

UNIT 3A: DOCTRINE

64: The Incarnation and the Theotokos in Our Christian Lives

1. A Model to Follow: The Apostle Thomas

The aim of this lecture is to learn to relate the Incarnation and the life of The Theotokos to our own lives. The technical term for our goal is *orthopraxy*—correct action arising from living out Orthodox Christian beliefs. We are struggling together to find a Christian praxis—a practical application of the Incarnation to our own lives. A good place to begin is with the experience that the apostle Thomas had in trying to do just that in his own relationship to Jesus Christ—alive, dead and resurrected

In this highly secular, developed Northern world of the twenty-first century, we are very much in the situation of the apostle Thomas. You will recall that Thomas refused to believe that Jesus was alive after the crucifixion and said: “Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). This was also of course said to test Christ as an identifiable living person, not a vision or ghost (against docetism). Today, many people do not believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the founder of the Orthodox Christian Church, because they have not themselves seen the major events in the life of Jesus—the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension or, more significantly, they have not personally tested the evidence for Christ in the Church.

Sometimes St Thomas has been given what is popularly known as “a bad press”—he is remembered for his doubting, not his later repentant cry, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28) when Jesus fulfilled Thomas’s request. Nor is St Thomas often remembered for his earlier determination to lead his fellow disciples to Jerusalem and to face death with Jesus (John 11:16). And it was Thomas who had the courage to admit to Jesus that neither he nor any of the other apostles had a clue what Jesus was talking about when Jesus said:

I go to prepare a place for you.... I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going. Thomas said to Him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, how we know the way? Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.'¹

By his honest questioning of Jesus and his admission of his own confusion and the confusion of all the disciples, Thomas provoked from Jesus Christ in John 14:6 the one assertion in the Gospels by Jesus Himself that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."

In an outstanding commentary on the Book of Acts, the Orthodox historian and theologian Jaroslav Pelikan considers the conversion of Saul to "this Way" on his journey to Damascus, as set out in Acts 9:1-4. Citing the approach of the 19th century American philosopher and psychologist William James to "the varieties of religious experience," Pelikan reflects on

the difference between what James defined (specifically referring to the events described here in the ninth chapter of Acts) as 'those striking instantaneous instances of which Saint Paul's is the most eminent, and in which ... a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new' [in contrast to] what [James] called 'the volitional type' of conversion, in which 'the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits.'²

Pelikan cites the example of Lydia, "the seller of purple goods," in Acts 16:14-15 as an example of "conversion by a gradual process of persuasion ... [which] is fully as much the work of God as is conversion by an instantaneous and dramatic intervention."³

¹ John 14:2-6

² Pelikan, *Acts* (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 120-121. The quotations from William James are drawn by Pelikan from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Gifford Lectures 1901-2 with an introduction by Jaroslav Pelikan (New York: Vintage/Library of America).

³ Pelikan, p. 122.

Just as “The Lord ... opened the heart [of Lydia] to give heed to what was said by Paul,” so Christ opened the heart of Thomas. As each of us seek to join the Incarnation and the life of The Theotokos to our own lives, we may well find that “regenerative change” within us (expressed by both our beliefs and our actions) is far more likely to follow the pattern of St Thomas than the experience of St Paul, as we seek to find and follow The Way. St John Chrysostom reminds us that “we need God, who can open the heart.... Let us pray to God that he may open our heart. In fact God opens those hearts that want to be opened.... The opening is God’s part, being attentive [Lydia’s part]”⁴

The challenge of finding, following and sustaining one’s life in The Way of Christ has been beautifully set out by the English writer and poet Alice Meynell (1847-1922) in her short poem, “Via, et Veritas, et Vita” in which the unity of the Way, Truth and the Life of Christ are captured:

‘You never attained to Him.’ ‘If to attain

Be to abide, then that may be.’

‘Endless the way, followed with how much pain!

‘The way was He.’”⁵

In seeking simply to abide with Christ we can find The Way, whether our journeys are “by a gradual process of persuasion” or “by an instantaneous and dramatic intervention” of the Lord.

