

Theotokos

One of the titles of the Virgin Mary which we leave in Greek is *Theotokos*. There are a few reasons that we prefer not to translate it into English. The term itself has a fascinating history because of its association with the Nestorian heresy.

The use of this title seems to have been by Origen in his "Commentary on the Romans." Origen has some questionable writings and theologies attributed to him. In and around 250 it was used in a letter from St. Dionysius, the Patriarch of Alexandria, to Paul of Samosata, the Bishop of Antioch. This shows that it is an ancient title.

The title became controversial because Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople refused to use it preferring the title *Christotokos*. For contemporary English speakers, the question is "what's the problem?"

The issue has nothing to do with honor and respect due to the Virgin Mary. The problem is the question of salvation. This statement is a great simplification, but due to space allowed, it will have to do.

Nestorius got the ire of the people with his refusal to use "Theotokos", but he felt that it was a better explanation of the relationship of Jesus to Mary. Nestorius spoke of Christ as "true God by nature and true man by nature... The person is one... There are not two Gods the Words, or two Sons, or two Only-begottens, but one." Those who opposed him understood him to mean that the second person of the Trinity was actually two persons: the man Jesus who was born, suffered and died and the divine Logos, eternal and unbegotten. So if you ask what the Nestorian heresy was, the simple answer is that Jesus is a man that was born of the Virgin and at some point, the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, entwined Himself in the man. So Jesus is two persons in one body. So when Jesus died on the cross, only the human person died and suf-

fered. This becomes a problem for the question of salvation because if only the man died, it is like the death of any other human being and therefore could not bring about salvation. For those who want theological exactitude: Nestorius taught that Christ had two natures (*dyophysitism*), Cyril of Alexandria interpreted his position as teaching that Christ had two persons (*dyhypostatism*).

Since this is not what Nestorius said, it is easy to see that the Churches of the East, *i.e.*, the Assyrian and the Church of St Thomas, could come to an understanding with Rome because it was more of a language issue than a theological one.

Simply, if Nestorius would have called the Virgin the Theotokos, there probably wouldn't have been a split. He personally did not believe the heresy that bears his name. Later when St Cyril had made peace with the Nestorian bishops in Egypt, he preached: "Great is the mystery of the gifts! For this visible infant, who

seems so young, who needs swaddling clothes for His body, who in the substance which we see is newly-born, is the Eternal Son, as it is written, the Son who is the Maker of all, the Son who binds together in the swathing-bands of His assisting power the whole creation which would otherwise be dissolved. ... Even the infant is the all-powerful God," which is a quote taken from Nestorius. This whole history is very confusing.

Nestorius was exiled to a monastery in Egypt where he died. It is interesting to note that followers on Nestorius went to an island in modern-day Kuwait where they established a monastery. No one knows why the monastery was abandoned and what happened to the monks.

The Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus (431) declared that the proper title was *Theotokos*. This was in reference to the faith that Jesus is fully divine and fully human and were united in a single person of the Trinity. Since when Mary gave birth, she gave birth to one person, the Logos made flesh, she was the Mother of God. *Christotokos* would have meant that she gave birth to only Jesus the Man who was assumed by divinity at another point.

Primarily, we use the Greek term because it was a title that comes from an Ecumenical Council. The second issue is how to translate *Theotokos* into English. Common translations are "Mother of God", "God-bearer", and "Birth-giver of God". The problem in these translations is that they fail to convey that the child born of Mary is truly God and truly man. Further, a misunderstanding could let a person conclude that Mary is the source of Jesus' divinity.

A bishop's reluctance to call the Virgin the Theotokos led to popular insurrection and an ecumenical council. So like St Cyril, I am amazed that there are some who are entirely in doubt as to whether the Holy Virgin should be called Theotokos or not. So let us continue to honor Our All-holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorified Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary.

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