

Archpriest Georges Florovsky (1893-1979)

The Ever-Virgin Mother of God*

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The writer is fully aware of the inadequacy of his exposition. This is not a theological essay in the strict sense. It is only an occasional address written down in haste some time after it had been improvised. The only contention of the author was to suggest the way in which the subject should be approached and to open the discussion. The main concern in the paper was to prove that Mariology belongs to the very body of Christian doctrine or, if we allow the phrase, to that essential minimum of doctrinal agreement outside which no true unity of faith could even be claimed.

G. F.

The whole dogmatic teaching about our Lady can be condensed into these two names of hers: the Mother of God and the Ever-Virgin— [in Greek,] *Theotokos* [literally, ‘God-bearer’] and *Aeiparthenos*. Both names have the formal authority of the Church Universal, an ecumenical authority indeed. The Virgin Birth is plainly attested in the New Testament and has been an integral part of the Catholic tradition ever since. “Incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary” (or “Born of the Virgin Mary”) is a credal phrase. It is not merely a statement of the historical fact. It is precisely a credal statement, a solemn profession of faith. The term “Ever-Virgin” was formally endorsed by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553). And *Theotokos* is more than a name or an honorific title. It is rather a doctrinal definition— in one word. It has been a touchstone of the true faith and a distinctive mark of Orthodoxy even before the Council of Ephesus (432).
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St. Gregory of Nazianzus warns Cledonius: “if one does not acknowledge Mary as *Theotokos*, he is estranged from God” (*Epist.* 101). As a matter of fact, the name was widely used by the Fathers of the fourth century and possibly even in the third (by Origen, for instance, if we can trust Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.*, VII, 32, and the texts preserved in catenas, e.g. *In Lucam Hom.* 6 and 7, ed. Rauer, 44. 10 and 50. 9). It was already traditional when it was contested and

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repudiated by Nestorius and his group. The word does not occur in Scripture, just as the term *homoousios* does not occur. But surely, neither at Nicaea nor at Ephesus was the Church innovating or imposing a new article of faith. An “unscriptural” word was chosen and used, precisely to voice and to safeguard the traditional belief and common conviction of ages. It is true, of course, that the Third Ecumenical Council was concerned primarily with the Christological dogma and did not formulate any special Mariological doctrine. But precisely for that very reason it was truly remarkable that a *Mariological* term should have been selected and put forward as the ultimate test of *Christological* orthodoxy, to be used, as it were, as a doctrinal shibboleth in the Christological discussion. It was really a key-word to the whole of Christology. “This name,” says St. John of Damascus, “contains the whole mystery of the Incarnation” (*De Fide Orth.*, III. 12). As Petavius aptly puts it: *Quem in Trinitatis explicando dogmate homoousiou vox, eundem hoc in nostro Incarnationis usum ac principatum obtinet theotokou nomen* (*De Incarnatione*, lib. V, cap. 15). The motive and the purpose of such a choice are obvious. The Christological doctrine can never be accurately and adequately stated unless a very definite teaching about the Mother of Christ has been included. In fact, all the Mariological doubts and errors of modern times depend in the last resort precisely upon an utter Christological confusion. They reveal a hopeless “conflict in Christology.” There is no room for the Mother of God in a “reduced Christology.” Protestant theo-

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-logians simply have nothing to say about her. Yet to ignore the Mother means to misinterpret the Son. On the other hand, the person of the Blessed Virgin can be properly understood and rightly described only in a Christological setting and context. Mariology is to be but a chapter in the treatise on the Incarnation, never to be extended into an independent “treatise.” Not, of course, an optional or occasional chapter, riot an appendix. It belongs to the very body of doctrine. The Mystery of the Incarnation includes the Mother of the Incarnate. Sometimes, however, this Christological perspective has been obscured by a devotional exaggeration, by an unbalanced pietism. Piety must always be guided and checked by dogma. Again, there must be a Mariological chapter in the treatise on the Church. But the doctrine of the Church itself is but an “extended Christology,” the doctrine of the “total Christ,” *totus Christus, caput et corpus*.

