Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk gave an online lecture for the Theological Institute of St. John of Damascus, Balamand University



On January 29, 2021, the Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk delivered an online lecture on the topic "Revelation of the Mystery of the Mother of God in Theological Works of St. John of Damascus" as part of a series of lectures in honor of the jubilee year for the Theological Institute of St. John of Damascus at the University of Balamand (Lebanon).

On behalf of the teachers and students, Metropolitan Hilarion was warmly greeted by Archimandrite Jacob (Khalil), Dean of the Theological Institute.

At the end of the lecture, Vladyka Hilarion answered students' questions.

Video of the lecture can be found
here:
http://www.balamand.edu.lb/news/AllNews/Pages/Details.aspx?FilterField1=ID&FilterValue1=177

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Metropolitan Hilarion's lecture is published below:

Lecture by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk

On the Occasion of the Jubilee of St. John of Damascus Institute of Theology

29th January 2021

7 p.m. Lebanese time, 8 p.m. Moscow time

Revelation of the Mystery of the Mother of God in Theological Works of St. John of Damascus

It is a pleasure for me to deliver this address as part of the lecture series marking the jubilee year for the St. John of Damascus Institute of Theology. For fifty years this leading theological school in the Middle East has been gifting the Church with outstanding figures, be it archpastors, pastors or laypeople. As is well known, His Beatitude John X, the incumbent Patriarch of Antioch, is also a graduate of this institute.

I greet all the listeners who have joined in, as well as the Dean, dear Father Jack, and the faculty, staff members and students, and convey to you blessings and warm wishes from His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia.

In this lecture I will attempt to tell in brief how the mystery of the Mother of God was unveiled in the theological works of St. John of Damascus – heavenly patron of this institute.

Veneration of the Theotokos is rooted at the very core of the Orthodox Tradition. However, the unveiling of the “mystery of the Mother of God” was a gradual process in the Eastern Christian ecclesiastical Tradition, and it passed through several stages: 1) first, mentions of Jesus’s Mother in the Gospels and the Book of Acts; 2) later, mentions of Jesus’s Mother in the writings of the early Church Fathers, in particular, Justin the Philosopher and Irenaeus of Lyons; 3) mentions of the Mother of God in the writings of the Church Fathers of the 4th and early 5th centuries; the establishment of the doctrine of the Theotokos’s perpetual virginity; 4) disputes over the term “Theotokos” in the 5th century and triumphant proclamation of the dogmatic teaching on the Virgin Mary as Theotokos by the Third Ecumenical Council: 5) development of liturgical veneration of the Mother of God after the Third Ecumenical Council; appearance of the feasts in honour of the Theotokos; formation of the hagiographic canon of the Mother of God; creation of liturgical texts dedicated to her; final compilation of the list of the Old Testament texts interpreted as prefigurations of the Theotokos; development of the iconographic canon of the Mother of God.

Why am I talking about the “mystery” of the Mother of God? The reason is because it took many centuries for this mystery to be revealed to the Orthodox church consciousness; yet, up to this day this topic remains veiled for an outside observer. Veneration of the Mother of God, albeit not in all its aspects, is something that Orthodox Christians share only with Catholics, while Protestants see no grounds for the veneration of Mary, relying on the sola Scriptura (“Scripture alone”) principle.

As far as is known, St. John of Damascus was born in the middle of the 7th century at the earliest, and died in 754 at the latest. His writings mark a significant milestone in the development of the Eastern Christian theology, with his lifework, The Fount of Knowledge trilogy, summarising all the preceding theological development. Apart from his major trilogy, John of Damascus wrote numerous works on various dogmatic topics, treatises in defence of the veneration of icons, sermons on church feasts, and liturgical texts. In this lecture we will briefly examine some of the fragments devoted to the Theotokos from the treatise Against the Nestorians and from An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, which is the third part of The Fount of Knowledge trilogy. After that we will turn to St. John Damascene’s homilies on the feasts of the Mother of God.

Dedicated to the Theotokos are the beginning and the end of the treatise Against the Nestorians which opens with the following passage:

The word to the Nestorians should begin as follows: Whom did the Holy Virgin conceive, by nature the Son of God and God, or man? And those who say that by nature the Son of God and God are Orthodox, because who is she conceiving God and giving birth to Him other than the Theotokos? **[1]**

In the main part of the treatise St. John of Damascus expounds Orthodox Christology, arguing that God

the Word and Man Jesus are one Person.

