

Chapter 9



The Theotokos With Child in the Apse: “Until Christ Be Formed In You”

(Gal. 4:19)

There appears in most Orthodox churches in the apse just above the holy table, a large painting of the Theotokos with the Christ Child in her bosom. The Child has an adult face to denote that even in childhood He is the “wisdom of God and the power of God.”

Through the years I have met persons who have expressed dismay that the entire front wall of the sanctuary should be reserved for the Theotokos. These people believed that it should be Christ alone Who should be depicted in such a strategically important visual area. These people need to be reminded that the figure of the Theotokos with Child in the apse conveys to the worshipper a fundamentally important message, that is, it tells us what our purpose in life is as Christians. It proclaims the vitally important fact that our purpose as Christians is that Christ be formed in us (Gal. 4:19) as He was formed in the Theotokos.

Elizabeth Briere writes, "People have been heard to remark that in Orthodox churches there are often more candles lit before the icon of the Mother of God than before the icon of Christ. That observation, however, is unwittingly revealing. For the usual icon of the Mother of God does not depict her alone; it is in fact an icon of the incarnation. Venerating it, the Orthodox express reverence and awe before the humanity of God; for they see God the Word held in His Mother's arms as a baby."⁴⁴

The Prototype of Each Believer

The Theotokos is not someone on a pedestal. She is one of us, a prototype of the true believer. She summons us to respond to the call of God with the same faith and obedience as she did in order that Christ be formed in us as He was formed in her.

Mary is the *typos* (type) of the Church, the expression of the fulfillment of the Church's mission. She is the example of the new people of God in whom and among whom God dwells: "I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (2 Cor. 6:16). Mary is the fulfillment of the purpose of Christ's coming to us. He came to make us temples of the living God. "Do you not know," asks St. Paul, "that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? . . . God's temple is holy, and that temple you are" (I Cor. 3:16-17). As Mary became God's temple, so we are to become His temples.

My Eyes Have Seen Your Salvation

A monk of the Eastern Church wrote,

*"Each soul ought to be a Temple of God, to which Mary brings Jesus. And each one of us should, like Symeon, take the child in his arms and say to the Father: 'My eyes have seen thy salvation.' The prayer of Simeon, 'now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace' does not simply mean that someone who has seen Jesus and has held Him in his arms can now leave this life and die in peace: it also means for us that, having seen and touched the Savior, we are released from the hold that sin has on us, and, in peace, can leave the realm of evil."*⁴⁵

The Theotokos Speaks

Thus the figure of Mary in the apse of the church speaks a powerfully important message to us: "Look," she says, "He Who is the Lord of the Universe has become small and vulnerable for you. He comes to you utterly approachable as a Child. He desires that you take Him into your arms and into your heart and find in Him your salvation from sin and death. Look! He Who is rich, for your sake became poor so that by His poverty, you may become eternally rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

Take this Jesus from the arms of Mary. She offers Him to you. Take Him into your arms as Simeon did. Embrace Him. Love Him. Obey Him. Follow Him. In Him you will find your peace. In Him your eyes will indeed see and experience the salvation of God.

No one has expressed the message of the Theotokos in the apse—that Christ be formed in us—better than St. Paul. His whole message centers around the indwelling Christ. One Hundred and sixty-four times in his letters he uses the expression "in Christ." No one else used this expression "in Christ." Paul invented it to indicate a totally new and completely unique experience of one who lives, yet does not live, but Christ lives in Him. For Paul says of himself, "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me." To the Galatians he writes, "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). St. Paul was literally pregnant with Christ as was the Theotokos.

A Heavenly Ladder

Professor George A. Soteriou has written concerning the significance of the Virgin in the apse of the church: "During the Byzantine period, the allegorical meaning of the apse as a point uniting the roof of the church with the floor, and symbolically heaven with the earth, contributed to the placing of the icon of the Theotokos as *Platytera*. The Theotokos hovers as it were between heaven and earth as 'the heavenly ladder, whereby God has descended' and as 'the Bridge leading those on the earth to heaven'" (from the *Akathist Hymn*).⁴⁶ The Theotokos is not on the front wall so that we may pray to her, but with her. She is there leading us in prayer to the Pantocrator in the dome even as she holds Him as a Child. Orthodox Christians do not pray to the Theotokos.

