

The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 101

St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Topic 10: The Virgin Mary: Mankind’s “Yes” to God

(Sources: *The Faith*, Chapter 7; and, the pamphlet, “Facing Up to Mary”, by Fr. Peter Gillquist, printed by Conciliar Press)

“To ignore the Mother of God means to misinterpret the Son.” -- Fr. Georges Florovsky, (an Orthodox 20th Century theologian of huge proportions and importance)

“Mariology”—what the Church believes about the Holy Virgin Mary—is inseparable from “Christology”—what the Church believes about Her Son, Jesus Christ.

Our theology about the Virgin protects and defends our theology about Christ.

“Theotokos” = “God-bearer”, or, “Mother of God”.

With this term we defend Christ’s full Divinity.

We call the Virgin the “bearer” and “Mother” of the Son of God. We understand that she is only the giver of her human nature to Jesus Christ. She is not the source of His Divinity.

However, the Divine Person who entered her womb at conception (the Annunciation) is the one and only Son of God the Father. The Person Who was born of Mary is the One Divine Son, having two natures (human and Divine).

The Son of God is the SAME PERSON as the son of Mary: One Person, with two natures (NOT two persons).

Since the baby Jesus can truly be called “God” (in Greek, “Theos”),
and since Mary is really His mother, His “bearer” (in Greek, “tokos”—
meaning “bringing forth”, as in “childbirth”),
therefore, we can say that Mary is the “God-bearer”, or “Theotokos”,
(the “Mother of God,” “the one who birthed God”.)

The heretic Nestorius (one time the patriarch of Constantinople) refused to call the Virgin Mary, “Theotokos.”

He coined the term, “Christotokos”, saying that Mary only bore Christ,
not the Eternal Son of God.

Nestorius’ error lay in his division of Christ into *two persons*:

the one Eternal Son of God and another, the mortal son of Mary.

Nestorius’ teaching was **condemned** at the Third Ecumenical Council, held at Ephesus, in 431 AD.

“To confess that the Blessed Virgin is the Mother of God is to confess that the Son born of her is God Himself.” (*The Faith*, pg.116)

A proper understanding of the person and work of Mary in the whole salvation story **defends Christ’s full humanity**.

Christ is a real man. He has a real “mommy”. She remains still His “Mom”. His relationship with her did not end at Christmas.

- a) She was **not simply** a passive “channel”, a “passageway”, through which God entered the human race.
- b) She was **not** an “egg-shell” which hatched the Son of God Incarnate—a shell whose usefulness was served and can now be discarded.
- c) She was and is a real human person, who gave birth to a real human person.
- d) We believe that Christ’s love for His mother continues in Heaven today. The parent-son love relationship continues forever.
- e) As believers, we are adopted into God’s family in heaven—becoming by Grace the sons and daughters of God. Christ, the Son of the Father, is our “big Brother”—and we become “co-inheritors” with Christ.

If we are adopted into God’s family as “children” through Baptism,
and God the Father becomes our “Father”,
and Christ becomes our “Brother”,
And since Mary is Christ’s Mother—and she is with Him in Heaven,
What, then, is our relationship to her?
She becomes our “Mother”.

Any lack of love for Jesus’ Mother is a lack of proper love for Him.

Can you really love a friend and not also be nice and respectful to His Mother whenever you are over at their house? If you really love your friend, you will certainly respect and honor, even love, his mom.

If, however, you ignore and are rude to your friend’s mom when in their house, ask yourself, how long are you and your friend going to remain on good terms?

I believe that Jesus suffers from many Christians’ lack of respect for His Mom.

What is Mary's proper due?

Many of those who were brought up in non-Orthodox and non-Catholic Christian backgrounds have already made up their minds in advance to reject the honour due to Mary, either in Christian veneration or in art. They should read the Bible carefully --

THE NEW TESTAMENT RECORD:

- **Luke 1:28** The Archangel Gabriel greeted Mary “Hail, O highly favoured one [“full of grace”], the Lord is with you! **Blessed are you among women!**”
- **Luke 1:41-43** “and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “**Blessed are you among women**, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the **mother of my Lord** should come to me?”
- **Luke 1:46-49** “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, *henceforth all generations will call me **blessed***. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His Name.”

Mary is the most blessed of women:

1. She conceived, carried, gave birth to, and nurtured the very Saviour of our souls.
2. She was chosen by the Father to bear in the flesh His only-begotten Son.
3. She was favoured by the Lord, due to her purity and devoted life. (Similar to Cornelius in the Book of Acts chapter 10, whose devotion, prayer and generosity were so pleasing to God that He sent His angel to him.)
4. Mary is the first person in all history to receive and accept Christ as her Saviour.
5. She has set the pace for all of us Christians to personally give our lives over fully to Jesus Christ.
6. In early Church history, she is called the “first of the redeemed.” She calls God, “Her Saviour.” (Luke 1:47)
7. Angels (Luke 1:28), saints (Luke 1:41-43), and “all generations” (Luke 1:48) call the Virgin Mary “Blessed”, so who are we not to do the same? Are we better than angels, saints, and the Holy Scriptures?

