

# The Sinlessness of the Theotokos

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The article that we offer here consists primarily of portions from a manuscript entitled, O Full of Grace, Glory to Thee, which we hope to publish in the near future. As we are aware that our topic has recently become a matter of debate, we are now posting these extracts (with slight revisions) out of concern for the welfare of the Church and love for the Mother of God.

In recent years, among some teachers in our Holy Orthodox Church, a question has been opened in reference to the Theotokos: Did the Theotokos sin? How did this question arise? What has been the accepted opinion of the consciousness of the Church on this matter? Through the prayers of the All-holy Theotokos an attempt shall now be made to formulate an answer to these questions.

An Orthodox nun once gave a talk in which she spoke of the sinlessness of the Mother of God. It happened that a clergyman present remarked that this was false, and that, in fact, St. John Chrysostom and others of the early Church Fathers said that she had sinned. On being questioned about this afterwards, this clergyman offered to send the inquirer a paper he wrote while in seminary that treated this subject. Basically, all the sources that were referred to were modern Roman Catholic scholars making reference to early Church Fathers. In his citations, where the sinlessness of the Theotokos was in question, the early Church Fathers were basically speaking of her struggles at the Cross. They express opinions to the effect that she was confused, in pain, and suffered emotionally. Beholding her Son on the Cross it could be concluded that she was attacked with doubts as to who her Son was. For modern Roman Catholic scholar (especially with their concept of "Immaculate Conception") this is sin, for the Orthodox, however, all this is not sin, but rather the struggle of our human nature against sin. In this case, it is especially true when we consider the fact that complete knowledge was not given until the Resurrection and Pentecost.

Although some of our Church Fathers have expressed the aforementioned opinions concerning the Theotokos at the Cross, these viewpoints cannot be termed dogma. It is because a reply to this question has neither been revealed in the historical information available to us, nor has it been formally investigated and articulated by the Church . There is no doubt that an exact answer has not been revealed to us, as St. Silouan the Athonite acknowledges: "The Mother of God committed to writing neither her thoughts nor her love for God and her Son, nor her soul's suffering at the Crucifixion, because we could not have understood, for her love for God is stronger and more ardent than the love of the Seraphim and Cherubim, and all the host of angels and archangels marvel at her." (1)

But if we, as Orthodox Christians, for our own edification would like to reflect upon what the Theotokos experienced at the Cross we would be safe in using the hymnology of the Church as a reference point. It is in particular the Cross-Theotokions in the Octoechos that speak of this. They especially speak of her suffering terribly as a mother as she stood at the foot of the Cross, and in this was fulfilled St. Symeon's prophecy. For example:

Standing by the Cross, O Jesus, She Who gave birth to Thee, wept lamenting and cried out: "I cannot bear this, to see Thee nailed on the wood to Whom I gave birth and escaped pain for it was without a man. How I am now gripped with pain, and wounded in heart; now is fulfilled the saying which Symeon uttered, 'A sword shall pierce thy heart O undefiled One.'" (2)

Again:

"Oh my Son", the Virgin cried out with tears, "Now a sword of sorrow hast harrowed my heart in that the assembly of lawbreakers with nails hast nailed Thee to the Cross." (3)

And there are many places where the Theotokos refers to Christ in such terms as, 'The fairest or most comely of all men', and she cries out questioning, "Where has this comeliness gone?" She also calls Him, "My sweetest Child", or "Most exceedingly beloved Child", and she often exclaims; "How is it (or Why is it) that Thou dost hasten to make me childless?" To illustrate her pain the hymnographer also says that while shedding tears, she tore her hair. So she suffered terribly and as she is the highest of all creation her love was more than any creature. Therefore she suffered more than any other mother could.

Yet did she at that time have a belief in the Resurrection? Or did she understand her Son was dying on the Cross for the sins of mankind? During her life in the temple she had already perceived that the Messiah would come to heal the effects of the fall on the whole race of Adam. (4) Her husband Joseph was told "he shall save his people from their sins" (Mat. 1:21). Christ openly preached that He would be crucified, and rise again, and that He was the good Shepherd Who would lay down His life for his sheep. Together with all this if we accept the opinion of St. Gregory Palamas that, "She flew high above all created things, saw God's glory more clearly than Moses (cf. Exod. 33:18-23), and beheld divine grace" (5), then we should conclude that she also far surpassed the apostles in the understanding of who her Son was, and the mystery of His dispensation. So at the Cross she not only lamented as a mother but as a faithful handmaiden of the Lord she also glorified her Son and God. As the hymnographer writes, at the cross she cried out:

"Woe is me my Child how divine and unutterable is Thy dispensation by which Thou dost enliven Thy creation; I hymn Thy tenderhearted compassion (6)...

