

The Mother of God – A Prototype of Hesychast Life – the exceptional point of view of St. Gregory Palamas –

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Abstract:

The holy person of the Mother of God is the central figure in both teaching and especially the worship of the Church, since she, making herself the Mother of God the Word, became the Mother of all mankind, especially Christians. Regarding the teaching of Holy Virgin Mary, patristic literature focuses on some clear directions that have biblical foundation, namely miraculous motherhood (*theotokia*), her ever-virginity (*aieparthenia*), and her life full of holiness, which she deserves an honor for, more important than that of all saints and angels (*hyperdoulia*), all aspects always being linked with the teaching about Jesus Christ. However, regarding other aspects in the life of the Holy Virgin, these are taken up and developed in the context of *Palamite disputes* related to the Church teachings on uncreated divine grace, and hesychasm as authentic monastic practice. St. Gregory Palamas demonstrates in his writings that monasticism is both life in Christ, but at the same time life in the prototype of Virgin Mary, the first and most perfect hesychast.

Keywords:

Mother of God, hesychasm, St. Gregory Palamas

God's plan of world salvation has its origin in eternity, because God, beyond time and space, brings into existence the entire creation bounded in time and space, because by working with man, God rises this creation to the supreme communion of love with Him.

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Given God's eternity and immutability, the decision of redemption in Christ lies with the eternal creation plan of the world and is ordained *before the ages, for our glory* (I Cor. 2. 7). *For God so loved the world that He gave His begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life ...* (John 3. 16). The Son and Word of God became Incarnate *when time had come* (Galatians 4.4), namely when Divine Providence in preparing the world to receive the Savior fulfilled¹.

In this sense, Saint John Damascene's words are comprehensive:... *through the courtesy of God and Father; of His Begotten Son and Word of God and the Father; He consubstantial with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The One beyond eternity, having no beginning, Who was from the beginning and was with God and with the Father and was God and is in the image of God, descends bending the heavens, namely meeking but not not meeking His heights that are not to be meeked, descends upon His slaves unspeakably and incomprehensibly. For this is what descent means, and being perfect God, he becomes perfect man and accomplishes the greatest novelty – of all news, being the only new under the sun, which shows the infinite power of God. For what could be more than that God become man? And the Word became flesh without change, coming from the Holy Spirit and Theotokos, the Ever-Virgin Mary.*²

The holy person of the Mother of God is the central figure in both the teaching and especially the worship of the Church, since she, making herself the Mother of God the Word, became the mother of all mankind, especially Christians. Thus, Mariology has an important place in the Church doctrine due to Christians' special piety for the person of the Lady, who gave birth eversince the dawns of Christianity to a particularly intense worship as historical reality; her wonderful motherhood (*theotokia*) her ever-virginity (*aieparthenia*), and her holy life have always been essential truths in the consciousness of Christians. And after doctrinal specifications of the Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), the person of the Pure Lady has become a religious force as the world before had not known, she being the Theotokos and the Intercessory Grace between all people and her Son our Savior Jesus Christ.³

Regarding teachings about the Holy Virgin Mary, patristic literature focuses on some clear directions that have biblical foundation, namely: miraculous moth-

¹ Dorel Man, *The Mother of God. The Feminine Image in the New Testament*, Publishing House of Maramureş and Sătmar Orthodox Romanian Diocese, p. 22-23.

² St John Damascene, *Dogmatica (Dogmatics)*, II nd Ed, transl.by D. Fecioru, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1943, p. 176.

³ I. G. Coman, *Şi Cuvântul trup s-a făcut (And The Word Made Himself Body)*, Timișoara, 1993, p. 307-310.

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erhood (*theotokia*), her ever-virginity (*aieparthenia*), and her life full of holiness, which she deserves an honor for, more important than that of all saints and angels (*hyperdoulia*), all of which are always linked with the teaching about Jesus Christ.

The Ever-Pure Virgin Mary *theotokia* is always seen as a consequence of the hypostatic union of the two natures of the hypostatic Logos, even from conception. Chosen by God from eternity to the dignity of mother of God, she was the one who united in herself, in a mysterious and wonderful way, the splendors of absolute purity and unique dignity of motherhood, making herself the mother of Jesus Christ, God the Word Incarnate.⁴

Thus, the Holy Spirit, helping as Person to the accomplishment of the act through which the Son of God is made hypostasis of human nature, works on the one that makes herself His Mother through this, as the Word Himself works, Who takes the form of human nature from her, allthesame, as a Person. Our Lady gives herself fully to the Word, not only in word, but showing a total availability to Him, so that the Spirit can overwhelm into her the fully natural law of birth.⁵

