

# MARY AND THE TEMPLE IN ICONS<sup>1</sup>

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Before we progress to the subject of Mary and the temple in icons, I would like first to discuss what the temple is ultimately for, what its ultimate purpose is. This will have a bearing on how we look at icons of the Mother of God in the context of the temple.

## **What is the Old Testament Temple for?**

The Greek word for temple, *naos*, meant originally the inner shrine where the statue of the god dwelt. In one sense God "dwells" in His temple, and yet the omnipresent God plainly does not need houses. If He does choose to reveal Himself in a specific place it is for a reason.

Is the temple a place of sacrifice? This was certainly a major role of the Old Testament temple and tent of meeting. But does God Himself need the sacrifice of bulls and heifers?

Is the temple a place of revelation? We are getting closer here. But if God simply reveals Himself, man is still left alone. An enlightened person is a more informed person, but knowledge itself does not transform. Revelation of itself does not change man.

The word temple comes from the Latin "templum", meaning a place set aside or consecrated for auspices or worship. And yet we could say that all creation is a suitable place to worship God. We can worship God in any place and God can reveal Himself to us in any place.

All the above roles for a temple are of course valid, but they are means and not the end. They do not I believe get to the crux of the matter.

I suggest that in Christian understanding the ultimate purpose of the temple is to be a place and means of union of the Creator with His creation, a nuptial chamber for the divine Bridegroom and His human bride. It is to be an aid to what the Greek Fathers of the Church call *theosis*. The Old Testament temple was a shadow or type of the New Testament temple, which is the human person full of the Holy Spirit, and more fully, the Church as Body of Christ.

The means of all this happening is of course Virgin Mary, because through her the divine and human natures were forever united when the Second Person of the Holy Trinity became man. She became the temple so that all of us may become temples of the Holy Spirit, *Xristophoroi*, Christ-bearers.

As we shall see, icons of Mary and the Temple all have this theme in common: they show what is necessary for all of us to enter into union with Christ.

## **The purpose of sacrifice: to make space for God**

Sacrifice is clearly an important element of the temple, in both Old and New Covenants. How does sacrifice fit into this purpose of theosis?

I suggest that the ultimate purpose of sacrifice is to help man acknowledge God as the source of life and thereby create space for God to enter. On

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Mount Athos there is a saying: "Give God your blood and He will give you His Spirit." Man sheds blood to make way for God, to create a space that God may enter and so bring about a permanent, hypostatic union of God and man. We have been called, as St Peter writes, to "become participants in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) - not only followers of Christ, but participators in Christ.

This is the meaning of the famous passage in Psalm 51:16,17 (50 in the Septuagint).

*For if You had desired sacrifice, I would have given it: You will not take pleasure in whole-burnt-offerings. Sacrifice to God is a broken spirit: a broken and humbled heart God will not despise.*

A humble heart is a heart with space for God to enter. Lao Tsi (Laozi) wrote that what makes a house and a cup useful is the space within. A solid block of stone cannot be lived in; a solid piece of china cannot contain drink. Likewise, because blood is life the shedding of blood is to acknowledge that God alone is life. We have life, but are not life.

According to St Ephraim the Syrian the tree of knowledge of good and evil was not bad of itself, but was the created world which was to be eaten in the right attitude of thanksgiving. Mankind had first to acknowledge that God is the source of life, and not created things. "Thanksgiving sanctifies all things" because in receiving with thanksgiving we receive the love of the Giver. Without thanksgiving, matter is death to us. With thanksgiving, it is grace-bearing:

*God placed two crowns for Adam, for which he was to strive,  
Two trees to provide crowns if he were victorious.  
If only he could have conquered just for a moment,  
He would have eaten the one and lived, eaten the other and gained  
knowledge...<sup>2</sup>*

If Adam and Eve had realised that God alone is life and beauty itself, and that created things have life and beauty only by participation in God, then they could have partaken of created things - the tree of knowledge - and received divine life through them. By receiving the world as gift they would have received the Giver.

