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## The Divine Maternity in the Early Church

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## THE DIVINE MATERNITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The title of our subject is, in itself, somewhat elastic. The period of time to be embraced in the phrase "the early Church" will vary with the preoccupations of the writer or reader. The general historian of the Church, for example, might extend the term from the founding of the Church to the Carolingian renaissance, thereby including in his research the first eight or nine centuries of the life of the Church. The historian of Christian origins might limit the term to the Apostolic and sub-Apostolic Church, and so be concerned only with the first and second centuries of the Christian era.

But the direct subject of our inquiry, the dogma of the Divine Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, like all Christian dogmas, has, and had, a life of its own in the faith of the Church, and the details of that life enable us to determine with some precision the period of historical time to be embraced in the story of the early life of this doctrine. Thus, in the first three centuries of our Christian era we find the doctrine accepted, at least implicitly, in the Church's explicit belief in the two doctrines that Jesus Christ is God and that the Virgin Mary is the Mother of Jesus Christ. In the fourth century we find indisputable proof of the Church's explicit belief in the Divine Maternity in the frequent use of the title *Theotókos* (Mother of God), and in the clear justification of both the title and the doctrine in the fact of the communication of idioms. In the fifth century the Nestorian controversy enabled the doctrine, if we may speak figuratively, to pass through the crisis of adolescence and develop into the settled state of maturity, by way of the condemnation of Nestorius and the approbation

of the views of St. Cyril of Alexandria at the general council of Ephesus in 431. The enthusiastic acceptance of the doctrine by the faithful immediately manifested itself in a magnificent increase in Marian devotion and in the multiplication of churches dedicated to the Virgin Mother of God. In the sixth century, in 553 A. D., the faith of the Church in the Divine Maternity was definitively confirmed when the Second Council of Constantinople (the fifth ecumenical council) approved of the Cyrillian anathemas against Nestorius. From this time on the doctrine of the Divine Maternity is unmistakably and unshakably a dogma of the Catholic faith. We can, then, do perfect justice to the history of the dogma in the early Church if we pursue our inquiry in the context of the first six centuries of the Christian era.

We shall divide our inquiry into two parts. In the first we shall consider the development of the doctrine prior to the Nestorian crisis, and in the second we shall be concerned with the reaction of the Church to the Nestorian error.<sup>1</sup>

## I

### THE DIVINE MATERNITY PRIOR TO NESTORIUS

As we have already indicated in our short summary of the history of this doctrine, the period prior to the Nestorian crisis may be divided, from the point of view of the degree of explicitness with which the doctrine is proposed, into two phases, viz., the first three centuries, during which the doctrine, while perhaps not explicitly stated, is at least implicitly believed, and the fourth and fifth centuries (prior to Nestorius), during which the doctrine is expressly believed.

<sup>1</sup> Since a separate paper in this volume of *MARIAN STUDIES* is devoted to the question of Nestorianism, we shall deal with Nestorius briefly, and only to the extent necessary to render intelligible the Church's reaction to the Marian error in Nestorianism.

(A) *The Divine Maternity in the First Three Centuries*

Before beginning the actual consideration of the testimony of the first three centuries, a few preliminary remarks may help to clarify both our procedure and its results.

First of all, it is necessary to observe at once that the doctrine of the Divine Maternity is not treated by the writers of this period directly, that is, for its own sake. It usually appears in the context of some other Christian doctrine which the Fathers are trying to defend, for example, the reality of Christ's human nature, or the fact that He is the Messiah. This is not surprising, if we consider that we possess relatively few Christian writings dating from this period, and those which we do possess are occasional writings, that is, works written with specific purposes other than an exposition or defense of the doctrine of the Divine Maternity. We might even say that this characteristic of the early Christian writings makes such evidence as they do offer to the doctrine of the Divine Maternity more precious. The indirectness, and occasionally the casualness, of its introduction in other contexts testifies to a widespread acceptance in the Church of the reality of this doctrine.

Our first witness is St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107/108). While his letters were written shortly before his martyrdom, it is important to remember that he himself was a Christian of the first century, probably a disciple of the Apostles, either of St. Peter or of St. Paul, and that he became bishop of Antioch about the year 69 A. D. His testimony, then, really takes us back to the Apostolic Era and is a witness to the Apostolic preaching.

