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Supra-Veneration of Theotokos in the Liturgical Services of the Orthodox Church

Lucian FARCAȘIU

Lucian FARCAȘIU

“Hilarion V. Felea” Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Arad, Romania
Email: lucian.farcasiu@yahoo.com

Abstract

The present study refers to the supra-veneration of the Theotokos in the liturgical services of the Orthodox Church. In the introduction I presented the theological foundations of supra-veneration of the Theotokos in the teachings of the Orthodox Church. The study develops the way in which the supra-veneration of the Theotokos is reflected in the liturgical service of the Orthodox Church, but also in the particular piety of the orthodox Christians. At the end of the study are presented the main conclusions from the research undertaken.

Keywords

supra-veneration, Theotokos, services, liturgical, Church, Orthodox

I. Introduction: The theological foundations of the supra-veneration of the Theotokos in the teachings on the Eastern Church

The supra-veneration of the Mother of God in Orthodox theology is based on two qualities of Mary, θεοτοκία and αειπαρτενία, of which we find testimonies both in the biblical and patristic tradition of the Church.

Theotokia and Aeipartenia of Theotokos was predominantly affirmed in the context of the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus, in 431, when Nestorius' heresy was condemned. Nestorius claimed that the Mother

of God may be called at most Χριστοτοκος or αντροποτοκος that is Christotokos (Birthgiver of Christ) or birthgiver of man. Regarding this heretical teaching, the Council emphasized and stressed the teaching about Theotokia and the Aeipartehia of Theotokos, that is, she gave birth to God in flesh and her everlasting virginity, qualities which the tradition of the Church kept developing even further.

Referring to the theotokia of the Mother of God, or the quality of Mother of God to be Birthgiver of God, in the eighth century, St. John of Damascus shows the following:

“We rightly call the Virgin Mary Theotokos, because this name encompasses the whole mystery of the divine economy. For if the one who gave birth to Christ is Teotokos, then the One who was born is truly God and man at the same time...; she is called Theotokos not only because of the nature of the Word, but also because of the deification of human nature. The Mother of God herself wondrously gave to the Creator to take form, and to God and the Creator of the universe to become man, deifying what He took”¹.

Referring to the quality of the Theotokos to be the Mother of God, Father Dumitru Stăniloae shows that her attribute

“expresses the relationship of deep intimacy that has been established between the Virgin Mary and the Son of God incarnate. If the word Virgin indicates more the divine initiative in the incarnation of the Son, the words of Theotokos and Mother of God give back her role and positive relationship with the One who was incarnated”².

Regarding the Theotokos *aeiparthenia*, that is, her quality of everlasting virginity or her perfect holiness, the testimonies of this quality of Mother

¹ Sf. IOAN DAMASCHIN, *Dogmatica*, book III, chapter 12, Editura Scripta, București, 1993, pp. 115-116.

² Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, second edition, Editura Omniscop, Craiova, 1993, p. 165.

of God are, firstly, of biblical origin, because "if we interpret the Gospel testimony in its first century Jewish context, there are many elements that prove that Mary intended to remain a virgin from the beginning of her marriage, and that she had no other children besides Jesus"³.

A first testimony in this sense is the word addressed by Mother of God to the archangel Gabriel, when he announces her that she will give birth to a son: "Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" (Luke 1, 34). Mother of God kept her purity and maidenhood before, during and after the birth, because she gave birth to Christs – the Son of God in an supernatural way and she remained "everlasting Virgin".

Referring to the Theotokos *aeiparthenia*, that is, her quality of everlasting virginity or her perfect holiness, St. Gregory of Nyssa calls her: "Mary without spot"⁴. In his book *Against Helvidius*, written in 383, the Venerable and God-bearing father Jerome affirms the Theotokos' everlasting virginity, showing that "the mother of the Son of God, who was a mother before she was bride, continued to be a virgin even after she gave birth to her Son"⁵. Regarding the conception of the Savior in the womb of the Mother of God and her virginal purity which she kept before, during and after the birth, Saint Ephrem the Syrian shows the following: "As the Lord made his entrance through the closed gates, so He came out of the womb of the Virgin, for she is truly the Virgin and truly gave birth without pain"⁶. As Father Dumitru Stăniloae appreciates: "not admitting that Mary gave birth to Jesus as a Virgin means not acknowledging that His subject was not the product of immanence. And this means the denial of Revelation"⁷. Therefore,

"the infant born in virgin purity had to remain pure from any state of lust; she had to remain Virgin in her whole existence

³ Brand PITRE, *Isus și rădăcinile evreiești ale Mariei*, translated from English by Monica Broșteanu, Editura Humanitas, București, p. 103.

⁴ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, *Despre feciorie 2*, PG. 46, 324.

⁵ Fericitul IERONIM, *Împotriva lui Helvidius*, 2, quoted by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Fecioara Maria de-a lungul secolelor. Locul ei în istoria culturii*, translated by Silvia Palade, Editura Humanitas, București, 1998, p. 119.

⁶ Sf. EFREM SIRUL, quoted by Anca Manolache, *Pași spre mântuire. Eseuri și studii teologice*, Editura Saeculum I. O, București, 2002, p. 69.

