

The rejection of the term *Theotokos* by Nestorius of Constantinople and the refutation of his teaching by Cyril of Alexandria
El rechazo del término *Theotokos* por Nestorio de Constantinopla y la refutación de su enseñanza por Cirilo de Alejandría

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Abstract: Cyril of Alexandria was not only one of the finest Christian theologians of his day, he also stands out in the ranks of the greatest patristic writers of all generations as perhaps the most powerful exponent of Christology the church has known. Nestorius was enthroned as archbishop on April 10th 428. The contemporary historian Socrates Scholasticus called Nestorius a proud and ignorant man whose innate and undisputed oratorical power masked a weakness of incisive thought. Nestorius argued that *Theotokos* did not do justice to the fact that, strictly speaking, Mary was not the mother of God but rather the mother of the man whom Christian faith recognizes as divine and thus calls God. On the other hand, the term *Anthropotokos* acknowledges that Mary is the mother of this man but can itself be taken to suggest that he is merely a man, which again is offensive to orthodox Christian faith in the deity of Christ. In Cyril's letters against to Nestorius, Cyril not only defends the title *Theotokos* against accusations that it was reviving the heresy of Apollinarianism, but he denies the very legitimacy of using alternative Christological schemes as such as the "association of personas" the Antiochian thinkers had spoken of. For Nestorius, the language of the exchange of properties was generally suspect, and often odious. He found, in the expressions "Mother of God" and "God suffering", little more than an ignorant piety that had cut so many corners in its implications that it stood very close to pagan mythical conceptions of the deity. For him, God the Logos raised the dead Lazarus, while the man Jesus wept at the tomb. In Nestorius' letter to Cyril, he argues that Cyril was right to teach the two natures were united in one person, and right to say that the divinity cannot suffer in itself, but that when he goes on to speak of the deity "participating in suffering" he undoes all his good work. Cyril insists that while of itself human nature is not powerful but passible, in its union with the godhead, as in the dynamic act of Incarnation, the human nature of the Logos thereby becomes an instrument of omnipotent power and thus, in a real thought paradoxical sense, an *omnipotent instrument*. It is at once powerful and fragile, majestic and humble. One of his favorite phrases is: "The Logos suffered impassibly". Christ had two natures. Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine. Cyril insists that Mary, the mother of God, should be called *Theotokos*. If Jesus was only human, Cyril argues, and God was elsewhere, the Incarnation, the Word become flesh, would be meaningless. Cyril plunges into the debate with sharp invective, addressing one document "To Nestorius, the new Judas".

Key Words: *Theotokos*, *Anthropotokos*, Christology, Mariology, Cyril of Alexandria, Nestorius.

Resumen: Cirilo de Alejandría no sólo fue uno de los mejores teólogos cristianos de su época, sino que también se destaca en las filas de los más grandes escritores patristicos de todas las generaciones, como quizá el más poderoso exponente de la cristología que la Iglesia haya conocido. Nestorio fue entronizado como arzobispo el 10 de abril 428. El historiador contemporáneo Sócrates Scholasticus calificó a Nestorio de hombre orgulloso e ignorante, cuyo innato e indiscutible poder de oratoria ocultó una debilidad de pensamiento incisivo. Nestorio sostuvo que el término *Theotokos* no hizo justicia al hecho de que, en sentido