St. Ignatius speaks clearly of the fact that Christ was born of Mary:

(a) In his epistle to the Ephesians, he speaks of "Jesus

Christ, 'who was of the family of David according to the flesh,' the Son of Man and the Son of God."<sup>2</sup>

(b) In the letter to the Trallians, he writes: "Be deaf, therefore, when anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, who was of the family of David, and of Mary, who was truly born, both ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of those in heaven and under the earth; who also was truly raised from the dead, when his Father raised him up. . . ." <sup>3</sup>

In these texts we have a simple, direct affirmation of both the birth of Jesus from Mary and the reality of the human nature of Christ. In the repetition of the word "truly" (in the original Greek, *alethos*),—"truly born," "truly persecuted," "truly crucified and died," "truly raised,"—it is permissible to see Ignatius affirming his simple faith against the Docetic denial of the reality of Christ's body, and thereby affirming the reality of Christ's human nature and His right to the title "Son of Man."

But Christ, who is "truly born" of Mary, and so the "Son of Man," is also, for St. Ignatius, God:

(a) "There is one Physician, who is both flesh and spirit, born and yet not born, who is God in man, true life in death, both of Mary and of God, first passible and then impassible, Jesus Christ, our Lord."<sup>4</sup>

(b) "For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary by the dispensation of God, 'as well as the seed of David,' as of the Holy Spirit: he was born, and was baptized, that by himself he might purify the water. . . . God was manifest as man for the 'newness' of eternal life. . . ." <sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Ephesians*, 20, 2; *P.G.* 5, 661; translation from Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, I (New York, n.d.), p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> *Trallians*, 9, 1-2; *P.G.* 5, 681; Lake, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> *Ephesians*, 7, 2; *P.G.* 5, 649, 652; Lake, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>5</sup> *Ephesians*, 18, 2; 19, 1; *P.G.* 5; Lake, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-193.

(c) "I give glory to Jesus Christ, the God who has thus given you wisdom; for I have observed that you are established in immovable faith, as if nailed to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, both in flesh and spirit, and confirmed in love by the blood of Christ, being fully persuaded as touching our Lord, that he is in truth of the family of David according to the flesh, God's Son by the will and power of God, truly born of a Virgin."<sup>6</sup>

In these three texts we have, once again, not a theological understanding of the doctrine of the Divine Maternity of Mary, but a simple affirmation of its reality. In all three texts Christ is God, and God "conceived by Mary," God born "of Mary," God "truly born of a Virgin," "God manifest as man." Might it not even be possible to see in the first text from the Epistle to the Ephesians, with its reference to the "one physician," "Jesus Christ, our Lord," who is "born and yet not born," "both of Mary and of God," a concrete acceptance of the unity of person in Christ, an actual, though not explicitly recognized, usage of the communication of idioms? Surely we have here, in a witness dating back to the times and the teaching of the Apostles, all the reality of the Divine Maternity. If Christ is God, and God conceived and born of the Virgin Mary in human flesh, then Mary is the Mother of God. It is true that St. Ignatius does not expressly call Mary the "Mother of God"; and it is possibly idle to ask whether or not the designation ever occurred to him. But, if we imagine that he were asked the direct question, "Is the Virgin Mary the Mother of God?"—he had at his disposal the reason for saying "Yes."

St. Justin Martyr (d. 165) is no less clear on the reality of the Divine Maternity. A few citations will suffice to show this:

(a) "For, they who claim that the Son is the Father are reproached for knowing neither the Father nor that the Father

<sup>6</sup> *Smyrnaeans*, I; *P.G.* 5, 708; Lake, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

God," (*Theotókos*) also came into use during the third century. If this be true, it would be an important witness to a widespread belief, and an explicit belief, in the Divine Maternity. Several different testimonies have been adduced to prove the usage of the *Theotókos* during the third century. In the Greek text of the *De benedictionibus Jacob*, a work of St. Hippolytus, we read: ". . . Joseph betroths Mary to himself and becomes a trustworthy witness to the Mother of God (*Theotókou*)". Unfortunately this reference to Mary as the *Theotókos* does not occur in the Georgian translation of the text, and consequently the views of scholars on its authenticity are not in accord.<sup>14</sup>

The ecclesiastical historian Socrates also informs us that Origen, in the first tome of his commentary on the Pauline *Epistle to the Romans* explained why Mary is called *Theotókos*. But there is nothing in the extant recognized works of Origen to confirm this assertion.<sup>15</sup>

