

# THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTION OF MARIOLOGY AND THE NOTION OF THEOTOKOS IN THE TEACHINGS OF SAINT AMBROSE

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## ABSTRACT

*Saint Ambrose (339-397 BCE) was bishop of the Italian city of Milan and was a leading writer in the Western Christian Church during the 4th century. He was an outspoken believer in the notion of Christian female virginity and succeeded in communicating prominent conceptions of God and of the Christian quest for a virtuous life. Central to Ambrose's teachings is the virginity of Mary and her role as the Theotokos (God bearer/Mother of God). This article discusses the Mariology of Ambrose of Milan, which greatly influenced the thinking of contemporary Popes including Damasus, Siricius and Leo the Great. In uncovering the Mariology of Ambrose, the researcher used various sources and went back to the official Marian pronouncements of Ambrose and also accentuated Scripture within the overall context of both Catholic and Orthodox Church teachings. A historical text-critical analysis was used and understood in terms the historic and socio-cultural context in which Ambrose lived. Biblical hermeneutics was applied to assist in the analysis of the relation between Biblical statements on Mary, Ambrosian writings and the early Church fathers, so as to arrive at a philosophical conception of Mariology and the notion of Theotokos in the teachings of Saint Ambrose.*

## INTRODUCTION

Mary, a virgin not only undefiled but a virgin whom grace has made inviolate, free from every stain (Ambrose of Milan, 340-370 BCE).

It is evident from literature that theologians often tend to neglect the importance of St Ambrose and his philosophy of Mariology in the overall study of the discourse on Mary. This paper seeks to examine St Ambrose's views on Mary. The research design for this paper was the phenomenological, post-positivistic paradigm of qualitative research since this is more congruent with the realities most often of interest in a theological/philosophical study. Since it is not possible to attain absolute objectivity, subjective beliefs and judgments as well as the experiences and values of individuals and ecclesiastic groups are valuable and important. The focus of exegesis is the text. The researcher thus gathered relevant works, studied and learned from them. Both primary and secondary resources were interrogated and a historical text-critical analysis was used and understood in terms of the historic and socio-cultural context in which Ambrose lived. Biblical hermeneutics was applied to assist in the analysis of the relation between Biblical statements on Mary, Ambrosian writings and the early Church fathers, so as to arrive at a philosophical conception of Mariology and the notion of Theotokos in the teachings of Saint Ambrose. It should be borne in mind that theology is essentially mystical because it is primarily evidence of religious experience. The paper interprets texts in an attempt to draw their meaning out and is intended, *inter alia*, to generate conversation on Ambrose's philosophical conception of Mariology.

The Orthodox Church, since its very inception, stresses the divinity of Christ in the Incarnation, the *Logos* (Word) and the human quest for *Theosis* (striving to be God-like). What is equally important is the divine motherhood of the Virgin Mary. In the Byzantine rite liturgy, during the feast of the *Synaxis* of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God tells Jesus: "As thou hast found my womb, so thou hast left it." During the prayers on the Feast of the Nativity of Jesus Christ the chanters state the following line: "According to His good pleasure, by a strange self-emptying, He passed through thy womb, yet kept it sealed." The Mother of God/God bearer (*Theotokos*) is fundamentally related to Christ and the Body of Christ that is the Holy Church and the "Bride" of Jesus Christ. The Virgin Mary is thus an essential component of the liturgical prayer life and sacred tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church. "The Logos begotten of the Father from on high, inexpressibly, inexplicably, incomprehensibly, and eternally, is He that is born in time here below of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos" (The Incarnation of the Word of God 8 [365 BCE], St. Athanasius). Mary is pre-eminent within the communion of saints and as there is only one incarnate God, only one woman can be God's mother. God the Father came into the human race and became the Saviour through the womb of Mary as she was exclusively selected by the Father to bear His only begotten Son. The mother of Jesus Christ had a genuine physical pregnancy and gave birth to Christ after conceiving Him by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). In Eastern Orthodoxy she is thus

termed the “Ever-Virgin”. The stand-out true blessing for Mary is that unlike Eve “she is the most blessed woman who ever existed because, by God’s grace, she never sinned” (Pacwa 1992: 164). Her role in the Christian economy is well understood in Orthodox and Roman Catholicism and she is termed the *Theotokos* or “Mother of God” since the third Ecumenical Council Synod held in Ephesus in 381 BCE.

## THE THIRD ECUMENICAL COUNCIL SYNOD

The holy Fathers who participated in this Council in Ephesus in 381 carefully examined the Holy Scriptures and attacked the teachings of the Nestorians which denied the divine nature of Jesus. They wanted Mary to be termed a *Christotokos* because according to the belief of their leader Nestorius, Mary gave birth to Christ without His divine nature. The Ecumenical Synod declared that Mary was indeed the *Theotokos* or Mother of God, since she gave birth to the Son of God who had both a divine and human nature that united in the person of Jesus Christ. The word *Theotokos* is a Greek designation for the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, and it is used especially in the Greek Orthodox Church. Its literal translations in English include *God-bearer* and *the one who gave birth to God*; while a less literal translation includes *Mother of God*. The latter title is also the literal translation of a separate title in Greek, *Miter Theou*, *Mother of God* which also translates the Greek words *Theomitor* and *Mitrotheos*, which are found in many texts of the early Church Fathers as well as in a wide range of liturgical texts. Mary is also referred to as the *Aeiparthenos* (Ever Virgin) and the *Panayia* (All Holy). The renowned Orthodox scholars Nissiotis (1974) and Coniaris (1982) considered these definitions to be representative on the subject of defining Mary the Virgin as the Mother of God. There are numerous passages in the Holy Bible which attest to the immense importance of Mariology and which are critical inputs in Eastern Orthodox Christianity as well as Roman Catholic faith. The Archangel Gabriel and Elizabeth both confess to the Virgin Mary as they state, “Blessed are you among women” (Luke 1:28 and 42) and no other woman in the Holy Bible is referred to in such glowing terms. It is in Luke 1:26-28, however, that we find the important clarification: “And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.” Later on Elizabeth, inspired by the *Paraclete* (the Comforter), says to Mary “blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, And why is it that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:42-43). We can view this as a Semitic means of saying that Mary was indeed the most blessed of all women ever. This is the predominant reason why in future “all generations will call [Mary] blessed” (Luke 1:48). The Archangel Gabriel appears to Joseph in a dream and assures him that “What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20). By giving birth to the *Theanthropos* or God-Man, Mary

