

The Miraculous Virgin Birth of our Lord

This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it; for the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut. -Ezekiel 44:2

Dear Brethren,

Many are unaware that the historic teaching of our Lord's Virgin Birth also teaches that He miraculously passed through the womb of the Virgin without violating her perpetual virginity. Father David Belden, an Orthodox priest, explains:

“Orthodox Christians must not confuse the virginal conception with the virgin birth of our Lord. The Church commemorates the first on the feast of the Annunciation, March 25, and the second nine months later, on December 25. Like all conceptions and births, they are two separate events. The Scriptures, the Creeds, the liturgical texts, the Holy Fathers, and all of Holy Tradition witnesses to the fact that our Lord had a virgin birth, i.e., no blood, no afterbirth, no breaking of the seal. This is what the Orthodox Church means by "virgin birth." It does not refer to the conception without a man, but refers precisely to the birth itself.”

“For without seed He took flesh of a Virgin and rose from the tomb, without breaking the seal of either.” (Akathist Hymn to Our Lord Jesus Christ)

“Having kept the seals intact, O Christ, Thou didst arise from the tomb, O Thou Who didst not break the seal of the virgin by Thy birth; and Thou hast opened unto us the gates of Paradise.” (Sixth Ode of the Paschal Canon)

This Tradition goes back to the earliest times of the Church. As the Orthodox Archbishop Chrysostomos writes,:

“As early as Justin Martyr, the Fathers have always taught that, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (e.g., Ezekiel 44:2: "This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no one shall pass through it; for the Lord God of Israel shall enter by it, and it shall be shut" [Septuagint]), Christ passed through the Virgin Mother's womb without violating it. It is this "virgin birth," along with the seedless or virgin conception, which we Orthodox uphold as a great miracle. Let us simply cite the words of St. John Damascus on this matter. In his Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, he assures us that Christ "passed through" the Virgin Mary, "keeping her womb closed," coming through this "Gate" without injuring "her seal." Everywhere our Church's hymns speak of the Mother of God bearing a Son in purity, the Redeemer having passed through her closed womb without violating it. Let us cite three very clear instances of this:

‘Thou hast been born without destroying my virginity, but Thou hast kept my womb as it was before childbirth....’ (a Stichiron from the Vespers of the Forefeast of the Nativity [December 24] according to Slavic usage, in which the Theotokos herself speaks)

‘For the All-Perfect God is born a babe of her, and by His birth He sets the seal upon her virginity.’ (The Oikos appointed after the sixth ode for the Matins’ Canon of the Feast of the Synaxis of the Theotokos [December 26], composed by St. Romanos the Melodist)

‘Thou art my God, for seeing the seal of my virginity unbroken, I proclaim Thee to be the immutable Word....’ (A verse from the Litany of the Feast of the Nativity, in which the Virgin Mary again speaks)”

Some now are arguing that the traditional Icon of the Nativity which depicts our Lord being bathed by midwives following His Holy Birth is a proof which contradicts this above teaching. Fr. David Belden offers a response to this:

Those who use the icon of the Nativity which portrays the washing of the infant as a proof that there is "... certainly no idea that He came forth from His mother without opening her womb" forget our Lord's baptism at the hands of John: Suffer it to be so now, or thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffered Him (Matt. 3:15). Without the need to be washed in baptism, so was our Lord washed, "Who didst not break the seal of the Virgin by Thy birth."

Or as another Orthodox writer states:

It is interesting to note that midwives are depicted on the Nativity Icon. These figures are apocryphal, but accepted by the Church. It was custom for new born infants to be bathed and rubbed with salt. That Christ was washed does not infer after-birth cleansing in the normal manner.

Such modern day denials of this ancient doctrine...

"seem to all be part of the thrust of Protestant Rationalism which seeks make Christ's miraculous Birth more 'realistic.' They just want to take every miraculous event and prophecy and subject it to reason and pragmatic concerns before they'll even consider believing."

Finally, some argue that such a teaching puts Christ out of touch with mankind of whom He is supposed to share natures with. I believe St. Ambrose offers the crucial key to understanding this teaching about St. Mary's miraculous Virgin Birth in which Christ was born by passing through her unopened womb just as He later did through unopened doors or the sealed tomb. St. Ambrose points out that there are something's about Christ which were to prove His humanity and identity with fallen man (as many against this teaching are eager to defend). Yet this is not the only thing which is affirmed about Him in our Faith. There are other things about Christ which prove to us His Divinity in order that we can trust that He was indeed our Savior (which no mere man could be). His Circumcision, hunger and thirst, Passion and ultimate Crucifixion were to demonstrate His true Humanity. His Conception without a human Father, Miraculous Birth, Transfiguration and ultimate Resurrection, were to demonstrate His true Divinity.