A more important discovery, from the point of view of establishing an early explicit belief on the part of the universal Church in the Divine Maternity, was the finding of a papyrus leaf on which parts of the prayer *Sub tuum praesidium* were inscribed. The word *Theotókos* was clearly inscribed on the papyrus. Vannucci holds that the papyrus is to be dated no later than the third century. Roschini, following Vannucci, ascribes it to the second or third century. Jouassard dates it from the fourth century, but is not apparently averse to an

<sup>14</sup> The text of the *De benedictionibus Jacob* appears in *Texte und Untersuchungen*, Vol. 38, Part I (Leipzig, 1911), p. 13; for further bibliography on the authenticity of the text cf. Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., *Mary in Western Patristic Thought*, in *Mariology*, Vol. 1, edited by Juniper B. Carol, O.F.M. (Milwaukee, 1955), p. 134, n. 120.

<sup>15</sup> The reference in Socrates occurs in his *Hist. Eccles.*, 7, 32; E. Dublanchy, art. *Marie*, in *DTC*, 9, 2350, and G. Jouassard, art. *Marie à travers la patristique*, in *Maria*, edited by Hubert du Manoir, S.J., Vol. 1 (Paris, 1949), p. 86, n. 2, are not convinced. Roschini, *op. cit.*, p. 168, accepts the testimony as probable.

earlier dating in the third century. Stegmüller, however, believes that it should not be dated before the end of the fourth century.<sup>16</sup>

The existence of a prayer addressed to our Blessed Mother as the *Theotókos*, or Mother of God, is, of course, evidence of a widespread belief among the faithful in the Divine Maternity, and, of course, better evidence than might be the testimony of one or another individual Father of the Church. But, in virtue of the uncertainty of the dating of the papyrus containing the revealing word, we can only conclude that the Marian *devotion* to the "Mother of God" certainly existed in the fourth century, and that it may quite possibly have existed even in the third century.

(B) *The Divine Maternity in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries  
Prior to Nestorius*

The first incontrovertible use of the term *Theotókos* occurs in the fourth century in the writings of Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria (d. 328). In a letter to Alexander, Bishop of Constantinople, he refers to Mary as the *Theotókos*, or "Mother of God."<sup>17</sup> The casual way in which he uses the title, as has been pointed out, is an evidence that it was already generally

<sup>16</sup> The description of the papyrus is to be found in *Catalogue of the Greek and Latin Papyri in the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge, 1939), n. 470, edited by John Roberts. Cf. F. Mercenier, *L'antienne mariale grecque la plus ancienne*, in *Muséon*, Vol. 52, 1939, pp. 229-233; *id.*, *La plus ancienne prière à la sainte Vierge*, in *Questions Liturgiques et Paroissiales*, Vol. 25, 1940, pp. 33-36; G. Vannucci, *La più antica preghiera alla Madre di Dio*, in *Marianum*, Vol. 3, 1941, pp. 97-101; O. Stegmüller, *Sub tuum praesidium: Bemerkungen zur ältesten Überlieferung*, in *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, Vol. 74, 1952, pp. 76-82. Cf. likewise V. Schweitzer, *Alter des Titels Theotókos*, in *Der Katholik*, Vol. 83, 1903, pp. 97-103; W. J. Burghardt, *art. cit.*, p. 132, note 108.

<sup>17</sup> *P.G.* 18, 569.

an accepted usage.<sup>18</sup> This would tend to lend credence to the evidence of the *Sub tuum praesidium*, or the *De benedictionibus* of Hippolytus, or to the statement of Socrates in reference to Origen.

At any rate, the use of the term *Theotókos* is more or less frequent during the fourth and fifth centuries. Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 340) calls Mary the "Mother of God."<sup>19</sup> Emperor Constantine (d. 337) himself, according to Eusebius, called Mary the "Maiden Mother of God" (*Theou Meter Kore*).<sup>20</sup> And, according to the testimony of St. Cyril, the apostate Emperor Julian reproached the Christians because, as he said, "You do not stop calling Mary *Mother of God*."<sup>21</sup> In the West, St. Hilary of Poitiers (d. 367) calls Mary the "Mother of our Lord in the flesh."<sup>22</sup> He also affirms that it is God who is born of Mary.<sup>23</sup> He insists, too, on the reality of Mary's role in begetting God in His human nature.<sup>24</sup> St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) also gives Mary the title *Theotókos*.<sup>25</sup>

It should also be mentioned, however, that the greatest indirect attack on the Divine Maternity took place in the fourth century with the rise of the Arian heresy. The Arian denial of the divinity of Christ would have led logically to a

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Dublanchy, *art. cit.*, col. 2351; also Burghardt, *art. cit.*, p. 135, note 124.