"The world rejoices receiving deliverance through Thee: my inner self burns beholding Thy crucifixion which Thou dost bear for the sake of Thy merciful kindheartedness, O God, most-good and sinless Lord. (7)...

"Thou hast torn asunder the handwriting of Adam being pierced with a spear O Master (8)...

"But I pray do not leave me in the world alone make haste to resurrect, and also raise up our forefather." (9)

This is what we see in the life of the Church concerning the Theotokos at the Cross, not the idea that she sinned. Yet is it hard to believe that the Theotokos did not sin? If we consider this from a merely human, logical, and rational point of view it is indeed difficult. On the other hand if we consider this question in the context of the history of salvation, and eternal life in God's kingdom, it will be easy to accept. The incarnation of Christ and the deification of man was God's plan of salvation from all eternity, "the mystery which hath been hid from the ages" (Col. 1:26). Who and what did God the Father want the woman who would give birth to His Son to be? Could it be other than the highest of all creation, ever-virgin, and sinless. This is so logical, this has to be.

Although we do believe the Theotokos had no actual sin, she was born, as were all the descendants of Adam, with the effect of sin upon her human nature. Yet she was brought into the temple at the young age of three, and there she led a life of prayer, fasting and study of the Scriptures. She struggled with the effect of sin upon her human nature and she overcame it. In

this respect, she was victorious and did not sin, even though she bore the nature of fallen man. If one were immersed in the services of the Church this would be so natural to believe.

Let us now turn to the testimony of one of our more recent saints, and then explain how it was that the Theotokos could have acquired the power to be victorious over sin. In the writings of St. Silouan the Athonite we read: "In church I was listening to a reading from the prophet Isaiah, and at the words, 'Wash you, make you clean,' I reflected, 'Maybe the Mother of God sinned at one time or another, if only in thought.' And, marvelous to relate, in unison with my prayer a voice sounded in my heart, saying clearly, 'The Mother of God never sinned even in thought.' Thus did the Holy Spirit bear witness in my heart to her purity." (10)

But how is it possible for any human being not to sin, even in thought? To answer this, let us review some of the information we have about the life of the Mother of God. At the tender age of three, the Theotokos was dedicated to God, having been brought into the temple by her parents. And what was her life like there? In the Apocryphal Gospel of St. Matthew we read:

"Mary was held in admiration by all the people of Israel; and when she was three years old, she walked with a step so mature, she spoke so perfectly, and spent her time so assiduously in the praises of God that all were astonished at her and wondered...She was so constant in prayer, and her appearance was so beautiful and glorious, that scarcely anyone could look into her face...And this was the order that she had set for herself: From the morning to the third hour she remained in prayer; from the third to the ninth she was occupied with weaving; and from the ninth she again applied herself to prayer. She did not retire from praying until there appeared to her an angel of the Lord from whose hand she used to receive food; and thus she became more and more perfect in the work of God. Then, when the older virgins rested from the praises of God, she did not rest at all; so that in the praises and vigils of God none were found before her, no one more learned in the wisdom of the law of God, more lowly in humility, more elegant in singing, more perfect in all virtue. She was indeed steadfast, immovable, unchangeable, and daily advancing to perfection...She was always engaged in prayer and in searching the law...." (11)

According to St. Gregory Palamas it was at this time that she acquired a state of ceaseless interior prayer. (12) In a homily on the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple, St. Gregory, while describing her sojourn there, makes Mary the model for the life of the one who treads upon the path of interior prayer. Praising the Most Pure One, he tells us that she

"chose to live in solitude out of the sight of all, inside the sanctuary. There, having loosed every bond with material things, shaken off every tie and even risen above sympathy towards her own body, she united her mind with its inclination to turn within itself, with attention and unceasing holy prayer. Having become her own mistress by this means, and being established above the jumble of thoughts in all their different guises, and above absolutely every form of being, she constructed a new, indescribable way to heaven, which could be called silence of mind. Intent upon this silence, she flew high above all created things, saw God's glory more clearly than Moses (cf. Exod. 33:18-23), and beheld divine grace. Such experiences are completely beyond the scope of men's senses, but they are a gracious and holy sight for spotless souls and minds." (13)

So then, according to St. Gregory Palamas, our Most Pure Lady while dwelling in the Temple, through "unceasing holy prayer" ascended to a great spiritual height formerly unknown. In speaking of the experience of struggling in such prayer and the fruit it conveys he writes:

"It is through contemplation that a person is made divine, not by speculative analogies on the basis of skillful reasoning and observations – perish the thought (this is something base and human) – but under the guidance of stillness. Continuing in our life's upper room (cf. Acts 1:13-14), as it were in prayers and supplications night and day, in some way we touch that blessed nature that cannot be touched.

