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# Father Dumitru Stăniloae's Understanding of Mariology through Liturgy

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## Abstract

Orthodox Mariology, like Eastern theology in general, has long been influenced by Western scholastic thought, which sought to articulate the great Mysteries of the faith and the Church through purely rational concepts. Father Dumitru Stăniloae, the foremost Orthodox theologian of the 20th century, was recently canonized by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church for his steadfast confession of the true faith, rooted in the Patristic Tradition, during the challenging years of the communist era. Through his extensive theological work, Stăniloae succeeded in bringing Orthodox theology back into the matrix of Patristic thought, thereby restoring its depth and relevance. In the field of Mariology, this saint confessor, relying on the Patristic Tradition, underscored that the Mother of God has always been venerated by the Church as Theotokos, ever-Virgin, eternally more honourable than all creatures, and especially as one who is not merely an intercessor and mediator, but as one who is full of grace, who imparts the gifts of her ineffable love to the entire Church. This spiritual reality is particularly manifest in the liturgical life of the Church, especially within the Divine Liturgy. In his liturgical commentary, "Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy", Father Dumitru Stăniloae frequently references the unseen presence and role of the Mother of God in the Eucharistic Synax, concluding that Orthodox Mariology cannot be defined through arid rationalism and abstract theological concepts, but through the living and personal experience of the presence of God and His Mother within the worship of the Church.

## Keywords

Liturgy, Church Fathers, Mariology, Spirituality, Communion

## I. Introduction

Numerous articles have been written about Father Dumitru Stăniloae, yet no one can genuinely claim to have captured every dimension of this extraordinary Romanian theologian's life and legacy. His holy life, his original creative genius, the way he structured his entire discourse around the mystery of experiencing God, alongside his tireless translation and commentary of Patristic literature, his unique discourse covering a wide range of theological research topics, including spirituality, church history, dogmatic and moral theology, biblical and liturgical theology, and more, all imbued his work with a value that left a lasting impression on the philosophical and theological realms of the day. The uniqueness and originality of his broad and complex theological endeavour<sup>1</sup> lie primarily in his ability to dismantle the rigid frameworks of scholasticism and promote a revitalizing return to Patristic theological discourse, advancing a spiritually ascetic and mystical interpretation of Orthodox dogmas. In this regard, Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae providentially focused primarily on what he thought to be of paramount importance: the theological and spiritual rediscovery and revalorization of Patristic thought through his translation and commentary on the writings of numerous saints, including Gregory Palamas, Maximus the Confessor, Cyril of Alexandria, and many others. This work laid the foundation for the profound Philokalic and Neopatristic renaissance that the great Transylvanian theologian sought to cultivate in Romanian theology, to counterbalance the negative influences of the Scholasticism and Pietism prevalent in his time.

Father Stăniloae's theological maturity would however become fully evident in his theological synthesis between Dogmatics, Spirituality and Liturgy, which he had long thought out and prepared through the profound studies published between the 1950s and 1970s. This unique trilogy was

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<sup>1</sup> On the defining aspects of Father Dumitru Stăniloae's work, see: Ioan I. Ică Jr., "De ce «Persoană și comuniune»? – Cuvânt prevenitor la un «Festschrift» întârziat", in: Fr. Prof. Mircea PĂCURARIU, PhD, Deac. Assist. Ioan I. Ică Jr. (eds.), *Persoană și Comuniune. Prinos de cinstire Părintelui Profesor Academician Dumitru Stăniloae la împlinirea vârstei de 90 de ani*, Editura și tipăritura Arhiepiscopiei ortodoxe Sibiu, Sibiu, 1993, pp. XXIV-XXVII.

initiated by the publication of the *Course in Orthodox Asceticism and Mysticism* in 1946-1947, which was then regarded as an attempt to engage with a “theological mysticism”, or a “theology of the spiritual life”, one that was meant to “bridge the gap between Dogmatic and Moral Theology” and have them culminate in their praxis<sup>2</sup>. The second part in Father Stăniloae's theological trilogy is represented by the publication of the three volumes of his *Dogmatic Theology*<sup>3</sup>, wherein the great theologian programmatically set his mind to leave aside “the scholastic method of treating dogmas as abstract statements of a purely theological interest”, as he embarked on a quest “to discover the spiritual significance of dogmatic teachings, and to highlight their truth in relation to the thorough needs of a soul in search of salvation”<sup>4</sup>. The book *Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy*, published in 1986, was intended to crown Father Stăniloae's work, as the final piece in his theological triptych<sup>5</sup>, which - as the man himself stated - would merge doctrine, spirituality and the liturgical experience into one unique and personal theological discourse<sup>6</sup>.

His comprehensive and integrated vision of the Holy Liturgy encompasses all dimensions of life in the Church, particularly a unique Mariology, which constitutes the object of this study, as the study seeks to re-interpret and systematize evaluatively the main themes related to the significance of the presence of the Holy Virgin Mary in the Eucharistic Synaxis within the life of the Church, as depicted in the works of Father Dumitru Stăniloae.

<sup>2</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitatea Ortodoxă, Ascetica și Mistica*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1992, pp. 5-7. This book is a reprint of the 1946-47 *Course in Orthodox Asceticism and Mysticism*, which had previously been republished in 1981, under the generic title *Orthodox Spirituality*, as the third volume of the course in Orthodox Moral Theology.

<sup>3</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, for the Theological Institutes, 3 volumes, Bucharest, 1978, 504+380+466 pp.

