (Benaki Museum, Plate 209: "Icon of the Virgin Paraklesis, Spoleto Cathedral"); see also, Plate 149, in H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 244: "Spoleto, cathedral; icon of the Madonna with Petitionary Letter, ca. 1100." Belting explains, "The variant with the letter was therefore not an invention of the Cypriot painter's but a quotation from an original icon, while the title in the inscription, *Eleousa*, underscores its present function in the iconostasis. One must assume in general that the *type* and the *name* of an icon had a fairly free relationship with each other and that they sometimes referred to different archetypes" (241).

<sup>93</sup>Onasch and Schnieper, 157: (image) The Mother of God Chalkoprteia, Serbian (?), 14th c.; (text) "Conforming to the pictorial type of the Mother of God Paraclesis, the

*Paraklesis* icon of the Virgin is a startling diversion from the usual iconographic depiction of Christ's mother, always with her Son. The *Paraklesis* icon of the *deesis* draws attention to the fact that she is still intimately related to her Son, in the act of prayer and petition. It is not surprising, then, to find the foundation of mediation language in verses of this sung prayer petitioning the Theotokos for help.

This triad is a distinctly seventh-century Byzantine creation. It presupposes, on the one hand, an enhanced sensitivity among Christians to the theme of Christ's second coming, and, on the other hand, the practice of praying through the intercession of the saints. "The *Deesis* was destined to become an integral part of internal church architecture. . . . Placed immediately above the entrance to the sanctuary, the *Deesis* is so arranged as to express the mystery of the Church united to Christ." The faithful who approach this "royal door" (as the central door to the sanctuary was called), to receive Communion can "see" that by doing so they are joined in communion with the saints, celebrating the heavenly liturgy in the presence of the Lord himself and interceding for all the living.<sup>94</sup>

## 2. Finding Words of Mediation in the "Small Paraklesis"

The Theotokos as petitioner to her Son is poetically amplified in allusion after allusion of mediation throughout this sung prayer, as the faithful present their requests to the Mother of Christ. Again and again, we see the vocabulary of the faithful seeking her help, her intercession, her being as the place of the holy, a place of refuge, her mediation as savior.

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head of Mary is slightly bowed to one side. Her hands are raised to shoulder height. Her deep brown face, faintly brightened by gold embellishment, is raised mysteriously above the golden background behind a large dark halo."

<sup>94</sup>Maria Giovanna Muzj, *Transfiguration: Introduction to the Contemplation of Icons* (Boston, Mass.: St. Paul Books & Media, 1991), 66-67.

## a. The Theotokos as "Intercessor"

To the Theotokos, let us **run now**  
 most fervently,  
 As sinners and lowly ones,  
 Let us fall down in repentance,  
**Crying** from the depths of our soul:  
 Lady, come and help us,  
 Have **compassion** upon us;  
 Hasten now for we are lost  
 In the host of our errors;  
 Do not turn your servants away;  
 For you alone are a hope to us.

Τῇ Θεοτόκῳ ἔκτενῶς νῦν  
 προσδράμωμεν,  
 ἁμαρτωλοὶ καὶ ταπεινοὶ  
 καὶ προσπέσωμεν ἐν μετανοίᾳ,  
 κρᾶζοντες ἐκ βάθους ψυχῆς.  
 Δέσποινα, βοήθησον,  
 ἔφ' ἡμῖν σπλαγχνισθεῖσα.  
 σπεῦσον ἀπολλύμεθα,  
 ὑπὸ πλήθους πταισμάτων.  
 μὴ ἀποστρέψῃς σοὺς δούλους κενούς.  
 σὲ γὰρ καὶ μόνην ἐλπίδα  
 κεκτήμεθα.<sup>95</sup>

In this first supplication to the Theotokos in the *Small Paraklesis* service, there are three words of mediation to notice. There is another word for "running" to the mother of Christ for help, *προσδράμωμεν*, similar in meaning to the phrase found in the *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, *καταφεύγομεν* (we hasten/fly). Also, we note the word for crying to her, *κρᾶζοντες* (cf. #1 in Glossary above). Thirdly, we see a new word, *σπλαγχνισθεῖσα* (translated "compassion"), which relates directly in its Greek root to the word used in the *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, *ευσπλαγχνίαν* (usually translated as "care" or "patronage").

