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Mother of the Lord – Evermore Prayer for Us Viorel SAVA

Viorel SAVA

Faculty of Orthodox Theology, “Al. I. Cuza” University of Iași, Romania
Email: savavi@gmail.com

Abstract

Our article, Mother of the Lord - Evermore Prayer For Us, contains an argument, two main parts, and some short conclusions. It is concentrated on the places of the Holy Virgin Mary as an endless intercessor for us as reflected in the Orthodox worship. Firstly, we pointed out the idea that despite a multitude of writings that highlight the special place She has in Orthodox theological thinking and Liturgy, many topics and aspects should be developed and treated in depth. One of them is the one we propose in our article. According to the Orthodox understanding of spiritual life and knowledge, there is a close connection. We know more because we live more deeply and effectively in daily life than what we know from the mysteries of our faith. Secondly, we emphasized that the Mother of our Lord, through Her prayers, is the protector of the Church community seen as a big family. In the pose of intercessor, we meet the Mother of God everywhere in Orthodox worship, so that is why a theologian of the last century introduced the idea of Her omnipresence in Orthodox liturgical life. In addition, we talked about the Mother of the Lord, as the protector of the little family named by St. John Chrysostom the Church from home. Finally, we note that our whole life, in the Church and the family, takes place under the protection of the Mother of God who carries us in Her persistent and unceasing prayers to Christ The Lord.

Keywords

Mother of the Lord, Orthodox worship, intercession, liturgical community, family

Argument

Over time, countless monographs, studies and articles have been written about the Mother of God, in all Christian traditions in which she is honoured as the Mother of the incarnate Son of God, writings that are added to formulas of faith, liturgical hymnography, sermons of the Fathers of the Church and of more recent orators and other categories of writings which, all together, highlight the special place she had and has in the work of saving the world, by participating to the “eternal mystery hidden” and unknown even to the angels, and in the life of the Church, from its foundation to the end of the ages.

To make an inventory of this multitude of writings about the Mother of God is almost impossible¹. However, there is still room for honouring her using the path of theological expression in texts that will be added to the already existing ones. The theological text is not or should not be

¹ Here we indicate some studies of Orthodox Mariology published in our church magazines: Pr. Dr. Ovidiu N. CĂCIULĂ, “În legătură cu noua dogmă a papalității: «Assumptio Corporae Beatae Mariae Virginis in coelum», in: *Ortodoxia*, II (1950) 4, pp. 503-514; Pr. Prof. Petru REZUȘ, “Mariologia ortodoxă”, in: *Ortodoxia*, II (1950) 4, pp. 515-558; Preot Prof. D. STĂNILOAE, “Învățătura despre Maica Domnului la ortodocși și catolici”, in: *Ortodoxia*, II (1950) 4, pp. 559-609; Pr. Prof. Liviu STAN, “O nouă răstăcire a papalității”, in: *Ortodoxia*, II (1950) 4, pp. 610-619; Preot Prof. D. STĂNILOAE, “Maica Domnului ca mijlocitoare”, in: *Ortodoxia*, IV (1954) 1, pp. 79-129; Arhim. Bartolomeu V. ANANIA, “Fie!”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXII (1980) 3, pp. 437-442; Preot Prof. D. STĂNILOAE, “Maica Domnului în prologul Evangheliei de la Luca”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXII (1980) 3, pp. 443-453; Pr. Prof. Constantin GALERIU, “Maica Domnului – «povățuitoarea»”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXII (1980) 3, pp. 454-468; Pr. Conf. Ilie MOLDOVEAN, “Învățătura Sfintei Scripturi despre Preacurata Fecioară Maria și implicațiile ei religios-morale (obiecțiuni și răspunsuri)”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXII (1980) 3, pp. 469-491; Diac. Asist. Emilian CORNÎTESCU, “Temeiuri ale preacinstirii Maicii Domnului în Vechiul Testament”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXII (1980) 3, pp. 492-500; Drd. PINTEA Dumitru, “Învățătura Sfântului Ioan Damaschin despre Maica Domnului”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXII (1980) 3, pp. 501-520; Pr. Prof. Ene BRANIȘTE, “Cinstirea Maicii Domnului în cultul ortodox și formele ei de exprimare”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXII (1980) 3, pp. 521-533; Pr. Prof. Dr. Nicolae C. BUZESCU, “«Panaghia Theotokos» în imnologia Mineiilor”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXII (1980) 3, pp. 534-558. More references see in: Pr. Viorel SAVA, *Ostenitori și rodiri în ogorul Teologiei Practice (ghid bibliografic)*, Editura Erota, Iași, 2003, pp. 111-115.

