

Most Holy Mother Of God

So many questions and controversies arise when the Holy Mother of God is mentioned in conversation. She is probably one of the most debated figures of history. To shed some light on what the Orthodox believe about the Theotokos is a series of questions below followed by an Orthodox answer.

Question: Why do you pray to the Mother of God?

Answer: Since Jesus Christ died on the Cross and rose from the dead, conquering death for us, there is no reason why we cannot ask those in heaven to pray for us just as we ask those still living on earth for their prayers. After all, in Christ all are alive. Therefore we ask the Ever-Virgin Mary to pray to her Son for us, just as we also ask the angels, the saints, and all the faithful believers here on earth to pray on our behalf, as Scripture commands us to do: "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, and giving of thanks, be made for all men... I will therefore, that men pray everywhere" (I Timothy 2:1,8). We turn readily to our friends and neighbors to ask for their prayers in our time of need; are not those in heaven even more our friends than those on earth? Why should they not intercede for us also before the throne of God?

Question: Why do Orthodox Christians call the Virgin Mary "Mother of God"? This term seems to imply that God is not the the creator and origin of all things.

Answer: We call the Holy Virgin Mary the Mother of God (from the Greek, Theotokos: literally, the "Birthgiver of God") because it is Scriptural: the righteous Elizabeth addressed the Virgin with these words: "And whence is this to me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me" (St. Luke 1:43). Who is this "Lord" of which Elizabeth speaks? It is Christ, the Lord God. For this reason we say, correctly, that the Virgin Mary is the Mother of God. She is not the Mother of God the Father, but the Mother of God the Son, who was begotten by the Father before all ages, and took flesh from the Virgin Mary.

Question: Why do Orthodox Christians give so much honor to the Mother of God?

Answer: We honor her because Jesus Christ Himself honored her on several occasions recorded in Scripture. He fulfilled her requests and also gave her special thought even while He was dying on the cross (St. Luke 2:51; St. John 2:3-9; St. John 19: 26-27). Even before Christ was born, she was honored by heaven when the Archangel Gabriel appeared and said to her: "Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women" (St. Luke 1:28).

Holy Scripture further proclaims of her that "henceforth all generations shall call me blessed" (St. Luke 1:48), because from her womb came forth God in the flesh. This means that all who believe in Christ and in the Bible must give special honor and veneration to the one that is "blessed among women." It is not enough to merely give

attention to her at Christmas-time, when she appears in the manger scenes of western Christian churches. No, this "highly favored one" must occupy a very special place in the hearts of those that follow her Son, just as she did among the first Christians.

Question: Didn't our Lord, during His earthly life, sometimes place His mother (and His other kinsmen) in a decidedly secondary position, emphasizing spiritual virtues over kinship according to the flesh?

Answer: No one who accepts the Gospel can believe that our Lord was in any way lacking respect for His mother. And seeming disrespect on His part can only be due to a faulty, superficial interpretation of Scripture, due sometimes to understandably imperfect translations into modern languages.

When, for example, at the marriage of Cana, His mother tells Him: "The have no wine," and our Lord replies: "Women, what have I do to with thee?" (St. John 2:4) -one must understand that although the word "woman" might sound disrespectful in modern English, it was not so in the ancient East; it is the very word our Lord used to address His mother as He was dying on the Cross and entrusted her to His beloved disciple (St. John 19:26). His words to her at the marriage feast in no way indicate disrespect, but only emphasize the importance to the miracle which was to follow (the changing of water into wine) -a miracle which He indeed performed at her request.

When our Lord extends the concept of spiritual kinship to all those who "do the will of God," (St. Mark 3:34) He does not deny such a higher kinship to His own family; we know of several of His kinsmen who were Apostles (James, Jude, Simon), and especially "blessed" in this spiritual kinship, of course, was His own mother, of whom alone does the Scriptures say that "all generations shall call me blessed" (St. Luke 1:48). Again, when a certain woman praises His mother for being the one who bore Him, and our Lord says, "Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it" (St. Luke 11:28), He is clearly raising the minds of His listeners to a higher degree of veneration for His mother: she is blessed not only for hearing Him in the flesh, but even more for being who "hears the word of God and keeps it."

Question: Yet in your church services I have heard Orthodox Christians call on the Mother of God to "save" them. How can she "save" anyone, since Christ is the only Savior?

Answer: We believe that there is only one Lord God and Savior of mankind, Jesus Christ, no one is equal to Him, and no one but Him can save mankind. We do not turn to Mary, the Mother of Christ our God and Savior, and we certainly do not put her on the same level as her son, but we turn to her as to one who helps us by her prayers, just as St. Paul himself said that he had become all things to all men, "that I might by all means and in any way save them" (I Corinthians 9:22). St. Paul was not claiming to

usurp Christ as the Savior; he merely wanted to help and strengthen others on the path to salvation. It is in this sense that we Orthodox Christians say, "Most Holy Mother of God, save us" -that is, "Please help us toward salvation by your prayers."

Source: Based upon the Missionary Handbook Series, "On Questions of the Orthodox Christian Faith Disputed by Sectarians", by Father Deacon J. Smolin, serialized in Orthodox Life, Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, N.Y.