### **The created and uncreated elements of the temple**

With the objective of theosis in mind, we can see that there are two elements to the Tent of Meeting, which is the prototype of the two Jewish temples:

A. *The man-made element*, that is, the tent and its furnishings, all made by the craft of man. It is important to note however that, though these things themselves are man-made, their design is according to God's plan, as revealed to Moses. This had to be so, since the temple and its furnishings are all meant to be icons or images of divine realities. They needed to be fit to receive the revelation of God, fit to be a locum of God's visitation. They were to be like a garment cut to fit the manifestation of God in and through the temple, just as the Virgin Mary had to be a holy person without spot or blemish to be able to bear God in the flesh.

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<sup>2</sup> "Hymns on Paradise" XII:17

B. *The divine element*, what God had made or miraculously caused to happen. According to the Book of Hebrews (Hebrews 9:4) there was within the ark a golden pot containing the manna miraculously provided by God in the desert, the budding branch of Aaron, and the tablets of the law (the originals inscribed by God's hand). And above all there was the Shekinah glory of God manifest in and through the Tent of Meeting. Without this glory the tent of was not complete for there was no meeting of God and man:

*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud abode upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.... For throughout all their journeys the cloud of the Lord was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel. (Exodus 40:34,35,38)*<sup>3</sup>

So the temple proper is not merely the man-made element, but the divine presence and the man-made element together. The temple with the Shekinah glory is a foretaste of man's deification in the New Covenant. Man is deified, he participates in light and manifests the glory of God. He is clothed in light, transfigured.

This theme of deification is why the Orthodox Church gives such emphasis to the feast of Transfiguration. As one of its hymns affirms:

*In His own Person He showed them the nature of man, arrayed in the original beauty of the Image. (Great Vespers, Aposticha)*<sup>4</sup>

*Today Christ on Mount Tabor has changed the darkened nature of Adam, and filling it with brightness He has made it Godlike. (Small Vespers, Aposticha)*

*The Glory that once overshadowed the tabernacle and spoke with Thy servant Moses, O Master, was a figure of Your transfiguration. (Matins, Canticle Three)*

It is therefore pertinent that Peter says on Mount Tabor, "Let us make three tabernacles." He seems to have realized that the transfiguration was the fulfilment of the Feast of Tabernacles, when the Jews commemorated the time when they dwelt in tents in the wilderness and God dwelt among them as a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. Peter realized that this shining person was God, that this light he was seeing was the same Shekinah glory that the Israelites saw over the tabernacle in the wilderness.

### **Deification central to icons of Mary**

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<sup>3</sup> For other mentions of this Shekinah being manifest see Exodus 14:20; 40:34-38; Leviticus 9:23, 24; Numbers 14:10; 16:19, 42

<sup>4</sup> This and all the following quotations from Orthodox liturgical texts are taken from "The Festal Menaion", translated by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (Faber and Faber, 1984).

The deification of the human person is the whole purpose of the Incarnation through the Virgin Mary. It is not sufficient that the human person remain merely human, no matter how morally or intellectually developed. Each person is called to theosis, to become a god by grace, to be transfigured. Mary was without spot and pure, but still had to await the incarnation in the flesh through her, and even await Pentecost that she might receive the Holy Spirit to dwell permanently in her heart. The icons of Mary depict either Mary's preparation for the Incarnation, or her part in preparing us to receive Christ.

### **Mary as ark of the covenant**

Mary herself is the temple, the hypostatic dwelling place of God. The ark itself is traditionally seen as a type of Mary, since both it and she "contain" divinity. St. Athanasius the Great, bishop of Alexandria (c.328-373) wrote about the connections between the Ark and the Virgin Mary:

*O noble Virgin, truly you are greater than any other greatness. For who is your equal in greatness, O dwelling place of God the Word? To whom among all creatures shall I compare you, O Virgin? You are greater than them all O (Ark of the) Covenant, clothed with purity instead of gold! You are the Ark in which is found the golden vessel containing the true manna, that is, the flesh in which Divinity resides. (Homily of the Papyrus of Turin),*

### **Cosmic significance of the temple; source of world sanctification**

We have seen that the tent of meeting together with the glory of God is a foretaste of man's deification. We can also say that it is a specific place where God reveals Himself so that from that place all the cosmos can be sanctified. It is a spring source, not a place to condemn what is beyond it as profane. It exists to sanctify everything else, not to condemn everything else.

