

THE SOTERIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FEAST OF MARY'S BIRTH

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By reviewing the unique characteristics of the Byzantine feast of Mary's Birth, the article articulates the feast's significance as an integral contributor to the salvation of humankind. The article first traces the historical emergence of Mariology to establish trends in Marian soteriology, then analyzes the liturgical contents of the feast to project a theological thesis. Finally, it proposes a liturgical paradigm of encounter to provide a fresh look at Christian soteriology through the celebration of this unique Marian feast.

IN CLASSICAL SOTERIOLOGY, the paradigmatic events that underpin the elaboration of imaginative narrative or theory include the Incarnation and the Pascha of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. Jesus is the main character of the story, and the principal agent of salvation, though some authors have variably contemplated the roles of the persons of the Father and the Holy Spirit with regard to a trinitarian presentation. Often, Jesus is conceived of as the initiator of the paradigmatic salvific act, reconciling humanity with the Father. Generally speaking, besides the Persons of the Holy Trinity, the classical soteriological narrative does not accommodate any other characters as principal.

The emergence of devotion to Mary as Theotokos poses pregnant possibilities for soteriology, especially given the contents of the liturgical celebration of her birth on September 8 in the Byzantine tradition. The hymnography of the feast illuminates her significance in salvation history, elevating the occasion of her birth to be a key soteriological event in the liturgical year. The following hymns from festal Small Vespers deliberately establish her as an integral character of the story:

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The Maiden in whom God came to dwell, the pure Theotokos, glory of the prophets, the daughter of David, is born of Joachim and Ann sober in spirit; and by her birthing she overthrows the curse of Adam that weighed upon us.¹

The Virgin, offspring of Joachim and Ann, has appeared to men, releasing all from the bonds of sin. . . .

The barrenness of Ann has truly been revealed as an overshadowed mountain, from which salvation has been granted to all the faithful.²

These liturgical texts sung during festal Small Vespers introduce two of the multiple themes emanating from the celebration. Mary's birth occasions a celebration because she is Christ's mother. The feast also carries miraculous overtones, given the barrenness suffered by her parents, Joachim and Anna. The feast defines Mary as a key figure in the salvation of humanity. In evaluating the theological significance of these texts, one might be tempted to dismiss them as devotional exaggerations, restricted to the purpose of stirring the piety of the participants in a liturgical celebration. But the fifth-century axiom attributed to Prosper of Aquitaine, "lex orandi est lex credendi," which has been used for over a century as the core component in restoring liturgical theology to the level of *prima theologia*, suggests that the liturgical experience and milieu serve as the source and inspiration for theological elaboration.³ Certainly, the relationship between worship and belief is frequently reciprocal, wherein particular theologumena or even devotional fragments have become firmly entrenched in liturgical texts. The historical development of Mariology and Marian feasts reveals the mutual exchange between worship and faith, and the significance of the celebration of Mary's birth in the Byzantine tradition is situated in this context. An evaluation of this festal celebration raises impor-

¹ This hymn is the third sticheron from Small Vespers. See *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware, intro. Georges Florovsky (London: Faber & Faber, 1969) 98–99. *The Festal Menaion* contains the twelve great feasts of the Byzantine liturgical year. The glossary provides the following definition for *sticheron*: "Stichera are stanzas inserted between verses taken from the Psalms. They occur in particular at Vespers, between the closing verses of *Lord, I have cried*; at Matins, between the concluding verses of Lauds. Stichera also occur at the Lity, but without verses from the Psalter" (ibid. 558).

² Ibid. 99, the first two stichera from the *Aposticha*.

³ Kevin W. Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1994) 3, 32–33 n. 1. Also see the essay by Alexander Schmemmann, "Liturgy and Theology," in *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann*, ed. Thomas Fisch (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1990) 49–68. For a succinct distinction between primary and secondary theology with regard to liturgy, see Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology: The Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary* (New York: Pueblo, 1984) 88–90.

tant questions pertinent to Christian soteriology, concerning the weight of the theological contribution Mary's birth makes to salvation history and the significance of secondary characters of the story (such as Joachim and Anna). This article addresses these questions by contextualizing the soteriological themes expressed by the feast of Mary's Birth within the core historical epoch of Mariological development, and by elucidating the unique soteriological contribution of this story through a liturgical paradigm that demonstrates the relationship between hortological anamnesis and mimesis for spiritual growth and ecclesiology. The communal encounter between the worshipping assembly and Mary renews the illumination of her critical contribution to the revelation of an exemplary faithful and obedient human; her "Amen" serves as the human response to God par excellence and mitigates any concern of devotional exaggeration.

THE EMERGENCE OF MARIAN DOCTRINE

In the development of the liturgical year, the feasts dedicated to the memory of Mary were adopted after the emergence of an annual paschal and sanctoral cycle with local variation. Initially, the veneration of saints developed around the cult of the martyrs, beginning as early as the second century with the martyrdom of Polycarp.⁴ The Marian cult began to emerge in the aftermath of the council of Ephesus with homilies composed in her honor.⁵ Ante-Ephesus patristic authors praise Mary, almost solely in her role of giving birth to Christ. Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca. AD 202) elucidated Mary's role in salvation history by identifying her obedience to the command of God as the antithesis to Eve's disobedience. Irenaeus thus established the Eve–Mary parallel, with Eve's disobedience as the cause of human death and Mary's obedience the cause of salvation.⁶ While Irenaeus exalted Mary's human obedience as paradigmatic, there was no contemporaneous liturgical cult or veneration of her in his epoch. Many of the renowned fathers from Cappadocia, Alexandria, and elsewhere praised

⁴ Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning after the Reform of the Liturgy*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1990) 206.

⁵ Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963) 111–12.

⁶ "Sic autem et Euae inobaudientiae nodus solutionem accepit per obaudientiam Mariae. Quod enim adligavit uirgo Eua per incredulitatem, hoc Virgo Maria soluit per fidem" (Irenaeus, *Contre les hérésies*, vol. 3, pt. 2, ed. Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, Sources Chrétiennes 211 [Paris: Cerf, 1974] 3.22.4). Also see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University, 1996) 42–43.

Mary's cooperation in Christ's incarnation, but attributions of queen and mediatrix belong to the post-Ephesus epoch.

