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Maria

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Author: Theophanes III of Nicaea

Title: On the All-holy Mother of God

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From Theophanes III of Nicaea († 1381), *On the All-holy Mother of God*. Extracts taken from Martin Jugie (ed.), *Theophanes Nicaenus, Sermo in Sanctissimam Deiparam* [Greek text with Latin translation] (*Lateranum* NS, 1.1 1935), from sections 3, 4, 5, 30, 31 and 32.

Michael O'Carroll describes this work as 'the most daring synthesis ever proposed on the primacy of Mary, her relationship to the three divine persons and her role as Mediatrix in all creation' (*Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, first edition, 'Theophanes of Nicaea', p. 340), but he correctly cautions that the work should be read in its entirety. It is not yet available to English readers, although Hilda Graef gives a useful synopsis of it (*Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, Part 1, 334-9). However, she questions the discourse's orthodoxy at a number of points, and a full discussion of its theological content has yet to be made. An attempt to reconstruct the historical background to Theophanes' Mariology has been made by Dmitri Makarov in 'К уяснению Определение исторического контекста мариологии Феофана Никейского' / 'Determining historical context of Theophanes of Nicaea's mariology', *Byzantinoslavica – Revue internationale des Etudes Byzantines*, 71.1-2 (2013), 233-47.

Discourse of Theophanes, Bishop of Nicaea, on Our Lady, the most holy and immaculate Mother of God, celebrating in a thousand ways her ineffable and divine greatneses, and in order to show also, that in the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God, there is a joining and conjunction of God with all creation, which is the supreme good and final cause of beings.¹

The Incarnation of the Word and the mystery of Mary as the final cause of all things

It is clear that God brought all beings into existence not that they should simply be, but that they should be well; for this belongs to the highest point of goodness. For to exist well is to exist truly and to be beheld in reality as manifest imitations of the archetype; since simply to exist is a kind of shadow and an imperfect image, while to exist well is to attain perfection and be a true likeness of what is properly blessed.

The creation therefore was fashioned for this in a twofold way, that it receive both simple being in the beginning of the ages, and well being in their consummation. For that it is given to every nature that has the power of reason to be well according to its kind, listen to Gregory the wonderful theologian who says, not from himself, but from a divine revelation intimated to him by an angel, 'Today salvation has come to the world, both visible and invisible'. But this will be made clearer little by little and has yet to be declared.

Since, then, the mystery concerning the Mother of God is the fashioning of creation to well being, which bears the same relationship to the fashioning according to simple being as truth to shadow, and as perfect to the imperfect, it is manifest to reason and it should properly be said that beings exist as certain shadows and prefigurations of the truth that is manifest in the all-holy Virgin and the mystery concerning her. Hence this mystery is also the final cause of beings, and it is for this reason that everything has come into being. For it is clear that it is for the sake of well being that beings receive simple being at all, so that if it is absent, simple being is in vain; for it is imperfect. For this is what the Lord's voice meant,

¹ Main heading in published text



saying of the traitor that 'It would be good for him not to have been born' (Matt. 26.24), for clearly he had lost well being.

Because this saying is in accordance with the truth, and that it is for the sake of the mystery concerning the Virgin that all things, both visible and invisible, have come into being, the divine Maximus also comes along and bears witness; for he affirms the divine truth concerning the natures united in Christ, saying that after the union of each of them the Word remains pure, hence they are preserved inviolate, saying:

This is the great and hidden mystery; this is the blessed purpose for which everything has been constituted; this is the divine goal of all things preconceived from the beginning, which we define saying that this is the preconceived end for the sake of which all things are, itself being for the sake of nothing else. With this end in view, God brought forth the essences of beings. This is properly the limit of providence and of the objects of providence, in accordance with which there is in God the recapitulation of all that he has made. This is the mystery, circumscribing all the ages, and manifesting the great purpose of God which pre-exists the ages limitlessly unlimited, being beyond the limitless, for which purpose the Word who is of the essence of God-become-human became himself a messenger, and constituted himself, if it is permitted to say this, as the innermost root of the fatherly goodness. He thus showed also in himself the purpose for which created things clearly receive the beginning of their being.

