

The Mother of God in the Vision and Writings of Saint Theophanes of Nice

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ABSTRACT: The theology of the Holy Apostolic Fathers regarding the person and role of the Virgin Mary was simple, direct, concise, based “on the confession of several truths: the Savior Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin is truly the mother of Christ, she is Prepurified, being chosen and protected by the power of God”. The mystery of the incarnation of God the Word is a convergence and connection (*syndrome kai synapheia*) between God and the whole creation, which is the ultimate good and the final cause of what is, the role of the Virgin being that of Mediator, bringing the truth about human nature.

KEYWORDS: Theoteology, Mariology, Mother of God, Mediator, cause and ultimate meaning.

“The virgin’s name was Mary.” (Luke 1:27b).

All the teaching, about the Virgin Mary and about her so important role that the Christian Church has, everything we know about her, is the result of long theological debates, of a rather fierce battle of ideas. The teaching about the Virgin Mary began to be structured in the Greco-Roman environment, not exactly favorable. In the ancient world, there were female divinities everywhere: in Egypt Isis, among the Phrygians Cybele, Mother Goddesses among the Romans, etc. Theoteology is a branch of dogmatic theology whose theme is the person of Mary, the Mother of God.

“The term is derived from the Greek language from (Θεοτοκος - *Theotokos*) which means Mother of God. In contemporary theology, it also has another relatively equivalent name: Mariology. The difference is that the latter comes from a Western theological stream, where the Mother of God is often called simply: “Mary” or “Mary, the mother of Jesus”, or “Virgin Mary”. There is, however, a noticeable denominational difference between the two names, which also involves the content of the teachings. The name of the Mother of God, after the nominal appellative, that is, Mary, indicates on the one hand a relaxed, even familiar approach to her holy person. But this is not defining to highlight his role in God’s work of saving the world, but it must be put in relation to the Person of Christ, His virgin-born Son, Who is the Savior Himself. Therefore, in order not to exclude or center her person outside the divine economy, the Mother of God is called Mother of God, or Theotokos. The name Theotokos was more common to Eastern theology in that context of the Christological disputes of the 5th century, where the dioprosopist theologians disputed this name, saying that the Mother of God is only the Mother of man, believing that the integrity of human nature is saved in Christ” (Dictionary of Orthodox Theology 2019, 922).

The dogmatic disputes of the first half of the 5th century AD were the moment when the teaching about the Mother of God, as Theotokos - Mother of God, was widely debated at the 3rd Ecumenical Synod, Ephesus, Asia Minor, in the period June-September 431.

In the first part of the 4th century, the title “Mother of God” was widely used in Alexandria (one of the main centers of theological elaboration of ancient Christianity) and was known throughout the Roman Empire. Dogma was proclaimed after the theological controversy caused by the Nestorians. Nestorius (381-451), the Patriarch of Constantinople, had actually stated that

Mary had no title to define “mother of God” but only “mother of Jesus”. The controversy between Alexandria and Antioch was resolved in an ecumenical council.

The council was held at Ephesus, Asia Minor, in 431. Here it was affirmed on June 22 that the Virgin Mary is the Mother of God. According to the synod, indeed, Jesus Christ, although he is at the same time both God and man - as the Council of Nicaea previously said - “He is one person, the two natures, divine and human, being inseparable. By way of consequence the Virgin Mary can be legitimately called Theotokos - *Mother of God*”. “The Mother of God [...] certainly not because the nature of the Word or its divinity had come from the holy Virgin, but since the holy body endowed with a rational soul to which the Word is substantially united was born from her, it is said that The Word was born after the flesh” (Dâncă 2015, 215-287). The Christological doctrine of Patriarch Nestorius was rejected by the council of Ephesus because it separated too much the human nature of Christ from the divine, risking, in the end, to think of Jesus Christ simply as a man “inspired”, “inhabited” by the Word of God. The title of *Theotokos* was then confirmed by the council in opposition to Nestorius, who preferred the title of *Christotokos* to *Theotokos*.

In *Orthodoxia* Journal, in the 50s of the 20th centuries, a series of polemical theology texts were published. Some of them “reflect two Mariological disputes: an interconfessional polemic declared against Roman Catholic Mariology caused by Pope Pius XII’s dogmatization on November 1, 1950 of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary with her body to heaven and a controversy - not declared as such - between Romanian Orthodox theologians over the dogmatic limits of Orthodox Mariology including in the subtext a dispute regarding the meaning and value of Byzantine theology in Orthodoxy” (Ică 2008, 24). In this context, Dumitru Stăniloae, priest, teacher, considered the greatest Orthodox theologian of the last century, wrote an extensive comparative presentation of Orthodox and Roman Catholic Mariology, “a model of erudition and theological subtlety”. The study of the Orthodox dogmatist “was at that time research unsurpassed by the breadth of documentation and the depth of observations in the entire pan-Orthodox theology” (Ică 2008, 42).