<sup>4</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică*..., vol. 1, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen HENKEL, *Îndumnezeire și etică a iubirii în opera părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae*, ediția a II-a, Deisis, Sibiu, 2006, p. 336.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Christian FELMY, *Die orthodoxe Theologie der Gegenwart. Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt, 1990, p. 6. See the Romanian translation by Fr. Prof. Ioan Ică: Karl Chr. FELMY, *Dogmatica experienței eclesiale. Înnoirea teologiei ortodoxe contemporane*, Deisis, Sibiu, 1999.

The presence of the Mother of God in the Church constitutes a profound mystery, one that is faithfully reflected in the reality of worship and can be discerned only by souls illuminated by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The theological context in which Holy Father Dumitru Stăniloae lived compelled him to articulate, in several of his writings, the Patristic understanding of the intercession of the Mother of God and her role within the Church. Stăniloae emphasized that the Most Pure Theotokos is not merely an intercessor but also a bestower of divine gifts, the one through whom God's love is most fully humanized, manifesting itself through her maternal love. The intercession of the Mother of God is not of a moral nature but fundamentally ontological. Christ gives Himself to us also through the love of His Mother, with the Church serving as the locus and context in which the Saviour is wondrously revealed in His saints, bestowing His love upon us in countless ways, through the innumerable gifts of His saints. This spiritual reality can be experienced in its fullness in the Holy Liturgy. The great merit of Father Dumitru Stăniloae lies in his having synthesized the guiding principles of an authentic Patristic Mariology in his work "Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy". The subsequent analysis will explore the vision of the great Transylvanian theologian concerning the Holy Liturgy, with particular emphasis on how the Mother of God is portrayed in its key moments.

## **II. The Holy Liturgy, the Mystery of the Person and of the communion of saints**

The Eucharistic celebration is, in Father Dumitru Stăniloae's opinion, only the visible dimension of the eternal Liturgy of love within the Holy Trinity, Whose Altar, Oblation and High Priest is Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb. He remains in a state of permanent sacrifice, having been incarnate, having died, risen again, and sent His Holy Spirit into the Church, so as to radiate among those who, through faith, open themselves to Him, saturating them with the dynamism of His self-offering to the Father. Through this dynamism of expiatory love He seeks to gather all in Himself, to permeate

them with His sacrificial love, and then present them all before the Father. Though still bound to the flesh in this world, the churchgoers can take part in Christ's perpetual Self-giving to the Father, their own sacrifice joining that of the heavenly Lamb via the seen rituals of the Holy Liturgy, through which Christ descends and substantiates Himself, and then extends His expiatory Body and Blood to the faithful, so as to bring all those who believe in Him before the Father, in a state of pure sacrifice. The dynamism of His altruistic love, available to all the faithful through the Holy Mysteries, reaches its full efficacy only in the extension and application of the said sacrificial love among people, through a life of asceticism and self-restraint, which is a generator of acts of kindness and almsgiving. In this way, the entire human life becomes an exchange of gifts between man and God: the Creator and Maker of all gives Himself to the man as a love oblation through the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, and thus empowers the man to give himself to the Father with and in Christ, and to extend this love dialogue to all of his neighbours.

The definitions that Father Stăniloae gives to the Holy Liturgy illustrate this profound, complete and complex vision on the reality of the eternal life that is manifest in this world through the rituals of the Church. The Eucharistic Synaxis is thus defined as: "The Kingdom of the Holy Trinity, the intimate godly home that comprises all"<sup>7</sup> "the movement of a community in the sacrificial spirit of Christ, and its advancement into the love realm shared by the Holy Trinity"<sup>8</sup>, "the ascent of creation en route to perfection and towards the glorification of the Holy Trinity, through the sacrifice of the incarnate Son, and through its partaking of this sacrifice"<sup>9</sup>, "the celebration that generates the union and communion between us and God"<sup>10</sup>....wherein the Holy Trinity is present "as the consummate structure and source of love that stands at the basis of the Son's incarnation, sacrifice and resurrection, which brought about our salvation, our adoption and eventually, our own

<sup>7</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în liturghia ortodoxă (Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy)*, Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, Craiova, 1986, p. 375

<sup>8</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 299.

<sup>10</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 327.

resurrection”<sup>11</sup> “our act of sacrifice that is synchronous with Christ’s, or His merger with the community, which is done in a state of sacrifice and in order to bring the latter along as a living oblation to the Father, so that the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity would mature within all...”<sup>12</sup>.

The whole ritual of the Holy Liturgy is seen by Father Dumitru Stăniloae as an extension and objectivation of Christ’s eternal act of self-giving and of drawing all rational beings into His sacrificial state. Christ is living and manifest through the matter of the Eucharistic sacrifice and in the liturgical acts, wherein He exerts his High Priesthood in this world by subjecting to the senses “His sacrificing of Self to the Father and His dwelling as sacrifice amongst us, so that we may also bring ourselves to the heavenly Father as offerings embedded in His sacrifice”<sup>13</sup>, writes the great theologian.

Father Dumitru Stăniloae’s commentary on the Holy Liturgy has often been understood as an expression of the absolute unity between “doctrine, theology and liturgical experience”<sup>14</sup> and “the consistently Trinitarian and Christological explanation of the entire ritualistic event” enframes his thorough theology of the person, of love and communion<sup>15</sup>.

Beyond his vast theological excursions, which often give the impression that the ritualistic acts are interpreted as felicitous pretexts to advance and explore further certain dogmatic or spiritual themes, and beyond the wish to reconcile the two schools of interpretation of the Holy Liturgy - i.e. the School of Alexandria, which sees the Church, the Mysteries and particularly the Holy Liturgy as projections of certain celestial realities, and the School of Antioch that places a greater emphasis on the relationship between the Holy Mysteries and Liturgy, and the events in Jesus Christ’s earthly life - Father Dumitru Stăniloae invariably pursues his complete and cosmic view of the Holy Liturgy, which he sees as *the act that grants redemptive*

<sup>11</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 257.