did not lose her purity and chastity either before, during or after giving birth, despite being married to Joseph. The New Testament stresses that Joseph and Mary were only “betrothed” to one another (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:27), which obligated overall sexual abstinence (Edersheim 1957: 41). Mary was with child “before they came together” in any kind of sexual familiarity. The conception is thus attributable to a miracle brought about by the power and energy of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35). Coniaris notes that: “The Incarnation was not only the work of the Father, of His Power and His Spirit...but it was also the work of the will and faith of the Virgin...Just as God became incarnate voluntarily, so He wished that His mother should bear him freely and with full consent” (Coniaris 1982: 77). Gregory the Theologian states “if anyone does not accept the Holy Mary as Theotokos, he is without the Godhead” (Epistle 101). Mary is uniquely blessed as she bore her own Saviour. In Roman Catholicism she is also special in that she immaculately conceived and without spot of sin, whereas Eve who was immaculately created, sinned. Orthodoxy disagrees here since they state only Jesus was without stain of original sin. Mary was thus made pure on the day of the Annunciation in Orthodoxy and if we accept the notion of an Immaculate Conception in a literal sense, we give Mary the stature of a goddess besides God. Mary is the virginal bride of God the Father (Cutsinger 2000: 43). Furthermore, her soul is without spot of blemish (Cunningham 2006: 111). Mary is the virginal bride of God and in the plethora of Orthodox doctrinal teachings on the economy of salvation, her unique and special status as *Theotokos* is recognised as being indispensable and is thus established as a representative Orthodox Church doctrine. In the authentic interpretations of Scripture in the Orthodox faith as well as in the official formulations and confession of faith, Mary is afforded a superior status as the “First amongst the Saints”. Shoemaker (2005: 445-448) accentuates Mary’s indispensable contributions to the earthly assignment of Jesus Christ and emphasises her leadership of the apostles in the early church, the *Ekklesia*. Her free and willing response to the Incarnation makes her even more worthy of honour since she accepted what God desired of her. The blessing of God which is placed on Mary is made analogous to the blessing of God which rests upon Jesus Christ in His humanity as the incarnate *Logos* of God. United in the one person of Jesus Christ are two distinct natures, the divine and the human. Mary, as the *Theotokos* is the mother of the one essence of Christ; as such she is the Mother of God.

## ORTHODOX TRADITION

In the Orthodox Christian tradition, the Immaculate Conception of Mary is not accepted as an official dogma. In the Roman Catholic dogma, Mary was cleansed of all original sin while in her mother’s womb, so that Jesus her pure Son of God could be born. This argument does not consider the free will of mankind and consequently the Orthodox Church dogma states that Mary was cleansed of all sin at the Annunciation after she accepts the offer of God the Father via the Archangel Gabriel. There is indeed a

very close linkage between dogma and devotion in Orthodoxy which are in essence inseparable from one another. It is evident from Scripture that the glory of the Mother of God is not located in her physical maternity, but in the fact that she carried the Logos, the Incarnate Word. The tradition around her is important, whether it be concerning the nativity, her presentation in the temple or her assumption. Much is celebrated by the Church without being stated in the Holy Bible. Holy tradition complements the Holy Bible especially in terms of the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies in the New Testament's good news. Holy tradition is what gives us the power to understand the meaning of the revealed truth (Luke 24, 25). Holy tradition confers upon us an understanding of what we need to hear and how we should continue to practise what we hear. In this way, the cult of the Mother of God is a fruit of Holy tradition and is the "...germ and stem of tradition. We can find a definite relationship between the person of the Mother of God and what we call the tradition of the Church" (Lossky 1951: 268). The term Mother of God, *Theotokos*, has not been understood, neither has it been intended to be understood, as referring to Mary as Mother of God *from eternity*, that is, as Mother of God the Father. It only refers to the birth of the *Logos* Jesus, that is, God in human form. The limitation in the meaning of *Mother of God* must thus be implicitly understood by the writer using the term. By means of contrast, the term *Theotokos* makes it explicit, and it therefore discounts any misunderstanding of the divine maternity of Mary. God the Father chose Mary to be a personal part of His immense act of clemency for humanity. Mary was thus full of His grace and kept spotless and thus free from sin for her complete life. Mary was prepared to be the perfect dwelling place for the God-man (*Theanthropos*) Jesus, the incarnate *Logos*, and was really His mother. Due to the fact that Mary became the *Theotokos*, she is a representation of God's compassion and grace to all His people. Mary's role in the economy of mercy is huge and she possesses the most earnest understanding of the mystery of God's salvific grace and mercy for humanity. Her pure body was required for the formation of a physical child and its development. Mary, by virtue of the conception of the Holy Spirit, gave birth to the second entity of the triune Godhead. She created His human nature, which became one with His divine nature. In Orthodoxy then Mary is hugely honoured and she is venerated as "more honourable than the Cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the Seraphim" (Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom). St. Cyril of Alexandria praised Mary at the fourth Ecumenical Council Synod of Ephesus in 431 BCE by stating in his sermon the following about Mary:

Hail Mary, Mother of God,  
Precious treasure of the whole world.  
Light unquenchable,  
Crown of virginity,  
Sceptre of Orthodoxy,  
Temple which shall never be destroyed,

Place which contained Him whom nothing can contain,  
Mother and Virgin (P.G. Ixxvii. 992, b.)

