

THE SANCTITY AND GLORY OF THE MOTHER OF GOD: ORTHODOX APPROACHES

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LOVE AND VENERATION for the Virgin, the Russian theologian Fr Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944), states:
It is the soul of orthodox piety, its heart, that which warms and animates its entire body. A faith in Christ which does not include the virgin birth and the veneration of his Mother is another faith, another Christianity, from that of the Orthodox Church.¹

His words are typical, and they indicate the unique place held in orthodox devotion by her whom we like to describe in our prayers as 'the joy of all creation'. How has this living heart of our piety, the life-giving source of our hope and joy, been understood in orthodox thinking, Greek and Russian, during the past sixty years?

Scarcely ever in the history of Eastern Christendom has the Blessed Virgin Mary been the subject of controversy. There is in the East nothing comparable to the elaborate discussions in the medieval West about the Immaculate Conception, or to the Catholic-Protestant debate from the sixteenth century onwards about the whole position of the Virgin in Christian theology and devotion. The main Eastern controversy involving our Lady — the fifth-century conflict between Nestorius and St Cyril of Alexandria over the title *Theotokos* — was concerned not so much with the person of Mary as with the doctrine of the Incarnation. The name of the Holy Virgin is constantly on our lips, her face is always before us in the holy icons, she is everywhere present like the air we breathe — to use the analogy of Gerard Manley Hopkins — she is honoured, revered, loved, but not the subject of critical analysis. We have not developed 'mariology'; indeed, the very word, suggesting as it does an autonomous and systematically organized body of doctrine, has about it a non-orthodox flavour. In the uncontroversial *milieu* of the orthodox East, then, there has not been the same stimulus as in the West to seek for new approaches and

fresh formulations. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*: our understanding of Mary is for the most part to be found, not in formal definitions or in manuals of theology, but in the worshipping life of the people of God. Our attitude is traditional, doxological, intuitive.

None the less, in recent orthodox thinking about the Mother of God certain master-themes are evident, and three of them in particular call for mention: the link between mariology and christology; the Mother of God as icon of the Holy Spirit; the value of the Blessed Virgin's human freedom. In connection with each of these three themes, there are points of convergence between the orthodox approach and the teaching of Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis cultus* (2 February 1974). Having considered these themes, in the second half of this paper we shall look at twentieth-century orthodox views on the sanctity and final glory of the Blessed Virgin. How has Orthodoxy reacted to the roman catholic definitions of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the bodily Assumption (1950)?

Mariology and christology

For the orthodox tradition there are in the end only two marian titles which the Church has endorsed with full dogmatic authority: *Theotokos*, 'God-bearer', and *Aeiparthenos*, 'Ever virgin'. The first of these was adopted by the third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, A.D. 431), the second by the fifth (Constantinople II, A.D. 553). Of the two, the first title is indubitably the more important: as St John of Damascus affirms, in words quoted by almost every recent orthodox writer on the subject, 'The name *Theotokos* expresses the whole mystery of God's saving dispensation'.² For, although the second title, *Aeiparthenos*, is used in conciliar acts from 553 onwards, as well as in the liturgical texts, and although the Orthodox Church believes firmly that Mary had no other children apart from Jesus, yet the councils attach no specific doctrinal significance to the term. The designation *Theotokos*, on the other hand, has a precise and basic theological content. It is the safeguard and touchstone of the true faith in the Incarnation, emphasizing as it does that the child whom Mary bore was not a 'mere' man, not a human person, but the divine person of the only-begotten Son of God, 'one of the Holy Trinity', yet genuinely incarnate. In the words of Fr Georges Florovsky (1893-1979), 'The name *Theotokos* is an inevitable sequel to the name *Theanthropos*, the God-man. Both stand and fall together. The doctrine of the hypostatic union implies and demands the conception of the divine motherhood'.³

Today, then, as in the past, Orthodoxy sees Mary first and foremost as *Theotokos*, Mother of God. And, as Florovsky's words indicate, this is a title that points at once to Mary's relationship with her Son. It speaks not so much about the person of Mary as about the person of Christ; and so, drawing out the implications of the title, recent orthodox writers insist constantly that mariology is but an aspect of christology. 'The Church never separates Mother and Son', says Bulgakov.⁴ Significantly the two are shown together in one of the two chief icons that dominate the orthodox church building as a whole, that immediately to the left of the holy doors in the icon-screen: This is an icon, not just of our Lady, but of the Incarnation. 'Mariology', writes Paul Evdokimov (1901-70), 'is a chapter of christology, a chapter without which christology itself would be incomplete'.⁵ And Florovsky insists:

The person of the Blessed Virgin can be properly understood and rightly described only in a christological setting and context. Mariology is to be but a chapter in the treatise on the Incarnation, never to be extended into an independent treatise. Not, of course, an optional or occasional chapter, not an appendix. It belongs to the very body of doctrine. The mystery of the Incarnation includes the Mother of the Incarnate.