mere speculation for the sake of speculation, like a narcissistic scientific manifestation, but an expression of climbing the ladder of perfection and deeper penetrating into the mystery of knowledge. In other words, we know more because we live more deeply and effectively in daily life what we know from the mysteries of our faith. “Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts”, said the Psalmist David (Psalm 41, 9). The depth of knowledge calls to the depth of living or to deep living, and the latter calls to deeper knowledge.

The text of the Psalm is interpreted differently by the Holy Fathers of the Church and by contemporary theologians, among these interpretations being the one related to knowledge. According to some, the psalmist refers to the multitude and depth of the troubles that came upon the Jewish people and which always come upon people: “One deep of trouble calls another deep of trouble «in the voice of Your gutters», that is, so frequent and one on top of the other are the troubles which come upon us, the Jews, Your fallen servants, Lord, so that it seems somehow that these troubles command and call one another to come...”². According to others, it refers to “the unending depth and multitude of our sins that call forth the depth and multitude of God’s healings³. According to Saint Maximus the Confessor, *the deep* is “all the seeing mind” that “calls divine wisdom, the unknown deep by knowledge, in order to give it (that is, the mind - our note) the voice of divine falls... asking to receive the knowledge of the faces and words of divine Providence...”⁴. We find the same meaning in Saint Gregory the Theologian. He says that “deep calleth unto deep” means “seeing the things above” and “passing beyond them”, “through the light, finding out

² Cuviosul EFTIMIE ZIGABENUL și Sfântul NICODIM AGHIORITUL, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirea Sfinților Părinți: Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, Sfântul Chiril al Alexandriei, Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul, Sfântul Grigorie Palama*, vol. I, catismele I-IX, tâlcuire verset cu verset, transliterare, diortosire, revizuire după ediția greacă și note Ștefan Voronca, Editura Cartea Ortodoxă și Editura Egumenița, București, f.a., p. 499.

³ Cuviosul EFTIMIE ZIGABENUL și Sfântul NICODIM AGHIORITUL, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirea Sfinților Părinți*, p. 500.

⁴ Cuviosul EFTIMIE ZIGABENUL și Sfântul NICODIM AGHIORITUL, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirea Sfinților Părinți*, nota 73, p. 500.

the light”⁵. The newer exegesis understands by the “deep” that calls “the deep” the state of the Jewish people exiled among foreigners, which it compares to “the swirling and turbulent waves of the river (Jordan - our note) which flow impetuously in the rainy season, overturning everything in its path”⁶.

Returning to knowledge, we must say that our knowledge of the Mother of God is an inexhaustible depth. Referring to our inability to comprehend Christ through knowledge, Saint Ephrem the Syrian says that we are not able to understand even His Mother: “No one knows what to call Your Mother, Lord. To call her “Virgin”? But her child is standing in front. “Married? But no one knew her. If, then, Your Mother is incomprehensible, who will comprehend You”?⁷

In this key of understanding we continue to deepen the truths of our faith about the Mother of God, the one who contained the Uncontainable One in her womb.

In the present study we set out to deepen two ideas, very closely related to each other, ideas that highlight the quality of the Mother of God as a supplicant for the Church and for the family, the first, the Church, understood as a family with many members over which she reigns Christ, the Head of the Church, the latter, the family, understood, as Saint John Chrysostom says, as “the church at home”⁸. We will talk, that is, about the Mother of God as intercessor in her prayers for the big family that is the Church and for the little church at home, which is the family.

⁵ Cuviosul EFTIMIE ZIGABENUL și Sfântul NICODIM AGHIORITUL, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirea Sfinților Părinți*, nota 73, p. 500.

⁶ Petre SEMEN, *Meditații la Psalmi*, vol. VI, Catisma a VI-a, Editura Sf. Mina, Iași, 2023, p. 155.

⁷ EPHRĂM DER SYRER, *Lebgesang an der Würste*, Lamberbes-Verlag, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1967, coll. *Sophia*, Band 7, p. 65, at Pr. Prof. D. STĂNILOAE, “Maica Domnului în prologul Evangheliei de la Luca”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXII (1980) 3, p. 449.