The temple is made of matter, and as such reveals God's intention for all matter, be it inanimate matter or the matter of the fleshly body. God's overshadowing the temple is a foretaste of the Spirit overshadowing the Virgin Mary to cause her to conceive Christ - though the first was a temporary event, while the second leads to a permanent and hypostatic union of God and human nature. Pentecost likewise is foreshadowed in the temple, since at Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes to human flesh, although this time to dwell permanently.

### **Paradise as the first temple**

We can say that the first temple was in fact Paradise, for it was a place where God and the human race were to meet and commune, and for man to enter union with God. Eden was a temple "not made with human hands". We have seen that a temple is a source and starting point for the whole world to be sanctified. And so when God tells Adam and Eve to "fill the earth and subdue it" He is telling them to make the whole world a paradise, to extend the borders of the garden-temple so that the whole world might become garden-temple.

Seen in this context, we shall see later how Mary's encounter with the unfallen angel Gabriel can be related to Eve's encounter with Satan. By her life on earth and obedience to God, Mary, like a second Eve, begins to undo

the work of the first Eve and so becomes a means of establishing the new and eternal temple-garden of the Church.

### **The temple veil as both mediation and coverer**

Between the holy place and the holiest of holies was a veil, made of blue, purple and scarlet material of fine twisted linen. We have seen that matter can mediate God to us. But it can also veil God from us, not to block Him out entirely, but to protect man from the full blast of His power and glory. According to the first century Jewish historian Josephus, the veil in Herod's temple was four inches thick and even horses tied to each side could not pull the veil apart! Quite a veil.

So why veil holy things? We look to Moses who had to veil his face so God's brightness did not overwhelm the Israelites, and so that their relationship with Moses could continue. So when God does "moderate" His brightness He does this to allow relationship to continue. He doesn't want to show off and frighten us away. And so the Transfiguration is again important - the Lord shows the disciples His glory "inasmuch as they were able to bear it", in the words of one hymn of the feast. Likewise in His incarnation through the Virgin Mary, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity enfleshes Himself so that we can behold His Glory and commune with Him without being destroyed by His brightness. Christ's humanity both reveals and veils.

### **Icons of Mary and the Temple**

We turn now to icons of Mary which include the temple, either overtly or symbolically.

## **THE ENTRY OF THE MOTHER OF GOD INTO THE TEMPLE 2 November**

*The all-pure Temple of the Saviour, the precious Bridal Chamber and Virgin, the sacred treasure of the glory of God, is led today into the house of the Lord, and with her she brings the grace of the Holy Spirit. Of her God's angels sing in praise: 'She is indeed the heavenly Tabernacle.'*

(Kontakion)

### **Background**

The details of this feast are taken from the second century work, the Protoevangelion of St James. According to this account, when Mary was three years old her parents decided that the time was ripe to fulfil their vow made when the aged Anna conceived. Together they went to the temple and presented Mary to the High Priest.

Wanting Mary to go gladly to her new home in the temple they gathered virgins who lived in the temple and had them go before her with lit candles. Drawn by the beauty of the tapers, she happily followed, dancing for joy. Thus she entered happily into the care of the High Priest Zacharias, the future father of John the Baptist. A variation of the story, sometimes included in icons, describes her ascending with an adult's ease the fifteen steps leading

into the inner court. These steps, the account tells us, correspond to the fifteen Psalms of ascent (120th to 134th), and thus prefigure her development by degrees in the spiritual life.

By prophetic inspiration Zachariah led Mary into the Holy of Holies - a place where the High Priest alone was allowed to go, and that only once a year, at Pascha. There she was miraculously fed by the hand of an angel. Mary remained in the temple until the age of 12, when Zacharias betrothed her to the elderly Joseph.

### **The icon and its meaning**

In our icon we see Zacharias stooping to receive the child Mary. He is dressed in his glorious priestly garments. Behind the child are her parents, encouraging her to go forward. Behind them are the young women bearing tapers. Having done their work they are in the background watching the child eagerly enter the temple.

Though only three years old, Mary is depicted with adult proportions. This reflects her spiritual age, beyond her years. She is "three years old in the flesh and many years old in spirit" says a hymn (Canticle Three of the Matins Canon).

She is normally clothed in an earth red garment, called a chiton. This colour represents the human, earthly nature she is later to give to the Divine Word. It is the same colour as the outer garment as found in icons of Christ.

