

# **THE LIFE OF THE HOLY VIRGIN MARY**

*Olga Moss*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Christian faith is a Divine revelation. In the course of time the Source of Divine Revelation became incarnate and dwelt among men, the men whom He had Himself created.

The Word of God, with the Consent of the Father and the Co-operation of the Holy Spirit, spoke: "Let there be...", and whole worlds, visible and invisible, came into being in time and space. In the book of Job we read that the angels were created before the material universe and watched with amazement as the beauty of the universe was unrolled – the galaxies with their billions of stars, the earth, the planets, the seas with their fish, the animals, the birds and, on the sixth day, man, who was created in the image and likeness of God.

St. Basil the Great likens the Father to the thought hidden in the mind. The Son is the Word, Who is with the Father, with the Thought before He speaks. Since the Word comes from the Thought, but not after the Thought, He is uncreated and *begotten* of the Father. But the Word cannot speak without the Breath (Hebrew: ruach), Who *proceeds* from the Father.

In the Psalms we read that God the Father created man with His two Hands: the Son and the Holy Spirit: "By the Word of the Lord were the heavens established, and all the might of them by the Spirit of His mouth" (32.6). The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all Hypostases, or Persons. But the Three are One God, and not three gods; and when, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was given to the Church, descending in tongues of flame on the apostles, the Father and the Spirit were with Him, as the light and the warmth are with the flame. The Three Persons have One Will.

Another name for the Spirit is the Kingdom of God. Christ said: "Seek first the Kingdom of God (the Holy Spirit), and His righteousness, and all the rest will be added unto you".

We read in the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit searches the deep things of God. And no-one knows God but the Spirit of God. Christ said to the Samaritan woman at the well: "God is Spirit, and those who seek the Father must seek Him in Spirit (the Holy Spirit) and in Truth (Christ the Word)." (John 4) The Holy Spirit searches the deep things of God, and no-one knows God but the Holy Spirit, just as no-one knows a man but the spirit of that man. God created man, not by giving a command, but like a sculptor. The Son and the Holy Spirit with the consent of the Father made man from the earth: his body and soul. Then the Holy Spirit breathed into him and he became a *living* soul.

According to St. Basil the Great, the Holy Spirit teaches not only men, but also angels. Thus through His teaching the Cherubim and the Seraphim increase in

knowledge of God and love for Him. So not only do men increase in glory, becoming nearer and nearer to God through all eternity, but also the angels.

## *THE FALL - EVE VERSUS MARY*

At the Fall men lost God the Holy Spirit and became “dead souls”. Eventually their bodies died and returned to the earth, while their souls went to Hades (Sheol) to wait for the Saviour. Job said: “I know that one day I will see my King in all His beauty”, referring to Christ’s descent into Hades.

Eve was created before the Fall - sinless, innocent and adult. While in Paradise, she never had to struggle spiritually against a Fallen nature, because God created her perfect, and she lived in Paradise in harmony with God, Adam and the animals.

Mary was born from Joachim and Anna with the corruption in her caused by the original sin of Adam and Eve. Mary had to grow into a young girl in a corrupt, Fallen world. She had to fight against the flaws in her nature, and she overcame them. When they were returning home from the Temple she could not find Jesus and worried where He was. Then the Lord gave her a gentle rebuke. Mary should not have worried because She knew that He was the Son of God and could only have been in “My Father’s house”.

St. Symeon the New Theologian points out that it was Eve’s lack of gratitude to God that made her a victim (prey) of the Devil’s deception. The Devil disguised as a snake told her three lies:

First, that God was not really good, because he had forbidden Eve to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Devil asked: “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat from every tree of the garden?’ To which Eve replied: “We may eat of the fruit from the trees of garden, but from the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, ‘You shall not eat of it.’” Eve’s reply was correct, but doubt had entered her heart. The Devil was insinuating that God was being harsh in forbidding them to eat of the one tree, that He was not good. So her heart fell away from God, she became unfaithful to Him. Nowadays one constantly hears people asking whether God is good or not when they cannot understand certain events, for example the tsunami in South-East Asia. Some go further and blame God, or even stop believing in His existence.

Secondly, that God had forbidden Adam and Eve to eat of the Tree because He was afraid that they would become “as gods”, equal to Him. So Eve’s mind was poisoned with pride as she contemplated the possibility of becoming equal to her Creator.

Thirdly, that Eve would not die if she disobeyed God. In this way the Devil took away from Eve the fear of God that is the beginning of wisdom, and weakened her will. As a result, she took the forbidden fruit.

With these three lies, the Devil corrupted the heart, the mind and the will of Eve, and she ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

So Eve now knows from her own experience what is good – to obey God and be in harmony with Him, and what is evil – to turn against Him.

St. John Chrysostom says the great saints have the real knowledge of good and evil, having been given the discernment to know what is truly good and truly evil. They don't judge by appearances, for sometimes what is good in the eyes of man is evil in the sight of God, and vice-versa. The world judges by appearances, and not in accordance with the profound ways of God, Who says: "My Thoughts are not your thoughts, and My Ways are not your ways".

Eve's soul, which had been pure before the Fall, now lost the Holy Spirit, and she suffered all the emotions of a Fallen nature, in particular confusion and loneliness. She rushed to Adam to make him share in her condition by persuading him of the goodness of the fruit.

Adam could see that if he did not do what Eve asked him, he would lose her. So, loving Eve more than God, he broke God's commandment. As St. Paul says, Adam was not deceived, whereas Eve was deceived. Nevertheless, out of weakness he followed her in her sin.

In this way we, too, can Fall away: either directly through a temptation of the Devil, or through being persuaded by a non-believer.

In Genesis we read that God declared war on the devil after he had deceived man: "I will put enmity between your seed and her seed. He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (3.14-15). The "seed" here is Christ, and God promises here that while Christ would be bruised in His heel – that is, crucified on the Cross – He would nevertheless bruise the devil's head – that is, destroy his power by His descent into hell.

The devil was called Lucifer ("light-bearer") before his Fall. Christ mentions this: "I saw Satan Fall like lightning from the sky". His name was changed from Lucifer to Satan ("adversary") when he became the adversary of God and man. In Genesis 1.34 we read that God created the light and saw that it was good, and that God divided the light from the darkness. This signifies the separation of good from evil, and the separation of the good angels from the bad, who had lost the light of God.

Immediately after the Fall of man God declared war on the devil who had deceived him: "I will put enmity between your seed and her Seed. He shall crush your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3.14-15). The "Seed" that God promised was Christ, Who would be bruised in the heel when He was crucified, but Who would crush the head of the serpent when He descended into hell and

destroyed the power of the devil, who was the head of all the Fallen angels. For the way to kill a snake is to crush his head.

Since the Fall a mighty war has been waged between good and evil. The devil tries to destroy the harmony of God's creation, and man constantly has to distinguish between that which is of God and that which is of the devil. After the flood of Noah God revealed the rainbow, which reminds us of God's promise that He will never again destroy the world through water. But there will be a judgement of fire. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by fire was a warning and prefiguring of the judgement of fire at the end of the world.

After the Fall, man lost the Holy Spirit in his soul and body. He did not recover it again until the Coming of Christ, Who, being God Himself, breathed the Holy Spirit into the souls of His disciples on the day of his Resurrection. Each of us receives the Holy Spirit again through Holy Baptism.

In the Old Testament, the prophets received their prophecies "through the Holy Spirit", as we say in the Creed. They had visions from outside themselves. However, the Christian after Baptism can receive visions and prophecies from within himself, since the Holy Spirit is now within him. As the Lord said: "The Kingdom of God [another name for the Holy Spirit] is within you".

And so in the Old Testament God was *above* or *outside* us. But when God became man He was *with* us. And since Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit into Christians at Holy Baptism, He is *in* us.

In the Garden of Eden we were forbidden to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but now God invites us to eat of the Living Tree, the Tree of Life. At the Last Supper Christ instituted the New Covenant with us, having warned us that unless we eat of His Body and drink of His Blood, we have no eternal life in us. We partake of the human nature of Christ, which is united to His Divine Nature, and in this way we enter into Him and He into us.

Christ said: "I am the Way", which is Himself. He did not say: "I am the way that you should follow", but "I *am* the Way, you should be in Me as I will be in you."

## JOACHIM AND ANNA

Many people do not know that the parents of Mary were Joachim and Anna, who were about seventy years old when they conceived the Virgin. They were rich people with property in Nazareth. They were devout and generous. In the house in Nazareth where Mary lived, there is a spring whose water is sweet – sweet and gentle as the Virgin. The locals in Nazareth will tell you where this house is.

The Virgin was the only child of Joachim and Anna, who brought her to the Temple when she was about three years old. Mary was like Anna, the mother of Samuel, in that she, like her, offered her son to the Temple. Her own mother was called Anna and offered her daughter to the Temple.

Joachim and Anna died when the Virgin was about ten years old. That is why she went to the house of her cousin Elizabeth to tell her the great news of the Annunciation – being an orphan, she had no closer relation than Elizabeth.

Joachim and Anna brought Mary to the Temple to be educated when she was about three years old. The High Priest Zechariah took her hand, and she let go of her mother Anna's hand and looked at the two rows of virgins who were holding candles for her. The Feast of the Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple is moving and beautiful.

To be educated in the Temple was a great honour, for the education given there was of a very high level. Mary learned the Scriptures and how to sew clothes, and probably how to speak Greek. For when, after the Resurrection of Christ, she landed on Mount Athos with a group of people, she spoke in Greek to the pagans there.



## JOSEPH THE BETROTHED

When Mary was fourteen years old, it was decided that she should be married. However, she had told Zechariah that she wanted to remain a virgin. This was a very unusual request, but Zechariah accepted it. He announced that an elderly man had to be found, a widower, who would give her protection and whose house she in turn would take care of. He then cast lots to see from which tribe the man should be chosen who would care for Mary. There were twelve tribes, and the lot fell on the tribe of Judah. So it was announced by criers who went through the land that every widower of the tribe of Judah should come to the Temple, bringing his rod with him. Joseph of Nazareth was eighty years old, and was of the tribe of Judah and of the royal house of David. He had become a widower the year before. He had been married for forty years to Salome, who had given him seven children: James, the first bishop of Jerusalem, Jude, one of the twelve apostles, Simon, the second bishop of Jerusalem, Joses, Salome, the mother of the Apostles James and John, Esther and another girl. James was the youngest, and was still in the house. Several Church Fathers - for example, SS. Epiphanius of Cyprus, Cyril of Alexandria and Hilary of Poitiers - believed that Joseph had been married and become a widower and that he had several children from his first wife who are called "the brothers of the Lord" in the Gospel.

In the East it is the custom to refer to cousins as "brothers" or "sisters". So the brothers and sisters of Christ referred to in the New Testament were in fact the children of Joseph and not blood-siblings of Christ. Christ was the first-born and only Child of the Virgin.

Joseph obeyed the order of the High Priest and went with his rod to the Temple. Zechariah was told by an angel to put all the rods of the eligible men on the altar in the Holy of Holies, where they would remain until the next day. He was told that one of the rods would blossom, thereby indicating God's choice of the man who was to look after the Virgin. It was Joseph's rod that blossomed. His request was granted. The next day, one of the staffs had put forth leaves. So when the men appear to collect their staffs, the High Priest held up the staff that budded and asked to whom it belonged. It was Joseph's. God's choice had Fallen on the elderly Joseph.

