

# THE SINLESSNESS OF OUR MOST HOLY LADY

ABBOT EPHRAIM

*The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopaidi*

Following the Third Ecumenical Council, the assimilation of the dogmatic teaching about the Theotokos was very slow. Certain Fathers were waypoints regarding the person of the Theotokos, such as Cyril of Alexandria, John Damascene, Gregory Palamas, Nicholas Kavasilas, Nikodimos the Athonite, and Silouan the Athonite. In this paper, we compare the positions of certain contemporary Orthodox theologians with those of the previously mentioned Fathers regarding the subject of the sinlessness of the Virgin Mary.

‘Let no uninitiated\* hand touch the living Ark of God’, we sing at the ninth ode of many of the feasts of the Mother of God. Indeed, the mystery concerning the person and the life of the Mother of God is a book ‘sealed with seven seals’<sup>1</sup> for the uninitiated, for those who do not have the revelation, the divine grace. It is a real and audacious mystery, divine and human, inaccessible to those with feet of clay. How can anyone understand the most sublime matters concerning the Mother of God, since he or she does not even have experience of lesser things? How can anyone who has not been purged of the passions speak with authority about deification?

The Gospels are silent regarding the life of Our Lady, the Virgin, and reveal only very little. But the Holy Spirit, with the Tradition of the Church, teaches us a great deal, such as the significance and meaning of the Gospel references. And the Mother of God herself often reveals information to her faithful servants, the Fathers of the Church.

In the beginning, the Church was not greatly concerned with formulating dogma about Our Lady. It did so only as regards the Triune God (Trinitarian dogma) and the incarnate Word (Christological dogma). The dogmatic teaching of the Church concerning Our Lady was formulated gradually, in direct correlation with Christology. It was only the Roman Catholic Church which formulated particular doctrines about Our Lady (immaculate conception, the assumption of her body, etc.). Thus, Saint Basil the Great, within the perspective of the ancient patristic tradition and addressing those who had doubts about the virginity of the Mother of God after she gave birth, shifted the significance of the matter onto the virgin birth of Christ,

\*Literally ‘outside the temple’ therefore ‘uninitiated’, which is what the hymn says, rather than the modern meaning of ‘irreverent’. [trans. note]

<sup>1</sup> Rev 5:1.

and said that virginity was essential until the incarnation, but that we should not be curious about afterwards because of the mystery involved.<sup>2</sup>

Saint Cyril of Alexandria, whose teaching on the term 'Mother of God' was endorsed by the Third Ecumenical Synod,<sup>3</sup> and Saint John the Damascene were fundamental in the development of the dogmatic teaching concerning Our Lady. In general, we might say that, from the Third Ecumenical Synod onward, the absorption of the doctrinal teaching about the Mother of God was a very slow process.

The fourteenth century was called the century of Christian humanism for Byzantium, and, unlike earlier Fathers, Saint Gregory Palamas was perhaps the first who stressed the anthropological significance of the person of the Mother of God, though he did not, of course, ignore her Christological importance, nor minimize the requirement for her. He spoke at length about the person and the ascetic life of the Virgin. He presented her as a hesychast within the Holy of Holies and as a model of spiritual perfection.<sup>4</sup> It was he who demonstrated that Our Lady was the first to see the risen Christ. According to Saint Gregory, she was 'the only virgin in the true sense'. She had acquired perfect purity, she was a virgin in body and soul and was unable to be touched by anything polluted, whether in the bodily senses or in the faculties of her soul.<sup>5</sup>

Palamas' perception was followed by his near contemporary, Saint Nikolaos Kavasilas. He writes that: 'It was a source of wonder, not only among people but among angels as well, that, though the Virgin was a simply a human and had nothing more about her than any other person, she—and she alone—was able to escape our common infirmity (i.e. sin).'<sup>6</sup> She was 'the one and only person who was freed from sin once and for all'.<sup>7</sup>

Later we find Saint Nikodimos the Athonite, whose theology was a synthesis based on that of all the preceding Fathers. He declared: 'If we suppose that all people and the rest of created beings wanted to become wicked, only Our Lady the Mother of God alone would be sufficient to please God' and that 'the whole of the intelligible and perceptible world came about for this end, that is for Our Lady the Mother of God, and, again, Our Lady the Mother of God came about for Our Lord Jesus Christ'.<sup>8</sup> In his interpretation *On the ninth ode to Mary the Mother of God*, he writes

<sup>2</sup> Basil the Great, *Eis tēn ágiān tou Christou génnēsin* 5 (PG 31:1468AB).

<sup>3</sup> See Chrysostomos Stamoulis, *Θεοτόκος καὶ ὁρθόδοξο δόγμα. Σπουδὴ στὴ διδασκαλία τοῦ ἁγίου Κυρίλλου Ἀλεξανδρείας* (Thessaloniki: Palimpsiston, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Whereas the Fathers of the fourth century promoted the Prophet Moses as the model of perfection (see Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Περὶ τοῦ βίου Μωϋσέως τοῦ νομοθέτου, ἡ περὶ τῆς κατ' ἀρετὴν τελειότητος* [PG 44:297-429]), Saint Gregory Palamas places the Virgin as the model of perfection and exemplar for the faithful in his homilies and in particular in Homily 53 in *Τρηγορίου Παλαμᾶ Ὁμιλίας KB*, ed. S. Oikonomou (Athens: F. Karampini & K. Vafa, 1861), 131-80.

<sup>5</sup> See Saint Gregory Palamas, Homily 14 (PG 151:172BC).

