

*A sermon given on Sunday, December 5, 2010
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

**Mother Mary, Part Two
The Mother of God: Love**

In the ancient city of Ephesus stood the Temple of Artemis, goddess of the hunt. So much of the local economy was connected to temple worship that, when the Apostle Paul began to evangelize in Ephesus, there were many who felt not just their religion but also their livelihoods threatened. At the amphitheater one day a crowd gathered, worked itself into a frenzy, and cried out against Paul. “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” shouted the mob in fury. “Great is Artemis!”

Four hundred years later, in that same city of Ephesus, the scene had changed considerably. Bishops gathered there from throughout the Christian world to settle a theological controversy. This time the conversation was not about the goddess Artemis. This time, they were talking about Mary, the Mother of our Lord. In 431 A.D., the Council of Ephesus, the Third Ecumenical Council of the historic church, proclaimed that Mary was and is the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. Like the Nicene Creed composed at the First and Second Ecumenical Councils, the Ephesus statement regarding the place of Mary was not considered optional. “If anyone should not confess that Emmanuel is truly God, and that as a consequence the holy Virgin is the Mother of God, for she brought forth in the flesh the Word of God made flesh, let him be anathema,” said the Council.ⁱ

Do you wish to be declared anathema? If not, let's explore the question! Let's explore the significance of Mary as *Theotokos*. We are at week two of our four weeks in Advent, considering Mary, the Mother of our Lord. Last week I suggested that perhaps Protestantism had thrown the baby's mother out with the bathwater at the Reformation. And I invited you to reflect with me on various ways in which Mary has been viewed by the church through the ages. Last Sunday we thought about Mary as “The New Eve.” If the tale of Adam and Eve seemed to lead a pre-destined, fallen hopelessness, akin to that of Macbeth – “life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”ⁱⁱ – the tale of Christ and Mary leads instead to a life full of grace as well as grief; hope as well as hardship. Last week, Mary as the New Eve. This week, Mary as the Mother of God.

It is, perhaps, an incongruous term, is it not? “The Mother of God.” Much as the phrase “Virgin Mother” seems a contradiction in terms, so “Mother of God” may seem nonsensical. How can God have a mother? This paradox points to the paradox of what we believe about Jesus himself – that he was both human and divine. In fact, that's what the Council of Ephesus was really about – the simultaneous divine and human natures of Christ. A fellow named Nestorius was suggesting a variation on something called adoptionism. Simply put (though in fairness it's not fully quite so simple), Nestorius believed that Jesus was initially born a human being, a man of fully human nature, with whom God later came to be so closely united that the man became divine. But orthodox Christian belief said no: Christ was God incarnate from the beginning. Begotten by the Father. Conceived by the Holy Ghost. God from God. To paraphrase the beautiful hymn we've just sung, Jesus was *not* “Of the Father's love adopted later on,” but rather, “Of the Father's love begotten.” [Hymn 82, *Divinum mysterium*] It was God's idea and God's action from the start.

The Council of Ephesus said that Mary was the *Theotokos*, which literally means the “God-bearer,” the “giver-of-birth” to God.

She did not merely give birth to a man, not even a very holy man, not even a unique man, but she gave birth to God himself. God took of her a complete human nature, and therefore she was and is the Mother of God, There is only one Incarnation, and therefore there is only one Mother of the Incarnate.ⁱⁱⁱ

What I hope is evident in all of this is that the bestowal of the title *Theotokos* upon Mary was intended to be a statement about the divine and human nature of Christ. It was not in the first instance about Mary. This was not an echo of those Ephesians four hundred years earlier, shouting, "Great is Artemis!" The Council at Ephesus was not shouting, "Great is Mary!" They were shouting, "Unique is Christ!" Mary's unique role was defined by that of her Son's dual nature, and a signpost to it.

This brings us to the lovely card which is in your leaflet today. This small gift from the parish to you is a reproduction of a local treasure. As indicated on the reverse side of the card, it is a 6th-century Egyptian icon of the Virgin and Child. The tapestry icon has been part of the permanent collection here at the Cleveland Museum of Art since 1967 and is considered one of its most precious objects. I'm told that a former director, when asked what he would rescue from the CMA collection if the museum (God forbid!) were burning, said he would take this icon, "The Cleveland Virgin." I must thank the CMA for granting us copyright permission, and I thank parishioner Greg Donley for shepherding this printing project at my request.

