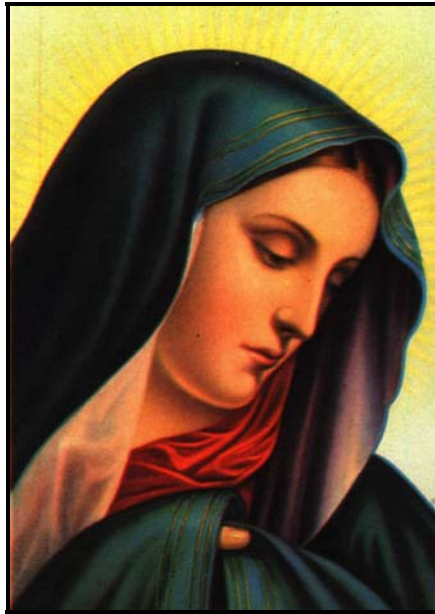


BACK TO BASICS



Saint Mary in The Orthodox Concept (Part 2)

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Saint Mary: Our New Eve

The Church calls Saint Mary, “the mother of all the living”, “the mother of the New Life”, and the “Second Eve”. Eve, through her disobedience to God, obtained only death for her children, and became the mother of the dead. Her daughter, Saint Mary, through her faith, obedience and humility, became, through the Holy Spirit, “the mother of Life”. She offered to Adam’s children the “Tree of Life” to eat of, that they may live forever.

The Son of God became man through the Virgin, that the disobedience caused by the serpent might be destroyed in the same way it had originated (Saint Justin Martyr).

Just as Eve, while the wife of Adam, was still a virgin and became by her disobedience the cause of death of herself and of the whole human race, so also Mary, espoused yet a virgin, became by her obedience the cause of salvation of both herself and the whole human race (Saint Irenaeus).

Eve is called the mother of the human race, but Mary, the mother of salvation (Saint Ambrose).

Through the mystery of the Divine Incarnation, Saint Mary became “the mother of the Head of the mystical body and also the mother of its members”, as Saint Augustine says. She received universal motherhood to all the believers. The Fathers consider the holy womb of Saint Mary as the bridal chamber, the meeting place, where the heavenly Bridegroom is united mystically with the Bride, i.e. the whole Church.

The Word is joined to flesh; the Word is wedded to flesh, and the bridal chamber of this exalted marriage is your womb (Saint Augustine).

He united the Holy Church to Him, through the mystery of the Incarnation. Now, the bridal chamber of this Bridegroom was the womb of the Virgin Mother (Pope Gregory the Great).

Full of Grace: The Mystery of “Rejoice”

At the Annunciation, Archangel Gabriel greeted Saint Mary with the words, “Hail full of Grace, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women”. It was not an ordinary greeting, nor did it mean “Peace”, but it had the full

meaning of “Rejoice”. The Greek word, “Hail” (*Shere*), is found over eighty times in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. About half are translated “rejoice”, and the other half are used to describe the joy of God’s people at some striking act done by God for their salvation. The angel invites Saint Mary to inner, heartfelt joy, because of the dwelling of the Lord Jesus Christ, her Savior and God, within her, and because of her motherhood to God’s Son.

Saint Mary’s Holiness

The idea of Saint Mary’s holiness is related to our conception of her motherhood to God, her perpetual virginity, her personal friendship to the believers, and her status as a symbol of the Holy Church. By free Divine Grace, Saint Mary gains preparatory perfection in spirit and body to enable her to receive Him. The Divine Grace sanctified Saint Mary, so that she could become the True holy of holies in whom God dwells.

Truly, she alone is said to be full of grace, who alone obtained the grace which no one else had gained; that of being filled with the Author of grace (Saint Ambrose).

The Orthodox believer feels the holiness of Saint Mary not only as a doctrine which he has learned from books, but as a fruit of a personal relationship with her in his daily life. The believer feels that she is his own mother, the holy Queen in heaven, who asks for his salvation. She longs for the holiness of her sons and daughters.

Saint Mary and Actual Sins

The Church believes that Saint Mary’s holiness is unique, and that it surpasses the heavenly creatures. She passed all her life in holiness, as the true Ark of the Covenant, which was made of incorruptible wood, overlaid with gold from within and without.

I do not propose to have a single question raised on the subject of sin in regard to the Holy Virgin Mary, out of respect for the Lord (Saint Augustine).

How could I paint the picture of this marvelous, beautiful one, with ordinary color...too exalted and too glorious is the image of her

beauty...she was wise and filled with the love of God...she was never defiled by bad desires, had remained from childhood steadfastly just and has always walked along the right way without fault or stumbling (Saint Jacob of Serug).