Descending as hypostasis Himself in her and starting to form His body from hers, with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, on the whole as a Person, her body, kept by her in full purity available to God, is cleansed from the original sin, so that the divine Hypostasis does not take His body from a body that was still under that sin and under the natural law of voluptuous birth. The quality of Mary being the Theotokos and her virginity are closely united. And if such a wonder happened to her, she could only stay there and then totally dedicated to God, namely a virgin. The one who held the Son of God as man in her arms and shared His purity, as she shared the release from the original sin upon His dwelling in her womb, from His conception as man, could only remain a virgin.⁶

St. John Damascene summarizes the whole teaching of the Church about the person of the Mother of God as follows: «*We preach that the Holy Virgin is in the proper and real sense Theotokos. By the fact that the One born of her is the true God, the true Theotokos is the one who gave birth to the true God, made flesh in her, not in the sense that the divinity of the Word took the beginning of His existence from her, but in the sense that the Word of God Himself, The One born*

⁴ Man, *The Mother of God...*, p. 55-58; see also: D.A. Streza, "Părintele Dumitru Stăniloae și Odo Casel - viziune comparată asupra misterului liturgic creștin (Father Dumitru Stăniloae and Odo Casel – Compared Perspective on Christian Liturgical Mystery)", in vol. *Părintele profesor Dumitru Stăniloae sau consonanța între dogmă, spiritualitate și liturghie (Father Dumitru Stăniloae – the Consonance between Dogma, Spirituality and Liturgy)*, Cetatea de Scaun/Mitropolia Olteniei PH, 2015, p. 509-520.

⁵ D. Stăniloae, *Dogmatica (Dogmatics)*, vol. II, IBMBOR PH, Bucharest, 1978, p. 84.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 85-86.

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*before eternity, beyond time, born of the Father, Who is and has no beginning and is eternal, together with the Father and the Spirit, in the days to come, for our salvation, dwelt within her womb, became flesh and born of her without change. The Holy Virgin did not give birth to a simple man but to the true God; and not to a simple God, but to a God Incarnate».*⁷

If, however, during the classical patristic period, Mariology is predominantly related to Christology, both topics having solid biblical foundations, the doctrine about the Holy Virgin reveals some issues somewhat underdeveloped, namely aspects in the life of the Mother of God before giving birth to Christ⁸. This is but natural, because, on the one hand, these aspects cannot find a basis in the canonical Scripture, but only in a rich apocryphal literature⁹, and on the other hand, the Church constantly answered to disputes and heresies of time which focused on the core elements of the Church doctrine. And besides, although the cult of Our Lady at the beginning of Christianity was very much alive and quite widespread, history does not record any celebration of the Holy Virgin earlier than the fifth century, only after the conviction of the Nestorian heresy in the third Ecumenical Synod (Ephesus 431), when the worship of the Theotokos has known a special flourishing.¹⁰

These aspects of the life of the Holy Virgin are mentioned in the context of *Palamite disputes* related to the Church teaching on uncreated divine grace, and to the hesychasm as authentic monastic practice. The protagonist and apologist of the Orthodox Church doctrine on these issues was St. Gregory Palamas, who,

⁷ St. John Damascene, *Dogmatica(Dogmatics)*..., p. 212

⁸ Still, St Roman the Melod composes the kontakion and the oikos to the feast of The Birth of the Mother of God, St Andrew of Crete also dedicates this feast four homilies (P.G. t. XCVII, col. 805-882) and a canon for Matins singing, and Saints Germanus and Tarasius, Patriarchs of Constantinople held speeches at the Feast of the Entrance to the Temple (P.G. t. XCVIII col. 291-320 and 1481-1500). cf. E. Braniște, *Liturgica generală (General Liturgics)*, IBMBOR PH, Bucharest, 1993, p. 191-192, see also: D.A. Streza, *Sărbătoarea Nașterii Domnului: Originea apostolică, evoluția și importanța ei în cadrul anului liturgic /The Feast Of The Nativity: its apostolic origin, evolution and significance in the liturgical year*, „Lucian Blaga” University /Andreiana PH, Sibiu, 2011, p. 71-86; D.A. Streza, “The Christian Calendar and the Historical Birth Date of the Lord”, *Revista Mitropolia Olteniei*, Nr. 1-4/2014, p. 230-232; D.A. Streza, ”Historical considerations regarding the birth date of our Lord”, *Revista Teologică*, vol. 23 1/2013, p. 55.