The budding of Aaron's rod (Numbers 17.8) is seen as a prophetic type of the blossoming of Joseph's rod. It is also the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 11.1-2: "There shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a blossom shall come up from his root; and the Spirit of God shall rest upon Him..."

Joseph was embarrassed, since Mary was so young - the people would ridicule him. However, he was told by the High Priest that Mary had chosen to remain a virgin and dedicate her life totally to God. She would look after Joseph and his sons and do the housework, but would not become his wife in the full sense. Joseph accepted these conditions.

There followed a betrothal service in the Temple. There are some lovely old icons that depict this service: a young girl next to an old white-haired man. Joseph is short and stooped.

Joseph was chosen to be Mary's husband in the eyes of the world in order to protect her from slander and in order to deceive Satan, who knew about the prophecy of Isaiah 7.14 that a virgin would conceive a Child Whose name would be Emmanuel. St. Ignatius of Antioch declared that Satan was kept in ignorance of the virginal conception. St. Ambrose of Milan agrees with him. Commenting on the devout Joseph, he says that Joseph understood that the purpose of the marriage was to protect Mary's good name. St. Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople, said that her betrothal was aimed at protecting her from the serpent, so that he would not attack her, but pass her by, thinking she was not the virgin of the prophecy.

God commits Mary to Joseph's safe keeping, just as on the Cross Christ committed His Mother to John's safe keeping. For it was the Jewish custom that when a woman was left a widow, her son should look after her. If the first son died, then the next child, whether son or daughter, was to look after her. But Christ was the only Child of Mary, and so Christ chose John His disciple to look after her, while He Himself was on the Cross. To Mary He said: "Behold thy son" (John), and to John He said: "Behold thy mother". If there had been brothers or sisters of Christ, as many Protestants incorrectly believe, then they would have been offended that their mother should have been given into the care of someone outside the family.

Again, Joseph in the Old Testament saved his family from famine; he looked after their bodies. In the same way Joseph the Betrothed in the New Testament took care of Mary and the Child Jesus; he looked after their bodies. As for Joseph of Arimathea, he looked after the Body of Christ and put it in his own tomb in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah (53.9).

On the icons of the Nativity Joseph is seen pondering on all the prophecies concerning Mary in the Scriptures. Opposite him is a man dressed like a prophet with a staff. Joseph was a devout man from the tribe of Judah who knew the Scriptures and the prophecy of Isaiah 7.14: "A Virgin shall conceive a child, and shall call His name Emmanuel", which means "God with us". Joseph, a devout widower, realized that Mary was the Ark in whom the Second Person of the Trinity dwelt. If Uzzah died because he touched the Ark of the Covenant, then Joseph, a man of God, would not have dared to touch Mary. She was the new Ark, the throne of God and the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy that no man besides the Prince would enter her.

## THE ANNUNCIATION

How great must be our admiration for Mary, who made it possible for us to receive God. Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow says: "How great was the act of creation when God said: Let there be!", and whole worlds, visible and invisible, came into being. But how my heart trembles when I think of the moment when divine Miriam uttered her response to God: 'So be it!', and brought the mighty Creator into the world!"

The Burning Bush that Moses saw was another symbol of the Virgin, who would carry in her womb the Divine Fire of God without being consumed.

The Prophet Ezekiel tells us that the Prince would enter her, and that nobody else would ever enter her after the Prince. The Prince here is Christ, and Mary - the Gate through which He enters. "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 in by it, because the Lord God of Israel has entered in by it; therefore it shall be shut. As for the Prince, because He is the Prince, he may sit in it to eat bread before the Lord; He shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gateway and go out the same way'" (44.1-3).

Her humility and love for God was so great that the Archangel Gabriel was sent to propose to her, that God unite Himself with her and become man in her. When she cautiously inquired how this could be since she had not known a man, Gabriel said to her: first, that the Holy Spirit would descend upon her, and secondly, that the Power of the Most High (that is, the Son of the Father) would overshadow her, and the Son of the Most High would be born of her.

So it was an act of the Holy Trinity. And we see another trinity in her icons, in the three stars inscribed on her forehead and shoulders in the form of a triangle. This is interpreted by the Church to mean that she was a virgin before the Birth, during the Birth and after the Birth of Christ.

Now the High Priest Zechariah had ordered that a new veil be woven for the Temple, and that four colours were to be used in it. Four lots were drawn for the four young girls who were to work on it. Mary drew the lot for the purple colour. According to tradition, when Gabriel the Archangel visited her, she was just finishing weaving her part of the new veil. As soon as she had received God's proposal to her, and she had accepted it with the words "So be it", she rushed to the Temple to deliver her part of the new Temple veil.

So the veil that was torn from top to bottom at the time of Christ's death was partly made by the Virgin. This veil symbolizes her flesh, which the Lord took from her and made into the beginning of His humanity. Just as Eve was made out of Adam, so the new Adam was made out of the new Eve, Mary. And just as Adam

said of Eve: "Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone", so Mary could say the same of her Child Jesus: "Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone".

The Prophet Zechariah saw the Virgin in a vision as a golden seven-branched candlestick (ch. 4). The iconostasis is often referred to as a lampstand since there are lampadas hanging on it in front of the icons. The iconostasis in the Orthodox Church (similar to the rood-screen in early English churches) is a symbol of the flesh of Christ, which is also the flesh of His Mother.

There was no need for Joseph, a human husband, at the Annunciation, because this was not an act of *pro*-creation, but of *re*-creation – in fact, a *new* creation. When God became man in the Virgin's womb He created for Himself not only a human body, but also a human soul with mind, heart and will. Just as at the original creation the Holy Spirit moved over the face of the deep before the Word spoke with the consent of the Father, so at the Annunciation the Holy Trinity accomplishes a new creation, with the Holy Spirit descending upon the Virgin before the Word entered her, recreating human nature.

Now just as at the creation there was an act of the Holy Trinity in which the Holy Spirit first moved the face of the deep before the Word spoke with the consent of the Father, so at the Annunciation the Holy Spirit descended on the Virgin before the Power of the Most High, the Son of the Father, overshadowed her. So the Incarnation of Christ was an extension of the original act of creation in Genesis.

Moreover, the Church teaches that when the bread and the wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ on the altar, this is an extension of what happened to the Virgin at the Annunciation. And again it is an act of the Holy Trinity. After repeating the words of Christ: "This is My Body... This is My Blood...", the priest prays to the Holy Spirit (in the epiclesis), and the Holy Spirit descends upon the offering. Then the Power of the Most High overshadows it, and it becomes the Body and Blood of Christ united to His human Soul and Divine Fire. Finally, the priest prostrates before the altar saying: "Amen, Amen, Amen," for each Person of the Holy Trinity.

Mary was very young at the time of the Annunciation – about 14 years old. Her reply to Gabriel is in sharp contrast to that of Eve to the serpent. Mary said: "Be it unto me according to Thy word". But Eve said, in effect: "Be it *not* according to Thy word", but according to the word of the deceiver. Eve did not believe the word of God: "Thou shalt surely die", while Mary did believe the word of God said to her, that she would become the Mother of His Son without the help of a human husband. This was a sublime act of faith which made Mary the Holy Virgin. Her radiant faith and love for God cancelled out Eve's unfaithfulness. Her humility reversed Eve's pride. And her steadfast will and obedience blotted out the weakness and disobedience of Eve.

The Roman Catholic Church believes in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, whereby she was born in a special way without original sin. However, the Orthodox Church believes that she was born in the normal way in original sin, but was purified and cleansed in order to be able to conceive the All-Pure Son of God in her womb. As St. Gregory the Theologian says: "The Son of God was conceived of the Virgin, who had been purified beforehand [from sin] in soul and body by the Holy Spirit". She was not sinless as Christ was, but she had struggled against sin as far as it is possible in the Fallen world, and had attained such humility and love of God that God chose her to be His Bride and Mother.

The Annunciation was hidden from the devil. He did not see or hear the conversation between Gabriel and Mary. He was blinded, just as the evil men who tried to enter the house of Lot in Sodom were blinded. This concealment was necessary. For, as the Apostle Paul says (I Corinthians 2.8), if the devil had known that Christ was the Lord of glory he would not have had Him crucified...

## ELIZABETH

The faith of Mary was revealed when she went to live in Nazareth after her betrothal. There the Annunciation took place. Then she returned to Jerusalem to hand her part of the veil in to the Temple before she hurried to see her cousin Elizabeth, who was six months pregnant with St. John the Baptist. Mary stayed with her for three months before returning to Nazareth.

Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, greeted Mary with the words: "What an honour that the Mother of my Lord should come to visit me". So Elizabeth was the first person to proclaim that Mary was the Mother of the Lord - together with her son, John the Baptist, who leapt in her womb at the approach of the Lord in Mary's womb. Thus already while he was in his mother's womb John was preparing to be the herald of God, making straight the path for Him. He was the Voice of the Word.

Just as Elizabeth, a woman, was the first to announce the Coming of Christ, so the myrrh-bearing women were the first to announce His Resurrection. This shows that in spite of the Fall, the separation from God caused by a woman, God still had faith in woman. As St. John the Baptist was the greatest man born of women, so the Holy Virgin is the greatest woman and the greatest human being in general. Moreover, no created being, not even the Seraphim and the Cherubim, is the equal of the Virgin, who is "more honourable than the Seraphim and beyond compare more honourable than the Cherubim", as the Church sings.

When Elizabeth confirmed that the Virgin was "the Mother of my Lord", she burst out into the Magnificat, the hymn of joy of a bride who knows that she has been chosen by her bridegroom. "From now on all generations shall call me blessed" expresses the joy of the chosen bride and is not a song of pride or arrogance, but of gratitude. How different from Eve is Mary, the new Eve: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour" (Luke 1.46-47).

Just as many men of the Old Testament were types of Christ - Noah as the Builder and Saviour of the Church, Melchizedek as the High priest, Moses as the Law-giver, Joshua as the Saviour, David as the King at war, Solomon as the King of peace, - so many women of the Old Testament were types of the Mother of God - Miriam, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Esther, Deborah.

Mary is the same name as Miriam, who danced and sang her song of joy and gratitude to God for having been saved from Pharaoh the enemy. Similarly, Mary in her Magnificat sings her joy and gratitude to her Saviour. She sings in the presence of her cousin and close friend Elizabeth. In the same way the Old Testament Miriam was the sister-in-law and close friend of Elisheba (Elizabeth), the wife of Aaron.

Now Moses' parents Amram and Jochanabel did not dare to come together in case she would conceive a child and a son would be born. Pharaoh had given the order that every Israelite baby, every "prevailer with God", should be killed. But

Miriam revealed to her parents that their lack of faith in God was a greater sin than Pharaoh's. Pharaoh killed a child once it was born. Amram and Jochanabel would kill him before he was born. As members of the God's People they should not through their decision prevent the birth of an Israelite. That would be robbing God of His glory – He alone decides the births and destinations of souls.