This was said some fourteen years before Vatican II. Florovsky adds that, if the Mother of God has a place also in ecclesiology, this is precisely for christological reasons: 'Again, there must be a mariological chapter in the treatise on the Church. But the doctrine of the Church itself is but an "extended christology", the doctrine of the "total Christ", *totus Christus, caput et corpus*'.⁶

The christological character of all our devotion to Mary is likewise one of Pope Paul's dominant concerns in *Marialis cultus*. 'In the Virgin Mary', he says, 'everything is relative to Christ and dependent upon him. . . . Genuine christian piety has never failed to highlight the indissoluble link and essential relationship of the Virgin to the Divine Saviour'; we are to reject at all costs 'any tendency . . . to separate devotion to the Blessed Virgin from its necessary point of reference — Christ'.⁷ Here an Orthodox can do nothing but applaud, for such exactly is the way in which we understand the title *Theotokos*.

Icon of the Paraclete

A second theme that has fired the imagination of modern orthodox thinkers is the link between the Holy Spirit and the Virgin; between

him whom we call *Panagion* and her whom we call *Panagia*. It is a theme developed in particular by Paul Evdokimov. The Spirit, he says, points always to Christ (cf John 16,13-14), and so in consequence the third person of the Trinity is in some measure hidden, anonymous, elusive: for he speaks to us, not about himself, but about another. The Son is the image of the Father, and the Spirit is the image of the Son, but the Spirit himself has no image within the Holy Trinity. In the virginal motherhood of the *Theotokos*, however, there is given to us a true and living icon of the Paraclete.⁸ To understand better what the Holy Spirit means, let us look at Mary. As Evdokimov says in the last paragraph that he ever wrote, a few hours before his death, 'The Holy Spirit has no place of incarnation, but he possesses in Mary the unique and altogether distinctive temple of his presence'.⁹ Prior to Evdokimov, Bulgakov had also suggested a similar approach. In the Virgin, so he urges, is brought to highest fulfilment that which the Paraclete is seeking to effect in every one of us: 'The Holy Spirit is not incarnated in a man but manifests himself in humanity. The Virgin Mary, 'the handmaid of the Lord', is a personality transparent to the action of the Holy Spirit'.¹⁰

Can this line of thought be carried a step further? Is there perhaps a special connection between the feminine character of the Mother of God, and feminine symbolism sometimes applied to the Holy Spirit, above all in syriac-speaking authors and in certain greek texts influenced by the syriac tradition?¹¹ The syriac *Didascalia apostolorum* (third century), for example, refers to the deacon as an image of Christ and to the deaconess as an image of the Holy Spirit,¹² while the homilies of St Macarius (fourth-fifth century) speak of 'the true, heavenly Father, the good, kind Mother, the grace of the Spirit; and the sweet and longed-for Brother, the Lord'.¹³ Scripture itself envisages the Spirit as a mother-bird, *peristera*, 'dove' in the feminine (Mt 3,16; Mk 1,10; Lk 3,22; Jn 1,32). Now it is of course true that in himself God is beyond all dualities and all opposites, and therefore he is beyond the masculine and the feminine. Yet God is the origin and end of both man and woman, of both masculine and feminine, and so the true meaning of these facts of our humanity is hidden somewhere deep within God. If, then, the Holy Spirit expresses in some mysterious but distinctive way the feminine aspect of God, the maternal principle in the deity, there is surely here a special reason why the Mother of God should serve as icon of the Spirit.¹⁴

Without developing this theme in *Marialis cultus*, Pope Paul at least suggests the possibility of a similar approach to the Mother of God when he emphasizes the need to reflect more deeply about 'the hidden relationship between the Spirit of God and the Virgin of Nazareth'.¹⁵

'Here am I': the human freedom of the Virgin

A third theme central to modern orthodox thinking about the Blessed Virgin Mary is her human freedom, her willing, voluntary choice, as manifested above all at the moment of the Annunciation. For us today, dwellers in an age absorbed by human rights, liberation movements and the struggle against all forms of oppression, this facet of the Virgin's personality possesses surely a particular significance. We may apply to her the words of Kierkegaard: 'The most tremendous thing granted to the human person is choice, freedom. And if you want to save this gift of freedom and to keep it there is only one way: in the very same second to give it back to God, and yourself with it'.¹⁶ We may apply to her also what is said by Nicolas Berdyaev: 'Man came forth out of freedom and issues into freedom. Freedom is a primordial source and condition of existence. . . . God is truly present and operative only in freedom. Freedom alone should be recognized as possessing a sacred quality'.¹⁷ Without freedom there can be no love: as Evdokimov insists, 'God can do everything except compel man to love him'.¹⁸

The crucial value of choice, freedom, voluntary love — that is exactly what is seen at the Annunciation. There is no compulsion. It was not God's wish to become incarnate by some mechanical process, violating human nature. He *waits* for Mary's willing consent — for the consent of all humankind — given through the mouth of its purest member. In the dialogue between the archangel and the Virgin there is present not the divine initiative only but a human response: 'Here am I: I am the Lord's servant; let it be as you have said' (Lk 1,38). Mary did not have to accept God's call, but could have refused. Her attitude of listening, her deliberate assent, her self-offering — 'Here am I' — are not incidental details but an indispensable precondition. In her we see human liberty freely redirected to its true end in God; as Vladimir Lossky says, 'The tragedy of liberty was resolved by the words *ecce ancilla Domini*'.¹⁹