<sup>6</sup> See Saint Nikolaos Kavasilas, *Ἡ Θεομήτωρ, Eis tēn Génnēsin* 6, ed. P. Nellas, 4th ed. (Athens: Apostoliki Diakonia, 1995), 69.

<sup>7</sup> Saint Nikolaos Kavasilas, *ibid.* 8, 196.

<sup>8</sup> Saint Nikodimos the Athonite, *Συμβουλευτικὸν ἐγχειρίδιον* (Athens: O agios Nikodimos, n.d.), 224.

that ‘the Mother of God was beyond any deliberate sin, whether venial or mortal, even to the extent of being attacked by wicked thoughts’.<sup>9</sup>

Finally we come to Saint Silouan the Athonite who testifies in the Holy Spirit that ‘the Mother of God never sinned even in thought’.<sup>10</sup>

Christ did not sin because, as a divine hypostasis (person) he could not do so. He was completely sinless by nature. ‘No-one is sinless but God’<sup>11</sup> refers to this sinlessness by nature of the Holy Trinity and, naturally, of Christ as the second person thereof. The Mother of God did not sin, although she could have done so. She was not sinless by nature, but by choice, by will, by grace.

The Mother of God had a real, perfect and not relative<sup>12</sup> sinlessness in her works, words, and thoughts, and not just a relative sinlessness. Neither was ‘the sin of the Mother of God minimal’,<sup>13</sup> nor did her exemption from sin occur after Pentecost,

Cf. Saint Nikodimos the Athonite, *Άόρατος Πόλεμος*, (Athens: O agios Nikodimos, n.d.), chap. 49, 165-6.

<sup>9</sup> Saint Nikodimos the Athonite, *Κήπος Χαρίτων*, 4th ed. (Thessaloniki: Rigopoulos, 1992), 200.

<sup>10</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1991), 392.

<sup>11</sup> Saint John the Damascene, *Ἐρὰ Παράλληλα, Τίτλ. ΙΓ’* (PG 95:1172AB).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, in the Dogmatics of Panayiotis Trembelas, where he writes: ‘As regards the sinlessness, which the Western Church, based on the one hand, on the salutation of the angels, in which the Mother is God is called “full of grace” and on the other on the idea that, were we to accept that she had been guilty of sin, this would reflect badly on the honour of her Son, we accept this as being merely relative, in the sense that Saint Paul says of himself “as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault”’. What is the late professor implying by the word ‘relative’? Whether the Mother of God sinned or not is not clear. Further on, however, he states that ‘only Saint Augustine accepts the Mother of God as completely free of personal sin’. And he goes on to say: ‘Many of the other Fathers and writers, however, attribute to the Virgin not only the potential to sin, but also that she was not free of weaknesses and certain imperfections (i.e. the passions)’. Thereafter he cites isolated passages from the Fathers and Church writers (Origen, John Chrysostom, Zigavinos), but without any examination of the reason, the cause of them writing this. Nor does he link it with the rest of their teaching on the Mother of God, where he ‘proves’ her to be impassioned! See P. Trembelas, *Δογματική*, vol. II, 2nd ed. (Athens: *Ἀδελφότης Θεολόγων «Ὁ Σωτήρ»*, 1979), 213-5. See also, *ibid.*, 215-6, for the Protestant-leaning manner by which he seeks to counter the Roman Catholic innovations concerning the Mother of God, where he is puzzled by Ludwig Ott’s assertion that no grace is transmitted to people without her active intercession’. It appears that the professor was unaware that by the same token we can also charge Saint Gregory Palamas, who writes revealingly: ‘Therefore she is the border between created and uncreated nature and no-one can come to God except through her and the Intercessor born of her. And none of God’s gifts can be made to people and angels except through her’. Gregory Palamas, *Ὁμιλία 53, 23, Ἰρηγορίου Παλαμᾶ Ὁμιλίας ΚΒ’*, ed. S. Oikonomou (Athens: F. Karampini & K. Vafa, 1861), 159.

<sup>13</sup> See Amalia Spourlakou-Eftychiadou, *Ἡ Παναγία Θεοτόκος τύπος χριστιανικῆς ἀγιότητος* (Athens: [n.n.], 1990), 57, n. 1. In other words, Our Lady did not have many sins and they were of minor consequence! This thesis was written, as appears from its explanatory subtitle as ‘A Contribution to the Orthodox Position against the Roman Catholic Immaculate Conception and Dogmas Related to it’. In her efforts to counter the Roman Catholic dogma, Spourlakou generally uses Protestant-leaning arguments and at many points contradicts herself, employing a host of Patristic and other passages to no effect, thus rendering the whole of her dissertation (in total 646 pages) somewhat rambling. As regards the issue of the sinlessness of the Mother of God, her position is not clear. For example, apart from the ‘subordinate sin’, which we mentioned above, at the beginning of p. 53, although she has written that Our Lady ‘received the grace not sinning’, she continues, on the same page, to claim that she had imperfections and venial faults. But venial faults/sins are in essence consent to sins in the mind. Likewise, on p. 628, where the sinlessness of the Mother of God is likened (essentially downgraded) to that of the righteous in the Old Testament and that the sanctity of the Mother of God ‘is open to all those who have the same receptiveness’. Cf. p. 55,

or even after the Annunciation.<sup>14</sup> Nor is it sufficient to argue that sin was potential within her, but not active, unless we make clear that this ‘potential’ was not activated in deed, words, or thoughts.<sup>15</sup> Even this ‘sinlessness by grace’<sup>16</sup> is accepted with the supposition that, with the synergy of divine grace, the Mother of God remained sinless from her birth until her Dormition and not that ‘irresistible grace’ imposed sinlessness after the Annunciation. This is put forward by many of ‘our’ modern theologians who answer Roman Catholic doctrines concerning the Mother of God with theology which leans towards Protestantism. If the heretics, ancient and modern, doubted the sinlessness of Christ,<sup>17</sup> how much more would they that of his Mother?

