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On Mariology in Orthodoxy

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I

I am fully aware of the fact that the problem of mariology does not seem to be central in Christian preoccupations today. I refer not noly to non-mariological churches, but even to Christians belonging to churches that were over-mariological at times. When I attended Vatican II as an observer, a *peritus* said to me, "Well, we'll get rid of mariology very soon." I still remember the shock I experienced then. In all honesty, we Orthodox are not ready to "get rid" of mariology. On the contrary, I think that if we understood the crisis in which we find ourselves today, if we truly understood the depth of today's problems, and that the real crisis is on the level not of "adjustments" between the Church and the world (relevance!) but on that of the ultimate Christian vision of God, world and man, then

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we would have also understood what for centuries was expressed in the veneration of Mary.

I realize that it is difficult to see the connection between our "modern problems" and Mary because in the Catholic West she has become the object of an almost separate cult. In the East, however, she is "taken for granted" and provokes no theological questioning or reflection. There is no "mariology" in the Orthodox Church if this term is taken to mean a specific theological discipline, a separate intellectual set of problems. The veneration of Mary permeates, so to speak, the entire life of the Church; it is a "dimension" of dogma as well as piety, of Christology as well as ecclesiology. It is this "dimension" that is to be made explicit today and in connection mostly with the problems that seem so alien to it. In other words, one is to ask the question: Is mariology a type of piety relevant in the past but no longer of value today? My preliminary answer is no. Something is expressed in mariology which is fundamental to the Christian faith itself, to the Christian experience of the world and of human life. It is in this area that I will try to share some thoughts with you.

II

Although I will not discuss the historical development of mariology, I must stress that the Orthodox understanding of it has always been in "Christological terms." To use a somewhat paradoxical approach, I would say that if nothing else were revealed in the Gospel than the mere fact of Mary's existence, i.e., that Christ, God and man, had a mother and that her name was Mary, it would have been enough for the Church to love her, to think of her relationship with her Son, and to draw theological conclusions from this contemplation. Thus, there is no need for additional or special revelations; Mary is a self-evident and essential "dimension" of the Gospel itself.

As to liturgical veneration, mariology developed at first within the frame-work of the so called "concomitant feasts." The oldest feast of Mary seems to have been the "Synaxis" in her honor on December 26, immediately following the Nativity. This means that liturgical veneration

of Mary followed the development of Christology; it was a part of the Church's contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation. In the East at least, this Christological character of the veneration of Mary has always been preserved. We have, of course, popular forms of Marian devotion, but even these remain organically connected with the mystery of Christ. And this remains the inner norm and criterion of Orthodox mariology.

The liturgy is the main, if not exclusive, *locus* of mariology in the Orthodox Church. As I said before, Mary has never become the object of any special and separate theological speculation; one would seek in vain for a mariological treatise in our manuals of dogma. This liturgical veneration has, to be sure, been adorned with much piety, symbolism and allegory, and this has led to questions about the biblical character and justification of these forms. Where in the Bible do we find stories about her nativity, her presentation in the Temple, her dormition—all themes of the principal mariological celebrations. To this the Orthodox answer is that whatever their poetical, liturgical and hymnological "expressions," all these events are *real* in the sense that they are self-evident. Mary was born, as with every pious Jewish girl she was, at some moment of her life, taken into the Temple, and, in the end, she died. The fact, therefore, that much of the liturgical expression of these feasts is taken from the Apocrypha does not change or alter their "reality." It is the ultimate meaning of these events that the Church contemplates, not the poetical elaborations of Byzantine hymnographies.

Mariological feasts are only one aspect of the veneration of Mary. Indeed, it permeates the entire worship of the Church. Thus, we find her veneration at the end of each liturgical unit, as its conclusion or epilogue. Each group of hymns or prayers is always concluded with a *Theotokion*, a special hymn to Mary. On Wednesdays and Fridays, days dedicated to the Cross, this prayer takes the form of a *Stavrotheotokion*, a hymn in which Mary is contemplated standing at the Cross.

Finally, a very important dimension of mariology is to be found in iconography. It is enough, for example, to look at one of the best Marian icons of the Orthodox East—*Our Lady of Valdimir*—to understand that

herein there is a wonderful revelation about the central mystery of the Christian faith, as well as the meaning of man, his body, his life, his destiny.

