

The Mother of God in the Armenian and Latin Churches

Reverend Father,

In an ecumenical spirit of understanding, I humbly would like to offer an explanation for something that was said about the Catholic Church in the conference. It is regarding a Roman Catholic title for the Mother of God: “co-redemptrix.” It was said in the conference that for Catholics who use this title, they mean that they have a male savior (Christ) and also a female one (St. Mary). Although I am not a Roman Catholic, I can confidently say that this is certainly not the meaning behind this title. Those who wanted this title officially proclaimed (which the Pope did not do) were clear that this was in no way meant to imply that St. Mary added anything to Christ’s eternal redemption of the world. Instead, the title is meant to lift St. Mary up, as I’ve heard Orthodox Frs. Schmemmann and Hopko refer to her, as “The Great Icon of Christian Perfection.”

It is believed that we humans are all called to take part, and assist, in the salvation of others. As St. Paul says, “We then, as workers together with [God] also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain” (2 Corinthians 6:1, NKJV). This is the “synergy” we hear about so beautifully from Eastern theologians. So, since we are all called to be God’s co-workers in our salvation and that of others, some Roman Catholics thought it fitting to give the above mentioned title to the most perfect Christian. It was meant to manifest that it is indeed humanly possible, although only through faith and the grace of God, to be a perfect follower of Christ. The Theotokos is a living example of this truth, God’s co-worker *par excellence*. Numerous early Fathers shared this conviction about the Theotokos as expressed in their writings. St. Ireneaus, for example, at the end of the second century wrote that the Mother of God “being obedient... became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race” Adv. haeres. 3, 22,4.

I agree that the title can be misleading and is certainly not necessary. I was pleased to hear that the Pope declined the many requests to officially proclaim this title for the Theotokos. But I just wanted to clarify what I understand is meant by it, again, in the name of ecumenical understanding. I know, the holy priest that you are, you would never want to bear false witness against anyone. So, this is why I wanted to contact you.

Once when I was discussing this title with a graduate of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary and pastor of a OCA parish, he pointed out to me that even the Orthodox Liturgy calls on the Theotokos to “save us.” This points to the reality of how she and other Christians can assist in our salvation. As St. Paul said “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church...” (Colossians 1:24, RSV).

I am still researching the issue of the Immaculate Conception. I have found that it is derived from the Eastern “Feast of the Conception of the Theotokos,” where she is honored as all-pure and immaculate, as you and I have discussed. The Byzantine Liturgy states in reference to Mary’s Conception that she was, “free from any stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature.” Perhaps Rome would have done better to have consulted its Eastern brethren to get a more thorough and mutual understanding of this feast before making its declaration on the Immaculate Conception. The Roman Catholic definition of the doctrine is based on western Thomistic-Philosophical deduction which can seem at times rather speculative. I sympathize with

those who question the need to raise such a doctrine to the level of dogma. Perhaps, through ecumenical dialogue, a joint statement will be reached on this issue expressing what we all hold in common. Actually the current Pope has emphasized the dire need for Eastern theology to play a prominent role in the Catholic Church's understanding of its doctrines. This "breathing with both lungs" will help to clarify the Church's universal understanding of God's truth and avoid one-sided theological developments.

But even the Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware, in his book "The Orthodox Church," states that although there is certainly no dogmas among the Eastern Churches, individual Orthodox may freely choose to believe that the Theotokos was immaculate from her Conception. In the book "The Mother of God" by the Armenian Apostolic Archimandrite Vatche Iknadiossian, there is an interview of Fr. Iknadiossian by a Catholic periodical. When asked about the Immaculate Conception he replied,

"the dogma of the Immaculate Conception officially proclaimed by the Roman Catholic Church in 1854, was not officially proclaimed by our Church. Nevertheless we celebrate it as a very great feast, on 9th December (instead of 8th). During the feast we find the following hymns:

"Thou art the Flower which cannot wither,
Thy birth was free from the condemnation of original sin,
Immaculate, holy Virgin, We glorify thee!"

"Living Eden. Tree of immortal life
guarded on every way by the flashing sword."

"Thanks to thy stainless and spotless purity, Thou art good!
Thanks to thine immaculate holiness thou art a Tutelary Advocate!"