Three chapters in An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith centre on the teaching about the Mother the God. In the chapter entitled “That the holy Virgin is the Mother of God” Saint John cites the reasons, based on which the Third Ecumenical Council proclaimed the Virgin Mary Theotokos: For inasmuch as He who was born of her was true God, she who bare the true God incarnate is the true mother of God **[2]**.

The Damascene then explains what it means that God was born of the Virgin:

God the Word Himself, Who was begotten of the Father timelessly before the ages, and was with the Father and the Spirit without beginning and through eternity, took up His abode in these last days for the sake of our salvation in the Virgin’s womb, and was without change made flesh and born of her**[3]**.

Saint John presents major arguments used in the polemic around the name “Theotokos,” which was instigated by the heresy of Nestorius. The latter, as we remember, insisted that the Virgin had born not the Word of God, but man Jesus. Repeating the arguments of Cyril of Alexandria, John Damascene cites Apostle Paul: God sent forth his Son, made of a woman (Gal 4:4).

The name “Mother of God,” John writes, embraces the whole mystery of the dispensation. For if she who bore Him is the Mother of God, assuredly He Who was born of her is God and likewise also man **[4]** . The Damascene argues that Christ is in essence and truth man: For how could God, Who was before the ages, have been born of a woman unless He had become man? For the son of man must clearly be man himself <…>The name in truth signifies the one subsistence and the two natures and the two generations of our Lord Jesus Christ **[5]**.

It was the Third Ecumenical Council that made an emphasis on the unity of the Person of Christ, and it was the Fourth Ecumenical Council that, in opposition to the Monophysites, pointed out Christ’s perfect human nature. He remained God incarnate, and His two natures – divine and human – were in the state of interpenetration, not conflation.

Having set forth the arguments concerning the two natures of Christ, John of Damascus enters into direct polemics with Nestorius on the term “Mother of Christ” invented by the latter: But we never say that the holy Virgin is the Mother of Christ, because <…> the impure… Nestorius… invented this name for an insult. For David the king, and Aaron, the high priest, are also called Christ, for it is customary to make kings and priests by anointing **[6]**.

Christological discourse continues in the chapter entitled “In answer to those who enquire whether the

holy Mother of God bore two natures, and whether two natures hung upon the Cross." The author insists that being begotten is not the property of the divine essence common for the three Hypostases of the Holy Trinity, but is the personal property of the Son of God, i.e., refers to subsistence **[7]**. Of the Virgin Mary, Christ was born in the flesh; and He also was crucified in the flesh, suffered in the flesh, while His divinity continued to be impassible **[8]**.

Finally, in the chapter entitled "Concerning our Lord's genealogy and concerning the holy Mother of God," John of Damascus turns his attention to the descent of the Mother of God from the house of David. He notes that the lineages from the Gospels According to Matthew and Luke are both the lineages of Joseph, but Matthew derives Joseph from David through Solomon, while Luke does so through Nathan; while over the holy Virgin's origin both pass in silence. Why is it so? Because it was not the custom of the Hebrews nor of the divine Scripture to give genealogies of women. At the same time, back then there was a law that prescribed a man to take as wife a woman from the same tribe. Therefore, the Virgin Mary was also of the lineage of David**[9]**.

In retelling the story of the Theotokos's birth of Joachim and Anna, the Damascene relies on the Protoevangelium of James. He also narrates the story of the Annunciation, explaining that Mary's virginity was concealed from the devil**[10]** and that Joseph was needed to protect her virginity**[11]**.

John of Damascus recounts the story of Christ's birth of the Virgin, stressing that which is natural and that which is supernatural: And so far as He was born of woman, His birth was in accordance with the laws of parturition, while so far as He had no father, His birth was above the nature of generation: and in that it was at the usual time (for He was born on the completion of the ninth month when the tenth was just beginning), His birth was in accordance with the laws of parturition, while in that it was painless it was above the laws of generation. The opinion that the Virgin Mary did not experience labour pains is based on the literal reading of Isaiah's prophecy: Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man child (Is 66:7)**[12]**. Similar interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy was given by Gregory of Nyssa**[13]**.

Following other Church Fathers, John Damascene strenuously defends the dogma of the perpetual virginity of the Theotokos:

He who was conceived kept her who conceived still virgin <…> The conception, indeed, was through the sense of hearing, but the birth through the usual path by which children come**[14]**.