St. John of Damascus (675-749 BCE) explains that the name Mother of God “contains the whole history of the divine economy in this world” (P.G. xciv. 1029d-1032a). Mary was thus called the Mother of God to emphasise that she bore a child that is a single and indivisible individual person who is God and man simultaneously. Mary is venerated directly due to her relation to Jesus Christ. Mary was not the Mother of God per se, but rather the Mother of God the Son incarnate and she is never venerated in isolation. This is evident in the iconography of the Orthodox Church where Mary is always depicted with the child Jesus. The icons are therefore not icons of Mary but rather of the Incarnation. St. Paul gave advice to prospective couples on marriage as an institution (I Cor. 7:1-40; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 5:21-33), and also viewed the union of husband and wife as a representation of Christ’s union with the *Ekklesia tou Theou* (Church of God in Eph. 5:25-30). It is thus to be noted that a celibate life and a person’s desire to detach from the world did not suggest a contempt for the institution of marriage amongst early Christians. In fact marriage and family life were witness to the teachings of Christ. Mary’s vow of virginity was indeed a whole consecration of her complete person, both in soul as well as in body, to God the Father. She thus planned to remain a virgin in both her soul and body, and did; and God respected her fervent wish to do so.

## SAINT AMBROSE ON MARY

Ambrose was fortunate to have a good literary education and was acclaimed bishop by the people of Milan in 374 BCE. He devoted much of his time to the study of theology and in particular the Greek Fathers whom he greatly respected. Ambrose was influential in the political sphere and counselled the young emperor Gratian, who reigned from 375-383 BCE. It was due to the counselling by Ambrose that the emperor introduced various measures to bring about the expansion of Christianity. He also counselled the emperors Valentinian II, who came to regard Ambrose in somewhat of a paternal light, and later Theodosius. Ambrose upheld the notion that the Church should be independent of the state and that it was undoubtedly the custodian of the moral fabric of Roman society. The Roman Empire in which Ambrose lived still tolerated pagans and Jews and was replete with representations and images of female sexuality, in which the female form had contrasting value in the religious and social arenas. There were extremes ranging from the statue of the virgin goddess Athena on the Parthenon in Athens, to the goddess of prostitutes, Venus Erycina, on the Capitoline hill in Rome. In the Forum Romanum, the Vestal Virgins “protected” Rome by living a chaste life. Ambrose the bishop of Milan (340-397) battled with the creation of a dialogue concerning the sexual repudiation of women that countered the value of similar non-Christian practices and traditions. The Vestal virgins had special legal rights and privileges, and their sexual status afforded them an almost sacred status (Beard 1980: 12-27). Ambrose wrote many

traditional dogmatic works and his moral and ascetic works including the panegyric on virginity, *De Virginibus*, emphasised the idea of continence. It has been suggested that this work on virginity was addressed in particular to his sister Marcellina in Rome, since he did not wish to directly attack his theological opponents (Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii*, 1.1 [Pellegrino, 50]). In Book I of *De Virginitate*, Ambrose focuses primarily on the theology of a consecrated virginity, whereas in Book II he points out that the book tends to focus more on the development of consecrated virgins. Consequently he presents the Virgin Mary as the “virgin of virgins”.

By writing such works, Ambrose wanted to encourage a social revolution. The Vestal virgins were regarded as important symbols of the Roman state and its pagan rites. Ambrose was intent on contesting their importance and status. To him, the humility and chastity of virgins in the Church, coupled with their strict fasts and pledge of poverty, were far superior to the Vestal virgins who were in any event pagan creations. He sought to bring the Vestal virgins under his wing and was keen to paternally guide them to the truth by adopting and consecrating them into the Church and by using the example of the Virgin Mary as an example of faultless purity, virtue and self-respect that could possibly counteract the strong demands that marriage made on women from the upper classes of the Christian Empire. Despite her descent from the royal bloodline of King David, the Virgin Mary’s pre-eminence is a consequence of God’s grace which abides in her. She was blessed above all women, and so was the child she bore: “blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb” (Luke 1:42). We also read that: “The Holy Spirit will come upon thee, and the power of the Most High will overshadow thee (*epikiasei*); that is why he who shall be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). To Ambrose, Mary possessed great strength and was the most dignified of all women: “There was nothing wild in the eyes, nothing wanton in the words, no immodest movement; there was no posture more gentle, no comportment more relaxed, as if the sight of her body was a likeness of the mind, a figure of worth” (Ambrose of Milan, *De Virginibus* II, 2, 7). Ambrose made use of Scripture to appeal to the Christian Romans and thereby strengthened the support base of his notions on the Virgin Mary. Mary was exceptionally blessed because she found favour in God’s sight. Mary’s role was prophesied by the prophet Isaiah who stated: “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). The prophecy thus states that a virgin would conceive and bear. Consequently Ambrose argues that Mary must have remained a physically-intact virgin in the act of bearing God’s only begotten Son as well as in His conception. This is also prophesied by the prophet Ezekiel who says: “Then he brought me back the way of the gate of the outward sanctuary which looketh toward the east; and it was shut. Then said the LORD unto me; This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it; because the LORD, the God of Israel, hath entered in by it, therefore it shall be shut” (Ezekiel 44:1-3). Ambrose asks:

Who is this gate (Ezekiel 44:1-4), 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....There is a gate of the womb, although it is not always closed; indeed only one was able to remain closed, that through which the One born of the Virgin came forth without the loss of genital intactness (Ambrose of Milan, *The Consecration of a Virgin and the Perpetual Virginity of Mary*).

The Archangel Gabriel's words of support to her are: "Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). He then further reassures her: "Fear not, Mary, for you have found favour with God" (Luke 1:30). Mary, like Jesus Christ, was from the beginning of her earthly existence, free from sin. Mary is described as *kecharitomene* or "Full of Grace" (Luke 1:28) which indicates she has unique qualities which enable her to become the Mother of God (*Theotokos*).