-composed by St. Gregory of Narek, AD 951-1003

When asked about the Roman Catholic devotion: the Rosary, Fr. Iknadiossian gave this prayer of St. Gregory of Narek as an Armenian example of Marian devotion:

"Help me with thy winged prayers,
O thou who art proclaimed Mother of the living,
So that when I leave this earthly valley
I may without suffering walk towards thy dwelling of life which was
prepared for us.
So that the end of my life be lightened,
although t'was enburdened with iniquity.
Transform for me my day of anguish into a joyous feast.
O Thou who curest Eve's pains!
With thy tears help me, for I am in distress,
O Thou, blessed amongst women.
Bend the knee to secure my reconciliation,

O Thou Mother of God.”

(Excerpts from “The Mother of God, p.51-54)

The “Book of Hours of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church” speaks of St. Mary’s Conception in relative terms in the Matins service on the day of the week the Eastern Churches set aside to honor the Theotokos (Wednesday):

“Of the virgin of old, Mother Eve,
through whom old Adam became a debtor,
the grievous curse was lifted
by thine holy birth, O virgin Mary;
pray to thine only-begotten
to forgive the sins of their children;
sing praises to the fruit of the Virgin,
in whom ye were blessed, O generations of the earth-born.”

And even in the above mentioned book “The Mother of God,” there is a forward by Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem, in which he states:

“The name of Mary, the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception who bore the Christ, will be honoured throughout eternity, as the quintessence of purity, innocence, sacrifice and devotion. No other human being has ever received, or been worthy of such veneration as this humble woman, so full of grace, from Galilee.” (ibid. p. 7).

Thank you for listening, Der Hayr. I hope this clarifies the Roman Catholic position and manifests how much we really hold in common concerning our teachings on the Theotokos. Roman Catholics are not at all saying that St. Mary’s co-operation in our redemption is on the level of that of Christ our God. Christ alone has redeemed us. Through *synergy* we humans can co-operate in our redemption by prayers, through faith and good works and the proclamation of and obedience to the Gospel. I was encouraged to hear Hayr Soorb Vahan (Hovhannessian) so strongly insist that a true Christian has an obligation to do just this. Again, I really found the retreat to be an experience of growth for me. I grew in love for our Lord, for the Nicene Symbol and for “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (St. Jude 3). I look forward to taking part in similar enriching experiences at your parish in the future along with other Armenians of the Apostolic and Catholic Churches.

In Christ’s Light,
Wm. DerGhazarian
(4-9-00)
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APPENDIX I:

Praise to the Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, as She Is Called

by Petros Siwnec'i (c. 500-557)

translated by Dr. Roberta Ervine

Associate Professor of Armenian Studies, St. Nersess Armenian Seminary

Petros Siwnec'i was bishop of the influential Armenian Metropolitan See of Siunik. A profound theologian and prolific translator, he was known for his devout faith and virtuous Christian lifestyle and was widely esteemed by his contemporaries and successors. He authored a number of other encomia in the style of this one. He also penned doctrinal works, biblical commentaries and, liturgical hymns.

You the multitude of this Christ-loving gathering have made this day a feast of the new and marvelous joy. In it we will rejoice with fantastic rejoicing. For lo, the heavens call out to the earth with the sound of good news, and announce the bursting forth of glory in the town of Bethlehem. Today, we are desirous of David's well, in which God's river pours with copious flow, giving drink to the universe. Truly, I tell you that that early archetype was imprinted with the truth, for the Mother of our Lord became a well, of itself springing up with living water. From it the one who kept it did not dare to drink, for with spotless purity was sealed her virgin flesh, from which the Sun of Righteousness arose and with His flashing rays of light illuminated the world.

Now, what shall I say, or what shall I speak? For mind and tongue are unable to offer up worthy honor to this virgin festival. Word cannot measure the love which God has for humanity, nor can any number account for the multifaceted honor of Mary. Oh, who has ever heard such wonders—that the Lord and Creator undertook to be born as a child of His handmaiden and clay vessel? Yes! Yes! Because He desired to raise up the first father and the first virgin from their fall, He was truly encapsulated in the womb; He truly became the Child Who is born this day! For this reason we too honor this day more than words can tell; we understand earth to be more lofty than the heavens, and the Virgin to be more glorious than the East. We exalt the shepherds above the angels, and we recognize the manger to be more choice than the cherubim. Jerusalem, too, shone more brilliantly than the fiery chariot.

