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## “Panagia”

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**The Orthodox Church has not made Mariology into an independent dogmatic theme:** it remains integral to the whole of Christian teaching, as an anthropological Leitmotif. Based on Christology, the dogma of the Mother of God has a strong Pneumatological accent; and through the double economy of the Son and the Holy Spirit, it is inextricably bound up with ecclesiological reality.

In truth, if we were to limit ourselves to dogmatic data in the strict sense of the word and were dealing only with dogmas affirmed by the Councils, we should find nothing except the term *Theotokos*, whereby the Church has solemnly confirmed the divine maternity of the Holy Virgin.<sup>1</sup> The dogmatic emphasis of the term *Theotokos*, as affirmed against the Nestorians, is above all Christological: what is defended against gainsayers of the divine maternity is the hypostatic unity of the Son of God become the Son of Man.

[196]

It is Christology which is directly envisaged here; but at the same time, indirectly, there is a dogmatic confirmation of the Church's devotion to her who bore God according to the flesh. It is said that all those who rise up against the appellation *Theotokos*— all who refuse to admit that Mary has this quality which piety ascribes to her— are not truly Christians, for they oppose the true doctrine of the Incarnation of the Word. This should demonstrate the close connection between dogma and devotion, which are inseparable in the consciousness of the Church. However we know instances of Christians who, while recognizing for purely Christological reasons the divine maternity of the Virgin, abstain from all special devotion to the Mother of God for the same reasons, desiring to know no other mediator between God and man than the God-Man, Jesus Christ. This suffices to demonstrate that the Christological dogma of the *Theotokos* taken *in abstracto*, apart from the vital connection between it and the devotion paid by the Church to the Mother of God, would not be enough to justify the unique position, above all created beings, assigned to the Queen of Heaven, to whom the Orthodox liturgy ascribes “the glory which is appropriate to God” (*he Theoprepes doxa*). It is therefore impossible to separate dogmatic data, in the strict sense, from the data of the Church's cultus, in a theological

exposition of the doctrine about the Mother of God. Here dogma should throw light on devotion, bringing it into contact with the fundamental truths of our faith; whereas devotion should enrich dogma with the Church's living experience.

2

We are in the same position in relation to scriptural data. If we desired to consider scriptural evidence apart from the Church's devotion to the Mother of God, we should be obliged to limit ourselves to the few New Testament passages relating to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and to only one direct reference in the Old Testament, the prophecy of

[197]

the Virgin Birth of the Messiah in Isaiah. But if we look at the Bible through the eyes of the Church's devotion, or— to use the proper term at last— in the Tradition of the Church, then the sacred books of the Old and New Testaments will supply us with innumerable texts used by the Church to glorify the Mother of God.

Some passages in the gospels, if viewed externally, from a point of view outside the Church's Tradition, seem to contradict quite flagrantly this extreme glorification and unlimited veneration. Let us take two examples: Christ, when bearing witness to St. John the Baptist, calls him the greatest of those born of women (Matthew 11:11; Luke 7:28). It is therefore to him, and not to Mary, that the highest position among human beings should belong. In fact, in the practice of the Church, we find the Baptist with the Mother of God on either side of the Lord in the *deisis* icons. But the Church has never exalted St. John the Forerunner above the Seraphim, nor has she ever placed his icon on a footing of equality with the icon of Christ, on one side of the entrance into the sanctuary, as is the case with the icon of the Mother of God.

Another passage in the gospels shows us Christ publicly opposing the glorification of his Mother. He answers the exclamation of the woman in the crowd who cries out "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked," by saying "Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:27-28). But it is precisely this passage in St. Luke, which seems to depreciate the fact of the divine maternity in comparison to the quality of those who receive and keep the divine revelation, which is the Gospel text read solemnly on feasts of the Mother of God, as if under its seemingly negative form it hid an even greater act of praise.

