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THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION IN THE ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE WITH ORTHODOXY: HOW THE TERM *THEOSIS* CAN INFORM CONVERGENCE

Virginia M. Kimball, S.T.D.*

The issue of the Immaculate Conception in the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue differs considerably from the discussion of the dogma in the Catholic-Protestant dialogue. Both Orthodox and Protestants object insofar as the Immaculate Conception is a papally defined dogma. Protestants seek scriptural justification for Mary's exemption from sin, whereas Orthodox liturgical hymnody proclaims the absolute purity of Mary. However, it is Orthodoxy's concept of original sin which presents the difficulty in affirming Mary's exemption from something which seems essentially human.

Here, after a brief review of Orthodoxy and the ecumenical movement, this article will sample pertinent Orthodox positions on the issue of the Immaculate Conception. It will then present the notion of *theosis*, briefly outlined as Jules Gross¹ suggests, while also viewing the possibilities, as suggested by A. N. Williams, of *theosis* as a "ground of union" to enlighten a convergence on ideas of soteriology—ultimately affecting the ecumenical dialogue on the "Immaculate Conception."

1. A Brief Review of Ecumenical Progress

The Orthodox Church has been a pioneer in the ecumenical movement and has raised the question of the importance of the *Theotokos* in ecumenical discussion. As a preparation for the

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¹ Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian, according to the Greek Fathers* (Anaheim, Calif.: A & C Press, 2002). Originally published as *La divinisation du chrétien d'après les pères grecs: Contribution historique à la doctrine de la grâce* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1938).

establishment of the World Council of Churches, the Church of Constantinople, in January, 1920, addressed a letter "unto all the Churches of Christ wheresoever they be" inviting the Churches "to renounce proselytism and to form a league for mutual assistance." At the Lausanne Conference of the Faith and Order conference in 1927, Professor Bulgakov (1871-1944) caused the greatest stir by introducing into the discussion the question of the significance of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the reunion of Christians. Professor Bulgakov said: "Holiness is the goal and essence of the Church's life: the holiness of the manhood of Christ, actualized in the communion of saints. But we cannot separate the humanity of our Lord from that of His mother, the unspotted Theotokos. She is the head of mankind in the Church; Mother and Bride of the Lamb, she is joined with all saints and angels in the worship and life of the church. Others may not yet feel drawn, as I do, to name her name in prayer. Yet, as we draw together towards doctrinal reunion, it may be that we are coming potentially nearer even in this regard."²

Although there were centuries of distrust between the Orthodox and Catholics, the situation began to change, on both sides, in the 1960s. Orthodox observers were present at Vatican II, and *Unitatis redintegratio* (UR) spoke of the "brotherly communion of faith and sacraments" which bound the two churches. Vatican II gave special consideration to the Eastern Churches: "Admiration is expressed for their liturgical worship, their devotion to the 'Mary ever Virgin, whom the ecumenical Council of Ephesus solemnly proclaimed to be the holy Mother of God, so that Christ might be acknowledged as being truly Son of God and Son of Man' (UR #15). In January 1964 Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople met for the first time, in Jerusalem, and, in a common declaration, the mutual excommunications of 1054 were "erased from the memory" of the church. A major effort to heal the

² Nicolas Zernov, "The Eastern Churches and the Ecumenical Movement in the Twentieth Century," in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 656.

schism was one of the aims of the pontificate of John Paul II. (Cf. Apostolic Letter *Orientale Lumen*, 1995, with its glowing tribute to the Eastern Churches, especially Eastern monasticism.) In his encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* (#56), he declared: "the structures of unity which existed before the separation are a heritage of experience that guides our common path toward the re-establishment of full communion. Obviously, during the second millennium the Lord has not ceased to bestow on his Church abundant fruits of grace and growth. Unfortunately, however, the gradual and mutual estrangement between the Churches of the West and the East deprived them of the benefits of mutual exchanges and cooperation."

In the Catholic-Orthodox ecumenical dialogue, progress has been made on doctrinal issues such as the Trinity, the Eucharist, even the long-debated question of *filioque*. Unfortunately, the present impasse deals more with jurisdictional than theological issues, especially the position of the Eastern Catholic Churches. The Orthodox response to documents on Mary from Paul VI and John Paul II has been studied by Mary Ann DeTrana.

A study of Orthodox publications in English from 1967 to 1988 showed that there was not a single detailed analysis of any of these documents from any Orthodox, official or unofficial, theologian or non-specialist. One may well ask why?³

The reasons, DeTrana suggested, may have been the Orthodox tradition of relying on the Liturgy as the teacher of the faithful; or that Orthodox theologians never took up the Catholic writings as more than reflections on Catholic teaching; or, for more ethnic reasons, because Orthodox churches in eastern Europe have no organized jurisdictional voice. DeTrana did find, however, that Orthodox theologians were "listening" prior to Vatican II. Before Vatican II, there was some response to the upcoming council, such as Lossky's question-

³ Mary Ann DeTrana, "Letters of Paul VI and John Paul II on the Virgin Mary: the evolution of a dialogue," pp. 181-194, in *Mary is for Everyone*, eds. William McLoughlin and Jill Pinnock (Herefordshire, Great Britain: Gracewing and The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1997), 181-182.

ing of isolating dogma from Christian life: "It is impossible to separate dogmatic data . . . from the data of the Church's cultus, in a theological exposition of the doctrine about the Mother of God. Here dogma should throw light on devotion."⁴ Overall, DeTrana sensed a progressive movement on the part of the East to understand the West.⁵

The notion of "listening" rather than formally responding may characterize much of the ecumenical dialogue since Vatican II. It becomes a comprehensive exercise as one book attests: *Growth in Agreement II, Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*. One of the most obvious aspects of looking at the calendar of meetings is that the dimension and dynamics of bilateral discussion has played a large role, perhaps to the surprise of some. This would entail another comprehensive study, but it can be said that, for example, Orthodox are "listening" to the dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans; the Reformed churches are "listening" to dialogue between Anglican, Catholic, and Orthodox dialogues; and so on. In other words, we are all learning from the dialogues of others. World Council of Churches editors Gros, Meyer, and Rusch endorse the observation:

It is also clear that an increased inter-relatedness among the dialogues has occurred. . . . The forum for bilateral conversations continues to survey in a helpful manner the inter-relatedness and coherence of the various dialogues.⁶

Robert Barringer, in his article on the present position of Catholic-Orthodox dialogue, suggests a dialogue of love, beginning with the 1965 action of Patriarch Athenagoras and

⁴ DeTrana, "Letters," 184, citing Vladimir Lossky.

⁵ DeTrana, "Letters," 191. She stated: "We have seen a steady progression in the focus of the Vatican, which has brought the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches face to face, one might say, in their veneration of the Mother of God. As we have noted, the Orthodox response to the documents has been minimal, but that is not to say that Orthodox theologians are unaware of them, or that they disagree with them."

⁶ Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch, *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998* (Geneva: WCC Publications; Grand Rapids, Mich./Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), "General Introduction," xv.

Pope Paul VI in a "purification of memories." Here, too, it has become evident that the method to be followed toward full communion is the dialogue of truth, fostered and sustained by the dialogue of love.