⁹ Of all, the most important story about the Life of Virgin Mary is the apocriph writing: *Protoevaghelia Sf. Iacob* (The Protoevangelium of James); dealing not only with Virgin Mary, but also with Zacharia’s death and that of St John the Baptist. The story is solid and represents the oldest history of Virgin Mary, dating back to the end of II century. I. G. Coman comes with a translation in his book: *Și Cuvântul trup s-a făcut...(And the Word Made Himself Body)*, p. 314-327, according to the German version of A. Meyer, *Die Erzählung des Jakobus*, in *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, Tübingen, 1924.

¹⁰ E. Braniște, *Liturgica*..., p. 186-190.

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in the controversy with the Latin scholastic theologians formulated the thesis on uncreated divine energies, relying on the experience of Hesychasts, practicing the prayer of the heart, by unifying the mind with the heart, coming up on the steps of virtue to the contemplation of the *divine Light*, making themselves yet in this life, according to the word of Holy Ap. Peter, *partakers of the divine nature* (2 Pt. 1.4).

St. Gregory Palamas lived in XIV century (approx. 1296-1359), belonging to a wealthy family, who however benefited of a serious education eversince childhood, both moral and intellectual and theological. Not long after the death of his father, who was a member of the Senate and intimate counselor of the Byzantine Emperor Andronicus II (1282-1328), young Gregory was distinguished in the capital of Byzantium both by his *skill in the sciences*, but also by his sober and virtuous life, in which he took Teolept, metropolitan of Philadelphia, as a model and guide.¹¹

Passing adolescence, he decided to enter the monastic life and first persuading those of the house - mother, sisters, some servants, and some relatives - to enter the monasteries of Constantinople, he left with his two brothers to the great monastic center of Mount Athos. It was the beginning of his high spiritual life, along which under the hand of many gracious parents, Grigory formed as a monk and learned through asceticism, and many struggles, the practice of clean praying of mind united in heart, acquiring great spiritual gifts from God.¹²

The most important aspect of his spiritual journey throughout his whole life is that this ascent to God was always put under the protection of the Mother of God. However, this attitude is part of a monastic tradition that can be seen since the beginning of monasticism throughout the Christian world, the particular devotion to Our Lady being a constant in all the great ascetics and spiritual fathers of the Church. This is especially a trait of XIV century, when in the Byzantine Empire, found in full political decline, but, paradoxically, in a cultural and religious revival, great figures of spiritual life arise, as St. Gregory of Sinai, which is related to early athonit hesychasm, Maximus of Kavsokalivit, the italian monk of Mount Athos Nikiphoros, the hermit Athanasius or Teolept of Philadelphia, the last three being evoked by St. Gregory Palama among his predecessor hermits and advisers.¹³

Thus, Gregory of Sinai, the main apostle of hesychasm in the fourteenth century, was the one who, by refraining from any controversy, gave Byzantine he-

¹¹ D. Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sf. Grigorie Palama*, (*The Life and Teaching of St Gregory Palamas*), Scripta PH, Bucharest, 1993, p. 9-10.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 11-12.

¹³ I. Ică jr, *Maica Domnului în teologia secolului XX și în spiritualitatea isihastă a secolului XIV: Grigorie Palama, Nicolae Cabasila, Teofan al Niceei* (*The Mother of God in the Theology of XX Century and in the Hesychast Spirituality of XIV Century: Gregory Palamas, Nicholas Cabasila, Theophan of Nicaea*), Deisis PH, Sibiu 2008, p. 159-160.

sychasm ascetic-theological expression united with the consciousness of the need for refreshing Christianity in general based on sacramentality, and the ethical and ascetic expression having mystical purposes, with broader goals and wide mission visions, aiming to convert urban elites. At his urge, Maximus of Kavsohalivit gave up his lifestyle, *holy madness*, manifested by burning the huts he lived in, and decided to become useful to all monks and laymen who came to the Holy Mount Athos, preaching ascetic abstinence, patience, acquiring virtues, but especially true prayer and contemplation, which is performed by detaching from things and thoughts, so that Christ, Who dwelt in the heart ever since Baptism to be reflected on the outside through virtues of humility, love and peace.¹⁴

There is no evidence showing a meeting between Gregory Palamas and Gregory of Sinai, or Maximus of Kavsohalivit, although such meetings are not impossible. In the life of St. Maximus of Kavsohalivit there is at least one area that brings him closer to St. Gregory Palamas: intense, fervent devotion to Our Lady. If, however, in the case of Maximus of Kavsohalivit, the Mother of God is characterized by spiritual realism and popular expressions dominated by visionarism and images, nevertheless filled with a deep theological content, to Gregory Palamas, this devotion to the Virgin Mary, as hesychasm protector, acquires a very elaborate and sophisticated theological expression.