A heretical doctrine cannot be refuted by argument and intellectual theologizing, but only through the empirical knowledge of Orthodox patristic theology. Those who most purely express the dogmas of the Church have developed their noetic and rational energy<sup>18</sup> to the fullest extent, who have acquired a dogmatic conscience. According to the blessed Elder Sophrony, this ‘is the fruit of spiritual experience, independent of the logical brain’s activity’.<sup>19</sup> ‘It is the deep-set life of the spirit, having nothing to do with abstract gnosis’, and it is absorbed after years of fluctuating spiritual states, of visits and withdrawal of grace<sup>20</sup>.

where she writes about the ‘similarity and identity of every Christian with the (sanctity of) the Mother of God’. Of course, we do not have the opportunity to make a detailed critique of Spourlakou’s dissertation, but we think (and believe that without wishing to do so) she diminishes the person of the Mother of God. Who can attain to the sanctity of the Most Holy Mother of God? Or perhaps she should also be judged, as the Pentecostals say? It is one thing to say that the Mother of God is a model of the Christian life, and quite another to say that we should be likened to her, that we should have the same receptivity of sanctity.

<sup>14</sup> See Professor Ioannis Kaloyirou, ‘*Μαρία*’, in *Θρησκευτική και Ήθική Έγκυκλοπαίδεια*, vol. 8 (Athens: Athanasios Martinos, 1966), 675. Kaloyirou is normally very profound and a pioneer in his studies of Our Lady (Trembelas followed him and Spourlatou more or less copies him), but here, fearing that the perfect sinlessness of Our Lady (not, of course, by nature, but by will, by choice) comes from the immaculate conception, transposes this sinlessness until after either the Annunciation, the Resurrection, or Pentecost. This phobia is also apparent in his study *Μαρία, ἡ Ἀειπάρθενος Θεοτόκος κατά τὴν ὀρθόδοξον πίστιν* (Thessaloniki, [n.n.], 1957), where, in the chapter, ‘*Τὸ ἀναμάρτητον τῆς Θεοτόκου ἐξ ἐπόψεως Ὁρθοδόξου*’, p. 78 ff., he enlists Syrian and Monophysite theologians in his support, ignoring the Patristic Tradition post-Saint John the Damascene. He also believes that Saint Nikolaos Kavalas writes about the purity and sinlessness of the Mother of God ‘acting under Latin, scholastic influence’. See *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>15</sup> See Amalia Spourlakou-Eftychiadou, *Ἡ Παναγία Θεοτόκος τύπος χριστιανικῆς ἀγιότητος*, *ibid.*, 57. Besides, once Orthodox Christians are baptized they are not only potentially but also actively sinless.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 53. Cf. Kaloyirou, ‘*Μαρία*’, *ibid.*, 675.

<sup>17</sup> See Christos Androutsos, *Δογματικὴ τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Ἀνατολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας*, 4th ed. (Athens: Astir, 1992), 191-3. Our theologians have also misinterpreted the sinlessness of Christ. See, for example, Andreas Theodorou, *Ἡ περὶ Τριάδος καὶ Χριστοῦ διδασκαλία τῆς Παρακλητικῆς* (Athens: [n.n.], 1962), 32, where Christ is presented as sinless by will, not by nature.

<sup>18</sup> See our paper, ‘*Ἡ χρῆση λογικῆς καὶ νοεῶς ἐνέργειας τοῦ ἀνθρώπου κατὰ τὸν ἅγιο Γρηγόριο Παλαμᾶ, in Πρακτικὰ Διεθνῶν Ἐπιστημονικῶν Συνεδρίων Ἀθηνῶν καὶ Λεμεσοῦ, Ὁ ἅγιος Γρηγόριος ὁ Παλαμᾶς στὴν ἱστορία καὶ τὸ παρόν* (Mount Athos: Holy Great Monastery of Vatopaidi, 2000), 776.

<sup>19</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 186.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 188. Cf. the vision which Saint Gregory Palamas had of the transformation of milk into wine, where his moral discourse was elevated to the dogmatic after 18 years of monastic asceticism. Philotheos of Constantinople, *Λόγος ἐγκωμιαστικὸς εἰς Γρηγόριον Παλαμᾶν* (PG 151:580AD).

According to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, Our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God, is 'ever-virgin'. That is, she was a virgin before she gave birth, while giving birth, and after giving birth. This virginity does not lie so much in her bodily purity, but much more so in that of her soul because 'virginity, as a mere biological state, is of no significance for theology or for salvation'.<sup>21</sup> To put it another way, the 'ever-virgin state' of the Mother of God is to be identified with perfect purity, i.e. sinlessness.<sup>22</sup> Sinlessness before she gave birth, while doing so, and afterwards. Her sinlessness did not derive from her Immaculate Conception<sup>23</sup> as the Roman Catholic Church wrongly dogmatized through Pope Pius IX in 1854, but from her free, personal turning away from sin.

The Virgin was conceived 'temperately in the womb of Anna by Joachim'. The fact that she was conceived 'temperately' means that the manner of her conception was pure and restrained. But for the Virgin to have been conceived immaculately, she would have had to have had a virgin birth, as Christ did.<sup>24</sup> The All-Pure Virgin, is the only member of the human race to have preserved, unblemished and bright, the 'image of God'. With her pure will and ascetic life, she developed, in freedom, all the godly virtues to the greatest extent. It is only in Our Lady that we have the full harmony of nature and hypostasis, or person. We have the union of outlook, of will, with the order of nature, so that, as Saint Maximos the Confessor puts it, we have 'the reconciliation of God with nature'.<sup>25</sup> Her will was completely aligned with that of God. She had rendered her volition entirely to God.