<sup>12</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> Fr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Iisus Hristos, Arhiereu în veac”, in : *Ortodoxia* 2 (1979), p. 220.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Christian FELMY, *Die orthodoxe Theologie der Gegenwart. Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt, 1990, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Jürgen HENKEL, *Îndumnezeire și etică a iubirii în opera părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2006, p. 338

*efficiency to the state of perpetual sacrifice that Christ, our eternal High Priest, is in.* What is really striking in this great theologian's explanation and interpretation of liturgical acts is the fact that everything is perceived as having been touched by the uninterrupted abidance of the Saviour in this state of sacrifice that creates communion, the communion of those who love Him. His eternal and perpetually dynamic sacrifice gives a purpose to the human being and shapes this communion. All the liturgical acts have an impact in the personal and ethical ascetic plane, as well as in the common, communitary and eschatological one. The whole Church is gathered in the Liturgy around the sacrificed Lamb. The invisible presence of Christ increases gradually until it reaches the point where the Lamb on the diskos in the visible altar becomes the Lamb-Christ, Who is perpetually sacrificed on the heavenly altar.

The Prothesis shows symbolically the reality of this communion of love of all Christians with the Holy Trinity and among themselves. They behold the face of Christ and are not isolated from one another. Together they praise God's glory, and together they serve before the divine throne; and Christ leads them to the source of life, that is, ever deeper in His love, of which they drink without the fountain ever running dry (Rev 7, 9-17; 15, 2-3). The love of the righteous among themselves is directed toward those on earth, with whom they are to a certain degree recapitulated together in Christ, that is, together enveloped in His love. Love toward those who need help consists in helping them, and thus, the saints help those on earth to overcome their difficulties, particularly aiding them in their pursuit of salvation. The saints are close to Christ and especially to the Virgin Mary. She is more united with Him than all the saints, standing far above both saints and angels. All the saints possess confidence, boldness and freedom of approach (παρησία) with Christ, who declared them His "friends" (John 15, 14) and assured them, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you" (John 15, 7). Yet Her relationship with Jesus is more intimate than that of any saint, for She is the one who bore the Son of God in her womb, conceived and born of her as a man; then she carried Him in her arms as a baby and remained united with Him through the supreme human affection that a mother feels

for her son. “That is why her *παρρησία* toward Him is greater than that of all the saints, and her love for us reflects Christ’s ultimate love for us”<sup>16</sup>.

This mystical reality of the communion of all saints in the perpetual Liturgy of heaven can be experienced by all Christians in this world through the visible rituals of the Eucharistic Synaxis. The following analysis will focus on the key moments of the Holy Liturgy in which the Mother of God is described, as well as the manner of her presence and role in the Church, as articulated by Father Dumitru Stăniloae in his writings.

### **III. The Prothesis and the significance of the ritual of cutting the particle for the Virgin Mary**

Father Dumitru Stăniloae approaches the entire ritual of the pre-bringing of the Gifts from two complementary perspectives: the Antiochian, which sees it as an iconization of the Savior’s life, where the priest’s actions symbolize both the Infant and the slain Lamb, and the Alexandrian, which interprets it as an expression of eschatological realism, present and manifest through the power of symbols in the rituals.

In explaining the symbolism of the cutting of the particles, Father Dumitru Stăniloae insists upon the iconic character of the entire ritual of preparing the Gifts. The entire Church is tropologically re-presented on the Holy Diskos, and is symbolically gathered around the slain Lamb, just as depicted in the Book of Revelation (Rev 5, 9-14). The sensibility laden Offering sits in the midst of the Church, full of delicacy and in a state of availability to God that is also illustrated by the symbolism of the bread, which is an aliment leavened with man’s labour, sweat and self-sacrifice, a nourishment for the human body, which itself is called to become an offering to God.<sup>17</sup> The cutting of the particles for the Theotokos and the saints, as well as the liturgical formulas uttered upon the occasion by the

<sup>16</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Volume 6: *The Fulfillment of Creation*, translated and edited by Ioan Ionita, Foreword by Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2013, p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God...*, p. 116.

priest, show that the triumphant heavenly Church is likewise glorified through the Transubstantiation of the Gifts, for it continuously enjoys its fruits<sup>18</sup>.

The shape of the prosphora also holds symbolic importance for Father Stăniloae, as it represents the body of Christ, the One who is victorious, as indicated by the letters IS HS and NI KA inscribed on the sides of the Holy Cross imprinted on the prosphora. "From this moment, only this part represents the body of Christ. The entire prosphora from which this portion is taken represents the Mother of God, who in turn represents the whole of humanity, which offers itself to God through her", says Father Stăniloae. Citing Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople, he further affirms: "And the prosphora, which is also called bread, blessing, and first-fruits, from which the body of the Lord is cut, symbolizes the Most Pure Virgin, who, by the will of the Father and the consent of His Son, the Word, and by the indwelling of the divine Spirit—having received within herself the Only-Begotten Son of Godgave birth to Him as God perfect and man perfect." (*Theoria mystica*, PG 98, 397 CD)<sup>19</sup>.