The Mother of God is in this way not merely the passive instrument of God's Incarnation but a positive and creative participant in the mystery. She is, according to the greek theologian Panagiotis

Nellas, the supreme example of *synergeia*, of 'co-operation' between God's grace and human freedom.²⁰ As St Irenaeus puts it, 'Mary co-operates with the economy':²¹ the pauline principle, 'We are co-operators (*synergoi*) with God' (1 Cor 3,9), applies *par excellence* to her. Her active role at the Incarnation, observes Nellas, while not particularly underlined in earlier patristic authors, is much to the fore in the writings of a fourteenth-century byzantine lay theologian, recently canonized, Nicolas Cabasilas.²² In words often cited by contemporary Orthodox, he affirms:

The Incarnation of the Word was not only the work of Father, Son and Spirit — the first consenting, the second descending, the third overshadowing — but it was also the work of the will and the faith of the Virgin. Without the three divine persons this design could not have been set in motion; but likewise the plan could not have been carried into effect without the consent and faith of the all-pure Virgin. Only after teaching and persuading her does God make her his Mother and receive from her the flesh that she consciously wills to offer him. Just as he was conceived by his own free choice, so in the same way she became his Mother voluntarily and with her free consent.²³

There is no pelagianism here. 'Without the three divine persons this design could not have been set in motion': the priority of divine grace is safeguarded, but the contribution of created human freedom is also seen as essential.

Cabasilas's line of thought is taken up by Evdokimov:

Any good that is imposed by force is changed into evil. It is only the free submission of sanctity that can constitute *the objective human condition of the Incarnation*, that can permit the Word to come to his true home. Grace does not violate or force the order of nature but completes it. Jesus can take human flesh because humanity in the person of Mary gives it to him; in the Virgin, all say, 'Yes, come, Lord Jesus . . . '.

The *fiat* of the Creator is answered by the *fiat* of the creature: 'Here am I, I am the Lord's servant, let it be so'. The angel Gabriel is, as it were, a question posed by God to the freedom of his prodigal child. . . . In the response of the Virgin bursts forth the pure flame of her who gives herself, and is thereby ready to receive.

Giving to the theme a eucharistic dimension, Evdokimov continues:

Man brings to the temple his offering, bread and wine, and God in a regal gesture makes of it his flesh and blood. Humanity brings its

purest offering, the Virgin, and God makes of her the place of his nativity, the Mother of all the living, Eve fulfilled.²⁴

In both cases the free and willing character of the offering is vital. At the eucharist God consecrates the bread and wine because we have first offered them to him; at the Incarnation God takes flesh from the Virgin because she has first offered her flesh to him.

It is a joy to note that, as before, there is a convergence of thought here between recent orthodox theologians and Paul VI. The Virgin, so the Pope states in *Marialis cultus*, is 'taken into dialogue with God', and she 'gives her active and responsible consent'. He links this with the concern of 'modern woman' to 'participate with decision-making power in the affairs of the community'. We are to see in the Virgin, not 'a timidly submissive woman', but one who makes 'a courageous choice'.²⁵

Such, then, is part of the meaning of the Mother of God for us. In an age when all too many are enslaved — some by outward and some by inward tyrannies — she shows us what it is to be free.

Orthodoxy and the Immaculate Conception

Thus far a convergence has been apparent between Rome and the orthodox East, but over the marian dogmas proclaimed by the Pope in 1854 and 1950 agreement is less complete.

In both cases, what is at issue is in part our understanding of the *development of doctrine*. What kinds of development are legitimate? As regards the Immaculate Conception, there has been a gradual clarification of teaching in both East and West, but this has taken opposite directions in the two halves of Christendom. The ancient fathers, whether greek, syriac or latin, often speak of the pre-eminent sanctity of the Mother of God. But their language commonly lacks precision. Some regard her as altogether sinless throughout her life, others envisage a particular purification at the moment of the Annunciation. When praising her purity, early authors generally leave it unclear whether she was exempt from original as well as actual sin; possibly many of them had not consciously asked themselves this question. Moreover it is necessary to inquire in each instance how an author understands original sin. Care must be taken not to read an augustinian view into texts where it is not in fact present.

In the West, following the explicit affirmation of the Immaculate Conception by Eadmer in the early twelfth century, and the equally explicit repudiation of the doctrine by Bernard, Albert the Great,

Bonaventura and Aquinas during the next century and a half, matters grow gradually clearer. What begins as a widely contested opinion becomes in time the prevailing western view, which from the later sixteenth or early seventeenth century can no longer safely be denied in public. But, until the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception as a dogma in 1854, it remains possible for a Catholic, so far as his private convictions are concerned, to reject the doctrine.