The child's position between her physical parents and Zacharias - her spiritual father to be - reveals a spiritual progression. The fulfilment of her domestic preparation is found with her life in the temple. And in turn, her ascetic life in the temple is to be fulfilled in her bearing God into the world. This sense of progression is further illustrated by Zacharias standing on some steps and Mary walking up towards him.

Icons often show Mary twice: entering the temple, and seated under a ciborium with an angel bringing her food. In the former depiction, she is often standing in front of the altar, like one who freely offers herself to God. As a hymn says, she is

*...a ewe lamb without spot, the dove without blemish.* (Canticle Six of the Matins Canon)

Usually three buildings and various pieces of temple furniture are shown. These correspond to the three main areas of the temple and at the same time to the three stages of the spiritual life. Although the placement of these buildings and their temple furniture vary quite a bit in the icon tradition, which sometimes conflates elements, their symbolic and theological significance remains the same. Although the event of course happened in Herod's temple, the liturgical texts refer more to the Tent of Meeting or Solomon's Temple. The furnishings depicted in most icons are in fact interpreted as the elements of an Orthodox church, with ambo, royal doors, low wall, altar and ciborium.

The building to the left represents the Outer Court of the temple. The second or middle structure represents the Holy Place. The structures on the right, where Mary is shown seated and being fed by an angel, together represent the Holy of Holies, although some icons transpose the ciborium to the centre. The steps represent the exalted spiritual state of Mary in the Holy of Holies

Many of the Church fathers have related these three parts of the temple to the three stages of spiritual progress. Evagrius explained these three stages in this way:

*We practise the virtues in order to achieve contemplation of the inner essences [logoi in the Greek] of created things, and from this we pass to contemplation of the Logos who gives them their meaning; and He manifests Himself when we are in a state of prayer. (Paragraph 52 from "On Prayer" in "The Philokalia" Volume 1, published by Faber.)*

These stages are described elsewhere, by St Dionysius the Areopagite, as purification, illumination and union.

In the icon Mary is shown twice. In the first case she is shown in transition from the first to the second stage - the active life of obedience to her parents to the contemplation of the logoi within the temple. In the second case she is being prepared to pass from illumination to union with God.

The roundness of the ciborium is reminiscent of a womb. At first this union is a mystical one, effected by God through her prayer and obedience. Later, this is to bear fruit in the union of the Incarnation, God taking flesh through her.

Of these three stages it is the second - illumination - on which the icon concentrates. The tapers and the tall central tower emphasize this middle period.

## **THEMES**

The inner meaning of this apocryphal account is clear: Mary is being prepared for her future participation in the Incarnation. As the future human temple of God Himself, she superseded the old temple made by human hands. Her entrance into the temple is really the entrance of the true Ark of the Covenant into the temple.

*The holy Ark enters into the house of God, there to feed upon divine grace. (Canticle 6, Canon of Matins)*

## **Spiritual directors**

In both phases of Mary's preparation she has spiritual directors, first her parents and then Zachariah. She is no loner, doing her own thing. Obedience was at the heart of her preparation. All the Marian feasts have as their Liturgy the Gospel reading Luke 10:38-42;11:27-28. In the last verse Christ puts His mother's obedience to God above her being His mother:

*A certain woman of the company lifted up her voice, and said to Him, Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts which You have sucked. But He said, Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it.*

In Vespers a hymn has Anna say:

*O Zacharias, take her who the prophets of God proclaimed in the spirit, and lead her into the holy temple, there to be brought up in reverence, that she may become the divine Throne of the Master*

*of all, His place, His resting-place, and His dwelling filled with light. ("Lord I have cried", Great Vespers)*

She is both the temple and the ark of the covenant, the temple because the spirit will overshadow her as did the glory of God over the tent of meeting, and ark because she will contain the bread of life, the manna from heaven, the will of the Father and fulfilment of the law represented by the tablets of Moses.

Why are stages necessary? If God is infinite and we finite there is no other way than to pass from glory to glory, stage by stage. Also, this movement from physical to spiritual affirms our bi-partite nature, as a union of matter and spirit.