Mary was physically untouched, but she was also free from every blemish of sin *at the Assumption and thus aptharti (incorrupt or immaculate)*. She was free from actual sin from that point. For Ambrose, sin indicates the inherited imperfection of Adam and Eve's revolt in the Garden of Eden. Mary was a virgin who was not only incorrupt (*incorrupta*), but also a virgin made inviolate by the grace of God the Father and was also free from every blemish of sin (*per gratiam ab omnia incorrupta labe peccati*). Ambrose uses the words *omnia incorrupta* to show that she was without any sin and was thus pure in a literal sense. The use of the Greek *aptharton* shows a correspondence with the Latin *incorrupta*. In the Vulgate Bible, 1 Corinthians 9:25, *aptharton* is translated as *incorrupta*. In the Song of Songs 4:12 it states: "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed." Early Orthodox Christians understood these two passages as portentous to the notion that the womb of the Virgin Mary is "shut" and "sealed" by God, and was not to be "opened" by her natural childbirth of Jesus the *Logos*. They maintained that the Lord passed through her closed womb by making use of divine power which is analogous to that power which He used to appear to His disciples in the upper room where the doors were shut (John 20:19). Mary was immensely humble and her humility is demonstrated in her free will and willing response to partake in the Incarnation which was the initiative of God the Father. Ambrose writes: "And then, how she also went every year to Jerusalem at the solemn day of the Passover, and went with Joseph. Everywhere is modesty the companion of her singular virtues in the Virgin. This, without which virginity cannot exist, must be the inseparable companion of virginity. And so Mary did not go even to the temple without the guardianship of her modesty" (Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning virginity*: Book II).

Ambrose also stresses her selection for her role as the *Theotokos* as thus being fully understandable:

Such has the Evangelist shown her, such did the angel find her, such did the Holy Spirit choose her. Why delay about details? How her parents loved her, strangers praised her, how worthy she was that the Son of God should be born of her. She, when the angel entered, was found at home in privacy, without a companion, that no one might interrupt her attention or disturb her; and



she did not desire any women as companions, who had the companionship of good thoughts. Moreover, she seemed to herself to be less alone when she was alone. For how should she be alone, who had with her so many books, so many archangels, so many prophets? (Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning virginity*: Book II).

Mary is thus gifted with grace resulting from God's pleasure in her person as a unique and perfect individual since her entrance into the world. Mary happily accepts her role: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). To Ambrose this was an indication that the upper classes in particular could not withdraw from a productive life in which for example, a family needed to be served or from their political responsibilities for that matter, and Mary's example as a committed individual was the ideal situation to emulate. It is evident from the historical record that the Mariology of Ambrose influenced the policies of a number of contemporary Popes, including Pope Damasus, Pope Siricius and Pope Leo the Great. He suggests in all his writings on the Virgin Mary that she was the perfect role-model of how to live, especially for those seeking to bury their heads in the soil like the proverbial ostrich, and shun their duties and many responsibilities to society. The Virgin Mary brought Christ forth as a virgin and she is blessed as the "gate" through which the Holy Spirit entered:

5. Mary heard the voice of the Angel, and she who before had said *How shall this be?* not asking from want of faith in the mode of generation, afterwards replied, *Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word.* This is the virgin who conceived, this the virgin who brought forth a Son. For thus it is written, *Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son;* declaring not only that she should conceive as a virgin, but also that she bring forth as a virgin.

6. But what is that *gate of the sanctuary*, that *outward gate which looketh towards the East, which remains shut, and no man, it is said, shall enter in by it but the Lord, the God of Israel.* Is not Mary this gate, by whom the Saviour entered into the world? This is the gate of righteousness, as He Himself said, *Suffer us to fulfil all righteousness.* Blessed Mary is the gate, whereof it is written that *the Lord hath entered in by it, therefore it shall be shut* after birth; for as a virgin she both conceived and brought forth (Ambrose of Milan, *Letter XLII, Letter of the Council of Milan to Pope Siricius*, S5 and S6, BCE 389).

It was becoming somewhat trendy in the Roman Empire for women of means and great influence to seek a Spartan-like existence in which virtue and self-sufficiency were desirable traits. Ambrose linked virginity very closely with the idea of Christian salvation and to an extent made it an indispensable part of being a Christian to serve his ends. In any event, the ritual of the consecration of virgins in the early Church was based on the marriage ceremony between a man and a woman and was thus equally if not more important. He used the debate on virginity and its merits to suit distinct needs he had at different times, but also explained that women had a maternal role of imparting Christian virtues in their offspring. In 395 BCE, Ambrose delivered the funeral oration for the Emperor Theodosius. In this oration he suggested that Helena, the Empress who was mother of Constantine, had nurtured him for his role as the one

who would give Christianity its rightful place in the world. In this sense, Helena and Mary were similar mothers: “Mary was visited, so that Eve be liberated; Helena was visited so that emperors be redeemed” (Ambrose of Milan 1985: 244-245). There is also a distinct variance in his stance on virginity in particular in his two works *De Virginibus* and *De Virginitate*. In the latter he tended to discard the overly ascetic interpretation of scripture and the virginity of the Virgin Mary who was martyr-like in description. She instead becomes the Bride of Christ (Neumann 1962: 33-47). The angel explained to Mary how she would bear Jesus Christ: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One Who is to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Mary does not hesitate, but actively seeks to choose to serve and obey God and to do His will. A virgin birth is indeed worthy of God in human form: “Which human birth would have been more worthy of God, than the one, in which the Immaculate Son of God maintained the purity of his immaculate origin while becoming human?” (Ambrose of Milan CSEL 64, 139).

