

Unit 7

We Celebrate God's Works

Feasts of the Church Year

24. The Mother of God Announces Christ

The Church professes that Mary is Theotokos (Mother of God) and ever a virgin. The Great Feasts of her infancy (September 8 and November 21) point ahead to the incarnation of Christ. The Feast of the Dormition points ahead to the final stage in Salvation History when those who are Christ's will experience the resurrection and eternal life in the age to come.

25. Exaltation of the Precious Cross

On September 14 the Church remembers how St Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, went to the Holy Land and discovered the sites of Christ's cross and tomb. Veneration of the cross began at this time. This feast also remembers how the cross, stolen by Persian invaders in the seventh century, was recovered by the Byzantine army and restored to Jerusalem.

26. Sunday of the Ancestors of Christ

Two Sundays before the Nativity the Church remembers all those who spiritually prepared the Israelites for the coming of the Messiah, especially the prophets. Daniel and his three friends, who remained faithful to the one true God despite threats of death, are particularly honored on this day.

27. Pascha: the New Passover

The Scriptures tell us that Christ is the new and ultimate Passover, taking us from the death of sin to eternal life. Many images of this Feast, including its very name, reinforce our belief that Christ is our Passover, sacrificed for us.

Feasts of the Theotokos	Exaltation of the Holy Cross	Sunday of the Ancestors	Pascha
September 8 November 21 August 15	September 14	Two Sundays before the Nativity	The New Passover

Lesson 24 The Mother of God Announces Christ

Objectives

By the end of this lesson the student should know that:

- Know that Mary is called Theotokos (Mother of God) because she gave birth to the incarnate Son of God.
- Understand that the early Church taught that Mary was a Virgin before, during, and after the birth of her divine Son.
- Know that the Great Feasts of Mary's infancy prepare us to celebrate the coming of Christ.
- Recognize that the Great Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos shows us that those who belong to Christ will share in the life of the world to come.

For the Catechist

Devotion to the Theotokos can be traced as far back as the second century AD, when the *Protoevangelion (Infancy Gospel) of James* was written. This work describes itself as an *Account of the Birth of Christ*, and the Perpetual Virgin Mary, His Mother, pointing to the early focus of devotion on the virginity of Mary. In this work, once used for readings in some Eastern Churches, Joseph, the spouse of the Theotokos, is described as a widower with children. The "brothers of the Lord" described in the Gospels would be Joseph's sons, confirming Mary's perpetual virginity.

Her title of *Theotokos*, although confirmed at the Council of Ephesus (431), was also of early origin. It was understood in the context of Isaiah's prophecy that the virgin would give birth to God-with-us (Emmanuel). This text is quoted in Matthew in the Septuagint Greek version; many modern English translations employ the Hebrew, which says simply that a "young girl" would give birth.

The oldest Marian feast is the celebration of Mary as Mother of God, kept today on December 26 in Byzantine Churches and on January 1 in the West. The other great Marian feasts arose later, between the fifth and seventh centuries, often in connection with the erection of churches in her honor, particularly in the Holy Land. This lesson accents their placement in the Church year as either pointing towards the incarnation (the feasts of Mary's infancy) or towards the completion of Salvation History at the resurrection of the body (the Dormition).

Materials Needed:

Opening Prayer: Icon corner

Introduction: Easel or wall pads, markers,

Guided Reading: Bibles, Come Bless the Lord Icon Packet #20, 24, 39

Activity B: Icons of the Theotokos Fact Sheet,

Come Bless the Lord Icon Packet #20, 22, 24, 39, any other icon collections available.

Activity C: Jesse Tree Worksheet

- 1. Opening Prayer** Begin with a prayer to the Mother of God that the students know, such as *It is truly meet*.

- 2. Review** Review the main points of the previous lesson using the pages from your wall or easel pad. Lessons in this unit are not taught consecutively, so review the last lesson taught.

- 3. Introduction** Begin by asking the students what they know about the Mother of God. Refer to the accounts of Mary in the Gospels: the Annunciation, the birth of Christ, flight into Egypt, seeking Christ in the Temple, the marriage at Cana, and Mary being entrusted to John by Christ on the cross. Ask how Mary figured in each of these events.