Mariology burgeoned in the Constantinopolitan environment immediately before the council of Ephesus, when Nestorius had assumed his ecclesiastical position as archbishop. Scholars currently assume one of two perspectives, the first focusing on the influential role of Empress Pulcheria (d. 453), represented by the writings of Kenneth Holum and Vasiliki Limberis. In this view, imperial politics and piety were the key instigators of the rapid development of the Marian cult. Pulcheria's role in the proceedings of the councils and the proliferation of liturgical piety directed toward Mary cannot be understated.⁷ Pulcheria, at the age of 15, devoted her life to virginity and acted as the chief coordinator of elaborate ceremonies for the reception of holy relics in Constantinople.⁸ Nestorius's downfall was closely associated with the power wielded by Pulcheria. He targeted her entourage of virgins along with other minority groups in Constantinople, thereby inciting her enmity toward him. Her role in the convocation of the Council of Ephesus was instrumental, as she had made an alliance with bishops Proclus and Eusebius.⁹ She asserted her power through shrewd alliances to ensure Nestorius's demise. Her personal devotion to the Theotokos was manifested through her campaign to build churches in Ephesus dedicated to Mary.¹⁰ Pulcheria's personal agenda served as a significant factor alongside Cyril's christological campaign.

Proponents of this view emphasize the emergence of Marian praise proclaimed in homilies by Proclus, Pulcheria's ally and the object of Nestorius's scorn. Proclus, a Constantinopolitan presbyter, was ordained archbishop of Constantinople in AD 434 and oversaw the capital's church until his death in AD 446.¹¹ Limberis situates Proclus in the midst of Pulcheria's endeavor to advance the virgin cult devoted to Mary and the worsening ecclesio-theological controversy:

All audiences would have expected the kind of panegyric of praise he delivered in honor of Pulcheria and would have been accustomed to the speeches' lofty metaphors. . . . Proclus's dramatic delivery of his panegyrics to the Theotokos would have changed the interior of the church into a politically charged, public forum.

⁷ See Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople* (London: Routledge, 1994) esp. chap. 3. Also see Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empress: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1982) esp. chap. 5.

⁸ Limberis, *Divine Heiress* 52–53.

⁹ Limberis claims that Pulcheria was responsible for the institution of the "Virginity Festival" in honor of the Theotokos on December 26, though she admits that there is no liturgical evidence for this claim (*ibid.* 55–57, 106).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 52. Pulcheria apparently arranged for other churches to be built as well.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 86–89.

One must remember that the orations were delivered at imperial request to fight against . . . Nestorius. Pulcheria's over-identification with the Theotokos facilitated Proclus' panegyrics to the Virgin.¹²

Proclus appears to have seized the opportunity to broaden Mary's role in the economy of salvation by referring to her body as the workshop in which the unity of the divine and human natures is fashioned.¹³ Proclus also broadened the typological images of Mary, which include, but are not limited to, the ladder of Jacob (Gen 28:12), the fleece of Gideon (Jgs 6:37), and the temple of Solomon (Heb 8), a collection that "would later determine the basic features of all subsequent Byzantine Mariology."¹⁴ Proclus's homily, delivered in the presence of Nestorius, provides multiple examples of such appellations, as he credits Mary herself with summoning the gathering on the festival dedicated to her: "synekalesen hēmas hē hagia Maria."¹⁵ Proclus elaborated on Christ's incarnation, referring to Mary's ever-virginity as proof of the fullness of Christ's two natures.¹⁶ Most significantly, Proclus's unique Mariology clarifies and corrects the christological problems of his milieu, underscoring the inseparability of Christology and Mariology during Mary's ascendancy.

Not surprisingly, Cyril of Alexandria also delivered a homily that appears to reflect the Mariology of the milieu of the Council of Ephesus.¹⁷ In the homily, which served several purposes, his salutations to the Theotokos resonate with the themes expounded in the feast of Mary's Birth:

Hail, the one who contains the uncontainable in the holy virginal womb, through whom the holy Trinity is glorified and venerated throughout the world, through whom heaven is exalted, through whom angels and archangels are delighted, through whom demons are banished, through whom the tempting devil fell from heaven, through whom fallen human nature is assumed into heaven.¹⁸

Like later Greek authors Romanos the Melodist and John Damascene,

¹² Ibid. 88.

¹³ See Nicholas Constans, "Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995) 180–83.

¹⁴ Ibid. 177.

¹⁵ Proclus, *Laudatio in sanctissimam Dei genitricem Mariam*, *Patrologiae Graecae* 65:679–91; (PG hereafter), translation and analysis in Nicholas Constans, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1–5, Texts and Translations* (Boston: Brill, 2003).

¹⁶ Proclus, *Laudatio*, PG 65: 684.

¹⁷ Thoroughly presented, analyzed, and translated by Susan Wessel, "Nestorius, Mary, and Controversy, in Cyril of Alexandria's *Homily IV*, (*De Maria deipara in Nestorium*, CPG 5248," *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum* 31 (1999) 1–49. See PG 77:991–96.

¹⁸ Translation from Wessel, "Nestorius, Mary, and Controversy" 43.

Cyril makes Mary a partner in God's work of salvation, which culminates with the repentance of the nations. A directive to sing hymns to the ever-Virgin Mary is included among the exhortations with which Cyril concluded his homily, seemingly thereby to provide proof, or at least encouragement, of an existing devotional piety directed toward Mary.¹⁹

The evidence from Cyril and Proclus suggests that the Council of Ephesus was the environment from which Marian devotion began to accelerate and proliferate, but a second perspective on the early history of Mariology contributes some critical points. First, it is crucial to stress the fact that the cycle of Marian feasts that assumed prominence in the liturgical calendar was practically nonexistent at this juncture, with the exception of a commemoration of Mary on August 15 in the Church of Jerusalem.²⁰ While later patristic authors such as John Damascene and Andrew of Crete preached on the feast of Mary's Nativity, the contributions of Cyril and Proclus are situated in the highly volatile context of christological dispute concerning Christ's human and divine natures. Scholars have recently cautioned that attributing the origin of Marian devotion to the consequences of the complicated ecclesio-political disputes between Pulcheria and Nestorius disregards a critical view of the historical facts. Pulcheria certainly took sides in the controversy, but the evidence attributing the construction of Marian churches to her patronage comes from late antiquity, and the consistency of her hostility against Nestorius has also been questioned.²¹ Perhaps most significantly, the homilies of Cyril and Proclus, renowned for their exposition of an audacious Mariology, are nevertheless marked by the prevailing christological concern eventually taken up by the council.²² Ultimately, the nascent Mariology of the Council of Ephesus should not be viewed as a product not of a strictly linear progression of events, but of a gradual evolution of a theology shaped by a complex web of theological and political factors. Susan Wessel aptly summarizes the issue by rejecting the notion of this Mariology as "merely derivative" of Cyril's christological definitions, and instead demonstrates that the convergence of events, theo-

¹⁹ See *ibid.* 49; PG 77: 996.

²⁰ The canon for this feast as celebrated in fifth-century hagiopolite liturgy appears in the Armenian lectionary, *Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121*, vol. 2, ed. Athanase Renoux, *Patrologia Orientalis* 36.2, no. 168 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1971) (c. 64, p. 355). The feast commemorates Mary Theotokos, but the prescribed readings, such as Galatians 3:29–4:7 and Luke 2:1–7, appear to reveal the theme of the Lord's birth. The contents of the canon provide no evidence of any mariological accentuation.