They ask her to pray for them, to intercede to her Son in their behalf. Nowhere is this brought out more clearly than in the well-known hymn of the liturgy: "Through the intercessions of the Theotokos, Savior save us." The Theotokos intercedes. The Savior saves.

Platytera

The icon of the Theotokos in the apse is usually called "The Platytera," from the Greek (*Platytera ton ouranon*), i.e., "she who is wider than the heavens"—so called because she gave birth to Christ, Who as God is the Creator of all things. Having received and conceived in herself Him Who cannot be contained in the whole of creation, the Theotokos is indeed *Platytera ton ouranon*, wider than the heavens.

What Is A Christian?

What is a Christian? Many answers can be given. A Christian is a person who acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, the Messiah, the Savior. A Christian patterns his life after the teachings of Jesus. He has been baptized. He belongs to the Church. He loves his enemies and prays for those who persecute him. He receives the Sacraments. He worships every Sunday. He has committed his life to Jesus as Lord, etc. All these definitions of a Christian are good, but they are not complete because they have left out the single most important fact about the true Christian: he/she is one in whom Christ lives. This is why the Christian life is more than *Christocentrism*; it is *Christification*, i.e., Christ living in us. To be "in Christ," says Paul, is to be united with Him, to follow Him, to be in communion with others who are in Christ through the Church.

He Lives In Me

Thus, I cannot be a Christian unless Jesus dwells in me and I in Him in the context of His Body: the Church. He breathes through all my aspirations. He wills through all my willing. He thinks through all my thinking. He loves through all my loving. He works through all my labors. The true gospel is not urging people to be good and to do good. "Try real hard to be good." That is good advice but there is no gospel in it. The true gospel is opening

the door as Mary did to let Christ be formed in us, to let Him dwell within us, to forgive us, to change our personality, to liberate us, to fill us with His power, His light, His life, love and joy. It is no longer "I," but Christ Who sits on the throne of life, directing and empowering it. It is not self control but Christ control that motivates and controls life.

How important is it that we live in Christ, and Christ in us? Jesus Himself gives the answer: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers . . ." (John 15:5-6). The real energy crisis in our world is in you and me, as we try to live the Christian life without the presence of the indwelling Christ. It can't be done. "Apart from me you can do nothing," said Jesus. That is why the Theotokos with child in the apse is the picture of every true Christian: a person in whom Jesus lives.

An Inside God

Christ is an immanent God. That is why His Name is Emmanuel: God with us. That is why the central purpose of the gospel is not only that Christ be formed in us (Gal. 4:19), but also that He may dwell in our hearts (Eph. 3:17). It is good that God is *for* us: "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). It is better that God is *with* us: "Fear thou not; for I am with thee" (Is. 41:10). But it is best that God is *in* us (Jn. 17:21). God with us. Good! God for us. Better! God in us. Best!

Although the Apostle John does not use the expression "in Christ" as Paul does, he uses the image of the vine and the branches which is much the same. The life of the vine (Jesus) is in the branches (us), enabling us to truly live and "bring forth much fruit." The secret of "bringing forth much fruit" is not toiling or spinning but abiding in Christ. Again, in the "High Priestly Prayer" in the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus prays that His disciples will be "in Him" and He "in them," as the Father is "in Him" and He is "in the Father." Jesus is expressing here a most intimate relationship between Himself and the believer very much like St. Paul's "life in Christ."

We Too Can Be Inseminated

We too can be inseminated by the seed of the word of God to bear the reality of the presence of Christ in our lives. When the seed of the word of God falls in the fertile soil of our heart and takes root, Christ is born within. We read in the Gospel lessons associated with the Feast Days of the Theotokos: "Blessed are the breasts that fed you." Jesus responds, "Nay, blessed rather are they who hear the word of God and keep it."

This is not a put-down for the Theotokos. She is totally one of us. What she did, we are called to do: to hear the word of God and keep it. That was her mission and ours!

Other gospel readings on the Feast of the Theotokos tell the story of those who said to Jesus: "Your mother and brothers are here!" Jesus responds: "Everyone who hears the word of God and does it is my mother and brother and sister."

St. Ambrose expressed it well: "Every believing soul conceives and gives birth to the Word of God; Christ, by means of our faith, is the fruit of us all, thus we are all mothers of Christ." The same Christ comes to be born in us and to dwell in us even as He did in the Theotokos.