Meanwhile in the christian East a crystallization occurs in the opposite direction. The first greek writer, so it seems, who was specifically aware of the western teaching on the Immaculate Conception and deliberately rejected it, was Nicephorus Kallistos Xanthopoulos in the fourteenth century.²⁶ In the prolonged discussions about unity between the Greeks and Latins at the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-39), it appears that the question of the Immaculate Conception was not raised; presumably neither side regarded it as a serious ground for conflict — which is scarcely surprising, since at that date most of the Greeks had not as yet formed a definite view on the subject, while in the West the doctrine was by no means generally accepted. By an interesting coincidence, at the very time when the Council of Florence was in session, another Council north of the Alps at Basel was discussing the Immaculate Conception; and on 15 September 1439, some two months after the decree of union between the Greeks and Latins had been signed at Florence, the Council Fathers at Basel adopted a definition endorsing the doctrine. But this had no effect on the proceedings at Florence, where Pope Eugenius IV and the other Latins looked on Basel as an illicit and schismatic assembly.

From the late sixteenth century onwards a number of greek writers have propounded what has gradually become the standard orthodox view on the subject: the Mother of God was subject to original sin, like the rest of humankind, but she was free from all actual sin. This is the view advanced, for example, by Metrophanes Kritopoulos, subsequently Patriarch of Alexandria (1636-39), in the Confession of Faith that he wrote in Germany in 1625.²⁷ The same standpoint is upheld in the Confession of Faith composed by Dositheos, Patriarch of Jerusalem (1669-1707), and endorsed by the important Council of Jerusalem (1672).²⁸ While thus insisting on the Virgin's freedom from actual sin, Orthodox at the same time distinguish in this connection between the 'absolute' sinlessness of Christ and the 'relative' sinlessness of his Mother.²⁹

But other Orthodox in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries explicitly uphold the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. It is affirmed, for example, in the early sermons of Cyril Lukaris, Patriarch first of Alexandria (1601-20) and then of Constantinople (1620-38), with periods of exile; in the autograph manuscript he has a note referring here to Robert Bellarmine, although presumably his name was not mentioned in the actual sermon.³⁰ This instance is the more significant, in that Lukaris was later accused of adopting protestant opinions. Another Greek to assert the doctrine, with great clarity and emphasis, is the celebrated preacher Elias Miniati (1669-1714), Bishop of Kernitsa and Kalavryta in the Peloponnese.³¹ The doctrine was widely held by russian theologians in the same period, as by St Dimitri of Rostov (1651-1709) and by Symeon of Polotsk (died 1680). Indeed, in the city of Polotsk in the seventeenth century there was even an orthodox confraternity specially dedicated to the Immaculate Conception.³² During the later eighteenth century, however, the view of Kritipoulos and Dositheos came to prevail generally in the greek and russian Churches.

Thus in the orthodox world during the period from 1600 to 1850, the situation is not dissimilar from that prevailing in the West during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries: different opinions are held, but each is free to believe as he or she wishes. But with the papal proclamation of the Immaculate Conception as a dogma in 1854 a further crystallization occurs on the orthodox side. I know of no orthodox writer since 1854 who has openly and explicitly taught the doctrine. Whereas the *Answer* of the Eastern Patriarchs to Pope Pius IX in 1848 does not refer to the Immaculate Conception as a point at issue between the two Churches, the *Answer* sent by the Ecumenical Patriarchate to Pope Leo XIII in 1895 specifically includes it among the seven major errors with which Rome is allegedly infected. It is termed 'a new-fangled dogma . . . unknown to the ancient Church, and strongly opposed at different times even by the most distinguished among the papal theologians'.³³ Speaking shortly after the announcement convening Vatican II, Bishop Cassian, Rector of the Russian Theological Institute of St Sergius in Paris, singled out the Immaculate Conception as one of the three chief questions separating Roman Catholics and Orthodox (the other two issues being, in his view, the *filioque* and the papal claims).³⁴ Personally I cannot but regard as exaggerated the standpoint adopted in the *Answer* of 1895 and by Bishop Cassian. If an Orthodox wishes to believe in the Immaculate Conception, he is free to do so, even though he should recognize that

he is going against the main body of opinion in his Church at the present time. The contemporary situation in the Orthodox Church as regards the doctrine may be compared to that prevailing in the Roman Catholic Communion in, say, the later fifteenth or sixteenth centuries: a Catholic at that time could in his own private judgment reject the doctrine, but he was in a minority position. Likewise an Orthodox today may affirm it as a private opinion, but again he will very definitely be in a minority.

Such, then, are the diverging developments in East and West. But in reality how grave is the discrepancy? Both sides agree in regarding the Virgin as 'most pure', as enjoying a special election and sanctification from the first moment of her existence. How important, then, is the question of her exemption, or otherwise, from original sin? Bulgakov, for example, writes:

The force of original sin, which varies generally from man to man, is in her case reduced to the point of a mere possibility, never to be actualized. In other words, the blessed Virgin knows no *personal* sin; she was manifestly sanctified by the Holy Ghost from the very moment of her conception.³⁵

A Roman Catholic may here interject that this is very close to what he means by the Immaculate Conception. Why, then, do Bulgakov and other modern orthodox theologians feel it essential to deny the doctrine?

Two main arguments are advanced: the first concerns the *continuity of sacred history*; the second, the *nature of original sin*.

