

THE PALAMITE BACKGROUND IN THE MARIAN THEOLOGY OF METROPOLITAN ANTHONY OF SOUROZH*

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Perceptions of the Mother of God have always reflected theological and pastoral concerns of Orthodox theologians and thinkers in Byzantium and beyond. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, one of the emblematic figures of the Russian Diaspora, treats the Virgin in a way that reflects the main concerns of his generation, marked by the political developments in Russia in the beginning of the twentieth century and the subsequent movement of the Russian Diaspora. The hardship of the loss of their homeland and the harsh reality of poverty, as well as the two world wars, greatly influenced the theological approach of Metropolitan Anthony and his generation. In his talks and homilies, Anthony of Sourozh focuses on the human person cut off from the community and its rituals. He speaks about the encounter of the individual with God on a one-to-one basis. He refers extensively to the agony man experiences when faced with the silence of God. He sees the Virgin as the model of the obedient but not passive disciple, the model of the dynamic surrender to God in freedom and sorrowful joy. Anthony's approach to the Mother of God is paralleled and compared to that of Gregory Palamas, who in the fourteenth century saw Mary as the model of perfect Hesychast.

Throughout Christian history, the Mother of God has been the vehicle for the expression of various aspects of Christian theology, formulated in literature, homiletics, and art. Her reception from the early Christian era down to our times reveals aspects of contemporary concerns and approaches to Christian doctrine. A great figure of the Russian Diaspora, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, is one of the eminent personalities who have marked Orthodox theology with their work in the 20th century. His approach to Patristic theology has been very different from the approach of other theologians of his era, like Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, Metropolitan John Zizioulas, Christos Yannaras, Fr Andrew Louth, and others. Each of the aforementioned figures contributed a distinct understanding of Christianity that enriched Orthodox theology and its reception in modern times.¹ Metropolitan Anthony rep-

* This paper was originally written for the conference, *Unwedded Bride: The Mother of God in the Hymns of the Eastern Churches* (University of Winchester, 18th-20th August, 2015), organized by Sarah Jane Boss and Andreas Andreopoulos. It was revised for publication in *Analogia*.

resents a very interesting figure of the 20th century, as he was a person deeply rooted in the Russian tradition who, nonetheless, was born, grew up, was educated, and worked in Western Europe. He was born as Andrei Bloom in Lausanne, Switzerland but some of his earliest memories were of Persia where he found himself as a result of Boris Bloom's diplomatic career.² In later years, Andrei took the name Anthony when he was secretly tonsured monk during the Second World War in Paris. His presence exercised great influence in France and especially in England where he became vicar and later bishop and metropolitan of the Diocese of Sourozh, based at Ennismore Gardens, London.³

Metropolitan Anthony started his career in France as a medical doctor with a PhD in the field but with no academic background in theology, though he was subsequently given four honorary doctorates, one from the University of Aberdeen for 'preaching the Word of God and renewing the spiritual life of this country', the second from the Moscow Theological Academy for 'his theological, pastoral and preaching work', the third from the University of Cambridge, and the fourth from the Kiev Theological Academy.⁴ He never wrote theological academic papers or books. He was an exquisite orator with a deep understanding of the Scriptures as well as of the Fathers. His theology was expressed in his talks and sermons and most of his books are transcripts of talks and sermons. Those that circulate in English, French, Russian, and Greek today consist of compilations of sermons and talks delivered on various occasions in Western Europe and Russia. His works were republished repeatedly and in various forms: as articles in journals, in the cathedral newsletter, as book chapters or individual works with introductions, forewords and commentaries by various people and in various languages. As a result, citing his works is not an easy task.⁵

¹ Andrew Louth, an eminent figure of Eastern Christian Studies himself, is the author of the book *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2015). Most of the names mentioned above are included in this book, whose focal point is the Russian Diaspora and the thinkers influenced by this current of thought. Interestingly enough, Fr Andrew does not include Metropolitan Anthony in his book.

² Metropolitan Anthony was a nephew of the composer Scriabin from the side of his mother. An unofficial but rich and interesting biography is given by Gillian Crow in her work, *'This Holy Man': Impressions of Metropolitan Anthony* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2005). For his background and early years see 3 ff.; See chapter 8 in Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *Encounter* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2005), 165-217. *Encounter* was first published in Russia in 1999, and was compiled and edited by Elena Maidanovitch.