If the Virgin had reasoned in that way, the Incarnation would never have taken place. But Miriam and Mary understood God's ways. It was because of their intimate relationship with Him that they received the Holy Spirit, the living Water of life.

Moses was brought up in an Egyptian palace to be trained to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Christ was born in a cave and educated in Israel, among His own people. He was invited to synagogues to read the Scriptures, and as a twelve-year-old astounded the scholars in the Temple with His Wisdom. But unlike Moses He came to save the whole world, and to deliver them, not from Egypt, but from hell.

Moses is the son of Egypt and the saviour of the Israelites. Jesus is the Son of Israel and the Saviour of mankind.

Amram and Jochanabel symbolize the man/woman relationship. Married people should dare to come together and let a child come from their union if God wills it, accepting that suffering may come with him. The child may be cast into the water of time and be killed, or God may save him against all odds and have a great plan for him.

Moses was borne in an ark upon the water like Noah in the Ark. Moses' ark was like Noah's – it was the Word of God in which both rested.

"Moses" in Hebrew means "drawn out of water" (Mosheh), but in Egyptian it meant "son". The princess who drew him out of the ark and adopted him expressed her relationship to him as that of a mother to her son.

Just as it seemed that Moses belonged to Egypt, but in fact was an Israelite, so the Son of Man seemed to belong to Israel only, but in fact revealed Himself to be God, Who had come to save mankind.

## CHRISTMAS

“Mary was found with child before they came together” (Matthew 1.18). This means that the conception was not preceded by sexual union. Joseph was not the father. However, he noticed that Mary was pregnant, and was worried because the High Priest had told him that Mary wanted to remain a virgin. But Mary did not tell him what the Archangel Gabriel had told her and how she had conceived a Child. This revealed her calm faith and peace of heart; she believed that God Himself would reveal to Joseph that her Child was from God. She did not try and explain. Who would believe her? She did not worry; she knew that God would reveal it to Joseph in His good time. And so it turned out...

Joseph’s doubts were resolved when the Angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him that the Child Mary was carrying was of the Holy Spirit and would be called Jesus (Matthew 1.20-21). Being a devout man, he believed the Angel. The Angel also told him to take Mary to himself as his wife. “To take unto thee” means to keep her in his house, for he had intended to put her away.

Joseph, who had never known the Virgin, stood in the presence of her glory, astonished. As St. Romanos the Melodist writes in a kontakion: “Just what manner of woman is this? For today she does not seem to me as she did yesterday. Both terrible and sweet does she appear to me now. I gaze upon burning heat in snow, paradise in a furnace. I gaze upon a smoking hill (Psalms 144.5), upon a divine flower with young freshness, upon an awesome throne and yet a pitiable footstool of the All-Merciful One. I do not understand the woman whom I took. How then shall I say to her: ‘Rejoice, thou Bride unwedded!’”

Joseph “did not know her until she had brought forth her firstborn Son” (Matthew 1.25). Many people do not understand the use of the word “until” in this passage. It does not mean that after the birth of her firstborn Son a change took place and Joseph knew Mary. The word “until” here is synonymous with “before” and simply means that Joseph and Mary did not know each other before the birth, without implying any change in that situation after the birth. The Gospel is not saying that they lived as husband and wife after the birth, but only that Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb without the seed of man. Again, when Christ is called the “first-born” of the Virgin, this does not imply that there was a second child born to her.

Joseph and Mary then went to the Temple, where the authorities were upset that Mary was with child. They could not understand how Mary could be pregnant, for she had always refused to marry and wanted to stay a virgin. They questioned both Joseph and Mary, and blamed them for not keeping their vows. However, they insisted on their innocence, and agreed to drink a bitter potion in order to prove it. According to tradition, if a person was telling the truth nothing would happen to



him after drinking the potion, but if he was lying his stomach would swell up. Mary and Joseph passed the test and demonstrated that they were telling the truth.

When the time came for Mary to give birth, she went with Joseph to Bethlehem, because that is where they had to enrol in accordance with the decree of Caesar. So Christ was enrolled on earth so that He could enrol us in Heaven. This edict provides historical evidence for the year in which Christ was born.

They went to Joseph's family house, but it was full of his other relatives, so it was suggested that Mary should go to the stable, where there would be no noise from relatives. Thus was fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah (1.3-4): "The ox knows his owner, and the donkey his master's crib. But Israel does not know, My people does not consider."

Mary gave birth during the night without any midwives being present. She had no birth-pains, as was prophesied by the Prophet Isaiah (66.7). In her was restored what women lost after the Fall, when God told Eve that she would give birth in pain. In the morning two midwives arrived. They were amazed that the Virgin had lost no blood. Her seal had not been broken during childbirth. That is why the Church believes that Mary was a virgin before, during and after the Birth of Christ. We believe in her perpetual virginity.

According to tradition, one of the midwives, surprised that the Virgin had not lost any blood, wanted to examine her. But when she approached the Virgin her hand dropped off. The Virgin restored her hand, and she repented of her lack of belief in the miracle of the birth.

Mary wrapped the new-born Child in swaddling-clothes, which prefigured the grave clothes in which He was wrapped after His death, and whose presence – unwrapped, but in the shape of a body – in the Tomb revealed that He was risen from the dead. The manger was a miniature sepulchre, signifying that God was born as man in order to die for us, in order to enter the domain of death and destroy it.

Then he was laid in a manger, a feeding-trough for the animals. For Christ is the Living Bread that came down from heaven and entered the world as a man in Bethlehem, which means "House of Bread", in order that we should feed on Him.

Nearby was a shepherd's field, where three shepherds were looking after the first-born, spotlessly white lambs. They were special shepherds who were allowed to help the Temple priests in the killing of the lambs. That night, while watching over their sheep, they were sheltering in a cave. Suddenly the Archangel Gabriel (according to local tradition) stood in front of them and told them that the Saviour had been born in a stable cave in Bethlehem and that He was lying in a manger. And a host of Angels appeared singing: "Glory to God in the Highest, Peace on earth, (God's) goodwill among men". And the Glory of the Lord – the Glory of Christ lying in the manger – shone around the shepherds.

Modern translations leave out the word "God's" here, which makes people think that as long as we show goodwill to each other, there will be peace on earth. But the real meaning is deeper. The Peace on earth is a Person, the Person of Christ, the gift of God the Father to us on earth, which proves His goodwill towards us. When the angels at Bethlehem sang: "Glory to God in the highest, Peace on earth, God's goodwill among men," the "Peace" they referred to was Christ, the Son of God, Who came as a heavenly Gift from the Father and proved God's goodwill towards men.

The Angel said: "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour Who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign to you: you will find the Babe wrapped in swaddling-clothes lying in a manger." (Luke 2.10)

Bethlehem was called the city of David here because David came from there. Joseph and Mary were both descended from the royal line of David.

The swaddling-clothes pointed to the grave-clothes in which Christ was tightly buried and which the Apostles found unwrapped and without His Body on the Day of the Resurrection. This pointer is the "sign" of which the Angel spoke: "Let this be a sign unto you..." Christ came out of the Tomb without breaking the seal and without unwrapping the grave-clothes. When God enters the Tomb of Man He transfigures it in the Womb of Eternal Life in God.

The shepherds hurried to find the Babe and worshipped Him. According to a local tradition in Bethlehem, they told Mary that the Archangel Gabriel had come and announced to them that the Saviour had been born and where to find Him. The Shepherds told of the Host of Angels singing, "Glory to God!" Then they went round telling everyone what had happened. They repeatedly returned to the stable-cave.

Then there was the visit of the three kings bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh. The three wise men or kings witnessed to the Nativity of Christ. They came from different countries and met up with each other on the way to Jerusalem. Then they called at the Palace of Herod to find out where Christ was, for they had followed a star that revealed to them that a king had been born. St. John Chrysostom thinks that this star was an angel in the form of a star. It went in front of them and did not stay in the sky like an ordinary star. But when they came to Jerusalem it disappeared. That is why they went to the Palace to find out where the child was born. King Herod was very troubled, for he had always feared that a powerful king would overthrow him one day. So he gathered all the chief priests and scribes to inquire of them where Christ was to be born. They told him that according to the Prophet Micah (5.2) he would be born in Bethlehem. So Herod told the three kings to find Him in Bethlehem and then return to him and tell him so that he could go and worship the new King himself. When the three kings left the Palace they rejoiced to see the star again going in front of them until it stopped over the place where the

young Child was born. Then the kings gave Christ gold (as a symbol that He is the King of all ages), frankincense (because, being God, He would receive the prayers of men) and myrrh (because He, though immortal by nature, would die for man). Then they were told in a dream not to return to Herod, who planned to kill the Child. Herod was furious that the three kings did not return to him. Now he worked out that the Child could not be older than two years, so he gave the order that all the male children in the Bethlehem area two years old or younger should be killed (Matthew 1.16-18).

In Isaiah 9.6 the Child born to those living in the darkness of the valley of death is given several titles: Wonderful, Prince of Peace... Everlasting Father, Almighty God. So Christ, the Son of God, is also called "Everlasting Father" and "Almighty God". As He said: "I and the Father are one."

The Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Yahweh is the name only of God the Father, and that Christ was created by Him. But Christ, as Scripture says, is "Almighty God" - He is Yahweh. He comes from the Father, but not after the Father. If he came after the Father, then He would be a created being. But He cannot come after the Father because He also is called "Everlasting Father". As we read in John 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God".

Although Christ and the Virgin shared the same human nature and flesh, only He was Divine. The human nature of Christ was united to the Divine Fire of His Godhead, which is expressed by the area within the sanctuary. Through His manhood Christ was one with humanity, but through His Divinity He was one with the Holy Trinity. Christ is like a door with two panels. The outer panel faces the created world, while the inner panel faces the uncreated Kingdom. Like a Door, he can open and shut access to the Kingdom.

Christmas, the Nativity of Christ, is called the feast of *re-creation*, the re-creation of human nature. Christ is the New Adam, and Mary the New Eve. Together they form the Church. Christ is the Head of the Church and the Bridegroom, and the Virgin is the Mother of the Church and the Bride. Just as God made Adam from virgin soil, so He made a new beginning of man when He Himself became man from the virgin soil of the Virgin's womb. And since the Virgin is the mother of His human body, she is also the mother of the Church, His Body, for which he shed His Blood.

As Christ is both God and Man in One Person with two natures, Divine and human, we can call the Virgin the Mother of God: "Theotokos" in the definition of the Third Ecumenical Council. She was the mother of His humanity, not of His Uncreated Divinity, but is entitled to be called the Mother of God because Christ is God. For nine months she carried His human soul and body under her heart while He remained God.

Mary, being created by God, was the Daughter of God. At the Annunciation she became His Bride. And at the Nativity, Christmas, she became His Mother.

The great mystery of Mary's being the Daughter, the Bride and the Mother of God is the Mystery of the Church. We can all be daughters and brides and mothers of God in the Church. For we are all created by God; we are all united to Him bodily in the Eucharist; and we can all give birth to Him by nourishing Him and bringing Him forth as spiritual fruit, as the Apostle Paul says: "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again, until Christ be formed in you" (Galatians 4.19).

