

THE ENTRY OF THE MOST HOLY THEOTOKOS INTO THE TEMPLE, NOVEMBER 21/DECEMBER 4, 2007

by

Fr. Dr. Photios+ (W)

Mary was chosen as the holy vessel through which Christ would become man on earth. It was crystal clear from her very beginning that she was to be very very spiritually special. The occasional misplaced ‘debate’ about whether Mary was a virgin or remained one after the Lord’s birth completely misses the point. Those people are looking at the situation with secular eyes. There was never any doubt that she was to be the Handmaiden of the Lord and a virgin in the eyes of the world. She voluntarily accepted her role. There was no coercion involved.

Mary’s entrance into the Holy of Holies within the Temple in Jerusalem is not described in Holy Scripture; however, it “is an organic part of Orthodox Tradition. The Church has established this whole teaching about the entry of the Panagia into the Temple, and in fact it has a feast day for it”.¹

The account of the birth of Mary, Holy Mother of God, is provided in the ancient *Protoevangelium of James*. Joachim and Anna, the parents to be of Mary, were without children. He had been confronted when bringing offerings that he had not “made seed” in Israel. He did a search of the registers of the twelve tribes and found that all the righteous had done so:

And he called to mind the patriarch Abraham, that in the last day God gave him a son Isaac. And Joachim was exceedingly grieved, and did not come into the presence of his wife; but he retired to the desert, and there pitched his tent, and fasted for forty days and forty nights, saying in himself: I will not go down either for food or for drink until the Lord my God shall look upon me, and prayer shall be my food and drink.²

Meanwhile Anna twice mourned and lamented, grieving because of her widowhood and childlessness. She too fervently prayed: “O God of our fathers, bless me and hear my prayer, as Thou didst bless the womb of Sarah, and didst give her a son Isaac”.³ She lamented over her lack of reproductive productivity ending with: “I am not like this earth, because even the earth bringeth forth its fruits in season, and blesseth Thee, O Lord.”⁴

And, behold, an angel of the Lord stood by, saying: Anna, Anna, the Lord hath heard thy prayer, and thou shalt conceive, and shall bring forth; and thy seed shall be spoken of in all the world. And Anna said: As the Lord my God liveth, if I begat either male or female, I will *bring it as a gift to the Lord my God; and it shall minister to Him in holy things all the days of its life* (emphasis supplied). And, behold, two angels came, saying to her: Behold, Joachim thy husband is coming with his flocks. For an angel of the Lord went down to him, saying: Joachim, Joachim, the Lord

God hath heard thy prayer Go down hence: for, behold, thy wife Anna shall conceive.⁵

Nine months later, Anna conceived a beautiful girl and called her Mary. When she was one year old, Joachim threw a great feast and invited the elders, priests, scribes and all the people of Israel. The chief priests blessed her, saying:

O God most high, look upon this child, and bless her with the utmost blessing, which shall be for ever.

...

And the child was two years old, and Joachim said: Let us take her up to the temple of the Lord, that we may pay the vow that we have vowed, lest perchance the Lord send to us, and our offering be not received. And Anna said: Let us wait for the third year, in order that the child may not seek for father or mother. And Joachim said: So let us wait. And the child was three years old, and Joachim said: Invite the daughters of the Hebrews that are undefiled, and let them take each a lamp, and let them stand with the lamps burning, that the child may not turn back, and her heart be captivated from the temple of the Lord. And they did so until they went up into the temple of the Lord. And the priest received her, and kissed her, and blessed her, saying: The Lord has magnified thy name in all generations. In thee, on the last of the days, the Lord will manifest His redemption to the sons of Israel. And he set her down upon the third step of the altar, and the Lord God sent grace upon her; and she danced with her feet, and all the house of Israel loved her.⁶

Mary, of course, did not turn back. She stayed there nine years until she reached the age of 12. Because of this, the priests convened a council to discuss what they should do with her “lest perchance she defile the sanctuary of the Lord”. They agreed that the high priest would stand before the altar of God and pray regarding Mary and that whatever the Lord manifested to him all would agree. High Priest Zacharias, husband of Elizabeth and father to be of John the Baptist, took the robe with twelve bells into the Holy of Holies and prayed concerning Mary:

And behold an angel of the Lord stood by him, saying unto him: Zacharias, Zacharias, go out and assemble the widowers of the people, and let them bring each his rod; and to whomsoever the Lord shall show a sign, his wife she shall be. And the heralds went out through all the circuit of Judea, and the trumpet of the Lord sounded, and all ran.