A Christ Not In Us Does Not Save

A famous spiritual writer said once, "This is the whole Gospel, the birth of the holy Jesus within us; His conquering life overcoming our inward death. A Christ not in us is a Christ not ours." It is much like two persons who have a deadly disease for which only penicillin is the cure. Both say they believe in penicillin. However, one takes it; the other does not. One survives, the other does not. "A Christ not in us is a Christ not ours." A Christ outside us will do us no good. It is the Christ inside who saves and empowers.

In the World But Not Of the World

Christ commands us to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. We cannot help being *in* the world. We have no choice. We were placed here by God. But to be *of* the world is our own moral choice. We don't have to be *of* the world. Those who are *of* the world are pushed around by forces too big for them to resist. But

those who are *in Christ* instead of *of the world* are not pushed around. The Presence of Christ within gives them the grace and power they need to live victorious lives. They are *in* the world but not *of* the world because they are *in Christ*. P. T. Forsyth said it well: "Unless there is within us that which is above us, we shall soon yield to that which is around us."

A New Creation

Christianity is not primarily the following of a code or rules. It is first and foremost the invasion of our lives by an altogether new quality of life which St. Paul calls *kainotis zois*, newness of



life, a totally new quality of life, a supernatural quality which is nothing else than the life of Christ Himself. So new is this life that Christ infuses in us that Paul calls it a "new creation": "Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Just as we cannot live at all physically unless the air is in us and we are in the air, so for the Christian Jesus is the atmosphere of life. He is always con-

scious of that presence and cannot live without it. The astronauts can not survive a moment in outer space without their space suits in which they carry with them the atmosphere of the earth. So the Christian carries with him wherever he goes the atmosphere of Christ. He lives and breathes in Him. "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me."

Paul says of Christ in us that He is "the hope of glory." "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). He is the One Who illumines all our thinking, the deepest motive of all our decisions, the nerve of all our moral courage, the One Who destroys our sin and death to enable us to share in the eternal glory of God. Not Christ *outside* but Christ *in* you, the hope of glory."

An Indwelling Christ

If Shakespeare lived in you, you could write great poetry. If Handel lived in you, you could compose magnificent music. If Christ lived in you, you could live a great life. But there is no *if*

about it. You cannot have an indwelling Shakespeare or Handel, but you *can* have an indwelling Christ. This is what enabled Paul to say, "I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13), not "some" things but "all" things. Who did more for Christ than St. Paul? Even though he was not one of the original twelve disciples, he traveled more missionary miles and reached more people for Christ than any apostle who had been with Christ. He did this through the power of the indwelling Christ. Truly ". . . he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (I Jn. 4:4).

————— *The Example of The Martyr Felicity* —————

Let me share with you what the indwelling Christ meant to the early Christian martyrs. A group of Christians faced martyrdom in the arena at Carthage in the year 203. Among them was a slave girl, Felicity, who was pregnant, and who therefore would not be executed until she had been delivered first of her child. Her companions offered prayer on her behalf, and immediately the birth pangs came upon her. At this point we read in the *Acts of the Martyrs*:

"She suffered a good deal in her labour because of the natural difficulty of an eight month's delivery. Hence one of the prison guards said to her: 'You suffer so much now—what will you do when you are tossed to the beasts? Little did you think of them when you refused to sacrifice.' 'What I am suffering now,' she replied, 'I suffer myself. But then Another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him.'"

Christ was indeed an indwelling presence and power in Felicity's life. How else can we explain her remarkable courage to confess Christ so bravely in the face of death? The same Christ craves to dwell in you as He dwelt in the Theotokos and as He dwelt in Felicity, to give you the same courage and strength to do all things in Him.

How Is Christ Formed In Us?

How do we receive the life in Christ about which we are talking? How can the Christ become a reality in our lives? How is He formed in us?

Our life in Christ comes as we are baptized into His body, the Church. It is through baptism that we first "put on Christ." As St. Paul writes, "As many of you as have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). In other words, life in Christ is not simply a mystical relationship between Christ and the individual believer, but is objectively based upon the believer's membership in the Church which is the visible Body of Christ. The Christian is not called first to an "imitation of Christ" but to life in Christ, since there can be no imitation of Christ unless Christ Himself dwells within us. As Nicholas Cabasilas emphasizes there can be no life in Christ except through baptism, chrismation, and the eucharist.

