

UNIT 3A: DOCTRINE

63: The Incarnation and the Theotokos

In considering the Incarnation and the life of the Theotokos three significant questions need to be asked: **Where did Jesus Christ come from? Why did he come? Who is the Theotokos?** Let us begin our search for answers in the Bible, then turn to the human confrontation with the reality of the Incarnation, the Council of Chalcedon's Definition of Faith, and finally, the Incarnation in modern Orthodox theology.

1. The Biblical Perspective

a. Where Did Jesus Come from?

The opening chapter of the first gospel, the Gospel of St Matthew, traces the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, not only from “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1.1), but as “conceived ... of the Holy Spirit” (v. 20). Whereas St Matthew considers the question of Jesus' origins from the viewpoint of the puzzled Joseph, the opening chapter of Luke tackles the same issue from the viewpoint of the puzzled Mary. The question we puzzle over today remains the question that Holy Mary asked in faith when the Archangel Gabriel told her she was pregnant: “How can this be?” (Luke 1.34). So Joseph and Holy Mary (and us) are all asking the same question: What is the genesis of Jesus? Where did he come from?

To answer such questions, we must deepen our faith, not deepen our power to reason. St Maximus the Confessor offers a model:

Let us contemplate with faith the mystery of the divine Incarnation ... for who, relying on the power of rational demonstration, can explain how the conception of the divine Logos took place? ... How was there an engendering without loss of maidenhead? How did a mother, after giving birth remain a virgin? ...¹

¹ Cited by Joanna Manley, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox*, Menlo Park, CA: Monastery Books, 1984), p. 999.

What happened is that for St Matthew and for us, as the New Testament Biblical scholar, the Roman Catholic Father Raymond E. Brown phrases it, “a new creative act brings into being the Messiah in a way that makes him uniquely related to God.”²

St Gregory Palamas explains this “new creative act”:

A most mystical economy of courtship came to pass as regards the Virgin, a strange greeting surpassing speech which the Archangel, descended from above, addressed to her, and disclosures and salutations from God which overturn the condemnation of Eve and Adam and remedy curse laid on them, transforming it into a blessing.... There came to pass in the womb, not a union only, but further, a formation, and that thing formed from the Power of the Most High and the all-holy virginal womb was the incarnate Word of God. Thus the Word of God took up His dwelling in the Theotokos in an inexpressible manner and proceeded from her, bearing flesh....³

Thus Jesus comes from a “mystical economy of courtship” between God and Miriam which transforms the curse (or disobedience) of Adam and Eve into a blessing in which “a thing” is formed in the womb of Miriam— “the incarnate Word of God,” which then “proceeded from her” womb into her birth canal and out into the world “bearing flesh”. This is not a science fiction story; it is a story of God’s power and Holy Mary’s faith. Why did He come?

b. Why Did He Come?

The answer has been framed in the context of love by St John the Evangelist, in his First Letter, chapter 4, verses 9 to 14:

By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so **that we might live through Him**. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that **He loved us** and sent His Son **to be the propitiation for our sins**. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to **love one another**.... If we love one another, **God abides in us**, and **His love is perfected in us**. By this **we know that we abide in Him and He in us**, because

² *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 175.

³ Manley, p. 1015, citing St Gregory of Palamas, *Homily on the Dormition*.

He has given us of His Spirit. We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. [Emphasis added]

In this challenging passage, St John, late in his life after much prayer and reflection, offers ten reasons why God the Father sent Jesus Christ, His Son, into the world: (1) “so that we might live through Him”; (2) because “He loved us”; (3) “to be the propitiation for our sins”; (4) to teach us “to love one another”; (5) so that “God abides in us”; (6) so that “His love is perfected in us”; (7) so that “we know we abide in Him”; (8) so that we know also that “He abides in us;”⁴ (9) because “He has given us of His Spirit”; and (10) “to be the Saviour of the world”. In striving to understand the Incarnation, it is important to reflect on all ten of these purposes of God the Father, being careful not to focus excessively on any one of these purposes (e.g. the propitiation for our sins), as has often happened in the past with non-Orthodox branches of Christianity. If we were to try to sum up all of these reasons why God the Father sent the Son into the world, perhaps the clearest answer is simply because He loves us; and in the next lecture we will explore how we can best respond to that love.

