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THE LIFE OF MARY AND THE FESTAL ICONS OF THE EASTERN CHURCH

*Dorian Llywelyn, S.J.**

The simple words “the life of Mary,” like most Marian realities, are polyvalent. They may refer variously to the historical life of the mother of Jesus, or to the many biographies of Mary, beginning with the *Protoevangelium*. In a more extended fashion, the phrase also describes the various ways in which believers discover Mary to be a living presence in the Church and the world. As I will use it here, “the life of Mary” refers primarily to those episodes from the Gospels, the *Protoevangelium*, and the *Transitus Mariae* traditions in which the Virgin Mary figures prominently and which provide an important part of the textual background for seven classical icons. These icons are themselves the visual expression of seven of the twelve Great Feasts of the liturgical calendars of the Eastern Churches.

Icon and Incarnation

In Eastern Christianity, Marian icons are of immense importance—psychological, cultural, national as well as religious.¹ The Mother of God is prayed to in and through her icons, which are kissed, censed, processed, anointed, and experienced as being an active and caring presence in the lives of believers. There exists an intimate semiological connection

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¹ Daniel Rancour-Laferrrière, *The Joy of All Who Sorrow: Icons of the Mother of God in Russia* (Moscow: Ladomir, 2005), provides an account of the importance of Marian icons in Russian religious psychology.

between the icon and the person of Mary. In different but connected modalities, both derive from and participate in a cosmic dispensation that has been transformed by the central event of the Incarnation. The confirmation of Mary as Theotokos at the Council of Ephesus in 351 AD was a matter of Christological orthodoxy, and formed an important stage in the development of the answer to what Jaroslav Pelikan describes as "the most important intellectual struggle of the first five centuries of Christian history,"² over whether Jesus' divinity was of the same kind and intensity as the Father's. The very title Theotokos, St. John of Damascus affirmed, "expresses the whole mystery of the economy. If she who gave birth is the Mother of God, then He who was born of her is definitely God and also definitely man."³

Christological questions also lay at the heart of the iconoclastic controversies. Over the course of the eighth and ninth centuries the Byzantine Empire was roiled by a series of theological and political crises that led to the massive destruction of images of Christ, Mary and the saints, and punitive restrictions on the use of all religious imagery. To St. John of Damascus is attributed the classical justification of *iconodulia*, which makes a direct connection between the Incarnation and the visual representation of Christ. In its most simplified form, the argument runs that since in Jesus, God takes on a material body, it is legitimate to make images of Jesus—and therefore of the Mother of God and all the saints. St. John of Damascus proclaims that he is "emboldened to depict the invisible God, not as invisible, but as he became visible for our sake . . . I do not depict the invisible divinity, but . . . God made visible in the flesh."⁴ Refuting the accusation that those who venerated icons were breaching the scriptural injunctions against idolatry, he replies "I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner

² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 32.

³ St. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 3, 12, in Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Epiphany: A Theological Introduction to Catholicism* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996), 241.

⁴ St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 22.

of matter, who became matter for my sake, and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked out my salvation ... I hold in respect that with which my salvation came, because it is filled with divine energy and grace."⁵

The rejection of images, according to Steven Bigham, had "implied a weakening or even a denial of the Incarnation itself."⁶ The practice of *iconodulia* functions symbolically as a dense affirmation of the whole of Christian truth. In the calendar of the Eastern Churches, the first Sunday of Lent celebrates the end of iconoclasm and is referred to as the feast of "the Triumph of Orthodoxy." At that liturgy are read the decrees of the Synod of Constantinople of 842, which anathematize Arians, Monophysites, Nestorians, and other heretics. Importantly, the hymn for the feast, in addressing the Theotokos, proclaims that "No-one could describe the Word of the Father, but when he took flesh from you, O Theotokos, He consented to be described."⁷ With this poetic phrase, it is implied that since Mary's maternity brings spiritual reality into the world of matter, the Theotokos is metaphorically the "iconographer" of the "image (*eikon*) of the Father" (Heb 1:13).

Divine Presence

It is important to note that strictly speaking icons are not "art" in a post-Enlightenment aesthetical sense, not even "religious art." The true place of the icon is the church and the home, not the art museum. An icon, technically, is "written" (*graphein*), not painted. It is a form of visual theology that belongs in the epistemic domain of Scripture, doxology, liturgy and sacrament. The hymns of the festal cycle frequently employ the word "today" in celebrating the feast: "*today* the Virgin gives birth." The "Cherubic Hymn" of the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom reminds worshipers that we "mystically represent the cherubim." In its earthly worship, the Church is joined with

⁵ St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises*, 29.

⁶ Stéphane Bigham, *Early Christian Attitudes toward Images* (Rollingsford, N.H.: Orthodox Research Institute, 2004), 18.

⁷ Léonide Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 31.

the eternal worship of the angels. The icon may be conceived of as a material "here" akin to the verbal "today" of the liturgy, a presence of the eternal world in the temporal one.