The removal of the particle for the Mother of God provides Father Stăniloae with an opportunity to emphasize the role that the Most Pure Virgin plays in the entire economy of salvation and how her unique position in the Church is reflected in the ritual of the Proskomedia:

"After the priest completes the actions for the Lamb", the great theologian notes, "he removes a larger particle, in the shape of a triangle, for the Mother of God, followed by smaller triangular particles for the saints. The conscious beings, having their foundation in the general creation, rise with their minds, with the sharpened point of their personhood, toward God"<sup>20</sup>.

The prayer recited by the priest when placing the particle for the Mother of God to the right of the Lamb – "In honor and commemoration of our most blessed and glorious Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, through whose prayers, O Lord, accept this sacrifice upon Your

<sup>18</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God...*, p. 123.

<sup>19</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 116.

<sup>20</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 122.

heavenly altar”<sup>21</sup>— expresses, in Father Stăniloae’s vision, a profound spiritual reality. It indicates that “the sacrifice of Christ and the preparation of the transformation into His sacrificial offering in the Divine Liturgy is also for the glory of His Mother”<sup>22</sup>, and that she partakes in this glory more fully than any other created being, abundantly pouring this glory upon the community.

“That is why”, Father Stăniloae adds, “the priest prays that through the intercessions of the Mother of God, Christ will accept the sacrifice of the community upon the altar above the heavens, transforming it into His own sacrifice, thereby including the community’s offering within His own”<sup>23</sup>.

Influenced by the depth of Saint Maximus the Confessor’s scholia on biblical texts, the great Transylvanian theologian uncovers deeper meanings within this liturgical formula, stating:

“These words hold yet another meaning. The pure and prayerful life of the Mother of God made it possible for the Lord to take flesh from her body in order to offer Himself as a sacrifice for our salvation. Now, once again, She is represented beside the Lamb, or near the image of the body of Her Son, and as a particle of humanity itself, concentrated in the prosphora as the image of Her body, praying at the forefront of the entire community, asking that the Lamb be received on the Altar above the heavens and transformed into the sacrificed body of Her Son, which will represent the sacrifice of both the community and the Mother of God herself”<sup>24</sup>.

She herself partakes of the fruits of the Eucharistic Sacrifice in a plenary manner, being continually filled with divine glory, and uniting her

<sup>21</sup> *Liturghier*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2012, p. 120.

<sup>22</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 122.

prayers with those of the community for the acceptance of the Lamb and its transformation into the sacrificed body of the Lord on the heavenly Altar, through the work of the Holy Spirit<sup>25</sup>.

The Mother of God is the human being fully united with Christ, and this union is eternal, making Her not merely a prayerful intercessor, but one who is filled with divine power, as she imparts to all the gifts of her divine love. She is the Treasury and Distributor of the riches of divinity (ταμεῖον καὶ πρῦτανιν τοῦ πλούτου τῆς θεότητος<sup>26</sup>), the Sovereign, the Queen, and the Mother of the heavenly King. Thus, the priest recites the prophetic words of Psalm 44, 10, “At Your right hand stands the Queen, clothed in a garment of gold, adorned in beauty” when placing the particle of the Mother of God on the Holy Diskos.

“She stands at the right hand of her Son, at this supreme height of glory”, affirms Father Dumitru Stăniloae, “and she prays for the transformation of our gifts into His sacrificed body and blood. Her ‘commemoration’ does not signify our prayer for an even greater exaltation of her – though every transformation of our gifts into the sacrificed body of the Son and our greater union with Him also makes her glory more manifest – but rather, it is a new praise of her”<sup>27</sup>.

The Mother of God both intercedes for us and, as a Queen, possesses the full authority to bestow her gifts and to initiate all the faithful into the depths of life in Christ<sup>28</sup>. She is the heart of the Church, its mystical core, the laboratory (ἐργαστήριον), the locus of the exchange of gifts between God and man, as affirmed by Saint Theophanes of Nicaea<sup>29</sup>, whom Father

<sup>25</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune*..., p. 123.

<sup>26</sup> St. GREGORY PALAMAS, “Homily 37, 17”, in: P. K. CHRESTOU, *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ ἅπαντα τὰ ἔργα*, vol. 10, “Ἕλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας 76. Θεσσαλονίκη: Πατερικαὶ Ἐκδόσεις Γρηγόριος ὁ Παλαμᾶς, 1985, p. 455.

<sup>27</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune*..., p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Maica Domnului ca mijlocitoare”, in: *Ortodoxia* 5 (1952), p. 104. See also: Fr. Vasile COMAN, “Maica Domnului în Liturghie”, in: *Telegraful Român* 31-33 (1951), p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> St. THEOPHANES METROPOLITA CONSTANTINOPOLITANUS, NICAEANUS, “Sermo in

Stăniloae discovered, studied, and cited in all his major Mariological works<sup>30</sup>.

The Proskomedia marks the beginning of the exchange of gifts between the faithful and God, and this exchange does not occur in a spiritual vacuum but in an atmosphere where the love of the Holy Trinity is wondrously revealed in the love of the saints. The particles for all categories of saints are placed to the left of the Lamb, at the same level as Him, indicating that they too partake in the glory in which the crucified and risen Lord dwells, and that through them also shines the boundless love of God. In the Church of the saints, we encounter Christ, not only in their presence but also in the light of their love, which is real and ontological, not merely psychological or moral, as scholastic theology asserts<sup>31</sup>.

