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MARY IN EASTERN LITURGY

A student of Mariology in the Orthodox Church may be struck by two apparently contradictory facts: on the one hand, a tremendous richness of Mariological material in liturgy, yet, on the other hand, a virtual absence of specifically Mariological studies in theology. It is indeed a real paradox of the Orthodox East that the whole of its Mariological experience and piety seems to have permeated its worship but did not provoke any significant theological reflection. We have nothing that would correspond to specialized Mariological treatises in the West, and in our manuals of dogmatics there are no separate chapters dealing with the place of Mary in the economy of salvation. Thus, the veneration of Mary—so obvious, so central in worship—has not been expressed, analyzed, or evaluated systematically.

At first this scarcity of theological reflection may appear as a deficiency of Orthodox theology. How could it happen that the Church which never prays to God or Christ without at the same time addressing her prayers to Mary, which constantly praises the one who "... is more honorable than the cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim ..." has not directed its theological mind to this enormously important fact of its life and piety? Upon deeper investigation, however, one comes to ask whether this absence of theological speculation is not itself an integral part of the "mystery of Mary" in the experience of the Church, whether theology as such—i.e. the rational investigation of the *depositum fidei*—is fully adequate to transpose into its precise terms the real content of that mystery, whether, in short, the proper *locus* of Mariology is not primarily, if not exclusively, in liturgy and prayer? To many Orthodox it seems that a theological "curiosity" concerning Mary may constitute in fact one of the sources of certain one-sidedness of Western Mariology. ... But before we reach any conclusions, however tentative, we shall first give a brief de-

scription of the place of Mary in the Orthodox liturgical tradition, then say a few words about the development of the veneration of the Mother of God, and finally, try to formulate a more or less synthetic view of its theological significance.

I

There are four main expressions of Mariology in the Byzantine liturgy:

(a) *The Mariological prayers*—As a general rule each cycle of liturgical prayers has always at its end a special prayer addressed to Mary. Thus, for example, the groups of hymns (*stichiras*) which we find within the fixed structure of the daily services are always closed with the so-called *theotokion*, which follows the doxology "Glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages." This rule applies to all liturgical units: the daily, weekly, and yearly cycles, as well as the Sanctoral. Whatever the theme of any particular celebration, its last word, its seal will always be the Theotokos, Mary—the Virgin Mother of God.

(b) *Mariological feasts*—There exists within the liturgy a highly developed cycle of Mariological commemorations. Four of them: the Nativity of the Virgin (September 8), the Presentation of the Theotokos into the Temple (November 21), the Annunciation (March 25), and the Dormition (August 15) belong to the category of the twelve major feasts. The feast of the Purification (February 2)—of the same category—is also deeply Mariological. In addition to these major feasts, we find a number of lesser Mariological feasts such as: the Protection of the Virgin (October 1), the Synaxis of the Theotokos (December 26), the Conception of Mary (December 9), etc.

(c) *Mariological iconography*—The icons of the Theotokos are an integral part of an Orthodox Church, where their very position—in the apse and on the iconostasis—has definite theological meaning. One must add to this a tremendously developed cult of the so-called miraculous icons of the Theotokos

Russia alone had more than 300 of such "revealed" icons—each of which also has its day of celebration and a liturgical "proper." Some of these icons' feasts—as for example that of the icon of *Our Lady of Kazan* in Russia, or *Zoodohos Pigy* in Greece, have developed into major and extremely popular feasts.

(d) *Para-liturgical Mariological piety*—Together with this "official" Mariological material in liturgy one must mention the enormous amount of secondary or para-liturgical Mariological feasts and services. The collection of the various "*akathisto*" to *Mary*—written after the pattern of the famous Byzantine *Akathistos*—would fill several volumes and is very typical of the constantly renewed flow of warm piety, love and praise addressed to Mary.

