

The Modulation of the Term *THEOTOKOS* from the Fathers of 2nd Century to Cyril of Alexandria

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Abstract: Christians believe God the Son is begotten of God the Father pre - eternally but is born "in time" of Holy Mary. Theotokos thus refers to the Incarnation, when the Second Person of the Holy Trinity took on human nature in addition to his pre-existing divine nature, this being made possible through the cooperation of Holy Virgin Mary. Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully human, so His mother should be called and She is Theotokos. This Virgin Mother of God is called "Theotokos" [God-bearer] not only by the Ecumenical Synods, but countless God-bearing Fathers, who indeed anathematize those who refuse to attribute this title to her.

INTRODUCTION

1. The use of the term Theotokos through the text of fathers before the Cyril of Alexandria

Through the disobedience of Eve, death and sin were introduced to the world, but through the obedience of the Ever-Virgin Mother of God, the Theotokos, the Son of God overthrew the power of the devil and liberated us from sin. *Theotokos* is a powerfully evocative term which belonged to the "language of devotion". The word "Theotokos" is Greek and literally means "God-bearer", although in more general terms it can be taken to mean "Mother of God". Mary is the *Theotokos*, the one who gave birth to God. This single word sums up the meaning of Luke's phrase: "Mother of the Lord"¹ and represents a counterpoint to John's teaching that the "Word was made flesh"² Usually the term *theotokos* is translated into English as "Mother of God". However, Greek-speaking Christians also used the equivalent *Meter Theou*. The latter form offers a more comprehensive vision of Mary's motherhood in line with a personalist point of view. The Fathers of the Church saw in this name, Theotokos, a compendium of the Church's faith in the Incarnation³.

In the 2nd and 3rd centuries we find the term Theotokos for the Holy Mother in the texts of Ignatius of Antioch. He had created the concept of Mary as God-bearer when he wrote in his second epistle to John that the Mother of Jesus was honorable, affable, and aroused wonder in all people who came in Jerusalem, and all wished to see her. The Virgin bore the true God. Also in his letter to Ephesians, he underlined that Mary is glorified as the Mother of God and the Virgin is full of grace and virtue. She is joyful in troubles and persecutions, does not grieve in poverty and want, and not only does not get angry with those who offend her but does good to them still more... because our enfleshed God (sesarkomenos), Jesus Christ, was carried in Mary's womb⁴.

Some years later another patristic writer of the Church, Origen used the term Theotokos. According to the early Church historian Socrates Scholasticus, Origen defended the term Theotokos -God-bearer or Mother of God- in a

¹ Lk 1:43

² Jn 1:14

³ J. Seward, *Christ is the Answer: the Christ-Centered Teaching of Pope John Paul II*, Alba House, New York 1995, p. 65.

⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistula ad Ephesios*, XVIII, 2, PG 5, 560B.

commentary on Romans a full two centuries before the Council of Ephesus defined the term⁵. Origen underlines that the name Mariam is the name of Mary, who will be called Theotokos⁶. In another passage of the Homily on Luke's gospel, Origen supports that the seeds of David are the ancestors of Mary, Theotokos, and of Christ⁷. Origen also in the first volume of his Commentaries on the apostle's epistle to the Romans, gives an ample exposition of the sense in which the term Theotokos is used⁸.

More problematic seems to be the evidence of the use of the term Theotokos by Gregory the Wonderworker (213-270), the most disciple of Origen. Indeed, it is not known who wrote the oration for Annunciation. This text which uses the specific term is attributed to either Apollinaris (310-390) or an unknown writer of the 5th century., But in no case in a Cappadocian Fathers⁹.

Some years later the term Theotokos is used by Alexander of Alexandria underlines that «our Lord Jesus Christ assumed flesh in reality (not by illusion) from Mary the Theotokos unto the end of the ages and came unto the race of men to destroy sin». The way that the term is used declares that it was a common word for the mother of Christ that period of time¹⁰. Alexander tried to defend the teaching of Arians with the use of the term Theotokos, and with his whole theology.