This phrase ["purification of memories"] was used of the lifting of the ex-communications of 1054 and appeals for the purging of that weight of bitterness which was collected from the past. This purging of bitterness perhaps demands more of Orthodox than of Catholics, because it is true in general that eastern Christians have more to forgive and forget in the long history of East/West relations.⁷

2. Pertinent Orthodox Opinions on the Immaculate Conception

Orthodox opinions on the Immaculate Conception are first influenced by attitudes toward the Church of Rome, the source of the definition of the Immaculate Conception. As with some Protestants, the fact that dogma has been papally defined invariably influences their decision. Cavarnos, for example, first denied the notion of "sister churches" or "two lungs," claiming there can be only one unified body of Christ. For him, the reason for the division is the dogma of papal infallibility: "The dogma of papal infallibility, then, is without basis in reality, as also is the dogma of papal primacy. And it constitutes one of the most serious causes of the separation of the two Churches."⁸

⁷ Robert Barringer, C.S.B., "Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue: The Present Position," in *Rome and Constantinople: Essays in the Dialogue of Love*, ed. Robert Barringer (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1984), 71. Barringer states:

Roman Catholics probably need a "jogging" of memories as much as they need a purification of memories, but the object of the challenge is not to wallow in guilt for past injustices. We are meant instead to plunge our roots more deeply into the history of the undivided Church and recover that first and fresh sense of communion between the East and West. . . . We are called to rid our memories of the resentments and grudges of the past and to provide for the generations to come *memories* of a deeper past which can nourish rather than poison the future. This is a duty laid upon Roman Catholics and Orthodox alike.

⁸ Constantine Cavarnos, *The Question of Union: A Fortbriht Discussion of the Possibility of Union of the Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholicism*, trans. Patrick Barker (Etna, Calif.: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1992), 23.

This same author claims that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is an "innovation" when it describes the Virgin Mary as "not conceived like other human beings, but immaculately and consequently . . . free from the ancestral sin." He points to the usual Orthodox attitude that the Virgin Mary was subject to ancestral sin like all of humanity until the Annunciation, when she was "purified through the coming of the Holy Spirit."⁹

Despite negative approaches like that of Cavarnos, there are leading Orthodox theologians today who do offer optimism and hope in the spirit of Christ's injunction for unity, repeated in the words of Peter: "Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind."¹⁰ Traditionally, the Orthodox approach, as described by Alexander Schmemmann, offers a view that "has always been in 'christological terms'" solely, with no need for further revelations concerning the Virgin Mary.

. . . if nothing else were revealed in the Gospel than the mere fact of Mary's existence, i.e., that Christ, God and man, had a mother and that her name was Mary, it would have [been] enough for the Church to love her, to think of her relationship with her Son, and to draw theological conclusions from this contemplation. Thus, there is no need for additional

⁹ Cavarnos, *The Question of Union*, 26:

A fifth innovation of the Western Church in the area of dogmas is the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. This dogma made its first appearance in Lyon, France, in 1140. It spread gradually among the Roman Catholics, and in 1854 it was proclaimed as a dogma of the Papal Church by Pope Pius IX, with the assent of the majority of bishops. According to this dogma, the *Panagia* was not conceived like other human beings, but immaculately, and consequently was free from the ancestral sin. . . . The Orthodox Church never accepted this innovation. St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite makes the following related comment in the *Pedalion*: "The attitude of the Orthodox Church is that the ancestral sin . . . is handed on to all mankind, even to those sanctified from their mothers' wombs, even to our Lady Theotokos herself" Theotokos "was subject to the ancestral sin until the Annunciation; for at that time she was purified through the coming of the Holy Spirit, as the Angel said: 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee.'"

¹⁰ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, revised standard version, ed. H. G. May and B. M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1 Pet. 3:8.

or special revelations; Mary is a self-evident and essential "dimension" of the Gospel itself.¹¹

In a 1988 article that presented Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Orthodox perspectives on John Paul II's recent Marian encyclical (March 25, 1987), Orthodox Damaskinos Papandreou listed three points found in the Roman Catholic document *Redemptoris Mater* that can be easily embraced by the Orthodox:

1. The Annunciation and Mary's conceiving of Christ stands at the center of God's mystery of salvation.
2. The Mother of God is mediatrix "in subordination to Christ's work of salvation."
3. The Mother of God represents an active maternity of God's son in "her obedient answer to the divine will for humanity's salvation."¹²

All of these points are consistent with patristic tradition in the early, undivided church. However, Papandreou also cautioned that there are two significant areas of concern for Orthodox over issues raised in the pope's encyclical.

1. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception cannot be considered consistent with the patristic tradition of the undivided early church—pointing out that Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, and Albertus Magnus could be included among those in aversion to the dogma. In fact, Aquinas described the purification from original sin that occurred for Mary in the Annunciation, arguing that Christ alone was without sin.
2. Orthodox see the dogma of the Assumption as closely related to her conception, where "death marks the boundary of her unique, immediate eschatological 'transformation' and the radiance which is bestowed

¹¹ A. Schmemmann, *The Celebration of Faith: Sermons*, trans. John A. Jillions (3 vols.; Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991-1995), v. 3: *The Virgin Mary*, 60. Hereafter cited as *Sermons: The Virgin Mary*.

¹² Kurt Koch, Damaskinos Papandreou, Ulrich Wilckens and Gerhard Voss, "Reactions to *Redemptoris Mater*," *Theology Digest* 35/1 (Spring 1988): 13.

upon her as a consequence 'not of her death, but of her conception' of Christ (John of Damascus)."¹³

3. Liturgy as Locus of Mariology

According to Schmemann, Orthodox reflection on Mary is found in the liturgy, as evidence of faith that has been continuous in time. "The Liturgy is the main, if not exclusive, *locus* of Mariology in the Orthodox Church."¹⁴ Liturgical traditions in the East concerning the Theotokos have been constant and unwavering. Paradoxically, in its evolving manner of thought on the dogma, Catholic theologians claimed support for the definition of the dogma to be confirmed in early eastern liturgical prayer. The point of discussion is how the meaning of that early eastern prayer was embraced in the *locus* of eastern praxis. The interpretation of the eastern prayers concerning the All-Holy One, *Panagia*, may have been interpreted by Catholics in an evolving process within a nineteenth-century soteriological emphasis quite different from the soteriology intended at the time of composition of the liturgical lyrics. This is the prime reason for returning to theological and liturgical sources to examine the early ages and the contextual actuality of what eastern liturgical and theological embrace was at the time.

However, Francis Dvornik discussed the possibilities of sources in the Byzantine Church's liturgy serving as evidence of belief in the Immaculate Conception.

During the seventh century, the commemoration of St. Anne's conception was also introduced and celebrated on December 9th. . . .

The fact that the Byzantine Church had introduced a special feast of the Conception of St. Anne has been interpreted by some western mariologists as a counterpart to the feast of the Immaculate Conception as the Western Church knows it. In reality the importance of this feast for the evolution of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception should not be exaggerated.¹⁵

¹³ Koch et al., "Reactions," 13-14.

¹⁴ Schmemann, *Sermons: The Virgin Mary*, 61.

¹⁵ Francis Dvornik, "The Byzantine Church and the Immaculate Conception," in *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance*, ed. Edward D. O'Connor (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 90. It was not until the seventh century that the Conception of [Mary to] St. Anne was introduced.

Orthodox theologians include Mary in the long line of prophets and saints expecting the messiah, and in particular in comparison to St. John the Baptist.

This feast [Conception of Virgin Mary by St. Anne] was originally simply a counterpart to another similar commemoration—the feast of the Conception of St. John the Baptist. . . . The liturgies of the two feasts are very similar.¹⁶

The context of the Feast of the Conception of Mary by St. Anne then has to be fully explored. If it is a feast corollary to the Feast of the Conception of St. John. Are both individuals considered to be “free of sin” in the description of a miraculous birth? In the Feast of the Conception by St. Anne, the miraculous is described by Dvornik:

But besides the miraculous announcement of Mary’s birth, the Byzantine Church also stressed, in the liturgy of this feast, the miraculous conception in the sterile womb of Anne and the beginning of life of the future Mother of God. In their poems and homilies Byzantine poets and orators insisted more and more on Our Lady’s *passive* Conception and on her holiness from the very beginning of her existence. So it happened that the introduction of this feast into the eastern liturgy contributed a great deal to the development of theological speculation on the greatest of Mary’s prerogatives.¹⁷

Byzantine theologians of past ages have never debated the idea of Mary’s prerogatives or called for a definition. There was not one eastern theologian who ever denied Mary’s prerogatives. Their starting point was different. Once the dogma of Mary, the *Theotokos*, was completed at the Council of Ephesus (431), “this sublime fact presupposes a great degree of sanctity in the Blessed Virgin,” and, as Dvornik noted, there was no more to be defined.¹⁸

4. Orthodox Theology of the Fall and the “All-Holiness” of Virgin Mary

The patristic idea of mankind’s state before Christ is described by Bishop Maximos Aghiorgoussis:

¹⁶ Dvornik, “The Byzantine Church,” 90.