This is why she was able to say, with magnificent humility, at her Annunciation: 'Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; let it be unto me according to your word'.<sup>26</sup> When it was explained to her that the conception would occur through the Holy Spirit in her virgin womb, she agreed, she accepted God's ineffable dispensation. Only someone who had led a spotless and unblemished life, only someone who had shown particular, unique, and magnificent awareness of God, who had acquired divine love

<sup>21</sup> Georgios Mantzaridis, *"Ἡ Παρθένος Μαρία, μητέρα τῆς καινῆς κτίσεως"*, in *Πρακτικά Θεολογικοῦ Συνεδρίου εἰς τιμὴν τῆς Ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου καὶ Ἀειπαρθένου Μαρίας* (15-17 Νοεμβρίου 1989) (Thessaloniki: Holy Metropolis of Thessaloniki, 1991), 274.

<sup>22</sup> 'Spiritual virginity is sinlessness'. Protopresbyter George Florovsky, *"Ἡ Ἀειπαρθένος Μητέρα τοῦ Θεοῦ"*, in *Θέματα ὀρθοδόξου θεολογίας*, 2nd ed. (Athens: Artos Zois, 1989), 136.

<sup>23</sup> This dogma of the Papist Church brought another one as a logical concomitant, that of the Assumption, which was formulated by Pope Pius XII in 1954. If the Roman Catholics spoke explicitly about the physical death of the Mother of God, the Orthodox would agree, since, according to tradition, after her demise Our Lady ascended, in the body, to the heavens. Testimony to her translation is the Holy Girdle, which was given to the Apostle Thomas. Professor Megas Farandos, who was also of a Protestant mind in his teaching on the Mother of God, does not accept the translation in the body, see M. Farandos, *Δογματικά καὶ ἠθικά I* (Athens: [n.n.], 1983), 270-1. Naturally, he also considered the sinlessness of Our Lady to be relative, too, see *ibid.*, 268-9.

<sup>24</sup> See also the testimony of Saint Paisios on the untroubled conception of the Mother of God in Hieromonk Isaak, *Βίος τοῦ Ἱεροντοῦ Παΐσιου τοῦ Ἀγιορείτου* (Mount Athos: Holy Hermitage of St. John the Forerunner, 2004), 171-2.

<sup>25</sup> See Saint Maximos the Confessor, *Ἑρμηνεία εἰς τὸ Πάτερ ἡμῶν* (PG 90:901CD).

<sup>26</sup> Luke 1:38.

such as no other created being had ever known, could accept this incomprehensible dispensation on the part of God without any doubts. The holy Virgin did accept Gabriel's praise, with humility and simplicity, as also the message of the divine incarnation, because she alone was so well suited to the supreme honour and mission which God had given her.<sup>27</sup>

This is precisely where her central and active role lies in the mystery of the incarnation of God and the salvation of humankind. She prepared herself with her most holy life so that she would attract God from heaven to earth. The Ever-Virgin Mary was not the best woman on earth, nor simply the best woman of all time, but she was unique in bringing down heaven to earth, in making God a human person. 'For she alone stood between God and the whole race of humankind. She made God the Son of Man, and men the sons of God. She made the earth heaven and our race divine'.<sup>28</sup>

Had the Virgin committed sins before the Annunciation—even if only in thought—how could the good, the holy Lord have come to be joined, to become incarnate from something that was not good and holy but rather had experience of sin? The Virgin who made room for God lived on earth as if she has no relation to the sin which humankind had committed in history. Saint Nikolaos Kavalas compares her to the ark of Noah, which took part—and indeed a saving one—in the flood, but had nothing to do with the people of the time of Noah.<sup>29</sup>

Born of human persons—Joachim and Ann—the Virgin inherited and bore the sin of Adam and Eve and its consequences: mortality and the blameless passions.<sup>30</sup> She received as much help from God as everyone else, and she lived without sin before she gave birth. It was from this sinless body and sinless soul, in other words this complete, sinless person, that the Son and Word of God took a sinless body and sinless soul and became a human person. His was the only immaculate conception.

<sup>27</sup> 'The Virgin Mary alone was the worthy temple of the divine incarnation! The Divine Word looked to the wondrous beauty of her soul in order to borrow His human nature through her precious blood. A Mother worthy of Her Son!' A. Theodorou, *Ἡ περὶ Τριάδος καὶ Χριστοῦ διδασκαλία τῆς Παρακλητικῆς* (Athens: [n.n.], 1962), 33.

<sup>28</sup> Saint Gregory Palamas, *Ὁμιλία 37, Εἰς τὴν Κοίμησιν* (PG 151:465B). We do not agree with the scholastic view that Our Lady could have had a married life and still served without obstacle or hindrance the plan for the divine incarnation. Had that been preferable to the life of a virgin, why did God not do it?

<sup>29</sup> See Saint Nikolaos Kavalas, *Ἡ Θεομήτωρ, Εἰς τὸν Εὐαγγελισμόν 3*, ed. P. Nellas, 4th ed. (Athens: Apostoliki Diakonia, 1995), 126.