His successor in the throne of Alexandria, Athanasius the great uses the word *Theotokos* in his teaching against Arianism too. This characterization for Virgin Mary always arises in his Christological context declares that Christ was truly man, homoousios to God and coeternal to Father¹¹. Athanasius used this term only a few times to show that Arius' falsehood for the Christ. The latter was the only real and coeternal God with the Father.

On the other hand a Cappadocian Father, the Basilus the Great uses the noun Theotokos for Mary a lot of times in his writings to show that Mary gave birth truly God and truly man¹². Through his works, Theotokos is presented as an honorable temple of God and a shrine made pure, and a golden altar of whole burnt offerings. By reason of her surpassing purity [she is] the Divine incense of oblation, and oil of the holy grace, and a precious vase bearing in itself the true nard; [yea and] the priestly diadem revealing the good pleasure of God, whom she alone approach the holy in body and soul.

Basilus' favorite friend, Gregory the Theologian in his Letter to Cledonius says the following: "Whoever does not accept Mary as the Theotokos is godless. And whoever asserts that God the Word passed through the Virgin as one passes through a tube, and, consequently, He was not formed inside her simultaneously in a divine and human manner - in a divine because there was no mediation of a man, and in a human manner because He was no subjected to the law of gestation - is equally godless".¹³

Epiphanius of Cyprus, in his attempt to exalt the Theotokos who is above all exaltation, underlines with emphasis the following: "How can I call blessed the glory which is the root of all glory, given that she is above all, except God, and that she is better than the Cherubim and the Seraphim and every other Angelic order? No language is sufficient for this, neither in heaven nor on the earth, and not among the Angels, since they, too, offered hymns and praise, honor and glory, but did not succeed to speak commensurable with her worth."¹⁴

Another Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa uses the term Theotokos to distinguish the holy Virgin from other women. In his Epistle 3, 19-24, he explains that the word of *theotokos* is incompatible with that of *anthropotokos*. The explanation of the differences between the terms *theotokos* and *anthropotokos*, we can say, that there is an early response to the falsehoods of Nestorius in the fifth century.

⁵ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII, 32, 2.

⁶ Origen of Alexandria, *Homily on Luke*, fragment 26,1, 41,1, 33, 2

⁷ Origen of Alexandria, *Homily on Luke*, fragment, 7.

⁸ Origen of Alexandria, *Commentary in Romans*, I, 1. 5. See Socrates *Scholasticus, Ecclesiastic History*, 7, 32, 2.

⁹F. Winkelmann, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum, qua optima quaeque scriptorum patrum graecorum recensione a primaevis saeculis usque ad octavum commode recluduntur*, vol. I: *Patres Antenicani Patres antenicani, schedulis usi quibus rem paravit*, Turnhout 1983, p. 243.

¹⁰ F. Mercenier, «L'antienne mariale grecque la plus ancienne», *Le Muséon* 52 (1939), p. 233.

¹¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Four discourses against Arians* 3: 29. *On the incarnation of the Word* 8, 2-3; 19,5 and 37,3.

¹² Basilus of Caesarea, *Sermons*, 39, PG 85, 425, 3, 34, 44. 428, 43, 16. 429, 23. 448, 5, 28. 429,23. 436,8. 437, 50. 441, 38, 47. 449, 18, 27. 452,6. Basilus of Caesarea, *De vita et miraculis sanctae Theclae libri ii*,

¹³ Gregory of Nazianzen, *Epistle to Cledonius*, 101,5.

¹⁴ Epiphanius of Cyprus, *Panareion* 78.