Thus, a very important role in the spiritual formation of St. Gregory Palamas lay just in his strong rooting in the ascetic tradition of the Church, which at that time often took the shape of popular unsophisticated hesychasm, being practiced without any *scientific-theological* theorizing, but as a way of life that is based primarily on emotional devotion - full of warmth, and tears - for Jesus Christ and the Mother of God.¹⁵

Regarding the vast corpus of Palamite works, it is divided into three sections, corresponding approximately also to the chronology of the main stages of their author's biography. By far, the most massive section is represented by a total of 20 works of *theology* and *personal apologetics* consisting of *letters, triads and antiretics*, through which St. Gregory Palamas defended hesychasm and substantiated the distinction between being and divine energies along the three phases of the controversy he has engaged in, in this regard with Barlaam of Calabria (1336-1341), with Gregory Akindynos (1342-1347) and Nikephoros Gregoras (1347-1359). The treaties are completed by a number of 63 written and spoken homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas during the last years as archbishop of Thessalonica (1347-1359), where his personality of theologian and monk appears as doubled

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 162-164.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 166-167.

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by that of a father involved in the lives of his parishioners in efforts to bring civil peace disturbed by the long years of the “revolutionary” regime of the Zealots (1340-1350). According to Father Meyendorff’s classification¹⁶, prior to the large group of treaties and collection of homilies there is a group of 7 *spiritual writings*, which are the first of his literary attempts, revealing Athonite spirituality, and relevant for the first stage of his life, that of an Athonite monk.¹⁷

The first two works by Gregory Palamas represent two elaborate texts, representing two encomiums of hesychastic life, embodied, according to the author, in the exemplary figure of St. Peter the Athonite and Virgin Mary. It is well known that in Byzantium the public encomium of a saint was an exercise often proposed to a beginner rhetor at the end of studies, and in Athos the style of the exercise was different but the method remained the same: in order to win the right to learn, one had to deliver a sample speech before the monk assembly. Gregory Palamas delayed up to 38 years old engaging in the oral or written way of teaching, first dedicating himself exclusively to prayer and asceticism. Regarding the choice of a subject, it is not random: St. Peter was and remains, even today, the protector and model of Hesychasts in the Holy Mountain who refused to comply with the communal rule brought in the tenth century by St. Athanasius. Although he himself had long lived in monk communities - in Lavra, at Esphigmenou - Palamas preferred hermit life similar to the one at St. Sava and writes *St. Peter’s Life* with the purpose to invigorate the hesychast ideal in Mount Athos.¹⁸

The second writing of St. Gregory Palamas written in Athos, shortly after *The word / Treaty on the Wonderful Life along with the Angels of the Venerable and our God Bearing Father Peter*, namely between 1333-1335, was, according to biographer Filotei II Kokin (ecumenical patriarch between 1350-1353 and 1364-1379)¹⁹, *The Word / treaty on the entry into the Most Holy and Deiform Life in it of the All-Pure Our Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary*. Manuscript transmitted and separately, it was included in all manuscripts that contain St. Gregory Palamas’ collection of homilies in which it appeared as *Homily 53*.²⁰

¹⁶ J. Meyendorff, “Palamas, Grégoire”, în *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, d’ascétique et de mystique*, XII, col. 81-107, cf. I. Ică Jr, *Sf. Grigorie Palama - scriitor duhovnicesc isihast*, în *Patristică și actualitate, Omagiu în onoarea Arhid. Prof., Dr., C. Voicu la împlinirea a 75 de ani de viață (St Gregory Palamas – Spiritual and Hesychast Writer in Patristics and Present, a Tribute in honour of ArchDeacon C. Voicu, , at the age of 75)*, Andreiana PH, Sibiu, 2008, p. 97.

¹⁷ I. Ică jr, *Sf. Grigorie Palama - scriitor duhovnicesc isihast...*, p. 98.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

¹⁹ This is the author of the main source for knowing the life of St Gregory Palamas, namely *Cuvântul de laudă (enkomion)* written in his honour on the occasion of preparing his canonization taking place on March 4, 1368. cf. *supra*, p. 98.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

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Initially held as speech at the Great Lavra around 1334, *the Logos* on The entrance of the Birthgiver of God to the Temple was amplified and transformed into the current Treaty of Saint Gregory Palamas in 1341, in the monastery where he stayed in Constantinople.