The name *Theotokos* stresses the fact that the Child whom Mary bore was not a “simple man,” not a human person, but the only-begotten Son of God, “One of the Holy Trinity,” yet Incarnate. This is obviously the corner-stone of the Orthodox faith. Let us recall the formula of Chalcedon: “Following, then, the holy Fathers, we confess *one and the same Son [hena kai ton auton]*, our Lord Jesus Christ... before the ages begotten of the Father as to Godhead, but in the last days, for us and for our salvation, *the selfsame [ton auton]*, born of Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, as to Manhood” [the translation is by Dr. Bright]. The whole emphasis is on the absolute *identity* of the Person: *the Same, the Self-same, unus idemque* in St. Leo. This implies a *twofold generation* of the divine Word (but emphatically *not* a double Sonship; that would be precisely the Nestorian perversion). *There is but one Son*: the One born of the Virgin Mary is in the fullest

possible sense the Son of God. As St. John of Damascus says, the Holy Virgin did not bear “a common man, but the true God” [*ou gar anthropon psilon... alla theon alethinon*], yet “not naked, but

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incarnate” *ou gymnon alla sesarkomenon*. The Same, who from all eternity is born of the Father, “in these last days” was born of the Virgin, “without any change” (*De Fide Orth.*, 111. 12). There is here no confusion of natures. The “second *genesis*” is just the Incarnation. No *new person* came into being when the Son of Mary was conceived and born, but the Eternal Son of God was *made man*. This constitutes the mystery of the divine Motherhood of the Virgin Mary. For indeed Motherhood is a *personal* relation, a relation between persons. Now, the Son of Mary was in very truth a divine Person. The name *Theotokos* is an inevitable sequel to the name *Theanthropos*, the God-Man. Both stand and fall together. The doctrine of the Hypostatic Union implies and demands the conception of the divine Motherhood. Most unfortunately, the mystery of the Incarnation has been treated in modern times too often in an utterly abstract manner, as if it were but a metaphysical problem or even a dialectical riddle. One indulges too easily in the dialectics of the Finite and the Infinite, of the Temporal and the Eternal, etc., as if they were but terms of a logical or metaphysical relation. One is then in danger of overlooking and missing the very point: the Incarnation was precisely a mighty deed of the Living God, his most personal intervention into the creaturely existence, indeed, the “coming down” of a divine Person, of God *in person*. Again, there is a subtle but real docetic flavor in many recent attempts to re-state the traditional faith in modern terms. There is a tendency to overemphasize the divine initiative in the Incarnation to such an extent that the historic life of the Incarnate itself fades out into “the Incognito of the Son of God.” The direct identity” of the Jesus of history and the Son of God is explicitly denied. The whole impact of incarnation is reduced to symbols: the Incarnate Lord is understood rather as an exponent of some august principle or idea (be it the Wrath of God or Love, Anger or Mercy, judgment or Forgiveness), than as a living Person. In both cases the personal implications of the Incarna-

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-tion are overlooked or neglected— I mean, our adoption into true sonship of God in the Incarnate Lord. Now, something very real and ultimate happened with men and to men when the Word of God “was made flesh and dwelt among us,” or rather, “took his abode in our midst”— a very pictorial turn indeed: *eskenosen en hemin* (John i. 14).

“But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman” (Gal. iv. 4, R.V.). This is a scriptural statement of the same mystery with which the Fathers were wrestling at Chalcedon. Now, what is the full meaning and purpose of this phrase ‘ “born of woman”? Motherhood, in general, is by no means exhausted by the mere fact of a physical procreation. It would be lamentable blindness if we ignored its spiritual aspect. In fact, procreation itself establishes an intimate spiritual relation between the mother and the child. This relation is

unique and reciprocal, and its essence is affection or love. Are we entitled to ignore this implication of the fact that our Lord was “born of the Virgin Mary”? Surely, no docetic reduction is permissible in this case, just as it must be avoided anywhere else in Christology. Jesus was (and is) the Eternal God, and yet Incarnate, and Mary was *his* Mother in the fullest sense. Otherwise the Incarnation would not have been genuine. But this means precisely that for the Incarnate Lord there is one particular human person to whom he is in a very special relation,-in precise terms, one for whom he is not only the Lord and Saviour, but a Son. On the other hand, Mary was the true mother of her Child-the truth of her human maternity is of no less relevance and importance than the mystery of her divine motherhood. But the Child was divine. Yet the spiritual implications of her motherhood could not be diminished by the exceptional character of the case, nor could Jesus fail to be truly human in his filial response to the motherly affection of the one of whom he was born. This is not a vain speculation. It would be impertinent indeed to intrude upon the sacred field of this unparalleled intimacy between the Mother