¹⁷ Dvornik, “The Byzantine Church,” 91.

¹⁸ Dvornik, “The Byzantine Church,” 91.

The cause of man's rejection of God was—and is—pride. [Note that this is the opposite of obedience.] It is an abuse of the self-determination given to man by God when He created him according to His image. Along with the angels, man is created "unsinful by nature, yet free in his will. Unsinful does not mean that man is not capable of sin: only the Divine is incapable of sin. Man, who did not have sin in his nature, invented sin by misuse of his freedom of choice (προαίρεσις). Thus he had the possibility (ἐξουσία) of remaining in harmony with the good and progressing in goodness through the cooperation of divine grace. But he also had the power (ἐξουσία) to turn his back on the good and place himself in evil; this God allows because of the human right of freedom of choice." . . . Evil, as a state of inauthentic existence, as a state of death and rejection of God who is the source of life, is not the "non-existing" (μη ὄν); but neither is it a particular "essence" since it has no separate being. Evil is the corruption of existence. In the words of St. Basil, "evil is not a living and animate essence; it is a disposition in the soul which opposes virtue; this attitude develops in the slothful because of their alienation from the good."¹⁹

In John Meyendorff's text on Byzantine theology, he stressed the continued Orthodox theme that Virgin Mary is "the culminating point of Israel's progress toward reconciliation with God, but God's final response to this progress and the beginning of new life comes with the Incarnation of the Word."²⁰ Byzantine homilies and liturgical hymnology referred to the Virgin using phrases such as "fully prepared," "cleansed," and "sanctified." These terms could have led westerners to think they had found references to the Immaculate Conception. Here are several examples of texts that could suggest some aspects of the Catholic dogma:

Sophronius of Jerusalem, d. 638

Many saints appeared before thee, but none was as filled with grace as thou . . . No one has been purified in advance as thou hast been.²¹

¹⁹ Bishop Maximos Aghiorgoussis, "Sin in Orthodox Dogmatics," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 21/4 (1977): 183-184. Here, Bishop Maximos cites St. Basil's *Hexaemeron*, Homily 2.

²⁰ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 147.

²¹ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 147: quoting Sophronius of Jerusalem, *Oratio II*, 25; PG 87:3248A.

Andrew of Crete, d. 740

When the Mother of Him who is beauty itself is born, [human] nature recovers in her person its ancient privileges, and is fashioned according to a perfect model, truly worthy of God . . . In a word, the transfiguration of our nature begins today. . . .²²

Nicholas Cabasilas, 14th century

Earth she is, because she is from earth; but she is a new earth, since she derives in no way from her ancestors and has not inherited the old leaven. She is . . . a new dough and has originated a new race.²³

These phrases of "purity" and "privilege" should be interpreted in terms of the theology of the Fall according to the patristic East. The Orthodox explanation of "*theosis*" (deification) enlightens them. According to Meyendorff, there is a difference between "mortality" and "guilt":

. . . the inheritance from Adam is mortality, not guilt, and there was never any doubt among Byzantine theologians that Mary was indeed a *mortal* being.²⁴

It is Meyendorff's contention, as well, that "never does one read, in Byzantine authors, any statement which would imply that she [Mary] had received a special grace of *immortality*."²⁵ Perhaps, the only exception to this is Gennadios Scholarios (d. ca.1472) who was influenced by the scholasticism of Aquinas but departs from it to discuss the factor of human guilt in original sin and the preservation of the mother of Christ.²⁶

The oldest feast of the Theotokos can be considered to be the *Synaxis* on December 26, the day after Christ's birth. The context of this feast shows the direct connection of understanding the mother of Christ in soteriological terms, and how

²² Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 147: quoting Andrew of Crete, *Homily I on the Holy Nativity of Mary*, PG 97:812A.

²³ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 147-148: quoting Nicholas Cabasilas, *Homily on the Dormition*, 4; PG 19:498.

²⁴ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 147.

²⁵ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 148.

²⁶ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 148.

the identity of Mary relates always to the mystery of Christ. Schememann pointed out:

One would seek in vain for a Mariological treatise in our manuals of dogma. This liturgical veneration [the liturgical texts of the feasts] has, to be sure, been adorned with much piety, symbolism and allegory, and this has led to questions about the biblical character and justification of these forms. Where in the Bible do we find stories about her nativity, her presentation in the Temple, her dormition—all of the principal Mariological celebrations. To this the Orthodox answer is that whatever their poetic, liturgical and hymnographic “expressions,” all these events are *real* in the sense that they are self-evident. Mary was born; as with every pious Jewish girl she was, at some moment of her life, taken into the Temple; and in the end, she died. The fact, therefore, that much of the liturgical expression of these feasts is taken from the Apocrypha does not change or alter their “reality.” It is the ultimate meaning of these events that the Church contemplates, not the poetic elaborations of Byzantine hymns.²⁷

To substantiate the claim that eastern theology about the Theotokos is centrally soteriological, Schememann reminds us of the theological depiction of Mary in iconography where her perpetual reference is toward her Son. Her image is always posed with her Son, or in reference to her Son. He cites the icon, *Our Lady of Vladimir* “to understand that herein there is a wonderful revelation about the central mystery of the Christian faith, as well as the meaning of man, his body, his life, his destiny.”²⁸ The Orthodox will explain that iconography is a category of religious “text” and embodies revelation within it just as the pages of the Bible do. Even the architecture of the Byzantine church has iconographic value, displaying once again the centrality of soteriology, where the Virgin is the human mother who contained the link between God and humanity. Stylianos Harkianakis, the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Australia, showed how Byzantine church architecture represents the Theotokos:

The central role of the Mother of God in the whole plan of salvation corresponds to her depiction in the Byzantine church. In the broad apse

²⁷ Schememann, *Sermons: The Virgin Mary*, 61.

²⁸ Schememann, *Sermons: The Virgin Mary*, 62.

behind the altar is the place where the so-called "Platytera" is represented, i.e., the Mother of God who has already conceived in her womb the Word of the Father, Whom no space can contain. The apse is the part of the church building which unites it with the main representation of the Mother of God, who has similarly united heaven and earth.²⁹

Myrrha Lot-Borodine addressed the issue of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in light of the Eastern Church. Her article points to the main difficulty for Orthodox regarding the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, namely, its relation to soteriology. To them the dogma appears to:

... detach the Theotokos from fallen humanity to which she brings salvation. Mary has been a privileged creature from before birth, a portion of humanity set aside from the outset, but this can be true without recourse to exemption of original sin. In the synergy between human nature and the gift of God, it is Mary's freedom that is at stake. But the difference between East and West lies precisely in the conception of human nature.³⁰

Concerning Mary—in the Orthodox Tradition—as an image of the Church, James Paffhausen suggested that the mother of Christ is the one human person in whom human salvation is fulfilled. She is seen in the Byzantine Tradition as:

... the culmination and fulfillment of the whole history. God gradually brought Israel towards communion with Himself through the giving of the Law, the liturgy of the Temple, and through the Prophets. He was preparing Israel to say Yes, to live in obedience, which is communion in love, with Him. In Mary, in her "yes" to God, this whole history was fulfilled when she responded to the Annunciation of Gabriel.³¹

The key words here are "culmination" and "fulfillment." At Vespers, on the feast of her birth on September 8, we find an *apos-*

²⁹ Stylianos Harkianakis, *The Orthodox Church and Catholicism*, trans. H. L. N. Simmons (Sydney: Australian Council of Churches, 1975), 40.

