Abstract:

The person of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a cherished element in all of the apostolic churches, East and West. This paper attempts to contribute to a deeper appreciation both of Mariology and its relation to other areas of Christian theology, primarily in the light of Alexander Schmemann’s theology of Mary. In his work *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann 1973-1983* (2000) Schmemann wrote: “the Orthodox man begins with the ‘end’, with the experience, the breakthrough, the very reality of God, the Kingdom, Life – and only afterwards does he clarify it, but in relation to the experience he has had”. Accordingly, Schmemann’s theology of Mary is clearly experiential. It arises from the catholic and living experience of the church. This paper will focus primarily on Schmemann’s series of sermons on “The Mother of God”, uncovering some of his theological insights of Mary. This paper will argue that Mary is a significant part of the answer to the question of what Christians of the East and of the West have to offer by way of response to our increasingly dehumanised and alienated world.

Introduction

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the historic embrace of Paul VI and the Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras I in January 1964,¹ the pope and the hierarchs of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches have, after centuries of mutual separation, embraced each other once again as sister churches. On many occasions the pope and the hierarchs of the respective churches have drawn attention to the loving veneration of, and special devotion to, Mary, the Mother of God, which both churches hold in common and which unite them as sister churches. In his apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus* on devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Paul VI affirms that “in venerating with particular love the glorious Theotokos and in acclaiming her as the "Hope of Christians", Catholics unite themselves with their brethren of the Orthodox Churches, in which devotion to the Blessed Virgin finds its expression in a beautiful lyricism and in solid doctrine".² Similarly, in a shared homily with Pope John Paul II, delivered during Vespers in the

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Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome on 5 December, 1987, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Dimitrios I said:

of all the entire Christian world our two sister Churches have maintained throughout the centuries unextinguished the flame of devotion to the most venerated person of the all holy Mother of God, dedicating to her the finest and most inspired artistic works of song, architecture and painting, turning to her sweetest figure the hearts' desires and the hopes of the devout people of every epoch.3

Patriarch Dimitrios I goes on to state that although the unilateral Marian dogmas4, which were promulgated centuries after the two churches sadly broke, tended to differentiate the common tradition regarding the Mother of God, the common dogmatic and theological Marian heritage can once again create 'an axis of unity and reunion of the separate parts'.5 If, according to the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus held in 431, to which Patriarch Dimitrios I alluded in his homily, Mary is truly the Theotokos, the Mother of God, Patriarch Dimitrios I identified Mary as a unifying centre for reunion of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. As the Mother of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God who is our salvation, Mary 'occupies a central and principal position in the faith of our Churches'.6 She, who is eternally connected with our Lord Jesus Christ, 'constitutes the "gateway to heaven" and the "space of the uncontainable" through which the eternal plan of God the Father for the salvation of the world in his only begotten Son is realised'.7 It is important to remember the physical context for Patriarch Dimitrios I's remarks. He proclaimed this connection of Mary to the faith of the two churches in the most important church in western Christendom dedicated to Mary the Mother of God.8 It was in this church that Patriarch Dimitrios I saw himself surrounded by the incomparable masterpieces of the common dogmatic and theological Marian heritage as he put forward the following proposal to John Paul II on behalf of the Eastern Orthodox Church:

we desire to propose in a more official manner that the subject of Mariology should occupy a central position in the theological dialogue between our Churches, not only examined from a Christological point of view, but also anthropological, and especially ecclesiological, for the full re-establishment of our ecclesial communion.9

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4 Dimitrios I is referring to the Roman Catholic Church's dogma of the Immaculate Conception (Ineffabilis Deus), defined and proclaimed by Pope Pius IX on 8 December 1854, and the dogma of the Assumption (Munificentissimus Deus), defined and proclaimed by Pope Pius XII on 1 November 1950.
5 Dimitrios I, 'May the Mother of God Be the Hinge of Our Unity', 6.
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8 The present Basilica of St Mary Major, or Santa Maria Maggiore, in Rome, is dedicated to Mary the Mother of God. It was built by Pope Sixtus III (432–40) after the Council of Ephesus proclaimed Mary as Theotokos, Mother of God, in 431. See The Weekday Missal, (London: CollinsLiturgical, 1992), 1555.
9 Dimitrios I, 'May the Mother of God Be the Hinge of Our Unity', 6.
The former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, reiterated in an interview with Vittoria Messori that this is a positive point of contact between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches: 'Yes ... it is necessary to go back to Mary if we want to return to that "truth about Jesus Christ", "truth about the Church" and the "truth about man".'