⁷ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Isus Hristos sau Restaurarea omului*, p. 159.

as the Mother of Jesus Christ, because the connection between mother and child is so intimate that even after birth there is a continuous spiritual transmission from her to Him”⁸.

Regarding the holiness of the Mother of God, which derives from her eternal virginity, the theologian Alexis Kniaseff shows the following:

“The character of this holiness is as easy to accept as it is mysterious. For, the whole human history waited for the Virgin, so that the highest rank of holiness - represented by the Thrones, Cherubim, and Seraphim, also known in the Mosaic religion - may remain behind a representative of the human kind, yet a woman. But if the greatest virtue is love (including humility), the Virgin Mary has conquered between and above the angelic wings, in her total attachment to God”⁹.

For “once the Holy Spirit came upon her, it remained over, and in Mary. She remained the living temple of the Spirit”¹⁰. Therefore, the Mother of God “was holy by her full attachment to God and became more and more holy by the descent of the Spirit upon her and in her, and then more and more holy by dwelling in her the divinity of the Word”¹¹.

Referring to the purity and everlasting virginity of the Mother of God, St. Gregory of Nyssa calls her “the spotless Mary (αμιαντος)”¹².

Therefore, in theological terms the worship brought to the Mother of God in the Orthodox Church is also called *hyperdoulia* (υπερδουλια), that is *supra-veneration* or *most veneration*, unlike the veneration we bring to the other saints of the Church, whom we call simple *doulia* (δουλια), that is *veneration* or *honor*¹³. Through this cult of *hyperdoulia* is expressed the highest honor that the Church brings to the Mother of God, showing the

⁸ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau Restaurarea omului*, p. 162.

⁹ Anca MANOLACHE, *Pași spre mântuire...*, p. 71

¹⁰ Alexis KNIAZEFF, *Cours de Mariologie*, Editure St. Serge, Paris, 1986, p. 54.

¹¹ Anca MANOLACHE, *Pași spre mântuire...*, p. 72.

¹² Sf. GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, *Despre feciorie 2*, în P.G. t. 46, col. 324.

¹³ Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica Generală*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 1993, p. 60-61.

supreme level that the Eternal Virgin is found at.

Emphasizing the connection between the worship of God (λατρεία) and the veneration of the saints (δουλία), or the super-veneration of the Theotokos (υπερδουλία), St. John of Damascus says that:

“He who honors the martyr honors God, for Whom the martyr suffered martyrdom. He who worships the apostle of Christ worships the One who sent the apostle. He who prostrates himself before the Mother of God is evidently bringing honor to her Son, for there is no other God but One, the One known and worshiped in the Trinity”¹⁴.

For Orthodox Christians, *the Theotokos is the intercessor for our salvation to her Christ-Son*. This teaching is in consensus with the whole patristic teaching of the Church. Thus, emphasizing the role of mediator of the Mother of God, Saint Andrew of Crete addresses her in such words: “You intercede with the Lord for the common creature. Until you were on earth, a small part of the earth held you. After you moved from the earth, everyone has you as intercessor of forgiveness”¹⁵.

Father Professor Dumitru Staniloae shows that in her quality as intercessor for us to her Son, Christ, “we ask the Blessed Virgin Mary not only to pray for us, but also to help us, as the Mother of the Son of God and that connects us with her special intercession for us”¹⁶. The mediation and help that we can receive from Theotokos is useful for us believers, since she, sitting in heaven with Christ the Savior, has “on the one hand maternal authority over Him when she prays for us, and on the other hand, motherly tenderness for our difficulties”¹⁷.

The Orthodox Church recorded in its piety “the hymns of the faithful, the theological conclusions of the Church Fathers and the prayers of the

¹⁴ LEONTIE AL NEAPOLEI din insula Cipru, *Contra iudeilor, despre închinarea la Crucea lui Hristos, la icoanele sfinților, a unora către alții și despre moaștele sfinților*, quoted by Sfântul IOAN DAMASHINUL, *Cele trei tratate contra iconoclaștilor, Mărturii despre icoane ale sfinților și cinstiților părinți din vechime*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2016, p. 108.

¹⁵ Sf. ANDREI CRITEANUL, *Homilie in Nativitatem*, PG 97, 896.

¹⁶ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 3, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe, București, 1997, p. 318.

¹⁷ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau Restaurarea omului*, p. 167.

saints, gathering them all together with the data of Scripture and thus achieving a coherent doctrine without exaggeration”¹⁸ by which it honors the Mother of God.

II. The Supra-veneration of Theotokos in the Liturgical Services of the Orthodox Church

Like in the case of other saints, Mother of God has been honored since the beginning of Christianity, through many forms or ways of expressing, of which the most important is *the establishment of feast days* or certain days during the Liturgical year, dedicated to her special memory or veneration¹⁹.

The special veneration given to the Mother of God in the Orthodox cult can be seen from the large number of feasts dedicated to her celebration and supra-veneration. While the other saints are, according to the general rule, mentioned only once a year - namely on the day of their falling asleep²⁰ - the Holy Virgin is specially celebrated several times during the Liturgical year, through feast days that honor not only her Dormition (falling asleep), but also several other important moments of her life, such as: the Nativity, the Presentation of the Theotokos into the Temple, the Annunciation, and some miracles performed by her, after her falling asleep.

