

MARY IN BYZANTINE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Is there a Byzantine Mariology?

Researching this question leads to a seeming paradox. On the one hand we find a tremendous richness of Marian thought in the liturgy, but on the other hand a virtual absence of specifically Mariological studies in theology. The Mariological experience and piety of the Byzantine churches – Catholic and Orthodox – seem to be embodied almost entirely in their worship. But we find no prominent theological reflection on the subject, nothing that would parallel the specialized Mariological treatises of the Western Church. Theology manuals contain no chapters dealing with the place of Mary in the economy of salvation. The veneration of Mary, which is so central in Byzantine worship has not been extensively expressed, analyzed, or evaluated systemically.

This scarcity of theological reflection may seem to some a deficiency in Byzantine theology. How could the Byzantine church which never prays to God or Jesus Christ without at the same time also addressing her prayers to Mary, and which constantly praises her who "... is more honorable than the cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim ...," neglect theologizing about her? Why has the Byzantine theological mind not been focused on this enormously important aspect of its life and worship?

In the Byzantine mind this seeming absence of theological study and reflection is seen as an integral part of the "mystery of Mary" in the experience of the church. The Byzantine scholar questions whether theology as the rational investigation of the truths of faith is adequate to transpose into precise terms the real content of that mystery. Perhaps the proper locus of Mariology is in liturgy and prayer, that is in worship. This is reminiscent of Prosper of Aquitaine's maxim, "*Lex orandi, lex credendi.*"

In Eastern Christianity, worship and liturgy are paramount. Liturgy is not seen as an action of the community. Liturgy is the procession or entrance into the eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God. It is the meeting place between this world and the Kingdom of God fully realized. Worship is not the commemoration

of a past event; it is participation in the events of salvation themselves, because although these occurred historically they also occur outside the category of time.

While this Byzantine tradition differs from the theological elaboration common in the West, it nonetheless “belongs to the full catholicity and the apostolicity of the Church” (Vatican II, *Decree of Ecumenism*, n. 17).

Some in the West have speculated that the Nestorian controversy, which was lived in Byzantine territory, may have contributed to fuller liturgical celebration of the *Theotokos* in the East. This development gave the East a more satisfying and habitual expression of devotion to Mary, and would support the notion that the proper locus of Mariology is primarily in liturgy.

The West, which lacks such regular liturgical expression, sought other means of elaborating Marian devotion, such as defining privileges and giving impetus to various movements.

The exploration of three areas may enlighten our appreciation of the Byzantine Marian heritage: the place of Mary in liturgical tradition, the development of the veneration of the Mother of God, and a synthetic view of its theological significance.

Byzantine Liturgy and Mariology

In the Byzantine liturgy we find four main expressions of Mariology: Marian liturgical prayers, Marian feasts, Marian iconography, and Marian paraliturgical piety.

Marian Liturgical Prayers

Each cycle of prayers concludes with a special prayer addressed to Mary. For example, the groups of hymns called *stichiras* in the structure of the daily services always conclude with the *theotokion*, which follows the doxology, “glory to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages.” This rule applies to all liturgical prayer units, daily, weekly, and yearly cycles, and also the sanctoral cycle. Whatever the theme of any liturgical celebration, the last word and seal will be the *Theotokos*, Mary the virgin Forthbringer of God.

Marian Feasts

The liturgical year includes a series of highly developed Marian commemorations. Four belong to the category of the twelve major feasts: the Nativity of the Virgin, September 8; the Presentation of the *Theotokos* into the Temple,

November 21; the Annunciation, March 25; the Dormition, August 15. The feast of the Purification, February 2, belongs to the same category and is also deeply Marian in meaning. Among the lesser Marian feasts are the Protection of the Virgin, October 1; the *Synaxis* of the *Theotokos*, December 26, the Conception of Mary, December 9, and others.

Marian Iconography

The icons of the *Theotokos* are integral to the life of the Byzantine Church. Their very position in the apse and on the *iconostasis* indicates definite theological meaning.

An icon is not meant to be a visual representation to stimulate the imagination for devotional purposes. Neither is it meant to teach or inspire. In the spiritual sense, it is a living thing, the point at which heaven and earth meet. St. John of Damascus called the icon a “channel of divine grace.” Laden with faith and grace, the icon is a mirror of divine revelation and gives testimony to the reality that the saving truth is not communicated only by mere human words but also through wordless beauty.