And this is why the Fathers affirm that Christ was born miraculously. Like His miraculous Conception by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary's ever Virginity is not a teaching based on some false understanding of birth and human sexuality as being sinful, but rather to demonstrate the great Mystery that GOD WAS CONCEIVED AND BORN. It demonstrates the great Power of God. St. Ambrose explains in the following quote:

"Therefore He accepted from us what it were proper for Him to offer for us in order to redeem us by means of what is ours... The sacrifice is of ours, the reward is of His own; and you will find many things in Him both in accord with nature and beyond nature. According to the condition of the body He was in the womb, He nursed at His mother's breast, He lay in the manger; but superior to that condition, the Virgin conceived and the Virgin bore, so that you might believe that He was God who restored nature, though He was man who, in accord with nature, was born of a human being..." - (The Mystery of the Lord's Incarnation, A.D. 382)

The Faith of our Fathers:

St. Irenaeus of Lyon: "And concerning His birth, the same prophet says in another place (Is 66:7), 'Before she who was in labor gave birth, and before the birthpains came on, she was delivered of a male child;' thus he indicated His unexpected and extraordinary birth from the Virgin" (On the Apostolic Preaching, 54; c. A.D. 175).

St. Clement of Alexandria: "For certain people say Mary, examined by the midwife after she had given birth, was found to be virgin" (A.D. 215).

St. Gregory Thaumaturgos: "Not in corporeal manner did God act, not to the law of the flesh did God subordinate Himself, but the Lord of corporeal nature manifested Himself to appear in the world by a miraculous birth, in order to reveal His power and to show, that in having been made Man, He is born not as a mere man, -- that God is made Man, since for His will nothing be difficult. Moreover, He that is become the God-Man is born, not as ordinarily man is born -- He is born as God made Man, manifest of this by His Own Divine power, since if He were born according to the general laws of nature, the Word would seem something imperfect. Therefore, He was born of the Virgin and shone forth; therefore, having been born, He preserved unharmed the virginal womb, so that the hitherto unheard of manner of the Nativity should be for us a sign of great mystery. Is Christ God? Christ is God by nature, but not by the order of nature did He become Man. Thus we declare and in truth believe, calling to witness the seal of intact virginity: as Almighty Creator of the womb and virginity, He chose an unshameful manner of birth and was made Man, as He did will" (c. A.D. 250 Discourse on the Nativity of Christ).

St. Ephrem the Syrian: Lift up your voice and sing the wonderful history Of the Virgin, the daughter of David, who gave birth to the Life of the World. Who loves you is amazed; and who would understand is silent and confused , Because he cannot probe the Mother who gave birth in her virginity. If it is too great to be clarified with words the disputants ought not on that account cross swords with your Son." -Hymns of the Nativity (4th century)

Didymos the Blind, "nor did [Mary] ever become the Mother of anyone else, but even after childbirth she remained always and every way an immaculate virgin." (On the Trinity, 3,4; A.D. 381).

St. Gregory the Theologian (of Nazianzus): Believe in the Son of God, the Word before the ages, who was begotten of the Father apart from time and incorporeally, who in these last days was, for your sake, made Son of Man, born of the Virgin Mary in an indescribable and stainless way..." (Oration on Baptism, A.D. 381)

St. Hesychius of Jerusalem: "Christ did not open but left closed the door of the Virgin; He did not violate nature's seal, did not harm the one giving birth, for her, in reality. He left the sign of virginity."

St. Ambrose: "Mary had kept the seals of her virginity. The Prophet Ezekiel (44:2) says He went forth from the Virgin.. A good gate is Mary, that was closed and was not opened; by her Christ passed, but He opened it not."

"Who is this gate, if not Mary? Is it not closed because she is a virgin? Mary is the gate through which Christ entered this world, when He was brought forth in the virginal birth and the manner of His birth did not break the seals of virginity (The Consecration of a Virgin and the Perpetual Virginity of Mary, A.D. 391).

St. Augustine: Mary "a Virgin conceiving, a Virgin bearing, a Virgin pregnant, a Virgin bringing forth, a Virgin perpetual. Why do you wonder at this, O man? It was fitting for God to be born thus, when He deigned to become man..." (Sermons A.D. 391-430)

St. Cyril of Alexandria: Jesus did not first come into being as a simple man, before the union and communion of God in Him; but the Word Himself, coming into the Blessed Virgin herself, assumed for Himself His own Temple from the substance of the Virgin, and came forth from her a man in all that could be externally discerned, while interiorly He was true God. Therefore He kept His Mother a Virgin even after her child-bearing, which was done for none of the other saints. (Against those who do not confess that the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God, 4; c. A.D. 430)

St. Peter Chrysologus: "Where are they who think that the Virgin's conceiving and the Virgin's giving birth are just like those of other women? Theirs is of the earth, hers is of heaven. Hers is by divine power, theirs by human weakness. Theirs is in the passions of the flesh, hers in the tranquillity of the Divine Spirit and in a human body at rest. Blood was quiet, flesh was still, here members slept, and the Virgin's womb was entirely unmoved in that heavenly visit, while the Author of flesh was clothing Himself in a garment of flesh and becoming a Heavenly Man, who would not only restore the earth to man, but would even give him heaven. A Virgin conceived, a Virgin bore, and a Virgin she remains. (Sermons post A.D. 432)