St. John of Damascus calls the Virgin "the spouse of the Father". And he adds about her assumption into the heavens: "It was fitting that the spouse whom the Father had taken to Himself should live in the Divine mansions."

St. Neophytus the Recluse of Cyprus also called Mary "the Bride of the Father", as well as the Holy Ark, the Rod of Aaron, the Promised Land, the City of God. To him she is "the Mistress of the world" and "the immaculate spouse of Christ".

St. John of Kronstadt refers to Mary as the daughter of God the Father, the Mother of God the Word, and the chosen Bride of God the Holy Spirit, Who is consubstantial with the Father and the Word. But, insofar as she is created, she is the Daughter of all Three Divine Persons. And since the Annunciation she is the Bride of all Three Divine Persons. But she is the Mother only of the Word.

## THE PRESENTATION

When Jesus was eight days old, He was circumcised and given the name "Jesus".

On the fortieth day after His Birth Joseph and Mary took Him to the Temple to be presented. Old Symeon was one of the seventy elders who had translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek in Alexandria. The seventy translators each worked in a separate cell and were not allowed to compare notes with each other. When Symeon came to the passage from Isaiah: "A Virgin shall conceive a Child and shall call His name Emmanuel" (Isaiah 7.14), he wondered whether he should translate the word for "virgin" by "young woman". But at that point the Holy Spirit revealed to him that he should not change the word "virgin", and that one day before he died he would himself see this Virgin and her Child. When the seventy translators had finished their work, they found, to their astonishment, that their translations were identical.

Symeon went back to Jerusalem and served in the Temple continuously, waiting for the fulfilment of what had been prophesied to him. Then one day the Holy Spirit prompted him to enter the Temple. He hurried, sensing that "this is the day". We can well imagine how the old man (he was well over one hundred years old) must have felt. On seeing the Virgin with the Child and the grey-haired Joseph behind her, he took the Child in his arms and uttered the famous and beautiful words:

"Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word. For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel."

Then he blessed them and said to Mary: "Behold, this Child is destined for the Fall and Rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, and a sword will through your soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

When Mary stood at the foot of the Cross this prophecy was fulfilled in her. For as the spear went through the heart of Christ to make sure that He was dead, so the sword of pain went through her heart. According to Longinus, the centurion at the Cross, Mary's eyes were constantly gazing up towards her Son and Bridegroom. She did not plead with Him to come off the Cross, but in obedience and indescribable pain she accepted the Will of God ("So be it") that He had to suffer for us in order to save us - His Death overcame our death. She did not weep while He was on the Cross, but after His Death she wept and wept. Unlike Eve, who drew Adam into her sin, Mary helped her Bridegroom to do the Will of God and shared in His suffering. Some Fathers wonder whether the spear that went through her heart was a momentary doubt in His Divinity. But other Fathers believe that they refer to the excruciating pain she suffered to see her Son, Bridegroom and god dying in such an

unimaginable way. To me they refer to the terrible grief that she shared with Him for the sake of man.

Simeon and Anna were the two witnesses from the Temple that the Messiah had been born. Simeon represented the priesthood, while Anna represented the prophets. St. Simeon was one of the 70 Jewish elders of Alexandria who had translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek. When he came to Isaiah 7.14: "A Virgin shall give birth...", he wanted to translate the word "virgin" as "young woman". But an angel appeared to him and told him to keep the word "virgin". He also promised St. Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the fulfilment of this prophecy - Christ in the arms of His Mother, the Virgin.

On the day of the Presentation of the Lord to the Temple, St. Simeon was told by the Holy Spirit that on that day he would see the Christ-Child, the Messiah. So he hurried to the Temple, and when he held the Messiah in his arms, he thanked God for blessing him to be the God-receiver - that is, he thanked the Child in his arms. For Christ is God no less than the Father.

Anna was the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She had been married for seven years when she became a widow. Now she was about eighty-four years old. She did not leave the Temple but served God in it day and night with fasting and prayer. Coming in at that moment, she gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

The Lord and Mary fulfilled the Law when they presented themselves to the Temple when He was forty days old. This event is commemorated as the Feast of the Meeting of the Lord, because it was then that the Lord met His people.

The Law gave them the choice of bringing either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons as an offering. My mother told me that in Russia many people bought a pair of turtledoves or two pigeons and released them on the Feast of the Meeting of the Lord. The meaning of this was that since God would provide His own Sacrifice in the form of His Son, the birds should go free.

This feast is also called the Purification of the Virgin. Of course, the Virgin did not need to be purified, since her birth-giving had been miraculous, but she submitted to the Law.

According to the Law (Deuteronomy 23.2), no illegitimate child could enter the Temple to be presented to God. However, when Mary and Joseph entered the Temple on the fortieth day after His Birth, the aged St. Simeon rejected any suggestion of the Child's illegitimacy, took Him in his arms and said: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, a light of revelation for the Gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel".

## THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

After the return of the three kings to their homelands, King Herod decided to kill the Christ Child. But he didn't know who He was, so He killed all the little boys aged two or under in the Bethlehem area. The Orthodox Church teaches that 14,000 baby boys were killed. This was the fulfilment of the prophecy of Jeremiah (31.15) that Rachel (whose tomb is at Bethlehem) would weep over her children: "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping and great mourning. Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." The massacre of the innocents showed how much the devil feared the fulfilment of the prophecy and the Coming of the Son of God to defeat him and save us. The moment had come for the great battle between God and Satan over man. The devil and his angels were determined to thwart God's plan.

St. John the Baptist was nearly killed during the massacre of the innocents, for Herod suspected that he might be the Child. So Herod's soldiers went to the Temple and asked Zechariah where his wife and son were. They had fled into the wilderness, where they were being protected by angels, but Zechariah did not know where they were. In spite of that, the soldiers killed him at the altar.

Mary heard the cries of the innocent. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus. James, the youngest son of Joseph, came with them. He was about seven years old. In some writings it is mentioned that another of Joseph's sons, the future Apostle Jude, also came with them. The Holy Family stayed there until Joseph was told he could return after the death of Herod (Matthew 2.13).

The journey was very difficult, and two robbers attacked them on the way. However, one of the robbers, whose name was Demas, was so struck by the holiness of the Baby's Face that he persuaded the other robber to leave them alone and not rob them, although they may have been carrying gold, frankincense and myrrh with them, the gifts of the three kings. According to tradition as recounted by St. John Maximovich (+1966), this robber was the thief on the right hand of Christ on the Cross. He recognized the holiness of Christ's Face, repented of his wretched life on earth, and was given the grace of perfect faith. He believed that Christ was Divine, that he was God. He believed that He had a Kingdom that was not of this world – an amazing thing for a man dying such a death to believe in. He believed that Christ, being God, could forgive him his sins. He hoped that He would remember him in His Kingdom. He felt a tremendous love for Christ and rebuked the other thief on the left side, confessing that Christ was the King and Saviour.

What perfect faith the good thief had towards the end of his life! He had *repentance*, *faith* that Christ is God and has an invisible Kingdom, *hope* in the Mercy of Christ and *love* to confess Him to the other thief and the jeering crowd beneath them.

The flight of Mary and Joseph into Egypt reminds us of the descent of the Old Testament Joseph into Egypt. Just as that Joseph provided a refuge for his family in Egypt when there was famine in Israel, so Joseph led his family to Egypt to escape persecution in Israel.

The Virgin contemplated Christ while He was in her womb and during His miraculous painless birth. She must have pondered the significance of the visitation of the shepherds and the three wise kings. During the flight to Egypt she must have pondered on what she had seen and heard, cherishing it in her mind and heart.

It was prophesied by the Prophet Isaiah that the idols in Egypt would fall down when Christ went into Egypt: "The Lord rideth upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt; and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at His presence" (Isaiah 19.1). And so it happened.

St. Athanasius the Great (+373) asks: "Who (but Christ) among the righteous ones or kings came into Egypt and the statues fell before them?" (*On the Incarnation of the Word*)

St. Jerome (+420) remarks that Egypt was full of idols and monsters that the people worshipped. Christ chose this pagan nation in which to do His first miracles for three and a half years. Later, when He was thirty years old, he would do the same for His own people, the Israelites, for the same period of time. First the pagans in His infancy, then the Jews in His adulthood.

"In that day," continues Isaiah, "shall Israel be third with the Egyptians and Assyrians... And blessed is My people that is in Egypt, and that is among the Assyrians, and Israel Mine inheritance" (19.24-25).

In his sermon on Christmas Day, St. John Chrysostom (+407) comments as follows on this passage: "What do you say, Judah, who was first, but has become third? The Egyptians and the Assyrians are placed before you, and Israel, the first-born, is last. Rightly shall the Assyrians be first, because through the Magi they were the first to worship Him. The Egyptians received Him after the Assyrians, when He was fleeing from the treachery of Herod. Israel is numbered in the third place, because it was only after His Ascent from the Jordan that He was acknowledged by His Apostles."

First the Holy Family went to Askelon, where Samson killed thirty Philistines (Judges 14.19). At that time Askelon was a strong and beautiful centre of Hellenistic culture.

At a certain point they were travelling on the same route that Abraham and Jacob had travelled on their way into Egypt. This led them into the province of Goshen.

Many Jews lived in Egypt, in Alexandria and the Nile valley. So the Holy Family went from one Jewish family to another. Whenever they stayed with a family, they



were greeted with great rejoicing. And when they left they were given plenty of food for their travels. At times they would stay in inns or caves.

Once, during the heat of the day, a huge tree bent over to give shelter and shade to the Virgin and Child. A similar miracle took place in the life of St. Irene Chrysovalantou, when she attached her handkerchief to the top of a cypress tree that bent down for her.

All over Egypt there are the ruins of temples dedicated to the Virgin. Some of them are still in use today. For example, in Samanuel there is a church called Apa Nub which was built on the ruins of an ancient church dedicated to the Holy Virgin, which in turn was built on the site of a place where the Holy Family stayed. The ancient church was built by St. Helena, and is known as "the Lady of the Palm". Tens of thousands of pilgrims come to this church every year. When the Virgin and Child were passing by a mountain near the church, a large rock was about to fall on them, but Jesus stretched out His hand and prevented it from falling. However, the imprint of His left palm remained on the rock. Since then the mountain has been known as Palm Mountain.

The Egyptians venerated the Virgin greatly, but they realized that the Power came from the Christ Child. Mary was the "swift cloud" on which the Lord rode into Egypt. And she was the intercessor, who often asked the Lord to heal someone, and then He carried out her request.

## THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

The Holy Fathers explain that the raven sent out by Noah was a symbol of the prophets of the Old Testament - men learned about God through the prophets inspired by the Holy Spirit. However, after the raven, Noah sent out the dove; and the dove is the symbol of the Holy Spirit that is given in the New Testament, the new era and dispensation. So when the Holy Spirit was seen as a dove descending on Christ at His Baptism, it was revealed to us that Christ *is* the new Ark of Noah, the Ark of Salvation. And when we are in His Body through partaking of the Divine Sacrament of His Body and Blood, we are in the Ark of Salvation.