This theme was not chosen at random because it seems that in that time, an attitude that spoke about the legendary character of narrations regarding the Virgin's entry into the Holy of Holies was developed. Palama's speech, nevertheless, is not trying to prove the historicity of any narration of this event, but is a long confession of piety and faith, which gives the festival an interpretation very similar to that given by St. Gregory of Nyssa to Moses' ascent on Sinai, the facts described being nothing but the expression of the mystical ascent of the soul to God.²¹

In addition, Gregory Palama's Word on the entry into the Holy of Holies is marked by a constructive boundary dispute on hesychasm, prototypically accomplished by Virgin Mary as the *true philosophy*, as compared to *first philosophy*, metaphysics of the ancient relaunched in the fourteenth century by Byzantine humanists like Barlaam or Gregoras.

Written in the same developed and calophile style as the *Word* of Peter the Athonite, the hesychast Mariological speech of St. Gregory Palamas, probably spoken in the Great Lavra within the period 1333-1335 on November 21, on the occasion of the Feast of The entrance of the Birthgiver of God to the Temple, has a good curdled, developed and complex structure.

In a developed prologue, Palamas highlighted the difficulty of the proposed theme (§ 1-6), invoking the help of the Virgin herself (§ 3) and the support of the audience (§4-5), as any appropriate Mariological discourse needs inspiration from above, the Virgin having an exceptional position in existence and being the intercessory both between the Old and New Testaments, and between God, Who was made Son of Man, and man, made Son of God (§ 6).²²

With this general statement of programmatic value, Palamas enters the actual development of the theme. To start with (§ 7-10), he shows how the Virgin became Empress of all, paradoxically Mother and Bride of Christ the Emperor, uniting in herself the coincidence of virginity and childbirth, of humility and glorification: ... *But all those below Her she lifted through Her and, showing obeyers as celestial instead of earthly, and partaking of such superior dignity and a higher power and being chosen by heavens, has been made sublime Empress of the high and Blessed*

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 121.

²² I. Ică jr, *Grigorie Palama - scriitor duhovnicesc isihast și epoca sa (Gregory Palamas – Spiritual and Hesychast Writer and His Age)*, introductory study to the volume: St. Gregory Palamas, *Fecioara Maria și Petru Athonitul și alte scrieri isihaste (Virgin Mary and Peter the Athonite and Other Hesychast Writings)*, Deisis PH, Sibiu 2005, p. 58-59.

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*of happy generations, sparkling everywhere, both in body and soul, with flashes of bright and very divine light.*²³

According to verse 12 of Psalm 44 - “The king wished for your beauty, for He is your Lord” - the Virgin who would give birth to this King - “*more beautiful than the children of men*” (Ps 44.3) - was so adorned with all the beauties possible so that anyone who looks at her beauty *adornment*, would raise their mind to God the Creator similar to the one contemplating the physical cosmos (§11-17).

St. Gregory is still making important clarifications, namely that all the beauty and glory of the Virgin, Daughter, Bride and Mother of the Emperor is not bodily, but it “*comes from inside*” (Ps 44.14), from the beauty of her virginal soul: ... *If you mind your steps, you will understand that the thought of the prophet [David] tends towards it; for he had not said that all the glory of the emperor’s daughter “is in” but “comes from within” pouring from the inside as a light indicating all who see devotion locked inside by a climactic unsinfulness and showing that the virginal soul is really all-beautiful (§ 17).*²⁴

Nevertheless, instead of being given to teachers for education, the Child Mary was brought by her parents to the Temple to become the throne of the emperor (§ 18), and her body become the *true tabernacle and place for God the King*, foreshadowed only by the Temple tabernacle in Jerusalem (§ 19-20).

Particularly interesting is the idea that will be repeated several times in various forms throughout his work, namely that the hidden life of the Virgin in the Holy of Holies is “a quiet apology of hesychastic life, unseen and unknown to people”: ... *In addition to those said, She offered, even by keeping silence, a noteworthy apology of the fact that not untruly had she chosen hesychast life, without communion with all. For if the Holy of Holies was invisible to all eyes and was locked to all people with all kinds of dividing walls ... not opened to anyone of all than to the one who was high priest according to the Law, but even to him..., when entering once a year here and making God merciful, making atonement for himself and for everyone out ... how this virgin vessel, would not be kept in the unseen sanctuary, leading here an inscrutable life for all people? ... (§21)*²⁵.