Ask the students what they know about how our church honors the Mother of God (*her icon always prominent on the icon screen and in the apse, prayers always end with remembering her*).

Note that today we will look at what the Church believes about Mary and at some of the feasts of Mary we celebrate each year and what they have to tell us about Salvation History.

Background Reading (The Icon of the Theotokos, the Greatest of All Saints):

"Because we believe in the true incarnation of the Son of God become man in Jesus, we give His Mother the honor we do. One of the most prominent examples of this reverence is the fact that we ... place the icon of the Theotokos containing Christ in her womb high on the rear wall of the church building. This image, placed between ceiling and floor, recalls that Mary bridges the gap between God and us by carrying the Son of God in her womb" (DC 11).

"The greatest of all saints is, of course, *Mary the Theotokos*, the Mother of God. In every Divine Liturgy, the unbloody sacrifice is offered first 'for our most holy, most pure, most blessed and glorious Lady, the Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary.' Her position is unique in salvation. As the one who by her own free will bore the Son of God in her womb, she is the first to be saved through the incarnation ('becoming flesh') of the Word of God. This is especially venerated in the feast of her falling asleep (*Dormition*) on August 15, which also celebrates her being taken into heaven (in Latin, *Assumptio*) as the first of all the human race to participate fully in the resurrection of our Lord. Other events of her life have a saving value for us as models of Christian life and because of her supreme role in the salvation worked through Jesus Christ" (LLII 50-51).

4. Guided Reading, Page 123

Before the reading, **summarize the objectives of the lesson** on a wall pad or easel pad so that the page can be preserved and used for review next week.

Have the students **read quietly the first two paragraphs on page 123**. Ask the students to read **Hebrews 9:1-5** to learn what was contained in the Ark of the Covenant (*the Ten Commandments, the manna*) and in the Tabernacle or Temple (*the Ark of the Covenant*). **Ask** why the Virgin Mary is compared to the Ark and the Temple (*she too was a "container" for God*).

Refer to the hymns in the sidebar containing other Old Testament images of Mary (p. 127). Have the students name each of the following images, then read the Old Testament text that speaks of this image:

- *Tabernacle [Meeting tent] of God* (Exodus 40:34) - it was where God's glory dwelled.
- *Ark of the Covenant* (Exodus 25:21-22) - it held the word of the Lord
- *Vessel of Manna* (Exodus 16:32-33) - it held the food which sustained the people
- *Veil of the Temple* (Exodus 40:3) - it concealed the presence of God
- *Rod of Aaron* (Numbers 17:20-23) - it sprouted and blossomed miraculously
- *Daughter of the King* (Psalm 45:11 -13) - she became queen
- *Dwelling place of God* (Exodus 40:34-35) - God was present within it
- *Gate of the King* (Ezekiel 44:1 -2) - only the LORD passes through it
- *Living Fountain* (Song 4:15) - it pours forth life



Background Reading (*The Theotokos*):

"Scripture honors Mary with most beautiful names: 'highly favored one' (Lk 1:28), 'blessed among women' (1:28, 42), and 'mother of the Lord' (1:43). These become the basis for all the titles ascribed to the Holy Virgin. The greatest title given to Mary is that of Theotokos, Greek for 'she who bore God.' It was given to her by the Council of Ephesus (431) which defined that 'Emmanuel is truly God, and therefore the Holy Virgin is the Theotokos, inasmuch as in the flesh [in her womb] she bore the Word of God made flesh' (Canon 1). This Council very clearly rejected all opinions about the personality of Jesus that would in any way separate the divine and human natures united in Him. It refused any implication that the divinity was united to Him after His birth or that Jesus is in any way distinguished from the Word of God. Mary was not simply the mother of Jesus the man, but of Jesus the incarnate Son of God. Both natures were united in His person. Through this relationship to this one person, she is the 'Mother of God.' The Byzantine Churches ordinarily refer to Mary by this title of Theotokos, which signifies that she is truly the 'Mother of God' through her conception, bearing, and giving birth to the person Jesus, true God and true man" (LLI 93-94).



**Feasts of Mary's Infancy
Pages 124-125**

Note that the Church uses all these images to speak of Mary because we cannot explain with rules or ideas how God could allow her to contain His Son in her womb.