St. John of Damascus's defense of the veneration of icons built on the insights of St. Basil the Great and St. Athanasius.⁸ While accepting the distinction between the sign and what it signifies, these Fathers also taught that there is also an analogical unity between them. It is due to this, as Basil argues in his *Treatise on the Holy Spirit* that the "honor paid to the image passes on to the prototype."⁹ In venerating an icon, we venerate the person or the event that it represents. Understood this way, an image of Christ or Mary or the saints is conceived of as "a vessel that contains and participates in divine reality, rather than standing in as a mere representation of it."¹⁰ This Eastern Christian emphasis is rather stronger than its Western Catholic equivalent in the degree of divine presence attributed to a religious image. The doctrinal defense of religious imagery made at Session 25 of the Council of Trent understood images to be primarily didactical and devotional in purpose, that is, they are a one-way conduit that channels and focuses prayer.¹¹

Nevertheless, in the West, popular religiosity has been less reticent in its attitudes towards images. Robert Orsi claims "encounters with images of the Virgin are encounters with presence." Orsi goes on to say that space between image and viewer is "an imaginative opening for need, fantasy, desire."¹² In contrast, in the mindset of Eastern Christianity, icons of the

⁸ See Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). Also, Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icône, Économie: Les Sources Byzantines de l'imaginaire contemporain* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996), ch. 2.

⁹ St. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 18:45, in Robin Margaret Jensen, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 104.

¹⁰ Thomas Lucas, "Virtual Vessels, Mystical Signs: Contemplating Mary's Images in the Jesuit Tradition," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 35 (November 2003): 5.

¹¹ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. and trans. Norman Tanner (2 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2:774-6.

¹² Robert Orsi, "The Many Names of the Mother of God," in *Divine Mirrors: The Virgin Mary in the Visual Arts*, ed. Melissa R. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4-5.

Theotokos provide a true, spiritual encounter. Bigham refers to iconography as a "mystical" art,¹³ a description which suggests both knowing and unknowing. The icon places itself between the person or scene depicted and the viewer: it is a window on to truth which facilitates human intimacy with God. It is, in the striking description of Paul Evdokimov, "the last arrow of human eros shot at the heart of the mystery."¹⁴

In its representational technique—light and shade, color, arrangements of forms—Eastern iconography gradually discovered a way of rendering in a rich symbolic system the intuition of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12 that this side of the *eschaton* we perceive reality as "in a glass darkly." The icon's artistic grammar connotes a transcendent reality which can be glimpsed, though never fully apprehended, with the eyes of faith. It presents the world not phenotypically, but in its true, inspirited form. Buildings and cities are compacted. Rocks split apart and bend at the presence of their creator. The iconic body is frequently ascetically etiolated, hardly touching the earth. In an antithesis of carnality, images of the saints show them to live in an almost-angelic form, generally, the mystery of their transfiguration only hinted at by flashes of light emanating from the folds of the garments in which their bodies are hidden. Multiple images of the same person occurring in the same image and chronologically impossible coincidences of events indicate that in the divine domain all salvific events are present at all times. The icon thus questions our perception, and shows the world to be pneumatophoric, pregnant with spiritual reality.

Images of Mary, Images of the Church

Iconography aims at condensing a wealth of theological truths into a single image. The Marian icons provide a visual Mariology that expresses and complements what is prayed in the Church's liturgy. Since images both reflect and shape faith,

¹³ Steven Bigham, *Heroes of the Icon* (Torrance, Calif.: Oakwood Publ., 1998), 69-71.

¹⁴ Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. Steven Bigham (Torrance, Calif.: Oakwood Publ., 1989), 236.

the iconographer assumes a grave ecclesial responsibility. St. Gregory the Theologian affirms that the iconographer is the greatest teacher of Christianity.¹⁵ Inspiration and creativity are necessarily present in the work of an iconographer, yet it should be devoid of ego. Artistic freedom is expressed within an iconographic canon and gained through humble fidelity to it. This attitude reverses the Western Romantic relationship between what is represented and who represents it, effectively dethroning the idealization of the subjective. Thomas Merton writes that the iconographer should open our eyes to the great eternal world.¹⁶ The icon is a visual anamnesis akin to the sacramental anamnesis of the Divine Liturgy. In reminding us, it becomes a channel of grace that brings the viewer into a world where all is sober, purified, restrained, watchful, recollected. A bright sadness typifies the face of the Theotokos of the icon, and her hieratic solemnity contrasts strikingly with the smiling Madonnas of Catholic art.

In the hemispheric dome of the apse of many Eastern churches is a large icon called the "Virgin of the Sign."¹⁷ The infant Emmanuel is represented on Mary's chest within a circular medallion that signifies her womb. Mary is portrayed with her arms uplifted in the *orans* gesture of prayer, echoing the posture of Jesus (whose right hand conveys a blessing) and simultaneously evoking a chalice. This gesture and the placement of the icon are fully intentional: analogously to the way that the incarnate Word proceeds from the womb of the Mother of God into the world, the body and blood of Christ are brought out from the sanctuary immediately below the icon of the Virgin of the Sign.

Eastern piety conceives of the iconostasis, the large icon screen between the nave and the sanctuary as connecting the

¹⁵ In Michel Quenot, *The Resurrection and the Icon*, trans. Michael Breck (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 64.

¹⁶ See Jim Forest, "Thomas Merton and the Christ of the Byzantine Icons" <http://incommunion.org/forest-flir/jimessays/merton-and-byzantine-icons/>. Accessed August 15, 2009.