At the Baptism of the Lord the Holy Spirit was seen in the form of a dove descending upon Him, and remained on Him. Why was the Holy Spirit seen as a dove? According to the Church Fathers, this is to remind us of the Ark of Noah, when Noah sent out a dove three times, and after the second time he returned with an olive twig in his mouth. Similarly at His Baptism the Lord is the new Noah, and His Body represents the Church, the Ark of Salvation. We are saved as long as we remain in Him, in the Ark which is His Body. The olive twig is a sign of reconciliation between God and man (the word for "olive" in Greek, eleos, also means "mercy") and the healing of the nations. Christ came to save us and heal us through His mercy. When we are in the Ark, in His Body, we are being saved.

The Lord warns us: "I will judge you the way I find you" at the moment of our death. Are we *in* Christ, or outside Him? Have we remained faithful unto death, or have we Fallen away from Him because the world has overcome us?

Why, on some icons of the Annunciation, is a dove shown as descending in a shaft of light on the Virgin? Because the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the dove, descended upon her, and because the Mother of God is the Ark in whom Christ, the new Noah, will rest. She is the Mother of His Body, the Ark, and at the same time she *is* the Ark.

The Law of Moses taught that we must have two or three witnesses to prove a case. At the Baptism of Christ the Holy Spirit was seen as a dove, and Voice of the Father was heard saying: "This is My Beloved Son: listen to Him". The Father and the Spirit were the two witnesses to Christ being the God-Man. The third was St. John the Baptist.

As we have seen, God can conceal from the Fallen angels any event that He does not want them to know. Thus it seems that the demons did not see the Holy Spirit descend upon Christ at His Baptism, nor did they hear the Voice of the Father calling Him His Son. What the devil did see was that Christ was baptized by John as if he needed cleansing from his sins like any ordinary man. When John said to the Lord: "I have need to be baptized by Thee", the Lord replied: "Suffer it to be so now", as if to say: "Although you do not understand why you should baptize Me, do it!" John obeyed. Here the Lord showed us that He had thrown in His lot with us.

## THE WEDDING AT CANA

It was at the wedding of Cana that the Lord revealed to the Church the great role played in the Work of Salvation by His Mother. She was present at His first miracle, and she interceded for the bridal couple when the wine ran out. When the Lord asked: "Woman, who are you to Me?" He reminded her that she was His Daughter, His Mother and His Bride. The Bridegroom always wants to do what His Bride wishes because of His love for her. Mary understood, and she went to the servants and told them: "Listen to Him and do whatever He tells you to do." The Lord also said: "My hour is not yet come," and some of the Fathers think that He was referring to His Cross. Perhaps; for it was on the Cross that the Lord would manifest Himself fully as God. But it was at this wedding that He worked the first of His miracles in which Mary played an important role as intercessor. She pleaded and He provided the power. They worked together for the earthly bride and bridegroom (according to tradition, St. Simon the Zealot), while being in fact the real Bride and Bridegroom, preparing for the Day when the Church, His Bride, will be at the wedding-feast in heaven. As her Bridegroom He wants to give her anything that will bring her joy. And as she is in such perfect harmony with Him, she would never ask for anything against His Will. Mary is the great intercessor for us, while Christ provides the power. She went to the servants and told them to listen to Christ our God. These servants are the faithful of the Church. She has authority over them as they listened to her and did what she told them to do.

Mary intercedes for us in our relationships just as she did for the bridegroom and bride at Cana. She has this role for all eternity, and we must venerate her for it. She will always tell the servants of God to listen to God and do whatever He tells them to do.

Why does the Church sing, during the Lamentation of the Virgin at the Funeral of Christ: "Where have You gone, my Son? Have You gone to prepare another wedding as at Cana?"

At the Crucifixion the Lord indeed went to prepare another wedding-feast - the Wedding of the Lamb in the Kingdom of heaven. At the earthly wedding, all the attention was on the earthly bridegroom and bride, while the True Bridegroom and Bride were in the background. At the earthly wedding, the wine ran out; for all earthly relationships of love are subject to time and change. They can be saved only if Christ enters and replenishes the wine, renewing the relationship and making it of far greater quality. This wine that Christ gives never runs out, like the water that He offered to the Samaritan woman: "When you drink of the water that I will give you, you will never thirst".

## THE CRUCIFIXION OF THE LORD

For man to be redeemed from sin and death, God had to die in His humanity. As the High Priest Caiaphas prophetically said: "It is better that one man should die than the nation perish."

It is fitting that a king should die for his subjects. But this was not an ordinary king, but the Lord of glory, the King of the whole of creation. He to Whom we owe our very existence was crucified so that we should live, because since the Fall we are under the sentence of death. God put this death-sentence on us, and only God can take it away by His fulfilling the Law. According to the Law of God, the devil had the right to take all those souls who had shown allegiance to him by sinning. However, he was not allowed to take any sinless soul. When he tried to take the soul of the Lord after His death, he committed a great faux pas, because the Lord was completely without sin and had not shown allegiance to him in any way. So the power of the devil was broken. He had broken the Law of God and discovered that this human soul was God Himself, his Creator! So he trembled, realizing his defeat. The humility of God had deceived and broken the pride of the devil. What compensation could Satan offer Christ? There was no compensation great enough. So Christ could demand all the souls in hell.

The Fathers explain this in a simple way. If you want to catch a fish, you put a worm on a metal hook and dangle it in the water. The fish sees the worm, but does not see the hook. It takes the worm in his jaws and is caught on the hook. In Psalm 21 Christ compares Himself in His humanity to a worm: "I am a worm, and not a man". Just as the devil deceived Eve, so now the Lord deceives and entraps the devil. The devil goes for His apparently defenceless humanity, and is hooked on the Divinity concealed underneath it.

Eve persuaded Adam to disobey the Divine Will, but Mary never tried to persuade Christ to come off the Cross. Through her total surrender to the Divine Will she strengthened and comforted her Bridegroom. She loved Him as her God, as her Son and as her Bridegroom. We know that our love for God is different from our love for our children or our spouse. But she experienced these three different loves as one Love. It is hard for us to grasp the intensity of Mary's love.

The Holy Virgin shared with Christ His humiliation and agony as He voluntarily shared with men their sense of abandonment by God after the expulsion from Paradise: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" This feeling of abandonment does not imply loss of faith in God. When Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, they suffered and wept, for their whole life had changed from utter bliss, joy, peace and harmony with God and the animals to the loss of all this and the bitter realization that it was all their own fault. They had brought it upon themselves through disobeying God, ignoring His warning, unfaithfulness and ingratitude. They wept, but they did not lose their faith in God. Christ's cry on the

Cross was the cry of man when he has lost God, the cry of all the lonely souls on earth.

In Glastonbury in England there is a church dedicated to St. John the Baptist with a beautiful stained-glass window behind the altar. At the bottom of it we see the Virgin walking away from the Crucifixion holding in her hands the crown of thorns which He wore on the Cross. "Christ wore a crown of thorns," writes St. John Chrysostom, "because He is the Plough that uproots with His Divine Head the sins of the world, of which thorns are the symbol".

The Virgin Mary had a strong character; she was never sentimental, but regal and steadfast. The sufferings of her journey to Egypt, and the humiliations she suffered when she was accused of adultery never made her bitter or self-pitying. She never murmured against God, but accepted everything that happened to her as from His Hands. Her acceptance of Divine Providence gave her strength and stillness.

How she suffered when she saw every member of Christ's holy body being dishonoured for our sake! On Holy and Great Thursday the Church chants: "Thy Head, the thorns. Thy Face, the spittings. Thy cheeks, the smiting. Thy mouth, the taste of vinegar mixed with gall. Thy ears, the impious blasphemies. Thy back, the lash. Thy hand, the reed. Thy whole Body spread out on the Cross. Thy joints, the nails, and Thy side, the spear, O Thou Who didst suffer for us, and set us free from suffering... O Almighty Saviour, have mercy on us." She may not have been present when they were doing all this to Him, but she knew the Scriptures and the Psalms and she shared with Him in her soul and spirit what they were doing to Him. We cannot imagine the suffering she went through when she stood at the foot of the Cross. She gazed at Him and, as St. Ambrose says, she did not weep. Inwardly, of course, she was weeping, and when He died and was taken down from the Cross she wept and placed her cheek against His cheek. But just as Christ died with such majesty, not writhing in order to disperse the fluid coming to His heart as happens with all other men during crucifixion, so His Mother was majestic in her conduct. She was giving Him strength through her faith in Him.

One tends to think that the Mother of God suffered mainly at the Crucifixion. But in fact she suffered throughout the three-and-a-half years of His ministry, When the disciples told her of the hostility of the Sanhedrin, she suffered. When she heard how they had tried to kill Him at the time of Lazarus' resurrection, she suffered.

St. Demetrius of Rostov (1651-1709) writes that a certain holy man in ecstasy heard the Lord ask His Mother: "What were your greatest sufferings on earth for My sake?" She replied: "First when St. Symeon in the Temple warned that You would be killed. Secondly, when I looked for You in Jerusalem and did not find You for three days. Thirdly, when I heard that You had been seized and bound by the Jews. Fourthly, when I saw You on the Cross. Fifthly, when I saw You placed in the tomb." It was ingratitude that led Eve to be disloyal to God and lose communion with Him. And now how great was the ingratitude of man towards God, Who created us, Who

came to earth as a man to share our pains and sorrows, and Who was betrayed by a disciple for thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave. The Lord healed multitudes and raised Jairus' daughter, the son of the widow of Nain and Lazarus from the dead. And yet He was rewarded with black ingratitude, was spat upon and hung upon the Cross between two criminals!

In Deuteronomy 28.66 Moses prophesied that "they shall see their Life upon the tree". This, of course, is Christ, Who is our Life, and the tree is the Cross.

Even irrational creation witnessed to Christ as He hung upon the Cross. The sun was darkened and darkness fell upon the earth. The rocks were rent, the graves were opened and many of the dead arose after the resurrection and walked through the streets of Jerusalem (Matthew 27.51, 52).

The veil of the Temple was rent from top to bottom. The Mother of God herself had worked on the making of this veil when she lived in the Temple. She was chosen to put the purple thread - purple was a symbol of royalty in the ancient world - into the veil.

When Christ was on the Cross He said to His Mother: "Behold thy son", and to the Apostle John: "Behold thy mother". Some Protestants believe that the Mother of God had other children after Christ. The Orthodox Church rejects this. It was a Jewish custom that if a woman lost her husband and the eldest son had died, then another member of the family had to care for the widow. It was considered an insult if she was looked after by someone outside the family. (The brothers and sisters of Christ mentioned in the Bible were not children of the Mother of God, but of Joseph by his first marriage. In the east, cousins are often called "brothers and sisters".) Many of the saints - for example, Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373), Hilary of Poitiers (315-367), Epiphanius of Cyprus and Paulinus of Nola (353-431) - considered John 19.25-27 to be proof that Mary had no other children than Christ. For if she had had another son, Christ would not have neglected him and entrusted His Mother to someone else. But since she remained a virgin after becoming the Mother of God, He gave her to disciple John as his mother.