Apart from the feasts in the Orthodox Church dedicated to the Theotokos, the worship addressed to her is also expressed through other forms of manifestation.

Thus, we have *odes* and *prayers* in the liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church or in different prayer books addressed to Theotokos.

As a Romanian theologian appreciates “there is no other saint in whose praise the lute of the saints and pious hymnologists has resounded longer, more reverently and with more ardor than it resounded in the worship of the ever-lasting Virgin”²¹. The praises that are brought to

¹⁸ Anca MANOLACHE, *Pași spre mântuire. Eseuri și studii teologice*, pp. 51-52.

¹⁹ In this regard see Alexis KNIAZEV, *Maica Domnului în Biserica Ortodoxă*, Humanitas, București, 1998, p. 30, as well as Mgs. Contantin PĂRVU, „Temeiurile ortodoxe ale cultului Maicii Domnului”, in *Studii Teologice*, VI (1954) 3-4, pp. 216-217.

²⁰ The exception to this rule is Saint John the Baptist, as well as the saints whose feast days were noted in the calendars also the days when their relics were found or moved.

²¹ D. I. BELU, *Maica Domnului în lumina imnelor liturgice*, Ed. Tipografiei și Librăriei Diecezane, Caransebeș, 1941, p. 73.

Theotokos by the holy hymnographers and melodists “in an endless variation of poetic images, of a unique beauty and revelatory power”²², emphasize the exceptional veneration of the Holy Virgin in the Church and contribute to the development of her cult. These hymns dedicated to the Mother of God capture the highest theology, trying “to explain in a more accessible language the mysteries of our faith”²³. These hymns, composed by St. Ephrem the Syrian, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. John of Antioch, St. Sophronius I of Jerusalem, Andrew and German, the Patriarchs of Jerusalem, Cosmas the Melodist, Roman the Melodist, St. John of Damascus, etc. expresses this “high theological thinking that they convey in such an accessible form”²⁴.

In the prayers during the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great or the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostome, the help of the Mother of God is invariably invoked²⁵. According to the Russian theologian Alexis Kniaeff, exceptionally, “the Byzantine Liturgy is the most Marial of all Christian liturgies”²⁶.

During the Proskomedia a portion for the Theotokos is taken out from the loaf and this tradition is mentioned since the 2nd-3rd centuries, by Hippolytus of Rome. The portion for the Mother of God is put on the right side of the Lamb and the priest says: “upon Thy right hand did stand the queen in gold of Ophir” (Psalm 44, 11)²⁷.

Saint Theophanes of Nicaea, explains this verse and shows that Christ is the Head of the Body of Church, the Christians are the members of the body of Christ and Theotokos is the neck that takes the gifts of Christs to his members. Saint Theophanes shows that Theotokos is:

”the one who mediates between the head and the body, being the neck, the highest adornment of the Church, Mother of God, the one who holds the head, the one seated to the right of the

²² D. I. BELU, *Maica Domnului în lumina imnelor liturgice*, pp. 78-79.

²³ Pr. Dr. Achim SĂRĂȘAN, *Viața și cinstirea Maicii Domnului*, Editura Andreiană, Sibiu, 2015, p. 228.

²⁴ Pr. Dr. Achim SĂRĂȘAN, *Viața și cinstirea Maicii Domnului*, p. 229.

²⁵ In this regard see Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica Generală*, p. 194; † IRINEU, Arhiepiscop al Alba Iuliei, *Împărăteasa Cerului și mama noastră*, ediția a II-a, revizuită, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2016, p. 34.

²⁶ Alexis KNIASEFF, „La Presence liturgique de la Mere de Dieu”, in: *Mariologie*, Paris, St. Serge, 1985, p. 8.

²⁷ *Liturghier*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2012, p. 120.

other members of the body, but lower than the head and closest to Him. Therefore, as Christ is the head of every beginning and dominion in the Church, and the only way that leads to the Father, so Theotokos, who is a kind of sanctified neck, is the other path, which leads all up to the head, to Christ”²⁸.

On the other hand, this text of the Psalms of David shows that:

“the place of the Mother of God, both in the economy of the Incarnation and the salvation of the human race, and in the future age can only be one: to give her to the One who chose her, prepared her through the Holy Spirit, His Church, before the Church seen at Pentecost. No one and nothing can separate the Empress from her Emperor and Emperor of the world, from whom comes an eternal honor for her, which exceeds, but also confirms, the veneration that the faithful bring to her in the Church”²⁹.

The Mother of God is then invoked during the Church services, which culminate in the Divine Liturgy, through the following intercession: “Remembering our most holy, pure, most blessed and glorious Lady, the birth-giver of God and ever-virgin Mary, with all the saints”³⁰. As Hierotheos, the Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, interprets the significance of this intercession,

“We call the Mother of God «the most holy» because she is above all the saints, being the culmination and perfection of all the saints ... The Mother of God is «most blessed» because she received great grace from the fullness of God’s grace. She is «glorious» because she is full of God’s glory, since even her «falling asleep is glorified». She is called «Lady» because she gave birth to the Lord of all, Christ. She intercedes and prays

²⁸ Sf. Teofan al Niceei, quoted by IEROTHEOS, Mitropolit al Nafpaktosului, *Praznicele Maicii Domnului – o perspectivă istorică și teologică*, p. 488.