⁸ Sfântul IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, “Omilie despre căsătorie. Din comentariul la Efeseni”, in: *Cateheze maritale*, transl. by Pr. Marcel HANCHEȘ, Editura Oastea Domnului, Sibiu, 2004, p. 102, at drd. Liviu PETCU, *Lumina Sfințelor Scripturi (Antologie tematică din opera Sfântului Ioan Gură de Aur)*, Editura Trinitas, Iași, 2007, p. 248.

I. The Mother of God – watchful suppliant for the great family, the Church

We acquired the Mother of God as a protecting, helping and praying Mother for each one of us and for all at once when Christ, her Son, being on the cross “seeing His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing by, said to his mother: Woman, here is your son! Then he said to the disciple: Behold your mother! And from that hour the disciple took her to himself” (John 19, 26-27). Interpreting this text, the hymnographer composing the Akathist of the Mother of God “the joy of all the afflicted” says: “Seeing you, Your Son and our God, standing by the Cross with His beloved disciple and with a heart torn by pain and suffering like him, said: «Woman, behold thy son!» Then saith he to the disciple, «Behold thy mother!» *making all who believe in Him your sons ...*” (5th Ikos)⁹. When the hymnographer states that at that moment Christ adopted us to His Mother, we understand that we were entrusted to her for care, just as the candidate for Baptism is entrusted with the Creed before receiving the Sacrament and as the newly ordained is entrusted with the Lamb sanctified, the Eucharistic Body of Christ, on the day of his ordination. Being entrusted to them, the Mother of God takes care of us in very different ways. Here is what the same hymnographer who composed the Akathist says:

“The Lord, who loves people, wanting to save the world from eternal torment and from unceasing suffering, settled in your ever-virgin womb, and gave you, His Mother, to the perishing for help, for cover and defence, to be comfort to the sorrowful, joy to the afflicted, hope to the hopeless, what you deliver us from eternal torment, through your intercession and bring to eternal joy all who with faith cry to your Son and our God: Alleluia!” (10th Kontakion)¹⁰.

⁹ *Ceaslov*, 2nd edition, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1990, p. 327.

¹⁰ *Ceaslov*, p. 333.

In another prayer, the Mother of God is called “shelter of orphans, and intercessor of travelers, strangers and pilgrims, joy of those in sorrow, protectress of the wronged...”¹¹. These texts and others like them, abundantly present in our worship books, prayers and hymns, express our faith, steadfast and strong, in the power of the Mother of God to intercede for us. This position of the Mother of God, placed between Christ, the Head of the Church, and the praying community, the mystical body of Christ, is not the position of a “simple «psychological-moral» supplicant or intercessor”, who “influences” the reception of several gifts¹², but “Mother of God is the heart of the Church kindled by the divine fire, its perfect transfigured centre, working inseparably with the Head of the Church in the sanctification and the transfiguration of all its limbs”¹³.

In the pose of intercessor, we meet the Mother of God everywhere in the Orthodox divine worship, being invoked in all types of prayers and hymns, so that a theologian of the last century introduced the idea of her “omnipresence”¹⁴ in the Orthodox liturgical life. In particular, the Mother of God is present in the Holy Liturgy where she unites her prayers with the prayers of the community¹⁵, starting from the Anaphora and until its end.

The call to the Mother of God in prayer is not only expressed in the form of the liturgical or ritualistic text, as we find in the Anaphora, but also through the image, through the icon. The presence of icons of the Mother of God in the church and in our homes expresses, equally, the honour that is brought to her and the belief that she prays for us and with us.

Among all these icons, one particularly holds our attention. It's about the icon *Deisis*, also called *Trimorphion* (*The three faces or faces*). According to the Orthodox iconographic program, the icon of *Deisis* can

¹¹ Ceaslov, p. 16.

¹² Preot Prof. D. STĂNILOAE, “Maica Domnului ca mijlocitoare”, p. 129.

¹³ Preot Prof. D. STĂNILOAE, “Maica Domnului ca mijlocitoare”, p. 126.

¹⁴ † Antonie PLĂMĂDEALĂ, Episcop vicar patriarhal, “Maica Domnului în Teologia și viața ortodoxă”, in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, XCVI (1978) 9-10, p. 1121. Also see Pr. Prof. Dr. Viorel SAVA, “Învățătura despre Maica Domnului și reflectarea ei în cultul și iconografia ortodoxă”, in: “În Biserica slavei Tale”. *Studii de teologie și spiritualitate liturgică*, II, 2nd edition, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2012, p. 75.