<sup>19</sup> *Vita Constantini*, 42; *P.G.* 20, 1104.

<sup>20</sup> *Oratio ad Sanctorum coetum*; *P.G.* 20, 1265.

<sup>21</sup> *Contra Julianum*, 3; *P.G.* 76, 924.

<sup>22</sup> *Tractatus in ps.* 131, 8; *P.L.* 9, 733.

<sup>23</sup> *P.L.* 9, 700: "Non enim inanis fructus est cum ex virginali ventre manens antea Deus nascitur."

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *De Trinitate*, 10, 16: "... ad incrementa partumque corporis omne, quod sexus sui est naturale contulerit. . . . Verbum caro factum non amiserat manere quod Verbum est." Cf. *ibid.*, 17: "Hominem enim dicens [*I Cor.*, 15, 47] nativitatem ex Virgine docuit: quae officio usa materno, sexus sui naturam in conceptu et partu hominis exsecuta est" (*P.L.* 10, 356).

<sup>25</sup> *Catecheses*, 10, 19; *P.G.* 33, 685.

denial of the Divine Maternity. But the triumphal defense of the divinity of Christ at the first general council at Nice in 325 set aside this danger to the doctrine in question. It is not, therefore, surprising to find that St. Athanasius (d. 373), the leading figure at Nice and the dedicated opponent of the Arian heresy, calls Mary the "Mother of God," and also assigns the communication of idioms as the theological foundation of the doctrine.<sup>26</sup>

According to St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), Antiochus, Bishop of Tolemais (d. 408), Theophilus, Atticus, Gregory of Constantinople, and Ammonius, Bishop of Adrianopolis, also style Our Lady *Theotókos*.<sup>27</sup> John, Bishop of Antioch, and a friend of Nestorius, wrote to the latter (after the adverse sentence passed on Nestorius at Rome in 430) that "none of the ecclesiastical doctors repudiated this title."<sup>28</sup>

In the West, St. Ambrose (d. 397) asks the rhetorical question: "What could be more noble than the *Mother of God?*"<sup>29</sup> St. Augustine (d. 430) does not use directly the term "Mother of God," but his doctrine is in accord with the faith of the Church. He calls Mary the "Begetter" of God ("genetrici suae"), and remarks that in the womb of the Virgin, "the divine nature joined human nature to itself, when the Word was made flesh for us, with this purpose, that coming forth from a mother, He might dwell among us."<sup>30</sup> That Mary's maternity is a Divine Maternity is also clear from the contrast which he institutes between the roles of Elizabeth and Mary in relation to their respective sons: "Elizabeth conceived a man, so did Mary. Elizabeth is the mother of John, Mary is

<sup>26</sup> Athanasius uses the term *Theotókos* in the *Oratio III contra Arianos*; P.G. 26, 349. For his exposition of the communication of idioms cf. *ibid.*, 29 and 33; P.G. 26, 385 and 393.

<sup>27</sup> *De recta fide ad reginas*, 10; P.G. 76, 1213.

<sup>28</sup> *Epistola ad Nestorium*; P.G. 77, 1455.

<sup>29</sup> *De virginibus*, 2; P.L. 16, 209: "Quid nobilius Dei Matre?"

<sup>30</sup> *Sermo* 186; P.L. 38, 999, and *Sermo* 195, 2, *ibid.*, 1019.

the mother of Christ: but Elizabeth is the mother of one who is simply a man, whereas Mary is the mother of One who is both God and man. This is a wonderful thing, that a creature could conceive the Creator." <sup>31</sup>

It is beyond doubt, then, that the doctrine of the Divine Maternity was generally believed in the Church in the first three and a quarter centuries prior to the advent of the Nestorian heresy. The testimony of St. Ignatius takes us back to the time of the Apostles and is like an echo of the teaching of the Apostles. The testimony of Justin and Hippolytus at Rome; of Irenaeus, the disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna, in Gaul; of Tertullian at Carthage; the testimony of Origen, who studied at Alexandria in Egypt, who voyaged to Rome, Epirus, Nicomedia, Antioch, Palestine, and who established a school of theology at Caesarea,—all these testimonies prove that the doctrine was known and believed, albeit though implicitly as to its precise terminology, throughout the whole Church in the first three centuries. The frequent usage of the name *Theotókos* in the fourth and fifth centuries proves that the doctrine was then explicitly believed; and the delineation of the theory of the communication of idioms by St. Athanasius is evidence that the theological justification of the doctrine was already understood. This might also prove, as the history of the *Sub tuum praesidium* seems to indicate, that the faithful of the preceding century were already devoted to Mary as the "Mother of God."

