

The *Theotokos* in the Christian East and West

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Introduction

In the last number of years, there has been an increasing ecumenical focus on the role and theology of the Mother of God.¹ The international Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue has issued a statement on her²; the Groupe des Dombes has done likewise³; and many Protestant theologians and faithful have begun showing a greater interest in the Mother of God and a recovery of certain forgotten or previously disdained beliefs and devotions.⁴ Among Catholics and Orthodox, there has not been so marked a recent increase in interest in part because both Churches have historically had very strong, and very similar, theologies of, and devotions to, the Theotokos. This essay reviews those devotions and doctrines shared by Catholics and Orthodox and does so historically and non-polemically. The result will be to see that such divergences as there are are slight and are methodological rather than substantial or doctrinal. In the end, East and West find common celebration in her whom the Byzantine tradition hymns as “more

¹ See, inter alia, Marc Ouellet, “Mary and the Future of Ecumenism,” *Communio* 30 (2003): 26–38.

² *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (Toronto: Novalis, 2005).

³ Groupe des Dombes, *Marie dans le dessein de Dieu et la communion des saints* (Paris: Centurion, 2003).

⁴ See, e.g., “Hail, Mary,” the *Time* cover story and accompanying articles on how “Protestants Are Finding Their Own Reasons to Celebrate the Mother of Jesus,” *Time* 165 (21 March 2005).

honourable than the cherubim and by far more glorious than the seraphim.”

A Christological Corollary and History

Devotion to, and the theology of, the Mother of God began in the context of early Christological controversies and their doctrinal settlements; Mariology in the East developed simultaneously with Christology. Marian heortology itself follows the same route, even though various historical circumstances have accelerated the process. A very positive aspect of the Eastern tradition is the fact that theology, liturgy, heortology, hymnography, and iconography all proceed hand-in-hand; often, and indeed almost always, one corroborates the other, so that an obscure aspect of one easily finds clarification and explanation in another.

If, on the one hand, the final definition of the Church’s authentic faith about the person and the nature of the Savior, as it was handed down by the apostolic tradition, found its final expression only in the fourth and fifth centuries, on the other hand, ever since apostolic times, it became necessary to reject as outside Christian belief those views which reduced the Redeemer to a simple man, or to a man particularly endowed with a divine power variously interpreted, or even to a divine being who had only an appearance of human nature. Since the beginning, the Church professed faith in Christ’s perfect divinity and perfect humanity. The problem that arose from theological thinking was one of harmonizing these two dimensions: Christ as perfect God and perfect man. However, this is a problem of synthesis, not of faith that must be accepted. Whoever does not accept it places himself outside the Church.

Clarity about Christ always entailed clarity about the person and the role of the all-holy Virgin. “There is but one Physician, both of the flesh and of the spirit,” writes Ignatius of Antioch (†107), “begotten and unbegotten, God in the flesh, true life in death, both from Mary and from God; first passible and then impassible, Jesus Christ Our Lord.”⁵ Ignatius wishes

⁵ Jack Sparks, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Minneapolis, MN, 1978): Ephesians 7:2.

to proclaim the human reality of the Savior in addition to His divine reality; and no proof appears more obvious to him than the declaration that the flesh Christ assumed really comes from Mary: “Our God, Jesus the Christ was conceived by Mary in accordance with the plan of God – of the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit; He was born and was baptized in order to purify the water by the passion.”⁶

Viewed from this perspective, Mariology in the East, in the pre-Nicene period, can be summed up in three points: divine maternity, perpetual virginity, and the parallel Eve-Mary. However, it must be stated at the outset that all three points flow from theological premises strictly essential to the plan of salvation carried out by the Incarnate Word; they are never viewed as simply “privileges” that the Word-made-man gave to His mother. The Marian mystery from this point of view is therefore an integral part of the mystery of the Incarnation. It is precisely for this reason – the manner of viewing the figure of the *Theotokos* – that it is very difficult to find in the early centuries, in the Christian writings even after Nicaea, certain themes which later on the awareness of the Church in her theological development would universally accept, such as Mary’s immunity from sin or her glorification after death. We must keep in mind that when these new aspects achieved their full development, the East, forever bound to the ancient tradition, always tried to connect them with the Christological mystery. If today some themes of Marian theology plainly seem to differ between East and West, these different trends diverge more in words and formulations than in substance. Indeed the whole Christian tradition, both Eastern and Western, is in total agreement in considering the Blessed Virgin firmly bound to the Christological mystery and in deeming incomplete any Christian faith that would not accept in the Redeemer the Marian mystery as well.

⁶ Ibid., Ephesians 18:2.