³ The Diocese of Sourozh has been a child of the Russian Revolution. For its intricate relationship with the Russian Diaspora, the communities of Western Europe, and its relationship with the official Church of Russia, as Bishop Basil of Sergievo writes in his introduction 'Metropolitan Anthony and the Diocese of Sourozh', in *Encounter*, v-xii. See also the official site of the Diocese: www.sourozh.org

⁴ For his impact in the West and with special reference to his honorary academic degrees see the obituary published in the Guardian in 2003. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2003/aug/06/guardiano-bituaries.russia>

⁵ Articles and interviews appear in various collections that circulate especially in the English language. Among his various collections one may single out the following—all appearing under his name—: *Encounter; Meditations on a Theme* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003); *The Messenger: Journal of*

Admittedly, his greatest talent, virtue, and quality was the way in which he related theology to issues preoccupying his contemporary society. The confrontation of faith and atheism is one of the topics which reveals his concern about his homeland and the destruction of the Christian tradition by the Communist regime. Forgiveness of one's enemies is another topic relevant to the historical circumstances in Russia. His most favourite topic, however, is prayer as a personal, unique encounter with God.

The structure of his talks and sermons, which has not been systematically studied yet, follows a pattern that deserves to be examined in relation to the tradition of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine homilies. The Virgin was not among his common topics, but the views he expressed on the Mother of God offer us a distinctive understanding of the figure of Mary and her contribution to soteriology. Metropolitan Anthony's Mariology is linked to and reflects concerns of the twentieth century, proving that—as always in Christian history—the Marian cult echoes questions, difficulties, worries, and doubts people experience in theology and in real life. Metropolitan Anthony's sermons and talks have been so uniquely popular precisely because they tackled issues of importance for theology in a way accessible to modern man, a way that was enriched by a personal understanding of the Scriptures and of everyday life.

Ever since the beginning of Christian history, the Mother of God has been linked to Christian devotion. We have gradually come to realize how multifaceted and complex the cult of the Virgin is and how many distinct strands underlie its development in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine centuries.⁶ In specific geographical areas, the Virgin has been used in order to gain a deeper understanding or promote theological trends, doctrines, and virtues through their association with her person. Let me

the Deanery of Great Britain and Ireland 24 (November 2013); *Our Life in God. Talks on the Holy Spirit and the Trinity*, Oxford: Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh Foundation, 2007; *School for Prayer*, first published in London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd in 1970 and reprinted 15 times before the appearance of the second edition in 1986 which is included in the volume *The Essence of Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1989). In this volume one can also find the *Living Prayer* (first published in London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1966 and circulating independently), his famous essay 'God and Man', a revised transcript of his interview with Jewess Margharita Laski for BBC in 1971, as well as his *Courage to Pray*, originally published in French as *La Prière* (Paris: Maison Mame, 1971). The English translation of this book (which is a discussion with Georges LeFebvre) was published in London (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973). An anthology of his writings under the title *Essential Writings* (including short excerpts on various topics, like faith in the Gospel, the Creation, Prayer, Orthodox Spirituality etc.) was compiled by Gillian Crow (New York: Orbis Books, Modern Spiritual Masters Series, 2010).

⁶ Until the year 2000, the studies on the Virgin were scarce and mainly focused on issues related to Catholic scholarship. Best known are the editions and studies by Martin Jugie, or the study of Wenger on the Assumption; A. Wenger, *L'Assomption de la très Saint Vierge dans la tradition byzantine du Vie au Xe siècle* (Paris: Archives de l'Orient Chrétien, 1955). Averil Cameron was one of the first to tackle the topic of Marian cult in relation to her relics in Constantinople; see the articles published in her *Continuity and Change in Sixth-Century Byzantium* (London: Variorum reprints, 1981), esp. articles XIV, XVI, XVII. Since the year 2000 a number of important volumes have appeared throwing light to the study of Mary in Byzantium and the various aspects of Marian cult; see, for example, M. Vassilaki, ed. *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art* (Milan: Skira, 2000); M. Vassilaki, *Images of the Mother of God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); L. Brubaker and M. Cunningham, eds., *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images* (Farnham: Ashgate 2011), and many other studies that appeared in the past decade.

