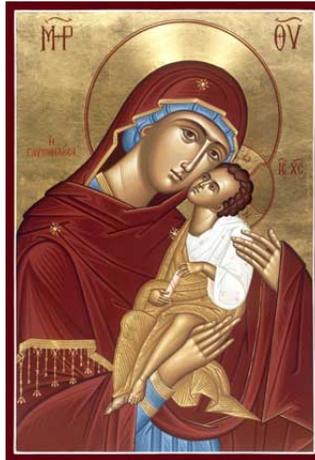


# Most Holy Theotokos *save us?*

by

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If it is your first time visiting an Orthodox Christian worship service, such as Vespers or Orthros, you might be somewhat perplexed by – or even shocked by – the veneration that we give to the Virgin Mary. This short document hopes to answer some of your questions and to explain, very briefly, why we do what we do.

First of all, what does that name *Theotokos* mean? It is a Greek word, referring to the Virgin Mary, which means “birth-giver of God.” That might sound scandalous at first - as if we are saying that Mary gave birth to God the Father. That is not so. We Orthodox Christians believe that the Logos, the Word and Wisdom of God, became incarnate as Jesus Christ and that He took His flesh from His human mother starting at the very moment when Mary said, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:39). From that point in time, God the Word dwelt in her womb for nine months until His birth. Since the Logos shares the exact same divinity as God the Father, yet is a distinct Divine Person, Mary is correctly called the “birth-giver of God” in that she bore the Word made flesh – Jesus Christ.

What do you mean when you call Mary “immaculate?” When we Orthodox say, “immaculate” we are translating the Greek word *achrantou* which also means “pure.” We Orthodox mean “immaculate” in the sense that Mary committed no serious personal

sins and that she, to the best of her fallen human ability, never violated God's moral law. In addition, we say that Mary was sanctified and purified of any minor personal sins by the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation when Jesus became incarnate in her womb.<sup>1</sup> In the Roman Catholic Church, there is the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception (19<sup>th</sup> century) which states that Mary was conceived without ancestral (i.e. original) sin so that she could be the Mother of God. This runs contrary to Luke 1:47 where Mary states, "...my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior." If Mary had no sin, not even ancestral sin, then why did she need a savior? Mary, like all of us, is ultimately saved from sin and death by her Son, the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you really believe in the virgin birth? Yes, absolutely. We do not accept any other teaching. St. Irenaeus of Lyons, a second century bishop, states that just as Adam was formed from untilled and virgin soil so Christ, the new Adam, must be made from the untilled and virgin flesh of His mother.<sup>2</sup> In this fact, we see Christ foreshadowed in the opening chapters of Genesis and Christ as the fulfillment of that prophecy because of His virgin birth from the Theotokos.

Mary is ever-virgin? Doesn't Scripture refer to Jesus brothers? First of all, those brothers mentioned in Scripture (Matthew 12:46, Mark 3:31, and Luke 8:19), according to the teachings of the Orthodox Church, are Joseph's children from a previous marriage (his first wife died). They are Jesus' half-brothers. Secondly, Uzzah was struck dead when he dared to touch the ark of the covenant (2 Sam. 6:1-7). Sanctified by God, Mary is the New Ark of the New Covenant that carries not the Word written on tablets, but the Word made flesh. Joseph, a pious God-fearing Israelite, would have recognized this fact and would have never considered violating God's sacred Ark of the New Covenant. Thus, Mary remained ever-virgin.

Is Mary ever referred to as the Queen of Heaven? Yes. Psalm 45 is a Messianic psalm. It tells us of the king's wedding and in that psalm it mentions two women. Protestants often refer to both the queen (Ps. 45:9) and the royal daughter (Ps. 45:13) as the bride and thus the Church. Unfortunately, that does not make sense since the Queen is at the King's right hand and the bride-to-be is waiting to enter the palace and be brought to the king (Ps. 45:13-15). The Orthodox Church understands the bride as the Church, but the Queen is the King's mother. If Jesus is the Messianic King prophesized

in the psalm then Mary, His mother, is the Queen who sits at His right side. That also explains Jesus' curious words in Matthew 20:23 and Mark 10:40. Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father (i.e. God the Father is at Jesus' left hand) and Mary, the Queen of Heaven, sits at the right hand of her son.

And now for the tough question: What does it mean when you say, "Most Holy Theotokos *save* us? First of all, let it be stated unequivocally that Jesus Christ is truly the only Savior of humankind. By His birth, life, crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension, He has destroyed sin and death and opened the gates of paradise for us sinners. The question of "Mary save us" can be answered in several different ways. First, look at an icon of the Theotokos. A proper icon of the Virgin Mary is never shown without her Son in her arms. Obviously we do not teach that Mary died on the cross for us, nor are we denying the fact that Christ is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5); however, Mary saves us in the sense that through her Jesus Christ became incarnate and thus was able to do all that He did for our salvation. Because of this, we refer to Mary as the mediatrix for our salvation because He suffered the Passion of the Cross in the flesh that He assumed from her.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, at the end of certain divine services such as Vespers, there is what this author likes to refer to as a "liturgical dance." The priest exits the royal doors, faces the congregation, and states, "Christ our God, the existing one, is blessed always now and ever and unto the ages of ages." After the people respond, the priest turns to the icon of the Theotokos and says, "Most Holy Theotokos save us." The people again sing a response, "More honorable than the Cherubim...." Note what happens next. The priest turns to the icon of Christ and says, "Glory to you, O Christ, our God and our hope...." In this "liturgical dance" we turn to Mary and ask her to save us, but we are then immediately directed to Him who is our God and our sure hope – the Lord Jesus Christ. Thirdly, think about this analogy. Bob and Mary go on a cruise ship vacation. While taking in the sights, Bob falls overboard into the ocean. He cries out, "Mary, save me!" Unfortunately, Mary can't swim. She can not save Bob directly. However, Mary can summon Captain Joshua, the boat's commander-in-chief, a former Olympic Gold-Medalist in swimming, who then dives into the waters and saves Bob. Mary saves Bob indirectly by summoning Capt. Joshua just as the Theotokos saves us by forever interceding on our behalf and by forever directing our lives towards her Son Jesus

Christ who, by the Cross, entered into the chaotic waters of Death, loosed the bonds of Hades, and rose from the dead on the third day. Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Michelis, *The Virgin Mary* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press), pgs 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Book III, Chapter 21:10.

<sup>3</sup> As sung in one of our hymns, the Tone 3 Resurrectional Theotokion.