## II

### THE REACTION TO NESTORIANISM

The dogma of the Divine Maternity was not defined by the Church until the Church's belief in the reality of the doctrine was challenged, and seriously challenged, in the course

<sup>31</sup> *Sermo* 289, 2; *P.L.* 38, 1308.

of the Nestorian heresy. The Nestorian heresy was primarily Christological. Nestorianism denied the unity of person in Christ, and asserted that the Divine Person, the Word, was a person distinct from the human person in Christ, although the two persons were morally united to one another. But the assertion of a human person in Christ led necessarily to a denial of Mary's right to be called the "Mother of God." Since the faith of the universal Church in the Divine Maternity, and the widespread use of the Marian title *Theotókos*, were solidly established by the close of the fourth century, it is not surprising that the deeper and more serious error of Nestorianism, the denial of the unity of person in Christ, should first have been brought to the attention of the Church generally through the Nestorian refusal to call Mary the *Theotókos* or "Mother of God."

It seems clear that Nestorius himself (d. c. 451) was neither the inventor of Nestorianism as a Christological error, nor the first to question the right of the Virgin Mary to the title "Mother of God." Diodorus of Tarsus (d. c. 391/392) seems to have been the first to draw a sharp distinction between the Person of the Son of God and the person of the son of David, saying, "The Son of God is distinct from the Son of David; the first dwells in the second as in his temple," and "The perfect eternal Son assumed the perfect son of David, the Son of God assumed the son of David."<sup>32</sup> As a consequence, he was led also to say: "Let not God the Word be thought to be the son of Mary."<sup>33</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), a pupil of Diodorus, also denied that Mary was the "Mother of God." "It is folly," he wrote, "to say that the Word, consubstantial with the Father, was born of the Virgin Mary. He who was born of the Virgin is the one who was formed of her substance,

<sup>32</sup> *Against the Synousiastes*; P.G. 33, 1559.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1560; cf. J. Tixeront, *Histoire des dogmes*, Vol. 3 (Paris, 1912), p. 14 f.

not the Word who is God; He who is consubstantial with the Father has no mother.”<sup>34</sup>

The position of Nestorius, then, was not an innovation, but simply an obstinate reiteration of the teaching of Diodorus and of Theodore of Mopsuestia.<sup>35</sup> Nor did Nestorius himself set the match to the conflagration of the controversy that bears his name. Nestorius came to Constantinople in 428 and was inaugurated as its Bishop. Toward the end of the same year Anastasius, his secretary, while preaching to the people, said: “No one should call Mary ‘Mother of God’ (*Theotókos*).”<sup>36</sup> Again, Dorotheus, Bishop of Marcanopolis, while preaching in the presence of Nestorius himself, exclaimed: “If anyone shall call Mary ‘Mother of God’ (*Theotókos*), let him be anathema.”<sup>37</sup> The people of Constantinople protested. But Nestorius, instead of retracting the teaching of Anastasius and Dorotheus, set himself the task of defending their position. In a series of sermons preached to the people during the years 429 to 430 he tried to discredit the Marian title “Mother of God,” (*Theotókos*).<sup>38</sup>

The teaching of Nestorius ran counter to the beliefs of the faithful and, because of its rapid and wide dissemination, caused unrest throughout the Church. At Constantinople itself, we are told, a layman, identified as Eusebius, later bishop of Dorylaeum, stood up in church and contradicted Nestorius, saying: “It is the eternal Word Himself who was born a sec-

<sup>34</sup> *Fragmenta ex libris contra Apollinarem*; P.G. 66, 993.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Nilus a S. Brocardo, O.C.D., *De maternitate divina* (Roma, 1944), pp. 1-3; and also P. Clément, C.S.S.R., *Le sens chrétien et la maternité divine de Marie au 4me et 5me siècles de l'Église* (Bruges, 1929), pp. 17-19.