Not all of these materials are, to be sure, of equal value and quality. Yet, the best Byzantine hymnographers—St. John of Damascus, St. Andrew of Crete, St. Cosmas of Maioum, etc.—wrote some of their greatest compositions on Mariological themes and it is in their works that one finds the true expression, the true contemplation and understanding of Mary in the Orthodox tradition.

Finally and not less important is the elaboration of these themes in the homilies composed for Mariological feasts by the Byzantine Fathers and doctors.

II

There exists no comprehensive history of the veneration of Mary in the Eastern Church and, therefore, only a few and "preliminary" remarks can be made. It seems that the first liturgical expression of that veneration must have been the so-called "concomitant" feasts, i.e. celebrations attached to the major feasts of Christ. The first Mariological feast may have been the *Synaxis* of December 26—directly connected with the celebration of Christ's Nativity. Annunciation was at first the name given to the Sunday before Christmas, etc. All this points

to the basically Christological dimension of the veneration of Mary, the contemplation by the Church of her place within the mystery of Incarnation. Even today the main Byzantine icon of Mary is that of the Mother with the Child—which is for the Orthodox Church primarily an icon of Incarnation.

The second remark concerns the biblical expression of Mariological themes. Of special interest here is the application to Mary of the entire terminology of the Temple and its cultic symbolism. The Temple and all its sacred furnishings are always understood by Byzantine hymnographers and preachers as announcing and foretelling the various "dimensions" of the mystery of Mary. She is the Temple, the Door, the Candlestick, the Censer, the Holy of Holies, etc. In this context even the "non-biblical" feasts—such as the Nativity of the Virgin or the Presentation into the Temple, are fundamentally the "fruit" of a certain reading and understanding of the Old Testament.

In the third place, one must stress the origin of certain Mariological feasts as rooted in the construction and dedication of churches in various places in which events of the sacred history were supposed to have taken place

Thus when investigating the history of Mariological piety, one discovers that it is rooted not in any special revelation but, primarily, in the experience of liturgical worship. In other terms, it is not a theological reflection on Mary that gave birth to her veneration; it is the liturgy as the experience of "heaven on earth," as communion with and the knowledge of heavenly realities, as an act of love and adoration, that little by little revealed the unique place of Christ's Mother in both the economy of salvation and the mystery of the "world to come." Mary is not part of the Church's *kerygma* whose only content is Christ. She is the inner secret of the Church as communion with Christ. The Church preaches Christ, not Mary. But communion with Christ reveals Mary as the secret joy within the Church. "In her," says a hymn, "rejoices the whole creation."

This "cultic" or liturgical origin of Mariology is of special

importance for the understanding of its true nature and theological implications. For, in a sense, Mary is not the object of a particular cult, added, so to speak, to that of Christ. She is, rather, an essential "dimension" of the cult addressed to God and Christ, a quality or tonality of that cult. To understand this one must briefly enumerate the more important Mariological themes of the Byzantine liturgy.

III

If Christ is the new Adam, Mary is very often referred to as the *new Eve*. This reveals the first—soteriological—dimension of her veneration by the Church. The Church has concentrated in Mary the whole biblical vision and experience of the relationship between God and creation, the Saviour and the world, as a mystery of love whose closest expression in "this world" is the man-woman relationship. God loves the world, God loves the chosen people, Christ loves the Church as the husband loves his wife, or, to be more exact, the mystery of human love reflects the mystery of God's love for His creation. Mary stands thus for the *femininity* of creation itself, femininity meaning here: responding love, obedience, self-giving, the readiness to live exclusively in, and for, the Other. . . . The woman "responds" to the initiative of man and follows him and—in this total self-giving—she fulfills herself. Yet Eve precisely failed to be woman for she took the initiative, she distorted thus the ontological order of creation and became the cause of sin. The chosen people of God failed to be the "handmaid" of the Lord in love and obedience. It is, therefore, Mary who, by her total obedience, restores something absolutely essential in the order of creation. "The light of an eternal spring comes to us when on the day of the Annunciation we hear the decisive: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word' (*Luke* 1:38). This is indeed the whole creation, the whole mankind and each one of us acknowledging the words which express our ultimate nature and being, our acceptance to be

the *bride of God*, our betrothal to the One who from all eternity loved us." Mary is not the representative of the woman or women before God, she is the icon of the entire creation, the whole mankind as response to Christ and to God. This is well expressed in the traditional icon of Mary—"platitera ton ouranon" ("wider than heaven") which is so often found in the apse of Byzantine churches.