And Joseph, throwing away his axe, went out to meet them; and when they had assembled, they went away to the high priest, taking with them their rods. And he, taking the rods of all of them, entered into the temple, and prayed; and having ended his prayer, he took the rods and came out, and gave them to them: but there was no sign in them, and Joseph took his rod last; and, behold, a

dove came out of the rod, and flew upon Joseph's head. And the priest said to Joseph, Thou hast been chosen by lot to *take into thy keeping the virgin of the Lord* (emphasis supplied).⁷

See that Mary's virginity was to be protected by Joseph! This was as it was to be, the Divine plan was for Mary to be the vessel of Christ's Incarnation, His taking of flesh and becoming man.

At first, Joseph refused because he was an old man and had children and she was a young girl. But the priest prevailed on Joseph, and even though he was afraid he took Mary into his care saying to her:

Behold, I have received thee from the temple of the Lord; and now I leave thee in my house, and go away to build my buildings, and I shall come to thee. The Lord will protect thee.⁸

Later the Archangel Gabriel appeared before Mary and said:

Fear not, Mary; for thou hast found grace before the Lord of all, and thou shalt conceive, according to His word. And she hearing, reasoned with herself, Saying: Shall I conceive by the Lord, the living God? And shall I bring forth as every woman brings forth? And the angel of the Lord said: Not so, Mary; for the power of the Lord shall overshadow thee: wherefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of the Most High. And thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins. And Mary said: Behold, the servant of the Lord before His face: *let it be unto me according to thy word* (emphasis supplied).⁹

Here are some comments by Saint Gregory Palamas about Mary and her entry into the Temple:

... He had to assume a flesh that was both new and ours, that he might refashion us from out of ourselves. Now He finds a Handmaiden perfectly suited to these needs, the supplier of Her own unsullied nature, the Ever-Virgin now hymned by us, and Whose miraculous Entrance into the Temple, into the Holy of Holies, we now celebrate. God predestined her before the ages for the salvation and reclaiming of our kind. She was chosen, not just from the crowd, but from the ranks of the chosen of all ages, renowned for piety and understanding, and for their God-pleasing words and deeds.¹⁰

...

God is born of the spotless and Holy Virgin, or better to say, of the Most Pure and All-Holy Virgin. She is above every fleshly defilement, and even above every impure thought. Her conceiving resulted not from fleshly lust, but by the overshadowing of the Most Holy Spirit. Such desire being utterly alien to her, it is

through prayer and spiritual readiness that she declared to the angel: ‘Behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto Me according to thy word’ (Lk 1:38), and that she conceived and gave birth. So, in order to render the Virgin worthy of this sublime purpose, God marked this ever-virgin Daughter now praised by us, from before the ages, and from eternity, choosing Her from out of His elect.¹¹

Mary voluntarily accepted her role as being chosen from among the chosen:

They have now led this truly sanctified child of God, now the Mother of God, this Virgin into the Temple of God. And She, being filled with Divine gifts even at such a tender age,... She, rather than the others, determined what was being done over Her. In Her manner She showed that She was not so much presented into the temple, but that She herself entered into the service of God *of her own accord* (emphasis supplied), as if She had wings, striving towards this sacred and divine love. She considered it desirable and fitting that she should enter into the Temple and dwell in the Holy of Holies.¹²

The High Priest saw that she had more divine grace within her than any others and wanted to place her within the Holy of Holies. He convinced all the others present that this was the right course because God had proposed and approved it. It was quite extraordinary for anyone other than the High priest to be allowed entrance into the Holy of Holies. Even the High Priest was only allowed in one time a year on the Day of Atonement. Mary dwelt in the Holy of Holies throughout Her youth:

She was led into the Holy of Holies not just once, but was accepted by God to dwell there with Him during Her youth so that through Her, the heavenly Abodes might be opened and given for an eternal habitation to those who believe in her miraculous birthgiving.