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and the divine Child. But it would be even more impertinent to ignore the mystery. In any case, it would have been a very impoverished idea if we regarded the Virgin Mother merely as a physical instrument of our Lord’s taking flesh. Moreover, such a misinterpretation is formally excluded by the explicit teaching of the Church, attested from the earliest date: she was not just a “channel” through which the Heavenly Lord has come, but truly the mother of whom he took his humanity. St. John of Damascus precisely in these very words summarizes the Catholic teaching: he did not come “as through a pipe” [*hos dia solenos*] but has assumed of *her* [*ex autes*], a human nature consubstantial to ours (*De Fide Orth.*, 111, 12).

Mary “has found favor with God” (Luke i. 30). She was chosen and ordained to serve in the Mystery of the Incarnation. And by this eternal election or predestination she was in a sense set apart and given an unique privilege and position in the whole of mankind, nay in the whole of creation. She was given a transcendent rank, as it were. She was at once a *representative* of the human race, and *set apart*. There is an antinomy here, implied in the divine election. She was set apart. She was put into a unique and unparalleled relation to God, to the Holy Trinity, even before the Incarnation, as the prospective Mother of the Incarnate Lord, just because it was not an ordinary historical happening, but an eventful consummation of the eternal decree of God. She has a unique position even in the divine plan of salvation. Through the Incarnation human nature was to be restored again into the fellowship with God which had been destroyed and abrogated by the Fall. The sacred humanity of Jesus was to be the bridge over the abyss of sin. Now, this humanity was to be taken of the Virgin Mary. The Incarnation itself was a new beginning in the destiny of man, a beginning of the new humanity. In the Incarnation the “new man” was born, the “Last Adam”; he was truly human, but he was more than a man: “The second man is the Lord from heaven” (1 Cor. xv. 47). As the Mother of this

“Second Man,” Mary herself was participating in the mystery of the redeeming re-creation of the world. Surely, she is to be counted among the redeemed. She was most obviously in need of salvation. Her Son is her Redeemer and Saviour, just as he is the Redeemer of the world. Yet, she is the only human being for whom the Redeemer of the world is also a son, her own child whom she truly bore. Jesus indeed was born “not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John i. 13— this verse is related both to the Incarnation and to baptismal regeneration), and yet he is “the fruit of the womb” of Mary. His supernatural birth is the pattern and the font of the new existence, of the new and spiritual birth of all believers, which is nothing else than a participation in his sacred humanity, an adoption into the sonship of God—in the second man,” in the “last Adam.” The Mother of the “second man” necessarily had her own and peculiar way into the new life. It is not too much to say that for her the Redemption was, in a sense, anticipated in the fact of the Incarnation itself,— and anticipated in a peculiar and personal manner. “The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee” (Luke i. 35). This was a true “theophanic presence”— in the fullness of grace and of the Spirit. The “shadow” is exactly a theophanic symbol. And Mary was truly “full of grace,” *gratia plena, kecharitomene*. The Annunciation was for her, as it were, an anticipated Pentecost. We are compelled to risk this daring parallelism by the inscrutable logic of the divine election. For indeed we cannot regard the Incarnation merely as a metaphysical miracle which would be unrelated to the personal destiny and existence of the persons involved. Man is never dealt with by God as if he was but a tool in the hands of a master. For man is a living person. By no means could it be merely an “instrumental” grace, when the Virgin was “overshadowed” with the power of the Highest. The unique position of the Virgin Mary is obviously not her own

achievement, nor simply a “reward” for her “merits,”— nor even perhaps was the fullness of grace given to her in a “prevision” of her merits and virtue. It was supremely the free gift of God, in the strictest sense— *gratia gratis data*. It was an absolute and eternal election, although not unconditional— for it was conditioned by and related to the mystery of the Incarnation. Mary holds her unique position and has a “category of her own” not as a mere Virgin, but as the *Virgin-Mother, parthenometor*, as the predestined Mother of the Lord. Her function in the Incarnation is twofold. On the one hand, she secures the continuity of the human race. Her Son is, in virtue of his “second nativity,” the Son of David, the Son of Abraham and of all the “forefathers” (this is emphasized by the genealogies of Jesus, in both versions). In the phrase of St. Irenaeus, he “*recapitulated* in himself the long roll of humanity” (*Adv. Haeres.*, 111, 18, 1: *longam hominum expositionem in se ipso recapitulavit*), “gathered up in himself all nations, dispersed as they were even from Adam” (111, 22, 3) and “took upon himself the *old way of creation*” (IV, 23, 4). But, on the other hand, he “exhibited a *new sort of generation*” (V, 1, 3). He was the *New Adam*. This was the most drastic break in the continuity, the true *reversal* of the previous process. And this “reversal” begins precisely with the Incarnation, with the Nativity of