John Paul II declared that 'the veneration of Mary, which unites East and West so intimately, will serve ... the cause of unity.' Likewise, Alexij II, Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia declared: 'The veneration of the Mother of God ... the veneration common to the Orthodox and Catholic Churches—brings us back to the times of the Early Church when there were no divisions between East and West so visible, regretfully, in our days.' Clearly, the veneration of Mary is a special witness to apostolic Christianity. Paralleling Mary's role in guaranteeing Christ's humanity in the Christological controversies, Mary's veneration in the churches is a sure sign of their apostolic catholicity. Mary's veneration in the churches is not merely a unifying element to be realised in a far off ecumenical future, but it is a spiritual force already forging deep ecumenical links between the churches.

Orthodox liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemann claims that knowledge of the profound and unique role played by the veneration of Mary both in Christian faith in general and in the life of the Orthodox Church is axiomatic to both Christian and non-Christian alike. Nevertheless, many of today's Christians question the meaning of Mary's veneration. Its meaning is no longer obvious to them and her veneration is even looked upon as problematic. Consequently, Schmemann attempts to explain the true meaning and content of the church's early and ongoing veneration of the Mother of God, the one of whom she herself said 'all generations will call me blessed' (Luke 1:48), in his series of sermons on the Mother of God. We will now consider some of Schmemann's Mariological insights, as expounded primarily in some of his sermons on the Mother of God.

The Veneration of the Mother of God

Schmemann declares that all the church's veneration, love and knowledge of the Mother of God 'is a gift that comes solely through personal experience, as the fruit of love.' This is clearly emphasised in two compelling questions:

Can our love for Christ and our faith in Him be so lukewarm as to have no feeling for the One whose purpose in life was to be His Mother? If we believe in the absolute, divine uniqueness of Christ and His work, then how can we not focus our inner spiritual sight on the woman who gave Him his human life?

14 Schmemann, Celebration of Faith, 12.
15 Schmemann, Celebration of Faith, 12, 14.
16 Schmemann, Celebration of Faith, 15.
17 Schmemann, Celebration of Faith, 15.
Thus, for Schmemann, those who truly desire to understand the church's veneration of Mary must come, taste and decide for [themselves] if all this is invention and myth, or if indeed truth, life, and beauty disclose to [them] their own vitality, depth and grace.\textsuperscript{18} The important thing here is that the church's veneration of Mary the Mother of God is the fruit of love and faith in Christ. It is not a gift achieved by rational analysis but the gift of the mystery of God's love. Awareness of the depth of this mystery appears in surprising places from unlikely sources. It was Martin Luther who declaimed that: 'the veneration of Mary is inscribed in the very depths of the human heart.'\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{The Annunciation}

The narrative of the Annunciation in Luke's Gospel (1:26-28) has been and continues to be an inspiring story.\textsuperscript{20} It has also been incorporated into innumerable magnificent paintings, poems and prayers.\textsuperscript{21} Hence, for Schmemann, this gospel narrative contains some eternal truth that has been recognised and deemed to be highly important.\textsuperscript{22} He sees this eternal truth contained in the angel's wonderful greeting and message to Mary: 'Rejoice!'\textsuperscript{23}

Schmemann observes that countless books on struggle and competition demonstrate that the road to happiness is hatred.\textsuperscript{24} There is no mention of the word 'joy' in any of them. However, the very same joy that the angel announced to Mary 'remains a pulsating force, that still has power to startle and shake human hearts.'\textsuperscript{25} One such moment, for Schmemann, comes in the church on the eve of the Annunciation, when, after the long service has slowly unfolded, the choir sings, 'With the voice of the Archangel, we cry to You, O Pure One: Rejoice, O Full of Grace, the Lord is with You!'\textsuperscript{26} On hearing this invitation to rejoice, hearts are filled with joy and warmth.\textsuperscript{27}

Schmemann suggests that this joy consists above all in the very presence of Mary herself, whose image is known throughout the world and who gazes directly towards those who are looking at her holy icons.\textsuperscript{28} It also consists in Mary's response to the angel, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word' (Luke 1:38), which emphasises her faithfulness, purity, wholeness, faith, total self-giving to God, and her boundless humility.\textsuperscript{29} Mary is truly the one in whom all creation rejoices because it recognises through her that the goal and fulfilment of all life and all love is to accept and live in Christ.\textsuperscript{30} In this way, Schmemann can suggest that the image of the Mother of God shows up the lie that continues to pervade the world and reduces human beings to their earthly appetites.

