

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD: *THEOTOKOS*

There remain yet four Sundays, including today, in the present Church Year, on one of which, next Sunday, it will be our privilege to have his Grace, Archbishop Haverland, with us. In the three remaining Sundays before Advent, I want to re-visit a mini-series preached some years ago on Mary, the Mother of our Lord, who is often rather lost sight of after the events that surround Jesus' birth. While she was generally in the background during the course of his ministry, she was always present, and noticeably so. At the end, at his death, she stood by the cross "her station keeping," and our Lord, caring for her even while dying, commended her into the guardianship of blessed St. John: "Woman, behold thy son. Behold thy mother." (It should surely not be lost on us in this congregation that our patron saint had thus a particular responsibility for the care of Mary, and that we in turn should exercise great care for her as well. We mustn't forget that we have them both before us in the scene of the Holy Rood on our striking altarpiece.) Mary continued to be with the apostles during the post-Easter period when our Lord repeatedly manifested himself in their presence; and she was in their midst on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon them all.

Remembering all of that I want to preach today and on the two Sundays that will remain, a series on the Blessed Virgin Mary, focusing on "Mary, Mother of God," "Mary, Mother of Sorrows," and "Mary, Queen of Heaven." It is, I think, a fitting conclusion to our celebration of the Christian Year, and should provide a useful transition to our reflections for Advent.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," we pray, and surely it is just the familiarity of those words that keeps us from being dumbstruck. "Holy Mary, *Mother of God.*" Mary, though 'holy,' though 'set apart' to God, set apart for the most unique of roles in all the history of our race, Mary was still of our race, like us in all things save for that unique role. Mary, flesh and blood, a young maiden, barely an adolescent, betrothed to one

Joseph, a carpenter, --Mary, as real and human, as delicate and fragile as any daughter or granddaughter any of us may know, --Mary, Miriam, . . . *Mother of God!!!*

It is truly the most wondrous of wonders that a young woman, any woman, should be called the Mother of God. No one would imagine that the term is used casually nor without the most convincing of reasons. Only a great authority could legitimize the claim implicit in the name. But we have it on the authority of the third great ecumenical Council of the holy catholic Church, the Council of Ephesus which met in the year 431 A.D. It was a statement clarifying the nature of the incarnation. St. John declared, as we read each Sunday, that the eternal Word of God, who was with God from the beginning and who was God, became flesh. The Council of Ephesus stated that it was not the case that the divine Word descended on an ordinary man born of Mary, but that he who was born of Mary was God and man from his conception, and was God and man so completely that Mary could legitimately be called ‘Mother of God,’ or in the Greek language of the Council, ‘*Theotókos*’ ‘God-bearer,’ a term you will hear repeatedly in the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox.

The Council hastened to clarify that this must not be taken to mean that Mary was the source or origin of the divinity in any way, like a goddess from Greek mythology, but that he to whom she gave birth was ‘very God of very God,’ as we say in the Creed. Thus understood, the name ‘Mother of God,’ is more a Christological statement than Mariological. The concern of the Council was to safeguard Christ’s divinity, affirming that he was divine from the moment of conception, which is exactly what the Gospels themselves declared. The Archangel, Gabriel, told Mary that the Holy Ghost would come upon her and the power of the most High would overshadow her so that that holy thing which should be born of her would be called *the Son of God*. The late Max Thurian wrote, when still a theologian at the ecumenical monastery at Taizé, “To call Mary ‘the Mother of God’ is to express in the only way which is adequate the mystery of the Incarnation of God who became man.”¹ He also stated, “To call Mary the ‘Mother of God’ is to recognize that God became incarnate so completely and so really in our human flesh that He had a truly human mother and was a truly human son in a human family.”²

¹ Max Thurian, *Mary, Mother of All Christians* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), p. 83.

² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

But if the term, ‘Mother of God,’ tells us in the first place who her Son is, it tells us at the same time that this young woman, hardly more than a child, is unique among her kind in that, by virtue of the gracious choice of God and that marvelous faith-filled fiat of her will that acquiesced to the message of the angel (“Be it unto me according to thy word”), she is worthy to be honored with a title none other could bear. The epithet, ‘Mother of God,’ tells us that the child was Divine, but it also tells us that the one who bore him in her womb was the chosen mother of the God-child, blessed above all women and worthily addressed as “Holy Mary, Mother of God.”

Christ, our God and Saviour,
Unto thee we sing,
And to thee the praises,
Of thy Mother bring.

O how pure and spotless
Must have been that breast,
Where the King of Angels
Did not scorn to rest!

Every generation
Her shall blessed call,
Who was made the Mother
Of the Lord of all.