The icon has two primary sections. In the upper zone is Christ in Majesty, enthroned and held aloft in the heavens by two angels – ruling us, and blessing us. Then in the lower zone is the Virgin, also enthroned, and flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel. In her lap, Mary holds her son, the Christ Child, who in turn holds a scroll, the Law of the Lord. Now, we might think it odd that Jesus appears twice in the same icon. There he is as an adult, up top, in the heavens. And there he is below as well, seated in his mother's lap. This duplicate presence of Jesus underscores that even an icon of the Virgin, like icons of any saint, is in the end not about them – it is about the one to whom they point as a signpost. In the Orthodox tradition, Mary is almost always shown not alone, but with her Son. Properly speaking, they are understood as icons not of Mary but of the Incarnation.^{iv} Contrary to later misunderstandings, Mary is the focus of the icon not because she is herself divine. As clearly depicted, it is Jesus who reigns on high. It is he who blesses and who saves. Mary is here shown as that which she uniquely is – the Mother of God. The one who bore him and who gives him to the world.

So, what can all this mean? Aside from exposition on a church council held 1600 years ago, and the theology of icons ... so what? What can Mary as *Theotokos* have to say to you and to me?

Fifteen years ago I attended a workshop with the great New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl. When he got to the Advent readings relating to Mary, he announced that no man should ever preach on those readings, because really, a man cannot understand the depth of Mary's experience. "A woman should preach on this," he said. I was happy to oblige, but in my little mill-town parish I had no assisting clergy, female or otherwise. So I did the next best thing. I turned the pulpit over to my wife! Thus in December 1994 Tricia offered a reflection on Mary. I want to share a portion of it with you now.

She began by relating how, in her Roman Catholic upbringing, various priests, nuns, and earnest lay instructors had repeatedly urged the girls to try and "be like Mary." Tricia writes: Our teachers were never very specific about what 'being like Mary' entailed, but we got the impression that it involved being meek and submissive and just generally 'good' – attributes that most of us were not particularly interested in cultivating. In addition, there didn't seem to be much hope of actually becoming like Mary, no matter how hard we

tried. Her purity and faith were obviously of a special order beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. ... It was not until after the birth of my own children, on some of the many occasions when I found myself lying with my own weary head resting near that of a wakeful infant and pondering what the future might hold in store for us both, that my understanding of what 'being like Mary' might mean began gradually to change.

It's difficult for us to know exactly what Mary *was* like. ... Christian tradition in the West has tended to emphasize Mary's holiness and sinless nature to a point that renders her an impossibly remote figure for many of us. Tradition in the Eastern Church, on the other hand, has a slightly different emphasis ... [using most often the word] *Theotokos*, which is best translated as "God-bearer." And it is in that sense, I have come to believe, that it is in fact possible for me or you, whether we are women or men, to "be like Mary."

We cannot, obviously, bear God in the physical sense that Mary bore Jesus. But there are many ways, large and small, in which we are able to bear, to carry, to *bring* God to others. Indeed, as Christians we are obliged to convey to family members, friends, colleagues, and even strangers, by our actions and our attitudes, the central message of Christmas: '*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*' [Jn 3:16]

For Mary, bearing God involved uncertainty and pain, and required much patience, time, and effort. For us, bearing God will involve and require all those things as well, [– uncertainty and pain; patience, time, and effort –] though perhaps not in quite the same forms. Bearing God, for Mary, meant that she gave herself up to being a channel through which God's compassion and mercy could flow into the world. And that is what we, too, must do as God-bearers, for it is only through us that the world will know Christ – or not. v [end quote]

There, from someone who has been a profound God-bearer in my life and that of my sons, is a description of what Mary might mean for any of us. To be a channel through which God's compassion and mercy might flow. That is what made Mary a God-bearer. Uniquely, yes; but also as a "model and paradigm of what each Christian hopes to be. In her is exemplified, not as an abstract ideal but as specific reality, the full meaning of membership" in the Body of Christ.vi From Scripture we know that Mary struggled with doubts, uncertainty, and grief abounding. "Yet she triumphed over them and could thus become 'the image' and 'the model'" of bearing God, "in short, the highest of the saints."vii

I wonder, where in my life and yours is the place where we are even now bearing God to others? I wonder, where in my life and yours is the place where we are called to do so more fully?