For the present, let us remember with St Gregory Palamas that it was the will of Christ “to undergo the passion for our sake, as this was why He became the God-man.... He chose willingly to [suffer] in order to show that His humility was to liberate us and lift us up.”⁵ The ten reasons set out above by St John as to why God the Father sent the Son into the world, have been encapsulated by Father Emmanuel Hatzidakis: “The whole purpose of the Incarnation, suffering, death and resurrection was to redeem us, and restore the ‘fallen image’ [of God in man].”⁶

⁴ Note the distinction between the reality (i.e. God abides in us) and our knowledge of that reality (i.e. we know that he abides in us). Both are important aspects of the Incarnation and our understanding of that event—the event and our existential awareness of it.

⁵ St Gregory Palamas, *Homily 16.30* in Christopher Veniamin (ed. and tr.), *The Homilies* (Weymart, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009), p. 128, cited by Father Emanuel Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen? The Human Nature of Christ Examined from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (Clearwater, FL: Orthodox Witness, 2013), p. 201.

⁶ Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen?* p. 201.

c. Who Is the Theotokos?

Despite the firmness of the Biblical accounts of the virgin birth given by both St Matthew and St Luke, we do not really understand very well how this young Jewish girl, whom we now call Mary, but who was known as “Mariam” in Greek or “Miriam” in Hebrew⁷, came to be the Mother of God, the Theotokos. The role of St Joseph is easier to understand. Reflecting on the first chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, St Bede preached:

Blessed Mary then had a husband who would be the most reliable witness of her integrity and the most faithful custodian of Our Lord and Saviour. This would prevent her from being condemned as guilty of defilement if she were to bear a son having no husband. He would also be there to afford the care which a home naturally demands... The reason for the marriage then was the guarantee afforded by Joseph’s genealogy, the protection of Mary against stoning as an adulteress, and the concealment of the virginal birth from the evil one.⁸

So understanding Joseph better gives us what might be called an apophatic (i.e. what she was not) understanding of Miriam—she did not lack integrity, she was not guilty of adultery, she did not deserve to be stoned, she needed help to make a home for Jesus Christ and to conceal the birth of Jesus Christ from the devil.

Luke offers us further insights about this remarkable person, Miriam. She is a person who, in a literal translation of the words of the Archangel Gabriel, can “be rejoicing” because she has found “grace [or favour] before the face of God.”⁹ St Basil the Great phrases the reality of the Incarnation very well indeed: “The first fruit of the Spirit is peace and joy. Therefore, ... the holy Virgin had received within

⁷ The correct name of the Mother of God is given in endnote 3, p.76 for the Gospel of Matthew in *The Holy Gospels*, Buena Vista, CO: Holy Apostles Convent, 2000 (Hereafter abbreviated as HAC). This translation is based on the King James New Testament, compared with the approved text of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, first published in 1904. These notes offer an excellent source of Patristic insights on Biblical passages.

⁸ St Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, I, 20-21, CCL 122, 15; CCL, 120, 30-31.

⁹ HAC, p. 294, exegesis of Luke 1:26-38.

herself every grace of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰ In other words, Miriam was living her completely Jewish life (both in Nazareth and in the Temple precincts) in such a way that she was ready to receive the fullness of God’s Messiah within herself.

Elizabeth, a relative (and probably a cousin) of Miriam, recognised that Miriam was the Theotokos. As St John the Baptist leaped in the womb of Elizabeth, she said to Miriam: “Why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”¹¹ Miriam was chosen by God to be the Theotokos because she was ready to receive the Messiah. As St Ephraim the Syrian phrases it, “He [God] came down in a manner that [only] He knows. He stirred and came in a way that pleased Him. He entered and dwelt in her without her perceiving. She received Him, suffering nothing”¹²

Father Emmanuel Hatzidakis has pointed out that: “The virgin birth of the Son of God was not invented by later generations; the Church believed in it universally since the beginning.”¹³ The concise summary of St Augustine has been universally accepted by the Orthodox Church: “A Virgin conceived, a Virgin bore, and [lived] after the birth as a Virgin still.”¹⁴ Furthermore, as Father Emmanuel has strikingly reminded us: “There are no believers in the Incarnation discoverable, who are not

¹⁰ HAC, p. 295, citing Toal, IV: 215.