Next, St. Gregory making frequent references to passages in the Old Testament shows that the Virgin, born as her parents’ fruit of prayer, Saints Joachim and Anne, was dedicated by her parents to Him, Who gave her to them through

²³ St. Gregory Palamas, *Cuvântul despre intrarea în Sfânta Sfințelor și despre viața deiformă aici a Atotpreacuratei Stăpânei noastre de Dumnezeu Născătoarei și Pururea-fecioarei Maria (The Word on the Entry into the Most Holy and Deiform Life in it of the All-Pure Our Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary)*, introductory study and translation by Ică Jr, Deisis PH, Sibiu 2005, p. 179.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 183.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 186-187.

prayer, to praying in the holy Temple, to be a *fruitful tree near the waters* (Ps 1,3), she being, nevertheless, the one that, in wise maturity, prefers God instead of her parents: ... *The way a three-year-old child entirely surrenders to the [Good] ... and by herself skillfully distinguishes between nature and the Creator of nature ... and prefers God to her father and mother's hugs ... Such a glorious and sagacious judgment of mind and will had the Virgin even before birth, and she was shown now to all as very right even before reaching adulthood ...* (§ 22-26)²⁶.

Further, the author believes that the Holy Virgin, in that she soars with innocence and the fervor of *divine eros* towards God, is superior to the righteous of the Old Testament: to Moses and Abraham and Melchizedek, who had discovered God in maturity, contemplating harmony, beauty and the complexity of the created world. In addition, Holy Virgin Mary is positioned even above Enoch (§ 31-32) and Elijah (§ 33), who were moved by God from the earth but not in heaven, but *in a lower place than the one now destined to the Virgin, because on earth, there was no holier place than the Holy of Holies ...*²⁷ Moreover, the Virgin is seen as even surpassing the seraphims seen by Isaiah (6.1 to 7) in the Temple, she being here the very throne of God or the tweezers for coal burnt in the divine fire (§ 34-36).

All these are seen constantly in terms of the supreme miracle of the Incarnation, which made only for her to be the “border” between the created and the uncreated and “*no one be able to come to God except through Her and through the Intercessor born of Her*” (§ 37). St. Gregory believes that, uniquely and completely loving God and being loved by God, the Virgin came to “*bear in her soul*”, according to the promise in John 14.23, “*the whole uncreated Trinity*” (§ 38), the result being that in virtue of this maximum union with God, She would become the one through whom the whole wealth of God and His graces be shared to the whole hierarchy of creatures from seraphims to people (§ 39-41).

After this extensive biblical-theological excursus (§ 27-41), St. Gregory Palamas comes back to the theme of the entry of the Virgin into the Holy of Holies, an act that completes all symbols and Old Testament prefigurations (§ 43). In this holy place, the Virgin starts a real angelic life, being fed not by a raven as Elijah, but by an angel (Ps 77.25); but Her superiority to all angels will be shown from the Annunciation when she was overshadowed not by an angel, but by the very Power of the Most High, by the very Word of God: ... *For she was to be overshadowed not by an angel, not by an archangel, nor by cherubims or seraphims themselves, but by the very enhypostastic Power of the Most High [Lk. 1.35], and - most of all - talking to Her not by storm and cloud [Job 38.1], not through the cloud and fire*

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 189-190.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 191-193.

[Is. 19.18; 20.21], not by a gust of thin wind [3 Kings 19.12], as it had happened before to the worthy, to each in his time, but the very Power of the Highest overshadowed the womb of the Virgin unintercessed, without cover, without anything between The One overshadowing and the one who was overshadowed, no air, no light, nor any of the sensitive, or anything above these. But this is not shading, but downright union ... (§ 45).²⁸

The life of the Holy Virgin in the Holy of Holies is onwardly described as a real heavenly life beyond pleasure, passion, concern and sorrow, in full dedication to God: ... *And so she lived as in heaven and in a high place above the ground or; rather, as in the heavenly courts because that impenetrable sanctuary was their foreshadowing. In conclusion she lead an ascetic life, without concerns and without labour; without sorrow, unparticipating to earthly passions, beyond the pleasure that is not without pain, living only for God, seen only by God, nourished by God, guarded only by God who would dwell among us through her, and surely she seeing only God, making God her food, uniting herself only with God ...* (§ 46-47).²⁹

Very interesting is the vision of St. Gregory below: the Holy Virgin Mary heard about the biblical readings that were made every week at the Temple about the fallen mankind into a life estranged from God, full of aches and pains and ending in death and hell, and filling her soul with pity, she decided to become our Intercessory to God, so that, through her messages, she would persuade God to heal the corrupted human nature uniting human nature to Himself: ... *And when the child of God, the Virgin, heard and saw these, feeling pity for the mankind she was part of ... she decided to return with all her mind to God and, taking deputation for us on her, she wanted to persuade the One impossible to be forced and draw Him faster towards us, so that He Himself take away the curse upon us, and instead give blessing, to make impenetrable light shine and unite the being with Himself healing our impotence ...* (§ 48).³⁰

Thus, the Virgin, trying to be convincing in her conversation with God, she invented and taught people a new practice, higher than human contemplation, and a new contemplation, different from the known philosophical contemplation: *She, therefore, innovated the greatest and most perfect one, invented a practice and transmitted it to her followers, a practice higher than contemplation and a contemplation which differed as much from that which was spoken of before, as much as truth is different from imagination.*³¹

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 203.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 205.

