

# Spirituality Conference explores role of Theotokos

## IMAGERY OF MARY, THE GOD BEARER

by Kathe Kress

In the third presentation of the 2007 Byzantine Spirituality, Archpriest John G. Petro brought each of the Theotokos' major feasts alive to the audience: her birthday (September 8), her Holy Protection (October 1), her Entrance into the Temple (November 21), the Conception of St. Anna (December 8), the Annunciation (March 25) and the Dormition (August 15). The Conference took place on November 3, 2007 at the Radisson Hotel in Monroeville, Pa.

A priest of the Archeparchy and rector of the Byzantine Catholic Seminary of Sts. Cyril and Methodius in Pittsburgh, Pa., Father John reminded the audience that, while the words of our prayers – such as the Akathist to Our Lady of Perpetual Help that we sing each year at Otpust, or the Theotokion that is integral to the Vesper prayers of each of her feasts – are beautiful, they also inform our imaginations. The images they paint serve to teach more clearly than dogma.

Women hymnographers like St. Thekla were on to something, he noted, when they chose Old Testament biblical images like the Burning Bush or the Ark of the Covenant to describe the Theotokos, her virtues and her role in the Divine economy.

The image of the Theotokos as the Ladder between earth and heaven, brings her Son to earth and, in turn, brings us - his people - to him and through our *theosis*, to Heaven. On Christmas Eve our hymns depict Mary as the “bridge or heavenly ladder,” Father John said, “God descends to Earth – this is the vision of the *Platytera* – ‘She who is wider than the heavens’ – the link between the *Pantocrator* above, and the Church below.”

The Christ Child sits on the throne of Mary's lap, yet she raises her arms – “she also intercedes and prays continually for us,” Father John added. In our churches' architecture,

the Theotokos' role in salvation history is revealed.

The image of the ladder which the hymnographers borrowed from the Old Testament Jacob's ladder shows pilgrims always progressing, even growing, along the way. By following the Theotokos in prayer, denial of self, self-sacrifice and good works, the pilgrim ascends this ladder.

The 7th century monk, St. John Climacus, reflected on this in his work *Ladder of Divine Ascent* describing the dynamic of our very spirituality. Father John showed that this spiritual growth takes effort; we are always along the way, “step-by-step” – it is not a “state of being,” not something we “arrive” at or attain.

St. Basil the Great also wrote of the spiritual ladder, that we must place our foot on the first step and withdraw from the earth in order to depart from evil. St. John Chrysostom spoke of an interior ascent achieved by amending and correcting one's habits, and that these steps would not be apparent to others. The icon of Jacob's ladder depicts Angels ascending and descending along the way – the angels do indeed carry our struggles to heaven, and bring back strength and aid to these struggles on earth.

The richness of the Old Testament image of the Burning Bush to represent the Theotokos teaches that Mary bears within her “branches” the image of “I

Am the One Who Is” – the ‘W-O-N’ written in the halo of Jesus in each and every icon. Moses removed his sandals before he approached the bush because it was the dwelling place of God.

Another Marian image taken from the Old Testament is from a less-familiar story, that of Gideon's Fleece. Gideon, upon hearing God's call, asks for one sign, and when that is given, he asks for another. First he asks that the woolen fleece be wet and the ground, dry. Then he asks that the ground be wet and the fleece, dry. Gideon asks all of this of God to be sure that God has called him to rescue Israel. [Jg 6:34-40]

St. Irenaeus sees the gentle dew falling on the fleece as prefiguring the gentle activity of the Holy Spirit on his people and the dry fleece as representing the House of Israel not responding to the Holy Spirit. St. John Chrysostom sees the fleece as the Incarnation, with the Theotokos' acceptance of the Archangel Gabriel's word as bringing forth the dew of the Holy Spirit upon her.

These and all of the images of the Theotokos that the Church beautifully provides for us, show “that the Church prefers to use images, symbols and prefigurations” to teach the mysteries of her importance in salvation history. Through the poetic language of hymnography and Scripture, through the beautiful imagery of icons and the design of their placement in



Archpriest John G. Petro

our Church architecture – all serve to teach the heart far better than mere words.

Following Father John's presentation, the audience paused to reflect on questions which called for a personal response in relation to the images of the Theotokos as Ladder, Burning Bush and Fleece. Questions for reflection included: In what way is Mary a 'ladder' in your life? What are some of the ways in which God speaks to you? In what way do we 'remove the sandals from our feet' when we approach God in prayer? What must we set aside? Like Gideon, when are some of the times that you also asked God for a 'sign' of what He wanted you to do?

These and other questions gave participants something more to take home from the day's events. Like manna, these questions served as food for the pilgrims' journey.

The 2008 Byzantine Spirituality Conference will take place on Saturday, November 1, at the Radisson Hotel in Monroeville, Pa. A conference theme and details of the program will be announced later this year. ■