estricto, María no fue la madre de Dios, sino la madre del hombre a quien la fe cristiana reconoce como divino, y por eso lo llama Dios. Por otro lado, el término *Anthropotokos* reconoce que María es la madre de este hombre, pero dicho término puede en sí mismo dar a entender que él no es más que un hombre, lo cual de nuevo es ofensivo a la fe cristiana ortodoxa en la deidad de Cristo. En sus cartas contra Nestorio, Cirilo no sólo defiende el título de *Theotokos* contra acusaciones de que estaba reviviendo la herejía del Apolinarianismo, pero él niega la genuina legitimidad del uso de esquemas cristológicos alternativos, tales como la “asociación de personas”, de la que habían hablado los pensadores antioqueños. Para Nestorio, el lenguaje del intercambio de propiedades era en general sospechoso, y con frecuencia odioso. Él encontró en las expresiones “Madre de Dios” y “Dios sufriente” poco más que una devoción ignorante que había cortado tantos ángulos en sus implicaciones, hasta el punto de haberse quedado muy cerca de las concepciones míticas paganas de la deidad. Para él, el Logos de Dios resucitó a Lázaro de la muerte, mientras que el hombre Jesús lloró ante su tumba. En una carta a Cirilo, Nestorio sostiene que Cirilo tenía razón al enseñar que las dos naturalezas de Cristo se unieron en una sola persona, y que también acertaba al decir que la divinidad no puede sufrir en sí misma, pero que cuando continúa diciendo que la deidad “participa en el sufrimiento”, él echa a perder toda su buena obra. Cirilo insiste en que, si bien por sí misma la propia naturaleza humana no es poderosa, sino pasible, en su unión con la divinidad, como en el dinámico acto de la Encarnación, la naturaleza humana del Logos se convierte así en un instrumento del poder omnipotente, y, por tanto –en un sentido real, aunque mentalmente paradójico—, en un *instrumento omnipotente*. Este es a la vez poderoso y frágil, majestuoso y humilde. Una de sus frases favoritas es: “El Logos sufrió impasiblemente”. Cristo tenía dos naturalezas. Jesucristo era plenamente humano y plenamente divino. Cirilo insiste en que María, la madre de Dios, debe ser llamada *Theotokos*. Si Jesús era humano, argumenta Cirilo, y si Dios estaba en otro lugar, la Encarnación, la Palabra hecha carne, carecería de sentido. Cirilo se sumerge en el debate con invectivas fuertes, remitiendo un documento “Para Nestorio, el nuevo Judas”.

Palabras clave: *Theotokos*, *Anthropotokos*, Cristología, Mariología, Cirilo de Alejandría, Nestorio.

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1. Instead of Prologue

We start with the *Hymn of Praise* for St Cyril composed by St Nicholas Velimirović (1880-1956):

Saint Cyril, unwavering
By his faith, amazes the universe,
With the honourable Cross,
the hero encompassed himself
against the enemies of the Church, took up arms,

Against the Jews, arch-enemies of the Cross,
And attacked the Novatianists,
Who took pride in themselves
To mercy, they placed a boundary,
Condemned sinners, prior to the Judgment,
To the power of God, they denied miracles.
But Cyril, shown the most
When he rose up against Nestorius,
The destroyer of the Orthodox Faith
The blasphemer of the Mother of God,
Cyril, the Mother of God, helped,
So that he overcame every diabolical power,
Holy Church cleansed of chaff,
All with the help of the Virgin Mother of God.
Cyril was a knight of Orthodoxy,
That is why the Church glorifies Cyril
And to him, prays without ceasing,
From diabolical uprisings, to protect us,
O Cyril, star among the stars,
By your prayers, help us.

2. Introduction: The historic environment of the presentation of the Nestorian Controversy

St. Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, glory of the Eastern Church and celebrated champion of the Virgin Mother of God, has always been held by the Church in the highest esteem. He was defined by Eulogios of Alexandria as “the guardian of the exactitude”,¹ the guardian of the true faith. Anastasios Sinaita called him as “the seal (*Sphragis*) of the Fathers”.² These phrases describe the characteristic feature of Cyril, the Bishop of Alexandria constant references to earlier ecclesiastical authors (including, in particular, Athanasius), for the purpose of showing the continuity with the tradition of theology itself. He deliberately, explicitly inserted himself in the Church's tradition, which he recognized as guaranteeing continuity with the Apostles and with Christ himself. Venerated as a Saint in both East and West, in 1882 St. Cyril was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Leo XIII.³

If the name of Cyril, patriarch of Alexandria is mentioned, some things come to mind automatically. The Patriarch of Alexandria was proclaimed a saint by the Triune God, not only for his life but also for his theology on the incarnation of the second Person of the Holy Trinity, as well as for his defence of the term *Theotokos* for the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. He defends the

¹ FOTIOS OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Myriobiblos*, 230, PG 103, 1053.

² ANASTASIOS SINAITA, *The Viae Dux*, VII, PG 89, 113.