<sup>36</sup> Socrates, *Hist. Eccles.*, 7, 32; P.G. 67, 808.

<sup>37</sup> Apud Cyrillum Alex., *Ep. 14 ad Acacium Beroeensem*; P.G. 77, 98.

<sup>38</sup> For the history of the position and conduct of Nestorius during the controversy, cf. Dublanchy, *art. cit.*, 2353-2354; Nilus, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-19; Clément, *op. cit.*, p. 17 ff.; Jouassard, *art. cit.*, pp. 122-136.

ond time in the flesh and from a Virgin.”<sup>39</sup> In Egypt the monks were disquieted by the teaching of Nestorius, and St. Cyril of Alexandria felt obliged to set their minds at rest by restating the true doctrine.

St. Cyril, once he had entered the lists, became the most energetic and persevering champion of the personal unity of Christ and of the Divine Maternity of Mary. Letters and treatises defending the true doctrine of the Incarnation and the Divine Maternity poured from his tireless pen. In the year 429, the year the controversy began, he wrote the *Homilia paschalis XVII*, the *Epistola ad monachos Aegypti*, and the *Scholia de Incarnatione Unigeniti*. In the year 430 he wrote the *Epistola altera ad Nestorium*, the *De recta fide* to Emperor Theodosius, the *De recta fide ad Principissas*, the *De recta fide ad reginas*, the *Adversus Nestorii blasphemias*, and the *Epistola synodica*, with the famous twelve anathematisms added to it.<sup>40</sup>

St. Cyril was quick to see that the reluctance of Nestorius to accept the *Theotókos* was more than a mere scruple about terminology.<sup>41</sup> He states clearly that it was based on a denial of the communication of idioms in the Incarnate Word, and on the denial of the unity of Person in the Incarnate Word. As a consequence, the efforts of St. Cyril were directed chiefly to the defense of the true doctrine of the Hypostatic Union.

But the Christological doctrine of St. Cyril is not within the province of our present investigation.<sup>42</sup> Our concern is the doctrine of the Divine Maternity, to which St. Cyril gives abundant evidence. In 429 he says: “. . . she who bore [God]

<sup>39</sup> The incident is reported by St. Cyril of Alexandria in *Contra Nestorii blasphemias*, 5; *P.G.* 76, 41-44.

<sup>40</sup> For the list of St. Cyril's writings on the Incarnation and the *Theotókos*, cf. Nilus, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-48.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Nilus, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> For an exposition of the Christological doctrine of St. Cyril, cf. Tixeront, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-79.

should be called the Virgin Mother: for she was not, as are all mothers among us, the mother only of the flesh and blood, but rather she was the Mother of the Lord, the Mother of God. . . ."<sup>43</sup> And again, "if our Lord Jesus Christ is God, why should not the sacred Virgin, who gave birth to Him, be called the Mother of God?"<sup>44</sup> He also explains why the Blessed Virgin is to be called *Theotókos*: "The Word indeed was God; but He became man: and because He was born in the flesh, because of humanity, it is necessary that she who gave birth to Him should be the *Theotókos*. For if she did not give birth to God, certainly He who was begotten of her should not be called God; but on the contrary the divine Scriptures call Him God . . . in what way, therefore, should not she who gave birth to Him be the Mother of God? But we learn from divine Scripture that He who is born is God."<sup>45</sup>

In 430 he also points out that the Fathers of the Church "did not hesitate to call the sacred Virgin *Theotókos*, not because the nature of the Word or His Divinity took its origin from the sacred Virgin, but because He took from her that sacred body, perfected by an intelligent soul, to which we say that the Word of God was united in hypostasis, and in which He was born in the flesh."<sup>46</sup> In the same year he also states: "But she [the Virgin Mary] is the Mother of God, because the Only-Begotten was made man like ourselves; having been truly joined to flesh, He underwent a corporeal generation."<sup>47</sup> It was in the year 430, also, that St. Cyril added his famous twelve anathematisms to the synodical letter which he sent to Nestorius. The first of these anathemata contains clearly the doctrine of the Divine Maternity: "If anyone shall not confess

<sup>43</sup> *Homilia paschalis* 17; P.G. 77, 775.

<sup>44</sup> *Epistola I ad monachos Aegyptiacos*; P.G. 77, 14.

<sup>45</sup> *Scholia de Incarnatione Unigeniti*; P.G. 75, 1400.

