

every person is called. This is why God has created us, so that we may live in continual communion with Him and true that we may live in continual communion with Him and experience His presence intimately woven into our existence. Every human being is not fully human until he or she is also "full of grace."

One of the greatest of Orthodox theologians and spiritual guides was St. Symeon the New Theologian, who lived in the tenth and early eleventh centuries in the area around Constantinople. He makes the direct connection between the birth of the Son of God from the Theotokos and the birth of the Word in the souls of the saints. He says,

*God, the Son of God, entered into the womb of the all-holy Theotokos and, taking flesh from her and becoming man, was born... Now, pay attention! What greater thing has ever happened for us? All of us who believe in the same Son of God and Son of the ever-virgin Theotokos, Mary, and who, believing receive the work concerning Him faithfully in our hearts; when we confess Him with our mouths and repent our former lawlessness from the depths of our souls, then immediately — just as God, the Word of the Father, entered the Virgin's womb—even so do we receive the Word in us, as a kind of seed...We do not, of course, conceive Him bodily as did the Virgin and Theotokos, but in a way which is at once spiritual and substantial. And that One Whom the pure Virgin conceived we possess in our hearts...given, that is, that our souls, too, are virginal and pure.(5)*

As we see from Symeon's words, for Christ to be planted and born within us should not be regarded as something extraordinary and reserved only for the very few, but is what should in fact be true for every Christian. Each of us is called to become Mary and to conceive Christ with our very being, to become pregnant with the Word and to give birth to His presence in our souls. Mary shows us that this is possible, and how it can be possible for us. With her example of absolute humility, devotion to God, steadfast faith, and fervent love, the Most Holy Mother of God leads the way for us out of the dark and wretched sorrow of our sins into the joy of God's continual presence.

By Helen Creticos Theodoropoulos

Excerpted from an address given March 23, 1996.

**Notes**

- (1) "The Virgin Mary," in The Celebration of Faith: Sermons, vol. 3. Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995, p. 36.
- (2) Luke 1:38.
- (3) Luke 2:51.
- (4) Matthew the Poor, The Communion of Love (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), p. 212.
- (5) Symeon the New Theologian, On the Mystical Life. The Ethical Discourses, vol. 1: The Church and the Last Things, Eth. 1.10, (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), pp. 55-56.

(Cover Icon written by Igor Stoyanov, of Odessa, Ukraine. It hangs on the iconostas of our church)

**Orthodox Church of the Mother of God**

Mays Landing, NJ  
Hudson St & Ivan's Lane,  
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**Days the church remembers this ICON:**

**Feast - October 24<sup>th</sup> and November 19<sup>th</sup>**

**The Icon of the Mother of God "Joy of All Who Sorrow"** was glorified by wonderworking in the year 1688. A sister by birth of Patriarch Joakim (1674-1690), Evphymia, who lived at Moscow, for a long time suffered from an incurable illness. One morning during a time of prayer she heard a voice: "Evphymia! Go thou to the temple of the Transfiguration of My Son; an image is there, named **"Joy of All Who Sorrow."** Have the priest serve a molieben with a blessing of water, and thou wilt receive healing from sickness." Evphymia, having learned that in Moscow was actually such an icon in the church of the Transfiguration on Ordynka, did the bidding of the Most Holy Mother of God, and she was healed. This occurred on 24 October 1688.

**Feast - July 23<sup>rd</sup>**

The account about the icon of the Mother of God "Joy of All Who Sorrow" (with its petty change welded by a bolt of lightning), manifest at Petersburg in 1888:

**The Icon of the Mother of God "Joy of All Sorrowing"** ("With Petty Change") was glorified in the year 1888 in Petersburg, when during the time of a terrible thunderstorm lightning struck in a chapel, but the icon of the Queen of Heaven situated in it remained unharmed; to it however was melted small metal coins (half-kopeck pieces), laying before the icon. A church was built in 1898 on the spot of the chapel.