²⁹ Pr. Conf. Dr. Ștefan BUCHIU, *Maica Domnului. O introducere în teotokologia ortodoxă*, Editura „Sigma”, București 2006, p. 92.

³⁰ *Liturghier*, p. 40, 89, 137, etc.

with great power, «without being ashamed as protector of Christians». She is the «Mother of God» because she did not give birth to a simple man, but to the second person of the Holy Trinity, who is God. And she is «ever Virgin Mary» because she was a virgin before birth, a virgin in birth and a virgin after birth ... we beseech the Mother of God, who is adorned with so many names and glory, to intercede for us. This is the meaning of the word «remembering her». We commemorate her to honor her and we ask her to intercede with God for our salvation, because Christ promised her before she fell asleep that all those for whom she would pray would be saved. That is why all the saints are closely related to the Mother of God, they feel her close to them and love her very much, as her friends. After God, we love the Mother of God the most. Christ is the intercessor between us and God the Father, and the Mother of God is the intercessor between us and Christ ... That is why we ask for the intercessions of the Mother of God, entrusting at the same time all our lives and those of our fellow men to Christ»³¹.

To this intercession spoken by the priest, the faithful respond: “Most Holy Birthgiver of God, have mercy upon us”³². Interpreting the meaning of this response from the people, the same metropolitan shows that

³¹ This is the ancient and original form of the faithful’s response to the invocation to the Mother of God. For us, Romanians, the form of this answer changed, in the form “Most Holy Birthgiver of God, have mercy upon us”, in the middle of the 20th century (1945-1950), the impulse of the sectarian accusations that the Orthodox consider the Mother of God to be redeemer, alongside the Redeemer Jesus Christ, under the influence of the Catholic dogma that considers the Mother of God Co-redemtrix. From the beginning we must state that there is no contradiction or incompatibility between the verbs “to save” and “to intercede”. Christ is the true Savior of the human race. He became incarnate for our salvation, but also from the people is required to work together or collaborate with God’s saving grace. Therefore, in the absolute sense of the word, the true Savior is Jesus Christ. But the verb “to save” also has a secondary meaning, which refers to those who work together for our salvation, thus becoming an intermediary instrument in the work of salvation (see in this sense HIEROTHEOS, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, *Feasts of the Mother of God - an historical and theological perspective*, p. 495-496). These instruments are “the saints and householders of God”. In this sense, the Mother of God intercedes from Christ through her prayers, our salvation.

³² IEROTHEOS, Mitropolit al Nafpaktosului, *Praznicele Maicii Domnului – o perspectivă istorică și teologică*, p. 496.

“The savior of people is Christ par excellence, but the Mother of God also saves in the second sense of the word, by virtue of the fact that she became the Mother of Christ, who gave birth to God as a man. The work of the Mother of God is higher than the work of intercession of the saints”³³.

In this regard, Saint German, the Patriarch of Constantinople shows that no one can save himself, escape the dangers and receive gifts from God except through the Mother of God:

„No one is redeemed except through you, Mother of God! No one is freed from dangers except through you, Virgin Mother! No one is saved except through you, Mother of God! No one is shown mercy except through you, the one who have received God! ... among those who approach God, that is, the saints and angels, the Mother of God is the closest to Him, therefore she can intercede with more power than all. Since the Mother of God alone is the boundary «between created and uncreated nature», no one can come to God unless is illuminated by her, the true divine torch”³⁴.

The entire teaching of St. German of Constantinople is centered around the theological idea that Mother of God is worthy to be Mother of Christ and to bestow the greatest good on mankind. The Person and work of the Mother of God cannot be conceived independently of the Person and work of Christ³⁵. This Orthodox teaching regarding the intercessions of the Mother of God for our salvation has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic teaching about the Mother of God as a redeemer, but only with the intercession that she, as the Mother of the Son of God, makes at the

³³ Sfântul GHERMAN AL CONSTANTINOPOLULUI, quoted by IEROTHEOS, Mitropolit al Nafpaktosului, *Praznicele Maicii Domnului – o perspectivă istorică și teologică*, p. 497-498.

³⁴ IEROTHEOS, Mitropolit al Nafpaktosului, *Praznicele Maicii Domnului – o perspectivă istorică și teologică*, p. 498.

³⁵ IEROTHEOS, Mitropolit al Nafpaktosului, *Praznicele Maicii Domnului – o perspectivă istorică și teologică*, p. 501.

throne of the Holy Trinity for our salvation. The Virgin Mary “saves in the sense that she became an organ of salvation, a salvation that Christ accomplishes”³⁶. She

“She does not simply intercede with God, as the saints do, but her daring surpasses theirs, because she has received a great gift from Christ God and she is a partaker of His glory. Based on these Orthodox premises, the request «Most Holy Birthgiver of God, have mercy upon us» is fully Orthodox and theological”³⁷.