On icons of the Crucifixion we see a grave with a skull underneath the Cross. According to tradition, Adam was buried there. So the Blood that Christ shed on the Cross fell on the skull of Adam and revived him. As St. Epiphanius writes: "Adam was restored to life by the drops of Christ's Blood that fell on his skull".

The Prophet Zechariah prophesied: "They shall look upon Him Whom they pierced" (12.10). This prophecy was fulfilled when the spear was thrust into the side of Christ while the Jews looked upon Him. And then we read that blood and water came out of His side. The Church teaches that these are the two sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. We are cleansed and reborn in water, so as to partake of His Blood. Since the Blood came out of His side, that is, out of His Flesh, "we now have access," as we read in Hebrews, "through His Flesh to the Holy of

Holies", that is, the most intimate communion with the God-Man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

St. John of Kronstadt says that it is the Lord's will that, after Himself, the Mother of God should be everything to us. It was for our sakes that He became man, suffered and overcame death by His own Death. It was also for our sakes that He adorned His Mother, the Most Pure Virgin Mary, with all the virtues, and endowed her with all the Divine energies, so that she, the most merciful and most perfect of human beings, should be, after Christ Himself, everything for us. And so let us not let the Grace of God, with which the Holy Virgin is filled, be fruitless for us. Let us come with boldness and perfect faith to the Virgin's wonderful, ever-merciful and most pure protection. For now, as at the Wedding in Cana, she says to us: "Listen to Him, and do whatever He tells you".

## JOSEPH OF ARIMATHAEA

Joseph was a rich man, and a disciple of Jesus. The Gospel says that he was a good and just man (Luke (23.56-57), who did not agree with the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish religious authority, in their condemnation of Jesus, and that He was waiting for the Kingdom of God. He went to Pilate and begged for His Body. Then Pilate commanded that the Body be delivered to him (Matthew 28, 57, 58).

St. John Chrysostom writes that "after the death of Christ he became very bold. We can see his courage from the fact that he was neither an obscure person, nor of the unnoticed, but one of the Council and highly distinguished. Through his love for Jesus, both by his having dared to beg for the Body and by his refusal to desist until he obtained it, Joseph exposed himself to death and the enmity of all."

Names are significant in the Bible. Thus St. Ephraim the Syrian writes that Joseph was chosen to bury Christ "so that full honour should be given to the name of Joseph, in that a Joseph presided at His burial and a Joseph at His nativity in the cave". Also, as St. Romanus points out, it was a Joseph who, having been betrayed by his brothers and cast into a pit as a figure of Christ (Genesis 37,18,20, 24), then saved his family from starvation when they came to Egypt to buy grain. So "Joseph" stands for those who look after the Body of Christ and the people.

Joseph the Betrothed of Mary took care of the bodily needs of Christ and His Mother. And Joseph of Arimathaea took care of His Body by placing it in a new tomb. This tomb was in a garden very near Calvary.

Thus was fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah (53.9) that Christ would be buried in a rich man's tomb.

Righteous Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin and a disciple of Jesus. He it was who at first came to Jesus by night, and then defended Christ before the Jews, saying: "Does our law judge any man before it hear him and know what he does?" The taunting reply he received was: "Are you also from Galilee? Search and see; for no prophet comes from Galilee" (John 7.51, 52). (They had forgotten about the Prophet Jonah, who was born in Geth-chopher in Zabulon, about five miles north of Nazareth in Galilee (II Kings 14.25). Now Nicodemus openly bought a mixture of myrrh and aloes in order to bury Him. Like Joseph, he risked everything in His devotion to the Body of Christ. It appears that he pulled the nails out of the hands and feet of Christ.

St. Joseph was arrested by the Jews and cast into prison. The Risen Lord appeared to him and brought him to belief in His Resurrection from the dead. The Jews then released Joseph and expelled him from Judaea. He travelled in many places preaching the Gospel. While in France he was told by the Apostle Philip to go to England with eleven disciples. He did so, and preached the Life of Christ at Glastonbury, where he settled and died.



According to tradition, while Christ was still a young boy Joseph went with Him and the Virgin to England. There are some monuments in churches in the south-west of England that depict Christ as a young boy.

## THE RESURRECTION

The Jewish authorities sealed the tomb and placed a guard of soldiers to watch over it. Their justification for this was that they had heard that Christ had claimed that He would rise from the dead on the third day, and they feared that the disciples would come and take the Body away and then claim that He had risen from the dead.

In the very early morning hours, while it was still dark, the Mother of God came to the tomb. St. Gregory Palamas describes the firm tradition of the Church – supported by many saints, such as Romanos, Theophanes, George of Nicomedia, Gregory of Nyssa, Hesychius of Jerusalem and Cyril of Alexandria – that the Virgin was the first to see Christ after His Resurrection. She was present as the earth quaked, and a great blinding light was seen and the stone was rolled away from the tomb. The guards were overcome with fear and then fled. The Mother of God rejoiced. “I believe,” says St. Gregory, “that the life-bearing grave opened first to the Theotokos. It was for her and by her grace that all things were revealed unto us – everything that is in heaven above and on the earth below. For her sake, the angel shone so brightly, so that even though it was dark she beheld by means of the angelic light not only the empty sepulchre, but also the burial garments which were neatly arranged, thereby witnessing the Resurrection of her Son.”

Mary Magdalene had accompanied the Holy Virgin to the Holy Sepulchre. But when she saw that the stone had been taken away she ran to tell Simon Peter and John ([John 20.2](#)). Meanwhile, the soldiers recovered from their shock and ran away, leaving the Holy Virgin alone at the sepulchre. It was at this time that her Son appeared to her. Just as Eve was the first woman to see Adam, so Mary, the new Eve, was the first woman to see the new Adam, Christ.

Several women came in groups of two or three to the sepulchre. They are called the holy myrrh-bearers, and included Mary and Martha, Salome, Susanna and Joanna, as well as the Mother of God and Mary Magdalene.

While one group of myrrh-bearers were on their way to the sepulchre with spices, they wondered how they would manage to roll the stone away from the tomb, and how the soldiers would react to them. But they still continued on their way with faith because of their great love for Christ and their longing to honour His Body with spices.

There were two angels who appeared on the morning of the Resurrection, one inside the sepulchre, and the other outside. The one outside is thought to have been the Archangel Gabriel. The angels told the women that the Lord was risen from the dead, and ordered them to pass on the joyful news to the disciples.

When the soldiers reported to the priests what had happened, they were given a large sum of money to keep quiet about what really happened, but to spread the story that the disciples had come to the tomb and stolen the Body. "They took the money and did as they were taught" (Matthew 28.15).

Longinus the centurion, who was on duty as the senior officer both at the Crucifixion and at the watch outside the tomb, refused to accept the bribe, together with his two fellow soldiers. The Jews conspired to kill Longinus by slandering him to Pilate. Longinus resigned from the army and removed his army belt. Then he was baptized and secretly left for Cappadocia. But Pilate's soldiers pursued him and beheaded him.

The women disciples were the first to know and proclaim the joy of the Resurrection. Although through Eve suffering entered the world, God did not lose faith in woman. He was born of the Virgin, and at His Resurrection came forth from a virgin tomb. And it was to the Virgin and the other myrrh-bearing women that He first proclaimed the joy of the Resurrection.

## MARY MAGDALENE

Now Mary Magdalene returned to the sepulchre and saw that it was empty, with the grave-clothes lying without the Body of the Lord in them. She was disturbed and went outside sobbing. While she was weeping, the Lord approached, but at first concealed His identity. She thought that He was the gardener and asked Him where was the Body of her Lord. He called her name, "Mary"... She immediately recognized His voice and wanted to kiss His feet. However, He did not allow her to do this because her love for Him was still carnal. He said that He had not yet ascended to the Father. In this way He wanted to raise her consciousness to a higher level, to an understanding of His Divinity.

Mary Magdalene loved the Humanity of Christ. She was like one of us when we lose a loved one. Heartbroken, we continue to want to see the person, hear him, touch him... She did not understand that in God's Kingdom we relate to each other in a different, much deeper way. For "from now on we know no man after the flesh; and even if we have known Christ after the flesh, from now on we shall no longer know him [in that way]" (II Corinthians 5.16).

The other myrrh-bearing women who met Christ after His resurrection were allowed to touch Him and kiss His feet, because they understood that He was Divine and had raised His human Body from the grave.

As a young girl, Mary Magdalene was very chaste and beautiful, and the devil thought that she had to be the Virgin spoken of by Isaiah who would give birth to Emmanuel (Isaiah 7.14). So he sent seven demons into her in order to prevent God becoming man in her. In this way she became as it were a decoy, and the devil's attention was diverted from the Virgin Mary. Later, Christ exorcised the seven demons from her, and she became a devoted friend of the Virgin.

It was a great honour for her that she suffered demon-possession in order to protect the Holy Virgin. We often do not understand the ways of God, Who says: "My ways are not your way, and My thoughts are not your thoughts". But even when we don't understand, we must undoubtedly believe in His Goodness and Justice.

Mary Magdalene went to Rome and appeared before the Emperor Tiberius. According to the Church historian Eusebius (263-339), she complained to the Emperor about Pontius Pilate, saying that he had slaughtered some Samaritans unjustly. So Tiberius ordered Pilate to Rome to answer for his actions. When Pilate arrived in Rome, Tiberius had died and Gaius was reigning in his stead. Pilate was banished.

Mary Magdalene presented a coloured egg to Tiberius and explained to him that the red colour signified the Blood of Christ, which made it possible for the shell to be

broken and for new life to come into the open. So the giving of Easter eggs at Easter was started by her.

Mary Magdalene then travelled to France, Egypt, Pamphylia, Syria and many other countries preaching the Good News of God. Later she went to live with the Mother of God and the Apostle John in Jerusalem. After the Dormition of the Mother of God she went to Ephesus with St. John, helping him to preach the Gospel. She suffered many hardships for the sake of Christ. Eventually she died in Ephesus and was buried by St. John.

Mary the Mother of God represents the Church triumphant, the Church in heaven, which has fought the good fight, has fought for truth and justice and purity and now reigns with Christ in glory. Mary Magdalene represents the Church militant, the Church on earth, which struggles against passions and enemies and which in our terrible days of apostasy cries out with her in search of the true sacraments: "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him."

## THE ASCENSION

Now the Mother of God was present at all the great events of her Son's life. Thus together with the apostles and the holy women she witnessed His glorious Ascension into heaven, when a cloud, signifying the Holy Spirit or an angel, came down and carried Him up, enthroned upon it, into another dimension (Acts 1.9-11). While he was ascending He continued to bless them until He was taken out of their sight. "Until" here does not mean that He stopped blessing them when they could not see Him any longer. Of course not! God continues to bless His Church for all eternity.

Suddenly two men in white appeared. They were angels who announced to the disciples that the Lord would return in the same way that He had ascended, and that His feet would touch the same place on the Mount of Olives from which He had gone up. This prophecy has not been fulfilled yet.

On icons of the Ascension the angels are depicted standing on either side of the Mother of God. She looks like the Chalice, with Christ above her as the Bridegroom Who was gone in order to prepare a place for His Bride in Heaven.