²¹ See Averil Cameron, "The Virgin in Late Antiquity" and Richard Price, "Marian Piety and the Nestorian Controversy," in *The Church and Mary*, ed. R. N. Swanson (Suffolk, U.K.: Ecclesiastical History Society, 2004) 11, 33–37.

²² *Ibid.* 37.

logical issues, and politics “set Marian discourse in motion, a discourse that eventually took on a life of its own divorced from the ecclesiastical setting that originally produced it.”²³

The incorporation of yet another key factor further complicates the matter and confirms the complexities associated with theological development. In one of the earliest official Constantinopolitan prayers to the Theotokos, the prevailing Marian image is that of the Queen of Heaven.²⁴ The numerous woes confronted by Constantinopolitans included the threat of invasion, earthquakes, and especially a plague of horrific magnitude in the latter years of Justinian's reign. This plague pointed up the natural need for an intercessor, and the imperial authorities promoted the cult, placing an icon of Mary on the gates of the city, with her image also appearing on coinage and bronze weights.²⁵ Mary's role as an intercessor strategically positioned to plead for divine favor was not novel for the Graeco-Roman mindset; pagan goddesses had occupied identical roles of patronage.

In summary, it would appear that several external factors contributed to the formation of the soteriological images and statements that eventually emerged from the Greek patristic tradition. These include imperial intrigue and controversy, the confusion surrounding christological controversy, and cultural considerations. Despite the sudden emergence of this robust Mariology, Cyril presents the victory of salvation as occurring through Mary. This theological qualification, wherein Mariology complements and further clarifies Christology, is simultaneous with the emergence of Marian devotion. The Mariology in the milieu of the Council of Ephesus is thus multifaceted, a collection of ideas and metaphors representing Mary as a key character through whom God saves humanity, and also elevating her to the honor of a universal saint who protects and intercedes for the people who have adopted her.

MARIOLOGICAL TRENDS FROM THE SIXTH THROUGH THE EIGHTH CENTURY

In the history of liturgical celebration, expressions of Mary's soteriological significance can be found in the Constantinopolitan milieu in an author as early as Romanos the Melodist (d. ca. AD 560). In a Christmas hymn, Romanos plays on the Eve–Mary typology by stating that a woman—Mary—raises Adam.²⁶ In another hymn, Mary is credited with removing

²³ Wessel, “Nestorius, Mary, and Controversy” 4–5.

²⁴ Averil Cameron, “The Theotokos in Sixth-Century Constantinople,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 24 (1978) 79–108, at 84–85.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 97–106.

²⁶ The notion of Mary raising Adam is expressed by a hymn from the feast of

the whole of corrupted humanity in accord with God's plan. Romanos also composed a canticle on the occasion of the feast of Mary's Birth. The hymn's opening strophe establishes the author's theological thesis:

By your holy birth, O pure one, Joachim and Anna were freed from the curse of barrenness, and Adam and Eve from the corruption of death; your people also, who have been freed from the guilt of their sins, celebrate the feast of your birth by crying unto you: "The barren woman gives birth to the Theotokos, who nursed [Christ], our life."²⁷

This strophe accentuates the occasion of Mary's birth as the beginning of salvation for humanity. The entire canticle reflects on the conversion of barrenness to fruitfulness through the stories of Joachim and Anna, Sarah and Abraham, and Zacharias and Elizabeth,²⁸ and throughout the canticle, Romanos calls on the people to rejoice because of the mystery that has been fulfilled on earth.²⁹ The canticle conveys a strong sense of completion with the birth of Mary, with scant reference to Christ. A notable exception is expressed in strophe 10, as salvation is specifically connected to Mary as the birthgiver, with salvation described as a privilege (*presbeian*), since "every Christian has a patron, protection of salvation, and hope, even if it was from [your] womb."³⁰ The editors placed [*sēs*] before *gastros* in the Greek text. If the bracketed version of the text is correct, this strophe indirectly refers to Christ as the gift of salvation for God's people, since the opening line of the strophe clearly addresses Mary herself.³¹

Romanos's canticle on the birth of Mary is instructive, as it conveys the significance of the feast of Mary's Birth itself, with specific references to

Christ's Nativity: "Adam was thrust out. And so Adam's God, contriving resurrection for Adam, assumed him from your womb. Before, a woman threw him down, and now a woman raises him, a virgin from a virgin. Then Adam had not known Eve, nor had Joseph known the Virgin, but without seed a Virgin gives birth, and after childbirth remains still a virgin" (St. Romanos the Melodist, *On the Life of Christ: Kontakia*, trans. and intro. Ephrem Lash [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995] 20). A Kontakion was originally a long poem, akin to a musical homily, sung in church, consisting of a short stanza followed by several strophes, as many as 24 (*The Festal Menaion*, 554).

²⁷ Romanos the Melodist, "On the Nativity of the Virgin Mary," in *Sancti Romani Melodi cantica: Cantica genuina*, ed. Paul Maas and C. A. Trypanis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963) no. 35, p. 276, translation by Brent Gilbert, The Catholic University of America, Department of Greek and Latin.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 278–79. Strophe 8 mentions Sarah and Isaac, and strophe 9 mentions Zacharias.

²⁹ "The mystery is being fulfilled on earth"—opening line of strophe 6 (Romanos, "On the Nativity of the Virgin Mary" 278).

³⁰ Opening line of strophe 10 (*ibid.* 280).

³¹ "For every Christian has an advocate, and salvific protection and hope, even if it is from [your] womb" (*ibid.*).

the characters of Joachim and Anna. The hymn concentrates on Mary's birth as the mysterious event that reverses humanity's plight, symbolized by the transformation of barrenness into fruitfulness. In the reference to Mary as birthgiver, Christ remains the hope of Christian salvation, but the canticle as a whole shifts the orientation to include Mary's birth as a key component of the entire scheme of God's plan.³² In other words, the salvation of humankind can be identified and celebrated within the sole narrative of the story of Mary's birth. Romanos's hymn marks a modest shift from the Mariology of the fifth-century milieu of the Council of Ephesus, as he emphasizes Mary's role in soteriology with only occasional reference to Christ. This snapshot into the sixth century demonstrates that Mary's close association with humanity's salvation is expressed and celebrated as an annual liturgical commemoration elaborating specific themes. In Romanos's hymn, Mariology enjoys some sense of independence, and Christian soteriology is definitively expanded to include the occasion of Mary's birth as a primary event in the economy of salvation, with Mary occupying the prominent role.

