

Theotókos: Mary as Mother of God

Mary's maternity of the Son of God is truly the greatest honor given to any creature and the closest unity between Creator and creature. The Pontifical International Marian Academy states:

In relation to the Incarnate Word, Mary is truly *mother*, having, in his human nature, conceived him, given him birth, nourished, raised, and educated him. Between the Incarnate Word- Jesus- and Mary there exists an indissoluble filial-maternal bond by which she recognizes in her Son her God and Lord. He honors and loves her as mother and thanks her for the gift of human life.¹

Mary as a real mother:

The first reference to Mary in the New Testament is a reference to her maternity. In writing to the Galatians, around 57, Paul relates Mary's maternity with our salvation: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4:4-5).

Earlier in this Letter, Paul has emphasized that God's promise was to Abraham and to his "seed," which Paul affirms is an individual, "meaning one person, who is Christ" (Gal 3:16). The early preaching of Peter (Acts 2:16ff and 3:13ff) as well as Stephen's defense (Acts 7) situate Jesus' coming within God's plan of salvation to Israel. The opening of the Letter to the Hebrews affirms that "...in these last times, He has spoken to His Son..." (Heb 1:2).

If God has so carefully designated the "time," in which, according to His plan, the Son would come, we can be assured that the woman who would give Abraham's humanity to the Son would also be chosen for this all important role.

As David S. Yeago explains: "Mary does not figure in the story of salvation only through the bare fact of her pregnancy: her pregnancy is located within a context of covenant and communion, of God's election and promise, and the faith that these evoke."²

Lawrence S. Cunningham asserts: "...the Son of God was a human with a specific history and a specific pedigree. Christ was not an angel or a demiurge or

¹ Pontifical International Marian Academy, *The Mother of the Lord, Memory, Presence, Hope*, trans. Thomas A. Thompson, SM (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2007), 36.

² David S. Yeago, "The Presence of Mary in the Mystery of the Church," in *Mary, Mother of God*, ed. Carl E. Bratten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 66.

a power but a man who came from a woman who was a child of Israel. He was, bluntly, a Jewish male with all that that assertion implies.”³

The early Fathers:

The earliest extra-Biblical mentions of Mary employ her maternity as a guarantee of Jesus’ physical birth. Such an assertion might seem hardly necessary and yet the denial of the reality of Jesus’ body was one of the earliest heretical opinions to emerge. This way of thinking is known as “Docetism” from the Greek word, *dokein*, “to seem.” The Docetists were not a distinct group, as J. N. D. Kelly explains, “Docetism was not a simple heresy on its own; it was an attitude which infected a number of heresies...”⁴

During the second and third centuries, Docetic opinions found expression in various Gnostic groups that maintained that the material world was created by an evil force, opposed to what was spiritual. Those Gnostics who had some relation to Christian belief did not accept the reality of Jesus’ flesh. In responding to this denial that Jesus had a real body, the early Church began to reflect more upon the role of Jesus’ human parent, Mary.

Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110-115) reacts against the Docetists when he insists on Jesus’ true human birth through Mary, “In regard to our Lord, you are thoroughly convinced that He was of the race of David according to the flesh, and the Son of God by His will and power; that He was truly born of the Virgin...”⁵

Ignatius emphasizes the reality of Jesus’ body with the actions of eating and drinking, along with His birth: “Be deaf, when anyone speaks to you, apart from Jesus Christ, who was of the race of David, the Son of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank...”⁶

Ignatius affirms, Jesus is “Son of Mary and Son of God.”⁷ Luigi Gambero, S.M., posits that this expression of Ignatius is derived from an ancient creedal formula, professing Jesus’ humanity and divinity.⁸

³ Lawrence S. Cunningham, “Born of a Woman (Gal 4:4), in *Mary, Mother of God*, ed. Carl E. Bratten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 40.

⁴ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 141.

⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Smyrneans*, 1.1, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh, S.J. (New York: CIMA Publ. Co, 1947), 118.

⁶ Ignatius of Antioch, *Trallians*, 9.1, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh, S.J. (New York: CIMA Publ. Co, 1947), 104.

⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephesians* 7.2, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh, S.J. (New York: CIMA Publ. Co, 1947), 90.

Another early witness to Jesus' birth of the Virgin is the apologist Aristides of Athens (d.c.145): "He is confessed as the Son of the highest God, descending from heaven through the Holy Spirit; and of a virgin, He took flesh..."⁹ Notice that Aristides stresses "He took flesh." Jesus did not have a sort of spiritual body but actually took flesh from Mary.