¹¹ Luke 1:43, as translated in *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

¹² HAC, p. 295, citing *Homily on the Nativity in Harp of the Spirit*, p. 66. St Ambrose offers a delightful description of the meeting of Elizabeth and Miriam: “Elizabeth was indeed the first to hear the voice of Mary, but John was the first to feel the Lord’s gracious presence. Sweet is the harmony of prophecy with prophecy, of woman with woman, of babe with Babe. The women speak words of grace, the babes move in a hidden manner. And as their mothers approach one another, so do they engage in a mysterious converse of love. And in a twofold miracle, though in diverse degrees of honour, the mothers prophesy in the Spirit of their little ones. Who, I ask, was it that performed this miracle? Was it not the Son of God, Who made the unborn be?” (HAC, p. 297; quoting *Of the Christian Faith*, Bk IV, Ch IX: 115 in Nicene, 2nd Ser, X: 277).

¹³ Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen?* p. 419. Father Michael notes that the single exception to this assertion was a small heretical group in the second century called the Ebionites. See Hatzidakis, p. 472, note 24.

¹⁴ St Augustine, *On the Creed* 6. NPNF-1, Vol. 3, p. 371, cited by Hatzidakis, pp. 419, 472 note 30.

also believers in the Virgin Birth.”¹⁵ For us, as for Miriam, the Incarnation remains an unexpected event, a surprising mystery. We were not prepared for it; we did not expect it. What did we not expect?

2. The Human Confrontation with the Reality of the Incarnation

We did not expect the unity of God and humanity which the Theotokos made possible. Opening a description of the Incarnation in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Vladimir Lossky points out that:

For St Maximus the Incarnation and deification correspond to one another; they mutually imply each other. God descends to the world and becomes man, and man is raised towards divine fullness and becomes god, because this union of two natures, the divine and the human, has been determined in the eternal counsel of God, and because it is the final end for which the world has been created out of nothing.¹⁶

This dual process of Incarnation and deification occurs in time. On the divine side, Christ himself has existed before the creation in which He participated (Colossians 1.16-17); and His Incarnation is His entering into time. But on the human side, there has been a long preparation for the Incarnation as Lossky explains:

The whole development of the Old Testament with its successive elections—the election of Noah, the election of the stock of Abraham, the election of the people of Israel, the election of the tribe of Judah the election of the House of David, the law which preserved the purity of the people of God, the blessing on the chosen descendants, the whole of this sacred history appears as a providential and Messianic process, as a preparation of the Body of Christ, of the Church—the very focal point of union with God, and above all as a preparation of Her who was to lend her human nature so that the mystery of the Incarnation could be realized.¹⁷

That’s what Miriam did to make the Incarnation possible—she loaned “her human nature” to make herself available for God’s purposes, even though she did not know

¹⁵ Hatzidakis, p. 420. Father Michael has drawn this quotation from Charles Gore, *Dissertations on Subjects Connected with the Incarnation* (London: John Murray, 1907), p. 49 as cited in *Jesus: Fallen?* p. 419 note 33 and p. 543 #124.

¹⁶ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991), p. 136.

¹⁷ Lossky, p. 140.

what those purposes would be. That is a model of the possibility of our own deification, as we will consider further next week—to make ourselves available for God’s purposes, when we do not yet know what those purposes will be. It is helpful to realize that deification is not simply something that happens in the future as our awareness of God deepens, but that deification is already happening as we (like Miriam) are purified and prepared by the experiences of life to receive whatever God has for us.

Hesitation to expect the Incarnation is not surprising. St Maximus phrases neatly the natural human response to the Incarnation:

We are astonished to see how the finite and infinite—things which exclude one another and cannot be mixed—are found to be united in Him and are manifested mutually the one in the other. For the unlimited is limited in an ineffable manner, while the limited is stretched to the measure of the unlimited.¹⁸

This doctrine of the Incarnation, of “how the finite and infinite” are united in Jesus Christ is not easy to understand, even when we know in faith that it has already happened. As we have seen in earlier lectures, the Church struggled to define this doctrine, especially in its early councils.

In the midst of an understandable human hesitation to appreciate and respect the significance of the Incarnation, consider the Virgin Birth as a sign of the truth of the Incarnation. As Father Emmanuel Hatzidakis has pointed out “if the mother had not remained a virgin, the child born of her would have been a mere man and the birth an ordinary human birth.”¹⁹ Just as in science, a proof of concept serves as evidence to verify a certain method or idea, so the Virgin Birth confirms the truth that the Christ child is both human and divine; however, whereas a proof of concept is usually small and often incomplete, the Virgin Birth with the continuing virginity of

¹⁸ Epist. XXI, PG, t.91.604 BC; cited by Lossky, p. 142.