What we are talking about, of course, is love. Not romantic love, and not emotional affection. But Christian love – New Testament, agape, no-strings-attached, sacrificial, self-giving love. The love that places the needs of the other ahead of our own. The love which, in the words of today's Psalm [72:4-6], defends the needy, rescues the poor, and comes down like a nourishing rain upon another. The love which, like John the Baptist, speaks not of sentiment but of responsibility. The love which, like John's repentance, puts us back in right relationship with God, because we are living in right relationship with others. [Mt 3:1-12]

To be a channel through which God's compassion and mercy might flow. I wonder, where in your life, are you bearing such love? Mary, the Theotokos, invites you there, with her.

Eight centuries after the Council of Ephesus *decreed* about Mary, the beloved St. Francis of Assisi *prayed* about Mary. We've put that prayer on the back of your tapestry icon card. In

its final lines Francis prays that the virtues which dwelt in Mary might, by God's grace, be poured likewise into our own hearts – "so that, faithless no longer, [we might] be made faithful servants of God." Amen to Francis. Amen to this prayer.

A Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi (13th c.)

Hail, holy Lady,
Most holy Queen,
Mary, Mother of God,
Ever Virgin;
Chosen by the most holy Father in heaven,
Consecrated by him,
With his most holy beloved Son
And the Holy Spirit, the comforter.
On you descended and in you still remains
All the fullness of grace
And every good.
Hail, his Palace.
Hail, his Tabernacle.
Hail, his Robe.
Hail, his Handmaid.
Hail, his Mother.
And, hail, all holy virtues,
Who, by the grace
And inspiration of the Holy Spirit,
Are poured into the hearts of the faithful
So that, faithless no longer,
They may be made faithful servants of God
through you.^{viii}

ⁱ Council of Ephesus, AD 431, as quoted by Eric L. Mascall in "The Mother of God," in *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc., 1983), Alberic Stackpoole, editor; p. 93.

ⁱⁱ from Macbeth's soliloquy in act 5, scene 5 of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

ⁱⁱⁱ Mascall (see note *i*), page 93.

^{iv} Kallistos Ware, "The Mother of God in Orthodox Theology and Devotion;" in *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue* (see above), p. 180.

^v Patricia J. Harvey, reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Advent 1994, Trinity Church, Ware, MA.

^{vi} Ware, p. 170.

^{vii} Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 64.

^{viii} *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, ed. Geo. Appleton (Oxford: OUP, 1985), p. 165.



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An Icon of the Virgin – “The Cleveland Virgin”

This 6th-century tapestry panel from Egypt has been part of the permanent collection at the Cleveland Museum of Art since 1967. The panel measures nearly four by six feet. In the upper zone is Christ in Majesty, upheld in the heavens by two flying angels. In the lower zone is the Virgin in Majesty. The Christ Child is in her lap, holding a scroll—probably the scroll of the Law. They are flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel. Around them are earthly and heavenly adornments—the former represented by fruits and flowers; the latter in the persons of the Apostles. Clockwise from top right: Andrew, Matthew, Paul, Luke, James, Phillip, Mark, Thomas, John, Matthias, Peter, Bartholomew.

The tapestry icon reflects the theological emphasis of the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431), which articulated the doctrine of Mary as Theotokos. The Council affirmed that the divine and human natures of Christ were one, that he was divine from the moment of birth, and that Mary was thus the Theotokos, the Mother of God, the “God-bearer.”

Icon of the Virgin & Child

Egypt, Byzantine period, 6th century.

Slit-and dovetailed-tapestry weave; wool. 178.7 x 110.5 cm.

Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund 1967.144

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A Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi (13th c.)

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Most holy Queen,
Mary, Mother of God,
Ever Virgin;
Chosen by the most holy Father in heaven,
Consecrated by him,
With his most holy beloved Son
And the Holy Spirit, the comforter.
On you descended and in you still remains
All the fullness of grace
And every good.
Hail, his Palace.
Hail, his Tabernacle.
Hail, his Robe.
Hail, his Handmaid,
Hail, his Mother.
And, hail, all holy virtues,
Who, by the grace
And inspiration of the Holy Spirit,
Are poured into the hearts of the faithful
So that, faithless no longer,
There may be made faithful servants of God
through you.