## b. The Mighty Act of Mary—Her "Yes"

O Theotokos, we shall never be  
 silent. Of your mighty acts, all we  
 the unworthy; Had you not stood  
 to intercede for us Who would  
 have delivered us, From the  
 numerous perils?

Οὐ σιωπήσωμέν ποτε, Θεότοκε,  
 τῶς δυναστείας σου λαλεῖν οἱ ἀνάξιοι  
 εἰμὴ γὰρ σὺ προΐστασο πρεσβεύουσα,  
 τίς ἡμᾶς ἔρρύσατο ἐκ τοσούτων  
 κινδύνων;

<sup>95</sup>The Service of the Small Paraklesis ... (1984), 3.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

Who would have preserved us all	τις δὲ διεφύλαξεν ἕως νῦν ἑλευθέρους;
Until now with our freedom?	
O Lady, we shall not depart from you;	Οὐκ ἀποστῶμεν, Δέσποινα, ἐκ σοῦ;
For you always save your servants,	σοὺς γὰρ δούλους σώζεις ἀεί,
From all tribulation. <sup>97</sup>	ἐκ παντοίων δεινῶν.

The faithful continue to remember the "mighty act" of Virgin Mary, her obedience to the will of God, and they continue to approach her as an ambassador with God. The word **προσβέουσα** is used to indicate her intercession, as revered ambassador. The root word, **πρῆσβεία**, indicates "age, seniority" and "ambasador" (cf. #14 in Glossary above). The next mediatory word, **ἐρρύσατο**, is related to the root word meaning "deliver" (cf. #8 in Glossary above). The third mediatory word we find is related to **σώζω**, the Greek root meaning to save (cf. #10 in Glossary above).

Virgin Mary, who stands at the foot of the cross, in the *deesis* iconographic tradition, petitions her Son through His death and resurrection. In a sense of standing by the Mother of Christ at the foot of the cross, the Christian seeks help through her close association with the flow of salvific grace from the cross.<sup>98</sup> Theologically, the mother's mediation is directly founded in the salvation flowing from her Son's sacrifice of love.

### c) The Theotokos is "refuge"

With my temptations surrounding me,	Πολλοῖς συνεχόμενος πειρασμοῖς,
Searching for salvation,	πρὸς σὲ καταφεύγω,
I have sought refuge in you;	σωτηρίαν ἐπιζητῶν;
O Mother of the Word, and ever-Virgin,	Ὡ Μήτηρ τοῦ Λόγου, καὶ παρθένε,
From all distress and dangers deliver me. <sup>99</sup>	τῶν δυσχερῶν καὶ δεινῶν με διάσωσον.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 4 (English and Greek).

<sup>98</sup>"The Crucifixion," Figure 27, in Muzj, *Transfiguration*, 133.

<sup>99</sup>*The Service of the Small Paraklesis* . . . (1984), 6 (English and Greek).

In this hymn, we find two more words related to "saving" (σώζω), but also an interesting new word that relates directly to the *Sub Tuum Praesidium*. In the sense of running to the Theotokos, in other words "seeking refuge" in her, we find the Greek word καταφεύγω, which is used in the ancient supplication (*Sub Tuum*) and translated "we hasten," or, "we fly" (to her "care"/"compassion"). This indicates that there existed a certain vocabulary of petition to the Virgin which links this hymn to the most ancient appeal for her help. The Theotokos is the safe harbor, a protection—a theme which is repeated and repeated throughout the cycle of liturgical prayer. She is the mother who intercedes for sinful children. Because of their appreciation of the divine motherhood, the Christian faithful have always "sought refuge" in the mother of Christ as mediator in God's judgment.