Entitled “Teaching about the Mother of God to Orthodox and Catholics”, Father Stăniloae’s study is presented in the form of assessments regarding “the differences between Orthodox and Catholic Mariology”. After recalling “the common elements of the dogma of Orthodox and Catholic Mariology: “the perpetual virginity of Mary (*aeiparthenia*), her quality as Mother of God (*theotochia*) and her honor above all Saints and angels (hyperdulia)”, he mentions that these “three elements” are “preached by the Apostles and found in Scripture on the occasion of the description of the Annunciation event” (Stăniloae 1950, 559).

Among the theologians cited in this extensive study are Palamas, Nicolae Cabasila and Theophanes of Nicaea. We have very little data about Theophanes of Nicaea. The date of his birth is not known, nor where and how he received his “classical education and solid theological and patristic formation, fully attested by his writings. From these it follows that he had as his mentor the patriarch of Filotea Kokkinos (1354-1355, 1364-1379), the disciple and biographer of Saint Gregory Palamas. More than likely, Theophanes was ordained Metropolitan of Nicaea by Philotei not long after October 8, 1364, when the latter became Patriarch of Constantinople for the second time” (Ică 2008, 266).

As in that era the ordination required the bishop to be 50 years old, and if these canons were respected, it can be considered as the date of birth of Theophanes of Nicaea, the year 1314, Byzantine theologian, ecclesiastical figure, from the second half of the 14th century, not very well known. A reason may also be the fact that “his theological works remained in manuscripts until recently, being known and accessible only to a few specialists. (...) Until the beginning of the 20th century, all that could be read from the work of Theophanes of Nicaea were only three admirable

pastoral epistles and a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance from plague and death” (Ică 2008, 262). The scholar father Martin Jugie (1878-1954), one of the best connoisseurs of Byzantine sources, some new, but especially of Palamite theology and Byzantine Mariology, is the one who brought to light the theological work of Theophanes of Nicaea. “In 1935 Jugie edited with a Latin translation the remarkable Discourse-treatise on the Mother of God by Metropolitan Theophanes of Nicaea (Theophanes Nicaenus, *Sermo in Sanctissima Deiparm*, {Lateranum N.S. An 11, no. 3-4}, Rome, 1935). (...) In 1946 Jugie offered (M. Jugie, art. «Théophane de Nicée», *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique XV*, 1946, col. 1797-1798) an exact table of the known data about Theophanes of Nicaea and a complete list of his remaining works, most of them unpublished” (Ică 2008, 263). *Apud* Ică, Ioan, I., through the work of Grigore Palama, years 1330-1357 and that of Nicolae Cabasila, approximately between 1360-1380, Byzantine Mariological thought was already structured “around two structuring axes” resulting in “a variant of Mariology of hesychastical inspiration and another of humanistic expression”. Both highlights, in an age characterized by humanism, “the dogmatic and spiritual implications of Eastern theological anthropology”. But this research, which led to the development of Byzantine Mariology, “culminated around the year 1380 with a third version, cosmic and holistic”. It is about “the total Mariology proposed by Metropolitan Theophanes of Nicaea, about whose magnificent Mariological speech it can be stated, without any exaggeration, that it is the pinnacle of late Byzantine theology” (Ică 2008, 261).

Among the Byzantine homilies edited by Father Jugie, that of Theophanes of Nicaea is one of the most remarkable from a theological point of view, especially for the doctrine of the Mediation of the Mother of God. The title itself, which was given to it in the Oxford manuscript on the basis of which the edition was printed, is particularly attractive to theologians:

Discourse (treatise) about our Most Pure and Most Holy Mistress of God the Mother of God, who in many different ways praises Her unspeakable and due glories to God and also shows that the mystery of the incarnation of God the Word is a convergence and a connection (syndrome kai synapheia) between God and the whole creation, which is the ultimate good and the final cause of all that is.

The title announces the author’s intention to place the Mother of God - Theotokos in “the dynamics of the mystery of the Incarnation of God, seen as the ultimate cause and meaning of all existence” (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 495). This “magnificent Mariological discourse, the pinnacle of late Byzantine theology” consists of sixteen chapters, and “between a prologue and an epilogue on the true praise due to her, the Mother of God is successively contemplated in her relations with the cosmos, with the eternal plan of God of deification through the Incarnation, with Christ and his mysterious body, with the Holy Trinity, with the saints and with us people” (p. 279) (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 496). Affirming that “She transcends and surpasses all creation”, that she has “gained great dominion over all”, Theophanes of Nicaea claims that “She is and is called Empress of all creation” (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 497). He further tells us how “wonderful is Her name in all the earth”, how “Her majesty has risen above the heavens”, that “She is above the cherubim and seraphim”, and “Her dominion over the whole universe, the dignity They reign”, “make it known and believed by every generation and every age of the well-honored (orthodox)” (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 497). Because She “gave birth in a supernatural form without a man to God the Word”, whom “theology praises as One above being”, so also the one who dedicates this speech to her, tries to praise her “The incomparable one above the things that are, the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge therein and of Her mystery” (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 498).