Pope St. Leo the Great: She (Mary) brought Him forth without the loss of virginity, even as she conceived him without its loss...(Jesus Christ was) born from the Virgin's womb because it was a miraculous birth. (Letter to Flavian, 28, 2; A.D. 449). His origin is different but His nature is the same. Human usage and custom was lacking, but by divine power it was brought about that a Virgin conceived, a Virgin bore, and Virgin she remained (Sermons 22, 2; ante A.D. 461).

St. Fulgence of Ruspe: "This was certainly a wonderful Person, having the natures of God and of man, but truly conceived and born according to the flesh, inasmuch as the Virgin, in an indescribable manner, conceived and bore the God of heaven, and remained inviolate, Virgin and Mother, -she of course, is truly designated by the angel "full of grace" and "blessed among women," -because she neither had nor desired any commerce of man but, while retaining a virginity both of mind and of body, she received from Him

whom she was about to conceive and bear the gift of uncorrupted fruitfulness and of fruitful integrity... This is the grace by which it was brought about that God, who came to take away sins, because in Him there is no sin, was conceived and was born Man in the likeness of the flesh of sin, from the flesh of sin. For the flesh of Mary, which had been conceived in iniquities in the usual human manner, was the flesh of sin which begot the Son of God, or rather, when the Son of God is said to be in the likeness of the flesh of sin, it does not mean that the Only-begotten God drew any stain of sin from the mortal flesh of the Virgin, but that He accepted the full reality of our nature.” (Letter of Fulgence and 14 Bishops to Various of Their Brethren, 17, 11; c. A.D. 502)

St. Gregory Pope of Rome: “... so that through an indescribable mystery, in a holy conception and in an inviolable birth, in accord with the realities of both natures, the same Virgin would be both handmaid of the Lord and His Mother also...” (Moral Teachings from Job, 18, 52, 85; c. A.D. 578)

“We must understand that the divine operation, if comprehended by reason, is not remarkable; nor does that faith which human reason puts to the test have merit... The body of the Lord come into the presence of the disciples through closed doors, which body, in truth, at His birth come forth to human eyes from the closed womb of the Virgin. What wonder, then if, after His Resurrection and about to reign victorious in eternity, He entered through closed doors, who, coming so that He might die, came forth from the unopened womb of the Virgin? (Homilies on the Gospels 2, 26, 1; c. A.D. 590)

St. Sophronios of Jerusalem: “We teach that every word and operation, be it something divine and celestial or be it human and earthly, proceeds from one and the same Christ and Son, and from His one composite and singular Person, in which the Incarnate Word of God was present and in which the operations of either nature, inseparable but unconfused, were performed in accord with that nature... His human [words and actions] were above what is human, not that His nature was not human, but because He voluntarily became Man, and having voluntarily become Man, He accepted what belongs to being a man; nor was this by any kind of tyranny or necessity, so that His becoming like us were involuntary, but it was when and to the extent that He willed it... At the same time, however, there were the sublime and preeminent indications of His divinity... such as His being conceived without seed, the exultation of John in the womb, the undespoiling birth, the immaculate virginity which was unblemished before the birth, during the birth, and after the birth... the marvelous and corporeal ascent from earth into heaven... all of which , accomplished on a level above human reason and nature, were indications proclamatory of the divine essence and nature of the Word of God... (Synodal Letter; A.D. 634)

St. John of Damascus: “And just as He that was conceived kept her that conceived a Virgin still, He that was born kept her virginity intact, only passing through her and keeping her closed. The conception was through the sense of hearing; but the birth was through the usual channel by which children come, even if some do prattle of His birth being through the side of the Mother of God. Certainly it was not impossible for Him to

come by this gate without injuring its seal in any way.” (The Source of Knowledge, 3,4,14; A.D. 743)

“And after parturition, of course, the signs of virginity, the seals so to speak, were kept safe.” (The Holy Trinity, 1)

I believe that through the Incarnation, the Most Holy Virgin Mary became truly the Theotokos — the Mother of God — in time. She was a Virgin before, during and after birth. Even as Jesus Christ arose from the dead despite the fact that the Jews had sealed His tomb with a stone, and even as He entered into the midst of His disciples while the doors were shut, so also did He pass through the virginal womb without destroying the virginity of Mary or causing Her the travail of birth. Even as the Red Sea remained untrampled after the passage of Israel, so also did the Virgin remain undefiled after giving birth to Emmanuel. She is the gate proclaimed by the Prophet Ezekiel through which God entered into the world "while remaining shut" (Ezekiel 44:2). <http://www.orthodoxphotos.com/readings/ibelieve/incarnation.shtml>