the “Second Man.” St. Irenaeus speaks of a *recirculation* from Mary to Eve (111, 22, 4). As the Mother of the New Man Mary has her anticipated share in this very newness. Of course, Jesus the Christ is the only Lord and Saviour. But Mary is his mother. She is the morning star that announces the sunrise, the rise of the true *Sol salutis: aster emphainon ton helion*. She is “the dawn of the mystic day,” *auge mystikes hemeras* (both phrases are from the Akathist hymn). And in a certain sense even the Nativity of our Lady itself belongs to the mystery of salvation. “Thy birth, O Mother of God and Virgin, hath declared joy to all the universe— for from thee arose the Sun of Righteousness,

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Christ our God” (Troparion of the Feast of the Nativity of our Lady). Christian thought moves always in the dimension of personalities, not in the realm of general ideas. It apprehends the mystery of the Incarnation as a mystery of the Mother and the Child. This is the ultimate safeguard against any abstract docetism. It is a safeguard of the evangelical concreteness. The traditional ikon of the Blessed Virgin, in the Eastern tradition, is precisely an ikon of the Incarnation: the Virgin is always with the Babe. And surely no ikon, i.e. no image of the Incarnation, is ever possible without the Virgin Mother.

Again, the Annunciation is “the beginning of our salvation and the revelation of the mystery which is from eternity: the Son of God becometh the Son of the Virgin, and Gabriel proclaimeth good tidings of grace” (Troparion of the Feast of the Annunciation). The divine will has been declared and proclaimed by the archangel. But the Virgin was not silent. She responded to the divine call, responded in humility and faith. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” Divine will is accepted and responded to. And this human response is highly relevant at this point. The obedience of Mary counterbalances the disobedience of Eve. In this sense the Virgin Mary is the Second Eve, as her Son is the Second Adam. This parallel was drawn quite early. The earliest witness is St. Justin (*Dial.*, 100) and in St. Irenaeus we find already an elaborate conception, organically connected with his basic idea of the recapitulation. “As Eve by the speech of an angel was seduced, so as to flee God, transgressing his word, so also Mary received the good tidings by means of the angel’s speech, so as to bear God within her, being obedient to his word. And, though the one has disobeyed God, yet the other was drawn to obey God; that of the virgin Eve the Virgin Mary might become the advocate. And, as by a virgin the human race had been bound to death, by a virgin it is. saved, the balance being preserved, a virgin’s disobedience by a virgin’s obedience” (V, 19, 1). And again:

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“And so the knot of Eve’s disobedience received its unloosing through the obedience of Mary; for what Eve, a virgin, bound by incredulity, that Mary, a virgin, unloosed by faith” (111, 22, 34-translation by Cardinal Newman). This conception was traditional, especially in the catechetical teaching, both in the East and in the West. “It is a great sacrament [*magnum sacramentum*] that, whereas through woman death became our portion, so life was born, to us

by woman,” says St. Augustine (*De Agone Christ.*, 24,— in another place he is simply quoting Irenaeus). “Death by Eve, life by Mary,” declares St. Jerome (*Epist.* 22: *mors per Evam, vita per Mariam*). Let me quote also an admirable and concise passage from one of the sermons of the Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow (1782-1867). He was preaching on the day of the Annunciation. “During the days of the creation of the world, when God uttered his living and mighty words: *Let there be...*, the Creator’s words brought creatures into existence. But on the day, unique in the existence of the world, when Holy Mary uttered her humble and obedient *Let it be*, I would hardly dare to express what took place then—the word of the creature caused the Creator to descend into the world. God uttered his word here also: *You will conceive in your womb and bear a son... he will be great... and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever*. But again that which is divine and incomprehensible occurs— the word of God itself defers its action, allowing itself to be delayed by the word of Mary: *How can this be?* Her humble *Let it be* was necessary for the realization of God’s mighty *Let it be*. What secret power is thus contained in these simple words: *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your will*— that it produces an effect so extraordinary? This marvelous power is Mary’s pure and perfect self-dedication to God, a dedication of her will, of her thought, of her soul, of her entire being, of all her faculties, of all her actions, of all her hopes and expectations.” [*Choix de Sermons et Discours de S. Em. Mgr. Philarete, Metropolitte*

