

**'I am Thy Servant and the Son of Thy Handmaid'  
The Theotokos and the Church**



“Let it be to me according to thy word.”

- Luke 1:38

Mary says ‘yes’ to God’s message, and thereby the Holy Spirit overshadows her and God is conceived within her.

She is called “Theotokos” (God-bearer), affirming that her Son was truly the co-eternal Son of God Incarnate. She is also called “Panagia” (All-Holy).

The icon of the Archangel Gabriel is often placed on one side of the church/royal doors, and the Theotokos saying ‘yes’ to God on the other side - the Holy Altar is in the middle.

The mystery of salvation takes place in exactly this ‘space’ - between God’s call and our response.



In the sixth century B.C., during the Babylonian invasions of the Holy Land, the **Ark of the Covenant** (which bore the presence of God and the manna bread from heaven) was taken away from the Holy of Holies in the temple.

As a child, **the Theotokos was led to the temple**, and the high priest Zacharias led her into the Altar, where she lived. This is celebrated as the “Entrance of the Theotokos” (21 November).

She becomes the **Ark**, who bears in herself the presence of God Incarnate - Christ. She bears within her “the **Living Bread** which came down from Heaven” (John 6:51).





“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 your name in all generations. In you, 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.”

- Protoevangelium of James









**“God was not just born among men, but born of a holy and pure virgin or, more precisely, of this exceedingly pure and most holy of virgins, who was not only above any physical stain, but also far beyond the reach of any defiled, carnal thoughts. Her conception of Christ resulted from the all-Holy Spirit coming upon her, not from fleshly desire, and was preceded by the annunciation and her faith in the in-dwelling of God in a manner we cannot describe, as it was outside the normal course of events and beyond words, but not heby submission to, or any experience of, passionate desire. Having utterly banished such desire by prayer and spiritual joy, she conceived and gave birth - “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38). In order that there would be a virgin equal to this task, God pre-ordained this ever-virgin Maid whom we extol today, and chose her from among His elect down through the ages.**

- St. Gregory Palamas



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**Christ gave the Theotokos as a Mother to the Church in the person of St. John the Beloved.**

“He who wishes to be another John must become . . . another Jesus. While Mary has no son other than Jesus, as it appears to those who think correctly about her, nevertheless Jesus said to his Mother, “Behold your son” (Jn 19:26), and not, “Behold, this man also is your son.” In other words, he said to her, “This man is Jesus, whom you bore.” Indeed, when someone is perfect, it is no longer he that lives, but **Christ lives in him** (cf. Gal 2:20); therefore when he [Jesus] speaks of him [John] to Mary, he says, “Behold your son, that is, Jesus Christ.”

- **Origen (3rd century)**

If one would have **God as Father** (by being united with **Christ**), one must also have **Mary as mother**.





“He can no longer have God for his father, who has not the Church for his Mother.”

- **St. Cyprian of Carthage (3rd century)**

**Likewise, to be united with Christ and have God as Father, one must likewise have the Theotokos as mother, who is herself a symbol of the Church.**

**The Theotokos is the Mother of God Incarnate and of believers (who are united with Christ). By receiving God within herself, Christ is made present in the world bodily.**

**The Theotokos is thereby a symbol of the Church, which also receives God within herself and through the Church Christ is made present in the world through the Holy Communion and the ministry of the Church, which is the Body of Christ.**



“What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me?

**I will take up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord.**

I will pay my vows to the Lord now in the presence of all His people.

**Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.**

O Lord, truly I am Your servant; **I am Thy servant and the son of Thy maidservant**; Thou hast broken my bonds asunder.

**I shall offer to Thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, And will call upon the name of the Lord.**”

- Psalm 116/117:12-17





“Arise, O Lord, to Thy resting place, Thou and the Ark of Thy strength.”

- Psalm 132/133:8 // II Chronicles 6:41

**The Dormition of the Theotokos is celebrated on 15 August.**



Icon of the Theotokos 'Softener of Evil Hearts'. The seven swords represent the fullness of pain at the crucifixion of her Son, as St. Symeon prophesied, "A sword will pierce thy own soul also" (Luke 2:35). The image and intercessions of her who bore sorrows with love and forgiveness softens the hearts of those who pray before her icon with faith.

"Pray for us, holy Apostles and all you Saints, that we may be delivered from dangers and afflictions: for in you we have gained fervent advocates with the Saviour.

"Beneath your Compassion we take refuge, O Theotokos! Our prayers, do not despise in necessities, but from danger deliver us, only pure, only blessed one."

ἮΤὸ τὴν σὴν εὐσπλαγχνίαν καταφεύγομεν Θεοτόκε· τὰς ἡμῶν ἰκείας μὴ παρίδῃς ἐν περιστάσει, ἀλλ' ἐκ κινδύου λύτρωσαι ἡμᾶς, μόνῃ ἀγνῇ μόνῃ εὐλογημένη·

#### - Orthodox Lenten Hymns

The earliest extant text of 'Beneath Thy Compassion' is on a **papyrus** from **c. 250 A.D.** (John Rylands Library, Manchester, UK).

It is still sung in the Orthodox Church during **Vespers** in **Great and Holy Lent**.





**The Theotokos is almost always pictured in iconography with Christ (usually holding the Christ child).**

**Two notable exceptions are: (1) the icon of the Protection of the Theotokos, and (2) the icon of the Theotokos as Abbess of Mount Athos.**

**The Feast of the Protection (28 October in Greek tradition / 1/12 October in Slavic tradition) comes from the vision of St. Andrew the Fool for Christ and his disciple St. Epiphanius (as well as others) who saw the Theotokos kneeling and praying with tears in the church at Blachernae in Constantinople in the early 10th century. They saw the Theotokos spread a veil of protection over those present, which is understood as the protection of her holy intercessions before the Savior. A threat from Russian barbarians was averted, and within less than a century the Rus had received Orthodox Christianity.**



**Mount Athos**, a semi-independent monastic republic (a protectorate of Greece), is under the special patronage and protection of the Theotokos.

**The Athonite monastics have a strong devotion to the Theotokos.** She is depicted in this icon holding the staff of an abbot, indicating her spiritual leadership of the Athonite monasteries.





'Deisis' (supplication) icon,  
Agia Sophia, 13th c.

# Questions / Discussion