³See BENEDICT XVI, Pope of Catholic Church, *Catechesis - Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, www.totus2us.com/...church/st-cyril-of-alexandria

title *Theotokos* for Mary, the Mother of Christ. As for his Christology, he is mentioned perhaps as the most powerful exponent of Christology the Church had known.⁴ Cyril represented the opposite side of the Christological dispute with Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople.

This essay presents the Nestorian controversy which was fundamentally Christological. The main sources of this essay are the letters which were sent from Cyril to Nestorius and the opposite.

But who were Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius of Constantinople?

2.1. The life of St. Cyril of Alexandria

Cyril, one of the great theologians and Fathers of the Church, was born at Alexandria in Egypt between 370-380. Our knowledge of Saint Cyril's childhood education and early upbringing is quite meagre. Saint Cyril's mother and her brother, Theophilus, hailed from Memphis. Saint Cyril was born in the town of Theodosion, Lower Egypt, very close to the current city Mahhalla El Kobra in the region of Mansoura. He was the nephew of the patriarch of the city of Alexandria, Theophilus.⁵ Cyril received a classical and theological education at Alexandria and was ordained by his uncle. He accompanied the patriarch of Alexandria Theophilus to Constantinople in 403 and was present at the Synod of the Oak⁶ that deposed John Chrysostom, whom he believed guilty of the charges against him.

After living for several years as a monk in the Nitrian Mountains,⁷ he succeeded his uncle Theophilus on the patriarchal chair of Alexandria, on the 18th October 412, but only after a riot between Cyril's supporters and the followers of his rival Timotheus.⁸ He began to exert his authority by causing the churches of the Novatians in the city to be shut up, and their sacred vessels and ornaments to be seized; an action censured by Socrates, a favourer of those heretics. He next drove the Jews out of the city, who were very numerous, and

⁴ See John A. MCGUCKIN, *St Cyril of Alexandria, the Christological Controversy. Its History, theology and texts*, New York, 1994, p. 1.

⁵ SOCRATES SCHOLASTICUS, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VII, 7, PG 67, 749C-762A. THEODORETUS OF CYRRHUS (Cyrus). *The Ecclesiastical History*, V, 40, PG 83, 1277D. NICEPHORUS CALLISTUS XANTHOPOULOS, *The Ecclesiastical History*, XV, 14, PG 146, 1100A-1104A. Mansi IV, 1464. Ed. Schwartz I, I, 3, 75. Chr. PAPADOPOULOS, *History of the church of Alexandria*, Alexandria, 1933, p. 264. A. THEODOROU, *The christological vocabulary and the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoretus of Cyrrhus (Cyrus)*, Athens, 1955, p. 37. Ch. KRIKONIS, 'Cyril of Alexandria and his christological teaching', Proceedings of the 19th. theological conference 'Saint Cyril of Alexandria], Thessaloniki, 1999, p. 236.

⁶ SOCRATES SCHOLASTICUS, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VII, 7.

⁷ If he is the Cyril addressed by Isidore of Pelusium in Ep. XXV of Book I, he was for some years a monk in Nitria. See *The international cyclopaedia - a compendium of human Knowledge*, revised with large additions, vol. IV, New York, 1899, p. 256.

⁸ See, Eirini ARTEMI, 'Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the relations with Orestes and Hypatia', *Ecclesiastic Faros* 68 (2007), p. 8.

enjoyed great privileges there from the time of Alexander the Great.⁹ In 428-430 Cyril became embroiled with Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, who was preaching that Mary was not the Mother of God since Christ was Divine and not human, and consequently she should not have the word *Theotokos* (God-bearer) applied to her.¹⁰

The patriarch of Alexandria managed to persuade Pope Celestine I to convoke a synod at Rome, which condemned Nestorius, and then did the same at his own synod in Alexandria. Celestine directed Cyril to depose Nestorius, and in 431, Cyril presided over the third General Council at Ephesus. Nestorius would not agree to the title *Theotokos*, “God-bearer” for Mary. He said Mary was not the mother of God but only of the man Christ, *Christotokos*. Nestorianism implied that the humanity of Christ was a mere disguise. Cyril represented the Pope at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and condemned Nestorianism as a dangerous heresy. This was the most important moment of his life. He had managed to defend the true faith against the Nestorian heresy successfully. He was known widely for saying, “as two pieces of wax when fused together make one, so too he who receives Holy Communion is so united with Christ, that Christ is in him and he is in Christ.”¹¹