(1) The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, so it seems to most Orthodox as to most Protestants, detracts from the unique value of Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the Cross. It is plainly stated in holy scripture that all are in the state of sinfulness, subject to the consequences of Adam's fall, and that all alike require to be redeemed in Christ (Rom 5,12; 1 Cor 15,22; cf Rom 3,23; Gal 3,22). Nowhere is it suggested in the bible that the Blessed Virgin Mary is excluded from this general situation.

To this it is of course replied from the roman catholic side that, in the words of the 1854 definition, our Lady is exempted from original sin precisely in view of the merits of Christ's future death and resurrection, *intuitu meritorum Christi Iesu Salvatoris humani generis*: Christ is just as much her Saviour as he is the Saviour of the rest of humankind. But this notion of *praeredemptio*, of an anticipated redemption, in its turn raises difficulties. Surely, it may be objected,

we are not to think in juridical terms of 'merits' imputable retrospectively to a human person before the passion has occurred, but we are to think in terms of salvation history. And in salvation history, while the events have an eternal dimension — the Apocalypse speaks of 'the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world' (Apoc 13,8) — there is at the same time a specific sequence and order. In Florovsky's words, 'There was a real progress in the history of redemption'.³⁶ So, in the period prior to Christ's death, it is said that 'the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified' (Jn 7,39). Those who died before the crucifixion do indeed share in Christ's redemption, but this happens through the 'harrowing of hell' at the time of the crucifixion and resurrection (1 Pet 3,19-20). Here the phrase 'went and preached to the spirits in prison' describes a spiritual event, not a movement in physical space, but it is nonetheless an event related to the temporal sequence.

The notion of an anticipated redemption appears to involve a kind of circularity. For Christ to enter the world, it is required — as we have already seen — that his mother should first freely consent to her election; yet, according to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, before she gives her free consent she already enjoys the fruits of her son's redemption. Is this not an example theologically of the fallacy of *petitio principii*? We seem to be begging the question. In the words of Evdokimov:

This dogma sets the Virgin apart, removes her from the common destiny, and indicates the possibility of deliverance from original sin before the Cross, and thus by the sole means of grace. In that case, in order for the redemption to take place, it was necessary that it should already be an existent fact, that the Virgin should enjoy its effects before it had happened.³⁷

Evdokimov's words, 'This dogma sets the Virgin apart, removes her from the common destiny', bring us to the heart of orthodox uneasiness. We feel that the Immaculate Conception separates Mary from the other righteous men and women of the Old Testament, removing her from the ancient covenant and setting her proleptically in the new, and that in this way it impairs the continuity of salvation history. In *Marialis cultus* Paul VI describes the *Magnificat* as 'the song of the messianic times in which there mingles the joy of the ancient and the new Israel'.³⁸ This is a most important idea. Mary stands at the point of transition; she is the link

between the ancient and the new and, as Florovsky expresses it, 'she secures the *continuity* of the human race'.³⁹ She is the heart of the apostolic Church, the first of the redeemed. But before that she is the last in a long series of Old Testament elections, the summit and recapitulation of all the sanctity that existed under the old covenant. When she said, 'Here am I; I am the Lord's servant', she was speaking not in her own name only but in the name of all the Old Testament saints who went before her. She spoke in the name not of unfallen but of fallen humanity. As Florovsky insists, 'She was *representative* of the race, i.e. of the *fallen* human race, of the "old Adam"'.⁴⁰

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, then, so it seems to us Orthodox, undermines the true vocation of the Mother of God as the bond between the old and the new. The objection is formulated clearly by Bulgakov:

Her exemption from original sin in virtue of this 'immaculate conception' distinguishes the Mother of God from the rest of mankind and seems consequently to render her incapable of imparting to her divine son the authentic manhood of the old Adam, with its need of redemption. The blessed Virgin, since she is truly human, shares with humanity both its original sin and also that inherent infirmity of human nature, which finds its extreme expression in an inevitable natural death.⁴¹

(2) Orthodox feel that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, as formulated in 1854, implies an understanding of original sin which they do not share. It speaks of immunity 'from all stain of original guilt', *ab omni originalis culpa labe*, a phrase which to orthodox ears seemingly presupposes an Augustinian notion of the fall. Those who, with Augustine, define original sin in terms of inherited guilt, may well feel that the All-Holy Virgin cannot have been party to such guilt. But when original sin is understood primarily in terms of an inherited mortality, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception appears not so much false as superfluous — 'an unnecessary complication', as Florovsky puts it.⁴²

Thus John Meyendorff, in his examination of the Marian piety of St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), after quoting a long series of texts in which Palamas extols the surpassing purity of the Blessed Virgin, goes on to ask: how could Palamas have spoken thus and yet have not accepted, at any rate implicitly, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception? And Meyendorff answers: 'It is indeed probable that

Palamas's very striking piety with regard to the Virgin would have led him to accept that doctrine, if he had *shared the western conception* of original sin'.⁴³ The main defect of Martin Jugie's vast monograph, learned but strangely unperceptive, *L'immaculée conception dans l'Écriture Sainte et la tradition orientale*, lies precisely in his tendency to read into eastern writers an Augustinian view of original sin, in places where no such view is in fact to be found. This is a point well made by another Catholic scholar, Hilda Graef:

