

Christos Yannaras

Theotokos

Excerpt from Chapter 8, "Jesus Christ", in
Elements of Faith (T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1991),
pp. 99-101.

The Church recognizes in the person of the Blessed Theotokos that creature who—alone within all God's creation, material and spiritual— attained to the fulness of purpose for which the creation exists, to the fullest possible unity with God, to the fullest realization of the possibilities of life. Her consent to the incarnation of the Son was not only a harmonizing of the human will with the will of God, but a unique existential event of co-inherence of the life of the created and the life of the uncreated: our Lady was counted worthy to share by her natural energy (the energy of will, but also of motherhood) in the common activity of the Divinity, that is in the very life of God. Her physical life, her blood, the biological functioning of her body, was identified with the life given effect in the incarnate hypostasis of God the Word. God the Word lived hypostatically as a part of her body; God lived within her womb with her own flesh and blood; her own natural created energy was identified with the energy of the life of the uncreated.

The Theotokos did not simply "lend" her biological functions to God the Word, because a mother does not "lend" her body to her child, but she builds up his existence with her flesh and her blood just as she forms the "soul" of her child with her nursing, speech, caressing, affection. The Church insists that the Son and Word of God did not simply assume flesh in his incarnation, but a "flesh animated by a reasonable and spiritual soul" (St John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 111, 46) just as is the flesh of every human fetus. Christ assumed human nature with the whole of the energies of body and soul which go to make it up and express it. And the symbol of the Theotokos does not stop at constructing the flesh of Christ, but extends even to what we could call formation of his soul, of his human psychology, since the mother is the source and ground for the articulation of the first mental experiences, of the first awareness, of the first baby-talk, of the progressive entry of the child into the world of names and symbols, the world of people.

To be Mother of God, then, the Virgin Mary identified in her existence the life of the created with the life of the uncreated; she united in her own life the creation with its creator. And so every creature, the entire creation of God, finds in her person the gate of "true life", the entrance to the fulness of the existential possibilities. "In her all creation

rejoices, the company of angels and the race of men". In the language of the Church's poetry, every image which includes nature is ascribed to our Lady, in order to exhibit exactly the entire renewal of the created which was accomplished in her person. She is "heaven" and "fertile earth" and "unhewn mountain" and "rock giving drink to those who thirst for life" and "flourishing womb" and "field bringing forth atonement". And the inimitable "semantics" of orthodox iconography translates the figurative statement of these images at one time in outline and at another in colour. It represents the Theotokos and throne of divinity, either as holding a child or praying, or sweetly kissing the Child, or "reclining" at the Nativity of Christ or at her own falling asleep. She is the new Eve who recapitulates nature, not in that autonomy contrary to nature and in death, but in that participation in the Divinity which transcends nature and in the realization of eternal life. Because her own will restores the existential "end" and purpose of creation generally, she gives meaning and hope to the "eager longing of creation". When the faithful seek the intercession of the Theotokos for their salvation, they are not seeking some kind of juridical mediation, but that their own ineffective will be contained within her own lifegiving will, her will which affirms the saving love of the incarnate God.