For more on Orthodox Christianity see:  
<http://ChurchMotherOfGod.org>  
<http://www.oca.org> and  
[http://nynjoca.org/about\\_orthodoxy.html](http://nynjoca.org/about_orthodoxy.html)

**Orthodox Church of the Mother of God,**

*Joy of the Sorrowful*

About the Patron of our Parish

**Deep within the heart of the Church,**

in the place where sorrow and joy meet and where our bitter tears are kissed away by a mother's love, we encounter the Most Holy Mother of God. The Church in its devotion to the Ever-Virgin Mary has always known that she is a mystery and a gift given to us by God. The Theotokos is a mystery that can be experienced and encountered, and yet never explained or described in words of logic and science, and she is a gift that brings radiant joy and comfort in the midst of darkness and need. Through the centuries the Church has expressed its love for her through countless hymns, has praised her in its most exquisite poetry and song, and has portrayed her in its most beautiful and beloved icons. No other saint is the subject of so much devotion, and no other saint has so many miracles attributed him or her.



In its wisdom the Church has hesitated to define the mystery of the Theotokos. We come to know her not through formal theological statements but through our relationship with her, person to person and heart to heart. Let us explore who Mary is as we encounter her in this territory of the heart. Because she is so present to us in our neediness, and her intercession is so critical to the life of the Church, let us focus on this aspect of her presence: that she is the **Joy of All Who Sorrow**.

This title is taken from a wonder-working icon known by that name that came from a hospital in twelfth century Kiev. This icon depicts the Blessed Mother of God—the most beautiful bloom of heaven—standing among the flowers of paradise.

Appearing above her in the clouds is the Ruler of heaven and earth, her Son, and along the edges of the icon, framing the Theotokos on both sides, are suppliants (us) asking for her intercession. Her tenderness and loving-kindness are evident in her face and demeanor as she stands with her arms spread open and her head tilted as if listening to us. Let us allow this icon to draw us into the mystery of her presence so that we may discover how she is our joy in the midst of all sorrows. We shall see that she can be for us both our joy in the midst of the physical and emotional pain and grief we suffer in this life, as well as our joy in the midst of the sorrow and burden of sin under which we struggle. Let us look at each of these aspects of her presence to us in turn.

In every moment of our suffering, the Holy Mother of God is there. First and foremost she is there because she is also our mother, and she loves us with the all-embracing love of a mother. She is our mother because Christ gave her to us. As He lay dying on the Cross, Our Lord turned to His mother and to His disciple John, and to the latter He said, "Behold your mother" (John 19:26-27). These words were spoken to St. John, and within the historical context of the event we can say that, on one level, Jesus was placing His mother in the disciple's care, so that after His death she would not be without the assistance that a son can offer. But on a deeper level we can understand these words as being spoken to all believers. We can understand that through these words our Lord blessed the world with the gift of His mother, and that at the Cross she adopted all who are believers as her sons and her daughters. Father Alexander Schmemmann, one of the foremost Orthodox theologians in this century, explains how the feast of the **Protection of the Mother of God** is best understood as, "the image of a Mother protecting, covering, and comforting her afflicted children." He then says that, "this feast became the heart of that experience of Mary as Mother, of the one who at the Cross was given to all humanity as Mother and who as Mother brings into her own heart all our sorrows, all our sufferings, all unbearable pain of our earthly existence...."<sup>(1)</sup>

However, long before the Cross, at the very moment of Jesus' conception, Mary in truth became our mother. When she became mother of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Mary became the mother of all humanity now re-created in Christ. She became our mother not just symbolically, but literally and in spiritual reality. This is because at His conception Christ took His humanity from Mary. When we share in the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, we are united with Him and, through Him, we share with Him the mother from whom He took His very body and blood. This is a great mystery that is understood not through science but through the great wisdom of the heart.

Because Mary is our mother, she feels our pain. Because she is His mother, the Mother of God, she intercedes for us, bringing our pain into His presence, praying our prayers with love, bringing our needs into the unique relationship of love that a mother shares with her child, so that now our requests are spoken

with her voice of love. Her intercession is unceasing and her love is without boundaries. Death does not separate her from us or end her intercession for us. Indeed, in the kontakion of the Matins for the **Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos** we sing,

*Neither the tomb nor death has power over the Theotokos, who is ever watchful in her prayers and in whose intercession lies unfailing hope. For as the Mother of Life she has been transported into life by Him who dwelt within her ever-virgin womb.*

She stands in paradise now, directly before the face of God, speaking to Him face to face. She is in paradise, and yet among us, for her heart, though centered in God, yet holds us there with her too. She is our joy because in her love she hears our cries, shares our tears, and brings consolation in the midst of our suffering. She is our voice in heaven before God, a pure and unfailing voice, a tender and loving voice.