2. A New Mindset: “I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me”

Now this “way of salvation” (Acts 16:17) requires faith, prayer and a certain mindset or outlook that is not by any means easy to achieve. The Greek term is *phronema*—“practising the correct faith (*orthodoxia*) in the correct manner (*orthopraxia*);” and

⁴ *Homilies on Acts of the Apostles 35 and Catena on the Acts of the Apostles 16:13*, cited by Francis Martin (Ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture [ACCS], New Testament V* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 201.

⁵ The poem is available on the web at: <http://www.bartleby.com/236/262.html> . If the word “But” is inserted before “If” in the first line, the meaning of the poem is clarified.

attaining *phronema* can be seen as the first step toward deification, toward becoming like God.⁶ This was a practice that St Paul urged upon the Corinthians: “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.”⁷

For us, this imitation of Christ should not be based on confronting a situation by asking, “What would Jesus do?” Jesus lived in a different culture, with different problems and different resolutions of those problems. As Jaroslav Pelikan has explained, living Tradition requires “the creative engagement of creed with each new culture into which it comes.”⁸ Hebrews 13:8 proclaims, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.” In every culture, He remains “a mediator between God and humankind,” bringing salvation,⁹ but the specific characteristics of His mediation adapt to different cultures.¹⁰

The Incarnation of Christ frames a new mindset for us in at least six ways. First, as St John the Evangelist makes clear in the opening chapter of his Gospel, Christ’s “coming into the world, enlightens every man... so that all might believe through Him” (John 1.9, 1.8). As one modern Biblical commentary points out, John uses the term, *the world*, in his Gospel with many different meanings that include “the universe, the earth, the people on earth, most people, people opposed to God, or the human system opposed to God’s purposes.” What is clear is that **the Incarnation gives us a mission—to participate in Christ’s giving of Himself to the world.** However we interpret *the world*, we seek to be one with Christ in the lives we lead so that our participation in contemporary culture, “encultures Christ”. In other

⁶ See the brief article on *phronema* at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phronema> .

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:1-2.

⁸ See Lecture 60 and Pelikan’s “The Will to Believe and the Need for Creed” in Valerie Hotchkiss & Patrick Henry (Eds.), *Orthodoxy & Western Culture* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2005), p. 176.

⁹ St Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 709, cited by Erik M. Heen & Philip D. W. Krey (Eds.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament X, Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 233.

¹⁰ “Culture” here can include many different “cultures” within a given society or region.

words, we seek to be united to Christ sufficiently that, as John phrases it, we “receive Him” and “become children of God” (John 1.12) and then live out our beliefs in our lives. In this context, it is important to remember that the Incarnation “stands more generically for the whole nexus of events of the life, teachings, sufferings, and glorification of the Lord, as considered as the earthly embodied activity of the Word.”¹¹

Second, this process of becoming Christ-like, of living out the Incarnation in our lives, links us to **the cosmic dimension of Christ’s mission**—the regeneration of the world in a New Creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christ saves not only each of us, but, through us, the whole universe as well (Romans 8:19-23). As St Athanasius has explained in *On the Incarnation*, “the Word of God is in the universe ... and has entered into it in its every part.” For St Athanasius:

The first fact that you must grasp is this: **the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning.** There is thus no inconsistency between creation and salvation for the One Father has employed the same Agent for both works, effecting the salvation of the world through the same Word Who made it in the beginning.¹²

Thus “the theological concept of the incarnation is a profoundly soteriological term”, that is, the Incarnation is linked to salvation, both our salvation and the salvation of the world.¹³

Elizabeth Theokritoff has pointed out that this cosmic dimension of the Incarnation gives an Orthodox Christian dimension to ecology, encouraging us “to handle the good things of the earth, with **ascetic detachment**, not making them idols to which

¹¹ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 180.