The journey of Christ begins to gather up all things fragmented by the fall, as says St Maximus the Confessor. Parenthood, monasticism in the temple, the temple worship, the furnishings of the temple are fulfilled in her and in Christ, deification.

## **THE ANNUNCIATION** **25 March**

### **THE ICON**

Common to all icons are of course the figures of Gabriel and Mary. Generally (though not always) some form of building is placed behind Mary. This is to affirm that the event occurred indoors, but also provides an opportunity to suggest her Old Testament types, most notably as temple, gateway, Holy of Holies, throne, and veil.

If a structure is set behind the Archangel it is simpler, to give emphasis to Mary. Sometimes it steps downwards, to reflect the archangel's descent from heaven.

The pose of the Virgin varies, each variation emphasizing different aspects of the event and her reaction to it. Sometimes her body is turned away but her head turned toward the angel, as though met by surprise. This reflects her humility in not expecting such a divine visitation. "She was greatly troubled by the saying" the Gospel account tells us. A spool of yarn is shown falling from her hand in surprise.

The yarn is important. The Protoevangelion tells us that among the virgins who did work for the temple, the lot had fallen to Mary to spin the "true purple and scarlet" yarn. This was to be used for the veil between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. This veil is in fact a type of the flesh of Christ:

*Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the veil, that is, his body... (Hebrews 10,19,20)*

Sometimes Mary's hand is open, palm outwards. This shows her wise initial non-acceptance of the startling promise. "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" she replies to Gabriel's promise of conception. Far from suggesting lack of faith, this questioning is hailed in the liturgical texts as a humble, wise and sober testing of spirits, and as such contrasts with Eve's undiscerning acceptance of the serpent's promise.



Often the Virgin is shown leaning away from Gabriel, and looking outside the picture. She is stepping outside the situation, to "consider in her mind what sort of greeting this might be." Although she is pliant to the will of God when she is convinced it is the will of God, she is initially active in testing the visitation.

In other icons her hand is open but is raised close to her ear, as though listening. This shows her quiet, contemplative character. The fact of her sitting and silently working at spinning adds to this sense of patient waiting upon the Lord, like a handmaid.

In other icons her hand is upon her breast. This is an attitude of acceptance: having finally been convinced that the visitation is from God she says: "Let it be to me according to your word."

When the Virgin is shown sitting, this shows not only her contemplative nature but also her superiority over the archangel; she is like an enthroned queen seated while her courtiers stand. Bodiless angels can never share directly in the mystery of the Incarnation. Humans by contrast can know not only a spiritual, "angelic" unity with the Word, but also a union according to the flesh with the incarnate Word.

When icons show Mary standing, it is to show her attentiveness, as though standing in prayer, erect in her stance as someone made in the image of God, a god speaking to God. Compared to her small size and lowly position in previous festal icons, here she has reached full stature. She is ready physically and spiritually to receive God, being no longer a child in body or wisdom.

In contrast to the Virgin's receptive stance, the archangel's stance is always active - through Gabriel it is God who has taken the initiative. His legs are apart, as though striding.

Sometimes the angel's wing is in the air, indicating that the angel has just swooped down from heaven. His hand reaches out to the virgin, as sign of his speech and also the blessing of God to her. Sometimes he has two fingers outstretched, a symbol of the two natures of Christ.

Gabriel usually holds a staff, as though travelling.

*"In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee..."* (Luke 1:26)

The staff is a sign also of authority and power, like a ruler's sceptre.

Apart from on the festal panel icon, the Annunciation is also depicted on the Royal Doors, which open between the sanctuary and the nave. The priest must pass through these doors to bring the Gospels out to be read, for the bread and wine offerings to be laid on the altar, and for the consecrated gifts to be brought out to the people. These things are all possible only through the incarnation, the Annunciation. The incarnation is what unites heaven, symbolized by the sanctuary, and earth, symbolized by the nave. The royal doors are at the interface of these two.

Usually a semicircle is shown on the top edge of the icon, with a ray of light coming down pointing to the Virgin's womb. Often the ray breaks into three at the end, which symbolizes the fact that all three Persons of the Trinity are acting with one will and one power. In each of God's deeds, one of the Persons is the prime actor (in this case, the Holy Spirit, who conceives the Word in the Virgin's womb), but the other two are acting through this Person.