According to Irenaeus' (d. c. 202) theory of recapitulation, Christ restored us by being a new Adam. Christ assumed the same nature as Adam to take into Himself everything of ours in order to heal the nature that had been weakened in Adam. If Jesus did not have real flesh from Mary, He would not be able to undo the harm Adam had done to our nature: "Those, therefore, who allege that He took nothing from the Virgin do greatly err."¹⁰

Tertullian (d. 220-230) maintains that Valentinus, a Gnostic leader, taught that Jesus' heavenly body only passed through Mary but Jesus took nothing from her: "...He came into existence through her, not of her- not experiencing a mother in her, but nothing more than a way."¹¹ In other words, Jesus passed through Mary like water through a pipe. She contributed nothing from herself. Tertullian appeals to the Letter to the Galatians asserts that Jesus was not born "through a woman" but "of a woman."¹²

Similarly, Clement of Alexandria (d. c. 215) affirms the reality of Jesus' human nature with reference to Mary: "The Son of God - of Him Who made the universe - assumed flesh, and was conceived in the virgin's womb (as His material body was produced)..."¹³

These appeals to Mary, identified as the Virgin, gave assurance of Jesus' real humanity. They do not rise from just one geographical area but represent the major locations of Christianity, i.e. Syria (Ignatius), Greece (Aristides), Samaria and Rome (Justin), Smyra in Asia Minor and Lyons in Gaul (Irenaeus), Carthage in Northern Africa (Tertullian), and Egypt (Clement). The diversity of areas, on

⁸ Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1999), 30.

⁹ Aristides of Athens, *Apology*, 15, 1, quoted by J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 145.

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, xxi, 10 - xxii, 1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 454.

¹¹ Tertullian, "Against the Valentinians," XXVII, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 516.

¹² Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, xx, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 538.

¹³ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, VI, xv, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 509.

three continents, witnesses to a shared belief throughout the early Christian world that affirms that Jesus had a true birth and that the role of Mary testifies to this.

There are Christians who consider Mary's role to be like that of a surrogate mother, someone who carries and bears the child but her contribution is small, the envelope, in which the letter arrived. For the Fathers, Mary guaranteed Jesus' humanity, which she gave to Him from her own substance.

The Apostles' Creed:

The belief in Jesus' real birth from a Virgin is present in the early creedal formulas that were the articulated standards or "canons" of beliefs. The "Apostles' Creed," so named because its articles are rooted in apostolic times, is the profession of faith in the Roman Baptismal Rite. It seems to have taken form towards the close of the Second Century and to have been standardized by the Fourth Century.

St. Hippolytus (d. 235), in his *Apostolic Traditions*, written between 215 and 217, recalls that one of the questions in the Roman Baptismal rite was: "Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God who was born by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary?"¹⁴ Rufinus (d. 404), in his commentary on this Creed, remarks that the Creed that was used in Rome and Jerusalem barely differed from the one to which he is accustomed. He furnishes us the text of the Creed, which states of Jesus, "Qui natus est de Spiritu sancto ex Maria virgine."¹⁵

This early creed of Rome, which was considered authoritative by Rufinus and Ambrose, explicitly expresses belief in the roles of both the Holy Spirit and Mary. Mary is named as "**virgin**," indicating that the Church identified Mary as both mother and virgin in the profession of faith of the new Christians.

Karl Rahner comments that "born of the virgin Mary" is the "oldest of the articles of faith concerning Mary," which Rahner affirms, "really implies the whole substance of Christian belief."¹⁶

The Councils:

Between June 19 and July 25, 325, three hundred and eighteen bishops met at the imperial palace at Nicaea, in response to the call of Constantine to clarify the relationship of Christ to the Father. This concern was instigated by a

¹⁴ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 14.

¹⁵ Rufinus, PL 21: 348-349.

¹⁶ Karl Rahner, *Mary Mother of the Lord* (London: Catholic Book Club, 1963), 54.

claim of a priest of Alexandria, Arius, that Jesus was a semi-divine creature. The bishops promulgated a creedal statement emphasizing Jesus' divine origin. The original version composed at Nicaea did not explicitly mention Mary in its formula regarding Jesus' Incarnation and birth but simply said, "incarnatus est et homo factus est," "He was made flesh and became man."¹⁷

A second council gathered at Constantinople in 381. Its Acts have been lost but its somewhat enlarged version of the Creed was affirmed at the Council of Chalcedon (451).¹⁸ It is possible that the fathers at the council of Constantinople did not deliberately add Mary's name to the Creed but rather employed a variant form of the Nicene Creed, which was later recognized as standard by the Council of Chalcedon.