\textsuperscript{18} Schmemann, \textit{Celebration of Faith}, 15-16.
\textsuperscript{22} Schmemann, \textit{Celebration of Faith}, 30.
\textsuperscript{24} Schmemann, \textit{Celebration of Faith}, 30.
\textsuperscript{25} Schmemann, \textit{Celebration of Faith}, 30.
\textsuperscript{26} Schmemann, \textit{Celebration of Faith}, 30.
\textsuperscript{27} Schmemann, \textit{Celebration of Faith}, 30.
\textsuperscript{28} Schmemann, \textit{Celebration of Faith}, 30.
\textsuperscript{29} Schmemann, \textit{Celebration of Faith}, 30-31.
\textsuperscript{30} Schmemann, \textit{For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy} (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 87.
baseness and brutality, 'the lie that says that [human beings] are] permanently enslaved to the immutable and impersonal laws of nature'. Schmemann highlights the fact that the church rejoices with delight and wonder in the image of Mary because it comforts, encourages, inspires and helps the faithful, and because in gazing at this image, it is very easy to believe in the world's divine beauty and humanity's divine calling.

The contemplation of the image of the Mother of God can be a source of both an aesthetic emotion and a new knowledge. For example, Russian theologian Sergius Bulgakov had an aesthetic emotional encounter in the Zwinger Gallery in Dresden, standing before Raphael's painting of the Sistine Madonna. Of this moment he declared:

The eyes of the Heavenly Queen, the Mother who holds in her arms the Eternal Infant, pierced my soul. I cried joyful and yet bitter tears, and with them the ice melted from my soul, and some of my psychological knots were loosened ... I ran there every day to pray and weep in front of the Virgin, and few experiences in my life were more blessed than those unexpected tears.

Schmemann sees the image of the Virgin Mother as Christ's first gift to the church as the unfolding of all that his teaching and calling means. He points out that in this image the church finds first of all the image of a woman. He strongly suggests that it is important, comforting and redeeming because our world, as he puts it:

has become so completely and hopelessly male, governed by pride and aggression, where all has been reduced to power and weapons of power, to production and weapons of production, to violence, to the refusal to willingly back down or make peace in anything or to keep one's mouth shut and plunge into the silent depths of life.

The image of the Virgin Mother 'stands against all of this and indicts it by her presence alone: the image of infinite humility, and purity, yet filled with beauty and strength; the image of love and the victory of love'. Thus, for Schmemann, the image of the Virgin Mother reveals those qualities that have 'almost completely been lost in our proud, aggressive, male world: compassion, tender-heartedness, care, trust, humility'. Schmemann underscores Mary's profound humility stating that, 'we call her our Lady and the Queen of heaven and earth, and yet she calls herself "the handmaid of the Lord"'. On this point he is clearly echoing the words of Syrian theologian Jacob of Serug: (in one of his rich poetic homilies on Mary the Mother of God):

[God] looked on her humility and her gentleness and her purity, and dwelt in her because it is so easy for Him to dwell with the humble ... He looked on her and dwelt in her because she was humble among those who were born. Even she herself said that

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He looked on her lowliness and dwelt in her ... He made her his mother and who is like her in humility?\textsuperscript{38}

Schmemann is concerned that theology itself has been contaminated by the world's concentration on structures and institutions rather than on the content wherein these structures exist and which is their final justification.\textsuperscript{39} He reminds the church of her own accumulated wisdom, which she, and she alone, can offer to the world, by challenging the church not to debate institutions and structures, but to debate her own mystery in her depths, where she finds Mary, the personification of the victorious humility of the church.\textsuperscript{40}

If the image of the Virgin Mother is a gift to the church from Christ, and if this image reveals the qualities of compassion, tender-heartedness, care, trust and humility, then these qualities are integral to the life of the church. This raises several questions: How much are the churches, East and West, preoccupied with institutions and structures? Are the two sister churches prepared to adopt a more dynamic ecclesiology resourced by a renewed Mariology? Are compassion, tender-heartedness, care, trust and humility, recognised as important leadership qualities? How visible are these qualities in the spiritual leaders in both churches so as to empower the faithful to embrace them? How often are these qualities promoted in the church? How compassionate, kind, caring, and humble are the churches, East and West, to one another? How much do they trust one another?