¹⁷ A reference to Is 7:14. The Greek name of the icon is *Platytera* ("more spacious"), from the hymn "In you rejoices all creation" of the Liturgy of St. Basil, which lauds the fact that the womb of Mary contains the fullness of God, whom "the heavens cannot contain."

divine and the human domains. On the iconostasis are represented the mysteries which are made present in the liturgy. In its most developed form, an iconostasis may consist of several rows of icons, one complete row of which will typically be dedicated to festal icons, seven of which feature the Mother of God. In the celebration of the Marian feasts, the mysteries of the life of Mary are brought into the lives of believers.

The Nativity of the Theotokos

Both the liturgical texts and the icon of the feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos draw upon the *Protoevangelium*, which in its turn has to be read as a palimpsest on which the Old Testament is clearly visible. The birth of Mary is to be interpreted by looking backwards at the series of miraculous births of the Old Testament. Proleptically, it invokes the births of John the Baptist (the last of the miracle births) and Jesus, the inauguration of the long-awaited Messianic era begins. As an annunciation of the Annunciation, the birth of the Mother of God already bespeaks the Incarnation.

In the icon, Anna reclines on a bed, having just given birth to Mary. The scene is an interior in the city of Jerusalem. Sumptuous furnishings and the presence of servants suggest Mary's high Davidic ancestry. On the right of some variants of the icon we find Joachim, pointing towards Anna, his body slightly inclined, indicating the fact of the birth and the appropriate, reverent attitude towards it.

Visual elements that reoccur in different icons serve to point out theological connections between chronologically separate events. At the bottom corner of this icon, midwives bathe the infant Mary in a bowl reminiscent of a baptismal piscina. At this beginning of the festal cycle, the infant Mary is shown as wrapped in swaddling clothes that suggest Jesus' clothing both at his birth and in the tomb. The arrangement of the cloth around her head sometimes intimates the *maphorion* (the veil of an adult Byzantine matron), Mary's invariable clothing in Eastern iconography. The motif also directly foreshadows the guise in which we will find the Virgin at her Dormition, adumbrating the whole trajectory of the life of Mary. Along with intimations of death, resurrection is also present in the event, for

vespers for the feast proclaim that "the soil which formerly was barren gives birth to fertile ground, and nourishes with milk the holy fruit sprung from the sterile womb."¹⁸ Mary's birth presages the new life that will arise from the tomb.

The Entry of The Holy Virgin in the Temple

The Entry of the Holy Virgin into the Temple—whose source is Chapters 7 to 9 of the *Protoevangelium*—forms, according to Sergei Bulgakov, "the boundary between the Old and New Testaments, for it fulfills and concludes the former and inaugurates the latter."¹⁹ The scenes of the icon take place in the rebuilt temple of Zerubbabel, the less glorious replacement for the Salomonic temple. According to the Babylonian Talmud, among the things of the first temple that the second temple no longer contained were the Ark of the Covenant and the Shekinah.²⁰ Within the precincts of the temple, the prefiguration of the Church, the preparation for the Incarnation will take place. Christ, prefigured in the Shekinah, the cloudy and brilliant glory of the Lord of 1 Kings 10:8-13, will come to replace the temple of stone. By the same token, Mary will be the ark who contains the Word and the new covenant, Jesus.

The icon is redolent of liturgical and sacramental atmosphere. The entry is shown as a liturgical procession, the dynamism of which is reflected in the two scenes which the icon contains. In the foreground we find the three-year old Mary. The infant Mary is portrayed as being a perfected person. Small but not childlike in its proportions, she is dressed in the *maphorion*. Iconographically, she is already the Mother of God. Zechariah stands dressed in priestly robes, on the steps at the entrance to the Holy, the second court of the temple. Behind Mary are Joachim and Anna and a procession of young girls with lit tapers and heads uncovered (a resonance of Psalm 45:11).

¹⁸ *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 99.

¹⁹ Sergei Bulgakov, *Churchly Joy: Orthodox Devotions for the Church Year*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 16.

²⁰ Robert B. Hughes and J. Carl Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 373.

Mary is marked out as something more than a temple virgin. Since Zechariah recognizes her as the living Ark, Mary is allowed to pass into the Holy, and from there, to enter fully into the presence of God.

From the time of Origen's exegesis of the Song of Songs onwards, the patristic tradition interpreted the three courts of the Solomonic temple as allegories of the three stages of the spiritual life, to each court corresponds one of the three books associated with Solomon—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. The first court of the temple is a type of the active life, the aim of which is *apatheia*, freedom from passions. The Holy, into which Mary is about to enter, is analogous to *physike theoria*—the knowledge of God found in creation. Grace is required to penetrate into the final stage, beyond the temple veil. The Song of Songs, according to St Gregory of Nyssa, is the expression of *theologia*, the contemplative life that "introduces the soul into the divine sanctuaries."²¹ Accordingly, we see in the upper part of the icon, a second representation of Mary, now seated under a baldachino representing the Holy of Holies, where angels feed her. In the years between Mary's entry into the temple and the Annunciation, the one who will suckle the one who is the Bread of Life is nourished with the bread of heaven. The coming Incarnation already speaks of Church and Eucharist.