Cyril was the most brilliant theologian of the Alexandrian tradition. His writings are characterized by precision, accurate thinking and great reasoning skills. If elegance, choice of thoughts, and beauty of style be wanting in his writings, these defects are compensated by the justness and precise exposition with which he expresses and underlines the great truths of religion, especially in clearing the terms concerning the mystery of the Incarnation. He died on the 9th or the 27th of June, 444, after an episcopate of nearly thirty-two years. Fr. John McGuckin called him «one of the most important theologians on the

⁹ SOCRATES SCHOLASTICUS, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VII, 7: “Cyril immediately therefore shut up the churches of the Novatians at Alexandria, and took possession of all their consecrated vessels and ornaments; and then stripped their bishop Theopemptus of all that he had.”

¹⁰ SOCRATES SCHOLASTICUS, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VII, 32: “... Mary was but a woman; and it is impossible that God should be born of a woman. These words created a great sensation, and troubled many both of the clergy and laity; they having been heretofore taught to acknowledge Christ as God, and by no means to separate his humanity from his divinity on account of the economy of incarnation, heeding the voice of the apostle when he said, «Yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh; yet now henceforth know we him no more». (B’ Corinthians 5,16). And again: «Wherefore, leaving the word of the beginning of Christ, let us go on unto perfection». (Hebrews 6,1). While great offence was taken in the church, as we have said, at what was thus propounded, Nestorius, eager to establish Anastasius’ proposition—for he did not wish to have the man who was esteemed by himself found guilty of blasphemy—delivered several public discourses on the subject, in which he assumed a controversial attitude, and totally rejected the epithet *Theotokos*».

¹¹ ‘ὡσπερ γὰρ εἴ τις κηρὸν ἐτέρῳ συναναπλέζας κηρῷ, καὶ πυρὶ συγκατατήζας, ἐν τι τὸ ἐξ ἀμφοῖν ἐργάζεται, οὕτω διὰ τῆς μεταλήψεως τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ τοῦ τιμίου αἵματος, αὐτὸς μὲν ἐν ἡμῖν, ἡμεῖς δὲ αὐτῷ πάλιν ἐν αὐτῷ συννεοῦμεθα’. (Cyril of Alexandria, *Ad Joannes*, X, B’). P.E. PUSEY, *Sancti patris nostri Cyrilli archiepiscopi Alexandrini in D. Joannis evangelium*, Brussels, 1965², vol. II, 542: 24-28 (=PG 74, 341D).

person of Christ in all Greek Christian writings”.¹² Fr. George Florovsky compared his significance «in the history of Christian thought with that of St Augustine”.¹³ The controversy of the third Ecumenical Council revolved around the Christology of St Cyril.

2.2. *The life of Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople*

Nestorius was born at Maras in Turkey, then Germanicia. His teacher was Theodore, bishop of Mopsuestia.¹⁴ He became a priest and entered the ascetic life in the monastery of Euprepios just outside the walls of the city. His speaking ability first gained for him the position of expounder of Scripture in his monastery. Probably, Nestorius' monastery was in the Antioch area, so he was called upon to preach publicly in Antioch. John of Antioch knew that Nestorius was a powerful preacher.¹⁵ After his recommendation, in 428 Nestorius was appointed Patriarch of Constantinople by Emperor Theodosius II. His accession to the Archiepiscopal Throne of Constantinople brought him at once into a position of great power in Constantinople. From a simple monk and priest, he became one of the most powerful men in the whole empire.

When he ascended his Episcopal throne for the first time, he told Emperor Theodosius: “Give me your empire purged of heretics and I will give you the Kingdom of Heaven. Give me power over the heretics and I will subjugate the Persians who make war on you.”¹⁶ Soon he put his words into practice. He used his power to attack to remnants of Arianism and Apollinarianism.

¹² J.A. MCGUCKIN, 'Cyril of Alexandria', *The SCM Press A-Z of Patristic Theology*, London, SCM, (2005), p. 93.