mention just few milestones: Mary's first representations emphasize her connection to the female deities of the Eastern Mediterranean and especially Isis. Already in the second century, concerns related to the relationship between the Old and the New Testament and the typological reflection of persons and events of the Old Testament in the New give rise to the Virgin as Second Eve. In the fourth century, the ideal of virginity associated with the growth of monasticism is reflected in the additional emphasis laid on the sanctity and purity of Mary. In the fifth century, the trend of allegorical interpretation propounded by the School of Alexandria is expressed in the debate over the use of the paradoxical title, *Theotokos*, which emphasizes and summarizes the reality of the Incarnation of the Word. At the same time, her cult in Constantinople spreads and numerous shrines are dedicated to the Virgin while during the same period her relics become a focal point of her veneration. Between the fifth and the seventh century, Mary is associated with the imperial city and possibly—as it has been argued—with female imperial authority. As defender of the City, she appears walking on its walls, forcing back its enemies. Doctrinal concerns of the Dark Ages pave the way of her association with the Passion. The Iconoclastic period witnesses an unmatched flourishing of Marian devotion. Mary as the gateway of Christ's Incarnation is used in a metonymic fashion in Iconophile argumentation for the defence of matter and hence of icons and the relics of the saints.⁷ In the centuries that followed, Marian devotion was consolidated with her hymns being officially incorporated in the liturgical books of the Church. It is impressive that Mary remained a means of expression of Christian doctrine even after the seventh Ecumenical Council in 787.

A striking example is provided at the time of Hesychasm, in the fourteenth century, when Mary was portrayed as the ideal Hesychast in the homily of Gregory Palamas on the Presentation to the Temple.⁸ Therein, Palamas addresses his audience as a 'sacred theatre' (θέατρον ιερόν) and calls the Virgin an animated statue (ἐμπνουν ἄγαλμα) and living icon of every virtue (πάσης ἀρετῆς ἔμψυχος εἰκών), the centre of divine and human graces (θειῶν τε καὶ ἀνθρωπίνων χαρίτων ἐστία). She was the one, Palamas says, 'who made all humans inhabitants of heaven, proving them to be spirit rather than flesh making them children of God' (πάντας οὐρανίους καταστήσασα, πνεῦμα ἀποδείξασα ἀντὶ σαρκὸς καὶ Θεοῦ ποιησαμένη τέκνα).⁹ The Mother of God, mediator, the Mother of God, queen of every creature of this and the other world; a universal queen (παγκοσμίου βασιλίδος) without crown, without precious stones,

⁷ N. Tsironis, 'The Mother of God in the Iconoclastic Controversy', in *Mother of God. Representations of the Mother of God*, ed. M. Vassilaki, (Milan: Skira, 2000), 27-39 and M. Vasilaki and N. Tsironis, 'Representations of the Virgin and their Association with the Passion of Christ', in *ibid.*, 453-463; see also, N. Tsironis, 'Emotion and the Senses in Marian Homilies of the Middle Byzantine Period', in *The Cult of the mother of God in Byzantium*, ed. L. Brubaker and M. Cunningham (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 179-196.

⁸ Gregory Palamas, Homily on the Entrance of the Virgin to the Temple, in *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας, Γρηγορίου Παλαμά έργα* 11, ed. P. Christou and Th. Zisis (Thessaloniki: Πατερικά εκδόσεις 'Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς', 1986), 260-347.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 266.

colours, and luxurious garments. Her insignia are the virtues of the soul, the visit of the Holy Spirit that covered her.¹⁰

The beauty of the Virgin serves as an agent linking the visible with the invisible world and directing people's mind towards God.¹¹ The Virgin is thus called the living (breathing / *ἐμπνους*) throne of God, adorned with virtues befitting the King sitting on it (the throne). The Virgin is said to have made the whole earth heaven through the Incarnation, uniting the *nous* with God, uniting God with the flesh, making God the son of man and man the son of God.¹² 'You gave us the possibility to perceive through the senses the one invisible in kind and our own in shape, to touch in matter the immaterial [...]' The Virgin is presented as the model of Hesychasm: 'Setting aside the concerns of everyday life she turned towards herself and to the unceasing prayer.'¹³ The whole divine plan of the Incarnation is understood as provoked by Mary as part of her *mesiteia* (intercession) on behalf of mankind: 'Out of pity for the human race and in an effort to find a remedy [against death and Hades] she took up the mission to urge towards us the one who cannot be urged and to draw Him towards us faster, in order that He pushes away the curse, to stop the course of flame that burns the souls, to weaken the enemies, to return the blessing, to make the unsetting light shine and curing the illness to unite the creature to himself.'¹⁴ 'Ἀντοχειροτόνητος' is the word that Gregory uses for the Virgin. The one who has taken upon herself the sacerdotal role of mediator on behalf of humanity, thus proving that the disposition of her soul urged her to become the one who would unite spirit and matter.

