

The Life of the Virgin Mary

The Birth of the Most Holy Virgin Mary

There lived in the town of Nazareth, in Galilee, a man by the name of Joachim with his wife Anna. Joachim was a direct descendant of King David but lived a simple life. Both he and his wife were God-fearing people and were known for their humility and compassion. They never had children and, being very aged, had no chance at having any children. However, not willing to despair, they continued to ask God to send them a child. They even made a vow that if they had an infant, they would dedicate that child to the service of God. At that time, to be childless meant to be punished by God for sins. Childlessness was especially difficult for Joachim since, according to prophecy, the Messiah-Christ was to be born into his family line. On the set time, the Lord finally sent them a great joy; Joachim and Anna had a daughter. The newborn child was given the name of Mary, which means in Hebrew "Mistress of Hope".

Presentation to the Temple

When the Virgin Mary became three years old, Her God-fearing parents prepared themselves to carry out their vow: they took Her to the temple in Jerusalem in order to consecrate Her to God. Mary was left to stay at the temple, in a special school for girls where She was taught the Law of God and working as a servant in the Temple. She prayed and read the Scriptures. The Blessed Virgin lived at the temple for approximately eleven years and grew up to be deeply pious and obedient to Him, as well as very modest and industrious. Willing only to serve God, She gave a vow to never marry and to remain forever a virgin.

The Holy Virgin Mary at Joseph's

Since Joachim and Anna were in advanced old age, they did not live for long after Her presentation to the temple, and the Virgin Mary was left an orphan. When She reached her fourteenth birthday, according to the law, She could no longer stay at the temple and had to wed. The High Priest, being aware of Her vow but reluctant to violate the law of marriage, formally betrothed Her to a distant relative of Hers, the widowed octogenarian Joseph, who promised to care for her and protect her virginity. Joseph lived in the town of Nazareth and also came from the lineage of King David. He was not a wealthy man and worked as a carpenter. Joseph had children from his first marriage: Judah, Simon, James (the Lesser) and Josses (Matthew 13:55), whom the Gospels refer to as "brethren" of Jesus. The Virgin Mary led as modest and solitary a life in the home of Joseph as She did in the temple.

The Annunciation

During Her first year in the house of Joseph, about six months after the appearance of the Angel Gabriel to Zacharias (see Luke 1:8-25), as the birth of the prophet John the Baptist was approaching, the Angel was sent by God into the town of Nazareth to the Holy Virgin with the joyous news that the Lord had chosen Her to become the Mother of the Savior of the world. The Angel, having appeared, told Her, "Rejoice, O Blessed One! (Literally, "filled with grace") The Lord is with you! Blessed art Thou amongst women." Mary was puzzled by the words of the Angel and unsure what this greeting was supposed to mean. The Angel continued by saying to Her: "Fear not, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And therefore, you will bear a Son and shall name Him Jesus. He shall be great and shall be known as the Son of the Most-high, and to His Kingdom there shall be no end." Still puzzled, Mary asked the Angel: "How can that be, since I know not a man?" The Angel replied that this would be accomplished by the power of the omnipotent God: "The Holy Spirit shall come upon Thee,

and the power of the Most-high shall overshadow Thee; therefore, accordingly, that Holy One which shall be born of Thee shall be called the Son of God. Your relative, Elizabeth, not having had any offspring till her very old age, shall soon give birth to a son; for with God nothing shall be impossible." Then Mary humbly answered, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:26-38). After this reply the Holy Spirit descended upon Mary, and She conceived the Word of God. Thus, in the most modest circumstances happened the greatest miracle in the life of mankind! Here the Infinite joined the finite; the Light, unapproachable to Angels, descended into the Virgin's womb!

In discussing this Angelic appearance, the Fathers of the Church underline the wisdom of the young Mary. She was careful not to accept Gabriel's message in haste, remembering what happened to Eve when she believed the serpent. Although God decided to make the Virgin Mary the Mother of the Savior, He wanted Her voluntary consent because He never overpowers or disregards the gift of free will that He gave us.