"Thus the light beyond our perception and understanding is diffused ineffably within those whose hearts have been purified by holy stillness, and they see God within themselves as in a mirror" (cf. 2Cor. 3:18). (14)

So Mary acquired a unique intimacy with God that prepared her to become His dwelling place. It is no wonder that, having attained to such a state, when she was obliged to leave the Temple and marry, she vowed a life of virginity. For how could one who was thus united with God unite herself with a man! Such a prayerful state of soul is thus described by St. Silouan the Athonite:

The young man seeks a bride for himself, and the maiden looks for a bridegroom. This is the earthly order of life, blessed by God. But the soul chosen of the Lord for Himself, the soul He suffers to taste of the sweetness of the love of God, does not set earthly life on a par with the love of God – she is absorbed in God alone, and attaches herself to no earthly thing. And if earthly thoughts come she takes no delight in them, for she cannot love the things of this earth – all her longing is for the things of heaven. (15)

And such is the power of the interior prayer which the Mother of God attained to, that it was this divine action that kept her free from sin throughout her entire life.

Although this may seem hard to believe, yet through "unceasing holy prayer" -- to use the terminology of St. Gregory -- Mary, the Mother of God, accomplished this. But why is this prayer designated "holy" and why does St. Gregory say "it is through contemplation that a person is made divine"? In order to answer this and conclude our discussion let us define both prayer and its stages. This will properly illustrate the power of grace-filled prayer, the same power that kept the Theotokos free from sin.

Archimandrite Sophrony gives us an outline of the stages in prayer when, in reference to the Jesus Prayer, he writes:

"It is possible to establish a certain sequence in the development of this prayer. First, it is a verbal matter: we say the prayer with our lips while trying to concentrate our attention on the Name and the words. Next, we no longer move our lips but pronounce the Name of Jesus Christ, and what follows after, in our minds, mentally. In the third stage mind and heart combine to act together: the attention of the mind is centered in the heart and the prayer said there. Fourthly, the prayer becomes self-propelling. This happens when the prayer is confirmed in the heart and, with no especial effort on our part, continues there, where the mind is concentrated. Finally, the prayer, so full of blessing, starts to act like a gentle flame within us, as an inspiration from on High, rejoicing the heart with a sensation of divine love and delighting the mind in spiritual contemplation. This last state is sometimes accompanied by a vision of Light."(16)

Bishop Kallistos Ware gives us a number of definitions of prayer which have some relation to the stages explained above. He first refers to a definition in an English dictionary that describes prayer as "a solemn request to God."(17) This can correspond to the first two stages spoken of by Archimandrite Sophrony. Prayer being described as an act of petition of man to God can be either verbalized or pronounced in one's mind. In a second definition he quotes St. Theophan

the Recluse, who says concerning prayer that "the principle thing is to stand before God with the mind in the heart, and to go on standing before Him unceasingly day and night until the end of life."(18) Bishop Kallistos points out that to pray "is no longer to ask for things," but it is "to stand before God, to enter into an immediate and personal relationship with Him."(19) This can correspond with the third stage mentioned above, yet this is still predominantly an action initiated by man. As Bishop Kallistos continues, "stress is laid primarily on what is done by man rather than God."(20) The third definition given by Bishop Kallistos relates to the fourth and fifth states spoken of by Archimandrite Sophrony. He quotes St. Gregory of Sinai who says, "Prayer is God, who works all things in all men"(21) -- it is not something which I initiate but in which I share; it is not primarily something which I do but which God is doing in me -- it is to cease doing things on our own and to enter into the action of God."(22) It is this stage of prayer that is a participation in the action or energy or life of God that many of our Holy Fathers reached and brought to a degree of perfection through their asceticism. The end of this state is a "manifestation of baptism", (23) it is a birth from God; therefore it is a new beginning, a new mode of life in which the grace of the Holy Spirit is perceptible and operative. This is the birth and stage of grace that John the Theologian writes of when he says: "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God."(I John 3:9) So this is why unceasing prayer can be called "holy" and contemplation can be said to make a person "divine".

What then can we say about the spiritual stature of the Theotokos? What spiritual height did Mary, the Theotokos, acquire while living in the Temple? She was brought there at the young age of three, providentially guarded from the temptations of this world, lived in strict asceticism and was nourished with the Scriptures and with prayer to God. And at the time of the Annunciation, when the "Holy Spirit came upon her and the power of the most High overshadowed her"(Luke 1:35), to what state of purity and grace was she raised? It is beyond our comprehension. We can only marvel at the state of the grace of the Holy Spirit which she acquired and with which she was endowed. It was the power of this grace of the Holy Spirit that prepared her to be the all-pure and all-holy dwelling place of God and that kept her free from sin all her days.