In Gregory Palamas, whom I have chosen to parallel Metropolitan Anthony, the Virgin is the most holy, *πάγκαλη*, most beautiful and virtuous with qualities which reflect her inner life and disposition. The point I would like to stress is that Palamas' Mariology reflects his theological concerns with monastic life, retreat from the world, and unceasing prayer, but also the dialectic relationship between spirit and matter, that is, the main issues that preoccupied him and dominated his day.

Spirit and matter—what he has often called Christian materialism, prayer and a vigilant attitude pertaining to spiritual life—were also the main axis of Metropolitan Anthony's thought as expressed in his talks and homilies and edited by people devoted to him throughout his life but also after his death in August 2003. The offspring of a high-ranking family with a father who served Russia as a diplomat in the years preceding the October Revolution, Metropolitan Anthony was among the people who experienced an abrupt change in their lives with the Revolution.¹⁵ This

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 266-268.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 272-281.

¹² *Ibid.*, 342-344.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 324.

¹⁵ Crow, 'This Holy Man', 3-38, 137-153 and *passim*. See also T. Wilson, 'Interview with Metropolitan Anthony', in Metropolitan Anthony of Surozh, *School for Prayer*, 3rd ed. (London: Darton, Longman and

breach would not start to be healed before the 1990s when gradually the former Soviet Union started becoming once again Russia, while at the same time it was losing parts of its former lands which were now seeking their independence from the central government of Moscow. With a rich spiritual tradition behind him, Metropolitan Anthony was a child of many cultures, moulded in the hardship of *challenging times*, 'a curse' as the Chinese say, but also a blessing if one considers how much the Russian Diaspora has offered to the West in the twentieth century. His personality alone would be worth analysing in monographs; this personality set against the backdrop of such challenging times is a fascinating topic worth looking into from the perspective of modern history, but even more importantly from the perspective of Orthodox theology and its reception in the twentieth century. From the wealth of material that is available in back issues of *Sourozh* and other publications, as well as the Metropolitan Anthony Foundation archive,¹⁶ I shall concentrate on Metropolitan Anthony's Mariology and more specifically on the way in which he treats the Virgin in his talks and homilies and the relationship of his Mariological views to his theology.

The main theological points of his Mariology focus on the person of the Virgin as an ideal model of what we should be as Christians. Interestingly enough, Metropolitan Anthony portrays Mary as the image (an ideal image) in a way reminiscent of Gregory Palamas' living image adorned with virtues. In Metropolitan Anthony, the idea of the Virgin as a prototype and model for humans couples with typological concerns, but which do not replicate the Second Eve vocabulary. What makes Mary unique, is the perfection of her gift of self to God, her transparency to God, her suppleness in the creative hands of God.¹⁷ It is in this context that the obedience of the Virgin occupies a central place in Metropolitan Anthony's Mariology.¹⁸ Obedience, however, is clearly and sharply contrasted to a passive acceptance of God's will: 'The Mother of God has not been a passive instrument of the Incarnation; without Her 'Amen' the Incarnation would have been as impossible as without the will of God'.¹⁹ In a number of instances, he quotes Charles Williams who says that 'when the time was right, a maiden of Israel proved capable of pronouncing the name of God with all her mind and all her will and all her flesh, and the Word became flesh. It is a gift of self, and it is at the same time an unreserved and heroic acceptance: a gift of self in humility, and a heroic acceptance because of what

Todd, 1999), 7-22.

¹⁶ <http://masarchive.org/Sites/Site/Texts-E-Sermons.html> but also the bibliography in http://www.mitrass.ru/eng/eng_publ.htm.

¹⁷ Homily on the Mother of God and the Departed preached on Saturday 2nd September 1989, *Cathedral Newsletter* 216 (February 1989), 1-2.

¹⁸ Talk given at the Church of St Mary, in Oxford and published under the title 'Discipleship, Obedience, Freedom', in *The Messenger: Journal of the Deanery of Great Britain and Ireland* 24 (November 2013), 2-9.

¹⁹ Sermon preached on Sunday 28th August 1986 for the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God, *Cathedral Newsletter* 253 (September 1992), 1-2.

it could have been, what is meant humanly speaking'.²⁰ Humility is not understood as a meek or docile way of existence. Anthony of Surozh reverts in etymology in order to emphasize the meaning of humility when applied with reference to the Virgin: 'Humility is a condition of the earth, lying completely open and surrendered: the earth which is open to all actions, of mankind, of the rain, accepting the refuse and accepting the furrow and bringing fruit, surrendered, offered and given. This is the essence of humility and this is the kind of humility which we see in the Mother of God.'²¹ Mary's humility is associated with her motherhood, the Incarnation, her spiritual and moral attitude towards God. Furthermore, it echoes an understanding of the relationship with God that is very often emphasized in Anthony's words. It emphasizes the reciprocity of the relationship with God, the responsive nature of this relationship that is one of absolute and deep love.