Angels have no honour
To compare with this;
Happy Maid and Mother,
Who can tell thy bliss?³

It mustn’t be thought that the name, ‘Mother of God,’ was an invention of that fifth century ecumenical council meeting in Ephesus. Long before that, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, who played perhaps a greater role than any other individual in defining orthodox faith in Jesus Christ at the Council of Nicea over a century before, did not hesitate to use that same term, ‘*Theotókos*,’ and say, “Christ, being God, became man for our sake and was born of Mary, Mother of God, to free us from the devil’s power.”⁴ Again he wrote, “It was for our sake that Christ became man, taking flesh from the Virgin Mary, Mother of God.”⁵

³ *English Hymnal*, no. 589.

⁴ *On Virginity* 3, cited in Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, tr. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), p. 101.

⁵ *Against the Arians* 3, 29, cited in Gambero, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

‘Mary, Mother of God’—it is a term we should not hesitate to use but rather delight in taking upon our lips. Karl Rahner said that “To honour God’s work in [Mary] is in fact a unique way of praising and being grateful for the one great and comprehensive benefit that God has conferred on mankind.”⁶ We must not fear that to honor Mary for her role in the story of our redemption and to exalt her as blessed among women because of the fruit of her womb, Jesus, is to take any glory away from her Son. E. L. Mascall, an eminent Anglican theologian of the last century, edited a book of papers entitled *The Mother of God* presented at a Symposium of members of The Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, an important organization promoting understanding between Anglican and Eastern Orthodox churchmen. Mascall’s own contribution was a paper on “The Dogmatic Theology of the Mother of God,” and he wrote it in Pusey House, Oxford, in view, as he notes, of the stained glass east window of the chapel which, as he describes it, marks clearly the distinction between Mary and our Lord:

Mary and her Son are seated side by side, turned toward each other. Both are enthroned, both are crowned. But while Jesus wears his crown in his own right, Mary is receiving hers from the hands of an Angel. And while Mary’s head is inclined in adoration and her hands are joined in supplication, the head of Jesus is erect in authority and his right hand is lifted in blessing.⁷

In the paper itself Mascall has a marvelous paragraph which I cannot refrain from quoting in full. He has just referred to the Council of Ephesus and the term ‘*Theotókos*’ as clearly defining orthodox truth over against various errors including *Adoptionism*, the idea that an ordinary human child of Mary was *adopted* by God sometime after his birth and elevated to a position of divinity, and *Docetism*, the idea that in Christ God only *appeared* to be human but was not really so. Then Mascall writes,

It is indeed upon the conception rather than the birth of Jesus that we should lay the main stress if we wish to understand in its fullness either the Incarnation of the Word or the Motherhood of Mary. The most profound and moving expression of this truth that I have found is provided by a scene in the Joyous Pageant of the Holy Nativity, which, in the days before [World War II], was performed almost every year by the people of St. Mary’s, Graham Street, and which has recently been revived. Mary is

⁶ Karl Rahner, *Mary, Mother of the Lord: Theological Meditations* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), p. 18.

⁷ *The Mother of God: A Symposium* by Members of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, ed. by E. L. Mascall (London: Dacre Press, 1949, reprint 1959), p. 37.

discovered at prayer, and the angel Gabriel comes to her with the message that she has been chosen to be the Mother of God. Mary replies with her *Ecce ancilla* [“Behold the handmaid of the Lord.”] and her *Fiat mihi* [“Be it unto me according to thy word.”] There is a moment’s trembling pause, and then Gabriel falls on one knee, adoring not her but the Holy One who is incarnate within her. Angels enter, robe her and crown her, and place her, flanked by lighted candles, in the center of an altar, in the place where the tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament normally stands. The *Magnificat*, Mary’s hymn, is sung, as it is at Vespers, and Mary, the living tabernacle of the God-man, is censed. And from this moment until the moment of the birth at Bethlehem, wherever Mary goes she is preceded by an angel carrying a white light, as the priest is preceded by a server with a white light when he bears with him the Blessed Sacrament. I do not think that we can ever understand either the full meaning of the Incarnation or the unique position held by Mary among all created beings unless we reflect calmly and reverently upon the fact that for nine months Mary carried God incarnate within her as she went about her work. If this sounds crude or materialistic to any of my hearers, I suggest that if they are logical they must feel the same emotion when they think about the Creator of the world lying asleep in a fishing boat or sitting eating his lunch on the grass. I am convinced that the main reason why so many professing Christians to-day look upon Mariology as either extravagance or an inessential luxury in theology is that, whether the words adoptionism and docetism mean anything to them or not, they do in fact hold what is fundamentally either an adoptionist or a docetic view of Christ.⁸

We, Anglican Catholics, do not believe either that a human Jesus was adopted as God’s Son or that his humanity was only apparent and not real. We believe that Jesus Christ, Son of God and child of Mary, was true God and true man, and that this great and glorious mystery of the incarnation lies at the very heart of our faith. Thus it is that we bow the knee during the Creed at the *Et incarnatus est*, and during the Last Gospel at “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” We bow not because we thoroughly understand but because we believe that “for us men and for our salvation” God became man in Jesus Christ and was born of the blessed Virgin Mary, who was thus the Mother of God.

Sermon preached by the Rev’d Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, October 30, 2011. Copyright © 2011.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.