d. The Theotokos Is "Protection, Shelter, and Cause of Good"

A protection and shelter,  
I have with you in my life,  
You, the Theotokos and the Virgin,  
Pilot me towards your port;  
For you are the cause,  
The cause of that which is good,  
Support of the faithful,  
The only all-praised One.<sup>100</sup>

Προστασίαν καὶ σκεμπήν,  
ζωῆς ἐμῆς τίθημι,  
Σὺ θεογεννήτορ Παρθένε;  
σύ με κυβέρησον,  
πρὸς τὸν λιμένα σου,  
τῶν αγαθῶν ἡ αἰτία,  
τῶν πιστῶν τὸ στήριγμα,  
μόνη πανύμνητε.

Again and again, the inter-relatedness of these early liturgical texts heightens their theological value. In addition, we meet yet another mediation word, Προστασίαν, a word meaning "protection" and used many times in the *Small Paraklesis*. The word προστασία indicates Virgin Mary is placed in authority for approaching God, a state considered to be more the plan of God than a position of earned honor. The leadership, then, of the Theotokos, is her obedience to God's will as she leads us to her Son. The great Feast of the Theotokos, Life-giving Fountain, is celebrated on the Friday

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 7

following Easter Sunday. In this feast, she is understood to be the "fountain of the Fountain (Christ)." And on the Feast of the Protection (*Skepi*), and all related feasts at Blachernae (including the deposition of the *soros*, her robe, and the veneration of her icon), there is continual reference to protection, fountain or well, and understanding that she is the "source" of the Source and place of shelter. The Greek word *pigi* (or *pege*), πηγή, translates to "fountain," "well," and also "source." Therefore, the Feast of the Virgin, Life-giving Fount, celebrated in the East on the Friday after Easter, is the Virgin of the Fount but also known as the Virgin of the Source.

#### e. The Theotokos Is "Spring, Shelter"

A fervent prayer, and wall most unshakable  
A merciful spring  
And shelter of all mankind;  
Fervently, we cry to you:  
Theotokos, our Lady,  
Come to us  
And from all dangers now deliver us<sup>101</sup>  
The only protection who speeds to us.

Πρεσβεία θερμή,  
καὶ τείχος ἀπροσμάχητον,  
ἐλέους πηγή,  
τοῦ κόσμου καταφύγιον,  
ἐκτενώς βοῶμέν σοι;  
Θεοτόκε Δέσποινα,  
πρόφθασον,  
καὶ ἐκ κινδύνων λύτρωσαι ἡμᾶς,  
ἢ μόνη ταχέως προστατεύο.

Note once again the connection to the *Sub Tuum Praesidium* in καταφύγιον. Also, we see the continuing mediatory idea of deliverance and protection. The language is particular and reverberates over and over again. And again, just before this prayer, we find the central supplication that permeates the whole sung prayer.

Deliver us,  
All of your servants, from danger,  
O Theotokos;  
After God, we all flee to you,  
For shelter and covering,  
As an unshakable wall<sup>102</sup>  
and our protection.

Διάσωσον,  
ἀπὸ κινδύνων τοὺς δούλους σου Θ  
ὅτι πάντες μετὰ Θεὸν  
εἰς σὲ καταφεύγομεν,  
ὥς ἀρρηκτον τείχος καὶ προστασία.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 13



The relationship of these lines is built around the same mediatory language and, once again, includes the identifying connection to the *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, in καταφεύγομεν.

f. The Theotokos Is "Deliverance" (Reminiscent of the "Our Father")

The odes appear to express appeal to the Virgin Mary for deliverance—rescue from physical and spiritual ills. At the conclusion of *Ode 1*, we again see a word directly related to the *Sub Tuum Praesidium* calling for rescue, ἐκλυτρούμεθα (often translated "free us").