The Nativity of the Lord

Reading festal icons deeply requires the aid of scripture, liturgical texts and a familiarity with patristic homiletics. Yet the theological grammar of many icons is also subtly disclosed internally, by an underlying geometric framework that reflects the beauty, order, and rationality of God's dispensation. Andrei Rublev's masterwork, the *Hospitality of Abraham*, portrays the mysterious angelic visitation of Genesis 13 and evokes the economy of the Trinity. Not immediately evident is the fact that the icon of the three figures seated around three sides of a table is structured on a complex grid of hexagons, pentagons, golden ratios, mandorlas, crosses, and arcs, but especially

²¹ In Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 156.

circles and triangles, which represent the eternity of God and the Trinity.²² By its cruciform geometry, the icon of the Nativity of Christ subtly evokes the *kenosis* of the Logos. An implied vertical line descends from the star that stands at the top center of the icon and passes through the dark cave which occupies the center of the icon and which represents the unredeemed cosmos. In the darkness the Light of the World is laid in a box-like manger that suggests a tomb, and wrapped in swaddling clothes that foretell his burial cloths.

Icons establish a direct correspondence between the proportions or placement of a figure and their theological significance. In the center of this icon we find Mary, the largest figure by far, resting at the same oblique angle at which Anna was portrayed at her birth, and lying on a bed of the kind used for traveling. Her *maphorion* is decorated with the traditional three stars, which signify her virginity *pre, in* and *post partum*. Her head touches the transverse beam of the underlying, implied cross, which is marked out by the contours of the natural world, represented by stylized rocks and hills.

Many elements in Marian iconography derive from the Akathist. Brian Daley notes that by the time of the hymn's composition at the end of the fifth century or so, "Mary had come to be evoked with a kind of ecstatic wonderment as the fulfillment of a whole range of typological figures from the Bible . . . [I]n sacred iconography and the *Hymnos Akathistos* she was majestic queen, patron of her people."²³ Although the Akathist lauds Mary as having given birth "ineffably"²⁴ while the matins for the Feast of the Nativity describes Mary's birth-giving as "in fashion past nature,"²⁵ her recumbent posture in the icon also suggests labor. In some versions, Mary looks directly at the child, suggesting her real maternal love. In other

²² See Guillem Ramos-Poquí, *The Technique of Icon Painting* (London: Burns and Oates, 1990), 62.

²³ Brian E. Daley, S.J., "At the Hour of our Death': Mary's Dormition and Christian Dying in Late Patristic and Early Byzantine Literature," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 73.

²⁴ *The Service of the Akathist Hymn* (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1991), 36.

²⁵ *The Festal Menaton*, 281.

variants, her head is turned away, as she ponders the meaning of this birth. In yet others, Mary's gaze is directed towards Joseph, who is portrayed at a physical remove from Mary and the child Jesus, as if to mark out Jesus' divine paternity. Typically, Joseph is seated the bottom corner of the icon, looking puzzled, even desolate, and tempted to doubt Mary's virginity by a thinly-disguised Satan. Meanwhile, Mary looks at her spouse as if with compassion for his incomprehension.

In the foreground of the icon, the child Jesus may be depicted a second time, being bathed by midwives. At one level, the washing in a bowl is merely a simple depiction of a human child receiving ministrations of kindness. Yet the scene also reflects the legend of the doubting midwife Salome as recounted in chapters 19 and 20 of the *Protoevangelium*, an episode theologically related to the incredulity of Thomas in John 20. The bathing also presages the account given in Luke 7:37-50 of the sinful woman who bathed Jesus' feet with her tears. Above all, it prefigures the mystery of Jesus' baptism.

The washing of the Christ-child, by affirming the physical reality of his body, also refutes Docetist doubts. In concord with the Gospel accounts, the icon seeks to convey the central dogma that in Christ, the Word was made flesh. Secondly, it seeks to show that the Incarnation is a re-creation of the whole world. The festal vespers express wonder at the harmonious confluence of the gifts of earth and heaven that takes place in the birth of Christ: "Every creature made by Thee offers thee thanks: the angels offer Thee a hymn; the magi, gifts; the shepherds their wonder; the earth, its cave; the wilderness, the manger."²⁶ Some elaborate variants (including one to be found in the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem) include a figure walking across the horizon and carrying a cave on his back. This charming detail is the allegorical personification of the earth.

According to that same vesperal hymn, humanity's contribution to the Incarnation is the Virgin Mother herself, who represents the whole human race. She is moreover, in Bulgakov's words, the "very personification of the Church . . . the head and

²⁶ *The Festal Menaion*, 253.

Glory of the human race."²⁷ Although the birth of Christ has taken place in the cave, with its suggestion of cosmic sin, Mary is at rest at the very edge of that darkness, close to the Light of the World and his life-giving cross. With the birth of Jesus, the Mother of God becomes the firstborn of the Church, a notion which will be made fully explicit in the icon of the Dormition. The Mother of the New Adam will become the New Eve.