Many women who were contemporaries of Ambrose did not accept or recognise the expectations placed upon them and Ambrose consequently advised Christian virgins to be supportive of their families and take their duties and responsibilities seriously or the result would be a life-long battle (Ambrose of Milan 2007: 111-113). He urges them: “If you conquer your family, you conquer the world” (Ambrose of Milan, *De Virginibus*, II, c. 15). Virgins will be rewarded for their virtue when they die and Mary will rejoice with them:

What a procession shall that be, what joy of applauding angels when she is found worthy of dwelling in heaven who lived on earth a heavenly life! Then too Mary, taking her timbrel, shall stir up the choirs of virgins, singing to the Lord because they have passed through the sea of this world without suffering from the waves of this world. Exodus 15:20 Then each shall rejoice, saying: I will go to the altar of God; to God Who makes my youth glad; and, I will offer unto God thanksgiving, and pay my vows unto the Most High (Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning virginity*:-Book II).

Mary was the most blessed of women, and the perfect model of obedience to the will of God. Ambrose considered virginity to be far superior to marriage and perceived Mary to be the ultimate role model of virginity (Ambrose of Milan, *De Virginibus* 2, 6). By pointing to Mary as the Mother of God, and the church which is the Mystical Body of Christ, Ambrose sought to locate in Mary the solution for a divided Christian Roman Empire. To Ambrose, Mary is the perfect example since: “...Mary, a virgin not only undefiled but a virgin whom grace has made inviolate, free of every stain.” Ambrose states: “The virgin birth was worthy of God. Which human birth would have been more worthy of God, than the one, in which the Immaculate Son of God maintained the purity of his immaculate origin while becoming human?” (Ambrose of Milan CSEL 64, 139). Mary as a virgin who conceived, is to be honoured and venerated and we honour her as our mother. She was totally respectful to the call of God and immediately resolved to be obedient to whatever she was to do:

And so, too, when Gabriel visited her, Luke 1:28 did he find her, and Mary trembled, being disturbed, as though at the form of a man, but on hearing his name recognized him as one not unknown to her. And so she was a stranger as to men, but not as to the angel; that we might know that her ears were modest and her eyes bashful. Then when saluted she kept silence, and when addressed she answered, and she whose feelings were first troubled afterwards promised obedience (Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning virginity*: Book II).

Ambrose says that we should: "...confess, that Christ the Lord was born from a virgin, and therefore we reject the natural order of things. Because not from a man she conceived but from the Holy Spirit" (Ambrose of Milan, *De Mysteriis*, 59, PG 16, 410).

## THE PROTOEVANGELIUM

The Protoevangelium (First Gospel) was written in the second century BCE in Syria and it testifies to the early devotion to Mary. Protoevangelium is also applied to the promise of a Redeemer after the Fall. Speaking to the serpent, God said: "I will make you enemies of each other; you and the woman; your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel" (Genesis 3:15). Traditionally the woman and her offspring have been understood to mean Mary and her Son (Hardon 1999). If we examine the Protoevangelium, it is evident that Mary is glorified as a virgin and her perpetual virginity is defended (Smid 1965: 57-103). We read of Mary's own Immaculate Conception by Anna and the birth of Jesus as bearing witness to the purity of virginity and the *Parthenos* (Virgin). Mary's own conception is described as a direct act of God's providence (Protoevangelium 1.2 - 4.4). Mary is described as a consecrated virgin from six months of age and her bedroom is made a *Hagiasma* or holy sanctuary into which nothing unclean or unholy may enter. From the age of three Mary is raised by priests in the temple and she marries Joseph at the age of twelve. Joseph is a widower with a few sons from his earlier marriage. Joseph does however not "live with her" but only protects her (Protoevangelium 9.1-2). So in the Protoevangelium Mary's total purity and chastity are the primary concerns. Virginity is a return to the Paradise that Adam and Eve blemished. Marian dogma and the theology of sexual abstinence assumed greater prominence in the writings of Ambrose and others. There was, however, great resistance to the notions expressed by Ambrose on the part of Jovinianus and also Helvidius. The latter throw out the doctrine of Mary's *virginitas post partum* while the former rejects her *virginitas in partu*. (Hunter 1993: 47-71). It was Jovinianus, a monk, who in particular reacted to the movement towards asceticism and all the doctrines associated with it. He attacked the ideas of monasticism and its associated moral and ethical principles. He stated that virgins as well as those who are married, once baptised as Christians, have the same merit depending on their conduct. Jovinianus also denied the notion of the perpetual virginity of the Virgin Mary (Healy 1910). He and explains his stance on virginity as stated below:

I do you no wrong, Virgin: you have chosen a life of chastity on account of the present distress: you determined on the course in order to be holy in body and spirit: be not proud: you and your married sisters are members of the same Church...Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: but I give my judgement, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful. I think therefore that this is good by reason of the present distress, namely, that it is good for a man to be as he is... See, the Apostle confesses that as regards virgins he has no commandment of the Lord, and he who had with authority laid down the law respecting husbands and wives, does not dare to command what the Lord has not enjoined. And rightly too. For what is enjoined is commanded, what is commanded must be done, and that which must be done implies punishment if it be not done. For it is useless to order a thing to be done and yet leave the individual free to do it or not do it. If the Lord had commanded virginity He would have seemed to condemn marriage, and to do away with the seed-plot of mankind, of which virginity itself is a growth. If He had cut off the root, how was He to expect fruit? If the foundations were not first laid, how was He to build the edifice, and put on the roof to cover all! Excavators toil hard to remove mountains; the bowels of the earth are pierced in the search for gold. And, when the tiny particles, first by the blast of the furnace, then by the hand of the cunning workman have been fashioned into an ornament, men do not call him blessed who has separated the gold from the dross but him who wears the beautiful gold. Do not marvel then if, placed as we are, amid temptations of the flesh and incentives to vice, the angelic life be not exacted of us, but merely recommended. If advice be given, a man is free to proffer obedience; if there be a command, he is a servant bound to compliance (Hunter 2007).