To conclude his reflections, John of Damascus mentions a well-known patristic opinion that the Mother of God, although did not experience labour pains, suffered the pain when standing at the cross of her Son: But this blessed woman <…> suffered those pains, which she escaped at the birth, in the hour of

the passion [of the Lord] **[15]**.

In his treatise, Saint John briefly speaks about all the essential constituents of the Orthodox teaching on the Theotokos. Summarised, they are as follows: 1) she is the Ever-Virgin, because was a Virgin before giving birth to Christ and remained a Virgin during and after the birth of Christ; 2) she is called the Mother of God because she bore Jesus Christ Who was God incarnate; 3) while giving birth to Christ, she did not travail, but suffered the pain when standing at His cross.

An Exact Exposition does not tell anything about the birth of the Mother of God or about her Dormition. John of Damascus fills these lacunas in his homiletic and liturgical writings. So, now we will briefly examine his four sermons dedicated to the Theotokos, one to the feast of her Nativity, and three to the Dormition.

The Oration on the Nativity of the Theotokos was delivered in Jerusalem, near the Sheep Gate and the Pool of Bethesda which are mentioned in the Gospel (Jn 5:2). There, according to the tradition, Joachim's house stood and the Virgin Mary was born**[16]**.

The sermon begins with the traditional comparison between Mary and Eve: Whereas the latter heard the divine statement, 'In pain you shall bring forth children', the former [heard], 'Rejoice, favoured one!'. The latter [heard], 'Your recourse shall be towards your husband!', and the former, 'The Lord is with you'**[17]**.

Christological theme is essential for the sermon, and in his reflections the preacher constantly turns from the Nativity of the Theotokos to the Nativity of Christ.

The Theotokos is glorified, for she surpasses angels and has dominion over the angels. She is the lily among thorns engendered from a most noble and regal Davidic root; the rose which has sprung from Judaic thorns and which has filled everything with divine perfume**[18]**.

All the Old Testament images, as John Damascene emphasises, are mere prefigurations of the Mother of God, and therefore, let a tabernacle that was entirely covered with gold recognize that it cannot compare with her, along with a golden jar which contained manna, a lampstand, a table, and all the other objects from long ago **[19]**.

Using vivid poetic images, the preacher speaks about the motherhood of the Theotokos. Having become the Mother of God, she attained such closeness to God which is unachievable for any mortal: His flesh is from your flesh, and His blood is from your blood, and God suckled milk from your breasts, and your lips were united with the lips of God**[20]**.

That special closeness of the Theotokos to the Infant Christ, described in these words, will find its expression in the Late Byzantine iconography of the Mother of God. The image of the Infant nestling his lips against the cheek of His Mother, known to us from the Eleousa icons, will become a vivid embodiment of the ideas set forth by John of Damascus in his Oration on the Nativity of the Theotokos.

In conclusion of his Oration, Saint John does what he never did in his previous sermons in honour of the Mother of God: describes her appearance. In the 4th century Blessed Augustine insisted that nothing is known about the appearance of the Virgin Mary**[21]**. In the 8th century John of Damascus tells to his listeners what the Most Holy Virgin looked like: [You possessed] mature judgement in a youthful body. Your modest dress escaped all softness and delicacy. Your gait was pious and undisturbed, free from foolish ostentation. Your manner was austere, but mixed with gaiety; you were unapproachable by men <…>. [You were] docile and obedient towards your parents <…> Your cheerful speech came forth from a soul that was free of anger**[22]**.

As an ardent apologist for the veneration of holy images, John of Damascus, undoubtedly, saw numerous icons of the Mother of God. And while in the 4th century the iconographic canon of the Theotokos had not yet been firmly established, by the 8th century it had been fully developed. And since that time the Mother of God has been portrayed on the icons just as she was described by John Damascene.

Let us now turn our attention to the most important writing by St. John of Damascus dedicated to the Mother of God: the trilogy of his Sermons on the Dormition. These three sermons were delivered during the All-Night Vigil on the feast of the Dormition**[23]**.

Saint John begins his first sermon with solemn opening words and then describes the birth of Christ of the Virgin. As for the Virgin herself, the preacher says: The Father predestined her, the prophets foretold her through the Holy Ghost. His sanctifying power overshadowed her, cleansed and made her holy **[24]** .