Evidence from the last part of the patristic era regarding the feast of Mary's Birth exhibits development of Mary's soteriological role. John Damascene is one of the most prominent authors of homilies dedicated to this event. He attributes to Mary, a servant of the divine will, the fall of the serpent and the introduction of immortality into the world.³³ Mary is also responsible for the transformation of humanity and the restoration of Eve because God has transmuted human nature through her.³⁴ John Damascene emphasizes Mary's personal holiness and purity, with an embellished reminder of her perpetual virginity. For John, Mary remains a virgin in spirit, soul, and body before and after her birth.³⁵ John relies on the story of Mary's birth from the *Protoevangelion of James*, as he traces her chastity and holiness back to Joachim and Anna:

By observing the law of nature, chastity, you have merited the gifts that surpass nature: for you have brought into the world the unwedded Mother of God. You who have lived piously and by divine law in a human nature have given birth to a daughter above angels, who now rules over the angels.³⁶

³² See *ibid.*, strophe 6 on God's foreknowledge of this event.

³³ See Jean Damascène, Pierre Voulet, ed., *Homélies sur la Nativité et la Dormition: Texte grec*, Sources Chrétiennes 80 (Paris: Cerf, 1961) no. 7.

³⁴ "We . . . honor the birth of the Theotokos, through whom the plight of the first mother Eve has been changed into joy" (*ibid.* no.1).

³⁵ "Having conducted a chaste and holy life, you bring forth the joy of virginity, the one that remains virgin before giving birth, during birth, and after birth, the only ever-virgin in mind, soul, and body" (*ibid.* no. 5).

³⁶ *Ibid.* no. 6.

John Damascene appears to be constructing a history of Mary that reveals her to be an exemplary human being, perfectly obedient to the law of nature, and thus comparable to her son, Jesus. John does so by accentuating her holy upbringing and the centrality of her personal chastity. He advances this pattern by reflecting on God's salvation of the Israelites in the Exodus story and their subsequent betrayal of God.³⁷ He concentrates on fornication as the paradigmatic sin that estranges the Israelites from their Lord despite their salvific escape through the Red Sea.³⁸ He then presents Mary as the Virgin who enters the world as the "adversary of ancestral fornication," who, betrothed to God himself, gives birth to the mercy of God.³⁹

John Damascene's homily on Mary's Nativity embellishes the importance of Mary's personal holiness.⁴⁰ While one cannot conclusively identify all of the author's motivations for his thesis, his emphasis on the consistency of Mary's obedience and holiness corresponds to his characterization of her as a key figure in Christian soteriology. This characterization could explain John Damascene's liberal incorporation of details from the *Protoevangelion of James* as supporting material for his homily.⁴¹

The *Protoevangelion of James* is an apocryphal work dating from the second half of the second century, probably of Egyptian provenance.⁴² The *Protoevangelion* has inspired much of Eastern and Western iconography; the feasts of Mary's Birth and entrance into the Temple are based on its narratives.⁴³ Émile de Strycker categorizes the *Protoevangelion* as hagiography, since the entire text aims to glorify Mary and accentuate her holi-

³⁷ Ibid. no. 8. Curiously, John uses "the people of the Lord" instead of Israel in this passage.

³⁸ John uses the phrase "pneumati porneias," literally "spirit of porn," to illustrate the depths of the people's falling away.

³⁹ Jean Damascène, *Homélie sur la Nativité* no. 8: "Now a virgin is born, an adversary of ancestral fornication, and she is betrothed to God himself, and gives birth to the mercy of God."

⁴⁰ See the canons for the feast in *Festal Menaion* 110–25. The first canon is attributed to John Damascene, the second to Andrew of Crete. While the Orthodox Church accepts these liturgical canons as authentic, authenticity would need to be demonstrated according to philological and historical norms. Nevertheless, the traditioned authorship is certainly plausible, thus strengthening the connections between the homilies and the liturgical texts.

⁴¹ Voulet, the editor of Damascene's homily, asserts that John Damascene exercised great restraint in his claims compared to those made by the text of the *Protoevangelion* (Introduction 30).

⁴² See Émile De Strycker, "Le Protévangile de Jacques: Problèmes critiques et exégétiques," *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 88 (1964) 339–59.

⁴³ Ibid. 339.

ness. Questions surrounding the legitimacy of the Matthean-Lukan infancy narratives may also have contributed to this composition, since the author connects Mary to Israel and the royal house of David, confirming Jesus as the Messiah.⁴⁴ The text itself centers on Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna.⁴⁵ Joachim is wealthy and generous, and devoted to God, but poorly regarded in Israel because he has no children. The barrenness of his wife, Anna, is a curse; she is cast out of God's temple and considered to be "less than matter" since even the earth bears fruit. After Joachim goes into the wilderness to fast for 40 days and nights, both he and Anna are visited by angels, who report that their prayers have been heard. In visiting Anna, God removes the reproach of her enemies, and Mary is born, presented as the fruit of righteousness.

While the author of the *Protoevangelion* has reintroduced some basic theological themes by patterning Joachim and Anna after Abraham and Sarah, and the angelic visitation after the conception of John and the Annunciation, he does not use the occasion to make any bold soteriological statements about Mary or the event of her birth.

Both Romanos's and John Damascene's use of the *Protoevangelion* as a source is opportunistic, as all the characters, including Joachim and Anna, play an important role in contributing to Mary's human holiness and purity. Romanos's hymn concentrates on the prominence of the event of Mary's birth and its theological significance, whereas John Damascene uses the story to construct a paradigm of the significance of Mary as a personal contributor to salvation. The writings of Romanos and John demonstrate the gradually increasing importance of the feast of Mary's birth for interpreting the economy of salvation from the sixth through the eighth centuries. Their interpretations of Mary's birth evidence its growing independence from the traditional christocentric events of salvation, and emphasize the contributions of an expanded cast of characters, especially Joachim and Anna. The event of Mary's birth underscores the breadth of God's salvation, and the feast occasions a new opportunity to ponder God's gifts to humanity and new exemplars of faith.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ See Oscar Cullmann, introduction to the presentation on the *Protoevangelion*, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, *Gospels and Related Writings*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. A. J. B. Higgins, et. al., ed. R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 366–68.

⁴⁵ See the translation of the text in *ibid.* 374–78 (*Protoevangelion* chaps. 1–7).