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de Moscow, traduits par A. Serpinet (Paris, 1866, T. I, p. 187); the translation is by Dr. R. Haugh]. The Incarnation was indeed a sovereign act of God, but it was a revelation not only of his omnipotent might, but above all of his fatherly love and compassion. There was implied an appeal to human freedom once more, as an appeal to freedom was implied in the act of creation itself, namely in the creation of rational beings. The initiative was of course divine. Yet, as the means of salvation chosen by God was to be an assumption of true human nature by a divine Person, man had to have his active share in the mystery. Mary was voicing this obedient response of man to the redeeming decree of the love divine, and so she was representative of the whole race. She exemplified in her person, as it were, the whole of humanity. This obedient and joyful acceptance of the redeeming purpose of God, so beautifully expressed in the *Magnificat*, was an act of freedom. Indeed, it was freedom of obedience, not of initiative—and yet a true freedom, freedom of love and adoration, of humility and trust—and freedom of co-operation (cf. St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haeres.*, 111, 21, 8: “Mary cooperating with the economy”)— this is just what human freedom means. The grace of God can never be simply *superadded*, mechanically as it were. It has to be received in a free obedience and submission.

Mary was chosen and elected to become the Mother of the Incarnate Lord. We must assume that she was fit for that awful office, that she was prepared for her exceptional calling— prepared by God. Can we properly define the nature and character of this preparation? We are facing here the crucial antinomy (to which we have alluded above). The Blessed Virgin was *representative* of the race, i.e. of the *fallen* human race, of the “*old Adam*.” But she was also the

second Eve; with her begins the “*new* generation.” She was set apart by the eternal counsel of God, but this “setting apart” was not to destroy her essential solidarity with the rest of mankind. Can we solve this antinomical mystery in

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any logical scheme? The Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary is a noble attempt to suggest such a solution. But this solution is valid only in the context of a particular and highly inadequate doctrine of original sin and does not hold outside this particular setting. Strictly speaking, this “dogma” is an unnecessary complication, and an unfortunate terminology only obscures the undisputable truth of the Catholic belief. The “privileges” of the divine Motherhood do not depend upon a “freedom from original sin.” The fullness of grace was truly bestowed upon the Blessed Virgin and her personal purity was preserved by the perpetual assistance of the Spirit. But this was not an abolition of the sin. The sin was destroyed only on the tree of the Cross, and no “exemption” was possible, since it was simply the common and general condition of the whole of human existence. It was not destroyed even by the Incarnation itself, although the Incarnation was the true inauguration of the New Creation. The Incarnation was but the basis and the starting-point of the redemptive work of our Lord. And the “Second Man” himself enters into his full glory through the gate of death. Redemption is a complex act, and we have to distinguish most carefully its moments, although they are supremely integrated in the unique and eternal counsel of God. Being integrated in the eternal plan, in the temporal display they are reflected in each other and the final consummation is already *prefigured* and *anticipated* in all the earlier stages. There was a real *progress* in the history of the Redemption. Mary had the grace of the Incarnation, as the Mother of the Incarnate, but this was not yet the *complete* grace, since the Redemption had not yet been accomplished. Yet, her *personal* purity was possible even in an unredeemed world, or rather in a world that was in process of Redemption. The true theological issue is that of the divine election. The Mother and the Child are inseparably linked in the unique decree of the Incarnation. As an event, the Incarnation is just the *turning-point* of history,—

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and the turning-point is inevitably antinomical: it belongs at once to the Old and to the New. The rest is silence. We have to stand in awe and trembling on the threshold of the mystery.