How then can we as Orthodox allow ourselves to welcome or entertain speculations of those outside the Church? We must live within the Holy Tradition of our Church. This living within tradition has been superbly described by Vladimir Lossky when he said that "to be within the Tradition, is to keep the living truth in the Light of the Holy Spirit."(24) The Mother of God is our "Victorious Leader"(25), who shared in our fallen human nature but did not succumb to sin through human weakness. She struggled against sin and overcame it; she was "never subject to the taint of sin". (26) She is the prototype of the life of a monastic, being the mother and foundress of the path of interior prayer and stillness. In cultivating these ascetic practices, she reached such a state of purity that God chose her to be His mother according to the flesh. She thus became the Mediatress between heaven and earth, and our "Victorious Leader." As a mother she shared in the suffering and Cross of her Son and our God, and by bearing this cross, she was brought to a higher state of perfection. Thus she is our model for struggles, and again, our "Victorious Leader." O Theotokos, "as Thou dost possess invincible might, set us free from every calamity, that we may cry to Thee: Rejoice, O Bride unwedded."(27)

- (1) Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *St. Silouan the Athonite*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds, Tolleshunt Knights by Maldon, Essex, England, Patriarchal Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1991, p. 392
- (2) The Ochoechos, Tone 5, Friday Matins Aposticha (all hymns from the Ochoechos are original translations from the Slavonic)
- (3) Ibid. Tone 4, Wednesday Matins Canon, Ode 6
- (4) cf., Saint Gregory Palamas, *Mary the Mother of God, Sermons by Saint Gregory Palamas*, edited by Christopher Veniamin, *On the Entry of the Mother of God into the Holy of Holies*, South Canaan, PA, Mount Tabor Publishing 2005
- (5) Saint Gregory Palamas, *Mary the Mother of God, Sermons by Saint Gregory Palamas*, p. 47
- (6) The Ochoechos, Tone 8, Friday Matins, Sessional Hymn after the second reading of the Psalter
- (7) Ibid., Tone 8 Wednesday Matins, Sessional Hymn after the first reading from the Psalter
- (8) Ibid., Tone 4, Friday Matins Canon, Ode 4
- (9) Ibid., Tone 4 Thursday Vespers, Lord I call
- (10) Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, p. 392.
- (11) *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, The Writings of the Fathers down to 325 A. D.*, ed. The Very Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL. D., Vol. VIII, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1956, p.371.
- (12) Saint Gregory's view of the prayer life of the Theotokos while she lived at the temple is not unique among the Fathers of the Church. He has indeed gone into greater detail on this subject than others yet before him Saints Jerome, George of Nicomedia, and Theophylact of Ochrid have written of her contemplative life and frequent visitation of angels at that time. This standpoint has the apocryphal accounts as its basis. (Saint Demetrius of Rostov, *The Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints*, trans. Father Thomas Marretta, Vol. III: November, House Springs Missouri 63051, Chrysostom Press, 1997, pp. 479-491).
- (13) Saint Gregory Palamas, *Mary the Mother of God, Sermons by Saint Gregory Palamas*, p. 47 (see also, Paisius Velichkovsky, *Little Russian Philokalia*, Vol. IV: St. Paisius Velichkovsky, St. Herman Press \* St. Paisius Abbey Press, Forestville, California 95436, 1994, pp. 33-34)).
- (14) Ibid. pp. 43-44, and p. 33.
- (15) Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, p. 502.
- (16) Archmandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) *His Life Is Mine*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds, Crestwood, New York, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977, p. 113
- (17) Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, *The Power of the Name*, New Edition, Convent of the Incarnation, Fairacres Oxford, SLG Press, 1986, p. 1
- (18) Ibid. p. 1
- (19) Ibid. p. 1
- (20) Ibid. p. 1
- (21) Ibid. p. 2
- (22) Ibid. p. 2
- (23) Ibid. p. 2
- (24) Leonid Ouspensky & Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer & E. Kadloubovsky, Revised Edition, Crestwood, New York, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982, p. 19
- (25) *Kontakion of the Annunciation*, trans., *Book of Canons*, Very Rev. Theodore Heckman, South Canaan, Pennsylvania, St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1984, p. 89
- (26) *The Festal Menaion*, Trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware, 24 Russel Square, London, England, Faber and Faber Limited, 1969, p. 190
- (27) *Book of Canons*, Very Rev. Theodore Heckman, pp. 89-90