As a hope and foundation,  
And a wall unshaken  
Of our salvation;  
We have you, the all-lauded One,<sup>103</sup>  
And from afflictions you rescue us.  
From death and corruption He has saved  
My nature, held by death and corruption;  
For unto death  
He Himself has surrendered;  
For which reason, O Virgin, please  
intercede  
With Him who is your Lord and Son,<sup>104</sup>  
From the enemies' evils deliver me.

Οἱ ἐλπίδα καὶ στήριγμα,  
Καὶ τῆς σωτηρίας τείχος ακράδαντον,  
κεκτημένοι σε πανύμνητε,  
δυσχερείας πάσης ἐκλυτρούμεθα.  
θανάτου καὶ τῆς φθορᾶς ὡς ἔσωσεν,  
ἑαυτὸν ἐκδεδωκὼς τῷ θανάτῳ,  
τὴν φθορᾶ,  
καὶ θανάτῳ μου φύσιν, κατασχεθεῖσαν  
Παρθένε, δυσώπησον,  
τὸν Κύριόν σου καὶ Υἱόν,  
τοῖς ἐχθρῶν κακουργίας με ρύσασθαι.

The liturgical text builds — often on a personal note and begs for safety. The Theotokos is the one who takes the petitions, no doubt long lists of them, to God and the heavenly hosts. She is the connection, mediator, between the *ouranos*, heaven above, and earth below.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 12

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 14

<sup>105</sup>Onasch and Schnieper, 157: (image) the Mother of God Paraclesis, Greek artist working in Ochrid, 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> c.; (text) "This icon is the left panel of a diptych in the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in Kiev."

## g. Calling upon the Theotokos

In the latter half of the Service of the Small Paraklesis, we see the word *paraklesis* itself, which indeed indicates clearly that this long, sung prayer of supplication uses mediatory language for a clear purpose, for supplication to God through the mother. In a hymn called a *Megalynarion* ("a short verse, usually beginning with the word *Magnify*"),<sup>106</sup> the word appears:

Lady and the Mother of Him who saves,

Receive the supplications

Of the lowly who pray to you;

Mediate between us

And the One you brought forth;

O Lady of all people,

Intercede for us.<sup>107</sup>

Δέσποινα καὶ μήτηρ τοῦ λυτρωτοῦ,

δέξαι παρακλήσεις ἀναζώντων ἱκετῶν,

ἵνα μεσιτεύσης πρὸς τὸν ἐκ σοῦ τεχθέντα

Ὁ Δέσποινα τοῦ κόσμου, γενοῦ μεσίτρια.

And here we have the direct summary of the mystery of mediation in the Theotokos: at the *Εξσαποστιλαριον* „Α τροπαριον, a stanza of religious poetry—occurring at the conclusion of the canon. It gives the dismissal.<sup>108</sup>

I have you as Mediatrix

Before God who loves mankind;

May He not question my action

Before the hosts of the Angels,

I ask of you, O Virgin,

Hasten now quickly to my aid.<sup>109</sup>

Καὶ σὲ μεσίτριαν ἔχω,

πρὸς τὸν φιλόανθρωπον Θεόν;

μή μου ἐλέγξη τὰς πράξεις,

ἐνώπιον τῶν Ἀγγέλων;

παρακαλῶ σε, Παρθένε,

βοήθησόν μοι ἐν τάχει.

The word *μεσίτρια* provides yet another term for mediation. This term is rare in these sung prayers, and should be understood only to mean that the Theotokos is the one who is providing aid and leadership to approach God and Christ who alone is mediator. (Cf. #16 in Glossary above.)

<sup>106</sup>The Festal Menaion, 556.

<sup>107</sup>The Service of the Small Paraklesis . . . (1984), 29 (English and Greek).

<sup>108</sup>The Festal Menaion, 551.

<sup>109</sup>The Service of the Small Paraklesis . . . (1984), 39 (English and Greek).

#### IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR MARIAN THEOLOGY

In the *Paraklesis*, there is clearly supplication to the Theotokos for help. There is a sense of "running to" the Virgin Mary, understood to sometimes mean "in haste." The faithful cry to her and beg her help. She is the seat of mercy, a source of compassion, the place of meeting with Christ. Salvation comes in the form of healing of physical ills and protection from harm, both personal and for the community. Also, there is spiritual salvation and a source to find healing from sin. The term "deliver" takes several forms. The Theotokos is the fortress of strength and security, she is the one who petitions God for needs of the faithful. This language is seen in connection to the *Sub Tuum Praesidium*. Virgin Mary is the one who "delivers" faithful ones from dangers and sin, hearkening to the language roots of "deliver us from evil" in the "Our Father."

#### V. CONCLUSION

The testimony of Early Christianity, the spirituality of the patristic ages, attests to *lex orandi—lex credendi*, received truth that continues to the end of time. The liturgical texts of the *Akathistos* and the *Paraklesis* indicate God's power of forgiveness and healing, and life-giving sustenance (for the future and also for the present) as found through supplication to the Theotokos, herself the very font of new life. This *dynameis* embues the motherhood of the Theotokos, initiated in the mystery of the Incarnation. The Mediation of the Theotokos is her mission in the *economia*, the *erga*—the works of God—in and through her. These early eastern liturgical texts include "a plethora of beautiful portrayals of the Holy Mother Mary, alluding to Her role in the Incarnation of the Lord, for the salvation of mankind."<sup>110</sup> Analyzing these ancient songs of supplication enables the Marian theologian, receptive to mystical and spiritual experience, to see and hear the mystery of the Theotokos as mediator. A theological

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<sup>110</sup>Papadeas, j.

analysis of these two long and supplicating hymns determines the very origins of Marian spirituality:

1. *The mediation of the Theotokos provides for physical and spiritual help.*

Ill am I in body,	ἀσθενεῖ τὸ σῶμα,
Ill am I also in my soul. <sup>111</sup>	ἀσθενεῖ μου καὶ ἡ ψυχή.

2. *The mission for the Theotokos is her divine motherhood, her role as nurturer of the faithful.*

As You willed, O our Savior,	
To dispense our salvation	
through Your economy	Σῶτερ οἰκονομήσασθαι,
Inside the Virgin's womb;	ἐν μήτρᾳ τῆς Παρθένου,
You showed to all the people	
That she was our own guardian;	τὴν προστατύν ἀνέδειξας.
O the God of our father,	
Blessed are You, our God. <sup>112</sup>	

3. *Her mission in the world, as it continues on in time to the eschaton, is supplication to Christ, a sign of relationship to God and to mankind.*

And they do exalt you [maiden]	Κόρη, εἰς αἰῶνας.
Throughout the many ages. <sup>113</sup>	

(The term *Kóρη* was "the name under which Proserpine was worshipped in Attica, the Daughter of Demeter,"<sup>114</sup> and was transferred to the more common term, "maiden." It is from these ancient insertions in the liturgical text that some scholars can derive false understandings of the Virgin Mary as goddess.)

<sup>111</sup>The Service of the Small Paraklesis . . . (1984), 29 (English and Greek).

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., 23

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>114</sup>The Lexicon, 388.

4. *She is "bride unwedded." Only a mystical encounter with God's presence in liturgical prayer can possibly give any illumination to this phrase.*

Rejoice, healing of my body;  
Rejoice, my soul's salvation.  
Rejoice, O Bride Unwedded.<sup>115</sup>

Χαῖρε, χρωτὸς τοῦ ἔμοῦ θεραπεία  
Χαῖρε, ψυχῆς τῆς ἑμῆς σωτηρία  
Χαῖρε, Νύμφη ἀνυμφευτε.

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<sup>115</sup>Vaporis and Zachariades-Holmberg, 27.