¹⁵ Preot Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturgia ortodoxă*, Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, Craiova, 1986, p. 122.

be painted on the pediment in the middle of the register in which the twelve Holy Apostles are represented (the third register from the bottom up)¹⁶. Also, the same representation appears in the nave of the church, usually in the apse of the pew on the right, in the same register as the holy Martyrs. Both representations have the same composition: Christ, in the middle sitting on the throne, on the right side the Mother of God, and on the left side Saint John the Baptist, both standing, in a reverent attitude, praying for the world. Incidentally, *Deisis* (δέησις, η) means *intercession*¹⁷ *persistent, insistent and uninterrupted*. In the north of Moldova, the icon of *Deisis* is painted in close relation with the votive painting of the founders, on the western wall of the nave, and in the Russian tradition it is placed in the centre of the iconostasis, above the royal icons¹⁸, occupying a dominant place among the other icons. The representation of *Deisis*, with the three holy personages, is called *the little Deisis* by reference to *the great Deisis*, a complex composition, having Christ in the centre, represented bust or sitting on the throne, flanked, on the right and left by The Mother of God and Saint John the Baptist, as in *the little Deisis*, to which are added the twelve Holy Apostles and the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel. Sometimes the place of the Mother of God is taken by a local saint, with special honour in the area¹⁹. All stand in a solemn, reverent and sober attitude, interceding for the faithful people.

As the mother of the eternal Son of the Father, incarnated in her womb by the Holy Spirit (Lk 1, 35), the Word, the eternal Logos, made flesh (John 1, 14), in everything like us, except for sin (Phil 2, 7), at the “fullness of the time” (Gal 4, 4), the Holy Virgin Mary acquired “motherly daring”

¹⁶ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Programul iconografic al bisericilor ortodoxe. Îndrumător pentru zugravii de biserici*, Editura Basilica, București, 2014, p. 9.

¹⁷ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Programul iconografic al bisericilor ortodoxe*, p. 17; John BAGGLEX, *Porți spre veșnicie. Icoanele și semnificațiile lor duhovnicești*, transl. Ioanași Florin Caragiu, Editura Sophia, București, 2004, pp. 194-195.

¹⁸ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, Prof. Ecaterina BRANIȘTE, *Dicționar de cunoștințe religioase*, Editura Andreiană, Sibiu, 2010, p. 124; Preot Prof. Univ. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica generală cu noțiuni de artă bisericească, arhitectură și pictură creștină*, II, 3rd edition, revised by Pr. Prof. Dr. Nicolae D. Necula, Editura Basilica, București, 2015, pp. 98 and 182.

¹⁹ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, Prof. Ecaterina BRANIȘTE, *Dicționar de cunoștințe religioase*, p. 124.

towards Christ and pray unceasingly for us. But not only the quality of motherhood gives her this dauntless to pray for people, for the sons and daughters entrusted to her for protection by Christ Himself when He was on the Cross, but also her deep humility and her complete obedience to by God, gifts and virtues through which she resembled her Son, humble and obedient to the Father, as no one on earth has ever managed to achieve such a resemblance. Christ became obedient to the Father “unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil 2, 8), a shameful death, a disgraceful death, and the Mother of God left herself in the hands and in the will of God saying “be it unto me according to thy word” (Lk 1, 38). Christ humbled Himself, depriving Himself of divine glory, took upon him the form of a servant (Phil 2, 7), thereby surprising and terrifying the nature of the angels (“In the grave, They laid Thee / O, my Life and my Christ / And the armies of the angels / were sore amazed / And they sang the praise of thy submissive Love”²⁰), and the Mother of God in complete humility received in her womb “The Uncontainable”, for which God “hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden” (Lk 1, 48). God *looks* for the humble and fills them with grace for their humility, and He opposes the proud: “God resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble” (1 Pt 5, 5). Because the Mother of God is *the depth of humility*, she became “full of grace” (Lk 1, 28). Moreover, when man obeys God fully and has deep humility, adding to these the consciousness of sinfulness, unworthiness and repentance for the sins committed, God makes known to him His mysteries, makes him partaker of His hidden things. This is shown by the psalmist who, in a state of repentance, testified: “... and in the hidden *part* thou shalt make me to know wisdom” (Ps 50, 7). For such virtues some holy people have acquired from God the gift of foresight and the gift of reading the thoughts and hearts of others. With reference to this aspect, the Mariological hymnography tells us that through the Mother of God the mysteries