The Eucharist

As Baptism is the sacrament of "newness of life," so Holy Communion is the sacrament of life in Christ. As our Lord emphasized, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides *in* me and I *in* him" (John 6:56). St. Symeon the New Theologian had a vision of the life of Christ in him after he came back from church one day where he had received Communion. He looked at his hands so frail, so powerless and saw in them the hands of Christ. He looked at his body so old, so decaying and saw in it the dwelling place of Christ. For he had just received the Precious Body and Blood of Jesus. He wrote in his "Divine Hymns of Love," "We become Christ's limbs, or members, and Christ becomes our members. . . . Unworthy though I be, my hand and foot are Christ. I move my hand, and my hand is wholly Christ, for God's divinity is united inseparably to me. I move my foot, and lo! it glows like God Himself . . ."

Nurtured By Faith

Although the life in Christ is given to us as a gift of God's grace through baptism, chrismation and the eucharist, it must be nurtured by faith. St. Augustine pointed out many centuries ago

that what is remarkable about the Theotokos is not that she conceived Christ in her flesh: "Mary was more blessed because she laid hold of faith in Christ than because she conceived the flesh of Christ. . . . Her motherly relationship to Him would have been of no use to Mary had she not carried Christ in her heart more happily even than she carried Him in her womb."⁴⁷

A Personal Faith

Mary's faith said yes to God's request. Our faith, too, must say yes to Him before Christ can be conceived in us. This means that the faith that my parents and godparent confessed for me when I was baptized as an infant must now be confessed personally and consciously by me. It must become *my* faith. This is something we are invited to do in every liturgy when we are called upon to confess the Nicene Creed. We are confessing personally and publicly our Christian faith. This is why we must not do it by rote or cursorily but with all of our mind and heart in it.

In addition to the liturgy, our confession of faith is renewed daily in our private prayer life as well as in the prayers of the Church.

The figure of the Theotokos with child in the apse of the Orthodox Church reminds us that our purpose in life is that Christ be formed in us. She shows us that a Christian is one in whom Christ lives. She invites us to receive within us by faith, by the word of God and by the eucharist the Christ Who was conceived and formed in her that we, too, may become THEOFOROI, i.e., "God-bearers," offering the dying world a real Christ incarnate and living in us. She stands before all of us on the front wall of the church to lead us in prayer to her Son, the Pantocrator, in the dome. Completely one with us, she is the first to experience theosis, to become by grace what God is by nature. Like a ladder, she unites heaven and earth; for it was through her that God in Christ came to us, and by faith, like Mary, we too may ascend to Him.

The Next Step In Evolution

C. S. Lewis said, "People often ask when the next step in evolution—the step to something beyond man—will happen. Well, on the Christian view, it has happened already. In Christ, a

new kind of man appeared; and the new kind of life which began in Him is to be put in us."

This new kind of life came first to Mary as she said Yes to God. This is indeed the next step in the evolution of man. For when man receives Christ within, he receives a new quality of life, the life of God, and human nature becomes transfigured "from glory to glory" to use St. Paul's expression.

I conclude with this story.

A new pastor had come to a village and called at a certain cottage. When the husband came home from work, the wife said, "The new pastor called today."

"What did he say?" asked the husband.

"Oh," she answered, "he asked, 'Does Christ live here?' and I didn't know what to say."

The man's face flushed. "Why didn't you tell him we were respectable people?" he asked.

"Well," she said, "I might have said that, only that isn't what he asked me."

"Then, why," pursued her husband, "didn't you tell him that we said our prayers and read our Bible?"

The wife replied, "But he didn't ask me that."

The man grew more vexed. "Why," he continued, "didn't you say that we were always at church?"

The poor woman broke down and said, "He didn't ask that either. He asked only, 'Does Christ live here?'"

Every time we come to church to worship, the Theotokos in the apse, with Christ in her bosom, asks the same question of each of us, "The Christ Who lived in me, does He live in you?"

I AM INADEQUATE

without Christ Who gives me power.

I AM INSENSITIVE

without my Lord Who makes me see
and feel another's hurt.

I AM ALONE

if I try and walk the path myself.

I AM POWERLESS

if I believe I can do it
on my own strength alone.

I AM DESTINED TO LOSE

if it is only for my own sake
that I live this life.

I WILL FAIL

should success be my only criterion
for living.

I WILL STUMBLE

unless God shows me the way.

I REMAIN NOTHING

until God uses me for something.

COME, DIVINE SON, MAKE YOUR HOME
IN ME. AMEN.