The Encounter

The iconography of the feast of the Encounter, the Eastern term for the events of Luke 2:22-3, develops the theme of *kenosis* more explicitly. The title itself is rich, applying as it does to a number of realities. The "tent of encounter" of Exodus 33 was the precursor of the Solomonic temple which housed the Ark of the Covenant. In time, both of these human structures become closely associated with Mary, who is guaratrix and place of the greatest and final encounter between the divine and human that occurs in the one person of Christ. Both temple and Theotokos also point forward to the Eucharist, the extension of the offering of Christ into all places and times. The typological dynamic of prophecy and fulfillment that provides the intellectual structure of the icon is more than a fervent linguistic fantasy or an intellectual *habitus*. Rather, it indicates a theological instinct concerning the coherence of salvation. In this multifaceted drama, each redemptive event reveals all other instances. What appear at first sight to be discrete historical events are portrayed as linked at the deepest ontological level, in which *chronos* is discovered to be shot through with *kairos*.

With a canopy and an altar, the icon evokes the temple simply. Mary stands at bottom center, offering her son to Simeon who leans forward to receive him. In other variants, Simeon has already taken the child in his arms, while Mary extends her right hand towards Jesus, indicating and interceding. The spatial arrangement of the protagonists—Mary and Simeon as the cynosure of interest, behind whom stand respectively

²⁷ Bulgakov, *Churchly Joy*, 26.

Joseph and Anna—conveys an intriguing theological symmetry. As Mother of God, Mary bore (*tikto*) Jesus in her womb. Simeon, in taking (*phero*) Jesus in his arms, becomes the "God-bearer" (*theophoros*). If Mary is symbolically the new temple, Simeon represents the old dispensation, who welcomes the new with joy.

The vesperal readings include the account of Isaiah 6 of the vision of God in the temple: "Then one of the seraphim flew to me, holding an ember which he had taken with tongs from the altar. He touched my mouth with it. 'See,' he said, 'now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged.'" ²⁸ The liturgical poetry of matins makes the connection explicit: "Christ, the coal of fire, whom Isaiah foresaw, now rests in the arms of the Theotokos as in a pair of tongs." Iconographically, the extended arms of the Theotokos who holds out the Christ-child intimate this typological conceit. ²⁹ The hands of both Mary and Simeon are covered, respectively with the edges of her *maphorion* and his robe. The motif—familiar to Roman Catholics in the form of the humeral veil used at Benediction—derives from a Byzantine gesture that was intended to convey profound respect and humility when giving or accepting a sacred object. ³⁰

The Eucharistic resonances of the feast are suggested in some icons by the presence of a cross or a book on the altar—a detail as theologically appropriate as it would have been historically impossible. The Mother of God comes to offer the Son to the Father. Bulgakov points out that Mary, who "did not know sin . . . came to offer a sacrifice for sin, having in her arms the One who truly was the Sacrifice for the sins of the world." ³¹ In this icon, Mary is shown as assuming a sacerdotal role which will be consummated at the sacrifice of Calvary. In the

²⁸ The seraph holding the tongs and the burning coal figures in the Russian icon-type called "The Unburnt Bush," which derives from the patristic understanding of the burning bush of Ex 3 as a type of Mary's perpetual virginity. See Egon Sendler, S.J., *Les icônes byzantines de la Mère de Dieu* (Paris: Desclée-Brouwer, 1992), 173-179.

²⁹ *The Festal Menaion*, 407.

³⁰ See Charles Witke, "Propertium Manuale," *Classical Philology*, 64/2 (April 1969): 107-109.

³¹ Bulgakov, *Churchly Joy*, 59.

Annunciation, the Mother of God receives the Word. In the temple, she subsequently receives the words of Simeon who tells that her heart will be pierced. Yet the emotional tenor of the icon is not sorrow, but acceptance of the working-through of the divine economy. The hymn for the Divine Liturgy enjoins Mary to "rejoice, O Theotokos virgin, for from thee hath risen the Sun of Righteousness."³² This sorrowful mystery is at the same time both joyous and glorious, for in it Christ is revealed as light to the nations.

The Annunciation

A foundational topos of iconological theology is the connection between perception and being, which takes 1 John 3:2 as a key topos. Seeing God is the result of *theosis*. In that the icon reveals something of heaven to our earthly existence, it is a liminal reality. The icon is often described as "a window into heaven," and it is one through which the act of looking passes both ways. To the extent that the icon reveals the unseen God, it also potentially transforms the believing viewer. In the context of prayer, "reading" an icon is also an act of being "read" by the unseen God, an interpersonal, visual *dabar* which moves the viewer towards fullness of being. The glimpse of the eternal world that the icon offers is an anticipation of *theosis*.

The icon of the Annunciation expresses in starkly dramatic form the encounter between eternity and history, the Trinity with humanity. The iconographic scheme is very ancient, found in paleo-Christian art possibly as early as the second century.³³ The Annunciation was a specific event in human history. At the same time, its mystery reaches out beyond all time and continues to reveal previously unsuspected dimensions of reality. In the famous fourteenth-century Byzantine icon of the Annunciation, now in the Icon Gallery of Ochrid, Macedonia, such is the energy the image contains that it almost explodes

³² *The Festal Menaion*, 416-417.