Visiting the righteous Elizabeth

Having heard that her relative Elizabeth, the wife of the priest Zacharias, would soon bear a son, Mary hastened to visit her. On entering the house, She saluted Elizabeth. Upon hearing Mary's voice, Elizabeth, being filled with the Holy Spirit, recognized Mary to be worthy to become the Mother of the Lord. She cried out aloud and said: "Blessed art Thou amongst women, and Blessed is the Fruit of Thy womb! And from whence is such happiness for me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?"

The Virgin Mary, in answer to Elizabeth's greeting, glorified God with the following words: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my savior. For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden: for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For He that is mighty hath done to me great things; and Holy is His name. And His mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation" (Luke 1:46-50). Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned to Nazareth. When the righteous, aged Joseph learned that Mary was expecting a child, he was scandalized, assuming that something had gone very wrong. Jewish law required unfaithful wives to be mercilessly stoned. But God revealed to Joseph not to be afraid of what had happened and to be kind to Mary. The Angel of God appeared to Joseph in his sleep and told him that Mary would bear a Son through the action of the Holy Spirit, just as the Lord God had predicted through the prophet Isaiah (Is 7:14) and the Angel commanded Joseph to give Him the name "Jesus" Savior —because He shall save people from their sins.

The subsequent Evangelical narratives mention the Virgin Mary in conjunction with the events in the life of Her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, they speak of Her in connection with the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, then His circumcision, the worship of the Magi, the offering brought to the temple on the 40th day, the flight into Egypt, settling in Nazareth, traveling to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover when He reached His twelfth birthday, and so forth. It should be noted that though the Evangelical references to the Virgin Mary are concise, they give the reader a clear comprehension of Her great moral eminence: Her humility, great faith, patience, courage, obedience to God, love and dedication to Him, and devotion to Her Divine Son. From these incidental but characteristic references we see why, in the words of the Angel, She became worthy "to attain favor from God."

The first miracle performed by Jesus Christ, at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, gives us an insight into the great kindness of His Mother and into Her influence on Her Son. These qualities made Her a powerful intercessor for all Christians. Having noticed a shortage of wine at the wedding feast, the Blessed Virgin drew the attention of Her Son to that fact, and though the Lord answered Her cryptically "What is it to Me and You Woman? My hour has not yet come,"

She was not discouraged by this rebuke, being sure that Her Son would not ignore Her plea. She told the servants: "Whatever He tells you, do this." As can be seen from this forewarning to the servants, this undertaking would come to a favorable end. Indeed, Her intercession drew divine intervention to an event in the life of a poor, little-known family. Thus happened the first miracle of Jesus, after which "His disciples believed in Him" (John 2:11).

The Gospels depict the Mother of God as having constant concern for Her Son, following Him in His journeys, always ready to help Him at any time, caring for His well-being and tranquility at home, which He always refused to take advantage of. Finally, we see Her standing in indescribable grief by the Cross of Her Crucified Son, hearing His final words and commandments, entrusting Her care to His beloved pupil. Not a word of reproach or despair left Her lips. She conceded all to the will of God. This was the time of Her supreme greatness.

Again, briefly, there is mention of the Virgin Mary in the Acts of the Holy Apostles when, upon Her as well as the Apostles, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of fiery tongues. After that, according to tradition, She lived some 10 to 20 years. Fulfilling the Lord's will, the Apostle John the Theologian, author of the fourth Gospel, took Her into his home, and with great love, as if being Her own son, he cared for Her till Her very end. When the Christian faith spread to other countries, many Christians came from far off countries to see and hear Her. From that time the Most Holy Virgin Mary became a mother to all of Christ's pupils and a high example of virtue.