⁴⁶ A similar attribution of soteriology to the occasion of Mary's birth is found in homilies by Andrew of Crete (AD 740), John Damascene's contemporary. In his first homily on this feast, titled "Encomium in nativitatem sanctissimae Deiparae, Oratio Prima," in Migne, *PG* 97 (1865 ed.) cols. 807–20, Andrew of Crete extends the economy of salvation to Mary's birth, as a "great womb unveils the virgin," and the "noble purification of humanity occurs." "Through her a loaf is formed

A progression in the soteriology of patristic Mariology is evidenced by the presentation on the fifth-century emergence of the Marian cult, the sixth-century hymns of Romanos, and the festal homily of John Damascene. Mary's role has increased, and the details included in her contribution are elaborated, especially by John Damascene. The feast recalls the story of Joachim and Anna, culminating in the birth of Mary. The most significant shift has occurred in the role of Christ himself. In the fifth century, Mariology complements Christology, and occupies a critical role in enriching the Church's interpretation and confession of Jesus Christ. Once the cult of Mary is established, the story of Christian soteriology expands to include Mary's life prior to Christ's birth, as evidenced by the works of Romanos and John Damascene. One consequence is the seemingly diminishing role and significance of Christ as Mary's story broadens. One can legitimately question whether this development led to a devotional prioritization of Mary over Christ and a consequent impoverishment of Christian soteriology. A complete analysis of the liturgical celebration of Mary's birth will comparatively examine the soteriological dimensions of Mariology and Christology of the feast.

THE FEAST OF MARY'S BIRTH ON SEPTEMBER 8

The great feasts of the Byzantine liturgical year include four specifically Marian celebrations: Mary's Birth (September 8), Mary's Entrance into the Temple (November 21), the Annunciation (March 25), and Mary's Dormition (August 15). One could argue that an inquiry into one of the three other Marian feasts or the famous *Akathistos* hymn would be more appropriate for establishing her soteriological significance, but I have selected her birth because its theology is primarily expressed by hymnography, and the core event the feast commemorates is not recorded in the canonical Scriptures.

The services comprising the liturgical celebration of Mary's Birth include Small Vespers, followed by a Vigil (comprised of Great Vespers and Matins), culminating in the Eucharistic liturgy.⁴⁷ The following chart furnishes

for the remodeling of the race. Today the noble purification of humanity receives grace from the first divine image and renders praise to her" (abbreviated). See PG 97:812, and Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999) 391–95.

⁴⁷ *Festal Menaion* 98–130. Most great feasts are followed by a "post-feast" octave, but Mary's birth is observed for five days because of the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross on September 14.

the schema for the Scriptural lessons chanted during the corresponding liturgical offices:⁴⁸

Liturgical Office	Reading
Great Vespers	Genesis 28:10–17 Ezekiel 43:27–44:4 Proverbs 9:1–11
Matins	Luke 1:39–49, 56
Divine Liturgy	Philippians 2:5–11 Luke 10:38–42; 11:27–28

The Vespers readings present typologies of Mary from the Old Testament. Jacob's ladder is an image of Mary, as she bridges earth and heaven, and she is the gate through which the Lord enters, which is permanently shut afterward, proof of her perpetual virginity. The same readings are prescribed for the feast of her Dormition, and have become "stock" lections usable for other Marian feasts. The Matins gospel accentuates the joy surrounding Mary's birthgiving of Christ, and Mary's own exaltation in the Magnificat, whereas the Epistle and Gospel for the Divine Liturgy point to Christ. The readings do not mention Joachim and Anna, nor do they directly reflect on Mary's own birth. The prescribed readings thus represent Mary as an important instrument in God's work, inseparable from Christ.

The real substance for the festal reflections on Mary's birth, its consequences for humanity, the participation of Joachim and Anna, and Mary's role in salvation history comes from the hymnography. Hymnography rose to preeminence in Byzantine liturgy with the victory over iconoclasm in the eighth century AD.⁴⁹ Constantin Andronikof emphasizes the exalted theological role of hymnography to such an extent that he exegetes all the hymns of a feast as his primary method for articulating its theology.⁵⁰

With hymnography established as a body of theology for the Church, a

⁴⁸ Ibid. 102–3, 109, 129–30.

⁴⁹ For a brief review of the significance of this phenomenon, see Robert Taft, *The Byzantine Rite: A Short History* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1992) 56–60. See also Miguel Arranz, "Les grande étapes de la liturgie Byzantine," in *Liturgie de l'Église particulière et liturgie de l'Église universelle: Conférences Saint-Serge XXII semaine d'études liturgiques, Paris, 30 juin–3 juillet 1975* (Rome: Edizione Liturgiche, 1976) 43–72.

⁵⁰ Constantin Andronikof, *Le sens des fêtes, tome I (le cycle fixe)* (Paris: Cerf, 1970) 7. Andronikof quotes Cyprian Kern, to whom the following phrase is attributed: "le chœur de l'église est une chaire de théologie." Andronikof further develops this idea: "À lire, à écouter les textes de l'Église, nous constatons qu'ils sont l'expression vivante de la pensée dogmatique et philosophique, du sentiment religieux de ses fidèles; qu'ils apportent et qu'ils développent une révélation sur Dieu et sur caractère divin de l'homme" (To read, to listen to the texts of the Church, we observe that they are the living expression of dogmatic and philosophi-

theological synthesis can be constructed from the hymns for the feast of Mary's Birth. While most of the hymns align Mary with Christ, she is clearly presented as a key contributor to salvation. Every September 8 is the "beginning of joy for all the world," as "today the winds blow that bring glad tidings of salvation," because "the barren woman is revealed as the mother of her who, after bearing the Maker, still remained Virgin."⁵¹ The word "today" is frequently used by Byzantine hymnographers, as it accentuates the inclusion of the celebrating Church in the underpinning salvific story and its effects.⁵² The story of salvation commences with Mary's birth, and Mary is upheld as the special fruit miraculously born from a barren womb, sustaining her own virginity after her numinous birthgiving of the Lord. Mary's perpetual virginity and the fulfilling of barrenness with blessed fruit constitute two of the core theological points established in the feast.

Mary's salvific role is further amplified in the stichera on the Lity as Adam and Eve are newly introduced to this story, exhorted by Joachim and Anna to "rejoice with us today: for if by your transgression ye closed the gate of Paradise to those of old, we have now been given a glorious fruit, Mary the Child of God, who opens its entrance to all."⁵³ Not only has Mary opened paradise, but she was also "preordained to be the Queen of all," and "through her cruel hell has been trampled under foot."⁵⁴ The final sticheron on the Lity links Mary to the lineage of David and boldly announces her contributions: "she is the restoration of Adam and the recalling of Eve, the fountain of incorruption and the release from corruption; through her we have been made godlike and delivered from death."⁵⁵

The liturgical offices contain additional texts written by hymnographers who creatively praised and extolled Mary and her contribution to salvation, generally repeating the same themes already presented here. The hymns identify many of the core components from salvation history and illuminate their connection to Mary. Adam and Eve's transgressions are evoked and linked to humanity's alienation from God and expulsion from paradise with the curse of death. Yet Adam and Eve are called to rejoice on the occasion of Mary's birth since she restores and recalls them, opens the

cal thought, of the religious sentiment of the faithful, from which they glean and develop a revelation on God and on the divine character of humanity)."