In his ever subtle and rich imagery, he describes Mary's attitude as one of great suppleness and flexibility, using the image of the child's hand guided by the mother in the process of learning how to write, or the supple surgeon's glove that protects the patient while at the same time adapted to his hand, following his movement and allowing him to operate. 'Replace', he says, 'the frailty [of the glove] by the strength of an armour's gauntlet and nothing will be possible'. Lastly, Anthony refers to the sail of the sailing ship that changes shape according to the wind, thus serving its scope in the best possible way. Suppleness is linked to humility and humility to surrender and frailty, which Bishop Anthony exalts by citing the words of the Lord in 2 Corinthians (12:9): 'My strength is made manifest in weakness'.²² In his talk on 'Discipleship, Obedience, Freedom', he speaks of the way in which discipleship is achieved only on the basis of a relationship of deep trust.²³ Listening plays an important role in his understanding of discipleship, and this is the quality of the Virgin he mostly praises the most in his treatment of the Cana miracle: her ability to listen and by listening we are convinced that effectively he means her ability to perceive.²⁴ For Bishop Anthony, Mary's obedience is not submissive. In another text, where he refers to the role of Mary at the Cana marriage, he speaks about silence as a virtue of the disciple, saying:

Discipleship begins with silence and listening. When we listen to someone we think we are silent because we do not speak; But our minds continue to work, our emotions react, our will responds for or against what we hear, we may even go further than this, with thoughts and feelings buzzing in our heads that are quite unrelated to what is said. This is not silence as implied in dis-

²⁰ Homily on the Mother of God preached at the University Church of Great St Mary's, Cambridge, on 19 May 1985 and published in *Sourozh* 21 (1985), 22-33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² *Ibid.*, 23-26.

²³ 'Discipleship, Obedience, Freedom', 2-9.

²⁴ Homily on Listening preached on 4th February 1973, *Cathedral Newsletter* 36 (February 1973), 1-2.

cipleship. The real silence towards which we must aim as a starting point is a complete repose of mind and heart and will, the complete silence of all there is in us, including our body, so that we may be completely aware of the word we are receiving, completely alert and yes, in complete repose. The silence I am speaking of, is the silence of the sentry on duty at a critical moment: alert, immobile, poised, and yet alive to every sound, every movement.²⁵

This is precisely the way Anthony of Sourozh describes the attitude of the Virgin: alert, immobile, poised, and yet alive to every sound and every movement.

Metropolitan Anthony has the gift to speak about the Scriptures, making the Gospels' narrative jump out of the page and become a real event.²⁶ He uses the narrative, removing the stereotypical expressions that deprive it of its immediacy and making it relevant to present day concerns. The fear of persecution and death that Metropolitan Anthony experienced in his early years as a refugee in Paris, as well as in World War II, inform his description of the Annunciation.²⁷ He stresses that the obedience of the Virgin is not a simple thing to do and say. It is consent to an act that according to the Jewish Law could have resulted in her death, as an unmarried girl who bore a child was condemned to stoning.

The cruelty and reality of death is also brought out in the parallel he draws between the consent of the Virgin at the Annunciation and the Sacrifice of Abraham, both of which show unconditional trust to God. Recently, Fr Maximos Constas analysed ingeniously the association of the Annunciation and the *Hypapante* with the Crucifixion in the context of the fulfilment of the prophecy regarding the sword that would pierce the Virgin's heart in his "*And a Sword Shall Pierce Your Own Soul*" (Lk 2:35): *The Kenosis of Christ and the Mother of God*.²⁸ In this insightful work, we find similarities with the theological approach of Metropolitan Anthony, who sees Mary as the 'one human person [in which] the fullness of humanity was achieved and revealed'.²⁹ However, this was not only a joyful event: 'When she accepted to become the Mother of the incarnate Son of God, she not only accepted honour and glory; she was confronted with awe, indeed with terror'.³⁰ The saints of the Old Testament, who saw the inaccessible, unsearchable and inapproachable God, perceived him as a consuming fire that made them want to die after having approached him. The

²⁵ Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *The Essence of Prayer*, 303.

²⁶ See for example the Guardian obituary cited in note 5.

