

means that it was the eternal Son of God who was born in the flesh from the Virgin Mary and became human. "From the God-bearing One, Jesus took flesh and became one in being with our human nature."¹⁵³ In a special way the Church expresses this unity in being with the Icon of Tenderness, in the embrace of Mother and Son.

- 188 The liturgical tradition of the Church magnifies the most holy, most pure, most blessed and glorious Lady and God-bearing One as being "more honourable than the cherubim and more glorious than the seraphim." The cherubim are the highest angelic order. The Church extols her "holy birth ... and her immaculate conception."¹⁵⁴ By her purity and her being immaculate the Theotokos surpasses all visible and invisible creation. Nonetheless, at the same time, she belongs to the human race spread forth from Adam and gathered in the Son of God.¹⁵⁵ By conception without seed within the womb of the most holy Mother of God, the Son of God "receives into his bosom the old creation"¹⁵⁶ and "manifests a new birth."¹⁵⁷ All of this is accomplished by the goodwill of God and the assent of the Virgin Mary.
- 189 In the reality of her being the Mother of God, the Church also contemplates the mystery of Mary's virginity, magnifying her as the "Ever-Virgin." In the year 649, the Lateran Council defined "ever-virginity" as virginity before, during, and after the birth of Christ. "[For you were a] Virgin before childbirth, and Virgin in childbirth, and still a Virgin after the childbirth."¹⁵⁸ With respect to the virginity of the Mother of God, the Church understands her integrity, the wholeness of a person filled with grace, in whom bodily and spiritual aspirations are harmoniously united in the fulfilment of a vocation from God. Her virginity is a virginity of "mind, soul, and body."¹⁵⁹ Church iconography symbolically portrays the virginity of Mary using stars, which are placed upon her forehead and shoulders. She retained virginity and incorruption even in death, which the Church refers to as her Dormition (Falling-Asleep). "Having fallen asleep in the flesh," Mary was "awakened" by her Son to

¹⁵³ JOHN or DAMASCUS, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, III, 12: PG 94, 1029.

¹⁵⁴ Menaion, *Nativity of Our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary* (September 8/21), Matins, Second Canon, Ode 6.

¹⁵⁵ See IRENAEIUS OF LYONS *Against Heresies*, III, 22, 3-4: PG 7, 958.

¹⁵⁶ "IRENÆUS OF LYONS, *Against Heresies*, III, 22, 4: PG 7, 958.

¹⁵⁷ IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Against Heresies*, V, 1,3: PG 7,1122.

¹⁵⁸ *Octoechos*, Tone 7, Sunday, Resurrectional Theotokion.

¹⁵⁹ JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *Homily 1: On the Nativity of the Mother of God*, 9 & 5: PG 96, 676 & 668.

life in glory: "You passed into life, for you are the Mother of Life."¹⁶⁰ The Lord glorified the soul and body of Mary—the first to be divinized from among the human race.

b. The Nativity of Christ

190 The Church celebrates the coming of the Son of God into the world with the feast of the Nativity of Christ. The birth of Christ is announced to the shepherds by the angel of the Lord: "To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Christ, the Lord" (Lk 2:11, KSV-CE). The Fathers of the Church extolled Christmas night as a day of joy and peace:

Today the Bountiful One became poor for our sake ... Today we receive a gift for which we did not ask ... This present day threw open the heavenly door to our prayers ... Now the Divine Being took upon himself the seal of humanity, in order for humanity to be decorated by the seal of Divinity.¹⁶¹

191 According to the liturgical texts, the birth of the Child "from a mother without a father"¹⁶² is the fulfilment of the prophecy of Daniel about the rock hewn from the mountain without human hands (see Dn 2:45). In the Incarnation, the Son of God "came from the bosom of the Father, and in his ineffable self-emptying he took on our lowly state."¹⁶³ Through the most holy Mother of God, he became what he had not been before—a human. The Church sings of the Mother of God thus: "The bright and spiritual cloud, filled with heavenly rain, today rises above the earth, in order to drop dew upon it and to water it."¹⁶⁴

192 At the birth of Jesus, "the spring of grace ... overcomes the winter of unbelief."¹⁶⁵ The Nativity is a harbinger of Pascha. The manger is understood to be a sign of the Lord's tomb, and the placing of the Child in the manger is a prefiguration of the placing of Christ in the tomb. The myrrh, brought by the magi, is already an anointing for the future burial.

193 As we sing in the divine services of the feast of the Nativity of Christ, God the Word, in the Incarnation, deigned to limit himself in time—"The beginningless Word mysteriously accepts a beginning"—and in space-

¹⁶⁰ Menaion, Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary (August 15/28), Troparion of the Feast.

¹⁶¹ ISAAC THE SYRIAN, Homily on the Nativity.

¹⁶² Trebnyk, Rite of the Great Blessing of Water for the Feast of Theophany, Second Prayer.

¹⁶³ Menaion, Sunday Before the Nativity of Christ, Holy Fathers, Matins, Second Sidalen.

¹⁶⁴ Menaion, Sunday Before the Nativity of Christ, Holy Fathers, Matins, Stichera at the Praises.

¹⁶⁵ Menaion, Sunday Before the Nativity of Christ, Holy Fathers, Matins, Stichera at the Praises.