In this version of the Creed, we find explicit mention of Mary. The Latin translation is "*et incarnatus est de Spiritu sancto ex Maria virgine, et homo factus est.*" The translation used in the Catholic Liturgy and by a number of Protestants as well is that He became flesh "by the power of the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary," distinguishing the two different prepositions in Latin *de* and *ex*, as was done in the Apostles' Creed.

Jaroslav Pelikan points out that the Greek, which likely retains the original language of the council uses the same preposition for both the Spirit and Mary: *ἐκ Πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς Παρθένου*.¹⁹ The Greek may bring out the active nature of Mary's role in relation to the Spirit. The official Denzinger translation seems to follow the Greek when it states: "He was made flesh of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary,"²⁰

This formula brings out the special relationship that Mary has with the Holy Spirit. In Matthew's Gospel, Joseph is told, "It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child" (Mt 1:20). In Luke's Gospel, Mary is told, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence, the holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God" (Lk 1:35).

Catholics acknowledge the important ramifications of this formula by bowing their heads at these words when the Creed is recited at Mass. On the Solemnities of Christmas and of the Annunciation, they genuflect.

¹⁷ DS 125, Heinrich Denzinger, *Symbols et Définitions de la Foi Catholique*, ed. Peter Hunermann & Joseph Hoffmann (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1997), 40.

¹⁸ DS 300.

¹⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, "Most Generations Shall Call Me Blessed," in *Mary, Mother of God*, ed. Carl E. Bratten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 11.

²⁰ DS 150, *Ibid.*, 57.

Mary as *Theotókos*, Mother of God:

An important element in understanding Mary's role was the emergence of the title, *Theotókos*. This is generally understood to mean "God-bearer" but it can also mean the "Birthgiver of God."²¹ In the West, this is customarily translated as "Mother of God," although the term is not literal. Another Greek phrase, *Mitir tou Theou*, was used by Constantine (337) when he spoke of "a conception without seed...and the maiden Mother of God."²²

The early Church historian Socrates Scholasticus (c. 380-450) states that the title *Theotókos* was explained by Origen (d. 254) in his now lost commentary on the Romans.²³ If Socrates is correct, the title can be traced to the middle of the third century.

The first extant reference to the use of the word *Theotókos* is given by Alexander, bishop of Alexandria (d. 328), writing against Arius in 325. He describes Jesus, as "having taken in truth and not in appearance a body from the *Theotókos*, Mary."²⁴ Alexander does not offer any explanation for his use of the term, *Theotókos*, which suggests that his readers were familiar with the name, possibly in the liturgy and in popular devotion.

An indication of its widespread use is that, around 361, the Emperor Julian, who tried to revive the worship of the old Roman gods, in his work attacking Christianity *Against the Galilaeans*, asks: "But why do you not cease to call Mary the *Theotókon*...?"²⁵

In an expression of adoration of the Three Persons, each as God, St. Basil (d. 379) affirms: "I confess to the economy of the Son in the flesh and that the holy Mary, who gave birth to Him according to the flesh, was Mother of God (*Theotókos*)."²⁶

Gregory Nazianzen (d. 390) uses the expression *Theotókos*, in contrast to the Apollinarists, whom he thought, considered Jesus' body to have come from heaven. He asserts that "Holy Mary is the *Theotókos*" and that there are not two Sons, "one of God the Father, the other of the Mother... For God and Man are

²¹ Kallistos Ware, "Mary Theotokos in the Orthodox Tradition," *Marianum*, LII (1990), 213.

²² Constantine, *On the Assembly of the Saints*, 11 in Eusebius,

²³ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.32.

²⁴ Alexander of Alexandria, "Letter to Alexander of Thessalonica"; PG 18, 568.

²⁵ Julian, *Against the Galilaeans*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright, *Works of Emperor Julian*, Loeb Classical Library, III (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1953), 399.

²⁶ St. Basil, "Letter CCCLX," in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, vol. VIII (second), ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 326.

two natures, as also soul and body are; but there are not two Sons or two Gods."²⁷

The Council of Ephesus (431)

The term, *Theotókos*, became especially significant during the struggle that led to the Council of Ephesus. Nestorius (d. ca. 451), the patriarch of Constantinople, took offence at a homily preached by the deacon Proclus in the cathedral, sometime between 428 and 429, in which Proclus spoke of Mary as the *Theotókos*. Nestorius, attempting to distinguish between Jesus' human and divine natures, insisted that the better title for Mary was *Christotókos* since Mary was the mother of Jesus' human nature not His divine nature.

The people of Constantinople reacted against their patriarch's assertion since the title had become traditional. While the title that was disputed belonged to Mary, the underlying issue concerned the natures of Christ. Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria, quickly confronted Nestorius about the ramifications of his position.