²⁷ See sermon on the Mother of God and the Departed, *op.cit.*; Crow, '*This Holy Man*', *passim* and esp. 11-36.

²⁸ Fr Maximos Constas, '*And a Sword Shall Pierce Your Own Soul*' (Lk 2:35): *The Kenosis of Christ and the Mother of God* (Massachusetts: Holy Resurrection Orthodox Church, 2014). On the same topic, expanded and with notes, see Fr Maximos Constas, *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography* (Alhambra, Calif.: Sebastian, 2014), *passim* and esp. ch. 2.

²⁹ Sermon preached on the 26th December 1988 (its title in the MA archive reads: On the Feast of the Mother of God) and was published in the *Cathedral Newsletter* 216 (February 1989), 1-2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

Virgin did not die as a result of her contact with God because she was the answer of the whole of mankind to the love of God. In one of his talks on Orthodoxy and the veneration of images, delivered at the Cathedral of Ennismore Gardens, Anthony of Sourozh refers to an icon that has struck him: an icon of the Virgin portrayed alone, as a young peasant girl without veil, with her hair falling to the right and left of her face and her hands clasped in a gesture of agony. A curious icon, as Metropolitan Anthony notes, as one realizes that in the background there is a Crucifixion painted in pale yellow. Contemplation of the Crucifixion is the reason why Mary is portrayed in agony and distress.³¹ Bishop Anthony goes through the steps of the Virgin's life, one by one, emphasizing her emotions, her response to the events that followed the Annunciation, which were full of agony, stress and torment. The Annunciation, he says, was followed by the rejection of the villagers of Bethlehem, her loneliness, the danger at the hands of the soldiers of Herod, the flight, the long journey far away from what was home to her. In a unique manner, he recounts the Presentation in the Temple, stressing the consent of the Virgin to the sacrifice of her Son, who was brought to the Temple as a living sacrifice, as a blood-offering, according to the commandment of Old Testament. The Presentation is mirrored by the Crucifixion, where once again Metropolitan Anthony sees the Virgin,

[...] wrapped in silence, totally at one with the Will of God and the Will of her Divine Son, giving Him for our salvation, accepting His death that to her was, as it is for every mother, more than her own death. In this she acted, one may daringly but truthfully say, as a priestess; because we all can offer to nothing to God but our souls and bodies, our own selves, and she was offering the life and death of the Son of God incarnate.³²

The way in which Anthony of Sourozh perceives the Incarnation and all the events of the New Testament is extraordinary in that it bridges history and theology, reality and inner meaning, thus annulling the boundaries between the historical and the eternal present.

The shadow of death and the sacrificial dimension of the narratives are accentuated in Metropolitan Anthony's words: 'This is something that very few of us will ever have to face in life, or at least I hope so; but it happens all the time in various parts of the world, and it has happened throughout history when one person has allowed another to give his or her life for a cause, for God or for men. Without a

³¹ The icon belongs to a type common in Russian iconography: the Mother of God of the Passion, in which the Virgin is portrayed with loose hair, the hands folded on her chest and at the background there is a depiction of the Crucifixion. Unfortunately, I have not been able to identify the specific icon Metropolitan Anthony was referring to. Nonetheless, I would like to thank Maria Lidova for her effort to throw light on the question. For the text, see Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *Essential Writings*, ed. by Gillian Crow (Orbis Books: New York 2010), 62.

³² On the Feast of the Mother of God, *Cathedral Newsletter* 216 (February 1989), 1.

word of protest, sharing in the heroic offering [sic].'³³ The understanding of Mary's consent as a heroic offering certainly appealed to his audience in the West, but imagine how relevant it sounded to the Russian people who received his sermons in tapes and translations. The traumatized twentieth century knew only too well the meaning of sacrifice for God or for men. It knew too well the weight and the smell of death, which is laconically insinuated in the imagery that Metropolitan Anthony employed in his sermons. The suffering he experienced during the early years of his life, together with the feelings fired by the circumstances of the Diaspora, influenced to a great extent his understanding of Christianity, persecution, sacrifice but also man's relationship with God. His distinct way of approaching the Scriptures not as narrative but as a reality that could be identified with people's experience is echoed in his treatment of Good Friday, the Crucifixion, and the death of Christ on the cross as a sharing of the tragedy of human condition.³⁴ He lays emphasis on the ways Christ experienced human feelings: loneliness, humiliation, betrayal, hatred. And he extends this even further by saying that Christ's death was a proof of his solidarity with mankind. He takes the hymn of Thursday in Holy Week 'O Life eternal how can you die; O light, how can you be quenched?', asserting that what we are reading is not rhetoric. 'It is not an allegory or a metaphor', he says.