In addition to the prayers we are addressing to the Mother of God in the litanies during the Holy Liturgy, the Mother of God is invoked immediately after the Epiclesis, the first of all the saints invoked as intercessors, showing that in addition to the saints praying for us, mentioned in the prayer of the diptych which precedes the moment of the Epiclesis, the Mother of God has a special place and role in intercession with God. The Russian theologian Alexis Kniazev believes that “the Eucharist, as the actualization of the Incarnation, must also be considered as the presence of the true Mother of God in this Mystery” because

“There is an ontological identity between the Mother of God, the Eucharist and the Church. Because the Virgin-Mother is present in the community of the Church not only as a member of the triumphant Church, but also as a participant in the mystery of the Incarnation, and the Eucharistic Sacrifice is offered for her also”³⁸.

Thus, immediately after the prayer of Offering the priest says:

“Again we offer you this spiritual sacrifice for those fallen asleep in the faith: forefathers, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, ascetics and every

³⁶ IEROTHEOS, Mitropolit al Nafpaktosului, *Praznicele Maicii Domnului – o perspectivă istorică și teologică*, p. 501.

³⁷ Alexis KNIASEFF, „La Presence liturgique de la Mere de Dieu”, in: *Mariologie*, Paris, St. Serge, 1985, p. 12.

³⁸ *Liturghier*, p. 177-178.

righteous spirit made perfect in faith. Especially for our most holy, pure, most blessed and glorious Lady, the Birthgiver of God and ever-virgin Mary”³⁹.

Saint Nicholas Cabasila shows that “the Church ... brings to God ... the spiritual sacrifice as thanks to God, and first of all the Holy Virgin, as one who is above all holiness”⁴⁰. Following the developments of St. Theophanes of Nicaea, we bring the Divine Eucharist as thanks “especially” to the Mother of God, because she is

”the most chosen, most wonderful, and most God-like fruit of His creative wisdom and divine grace. She is the divine table, which puts forward the communal ambrosia and the life-giving nectar, that is, the Body and Blood of the One Who sprung forth from her in an unspeakable way. She is the caring and generous host who prepares the feast of divine and godly food”⁴¹.

The commemoration of the Mother of God immediately after the Epiclesis, in order to partake the faithful with the Divine and Holy Mysteries, is explained by St. Simeon the New Theologian: “he who partakes of the Body of Christ partakes of the body of which Christ took from His Mother and deified it”⁴².

At this invocation of the Mother of God after the epiclesis, the faithful sing the well-known hymn of the Mother of God “It is truly right to call you blessed, O Birthgiver of God...”. We sing this hymn in all eight tones of the Octechos, every Sunday, because the Most Holy One deserves to be praised in all tones. This hymn dedicated to the Mother of God consists of two separate chants. The first part of it is “It is truly right to call you blessed, O Birthgiver of God, ever blessed and Most Pure and Mother of

³⁹ Sf. NICOLAE CABASILĂ, *Tâlcuirea Dumnezeieștii Liturghii*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1997, p. 79-80.

⁴⁰ Sf. TEOFAN AL NICEEI, quoted by IEROTHEOS Mitropolit al Nafpaktosului, *Praznicele Maicii Domnului – o perspectivă istorică și teologică*, p. 490.

⁴¹ Sf. SIMEON NOUL TEOLOG, quoted by IEROTHEOS Mitropolit al Nafpaktosului, *Praznicele Maicii Domnului – o perspectivă istorică și teologică*, p. 492.

⁴² Ceaslov, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2014, p. 21; *Catavasier*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2017, p. 110.

our God”⁴³. The second part of the hymn has the following content: “More honorable than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim; who without loss of virginity gave birth to God the Word, true Birthgiver of God, we praise you”.

This part of the hymn was composed as the Theme-Song of the 9th Ode of the Canon of Good Friday⁴⁴. These two odes, although at first they were separate, were merged into one, being thus sung at the Divine Liturgy and other services⁴⁵. The hymn “It is truly right” expresses the entire dogmatic

⁴³ *Ceaslov*, p. 74; *Catavasier*, p. 72, 110.

⁴⁴ *Lenten Triodion*, Great Friday, Matins, 9th Ode, Theme-Song, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, p. 616.