Again we face the impossibility of separating dogma from the life of the Church and Scripture from Tradition. Christological dogma obliges us to recognize the divine maternity of the Virgin. Scriptural evidence teaches us that the glory of the Mother of God does not reside merely in her corporeal maternity, in the fact that she carried and

[198]

fed the Incarnate Word. In fact, the Church's Tradition, the holy memory of those who "hear and keep" the words of the revelation, gives to the Church the assurance with which she exalts the Mother of God, ascribing to her an unlimited glory. Apart from Church Tradition, theology would be dumb on this subject and unable to justify this astounding glorification. That is why Christian communities which reject any idea of Tradition are also alien to the veneration of the Mother of God.

The close connection between Tradition and all that concerns the Mother of God is not simply due to the fact that events of her earthly life— such as her Nativity, her Presentation, in the Temple, and her Assumption— are celebrated by the Church without being mentioned in the Bible. If the Gospel is silent about these facts, and if their poetical amplification is due to apocryphal books of late date, still the fundamental theme which they signify belongs to the mystery of our faith and is not to be taken away from the Church's consciousness. In fact, the notion of Tradition is richer than we habitually think. Tradition does not merely consist of an oral transmission of facts capable of supplementing the Scriptural narrative. It is the complement of the Bible and, above all, it is the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New, as the Church becomes aware of it. It is Tradition which confers comprehension of the meaning of revealed truth (Luke 24). Tradition tells us not only what we must hear but, still more importantly, how we must keep what we hear. In this general sense, Tradition implies an incessant operation of the Holy Spirit, who could have his full outpouring and bear his fruits only in the Church, after the Day of Pentecost. It is only in the Church that we find ourselves capable of tracing the inner connections between the sacred texts which make the Old Testament and the New Testament into a single living body of truth, wherein Christ is present in each word. It is only in the Church that the seed sown by the word is not barren, but brings forth fruit; and this fruition of Truth, as well as the power to make it bear fruit, is called Tradition. The Church's unlimited veneration of the Mother of God which, viewed

[199]

externally, might seem to be in contradiction with the scriptural data, is spread far and wide in the Tradition of the Church and is the most precious fruit of Tradition.

But it is not only the fruit of Tradition; it is also the germ and the stem of Tradition. We can find a definite relationship between the person of the Mother of God and what we call the Tradition of the Church. Let us try, in setting forth this relationship, to see the glory of the Mother of God beneath the veil of silence of the Scriptures. We shall be led to this by an examination of the inner connection between the texts.

St. Luke, in a passage which is parallel to the one we have already quoted, shows us Christ refusing to see His Mother and His brethren, declaring that "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:19-21). The context is significant: in St. Luke, at the moment when the Mother of God desires to see her Son, he has just finished the parable of the Sower.<sup>2</sup> "And as for that in the good soil they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast

in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience.... He who has ears to hear, let him hear.... Take heed then how you hear; for to him who has will more be given, and from him who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away” (Luke 8:8, 15, 18). Now, it is precisely this faculty of keeping the words heard concerning Christ in an honest and good heart- the faculty which elsewhere Christ exalts above the fact of corporeal maternity (Luke 11:28)- which the Gospel attributes to no individual except the Mother of the Lord. St. Luke insists upon it, as he mentions it twice in his Infancy narrative: “But Mary kept all these things pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19, 51). She who gave birth to God in the flesh kept in her memory all the testimonies to the divinity of her Son. We could say that we have here a personification of the Church’s Tradition before the Church was, were it not that St. Luke is careful to tell us that Mary and Joseph

[200]

did not understand the saying of the Child, that he must be about his Father’s business (Luke 2:49-50). Therefore the meaning of the sayings kept faithfully in her heart by the Mother of God had not been fully realized in her consciousness. Before the consummation of the work of Christ, before the Day of Pentecost, before the Church, even she upon whom the Holy Spirit had come down to fit her for her part in the Incarnation of the Word had not yet attained the fullness which her person was called to realize. Nevertheless, it is already possible to see the connection between the Mother of God, as she keeps and collects the prophetic sayings, and the Church, the guardian of Tradition. One is the seed of the other. Only the Church, the complement of Christ’s humanity, will be able to keep the fullness of revelation which, if it were entirely committed to writing, could not be contained within the space of the whole world. Only the Mother of God, she who was chosen to carry God in her womb, could fully realize in her consciousness all the import of the Incarnation of the Word, including the fact of her own divine maternity.