⁵¹ *The Festal Menaion*, the fifth sticheron interpolated between select verses from Psalm 140 (typically titled "Lord, I have cried") 101–2.

⁵² Irwin, *Context and Text* 93. The use of *hodie* in Roman liturgy corresponds to the Greek "sēmeron," situating the worshipping community within the saving effects of the historical event.

⁵³ *Festal Menaion* 105, third sticheron on the Lity, attributed to Anatolios.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, last sticheron (after "Glory . . . now and ever") on the Lity.

gates of paradise that had been closed, and facilitates humanity's reconciliation with God, all of which was preordained by him in the first place.⁵⁶ The hymns' characterization of Joachim and Anna elaborates Mary's restoration of humanity. They represent humanity's barrenness, while Mary's miraculous birth indicates God's providential transformation of humanity from barren to fruitful. The centrality of faith and obedience is not compromised, as Joachim and Anna are "wise," and their "prayer and groaning have proved acceptable."⁵⁷ Their ancillary role epitomizes the disposition required on the part of humanity in receiving God's salvific intervention. In the introduction to the *Festal Menaion*, the editors assure the readers that "Mary's link with her Son, her place within the saving and redemptive mission of Christ, is never for one moment forgotten."⁵⁸ While Christ's paradigmatic work remains in the background, many of the hymns confidently attribute salvation to Mary alone with no explicit or even implicit mention of Christ.

The feast's liturgy expresses a theological synthesis generally consistent with the Mariology of Proclus, Cyril, Romanos the Melodist, and John Damascene, as Mary is the central figure who constitutes the fruit that symbolizes God's action in saving humanity from death. While the feast's hymns focus on Mary, the notion of Christ as the ultimate fruit of God's work remains present through the readings and in the background of select hymns. Thus, in its greater orientation toward Mary's story and personal virtues, the feast appears to function as a synthetic repository of patristic Mariology, reflecting the later developments characteristic of Romanos the Melodist and John Damascene. The prominence of patristic Mariology in the feast of Mary's Birth raises the issue of the veracity of the theology embedded in the festal hymnography, especially given its privileged pedagogical and doxological liturgical functions.

THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FEAST OF MARY'S BIRTH

The theological synthesis described above, derived from the readings and hymns chanted at the liturgical offices on the feast of Mary's Birth, can be characterized as audacious. Before dismissing the hymnography as mere exaggeration, a brief review of the application of heuristic principles to Byzantine hymnography should help to clarify the hymnographers' inten-

⁵⁶ Her role is explicated by the first *Troparion* in the first Canon, Ode 8, *Festal Menaion* 121: "The preordained tabernacle of our reconciliation with God now begins to be. It is she who shall bear us unto the Word, appearing in the material substance of the flesh."

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: "wise" from the second *Troparion* on the Second Canon of Ode 6, 118; and "prayer and groaning" from the *Ikos* on 119.

⁵⁸ See the introduction, (iii) The Background and Meaning of the Feasts, *ibid.* 49.

tions. The oldest collection of Greek hymns contains numerous *Theotokia*, hymns that contemplate Mary and her role in salvation history.⁵⁹ Christian Hannick identifies the problem resulting in the discomfort that comes from the ascription of a salvific role to Mary. Unlike homilies from the patristic era that were designed to express doctrine, hymnography can be equivocal with regard to doctrinal declaration or the evoking of feelings of devotion.⁶⁰ However, the celebrated *Akathistos* hymn occasions an opportunity to demonstrate the connection between hymnography and homiletics.⁶¹ The *Akathistos* hymn is the descendant of the *Kontakion*, a poetic stanza of 24 lines sung by a selected chanter from the middle of the assembly.⁶² The *Kontakion* functioned as a liturgical homily, providing an elaborate exegesis of the event celebrated.

Hannick ably demonstrates the way the hymnographers essentially provided theological tracts for a liturgical setting, with the Theotokos occupying varying roles, sometimes as an instrument of salvation pointing to Christ, as in the *Dogmatika Theotokia* attributed to John Damascene, at other times as the sole subject of praise.⁶³ Hannick attends to hymnography's final theological ascendancy as the "privileged bearer of scriptural exegesis" that "reconstructs the entirety of salvation history in relation to the telos."⁶⁴ Hymnography filled the vacuum resulting from the deterioration of scriptural exegesis at the end of the patristic era, assuming a pedagogical role it continues to occupy today.⁶⁵ Hannick also asserts that the

⁵⁹ Christian Hannick, "The Theotokos in Byzantine Hymnography: Typology and Allegory," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassiliki (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005) 69.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 70.

⁶¹ The *Akathistos* hymn, customarily chanted on the fifth Saturday of Lent in the Byzantine tradition, is a lengthy doxological poem accompanied by the refrain "Rejoice, O Unwedded Bride!" For a brief definition of the *Akathistos* hymn, see Johann von Gardner, *Russian Church Singing*, vol. 1, *Orthodox Worship and Hymnography* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1980) 46–47. For a more extensive presentation, see Egon Wellesz, "The *Akathistos*: A Study in Byzantine Hymnography," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 9–10 (1956) 141–74. Leena Mari Peltomaa has recently proposed that, based on the similarity of the words in strophe 15 to the theological language of the Council of Ephesus, the *Akathistos* was composed after Ephesus but before Chalcedon. See Peltomaa, "The *Akathistos* Hymn and the Mariology of the Council of Ephesus," *Studia Patristica* 35 (2001) 304–8.

⁶² Gardner, *Orthodox Worship and Hymnography* 45–46.

⁶³ Hannick, "Theotokos in Byzantine Hymnography" 72–75. Allegorical treatment of the Theotokos typically carries a more profound meaning.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 76.

⁶⁵ Hymnography began to flourish when it entered Constantinople toward the end of the iconoclast controversy, imported by St. Theodore the Studite from St. Sabbas monastery in Palestine as a key weapon in creatively combating iconoclasm. See Arranz, "Les grande étapes de la liturgie Byzantine" 43–72.

hymnographers sought to eloquently proclaim doctrine through the doxological medium of liturgical poetry. As a result, the hymnographers' doctrinal intent dismisses a qualification of such hymnography as exaggeration. Rather, the hymns reflect the authors' understanding of Marian doctrine in their respective milieu. The hymns' theological concordance with the Mariology of Greek fathers such as Proclus, Cyril, and John Damascene confirms their unique inclusion and expression of patristic theology.