⁴⁵ The second part of this hymn was composed at the beginning of the 8th century by St. Cosmas the Melodist. It actually constitutes the theme-song of the ninth ode of the Good Friday Matins Canon, which takes place on Maundy Thursday, in the evening. As is known, the ninth ode is always dedicated to the Mother of God. In his analysis of this song, St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite refers to the explanation given by Nichiforus Calistus Xantopoulos at the request of a certain Neophyte, ecclesiarch and hieromonk in Odighitria. According to Nichifor’s explanation, Saint Cosmas the Melodist, composing the Good Friday Canon and reaching the singing of the ode dedicated to the Mother of God, wanted to comfort the Mother of God, as one who saw her Son in pain and suffering on the Cross. St. Nicodemus writes: “This irmos, St. Cosmas made it even more uplifting and beautiful, worthy of the Mother of God, in order to comfort her, who was in pain that day because of the Passion of her most sweet Only Begotten Son”. When she listened to this song, the Mother of God loved it and revealed this to St. Cosmas: “Our Lady of God, the Mother of God, appearing before St. Cosmas, who was preparing the irmos, thanked him, telling him that this song rested her more than any other and that wherever it is sung, she will also be present, blessing, in return, those who bless her. Besides, many people really saw the Mother of God coming and blessing those who sing this hymn. That’s why it was arranged that those who sing should sit with their heads uncovered”. The first part of Our Lady’s hymn, “It is truly right...”, was added to this song later, following a wonderful event. Thus, in a cell in the Holy Mountain that belongs to the Holy Pantocrator Monastery and is dedicated to the Dormition of the Mother of God, the monk Gavriil was going to do the Sunday Matins service alone, because his Elder had gone to keep vigil at Protaton, in Karyes. After Vespers an unknown monk knocked on the door and stayed the night there. At the time of Matins, when they reached the ninth ode, the monk Gavriil sang, according to the order, the hymn of the Mother of God composed by Saint Cosmas, “Most honorable than the cherubim...”, but the unknown monk also added at the beginning “It is truly right...”. The monk Gavriil was amazed, because until then nowhere in the Holy Mountain sung this hymn, and he asked the monk to write it down for him, so that he could sing it too. As there was no ink or paper, the monk inscribed this hymn on a stone slab and became invisible. He had been the Archangel Gabriel, sent by God

teaching about the Mother of God, “everything that the Church can say more completely and more precisely on a dogmatic and moral level about the Mother of God, about her purpose and contribution in the economy of the incarnation of the Son of God and in the salvation the human race”⁴⁶.

As the Western theologian Jaroslav Pelikan appreciates, “The cult of the Virgin Mary found its perfect expression in the Byzantine Liturgy”⁴⁷.

The Mother of God is also invoked in the hymnography and prayers that compose the contents of the Daily Cycle that we perform in the Orthodox Church⁴⁸.

We can also state that in the church tradition we find invocations and intercessions addressed to the Mother of God. In this sense, the Mother of God is mentioned, invoked, praised and magnified in the service of each liturgical day during the church year, through a rich hymnography (troparion, sticheron, canons, etc.) which alternates with that consecrated to the respective Saints and which occupies much of the content of our service books (Octoechos, Lenten Triodion, Pentecostarion, Menaion and Horologion). In particular, the order of services that make up the structure of a liturgical day, i.e. the order of the Seven Lauds, contains many verses and tropes dedicated to the Mother of God. Among these we mention: the special troparions of the Mother of God, called θεοτοκία or *Bogorodicine*,

to reveal the angelic song to the monk Gabriel and, through him, to all the faithful. When the Elder returned to his cell, he was amazed by this incident, and went with his disciple to Protaton, where they showed the slab on which the hymn was inscribed. The fathers glorified God and sent the tablet to Constantinople, to the patriarch and to the emperor, and the angelic hymn was added to the hymn of Saint Cosmas, “Most honorable than the cherubim...” and spread throughout the world, to be sung by all Orthodox Christians. The icon of the Mother of God, before which the archangel sang, was moved by the Fathers to the great church of Protaton, where it has been kept ever since, sitting on the bishop’s chair in the Holy Altar. The cell where this wonderful event took place was called “Axion estin”, which means “It is truly right...”, and the valley in which the cell is located was named “Adin”, which means “to sing”, because heret was sung the first time by the angel the hymn dedicated to the Mother of God. This miracle is celebrated on June 11 (in this regard see IEROTHEOS, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, *Feasts of the Mother of God - an historical and theological perspective*, pp. 502-505).

⁴⁶ † IRINEU, Arhiepiscop al Alba Iuliei, *Împărăteasa Cerului și mama noastră*, p. 35.

⁴⁷ Jaroslav PELIKAN, *Fecioara Maria de-a lungul secolelor. Locul ei în istoria culturii*, p. 108.

⁴⁸ In this regard see Arhim. Mihail DANILIUC, *Maica Domnului în cultul divin ortodox și în cultura română (poezia cultă)*, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2021, pp. 114-132.

from the service of Vespers and Matins, special stichérons or troparion at the Sessional Hymns, the Canons and at the Praises of Matins, special Canons at Matins, the Axion at the Holy Liturgy. As a general rule, the last sticheron of any group of stichérons, sung in the various moments of the church services (to Lord, I cried unto thee, to Aposticha and the Troparion of the Vespers, to the Sessional Hymn, the Canon Hymns and Matins Praises, to the Beatitudes in the order of the Holy Liturgy), hymns that are preceded at Both now... by the sticheron or troparion of the Mother of God. Likewise, the last troparion from each ode or hymn of the Hymnographic Canons from the Matins service, or from the ordinances of some Holy Mysteries or Special Payer Services (such as the Holy Unction, the Blessing of the Water or the Funeral Service) are troparions dedicated to the Mother of God⁴⁹.