Mary is our model for Christian service:

She committed herself and all of her life to Jesus Christ.

Even if we are totally sincere about wanting to follow God, He will never conscript us apart from our consent. God is the “God of all grace.” (1 Peter 5:10) We are to **choose freely** to obey Him and do His will, just as the Virgin Mary the New Eve did.

Mary’s response was, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) This was her “YES!” to God.

Mary is the Mother of God.

Luke 1:43 Elizabeth greeted Mary: “Why is this granted to me, that the **mother of my Lord** should come to me?”

In the 3rd Ecumenical Council, the Church Fathers refuted the teachings of the heretic Nestorius who claimed that the one in Mary’s womb was only a man and not God. The Fathers stated that to speak of Jesus Christ as being something less than God in the flesh is sub-Christian. The Church Fathers explained that unless the One in Mary’s womb was and is fully God, we are dead in our sins. In order to safeguard the full Deity of Christ, the Church has always insisted that St. Mary be rightly called “the Mother of God,” as stated in the Bible by St. Elizabeth, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, when she called Mary, “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43).

The Title of “Mother of God” **does not mean:**

- (a) that she is the mother of the Holy Trinity (since the Holy Trinity does not have a mother)
- (b) that she originated the Person Who is God the Son.
- (c) that she gave birth to—or was the source of—the Divinity of Jesus Christ

The title of “Mother of God” refers to Mary being the Mother of the Son of God, Who assumed full humanity in her womb.

Orthodoxy insists that Jesus, at the very moment of His Conception in Mary’s womb, was fully human and fully God, thereby calling Mary the “Mother of God”, in Greek called “Theotokos”, which translated in English, is “God-bearer”.

We are to honor Mary and call her blessed.

Luke 1:48 "... henceforth all generations will call me blessed."

All generations in Church history have done so. From the beginning of recorded Christian worship, Orthodox Christians have taken special care to venerate or honour the Virgin Mary in the Liturgy.

Ex: Church Hymn: "It is truly meet to bless you, O Theotokos! Ever-blessed and most pure and the Mother of our God. More honourable than the cherubim, and most glorious beyond compare than the seraphim. Without defilement [corruption] you gave birth to God the Word. True Theotokos, we magnify you!"

Note: We say "magnify", but we do not say "worship".

Orthodoxy does not worship Mary. Worship is **reserved** for the Trinity **alone**: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Instead, we **highly venerate** her.

The Bible teaches us to:

- honour the king (1 Peter 2:17)
- give preference to each other (Roman 12:10)
- give honour to whom honour is due (Romans 13:7)

If we do this for kings, for each other, and to all for whom it is due, certainly we should honour the Mother of the King of Kings!

OLD TESTAMENT RECORD:

Isaiah 7:14 "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel."

Exodus 25 and 26 -- The Church has seen **prefigurements** of the Incarnation in the Tabernacle (and Temple) of the Old Testament.

- 1) Golden Jar of Manna. Christ is the Manna, the True Bread from Heaven, and the womb of the Virgin Mary is the Golden Jar that held that Manna for nine months.
- 2) Table holding the Shewbread. Christ is the Bread; Mary is the Table.
- 3) Golden Candlestick. Christ is the candle; Mary is the candle-holder.
- 4) Tables of the Law. The clay tablets are the humanity of Christ which He received from His human mother; the letters of the Law divinely-inscribed are referring to the Divine Logos (the Word of God).

- 5) The Ark of the Covenant. Mary is the golden ark where the “Mercy Seat” was located—where God “sat” when He met with the high priest. Mary held Jesus in her womb and on her lap.
- 6) The Tabernacle (of cloth) and the Temple of Solomon. God’s dwelling; where He met with man. This symbolizes the womb of Mary. Her womb is the Temple where God’s Divine Presence (His Glory) dwells.

Ezekiel 44:1-2 “Then He brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary which faces toward the east, but it was **shut**. And the LORD said to me ‘This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because **the LORD God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut.**”

The traditional interpretation of this passage held by the great majority of early Church Fathers (and as well as by many of the Reformation leaders) is that Mary is the temple and Christ is the Prince of Peace. The gate mentioned is seen as a picture of Christ’s passage through the door of Mary’s womb. It remains, after His passage, **sealed shut**. She was a virgin before giving birth, and remains a virgin after giving birth to Her only Son. She had no other child in her womb. It remains holy for the Lord.

