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## Cyril's Defence

### Cyril's understanding of the Incarnation

We do not say that the nature of the Word was changed and became flesh, nor that he was transformed into a perfect man of soul and body. We say, rather, that the Word, in an ineffable and incomprehensible manner, ineffably united to himself flesh animated with a rational soul, and thus became man and was called the Son of Man...

While the natures that were brought together into this true unity were different, nonetheless there is One Christ and Son from out of both. This did not involve the negation of the difference of natures, rather that the Godhead and manhood by their ineffable and indescribable consilience into unity achieved One Lord and Christ and Son for us.

For this reason, even though he existed and was begotten of the Father from before all ages, he is also said to have been begotten from a woman according to the flesh. This does not mean that his divine nature received the beginning of its existence in the holy virgin or that it necessarily needed a second generation for its own sake after its generation from the Father. It is completely foolish and stupid to say that He who exists before all ages and is coeternal with the Father stood in need of a second beginning of existence.

Nonetheless, because the Word hypostatically united human reality to himself, 'for us and for our salvation', and came forth of a woman, this is why he is said to have been begotten in a fleshly manner. The Word did not subsequently descend upon an ordinary man previously born of the holy virgin, but he is made one from his mother's womb, and thus is said to have undergone a fleshly birth in so far as he appropriated to himself the birth of his own flesh.<sup>1</sup>

### Mary as *Theotokos* ("Mother of God") – A traditional concept

I was completely amazed that certain people should be in any doubt as to whether the holy virgin ought to be called the Mother of God or not. For if our Lord Jesus Christ is God, then how is the holy virgin who bore him not the Mother of God? The divine disciples handed on this faith to us even if they did not make mention of the term. We have been taught to think this way by the holy Fathers.

Our Father Athanasius ... composed a book for us concerning the holy and consubstantial trinity where, throughout the third discourse, he calls the holy virgin the Mother of God... the exact words are these: 'This, then, is the purpose and essential meaning of the divine scripture, as we have said many times, that it contains a two-fold statement about the Saviour; firstly that he is eternally God, and that he is the Son being the Word, the Radiance, and the Wisdom of the Father, and secondly that later for our sake he took flesh from the virgin Mary the Mother of God and so became man' (*Contra Arianos* 3.29).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Second Letter to Nestorius* 3-4 (McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy*, pp.263-4)

<sup>2</sup> *Letter to the Monks* 4 (McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy*, p.247)

## Cyril's Christological explanation of the Nicene Creed

We follow in every respect the confessions of the holy Fathers<sup>3</sup> which they made with the Holy Spirit speaking in them. By following the path in which they understood these things we come, as it were, along the Royal Road, and we declare that the Only Begotten Word of God himself, who was begotten of the very essence of the Father, the true God of true God, the light of light, he through whom all things in heaven or on earth were made, himself came down for the sake of our salvation and lowered himself into a self-emptying, and was incarnated and made man. That is, taking flesh from the holy virgin and making it his very own from his mother, he underwent a human birth and came forth as man from a woman.

This did not mean he abandoned what he was, for even when he came as man in the assumption of flesh and blood even so he remained what he was, that is God in nature and in truth. We do not say that the flesh was changed into the nature of Godhead, nor indeed that the ineffable nature of God the Word was converted into the nature of flesh, for he is entirely unchangeable and immutable, and in accordance with the scriptures he abides ever the same (Heb.13.8; Mal.3.6). Even when he is seen as a baby in swaddling bands still at the breast of the virgin who bore him, even so as God he filled the whole creation and was enthroned with his Father, because deity is without quantity or size and accepts no limitations.<sup>4</sup>

## The recapitulatory effects of the "birth of God"

Since the holy virgin gave birth in the flesh to God hypostatically united to flesh, for this reason we say that she is the 'Mother of God'. This does not mean that the Word's nature took the beginning of its existence from the flesh, for he 'was in the beginning' and 'the Word was God, and the Word was with God' (Jn. 1.1) and he is the maker of the ages, coeternal with the Father and maker of all things. As we have said before, it means rather that he hypostatically united the human condition to himself and underwent a fleshly birth from her womb.

He had no natural need, or external necessity, of a temporal birth in these last times of this age, but he did this so that he might bless the very beginning of our own coming into being, and that since a woman had given birth to him as united to the flesh, from that point onwards the curse upon our whole race should cease that drives our earthly bodies to death. He did it to annul that sentence: 'In sorrow shall you bring forth children' (Gen.3.16), and also to demonstrate the truth of the prophet's words: 'Death swallowed us up in its power, but God wiped every tear from every face' (Is. 25.8 LXX). This is why we say that in the economy<sup>5</sup> he himself blessed marriage, and being invited went to Cana of Galilee with the holy apostles (Jn.2.1f.).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A reference to those who met at the Council of Nicaea, 325 AD

<sup>4</sup> *Third Letter to Nestorius* 3 (McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy*, p.268)

<sup>5</sup> Economy = arrangement or plan. Cyril is speaking of the "economy of salvation".

<sup>6</sup> *Third Letter to Nestorius* 11 (McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy*, p.273)