The prayers addressed to the Mother of God are also found among those that Orthodox Christians say in the morning when they get up, in the evening before going to bed or during the preparation for Holy Communion⁵⁰. Also, in some monasteries, is preserved a beautiful tradition according to which, during the meal are read prayers dedicated to the Mother of God⁵¹.

Also, in the service and prayer books we can find *services* and *special prayer services* dedicated to the Mother of God, the oldest of which is the *Akathist to the Theotokos*⁵², to which in more recent times were added

⁴⁹ In this regard see G. FERRARI, „La dottrina e l'Eortologia Mariana nella tradizione orientale”, in: *Sacra Doctrina*, Roma, nr. 69-70, 1973, pp. 215-254; Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica Generală*, p. 194; Pr. D. I. BELU, *Maica Domnului în lumina imnelor liturgice*, Caransebeș, 1941, p. 32; Alexis KNIAZEV, *Maica Domnului în Biserica Ortodoxă*, p. 19

⁵⁰ Alexis KNIAZEV, *Maica Domnului în Biserica Ortodoxă*, p. 19.

⁵¹ Alexis KNIAZEV, *Maica Domnului în Biserica Ortodoxă*, p. 19.

⁵² His text is rendered in full in Greek in PG 92, 1335-1348. Most theologians believe that the Akathist Hymn belongs to Saint George of Pisidia, Saint Germanus I of Constantinople or Saint Romanos the Melodist (see in this regard Fr. Adrian DINU, *Virgin Mary – prototype of spiritual life – interpretation of the work of St. Irenaeus of Lyon*, p. 196). More recent studies fix the date of this hymn in the second half of the 5th century or at the beginning of the 6th century, but without attributing it to any author (see in this sense Ermanno TONIOLO, *Canto di lode a Maria, fonte di luce*, Rome, 1976; Ermanno Toniolo, „L'Inno Acatisto, monumento di teologia e di culto mariano nella Chiesa bizantina”, in: *De cultu mariano saeculis VI-XI*, vol. 4, Rome, 1972, pp. 1-39). Spiritually, the Akathist Hymn is a prayer of praise to the Holy

many other Akathist hymns dedicated to the Feasts of the Mother of God or of the miracle performing icons⁵³. Of more recent origin there are the two *Paraklesis of the Mother of God* in Horologion⁵⁴, as well as the *Paraklesis of the Mother of God* in Psalter⁵⁵. Of a much newer form is the *Psalter of Mother of God*, composed by St. Demetrius of Rostov, in the 17th-18th century⁵⁶.

Mother, showing the deep connection she has with her Son. In its content, the Akathist Hymn presents itself as an interweaving of narrative and doctrinal elements.

⁵³ See *Buchet de Acatiste ale Maicii Domnului*, Editura Biserica Ortodoxă, Alexandria, 2001.

⁵⁴ See *Ceaslov*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2014, pp. 388-426.

⁵⁵ See *Psaltirea*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2016, pp. 395-420.

⁵⁶ See in this sense the *Psalter of the Mother of God*, in the *Psalter, the Paraklesis and the Lamentations at the Tomb of the Mother of God*, Egumenita Publishing House, Galați, 2004, p. 3-239. Regarding the origin of this text in the *Psalter of the Mother of God*, according to more recent research it can be found that it is not the composition of St. Demetrius of Rostov, but it can only represent a translation of an older text by this Saint of the Russian Church. In this regard, we recall the fact that a Latin text was found, after which the evening service, called Lamentations at the Tomb of the Mother of God was later translated into English, in the middle of the 19th century (this is the translation of J. Cummings from 1882). From the series of Latin texts of the Psalter of the Mother of God we mention: a manuscript from the 15th century, attributed to H. Mitzschewitz, from the year 1493; another manuscript appeared in Florence, dating from 1568, with the author Bernard de Clairvaux, a holy Frank monk from the Benedictine order, who died in 1153, and finally the *Psalterium Beatae Mariae Virginis*, printed in 1607, attributed of Bonaventura, Catholic saint from the 13th century, one of the doctors of the Church in Rome. So, the Latin Psalter of the Mother of God is attributed to Bonaventura or Bernard de Clairvaux, and in some texts even Fer Jerome is mentioned long before the appearance of the Psalter of St. Demetrius of Rostov. Some Western theologians even support the much older origin of the Psalter, placing the period of its writing just before the Great Schism of 1054, this text from the first millennium was later compiled and edited by Bonaventura or Bernard of Clairvaux. If so, then the period in which the Psalter was composed is the time when the western part of Europe was still orthodox. On the other hand, the 17th century represented for Eastern Christians a great approach to Catholic writings and practices. During this period, especially the Russians took over a series of prayers close to the spirit of Orthodoxy, including them in popular piety. It is possible that this fact also happened with the Psalter of the Mother of God. Thus, St. Demetrius had great piety and he also prayed to the Mother of God. He could have thus translated the Psalter of the Mother of God from the Latin language, which he then embellished and gave to the Christians of Russia for reading and spiritual use (see in this sense "Foreword", to the *Psalter of the Mother of God*, Arsenian Publishing House, Arad, 2020, p. 3-5).

It was not included in the cult of the Church, but it remained as a book used more in popular piety.