The glory of the saints is manifested in the particles that represent them, placed around the Lamb, which is transformed into the body of Christ. The solidarity of all right-believing Christians, strengthened by their relationship with Christ, is also reflected in the particles placed on the paten. Yet the very glory of Christ is manifested through the saints and righteous, whose number continuously increases through His sacrifice. They partake of this sacrifice in the form of the Eucharist, the power of which they actualize through their pure life on earth, and in heaven through their ever-increasing radiance and love for Christ and their brethren on earth. Therefore every Eucharist is offered both for the glory of Christ

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sanctissimam deiparam”, in: M. JUGIE, *Theophanes Nicaenus* († 1381). *Sermo in sanctissimam Deiparam*, Lateranum. Nova series 1., Rome: Facultas Theologica Pontificii Athenaei seminarii Romani, 1935, pp. 2-210.

<sup>30</sup> Father Dumitru Stăniloae was a leading proponent of a Neopatristic Mariology in Romanian theology, opposing the Scholastic theology of the time promoted in Sibiu and Cernăuți, which viewed the Mother of God as a secondary and moral intercessor. For an in-depth study on this fascinating chapter of our interwar theology, see: Archim. Prof. Dr. Ioan Ică Jr., *The Mother of God in 20th-Century Theology and in the Hesychast Spirituality of the 14th Century: Gregory Palamas, Nicholas Cabasilas, Theophanes of Nicaea*, Deisis, Sibiu, 2008. These are the treasures that Father Stăniloae sought to make accessible to the piety of our people. It was only after more than half a century, in a paradoxical yet marvellous way, that this well-documented and exceptional volume by Father Professor Ică Jr. was published in Sibiu, fulfilling “in a gesture both of restitution and posthumous homage” (p. 48), the luminous vision of the great Transylvanian saint-theologian.

<sup>31</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Maica Domnului ca mijlocitoare...”, p. 83.

and for the glory of the saints. The glory of the Mother of the Lord is also manifested through the increasing number of saints and their advancement into a greater glory, although this glory is itself an extension of Christ's glory. Through their prayers, the saints themselves help those on earth draw closer to Christ's sacrifice and to its fruitfulness in their lives. By helping to increase the number of those who are saved, the saints receive an ever-greater measure of glory and joy<sup>32</sup>.

#### **IV. The litanies of the Liturgy and the intercession of the Mother of God**

In the Orthodox worship, and not only in the Divine Liturgy, all the litanies conclude with this petition before the final exclamation: "Calling to remembrance our most holy, most pure, most blessed, glorious Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, with all the Saints, let us commit ourselves and one another, and all our life unto Christ our God"<sup>33</sup>. This petition so aptly expresses, in liturgical language, the essence of the Christian faith and the heavenly foundation of the Eucharistic Liturgy, which is the sacrificial love of the Holy Trinity, a love that man can taste through all the worship services of the Church. Without tasting and appropriating this divine love, man cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. That is why, the Creator of all took the initiative to sensitize the human nature and raise it to the capacity to sense His complete and most pure love, and gave it the chance to sample the life of communion that is in the bosom of the Holy Trinity. Only Christ could accomplish that through His consummate sacrifice, for He infused the human nature He had assumed with a piercing sensitivity and with the sentiment of total Self-giving, by which He allowed it to experience its meeting with God and with its fellow people in a plenary way. The Saviour's Self-sacrifice lifted the human nature to a level of sensitivity where it was able to sense the delicate presence and sensitivity of the

<sup>32</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Volume 6..., p. 92.

<sup>33</sup> *Liturghier...*, p. 137.

divine, and filled it with compassion for people, and thus He transformed all people into sons of the Father and brothers of His by humanity.

The material symbols utilized in the rituals of the Church make the entire mystery of salvation available to all people while they are still in flesh. At the Holy Liturgy, Christ, the High Priest Who keeps into a permanent state of sacrifice while He amasses the sacrifices of all the faithful in order to put them together with His own before the Father, makes this mystical reality visible via the ritualistic acts performed by the hierarchy of the Church who serve as intercessors, through which He offers His sacrifice before the eyes of the congregation, a sacrifice that is bloodless and delicately vested in the robe of the liturgical symbol.

All the litanies used in worship include this petition, through which Christians ask for help to partake in the sacrificial love of the Holy Trinity and to show its effectiveness in their personal lives through mutual self-giving, following the example of the Mother of God and all the saints, thereby preparing themselves for the future life of love and joy in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Self-sacrifice opens the way to the mysteries of the eschaton. It is filled with a unique dynamism, as it has the power to draw others into this mystical circuit of sacrificial love:

“He who gives of himself is not lost, but fulfilled”, says Father Dumitru Stăniloae, “for he enters into the fullness of life, lived together with others. He who gives of himself receives himself back at a higher level. Our fellow human beings are gifts given to us by God... and the gift given to us in the persons of our neighbors must be returned to God for their happiness. We cannot offer [them] to God unless we first offer ourselves to them. Only then do they give themselves to us, so that in giving ourselves to God, we also offer them to Him”<sup>34</sup>.

In the view of the same great theologian, entering into a state of sacrifice is an act of offering one’s own being, a heroic act of renouncing

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<sup>34</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, pp. 166-167.

one's selfishness, a sign of the freedom of perfect love and total self-giving to Christ and to one another, which the faithful will experience fully in the Kingdom of Heaven. "That is why we are asked, at the conclusion of the litanies", the great Transylvanian theologian points out, "to prepare ourselves through self-giving to Christ and to one another for the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity"<sup>35</sup>. The perfect model of self-giving and the aid for entering into a state of sacrifice is the Mother of God, for She achieved in herself the supreme act of giving herself to God, both as a mother and as a virgin, and the power of this self-giving She imparts to all who love Her purely and honor her with reverence. Father Stăniloae expresses this profound spiritual reality so beautifully in a lengthy passage from his liturgical commentary, where he sensitively synthesizes and reformulates all his Patristic and Mariological readings from the early decades of the last century:

"The Mother of God elevated femininity to its highest point by uniting and thus fulfilling the two forms of feminine self-giving: virginity and motherhood. Of course, She could only unite these through God; only through Him could She be both Ever-Virgin and yet a mother, for she was the Mother of God. Only through Him did she achieve the culmination of these two forms of pure feminine affection. She gave herself totally to God through virginity and gave herself totally to God as the mother of His Son, without dividing her affection between a husband and this unique Son. The 'self' of her Son truly became her own 'self,' not by dissolving it but by affirming His self, while maintaining it as Her own. All the senses and affections of Her soul and body were filled with Him. Through this, His Holy Spirit, the Spirit of power and spiritual fire, overwhelmed her bodily processes as the Spirit of freedom from any law, as the Spirit who rules over all passions that impose themselves forcefully. Thus, Her soul and bodily senses became entirely filled with Him. Therefore, the Spirit enabled the One who is the Light and the Source of all conscious created forms to take His soul and body from Her

<sup>35</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, pp. 166-167.

soul and body, filling Himself with Her most pure spiritual and bodily affections, or imprinting Himself in His self from Her self”<sup>36</sup>.

Therefore, on the one hand, we cannot speak of Christ without speaking of His Mother, and on the other hand, she enjoyed, even while on earth, a glory of freedom from the bondage of laws that work within the body, her body becoming the place and instrument of the workings of the Spirit.

This litany simultaneously conveys in a liturgical manner the three great teachings about the Mother of God, namely Her role as Theotokos, Her Ever-Virginity, and Her Hyperdulia, that is Her supreme veneration.

“That is why She is called Most Holy (or better said, All-Holy — Panaghia)”, Father Stăniloae points out, “as we do not call any other saint; Most Pure, in both Her spiritual and bodily senses and affections; Most Blessed by God in a unique way among women; Glorious, as no other creature is, and our Sovereign Lady, as we do not call any other saint, for the Mother of the Lord is also a Sovereign, having, in the sense described above, our Lord Jesus Christ as the core Self within Her own Self”<sup>37</sup>.

The Mother of God is together with all the saints around the sacrificed Lamb at the heavenly banquet of the Kingdom of Heaven. The saints cannot be anywhere but beside Her, for only in this way can the Church be universal; only in this way can the dynamism of the Holy Trinity’s altruistic love descend in paradoxical and unique ways, becoming humanized and manifesting itself as virtues, and in a plenary way, through the image of maternal love. Through Her, we have a mother’s heart that beats in Heaven, we have the heart of the Church, and its mystical center. “There is no gift bestowed or received within the Church except through the intercession of the Mother of God, the First-fruits of the Church, who has been exalted to glory”<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, pp. 166-167.

<sup>37</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 170.

<sup>38</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Maica Domnului ca mijlocitoare...”, p. 105.

Thus, from the earliest times, at the mere mention of the name of the Most Pure Virgin, the faithful would exclaim: “Most Holy Theotokos, save us!” [Υπεραγία Θεοτόκε, σῶσον ἡμᾶς] an acclamation that has since been included in all the litanies of Orthodox worship<sup>39</sup>. This “save us” addressed to the Mother of God does not imply salvation as the work accomplished by Christ, but rather “deliverance” or “rescue” from various difficulties, afflictions, dangers, and temptations, all of which are, nevertheless, related to salvation. (...) But anything we ask from the Lord’s Mother, we ask because She is in the most intimate relationship with Her Son. Therefore, in the final analysis, He is the source of all the help She gives us. It is only because She is the Mother of God the Savior that She is directly asked for certain help, but not because She is a savior or co-savior (“co-redemptrix”, as Catholicism tends to consider Her), for She cannot be placed on the same level as Christ, who is Himself the author of salvation<sup>40</sup>.

The Mother of God is closer to Her Son than any other created being, and for this reason, She has that “boldness” before Him, when asking for His love on our behalf while at the same time giving us from Herself the fruits of Her love – the gifts of the Holy Spirit with which She is filled – distributing them as the Most Pure Mother to all who honor Her with reverence. Her intercession, Her love is not merely moral or secondary, but ontological, real, and alive. In Her presence, our dialogue with Christ always takes place in an atmosphere of divine maternal light and ineffable love, and thus the Church knows, praises, and makes use of Her “boldness” before God<sup>41</sup>.

## V. The diptychs and the invocation of the Mother of God. The hymn of the Axion

The term “diptychs”, given to the final part of the Eucharistic anaphora that includes petitions, originates from an ancient liturgical practice in which

<sup>39</sup> Pr. Petre VINTILESCU, “Verbul «a mântuii» ca termen de invocare a Preasfintei Născătoare Dumnezeu în pietatea ortodoxă — contribuție de filologie liturgică”, in: *Studii Teologice*, VIII (1940) 2, pp. 33-54.

<sup>40</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God...*, vol. 6, p. 91.

<sup>41</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Maica Domnului ca mijlocitoare...”, p. 119.

the names of believers, both the living and the departed of a particular community, were read by the priest during the prayer of intercession following the consecration of the gifts. These nominal commemorations were done based on lists of names written in booklets, which consisted of two covers made of gold, silver, or other metals that were joined together so they could close over one another. The names to be commemorated, whether of the living or the departed, were inscribed on the inner faces. When the list of names grew too long, one, two, or more additional leaves of parchment or papyrus were inserted between the covers, forming actual booklets or books. Due to this structure, they were called diptychs [δίπτυχα = δίς+πτυχή, meaning “folded twice”].