Richard M. Price has written, "The importance of acknowledging the Virgin as *Theotokos* was that it expressed the reality of the incarnation. Mary mattered precisely as the *Theotokos*, the one who gave birth to Christ, God and man."²⁸

Bishop Kallistos Ware, an Orthodox bishop, explains:

Christ's birth from a virgin underlines that the Incarnation did not involve the coming into being of a new person... the person of the incarnate Christ is none other than the second person of the Holy Trinity. At Christ's birth no new person came into existence, but the pre-existent person of the Son of God now began to live according to a human as well as a divine mode of being.... Because the person of the incarnate Christ is the same as the person of the logos, the Virgin Mary may rightly be given the title *Theotokos*.²⁹

During the fourth and fifth centuries, there were two great centers of Christian teaching. Antioch stressed the distinction between the two natures

²⁷ Gregory Nazianzen, *Letter CI, to Cleodnius Against Apollinarius*, in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, vol. VII, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 439.

²⁸ Richard M. Price, "*Theotokos* and the Council of Ephesus, in *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (London: Burns & Oates, 2008), 96.

²⁹ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 80.

while Alexandria emphasized the unity.³⁰ Although Nestorius was bishop of Constantinople, he was originally from Antioch.

In his concern to distinguish the two natures, Nestorius would only say that they were joined but he would not say they were united in Jesus, implying, his opponents thought, there were two subjects in Jesus. In the orthodox position the two natures are united yet still distinct in one subject.

Nestorius rejected what is known as the *communicatio idiomatum*, the “communication of idioms.” By means of this traditional way of speaking, what is true of one nature of Jesus is applied to the other nature, as in saying that “God wept at the tomb of Lazarus” or “A carpenter raised a man from the dead.”

The distinctions in the actions of the natures are, of course, understood because the unity of the one subject allows this way of speaking. In addressing Mary as the God-bearer, the Christians knew very well that the Son of God did not begin to exist at the Incarnation but began to be in His humanity.

Nestorius so emphasized the distinction of the natures that he seemed to be saying either that Mary gave birth to a human person who was assumed by the divine Logos or that Mary gave birth to the human nature of Christ. At times, Cyril implies that Nestorius is saying the first, but, perhaps Nestorius did not hold such a blatantly heretical position. It may be that he thought that at the time when Jesus was born, only His humanity was new and so Mary was the mother of that. Nevertheless, it was not a nature that was born but a person, a divine Person who took a human nature.

In 431, a council was convoked at Ephesus, which concerned itself with clarifying the way in which the two natures of Jesus are united but still distinct. The Council did not explicitly make a profession of faith in Mary as *Theotókos*. In fact, the bishops did not want any new professions of faith.

Rather, the bishops read the Nicene Creed and then compared Cyril’s second letter to Nestorius, and Nestorius’ letter to Cyril. The bishops determined that Cyril’s letter was in accord with the Nicene Creed, while Nestorius’ letter was not. Nestorius was condemned. In the Acts of the council, the bishops included Cyril’s second letter as well as twelve anathemas that Cyril had composed before the council. The first of these anathematized anyone who denied that Mary was the *Theotókos*.

³⁰ Although our information about Nestorius comes mostly from his opponents, his position reflects the Antiochene school. Nestorius had been a disciple of Theodore of Mopsuestia, who was a disciple of Diodorus of Tarsus. These bishops spoke of the Word dwelling in the man Christ as in a temple.

After the Council, in 433, the division between the church of Antioch and the church of Alexandria was resolved by an agreement between John of Antioch and Cyril. This agreement explicitly stated: "With this understanding of a union without fusion we confess that the Holy Virgin is the *Theotókos*, because God the Word was made flesh and was made man, and from His very conception He united to Himself a temple taken from her."³¹

Before Ephesus, Mary was seen as the "new Eve" or as a type of the Church but with Ephesus, her maternity came to be appreciated as the central mystery related to her. As Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., observes, the simple Biblical expression, "Mary, the mother of Jesus," (Acts 1:4) contains the entire dogma of Mary, elaborated by all the other Marian teachings.³²

Reaffirmation by other councils:

In 451, the fourth Ecumenical Council, meeting at Chalcedon, affirming the decisions of Ephesus, states the Son, "...born of the Father before all time as to His divinity, born in recent times, for us and our salvation, from the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, (*Theotókou*), as to His humanity."³³

Pope John II, in a letter in 534 to the Senate of Constantinople, responds to the question whether Mary can be called "Mother of God," "The glorious and holy Mary, ever a virgin, is in a real and true sense Mother of God."³⁴

The Second Council of Constantinople (553) again confirmed the teaching of Ephesus, condemning those who might call Mary "mother of man... and does not confess her as really and truly mother of God..." must be anathema.³⁵

The third Council of Constantinople (680-681), also affirms that Mary is "properly and truly the Mother of God according to humanity."³⁶

³¹ John of Antioch, "Letter to Cyril" (Letter 38) in *St. Cyril of Alexandria, Letters 1-50*, trans. John I. McEnerney (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 145. In fact, even the Antiochenes accepted the title before the council. Their concern was that the two natures not be confused.

³² Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Mary, Mother of the Redemption* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 114.

³³ The Council of Chalcedon, in *The Teaching of the Catholic Faith as Contained in her Documents*, Josef Neuner, S.J. & Heinrich Roos, S.J., ed. Karl Rahner, S.J. (Staten Island: Alba House, 1967), 153-154. DS 301.

³⁴ Pope John II, *Ibid.*, 155. DS 401.

³⁵ Second Council of Constantinople, *Ibid.* 157-158. DS, 427.

³⁶ Third Council of Constantinople, in *The Sources of Christian Dogma*, Deferrari, 114. DS, 555.

Paul IV reasserted this teaching in the sixteenth century.³⁷ On December 25, 1931, the fifteenth centenary of the Council of Ephesus, Pius XI, reaffirmed that Mary is truly “*Deipara, Theotokos*.”³⁸

The eighth Chapter of *Lumen Gentium* makes use of the words, *Mater Dei*, *Dei Genitrix*, and *Deipara*, twelve times. The English edition edited by Austin Flannery, O.P., chooses to translate each of these as “Mother of God,” not taking note of the slight nuances. *Dei Genitrix*, which places emphasis on giving birth to God, and *Deipara*, which brings out the sense of “bearing God.”

Reflection on the development of Marian devotion in the light of Ephesus:

At times, Marian devotion is alleged to be the creation of the male clergy. In this instance, it was the laity who reacted against the patriarch’s rejection of this title. Jaroslav Pelikan notes: “But for the development of the doctrine of Mary... the lead had been taken by the devotional and liturgical development of the Church, which in its ascription of the title *Theotókos* to the Virgin Mary had anticipated the formal Conciliar promulgation of the doctrine by more than a century.”³⁹

According to some authors, the devotion to Mary was simply the revival of the mother goddess. Jaroslav Pelikan dismisses these oft-repeated suggestions, as “facile modern theories”:

For the term Theotokos was apparently an original Christian creation that arose in the language of Christian devotion to her as the mother of the divine Savior and that eventually received its theological justification from the church’s clarification of what was implied by the orthodox witness to him.⁴⁰

John McGuckin reaches a similar conclusion, noting the tradition that Origen was one of the first authors to use the title *Theotokos*. Although Origen is from Alexandria in Egypt, he shows no indications in his many writings of influence of the traditional worship of Isis, the Egyptian mother goddess, as McGuchin notes, “certainly not for his doctrine of Mary...”⁴¹

³⁷ DS, 1880.

³⁸ Pius XI, *Lux Veritatis*, in the Benedictine monks of Solesmes, *Our Lady, Papal Teachings*, trans. Daughters of St. Paul (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1961), 214.

³⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine* (New Haven: Yale, 1969), 113.

⁴⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale, 1996), 57-58.

⁴¹ John McGuckin, “Early Cult of Mary” in *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (London: Burns & Oates, 2008), 10.

McGuckin dismisses the alleged associations between the cult of the goddess Isis and Mary: "The conclusion is inescapable, to all who have any care for balance in the matter: the Marian cult uses incidental motifs from the iconography of the Isis cult, but the substantial connections are simply not there. The Marian iconography is driven exclusively by biblical symbols, and coloured by Byzantine imperial theory."⁴²

The attention given to Mary by the controversy and by the Council played a major role in the spread of devotion to Mary. In the West the names, *Dei Genitrix* and *Deipara*, became the equivalents for the Greek word. Eventually *Mater Dei* (Mother of God) became the common form.

What does the Divine Maternity say about Christ?

As we have seen, for the early Fathers, Mary's motherhood of Jesus was the proof that Jesus had a real body. In other words, He was really human. This was against the background of those who denied Jesus' real humanity. Mary's maternity is a continual reminder that Jesus had a human nature.