In some parts of Orthodoxy, it is more and more customary that after Vespers with Litany or Matins, performed as Vigil, on the eve of the Dormition of the Mother of God⁵⁷, the Lamentations at the Tomb of the Mother of God is sung, which is a replica at the service of the Lamentations at the Tomb of the Lord, from the order of Matins of Great Saturday in the Lenten Triodion.

The appearance and development of this rich Marian hymnography, which “in Byzantium exceeded the framework of the Marian feasts and found an important place in the structure of all the services of the liturgical year, as well as in the Euchologion”, abundantly demonstrates again the piety of the Christian Church towards of the Mother of God and the trust in her intercessions⁵⁸. All these frequent invocations of the Mother of God show the exceptional honor which the Church gives her.

As Father Nicolae Buzescu shows, the cult of the Mother of God, expressed in hymns and liturgical prayers “introduces us directly into a purely spiritual, divine atmosphere, and all the literary-poetic richness and beauty can only be understood spiritually, by accepting the miraculous, the paradox, as they were transmitted to the Church through Tradition”⁵⁹.

Many data concerning the Mother of God that do not appear in the Holy Scriptures, but are included in the hymnography of the Church from the Holy Tradition, discover the fact that this

“has a much deeper revelatory content than the Holy Scriptures, which is also a written form of Tradition. This richer content was recorded in the books of worship and developed theologically

⁵⁷ In this regard see *Prohodul Maicii Domnului*, in: *Psaltirea, Paraclisul și Prohodul Maicii Domnului*.

⁵⁸ In this regard see Alexix KNIAZEV, *Maica Domnului în Biserica Ortodoxă*, p. 30. Also A. WENGER, „Foi et piete mariale a Byzance”, in: *Maria*, vol. V, 1958, pp. 923-981; J. LEDIT, *Marie dans la liturgie byzantine*, Editions Beauchesne, Paris, 1976; A. SALAVILLE, „Marie dans la liturgie byzantine”, in: *Maria*, vol. I, Editions Beauchesne, Paris, 1949, pp. 249-326

⁵⁹ Nicolae C. BUZESCU, „Panaghia Theotokos în imnologia Mineelor”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXII (1980) 3, p. 537

and dogmatically in Menaion Octoechos, Lenten Triodion, Horologion, and Pentecostarion”⁶⁰.

III. Conclusions

1. The super-veneration of the Mother of God in Orthodox theology is based on the two qualities of Mary, Theotokia and her Aeipartenia, that is: Birthgiver of God and Ever Virgin.

2. The two qualities of the Mother of God were predominantly affirmed in the context of the Third Ecumenical Synod, from Ephesus in 431, which fought the heresy of Nestorius.

3. The cult brought to the Mother of God in the Orthodox Church is called in theological terms *hyperdulia* (υπερδουλία), that is, supra-veneration or most veneration, in contrast to the honor we bring to the other saints of the Church, which we call simple *dulia* (δουλία), meaning worship or honor. Through this cult of *hyperdulia*, is expressed the highest honor that the Church brings to the Mother of God, showing the supreme level at which the Ever-Virgin is found.

4. For Orthodox Christians, the Mother of God intercedes with Christ her Son, for our salvation, this teaching being in agreement with the entire patristic teaching of the Church.

5. The veneration of the Mother of God in the worship of the Church has been manifested, since the beginning, through several forms or ways of expressing, the first of which in terms of importance is the establishment of feast days or certain days during the church year, dedicated to her memory and special honor.

6. Apart from the feast days dedicated to the Mother of God, in the Orthodox Church, the cult addressed to her is also expressed through other forms of manifestation. Thus, in the liturgical year of the Orthodox Church or in the various prayer books, we have odes and prayers addressed to the Mother of God.

7. In public divine worship, the Mother of God is invoked in the prayers of the Holy Liturgy, of the Holy Mysteries, of the Daily Cycle, as well as in and church services through a rich hymnography (troparions, stichera,

⁶⁰ Nicolae C. BUZESCU, „Panaghia Theotokos în imnologia Mineelor”, p. 538.

hymns, etc.) that alternate with the one consecrated to the respective Saints and which occupies a large part of the content of our service books (Octoechos, Lenten Triodion, Pentecostarion, Menaion and Horologion). In the service and prayer books we can find services and special services dedicated to the Mother of God, the oldest of which is the Akathist to the Theotokos, to which in more recent times other akathists dedicated to the Feasts of the Mother of God or her miracle performing icons have been added. Of more recent origin are the two Paraklesis of the Mother of God in Horologion, as well as the Paraklesis of the Mother of God in Psalter. We also remember the Lamentations at the Tomb of the Mother of God that is sung together in monasteries and even parish churches after the Vigil service on the eve of the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God.

8. The Psalter of the Mother of God, attributed to St. Demetrius of Rostov, is of a much newer version, is not included the Church's cult, but remained as a book used more in popular piety.

9. The appearance and development of this rich Marian hymnography demonstrates the devotion of the Christian Church to the Mother of God, the trust in her intercessions, as well as the exceptional veneration that the Orthodox Church gives her.