Point out that the icon on p. 123 is called the *Platytera ton ouranon* (She who is more specious than the heavens) because she is carrying Christ in her womb. Explain that the oval surrounding Christ in this icon represents the womb of Mary.

Tell the students that there are two doctrines the Church believes about Mary, mentioned in the next two paragraphs. Have the students read the paragraphs and identify the two doctrines (*Mary is Theotokos and Virgin*).

Introduce this section by **distributing copies of the festal icons #20 and #24** from the *Come Bless the Lord* Icon Packet to a few students. Have others **read the description of these feasts** in this section of the text. Have each student summarize what they read, first on one feast, then on the second, if time allows. Otherwise, concentrate on the approaching feast. Note on your chalkboard or newsprint pad the different aspects of the feast covered in the two resources.

Background Reading (Mary's Role in Salvation):

"Byzantine theology is even clearer about Mary's role in the salvation of the human race. On the feast of the Annunciation, Gabriel is described as greeting Mary as the one 'through whom Adam is called back to Paradise, Eve is freed from bondage, and the world is filled with joy.' In her womb, God is united with human flesh 'through the good will of the Father and the operation of the Holy Spirit' (Liti Stichera). On the Feast of the Dormition the Church proclaims, 'Rejoice, O Virgin, for you alone brought heaven and earth together in giving birth to your Son' (Stichera at the Praises) and 'through her holy Dormition the world is given new life' (Liti Stichera). As the one who gave birth to God in the flesh, Mary's choices had cosmic significance; and she is the first to participate in the complete salvation wrought through the incarnation of Christ, including the assumption of her body into the presence of God. Thus she has a unique role as intercessor for all humanity. One of the most ancient prayers of the Church describes her role, 'We hasten to your patronage, O Virgin Mother of God. Despise not our prayers in our necessities, but deliver us from all danger, you who alone are pure and blessed.' Byzantine Church history contains many examples of prayer vigils to the Theotokos in times of civil danger. One such occasion gave rise to the feast of the Protection of the Mother of God (October 1)" (LII 93).



Activity A (Feasts of the Theotokos)

5. Activity B (Icons of the Theotokos)

6. Activity C (The Jesse Tree)

Stress how the feasts of Mary's infancy look ahead to the coming of Christ. Note that they are observed in the first part of the Church year, looking forward to Christmas.

Ask the students if they know the real meaning of the word *cemetery*. Tell them that it comes from the Greek name for this feast, *koimisis*. **Have them read the section** and then explain the word based on what they have read {*a cemetery is a "sleeping place"*}.

Emphasize the Church's faith that those who are faithful to Christ will enjoy the life of the word to come in the body. Mary is the first to enjoy this gift, because her body had contained God.

After discussing the idea with your priest, brainstorm with the students how they may participate in the next feast of the Theotokos in the Church year. Some ideas include:

- Learning to sing the Troparion of the Feast (see the appropriate worksheet at the end of this lesson);
- Decorating an icon of the feast in the church or in the church hall with candles, flowers, drapery, etc.;
- Participating in a procession with the icon of the feast at the Liturgy carrying candles, banners, etc.;
- Hosting a special coffee hour after the festal Liturgy;
- Distributing icon prints of the feast to all who attend.

Distribute the Icons of the Theotokos Fact Sheet and give the students time to read the descriptions. Then allow them to visit the parish church to identify the Marian icons there and/or distribute icon prints, the *Come Bless the Lord* Icon Packet, and other books of icons to find the icons described on the Fact Sheet.

Have the students complete the ornaments on the Jesse Tree Worksheet (Theotokos).

7. Time Line

Refer to the Time Line Poster and have the students locate the time of the Virgin's life.

8. Summary

End the lesson by summarizing the lesson from the aims on page 339, from the elements in the student text on which you focused and/or from any other points raised in the lesson.

9. Closing Prayer

Conclude with the Hymn to the Theotokos on page 127 or the troparion of the current feast of the Theotokos from the appropriate sheet at the end of this lesson.

Icons of the Theotokos

The Church honors the Theotokos with a number of icons, each of which tells us something different about how we understand the Virgin's role in Salvation History. For example, most icons of the Mother of God (except for those showing historical scenes) also show Christ. We rarely honor Mary apart from her Son because her role in Salvation History can only be understood in the light of Jesus and the Incarnation. If Christ is not present in the icon, then Mary is in some way pointing the way toward Him, announcing His coming.