³⁰ Myrrha Lot-Borodine, "Le dogme de l'Immaculée Conception à la lumière de l'Église d'Orient," *Irenikon* 67/3 (1994): 344.

³¹ James Paffhausen, "Mary in the Orthodox Tradition: Image of the Church," *Ecumenism*, no. 87 (September, 1987): 22.

ticha (brief hymn-response added to the verses from the Psalms at the end of Vespers and Matins) expressing how she represents the "culmination" of salvation, by being the chamber where the rejoining of God and humanity took place:

She is the treasure of virginity, the rod of Aaron springing forth from the root of Jesse, the preaching of the prophets, offshoot of the righteous Joachim and Ann . . . She is the holy Temple, the Receiver of the God-head: the instrument of virginity, the Bridal Chamber of the King, wherein was accomplished the marvelous mystery of the ineffable union of the natures which come together in Christ.³²

In this Orthodox view, Paffhausen states:

Mary's life of love and obedience, without sin, is brought to fulfillment in her exaltation, already having entered into Paradise, as the first fruits of humanity to have seen the Resurrection of the End of the Age. It is for this reason that she is seen as "the All-Holy One [*Panagia*]," her own deification being the very content of salvation, not for herself alone, but for everyone who follows the same path of love and obedience. . . . Mary, as the perfectly fulfilled and deified human person, can be both the focus and source of unity for the Church. Her model of obedience and humility, of her acceptance of the will of God and willingness to carry it out, whatever the cost, without wavering, without sinning, without breaking communion with God—even seeing her own Son crucified and buried—is the model for every Christian.³³

Is this an acceptance of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception? One has to look carefully at the terminology. She is presented as the model of the redeemed one: soteriologically "her own deification" is the schema for the salvation of all. Yes, Mary was without sin but he is not saying "without original sin" or "without original guilt." She is consecrated, given gifts by God, to prepare her for the message of the angel because of her humility and lack of sinning. The well-known eastern hymn *Axion Estin* ("You are most worthy"), that follows Consecration in the Liturgy of St. Basil and St. Chrysostom,

³² Paffhausen, "Mary in the Orthodox Tradition," 23.

³³ Paffhausen, "Mary in the Orthodox Tradition," 24.

describes the Theotokos to be without corruption. As Paffhausen helps us to understand, Theotokos is "honorable" because of her own deification, meant by the phrase "without corruption." She did not fall to mortality but accepted life with God. To quote from the hymn:

More honorable than the cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim, without corruption you gave birth to God the Word, true Theotokos, we magnify you.³⁴

Bishop Kallistos Ware described the title "all holy" as follows:

Orthodoxy understands this title to mean that Mary is free from all actual sin, although she was born subject to the effects of original sin, in common with the other holy men and women of the Old Covenant. Thus the Orthodox Church sees in her the supreme fulfillment of sanctity in a human person—the model and paradigm of what it means, by God's grace, to be authentically human. . . .³⁵

Additionally, he described the Theotokos in terms of Byzantine spirituality that would view Mary as "the model hesychast, a living icon of what it means to practice *hesychia*, stillness of heart. The words of the Psalmist—'Be still, and know that I am God' (Ps. 46:10)—apply exactly to her."³⁶ At the Annunciation, the Theotokos places herself in the stillness of God's presence. She is "an icon of human freedom and liberation. [She] is chosen, but she herself also chooses."³⁷ These are important elements in the patristic understanding of *theosis*.

Bishop Kallistos offered a succinct description of the Virgin Mary in three titles: "'all-holy' (in Greek *Panagia*), 'ever-Virgin' (*Aieparthenos*), and 'Mother of God' (*Theotokos*)."³⁸

³⁴ *Axion Estin (Thou are holy)*, hymn following consecration in the Orthodox Divine Liturgy.

³⁵ Kallistos Ware, *Mary Theotokos in the Orthodox Tradition* (Great Britain: The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1997), 4. This paper had previously appeared in the Orthodox periodical *Epiphany* 9/2, published in San Francisco, and in *Marianum*, no. 140, published in Rome.

³⁶ Ware, *Mary Theotokos*, 13.

³⁷ Ware, *Mary Theotokos*, 14.

³⁸ Ware, *Mary Theotokos*, 4.

Bishop Kallistos concluded his paper by recommending a two-fold understanding:

On the one hand, in her role as Mother of God she may be seen as unique. In all the history of the human race there is only one Incarnation, and so there can only be one Mother of the Incarnate. But, on the other hand, she is also our pattern and exemplar, and we are to perceive not only her uniqueness but [also] what we share in common with her. As the New Eve she expresses our universal humanity.³⁹

Bishop Kallistos further explores the title "All-Holy" (*Panagia*) in a comprehensive investigation of the theology of John of Damascus, the seventh-century homilist and liturgical writer who developed that image extensively.

She is "all-holy" (*panagia*), "pure" (*agnē*), "spotless" or "immaculate" (*achrantos*), "blameless" (*amemptos*), "without blemish" (*amōmos*), "altogether without blemish" (*panamōmos*). "The immaculate Virgin had no converse with earthly passions," John states; "after God, she is truly holy above all others." ". . . after God": here again John confirms the basic principle of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, that she is to be honoured always "*under Christ*."⁴⁰

Again, it is a question of language. To really interpret John's hymns and homilies, it is necessary to probe the linguistics and context of his phraseology. Those phrases can be interpreted, and they were by Catholic theologians, to mean that John of Damascus anticipated the emerging dogma of the Immaculate Conception:

John believes that Mary underwent a special purification and hallowing at the moment of the annunciation, when "the sanctifying power of the Spirit overshadowed, cleansed and consecrated her." But this does not signify that, in John's view, she was sinful prior to the annunciation; on the contrary, he clearly considers that she was *always* pure and guiltless. Moreover, he also states clearly that she was predestined from all eternity

³⁹ Ware, *Mary Theotokos*, 17.

⁴⁰ Kallistos Ware, "The Earthly Heaven': The Mother of God in the Teaching of St. John of Damascus," in *Mary for Earth and Heaven*, eds. William McLoughlin and Jill Pinnock (Leominster: Gracewing, 2002), 359.

to be the Mother of God incarnate: "She was chosen from ancient generations, through the preordained counsel and good pleasure of God the Father. . . . The Father forechose her, the prophets through the Holy Spirit proclaimed her in advance."⁴¹

Patristic studies understand that John of Damascus was not dealing with the concept of "the stain of original sin":

John is certainly convinced that the Holy Virgin was free from all *actual* sin, but he nowhere speaks explicitly of any exemption from the "stain" of *original* sin. He does, however, specify that she bore Christ without enduring the pangs of childbirth due to the fall (Gen. 3:16), which suggests that she was indeed exempt from the effects of the fall. But we must in any case allow for the fact that John's understanding of the fall and of original sin is not the same as that upheld by St. Augustine and normally accepted in the Latin West.⁴²

5. Theosis: "Ground of Union" for Convergence on "Immaculate Conception"

In 1986, at the ESBVM Congress in Chichester, Bishop Kallistos T. Ware and the late Edward Yarnold, S.J., suggested a "search for convergence" between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches on the issue of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.⁴³ Now, in this 150th year of the anniversary of Pope Pius IX's definition of the Immaculate Conception, it is fitting in the ecumenical forum to return to this discussion.