Such an exalted Mariology is not limited to the feast of Mary's Birth, but abounds throughout the Byzantine liturgical corpus.⁶⁶ In his seminal work on Mary in the Byzantine liturgy, Joseph Ledit extrapolates Mariology from the hymnography of the Byzantine liturgy. Ledit presents the feast of Mary's conception celebrated on December 9 as the beginning of the restoration of humanity's favor with God, the foundation of the beginning of the regeneration of the human race, and the fulfillment of the prophets.⁶⁷ The following sampling of hymns from the feast of Mary's conception proclaims the same message of salvation expressed in the feast of Mary's Birth:

The conception of the pure and godly maiden, the first fruits of faith, hath appeared, which before the ages was ineffably proclaimed by God in His divine and dread mysteries. Through her are the works of darkness and the passions brought to an end.⁶⁸

[She] who gave birth unto the light which illumineth all creation doth Anna begin to put forth today from her barren womb. Wherefore, let us all make haste, for our deliverance from the condemnation of Eve is come.⁶⁹

The hymnographers have obviously used the same primary sources for the texts of this feast, extending the beginning of salvation to Mary's Conception. Ledit attempts to characterize the liturgical themes from the feast of Mary's Birth as essentially reprising those from the feast of her Conception on December 9 by viewing the feast of her Birth as chronologically following the feast of her Conception. This, however, does not follow, as the feast of Mary's Birth was historically established before that of her Conception on December 9, and Mary's birth was celebrated with much more solemnity in the Great Church of Constantinople.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ See the seminal work by Joseph Ledit, *Marie dans la liturgie de Byzance*, pref. Albert Martin, *Théologie historique* 39 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 102–5.

⁶⁸ The third sticheron on the Praises, quoted from *The Menaion of the Orthodox Church*, vol. 4, *December*, trans. Isaac E. Lambertsen (Liberty, Tenn.: St. John of Kronstadt, 1996) 77.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* the festal Exaposteilarion (Hymn of Light).

⁷⁰ The Georgian Lectionary, representing Jerusalemite worship from the fifth to eighth centuries, contains a developed feast of Mary's Birth on September 8, but

The feast of Mary's Conception supports and confirms the theology inherent in the feast of her Birth. The two feasts commonly proclaim her entrance into the world as the beginning of salvation, as an occasion to rejoice with the restoration of paradise to humanity, the restoration of Adam and Eve, and the deliverance of humanity from death. The two feasts elaborate source stories from the *Protoevangelion of James* and position Joachim and Anna as symbols of human barrenness, whose restoration is a fruit of their own righteousness. Both feasts confirm Mary as the person who facilitates humanity's salvation, with a special emphasis on her perpetual personal holiness and chastity. Both feasts resonate with the Greek patristic theology characterized by the canticle of Romanos the Melodist and the festal homily of John Damascene.

The prominence of the feast of Mary's Birth in the liturgical year and the bold and creative expansion of the core narrative of salvation history to include the events of Mary's conception and birth pose new possibilities for a Christian interpretation of soteriology. In the new scheme, Mary occupies a central role as the Mother of the unique Son of God. Her personal holiness and voluntary cooperation with God, proven by an examination of her historical life, renders her an honored partner in saving humankind. Contemplation of the expanded story allows one to view the premium placed on obedience and righteousness, exemplified by Mary and her parents, Joachim and Anna. As the liturgical participants are incorporated into the story of the events surrounding Mary's birth, they gain access to an expanded cast of characters who are more akin to them in their mere humanity, people whose deficiencies were rewarded through righteousness and holy living.

CONCLUSION: ENCOUNTERING MARY IN LITURGICAL CELEBRATION

My final concern returns to considerations of how the liturgical celebration of this feast enlivens and reveals its soteriological significance for the

there is no commemoration of her conception on December 9. See *Le grand lectionnaire de l'Église de Jérusalem V–VIII siècle*, ed. Michel Tarchnisvili, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 188, 189, 204, 205 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO 1959–1960) nos. 1221–26. On December 9, Father Sabba is commemorated (no. 1404). The liturgical solemnity accompanying the feast of Mary's Birth (also September 8) in the Great Church of Constantinople of the ninth century includes a developed Vigil, Orthros, second hour, and Divine Liturgy, whereas the Conception from St. Anna (of the Theotokos) on December 9 follows a more restrained liturgical ordo. See *Le Typicon de la Grande église: Ms. Sainte-Croix no. 40, Xe siècle*, vol. 1, *Le cycle de douze mois*, ed. and trans. Juan Mateos, S.J., *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 165 (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1962–1963) 19–21, 127.

life of the church. It can be tempting to imagine liturgy as a mere nostalgic mimesis of some past event, like viewing a depiction of a particular historical passage with no sense of connection or participation in it. A narrow interpretation of mimesis occasions an opportunity to address the tension between a past, unrepeatable event, and the present celebration. The paradigmatic event usually evoked in such discussions is Christ's salvific Pascha, which would include the supper with the disciples, the passion, the cross, the tomb, and the resurrection. Each of these paschal components is remembered by the worshipping assembly as a sacred event. Following this pattern, all the commemorations that comprise a particular Church's calendar can be celebrated as sacred events. The Byzantine environment treated here furnishes multiple instances, including Christ's transfiguration, his entrance into Jerusalem, his presentation in the Temple, the annunciation, and the aforementioned events from Mary's life, including her birth. Robert Taft asserts that the point of celebrating these feasts is to encounter the risen Lord, not the Jesus presented to us by the evangelists:

The Jesus of the Apostolic Church is not the historical Jesus of the past, but the Heavenly Priest interceding for us constantly before the throne of the Father . . . and actively directing the life of his Church. . . . The vision of the men that produced these documents was not directed backwards, to the "good old days" when Jesus was with them on earth.⁷¹

Invoking an anamnesis of the sacred event of Mary's birth does not amount to nostalgically remembering a story about Mary and her parents, Joachim and Anna, with an exhortation to imitate their moral fortitude, since heortology is not limited to moral instruction. Instead, liturgical anamnesis removes the barriers of time imposed by history and renders everything in the present, uniting the participants with the people the feast commemorates. Liturgical celebration is not intended to focus on things (like bread and wine), but on people, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the people participating in the festal liturgy of Mary's Birth encounter not only God but also Mary, Joachim, and Anna as they are today.⁷² The encounter with the subjects *as they are now* forms an integral component of this liturgical event as encounter, and is well established in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy, where the assembly remembers not only the cross, the

⁷¹ Robert F. Taft, "Toward a Theology of the Christian Feast," in *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, 2nd enl. ed. (Washington: Pastoral, 1997) 8.