Thomas Aquinas comments on the relationship between Mary's maternity and Jesus' humanity, "[T]he humanity of Christ and the maternity of the Virgin are so interrelated that he who has erred about the one must be in error about the other."⁴³

Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., observes that Mary's Motherhood serves us in obtaining the proper understanding of God:

God silently entered the womb of a woman. It is really the case to say that this is credible precisely because it is crazy; it is certain precisely because it is impossible....The God who became flesh in a woman's womb is the same God who comes to us in the heart of the matter, in the Eucharist. It is a unique economy and a unique style. St. Irenaeus was right in saying that he who doesn't comprehend God's birth of Mary cannot comprehend the Eucharist either (Cf. *Against Heresies*, V,2,3) t.⁴⁴

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⁴² John McGuckin, "Early Cult of Mary" in *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (London: Burns & Oates, 2008), 12.

⁴³ "...humanitas Christi et maternitas Virginis adeo sibi connexa sunt, ut qui circa unum erraverit, oporteat etiam circa aliud errare." *Commentarium in quattuor libros Sentiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi*, III, dist. 4, q. 2. a.2.

⁴⁴ Raniero Cantalamessa, *Mary Mirror of the Church*, trans. Frances Lonergan Villa (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 65.

As Lawrence S. Cunningham affirms, whatever the differences between Christians, “the one thing all traditions agree on is that Mary was the *terminus a quo* [source from which] of the historical event of the Word made flesh.”⁴⁵

Repeatedly, throughout the history of salvation, God is very deliberate in His choices of people for particular missions and gives them special graces to fulfill those missions. This is true of Abraham or Moses or John the Baptist. Luke provides us with the insight into the intricate relationship between God and the woman who would be mother of His Son.

Augustine assures us that Mary was first of all a disciple:

Indeed the blessed Mary certainly did the Father’s will, and so for her it was a greater thing to have been Christ’s disciple than to have been His mother, and she was more blessed in her discipleship than in her motherhood. Hers was the happiness of first bearing in her womb Him Whom she would obey as her master.⁴⁶

Was Mary’s discipleship greater than her motherhood? Surely, her motherhood as a manifestation of doing the will of God was the greatest act of human cooperation with God: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

Frequently, we associate Mary’s maternity with the Annunciation and Christmas. In fact, motherhood is a life-long relationship with a child. Mary’s maternity was more than the act of giving Jesus birth. A Kiswahili saying reflects this: *Kuzaa si kazi, kazi ni kumlea mwana* – “To give birth is not the work, the work is raising a child.” Motherhood is a process by which the mother nurtures the child as the child grows and develops. This is especially evident in the child’s youth but the interaction between mother and child continues through their lives.

Jesus, becoming like us in all things but sin, underwent the human growth in wisdom and age that we do (Lk 2:52). In the interactions between mother and child, Mary helped him eat and taught Him to speak and walk. The words that He repeated after her would later be used to teach the world and cure the sick.

Luke indicates that Mary will be closely involved in the life of her Son, as Simeon predicts that a sword of sorrow will pierce her heart. How much did

⁴⁵ Lawrence S. Cunningham, “*Born of a Woman (Gal 4:4)*, in *Mary, Mother of God*, ed. Carl E. Bratten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 46.

⁴⁶ Augustine, Sermon 25

Mary understand? We do not know. We know that, at times, Mary didn't understand her Son's vocation (Lk 2:50).

Yet, Jesus was the Son of God. In her interactions with her Son, Mary was the first to experience the graces that flowed from His presence. Mary's motherhood is intimately united with her experience of redemption in her Son. *Lumen Gentium* uses the language of Mary advancing "in her pilgrimage of faith: and "faithfully persevered in her union with her Son..."⁴⁷

Karl Rahner emphasizes that Mary's maternity is more than a physical relationship to Christ. Jesus is a gift from God to her as He is to us. She gave Him the ability to be a member of the human race and ultimately its Savior. Her motherhood is not just a biological event nor is it her personal history, but a motherhood effected by faith, (Lk 1:43; 2:27 ff.), "a true partnership with God's action for mankind."⁴⁸ Mary's motherhood occurs by God's grace, and through her motherhood, she accepts grace for the world.⁴⁹

Mary's Maternity in the Liturgy:

For Catholics, the Hail Mary, one of the prayers most frequently repeated throughout the world, makes reference to this mystery, as we pray, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners." Such devotions as the rosary and the Angelus recall in meditation this great mystery. Many of our practices at Christmas time, such as the Christmas crib, recall in poignant ways the reality of the Divine Maternity.

