MARY IN BYZANTINE LITURGY

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One aspect of the Byzantine Liturgy that frequently captures the attention of the Christian faithful is the exalted place given the Blessed Virgin Mary in daily worship. Her image is always at the left side of the iconostasis, depicting her with her Son and never without him. Her name is always proclaimed after that of her Son. In addition to the four Marian feasts shared with the Roman Church, the Byzantine faithful celebrate many other Marian festivals and dedicate two weeks of intense preparation for her feast of the Assumption (Dormition).

When Mary’s name is mentioned in liturgical prayer, the Byzantine Church gives her entire title: “All holy, spotless, most highly blessed and glorious lady, the Mother of God (Theotokos) and ever-virgin Mary.” Three expressions stand out in this title: Theotokos, ever-virgin, and all-holy. The first encomium was applied to her by the Council of Ephesus in 431, and the second by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553.

Theotokos

The exalted place reserved for the Blessed Virgin Mary is based on the revealed fact that she is Theotokos, the Mother of God. When Nestorius denied her this title and called her only Christotokos, Mother of Christ, all Christendom was disturbed and a general council was convened in Ephesus to address this issue. The council declared that Jesus Christ is both God and man. St. Cyril of Alexandria, who presided over the council on behalf of Pope Celestine, proclaimed to the crowds awaiting the conclusion that “Mary is Theotokos; she is the Mother of God.”
The city of Ephesus erupted in joy as its residents accompanied the council fathers with torches in procession to their residences chanting in acclamation the council statement: “Mary is the Theotokos, since she conceived in her virginal womb by the power of the Holy Spirit and brought into the world Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is One Being with the Father.”

We venerate the Theotokos, Mother of God, because she is the Mother of His son. Mariology, the theology concerning Mary, is an extension of Christology, the theology concerning Jesus Christ. Blessed John Paul II reminded us that “Only in the mystery of Christ is her mystery made clear.” In recognizing Mary as Theotokos, the Council of Ephesus emphasized the integrity of the Person of Christ. In recalling that “the Word was made flesh,” we acknowledge with tremendous reverence the one who was chosen by God to be the instrument of so amazing a mystery. To honor Mary is to honor her Son.

All the privileges of the one who is “full of grace” stem from her quality of being the Theotokos. If she has been preserved from original sin from the first moment of her conception, it is because she is Theotokos. If she has preserved her virginity before, during, and after the birth of Emmanuel, it is because she is Theotokos. If she has been transported body and soul to everlasting life after death, it is because she is Theotokos.

During Great Lent Byzantine Christians pray this tribute of St. John of Damascus, “In you, O full of grace, all creation rejoices, the orders of angels, and the human race as well; in you, sanctified temple, spiritual paradise, glory of virgins, from whom our God, who exists from all eternity, took flesh and became a little child. He has made your womb more spacious than the heavens. In you, O full of grace, all creation rejoices; glory to you.”
Ever Virgin

The fiat of the creature responded to the fiat of the Creator: “Let it be done to me according to your will.” Pope John Paul II explained in his encyclical, Redemptoris Mater, “In the salvific economy of God’s revelation, Abraham’s faith constitutes the beginning of the Old Covenant; Mary’s faith at the Annunciation inaugurates the New Covenant. Just as Abraham ‘in hope believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations,’ so Mary, at the Annunciation, having professed her virginity believed that through the power of the Most High she would become the Mother of God’s son in accordance with the angel’s revelation: ‘The child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God’” (Lk 1:35).

Panaghia, All-Holy

Mary is Panaghia, All-Holy, not only because she is Theotokos, but also because she is the supreme example of cooperation (synergia) between the Divine Plan and the Liberator, Christ.

God has always respected human liberty. He did not wish to be incarnate without the consent of the Theotokos. Mary was not passive in the mystery of the Incarnation. She was invited, not compelled, and she fully participated in consenting to the proposal brought to her by the angel.

The fourteenth century Byzantine lay theologian, St. Nicholas Cabasilas, summarized the mind of the early Church Fathers: “The Incarnation has been not only the work of the Father, of His Son, and of the Holy Spirit, but also the work of the faith of the Virgin. For without the consent of the Most Pure, without the cooperation of her faith, this design was as unrealizable as without the intervention of the three Divine Persons. It is only after persuading her that God takes her as his Mother and borrows the flesh that she can give to Him. Likewise, as He wished to be
incarnate, He wished that His Mother beget Him freely and with full consent.”

New Eve, Mother of Us All

Mary is an extraordinary woman. She carries in her womb all humanity, since she is the New Eve, the giver of life. Her maternal care and protection cover not only the Child Jesus, but also the entire universe and all members of the human race. Again Blessed John Paul II explained in Redemptoris Mater that “In accordance with the eternal plan of Providence, Mary’s Divine Motherhood is to be poured upon the Church, as indicated by statements of Tradition, according to which Mary’s ‘motherhood’ of the Church is the reflection and extension of her motherhood of the Son of God.”

At a general audience in Lent 2012, Pope Benedict XVI declared, “Mother of God and Mother of the Church, Mary exercises this motherhood forever. We entrust to her every passing phase of our personal and ecclesial life, not least that of our final transit.”

Chosen by God to Help Us

Together with the West, all the Eastern Churches proclaim Mary as Mother, Advocate, and Mediatrix. She protects us with maternal care and is our never-failing intercessor before the Creator. In no way does her role diminish that of the only and unique Mediator, Christ. The Second Vatican Council clearly taught that “The maternal duty of Mary toward the human race in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power. For all the saving influences of Mary originate, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. They flow from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rest on his mediation, depend entirely on it, and draw all their power from it” (Lumen Gentium).
If Christ is the door, Mary is the first to enter. She advances the whole of humanity. She is the pillar of fire to guide the People of God to the heavenly Jerusalem. Nothing symbolizes and illustrates the true message of the Marian apparitions of the last two centuries better than the Byzantine icon of the Deisis. In that icon the Blessed Virgin and St. John the Baptist surround Christ, the sovereign judge, and Mary exercises her ministry of intercession and charism of prayer and supplication, calling all mankind to repentance, asking for God’s mercy, praying: “Come, Lord Jesus. Maranatha. Amen.”