¹³ Fr. George FLOROVSKY, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth Century*, trans. Raymond Miller, et al., Vol. 8, in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987, p. 262.

¹⁴ Theodore of Mopsuestia wanted to affirm the perfect humanity of Christ and considered that this perfect humanity cannot be achieved unless Christ was a human person because he believed that there is no perfect existence without a personality. Thus he did not only affirm the existence of a perfect human nature in the Lord Christ but went further into affirming that God the Word took a perfect man and used him as an instrument (tool) for the salvation of humanity. He considered that God the Word dwelt in this person through good will, and that He was *conjoined* to him externally only. He used the expression *conjoining* (in Greek *synapheia*) rather than *union* (in Greek *enosis*). Thus he puts two persons in Christ, one Divine and the other human; together they formed one person who is the person of the union (external union) in the likeness of the union between man and wife.

¹⁵ A. Fortesque writes: “Nestorius had been a monk at the monastery of Euprepios; then deacon, priest and preacher at the chief church of Antioch”. (Andrian FORTESQUE, *Lesser Easter Churches*, London, 1913, p. 61). Friedrich LOOFS (*Nestorius and His Place in the History of Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge, 1914, p. 27) supports: “It is well known that Nestorius in April 428 was called out of the monastery of Euprepios, in the neighbourhood of Antioch, to the vacant bishopric of Constantinople.”

¹⁶ This is a summary of the life of Nestorius. Material in quotes is from a Syriac *Life* supposed by Nestorius himself, which he found in a Persian manuscript, and of which he says, “it was made from manuscript 134 of the library of the American missionaries at Ourmiah. The

As we referred before, Nestorius refused to give to Mary, Mother of Christ, the predicate *Theotokos*, God-bearer, Mother of God. The reaction to this sermon—and in particular to the condemnation of the *Theotokos*—was immediate and unfavourable: “He disturbed many of the clergy and all of the laity in this matter” (πολλούς κληρικούς τε καί λαϊκούς ἐν αὐτῷ πάντας ἐτάραξεν).¹⁷ His heretical teaching led to a dispute about his conception of the unity of the human and divine natures of Christ. When Cyril was informed about his teaching, he tried to explain to Nestorius why Mary should be called *Theotokos*. Unfortunately there was no success. A correspondence with Nestorius followed in a quite moderate tone. The Bishop of Constantinople insisted on refusing the term *Theotokos* for the mother of Jesus. An Ecumenical Synod was called by Theodosius II, at Ephesus in 431. Nestorius was condemned and returned to his monastery. Later he exiled in 436, landing in Upper Egypt. New Bishop of Constantinople became Maximian.

3. The theological controversy of Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius.

3.1. The beginning of the Christological controversy between Cyril and Nestorius

The Nestorian controversy was fundamentally Christological, but Mary the mother of Christ figured large in this dispute between Cyril and Nestorius.¹⁸ The bishop of Constantinople was an Antiochian in Christology.¹⁹ He was

manuscript was written in 1558 AD.” (NESTORIUS, *The Bazaar of Heracleides, Newly translated from the Syriac and edited with an Introduction Notes & Appendices* by G. R. Driver, and Leonard Hodgson, Oxford, 1925, in file://E: \Nestorius, The Bazaar of Heracleides (1925). Preface to the online edition.htm).

¹⁷ SOCRATES SCHOLASTICUS, *The Ecclesiastical History* 7.32: “Everywhere he forbade the word *Theotokos*.” The sermons are preserved in the contemporary, but probably inaccurate, Latin translations of Marius Mercator (ACO I, i, 5, p. 26-46).

¹⁸ “A certain presbyter named Anastasius, a man of corrupt opinions, and a warm admirer of Nestorius and his Jewish sentiments, who also accompanied him when setting out from his country to take possession of his bishopric; at which time Nestorius, having met with Theodore at Mopsuestia, was perverted by his teaching from godly doctrine, as Theodulus writes in an epistle upon this subject—this Anastasius, in discoursing to the Christ-loving people in the church of Constantinople, dared to say, without any reserve, ‘Let no one style Mary the Mother of God; for Mary was human, and it is impossible for God to be born of a human being.’” (EVAGRIUS SCHOLASTICUS, *Ecclesiastical History*, translated by E. Walford, London, 1846, I, 2, 4 (=PG 86, 2424A-D). Also see NIKEPHOROS KALLISTOS XANTHOPOULOS, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, XIV, 32, PG 146, 1160-1164.