(Quaestiones ad Thalassium 60)

Do you hear? This most contemplative intellect and teacher of theology says that this is the blissful end through which everything is constituted – for the sake of which, he says, everything exists. This end itself exists for the sake of nothing else, being manifestly the final cause. For, he says, it was looking to this end that God brought forth the essences of beings. Truly then, it is said that for this reason every nature that has the power of reason properly received well being, so that everything has come to be for the sake of this mystery, and that it was looking to this end that God brought forth the essences of these natures together with all the others.

The Blessed Virgin as the earth and as the centre of all creation

Since the ineffable mystery of the Mother of God bears the same relation to beings, as truth to shadow, and the paradigm to imitations, and is the final cause of all things perceived by the intellect and the senses, she is to be hymned just as earth and heaven and as the whole cosmos, constituted and composed of heaven and earth and of those things in the middle. For from these shadows and prefigurations the truth will become more manifest, as will the mystery concerning the Mother of God, as we have already said. For as this radiant truth becomes clearer, the types and foreshadowings of her and, together with her, the beings themselves and the knowledge of them will become more manifest. The purpose of the principles of their creation is revealed more clearly, since their final end has become manifest – the end for the sake of which [their creation] came to be.

Therefore, she is to be hymned, as I said, as the earth, because our Lord and God who is become the new Adam received from her what is according to the flesh. At the first creation, the creator Word, wishing to constitute the old Adam, took dust from the pre-existing earth, and fashioned his body with his own creative hand and power, without any generative pleasure or any fleshly desire going before, but the earth gave the matter to be fashioned, while the creative Word placed in it the form and the rational soul. And so too, at the second creation, which gives to beings well being, you see that this has come about in a corresponding fashion. For the creative Word himself wanted to refashion the old Adam and those who have come from him, and give them well being, so he did not first fashion our nature in Adam, so that the old Adam should first receive well being – and the first creation thus be like the new one – and so that those who come from him should receive this well being by succession from him, but rather, the creative Word first renews and perfects this in himself, and thus he gives well being. And God himself became—oh strange wonder!—another Adam, being himself both creating and created, and thus from that other Adam there proceeds the second creation which also extends well being to the whole of the old creation, which has already become in Christ a whole new creation. Therefore the new Adam, who was fashioned and created by himself, constituted the Virgin as a kind of dust, and he did this beforehand, in a predetermined time before the ages, and with his creative hand, who is the



Holy Spirit, he took from the Virgin her flesh, as a kind of dust, and thus he came to be in our form, without any pleasure or fleshly desire going before this forming and fashioning at all.

You see how the mode of creation of the first Adam was a type and shadow of the second. Rightly is it said, that all beings and their principles (*logoi*) and types and prefigurations refer to this mystery of the all-holy Virgin, and that God, having this mystery in mind as the final cause, brought forth the essences of beings, according to the divine Maximos, 'that there might be a union of the limited and the infinite, or Creator and creation' (ibid., 621AB). But behold the difference between the truth and the shadow! For the first Adam was the cause of the curse to all who are included in him (ἐνεγκούση): 'For cursed is the earth in your works' (Gen. 3.17). The new Adam makes the one who gave birth to him blessed: 'For blessed are you among women' (Lk 1.42), not only for herself, but as a fountain and provider of blessing for all others.

If, moreover, her son is truly the bread of life, or the grain of seed buried in the earth, and she thus bears as fruit the salvation of the world, she is to be called life-giving earth and truly fertile field – without seed or cultivation, bearing as fruit the one who has come forth from her, and who, through her, grants true life to human beings.