We speak here of the *Hesychast way*, found beyond the ethical and rational knowledge of nature and soul, as well as beyond the metaphysics of the first principles of existence through thinking, reasoning and analogies (“*the first Hellenic philosophy*”) (§ 50). This is because there is a radical difference between philosophical contemplation (*theoria*), also known by the ancient pagans and the hesychast vision of God (*theoptia*). This is the distinction between knowledge and discourse about God based on personal reason and the union with God through a paradoxical feeling of mind which equals with an *apophatic incognition* above knowledge.

This philosophy is therefore *hesychia*, namely, arresting mind and continuous prayer that *loosen the mind from earthly matters and unites it to the above ones*, this being the true practice and contemplation; if virtues heal the passions of the soul, hesychast contemplation deifies man who sees in his pure heart, like in a mirror, God beyond feeling and mind (§ 52). The Virgin is, therefore, the living proof of supernatural hesychia ever since her childhood (§ 53), thus, pondering “*her extremely deiform life*” in her impenetrable sanctuary of the Holy of Holies, we are invested, too, to invisibly see the immortal world (§ 54).³²

*This being sought by the Virgin - for it was very necessary to meet those messengers, to which the message was addressed to - she finds guidance in holy hesychia; hesychia, arresting the mind and the world, forgetting the earthly matters, initiating one in the above ones, putting off meanings for the best: this is the true practice, the real stage of contemplation or vision of God. For any other virtue is like a medicine and antidote for soul infirmities and for bad passions rooted in it by idling, but contemplation is the result of a sound mind, being like an end [target] and a deifying species; for, through it, man is deified, not through analogical concurrence coming from reasoning and visible things- let it not be so!, because this is earthly and human -, but from hesychast education, because through it we untie from earthly things and we bow to God ...*³³

A cosmological and anthropological excursus follows (§ 55-56), regarding man and the cosmos in a close coexistence to each other, in both cases, their structure being composed of the harmonization of contraries. The cosmos consists of four elements: earth, water, air, fire, and the sky atmosphere and the soul of the five powers: feeling, imagination, opinion, thought and intellect/mind. The inner equivalent of the sky (ouranos), intelligence/mind (nous) is superior to it, as it “*alone is face/icon of God, knows God and becomes, if wished, god, raising with it*

³² I. Ică jr, *Grigorie Palama - scriitor duhovnicesc isihast și epoca sa (Gregory Palamas – Spiritual and Hesychast Writer)...*, p. 62.

³³ St Gregory Palamas, *Cuvântul despre intrarea în Sfânta Sfințelor (The Word on the Entry)...*, p. 207.

the body of humbleness” . There is, thus, a radical difference between thought and intellect/mind. Thinking is formed starting from an opinion, from imagination and feeling, forming itself and activating *through the first tool [proton organon] of the soul: the mental spirit which is in the brain ... Intelligence/mind is not, however, a tool but a substance that is its own purpose and is active in itself, even if it comes down to mental life and develops it into the process of thinking* (§ 56)³⁴

To understand this concept, one requires a brief excursus into the ancient Greek thinking on the relationship between soul and body. According to the ancient Greeks, intelligence and body are two separate substances, incompatible because their origins are radically different: intelligence (nous) is divine, disembodied, supercosmic and has a circular motion, celestial, perfect, and the body (soma) is purely material, composed of the combination of the four elements and has a rectilinear, imperfect motion, the soul (psyche) is a mediator between them, whose vehicle and first tool (proton organon) or first body is a spirit (pneuma), consisting of a matter that is extremely subtle, bodily, yet, at the same time related to air, fire and astral ether. This hot fluid or warm pneumatic gas circulates in the body through the respiratory, blood and nervous passages, being the principle of life and reproduction, of movement and knowledge of living beings.³⁵

According to the systematization of Galen (130-201 AD) there are three kinds of spirits: a natural spirit established in the liver that circulates through the veins and left ventricle and takes the soul vegetative functions (nutrition, growth, reproduction); a vital spirit (*pneuma zootikon*) located in the heart that circulates through the arteries and the right ventricle and transmits life to the whole body; and a psychological (mental) spirit (*pneuma psychiko*) providing cognitive functions located in the brain, its front ventricle being the location of imagination, the median being the location of reason, and the back, that of memory. Through this spirit or pneuma the intelligent soul transmits the soul mobility and the body transmits the soul messages from the five senses as images (*phantasmata*) without which reason and thinking can not understand anything. The spirit then becomes an imaginative spirit (*pneuma phantastikon*) which is the famous “inner common sense” to all the senses, “*the first instrument and vehicle of the soul*”, which is a mirror that can reflect either sensations, or dreams, or fantasies, or divine revelations. Hesychast life is withdrawing intelligence/mind from bodily and material relationships, and concentrating it on its own essence and dynamics. This reflects the Trinitary dynamics of divine Life absorbing the divine *Nous*, the divine *Logos*

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 210.