2. The introduction to the whole Christianity the term theotokos by Cyril of Alexandria

In the time of St. Cyril of Alexandria, Nestorius of Constantinople refused to accept that Christ is real God –the eternal Son of God – and at the same time is real man (with body, soul and mind –*vous*). Nestorius' fear of confusing the two natures of Christ led him to be very reluctant to call Mary as Theotokos. The disallowance of the term Theotokos and its suppression only with Christotokos created problems with the salvation of human race. If Mary bore only human Christ, in an indirect way there was a denial that Christ was God too¹⁵. In this point Christ would be one more of the saint people of Israel¹⁶.

Cyril explained to Nestorius that anything that was taught distorted the truth of the Christian faith, and he urged him to accept the term Theotokos for the Holy Virgin Mary¹⁷. This holy doctor emphasized that the rejection of the term Theotokos was tantamount to a refutation of Christ's divinity and a falsification of the Divine Incarnation. Then, Christ would not be true and simultaneously "perfect" God and "perfect" man; he would be a mere tool of the Deity, a God-bearing man.¹⁸ He passionately emphasized that Christ was not a God-clad man, nor did the Word of God merely dwell in a man, but rather that He was made flesh, or perfect man, according to the Scriptures. Cyril supported the fact that "the holy Virgin is able to be called the Mother of God. For if our Lord Jesus Christ is God", he wondered, "how should the holy Virgin who bore Him not be the Mother of God", adding:

"They say that God the Word hath taken a perfect man from out the seed of Abraham and David according to the declaration of the Scriptures, who is by nature what they were of whose seed he was, a man perfect in nature, consisting of intellectual soul and human flesh: whom, man as we by nature, fashioned by the might of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Virgin and made of a woman, made under the law, in order that he might buy us all from the bondage of the law, receiving the sonship marked out long before, He in new way connected to Himself, preparing him to make trial of death according to the law of men, raising him from the dead, taking him up into Heaven and setting him on the Right Hand of God"¹⁹.

Cyril stressed that the Only-begotten Word of God was incarnate and made man: That was, taking flesh of the holy Virgin, and having made it his own from the womb, he subjected himself to birth for us, and came forth man from a woman, without casting off that which he was; butal though he assumed flesh and blood, he remained what he was, God in essence and in truth²⁰.

He was a perfect man with a body (*sarx*) and a soul (*nous*), and he was borne by the Virgin Mary. It was obvious that the holy Virgin Mary did not give birth to a common man in whom the Word of God dwelt²¹, lest Christ be thought of as a God-bearing man. For all this, the holy Virgin should be called Theotokos and She is Theotokos²².

3. The Theotokos in the Orthodox Christianity

Theotokos is not only the mother of God, but the mother of every Christian. The Orthodox think that the Holy Virgin is a very significant part of their religion, of their life. We write down two hymns from the liturgy of Saint Chrysostom and Saint Basilus, to show the Orthodox's respect for the Mother of Christ.

"It is truly meet to bless you, O Theotokos, ever-blessed and most pure, and the Mother of our God. More honorable than the Cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim, without defilement you gave birth to God the Word. True Theotokos we magnify you!²³".

¹⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, *Quod unus sit Christus*, PG 75, 1273A. Cyril of Alexandria, *Epist. I ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 41C.

¹⁶ Eirini Artemi, "The rejection of the term Theotokos by Nestorius Constantinople and the refutation of his teaching by Cyril of Alexandria", *De Medio Aevo* 2 (2012 / 2) ISSN-e 2255-5889, σελ. 125-149. <http://capire.es/eikonimago/index.php/demedioaevo/article/view/55/96>. See. E. Artemi, Cyril of Alexandria's critique of the term Theotokos by Nestorius Constantinople, *Acta Theologica* 2 (2012) 1-16, *Acta theologica* vol.32, no.2, Bloemfontein Dec.2012, University of the Free State, Print version ISSN 1015-8758.

¹⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, PG 77:41B

¹⁸ Cyril of Alexandria, PG 77,41C

¹⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, PG 75, 1273AD

²⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, PG 77, 109C

²¹ Cyril of Alexandria, PG 77, 112A.