If then this earth is regarded as being at the centre of the spherical visible body of the whole cosmos, and one wishes to hymn her as an earth beyond the heavens, this will not be a discordant sound but a truly harmonious one. If, moreover, she is compared to the whole intelligible cosmos, which is constituted from rational and immortal nature, moving in a circle around God, according to the sacred Dionysios, she will stand as a kind of centre at the middle of all this, in herself joining these beings to others and to God, so that she is the receptacle of the whole divine fullness, just as the centre of a circle is the point of convergence for the radii. For if she bears in her maternal womb her Son and God, who is completely immovable by nature, and is therefore the stable hearth of all things that move naturally, then she is the physical source of stability and unchangeability and rest and eternity, and so she, with him, becomes the first receptacle of this inexhaustible treasure, and therefore the way and door to participation in gifts beyond any conception, and to deification for all nature that has the power of reason. For just as the mother of God the Word is one, so too, consequently, with him she is one and the same source and provider of all his divine and supernatural gifts, from

which all nature that has the power of reason draws abundantly. And therefore the divine entrance to, and participation in, divine things is not to be found in any other than her alone. Hence she returns everything and gathers all things to herself, and unites them to one another and to God, just as the radii of a circle converge on the centre. For just as the centre, being the single beginning of the whole circle, gathers to itself all lines that radiate from it as the one, common beginning, so too she, being the one, sole and unrivalled source of the whole divine fullness of the common beginning of all, and their repose and deification, joins the many and varied [forms] of the rational nature in herself, linking them to one another and to the common beginning of all. This is, I think, what the wonderful Solomon hinted at in his mystical song, when he said, 'There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and young women without number, but one is my perfect dove, one is the chosen one of her mother who bore her. The daughters beheld her and blessed her; queens and concubines praise her. Who is this, peeping forth like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, elect as the sun?' (Cant. 6.7–9).

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The Blessed Virgin's relationship with the Holy Spirit

Since the winter of unbelief has already passed, according to the author of the Song, and the flowers have been seen on the earth, the spring of salvation has dawned, and the shadows of the Law have begun to move and recede, and the day of grace already breathes and illumines, it is necessary to make ready and prepare the Lord's bridal chamber that will receive God. For, when the bridegroom has entered, to unite and join himself to our nature through goodness, so that the bridegroom and Creator will call this union into existence to our life when he says, 'Rise up, come, my neighbour, my good one, my dove, for the winter has passed; come, hide yourself in the shelter of the rock' (Cant. 2.10), meaning by this, I think, the sterility of the human womb (as another prophet says, 'Look to the hard rock, from which you have been hewn' (Isa. 51.1), that is, Sarah who was in labour with us), then who else could be the architect of this royal bridal chamber than the Paraclete? For it was not without man that Anne gave birth to the Mother of God – this being kept alone, among those of the whole age, for the Mother of God. But since Anne's womb was sterile and infertile,



and therefore dead for this reason, how could what is dead become active in a living way, save through the presence of the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the dead and calls those who have no being 'beings'? Therefore this all-holy maiden was born from a sterile womb, lest her entry into life should be a natural act and not through the cooperation of the Holy Spirit.

So from the beginning she was united to the Spirit, who is the source of life. For it was not to be that her beginning should come about without participation in the Holy Spirit. For this participation in the Spirit became, for her, participation in existence, and her conception was an image of and prelude to the conception of her Son. For if it is a paradox beyond compare that a virgin womb should conceive, it is also a paradox beyond nature that a sterile and dead womb should be a source of life, and indeed a work of God's power alone. Hence it is in a wholly new way that there should enter into life something wholly worthy of God and his gift, chosen before the ages and set apart for the service of the awe-inspiring mystery of the Incarnation of God. The Holy Spirit is the guard and guide in this, determining and adorning the bridegroom, and fashioning this maiden as the bride graced by God who is the Father, and made exceedingly pleasing to be the mother of his beloved Son – and truly, according to the mystical Song, to be the resplendent good pleasure, who is fitting and in harmony with the fatherly will, 'for in her was pleased to dwell the whole fulness of the Godhead' (Col. 1.19).