The whole question was seen by the Greeks in an altogether different light from that in which it was considered by western theologians. In the Greek Church original sin had never played the same preponderant part as in post-Augustinian western thought. From very early times it had been assumed as an indisputable fact that Mary was the purest creature imaginable, the highest angels not excepted. St John of Damascus even considered her active conception to have been without sin, but as he did not share the Augustinian view of original sin as an inherited guilt transmitted through the sexual act, the problem never presented itself to him in the way that it did to Latin theologians. For the Greeks saw original sin far more as mortality with all its implications, and as the *Theotokos* was subject to this, they did not exempt her from it.⁴⁴

This second argument advanced by the Orthodox, however, like the first is contested from the Catholic side. In the view of many Catholics, the 1854 definition does not presuppose any particular understanding of original sin, whether the Augustinian, the Anselmian or any other. What is evidently needed here is a mutual clarification of our respective views of original sin; this is a concept that needs to be re-thought within the theological traditions of *all* our Churches. But if there is any substance in this second argument, as stated from the Orthodox side, then clearly this disagreement arises not primarily over the way in which we see the sanctity of the Holy Virgin, but over our estimate of the fall and its consequences.

Before we leave the topic of the Immaculate Conception, a few words may be added about the Orthodox attitude towards Lourdes. Many Orthodox count it a privilege to journey there as pilgrims, and they honour the grotto as a holy place where prayer is answered and healing conferred. But why, they ask, did the Virgin say to Bernadette, 'I am the Immaculate Conception', and not 'I am the fruit of the Immaculate Conception' or 'I am she who was immaculately conceived'? It is as if Christ were to say 'I am the Virgin Birth'. It is true that he does indeed say such things as 'I am the

resurrection and the life' (John 11,25), but here the sense is manifestly different: he means 'I am he who gives resurrection and life to those who believe'. Perhaps Bernadette's words are not to be pressed theologically but taken in a human sense: it may merely have been her way of saying that she had spoken with the Mother of God. But, as Lossky points out, it is significant that these words were spoken to Bernadette, not on 8 December, the feast of Mary's conception by her mother St Anne, but on 25 March, the feast of the Annunciation, when Mary herself conceived Christ. Was our Lady perhaps referring, not to her conception by St Anne, but to the virgin and immaculate conception of Christ in her own womb?⁴⁵

The bodily Assumption

In their treatment of the final glory of the Holy Virgin, recent orthodox theologians follow two different approaches. First, there is a minimizing view, apparent especially since the papal proclamation of 1950. Typical of this attitude are the words of the Greek theologian Panagiotis N. Trembelas (1886-1977) in his *Dogmatic theology*. 'With regard to the dogma of the Assumption of the Mother of God, recently proclaimed by the Roman Catholic Church', he remarks, 'we will content ourselves with the observation that it is based on apocryphal renditions dating from the fourth century'. After summarizing the early evidence he concludes, 'It is self-evident that such sources cannot be used as a serious basis for dogma'.⁴⁶ Even though he does not actually say that he disbelieves the doctrine, his lack of enthusiasm is only too evident.

Trembelas might have added, although in fact he does not, that the Greek liturgical texts for 15 August contain surprisingly few explicit references to the bodily Assumption. Only in three or four places is it said specifically that her body has been taken up into heaven; for the most part the hymns speak of Christ receiving her soul, or else without entering into details they state that she has passed over into eternal life.⁴⁷ The feast is usually called *koimisis*, 'falling-asleep'; occasionally it is styled *metastasis*, 'translation'; but the term *analipsis* — meaning 'ascension' or 'assumption' in the strict sense — is hardly ever employed.⁴⁸ Moreover the icon of the feast usually shows the dead body of the Virgin laid out on her bier, with Christ standing behind and holding her *soul* in the form of a baby wrapped in white swaddling clothes: it is the icon of her Dormition, not of her bodily Assumption. Sometimes, it is true, she is shown seated on a throne, within a mandorla that is being carried

up by the angels into heaven; but such icons are relatively late and infrequent.⁴⁹

Most Orthodox, however, and in particular most Russian theologians, are far less reserved than Trembelas. Bulgakov affirms without ambiguity (and for myself I agree with him wholeheartedly):

The Church believes that, dying a natural death, she was not subject to corruption, but, raised up by her Son, she lives in her glorified body at the right hand of Christ in the heavens. . . . Her body is completely spiritual and transfigured. She is the justification, the end and the meaning of creation. She is, in this sense, the glory of the world. In her God is already 'all in all'.⁵⁰

Note here that Bulgakov, following the normal orthodox view, considers that Mary underwent physical death in the usual way, and that her body was afterwards resurrected and united with her soul in heaven. The papal definition of 1950 is less precise, stating merely with studied vagueness *expleto terrestri vitae cursu*, 'on completing the course of her earthly life'.