## **TEMPLE THEMES**

### **Mary as Temple**

The building itself represents the temple, for Mary is the temple of God, the means by which God permanently dwells within and is united to our human nature.

*The Tabernacle of the human nature which the Lord took upon Himself, making divine the substance He assumed, is consecrated as a Temple of God. (Lity)*

*Do you not know that your are God's temple, and God's Spirit dwells in you? (1 Cor. 3:16)*

*From thee has Christ our God and our Salvation taken human nature, raising it up unto Himself. (Lity)*

*In times of old Adam was once deceived: he sought to become God, but received not his desire. Now God becomes man, that he may make Adam God. (Lity of Matins)*

### **The Shekinah glory and gold**

The gold in icons is not mere decoration. It represents the presence of God, the Shekinah glory. There are three ways it is used in icons: as background, in which case it represents the sustaining presence of God, in whom we "live and move and have our being," as St Paul said. There is then the halo, which represents God indwelling and radiating out from the saints. And then we have gold lines painted onto inanimate matter such as garments, buildings and furniture, called *assist*. This represents the material world transfigured, participating in uncreated light as much as its nature allows.

### **Mary as veil**

The parted veil behind Mary represents of course the veil between the Holy Place - which can be taken to represent earth - and the Holy of Holies, which represents heaven. This veil, as we have seen, represents our humanity which God has assumed and made the means of union. The veil has become door, sinful humanity has become God-bearing flesh, the Body of Christ. This is why Mary is often shown with the spool of scarlet thread. Her spinning this thread for the veil at the time of the Annunciation symbolizes the fact that Mary's whole life - and in fact the whole history of Israel - was a preparation of our humanity to receive God.

### **Mary as the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat/ark-cover**

As has been noted earlier, the ark contained manna, Aaron's budding branch and the tablets of the law. It is not therefore surprising that the liturgical texts tell us that the ark prefigures Mary, who is to bear the Bread of Life, the one who dies on the life-giving cross (Aaron's budding rod), and who is the Giver of the law. In a hymn of Matins, the archangel Gabriel says to Mary:

*As an Ark of gold, O spotless Maiden, receive now the Giver of the Law, who through thee has been pleased to deliver the corrupt nature of mankind. (Matins, Canticle Seven)*

A lid of solid gold was placed on the ark to cover it. This was called in Hebrew the *kapporet* (the atonement piece) and in the Greek Septuagint, the *hilasterion* or "thing of propitiation"). Either side of the lid were the cherubim. God's presence was revealed over the throne, amidst the cherubim.

The icon of the Annunciation shows a throne behind Mary, and the liturgical texts make it clear that she is the throne upon which God sits:

*Hail fiery throne, more glorious by far than the living creatures with four faces. (Great Compline, referring to the vision described in Ezekiel 1: 1-28)*

### **Our Lady of the Sign**

We can take a break from the festal icons to look briefly at the icon type called our Lady of the Sign. This title is of course taken from Isaiah 7:14,

*Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Emmanuel.*

Although this icon is not an icon of the temple as such, it clearly depicts the paradox of the creator and sustainer of all things dwelling in a womb, as in a temple. Whilst Christ is fully human He remains, even as a child, the sustainer of the universe. Often the Christ child is shown within a mandorla, which represents heaven and the divine radiance of the Word. But it is also the Virgin's womb: her womb has become heaven, the dwelling place of God.

### **Mary as the new Eve**

Although not often found in icons of the Annunciation, sometimes, as in a 12th century work from Sinai, a tree is included. This suggests Paradise and by implication suggests Mary as the new Eve. She reverses the effects of the fall introduced in Paradise. Through her obedience the gate to paradise is opened. The following text is taken from the imagined conversation between Mary and the Archangel described in the Canon for Matins of the feast:

*My mother, Eve, accepting the suggestion of the serpent, was banished from divine delight; and therefore I fear thy strange salutation, for I take heed lest I slip. (Canticle 3, Matins Canon)*

Service texts sometimes call Mary the second Eve. By the disobedience of the first Eve, death entered the human race. But by the obedience and discernment of the second Eve, Life Himself came to dwell among men, and the Tree of Life was planted on earth.