¹⁹ Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen?*, p. 428.

the Theotokos is an immense event with immediate consequences for humanity, for all life, and for the universe.

In considering the meaning of the Incarnation, we naturally tend to focus on its importance for human salvation. However, Father John Anthony McGuckin has stressed in his helpful and comprehensive *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* that:

Incarnation does not simply refer to the act itself (such as the conception of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin, or the event of Christmas); it stands more generically for the whole nexus of events of the life, teachings, sufferings, and glorification of the Lord, considered as the earthly embodied activity of the Word. As such the theological concept of incarnation is a profoundly soteriological term: it always has reference to the dynamic effects of God's involvement in the cosmos....²⁰

In order to gain even a small understanding of the Incarnation, Father John is right to stress that we must consider “the whole nexus of events of the life, teachings, sufferings, and glorification of the Lord”—that is, we must consider how all the events in the life of Christ are connected to each other.

3. The Council of Chalcedon's Understanding of the Incarnation

In non-technical terms, the Incarnation indicates that the human and divine qualities of Jesus Christ are unified; but the precise meaning of that unity has been the subject of much debate. The theological term used to express that unity is *hypostasis*; and the key Definition of Faith is from the fifth session of the Fourth Ecumenical Council held in Chalcedon in 451, that Jesus Christ “is perfect according to divinity and perfect according to humanity, truly God and truly man,” with the

²⁰ Father John Anthony McGuckin, “Incarnation” in *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 180. All of the more than 400 entries in this handbook of more than 360 pages have been written by Father John. Soteriology is “a modern term derived from the Greek word for salvation (*soteria*) [and] refers to the doctrine or theology of salvation.” p.315.

properties of these “two natures”—divine and human— “retained and united in one single person and single hypostasis”—that is one concrete reality.²¹

Father Emmanuel Hatzidakis offers a clear definition of *hypostasis*, as well as a concise explanation of its importance in understanding Christ: “Hypostasis is nature in its concrete existence. Everything that exists is a hypostasis, a concrete reality. Every human being is a separate hypostasis. Christ too, although He is *from* two natures and subsists *in* two natures (human and divine) is a single hypostasis. After the incarnation, we don’t have a Son of God in heaven and Jesus on earth. Jesus Christ is the unique and eternal Son of God enfleshed.”²²

It is helpful to remember that the purpose of the Chalcedonian Definition of Faith “was to define the limits of legitimate speculation rather than to make an exact and final statement of a theological position.”²³ Ecumenical councils fight off heresy; they are best seen as apophatic events that agree what the Church does *not* believe. Lossky stresses the “apophatic character” of Chalcedon’s understanding of the Incarnation—how “the union of the two natures is expressed by ... negative definitions, so that “we know the fact of the union of the two natures in one person, but the ‘how’ of this union remains for us a mystery...”²⁴ In an important sense

²¹ Archbishop Peter L’Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils: The Disciplinary Work of the First Four Ecumenical Councils* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), p. 194; Philip Schaff & Rev. Henry Wallace, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol XIV*, p. 264; F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone (Eds.), *Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), entry on “hypostasis,” p. 813; Propresbyter Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition*, trans. Hieromonk Seraphim Rose, 3rd ed. (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005), pp. 183-184, 189).

²² Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen?* p. 228. The Italics for the words “from” and “in” are in the original text. It is helpful to understand that “contemporary Oriental Orthodox theologians prefer to speak of Christ as being *of* two natures, but not *in* two natures, because in their understanding ascribing two natures to Christ is equivalent to attributing two personalities to Him.” Father Hatzidakis proposes that: “If the Eastern Orthodox agree on using the term human *personality* as describing the uniquely human *character* of Christ that expresses all the particularities a human being has, and the Oriental Orthodox accept the same term an expression of His humanness, then both of them, in union with the Western Christians, would have the same understanding about the uniqueness of Christ’s humanness.” pp. 234-235.

²³ Cross & Livingstone, entry on “Chalcedon, the Definition of,” p. 315.

²⁴ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p.143. Cf. Hatzidakis, pp. 228-229.

then, while “defining the limitations of legitimate speculation” about the Incarnation, Chalcedon’s understanding of the Incarnation also invites further reflection rather than closing off debate.