The Holy Spirit commanded all the angels to lift up their gates so that Christ could ascend from one region of the heavens to another. The angels looked in wonder as the Lord of Glory went up into Heaven with a human body.

This is the hope set before us, that we too may ascend into Heaven through Christ as our Forerunner. Since His humanity is now seated at the Right Hand of the Father in Heaven, we too can be said to sit at the Right Hand of the Father insofar as we partake of His Body and Blood in the Eucharist. And "He has raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly place in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2.6).

Immediately afterwards, when the apostles gathered together to elect a twelfth apostle to replace Judas, we read that "they all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication with the women and Mary the Mother of Jesus" (Acts 1.14). Following the words of Christ, they were waiting in great expectation for the Descent of the Holy Spirit, "the promise of the Father" ...

## PENTECOST

By tradition, we know that the Mother of God was also present when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples ten days after the Ascension, on the feast of Pentecost. 120 people were gathered in the upper room on Mount Sion when there was a sound as of a rushing wind and tongues of fire descended upon the heads of the disciples. Suddenly they found themselves able to speak in different languages to the Jews who had come to the feast from many different countries and spoke many different languages.

They spoke of the Good News that Christ has brought to us, the news that in Christ God became man for our salvation, that through His Sacrifice on the Cross He has granted us the remission of our sins if only we believe in Him and sincerely repent of our sins, and that by His resurrection He has destroyed the power of Satan and opened the gates of Paradise to us. Christ took upon Himself all the sufferings of man. He became one of us, sharing our pains and sorrows and even our fear of death. He voluntarily willed Himself to share this anguish in the face of death. He voluntarily accepted to feel hunger, thirst, betrayal, fatigue and even the feeling of being abandoned by God. Finally He died for us, and thereby destroyed the power of death. Only after Christ had died and risen again from the dead was the Holy Spirit sent down on those who believed in Him, so as finally to restore the full communion between God and man that existed in Paradise before the Fall.

The Holy Spirit came down in the form of tongues of fire because fire contains both heat and light, and the Holy Spirit is warmth and light for our souls. At the Baptism of Christ He appeared in the form of a dove in order to show us that Christ is the new Noah, and His Body – the new Ark of salvation. At other times he was seen as a bright cloud (at the Transfiguration and at the Ascension). But at Pentecost He appeared as a strong wind that destroys the strongholds of error, and as fire and light to give zeal and the true knowledge of God to the faithful.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, the holy Apostles now had the power to take the Gospel to every nation on earth. So they came together to cast lots to determine where it was the will of God that each of them should go. The Mother of God also asked to have a lot, so that she might share in the preaching. Her lot was the land of Iberia, or Georgia. However, the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her and told her that the place assigned to her was not Georgia, but Mount Athos in Greece. Another woman, said the archangel, would evangelize Georgia. And centuries later St. Nina was duly sent to bring the Gospel to the Georgians.

## MARY IN JERUSALEM

In the life of the early Church Mary played a central role. At first she lived in the house of St. John the Apostle in Jerusalem. Christians came from all over the world to see her. She bestowed upon all of them her grace, healed and comforted the sorrowful, brought many sinners to repentance and confirmed all in the true faith, filling them with hope and joy and love.

The Lord left the Mother of God for the Church on earth in order to help the apostles and newly baptized Christians. One of these, St. Dionysius the Areopagite, wrote after meeting her that if he had not been told by the apostles that she was a mortal woman, he would have taken her for a goddess. The beauty and peace of her countenance, the holiness which radiated from her, brought many to believe in Christ as the Son of God who died and rose from the dead for our salvation. The Mother of God always had joy and gave it to others. She rejoiced greatly at the spread of the Gospel of her Son. And now her own prophecy began to be fulfilled: "Behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed" (Luke 1.48).

St. Ignatius the God-bearer (+110) was a disciple of St. John the Apostle and the Bishop of Antioch. By tradition he was the child that Christ took in His arms when He was teaching that we should become like children in order to enter the Kingdom of God. He wrote to St. John that the Mother of God was joyful in troubles and persecutions, free from murmuring in the midst of hardships, and never got angry with those who offended her. She is the Lady and Teacher of our new piety, he said. The Holy Virgin helped the Apostle Luke to write his Gospel by describing various events in her life that were known only to her - for example, the Annunciation. She also blessed him to paint icons of her and her Son, saying that her grace would abide with the icons. About five existing icons are ascribed to the Apostle Luke.

Now the holy Protodeacon Stephen was falsely accused of blasphemy by the Jews and was sentenced to death by stoning. The Holy Virgin stood in the crowd and watched Stephen being stoned. Through her prayers she strengthened him in the contest of martyrdom. Stephen was rewarded just before his death by being granted a vision of Christ at the Right Hand of the Father.

Mary loved to recite the Psalms, especially Psalm 26, "The Lord is my Light and my Saviour; whom them shall I fear?" and Psalm 22: "Though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil".

She loved to visit the places that had been important in the life of her Son on earth. She was always on pilgrimage, reliving events of eternal significance. Thus she would go to Bethlehem to relive His Nativity, the visits of the shepherds, the angels and the magi. But most of all she liked to go to the places where He suffered. There she wept as she relived His pain, humiliation and betrayal. "Here my Son was scourged. Here He was crowned with a crown of thorns. Here He walked, carrying



His Cross. Here He was crucified." But when she came to the Holy Sepulchre she would be filled with such joy. "Here," she said, "He rose from the dead on the third day!"

The Mother of God teaches us by her example that it is good to go on pilgrimage, to spend time, effort and money in visiting the Holy Places and reliving in our souls and hearts the eternal events that took place there.

Soon some Jews reported to the chief priests that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, had the custom of daily visiting the sites of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of her Son. They also reported that she came with other, and would kneel, weep and burn incense. So they decided to put a guard at these sites, so that if the Holy Virgin came again they could kill her. However, God blinded the guards and they saw nothing. After a long time they reported to the priests that they had seen nothing; they swore with an oath that they had seen nobody at all...

The Holy Virgin Mother was continually slandered by the Jews, who hated her and tried to have her killed. However, she was also surrounded by the love, gratitude and veneration of those who believed in her Son as the long-awaited Messiah, Who was the Almighty God born of the Virgin according to Isaiah's prophecy, Who created us and Who died for us (Isaiah 7.14, 9.16, 54.9). Nevertheless, at a certain time the apostles decided that it was too dangerous for her to remain in Jerusalem, and so she went to live with the Apostle John in Ephesus. The house where she lived in near Ephesus can still be seen.

At the request of St. Ignatius, the Holy Virgin visited him in Antioch. We possess a letter from him to her, and her reply: "The lowly handmaid of Christ Jesus to Ignatius, her beloved fellow-servant. The things which you have heard and learned from John concerning Jesus are true. Believe them, cling to them, and hold fast the profession of that Christianity which you have embraced, and conform your habits and life to your profession. Now I will come in company with John to visit you and those who are with you. Stand fast in the faith, and show yourself a man. Do not let the fierceness of persecution move you, but let your spirit be strong and rejoice in God your Saviour. Amen."

The Virgin returned from Ephesus and Antioch to Jerusalem, where she stayed for a long time.

## MARY ON MOUNT ATHOS

Then St. Lazarus the four-days-dead begged the Holy Virgin to visit him in Cyprus, where he was serving as Bishop of Kition. He could not go to see her in Jerusalem because the Jews still wanted to kill him because Christ had raised him from the dead and so he was a living witness to the Divinity of the Lord. The Mother of God wrote to him suggesting that she travel to Cyprus with the Apostle John and some other disciples. She said that she had made a bishop's stole and cuffs for him, and wanted to bring them to him as a present. She asked him to send a ship to fetch her from Israel to Cyprus, which he did. And so in the year 52 the Mother of God boarded the ship to Cyprus. But a storm broke out and the ship landed on Mount Athos, which was inhabited by pagan Greeks and covered with pagan temples.

On Athos there was a special cult of the goddess Diana. Girls would be sent there from all over Greece in order to become her priestesses.

Also on the peak of Mount Athos there was a giant gold and ivory statue of Jupiter, whose eyes were made of two large jewels that reflected the light of the stars and so flashed out light by night. In this way it served as a light-house for sailors sailing around Athos. When the ship carrying the Mother of God approached Athos, the great statue of Jupiter crashed to the ground...

The Holy Virgin was astonished by the beauty of Mount Athos, and she remembered that the Archangel Gabriel had told her that this land was her lot. The moment she remembered this, the ground shook, all the statues on Athos fell down and even the trees of the peninsula bent forward as though venerating her. As the idols fell they shouted, even against their will: "Mary is the Mother of the Great God Jesus".

The pagan inhabitants of Athos were shaken and went to the port to welcome the Holy Virgin. Treating her and the Apostle John and the other Christians with honour, they escorted them to their common hall, where they asked her: "What god did you bear, and what is his name?" The Virgin Mother then explained in detail everything concerning Christ. The pagans listened carefully and put many questions to her.

They were also surprised that she, a Jewish woman, could speak to them in Greek. But the Mother of God is likely to have learned Greek as part of the excellent education she received in the Temple. Moreover, St. Gregory Palamas and other Holy Fathers say that she received *all* the gifts of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost – which included the gift of tongues.

After the pagans had been catechized by her, they accepted Holy Baptism and became Christians. The Mother of God then decided which of the Christians she had brought with her should stay on Athos as priests in order to teach the people.

Having prayed for them and blessed them, she re-entered the ship with her companions and they all sailed to Cyprus.

The sorrow of the Christians of Cyprus was turned into great joy when the Mother of God appeared among them. She gave St. Lazarus the stole and cuffs that she had made, and then, having comforted and strengthened the faithful there, she returned to Jerusalem.

## THE DORMITION

The Mother of God has ascended from terrestrial conditions to celestial beatitude. That is why the feast of her Dormition, or "Falling asleep", on August 15th is celebrated with such fervour in the Orthodox Church. For us it is a mysterious second Pascha, pointing to the end of time, the general resurrection and the consummation of all things.

God in His great mercy has decreed that the death of the body should not only be for the punishment of man, but also for his salvation, so that by being dissolved at death the body should be purified of all impurity and rise again at the General Resurrection pure and undefiled.

Being born, like every other human being, from the union of a man and a woman, Joachim and Anna, the Most Holy Mother of God received the corruption of Adam's Fall in her own body. Therefore she also underwent the fate of all the earthborn - death. St. John of Damascus, St. Gregory Palamas and many other great saints write movingly about the death of the Mother of God.

Once she was praying on the Mount of Olives at the site of the Ascension of her Son and God. As she prayed, the olive trees on the Mount of Olives knelt with her. And when she arose they also straightened themselves up. In this way the trees revered and honoured the Lady and Mistress of the universe. Suddenly the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her and told her that in three days her Son would summon her to join Him in the Heavenly Kingdom. According to tradition, this happened on a Friday, and the Mother of God died on the Sunday following. She was also told the precise hour of her death, and its manner - very gentle, like a falling asleep.

As a sign of the truth of his words, the Archangel gave her a date palm branch from Paradise which shone with light. St. Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople (635-733) says that the palm branch was a symbol of victory. Other saints, such as Methodius of Constantinople, Irene Chrysovalantou and Euphrosynus the Cook, have also received gifts from Paradise.