The diptychs consist of two distinct elements: on the one hand, the petitions that follow the Eucharistic epiclesis, and on the other hand, the diptychs proper, which involve the commemoration by name. Immediately after the epiclesis, the priest recites this prayer, asking that partaking of the Body and Blood of the Savior be granted to the faithful “for the purification of soul, for the remission of sins, for the communion of Your Holy Spirit, for the fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven, for boldness toward You, and not for judgment or condemnation”<sup>42</sup>.

This petition is followed by the commemoration of those for whom Christ’s sacrifice is offered, both for their glorification and for their benefit, including both the living and the departed. First, the priest announces that the spiritual sacrifice is offered for those who have departed in faith, mentioning silently the forefathers, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, and ascetics of the Church from all times and places. Then, aloud, so that all the people may hear and glorify Her, the priest commemorates and invokes the Theotokos, as the complete and perfect realization of humanity: “especially for our most holy, most pure, most blessed and glorious Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary” [Ἐξαιρέτως τῆς παναγίας ἀχράντου ὑπερενδόξου εὐλογημένης δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου καὶ ἀειπαρθένου Μαρίας].

This exclamation was introduced into the Liturgy of Constantinople in the 5th century by Patriarch Gennadius I (458-471), at the command of

<sup>42</sup> *Liturgier...*, p. 177.

Emperor Leo I (457-474), as a reaction to Patriarch Martyrius' (459-470) refusal to call the Mother of God by the title Theotokos<sup>43</sup>. Through these titles, the three prerogatives and the foundations for honoring the Mother of God – Her role as Theotokos, Her Ever-Virginity, and Her Hyperdulia – are liturgically expressed. Upon hearing the names by which the Most-Pure Virgin Mary is called, the people respond with the hymn of praise to the Theotokos, “It is Truly Meet”, which was introduced into the Liturgy in the 11th century when the names of the departed were no longer read aloud. Initially, this Mariological hymn, partially composed by St. Cosmas the Melodist and completed by a miraculous revelation from an angel to an Athonite monk on June 11, 982, was recited quietly by the deacon or priest. Over time, however, it came to be sung by the entire congregation.

The glory of the Mother of God is sung by the entire congregation because, as Father Dumitru Stăniloae states, “at every Eucharist, the saints receive an increase in glory, and that also grants us greater confidence in their prayers for us”<sup>44</sup>. St. Nicholas Cabasilas highlights this understanding of the saints' commemoration in the diptychs, saying:

“But our sacrifice is not only one of petition, but also of thanksgiving... When the gifts are offered and sanctified, the priest, through them, gives thanks to God and also prays. For whom does he give thanks? For the saints, because in them the Church has attained its goal and has seen the fulfillment of the prayer for the Kingdom of Heaven. And for whom does the priest pray? For those who are not yet perfected, who need prayer... The saints are the cause of the thanksgiving that the Church offers to God. For them, this ‘spiritual service’ is offered as thanksgiving to God, and above all for the Holy Virgin, as She is above all holiness. Therefore, the priest asks nothing for them, but rather prays that he himself may be helped by them in his

<sup>43</sup> R. TAFT, *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, Volume IV: *The Diptychs*, Rome, 1991, p. 101. The first to bring attention to the context of the introduction of this exclamation into the Eucharistic text was F. DIEKAMP, *Analecta patristica. Texte und Abhandlungen zur griechischen Patristik* (= OCA 117), Rome, 1938, p. 68

<sup>44</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune....*, p. 303.

prayers, for the sacrifice offered for them is one of thanksgiving, not of petition [Ὅτι οὐχ ἰκέσιον ἀλλὰ χαριστήριον, ὥς εἴρηται, ποιεῖται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν τὴν τῶν δώρων προσαγωγὴν]<sup>45</sup>.

The saints' increase in glory is due to their partaking "more truly" of Christ in the world to come. The Mother of God is the one who partakes of Christ most fully, advancing endlessly in His love and glory. "He dwells in the heart of His Mother, never to be severed from Her"<sup>46</sup>, and "presents Himself unceasingly as a sacrifice to the Father from within Her intimacy, as from an altar"<sup>47</sup>, says St. Theophanes of Nicaea, indicating the glory that clothes Her, as the human being most united with God. Divine light so fills Her, that She is entirely hidden in God, in a complete transcendence of all autonomy, which represents the sin<sup>48</sup>. Adapting a passage from St. Maximus the Confessor's *Ambigua*, on the future glory of saints who are known not by their own merits but by Christ's virtues that flourish in them, St. Theophanes states of the Theotokos:

"Having received from Her Son the natural attributes of His divinity, She has so fully identified and blended with them that those deemed worthy to behold Her now recognize Her more by His attributes than by Her own natural ones, having been transfigured into the beauty and radiance of the Son"<sup>49</sup>.

Thus, in heaven, the Mother of God, as Father Dumitru Stăniloae explains, "is not an autonomous center of power, parallel to Christ and apart from us, but is in Christ and in communion with us"<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> Nicolaus CABASILAS, "Explicatio divinae liturgiae 33, 7", in: R. BORNERT, J. GOILLARD, P. PÉRICHON, and S. SALAVILLE (eds.), *Nicolas CABASILAS, Explication de la divine liturgie*, Sources chrétiennes 4 bis, Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1967, p. 190.

<sup>46</sup> St. THEOPHANES METROPOLITA CONSTANTINOPOLITANUS, NICAENUS, "Sermo in sanctissimam deiparam", p. 144.

<sup>47</sup> St. THEOPHANES METROPOLITA CONSTANTINOPOLITANUS, NICAENUS, "Sermo in sanctissimam deiparam", p. 148.