²² Eirini Artemi, "The Virgin Mary, *Theotokos*, and Christ, true God and true man. The mystery of Incarnation according to Cyril of Alexandria" *Mirabilia* 17 (2013/2) 52-74, Jun/Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

²³ Hymn to the Theotokos From the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.

Also From the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great: " All of creation rejoices in you, O full of grace, the ranks of Angels and the human race; hallowed Temple and spiritual Paradise, glory of Virgins; from you God was incarnate, and He, who is our God before the ages, became a little child. for He made your body a throne and made your womb more spacious than the heavens. All of creation rejoices in you, O full of grace; glory to you!".

In Greece, there are many churches in every city, village, island and mountain which are devoted to Theotokos. There are many celebrations for the Holy Mother as her Birth, her Dormition, her Assumption, her Annunciation etc. There are not only the many celebrations for Virgin Mary who show the importance of her presence to the Greeks' life but many different adjectives that are given to Holy Mother by people in every place of Greece. Some of them are: Chozoviotissa, Glykofiloussa, Grigoroussa, Malevi, Evagelistria, Gorgoepikoos, Galaktotrofousa, Parigoritria, Akathi, Partaitissa, Varnakova, Soumela and many others. The whole numbers of the adjectives for our Panagia is over 600 in all Greece.

In the end it should be underlined that Panagia is a holy figure for Greeks not only because she gave birth to Jesus but because worshipers have connected Her with the Greek nation's freedom during some hard times, apart from the miracles recorded in many personal cases as well. So Greeks thank the Virgin Mary for her aid in some of the woes they faced. The best known and most significant historic event occurred in 626, when Constantinople was besieged by the Avars while Emperor Heraclius and his troops were campaigning against the Persians in Asia Minor. The icon of the Virgin Blachernitissa was carried along the battlements in a procession headed by the son of the absent Emperor and Patriarch Sergius (610-638). The Avars raised the siege and the saving of the City was attributed to the direct intervention of the Mother of God. The entire population gathered at the church with the famous icon and in an all-night vigil they sang standing the Akathistos Hymn in praise of the Virgin Mary.

In modern times, Panagia helped Greeks to defend the enemies successfully during the two world wars. Every Greek mother pray to Her and ask health and happiness of her Child. Theotokos is the mother of All, so everyone trusts her, his dreams, his prayers, his sadness, his happiness. She listens carefully to everyone's prayer and she begs her son for us.

"To God and the Savior you've given birth; I ask you, O Virgin, from the dangers deliver me; For now I run to you for refuge, With both my soul and my reasoning. Now and forever, and to the ages of ages. Amen".

Conclusions

The Fathers of the Church have written at length on the virginity of Holy Maria and the her important role in the mystery of the Incarnation of World. Suffice it to say that ancient Christian tradition supported the idea that the Mother of God was ever-virgin, just as Church Fathers and Councils condemned heretics in the early Church who questioned the spiritual eminence of the *Theotokos*. Orthodox do not "worship" the Virgin Mary. They "venerate" her and show her great honor. Her life told by the Tradition of the Orthodox Church through the major feasts dedicated to her. She has the all-merciful power of driving away from us, at her sign, the sub-celestial spirits of evil—those ever-vigilant and ardent sowers of enmity and malice among men. She is the highest of all creatures, the Mediatrix for the whole race of mankind. Strive to train everyone in the spirit of humility, for she herself was more humble than any mortal, and only looks lovingly upon the humble. Recall what she said to her cousin Elizabeth, 'He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden'. No mediation is greater than that made in our behalf by the Theotokos, the Mother of all the saint, living and dead.

In Greece the Virgin Mary is the most favorite person for kids, young people and old. She is thought as the best alliance in every difficult moment. For all these, we say: "The heavens were astonished and stood in awe, and the ends of the earth, O maiden, were sore amazed, for God appeared bodily to mankind as very man. And lo, thy womb hath proved to the vaster and more spacious than heaven's heights. for this, O Theotokos, the choirs and assemblies of men and angels magnify thy name".