Those sayings of Christ which seem so harsh to his Mother are sayings which exalt the quality which she has in common with the sons of the Church. But while they, as guardians of Tradition, can only become conscious of the Truth and make it fruitful in themselves to a greater or lesser degree, the Mother of God, by virtue of the unique relationship between her person and God, whom she can call her Son, alone can rise from here below to a complete consciousness of all that the Holy Spirit says to the Church, realizing this plenitude in her own person. But this complete consciousness of God, this acquisition of the fullness of grace appropriate to the age to come, could only happen to a deified being. This places before us a new question, which we shall try to answer so that the special character of the Orthodox Church’s devotion to the Sovereign Queen of Heaven can be better understood.

[201]

Christ, when bearing witness to St. John the Baptist, called him “the greatest of them that are born of women” (Matthew 11:11; Luke 7:28), but he added, “He who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he.” Here Old Testament holiness is contrasted with the holiness that could be realized when the redemptive work of Christ was accomplished and when “the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4), the descent of the Holy Spirit, had filled the Church with the fullness of deifying grace. St. John, although “more than a prophet” because he baptized the Lord and saw the heavens open and the Spirit like a dove descending on the Son of Man, died without having received the promise, like all the others “well-attested by their faith,” “of whom the world was not worthy,” who according to the divine plan “apart from us should not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:38-40), *i.e.* apart from the Church of Christ, It is only through the Church that the holiness of the Old Testament can receive its fulfillment in the age to come, in a perfection which was inaccessible to humanity before Christ.

It is beyond any question that she who was chosen to be the Mother of God represents the summit of Old Testament holiness. If St. John the Baptist is called “the greatest” of those before Christ, that is because the greatness of the All-Holy Mother of God belongs not only to the Old Testament, where she was hidden and does not appear, but also to the Church, in which she realized her fullness and became manifest, to be glorified by all generations (Luke 1:48). The person of St. John remains in the Old Testament dispensation; the most holy Virgin passes from the Old to the New; and this transition, in the person of the Mother of God, shows us how the New Covenant is the fulfillment of the Old.

The Old Testament is not only a series of prefigurations of Christ, which become decipherable after the Good News has come. It is above all the history of the preparation of humanity for the coming of Christ, a story in which human liberty is constantly put to the test by the will of God. The

[202]

obedience of Noah, the sacrifice of Abraham, the Exodus of God’s people through the desert under the leadership of Moses, the Law and the Prophets, is a series of divine elections, in which human beings sometimes remain faithful to the promise made to them and at other times fail and suffer punishments (the captivity and the destruction of the first temple). All the sacred tradition of the Jews is a history of the slow and laborious journey of fallen humanity towards the “fullness of time,” when the angel was to be sent to announce to the chosen Virgin the Incarnation of God and to hear from her lips human consent, so that the divine plan of salvation could be accomplished. Thus, according to St. John of Damascus, “The name of the Mother of God contains all the history of the divine economy in this world.”<sup>3</sup>

This divine economy, preparing human conditions for the Incarnation of the Son of God, is not a unilateral one: it is not a matter of the divine will making a *tabula rasa* of the history of humanity. In this saving economy, the Wisdom of God is adapted to the fluctuations of human wills, to the

different responses of men to the divine challenge. It is thus that, through the generations of the Old Testament righteous men, Wisdom “has built her house”: the all-pure nature of the Holy Virgin, whereby the Word of God will become connatural with us. The answer of Mary to the archangel’s annunciation, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), resolves the tragedy of fallen humanity. All that God required of human liberty since the Fall is accomplished. And now the work of redemption, which only the Incarnate Word can effect, may take place. Nicholas Cabasilas said, in his homily on the Annunciation, “The Incarnation was not only the work of the Father and of His Virtue and His Spirit; it was also the work of the will and faith of the Virgin. Without the consent of the All-Pure One and the cooperation of her faith, this design would have been as unrealizable as it would have been without the intervention