He [Christ] died on the Cross, and the operative words are the most tragic words of history. He, who is the Son of God, because he had accepted total, final, unreserved and unlimited solidarity with men in all their conditions, without participation in evil but accepting all its consequences; He, nailed on the cross, cries out the cry of forlorn humanity, 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?'³⁵

It has been occasionally argued that Metropolitan Anthony had no theology. I would like to argue that he was definitely not a theologian in the technical sense of the term. This becomes evident in the way he resents systematic theology. As a true oral composer, he draws freely from Patristic literature, hymnography, and his wider reading, constructing his homilies and talks with building blocks that remind us of the theory of orality and performance.³⁶ Epistemological tools of research were

³³ Metropolitan Anthony, Talk on Forgiveness, Russian Cathedral, Ennismore Gardens, October 1993. The typescript was kindly made available to me by Veronique Magnes.

³⁴ Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *The Essence of Prayer*, 256.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 257. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, 'Lent, Holy Week, and Easter', in *Essential Writings*, 183. See also his treatment of the subject in 'the Resurrection and the Cross', in Anthony Bloom, *Meditations on a Theme*, London, New York: Continuum, 2003, 111-125.

³⁶ The theory was originally formulated for the study of Homeric poetry by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the 1930s and was subsequently developed in a theory of performance by the distinguished classicist Gregory Nagy. See A. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 24 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); G. Nagy, *Poetry as Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

irrelevant to his way of transmitting the message of the Gospel as a real experience. Instead of analysing words and images, methods and techniques, Anthony of Sourozh proceeds to a reading of the Gospel that is reminiscent to that of the Church Fathers. Worth noting is the great fascination and pleasure he takes in reverting to etymology in order to discover deep mystical sense in the words, as for example his etymological approach to the word 'intercession', which in Latin means to take a step which puts us at the heart of a situation, like a man who stands between two people ready to fight, or the etymology of 'God' whose Gothic root means the one before whom one prostrates in adoration.³⁷ In his weighty talk, included in the book, *God and Man*, he speaks about the last words of Christ on the Cross resenting their typological understanding, or rather going beyond that level of meaning. 'People who are keen on exegesis', he says, 'explain to us that at that point [when Christ utters the words "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me"] he was rehearsing a verse of a prophetic song.'³⁸ The manner in which he refers to typological exegesis is rather pejorative. He ironically asks his audience whether anyone has seen someone dying while rehearsing a prayer he had been taught as a boy. And he continues: 'Besides, it is an error of vision—for it is a prophecy that is turned towards its fulfillment, not fulfillment that is supposed to recite words of prophecy. *No, it was something real [my emphasis]*'.³⁹ Already the vibrant emphasis on the reality of the events shakes and alerts his audience, seizes it and transports it to the place where the events were actually taking place. 'God is not someone about whom one can have notions, God is someone whom one encounters'. I quote from the same Good Friday text:

When Christ said '*My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me?*'—and the repetition of the very words is certainly not accidental—He was crying out, shouting out the words of a humanity that had lost God, and he was participating in that very thing which is the only real tragedy of humanity—all the rest is a consequence. The loss of God is death, is forlornness, is hunger, is separation. All the tragedy of man is in one word, 'Godlessness'.⁴⁰

Christ's descent to Hell is thus described precisely in these terms: as a descent to a place where God is not, a place of final dereliction. Hell is destroyed because the man who descended therein is both man and God. There is no longer a place where God is not. The destruction of Hell is a proof of Christ's solidarity to mankind. In his conclusion, the point I made above regarding the way Metropolitan Anthony links his theology to concerns of his times, is spelled out in a most original way:

³⁷ Metropolitan Anthony, 'Courage to Pray' in *The Essence of Prayer*, 384.

³⁸ Idem., 'Man and God' in *The Essence of Prayer*, 257.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 257.