¹⁹ “Antioch became a centre of Christian learning and the Antiochene school of theology, which flourished in the third and fourth centuries was particularly renowned. Unlike the school of Alexandria, which interpreted the Bible allegorically and in accordance with speculative philosophy, the Antiochene school expounded the Scriptures in conformity with their historical and literal meaning. The biblical commentaries composed by this school in the fourth and fifth centuries.” (Stylianos PAPADOPOULOS, *Patrologia* II, Athens, 1990, p. 566-574).

influenced by the teaching of Theodore of Mopsuestia.²⁰ Quite early in his reign, he was called upon to give his opinion on the suitability of *Theotokos*²¹ (the woman who gave birth to God) as a title of the Blessed Virgin and supported that it was of doubtful propriety, unless *Anthropotokos* (the woman who gave birth to man) was added to balance it. He insisted that the title *Christotokos* (the one who gave birth to Christ) was more preferable as begging no questions. God did not take origin from a creaturely human being, and for this reason the word *Christotokos* would be better taking it all around. For supporting his theory, Nestorius urged on his congregation that Mary bore a mere man, the vehicle of divinity but not God.²² He argued that in the case of the term *Theotokos*, he was not opposed to those who wanted to say it, unless it should advance to the confusion of natures in the manner of the madness of Apollinarius or Arius. Nonetheless, he had no doubt that the term *Theotokos* was inferior to the term *Christotokos*, as the latter was mentioned by the angels and the gospels.²³ Also he said that “the term *Christotokos* kept the assertion by both parties to the proper limits, because it both removed the blasphemy of

²⁰ Following the basic patristic principle that “what is not assumed is not redeemed,” (GREGOIRE OF NAZIANZUS, *Epist 101, Ad Cleodionum*, PG 37, 181D-184A). Theodore of Mopsuestia, as theologians of the Antiochene school, emphasized the humanity of Jesus Christ, the Alexandrian his deity. Theodore of Mopsuestia held that Christ's human nature was complete but was conjoined with the Word by an external union. Theodore maintained against the Apollinarians that Christ had a real human soul, not that the Word took the place of the human soul. Only in this manner could the human soul be redeemed. Theodore's Christology exercised a more direct and eventful influence on the doctrine of his (mediate) disciple Nestorius. Theodore vehemently refused the use of the term *Theotokos*, long employed in ecclesiastical terminology, because Mary was strictly speaking *Anthropotokos*, and only indirectly *Theotokos*: “It is folly to say that God was born of the Virgin”, he states. “He was born of the Virgin who has the nature of the Virgin, not God the Logos. He was born of Mary who was of David's seed. It was not God the Logos who was born of woman but he who was formed in her by the power of the Holy Spirit. ‘One can call Mary the *Mother of God*, or more accurately, *Theotokos*, in the metaphorical, non-literal sense of the phrase, just as one can call her the *Bearer of Man* (*ἄνθρωποτόκος*). She naturally bore a man, but God was in the man she bore, as he never had been in anyone before. It is perfectly clear that under ‘unity of person’ Theodore understood only by completeness of deified and grace-impregnated humanity. One must not conceive of perfect nature as being impersonal (*ἀπρόσωπος*) he supposed. Consequently, in so far as humanity was complete in Christ, he was a human being. Moreover, the nature of the Logos is not impersonal. But in the Incarnation the “unity of harmony” and the “connection of honour” is established and in the sense of a certain new ‘unity of person’.” (THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA, *Fragments of De Incarnatione*, PG 66, 981BC. George FLOROVSKY, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth Century*, Paris, 1978, p. 238). See Basilius STEFANIDES, *Ecclesiastical History*, Athens, 1959, p. 194 -210.