Far from rebuking Mary for her hesitancy, the archangel actually praises her:

*Thou dost think, so it seems, that I utter words deceitfully; and I rejoice to see thy prudence. (Canticle 1, Matins canon)*

Christian faith is not merely the capacity to believe, but is also the ability to discern truth from error, to choose aright the object of our belief.

## **THE MEETING OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE**

**(also known as the Presentation of Christ in the Temple or the Purification of the Virgin)**

**2 February**

### **Background**

By Old Testament law every first-born male child had to be consecrated to God (Exodus 13:2). It was in fact a form of purchasing back the first born child, which was God's. The first born was raised by the parents on behalf of its true father, who was God. The sacrifice was to redeem the child back, a reminder that he was "on loan", to prepare for his work as a consecrated child of God (Exodus 13:1,2,12,15). This is somewhat like the ram which replaced Isaac so Abraham did not have to sacrifice him.

Forty days after the birth the mother also had to go to the temple for ritual purification. She had to present offerings for sacrifice, which if she were poor were two turtle doves or pigeons (Leviticus 12:6-8). These two events - particularly Christ's presentation but also Mary's ritual purification, are what are commemorated in this feast.

It is called the Meeting because Christ meets his people. In the West it is also called the Presentation of the Lord, or else the Purification of the Virgin.

The facts are laid out in Luke 2:22-38. This tells us that when Mary and Joseph entered the temple they were met by a righteous man called Simeon. He was very old and had been waiting for the coming of the Messiah. It had been revealed to him by the spirit that "he would not die before seeing the Lord's Christ". An aged prophetess called Anna also came and prophesied and spoke of Him to all who were awaiting the Messiah.

Mary holds and offers the Lord to Simeon, with Anna behind and Joseph to the left. Anna holds a scroll, the sign of a prophet. Joseph holds the two turtle doves, the offering stipulated in law for poor people. Often they are shown sitting in Joseph's hands without the need for a cage, since they recognize Christ as their maker and are happy to be sacrificed on His behalf.

As with the icon of Mary's entrance into the temple, the architecture has symbolic significance, although their arrangement varies considerably between icons. Some icons show Christ in front of an altar. The icons usually depict the temple precisely like an Orthodox church, with a low chancel screen and ciborium. The steps on the right recall the icon of Mary's Entry into the Temple. Some icons show no altar and instead emphasize the meeting of Simeon and Christ, the Old and New Covenants. Other icons, like the illumination from the Menalogion of Basil II (c. 1000AD) strips everything down to the sanctuary furnishings of an early Christian temple: altar, chancel screen, royal doors and ciborium.

But in general there are three structures, representing the Inner Court, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies. These can also be related to the three stages of the spiritual life: purification, illumination and union. We read in Luke 2:52 that "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man". He was prepared as a human for his ministry.

## THEMES OF THE ICON AND LITURGICAL TEXTS

Mary gives her child back to the Father. Unlike Adam and Eve who grasped at created gifts without thanksgiving, Mary (and Joseph as stepfather) offer their very own son back to God, thereby acknowledging life itself as gift. This strong bond between Mother and Child is shown in icons where the Christ child is reaching out to Mary as the old man Simeon holds him. In other icons, Christ pulls away for the old man Simeon, as though scared and not wanting to leave the arms of its mother. Perhaps also, as God the Christ-child knows of His coming death and offering as a sacrifice, and as a human, is naturally afraid.

### **Mary as offerer**

The feast of Meeting prefigures the Eucharist, since Christ is both the sacrifice and the priest. Mary offers Christ in front of the altar, just as the Orthodox faithful do when they offer bread and wine at the beginning of the Holy Liturgy, later to be consecrated. In the Liturgy the Orthodox have the Little Entrance when the Bible is processed, and then the Great Entrance, when the bread and wine are processed from the side chapel (*proskomedía*) through the holy doors and onto the altar, there to be consecrated later.

*Now the God of purity as a holy Child has opened a pure womb,  
and as God He is brought as an offering to Himself... (Lity)*

In the Orthodox Liturgy there is the prayer: "Thine own of Thine own, we offer unto Thee, on behalf of all and for all."