[203]

of the three Divine Persons themselves. Only after teaching and persuading her does God take her for His Mother and receive from her the flesh which she wills to offer Him. just as He voluntarily became incarnate, so He willed that His mother should bear Him freely, with her own full and free consent.”<sup>4</sup>

From St. Justin and St. Irenaeus onwards, the Fathers often have drawn attention to the contrast between the “two virgins,” Eve and Mary. By the disobedience of the first, death entered into humanity. By the obedience of the “second Eve,” the author of life became man and entered into the family of Adam. But between the two Eves lies all the history of the Old Testament, the past from which she who has become the Mother of God cannot be divided. If she was chosen to take a unique part in the work of the Incarnation, that choice followed and concluded a whole series of other chosen ones who prepared the way for it. It is not for nothing that the Orthodox Church, in her liturgical texts, calls David “the ancestor of God” and gives the same name of “holy and righteous ancestors of God” to Joachim and Anna. The Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception seems to break up this uninterrupted succession of Old Testament holiness, which reaches its fulfillment at the moment of the Annunciation, when the Holy Spirit came down upon the Virgin to make her fit to receive the Word of the Father in her womb. The Orthodox Church does not admit the idea that the Holy Virgin was thus exempted from the lot of the rest of fallen humanity-the idea of a “privilege” which makes her into a being ransomed before the redemptive work, by virtue of the future merits of her Son. It is not by virtue of a privilege received at the moment of her conception by her parents that we venerate the Mother of God more than any other created being. She was holy and pure from all sin from her mother’s womb, but still this holiness does not place her outside the rest of humanity before Christ. She was not, at the moment of the Annunciation, in a state analogous to

[204]

that of Eve before the Fall. The first Eve, “the mother of all living,” lent her ear to the words of the seducer in the state of paradise, in the state of innocent humanity. The second Eve-she who

was chosen to become the Mother of God-heard and understood the angelic word in the state of fallen humanity. That is why this unique election does not separate her from the rest of humanity, from all her fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters, whether saints or sinners, whose best part she represents.

Like other human beings, such as St. John the Baptist, whose conception and birth are also feasts of the Church, the Holy Virgin was born under the law of original sin, sharing with all the same common responsibility for the Fall. But sin never could become actual in her person; the sinful heritage of the Fall had no mastery over her right will. Here was the highest point of holiness that could be attained before Christ, in the conditions of the Old Covenant, by one of Adam's seed. She was without sin under the universal sovereignty of sin, pure from every seduction in the midst of a humanity enslaved by the prince of this world. She was not placed above history in order to serve a special divine decree but realized her unique vocation while in the chains of history, sharing the common destiny of all men awaiting salvation. And yet, if in the person of the Mother of God we see the summit of Old Testament holiness, her own holiness is not limited thereby, for she equally surpassed the highest summits of the New Covenant, realizing the greatest holiness which the Church can attain.

The first Eve was taken out of Adam: she was a person who, at the moment of her creation by God, took unto herself the nature of Adam, to be his complement. We find an inverse relationship in the case of the New Eve: through her the Son of God became the "Last Adam," by taking unto Himself human nature. Adam was before Eve; the Last Adam was after the New Eve. However we cannot say that the humanity assumed by Christ in the womb of the Holy Virgin was a complement of the humanity of his Mother. It is, in fact, the humanity of a divine Person, that of the "man of heaven" (I Corinthians 15:47, 48). The

[205]

human nature of the Mother of God belongs to a created person, who is the offspring of the "man of earth." It is not the Mother of God, but her Son, who is the head of the new humanity, "the head over all things for the Church, which is his body" (Ephesians 1:22-23). Thus the Church is the complement of his humanity. Therefore it is through her Son, and in His Church, that the Mother of God could attain the perfection reserved for those who bear the image of the "man of heaven."