## THE SYNOD OF MILAN

The Synod of Milan (390 BCE), with Ambrose of Milan as the chair, condemned the teaching of Jovinian that Mary did not give birth as a physical virgin. Ambrose embraces the views in the Protoevangelium of James and goes so far as to link virginity to martyrdom and use the Virgin Mary as an example of an explicit martyr who does not suffer death as martyrs invariably do, but by her actions and chastity is an acceptable type of martyr in the social mind of the Imperial Roman. Ambrose says that the Virgin Mary was not unfamiliar to sinful temptations since “only God is without spot of blemish” (Ambrose of Milan, *Commentary on Psalm 118*). To Ambrose: “Christ is not divided but one. If we adore him as the Son of God, we do not deny his birth from the virgin... But nobody shall extend this to Mary. Mary was the temple of God but not God in the temple. Therefore only the one who was in the temple can be worshipped” (Ambrose of Milan, *De Spiritu Sancto*, III, 11, 79-80). Her role as the *Theotokos* afforded Mary special dispensation from God as she becomes the first to receive the blessed heavenly Kingdom: “Yes, truly blessed for having surpassed the priest (Zechariah). While the priest denied, the Virgin rectified the error. No wonder that the Lord, wishing to rescue the world, began his work with Mary. Thus she, through whom salvation was being prepared for all people, would be the first to receive the promised fruit of salvation” (Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio in Lucam* 2, 17; PL 15, 1640). Mary is the most blessed

of women for many reasons, however the predominant reason is that she conceived, carried, and gave birth to Jesus Christ and was essentially the spouse of the Holy Spirit and a virgin and a mother. It is important to confess Christ as the Son of a virgin mother. We confess that Christ the Lord was born from a virgin, and therefore we reject the natural order of things. "Because not from a man she conceived but from the Holy Spirit" (Ambrose of Milan, *De Mysteriis*, 59, PG 16, 410).

Eve was the mother of the old Adamic race and although pure at birth, sinned, and by contrast Mary (who is pure and without sin) is the new Eve, the Mother of the new people which are the Body of Christ, His Church, and Christ is the new Adam. Ambrose relates the prophecy of the prophet Ezekiel: "This gate is to remain closed; it is not to be opened for anyone to enter by it. Since the Lord, the God of Israel has entered by it, it shall remain closed" (Ezekiel 44:2). Ambrose then states: "Who is this gate, if not Mary?" The sexual contact substances are best kept separated but in the case of virgins there is no physical defilement or bewilderment to plague them (Brown 1988: 353). To Ambrose, Mary is the ultimate role model for both males and females, since she was virgin not only in body but also in mind. She was never touched by the seed of any male and her womb was an *aula pudoris* (hall of purity) and conceived the *Logos* and nothing of any male entered her womb (Ambrose of Milan, *Exposito evangelii secundum Lucam*: 55). Mary is totally flawless and the paragon of all virtue. He regards her as total perfection and absolutely nothing stands in the way of this notion (Ambrose of Milan, *De Virginibus*, 2, 2, 6-18). He further elucidates that: "The first impulse to learn is inspired by the nobility of the teacher. Now, who could be nobler than the Mother of God? Who more splendid than she, whom Splendor chose? Who more chaste than she, who gave birth to a body without bodily contact? What should I say, then, about all her other virtues? She was a virgin, not only in body but in her mind as well, and never mixed the sincerity of her affections with duplicity" (Ambrose of Milan, *De Virginibus* 2, 7). She is an inspirational virgin who has much to teach us about how to live our lives: "This is the likeness of virginity. For Mary was such that her example alone is a lesson for all. If, then, the author displeases us not, let us make trial of the production, that whoever desires its reward for herself may imitate the pattern. How many kinds of virtues shine forth in one Virgin! The secret of modesty, the banner of faith, the service of devotion, the Virgin within the house, the companion for the ministry, the mother at the temple" (Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning virginity*: Book II).

As for the heretical Jovinians, Ambrose has some critique: "They pretend that they are giving honour to marriage. But what praise can rightly be given to marriage if no distinction is paid to virginity? We do not deny that marriage was hallowed by Christ, for the Divine words say, *And they twain shall be one flesh*, and one spirit, but our birth precedes our calling, and the mystery of the Divine operation is much more excellent than the remedy of human frailty" (Ambrose of Milan, *Letter XLII. Letter of the Council of Milan to Pope Siricius*, S3, BCE 389). Marriage is thus important but so then is

virginity. It is also not strange that Mary should give birth to Jesus and still be a virgin since she was a “royal” virgin:

But why should it be incredible that Mary, contrary to the usage of natural birth, should bring forth and yet remain a virgin; when contrary to the usage of nature, the sea saw and fled, and the floods of Jordan retired to their source. It should not exceed our belief that a virgin should bring forth, when we read that a rock poured forth water, and the waves of the sea were gathered up like a wall. Nor need it, again, exceed our belief that a man should be born of a virgin, when a running stream gushed forth from the rock, when iron swam upon the waters, and a man walked upon them. If therefore the waves carried a man, could not a virgin bring forth a man? But what man? Him of Whom we read, *The Lord shall send them a Man Who shall deliver them; and the Lord shall be known to Egypt*. Wherefore in the old Testament a Hebrew virgin led the people through the sea, in the New Testament a royal virgin was elected to be a heavenly abode for our salvation (Ambrose of Milan, *Letter XLII. Letter of the Council of Milan to Pope Siricius*, S7, BCE 389).

Ambrose is adamant as to the total purity of Mary and further stresses that: “Mary was a Virgin not in body only, but mind also...God made her whom He had chosen and chose her of whom He would be made” (Ambrose of Milan, *De Virginibus*, 2, 11). In the writings of Justin the Martyr (165 BCE.), Irenaeus (202 BCE.) and Cyril of Jerusalem (348 BCE.), all of whom preceded Ambrose with whom he agreed, Mary is depicted as bringing Christ who is life into the world, whereas Eve, by her sin brought death. He also concurs that Mary’s humility and obedience can be contrasted with Eve’s arrogance and defiance. Because Mary gave her flesh to the Son of God, she is exclusively to be “blessed from generation to generation” (Luke 1:48). Even though she was the Theotokos, she still wanted to learn the teachings of the Lord, and she still wished to know God.