As Father Emmanuel explains:

The Fifth Ecumenical Synod [held in Constantinople in 553] confirmed that Christ’s human nature did not have its own-human-hypostasis. As stated by this Synod, Christ *is* the Divine Logos: God the Word was ‘one and the same [with] our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Furthermore, the same Synod declared that the union of the two natures is real (against Arius), not a mere indwelling of God in a man (against Nestorius), with a rational soul (against Apollinaris), and that Christ’s divine nature remains unchanged (against Eutyches)²⁵

Thus in the full century between the Fourth and Fifth Ecumenical Councils, four heresies emerged that were firmly dismissed by the Fathers of the Fifth Ecumenical Council.

Despite the impressive progression over the centuries as the Ecumenical Councils clarified the meaning of the Incarnation, “ultimately, the ‘how’ does Christ function as God defies any logic and understanding.”²⁶ The advice of St Maximus the Confessor is very sound:

Let us contemplate with faith the mystery of the divine incarnation, and in all simplicity let us simply praise Him who in His great generosity became man for us. For who, relying on the power of rational demonstration, can explain how the conception of the divine Logos took place. How was flesh generated without seed? ... How did He who was supremely perfect develop as He grew up? ... Faith alone can embrace these mysteries, for it is faith that makes real for us things beyond intellect and reason [see Hebrews 11:1].²⁷

²⁵ Hatzidakis, p. 238.

²⁶ Hatzidakis, p. 241.

²⁷ St Maximus the Confessor, *The Capitula of the Council II of Constantinople*, NPNF-2, Vol 5, p. 313. Cited by Hatzidakis, pp. 241-242.

Let us now consider how modern Orthodox theology has reflected on the Incarnation.

4. The Incarnation in Modern Orthodox Theology

Following the Definition of Faith at Chalcedon and its progressive elucidation by future councils, it is entirely appropriate to view the Incarnation in rather general terms, as does the Romanian theologian, Father Dumitru Staniloae: “Jesus Christ is the bridge stretching from God to the realm of our humanity, by His one hypostasis, which unites both the divine and human natures.”²⁸ But Father Dumitru also sees Christ in the context of Colossians 1.16-17, as noted above, because “all things were created through him and in Him all things hold together,” so that the divine nature of Christ links the whole of creation to God the Father: “When God undertook to bring the world out of nothingness into existence, the Son was given the role of being in closest contact with it.”²⁹ Thus through the Incarnation, The Word of God, the Logos, not only humanity is drawn to Christ, but also creation is drawn to Christ. This is a powerful extension of the purposes of the hypostasis of Christ—that Christ deifies not only us, but the whole of creation.

It is indeed appropriate and rather awesome to see the Incarnation as opening up the possibility of deification to both the whole of creation and the whole of humanity. In *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition*, Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky suggests that “the general salvation of the world in Christ” and “the general justification of human existence” have been “accomplished by the Incarnation of God, together with all the further events in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.”³⁰ The editors from the St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood offer a concise definition of “general salvation” and “general justification” as:

²⁸ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar* (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon’s Orthodox Theological Seminary Press, 2002), p. 56.

²⁹ Staniloae, p. 56.

³⁰ Pomazansky, p. 202.

This is the ‘free gift’ that ‘came upon all men unto justification of life (Romans 5.18). Christ has saved our nature: through His Incarnation, death and Resurrection, physical death will not hold us, and all mankind has been made subject to future resurrection. Further, Christ has opened to human nature the possibility of being deified and united to God eternally in the Kingdom of Heaven.³¹

The monks are following St Nicholas Cabasilas in claiming correctly that “Christ broke down the three barriers that separated man from God: the barrier of nature by His Incarnation, the barrier of sin by His death, and the barrier of death by His Resurrection.”³²

5. Conclusion: How Can We Receive and Keep within Ourselves and the world the Grace of God?

What the monks from the St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood are proclaiming is that even after the Incarnation “other barriers between man and God still remained” and that **because of “the barrier of sin, man could not receive and keep the Grace of God within himself.”**³³ In other words, most human beings are not like the Theotokos. We do not have the ability to receive and keep within ourselves, in the words of St Basil the Great, “every grace of the Holy Spirit.” Furthermore, the world too must be called “back to grace.”³⁴ That is the dual challenge to be tackled in the next lecture—how can we link the Incarnation and the life of the Theotokos to our own lives and the world?

³¹ Pomazansky, p. 202n.

³² Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, 3rd Ed. (London: Janus, 1994), pp. 105-106.

³³ Pomazansky, p. 202n.

³⁴ McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, p. 315.