John of Damascus retells in brief the most important milestones of the Tehotokos's life, as it was recounted in the Protoevangelium of James, including the story of her conception by Joachim and Anna, her birth and entrance into the Jerusalem Temple**[25]**. Narrating the story of the Annunciation, based on the Gospel According to Luke**[26]**, Saint John notes that she… kept undefiled her double virginity, her virginal soul no less spotless than her body **[27]**.

In his homily the Damascene also speaks about the Old Testament prefigurations of the Mother of God:

The burning bush was a figure of thee, and the tablets of the law, and the ark of the testament. The golden urn and candelabra, the table and the flowering rod of Aaron were significant types of thee <…> And Abraham's tent most clearly pointed to thee <...> I had nearly forgotten Jacob's ladder <…> Just as Jacob saw the ladder bringing together heaven and earth <…> so art thou placed between us, and art become the ladder of God's intercourse with us**[28]**.

Having cited, in brief, the prophets' words relating to the Theotokos, the preacher finally turns to the topic of the Dormition, recounting how the Mother of God was taken up into heaven:

Angels and the spirits of the just, patriarchs and prophets surround thee to-day in thy departure to thy Son. Apostles watched over the countless host of the just who were gathered together from every corner of the earth by the divine commands, as a cloud around the divine and living Jerusalem, singing hymns of praise to thee**[29]**.

Let us note the expression "as a cloud," which demonstrates that John of Damascus is inclined to interpret the apocryphal story about the Apostles being carried on clouds to the deathbed of the Mother of God and about the dead being raised in order to bid farewell to her as a metaphor, as an indication of the spiritual meaning of the event, present at which were the angels, the Apostles and the dead, just like, according to the teaching of the Church, they all are present whenever the Eucharist is being celebrated.

In the First Sermon on the Dormition, nothing is said about the bodily assumption of the Mother of God into heaven. What John of Damascus does say is that her soul ascended to God. At the same time, he emphasises that the body of the Theotokos remained on earth not for long and escaped corruption.

Saying that the Theotokos "surpassed heaven," the preacher notes, It was not after bodily wise that she surpassed heaven. For how can a body measuring three cubits… be compared with the dimensions of heaven? It was rather by grace that she surpassed all height and depth, for that which is divine is incomparable **[30]**.

One cubit was approximately 46,3 centimetres. Taken literally, the words of the Damascene mean that, according to him, the height of the Virgin Mary was about 140 or 150 centimetres. But where did he get this information? Obviously, his calculations were based on the size of the cave, in which, according to the tradition, the body of the Mother of God was laid**[31]**.

In his Second Sermon on the Dormition, John of Damascus speaks again about the perpetual virginity of the Theotokos: To-day the holy Virgin of Virgins is presented in the heavenly temple. Virginity in her

was so strong as to be a consuming fire. It is forfeited in every case by child-birth. But she is ever a virgin, before the event, in the birth itself, and afterwards**[32]**.

A considerable part of the sermon centres on the miracles that occurred during the Dormition of the Mother of God. As the Damascene notes, we know little – the knowledge about them has been passed down from father to son since olden times**[33]**.

Describing the demise and burial of the Mother of God, Saint John recounts how Christ appeared to take His Mother's soul up into heaven, how the Theotokos was being prepared for the burial, tells about the burial procession, and about an ungodly Jew who tried to overturn the bier and, because of that, lost the use of his hands, as well as how the body of the Mother of God was laid in the tomb in Gethsemane, wherefrom it was assumed after three days to the heavenly mansions**[34]**.

In his Second Sermon on the Dormition, the Damascene narrates in detail the story of the deposition of the Most Holy Theotokos's robe in the Church of Blachernae in Constantinople, citing the Euthymius's History written supposedly in the 6th century.

To conclude his homily, John of Damascus calls the Mother of God a model of virginity, purity, chastity, continence, fasting, prayer and other Christian virtues**[35]**.

The Third Sermon on the Dormition serves as the epilogue to the whole trilogy.

In this homily the preacher notes that the Virgin Mary, as the daughter of Adam, is subject to the universal law of death, but inasmuch as she is also the Mother of God, her soul is assumed to heaven, and not only her soul. Saint John says: Let us raise the ever-virginal body with spiritual arms <…> Let us go in adoring, and learn the wondrous mystery by which she is assumed to heaven**[36]**.