²⁰ Michel QUENOT, *Icoana, fereastră spre absolut*, translation, foreword and notes by Pr. Dr. Vasile Răducă, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1993, p. 22; Dr. Bogdan BOTEZATU, *Cultul divin și imaginea. Teologia și funcția liturgică a icoanei*, Editura Andreiană, Sibiu, 2013, pp. 299-300; Markiyan FILEVYCH, *Iconography and Theology of the Deësis. Image in Eastern Slavic Art from its Origins Until the 15th Century*, doctoral dissertation, Graz, 2009, pp. 166-179.

hidden and inaccessible to humans became known and accessible. This fact is expressed by the troparion of the Mother of God, of the resurrection, the 4th voice: *“The mystery which was hidden from everlasting and was unknown of the Angels, through thee, O Birth-giver of God, was revealed to those who dwell upon on earth ...”*²¹.

An essential moment that inaugurates a new stage of the discovery of mysteries unknown and inaccessible to people, God Himself being the initiator of this act, is the announcement of the incarnation of the Son of God made by the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin of Nazareth (Annunciation), an event synthesized in the troparion of the celebration, which says the following:

“Today is the crown of our salvation and *the manifestation of that mystery which is from everlasting*. The Son of God becometh the Son of a Virgin and Gabriel announced the glad tidings of grace. Wherefore let us cry aloud with him unto the Birth-giver of God: Hail, thou that art full of grace, the Lord is with thee!”²²

So, the Mother of God is the icon of deep humility and complete obedience, resembling, more than all creatures, Christ the humble and obedient to the Father. Looking at things thus, we understand why we pay him a higher honour than all men and angels; we understand why it is the window through which God communicates His secret mysteries to us; we understand why it is the first among our supplicants and intercessors; we understand why on the Feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God (September 8) the text of the Apostle that is read at the Holy Liturgy is precisely the text that tells about the kenosis of Christ the Saviour (Phil 2, 5-11).

To the left of the Saviour, face to face with the Mother of God, but oriented towards Christ, the unique centre of this iconographic representation, stands Saint John the Baptist, the icon of asceticism carried to its maximum possible limits in human life and of unceasing prayer of uninterrupted vigil. He is the greatest, more important than all those born of women (Lk 7, 28), above all the prophets of the Old Testament, yet at the

²¹ Ceaslov, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2014, p. 236.

²² Ceaslov, pp. 461-462.

meeting between the two Testaments. Because they clearly prophesied him and waited for him with hope, “all the saints of the Old Testament, with John the Baptist at the head, through the Resurrection of Christ, became intercessors in the New Testament whose most beautiful flower remains the Holy Mother of God”²³.

The icon of *Deisis*, with the two holy characters in a state of persistent prayer, the Mother of God and Saint John the Baptist, shows that the true intercessors, whom God quickly listens to, are those who have acquired deep humility, complete obedience, through unceasing prayer and asceticism rough.

But the icon of *Deisis* is not only the icon of the Mother of God and Saint John the Baptist in a state of prayer, but it is *the icon of the triumphant Church in its fullness* in a state of prayer for the struggling church, the church on the way, which strives to acquire his kingdom God. “*Deisis*”, says a theologian quoted above, is the icon of the wedding of the Lamb: Christ is accompanied here by His “bride”, the Church, represented by the Mother of God. Friend of the Bridegroom (John 3, 29), the Forerunner accompanies the betrothed...”²⁴. So all the saints, those painted on the walls of the church and those not painted, are in a state of prayer, intercession, persistent or insistent and unceasing. This means that in the church the prayer never stops. The services have begun and ended, they are officiated at certain times of the day and night, those who perform them, i.e. the priests, and those who participate in their performance, i.e. the believers having limited physical potential, to which is added the natural weaknesses of human life, cease prayers and vigils. The saints, however, led by the Mother of God and Saint John the Baptist, never stop. They continue the vigil even when we have closed the church and return to ours and we find them vigil when we return to the church. Basically, we do not integrate them into our intermittent prayer, but they integrate us into their unceasing prayer. The good, pious Christian with a developed sense of the sacred walks timidly when he enters the church, not only because it is a holy space, but also so as not to disturb the prayer of those who pray incessantly.