All this material—and one could add to it, the homilies, sermons, meditations, etc.—has never been "organized" into a consistent body of doctrine. It seems that the Church is reluctant to "touch" that mystery, that it has no adequate words for it. "Come, taste, see," and then understand—such seems to be the invitation. This makes a rational or analytical presentation of mariology very difficult.

III

But this is being challenged today; an attempt to explain becomes inevitable. Such an explanation must of necessity "dessicate" an organic whole and show its different strata. In the first place, we find the very important theme of Mary as the *New Eve*. It can be termed the "cosmological" aspect of mariology. At the same time it sets the frame-work for the entire mystery: the relationship between God and the world (cosmology), God and his chosen people (history of salvation), God and the Church (ecclesiology) and finally, the consummation of all things in God. All this is expressed primarily as a mystery of love, in terms of marital unity. The second theme is that of *Mary as Temple*. It finds its ultimate expression in the feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple. The Temple is the place of Divine presence, of encounter between God and man, of the revelation of Divine glory. In this feast the ultimate mystery of man as the Temple of God is revealed to us. Mary represents all of us in this fulfillment of one Temple in and through the other—the human Temple. Finally, the *death* of Mary, the great theme of Dormition. If I am permitted a word here by way of a friendly ecumenical critique, the Catholics should have never permitted their theologians to "elaborate" the mystery of the Assumption (as also that of the Immaculate Conception). They missed the whole point, for they tried to explain rationally—and in inappropriate terms—an eschatological mystery. The Orthodox Church does not "explain" what happened when Mary died. It simply states that her death signifies the "morning of a mysterious day," that Mary, in virtue of her

total love for God and surrender to him, of her absolute obedience and humility, is the beginning of that common resurrection which Christ annnounced to the world.

Each of these themes requires a long and elaborate treatment. Here I will only touch upon one aspect of mariology: its meaning for the doctrine and understanding of the Church.

IV

Ecclesiology is one of the great themes of our ecumenical age. And the first thing one must say about ecclesiology is that today it is "polarized." It is polarized between the notions of authority and freedom. One can say that the old presentations of *De Ecclesia* are coming to an end. As we know today, the classical *De Ecclesia* with its emphasis on structure, institution and legalism is the product of confessional polemics, of the great Western crisis of Reformation - Counter-Reformation. It is this *institutional* or structural reduction of ecclesiology that is being challenged and denounced today. Yet, as it always happens, one extreme leads to another. When people tire of "structures" and "institutions," they jump into a kind of illusion of freedom, not realizing that in shaking one set of structures, they prepare another one. Today's freedom will become tomorrow's "institution," and so on *ad infinitum*. Perhaps it is time for us to realize that as long as we debate institutions and structures, and not the mystery of the Church in her depth, we are by-passing the real issue.

What is the Church? On the one hand the Church is certainly structure and institution, order and hierarchy, canons and chanceries. Yet this is only the visible structure. What is its content? Is it not also, and primarily, that which is to change and to transfigure life itself? Is it not the anticipation, the "Sacrament" of the kingdom of God? Yes, the Church is structure, but the unique purpose of that structure is to be an "epiphany," to manifest and to fulfill the Church as expectation and fulfillment, as pilgrimage and anticipation. The Church is thirst and hunger, and she is also the "food of immortality." She is the "not yet" and the "already is . . ." Now, it is in this perspective—that of the Church as *life*, and not only

structures—that we can understand the unique place of Mary in "ecclesiology," i.e., the attempt to understand the Church from within.

It is, of course, in worship that this experience of the Church is given. It is in her *litourgia* that the Church transcends herself as institution and structure and becomes "that which she is": response, adoration, encounter, presence, glory, and, ultimately, a mystical marriage between God and his new creation. It is precisely here that Mary stands at the center—as the personification, as the very expression, icon and content of that response, as the very depth of man's "yes" to God in Christ. In the worship of the Church there comes the moment when all structures *qua* structures disappear; they are fulfilled. They are essential, necessary to bring us up to that moment, to make that moment possible. Yet when it comes, it is life and life alone that triumphs. It is that perfect experience of unity and joy that is given—and here stands Mary as, indeed, the personal "icon" of the Church, of that movement of love and adoration.

There is no "icon" of the Church except the human person that has become totally transparent to the Holy Spirit, to the "joy and peace" of the Kingdom. If Christ is the "icon" of the Father, Mary is the "icon" of the new creation, the new Eve responding to the new Adam, fulfilling the mystery of love.