It is known that God created all beings, not just to have a simple existence, “but to exist happily”. And to exist happily, is to “really exist and be truly seen as imitations of their

Archetype” (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 498). But “to exist merely as a shadow, and to exist happily, is the consummation and likeness of Bliss proper.” Theophanes believes that the building of creation is done “twice: existence simply receives it at the beginning of ages, and happy existence at their end.” After stating that “the mystery of the Mother of God is the building of creation for happy existence”, Theophanes believes that “this mystery is also the final cause of what is” (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 499). But the Virgin Mary must also be praised because she is considered “an earth and a sky, and as a whole cosmos”. On the one hand, it is compared to an earth (*Ge*) “because from it our Lord and God was taken according to the flesh when the new Adam was made” (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 499). Going further, Theophanes says that if “Her Son is the Bread of Life” then the Virgin Mary “could be called life-giving *earth* and fruitful field”. But, “in relation to all the intelligible world (...) which moves in a circle around God, and She stands in the midst of them as a center connecting them in herself to each other and to God, as a receptacle of divine fullness” (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 500). Theophanes continues: “For as no one can come to the Father except through the Son, so also no one can come to the Son except through His Mother” (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 510). The Mother of God is still the true “Heaven”. If in the beginning heaven was the throne of God and the earth belonged to men, the Incarnation overturned this state of affairs. Now “the angels in heaven look to the Virgin Mother of God, who is now above them”, and because in “the Mother of God God dwells hypostatically in His Son, the Sun of Righteousness, is the true heaven and throne of God.” As the Virgin-Mother who gave birth to God as man, “now inherits all the divine qualities of her Son”, as in the incarnation He inherited “her human ones”. The moment follows when “Theophanes reaffirms the fundamental principle of Eastern soteriology: salvation begins at the Incarnation which reveals its deep nature, that of mutual exchange between man and God: we give Him our body and blood, and He gives us His divinity in return”. This exchange is due to the intercessor, “through which both the gift (*dosis*) of the incarnation/naming of God and the counter-gift (*antidosis*) of our deification, which is the Most Pure Virgin Mother of God, is realized”. Theophanes states that the angels themselves “now partake of deification and all divine gifts also through Her” (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 512-515). In the divine, universal plan of creation, “Mary’s place is first in the hierarchy of created beings, immediately after the Man-God her Son. The role of the Virgin is that of Mediator, after the universal Mediator” (Salaville 1953, 266-271).

According to Ioan Ică Jr., in the last part of his Speech, Theophanes investigates the mysterious connection that the Virgin-Mother has with creation but also with God. “The common element between the Mother of God and the Father is seen in the fact that the Only Begotten Son is their common womb (*splanchon*): “See the unspoken communion and connection between the Father and the Mother of God the Word: The womb of the mother rests in the bosom of the Father and that of the Father in that of His Mother. The Father sees his own Intestines naturally dwelling in the same sense in Himself and in His Mother, and His Mother similarly sees the same common Intestines naturally contained in the same sense in herself and in the Father” (Theophanes of Nicaea, in Ică 2008, 549). The Mother of God has her entire being “governed by divine energy”. It can be said that “on the basis of the hypostatic union, (...) the divinity of the Son, becoming His Mother’s own, makes Her Lady and Queen of all creation” (p. 289). Regarding the mysterious connection of the Virgin with the Holy Spirit, Dumitru Stăniloae also quotes Theophanes of Nicaea:

“But look at the unspeakable bond of the Comforter with the Virgin. For God the Word and her Son not only cleanses her in advance and sanctifies her through his own Spirit, which is the cleansing and sanctifying power, to make her suitable for His unspeakable abode, but also at the incarnation touches her flesh directly through Him, as through one’s own finger, and thus makes it subsist in

Him. But the Savior's body is also the first receptacle and source of the divine fullness itself, from which all believers receive, which is the grace and natural energy of the Holy Trinity and whose procurator and distributor on behalf of the building is the Comforter. And the second place of the Mother of God, immediately after that. For God the Word, being by nature the procurator of his own Spirit according to energy, first fills his own place and temple with all of it, then it comes out from there as if from a spring in his second place and temple" (Theophanes Nicaenus, in Stăniloae 1950, 564).

Being the source of beneficence and of all gifts, the Mother of God is also the Mother of us all, who shows deep love, care, goodness and divine affection. But She does not only this for us but, "as every mother gives her children simple existence, so the mother of God gives happy existence to all; and as those are to their children the cause of their being by nature mortal men, and besides this they are their nurse and nurturer, so also She is to them the cause of their becoming gods by grace, and she is also the bearer of care and the generous organizer of the banquet of divine and deifying delight" (Theophanes Nicaenus, in Ică 2008, 574).

Finally, we can say, in full agreement with the translator and editor of Theophanes's work, Martin Jugie, that Theophanes' Discourse is of inestimable value in that although it is not a complete treatise on Mariology and even less a complete treatise about the mystery of the Incarnation, it touches both subjects in a profound way, capturing their essence.

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