We have already indicated a close connection between the person of the Mother of God and the Church, when speaking of the Tradition which she personified, as it were, before the Church existed. She who bore God according to the flesh also kept in her heart all the sayings that revealed the divinity of her Son. This is a testimony concerning the spiritual life of the Mother of God. St. Luke shows us that she was not simply an instrument, who willingly let herself be used in the Incarnation, but rather a person who sought to realize, in her own consciousness, the meaning of the fact of her divine maternity. After having offered her human nature to the Son of God, she sought to receive through Him that which she did not yet have in common with Him:

participation in the divine nature. It is in her Son that the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily (Colossians 2:9). The natural connection which linked her to the God-Man did not yet confer upon the person of the Mother of God the state of a deified creature, although the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of the Annunciation made her fit to accomplish her unique task. In this sense, the Mother of God, before the day of Pentecost, before the Church, still belonged to the humanity of the Old Testament, to those who waited for "the promise of the Father," expecting to be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5).

Tradition shows us the Mother of God in the midst of the disciples on the day of Pentecost, receiving with them the Holy Spirit, who was communicated to each of them as a distinct tongue of fire. This agrees with the testimony of Acts: after the Ascension, the apostles "with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and

[206]

Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (1:14). "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place" (2: 1). The Mother of God received with the Church the last and only thing she lacked, so that she might grow "to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

4

She who by the power of the Holy Spirit received the divine Person of the Son of God into her womb, now receives the Holy Spirit, sent by the Son. The two descents of the Holy Spirit upon the Holy Virgin may be compared, in a certain sense, to the two communications of the Spirit to the apostles, one on the evening of the day of Resurrection and the other on the day of Pentecost. The first of these conferred on the apostles the power to bind and to loose. This is a function independent of their subjective qualities, due solely to a divine decree which selects them to play this particular role in the Church. The second communication of the Spirit, at Pentecost, gave to each of them the possibility of realizing his personal holiness—something which will always depend on subjective factors. But the two communications of the Spirit, the functional and the personal, are mutually complementary. One can see this in the apostles and their successors: no one can fulfill his function in the Church well unless he is striving to acquire holiness; on the other hand, it is hard for any one to attain holiness if he neglects the function in which God has placed him. The two should coincide more and more as life goes on; one's vocation normally becomes a way by which one acquires selflessness and personal sanctity. We can see something analogous in the otherwise unique case of the Mother of God: the objective function of her divine maternity, in which she was placed on the day of the Annunciation, will also be the subjective way of her sanctification. She will realize in her consciousness, and in all her personal life, the meaning of the fact of her having carried in her womb and having nourished

[207]



at her breast the Son of God. It is thus that the words of Christ, which appear to abase his Mother in comparison with the Church, receive their meaning of supreme praise: blessed is she who not only was the Mother of God but also realized in her person the degree of holiness corresponding to that unique function. The person of the Mother of God is exalted more than her function, and the consummation of her holiness receives more praise than its beginnings.

The function of divine maternity is completed in the past; but the Holy Virgin, still on earth after the Ascension of her Son, remains as much as ever the Mother of Him who, in his glorious humanity, taken from the Virgin, is seated at the right hand of the Father, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come" (Ephesians 1:21). What degree of holiness able to be realized her below could possibly correspond to the unique relationship of the Mother of God to her Son, the Head of the Church, who dwells in the heavens? Only the total holiness of the Church, the complement of the glorious humanity of Christ, containing the plenitude of deifying grace communicated ceaselessly to the Church since Pentecost by the Holy Spirit. The members of the Church can enter into a family relationship with Christ; they can be his "mother, brothers, and sisters" (Matthew 12:50) in the measure in which they accomplish their vocations. But only the Mother of God, through whom the Word was made flesh, will be able to receive the plenitude of grace and to attain an unlimited glory, by realizing in her person all the holiness of which the Church is capable.