Bulgakov and other Russian writers see the Assumption essentially as an eschatological event, as an anticipation of that full *theosis* of the human person which will be the lot of all the blessed at the resurrection from the dead on the last day. It is an expression of inaugurated eschatology, part of our future hope. Mary's resurrection and assumption, says Bulgakov, 'are essentially *anticipations* of what is prepared for the humanity of the whole Christ in the risen life; both were bestowed in advance upon the Mother of God'.⁵¹ Lossky speaks in similar terms: 'She has crossed the frontier which separates us from the age to come';⁵² she has passed 'beyond death, beyond the resurrection, and beyond the last judgment'.⁵³ But she is not thereby separated from the rest of humanity and set upon a different level; for in that same glory which she already enjoys, all of us hope by God's mercy eventually to share. In this perspective, to affirm the bodily Assumption of the Virgin is to make a statement not about her alone but about human nature as such.

There can be no doubt that Bulgakov and Lossky are in this regard far more representative of the usual orthodox standpoint than is Trembelas. But, while most Orthodox are firmly convinced of the reality of the bodily Assumption, they do not consider that it is desirable or even possible to define it as a dogma. This raises, as before, the wide-ranging question of the development of doctrine. Orthodox have misgivings about the transition, sometimes (so it

seems to us) made too quickly by Roman Catholics, from what is 'implicit' in tradition to what should therefore be made 'explicit'. Surely, for anything to be defined as a dogma, it must have a clear basis in scripture. As for the Assumption, says Evdokimov, it is 'not a dogma . . . but a fact of liturgical tradition and piety'.⁵⁴ In the wise and eloquent words of Lossky:

It is hard to speak and not less hard to think about the mysteries which the Church keeps in the hidden depths of her inner consciousness. . . . The Mother of God was never a theme of the public preaching of the apostles; while Christ was preached on the housetops, and proclaimed for all to know in an initiatory teaching addressed to the whole world, the mystery of his Mother was revealed only to those who were within the Church. . . . It is not so much an object of faith as a foundation of our hope, a fruit of faith, ripened in tradition. Let us therefore keep silence, and let us not try to dogmatize about the supreme glory of the Mother of God.⁵⁵

Belief in the supreme glory of the Blessed Virgin, then, is not to be set upon the same level as the basic truths of the faith — the truths of our Lord's birth, death and resurrection — which are the theme of the Church's public preaching. While the Assumption is indeed connected with those basic truths, it follows from them not so much by any process of strict logic as by virtue of an inner coherence apprehended intuitively through prayer. *Let us therefore keep silence.* There is a danger of trying to say too much about the Mother of God. St Basil's warning is not to be forgotten: 'Let things ineffable be honoured in silence'.⁵⁶ The realities of this world are expressed through speech, says St Isaac the Syrian, but the mysteries of the age to come can be expressed only through silence.⁵⁷ The Virgin's supreme glory is precisely one such mystery, an event of the eighth day, part of our eschatological hope, one of the truths that at the present moment can be understood at best 'through a glass, darkly' (1 Cor 13,12).

The Mother of God, as Pope John XXIII liked to say, belongs to the common heritage which Catholics and Orthodox share together. In the present essay it has been my task to speak of points over which Orthodox are conscious of differing from Rome. These points are certainly significant, and they deserve to be scrutinized with honesty and a hawk-like sharpness of vision. But incomparably more important than any differences are the things that we share in common. May the Mother of our Saviour, the source of joy to us all, draw us closer to her Son and in this way closer to each other.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Orthodox Church* (London, 1935), p 137.
- ² *On the orthodox faith* III, 12 (PG 94, 1029C; Kotter, no 56, line 38). Cited by, among others, Lossky, V.: 'Panagia', in E. L. Mascall (ed.), *The Mother of God* (London, n.d. [? 1949]), p 29; reprinted in *In the image of likeness of God* (New York, 1974), p 202; also by Florovsky, G.: 'The Ever-Virgin Mother of God', in Mascall, *op. cit.*, p 52; reprinted in Florovsky: *Creation and redemption, collected works*, vol iii (Nordland, Belmont, Mass., 1976), p 172; and by Evdokimov, P.: *La nouveauté de l'Esprit* (Spiritualité orientale 20; Bellefontaine, 1977), p 268.
- ³ 'The Ever-Virgin Mother of God', p 53; *Collected works* iii, p 174.
- ⁴ *The Orthodox Church*, p 138.
- ⁵ *La nouveauté de l'Esprit*, p 267.
- ⁶ 'The Ever-Virgin Mother of God', p 52; *Collected Works* iii, p 173.
- ⁷ Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis cultus*, nos 25 and 4.
- ⁸ *La nouveauté de l'Esprit*, p 262.
- ⁹ *Op. cit.*, p 277.
- ¹⁰ *The Orthodox Church*, p 140; cf Bulgakov, S.: *The wisdom of God: a brief summary of sophiology* (New York/London, 1937), p 183.
- ¹¹ See Murray, Robert, S.J.: *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A study in early syriac tradition* (Cambridge, 1975), p 312-20.
- ¹² *Didascalia Apostolorum*, ed. R. H. Connolly (Oxford, 1929), p 88.
- ¹³ *Hom.* 28,4.
- ¹⁴ Bulgakov develops this theme in a somewhat different way, linking the Mother of God with the figure of Sophia: as created wisdom, she is an image of God's uncreated wisdom (see *The wisdom of God*, pp 185-96). His sophiological ideas, sharply criticized by other Orthodox and admittedly speculative, have yet to receive the attention that they deserve.
- ¹⁵ See nos 26-27.
- ¹⁶ *Journals*, translated by A. Dru (London/Princeton, 1938), p 372.
- ¹⁷ *Dream and reality: an essay in autobiography* (London, 1950), p 46.
- ¹⁸ *L'Orthodoxie* (Paris, 1959), p 60.
- ¹⁹ *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church* (London, 1957), p 141.
- ²⁰ *I Theomitor* (Athens, 1968), p 35.
- ²¹ *Against the heresies* III, xxi, 7.
- ²² *I Theomitor*, p 29.
- ²³ *Homily on the Annunciation* 4-5 (Patrologia Orientalis xix, 488); cited by Lossky: 'Panagia', p 30; *In the image and likeness of God*, p 203; and by Evdokimov: *La nouveauté de l'Esprit*, pp 141-42.
- ²⁴ *La nouveauté de l'Esprit*, pp 142-43.
- ²⁵ No 37.
- ²⁶ See Jugie, M.: *L'immaculée conception dans l'écriture sainte et dans la tradition orientale* (Rome, 1952), p 218-21.
- ²⁷ *Confession of the catholic and apostolic Church of the East*, 17, in Kimmel, E. J.: *Monumenta fidei Ecclesiae Orientalis* (Jena, 1850), vol ii, pp 177-79.
- ²⁸ *Confession*, no 6, in Kimmel, *op. cit.*, vol i, pp 432-33.
- ²⁹ See Trembelas, P. N.: *Dogmatiki tis Orthodoxou Katholikes Ekklesias*, vol ii (Athens, 1959), pp 205, 213-15; French trans. by Dumont, P.: *Dogmatique de l'Eglise orthodoxe catholique*, vol ii (Chevetogne, 1967), pp 223, 231-33.
- ³⁰ Jugie, *L'immaculée conception*, p 320.
- ³¹ Jugie, *op. cit.*, pp 348-53.
- ³² Jugie, *op. cit.*, pp 425-27.
- ³³ *Answer of the Great Church of Constantinople to the papal encyclical on union*, nos 6, 13; Eng. trans. by Archimandrite Eustathius Metallinos (Oxford, n.d. [1896]), pp 24-25, 34-35. The other six major errors cited in this (not very eirenic) document are the addition of the *filioque* to the Creed, the use of unleavened bread, purgatory, baptism by 'sprinkling', the temporal power of the papacy, and the papal claims (infallibility, supreme ordinary jurisdiction).