Also to be considered is the highly developed cult of the commonly termed “miraculous” icons of the *Theotokos*, some of which have given rise to important and extremely popular feasts.

Paraliturgical Piety

In addition to the official Marian prayers and celebrations of the liturgy, we find an enormous amount of secondary or paraliturgical feasts and services. To gather all the *akathistoi* to Mary, written after the pattern of the renowned *Akathistos* attributed to Romanus, would result in several printed volumes. They testify to the constant flow of heartfelt piety, love, and praise directed to Mary.

Not all these compositions are of equal value and quality. However, the outstanding Byzantine hymnographers like St. John of Damascus, St. Andrew of Crete, St. Cosmas of Maioum, wrote some of their best works on Marian themes. In the products of their pens we find the true expression, contemplation, and understanding of Mary in Byzantine tradition.

The Byzantine patrimony in this area also includes the commentaries on these themes in the homilies composed for Marian feasts by the Greek Fathers and Doctors.

Historical and Liturgical Perspectives

Because the Eastern Churches have no comprehensive historical record of the veneration of Mary, our observations are limited. The first liturgical expression of Marian veneration must have been the “concomitant” feasts, the celebrations attached to the major feasts of Christ. Most likely the first Marian feast in the Byzantine calendar was the *Synaxis*, December 26, which is directly connected with the Nativity of Jesus Christ. Originally the name given to the Sunday before Christmas was Annunciation. These facts point to the Christological basis of the veneration of Mary. The Byzantine Church contemplated Mary within the mystery of the Incarnation. This Christological dimension is still evident today in the chief Byzantine icon, which portrays Mary as the Mother with the Child, an icon of Incarnation.

Concerning the Biblical expression of Marian themes, the Byzantine Church focuses special interest on applying to Mary the terminology of the Temple and its cultic symbolism. The Temple and its sacred furnishings are understood by Byzantine hymnographers and preachers as announcing the various dimensions of the mystery of Mary. She is called the Temple, the Door, the Candlestick, the Censer, the Holy of Holies, and so forth. In this context the non-Biblical feasts, like the Nativity of the Virgin and the Presentation into the Temple, are considered basically as the fruit of a particular reading and understanding of the Old Testament.

Also to be considered is the origin of certain Marian feasts rooted in the construction and dedication of churches in places where events of sacred history was supposed to have occurred.

In tracing the history of Byzantine Marian piety we find that it is rooted not in any special revelation, but primarily in the experience of liturgical worship. Theological reflection on Mary did not give rise to her veneration. This veneration sprang from the liturgy as the experience of “heaven on earth,” as communion with heavenly realities, as an act of love and devotion, that gradually revealed the unique place of Christ’s Mother in both the economy of salvation and the mystery of the “world to come.” The Church preaches Christ, not Mary. But communion with Christ reveals Mary as the secret joy within the Church. States a Byzantine hymn, “In her rejoices the whole creation!”

In celebrating the liturgy, there is really no time gap. In the mystical area of time beyond time, Jesus’ redeeming act and one’s being redeemed are going on

together now – this day, hour, minute. When one is praying with the Church one is not praying a memory of an event; one is living the dynamics of the event with that special awareness that recognizes the presence of the Lord.

In seeking to understand the meaning of Eastern Christian liturgy, the Byzantine in particular, it is important to note that it is not symbolic in the Western sense. A liturgical action has no isolated intrinsic meaning. Neither can theology be appealed to for a definition or rational explanation of a single sign or action; because Eastern Christian theology describes rather than defines the reality of salvation. The Eastern Church resists attempts to define meaning piecemeal by analyzing elements of liturgy. Eastern Christian worship must be comprehended wholistically, and liturgical actions recognized as pointing beyond themselves to a greater reality in which the Christian participates when worshipping.

In the Eastern and Byzantine world the cultic, liturgical origin of Mariology possesses special importance for the understanding of its true nature and theological implications. Mary is not the object of a cult added to that of Jesus Christ. Rather she is an essential dimension of the cult addressed to God and Christ, a quality of that cult.