³³ In what is sometimes held to be the earliest image of the Annunciation, found in the 2nd to 4th century Catacomb of Santa Priscilla, a seated Mary is portrayed as being addressed by a standing male figure.

out of the frame. As divinity empties itself out into human history, the normal, phenomenological world is turned inside out. In the words of the matins hymn for the day "Today all creation greatly rejoices."³⁴ The architectural details of this work are almost as geometrically stupefying as the buildings of M. C. Escher, whose drawings explore mathematical infinity rendered in physically impossible constructions. The hymn for the feast tells Mary, that in this cosmic rebirth, "the whole world was amazed at thy divine glory, for thou, O Virgin, who hast not known wedlock, hast held in thy womb the God of all."³⁵

The Ochrid icon exemplifies the general predilection of traditional Greek and Russian iconography for a particular use of perspective. From the Quattrocento onwards, Western religious art has generally employed vanishing perspective, which makes mathematical use of relative ratios to convey the illusion of physical depth on flat surfaces. The meeting-point of the diagonal lines that structure vanishing perspective lies within such paintings themselves. While Western religious art has no inherent preference as to kinds of perspective, Eastern Christianity attributes a theological value to the reversed perspective typical of icons. With this technique, the implied lines geometrically underpinning the elements of an icon converge as it were *outside* the image, directly in front of the viewer. The apparent physical depth of vanishing perspective is deliberately eschewed in favor of a different spatial grammar in which the eternal reality of the scene depicted seems to reach out into our own time and place, as a quasi-third-dimensional presence. Reversed perspective expresses in pictorial terms the sacramental economy of God.

All moments of the Annunciation are contained in the compressed time of the icon: the apparition of Gabriel, his greeting, Mary's perturbation and response, and the stirring of new life in Mary's womb. In a twelfth-century Byzantine icon now in St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, the angel is portrayed as if he has just arrived, his torso twisted, his robe still fluttering in motion, one wing raised higher than the other. Read left to

³⁴ *The Festal Menaion*, 446.

³⁵ *The Festal Menaion*, 452.

right, the icon is divided into two equal halves, Gabriel signifying the divine sphere, and Mary this eon. Her head is alert, attentive, stressing that she is actively involved in listening to the message.³⁶ The Mother of God is seated, representing her superior status. The Virgin casts aside the yarn she has been spinning for the temple veil in favor of her new task of furnishing the flesh of God. In many icons, Mary is portrayed with the palm of her hand turned outwards, a gesture which may indicate both listening and perplexity. In other variants she is standing, her head bowed in humility, with her hand held to her breast as a sign of assent. Her gaze is focused interiorly or raised to heaven.

In the Sinai icon, a ray reaches down towards Mary from the top left edge of the icon. Its source is a partial circle of burnished gold, whose implied circumference lies outside the edges of the icon. This is the apophatic God whose full existence can only be discerned by faith, "the evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). The viewer's eye immediately perceives the dove present in another circle located halfway along the beam of light, at the point where the beams of the cross would intersect in an icon of the Crucifixion. Only with patient contemplation is an image of the Christ-child painted in very faint grisaille on the Virgin's breast revealed. The iconographer has suggested that the mystery of the Word-made-flesh requires time to apprehend.

The Ascension

Just as the Annunciation marks the beginning of the earthly life of Jesus, so the Ascension marks its end. Since the life of Mary is inseparable from the life of Jesus, in the icons of both these feasts the Mother of God figures prominently. The icon of the Ascension is divided horizontally into two segments, the upper half of which portrays Jesus enthroned in glory and accompanied by angels. At the center of the bottom, earthly portion of the icon, surrounded by all the apostles, stands

³⁶ Discussions of this icon are found in Robert S. Nelson and Kristen M. Collins, eds., *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006), 152-153, and Archimandrite Zacchaeus, *A History of Icon Painting*, 61.

Mary.³⁷ She is directly under Christ, the implied line between their two figures constituting the lateral beam of the cross which forms the icon's most evident geometrical scheme. (A horizontal line of rocks and vegetation indicating the Mount of Olives forms the transverse beam.) Behind or immediately either side of Mary stand angels, the "men in white garments" of Acts 1:10, while amongst the apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, figures of the Church of the Jews and the Gentiles, stand closest to her. In some variants, Mary is shown as standing on a small dais, thereby elevated slightly above the apostles.

Mary's very inclusion in the icon is potentially surprising. The disparity between the scriptural accounts of the Ascension (which do not mention Mary) and their iconographical rendering signals that the festal icons are less concerned with the literal facts of the events they portray and much more with their soteriological meaning. The presence of both the Theotokos and St. Paul indicates that the icon of the Ascension is an ecclesiological portrait in which Mary and the apostles personify the whole Church and should be read as a confession of faith in the presence of the Mother of God in and to the apostolic Church. That same grouping (Christ, angels, Mary, Peter and Paul together with the college of the apostles) appears again in the icon of the Dormition, albeit in a different spatial arrangement. The Son's Ascension points forward to the Dormition of the Mother of God.

One notable feature of the scheme is the contrast in physical attitude between Mary and the apostles. While they stand gazing up into the sky, amazed or gesticulating, she is inevitably portrayed as being serenely immobile. Mary and the angels alone have haloes, for while the Spirit has yet to descend on the apostles, Mary has been inspirited from the moment of her conception. (Most icons of the Nativity of the Theotokos portray the infant with a halo.) Her figure is ascetically slender, a reflection of the typological greetings in which she is hailed in the Akathist as "heavenly ladder whereby God came down," "bridge leading men from earth to heaven," "pillar of fire, guiding

³⁷ This scheme is found as early as the seventh century, on the silver phials of Monza. See Leonid Ouspensky, *The Theology of the Icon*, trans. Anthony Gythiel (2 vols.; Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), 1:81-82.

those in darkness.”³⁸ The Virgin Mother is the image of the Church in its holiness and fecundity. Variants portray her with different gestures. With arms in the *orans* position, she is a figure of the Church who prays for her children. In other icons, both of Mary’s hands are held at chest-level, palms turned outwards in a profession of faith. In yet others, one hand is raised in that same gesture of listening found in some icons of the Annunciation. The one who has listened to the Word and cooperated in his embodiment now listens to the prayers of the Church and intercedes before her Son.