¹² *On the Incarnation*, 41; emphasis in original text; available on the web at: www.spurgeon.org/~phil/history/ath-inc.htm. This approach also has an ecumenical dimension, linked to the ideas of the Roman Catholic theologian/scientist, Father Teilhard de Chardin in *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1965) and *Le Milieu Divin: An Essay on the Interior Life* (Waukegan, IL: Fontana, 1976). Cf. Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God’s Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2009), p. 46.

¹³ McGuckin, pp. 180-181, 315-316.

we are enslaved.”¹⁴ She points out that the Orthodox Church is concerned not “with transforming structures, but with transforming human beings”;¹⁵ and she makes this challenge that the Incarnation poses to the Church a very personal challenge as well:

The familiar motto ‘think globally, act locally’ is for the Orthodox Christian at once too broad and too narrow. We are called to think not just globally, but **cosmically**; and to act not just locally, but **personally**. Think cosmically—be aware that our ultimate task is to not to improve the world, but to transform all creation. And act personally: recognize that I am the Adam, who wants to take the world as his food, to use it apart from its Creator. To see the roots of the alienation from God that is played out in abuse of his creation, I need look no further than my own heart.¹⁶

Think cosmically, act personally is, therefore, a powerful motif for living our lives.¹⁷

A third important aspect of the mindset linked to the Incarnation is that this ascetic detachment applies not only to our relationship to the environment, but to our whole lives. Through the affirmation of Christ in the act of being baptised, we participate in “the death and resurrection of the Lord”; and **the new person “in Christ doesn’t grow and expand in us except in the measure in which the old [person] gives way and shrinks in us.”**¹⁸ Such a slaying of the passions that are attractive to the old person is only possible with a considerable degree of asceticism. Yet a belief in the Incarnation does not mean that we seek asceticism

¹⁴ Theokritoff, p. 255; emphasis in original.

¹⁵ This author respectfully disagrees with the limitation of transformation to the personal. Structural reform led by the vision of transformed persons is also a work of the kingdom of God. Social, political and economic realities are also to be critiqued by the gospel. The Old Testament prophets are an eloquent testimony to this truth as is St Basil the Great and other pioneers of structured, institutional provision for the poor and the sick.

¹⁶ Theokritoff, p. 256; emphasis in original.

¹⁷ This linking of the cosmic with the personal perspective also has an ecumenical dimension, set out by the Roman Catholic theologian/scientist, Father Teilhard de Chardin in *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1965) and *Le Milieu Divin: An Essay on the Interior Life* (Waukegan, IL: Fontana, 1976).

¹⁸ Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*, South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon’s Orthodox Theological Seminary Press, 2002), pp. 61-62.

as an end in itself. The Romanian Orthodox theologian, Father Dumitru Staniloae notes:

The problem of asceticism is how can this enslavement of the passions (*prospatheia*), the substance of the passions, be slain, not how to slay our authentic nature and the world we live in. The challenge is, how can we live in the world as free beings, admiring it and understanding it as a transparent creation of God, without this admiration enslaving us to its purely perceptible and opaque surface, and thus hinder our development as beings oriented toward the infinite spiritual order. How can we use the world, the road toward our goal, without falling and succumbing on it?¹⁹

Staniloae's response is to challenge us to "lay aside all earthly care" and to seek "to please God, not to please the world" by making ourselves "available to God" so that "by the fulfilling of the will of God, our authentic nature is realised."²⁰ This fulfilment is possible because through the Incarnation Jesus Christ has healed the whole of ourselves—mind, body and soul.²¹ Yet it is also true, as Staniloae emphasises that "We are not only raised with Christ, but we also die with Him. We can't be resurrected with Christ if we don't first die with Him."²²

Fourth, the incarnation purifies the whole of our lives, as we seek union with Christ. As we gradually become aware of the mission-oriented, cosmic and ascetic impact of the Incarnation on our lives, we are purified. That process of purification draws us into the interior life as set out by St Paul in Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

¹⁹ Staniloae, p. 115.

²⁰ Staniloae, pp. 117-118.