The intimate experience of the Mother of the Lord is hidden from us. And nobody was ever able to share this unique experience, by the very nature of the case. It is the mystery of the person. This accounts for the dogmatic reticence of the Church in Mariological doctrine. The Church speaks of her rather in the language of devotional poetry, in the language of antinomical metaphors and images. There is no need, and no reason, to assume that the Blessed Virgin realized at once all the fullness and all the implications of the unique privilege bestowed upon her by the grace of God. There is no need, and no reason, to interpret the “fullness” of grace in a literal sense as including all possible perfections and the whole variety of particular spiritual

gifts. It was a fullness *for her*, she was *full* of grace. And yet it was a “specialized” fullness, the grace of the Mother of God, of the Virgin Mother, of the “Unwedded Spouse,” *Nymphe anympheute*. Indeed, she had her own spiritual way, her own growth in grace. The full meaning of the mystery of salvation was apprehended by her gradually. And she had her own share in the sacrifice of the Cross: “Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also” (Luke ii. 35). The full light shone forth only in the Resurrection. Up to that point Jesus himself was not yet glorified. And after the Ascension we find the Blessed Virgin among the Twelve, in the center of the growing Church. One point is beyond any doubt. The Blessed Virgin had been always impressed, if this word is suitable here, by the angelic salutation and announcement and by the startling mystery of the virgin birth. How could she not be impressed? Again, the mystery of her experience is hidden from us. But can we really avoid this pious guesswork without betraying the mystery itself? “But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart” (Luke ii. 19). Her inner life had to be concentrated on this crucial

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event of her story. For indeed the mystery of the Incarnation was for her also the mystery of her own personal existence. Her existential situation was unique and peculiar. She had to be adequate to the unprecedented dignity of this situation. This is perhaps the very essence of her particular dignity, which is described as her “Ever-Virginity.” She is *the Virgin*. Now virginity is not simply a bodily status or a physical feature as such. Above all it is a spiritual and inner *attitude*, and apart from that a bodily status would be altogether meaningless. The title of Ever-Virgin means surely much more than merely a “physiological” statement. It does not refer only to the Virgin Birth. It does not imply only an exclusion of any later marital intercourse (which would be utterly inconceivable if we really believe in the Virgin Birth and in the Divinity of Jesus). It excludes first of all any “erotic” involvement, any sensual and selfish desires or passions, any dissipation of the heart and mind. The bodily integrity or incorruption is but an outward sign of the internal purity. The main point is precisely the purity of the heart, that indispensable condition of “seeing God.” This is the freedom from passions, the true *apatheia*, which has been commonly described as the essence of the spiritual life. Freedom from passions and “desires,” *epithymia*— imperviability to evil thoughts, as St. John of Damascus puts it. Her soul was governed by God only [*theogyberneton*], it was supremely attached to him. All her desire was directed towards things worthy of desire and affection (St. John says: *tetamene*, attracted, gravitating). She had no passion [*thymon*]. She ever preserved virginity in mind, and soul, and body, *kai noi kai psychei kai somati aeipartheneusan* (*Homil. 1, in Nativitatem B.V. Mariae* 9 and 5, Migne, Ser. Gr. XCVI, 676 A and 668 C). It was an undisturbed orientation of the whole personal life towards God, a complete self-dedication. To be truly a “handmaid of the Lord” means precisely to be ever-virgin, and not to have any fleshly preoccupations. Spiritual virginity is sinlessness, but

not yet “perfection,” and not freedom from temptations. But even our Lord himself was in a sense liable to temptations and was actually tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Our Lady perhaps had her temptations too, but has overcome them in her steady faithfulness to God’s calling. Even an ordinary motherly love culminates in a spiritual identification with the child, which implies so often sacrifice and self-denial. Nothing less can be assumed in the case of Mary; her Child was to be great and to be called the Son of the Highest (cf. Luke i. 32). Obviously, he was one who “should have come,” the Messiah (cf. Luke vii. 19). This is openly professed by Mary in the *Magnificat*, a song of Messianic praise and thanksgiving. Mary could not fail to realize all this, if only dimly for a time and gradually, as she pondered all the glorious promises in her heart. This was the only conceivable way for her. She had to be absorbed by this single thought, in an obedient faithfulness to the Lord who “hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden” and “hath done (for her) great things.” This is precisely the way in which St. Paul described the state and the privilege of virginity: “the unmarried woman, and the virgin, thinks about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and in spirit” (1 Cor. vii. 34, Douay version: *hina e hagia kai toi somati kai toi pneumatī*). The climax of this virginal aspiration is the holiness of the Virgin Mother all-pure and undefiled.