Bishop Kallistos and Father Yarnold raised questions on how the pivotal theological issue of the "mystery of original sin" may affect the convergence in understanding the all-holiness of the Virgin Mary, who is the woman considered by both churches as "an eschatological icon" for all humanity.⁴⁴ They

⁴¹ Ware, "The Earthly Heaven," 359-360.

⁴² Ware, "The Earthly Heaven," 360.

⁴³ Bishop Kallistos T. Ware and Edward Yarnold, S.J., *The Immaculate Conception: A Search for Convergence* (Surrey, England: Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1987), 3. Available through the ESBVM-US website: www.esbvm.org.uk.

⁴⁴ See: *The Homily of the Holy Father John Paul II*, Prairie de la Ribère, August 15, 2004, #6: "Both [the Assumption and Immaculate Conception] proclaim the glory of

suggested three levels to describe "original sin"—"the moral, the physical, the juridical."⁴⁵

Bishop Kallistos stated that there is no disagreement over the first two levels. The third level described the concept of "guilt" inherited from the sin of Adam and Eve: an issue of Mary needing or not needing a remedy for "guilt."

Fr. Yarnold attempted to describe the Catholic thought in Eastern terms. The "lack of original justice," which is, he said, equivalent to the *original sin*, that humans after the Fall come into the world with an empty "hole." The Roman Catholic concept believes God made humans with a "hole" that needs to be filled with God's grace (equivalent to the Eastern term "*theosis*")—a completion that was lost with the original sin. But, he said,

Christ the Redeemer and the holiness of Mary, whose human destiny is even now perfectly and definitively realized in God." See also: Schmemmann, *Sermons: The Virgin Mary*, 66: "She—Mary—is the ultimate 'doxa' of creation, its response to God."

⁴⁵ Ware and Yarnold, *The Immaculate Conception*, 11. As explained on p. 5, the three levels are:

1) "physical consequences: tiredness, illness, bodily pain, and finally physical death";

2) "moral consequences: weakness of will, inability to make any decision at all, doing what we know is wrong when we want to do what is right, moral paralysis";

3) "juridical consequences: original sin is understood in terms of inherited guilt" suggested "particularly by St. Augustine" who believed it was "transmitted through the sexual act."

On these three levels of the discussion of original sin and its effects, Fr. Yarnold indicated there can still be hope for convergence. On page 8, in reference to the first level, Father Yarnold could agree:

But for Mary were death and suffering spiritual problems? It seems to me—though this is really another subject—that just as her Son was tempted, though we do not know psychologically speaking what it meant for him to be tempted, even more it must be true that Mary was liable to temptation. Therefore presumably death and suffering could have been sources of temptation to her. To that extent I think we could say that she shared our fallen nature.

Concerning level two, Fr. Yarnold, on page 8, seems to agree:

If one wants to think of that as a characteristic of fallen nature [the weakness of the will, or the division of the will], then Mary too, it seems to me, should be said to share fallen nature. But let us remember that we are not talking about actual, personal sin; it is not a matter of disagreement between East and West whether Mary personally sinned or not. We are talking about this mysterious entity "original sin."

Mary never experienced this unfilled hole or lack of original justice. Her human nature included a hole always filled with God. He asserted:

What one would want to say in the Western tradition is that for the Blessed Virgin Mary at every age, whether immediately after conception, or at birth, or at the age of thirty or forty, that hole was filled, and she received grace as God wished and as he was able to give it to a human being of that age.⁴⁶

Therefore, Fr. Yarnold suggested, as a possibility, that "*theosis*" is the same as this "God-shaped hole" in the human heart filled with God; meaning that "God made us with the capability of receiving his grace, of receiving (to speak in Eastern terms now) deification."⁴⁷ Regarding the how and why of Mary's all-holiness, Bishop Kallistos responded to Fr. Yarnold that on the third juridical level "... if we [Orthodox and Catholics] do not take an Augustinian view of original guilt, then perhaps the question can remain open," adding that "the whole subject of original sin and inherited guilt is of such obscurity that we should leave open the question of Mary's relationship to it."⁴⁸ He pointed out that Orthodoxy prefers the word "Fall" (*propatorike hamartia*—sin of the forefathers, or "ancestral sin") over the term "original sin," and singled out the issue of inherited "guilt" as most problematic: "By comparison, the Greek Fathers are very tentative and hesitant about the notion of any inherited guilt. . . . We cannot imagine that the Mother of God was subject to the consequences of the Fall as Augustine envisages them."⁴⁹ As an example of Augustine's thinking on "the bond of guilt" inherited as a result of original sin, we look to Augustine's letter to Boniface, written in 408—twenty-two years before his death: "A child having once received natural birth through his parents can be made partaker of the second (or spiritual) birth by the Spirit of God, so that

⁴⁶ Ware and Yarnold, *The Immaculate Conception*, 9.

⁴⁷ Ware and Yarnold, *The Immaculate Conception*, 9.

⁴⁸ Ware and Yarnold, *The Immaculate Conception*, 11.

⁴⁹ Ware and Yarnold, *The Immaculate Conception*, 11.

the bond of guilt which he inherited from his parents is cancelled [through Baptism]."⁵⁰

In reality, the discussion by Bishop Kallistos and Fr. Yarnold on the all-holiness of Virgin Mary is related to soteriology and an understanding of "the Fall." Ecumenists must reexamine earlier interpretations, especially those of the late-medieval period, "if the cause of reconciliation, or even increased understanding, is to be advanced in our time."⁵¹ The need for East and West to look again at the earlier centuries was what John Meyendorff suggested:

In order to find the mutual understanding between Easterners and Westerners once again, we should search today for the fundamental inspiration of these two modes of thought, in a patient dialogue based on the texts. It would then perhaps be possible to delineate with more precision what in the two Christian traditions belongs to the tradition of that church to which all Christians ought to refer back, in order to find once again the unity of the first centuries.⁵²

Theosis is familiar to Eastern thought, and can be offered as a pivotal consideration of soteriology. A. N. Williams suggests this path of consideration:

... deification entails discussion not only of sanctification and theological anthropology generally, but also the doctrines of God and the Trinity, religious knowledge and theological method, [and] it ultimately touches on almost every major branch of Christian doctrine. Because it is so all-encompassing, then, deification provides an excellent locus for the comparison of Eastern and Western theology.⁵³

Jules Gross, in *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers*, presents a systematic tracing of the concept of *theosis*, from the beginnings in Hellenistic philosophical

⁵⁰ St. Augustine of Hippo, "From Augustine to Boniface," in *Letters*, New Advent Fathers, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102098.htm> (24 July 2004).

⁵¹ A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

⁵² John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Hesychasm: Historical, Theological and Social Problems* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1974), as referenced in Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 4, n. 5 (p. 177).

⁵³ Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 7.

thought through a theological employment of the patristic understanding—which importantly delineates a new and Christian embrace of the term. (This was a seminal study for recent works on the subject of deification by A. N. Williams and Emil Bartos.) These works embrace “the goal of contributing to ecumenical dialogue between Eastern and Western theologians by using the doctrine of deification—long neglected but now being studied again in the West—as a useful and mutually acceptable vehicle.”⁵⁴

As an example of those who probe the “ground of union” in the concept of *theosis*, Catherine Mowry LaCugna attributes the theological differences between East and West to be found “in attitudes towards substance metaphysics.”⁵⁵ André de Halleux “more specifically links this ‘mystery of communion between God and humanity’ to the difference between the Platonic basis of the Palamite East and the Aristotelian basis of the scholastic West.”⁵⁶ Other than political and historical factors that caused a chasm of division between East and West, the ecumenical dialogue today suggests that the very theological core of understanding God and the human invitation to return to God appears to be the most cogent question of all, the very issue of “deification” (*theosis*) in Eastern terminology and “salvation” in Western philosophically derived thought.⁵⁷ Ultimately, according to A. N. Williams, the obvious question to ask is whether the theologies of Thomas Aquinas and Palamas are irreconcilable. More broadly, there is the question of whether *theosis* was biblical and patristic.