Ambrose highlights that Christians are to worship only Jesus because: “Christ is not divided but one. If we adore him as the Son of God, we do not deny his birth from the virgin...But nobody shall extend this to Mary. Mary was the temple of God but not God in the temple. Therefore only the one who was in the temple can be worshipped.” (Ambrose of Milan, *De Spiritu Sancto*, III, 11, 79-80). The true wealth of Mary’s virginity is in her humility and utter obedience and these are the banners of the faith (Ambrose of Milan, *De Virginibus*, II, C, 15). Ambrose reflects: “According to the condition of the body (Jesus) 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” (Ambrose of Milan, *Mystery of the Lord’s Incarnation*, 6:54; 382 AD). Ambrose makes Mary’s name synonymous with virginity and it is our benchmark for life: “Let, then, the life of Mary be as it were virginity itself, set forth in a likeness, from which, as from a mirror, the appearance of chastity and the form of virtue is reflected. From this you may take your pattern

of life, showing, as an example, the clear rules of virtue: what you have to correct, to effect, and to hold fast. The first thing which kindles ardor in learning is the greatness of the teacher. What is greater than the Mother of God? What more glorious than she whom Glory Itself chose? What more chaste than she who bore a body without contact with another body?" (Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning virginity*: Book II, 2). Ignatius of Antioch explains the mystery of Mary's virginity and childbearing as a sign of God's omnipotence and Ambrose shares his views. Ignatius states that God used the same power at His transfiguration and Glorious Resurrection: "Mary's virginity was hidden from the prince of this world; so was her childbearing, and so was the death of the Lord. All these three trumpet-tongued secrets were brought to pass in the deep silence of God" (Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 19; c. 107 AD).

Ambrose in a sense reinforces the teachings of St. Athanasius on asceticism and the value of both virginity and celibacy for Christians. In fact from roughly 200 BCE reference was made of ascetics who lived a life of pure continence and virginity was respected by the Church. St. Ignatius of Antioch *inter alia* spoke of both Christian men and women who sought to imitate Jesus Christ and adopted a life of celibacy (Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to Polycarp*, 5, 2). Virgins during the time of Ambrose had certain roles to fulfil (Camelot 1967: 701-704). Virgins and others who were celibates stayed at home with the families from which they emanated and participated in local church-life activities. From time to time some would create groups and Ambrose and others such as St. Jerome created rigid rules of living for them. In order to be approved as "church" celibates it was necessary for a bishop to hear them take official vows. Virgins were required to wear black robes and veils after a bishop had consecrated their vow of celibacy. In a Letter of Pope Siricius to the Church of Milan to notify them of the sentence of excommunication passed against Jovinian and his heretical followers, Siricius states: "...but virgins, for whose existence marriage is necessary, as being devoted to God, we honour more highly" (Ambrose of Milan, *Letter LXI of Pope Siricius to the Church of Milan*, BCE 389). In Letter XLII [BCE 389] which was a reply to Siricius, probably penned by Ambrose personally, the Council of Milan thanks Ambrose for his care, and they state that they are following his paradigm and also condemned Jovinian and his heretical band of followers. The letter attacks Jovinian's error especially relating to his derision of virginity, and on his total denial of the true virginity of Mary the *Theotokos*. Ambrose demonstrates his reverential stance on virginity when he writes: "For it is a savage barking to shew no reverence to virginity, observe no rule of chastity, to seek to place every thing on a level, to abolish the different degrees of merit, and to introduce a certain meagreness in heavenly rewards, as if Christ had only one palm to bestow, and there was no copious diversity in His rewards" (Ambrose of Milan, Letter XLII, S 3, *Letter of the Council of Milan to Pope Siricius*, 389 BCE).

In the same letter Ambrose expresses his belief that virgins are under the grace of God and virginity is better than marriage and he says: "A good wife is deservedly praised, but a pious virgin is more properly preferred, for the Apostle says, *He that giveth*

*his virgin in marriage doeth well, but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better; for the one careth for the things of the Lord, the other for the things of the world.* The one is bound by the chains of marriage, the other is free from chains; the one is under the Law, the other under Grace. Marriage is good, for thereby the means of continuing the human race has been devised, but virginity is better, for thereby the heritage of the heavenly kingdom is regained, and the mode of attaining to heavenly rewards discovered. By a woman care entered the world; by a virgin salvation was brought to pass... Christ chose virginity as His own special gift, and displayed the grace of chastity, thus making an exhibition of that in His own person which in His Mother He had made the object of His choice” (Ambrose of Milan, Letter XLII, S 4, *Letter of the Council of Milan to Pope Siricius*, 389 BCE). Ambrose attacks the Jovinians for suggesting that Christ could not be born of a virgin but still accept that women after having given birth to human pledges can remain virgins: “God, came upon earth in an extraordinary way, that as He had said, *Behold I make all things new*, so also He might be born of an immaculate virgin... But from their perverse ways they are induced to say ‘She was a virgin when she conceived, but not a virgin when she brought forth.’ Could she then conceive as a virgin, and yet not be able to bring forth as a virgin, when conception always precedes, and birth follows?” (Ambrose of Milan 1989: 89-90). Virginity was a serious matter and it was no co-incidence that the Council of Elvira (306 BCE) issued the idea of fines to be imposed on virgins who broke their vow of virginity to God. Eight years later at the Council of Ankyra (314 BCE), sanctions on virgins intensified as it was stated that consecrated virgins who opted to get married were bigamists as they were already married to Jesus Christ. Under the rule of the Emperor Valens (364 BCE), men who married consecrated virgins would be put to death once they were discovered. Essentially, virgins had to stay at home, fast austere by eating mainly bread and vegetables and pray three times a day, usually at 9am, 12pm and 3pm (Evdokimov 1966: 64-66). Ambrose urges people to accept Mary as a role-model for a life of virtue and chastity: “Let, then, the life of Mary be as it were virginity itself, set forth in a likeness, from which, as from a mirror, the appearance of chastity and the form of virtue is reflected. From this you may take your pattern of life, showing, as an example, the clear rules of virtue: what you have to correct, to effect, and to hold fast” (Ambrose of Milan 1896: S6). Mary was the most virtuous of all women and was humble and hardworking and often attended the temple. It is Mary who must lead virgins to the bridal chamber of Jesus Christ the bridegroom. After all, she conceived “...contrary to the course of nature” (Ambrose of Milan 1963: 25).