Devotion to Mary and the liturgical celebration of Mary were gradual developments in the first centuries of the Church. Athanasius makes two references to a "commemoration and office of Mary" when he is arguing against the Arians: "For if the Logos is of one essence with the body, that renders superfluous the commemoration and office of Mary."⁵⁰ And elsewhere Athanasius reflects, "If that were so, the commemoration of Mary would be superfluous."⁵¹

Pelikan is of the opinion that these references refer to a feast of Mary: "There is some evidence to support the existence of a festival called the *mnene* of Mary, celebrated on the Sunday after Christmas, but the evidence does not go back quite as far as Athanasius. Nevertheless, Athanasius' language seems to

⁴⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, "The Constitution on the Church," 58.

⁴⁸ Karl Rahner, *Mary Mother of the Lord* (London: Catholic Book Club, 1963), 12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Athanasius, *Epistle to Epictetus*; PG 26: 1056-1057.

⁵¹ Athanasius, *Epistle to Maximus the Philosopher*, 3; PG 26:1088.

make it plausible that such a commemoration of Mary was being kept already during his time and that his argument was based on it."⁵²

The resistance of the Christians in Constantinople to their Patriarch, Nestorius,' rejection of the title *Theotókos*, indicates that there was more devotion to Mary than has been recorded in documents.

Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., commenting on the rise of devotion to Mary after Ephesus, explains:

This rapid flowering of Marian piety is not tied to a proclamation about her, but to a statement about Christ. Possibly this joining of son and mother, a relationship not always honored in subsequent history, was the signal for a christologically oriented liturgical cult of Mary. The christological triumph of Ephesus was enough to give impetus to a pronounced Marian cult.⁵³

After the Council of Ephesus, Sixtus III (432-440) completed the Marian basilica in Rome, now known as *Santa Maria Maggiore* (St. Mary Major). It is unclear at what point the words, "gloriosae semper virginis Mariae, genetricis Dei et Domini nostri Jesus Christi," "the glorious ever-Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Lord Jesus Christ" were introduced to the Roman Canon (First Eucharistic Prayer).

McDonnell suggests that Mary's name was first introduced during the pontificate of St. Leo (440-461), although the reference to her as *Genetrix Dei* (*Theotókos*) may be from the sixth century or a contribution of one of the Greek popes in the seventh century. The manner in which Mary is honored shows the special reverence with which she is regarded.⁵⁴

In the seventh century, a generic feast in honor of Mary, *Natale sanctae Mariae*, the "Giving birth of Holy Mary," was celebrated on January 1 in the West. James Dunlop Crichton comments that this feast associates Mary with Jesus. It is the oldest feast of Mary in the Roman rite, as seen by its presence in

⁵² Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 61.

⁵³ Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., "The Marian Liturgical Tradition," *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary*, ed. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 179-180.

⁵⁴ Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., "The Marian Liturgical Tradition," *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary*, ed. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 180.

the seventh century Gregorian Sacramentary.⁵⁵ This was composed of elements from the Mass for Virgins.

However, the feast disappeared as the West adopted new Marian feasts from the East.⁵⁶ John Allyn Melloh, S.M., observes that even though the liturgical celebration on January 1 changed from *Natale sanctae Mariae* to Octave Day, to Circumcision, and back to Octave Day, a Marian theme remained, "Despite the nomenclature shifts, January 1 never lost its marian character."⁵⁷ In the seventh century also, Gospel texts with Marian significance, Luke 1:26-38 (Annunciation) and Luke 1:39-47 (Visitation) are found in the Ember Day liturgies in Advent.⁵⁸

Mention of Mary in the Christmas liturgies can be found in the Leonine Sacramentary of the seventh century and the Gelasian Sacramentary of the mid-eight century. The Gregorian Sacramentary does not include Mary in the Christmas Masses, except in an appendix where two alternate prayers may be found. The reason for this may be the evident presence of Mary in the Advent liturgies. Advent, with its emphasis on Jesus' two natures, seems to have arisen as part of the East's response to Nestorianism. Advent was accepted in the West in the second half of the sixth century.⁵⁹

In the revision of the liturgy, which was effective January 1, 1970, the first day of January was again celebrated as a feast in honor of Mary's maternity. Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation of February 2, 1974, *Marialis Cultus*, explains:

In the revised ordering of the Christmas season it seems to Us that the attention of all should be directed toward the restored Solemnity of Mary the holy Mother of God. This celebration, assigned to January 1 in conformity with the ancient liturgy of the city of Rome, is meant to commemorate the part played by Mary in this mystery of salvation. It is meant also to exalt the singular dignity which this mystery brings to the "holy Mother . . . through whom we were found worthy . . . to receive the Author of life."⁶⁰

⁵⁵ James Dunlop Crichton, *Our Lady in the Liturgy* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1997), 57.

⁵⁶ James Dunlop Crichton, *Our Lady in the Liturgy* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1997), 57.