²³ Michel QUENOT, *Icoana, fereastră spre absolut*, p. 92.

²⁴ Michel QUENOT, *Icoana, fereastră spre absolut*, p. 92; Dr. Bogdan BOTEZATU, *Cultul divin și imaginea. Teologia și funcția liturgică a icoanei*, p. 300.

Nor does he utter inappropriate words in church so as not to mix the poison of his words with the sweetness of the words of the saints' prayers.

The same truth about the triumphant church always at prayer, expressed in the icon of *Deisis*, is also expressed in the ritual of the *Proskomedia*, where, on the Holy Paten, around the Lamb (the Lamb of God), the Mother of God on the right and Saint John stand, prefigured by the myriads The Baptist together with the nine groups of saints, on the left, interceding for the church on the way, made up of hierarchs, representatives of the people, the founders of the churches and the crowd of living and sleeping believers, represented by the small particles of bread placed at the bottom of the Holy Paten (in front of Holy Lamb)²⁵.

A detail that appears in the representation of *Deisis*, often overlooked by the mystagogic interpretation of this icon, highlights the privileged relationship that the Mother of God and Saint John the Baptist, through humility, obedience, asceticism and vigilance, acquired before Christ. If in most of the representations of *Deisis* the Mother of God and Saint John the Baptist stand at some distance from the throne of Christ the Redeemer, in others, fewer in number, the two characters touch the throne with one hand, not to lean on, but to he had direct contact with the One who is the source of holiness. It is a gesture full of tenderness, shyness and respect. In Orthodox practice this gesture is also performed by pious believers when they venerate the Holy Icons, Holy Relics and other holy relics. The gesture of the Mother of God and that of Saint John the Baptist show, on the one hand, the familiarity they acquired in their relationship with Christ, and, on the other hand, show that this familiarity can be acquired by each of us through humility, obedience, prayer and asceticism. The familiarity acquired by the saints gives great hope that their prayers have a lot of success with the King of glory, or as we state in the Prayer at the end of the Akathistof Annunciation "that the prayers of the Mother (and of all the Saints - our note) can do much to tame the Master"²⁶.

²⁵ Preot Profesor Dr. Petre VINTILESCU, *Liturghierul explicat*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, pp. 130-136; Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILAOE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturgia ortodoxă*, pp.122-129; Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, Prof. Ecaterina BRANIȘTE, *Dicționar de cunoștințe religioase*, p. 124.

²⁶ *Ceaslov*, p. 352.

II. The Mother of God - the protector of the “church from home”

The Sacrament of Matrimony is one of the most beautiful services that Orthodoxy keeps in its liturgical treasury and performs for the benefit of the faithful. Solemn and joyous moment, which brings together a lot of people, parents, relatives, friends, the wedding also has deep spiritual meanings that show what wonderful gifts the bride and groom receive, but also what the newly founded and blessed family must become before the Holy Altar. We will dwell on the most important spiritual meanings of the Wedding in what follows, seeking to highlight the presence and the mysterious work of the Mother of God in the bosom of the family.

As we have already mentioned, Saint John Chrysostom calls the family founded by the Sacrament of Marriage “concerning Christ and the church” (Eph 5, 32), “the little Church” or “the Church at home”, showing that the family is not a parallel reality to the Church, but rather an extension of it, Christ, the Head of the Church, of the big family, being also the Head of the Church at home. In other words, the family is the laboratory where, in obedience to God, those who make it up, parents and children, work ceaselessly together, supporting each other, to renew their lives and save themselves. By the fact that Christ the Saviour is born in a family and that the first miracle of His earthly activity is also performed in a family, it shows us that the family is the place and the environment in which God works wonderfully for our salvation. Regarding these, Father Patriarch Daniel, since the time when he was Metropolitan of Moldova and Bucovina, stated the following:

“Since the man and the woman together, i.e. the first family, Adam and Eve, fell into sin, the New Adam, begins the lifting of the human race from sin choosing precisely the family as the starting place of His redeeming work, through humble obedience to God. It is also understandable that the first miracle that Jesus the Redeemer will perform in His public activity takes place at the foundation of a new family, at the wedding in Cana of

Galilee to which He, Jesus, and His mother, the Virgin Mary, were invited (John 2, 1)²⁷.