Read the characteristics of these different icons; then find actual examples in your parish church or in collections of icons.

Mother of God - In these icons she is shown with the Christ-child whom she holds in her arms. There are several different variations of this icon:

- *Icons Illustrating Jesus' Humanity* - They often show Mary holding Christ who has His arms around her. We see the tender love of Mary for her Son, that special love that only a mother can have. These icons are meant to illustrate the real humanity of Jesus by showing the emotional bond between Him and His Mother. For the same reason some icons even show Mary nursing her Son. There are a great variety of icons of this type.
- *Icons Depicting Jesus' Divinity* - They often show Mary holding Christ, but He seems to be standing of His own will or seated upon her arm as upon a throne. She points toward Him with her hand, showing us the way to Him (*Hodigitria* - A Greek word meaning *She who Shows the Way*).
- *Mystical-Theological Icons* - These icons show Jesus and Mary in a reality that has not happened on the earth. Often Jesus is in a *mandorla* (a halo that completely surrounds His body), such as in icons of the *Platytera* (see below). Sometimes the icon shows Mary at the throne of her Son, often with her hands raised to Him in supplication. These icons depict themes in the theology and teaching of the Church.

Platytera - This Greek word means *She who is Greater than the Heavens*. In these icons Christ is shown as if enthroned in His mother's womb. Her hands are extended in prayer. It is often painted in the apse or halfway up the back wall of the altar area to show that she is a link: the one through whom Christ comes into the world and who also prays to God for us. This is sometimes called the *Icon of the Sign*, referring to the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14, fulfilled in Christ: "There the Lord Himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and shall name Him Emmanuel" (a name which means *God is with us*).

Gospel Scenes - These icons depict Mary in the Gospel scenes in which she took part, such as the Annunciation, the Nativity of Christ, His Encounter in the Temple, the Crucifixion, the Ascension and Pentecost. Other icons show Mary in scenes from her life or in scenes from the history of the Church. Most popular of these is the:

Protection of the Virgin - In these icons Mary stands with outstretched arms, holding her mantle over the people as a sign of her protection, as she appeared in tenth-century Constantinople. The Feast of the Protection of the Theotokos is kept on October 1.

How many of these icons can you find in your parish church?

How many of these icons can you find in icon collections, books, etc.?

Learn about other icons of the Theotokos and explain them to your class.

Feasts of the Theotokos



Nativity of the Theotokos (September 8)

Troparion (Tone 4) - Your Nativity, O Mother of God, heralded joy to the whole universe, for from you rose the Sun of Justice, Christ our God. Taking away the curse, He imparted the blessing, and by abolishing Death, He gave us everlasting life.



Protection of the Theotokos (October 1)

Troparion (Tone 1) - We praise your great protection, O Virgin, which you spread forth like a radiant, transcendent cloud. Invisibly you guard your people from every foe's attack. Since you are to us a shelter and a sure defense, we cry to you with our whole heart: Glory to your great deeds, O Lady! Glory to your divine shelter! Glory to your care and providence, O most pure Virgin!



Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple (November 21)

Troparion (Tone 4) - Today is the prelude of the benevolence of God and the announcement of the salvation of men. In the Temple of God, the Virgin is seen openly, foretelling to all the coming of Christ. Wherefore, let us cry out to her in a loud voice: "Hail, O fulfillment of the Creator's plan!"



Dormition of the Theotokos (August 15)

Troparion (Tone 1) - In giving birth, you have preserved your virginity; and in falling asleep, you did not forsake the world, O Mother of God. You have passed to life, being the Mother of Life. Through your intercession, save our souls from death.

Feasts of the Theotokos



Nativity of the Theotokos (*September 8*)

Troparion (Tone 4) - Thy nativity, O Mother of God, brought joy to the whole world: for out of thee arose the Sim of righteousness, Christ our Lord; and absolving the curse, he brought us blessing, and slaying death, he granted us eternal life.



Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple (*November 21*)

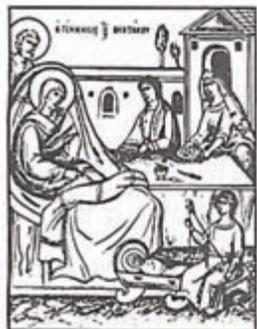
Troparion (Tone 4) - Today is the beginning of the benevolence of God, and the first proclamation of the salvation of mankind; in the temple of God the Virgin radiantly presents herself, and for the first time announces Christ to all. To her let us also cry with a great voice: Hail, thou fulfillment of the providence of the Creator.



Dormition of the Theotokos (*August 15*)

Troparion (Tone 1) - In giving birth thou didst preserve thy virginity, in thy sleep thou didst not forsake the world, O Mother of God; thou didst cross over to life, being the mother of life, and with thy prayers savest our soul from death.

Feasts of the Theotokos



Nativity of the Theotokos (*September 8*)

Troparion (Tone 4) - Your birth, O Virgin Theotokos, heralded joy to the universe; for from you arose the Sun of Justice, Christ our God. Removing the curse, he gave the blessing, and by destroying Death he granted us everlasting life.



Protection of the Theotokos (*October 1*)

Troparion (Tone 4) - Protected by your appearance, O Mother of God, we devout people solemnly celebrate today. Gazing upon your most pure icon, we fervently say: Protect us with your holy veil, and deliver us from all evil, imploring your Son, Christ our God, to save our souls.



Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple (*November 21*)

Troparion (Tone 4) - Today is the prelude of God's benevolence and the herald of our salvation; for the Virgin openly appears in the temple of God and foretells Christ to all. Let us also with full voice exclaim to her: Rejoice, Fulfillment of the Creator's plan.



Dormition of the Theotokos (*August 15*)

Troparion (Tone 1) - Theotokos, in giving birth you preserved virginity; and in your falling asleep you did not forsake the world. You are the Mother of Life and have been transferred to life, and through your prayers you deliver our souls from death.

Feasts of the Theotokos



Nativity of the Theotokos (*September 8*)

Troparion (Tone 4) - Your birth has filled the universe with joy, O virgin Mother of God, for from you arose the glorious Sun of righteousness, Christ our God. He destroyed the age-old curse and replaced it with a blessing. For having conquered Death, He gives us everlasting life.



Protection of the Theotokos (*October 1*)

Troparion (Tone 4) - Solemnly do we faithful believers celebrate this day as we are blessed by your visitation; and gazing upon your most pure image we humbly entreat you: Protect us with your precious mantle and deliver us from every evil, and pray your Son, Christ our God, to save our souls.



Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple (*November 21*)

Troparion (Tone 4) - This day is the prelude of God's good pleasure and the herald of humanity's salvation. The Virgin appears openly in the temple of God and foretells to all the coming of Christ. Therefore with all our hearts let us loudly acclaim her: "Hail, fulfillment of the Creator's plan!"



Dormition of the Theotokos (*August 15*)

Troparion (Tone 1) - Even though you gave birth, you still kept your virginity. Although you fell asleep, you did not abandon the world, O Mother of God. Being the Mother of Life, you passed into life. Through your prayers you deliver our souls from death.

Feasts of the Theotokos



Nativity of the Theotokos (*September 8*)

Troparion (Tone 4) - Your birth, O virgin Mother of God, heralded joy to the universe; for from you rose the Sun of Justice, Christ our God. He took away the curse, He gave the blessing, and by trampling Death, He gave us everlasting life.



Protection of the Theotokos (*October 1*)

Troparion (Tone 4) - Protected by your coming, O Mother of God, the faithful people solemnly celebrate today; and gazing upon your immaculate image, they humbly say: Watch over us with your noble protection and deliver us from all evil by asking your Son, Christ our God, to save our souls.



Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple (*November 21*)

Troparion (Tone 4) - Today is the prelude of the benevolence of God and the herald of the salvation of mankind; for the Virgin openly appears in the temple of God and foretells Christ to all. Let us also with full voice exclaim to her: "Hail, fulfillment of the Creator's plan!"



Dormition of the Theotokos (*August 15*)

Troparion (Tone 1) - O Mother of God, in giving birth you still preserved virginity; and in your falling asleep, you did not forsake the world. You are the Mother of Life and have been transferred to life, and through your prayers have delivered our souls from death.

The Jesse Tree