According to Bishop Maximos Aghiorgoussis, St. Cyril of Alexandria described Christ’s work of once again joining mankind

⁵⁴ Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers* (Anaheim, Calif.: A & C Press, 2002). Originally published as *La divinisation du chrétien d’après les pères grecs: Contribution historique à la doctrine de la grâce* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1938), xvi.

⁵⁵ Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 6.

⁵⁶ Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 6.

⁵⁷ Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 7, citing Yves Congar: “This same soteriology (of Oriental theology) supposes a concept of deification and of the relationship of what we call nature and grace quite different from that which animates the Latin theological construction for the same mysteries. This Latin construction depends on a distinction of nature and grace, whose categories and vocabulary are foreign to Greek Theology.”

with God: "God does this through His Logos who 'became what we are, so that we might become what He is.'"⁵⁸ In one of the best contemporary descriptions of Orthodox perception on deification, representing what the majority of Greek Fathers uphold, Bishop Maximos wrote:

Man's venture, as described in Genesis 2, can be interpreted in two ways. One way is the juridical interpretation proposed by St. Augustine and followed by the Western theological tradition. According to this interpretation, man was the recipient of all kinds of extraordinary "added gifts" which comprised the "original justice" of man. Man transgressed the commandment of God. He offended God and was punished by God with death. . . . The other interpretation of Genesis is that which the majority of Greek Fathers uphold. According to this interpretation, man failed in achieving the purpose of his creation; he failed to achieve his destiny, his *theosis*. He tried to become a "god without God."

. . . Thus, man became wicked "not by necessity, but by his lack of will"; the more he separated himself from authentic existence, the more he found himself in inauthentic existence: "the more he separated himself from life, the more he drew near to death. For God is life, and the loss of life is death."⁵⁹

Returning to the idea of the divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers as explained by Jules Gross, we find a careful exposition that moves from the prelude in Hellenistic philosophy to the patristic theology on "deification." Overall, the author asserts, "Making the most of the biblical facts, along with the resources of their environment, the fathers work out a doctrine of divinization."⁶⁰ Throughout the study, it is seen that most of the Fathers assert that "divinization" is accomplished by Christ, with a growth and maturing nurtured by the Holy Spirit. The purpose of Christ was to bring humanity back in direct union with God, a reality in His own person and in His ultimate sacrifice on the cross, punctuated

⁵⁸ Bishop Maximos Aghiorgeoussis, "Sin in Orthodox Dogmatics," 187, quoting the words of St. Cyril of Alexandria.

⁵⁹ St. Basil on *Original Sin*, cited by Bishop Maximos, "Sin in Orthodox Dogmatics," 182.

⁶⁰ Gross, *The Divinization*, 266.

in the glory of His resurrection. In reflecting on this whole long search, Jules Gross concluded:

This is why the Logos was incarnated. By transmitting divine strength to humanity, He superabundantly gives back to it the deiform life and immortality which were lost. A person will only have to unite with Christ and with His Spirit in order to appropriate these blessings.⁶¹

To understand the Orthodox position on "the Fall," this study by Jules Gross clearly points to the tradition and soteriological theology of patristic thought.

The clear result of our investigation is that from the fourth century the doctrine of divinization is fundamental for the majority of the Greek fathers. It forms a kind of center for their soteriology. The whole redemptive work of Christ, from the incarnation to the resurrection, as well as the action of the Holy Spirit and of the church which continues this work, converge on **deification** as the completion of our salvation.⁶²

The question remains, how do we use the concept of *theosis* to inform us about the Virgin Mary, and in particular, the issue of an "Immaculate Conception"? For the purposes of this paper, we can only sample a few ideas. This is an investigation that affords future, more detailed study and discussion. Overall, it is important to note several factors, demonstrated in the words of the Greek Fathers:

1. that it is only and always the work of Christ to bring about the new "oneness" with God;
2. that deification of humanity implies that "of the essential perfections of divinity, namely, unbegottenness and incorruptibility, only the latter is communicable to creatures",⁶³ and
3. that "the Christian participates by grace in the perfections that God possesses by nature, such as wisdom, impassibility, and love."⁶⁴

⁶¹ Gross, *The Divinization*, 268.

⁶² Gross, *The Divinization*, 271-272 (emphasis added).

⁶³ Gross, *The Divinization*, 272.

⁶⁴ Gross, *The Divinization*, 272.

At best, in this space, we can only excerpt some of the aspects of an understanding of *theosis* that can apply to the Theotokos, a young woman born into the world as all other humans, according to Orthodox thought. It may be helpful to quickly review some of these aspects.

a. The Scriptures

Beginning with Irenaeus, many concluded from the account in Genesis that Adam and Eve experienced a "certain deification . . . distinguishing between image [εἰκὼν] and likeness [ὁμοίωσις], they understood this latter item in the sense of a more perfect similarity, which would surpass by far what humankind possess in their nature."⁶⁵ The center of their act involved "obedience." Adam and Eve were to grow in the garden, via "obedience." Let us pause and remember the biblical centrality of Virgin Mary's "obedience."

The idea of "divine filiation" or being called a "son of God" is a critical phrase in the Old Testament, where the king (i.e. Solomon) is called a "son of God (2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13; 22:9; 27; 28:6)." However, "the analogy of divine filiation [in the Hebrew Scriptures] seems to express a rather external relationship, a favor which, as its principal goal, assures the salvation of the Jewish nation and thereby the triumph of its God."⁶⁶ It should be noted here that the "favor," perhaps called divine daughter-ship in Mary as described by the Catholic dogma, is not "external" where Christ is the one who fulfills the image to a likeness in God, through the nurturing gift of the Holy Spirit.

Whereas in the present life the divine filiation of the righteous seems to be of a purely moral nature, it blossoms out in the hereafter in this way: it even makes the separated soul actually participate in the specifically divine properties of blessed immortality, power, and glory. Is this not a genuine deification of the soul—even though it is not so described [in the Old Testament]—to the entire extent in which its position as creature, which, of course, never disappears, allows?⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Gross, *The Divinization*, 61–62.

⁶⁶ Gross, *The Divinization*, 66.

⁶⁷ Gross, *The Divinization*, 68.

In the context of the Old Testament, we find a way we should regard the Virgin Mary—anthropologically fully Hebrew—at her encounter with God's messenger at the Annunciation.

In the New Testament, we find, especially in the Synoptics, that human beings who "have been estranged from God by sin, must first renounce this by μετάνοια [*metanoia*], that is, by a profound change of heart that includes the loathing of evil and the confident return to God [Luke 15:11-32 on the parable of the prodigal son, and Luke 18:9-14 on the Pharisee and the publican]."⁶⁸ Can we see in the Virgin Mary a young woman who yearned for the return to God? "The righteous 'will shine [in eternal life] as the sun'" [Matthew 13:43, according to Daniel 12:3].⁶⁹ This may bring to mind the tradition of Theotokos of Protection at Blachernae who, according to the legend, appeared at the church's altar in a flash of lightning and bright light (with John the Baptist at her side).⁷⁰

In the Gospel of John, "the analogies of the 'light' and the 'life,' which characterize" his "theodicy," also govern his "soteriology." And, "since the fall of Adam, human beings have been plunged into 'darkness,' that is, 'into evil,' 'because their deeds were evil.' They were also 'in death,' in the grip of divine wrath, and under the rule of Satan."⁷¹

"By His incarnation the 'Logos of life' becomes the source of divine and eternal life for people, 'the bread of life,' and 'the true vine,' who imparts His sap to those who are joined to Him."⁷² If this is the soteriology John the Evangelist envisions, then Christ's mother may have been unified with the Logos at His conception, further flooded with Divine Love for her own *theosis* in the Holy Spirit. Some of the Greek fathers will prefer "to develop the Johannine idea of the Logos as the incarnated source of the divine life," and they will "insist on the incarnation as the principle of our divinization."⁷³

⁶⁸ Gross, *The Divinization*, 81.