³⁵ I. Ică Jr, *Grigorie Palama - scriitor duhovnicesc isihast și epoca sa (Gregory Palamas – Spiritual and Hesychast Writer) ...*, p. 63.

and divine *Pneuma* in it. The divine *Pneuma* itself, not the imaginative pneuma, becomes the lucent means of accomplishing contact between creative intelligence and Divinity, its uncreated Archetype.³⁶

From this perspective, St. Gregory refers to the attitude of the Most Pure Virgin, who having examined her soul through introspection, sought in her soul powers a means to reach union with God, and found that only intelligence/mind has in it a holy and divine eros like the power that leads it to the supernatural and beyond the world union with God (§ 58). This, however, only if given the condition of a return to self in vigilance and constant prayer, beyond any thoughts, to see the glory of God, “*on the new inexpressible way skyward in silence of the mind*” the hesychast path (§ 59). This vision into the divine feeling of the mind is only possible by grace, which is the light of God, it is God Himself who becomes the light of the mind’s eye, the eye itself turned into light. Because, according to evangelical beatitude and promises (Mt 5.8; In 14.23), He reveals Himself to the present purified mind, but indirectly as in a mirror (7 Co 13.12) (§ 60).

Through this hesychast experience, the Virgin has perfected her message for humanity, resembling God through deification and had persuaded God to make a body, similar to that of man, through the Incarnation (§ 61).

The speech culminates by praising our divine-human union and communion with God through flesh and blood (§ 62), which is God’s answer to the pious supplication with pure mind made by the Virgin (§ 64). Thus, she becomes the model of true prayer, the contemplative one and of true contemplation coming not through the senses and reason, but by purity of mind and sharing of divine grace (§ 62).

The end of speech is a call to keeping this unity with God and with each other, celebrated in Christ, the second Adam, Who is heavenly, Who made our nature eternal by God’s immaterial fire, maintaining bonds of love, lifting our hearts up, stripping us of our skin clothes and dressing us in light (§ 65).³⁷

This masterpiece of Byzantine theology is the most original and profound theological and spiritual text in the entire work of St. Gregory Palamas, thus initiated by a high level of theological thought, his Mariological-hesychast speech asserting the truthful deification of Virgin Mary before the Incarnation of the Son of God and the Redemption brought by Christ.

As bishop of Thessalonica, he will later return in his sermons on the mysteries and the role of Virgin Mary in the economy of salvation. In the collection of 63 sermons transmitted under his name, no longer than 7 have Mariological

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

content: besides the speech discussed above, inserted here as Homily 65, although it is not actually a homily, but a genuine theological-spiritual treaty, St Gregory Palamas talks a lot about Virgin Mary in Homily 57 on Sunday before Nativity dedicated to Christ's parents in flesh, and in Homily 18 on Myrrhbearing Women Sunday, which insists that Virgin Mary was the one who first saw the risen Lord; and devotes special homilies to the great feasts of the Mother of God: Homily 14 on Annunciation, Homily 37 on Dormition, Homily 42 on Birth and Homily 52 on her entrance to the Temple.

Thus, the speech of St. Gregory Palama is centered around two poles: *hesychasm* as a form of subjective salvation presenting as the true philosophy of authentic life of man, and *redemption*, the objective salvation fulfilled by Jesus Christ, presented as a renewal of this Life affected by man's fall into the slavery of sin, devil and death. Far from being in contradiction, deification and salvation, or more specifically, Mariology and Christology, reinforce and claim each other in the work of St. Gregory, finding unity in the mystery of God's Life, Who is at the same time an incommunicable Being and in reality a transmitted and shared energy to people, deifying their persons and making their nature immortal.

Thus, the Athonit monk Gregory Palamas demonstrates, since the beginning of his literary activity, that he only understood monasticism as life in Christ, and at the same time as a prototype of Virgin Mary, the first and most perfect hesychast, the Queen of creation and the Lady of the Holy Mountain.³⁸

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p.196-197.