The Dormition:

Once, as the Holy Virgin prayed on the Mount of Olives (near Jerusalem), the Angel Gabriel appeared to Her, as he had the first time in Nazareth, holding in his hand a branch with a white flower from Paradise, and announced to Her that in three days Her earthly life would come to an end and that the Lord would take Her to Him. The Lord arranged it so that toward that time the Apostles congregated in Jerusalem from the many parts of the world where they were preaching. At the hour of Her end, a bright light illuminated the room in which the Virgin Mary was lying. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself, surrounded by Angels, appeared and received Her most pure soul. The Apostles buried Her holy body, according to Her wish, at the foot of the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane, in the cave where reposed the bodies of her parents and of the righteous Joseph. During the burial, many miracles came to pass. By touching the bier of the Mother of God, the blind regained their sight, demons were exorcised, and many diseases were cured.

Three days after the burial of the Theotokos, there arrived belatedly the Apostle Thomas, who had missed the burial. He was very distraught at not having paid his last respects to the Mother of Jesus and wished to see Her body for the last time. When the cave in which the Virgin Mary was buried was opened, Her body was not found, but only Her burial clothes. The Apostles returned to their home in amazement. In the evening during their prayers, they heard Angels singing. Glancing upward, the Apostles saw the Most Holy Virgin surrounded by Angels, in radiant heavenly glory. She said to the Apostles: "Rejoice! I am with you for all the days and nights."

She has been fulfilling this promise to help and defend Christians to the present day, having become our heavenly Mother. For Her great love and all-powerful help, Christians always have honored Her and turned to Her for help, appealing to Her as the "Fervent intercessor for the Christian race, the Joy of all those who grieve, Who did not abandon us after Her Dormition." From these earliest times, following the example of the prophet Isaiah and the righteous Elizabeth, all Christians began to address Her as the Mother of God or Theotokos, and this title was confirmed during the Third Ecumenical Council (431 AD) in Ephesus.

The Most Holy Virgin Mary serves as great example to all those who are striving for perfection. She was the first who decided to dedicate Her whole life to God and who showed that voluntary virginity is higher than wedded life. From the first centuries, in emulating Her and Her Son and other prophets and apostles, many Christians began to pass their life in virginity, prayer, fasting, meditation and contemplation. Thus, the monastic life arose, and there appeared many monasteries, which became sources of inspiration for a pious life and spiritual wisdom.

Unfortunately, the present ungodly world does not appreciate and even sometimes ridicules the advancement of virginity, disregarding the words of the Lord: "For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs (virgins) for the kingdom of heaven's sake." To this the Lord added this very unambiguous directive: "He who is able to accept it, let him accept it" (Matthew 19:12).

In reviewing the earthly life of the Theotokos, it is essential to emphasize that, just as at the moment of Her greatest glory, when She was chosen to become the Mother of the Savior, as well as at the hour of Her greatest grief, by the prophecy of the righteous Simon, as She stood at the foot of the Cross when "a weapon pierced Her soul," She displayed complete self-control and faith in God. In all events, big or small, She invariably manifested the strength and beauty of Her virtues: humility, perseverance, patience, courage, hope in the Lord and unbounded love for Him! That is why we Christians hold Her in such high esteem and want to emulate Her.

On the Feast of Dormition (August 22nd -Misra 16th)

"The repose of the Theotokos is best explained through the Dormition icon ...The Mother of God has fallen asleep and lies on her deathbed. Christ's apostles have gathered around her, and above her stands Christ Himself holding His Mother in His arms, where she is alive and eternally united with Him. Here we see both death and what was already come to pass in this particular death: not rupture, but union; not sorrow, but joy; and most profoundly, not death, but life. 'In giving birth, you remained a

Virgin and after falling asleep you have not forsaken the world, O Theotokos ... Neither the tomb nor death could hold the Mother of God, who is ever watchful in prayer, in whose intercession lies unfailing hope. For as Mother of Life she was transported to Life..."

The Feasts of the Virgin St. Mary, the Theotokos:

1. The Birth of the Virgin Mary (Bashans 1st)
2. Her Birth according to another reference (Tut 10)
3. Her Entrance to the temple (dedication) (Koiak 3)
4. Her departure (Tuba 21)
5. Departure of Aksani (For the celibate virgins) (Tuba 29)
6. The Consecration of the First Church Named after the Virgin in the city of Philippi (Baouna 21)
7. The Ascension of Her Holy Body (Missra 16)