

Archimandrite Zacharias ZACHAROU, *Mariam - The Mother of the Lord and Mother of Our Life*, St. John the Baptist Stavropegic Monastery, Essex, United Kingdom, 2023, 96 pp., ISBN 978-1-915687-23-4, translated by Nuns Thekla and Porphyria, Lyhnia A.E. Press, Athens, Greece, edition of the Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, Essex, UK

The work of the well-known theologian and spiritual father Zacharias Zacharou addresses a central theme of Orthodox theology, namely Mariology. This work, structured in three chapters, proposes a succinct synthesis of the Virgin Mary's life from a spiritual perspective, portraying her as both the Mother of the Lord and the Mother of Our Life. The methodological approach focuses on spiritual-empirical exegesis, as Father Zacharias discovered it in the life and writings of St. Silouan the Athonite, as well as through his close communion with St. Sophrony the Athonite – two towering luminaries who shone brightly in the Church's firmament in the past century. The author's sources of quotations are primarily the Holy Scriptures, liturgical texts of the Church and homilies on the feasts of the Theotokos by the Holy Fathers, such as Gregory Palamas, Nicodemus the Hagiorite, and Philaret of Moscow, as well as the writings of Saints Silouan and Sophrony. This work is particularly suited for theologians, who will be able to learn how to think and write "in the spirit of the Fathers", as a method of research, but also for spiritual fathers, monastics and lay faithful who desire to follow the Virgin Mary on the path of the Kingdom and God's love.

The first chapter of the book entitled: *The Mystery of the Most Holy Mother of God*, provides a brief exploration of salvation history, emphasizing the mystery of Christ's incarnation, accomplished through the Mother of God, "the fullness of time" (Gal 4, 4) and the fulfillment of humanity. The mystery of human salvation is presented as a synergy between God and humankind, mediated through the Most Holy Theotokos, in whose heart "the will of God was the only law of her existence" (p. 18).

The chapter also includes an interpretation of the hymn “Theotokos, Virgin, rejoice” and a spiritual analysis of her response, “Let it be to me according to thy word” (Luke 1, 38). This response is likened to the creative “Let there be” of Genesis, revealing the Virgin Mary’s complete self-emptying, which preceded her ultimate perfection as the New Eve, through whom God worked the world’s renewal.

The second chapter entitled *The Garment of Humility of the Mother of God, the Pattern for Monasticism*, presents the Virgin Mary as “the perfect model of monastic life” (p. 25), likening her to “Jacob’s ladder”, the first monk and the first hesychast. She withdrew into the Holy of Holies into a tomb and enclosed herself there as into a cave. Her life and work serve as both a ladder and a model for monastics and all Christians in their striving for spiritual perfection. This chapter is divided into two subchapters. The first presents a rule of life as mirrored in the Virgin Mary’s life, each section discovering a specific virtue of the Theotokos: *Divine humility*, “*Let it be to me according to thy word*”, *Concealment from the world*, *Purity*, *Holy Scripture*, *The deep heart and hypostatic prayer*, *The transcendence of natural boundaries*, *Bearing within her the life-giving death of Christ*, *Holy fear*, *The consecration of truth*, *The prophetic gift*, *Denying self-righteousness*, *The time for the Lord to work* and *The embrace of divine life*. The second subchapter offers an interpretation of Psalm 44 as a prophecy about the Virgin Mary. Its sections include: *Abiding in eternity*, *Hearing the word in the heart*, *The hidden dwelling and inner beauty*, *The soul’s garment*, *Guidance to the bridal chamber*, *Holy and humble boldness* and *The privilege of the monastic life*. This subchapter presents the Virgin Mary as the icon of monastic life, teaching both monastics and lay faithful to stand in the presence of God’s glory with the mind in the heart, calling the Name of God and uniting with His Spirit. This, according to St. Sophrony the Athonite, is “the miracle of the miracles”.

The third chapter, entitled *The Mother of God as the Eschatological Event of the Human Race*, reveals the Virgin Mary as the Mother of Our Life and the “expectation of the nations” (Gen 49, 10), in whom the cry and longing for the Messiah, expressed by the righteous and the prophets throughout all ages, finds its fulfillment. Passages such as „you who are enthroned upon the cherubim” (Ps 79, 2), “Bow the heavens and come

down” (Ps 143, 5), and “Show us Your face, and we shall be saved” (Ps 79, 3) are fulfilled in her. The Theotokos is presented as the “miracle of eschatological miracles” (p. 71). The Holy Fathers, when interpreting the summary of creation – “and God looked at all that He had made, and behold, all that He had made was very good” (Gen 1, 31), in fact, “He had seen beforehand in the person of the Mother of God the fruit which was to be given to the humankind” (p. 70), that is the Savior of the world. At first sight it would seem that this chapter repeats some of the content of the first two chapters, but the author gives new meaning and deep significance to this content. For instance, during the Virgin Mary’s time in the Holy of Holies, she discovers her deep heart, where she united herself with her Creator and experienced “an ontological participation in the being of all humanity”. This led her to see the world with God’s eyes and to feel compassion for it. Furthermore, she discovered that her heart embraced all the creation and humankind across all ages and places (p. 73). In the grace of this “eschatological widening of her heart, the Blessed Virgin began to intercede in fervent prayer for the salvation of the whole world” (p. 73). On the other hand, “the eschatological character of the holiness of the Blessed Virgin Mary is also seen from the perspective of her virginity, since the *Yes* of the Blessed Virgin Mary has annulled the *No* of Eve, turning the curse into a blessing” (p. 80) and renewing the man for „a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21, 1), for the Kingdom of God.

The originality of this work lies both in the depth of the theological ideas that it treats in the “„spirit of the Fathers” and in the use of expressions that are unique in contemporary theology. The biblical and patristic argumentation, the clarity of the ideas and their practical applicability are the strengths of Archimandrite Zacharias’ work, which we highly recommend. The publication of such works, rooted in empirical theological research is a great benefit and necessity for contemporary society, which suffers from a lack of spiritual models and faces a moral and ethical crisis.

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