Saint Mary & Original Sin

The Orthodox Church, whose love towards Saint Mary is deeply rooted, considers her more holy than all of the heavenly creatures, while a natural member of the human race. We do not however, set her apart from the human race by assuming that she was born without original sin, as if she was born not of human seed.

Saint Mary, herself, declared her joy to God her Savior (Luke 1:47), for indeed she was in need of salvation. Saint Ambrose says, "When the Lord wanted to redeem the world, He began His work with Mary, that she, through whom salvation was prepared for all, should be first to draw the fruit of salvation from the Son."

This Orthodox concept preserved our Church from any exaggeration or confusion between Christ and His mother. No worship is offered to her, but only veneration and praise.

Saint Mary: Our Intercessor

In the Orthodox Church, we cannot accept any mediator between God and people, except the Lord Jesus Christ, the sole High Priest of the heavens, and the Sacrifice by whose blood we receive the reconciliation and remission of sins. "*For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12).

Why then does the Church ask for the intercessions of Saint Mary and the prayers of the saints? Fr. Tadros Malaty says, "Truly the Gospel in its spirit and texts aims at bringing man to the experience of divine life; that is, divine love. This means that the person puts aside his own-self, so that by the Holy Spirit he offers his whole life for the salvation of his fellow brethren. In other words, the evangelic life is but an intermediary life, during which the believer does his best, through his deeds and prayers, to see that everybody is glorified in the bosom of God."

This is precisely the concept of intercession. As the soul moves closer to God, in a deeper union with Jesus Christ, it becomes more attached to others, and hence prays for them, asks for their salvation. Saint John Chrysostom says, "The most perfect rule of Christianity, its exact definition, its highest summit, is this: to seek what is for the benefit of all. I cannot believe that it is possible for man to be saved if he does not labor for the salvation of his neighbor."

Our Lord Jesus Christ gave positive responses to the intercessions of people and their petitions of others. He healed the paralytic for the sake of those who brought him (Matt. 9:2). He also healed the centurion's servant because of the petition of his master (Matt. 8:5). It is also evident that the evangelic love is always associated with true humility. This implies that in our mind, we feel we are not worthy to pray for others, but rather we ask them to pray for us.

If human intercession between the Communion of the Saints exists on earth (Jam. 5:16-18), then surely it is even more valid for those who enter Paradise, that they do not cease in praying for their brothers and sisters. The concept of intercession declares the unity of the Church, as members of one body, all members suffering if one is hurt, and pleased at the honor of others (1Cor. 12:26,27).

If we give importance to the principle of intercession in general, how much more effective would be the prayers of the Mother of God for the salvation of her children!! We have seen her receive the motherhood of the Incarnate Son of God and become Mother of His flesh, i.e. the Church. This motherhood is not merely an honorable title but a responsibility of unceasing work.

In the story of the wedding of Cana at Galilee, we can realize other aspects of the intercession of Saint Mary (John 2:1-8). It shows clearly the trust of Saint Mary in her Son, for she did not repeat her request, but with every assurance and confidence said to the people, "Do whatever He tells you." She was sure that her Son would answer her request for His Children.

Through her conversation with the people of the wedding, we can visualize her role in intercession. Certainly, it is not to give her worship, but to trust in her ability to direct our hearts, to secretly carry out the commandment of her Son to "do whatever he tells you."

Saint Mary & the Church

As we discussed before, it was in the womb of Saint Mary where Christ united the Church, His body, to Himself. Thus, the Church realized her mystical existence in full. She also received the unity of the Redeemer (Christ) with the redeemed person (her), which all the Church is summoned to receive.

Saint Mary and the Church are both mother and virgin at the same time, each one conceived by the Holy Spirit without human seed, giving birth to the unblemished Son. Saint Mary is the mother of the Divine Word, whom she generated according to His humanity, and the Church is the mother of its members, whom she generates through baptism to participate in Christ's life.

Similar to Saint Mary, the Church is "the handmaid of the Lord." She should be as a humble handmaid, denying all efforts which result from man's power, and thus becoming a sign of the pure grace of God, who seeks us out in the humility of our human condition in order to lead us to the glory of His kingdom.

The intercession of Saint Mary is a typical function of the church. For the triumphant (those in heaven) and militant (those on earth) members of the church have to imitate Saint Mary, praying unceasingly for the renewal of the whole world in Jesus Christ.