A first aspect that we want to highlight is reflected in the text of the Gospel that is read at the Sacrament of Marriage, a text taken from the Gospel according to Saint John, chapter 2, verses 1-11. The text tells us that at the Wedding in Cana the Galileans were invited, in addition to other guests, Jesus, along with His Mother and His disciples. And being called, they went to the wedding, whence we understand that they come to all weddings to which they are called. And what else is, first of all, the service of the Wedding, if not the call of Christ, the Mother of God and the Holy Disciples? This presence of Christ, together with His Holy Mother and His Disciples, makes the wedding an icon of the kingdom of God, a visualized expression of the kingdom of the Holy Trinity. In one of the parables spoken by Him, the Saviour says that the kingdom of God is like a wedding: "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son" (Matt 22, 2). In another parable we read that, although at the end of the ages they were waiting for Christ as Judge, He comes as the Bridegroom and those who are prepared enter with Him to the wedding (parable of the 10 virgins - Matt 25, 1-13). This kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is blessed by the priest at the beginning of the wedding service, expressing the belief that it, the kingdom, is a reality that we experience here and now, at the Wedding, and a reality with which and in the atmosphere in which those who establish, through the Mystery of the Wedding, the "Home Church" are called to live. Interpreting this blessing formula, which, in fact, is the blessing formula of the Holy Liturgy, Father Dumitru Stăniloae says that "the praise of the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity implies the will of the community (in our case the will of the newly founded family) to *advance in it*, because the he who praises something wants to share in what he praises"²⁸. From what

²⁷ † DANIEL, Mitropolitul Moldovei și Bucovinei, "Nașterea Domnului – binecuvântarea familiei", in: † DANIEL, Mitropolitul Moldovei și Bucovinei, *Daruri de Crăciun – înțelesuri ale Sărbătorii Nașterii Domnului*, Editura Trinitas, Iași, 2005, p. 47.

²⁸ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturghia ortodoxă*, p. 134.

was stated by Father Dumitru Stăniloae, we understand that the Sacrament of Marriage marks the beginning of a process of spiritual growth together for those who, until the Wedding, grew spiritually separately. The desire for advancement in the Kingdom is actually the desire for continuous progress.

In this work of mutual spiritual edification, the two are assisted and helped by Christ Himself, by the Mother of God, by the Holy Apostles, by the saint or saints taken as protectors of the family (just as the large family has a patron, so the church at home has a patron saint) and other saints because, unlike the godparents, parents, relatives and friends and the other bridegrooms who came to the wedding and after a while leave again to their affairs, *Christ, the Mother of God and the disciples came to stay. Precisely because they don't leave, because they stay where they were called, the family becomes the church from home.* When, after the Marriage, the family locks Christ in the church and returns to the secularized life before the Marriage, it risks becoming hell at home. The pastoral experience of each priest can confirm this.

When Christ, the Mother of God, the Holy Apostles stay in the house, the family borrows from the behaviour of those living with them. Saint Paul says that the man is obliged to love his woman (and the reciprocal is valid) as Christ loved the Church (Eph 5, 25). How did Christ love the Church?, says Saint Paul in the same place, “which he hath purchased with his own blood”, as we read elsewhere (Acts 20, 28). This means that the love between spouses must be permanent, not intermittent or sequential, sacrificial, disinterested, dispassionate and always abounding, for Christ also did not love the Church out of an interest, passionately, only from time to time, but disinterestedly, always placing over everything, as a seal, the sacrifice of Himself.

The presence of Christ, the Mother of God and the Holy Apostles in the family represents another icon of *Deisis*. It is an active presence in which Christ protects the family through the prayers of his Mother and his Holy disciples. At the wedding in Cana, Saint John the Evangelist tells us, unexpectedly and surprisingly the wine ran out, a fact noticed by the Mother of God. Any mother who takes her status and vocation seriously

notices what happens in the family, and when something is superfluous, and when that something is missing. Even more so the Mother of God, the one to whom we were entrusted by Christ when he was nailed to the cross. What she sensed turned into a prayer to her Son who, even though the time to begin His work on earth “hadn’t come”, because His Mother asked Him, miraculously turned the water into wine, and this wine from the latter was qualitatively superior to the former. The qualitative difference between the two types of wine is interpreted by Saint Andrew of Crete in a spiritual sense. He says that the turning of water into good quality wine is the icon of the permanent spiritual renewal of those who make up the family: “An honest wedding is also an undefiled bed, for Christ blessed them both before, feasting bodily, and at the wedding in Cana of Galilee turned water into wine, showing the first miracle, *so that you may be renewed, O soul*”²⁹. Saint John Chrysostom says that through this miracle Christ *honoured and admired* the wedding: “Christ was from the Virgin”, but he was present at the wedding and also brought a gift: “We have no more”, he says, “wine” (John 2, 3). And he turned the water into wine, “*honouring the wedding through virginity, admiring the wedding through the gift he made*”³⁰.