Did Mary remain a virgin after the birth of Christ?

Matthew 1:25 “[Joseph] took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.”

From a Scriptural standpoint, the presence of the phrase, “until she had brought forth her first Son” does not automatically mean that Joseph must have known her sexually afterwards. This is because in both Greek and Hebrew the word **until** or **to** can have several different meanings.

Examples:

2 Samuel 6:23 “Michal the daughter of Saul had no children to [until] the day of her death.”

[This does not imply that Michal had a child after her death.]

Matthew 28:20 “Lo, I am with you always, even to [until] the end of the age.”

[This does not imply that Christ will depart at the end of the age.]

Deuteronomy 34:6 We read that Moses was buried “in a valley in the land of Moab...but no one knows his grave to [until] this day.”

[This does not imply that Moses’ burial place was discovered the day Deuteronomy was written.]

Consequently, Matthew 1:25 does not mean that Joseph and Mary began a sexual union after Christ was born. It simply is referring to the time in question, and clarifying that from the day the Archangel Gabriel greeted her to the day Christ was born there were no

conjugal relations between Joseph and Mary. It is not making a comment about the time after Christ's birth.

What about Jesus' brothers and sisters who are referred to in the Bible?

(Brothers are named: James, Joses, Jude, and Simon, as well as some sisters. Mark 6:3)

1. There is no direct wording in the Bible that these brothers and sisters were the sons and daughters of Mary and Joseph.
2. The Bible often speaks of children and relatives as "brothers." Ex: Abraham and Lot are called brothers, when actually Lot was Abraham's nephew. Jacob and Laban are called brothers, even though Jacob was the son of Rebecca, Laban's sister, making him the nephew of Laban.

St. Ambrose (+397 AD) believed that these **brothers and sisters** (mentioned in Mark 6:3) were **children** of a **former marriage** of Joseph, (a former marriage prior to Matthew chapter 1), by a wife who had died, leaving him a widower. As an older man, he gets betrothed to the young Virgin Mary, but he already has a house full of children. This is the widely held tradition. Note: Scripturally, the older Joseph has already died and is out of the picture by the time Jesus is 30 years old and begins His public ministry.

Other Fathers in the Church taught that these siblings were really **cousins** of Jesus.

Jesus asks His young Disciple John to take care of the Virgin Mary:

A strong Scriptural support to the argument that James, Joses, Jude, and Simon were not the younger blood brothers of Jesus, the younger children of Joseph and Mary, is John 19:26-27. On the cross, about to die, Jesus settles His earthly affairs, and at the last moment finds a home for His Mother, by assigning His Disciple John the role of caring for the widowed Virgin Mary. "Woman, behold your son!" (vs. 26) And to John He said: "Behold your mother! And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home" (vs. 27). IF James, Joses, Jude and Simon were the younger brothers of the 33-year-old Jesus by blood, they would have been in their late 20's, certainly old enough to care for their own mother. Why would Jesus put her into the care of a stranger, the youngest Disciple, if she had four grown adult sons to take care of her? The only answer that solves this riddle is that they were NOT the blood children of Mary. They were sons of Joseph by another woman (or cousins), and they were already older than Jesus in human years, established in their own homes. With Jesus dying on the cross, Mary had no other child of her own on earth to care for her, so from that moment, St. John the Disciple, at the Lord's command, "took her to his own home" to care for her.

Finally: a note about what we as Orthodox **do not believe** about Mary:

The Immaculate Conception. This is a modern Roman Catholic innovation in 1854. Because the Orthodox Christian East always read Greek, it avoided the mistake in theology which occurred in the West due to the mistranslation in Latin of Romans 5:12, which led Latin theologians into thinking that all humans sinned (and are thereby condemned to hell by Adam's disobedience) when Adam sinned. (This is the false

“Original Sin” idea that we all sinned “in Adam.”) This concept teaches that the guilt of Adam is passed biologically down through the generations. The Latins, therefore, invented the Immaculate Conception to somehow “purify” the Mother of God, Mary, so that her humanity would be “good enough” to carry the Son of God without the guilt of Adam staining her and Him. The innovation says that Christ’s merits were used to preserve Mary “immaculate” and free of all Original Sin (especially the stain of Adam’s guilt) at the moment of her conception in the womb of her mother St. Anne. In effect, this falsely gives Mary a special status, a unique type of “redemption”.

The Orthodox have always rejected the idea that we are guilty for Adam’s sin. We believe that we all share the consequences of Adam’s sin (such as mortality and the corruptibility of the human passions), but Adam remains answerable to God for his own personal sin, and we remain answerable to God for our own sins.