IV

Being the heart of the new creation, Mary is the icon of Christ. The Church is *institution* and the Church is *life*. Ecclesiology, as it developed since the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, dealt almost exclusively with the institutional aspect of the Church which is its "masculine" aspect: canonical and jurisdictional structures, hierarchy, *ordos*, etc. All this is necessary and essential for the Church; all this, however, is not *the Church*! The Church is new life in Christ, new joy, communion, love, ascension, deification, peace. The Church is an eternal "passage"—from the *old* into the *new*, from this world into the Kingdom of God. It is difficult to define this life, but those who live it, be it only imperfectly, know that its perfect expression, its very "movement" is Mary. As *life*, the Church is a *she*, the Bride of Christ, the one who is called from eternity to be "a chaste virgin to Christ" (II Cor. 11:2), to whom from all eternity her Bridegroom has said: "thou art all fair, my love, there is no spot in thee." No synod, no ecclesiastical authority has decreed all this; it is the direct and living experience of the Church herself that has discovered this identification of the Church with Mary, has expressed the life of the Church in reference to Mary and the veneration of Mary in reference to the Church. The piety of the Church is Mariological because Mary is the very embodiment of that piety, its image, its direction, its movement. She is the "oranta"—the one eternally alive in adoration and self-giving. . . .

V

The icon of creation, the icon of the Church, Mary is also "the dawn of the mysterious day"—the foretaste of the Kingdom of God, the presence among us of that "realized eschatology" which is so often mentioned by theologians. From what secret source did the Church learn that the one who is "virgin after child bearing" is also "alive after death"? (Kontakion of the Feast of the Dormition.) Yet it is a certitude, a self-evidence of the faith that, even before the common resurrection and the consummation of all things in Christ, She is fully alive, i.e. beyond the destruction and the separation of death.

The Christian East has never rationalized this mystery, has not expressed it within the categories of original sin, immaculate conception, *donum superadditum*, etc. Different in this from Western Mariology, it affirms that Mary shared with mankind the original sin and that she fell asleep—i.e. died. . . The wonderful thing about her is not that, having no original sin, she did not have to die, but that her death itself was filled to capacity with life in God, and, therefore, changed into "blessed assumption." It is her total unity with Christ that destroyed her death and made her the beginning, the inauguration of the common resurrection. In her, a part of this world is totally glorified and deified, and she is thus the "dawn of the mysterious day" of the Kingdom.

VI

She stood at the Cross. A sword pierced through her soul "that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (*Luke 2:35*). She was made our Mother by her crucified Son. Every Wednesday and Friday the Church remembers Mary's mystery of suffering and compassion and expresses it in its beautiful *stavrotheotokia* (the Byzantine counterparts of the "Stabat Mater Dolorosa . . ."). This is the source of another dimension of Mariology—the experience of Mary as protection and in-

tercession. She is identified with all suffering, with human life in this world as tragedy and suffering. She is thus the icon of the Church as Mother. This theme is nowhere better expressed than in the feast of the Protection of the Virgin and in the unquenchable flow of Mariological prayers mentioned above in the category of the para-liturgical services and compositions.

Summing up, we can say once more that the "cult" of Mary is not an autonomous element in the rich tradition of the Church, an element that can be studied "in itself". It is an essential dimension of Christian cosmology, anthropology, ecclesiology and eschatology. It is not an object of faith, but its fruit; not a *nota ecclesiae*, but the self-revelation of the Church; not even a doctrine, but the life and the fragrance of Christian doctrine in us.

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