Although she is the mother of us all and we have been entrusted to her for care, the Mother of God conditions her intervention next to the Saviour, a fact made clear by the text of the Holy Gospel which tells us that, after the Mother of God informed the Saviour that the wine was finished, he turned to those who were serving and said to them: “Whatsoever he saith unto you, do *it*” (John 2, 5). From here we understand that the Mother of God intervenes to help the family when it *obeys God*. By obeying God the family becomes part of the select group of those who, through obedience, have acquired full familiarity in their relationship with God.

God’s wonderful work in the family, in response to the intercessions of the Mother of God, goes beyond the narrow limits of immediate and transient needs. The Gospel shows us that the Saviour Christ listens to

²⁹ *Triodul*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2000, p. 431; Pr. Dr. Vasile GAVRILĂ, *Cununia, viața întru împărăție*, Fundația “Tradiția Românească”, București, 2004, p. 54.

³⁰ Sfântul IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, “Duhul Sfânt și căsătoria”, in: Sfântul IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Cuvântări despre viața de familie*, transl. Pr. Marcel Hancheș, Editura Învierea, Arhiepiscopia Timișoarei, Timișoara, 2008, p. 32.

the prayers of His Mother and fulfils the needs of the family so that they discover God, see His glory, strengthen and increase their faith. In other words, Christ answers a prayer aimed at a passing necessity by pursuing a purpose with eternal resonances. All of this is specified in the last verse of the text that describes the event at Cana of Galilee: “This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him” (John 2, 11). This fact is also reflected in the prayers during the Wedding Service in which we ask God to give those who marry “length of days, the birth of good children, *increase in life and faith ... to fill them with fatness of the earth and to entitle them also to the enjoyment of the bounties of the promised; through the prayers of the Mother of God and of all the Saints*”³¹.

Therefore, the Sacrament of Marriage shows us that the family that blesses itself in front of the Holy Altar must become a Christian family in whose life the presence of God can be seen, become a community whose life gravitates around Christ, like the parish community, the mysterybody of Christ, which gravitates around the Holy Chalice, around the Eucharistic Christ. The heart of this community called family is the Mother of God who comes to all the weddings to which she is called and stays where she is wanted, inspiring through her exemplary life, spent in deep humility and in complete obedience to God, and interceding with her Son for the needs of the family, both for biological life on earth and for eternal life in the kingdom of God.

From those presented above we note that our whole life, in the church and in the family, takes place under the protection of the Mother of God who carries us in her persistent and unceasing prayers to Christ the Lord. The responsibility of Mother of all those who believe in Christ, fully assumed by the Mother of God, is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. Referring to the words addressed on the cross to the beloved disciple and His Mother “behold thy mother!” and

³¹ *Molitfelnic*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2019, p. 32.

“woman, behold thy son!”, Blessed Father Patriarch Daniel says that: “the beloved disciple of the Lord becomes a spiritual son of the Mother of God, and The Mother of God becomes the spiritual mother of the beloved disciple. There, in the mystery of the Cross as a love stronger than death, the mystery that contains in it the power of the Resurrection, the mystery of the bond between Christ, the Mother of God and the Church (and family, we could add – our note) is also shown. There is shown the secret of mutation or passing from motherhood and sonship according to the flesh to motherhood and spiritual lineage. Through the words spoken by Christ on the Cross, the Mother of God becomes the Mother of Christ’s faithful disciples, and those who love Christ become sons of the Mother of God. But the sons of the Mother of God are in a special way, as brothers in Christ, also spiritual sons of the heavenly Father”³². These words fully clarify the mystery of our boldness in prayers to the Mother of God and the daring of the Mother of God, present in the icon of *Deisis*, in the big family that is the Church and in the Church at home, which is the family, through persistent prayers for us, to her Son and our God.

³² † DANIEL, Mitropolitul Moldovei și Bucovinei, “Nașterea Domnului – binecuvântarea familiei”, p. 119.