### **Mary holds the burning coal**

The feast's liturgical texts often speak of Christ being the burning coal which Isaiah beheld in his vision:

*Christ the coal of fire, whom holy Isaiah foresaw, now rests in the arms of the Theotokos as in a pair of tongs, and He is given to the Elder. ((Small Vespers))*

The biblical text describing Isaiah's vision is also one of the set readings for the feast (Isaiah 6:1-12). The angel picks up the coal with tongs and touches Isaiah's lips. These texts therefore give great emphasis to the divinity of Christ. In icons of the feast we see that Simeon does not hold Christ in his naked hands, but has a cloth draped over his hands. And Christ is usually shown in bright orange garments, with gold lines (called *assist*), all indicating the Child's divinity.

A burning coal is a material substance united to "immaterial" heat and fire. This image of coal as matter and heat united is often used by Church fathers as an image of Christ, of Mary bearing God without being consumed, and of saints who are deified.

However, apart from these two elements of the cloth over Simeon's hands and Christ's radiant garments, the festal icons seem to make more of Christ's humanity, His humility in becoming small and vulnerable that He may be offered as a sacrifice. St. Hilary of Poitiers (315-367) wrote:

*His humility is our ennoblement: His shame is our honour. He who is God co-existed with us in the flesh, and thus have we*

*been restored from the flesh to the divine nature. ("On the Trinity" 2:25)*

### **The Lord Meets His People**

*This is He who spoke through the Law: this is He whose voice was heard in the prophets. (Lord I have Cried, Great Vespers)*

The whole of the Old Testament times was a preparation for Israel to bring forth the Saviour. Its laws and prophecies and temple practices were all types of Christ. They were Christ speaking to the world through written and spoken prophetic word, through ritual, ordinances, architecture, and temple furnishings. In Christ's entry into the temple, the hitherto invisible speaker becomes visible and meets His people. We feel the whole of Israel sighing in Simeon:

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.*

### **The firstborn of a new race**

*We magnify the firstborn Word and Son of the Father without beginning, the firstborn Child of a Mother who had not known man. (Matins Canon)*

By being presented as the firstborn child the Lord shows us that He is the first of a whole new race, a new Israel, a Church of people "born from above":

*To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born not of blood nor of the will of man but of God. (John 1:12,13)*

### **The feminine recognizes God**

The Gospel texts often have women meeting and believing in Christ and His divinity before men do, or at least at the same time. For example the myrrh bearers are the first people to encounter the empty tomb. And while many of the male disciples abandon Christ at the cross, Mary the Mother of Christ is there, as are other of the Marys. The role of the lady is re-established. And this radiant role of the feminine is reflected in the icon tradition, especially of course in making Mary central in so many icons, but also in placing other women in important positions. So it is that the prophetess Anna is included in the icon of the Meeting:

*Ann was proved to be a prophetess, preaching the Saviour and Deliverer of Israel. (Great Vespers)*

### **WALL PAINTINGS OF MARY IN THE CHRISTIAN TEMPLE**

Perhaps I am overstepping my theme here, but I would like to finish by mentioning wall images of Mary found in the Orthodox Christian temple. Apart from on the icon screen on the north side of the royal doors, and festal scenes spread throughout the church walls, the most common places that images of Mary are found are the apse and often also on the triumphal arch, with Gabriel on the left and Mary on the right, together forming the Annunciation.

The placing of Mary in the apse is significant. We have Christ Pantocrator in the lofty dome, far above. And yet He deigns to come to earth, and He does this through the womb-like apse, where Mary the Mother of God is depicted.

Mary is also strongly linked to the Eucharist by being depicted near the altar, or the Holy Table as it is called in Orthodox terminology. This link of Mary and Eucharist is particularly strong when below her are depicted hierarchs concelebrating with the priest or bishop at the altar. We too, like Mary, become God-bearers through the descent of the Holy Spirit, through the epiclesis when we pray that God "send down upon us and upon these Thy gifts, the Holy Spirit" that we may eat and drink the Body and Blood of the Lord. This descent of the Spirit completes the temple, for it is the Shekinah glory of God transfiguring and deifying His creation.

The Annunciation scene on the triumphal arch likewise draws us into the sacred drama, since Gabriel and Mary are conversing across the actual space inhabited by the congregation. The congregation are being asked by the archangel if they too wish to be "theophoroi" or God-bearers, if they wish to become temples of the Holy Spirit and Christ bearers.