<sup>46</sup> *Epistola 4, altera ad Nestorium*; P.G. 77, 48.

<sup>47</sup> *Adversus Nestorii blasphemias*; P.G. 76, 27.

that Emmanuel is truly God, and for that reason the holy Virgin is the Mother of God, for she begot the Word of God made flesh in the flesh, let him be anathema.”<sup>48</sup>

The role of St. Cyril in the Nestorian controversy was not limited to polemical writing. He sent word to Pope Celestine at Rome about the dangers inherent in the Nestorian teaching. In 430 a Roman synod condemned the teaching of Nestorius and the Pope delegated St. Cyril to see to the execution of a sentence of deposition on the troublesome Patriarch, if he did not retract his errors within ten days of the notification of the Roman decision. Instead of tending immediately to the execution of the Pope's wishes, St. Cyril first called a synod in Egypt. At this synod the bishops approved the text of a document composed by St. Cyril, and also his twelve anathematisms against the Nestorian errors. The document — the *Epistola synodica*—and the anathematisms were sent to Nestorius. Unfortunately some of the Cyrillian expressions on the nature of the Hypostatic Union caused consternation among the bishops of the East. As a result, the controversy was not settled until the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 passed a sentence of condemnation and deposition on Nestorius.<sup>49</sup>

It was at the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus that the doctrine of the Divine Maternity was established beyond all doubt. At the council the *Epistola altera* of St. Cyril to Nestorius was read aloud and approved by the assembled bishops. In relation to the Divine Maternity this letter of St. Cyril stated: “Nor was He first born of the holy Virgin as an ordinary man, in such a way that the Word only afterwards descended upon Him; rather was He united [with flesh] in the womb itself, and thus is said to have undergone birth according to the flesh, inasmuch as He makes His own the birth of His own flesh. . . .

<sup>48</sup> *P.G.* 77, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Jouassard, *art. cit.*, pp. 122-136.

For this reason [the holy Fathers] have boldly proclaimed the holy Virgin *Theotókos*.”<sup>50</sup>

The Papal Legates to the council were not present at the session in which the council approved the doctrine of St. Cyril. But, when they arrived at the council, the acts of the session were presented to them and they formally approved of the decision. This formal approval gave canonical sanction to the decision.<sup>51</sup>

Was the decision of the council on the Divine Maternity a solemn definition of the dogma of the Divine Maternity? Jouassard is of the opinion that it was not. He states categorically: “There was no definition of this sort at Ephesus.” And he adds that the Fathers at Ephesus systematically refused to add anything new to the decisions of the Council of Nice. But he does admit that, practically speaking, the decision at Ephesus was the equivalent of a definition of the dogma. At any rate, the Council of Chalcedon (451) accepted and made its own the designation *Theotókos*; and the second Council of Constantinople (the fifth ecumenical council) in 553 accepted the twelve anathematisms of St. Cyril. This latter official action of the *Magisterium* of the Church would suffice, in the absence of any certain prior definition, to establish the dogma of the Divine Maternity.<sup>52</sup>

The activity of St. Cyril did not cease with the condemnation of Nestorius. In that same year (431) he wrote two works defending his twelve anathematisms. After the council

<sup>50</sup> The text of the letter of St. Cyril can be found in *P.G.* 77, 43-45. It is also cited in *DB*, 111a, but the last sentence, concerning the Divine Maternity, is not cited in *DB*.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Jouassard, *art. cit.*, pp. 130-131, and n. 39 on p. 131.

<sup>52</sup> For Jouassard's view cf. *art. cit.* p. 135, nn. 56 and 57; cf. *ibid.*, also p. 129, nn. 33, 34 and 35; and *ibid.*, p. 131, n. 39; cf. also the view of Eamon Carroll, O.Carm., *art. Mary in the Documents of the Magisterium*, in *Mariology*, edited by Juniper B. Carol, Vol. 1 (Milwaukee, 1955), pp. 8-9 and p. 9, n. 18.

he also wrote the *Explicatio XII capitulorum*. A little later he composed the dialogue *Quod unus sit Christus*, in which he again defended the Divine Maternity: "If [our] adversaries say that the holy Virgin ought in no way to be called *Theotókos*, but that rather she should be called *Christotókos*, it is clear that they blaspheme, and they deny that Christ is truly God and the Son. For if they really believe that He is God, since the Only-Begotten was made like to us, why are they afraid, I ask, to call the one who begot Him in the flesh the *Theotókos*?"<sup>53</sup>