## 5

The Son of God came down from heaven and was made man through the Holy Virgin, in order that men might rise to deification by the grace of the Holy Spirit. "To possess by grace what God has by nature": that is the supreme vocation of created beings and the final destiny to which

[208]

the sons of the Church aspire here below, in the gradual development of the Church in history. This development is already consummated in the divine Person of Christ, the Head of the Church, risen and ascended. If the Mother of God could truly realize in her human and created person the sanctity which corresponds to her unique role, then she cannot have failed to attain here below by grace all that her Son has by His divine nature. But if this be so, then the historical development of the Church and the world has already been fulfilled, not only in the uncreated person of the Son of God but also in the created person of his Mother. This is why St. Gregory Palamas calls the Mother of God "the boundary between the created and the uncreated." Alongside the incarnate divine hypostasis there is a deified human hypostasis.

We have said above that in the person of the Mother of God it is possible to see the transition from the greatest holiness of the Old Testament to the holiness of the Church. But if the All-Holy Mother of God has consummated the holiness of the Church and all holiness which is possible for a created being, we are now dealing with yet another transition-the transition from the world of becoming to the eternity of the Eighth Day, the passage from the Church to the Kingdom of

God. This last glory of the Mother of God, the *eschaton* realized in a created person before the end of the world, henceforth places her beyond death, beyond the resurrection, and beyond the Last judgment. She participates in the glory of her Son, reigns with Him, presides at His side over the destinies of the Church and of the world which unfold in time, and intercedes on behalf of all before Him who will come again to judge the living and the dead.

This supreme transition, by which the Mother of God rejoins her Son in His celestial glory, is celebrated by the Church on the day of the Feast of the Assumption. On that day the Church thinks of a death which, according to her inner conviction, could not but have been followed by the corporeal resurrection and ascension of the All-Holy. It is hard to speak and not less hard to think about the mysteries which the Church keeps in the hidden depths of her inner

[209]

consciousness. Here every uttered word can seem crude, every attempt at formulation can seem sacrilegious. The authors of the apocryphal writings often alluded imprudently to mysteries about which the Church had maintained a prudent silence by economy towards those on the outside. The Mother of God was never a theme of the public preaching of the apostles. While Christ was preached on the housetops and proclaimed for all to know in a catechesis addressed to the whole universe, the mystery of the Mother of God was revealed only to those within the Church, to the faithful who had received the message and were pressing towards “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14) - More than an object of faith, this mystery is a foundation of our hope, a fruit of faith, ripened in Tradition.

Let us therefore keep silence, and let us not try to dogmatize about the supreme glory of the Mother of God. Let us not be too loquacious, like the Gnostics who, wanting to say far more than was needful and indeed more than they were able, mingled their heretical tares with the pure wheat of Christian Tradition. Let us rather listen to St. Basil, who described that which pertains to Tradition as “an unpublishable and ineffable teaching, which was preserved by our fathers in silence, so as to be inaccessible to all curiosity and indiscretion, for they had been healthily instructed how to protect, by silence, the holiness of the mystery. It would not be proper to publish in writing the teaching given about things which ought not to be seen by the eyes of the uninitiated. Apart from that, the reason for an unwritten tradition is that many people who often inspect what is contained in these teachings are in danger of losing their veneration for the things concerned by becoming used to them. For teaching is one thing and preaching is yet another. Teachings are to be kept in silence; preaching is to be made manifest. A certain obscurity in the language which the Scriptures sometimes use is another way of keeping silence; thus the meaning of the teachings is made harder

[210]

to understand, for the greater benefit of those who read them.”<sup>5</sup>

If the teaching about the Mother of God belongs to Tradition, it is only through our experience of life in the Church that we can adhere to the unlimited devotion which the Church offers to the Mother of God; and the degree of our adherence to this devotion will be the measure of the extent to which we belong to the Body of Christ.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term “Ever-virgin” (*aeiparthenos*), found in conciliar acts from the Fifth Council on, has never been made particularly explicit by the councils which have employed it.

<sup>2</sup> In St. Matthew (13:23) and St. Mark (4:1-20) the parable of the sower immediately follows the episode with the Lord’s Mother and brothers. Here also the connection is evident.

<sup>3</sup> *De fide orthodoxa* 111, 12; P.G. 94, cols. 1029-32.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. M. Jugie, *Patrologia orientalis* 19.2.

<sup>5</sup> *De spiritu sancto* 27; P.G. 32, col. 189.