⁷² See Robert Taft, "What Does Liturgy Do? Toward a Soteriology of Liturgical Celebration: Some Theses," *Worship* 66 (1992) 203–8. Taft emphasizes the pneumatological function of bringing Christ and all the participants together in a place not bound by time. This gathering entails the presence of Mary and the saints as they are integral to the story.

tomb, the resurrection on the third day, but also the “second and glorious coming,” an event that has not historically come to pass but is made present to the assembly by the power of the Holy Spirit.⁷³ Given the boundless quality of the liturgical event, through which an encounter with the story’s characters occurs, one can also assert that the original historical event is manifested to the liturgical participants.⁷⁴ Participants are adopted into the story, so that, in remembering the event, they not only receive the real benefits and gifts elucidated by the story, but also inherit ownership in the story as it becomes theirs.

This liturgical anamnesis, most powerfully expressed by the festal hymns, is multifunctional. Participation in the liturgy facilitates communion with the holy characters of the story. An additional fruit of the annual celebration of the feast is its illumination of humanity’s contribution to God’s story of salvation. In hearing the story and communing with its characters, the participants identify with the humanity of Mary, Joachim, and Anna and are prodded to ponder the ultimate fruit of Mary’s birth, which is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The liturgical anamnesis of Mary’s birth thus shapes a spiritual and anthropological mimesis, wherein the participants can identify themselves in the cosmic picture of salvation, and strive to grow into the humanity of the characters through imitation. This model demonstrates the dialogical relationship between anamnesis and mimesis in Byzantine heortology and mitigates the fears associated with mimesis as nostalgia. Anamnesis provides the background and energy for mimesis by defining the context of the event and facilitating the encounter between all participants, which results in an authentic mimesis of spiritual growth and vocation.⁷⁵

This feast represents an instance where the *lex credendi* of the Church has shaped its *lex orandi*. The close correspondence between patristic Mariology and the hymns of the feast, which clearly carry its theological weight, confirms the development of the feast as a synthesis of Mariology expressed through the event of Mary’s birth. The soteriological significance of Mary’s birth can be clearly expressed and provide fresh insights into God’s salvation of humanity by restoring the priority of *lex orandi* in the celebration of the feast. The paradigm of anamnesis and mimesis presented

⁷³ See the anamnesis immediately preceding the epiclesis of the Eucharistic Canon in *The Divine Liturgy according to St. John Chrysostom with Appendices* (New York: Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of America, 1967) 65: “Remembering this saving commandment and all those things which have come to pass for us: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, and the second and glorious Coming.”

⁷⁴ Sr. Nonna Harrison, “Gregory Nazianzen’s Festal Spirituality: Anamnesis and Mimesis,” in *Philosophy and Theology* (forthcoming).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

here, highlighted by communal encounter with the story's characters, articulates a rich soteriology by revealing the connection between worship and ecclesiology in the *lex orandi*. If the liturgy facilitates the assembly's adoption into Mary's story, then the assembly realizes its vocation as the body of Christ, as the worshipping Church manifests Christ's presence by providing him a location, a body of people that includes Joachim, Anna, and Mary. Mary fulfills the role of facilitator by revealing the assembly's vocation through the liturgical celebration of her story. The theology of the feast of her birth, a repository of Mariology extending beyond the significance of the single event of her birth, is appropriated as the content for the contemporary mission of the assembly gathered in her honor. Clearly, in this model, mimesis cannot be interpreted as reductive, but rather occupies an integral role in the process of continuing conversion for the building up of the church and the fulfillment of its mission.

This thesis finds support in the church's tradition outside the Marian milieu examined here. While the heortology expresses most of the Marian soteriological motifs presented in the historical review above, the core notions of encounter and identification through communion are grounded in the development of the cult of the martyrs. Peter Brown expertly delineates the phenomenon in antiquity of identifying one's self with a beloved saint and thus incorporating the virtuous qualities of the holy person into one's own life; the veneration of saints was expressed and celebrated in public liturgies and eventually blazed a path for the Marian devotion described above.⁷⁶ Since the expectation of Christ's second coming steadily diminished after the apostolic age, the veneration of saints who were imitators of Christ provided accessibility to the promise of the resurrection.⁷⁷ As Taft noted, Christian liturgy identifies Jesus as the heavenly priest who eternally intercedes on behalf of humankind. But the eruption of controversy, along with the consequential generation of a new and occasionally confounding theological vocabulary that described Christ's hypostatic union, contributed to a perception of Christ as a divine, distant God. On the part of the faithful, Christ was perceived as increasingly inaccessible, opening a vacuum readily and ably filled by a natural hero for people, the mother of God.⁷⁸ Theologically, Mary became the mother of the church

⁷⁶ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, The Haskell Lectures on History of Religions, n.s. 2, Joseph M. Kitagawa, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981) 58. Harrison ("Gregory Nazianzen's Festal Spirituality") expertly demonstrates Gregory's exhortations for mimesis of biblical characters.

⁷⁷ Brown, *Cult of the Saints* 78–85.

⁷⁸ Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* 1:112.

and of the people, as they become Christ's siblings through baptism.⁷⁹ Thus, the loving relationship that materialized between Mary and the people was the organic result of the natural human inclination to call on a mother for help, and Mary's availability to play a mediating role, a relational paradigm that had developed in the earlier cult of the martyrs.

The message of the feast of Mary's Birth relies on this paradigm of the communion of heavenly witnesses. Her current role reprises the message of the feast by referring the worshipping assembly to Christ through their anamnesis and mimesis. This model emphasizes an integral tenet of Mariology: as Mary is inseparable from her son, so Mariology is inseparable from Christology. The editors of the *Festal Menaion* stressed this point in explicating the meaning of the feast of Mary's Birth: "Mary is venerated because of the Child that she bore: Mother and Son are not to be separated, but Mariology is to be understood as an extension of Christology."⁸⁰ One needs only to examine the *Apolytikion*, or chief hymn from the feast to see this point poignantly illustrated:

Thy birth, O Theotokos, has brought joy to all the inhabited earth: for from thee has shone forth the Sun of Righteousness, Christ our God. He has loosed us from the curse and given the blessing; He has made death of no effect, and bestowed on us eternal life.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Robert F. Taft, "Marian Liturgical Veneration: Common Origins, Contemporary Catholic Renewal, and Meaning for Today," in *Oriente Lumen III Conference Proceedings—1999* (Fairfax, Va.: Eastern Churches Publications, 1999) 91–112, at 95–96.

⁸⁰ Mother Mary and Bishop Kallistos, *Festal Menaion* 49. The link between Christology and Mariology is confirmed by the most pithy statement of the Council of Ephesus on Mary: "According to this understanding of the unconfused union, we confess the holy virgin to be the mother of God because God the Word took flesh and became man and from his very conception united to himself the temple he took from her" (Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, *Nicaea I to Lateran V* [Washington: Georgetown University, 1990] 70).

⁸¹ *Festal Menaion* 107.