The Mother of God was filled with joy. She longed to see the Face of her Bridegroom, her Son and her God. But first she wanted to see her family, the Apostles and the Church. And so she returned to her house, where she lived with the Apostle John. Her face was radiant with indescribable glory. She told St. John what she had been told by the Archangel, and showed him the branch from Paradise. Then she told the rest of her household, Mary Magdalene, Sepphora, Abigail and Jael. They were full of sorrow, but she promised that she would intercede for them and the whole world when she would be in heaven with her Son.

St. John and St. James, the Bishop of Jerusalem, then arranged that all the Christians should be told. People flocked to Jerusalem, and there was a lot of crying and weeping.

However, at this time the other Apostles were scattered over the face of the earth. Since the Mother of God wished to see them, too, before she died, they were miraculously brought on clouds from all over the world to her bedside. This happened as follows. While the Holy Virgin was preparing for her departure there was suddenly heard a noise like a clap of thunder. A cloud encompassed the house of St. John, and the Apostles. Then the Apostles - all of them except the Apostle Thomas - were seen on their clouds, borne by angels.

We read in the Holy Scriptures that the Prophet Habbakuk was carried by an angel with food to Daniel in the lions' den, and then returned in the same way to Jerusalem (Bel and the Dragon, 33-37). Also we read that after baptizing the eunuch from Ethiopia, the Apostle Philip was borne away by the Holy Spirit (Acts 8.39). In the same way, it was fitting that the Apostles should be brought by angels to witness the Glory of the Lord in His Mother and Bride. Just as both men and angels witnessed to the Lord's Ascension into Heaven, so the Angelic hierarchy, the Cherubim and the Seraphim, together with the Apostles and the Holy Women, were gathered to witness the Holy Virgin's ascent into Heaven.

The Mother of God thanked her Son for granting her wish to have the Apostles present at her "falling asleep"...

It was 9 a.m. on August 15. The Holy Virgin was lying on an adorned bed, waiting. She stretched her hands out to heaven and prayed. Suddenly there was a sound as of thunder from above, and there came a fearful voice as of chariots and a multitude of the hosts of heaven, and a voice as of the Son of Man was heard. Then an ineffable Light, the Light of the Glory of God, shone in the room. The people present were awestruck. It was the Lord, the King of Glory, descending from heaven, surrounded by all the heavenly powers, together with the holy patriarchs and prophets who had prophesied about the Holy Virgin. St. John of Damascus says that the Virgin's mother Anna appeared together with her cousin Elizabeth, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with David and all the righteous ones of the Old Testament. The Lord consoled His Mother with loving words and told her not to fear the power of Satan, for He had conquered him. He called her fearlessly to pass from earth to heaven. Then she closed her eyes, and died as if falling asleep, surrendering her soul into the hands of her Son and Bridegroom.

A wonderful fragrance was emitted from the body of the Holy Virgin that filled the hearts of the people with joy. The sick received healing from simply touching the bed of the Theotokos, the blind received their sight, the ears of the deaf were opened, the lame were made to walk, and demons were driven out. The word spread, and many came running to the house of the Apostle John, and all were healed.

An ancient Anglo-Saxon homily on the Dormition witnesses to the great love Orthodox Englishmen had for the Mother of God when it says that this feast “incomparably surpasses the feastdays of all the other Saints”, and continues: “On this heavenly Queen’s ascent the Holy Spirit gave glory in hymns, asking: ‘Who is this that here ascends like the rising dawn, as beautiful as the moon, as choice as the sun, as terrible as a warlike band?’ (Song of Songs 6.9) The Holy Spirit wondered, for He caused all Heaven’s inhabitants to wonder at this Virgin’s upward journey. Mary is more beautiful than the moon because she shines without intermission of brightness. She is choice as the sun with rays of exalted power because the Lord, the Sun of righteousness, chose her as a parent. She is comparable to a warlike band because she was escorted by heavenly potentates and companies of angels.”

The funeral of the Mother of God was a great event; people came from all over the city and the surrounding countryside. Everyone was filled with joy, as at a wedding. The Lord Himself had a hurried burial and no multitudes of people honouring the Feat He had accomplished in destroying the power of Satan. But He willed that His Mother should be given all honour at her funeral.

During the funeral procession the holy Apostles Peter and John were at the head, on either side of the bier, with St. John carrying the branch from Paradise. Behind them walked St. James and St. Paul, followed by the faithful bearing lights and censers. St. John of Damascus points out that just as in the Old Testament the Ark of the Covenant was transferred from Mount Sion to Gethsemane, so now the New Testament Ark, the Mother of God, was transferred from the house of St. John on Mount Sion to the Garden of Gethsemane.

As they processed, a radiant cloud in the shape of crown hovered over them, and angels’ voices were heard coming from the cloud. At one point soldiers were sent to disperse the multitude and burn the holy body. But then the cloud descended and formed a wall around the body, striking the soldiers with blindness. The cloud ascended again... But then a Jewish priest called Athonius, mad with fury, hurled himself at the body. However, like Uzzah in the Old Testament, who was punished by God for touching the Ark of the Covenant without faith, immediately Athonius touched the bier in his blind unbelief, his arms were cut off at the elbow by an invisible angelic power. He fell to the ground, writhing in pain. At this sight some Jewish bystanders were converted, crying out: “He that was brought forth by you is the True God, O Virgin Mother!” Then Athonius cried out to the apostles to help him. The procession came to a halt. St. Peter asked Athonius whether he repented and recognized that Christ was the long-awaited Messiah, and that Mary was the Ever-Virgin spoken of by Isaiah, Who gave birth to Emmanuel, God with us. Athonius repented, confessed the truth, and was healed. Then he followed the procession to Gethsemane. Later he was baptized and martyred for the faith...

The Mother of God was buried in the blue and red garments that she always wore. She was not wrapped in grave-clothes, but a cloth was placed over her fully-clothed

body. In icons of the Dormition we see a priest censuring her body, for her body is her Son's Body, the Church.

When she was placed in the tomb, that tomb became for us a ladder to heaven, because the Mother of God is the first-fruits of the Church that lives in heaven, in the Day of the Lord.

## ST. THOMAS' ARRIVAL

The Apostle Thomas arrived at Gethsemane on the third day after her death. Like the other apostles, he had been flown from India on a cloud, but by the Providence of God he arrived after the burial of the Mother of God. On arriving, he found the apostles, disciples and faithful sitting and mourning around her tomb. He was very sad that he had not been present at the Holy Virgin's repose, and asked the apostles to open the tomb so that he could see her wonderful face for the last time.

They agreed to his request, and when they opened the tomb, lo! they found her robe and sash lying there, but the body had disappeared. They were stunned and speechless, for they knew that the body could not have been stolen since they had been beside the tomb ever since the burial. In silence they walked to the house of St. James. Then, as they were about to sit down to a meal, the Mother of God appeared to them bodily just as the Lord had appeared to them on the evening of the Resurrection. "Panagia!" (All-holy one!), they cried. And she replied: "I shall be with you until the end of time." Then they knew that the body of the Mother of God, like that of her Son, had not suffered any corruption in the tomb, but had been resurrected and ascended to heaven in glory. Just as Christ was the first man to enter Heaven in the body of the resurrection, so the Mother of God was the first member of His Body, the Church, to enter Heaven in the body of the resurrection. Rendering the honour due from a son to his mother, He had taken her to Himself in His Kingdom on the third day after her death.

In this way God allowed Thomas to be the instrument of the world's knowing of the bodily resurrection of the Mother of God, just as he had been the instrument of the world's knowing of the bodily resurrection of her Son and God. Just as he helped many believers to realize that Christ is truly God - as he said on touching His side, "My Lord and my God!" - so he helped the faithful to understand that the Virgin is truly "our Lady, the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary".



## MARY AND THE CHURCH

The Gospel states that when Mary was standing at the foot of the Cross she was accompanied by her sister, also called Mary. This was Mary the wife of Cleophas. Cleophas was the brother of Joseph, so Mary of Cleophas was in fact her sister-in-law.

There is a spiritual as well as a literal interpretation of the scene at the foot of the Cross. All the disciples had fled, and only John remained at the foot of the Cross. So John represents the Church while Mary is the Mother of the Church. And for all eternity Mary will be both the Mother of God and the Mother of the Church.

There is a close parallel between Mary and the Church. Of both it is said in Psalm 44: that she is “the queen, arrayed in a vesture of inwoven gold”, and that “the King shall greatly desire thy beauty, for He Himself is thy Lord, and thou shalt worship Him”.

Abraham is called the father of the faithful. He was willing to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac when God asked him to do this. In Hebrews we read that Abraham believed that God could keep His promise that through Isaac his posterity would be as many as the stars or the sands of the sea by raising Isaac from the dead. Now Abraham had accepted to sacrifice Isaac with his whole soul, mind, heart and will; he had already experienced the pain. But God stopped Abraham’s hand through the Angel. So indeed Abraham is the father of the faithful.

But Mary has the right to be called the mother of the faithful. She knew that Christ had to suffer and be crucified, but that He would rise again on the third day. He told His disciples about this beforehand, and certainly He would have told her. But in her case, unlike Abraham’s, she had to go through the death of her Son with Him – and a sword went through her heart, as St. Symeon had prophesied.

So Mary is truly the mother of the faithful. And several Fathers call her the Queen of heaven.

Mary and the Church are inseparable. For the Church is the Body of Christ, and Christ received His Body from her.

In Revelation 12 we read of the woman clothed with the sun, who in pain brings forth a son, who is taken up to Heaven. This image cannot be of the Mother of God, because she had no pain when she gave birth to Christ. Instead, the Fathers say, this is an image of the Church in the last times, who brings forth the last generation of Christians in great pain. However, so close is the identification of Mary and the Church that we involuntarily think of her. For she is indeed the Mother of all Christians. When a Christian is born in Christ, she is there. And when a Christian suffers for Christ, she is there. As Clement of Alexandria says: “There is but one

Virgin Mother. I like to call her the Church. She is both virgin and mother, immaculate as a virgin and loving as a mother. She calls her children and feeds them with holy milk: the Word".

The Mother of God, like the Church, is "the frontier between uncreated and created nature" (St. Gregory Palamas). She is now the Queen of heaven, standing at the right hand of her Son, "embroidered in the virtues and gifts of purity, of holiness, everything beautiful, chosen, innocent, as the holiest of all the saints, nobler than the seraphim and incomparably more glorious than the seraphim and all the heavenly hosts. And so, after God, she is venerated, praised and glorified above all beings in heaven and on earth." (St. John of Damascus)

## AFTERWORD

In the writing of this book, I gratefully acknowledge that I have been helped especially by two books: Thomas Livius, *The Blessed Virgin in the Fathers of the First Six Centuries*, London: Burns & Oates (1893), and Holy Apostles Convent, *The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos*, Buena Vista, Colorado (1989).

Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers, and of the Most Holy Mother of God, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us! Amen.

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East House, Beech Hill, Mayford, Woking, Surrey. United Kingdom.