We have not labored to contrive these words as mere rhetoric, born of our own thought; before us, the divinely-written Scriptures foretold the same. For the One Whose Being created rationality within the natures of angels and men at their fashioning, the Self-existent Father today begot, as it were, from His very self. The same Father sang through the mouth of David, "You are my son; today have I begotten Thee."

Now come you, on this day when the Creator of days and words took upon Himself to be born again, bring me words to say: what words can we offer sufficient to relate the praises of such a day? If we imply that the earth is higher than the heavens, is it so vain a boast? Were not the heavens the dwelling place of the ministering spirits, while the earth became the special city of the God of all? As the prophet openly trumpeted, "This is our God, alongside whom no other is of any account!" After this, He appeared on earth and walked about with human beings!

And if we envision the Virgin Mary more glorious than the East, have we inflated our thought more than we ought? Not at all. The East is the more honorable because the day's fire rises through it; but it is not to be compared with the maidservant Mother of our Lord, in whom the God of all dwelt and like the sun arose upon the world.

And if we stated that the manger is greater than the cherubim, have we made a puerile comparison between things which are not alike? Is not the One sitting today in the manger as in His Father's bosom the [very] One at the wonder of Whom the six-winged beings tremble from a distance?

Hence, the prophetic mouthpieces of grace, looking at all this and making the appropriate connections, compared the things below with those above and, more particularly, they concluded that the things below

are more exalted than those above. For the One at Whose presence the heavens melt like wax is today contained and constrained in a cave. The word of Proverbs too wondered in amazement at this, "What land is this into which the light will fall?" For He fell from the Paternal bosom like fiery lightning and was swaddled, harmless, in earth's darkness. As it was foretold, "The earth: from it will arise bread, and underneath it fire circulated," which another prophet interprets clearly [saying], "You brought forth bread from the earth," that is, [He brought forth] His body from the Holy Virgin, Mary.

Oh, unspeakable blessings sealed the virgin womb, which the prophetic spirit [speaking through] David's mouth called "a holy mountain." "Its foundation," he said, "is on His holy mountain." Verily, on this holy mountain were the two worlds, the divine and the human, affirmed in an inseparable union. Therefore let no one dare to call the One Who was born of the Holy Virgin a mere mortal, for He Himself, the Exalted One, laid that foundation in her. As the angel announced, "What is born of her is of the Holy Spirit." It says, "The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob." The Unbeginning Word of God made the virgin flesh a second "gate of Zion," for when the angel greeted her, the Word entered into her through her ears, and for nine months took on substance within her body. The Lord who gives immortal life did not scorn to be born through the same means as all mortal beings.

What a great mystery! He entered in and came out, and the gate of her virginity was preserved intact. Now, O Mother of God, in what terms shall we bring forth your praise? Lo, you became

Paradise, planted by God;
Pleasant vineyard;
Unconsumed burning bush;
Holy mountain;
Rock from which gushed water;
Rod which budded;
Golden vessel;
Container of fragrant incense;
[Movable ark;
[House of living water;]
Good plant;
Place of sapphires;
City of God;
Enclosed garden;
Sealed spring;
Hill of frankincense;
Valley of lilies;
Thirsty land;
Swift cloud;
Untrod wilderness;
Bolted door;
Scroll which cannot be read;
Rational land;
Dawn of peace.

All these [names] did the prophets give to you of old. ...Now, by what other examples can we give you your due, Holy Mother of God? Have you not gone beyond all words? Are you not truly above all beings? Did you not transcend mortal thought, when "the Holy Spirit came down upon you and overshadowed you with the power of the Most High?" Truly, this is so. For

You received God;
You conceived God;
You felt the pangs of God;
You gave birth to God;
You held the uncontainable God in your arms;

You suckled God;
You nursed God;
You dandled God;
You swaddled the One whose throne is the heavens and whose footstool is the earth, whose whole Essence the heavens of the heavens are not sufficient to contain.