So it is, and this is why She, *from the beginning of time* (emphasis supplied), was chosen from among the chosen. She Who is manifest as the Holy of Holies, Who has a body even purer than the spirits purified by virtue, is capable of receiving ... the Hypostatic Word of the Unoriginate Father. Today the Ever-Virgin Mary, like a Treasure of God, is stored in the Holy of Holies, so that in due time, (as it later came to pass) She would serve for the enrichment of, and an ornament for, all the world. Therefore, Christ God also glorifies His Mother, both before birth, and also after birth.

Mary as a hesychast in the Temple

In the temple the Theotokos lived in Paradise. ‘She lived her life without equipment, unworried, carefree, without grief, having no

part in base passions, above the pleasure that is not without pain, living only for God, seen only by God, nourished by God, guarded only by God, who was to dwell among us through her, she looking only at God, making God her delight, constantly devoted to God'.¹³

In the Holy of Holies, Mary concentrated her nous (bodiless mind) turning inward with unceasing divine prayer toward intelligible silence, and “she soared above all created things and saw God’s glory better than Moses and kept an eye on divine grace... In other words, she attained the vision of God. And since this vision of God is union with God, therefore *even* before (emphasis supplied) she conceived Christ, the Theotokos was united with the Trinitarian God.”¹⁴

The Theotokos chose the way of hesychia to obtain communion with God. St. John of Sinai states that “hesychasm is the enclosing of the bodiless mind (nous) in the bodily house of the body”.¹⁵ We bring the nous (mind) into the heart. Our mind descends into our heart in order to practise the Jesus Prayer and obtain sobriety, a rejection of temptations. We ignore the senses and withdraw inwardly. Through stillness Mary found the “entrance to the true vision of God, which ‘is the only example of a truly healthy soul’”.¹⁶ We are deified through

a hesychastic way of life. The Theotokos achieved hesychia and the vision of God in the Temple and she attained communion with the Triune God. And anyone who wants to achieve this vision of God, which is man’s salvation, must follow the way of the life of the Theotokos. The only way is the way of hesychia.¹⁷

Our goal is to divert our attention and reason from concerns of this world and focus on “the inaccessible places of heaven, to the Holy of Holies, where the Mother of God now resides”. In this way, we may become heirs to the Lord’s everlasting blessings.¹⁸ Scorn temptations and seek spiritual gifts as we with inner stillness pursue resolutely our Holy of Holies, our salvation in Christ!

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, *Saint Gregory Palamas As A Hagiorite – 3. One Who Expressed The Hesychastic Life Of The Holy Mountain*, at http://www.vic.com/~tscon/pelagia/htm/b16.en.saint_gregory_palamas_as_a_hagiorite.03, p. 10 of 12.

² *ibid.*, p. 1.

³ *id.*

⁴ *id.*

⁵ *id.*, pp. 1-2.

⁶ *id.*, p. 2.

⁷ *id.*, p. 3.

⁸ *id.*

⁹ *id.*

¹⁰ Saint Gregory Palamas, *Discourse On The Feast Of The Entry Of Our Most Pure Lady The Theotokos Into The Holy Of Holies*, November 21, see at <http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/entry-of-the-theotokos-saint-gregory-palamas.html>, p. 1 of 5.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹² *id.*, p. 4.

¹³ Metropolitan Hierotheos Nafpaktos, *op. cit.*, discussing Saint Gregory Palamas' teaching and analysis of her entry into the Temple, p. 10.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ St. John of Sinai, *Ladder Of Divine Ascent*, Step 27, 5.

¹⁶ *id.*

¹⁷ *id.*

¹⁸ Saint Gregory Palamas, *Discourse On The Feast Of The Entry...*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.