

“Behold You Are Beautiful:” Theological Anthropology in Light of the Theotokos

Gregory Jensen

*“Behold my beloved you are beautiful; behold you are beautiful”
(Song of Songs 1:15)*

Introduction

In the Akathist Hymn to the Theotokos,¹ we hear that “an angel, and the first among them,” appears to the Virgin Mary. There then follows praises uttered by the angel to Mary:

Rejoice, you through whom joy shall shine forth.
Rejoice, you through whom the curse shall vanish.
Rejoice, fallen Adam’s restoration.
Rejoice, redemption of Eve’s tears.
Rejoice, height that is too difficult for human thought
to ascend.
Rejoice, depth that is too strenuous for Angels’ eyes to
perceive.
Rejoice, for you are the throne of the King.

¹ A good summary introduction to the history of the Akathist and its place in Orthodox Christian piety can be found at the web page of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia: <http://home.it.net.au/~jgrapsas/pages/Akathist.htm>. It should be noted that “akathist” is a popular devotional form in eastern Christianity and that there are similar devotional hymns offered in honor of not only the Theotokos, but also Christ, the saints and even one offered in praise of God for the gift of the creation: <http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article8228.asp>.

Rejoice, for you hold Him who sustains everything.
Rejoice, star that shows forth the Sun.
Rejoice, womb in which God became incarnate.
Rejoice, you through whom creation is renewed.
Rejoice, you through whom the Creator becomes an
infant.
Rejoice, O Bride unwedded!²

To some, these and other praises of the Mother of God might seem an excess of Byzantine rhetoric but to see the praises of the Theotokos in this way is to miss the point entirely because the Church's praise of the Theotokos is meant first and foremost to highlight the mystery of the Incarnation.³

We can, however, go further and say that, because Christ reveals man to himself, these praises highlight both the great mystery of the Incarnation and also our own vocation as Christians. As the Virgin Mary is the Theotokos, the "God Bearer," the Christian is called to be *Christophorus* or "Christ-bearer." In other words, everything that we say about the Theotokos can and should be said of each and every Christian and (at least potentially) every human being.

To be human is to have the potential by grace, and through the exercise of our own freedom, to be, like the Virgin Mary, a "fervent advocate, [an] invisible battlement, [a] fountain of mercy, and [a] sheltering retreat for the world."⁴ What makes the Mother of God extraordinary, what makes her unique in the human community, is her willingness to be human in full; in her unreserved embrace of her own humanity, she reveals to us that to be human is to be nothing less than a source of salvation for the world.

² Unless noted otherwise, the quotations are from Archimandrite Ephrem Lash, <http://www.anastasis.org.uk/index.html>.

³ This turning to the Virgin Mary as the guardian of Christological orthodoxy was canonized in 451 AD at the Council of Ephesus in response to the Nestorian denial of the unity of the divine and human natures in the one divine person. It is only when we forget, or are indifferent to, their proper Christological context, that these praises seem excessive.

⁴ *Small Paraklesis to the Theotokos*.

A Ravaged Beauty

While Christian theological anthropology is foundationally Marian, Mary does not exhaust the meaning of the human situation. The Christian witness to the goodness of humanity is offered to a human community which, personally and corporately, is fundamentally flawed. In the *Evlogitaria*⁵ in the Byzantine funeral service, for example, we hear:

of old you formed me from nothing and honored me with your divine image, but because I transgressed your commandment, you returned me to the earth from which I was taken; bring me back to your likeness, my ancient beauty.

And a little later, in the same service, we hear these words from the Canon of Saint John Damascene:

I grieve and lament when I contemplate death, and see the beauty fashioned for us in God’s image lying in the graves, without form, without glory, without shape. O the wonder! What is this mystery which has happened to us? How have we been handed over to corruption, and yoked with death? Truly it is at God’s command, as it is written, God who grants rest to him who has passed over.

Tragically, because of Adam’s transgression, humanity finds itself having “been handed over to corruption, and yoked with death.” As a consequence of Adam’s transgression, a rebellion which we ratify for ourselves each time we sin, we now live lives “without form, without glory [and] without shape.” Again in the words of the funeral service:

⁵ The “Evlogitaria” are hymns with the refrain, “Blessed art Thou O Lord, teach me thy statutes.” They are sung either at Sunday Orthros (Matins), in praise of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, or at funerals on behalf of the newly departed.