Biblical Theological Perspective

The Byzantine liturgy unfolds other Mariological themes that are Biblically based. Christ is the New Adam and Mary is the New Eve. This is the primary and soteriological dimension of her veneration by the Church. The Byzantine Church concentrates in Mary the whole Biblical vision and experience of the relationship between God and creation, the Saviour and the world, as a mystery of love whose closest expression in “this world” is the man-woman relationship. God loves the world, God loves the chosen people, Christ loves the Church as the husband loves his wife. More precisely, the mystery of human love reflects the mystery of God’s love for his creation. Mary stands for the femininity of creation itself. Here femininity means responding love, obedience, self-giving, the readiness to live exclusively in and for the Other. The woman responds to the initiative of man and follows him, and in this total self-giving she fulfills herself. Eve failed to be woman because she took the initiative; she distorted the order of creation and became the cause of sin. The chosen people of God failed to be the handmaid of the Lord in love and obedience. But Mary, by her total obedience, restores something absolutely essential in the order of creation. She is not the representative of the woman or women before God. Mary is the icon of the entire creation as response to Christ and to God.

The traditional icon of Mary “wider than heaven” expresses well this notion; it is often found in the apse of Byzantine churches.

Ecclesial Perspective

Another significant difference between Eastern and Western Christianity is the understanding of Church. In the East the Church is not only an institution or community, but sacrament in the sense of being the epiphany of the events of salvation. In this context, liturgy is not the way in which the community expresses its faith but is the participation of those who believe in the timeless reality of salvific events.

The Church is institution and the Church is life. Since the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, ecclesiology has dwelt mainly on the institutional aspect of the Church. These canonical and organizational aspects are necessary and essential for the Church. All this, however, is not *the* Church. The Church is new life in Christ, new joy, communion, love, deification, peace. The church is an eternal passage from the old into the new, from this world into the Kingdom of God. This life is difficult to define; but those who live it, no matter how imperfectly, know Mary is its perfect expression, its very movement. As heart of the new creation, Mary is the icon of Christ, the Bride of the Bridegroom, as is the Church. No ecclesiastical authority has decreed this. The living experience of the church herself discovers this identification of the Church with Mary, and expresses the life of the Church in reference to Mary and the veneration of Mary in reference to the Church. The devotion of the Byzantine Church is Mariological because Mary is the very embodiment of that piety, its image, its direction, its movement. Mary is the *oranta* eternally alive in adoration and self-giving.

Eschatological Perspective

As icon of creation and icon of the Church, Mary is also “the dawn of the mysterious day,” the foretaste of the Kingdom of God, the presence of realized eschatology mentioned by theologians. The one who is “virgin after childbearing” is also “alive after death” states the *Kontakion* of the Feast of the Dormition. Faith tells us that even before the common resurrection and the consummation of all things in Christ, Mary is fully alive, beyond the destruction and separation of death. The Christian East has never rationalized this mystery.

In the East knowledge of God is not the result of logical arguments presented by theology. Only in worship can human beings obtain knowledge of God. Such

knowledge is nonrational; it is contemplative and mystical.

Mary's total unity with Christ destroyed her death. In her a part of this world is totally glorified and deified, making her the "dawn of the mysterious day" of the Kingdom.

Maternal Perspective

Mary was associated in all the mysteries of her Son's life on earth. She stood at the foot of the cross, and a sword of sorrow pierced her heart. Her crucified son made her our Mother. Each Wednesday and Friday the Byzantine liturgy remembers her mystery of suffering and compassion in the moving *stavro-theotokia*, Byzantine counterparts of the Latin *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*. The experience of Mary as protection and intercession is another dimension of Byzantine Mariology.

Mary is identified with all suffering and human tragedy. In this regard she is the icon of the Church as Mother. This theme is emphatically expressed in the feast of the Protection of the Virgin, and in the endless flow of paraliturgical Marian prayers and writings previously mentioned.

The Byzantine Mariological Perspective

The role of theology in Eastern Christianity differs from that in Western Christianity. In the West theology is symbolized and encoded in liturgical action. In the East theology flows from liturgy and is subject to it. Theological discussion is always dependent on liturgy, and can be understood and experienced only in the context of the worship life of the Church.

Mariology is not an independent and free-standing element in the rich tradition of the Byzantine Church or in any other of the Eastern Christian churches. It is not studied in itself. Rather, Mariology – doctrine and devotion – is an essential element of Christian cosmology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. It is not an object of faith, but its fruit. Mary is not a *nota ecclesiae*, but the self-revelation of the Church. Mariology is not a doctrine, but the life and fragrance of Christian doctrine in us.

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