⁶⁹ Gross, *The Divinization*, 81.

⁷⁰ In the *synaxarion* account of the event at Blachernae, the Theotokos appears in a blinding light and then appears with John the Baptist at her side.

⁷¹ Gross, *The Divinization*, 88. See John 1:5; 3:19; 5:24.

⁷² Gross, *The Divinization*, 88-89.

⁷³ Gross, *The Divinization*, 92.

The work of Christ in restoring “newness of life” in the “new creation” is clearly demonstrated in the writings of Paul. Those who are saved must be “buried with Him by baptism into His death” and “grafted onto Him,” so that being “set free from sin (Romans 6:1-10)” and “saved by the washing of regeneration (Titus 3:5),” he or she may live “to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11).” If the New Testament sees union with Christ as the means of salvation, we can understand why Athanasius finds the Annunciation so important a beginning, where only the Logos was able to restore the image in fallen humankind. The Orthodox ask, “Why would the Virgin Mary be outside this plan of Christ’s work set in action by God from the beginning?”

b. Irenaeus

For Irenaeus, there is a constant reference to the phrase that humanity was created “according to the image and likeness of God” (εἰκὼν and ομοίωσις). For him, the terms are nearly synonyms. When he describes salvation, he paints a picture that could easily form a paradigm for the relationship between the Virgin Mary and God at the Annunciation:

So this means that this Word was revealed when the Word of God became human, being Himself assimilated to humankind and assimilating humankind to Himself. And this was in order that the humankind might become more dear to the Father, due to their likeness with the Son. In the past, it was indeed said that humankind was made in the image of God, but this was not manifest. Actually, the Word was still invisible by whose image humankind had been made. This is why they easily lost the similitude [ομοίωσιν]. But when the Word of God became flesh, He strengthened both, because He revealed the true image by becoming Himself what was His image, and He firmly restored the similitude by making them with Himself like [συνεξομοιώσας] the invisible Father, through the visible Word.⁷⁴

There is much to reflect upon here in terms of *theosis*. Irenaeus is saying that humanity did not lose its εἰκὼν through the

⁷⁴ Gross, *The Divinization*, 123. Reference to St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* [*Against Heresies*], 5.16.2.

Fall "any more than they lost the human nature; the ομοίωσις, on the contrary, was erased by the sin of Adam."⁷⁵ The terms "image" and "likeness" for Irenaeus were not as precise as in the thinking of later fathers, but the issue is to see the importance of the Incarnation and the work of Christ. The method of union with Christ and His Spirit "takes place through faith, love, and the customary practice of sacraments, such as baptism and the Eucharist."⁷⁶ This is the way, according to Irenaeus, that God works.

c. Methodius

Methodius had the same understanding that it is Christ who brings human nature back "to what it was at the beginning before falling—to immortality."⁷⁷ Again, we have a good schema to reflect on the Virgin Mary and her salvation at the Annunciation:

Christ became exactly what Adam was, because upon this one has come the Logos who is before the ages. Indeed, it was right that the Firstborn of God, His first offspring, His Monogene, His Wisdom, mingling with the protoplast, the first and the firstborn of humankind, became human. . . . So therefore God, taking up again His work of the beginning and re-forming it once again with the Virgin and with the Spirit, fashions the same [being], just as at the beginning, when the earth was virgin and not yet plowed.⁷⁸

d. Athanasius

It is Christ who fashions "with the Virgin and with the Spirit" the new Adam, the new creation. Perhaps, we can argue that the Virgin Mary's deification comes with her contact with God in her flesh, or in reception of the nurturance of the Spirit, but the mechanism of salvation appears here to be exclusively

⁷⁵ Gross, *The Divinization*, 123.

⁷⁶ Gross, *The Divinization*, 126.

⁷⁷ Gross, *The Divinization*, 156.

⁷⁸ Gross, *The Divinization*, 156. Reference to St. Methodius, *Symposium [Banquet of the Ten Virgins]*, 3.4.

begun with Christ's union with the flesh of Adam. For Athanasius, the intimate contact of God with the human in the womb of Mary is the mechanism of deification:

This is why the contact [συναφή] was thus made, in order that the human nature might be united with the divine nature and that the salvation and deification [Θεοποίησις] of the former might be assured.⁷⁹

Also, Athanasius says that Christ assumes human nature in the Holy Spirit. We see in his words an exegesis of the Lukan passage that some have utilized to say that the descent of the Holy Spirit purified the Virgin Mary. To Athanasius, it is the operative of Incarnation: "When the Logos descended into the holy virgin Mary, the Spirit came into her at the same time, and it is in the Spirit that the Logos developed and adapted His body, wanting through Himself to unite and offer the creation to the Father."⁸⁰ We have to assume from his analysis that Mary's deification will proceed the same as for all humanity. It will be her bearing of the Logos that directly offers her the contact with the body of Christ, thus initiating her *theosis*.

e. Gregory of Nyssa

For Gregory of Nyssa, "the immutable takes residence in the mutable."⁸¹ From the divine heights, God "mingled with our nature in order that, by virtue of its mingling with the divine, our nature might become divine."⁸² The "apogee of Greek doctrine" takes place in the thought of the Cappadocians. Gregory of Nazianzus uses the word *theopoiesis*. The incarnation "is a remote cause of the redemption, insofar as it allows the Savior to give in ransom body for body, soul for soul."⁸³

⁷⁹ Gross, *The Divinization*, 167. Reference to St. Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos* [*Orations against the Arians*], 1.70.

⁸⁰ Gross, *The Divinization*, 170. Reference to St. Athanasius, *Ep. Serap.* [*Letters to Serapion concerning the Holy Spirit*], 1.31.

⁸¹ Gross, *The Divinization*, 183. Reference to Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* [*Against Eunomius*], 51.

⁸² Gross, *The Divinization*, 182. Reference to St. Gregory's *Or. Catech.* [*Great Catechism*], 25.

⁸³ Gross, *The Divinization*, 196.

f. The School of Alexandria

Didymus the Blind, in describing the deifying power of the union of Christ with humanity, gives us a thought that those who have been "intimately united with God by virtue, do not die as human beings, having in them the living God, [and they also] are 'children of the Most High.'"⁸⁴ If we apply this to the Virgin Mary, she was indeed "intimately united with God" at the Incarnation and did not die to sin, but had within her the living God.

"The fathers who in the fourth century embody the doctrinal movement called the school of Alexandria all bear witness to the existence and vitality in the Greek church of the idea that the Christian is deified."⁸⁵ In this context, as in Didymus, we come to understand the meaning of such terms as "incorruptibility."

Incorruptibility, in which lies the main element of our divinization, is assured to us from this life on due to the inhabitation of the Trinity in our souls, but it will only become effective in the other world. After the dissolution of "this house of the dense body, the soul is transported to the heavenly region, called eternal home, not made by human hands." It will nevertheless regain its body, which will become "heavenly" and "spiritual."⁸⁶

How well this description fits the profile of the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation and at her Dormition, where her soul is seen iconographically borne by Christ.

g. The School of Antioch

The School of Antioch was different in its regard for divinization, compared to the mysticism and allegory of the Alexandrians. "Nonetheless, the theme of *theopoesis* is found again with the latter as the essential base underlying the biblical analogies of the divine likeness and filiation."⁸⁷ Let us consider a few examples.

⁸⁴ Gross, *The Divinization*, 198.