²¹ St Gregory the Theologian (329/330-389/390), also known as St Gregory of Nazianzus, has emphasised that precisely because Jesus Christ was totally human and totally divine we gain "our total salvation." Jesus Christ did not simply take on "the mere appearance of humanity" but the whole of a human body, soul and mind. He "assumed" the whole human person because "what has not been assumed has not been healed". It is "what is united to His divinity that is saved"; and since the complete human person has been united to the divinity of Christ, we are each completely saved. See St Gregory of Nazianzus at: www.newworldencyclopedia.org with link to note 46.

²² Staniloae, p. 26.

This is not some kind of super-spiritual process, but rather a deepening of our own understanding of what it means to be a person. Father Staniloae offers a no-nonsense interpretation of Galatians 2:20: -

In other words, my personality hasn't ceased to exist because I am conscious of it at the same time as I affirm it; my personality now lives the life of Christ. I am still a [person] by nature, but I have become Christ by the powers by which I myself now live. This is the experience of the Christian on the highest peaks of his [or her] spiritual life.²³

In summary then, a deepening of our understanding of the Incarnation also deepens our understanding of ourselves as persons living in the world seeking deification.

Fifth, the Incarnation draws us to both personal and corporate prayer, linking the two forms of prayer. The faith of the individual Christian in the reality of Christ's presence in his or her life is balanced by the prayer of the Church as a communal entity. Father Georges Florovsky begins his essay "The Worshipping Church" with many significant insights:

... To be Christian means to be in the Community, in the Church and of the Church. However, personality should never be simply submerged in the collective. The Church consists of responsible persons...The Church is composed of unique and irreplaceable personalities which can never be regarded merely as elements or cells of the whole, because each individual is in direct and immediate union with Christ and His Father—the personal is not to be dissolved in the corporate.²⁴

The Incarnation calls each of us—child or adult, man or woman, lay person or cleric—to be "responsible persons" who exercise *Orthopraxy*.

Sixth, the Incarnation has a social dimension, as well as personal and universal meaning. As Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) has insisted: "The human being is *defined* through otherness. It is a being whose identity emerges only in relation to other beings, God, the animals and the rest of creation."²⁵ The Incarnation and the

²³ Staniloae, p. 39,

²⁴ P. 21. For further development of Father Florovsky's ideas and the full reference, see the second paragraph of the appendix to this lecture, "Feasts of the Theotokos."

²⁵ John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, edited by Paul McPartlan (London: T & T Clark, 2006), p.39.

possibility of living our lives in unity with Christ “means placing all our relations, in and through which we obtain our personal identity, in the *hypostasis* of Christ.”²⁶ In a deep awareness that each human person is different from ourselves, there is also the possibility of reaching out to others in a reciprocal relationship in which we influence them, they influence us, and we are all moulded in our lives by the life of Christ. This social dimension of both a life in Christ and the challenge of otherness has been beautifully captured by Alice Meynell in her poem, “The Unknown God:”

One of the crowd went up, / And knelt before the Paten and the Cup / Received
the Lord, returned in peace, and prayed / Close to my side; then in my heart
I said: / ‘O Christ, in this man’s life— / This stranger who is Thine—in all his
strife, / All his felicity, his good and ill, / In the assaulted stronghold of his
will, / ‘I do confess Thee here, / Alive within this life; I know Thee near / Within
this lonely conscience, closed away / Within this brother’s solitary day. /
‘Christ in his unknown heart, / His intellect unknown—this love, this art, / This
battle and this peace, this destiny / That I shall never know, look upon me! /
‘Christ in his numbered breath, / Christ in his beating heart and in his death, /
Christ in his mystery! From that secret place / And from that separate
dwelling, give me grace.’²⁷

We all seek grace from Christ and can often find it in and through our relationships to others.