She is the New Eve because to God's request she answered, "I am the servant of the Lord, be it done to me according to his word." At that moment all human "structures" which originated in man's alienation from God—freedom and authority, rights and obligations, etc.—all this was transcended. The new life entered the world as life of communion and love, not of "authority" and "submission." Thus, being the "icon" of the Church, Mary is the image and the personification of the world. When God looks at his creation, the "face" of the world is feminine, not masculine. We men are, to be sure, co-workers with God. We are the heads of families, churches, institutions, etc. We become bishops, priests, superintendants. Unfortunately, some women today think that they should also become priests and bishops. They are wrong, for when it comes to holiness and joy, to ultimate reality and transfiguration, it is the "feminine" qualities of humility, beauty, obedience and total self-giving that triumph

in the "new creation" and crown it with Divine glory. It is symbolic indeed that on Mount Athos, the great monastic center of the Orthodox East, no woman is admitted. Yet, the whole mountain is considered to be the particular possession of the Mother of God. The intuition of the great Russian novels like *Anna Karenina* or *Dr. Zhivago* is that in spite of all its ambiguity, its tragical identification with the demonic temptation, its deviation from the Divine beauty, it is here, in the mystery of woman that the last word of creation is to be revealed. She—Mary—is the ultimate "doxa" of creation, its response to God. She is the climax, the personification, the affirmation of the ultimate destiny of all creation: that God may be finally all in all, may fill all things with himself. The world is the "receptacle" of his glory, and in this it is "feminine." And in the present "era," Mary is the sign, the guarantee that this is so, that in its mystical depth the world is already achieving this destiny.

Our world today is "masculine" in the sense that it concentrates almost everything on forms and structures, on institutions and categories, but not on the content in which these structures exist and which is their final justification. This "masculine" approach has contaminated theology itself. But the "epiphany" of the Church always takes place beyond the structures, as their fulfillment. There comes a time when the institution disappears, although without the institution that moment would have never come, would have been impossible. This is when the Church is actualized as "joy and peace" in the Holy Spirit, is the taste—here and now—of the Kingdom which is to come. At the heart of that moment, as its expression, movement and perfection, we find Mary. She is not the "object" of prayer and adoration, but its very expression. She is the Church as prayer, as joy, as fulfillment. It is this combination of beauty and humility, matter and spirit, time and eternity, that is the real experience of the Church and of that experience Mary is the focus and the life. It is for this experience that the world is longing today.

We think that we can solve all problems today by "masculine" means —by changing institutions and adopting new laws, by planning and calculating. In the end, however, this alone cannot and will never triumph. What will always win while being defeated is something quite different:

a vision, an experience which is behind all these structures and alone can give them significance, the victorious humility of the Church as personified in Mary. The Church should not adopt—as she seems to do today—a "me-too" attitude, that of simply joining the world in its struggles, protests, pickets, and in all "human all too human" wisdom and passion. Throughout the centuries she has accumulated another wisdom, another experience, something for which every man and woman, every society and generation, is really nostalgic. For behind all the struggles and conflicts which fill the world there is the secret, unknown and unconscious desire for the ultimate synthesis, a convincing image of man and manhood. This is what the Church, and she alone, can offer to the world.

This is what I call the mariological dimension of ecclesiology. I do not find it discussed in modern theology. On the contrary, what we want to prove to ourselves and to the world is how "masculine," structured, and, in general, how "this-wordly" we are. We are indeed ashamed of mariology, perceiving it as weakness and sentimental deviation. There must be someone, then, who in the midst of this surrender would simply affirm and proclaim the eternal validity of the mariological "focus" of the Church. And if we take one by one the various problems which constitute the "agenda" of our times and study them in the light, not of superficial mariology, but of its deep implications and insights, of the silent vision behind it, this may be, in spite of all theological inflation and the noise of our days, the best way to serve the world. We have received a gift from God and we can share it with the world, thirsty and hungry, in joy and beauty. Mary is the secret joy of all that the Church does in this world. It is she who can and will purify the world, not priest's unions and masses of protest. She will reveal to us that which we are losing every day, the *mysterium* of the Church, that without which everything in the Church looses all meaning. This is why the mariological theme is actual. We have not yet started to work on it, but I would suggest that instead of adding to the world's crowds of specialists in all possible areas we return with a new interest to the one in whom God has given us both "icon" and "power" to become that which Christ wants us to be.

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