<sup>48</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, "Învățătura despre Maica Domnului la ortodocși și catolici", in: *Ortodoxia* 4 (1950), p. 602.

<sup>49</sup> St. THEOPHANES METROPOLITA CONSTANTINOPOLITANUS, NICAENUS, "Sermo in sanctissimam deiparam", p. 162.

<sup>50</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, "Învățătura despre Maica Domnului...", p. 603.

The mystical union of the Mother of God with Her Son, Her unity with all the faithful who piously honour Her, Her glory and humility, Her role as Queen of Heaven, and Her bold intercession before Christ – all these reveal how unfathomable the mysteries of the Most Pure Virgin are. Every liturgical expression directed to Her is filled with paradox and antinomy. As Father Dumitru Stăniloae explains, paradox and antinomy are meaningful in theology, as they allow heavenly truths to be expressed without diminishing their eternal mystery<sup>51</sup>. Any attempt to understand the mystery of the Mother of God must begin with the experience of Her presence and intervention within the Church. She is immersed in the light of Christ's love, and only in this light does She desire to manifest Her mysterious love and care for us. Her person is hidden in the mystery and glory of the life to come. She is the great mystery of deified humanity. She is the being in whom the hypostatic union in the Person of Her Son has reached its fullest human realization. "She is the heart of the Church, enkindled by divine fire", as Father Dumitru Stăniloae says, "its perfectly transfigured core, working in perfect unity with the Head of the Church for the sanctification and transfiguration of all its members"<sup>52</sup>.

The Person of the Mother of God appears in the Liturgy veiled in mystery, as one of the mysteries of the life to come, and this cannot be exhausted by definitions or dogmatic speculations. She is experienced in the life of the Church, and for this reason, the liturgical language preserves Her overwhelming richness and complexity through the use of antinomy and paradox. "The hymns dedicated to the Mother of God, the titles and prayers addressed to Her, represent the most authentic Orthodox theology, and through Her, ecclesial life has remained rooted in its true essence", states the great theologian from Transylvania. The liturgical service is imbued with the deepest realism, and everything said in the Liturgy about the Mother of God is the actual reality of eternal life. The Church does not engage in wordplay but expresses the divine truth in all its nuances with astonishing precision and holy seriousness<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>51</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 251.

<sup>52</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, "Maica Domnului ca mijlocitoare...", p. 126.

<sup>53</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, "Maica Domnului ca mijlocitoare...", p. 106.

Following this research, a few conclusive remarks are in order:

1. The Eucharistic celebration is, in Father Dumitru Stăniloae's opinion, only the visible dimension of the eternal Liturgy of love within the Holy Trinity, Whose Altar, Oblation and High Priest is Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb, Who keeps in a state of permanent sacrifice, Who was incarnate, Who died and arose again, and sent His Holy Spirit in the Church, so as to radiate among those who open up to Him in faith, and thus saturate them with the dynamism of His own surrender to the Father. Bound to the flesh in this world, the churchgoers can take part in Christ's perpetual Self-giving to the Father, their own sacrifice joining that of the heavenly Lamb via the seen rituals of the Holy Liturgy, through which Christ descends and substantiates Himself, and then extends His expiatory Body and Blood to the faithful, so as to bring all those who believe in Him/His devotees before the Father, in a state of pure sacrifice. The dynamism of His altruistic love, available to all the faithful through the Holy Mysteries, reaches its efficiency only in the extension and application of the said sacrificial love among people, through a life of asceticism and self-restraint, which is a generator of acts of kindness and alms-giving. Thus, the entire human life becomes an exchange of gifts between man and God: the Creator and Maker of all gives Himself to the man as a love sacrifice, through the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, and thus empowers the man to give himself to the Father with and in Christ, and to extend this love dialogue to all of his neighbours.
2. This exchange of gifts between God and humanity, as a perpetual liturgy, is the foundational premise from which Father Dumitru Stăniloae formulates his Mariology. In his vision, the Mother of God is the human being who has realized this exchange of gifts to its fullest extent—offering Her humanity to God, giving Herself entirely to Him, and in return receiving His divinity within Herself, becoming filled with His light and then shining and radiating it throughout the entire Church with Her love. The Mother of God is not only a prayerful intercessor but also full of divine power,

sharing the fruits of Her sacrificial love with all who love Her. She gave Herself in an exemplary manner to God both as a virgin and as His mother, and through the dynamism of Her self-giving, She seeks to ignite the hearts of all the faithful who venerate Her with devotion.

3. Father Stăniloae's unique contribution lies in demonstrating that the entire ritual of the Divine Liturgy mystically portrays the presence of the Mother of God in the Church. In his view, the Most Pure Virgin Mary continually and ineffably partakes of the fruits of Her Son's sacrifice and stands at His right hand at the eternal banquet of the sacrificed Lamb, hidden in His light. Filled with light and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as a Mother of the Church, She desires to share these gifts with all, thus revealing through them the love of Christ in its fullest human expression. The Savior reveals Himself in the Liturgy, manifesting His love through the love of His saints and drawing all the faithful to Himself, not only through the dynamism of His sacrificial state but also through the dynamism and transformative power of His sacrificial love, which bears fruit in the virtues of the saints.
4. Father Dumitru Stăniloae emphasizes that believers partake in this ineffable communion with all the saints at each Eucharistic Synaxis through the visible liturgical ritual. This ritual must not be viewed as an accessory to religious life or as mere poetic expression without substance, but as an objective reality imbued with the deepest eschatological realism – an actual experience of communion with Christ in the love of His saints.