We see that St. John of Damascus, like St. Andrew of Crete, confesses the bodily resurrection of the Theotokos which took place on the third day after her Dormition. Yet, nowhere in the Damascene's text we will find a description of her assumption into heaven. The Mother of God died a natural death and was buried. However, when on the third day her tomb was opened, her body was no longer there; only her burial sheets remained. So, a conclusion was made that she was raised, although there were no eye-witnesses of her resurrection and bodily assumption into heaven.

John of Damascus speaks much about the Theotokos in his treatises in defence of the veneration of icons, pointing out that by venerating icons of Christ, the Mother of God and the saints people are worshipping God**[37]**.

In this lecture we have tried to briefly examine the essential aspects of the writings by St. John of Damascus that unveil the “mystery” of our Most Holy Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary.

Thank you for your attention!

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[1]John of Damascus. Against the Nestorians (PTS 22, 263).

[2]John of Damascus. An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith (SC 540, 68). English translation is cited by: **https://www.ccel.org/ccel/s/schaff/npnf209/cache/npnf209.pdf**.

[3] Ibid (SC 540, 68–70).

[4] Ibid (SC 540, 72).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid (SC 540, 72–74).

[7] Ibid (SC 540, 172–174).

[8] Ibid (SC 540, 174).

[9] Ibid (SC 540, 218–220).

[10]Ignatius the God-Bearer. The Epistle to the Ephesians, 19 (SC 10-bis, 71).

[11] Epiphanius of Cyprus. Panarion, 78, 8.

[12]John of Damascus. An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith (SC 540, 224). English translation is

cited by: **https://www.ccel.org/ccel/s/schaff/npnf209/cache/npnf209.pdf**.

[13] Gregory of Nyssa. Homily on the Holy Easter, and on the Three-day Period of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[14]John of Damascus. An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith (SC 540, 226). English translation is cited by: **https://www.ccel.org/ccel/s/schaff/npnf209/cache/npnf209.pdf**.

[15] Ibid (SC 540, 228–230).

[16] Voulet P. Introduction // Jean Damascène. Homélies sur la Nativité et la Dormition. Texte grec, introduction, traduction et notes par P. Voulet. SC 80. Paris, 2008. P. 8.

[17] John of Damascus. Oration on the Nativity of the Holy Theotokos Mary (SC 80, 46). English translation is cited by: **https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2016/09/oration-on-nativity-of-holy-theotokos.html**.

[18] Ibid (SC 80, 58–60).

[19] Ibid (SC 80, 62).

[20] Ibid (SC 80, 62–64).

[21] Augustine. On the Trinity 8,7.

[22]John of Damascus. Oration on the Nativity of the Holy Theotokos Mary (SC 80, 76). English translation is cited by: **https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2016/09/oration-on-nativity-of-holy-theotokos.html**.

[23] Louth A. St John Damascene. Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology. Oxford, 2002. P.

232, 243.

[24]John of Damascus. Sermon I on the Assumption (SC 80, 84–86). English translation is cited by: **http://www.balamandmonastery.org.lb/index.php/st-john-of-damascus-three-sermons-on-the-dormition-feast/sermon-i**.

[25] Ibid (SC 80, 92–96).

[26] Ibid (SC 80, 96–98).

[27] Ibid (SC 80, 98).

[28] Ibid (SC 80, 100).

[29] Ibid (SC 80, 106).

[30] Ibid (SC 80, 116).

[31] Andrew of Crete. First Homily on the Dormition of Mary (PG 97, 1057 AB).

[32]John of Damascus. Sermon II on the Assumption (SC 80, 126). English translation is cited by: **http://www.balamandmonastery.org.lb/index.php/st-john-of-damascus-three-sermons-on-the-dormition-feast/sermon-ii**.

[33] Ibid (SC 80, 134–136).

[34] Ibid (SC 80, 148–156).

[35] Ibid (SC 80, 174–176).

[36]John of Damascus. Sermon III on the Assumption (SC 80, 192). English translation is cited by: **http://www.balamandmonastery.org.lb/index.php/st-john-of-damascus-three-sermons-on-the-dormition-feast/sermon-iii**.

[37]John of Damascus. Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images (PG 94, 1345 D–1348 A). English translation is cited by: **https://ccel.org/ccel/damascus/icons/icons.i.iii.html**.

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