How can I even enter a competition [in your praise]? How can expressions of your bliss lead me waveringly on? Lo, there are the heavens which with their fiery flame on Mount Sinai caused the foundations of Sheol to shake, quivering; and the hands which made those heavens and the earth come forward today like those of a child holding a cup in his hands, offering it to a young girl.

Now, this praise [of mine] is none other than the fulfillment of your own prophecy, that "Hereafter all nations shall call me blessed." So I beseech you, holy Mother of God, intercede with your Son and our God, that He may always deliver from temptation this people who have believed in Him [Who came] through you and offer praise to the One born of you, now and unto the ages of ages, Amen.

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APPENDIX II:

Other Patristic quotations regarding the Immaculateness of the Holy Virgin

Hippolytus:

"He [Jesus] was the ark formed of incorruptible wood [Mary]. For by this is signified that His tabernacle was exempt from putridity and corruption."
Orat. In illud, Dominus pascit me (ante A.D. 235), in ULL,94

Origen:

"This Virgin Mother of the Only-begotten of God, is called Mary, worthy of God, immaculate of the immaculate, one of the one." Homily 1 (A.D. 244), in ULL,94

Ephraim:

"Let woman praise Her, the pure Mary." Hymns on the Nativity, 15:23 (A.D. 370), in NPNF2, XIII:254

"Thou alone and thy Mother are in all things fair, there is no flaw in thee and no stain in thy Mother."

Nisibene Hymns, 27:8 (A.D. 370), in THEO, 132

Ambrose:

"Mary, a Virgin not only undefiled but a Virgin whom grace has made inviolate, free of every stain of sin."
Sermon 22:30 (A.D. 388), in JUR, II:166

Augustine:

"We must except the Holy Virgin Mary, concerning whom I wish to raise no question when it touches the subject of sins, out of honour to the Lord; for from Him we know what abundance of grace for overcoming sin in every particular was conferred upon her who had the merit to conceive and bear Him who undoubtedly had no sin." Nature and Grace, 42[36] (A.D. 415), in NPNF1, V:135

Proclus of Constantinople:

"As he formed her without any stain of her own, so He proceeded from her contracting no stain."

Homily 1 (ante A.D. 446), in ULL,97

Theodotus of Ancrya:

"A virgin, innocent, spotless, free of all defect, untouched, unsullied, holy in soul and body, like a lily sprouting among thorns." Homily VI:11 (ante A.D. 446), in THEO,339

Peter Chrysologus:

"The angel took not the Virgin from Joseph, but gave her to Christ, to whom she was pledged from Joseph, but gave her to Christ, to whom she was pledged in the womb, when she was made."

Sermon 140 (A.D. 449), in ULL,97

Jacob of Sarug:

"[T]he very fact that God has elected her proves that none was ever holier than Mary, if any stain had disfigured her soul, if any other virgin had been purer and holier, God would have selected her and rejected Mary."

(ante A.D. 521), in CE

Theotoknos of Livias:

"She is born like the cherubim, she who is of a pure, immaculate clay"

Panegyric for the feast of the Assumption, 5:6 (ante A.D. 650), in THEO,180

Andrew of Crete:

"Today humanity, in all the radiance of her immaculate nobility, receives its ancient beauty. The shame of sin had darkened the splendour and attraction of human nature; but when the Mother of the Fair One par excellence is born, this nature regains in her person its ancient privileges and is fashioned according to a perfect model truly worthy of God.... The reform of our nature begins today and the aged world, subjected to a wholly divine transformation, receives the first fruits of the second creation"

Sermon I, On the Birth of Mary (A.D. 733), in THEO,180

Germanus of Constantinople:

"[T]ruly elect, and superior to all, not by the altitude of lofty structures, but as excelling all in the greatness and purity of sublime and divine virtues, and having no affinity with sin whatever."

Marracci in S. Germani Mariali (ante A.D. 733), in ULL,98

John of Damascus:

"O most blessed loins of Joachim from which came forth a spotless seed! O glorious womb of Anne in which a most holy offspring grew." Homily I in Nativ.(ante A.D. 749), in THEO,200

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