<sup>30</sup> Since the Fall, people have not inherited/ participated in the guilt of sin of Adam and Eve, but are subject to the consequences for what is now debilitated human nature, decay, the venial sins and death. If people feel guilt over the sin of Adam and Eve and that they are being punished by God, this indicates an influence from Western, legalistic teaching on the Fall. See Fr. John Romanidis, *Τὸ προπατορικὸν ἁμάρτημα*, 3rd ed. (Athens: Domos, 1992), 154 and 160-1. We did not sin in the person of Adam, nor did everyone become sinners because of him. In his interpretation of the passage in Saint Paul, 'For as through the disobedience of one person [Adam] many became sinners' (Rom 5:19), Saint Cyril of Alexandria writes: 'Many people became sinners not through having transgressed with Adam, since they were not there then, but as being of that nature which has fallen under the law of sin [...] Human nature fell sick through Adam through the corruption of disobedience and it was thus that the passions entered it' (PG 74:789B).



God created human beings ‘sinless by nature and independent by will’.<sup>31</sup> Through misuse of his independent will, sin entered man and has overcome him. According to Saint Nikolaos Kavalas, God knew that humankind was capable of offering him an untainted and pure human nature—like the one which had first been created—so that he could take his Mother from it.<sup>32</sup> God waited for the ‘only Pure and Spotless Virgin’ to be born, so that the dispensation He had created before the foundation of the world could be implemented. He did not change His plans, nor did he do away with His creatures, because that would have indicated that he had done something not ‘very well’.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, the process of the Virgin’s labour was also sinless, since it was supernatural, ‘without pain’. But even after she had given birth she lived sinlessly, since within her dwelt ‘bodily the whole fullness of the Most High’.<sup>34</sup> From the moment when she was ‘overshadowed by the power of the Most High’,<sup>35</sup> that is, of the Holy Spirit, at the Annunciation, Our Lady the Virgin received a continual increase in sanctity, which did not cease and was not interrupted. Saint Gregory Palamas writes: ‘For you are holy and full of grace, but the Holy Spirit will come upon you through a more sublime addition of sanctity, preparing and making provision for the birth of God within you’.<sup>36</sup> George Florovsky agrees with Palamas and considers that at the time of the Annunciation we have ‘a premature Pentecost’.<sup>37</sup> In other words, what happened to the Virgin at the Annunciation was a purification, according to the Fathers;<sup>38</sup> not purification from personal sins, which did not exist, but ‘an addition of graces’.<sup>39</sup>

Those who do not accept the sinlessness of the Mother of God try to support their view with certain scriptural passages and events which, unfortunately, they misinterpret. Thus, at the marriage of Cana in Galilee,<sup>40</sup> they claim that the Mother of God ‘was moved “by the sickness of vanity”, since “she troubled the Lord in an untimely manner” when Christ at first refused to perform the miracle, as his Mother

<sup>31</sup> Saint John the Damascene, *Ἐκθεσις πίστεως* 26 (PG 94:924AB).

<sup>32</sup> ‘But requiring this, He did so in order that He would take His Mother from it, after supplication had been made’. Saint Nikolaos Kavalas, *Ἡ Θεομήτωρ, Εἰς τὸν Εὐαγγελισμὸν* 8, ed. P. Nellas, 4th ed. (Athens: Apostoliki Diakonia, 1995), 150.

<sup>33</sup> Gen 1:31.

<sup>34</sup> Col 2:9.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Luke 1:35.

<sup>36</sup> Saint Gregory Palamas, *Ὁμιλία* 14 (PG 151:176).

<sup>37</sup> See Fr. George Florovsky, *Ἡ Αειπάρθενος Μητέρα τοῦ Θεοῦ*, in *Θέματα ὀρθοδόξου θεολογίας*, 2nd ed. (Athens: Artos Zois, 1989), 130.

<sup>38</sup> ‘For after she consented, the Holy Spirit came upon her according to the word of the Lord which the angel had spoken, and purified her’. Saint John the Damascene, *Ἐκδοσις ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως* 46 (PG 94:985B).

<sup>39</sup> ‘According to the holy teachers, the Virgin was not purified by the Spirit as if she were not pure before, but as an addition of graces, in the same manner as angels are purified, though there is no evil in them’. Saint Nikolaos Kavalas, *Ἡ Θεομήτωρ, Εἰς τὴν Γέννησιν* 10, ed. P. Nellas, 4th ed. (Athens: Apostoliki Diakonia, 1995), 84.

<sup>40</sup> See John 2:1-10.

urged him to do'.<sup>41</sup> But we would say that this demonstrates exactly the extent of the confidence of the Mother of God, because, despite his initial refusal, Christ obeyed Our Lady and performed the miracle.<sup>42</sup> Something similar happened with a miracle connected to one of the seven wonder-working icons in our Monastery, Our Lady the Consolation.<sup>43</sup>

As regards the occasion when Christ was speaking to the multitudes and his mother and those considered to be his brethren wished to speak to him and Christ said that 'whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother',<sup>44</sup> it has been claimed that, with this answer, the Lord gently chided her ambitious aim and expelled the tyrannical passion of vanity.<sup>45</sup> But here, as in all his public appearances, Christ shows no particular sentimental attachment to his mother, which is why it appears that he never calls her 'mother' in the Gospels. Because those who have not experienced love in the Holy Spirit would be able to misinterpret this as sentimental. There is, however, an enormous difference between the two kinds of love, as great as the difference between the created and the uncreated. Moreover, Christ did not want to have his mother as a witness to his work, because, since he was mostly addressing disbelieving and inflexible Jews, her testimony would have been suspect. Saint Gregory Palamas proposes something similar, in fact, when he explains why it was that the evangelists did not explicitly state that the risen Christ appeared first to his All-Holy Mother.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> See Trembelas, *Δογματική*, vol. II, 214. Trembelas bases his argument on Homily XXI of Saint John Chrysostom *Εἰς τὸν εὐαγγελιστὴν Ἰωάννην*, though the focus of Chrysostom's homily is not the person of the Mother of God but the moral teaching: 'Let us not then boast of our lineage, for even if we have a whole host of wonderful forebears, let us make it our business to outdo them in virtue'. *Εἰς τὸν εὐαγγελιστὴν Ἰωάννην*, *Ὁμιλία* 21 (PG 59:132). With his skill as an orator, Chrysostom develops this idea throughout his homily, though not to the detriment of the Mother of Christ, since Christ 'honours her greatly'. *Ibid.*, (PG 59:131).

