

An Orthodox View of the Virgin Mary

A Protestant preacher recently said that devotion to the Mother of God is the cause of all bad in the world, since she was not a virgin after she gave birth to Christ and was just another woman. This really has upset me. Why do we worship the Virgin Mary and how do we answer those who say that she was nothing but another woman? What significance does she have for us Orthodox? (B.W., TX)

One cannot react to every opinion and idea about Christianity. At some point, common sense must prevail. In the first place, the idea that devotion to the Theotokos, or Bearer of God, is the cause of the world's ills is a ridiculous proposition. One must look at such an idea with the same passivity that we show towards so-called scholarly attempt to prove that Christian devotion to the Virgin Mary derives from the pagan cult of the earth goddess. It does not deserve a response. Secondly, while non-Orthodox Christian denominations may differ with regard to their assessment of the significance of the Mother of God, this does not explain the views of those who would like to believe—an incredible, if not demonic thing—that a woman chosen by the God of the universe to bear His Incarnate Son would simply return, after this miraculous event, to the world of the flesh. If St. Paul praises the chaste life, if Christians are called to become eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom, and if, at least in the Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran Churches, monks and nuns are called to uphold the standard of virginity and purity,* how could any rational person suggest that the woman called to bear the Son of God would be exempt from such a pious commitment?

We will not, here, comment on the mistranslation and misuse of Scripture by which some heterodox try to claim that the Virgin Mary was a virgin only "up to the time" of the Virgin Birth and not after, or by which they rather naïvely understand the children of St. Joseph (the Virgin Mary's step-children) and their cousins to be the literal "brothers and sisters" of Christ. The Fathers of the Church have written at length on these matters. Suffice it to say that ancient Christian tradition supported the idea that the Mother of God was ever-virgin, just as Church Fathers and Councils condemned heretics in the early Church who, like their counterparts today, questioned the spiritual eminence of the Theotokos.

As for the very eminence of the Mother of God, let us turn to Scripture. Going to the house of Zacharias, the Virgin Mary greeted his wife, Elizabeth. "Filled with the Holy Spirit," St. Elizabeth cried out, "Blessed art thou among women..." (St. Luke 1: 40-42). In response, the Theotokos observes that "...henceforth all generations shall call me blessed." It would, again, suggest a psychological or spiritual problem of no small dimensions for anyone to believe that, after these statements, the Virgin Mary would simply return to the life of the flesh and set aside her spiritual role in the salvation brought to mankind by Jesus Christ.

Finally, we Orthodox do not "worship" the Virgin Mary. We "venerate" her and show her great honor. Nor have we ever, like the Latins, developed the idea that the Theotokos was born without sin (the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception) or that she is a co-redemptor with Christ (the cult of the Redemtrix in the Latin Church). The consensus of the Church Fathers rejects such ideas, and the Orthodox Church adheres to that consensus. However, we do believe that the Virgin Mary is an image, as St. Maximos the Confessor says, of the Christian goal of becoming Christ-like, of theosis. Just as the Theotokos gave birth to Christ in a bodily way, so we must, St. Maximos tells us, give birth to Christ in an unbodily or spiritual way. In so doing, we imitate her practical spiritual life, including the purity and humility by which she formed her free will into perfect obedience to the Will of God. Of this practical image of the Virgin Mary, one of our readers, Archdeacon Basil Kuretich, D.D., has written some words

that bear repeating here. They give us a clear picture of the importance of the model which she presents for every Orthodox believer:

"We...are aware of the part played by Divine Grace in the Virgin Mary's life and are aware of the perfection of her virtue. However, we cannot lose sight of the importance of free will in the development and expression of her rich personality. After the Annunciation, she kept the secret of God's plan for her; she faced misunderstanding and accusation from others. She quickly visited her cousin, Elizabeth, not thinking of her own needs, but only the need of Elizabeth to share her joy. She endured the journey to Bethlehem; she humbly prepared for the birth of her Child and obediently accepted the command to flee into Egypt. The Virgin Mary, aided by Divine Grace, carried out these actions in a real world—with real effort and sacrifice. Thus she is for us a model of many virtues."

**Although they may be familiar with monasticism in the Latin Church, most Americans do not know that monastic brotherhoods and sisterhoods survived in the Lutheran and Reformed movements, despite the generally polemical attitude towards the monastic estate that marked the Protestant Reformation. Over the years they have decreased in number or have been absorbed into Roman Catholicism, as is the case in Sweden, where most of the Lutheran monastic houses have succumbed to the widespread proselytizing of German Jesuit missionaries in that country.*

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