³⁴ *Le Messager Orthodoxe* 6 (Paris, 1959), p 11. But he adds that the real *impedimentum dirimens* is the papal claims; the other two points do not constitute an 'insurmountable obstacle' to unity.

³⁵ *The wisdom of God*, p 174.

³⁶ 'The Ever-Virgin Mother of God', p 59; *Collected works* iii, p 182.

³⁷ *La nouveauté de l'Esprit*, p 142.

³⁸ No 18.

³⁹ 'The Ever-Virgin Mother of God', p 56; *Collected works* iii, p 178.

⁴⁰ *Art. cit.*, p 59; *Collected works* iii, p 181.

⁴¹ *The Wisdom of God*, p 174. Cf Lossky: *The mystical theology of the eastern Church*, p 140; 'Panagia', pp 30-31; *In the image and likeness of God*, pp 203-04.

⁴² 'The Ever-Virgin Mother of God', p 59; *Collected works* iii, p 182.

⁴³ *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (Leighton Buzzard, 1964), p 234.

⁴⁴ *Mary: A history of doctrine and devotion*, vol i (London, 1963), pp 322-33.

⁴⁵ Lossky, V.: *Le dogme de l'immaculée conception* (Lettres orthodoxes, Paris, 1953), pp 6-7. Cf Merslukine, A.: *Le dogme de la conception de la Vierge Marie et le point de vue orthodoxe* (Paris, 1961), pp 41-44.

⁴⁶ *Dogmatiki*, vol ii, pp 205, 216; French trans., vol ii, pp 223, 233. For a similar standpoint among the Russians, see the monograph of A. J. Bulgakov (not to be confused with Fr Sergei Bulgakov), written in 1903: summarized in Jugie, M.: *La mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge. Etude historico-doctrinale* (Studi e Testi 114, Vatican, 1944), pp 355-56.

⁴⁷ Jugie, *op. cit.*, pp 188-94.

⁴⁸ Jugie, *op. cit.*, p 184.

⁴⁹ Ouspensky, L. and Lossky, V.: *The meaning of icons* (Olten, 1952), pp 215-16.

⁵⁰ *The Orthodox Church*, p 139.

⁵¹ *The wisdom of God*, p 178.

⁵² *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church*, p 194.

⁵³ 'Panagia', p 35; *In the image and likeness of God*, p 208.

⁵⁴ *La nouveauté de l'Esprit*, p 145, note.

⁵⁵ 'Panagia', p 35; *In the image and likeness of God*, p 208.

⁵⁶ *On the Holy Spirit* xvii (44).

⁵⁷ *Mystic treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, trans. by A. J. Weinsinck (Amsterdam, 1923), p 315.