Hence she was made to enter in a paradoxical way into the Holy of Holies, that belonged to types and shadows, by Him who ordered with ineffable utterances everything that concerned her. In this way, he joined, as it were, the truth to the shadow, or the archetype to the type, thus indicating the ineffectiveness and cessation of what was already growing old, and almost saying that, now the sun had risen, the remaining light of the lampstand was already going out, and that there was manifest in her the image or truth of things, since the Law, which is the shadow of the good things to come, had passed away. The closeness and proximity of the maiden to the sanctuary of the Law invites comparison as of one with another and shows the nature of the true and archetypal Holy of Holies, free from and impervious to all sin, and how the thing of types and shadows with the same name is remote from the original. For truly something of lifeless matter cannot be called the Holy of Holies. And it shows how the only true high priest of the good things to come is received within, with one offering taking away once for all the sins of all. This is not like that which is

received yearly, and other offerings that cannot perfect the consciences of those who worship, as the divine Paul says, and it shows that this is the true dwelling place of God, 'for God does not dwell in temples made by hand' (Acts 17:24²), and therefore it is no longer necessary to sit in the shadow and continue to pay attention to the types. Perhaps the entry of the Virgin within the veil [of the Temple] was intended by the Holy Spirit, because she alone of those of this age was set apart by God for the service of the mystery, which is greater than any divine rite, whether heavenly or earthly; and so she was placed appropriately, as a kind of vessel and sacred thing set apart, and was there within, where the divine vessels were placed, more sacred and precious than anything on the earth, such as the ark and the sacred things within it. ...

Therefore she was nourished in a twofold way, fashioned and formed there by the divine Spirit, in a way beyond any understanding, for the service appropriate to the awe-inspiring mystery. Hence the archangel Gabriel, bringing to her the good news of our salvation, found there also the Paraclete, who was sent down there from heaven, or rather, was dwelling in her; or indeed, was dwelling in the heavens, since she had been fashioned by him as more radiant and more august by far than the heavens or anything in the heavens, as the minister and steward of those mysteries, 'into which angels desire to look' (1 Peter 1:12). Whence the Lord himself in his command – in the voice of this archangel, being the trumpet of God – descended from heaven, the first manifest descent into the incorruptible and unstained earth, from whom he received fleshly existence, since in his presence the whole earth was corrupt; and all human beings, dead in their sins, that is, with a spiritual death, might first rise in Christ. ... [For the Saviour's nature was taken from us in the hypostatic union, and through Baptism we share in the Resurrection.]

Such is the union and conjunction of the Paraclete with the all-holy Virgin – which is both inexpressible in any word and unknown to any mind – if, through an overflow of love for humanity, he opens up the mystery in a way we can understand, through the divine oracles and those who can explain and teach this. For it is not only through the Virgin's procession

² Jugie gives Acts 7:48, but this is from Stephen's speech, and one would expect from context something from Paul, even though the whole paragraph is a summary of (Paul in) Hebrews. The text from Paul's speech on the Areopagos fits the context equally well.



into being that participation in the Paraclete has come about – that is, by her being conceived in a strange way and beyond nature in an infertile and dead womb by His power and presence – but also by all that was paradoxically accomplished in her, as has been said: her strange and unwonted entry, while she was still a child, within the sanctuary of the temple; and the progress and pre-cleansing, the bridal adornment and the exceeding radiance and joy of her countenance, both manifest and hidden, such that, on beholding her, the all-radiant Gabriel was struck with joy and called her blessed. So, too, there was her readiness for the presence and incarnation of the Word – the incarnation itself transcending any understanding – through which there took place in her the ineffable conjunction and union with God the Word, and through this with the Father, accomplished through the divine Spirit and the complete presence of him to her through coinherence. For apart from the divine Spirit and participation in him it is impossible for nature that has come into being to be united to the Son, and to be worthy, as it were, of such an ineffable union and conjunction; as again, there is no union with the Father save through the Son and his presence.

Hence, she has first become receptive to the whole divine fulness, which is divided out and apportioned by the Spirit immediately to the creation. Thus she was united to God the Word, by the source of the holy Spirit, in an ineffable union and conjunction, by which she also found that inexpressible communion with the Father. Therefore, just as the Son is the natural image of the Father, whence also and undeviatingly, the Spirit is the image of the Son, so too the mother of this Son is not a natural image of the Paraclete, but is an image according to participation and grace. Yet she images forth the prototype incomparably beyond any nature that has come into being, as most purely is beheld in her alone all the graces and reflections of the Spirit, which are those of her own Son. For the form and the radiance of both is one. Whence she is a particular manifest pillar of the hidden treasures of the Spirit, of the radiant power of the hiddenness of the Godhead.