3. The Theotokos in Our Lives

The last lecture noted that “most human beings are not like the Theotokos. We do not have the ability to receive and keep within ourselves, in the words of St Basil the Great, ‘every grace of the Holy Spirit.’” However, this statement is somewhat misleading. As we come closer to the Theotokos and better understand her life, we recognize that we can become more like her. The way she lives is an attainable

²⁶ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 75.

²⁷ The poem is available on the web at: <http://www.bartleby.com/236/263.html> .

reality for each of us. Let us consider why such a goal is possible and how we might attain it.

First, we need to understand that “the decisive significance” of the Theotokos “consists, not in revealing the ‘feminine’ attributes of God,²⁸ but in embodying the way that [humanity] collaborates in the redemptive process.”²⁹ From both an Orthodox and a Roman Catholic perspective, the Theotokos is an archetypal Christian, rather than an ideal woman.³⁰ In the feminist critique of some Protestant theologians, Mary has often been studied as symbolic “of the ‘feminine’ or ‘maternal’ attributes of God.”³¹ However, even if we rightly view the Theotokos as the most important woman that has ever lived, her life cannot be fully appreciated through the lens of Christian feminism.

Second, it is actually encouraging that **Mary was an ordinary human being**, a teenager when Jesus Christ was conceived within her by the Holy Spirit. She is without doubt the best known teenage mother in human history. Her initial reaction to the completely unexpected news from the Archangel Gabriel was a response of faith: “May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). However, in the *Protoevangelion of James*, the 2nd century apocryphal Infancy Gospel of James, Holy Mary’s deep faith is set within a quite human response that many teenage mothers will have experienced: “But perceiving herself daily to grow big, and being afraid, she went home and hid herself from the children of Israel; and she was fourteen years old when these things happened.”³² There was certainly good reason to hide when stoning was a possible punishment for fornication. Holy Mary’s perplexity and her awareness of her own sexuality is also expressed in her conversation with the

²⁸ ... simply because she is not God!

²⁹ Father Manfred Hauke, on the Roman Catholic-oriented Ignatius website, “Mary in Feminist Theology: Mother of God or Domesticated Goddess?” at: www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2005/mhauke_maryfem_july05.asp .

³⁰ Father Hauke notes that Roman Catholic feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether in the United States and Catherina Haikes in Holland consider Mary Magdalen, rather than Mary as models “for women who are becoming more independent.”

³¹ Hauke, as cited above.

³² At: <http://ministries.tliquest.net/theology/apocryphas/nt/protevan.htm> ; chap. 9, v. 22-23.

Archangel Gabriel in the opening prayer of Great Vespers for the Annunciation: “I have not known pleasure; I have not entered into wedlock. How then shall I bear a child?” It is a valid and well-phrased question that Holy Mary asks.

Third, precisely because Mary was an ordinary human being and subject to the consequences of the fall of Adam, she **“was born with an inclination to sin.”**³³ It should be noted that this Orthodox teaching differs from the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception (that Mary was free from sin at birth) proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1854, as well as the logical corollary of the Assumption of the Mother of God into heaven,³⁴ proclaimed by Pope Pius XII in 1950. Father Pomazansky points out that:

If the Mother of God was removed from the general law of original sin, this means that she was given from her very conception supernatural gifts: righteousness and immortality, such as our first ancestors had before their fall into sin, and she should not have been subject to the law of bodily death. Therefore, if the Mother of God died, then in the view of Roman [Catholic] theologians, she accepted death voluntarily so as to emulate her Son; but death had no dominion over her.”³⁵

In such a perspective, the Theotokos is far less of a model for us of how to live our lives, because she is no longer simply human in exactly the same way that we are.

St John (Maximovitch) of Shanghai and San Francisco points out that:

None of the ancient Holy Fathers say that God in miraculous fashion purified the Virgin Mary while yet in the womb; and many directly indicate that the Virgin Mary, just as all men [and women] endured a battle with sinfulness, but was victorious over temptation and was saved by her Divine Son.³⁶

³³ Notes from the St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood in Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Explanation* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 3rd ed., 2005), p. 195n.