Cardinal Newman in his admirable “Letter addressed to the Rev. E. B. Pusey, D.D., on occasion of his Eirenicon” (1865) says very aptly: “Theology is occupied with supernatural matters, and is ever running into mysteries, which reason can neither explain nor adjust. Its lines of thought come to an abrupt termination, and to pursue them or to complete them is to plunge down the abyss. St. Augustine warns us that, if we attempt to find and to tie together the ends of lines which run into infinity, we shall only succeed in contradicting ourselves...” (*Difficulties felt by Anglicans*

in Catholic Teaching, 5th ed., page 430). It is widely agreed that the ultimate considerations which determine a true estimate of all particular points of the Christian tradition are doctrinal. No purely historical arguments, whether from antiquity or from silence, are ever decisive. They are subject to a further theological scrutiny and revision in the perspective of the total Christian faith, taken as a whole. The ultimate question is simply this: does one really keep the faith of the Bible and of the Church, does one accept and recite the Catholic Creed exactly in that sense in which it had been drafted and supposed to be taken and understood, does one really believe in the truth of the Incarnation? Let me quote Newman once more. “I say then,” he proceeds, “when once we have mastered the idea, that Mary bore, suckled, and handled the Eternal in the form of a child, what limit is conceivable to the rush and flood of thoughts which such a doctrine involves? What awe and surprise must attend upon the knowledge, that a creature has been brought so close to the Divine Essence?” (*op. cit.*, page 431). Fortunately, a Catholic theologian is not left alone with logic and erudition. He is led by the faith; *credo ut intelligam*. Faith illuminates the reason. And erudition, the memory of the past, is quickened in the continuous

experience of the Church. A Catholic theologian is guided by the teaching authority of the Church, by its living tradition. But above all, he himself *lives in the Church*, which is the Body of Christ. The mystery of the Incarnation is still, as it were, continuously enacted in the Church, and its “implications” are revealed and disclosed in devotional experience and in sacramental participation. In the Communion of Saints, which is the true Church Universal, and Catholic, the mystery of the New Humanity is disclosed as a new existential situation. And in this perspective and living context of the Mystical Body of Christ the person of the Blessed Virgin Mother appears in full light and full glory. The Church now contemplates her in the state of perfection. She is now seen as inseparably united with her

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Son, who “sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” For her the final consummation of life has already come in an anticipation. “Thou art passed over into Life, who art the Mother of Life,” acknowledges the Church, “Neither grave nor death had power over the Mother of God... for the Mother of Life hath been brought into Life by him who dwelt in her ever-virgin womb” (Troparion and Kontakion for the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, *koimesis*). Again, it is not so much a heavenly reward for her purity and virtue, as an “implication” of her sublime office, of her being the Mother of God, the *Theotokos*. The Church Triumphant is above all the worshipping Church, her existence is a living participation in Christ’s office of intercession and his redeeming love. Incorporation into Christ, which is the essence of the Church and of the whole Christian existence, is first of all an incorporation into his sacrificial love for mankind. And here there is a special place for her who is united with the Redeemer in the unique intimacy of motherly affection and devotion. The Mother of God is truly the common mother of all living, of the whole Christian race, born or reborn in the Spirit and truth. An affectionate identification with the child, which is the spiritual essence of motherhood, is here consummated in its ultimate perfection. The Church does not dogmatize much about these mysteries of her own existence. For the mystery of Mary is precisely the mystery of the Church. *Mater Ecclesia* and *Virgo Mater*, both are birthgivers of the New Life. And both are *orantes*. The Church invites the faithful and helps them to grow spiritually into these mysteries of faith which are as well the mysteries of their own existence and spiritual destiny. In the Church they learn to contemplate and to adore the living Christ together with the whole assembly and Church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven (cf. Heb. xii. 23). And in this glorious assembly they discern the eminent person of the Virgin Mother of the Lord and Redeemer, full of grace and love, of charity and compassion— “More honorable

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than the cherubim, more glorious than the seraphim, who without [corruption] didst bear [God the] Word.” In the light of this contemplation and in the spirit of faith the theologian must fulfill his office of interpreting to believers and to those who seek the truth the overwhelming mystery of the Incarnation. This mystery is still symbolized, as it was in the age of the Fathers, by a single and glorious name: Mary— *Theotokos*, the Mother of God Incarnate.