Mary also brings us joy by showing us how to endure and experience the trials of this life. She was an innocent woman barely out of childhood when she accepted God's call. What He asked of her was beyond words, beyond belief. Surely she knew it would also be difficult beyond anything imaginable, and yet she must have known just as surely that the grace of God would sustain her. We hear from her no word of complaint, never a word of real doubt, never a cry of despair. What do we hear in the Gospels of her? We hear her say, "**Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word,**"<sup>(2)</sup> and later we hear "**and His mother kept all these things in her heart.**"<sup>(3)</sup> In utter humility she waits upon the Lord.

Mary was truly able to pray to God, "**Your will be done.**" She was able to so join her will to God's will that they became one. The Most Holy Virgin knew that, although in this life it leads through suffering, nevertheless God's will is the only path that will assuredly end in joy. But we should not say that she simply accepted God's will. This sounds as if she merely agreed passively to her fate. This is not at all an accurate picture of Mary's response. We should say rather that she embraced God's will with eagerness and joy, with open arms and an overflowing heart. By her example Mary teaches us to not merely resign ourselves to God's path in this life. Rather, we should welcome God's will as we welcome the coming of spring after a bitter winter, or as we welcome a loved one who has been gone for a long time. We should cry out with great joy, as Christ Himself taught us, "Your will be done!"



We rejoice in her "**Let it be to me according to your word**" because it unlocked the prison of our slavery to sin. She was the one who was chosen, and yet she is also the one who chooses. In her total, unquestioning devotion to God, in her emptying of herself to be everything for God, she chose freedom and life for all humanity, through her Son and Savior. Furthermore, she is also the joy of all who sorrow in the depths of sin, for she is the first human to be entirely filled with the grace of God and to experience what we are all called to become, namely divine by grace. She is the image, the icon of the perfect human being as humans were created to be: filled with grace. What greater perfection is there than to be full of grace? And that grace has been perfected for the salvation of the world, for our salvation. The bounty of grace in Mary has a twofold benefit for us; first, the divine grace within her is a powerful aid to us in our repentance and regeneration, and second, it is the foreshadowing of the destiny of all who depart from sin and are reborn into the life of Christ.

Let us first see how the grace of God present in the Theotokos becomes an aid to raise us from the darkness of our sinfulness. The Holy Mother of God prays incessantly for our salvation. But the intercession of the Virgin on account of our sinfulness must be properly understood. She herself does not forgive our sins; only God can do so. When she intercedes for us she raises us to her place before God and endows us with her powers, that is, with her grace and purity and holiness. A Coptic Orthodox monk by the name of Matta el Meskin, or Matthew the Poor, explains how this happens. He says:

*When the Virgin intercedes for our aid, healing, or repentance, she draws us into the realm of her relationship with Christ. In Orthodoxy, intercession raises us to the level of the intercessor, bringing us into the presence of Christ, then the mediator disappears. This is to say that intercession is a communion with Christ by grace; the Virgin grants us all the powers granted to her so that we might come before Christ.... We take from the Virgin the courage that derives from her purity and the audacity that derives from her motherhood and her unique love for Christ. All these things are considered to have been granted to her for our sake, and she, in her great confidence before God, is able to transfer them to us, just as a stronger member in the body grants its strength to a weaker one.<sup>(4)</sup>*

But, as I said earlier, the Theotokos is more than mediator; she is also the icon of who we are to be, and in this we also rejoice. The image we see of ourselves in sin is misshapen and ugly. When we gaze on what we have become in sin we can only feel despair and loathing. But as we turn our gaze to the Virgin we see before us the vision of our destiny, if we receive the grace of salvation and re-creation offered to us in Jesus Christ. How is this possible? After all, she is unique in all creation, for she alone has given birth to the Son of God. And, of course, it is true that we cannot physically duplicate her unique work. And yet we can, indeed, give birth to the Word in our souls. This is the great mystery of the transfiguration, or deification, to which each and