⁸⁵ Gross, *The Divinization*, 199.

⁸⁶ Gross, *The Divinization*, 199.

⁸⁷ Gross, *The Divinization*, 200.

1) St. John Chrysostom

Here is the peak of highest virtue and what helps arrive at the very summit of benefits: to make ourselves like God as much as is possible for us [τὸ πρὸς Θεὸν ὁμοιωθῆναι, κατὰ τὸ ἐγγχωροῦν ἡμῖν].⁸⁸

Love is the root of the "benefits" because love is what humans have in common with God, and all virtues, as well, are inferior to love.

2) Theodore of Mopsuestia

Although Theodore and Theodoret held "views on divinization . . . irreparably compromised by an erroneous Christology,"⁸⁹ we find the continuing thought that salvation is accomplished only through Christ and is manifested in the Virgin Mary as in a container. Theodore describes deification: "This is by virtue of God the Word who dwells in Christ as in a temple and makes Him both the type and agent of our immortalization."⁹⁰ And Theodoret gives us an idea of *theopotesis*, inspired by Gregory of Nazianzus, that we can find interesting in relationship to the Virgin Mary:

Indeed He intercedes also as a human being and even now, for my salvation. This is because He is with the body which He assumed in order to make me god (ἕως ἄν ἐμὲ ποιήσῃ Θεόν) by the power of His incarnation, although He is no longer seen according to the flesh.⁹¹

Perhaps, we can see here "immortalization" for the Virgin when she becomes the vessel of Christ at the Annunciation.

3) St. Cyril of Alexandria

There is no doubt that St. Cyril, like his forerunner St. Athanasius, is "the doctor whose authority was the most

⁸⁸ Gross, *The Divinization*, 205. Reference to St. John Chrysostom, *Expositiones in Psalmos quosdam* [*Expositions on Certain Psalms*], 134.7.

⁸⁹ Gross, *The Divinization*, 216.

⁹⁰ Gross, *The Divinization*, 210.

⁹¹ Gross, *The Divinization*, 215. Reference to Theodoret of Cyrhus, *Eranistes* [*Dialogues*], 2.

decisive for the definition of Christian doctrine.”⁹² Cyril identifies two natures where all creation owes its existence to the Logos. In this reference, the question to ask here is how “privileges” granted to Mary by God would be related to the work of the Logos. According to St. Cyril, redemption is essentially:

[the] “restoration of the ancient beauty of nature” [τὸ ἀρχαῖον τῆς φύσεως ἀνακομισάμενοι κάλλος], an elevation “because of Christ to the high position above nature” [εἰς τὸ ὑπὲρ φύσιν ἀζίζωμα], namely, the adoptive divine filiation, which merits for us the titles *children of God*, even *god*, according to Psalms 82.”⁹³

In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Cyril sees that it is “in the incarnation that this communication of divine life, which defies human nature, is carried out,” and it is “a deification by contact.”⁹⁴

Cyril is brought to a very important question in a dialogue on the Trinity. In saving humanity, does God just bestow unseen graces or is there a union forged with God?

We are called, and we are, temples of God, and even gods. Why? Question the adversaries whether we actually partake only of a grace, bare and devoid of hypostasis [εἴπερ ἔσεν ἀληθῶς φιλῆς καὶ ἀνυποστάτου χάριτος μέτοχοι]. But it is not so. For we are temples of the Spirit, who exists and subsists; because of Him, we are also called gods insofar as, by our union with Him, we have entered into communion with the divine and ineffable nature. If the Spirit who deifies [θεοποιεῖν] us through Himself is actually foreign and separate, as to essence, from the divine nature, then we have been defrauded of our hope, assuming for ourselves who knows what vain glory.⁹⁵

⁹² Gross, *The Divinization*, 219. “In the vast domain of being, Cyril, in his turn, distinguishes ‘two natures’: the uncreated nature, ‘incorruptible and indestructible by essence [ἄφθαρτον καὶ ἀνώλεθρον οὐσιωδῶς],’ and the created nature, ‘necessarily subject to corruption’ and to the return to its origin, which is nothingness.”

⁹³ Gross, *The Divinization*, 222, citing *Comm. Jo. [Commentary on John]*, 1.12, with reference also to *Fragmenta commentarii in Lc. 5.19 [Commentary on Luke, fragments]*.

⁹⁴ Gross, *The Divinization*, 223.

⁹⁵ Gross, *The Divinization*, 230. Reference to Cyril of Alexandria, *De Trinitate Dialogi [Dialogues on the Trinity]*, 7.

4) *John of Damascus*

John of Damascus in the ninth century "presents the deification of the Christian as a return to original perfection."⁹⁶ Using the physical theory of divinization, John of Damascus describes a soteriological event in Christ where human nature is ignited like molten iron.

We were really sanctified when [ἀφ' οὗ] the Logos-god became flesh, having been likened to us in everything except sin, when He was mingled with our nature without confusion, and when, without changing it [ἀμεταβλήτως], He deified [ἐθέωσε] the flesh by the mutual penetration [περιχώρησις], without fusion, of His divinity and His flesh.⁹⁷

What can we say of the mystery at the Annunciation and what the Virgin's physical contact with God and associated filling with the Holy Spirit fully wrought in her? John of Damascus did not mean to imply that "a real deification of all individuals is due to the very fact of the incarnation" and the "divinization of the human nature which results from the incarnation is thus by no means a deification of persons."⁹⁸ It is an imitation of Christ and his assimilation of natures that makes the sacraments necessary.

Conclusion

In the work of A. N. Williams that seems so relevant to this topic, she concludes:

East and West may thus be said to make different uses of the idea of **theosis**, but this study indicates that at least until the Middle Ages, one cannot characterize the differences between East and West as deriving from two wholly divergent conceptions of either divinization or sanctification, broadly speaking, and there is increasing reason to believe such a divide cannot even be asserted before the Enlightenment.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Gross, *The Divinization*, 256.

⁹⁷ Gross, *The Divinization*, 260. Reference to John of Damascus, *De Sacris Imaginibus orationes* [*Orations on the Sacred Images*], 1.21.

⁹⁸ Gross, *The Divinization*, 260-261.

⁹⁹ Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 174.

It can be demonstrated, as Williams has done, that in Aquinas and Palamas there is nothing that is in "diametrical opposition," although they are divergent in some ways in philosophical base and language.¹⁰⁰ Jules Gross concluded his study with a citation from Gregory of Nyssa, inspiring us to reflect further on the possibility of the Virgin Mary's experience of *theosis* as a way to approach convergence on the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception:

Humankind transcend their own nature: from mortal they become immortal; from perishable, imperishable; from fleeting, eternal; in a word, from human beings they become gods. Indeed, made worthy of becoming children of God, they will have in themselves the dignity of the Father, enriched with all the paternal benefits. O munificence of the Lord most rich! . . . How great are the gifts of unutterable treasures!¹⁰¹

Therefore, in this context, we see a patristic meaning in the *Axion Estin*, "without corruption you gave birth to God the Word, true Theotokos, we magnify you."¹⁰² In her bearing of Christ—"true Theotokos," God-trusting and faithful young Miryam of Nazareth experienced direct contact with Christ, an integral aspect of *theosis*. The how and the when are a mystery. But regarding the liturgical texts in patristic language provides a way to understand the mother of Christ as "most pure." In hoping for a convergence on the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, we should explore the patristic soteriology, the context of liturgical texts from the patristic period, and the ways *theosis* may have been understood from the early ages. Thereby, a path to convergence is suggested by the East in reflection on the Fall and reflection on the mystery of *Panagia*, the all holy one.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 175.

¹⁰¹ Gross, *The Divinization*, 273. Reference to Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Beatitudes*, 7.

¹⁰² Paffhausen, "Mary in the Orthodox Tradition," 22.