⁵⁷ John Allyn Melloh, S.M., "Mary in Advent/Christmas: Liturgical References," in *Marian Studies*, XLI (1990), 74.

⁵⁸ Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., "The Marian Liturgical Tradition," *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary*, ed. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 180.

⁵⁹ Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., "The Marian Liturgical Tradition," *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary*, ed. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 180-181.

⁶⁰ Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, 6.

The Liturgical Celebration:

The Collect for the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, comes from the seventh century Gregorian Sacramentary. John Allyn Melloh, S.M., notes: “It expresses seventh-century Roman faith not **only in the virginal maternity of Mary, but also in the power of the one who welcomed Christ.**”⁶¹ The translation of the Latin reads:

O God, who through the fruitful virginity of blessed Mary bestowed on the human race the grace of eternal salvation, grant, we pray, that we may experience the intercession of her, through whom we were found worthy to receive the author of life, our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son.⁶²

The Prayer over the Offerings was composed at the time of the new calendar. It brings out the idea that salvation is seen as an on-going process:

O God, who in Your kindness begin all good things and bring them to fulfillment, grant to us, who find joy in the Solemnity of the holy Mother of God, that, just as we glory in the beginning of Your grace, so one day we may rejoice in its completion.⁶³

The Prayer after Communion is a new prayer with phrases from a ninth-century text for St. Agnes:

We have received this heavenly Sacrament with joy, O Lord grant, we pray, that it may lead us to eternal life, for we rejoice to proclaim the blessed ever-Virgin Mary Mother of Your Son and Mother of the Church.⁶⁴

The Preface of the Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary proclaims:

...to praise, bless, and glorify Your name on the Solemnity of the Motherhood of the Blessed ever-Virgin Mary. For by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit she conceived Your Only Begotten Son and without

⁶¹ Melloh, "Mary in Advent/Christmas," 74.

⁶² "Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, *The Roman Missal*, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2011), 180.

⁶³ "Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, *The Roman Missal*, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2011), 180.

⁶⁴ "Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, *The Roman Missal*, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2011), 182.

losing the glory of virginity, brought forth for the world the eternal Light, Jesus Christ our Lord...⁶⁵

The Second Reading of the Mass is Galatians 4:4-7, demonstrating Mary's role in giving Jesus His humanity as well as the salvific purpose of the Incarnation. In the Gospel, Luke 2:16-21, Mary, after the visit of the shepherds "ponders all these things." We also learn that the Child is to be named "Jesus," as the feast was intended to incorporate also the former Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, although the optional memorial of the Most Holy Name on January 3 has been restored in recent years.

The theme of the renewal of our nature through the Incarnation is also brought out by the first antiphon for Evening Prayer I and II: "O marvelous exchange! Man's Creator has become man, born of a virgin. We have been made sharers in the divinity of Christ Who humbled Himself to share in our humanity."

Other antiphons recall Patristic reflections on the mysteries of Mary's Virgin Motherhood: "By Your miraculous birth of a Virgin You have fulfilled the Scriptures: like a gentle rain falling upon the earth You have come down to save Your people. O God we praise You." (Second Antiphon for Evening Prayer I and II). Also "Your blessed and fruitful virginity is like the bush, flaming yet unburned, which Moses saw at Sinai. Pray for us, Mother of God." (Third Antiphon for Evening Prayer I and II).

The Magnificat Antiphon takes up the theme of the short reading Galatians 4:4-5: "In His great love for us, God sent His Son in the likeness of our sinful nature, born of a woman and subject to the law, alleluia."

The antiphons for Morning Prayer likewise praise the Virginal Motherhood. The First Antiphon reads: "The Virgin has given birth to the Savior: a flower has sprung from Jesse's stock and a star has risen from Jacob. O, God, we praise You." Notice that this mystery moves us to doxology, praise of God.

The Second Antiphon gives attention to Jesus as our Savior: "Mary has given birth to our Savior. John the Baptist saw Him and cried out: This is the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world, alleluia." The Third Antiphon reads: "Mary has given birth to a King whose name is everlasting; hers the joy of motherhood, hers the virgin's glory. Never was the like seen before, never shall it be seen again, alleluia."

⁶⁵ "Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, *The Roman Missal*, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2011), 181.

The Benedictus Antiphon for Morning Prayer candidly makes us aware that this Feast and indeed the very Mystery of Mary's Maternity, while it is about Mary, is primarily about Jesus and also about us: "Marvelous is the mystery proclaimed today: man's nature is made new as God becomes man; He remains what he was and becomes what He was not." Through the Virgin Mary, Jesus takes our nature, while remaining divine, in order that our nature might be renewed.

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January 13, 2012