<sup>42</sup> Hieromonk Grigorios, *Ἡ Ὑπεραγία Θεοτόκος* (Mount Athos: Holy Cell St John the Theologian of Monastery Koutloumousiou, 1994), 39. Our Lady's words 'do whatever he tells you' are her testament, since they are the only time she refers to Christ and they are also the last of her words to be recorded by the evangelists. See Hieromonk Grigorios, *ibid.*, 38-42.

<sup>43</sup> See Georgios Mantzaridis, 'Miraculous icons – holy relics', in *The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopaidi, Tradition – History – Art*, vol. I (Mount Athos: Holy Great Monastery of Vatopaidi, 1998), 118.

<sup>44</sup> See Matt 12:46-8. Cf. Luke 8:19-21.

<sup>45</sup> See Trembelas, *Δογματική*, vol. II, 215. Amalia Spourlakou refers to the passage Luke 8:21 on the cover of her book. Both quote Saint John Chrysostom, *Εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον*, *Ὁμιλία* 44 (PG 57:463-472) to support their view that the Mother of God was not sinless and that she even had passions. But they misinterpret Chrysostom, since they do not understand the basics of this particular homily. In this homily, the saint wanted to stress the value of virtue, which doesn't lie in family, but in will, which is why he emphasizes, in the same homily that we not boast of our children unless we share their virtues, nor of forebears unless we are like them, see *ibid.*, (PG 57:466).

<sup>46</sup> 'And the evangelists did not say this clearly, not wishing to offer His Mother as a witness, so as not to give the non-believers any cause for suspicion' Saint Gregory Palamas *Ὁμιλία* 18 (PG 151:237D). Besides, many interpreters, such as Saint Nikolaos Kavasilas consider that, with this comparison, Christ places his Mother as a model at the very peak of sanctity. See Saint Nikolaos Kavasilas, *Ἡ Θεομήτωρ, Εἰς τὴν Γέννησιν* 10, ed. P. Nellas, 4th ed. (Athens: Apostoliki Diakonia, 1995) 86. Cf. Hieromonk Grigorios, *Ἡ Ὑπεραγία Θεοτόκος*, *ibid.*, 41.



It is also claimed that, at Christ's crucifixion, the 'sword which pierced'<sup>47</sup> the virgin's heart was due to lack of faith and that she was shocked and shattered by Christ's dishonourable death.<sup>48</sup> Saint Silouan the Athonite writes, however:

We cannot attain to the full the love of the Mother of God, and so we cannot thoroughly comprehend her grief. Her love was complete. She had an illimitable love for God and her Son but she loved the people, too, with a great love. What, then, must she have felt when those same people whom she loved so dearly, and whose salvation she desired with all her being, crucified her beloved Son? We cannot fathom such things, since there is little love in us for God and man.<sup>49</sup>

Of course, to show that the Mother of God was a human being and not a goddess (because Nestorios and other heretics said, 'it is impossible for God to be born of a human'<sup>50</sup>), Saint Luke the evangelist has preserved for us the occasion when, on their return from Jerusalem, Our Lady did not know where, Christ, her child, was and she and her betrothed, Joseph, looked for him for three days.<sup>51</sup> This, however, demonstrates a sinless error and the fact that she was not all-knowing, since she was human.<sup>52</sup>

The Mother of God did not even have venial sins. She had perfect sinlessness as regards works, words, and sin in the mind.<sup>53</sup> This came about because, from her birth to her Dormition, she was in unbroken and conscious communion with God. 'The whole of her life was an uninterrupted transcendence of the tendency towards evil, and continuous ascent and progress towards virtue. With her holy Life, Our Lady surpassed the stage of asceticism and purification'.<sup>54</sup> Saint Silouan writes revealingly that: 'The Mother of God never lost grace', which is why she never sinned, even in thought'.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>47</sup> See Luke 2:35.

<sup>48</sup> See I. Kaloyirou, *Μαρία, ἡ Ἀειπάρθενος Θεοτόκος κατὰ τὴν ὀρθόδοξον πίστιν* (Thessaloniki: [n.n.], 1957), 96 ff.

<sup>49</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 390.

<sup>50</sup> See I. Karmiris, *Τὰ Δογματικά καὶ Συμβολικά μνημεῖα τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Καθολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας*, vol. I (Athens: [n.n.], 1952), 138.

<sup>51</sup> See Luke 2:44-6.

<sup>52</sup> See also Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 392.

<sup>53</sup> Patriarch Kyrillos I (Loukaris) confessed this 'threefold sinlessness' of Our Lady in a homily on the Dormition of the Mother of God. See I. Karmiris, *Τὰ Δογματικά καὶ Συμβολικά μνημεῖα τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου καὶ Καθολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας*, vol. II (Athens: [n.n.], 1953), 711.