³⁴ ... that is, in its contemporary Roman Catholic dogmatic understanding. The Orthodox do, of course, celebrate the Dormition of the Mother of God (aka “Assumption.”)

³⁵ Pomazansky, p. 194.

³⁶ Cited by Pomazansky, p. 195n. from St John Maximovitch of Shanghai and San Francisco, *The Orthodox Veneration of Mary the Birthgiver of God* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1994), Rev. Ed., p. 51.

In fact, as Father Pomazansky stresses, Holy Mary’s “freedom from personal sins” before the Annunciation “was the fruit of the union of her [own] spiritual labour upon herself and the abundance of [divine] Grace that was poured out upon her.”³⁷ Indeed, the Archangel told her that by the combination of her own efforts and the impact of grace, “you have found favour with God” (Luke 1:30); and, as Father Pomazansky comments, “found” means Holy Mary has “attained, acquired, earned” her new role. That same possibility is open to us: that by a combination of our prayer, “spiritual labour” and grace, we can find the roles that God has for us—and they may be quite unexpected, as they were for her!

Surprisingly, we can begin at the same place as Holy Mary by praying Psalm 70:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a right spirit within me;
Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore me to the joy of Your salvation,
And uphold me with Your guiding Spirit. (verses 12-14)

We too can identify with her in praying Psalm 70:

The Lord is my hope from my youth.
By you I have been supported from birth;
From my mother’s womb You have been my protector;³⁸
I am become as a wonder to many,
And you are my strong helper. (verses 5b-7)

So the life of Holy Mary—the life of the Theotokos—is not as distant from us as first appears. The way she lived her life is absolutely attainable for each one of us.

Finally, if Holy Mary is to serve as an efficacious model for us—that is, a model that produces the intended result—we need to spend time with her in prayer. We need

³⁷ Pomazansky, pp. 195-196.

³⁸ God’s power to form and protect a person in the womb is a strong Old Testament tradition. Note that Jeremiah was told: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; ...” (Jeremiah 1:5). This blessing is especially strong in the book of Isaiah: “The Lord called me from the womb; from the body of my mother He named me” (Isaiah 49:1, cf. 43:24). A note in the New American Bible points out that “God made the nation Israel as surely as He made the first man” (Isaiah 43:1; cf. 49:5). This formation, whether for a person or a group, has responsibilities: “The people whom I formed for Myself will declare My praise” (Isaiah 43:21).

to learn to respect her as a genuine person of great spiritual depth, rather than an icon on a pedestal far above our own experience. For two thousand years the Orthodox Church has struggled with this challenge; and its response has not been to develop new dogmas (like the Roman Catholic Church), but rather to grow a liturgy that teaches us what happened to Mary during five key events in her life: (1) her birth (commemorated each year on the 8th of September); (2) her entry at a very young age into the Temple (21 November); (3) her Annunciation (25 March); (4) her purification 40 days after the birth of Jesus Christ (2 February); and (5) her death or Dormition (15 August). Reflections on each of these five feasts are given in an appendix to this lecture.

Metropolitan Kallistos's encouragement to apply the Bible "directly to ourselves" also certainly applies to the life of the Theotokos: "We are to say to ourselves. 'These are not just distant places, events in the remote past. They belong to my own encounter with the Lord. The stories include me.'"³⁹ For each of us, this is quite a challenge, just as it has been for the Orthodox Church over the centuries, but guided by Church doctrine, we can meet that challenge and affirm the presence of the Theotokos in each of our lives.