Although Pentecost is among the twelve Great Feasts, and Acts 1 suggests the presence of Mary at that event, the oldest iconography for Pentecost does not include the Mother of God. Leonid Ouspensky explains that the icon of Pentecost is not an illustration, but a portrait of the apostolic college. Were Mary to be included in that icon, she would be merely another of the apostles. In fact her absence from that icon shows that “she occupies a very special place in the Church . . . ‘*more honorable than the cherubim*.’”³⁹ The last of the festal icons delineates her “special place.”

The Dormition

Marian feasts mark the beginning and end of the Eastern Church’s liturgical year. Correspondingly, just as the icon of the Birth of Mary is placed on the far left side of the festal row of the iconostasis, at the far right we frequently find the icon of the Dormition, commemorating this last Great Feast celebrated on August 15. The metonymic figure of *merismus*, in which the contrasting parts of a whole express the totality of something (as in the phrases “Alpha and Omega” or “heaven and earth”) is a characteristic stylistic element both of biblical poetry and the liturgical poetry that derives from it. We may think of the events of the Nativity and Dormition as encompassing and expressing the totality of the life of Mary.

Clearly, neither the icons of the Nativity of the Mother of God or her Dormition—nor indeed all the icons of the Great

³⁸ *The Service of the Akathist Hymn*, 36 and 41.

³⁹ Léonide Ouspensky, “Quelques considérations sur l’iconographie de la Pentecôte,” *Messenger de l’Exarchat du Patriarchat Russe en Europe occidentale* 33-34 (1960): n.p.

Feast taken as a whole—expatiate the many details of a Marian biography such as that of Anne Catherine Emmerich. Rather, the festal icons present a visual Mariology that eschews intense curiosity about the minutiae of Mary's life or any attempts at psychological reconstruction such as Petru Popescu's 2009 novel *Girl Mary*.⁴⁰ The liturgical texts and icons of the feasts seek only to convey the truth necessary for salvation. The sequence of the feasts and the placement of their corresponding icons, left to right in calendrical order on the festal row of the iconostasis make manifest that the life of Mary is both a prelude to and an echo of the life of Christ. Just as Mary "contained within herself that God whom the world cannot contain"⁴¹ and embraced the infant God in her arms, the initial and final Marian feasts enfold and frame the life of Jesus that is celebrated by the whole liturgical year.

The iconographic scheme of the Dormition accumulated in tandem with patristic homilies, liturgical texts such as the Akathist, and especially the materials of the *transitus Mariae* traditions. The classic iconography, well established by the tenth century, is structured around strong geometrical forms. The bier on which Mary lies dead occupies the icon's foreground and forms its major horizontal axis.⁴² Corresponding to this is the horizontal figure of Christ, who stands behind the bier and surrounded by a mandorla of angels. In the mystery of the Dormition, birth and death are intermingled in a miraculous interchange, their meanings transformed by the mystery of Christ. In his arms Christ holds a second representation of the Theotokos, now shown as a tiny, baby-like figure. The one who gave birth to Christ is now herself born into eternal life. Christ now holds his mother as she once held him. She is a reflection, an image (*eikon*) of her son. The *kenosis* that marked the Incarnation of the Son now results in her *theosis*.

⁴⁰ Petru Popescu, *Girl Mary* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

⁴¹ St. Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* 143, 7, in Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), 300.

⁴² Since the Eastern Churches do not espouse Augustinian notions of original sin, the argument that Mary was preserved from death, the consequence of original sin, does not make theological sense. The liturgical texts for the feast clearly state the belief in Mary's real death.

Elegant theological parallels exist between the icons of the Dormition and the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple, each of which illuminates the other. In the latter she is portrayed as entering into the temple of Jerusalem, to become the new Ark. The vespers of the Dormition proclaim that "the Palace of the King withdraws, the Ark of Holiness is raised on high," evoking Psalm 132 which accompanied the procession of the Ark, the throne of God, to the temple. The icon shows that Mary who provided the humanity of the enfleshment of God and the dwelling place of his glory (Jn 1:8) has now entered into the eternal dwelling-place of God.