<sup>54</sup> Eftyhia Yioultsi, *Ἡ Παναγία πρότυπο πνευματικῆς τελειώσεως* (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 2001), 87. As regards the sinlessness of Our Lady, Yioultsi writes clearly that 'with her most holy life, she herself completely avoided sin and is the only person without sin', *ibid.*, 89. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, *Ἐξομολόγηση καὶ Θεία Κοινωνία, Ἐπίγνωση*, 86 (Autumn 2003): 13, also is clear as regards the sinlessness of Our Lady, when he writes that 'no human being has been sinless with the exception of the Most Holy Birth-Giver of God, the Mother of the Lord'.

<sup>55</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite, ibid.*, 390.

The way a person sees, his or her witness and confession concerning the person and sinlessness of Our Lady the Mother of God, reveals his or her internal spiritual state. Of course, the Protestants and the Roman Catholics stand respectively at the two extremes of under-appreciation and over-appreciation of the person of Our Lady. But within the sphere of Orthodoxy, too, the moralists, on the one hand, and the intellectualists, on the other, certainly have mistaken views concerning Our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God, because they are not founded on empirical, existential communion with her.<sup>56</sup> The moralists accept the corporeal virginity of the Mother of God, but not the spiritual, because they cannot get beyond the 'outside of the cup'.<sup>57</sup> The intellectualists do not believe in the sinlessness of Our Lady, because it is unacceptable to their brilliant and penetrative, though obsolete and unenlightened, minds. The blessed Elder Sophrony of Essex, who was an empirical theologian and beholder of God and, in my opinion, the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, confesses: 'No person has ever been sinless, except the Most Holy Virgin Mary',<sup>58</sup> 'and with her, and thanks to her, the history of the world stepped into a new orbit immeasurably more grandiose than before'.<sup>59</sup> If someone believes that the deification of man is a moral event<sup>60</sup> and not an ontological state, how can he or she penetrate and infiltrate the mystery of the Mother of God?

Of course, 'the more profound experience of the Mother of God is hidden from us and nobody will ever be able to share in that unique experience'.<sup>61</sup> It was and is not possible for any created being to be more perfect than her, nor could she herself have become more perfect than she is. According to Saint Augustine, 'despite being all-powerful there are three things which God could not have made more perfect: the incarnation, the Virgin, and the bliss of the righteous in the life to come'.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>56</sup> This empirical communion is created through prayer, but principally through the body of Christ. 'The body of Christ is one and undivided. It is the body which was born of the Virgin Mary. It is the body of which the faithful partake at the sacrament of the Divine Eucharist. This body creates the new creation. This is the land of the living, which manifested to the world the container of the uncontainable, the Virgin Mary, the mother of the new creation'. Georgios Mantzaridis, *Ἡ Παρθένος Μαρία, μητέρα τῆς καινῆς κτίσεως*, *ibid.*, 277. In this sense, the blessed Elder Iosif the Hesychast, that Athonite friend of the Mother of God, saw in the body of Christ 'the most wonderful relationship, which we have received from Our Lady and sweet little Mother'. Elder Iosif, *Θείας Χάριτος ἐμπειρίες, Γέροντας Ἰωσήφ ὁ Ἡσυχαστής, Ἐπιστολή 13* (Mount Athos: Holy Great Monastery of Vatopaidi, 2005), 172.

<sup>57</sup> Matt 23:25.

<sup>58</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *Ὁψόμεθα τὸν Θεὸν καθὼς ἐστι* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1992), 240 (greek version) and in the first edition in Russian Архимандрит Софроний (Сахаров), Видеть Бога как Он есть (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1985), 148.

<sup>59</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *We shall see Him as He is* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1988), 217.

<sup>60</sup> 'Of course, this glorification can be understood only in a moral sense'. Amalia Spourlakou-Eftychiadou *Ἡ Παναγία Θεοτόκος τύπος χριστιανικῆς ἀγιότητος* (Athens: [n.n.], 1990), 433.

<sup>61</sup> Protopresbyter George Florovsky, *Ἡ Ἀειπάρθενος Μητέρα τοῦ Θεοῦ*, in *Θέματα ὀρθοδόξου θεολογίας* 2nd ed. (Athens: Artos Zois, 1989), 134.

<sup>62</sup> This passage has been borrowed from Monk Theoklitos Dionysiatis, *Τερομόναχος Ἀθανάσιος Ἰβηρίτης, Ὁ θερμὸς Λάτρης τῆς Πορταϊτίσσης* (1885-1973), 2nd ed., (Athens: Spiliotis, 2002), 41.

Because of her ‘God-bearing, spiritual beauty, beyond measure and description’,<sup>63</sup> her all-holiness, and her sinlessness, Our Lady is magnified in Orthodox worship with wonderful and theologically rich hymns<sup>64</sup> and is praised with sublime, revelatory words which are inaccessible to the ordinary human mind.<sup>65</sup> Fervent prayers are addressed to her.<sup>66</sup> We are not paying the honour due to Our Lady the Mother of God if we maintain that she was merely virtuous and lived in obedience and humility, but do not confess what is even greater: that she lived without sin. Christ is not jealous; we do not detract from his person as the only creator and Saviour of the world<sup>67</sup> if we say that his Mother is sinless. Not, of course, by nature, but by choice. We need to cast aside the phobia which comes from Protestant-style arguments which claim that by honouring the person of Our Lady, we are separating her from Christ, from the mystery of the incarnation. Honour and veneration of Our Lady do not mean acceptance of Roman Catholic Marianism.<sup>68</sup> Orthodox teaching on the Mother of God expresses and interprets her true position within the Church.

<sup>63</sup> Monk Theoklitos Dionysiatis, *Ἡ Παναγία Σουμελά* (Thessaloniki: Panagia Soumela, 1994), 39.