\textit{The Second Day of Christmas:}
\textit{The Assembly in Honour of the Mother of God (December 26)}

An important point for Schmemann and Orthodoxy is that the Virgin Mary is humanity's gift to God, who comes to the world, to humankind, in Christ. Schmemann underlines this point by citing the following hymn for the feast of the Nativity of Christ:

\begin{quote}
What shall we offer Thee, O Christ, who for our sakes hast appeared on earth as man? Every creature made by Thee offers Thee thanks. The angels offer Thee a hymn; the heavens a star; the Magi, gifts; the shepherds, their wonder; the earth, its cave; the wilderness, the manger; and we offer Thee a Virgin Mother.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

Schmemann stresses that all creation does not merely thirst for God or eagerly wait for God's coming, but actually prepares for the coming of the Lord.\textsuperscript{42} Consequently, he understands that the meeting of God with humanity is at the heart of Christian faith.\textsuperscript{43} He finds the hymn remarkable in that its poetic metaphors reveal the hidden or inner meaning of the reality of the Incarnation which the rational mind is unable to grasp.\textsuperscript{44} Hence according to Schmemann, heaven's gift of the star to Christ signifies

\textsuperscript{39} Schmemann, 'On Mariology in Orthodox', in \textit{Celebration of Faith: The Virgin Mary} (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 66.
\textsuperscript{40} Schmemann, 'On Mariology in Orthodox', 67.
\textsuperscript{41} The Festal Menaion, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 354.
\textsuperscript{42} Schmemann, \textit{Celebration of Faith}, 33.
\textsuperscript{43} Schmemann, \textit{Celebration of Faith}, 34.
\textsuperscript{44} Schmemann, \textit{Celebration of Faith}, 34.
that everything that exists is naturally designed to reveal a higher meaning. The world itself is the ‘symbol’ of God, as longing for and anticipation of God. Since poetry and faith both know that the heavens are manifesting God's glory (Ps 19:1), they are able to see in Christ's birth not only that God comes into the world, but that the world goes out to meet God. At the radiant heart of this procession of the world—of the star, wilderness, cave, manger, angels, shepherds and wise men—is Mary. She is its heart and fulfillment, the supreme and most beautiful fruit of God's creation. Schmemann sums this up as follows:

It is as if faith says to God, 'In Your love for us You give us Your Son; and we, in our love for You, give you Mary the Virgin Mother.' In Mary the world is, so to speak, betrothed to God as the fulfillment of their mutual love. The Gospel says, 'God so loved the world that He gave his only-begotten son' ... the Church answers: 'The world so loved God that it gave Him the one whose beauty and purity reveal the world's deepest meaning and content.'

Therefore, for Schmemann, the image of the Virgin Mother and Child manifests the union once again of God and humankind. In this image God's eternal love for the world and the world's eternal love for God are united. Accordingly, it is the only authentic image of the true world, true life and true human being. Mary is truly the one in whom all creation rejoices because it recognises through her that the goal and fulfilment of all life and all love is to accept and live in Christ. Schmemann is emphatic that Mariology must not be perceived as weakness and sentimental deviation. He agrees with the statement Hans Urs von Balthasar made early in the post-conciliar crisis: "One is ashamed for a Christianity, which today is ashamed of its own Mother."

Conclusion

Schmemann believes that study of the various problems that constitute the agenda of our times in the light of the deep implications and insights of Mariology may be the best way to serve the world. This is reflected in his following statement:

We have received a gift from God and we can share it with the world, thirsty and hungry, in joy and beauty. Mary is the secret joy of all that the Church does in this world. It is she who can and will purify the world ... She will reveal to us that which we are losing every day, the mystrium of the Church, that without which everything in the Church loses all meaning. This is why the Mariological theme is actual. We have not yet started to work on it,
but I would suggest that, instead of adding to the world’s crowds of specialists in all possible areas, we return with a new interest to the one in who God has given us both ‘icon’ and ‘power’ to become that which Christ wants us to be.\(^{58}\)

Similarly, Hans Urs von Balthasar declares:

Perhaps it is particularly necessary for our times to look at Mary. To see her as she shows herself, not as we like to imagine her. To see her, above all, in order not to forget her essential role in the work of salvation and in the Church. She really shows herself and defines herself as the archetypal Church, upon whose form we should form ourselves. We: that means every single Christian and it means, perhaps even more, our image of what the Church is. We are for ever concerned with reshaping and improving the Church in accordance with the demands of our time, following the criticism of opponents and our own models. But do we not thereby lose sight of the one fulfilled standard, indeed the Model? Should we not constantly keep our eyes fixed on Mary in our reforms, not in any way to multiply the Marian feastdays, devotions or indeed definitions, but rather simply to know what Church, what ecclesial Spirit, and what ecclesial behaviour is?\(^{57}\)

Indeed, Mary’s re-consideration and re-establishment of her importance in Christian theology and Christian life is a sure means of addressing the issues emphasised in modern times. Mary and her Son’s redemptive work are inseparable.\(^{58}\) She is the Mother of Jesus Christ, who is now at work in the hearts of the faithful through the Holy Spirit.\(^{59}\)

\(^{56}\) Schmemann, ‘On Mariology in Orthodoxy’, 68.