This is the measure of Christ's solidarity with us, of his readiness to identify himself, not only with our misery but with our godlessness. If you think of that, you will realize that there is not one atheist on earth who has ever plunged into the depths of godlessness as the Son of God, become the Son of Man, has done. He is the only one to know what it means to be without God and to die of it.⁴¹

Metropolitan Anthony relates his talks and sermons on the Virgin to the Crucifixion. He views the two topics in absolute interdependence as it becomes evident in some of the examples we saw above. He describes the pain of the Virgin at the Crucifixion entirely stripped of its ritual context. The lament of the Virgin, in the eyes of Metropolitan Anthony does not resemble the mourning of other women. She does not faint and does not weep; her grief is expressed as a silent lamentation, deep and mute; it makes her turn inwards and apprehend the events that are taking place in front of her eyes in a way that is in accordance with the sobriety she showed at the Annunciation and the Presentation to the Temple. Pivotal instants of human lives such as birth, puberty, marriage, death, encountered in all religions throughout centuries, today gradually disappear. This is probably related to the desacralisation of society which has a tendency to share the celebration of a pleasant event but to keep private events related to death and bereavement. We may suggest that the non-ritual description of Mary at the foot of the cross is linked to the non-ritual context of France and England, where he lived and for the people of which he composed his homilies.

In a homily on Palm Sunday [April 1993, Encounter 175] the Virgin is portrayed as the ideal disciple, standing at the foot of the Cross in silence, accompanied by John the Beloved disciple. She is said to be offering his death for the salvation of mankind, silent and dying with him hour after hour. The disciple was standing by in horror, seeing his master die and the Mother in agony. Mary's philanthropy is brought to the fore, where Bishop Anthony encourages us to pray to the Mother of God, identifying ourselves with the crucifiers, trusting she will mediate for our salvation to her son and God.⁴² Mary, the maiden of Israel, who made possible the Incarnation of the Word, not as an instrument but as an accomplished human being, conscious of her role in history and salvation, is praised here for the openness of her heart, her personal surrender. In his talks and homilies on the Creation, Metropolitan Anthony clearly speaks of woman as the alter ego of man created through God's philanthropy for the cure of his 'aloneness' (sic).⁴³ Anthony coins this word to transmit the discovery of the ultimate loneliness of Adam at the time he gives names to all creatures who are

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 257 but also *Idem.*, 'I Believe in God', in *We Believe in God*, ed. Rupert Davies (London: 1968) as reproduced in http://www.mitrass.ru/eng/eng_04.htm.

⁴² Metropolitan Anthony, *Essential Writings*, 112-113.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 86-89.

presented to him in couples, male and female. The person God creates is not a helper but a full human being that came out of Adam who contained within him too much and yet enough. God calls out a companion from this complex human chaos of pure, innocent, and yet incomplete potentialities.

As I said above, Metropolitan Anthony encounters God as a person, as a living being and not as a notion. In this very same way, he describes his vision of the Virgin Mary: not as a submissive female but as a person with deep consciousness, an accomplished human being whose greatest virtue was her ability to be silent, perceiving deeply in her heart the whisper of God. Metropolitan Anthony used to say that often as humans we expect God to reveal himself in awe and thunder. But in fact God reveals himself in frailty, in weakness and this weakness Metropolitan Anthony associates with the Virgin. At the same time, he stresses the fullness of her humanity and her role in the Incarnation and death of Christ.

Summarizing the points I have made, I wish to stress the way in which the Mother of God from the first Christian centuries to the present day served as a means for the expression of theological currents and trends. Just like Gregory Palamas sees in Mary the ideal Hesychast, similarly Metropolitan Anthony, one of the most important and acclaimed preachers of the 20th century, employed Mary in order to express his own world view and the concerns that preoccupied him at the time of his service at the Russian Cathedral in London in the post-World War II years. His teaching focused on the personal understanding of Christianity and the personal relationship to God, stripped of rituals and diversions. It was a relationship that answered the needs of a broken people faced with the threat of a Godless world. His answer to that was given through his sermons and writings. Therein the Mother of God is portrayed as the ideal disciple of Christ, the one who made the Incarnation possible through her conscious and full acceptance of God in virtue and sacrificial love. Her fullness of being points to an ethos that makes her unique the creation. In a way that is reminiscent of Palamas, Mary somehow takes the initiative to pave the way for the Incarnation of the Word. It was Palamas who referred to the Virgin as the door keeper of the kingdom. But, contrary to what doorkeepers normally do, Mary does not prevent people from entering but urges them to enter and share the kingdom of God. Likewise, Bishop Anthony quotes St John Chrysostom: 'When you discover the door of your heart you discover the gate of heaven.' And he adds: 'This discovery of our own depths goes together with the recognition of the depths in others [...] The immensity of our vocation is to share the divine nature, and in discovering our own depths we discover God [...]'⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Metropolitan Anthony, 'Courage to Pray', in *The Essence of Prayer*, 336.