4. Conclusion: The Theotokos is a Viable Model for Our Own Deification

Perhaps already you are surprised by how similar to the Theotokos you are. That is certainly a realistic response to a close reading of the appendix to this lecture in which the humanity of Mary is deeply present. A dream of Metropolitan Kallistos is relevant. He writes:

Some years ago I had a dream that I still remember vividly. I was back in the house where, for three years as a child, I lived in a boarding school. A friend took me first through the rooms already familiar to me from the waking life of my childhood. But then in my dream we entered other rooms that I had never seen before—spacious, elegant, filled with light. Finally, we came to a small, dark chapel, with golden mosaics gleaming in the candlelight. 'How

³⁹ "How to read the Bible," in *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 1765.

strange,' I said to my companion, 'that I have lived here for so long, and yet I never knew about the existence of these rooms.' And he replied, 'But it is always so.' I awoke, and behold, it was a dream.⁴⁰

The irony of Metropolitan Kallistos's story is that this dream is not a fantasy, as he certainly recognizes when he reflects that "There is so much for us still to explore." It is clear to him, and hopefully to us, that "these rooms" that we do not yet know can become present for us as adults, even though we did not know them as children. "It is always so:" we can grow, within ourselves, within our love for the Lord and the Theotokos and within our love for others. We can become stronger Orthodox Christians with a deeper faith grounded in our understanding of the Incarnation and the life of The Theotokos.

So how might each of us as adults explore further these "new rooms" with their possibility of bringing the Incarnation and the Theotokos deeper in our lives? In the previous lecture, Vladimir Lossky's insight was noted that Holy Mary loaned "her human nature" to make the Incarnation possible, thereby becoming a model for our own deification. That is true, but we too can live the Incarnation: God has purposes for and within each of us that He wants to bring forth. A deeper understanding of the life of the Theotokos and the liturgy of her festivals leads to a deeper awareness of precisely how we too can be part of the Incarnation.

As set out in *The Protoevangelion of James*, Holy Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, dedicated her to God and to service in the Temple precincts.⁴¹ In Orthodox tradition, among Mary's earliest memories would be going as a young child, about the age of three, in the midst of candles, into that service. Every indication, in both Biblical and traditional sources, is that Mary herself sought to understand and affirm that dedication. Yet her affirmation of her parents' hopes and her own searching did not lead to a denial of her own personality or a sacrifice of her talents. The discussion

⁴⁰ "How to Read the Bible," in *The Orthodox Study Bible*, p. 1759.

⁴¹ See: <http://ministries.tliquest.net/theology/apocryphas/nt/protevan.htm> , Chap. 1-7.

in the appendix about The Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple (21 November) develops these insights further.

As noted earlier, both the Theotokos and each of us were born with an inclination to sin. However, it is also important to add the insight that we do not have to sin; God grants us genuine free will. The Russian Orthodox pianist and conductor, Vladimir Ashkenazy, has pointed out that we all have different gifts, but whatever gifts we inherit genetically and from our childhood, we need to practise to bring those gifts to fruition.⁴² His insights about his own musical life are relevant to how we approach our own lives: it is not appropriate to seek glory or even to think that we have great gifts and everyone around us should know about it. On the contrary, the key to Ashkenazy's life, and hopefully to each of our lives, is profound humility.⁴³ If, as adults, we gain and keep humility, we can then be open to God's purposes, just as was Holy Mary –even when neither she nor we know the fullness of those purposes. Life itself challenges us, just as it did Holy Mary, but like Mary we can live our lives with humility.

⁴² Talk by Vladimir Ashkenazy, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, 7 October 2010. Ashkenazy also commented: "If people like you, they like you; if they don't like you, don't worry about it." A Christian counsellor has commented that: "We wouldn't worry so much about what other people think about us, if we realized how little they did." In other words, most people are too busy living their own lives to make judgements about how we should live ours.

⁴³ The closing canto of Dante's *Paradiso* stresses the centrality of Mary's humility empowering her to fulfil God's will in the Incarnation: "Virgin mother ... more humble and sublime than any creature ...you are the one who gave to human nature so much humility that its Creator did not disdain His being made its creature" (Programme Note, "The Sixteen: A Mother's Love: Music for Mary", Bridgewater Hall, Manchester, 8 October 2010.) A CD of the concert, "A Mother's Love: Music for Mary," is available from the website of The Sixteen at: www.the-sixteen.org.uk . See also: www.online-literature.com/dante/paradiso for Canto XXXIII.