In the West, John Cassian (d. c. 435) wrote a refutation of the first four sermons of Nestorius. In it he affirms: "You, whoever you are, speak heretically when you say that Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, cannot be called *Theotókos*, that is, Mother of God, but that she must be called *Christotókos*, that is, only the Mother of Christ, not of God. . . ." <sup>54</sup> A few years after the council, St. Vincent of Lerins (d. c. 450) also defended the dogma of the Divine Maternity and pointed out that it was a consequence of the unity of person in Christ.<sup>55</sup> St. Fulgentius (d. 533) defended the reality of Christ's human nature, the reality of His conception in the womb of the Virgin, the reality of His birth of the Virgin, and called the Virgin who gave birth to God "virgo generatrix" (*Virgin Mother*).<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *Apologeticus contra Orientales*; P.G. 76, 315-386; *Apologeticus contra Theodoretum*; P.G. 76, 386-452; *Explicatio XII capitulorum*; P.G. 76, 293-312; *Quod unus est Christus*; P.G. 75, 1253-1362; the citation is found in column 1262.

<sup>54</sup> *De Incarnatione Christi adversus Nestorium*; P.L. 50, 31.

<sup>55</sup> *Commonitorium*, 15; P.L. 50, 658: "Haec in Christo personae unitas nequaquam post virginis partum, sed in ipso virginis utero compacta atque perfecta est. . . . Per hanc, inquam, personae unitatem illud quoque similis mysterii ratione perfectum est, ut, carne Verbi ex integra matre nascente, ipse Deus Verbum natus ex virgine catholicissime credatur, impiissime denegetur. . . ."

<sup>56</sup> *Epistola 17*; P.L. 65, 457.

For the Church generally, the decision against Nestorius at Ephesus settled practically the question of the Divine Maternity. Devotion to our Blessed Mother increased throughout the Christian world. New feasts were instituted and new prayers composed in her honor.<sup>57</sup> The conciliar decision was in harmony with the faith of the people and provided an impetus to the growing cult of the Blessed Mother of God.

*Conclusions:*

This brief sketch of the development and eventual definition of the dogma of the Divine Maternity enables us to draw the following conclusions:

(1) The doctrine is apostolic in origin. We find it recognized and believed in the universal Church in the first three centuries of the life of the Church.

(2) Though the title "Mother of God" was not used before Origen or Hypolytus (at least we have no certain historical evidence of this), nevertheless the doctrine is generally accepted. From St. Ignatius on we find at least a concrete (if not theologically conscious) usage of the principles of the unity of person in Christ and the consequent communication of idioms as the basis of the Divine Maternity. With the advent of Athanasius, at least, these principles are used consciously as the theological foundation of the doctrine.

(3) Before the Nestorian crisis in the fifth century, the doctrine is universally accepted. But the Nestorian crisis, though primarily Christological, produced the official definition of the dogma of the Divine Maternity.

(4) The history of the dogma, then, is quite similar to the history of other great Christian dogmas. In the beginning the doctrine is known and believed, though perhaps not fully understood. As difficulties arise and errors against the doctrine

<sup>57</sup> For the development of the cult of Mary, cf. the articles in *Maria*, edited by H. du Manoir, Vol. 1, book 2, *Marie dans la liturgie*, pp. 215-413.

are propounded, both the teaching and the learning Church deepen their understanding of the realities involved and the doctrine is proposed ever more clearly until the *Magisterium* of the Church finally defines solemnly what the whole Church believes and must believe. Before the dogma of the Divine Maternity was finally defined (at least practically at Ephesus, and beyond any doubt at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553), the doctrine survived the crises of Docetism, the denial of the reality of Christ's human nature; of Gnosticism, especially insofar as it denied that the Word, or Christ, was identical with Jesus, the Son of Mary; of Arianism, which denied the divinity of Christ; of Apollinarism, which denied the completeness of the human nature of Christ; and, finally, the anvil on which the definition was forged, the crisis of Nestorianism, which denied the real unity of person in Christ and the consequent communication of idioms.

(5) Once the *Magisterium* of the Church had solemnly proclaimed the dogma of the Divine Maternity, the whole Church was placed in a position in which it could appreciate the sublime truth involved and could express its acceptance in the growth of Marian devotion and Marian theology which followed in the succeeding centuries.

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