The icon of the Nativity of Christ likewise enlightens us as about the significances of the Dormition. At the birth of Jesus, Virgin Mother was encircled by the whole of creation: angels, shepherds, magi and the natural world. At her death she is portrayed as being surrounded by the apostles, who represent the Church spread throughout that whole world. Standing respectively at the head and foot of the bier, St. Peter and St. Paul bend low over her figure, while the gestures and faces of the other apostles express deep grief. Frequently, the icon features a candlestick placed at the center in front of the bier, a detail explained by a verse from the matins of the feast according to which "Christ has made Mary dwell in the Holy of Holies as a Bright Candlestick flaming with immaterial fire."⁴³ In more developed versions, the apostles are accompanied by four bishops: St James "the brother of the Lord" and first bishop of Jerusalem; Timothy, first bishop of Ephesus; Hierotheos, first bishop of Athens; and his successor Dionysius the Areopagite. Later, the canonical iconography became even more complex. A fifteenth-century icon now in the Museum of History and Architecture in Novgorod shows the apostles as accompanied by angels and being brought back to Jerusalem on clouds from the ends of the earth, groups of the women of Jerusalem, along with the fanatical Jew Jephonias who attempted to profane the bier and whose hands were cut off by an avenging angel.⁴⁴ At

⁴³ *The Festal Menaton*, 519. This is related thematically to the description of Mary as "a brilliant beacon-light shining to those in darkness," *The Service of the Akathist Hymn*, 48. The elongated form of Mary in the icon of the Ascension also suggests a candle.

⁴⁴ Stephen Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38-41, notes that this detail

the top of the most elaborate icons of the Dormition, such the eighteenth-century one in the monastery of Balamand, Lebanon, Mary may be represented a third time, as enthroned in heaven.

St. Theodore the Studite praises the Theotokos who has "never ceased to protect her people."⁴⁵ The motif of protection leads us to the third meaning of "the life of Mary." As patroness, protectress and above all as mother, Mary embraces the lives of all generations. In the Balamand icon, Mary hands her girdle down to St. Thomas, a detail recounted in one variation of the *Transitus Mariae* legends according to which the apostle was not present at the Dormition, but arrived a week later. In response to his doubts about the events he had missed, Mary's girdle fell from heaven.⁴⁶ The "late apostle" theologoumenon, an evident echo of John 24:20-29, establishes a correlation between a celebrated Byzantine icon and the wounds of Christ. Both are the physical proof of a salvific event and the immediate cause of belief, respectively in Jesus' Resurrection and Mary's Dormition (which represents the dynamic consequences of the Resurrection).⁴⁷ Just as the icon of the Nativity of the Theotokos announces the Annunciation, the icon of the Dormition suggests that under the tutelage of the Mother of God, the joy of the resurrection transforms the whole world. As a statement of Christian faith concerning death, the icon represents not only the death of Mary but also the hope of the Church.

belongs to the earliest Dormition traditions. The figure of Jephonias offers an interesting parallel to the midwife Salome of the *Protoevangelium*: the hands of both characters are cursed but subsequently redeemed. The account of Salome's hand, "burned" by testing the physical virginity of Mary but subsequently healed by touching the Christ-child, mirrors the restoration of Jephonias's hands by the apostles. In both cases, thaumaturgical healings are emblems of inner conversion.

⁴⁵ St. Theodore the Studite, "Encomium on the Dormition of the Mother of God," in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, trans. and ed. Brian E. Daley, S.J. (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 251.

⁴⁶ Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 67-72.

⁴⁷ The girdle of Mary, a treasured relic in imperial Constantinople, where it was held to be signal proof of Mary's protection. See Christine Angelidi and Titos Papamastorakis, "Picturing the spiritual protector: from Blachernatissa to Hodegetria," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005), 209-217. A similar tutelary role was attributed to the ancient icon of the *Hodegetria*, painted, according to popular tradition, by St. Luke. According to later Byzantine belief, this miracle-working icon protected Mary's city against the invading Avars in 626. See Bissera Pentcheva, *Icons of Power: The Mother*

Conclusion

The festal icons portray the theological truth of what Pope John Paul II refers to as Mary's "exceptional pilgrimage of faith."⁴⁸ In varying ways, each icon reveals the life of the mother to be inseparable from that of the Son. From Mary's motherhood of Christ derives her motherhood of the body of Christ. Accordingly, in all three of its meanings "the life of Mary" is also inseparable from the life of the Church. The visual grammar of the icons correspond to the Church's faith that the Mother of God is at once of the Church, for it, and with it. Given that essential link at the profoundest level of being between Mary and the Church, the various glimpses of Mary's life depicted in the festal icons provide much more than a portrait of the Mother of God. Taken as a whole, they express the Christian journey of faith, hope and love. The life of Mary "represents a constant point of reference for the Church, for individuals and for communities, for peoples and nations and, in a sense, for all humanity."⁴⁹

The life of Mary is "written" in icons. More importantly, in the sense that an icon represents what truly is and what the Church aspires to, the life of Mary is itself an icon of the life of all Christians. Present in the mind of the Trinity from all ages, Mary, Church and each human soul are called into being in time. To a paramount degree, Mary is consecrated to and lives in intimacy with the Holy One of Israel—the vocation of all Christians. Like the Mother of God, the body of the Church and each of its members are called to receive the Word and by internalizing it to become God-bearers. Under the glorified Christ we are called to pray in the company of angels and the apostles. At the end of our life, we too hope to be surrounded by a cloud of witnesses and carried by Jesus into the embrace of that eternity of which this whole world is a shadow, when we will finally "see him as he is" (1 John 3:2) and "know fully even as we are known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

of God in Byzantium (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania University State Press, 2006), 37-59, and John Wortley, "The Marian Relics at Constantinople," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 45 (2005): 171-187.

⁴⁸ *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 6.

⁴⁹ *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 6.