<sup>64</sup> The hymnology does not exaggerate, but rather theologizes and saves. Dimitrios Tselengidis, Professor of Dogmatics, declares: ‘The teaching of the Church concerning the Mother of God, as this is manifested in the hymnography of her feasts, is no different from the dogmatic formulations of the Ecumenical Synods which dealt with the Mother of God’. D. Tselengidis, *Ἡ θεοτοκολογία στήν ὑμνολογία τῶν θεομητορικῶν ἑορτῶν*, in *Ὁρθόδοξη θεολογία καί ζωή* (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 2005), 48. We do not agree with Kaloyirou when he talks of ‘poetic and rhetorical embellishments and overstatements in hymns to the Mother of God’ (See I. Kaloyirou, *Μαρία ἡ Ἀειπάρθενος*, *ibid.*, 108-9) or when he attempts to oppose Elder Theoklitos Dionysiatis over the hymn ‘Hail God after God [...]’ (See *idem*, *Ἡ ὁρθόδοξος συμβολή εἰς τήν σύγχρονον ἐπιδίωξιν, κοινῆς χριστιανικῆς ἐκφράσεως τῆς περὶ τῆς Θεοτόκου Μαρίας ἀληθείας καί τῆς πρὸς αὐτὴν τιμῆς*, in *Πρακτικά Θεολογικοῦ Συνεδρίου εἰς τιμὴν τῆς Ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου καὶ Ἀειπαρθένου Μαρίας* (15-17 Νοεμβρίου 1989) (Thessaloniki: Holy Metropolis of Thessaloniki, 1991), 693-4. Nor do we agree with I. Karmiris when he writes: ‘What is said thus, metaphorically and by poetic licence, and is sung in the whole of Worship should not be taken literally, since it does not belong to the substance of Orthodox dogmas’, I. Karmiris, *Τὰ Δογματικά καὶ Συμβολικά μνημεῖα τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Καθολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας*, vol. I (Athens: [n.n.], 1952), 245-6, n. 4. The late Elder Porphyrios became a saint through reading and poring over the hymns of the Paracletic Canon, the Minaion and so on; see *Γέροντος Πορφύριου Κανσκαλυβίτου, Βίος καὶ Λόγοι* (Hania: The Holy Monastery of Chrysopigi, 2003), 176-7. And the blessed Elder Iakovos Tsalikis did not have the opportunity to study patristic texts, but still delved into the liturgical books; see S. Papadopoulos, *Ὁ μακαριστὸς Ἰάκωβος Τσαλίκης*, 2nd ed. (Athens: Trohalia, 1995), 72-3.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, the discourses of Saints Gregory Palamas, *Homily 53* (On the Entry of the Mother of God); Nikolaos Kavalas, *On the Annunciation*; Andrew of Crete, *On the Nativity*; and John the Damascene, *On the Dormition*.

<sup>66</sup> Our holy Fathers have left written examples of their fervent and intensely supplicatory prayers to Our Lady. Saint Kallistos, in a broken and contrite spirit, but aflame with divine love, prays: ‘Therefore, do not desert me, All-Spotless Lady. For everyone has overlooked me and passed me by, seeing me as incurable: Prophets, Apostles, the Righteous, divine Fathers. And I have been left alone [...]’ (This is why he cries aloud to the all-hymned Mother of God) who is capable of all things and of completing them’ A.D. Simonon, *Μέγα Προσευχητάριον* (Athens: Pelekanos, n.d.), 329.

<sup>67</sup> See the scholastic view and association of sinlessness with the Saviour, which permeates Mitrofanis Kritikopoulos and is accepted by Ioannis Kaloyirou. The syllogism works as follows: Christ is the Saviour. Christ is sinless. The Mother of God is not the Saviour. Therefore, the Mother of God cannot be sinless. But by the same token we might posit: the angels are sinless; are they therefore saviours? See I. Kaloyirou, *Μαρία, ἡ Ἀειπάρθενος Θεοτόκος κατὰ τὴν ὁρθόδοξον πίστιν*, *ibid.*, 93.

<sup>68</sup> This anti-Roman Catholic polemic affected even virtuous people, such as Saint John Maximovich, who had no access to the texts of Gregory Palamas and Nikolaos Kavalas and (despite his obvious sanctity as expressed by the gifts of foresight and healing which he did possess) fell into the error of writing that the

The all-holy life and the sinlessness of the Virgin, through which she became the Birth-Giver and Mother of God, explain her special position, which we confess to be after God and above all the angels and saints. With the hypostatic union of the divine and human nature in the person of Christ, and the creation of the the-anthropic family and society, Our Lady became the Mother of the new creation.

Our Lady is 'at the boundary between created and uncreated nature', the 'god after God who bore the Second Person of the Trinity' who is 'more honourable than the Cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim', 'greater than the holy of holies', who is capable of doing 'whatever it is she wishes to do' and to whom alone is due 'the veneration of her servants' while 'to God is due worship and to the saints honour'.<sup>69</sup> This is why we believe we are not outside the spirit of our holy Fathers if we address this hymn of praise to Our Lady: 'Hail, sinless Lady, Bride of God' Amen.

Mother of God was not free 'from any personal sins'. See Saint John Maximovich, *The Orthodox Veneration of Mary the Birthgiver of God*, 5th ed. (Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1996), 53 ff. Of course, at the end of his study, Maximovitch writes that 'She repulsed from Herself every impulse to sin' (*ibid.*, 65), perhaps in order to moderate what he had written earlier. Be that as it may, in this book he gives a confused view of the sinlessness of Our Lady.

<sup>69</sup> See Monk Theoklitos Dionysiatis, *Μαρία ἡ Μητέρα τοῦ Θεοῦ* (Thessaloniki: Melissa, 1988), 59.