Women, both virgins and widows were called upon by Ambrose to strengthen the moral fabric of a Roman society that had been disrupted by the Emperor Julian (361-363 BCE) who relinquished Christianity and wanted to reinstate pagan worship. In this environment of potential spiritual destruction, virgins could play a great role as examples of purity while mothers could be promoters of Christian values and ideals. Each had a role to fulfil in society and Mary is the prime model for women: “For Mary



was such that her example alone is a lesson for all. If, then, the author displeases us not, let us make trial of the production, that whoever desires its reward for herself may imitate the pattern. How many kinds of virtues shine forth in one Virgin! The secret of modesty, the banner of faith, the service of devotion, the Virgin within the house, the companion for the ministry, the mother at the temple.” He continues: “Let, then, the life of Mary be as it were virginity itself, set forth in a likeness, from which, as from a mirror, the appearance of chastity and the form of virtue is reflected. From this you may take your pattern of life, showing, as an example, the clear rules of virtue: what you have to correct, to effect, and to hold fast” (Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning virginity*: Book II).

Christian virgins are bearers of divine grace and have a special place in God’s eyes since they are akin to altars: “Nor would I hesitate to admit you to the altars of God, whose souls I would without hesitation call altars, on which Christ is daily offered for the redemption of the body. For if the virgin’s body be a temple of God, what is her soul, which, the ashes, as it were, of the body being shaken off, once more uncovered by the hand of the Eternal Priest, exhales the vapor of the divine fire. Blessed virgins, who emit a fragrance through divine grace as gardens do through flowers, temples through religion, altars through the priest” (Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning virginity*: Book II). Mary possessed other virtues such as her ability to remain at home and to strive for virtue in everything. She was responsible in her behaviour and a lady in her demeanour, keen to learn as much as she could so she could teach others how to live a life of virtue:

She was unaccustomed to go from home, except for divine service, and this with parents or kinsfolk. Busy in private at home, accompanied by others abroad, yet with no better guardian than herself, as she, inspiring respect by her gait and address, progressed not so much by the motion of her feet as by step upon step of virtue. But though the Virgin had other persons who were protectors of her body, she alone guarded her character; she can learn many points if she be her own teacher, who possesses the perfection of all virtues, for whatever she did is a lesson. Mary attended to everything as though she were warned by many, and fulfilled every obligation of virtue as though she were teaching rather than learning (Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning virginity*: Book II).

## CONCLUSION

The idea of Christian virginity was instinctively elevated into a Roman world where female sexuality assumed important meaning as well as figurative power in the religious as well as socio-political spheres. By using the example of Mary to encourage the celibates who strive for purity, Ambrose tried to bring about a social revolution. Whereas she was virtuous and pure, the noble born women battled with the great demands that marriage made upon them. To Ambrose Mary was chaste and splendid

and a virgin not only in body but also in her mind and soul and above all she was full of grace and the Mother of God. Early Christian belief has always linked Mary with Jesus in the divine plan for human salvation. The early Church Fathers thus refer to Mary as the “new Eve,” who cooperated with Christ, the “new Adam” to bring about the reconciliation of sinful humanity with God. Ambrose teaches that she should be the role model for all people on many issues and especially on virtue and virginity in a Roman Empire that still endured pagans and Jews. Ambrose realised the potential of Mary to appeal to women and their daughters, especially from the Patrician stratum of Roman society. The grace of God consummates both Mary’s perpetual virginity and status as a totally sinless woman. Mary has an inimitable role in the salvation of humankind since she gave a body to the *Theanthropos* and *Logos*. She thereby became the *Miter Theou* and “mother” of all those who will be saved. That is the reason why Jesus, while still on the Cross, says to Mary, “Woman, behold your son!” and then said to Saint John, “Behold, your mother!” (John 19:26, 27). Ambrose clearly felt that she was the ideal role model for all people especially in the area of asceticism, since she gave up her life on her own volition to serve God. Ambrose also believed that virginity was a blessed state and is thus an important state in the salvation of humanity. The perpetual virginity of Mary was subsequently defended in a number of church synods such as the fifth ecumenical council which took place in Constantinople (553 BCE). Her virginity was also dogmatically delineated by Pope St. Martin I during the Lateran Council of Rome (649 BCE). The Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception as it stands breaks up the “uninterrupted succession of instances of Old Testament holiness which reaches its term at the moment of the Annunciation, when the Holy Spirit came down upon the Virgin to make her fit to receive the Word in her womb...she was chosen to become the Mother of God, heard and understood the angelic saying when she was in the state of fallen humanity” (Lossky 1951: 264). Because Christ is Head of his Mystical Body, the Holy Church, it is logical to state that Mary, the mother of Christ, is the mother of the Church. Ambrose realised that Mary would have huge appeal to Christian women of all classes but especially the noble echelon of society since she demonstrated the highest peak of Old Testament holiness that a person could attain. She did not allow the sinful heritage of the fall to master her right will. Ambrose thus further defended her life-long virginity and holiness and she through whom the Word became flesh achieved an unlimited glory by “realising in her person all the holiness of which the Church is capable” (Lossky 1951: 265). His writings are loquacious and replete with issues concerning Mary, the value of asceticism and also of the institution of marriage. Ambrose puts into perspective the ecclesiological significance of the Mother of God. In the context of “Every Christian is a theologian if he ‘loves the appearing’ of Christ” (II Timothy 4:8), Ambrose was successful in anthropologically integrating the notion

virginity into the early Church and sought to radically renew it in a Roman Empire of cults and heresy.

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