²¹ “The disputed title *Theotokos* was widely accepted in the Alexandrian school; it followed from the *communicatio idiomatum*, and expressed the truth that, since His Person was constituted by the Word, the Incarnate was appropriately designated God.” (John N. KELLY, *Early Christian Doctrines*, London, 1968⁴, p. 311).

²² CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Adversus Nestorium*, I, A, ACO, t. 1, I, 6, 18: 27-40, 19: 1-43, 20: 1-5, 37: 9-42, 38: 1-43, 39: 1-38, 40: 1-12 (=PG 76, 25A-28D, 72A-77D, 120A-D).

²³ *III Epistula Nestorium ad Celestinem*, Loofs, Nestoriana, p. 181-182.

Paul of Samosata, who had claimed that Christ the Lord of all was simply a human being, and also flees the wickedness of Arius and Apollinarius.”²⁴

The Catholic doctrine of the Incarnation, the manhood united by God the Son to His own self, was to Nestorius, Apollinarianism or heretic mixture. Nestorius said so. In his letter to Pope Celestine he told of the “corruption of orthodoxy among some” and thus described it:

It is a sickness not small, but akin to the putrid sore of Apollinarius and Arius. For they mingle the Lord’s union in man to a confusion of some sort of mixture, insomuch that even certain clerks among us, of whom some from lack of understanding, some from heretical guile of old time concealed within them are sick as heretics, and openly blaspheme God the Word Consubstantial with the Father, as though He had taken beginning of His Being of the Virgin mother of Christ, and had been built up with His Temple and buried with His flesh, and say that the flesh after the resurrection did not remain flesh but passed into the Nature of Godhead, and they refer the Godhead of the Only-Begotten to the beginning of the flesh which was connected with it, and they put it to death with the flesh, and blasphemously say that the flesh connected with Godhead passed into Godhead.²⁵

Same thoughts were expressed in the second letter of Nestorius to Cyril:

But to use the expression “accept as its own” as a way of diminishing the properties of the conjoined flesh, birth, suffering and entombment, is a mark of those whose minds are led astray, my brother, by Greek thinking or are sick with the lunacy of Apollinarius and Arius or the other heresies or rather something more serious than these.²⁶

It is obvious that behind the delineation of Mary as *Theotokos*, he professed to detect the Arian tenet that the Son was a creature, or the Apollinarian idea that the manhood was incomplete. When Cyril read it, he realized that he had found the scandal that he was looking for. Cyril felt a great disappointment about the Nestorius’ teaching. Initially, he tried to refute Nestorius,²⁷ heretic

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Concil. Eph. P. i. c. 16.*

²⁶ NESTORIUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Epistle II ad Cyrillum*, PG 77, 56A.

²⁷ According to Socrates Scholasticus’ *Ecclesiastical History*, Nestorius was a proud man without sharp thinking: “Having myself perused the writings of Nestorius, I have found him an unlearned man and shall candidly express the conviction of my own mind concerning him: and as in entire freedom from personal antipathies, I have already alluded to his faults, I shall in like manner be unbiased by the criminations of his adversaries, to derogate from his merits. I cannot then concede that he was either a follower of Paul of Samosata or of Photinus, or that

teaching about the mystery of the Word's Incarnation by sending letters²⁸ to the bishop of Constantinople. Unfortunately, there was no success.

3.2. The rejection of the term Theotokos by Nestorius of Constantinople and the refutation of his teaching by Cyril of Alexandria

3.2.1. The first Cyril's letter to Nestorius and the answer of bishop of Constantinople to the bishop of Alexandria.

When Cyril was informed that during the Divine Liturgy the Bishop Dorotheos, in front of the Patriarch of Constantinople Nestorius, cursed those who accepted Mary, Mother of Christ, as *Theotokos* and Nestorius stayed silent and co-communicated with him, he decided to react. This occasioned so much disturbance in the thoughts of some of the Monks of Egypt that Saint Cyril wrote a letter to them, pointing out that the Incarnation meant that God the Son united to Him His own human nature which He took, as completely as soul and body are united in each of us, and in this way His Passion and Death were His own, though He, as God, could not suffer. This letter had an extended circulation and reached Constantinople. It irritated Nestorius. He wrote then, in order to mark his dissatisfaction on the letter of Cyril to the monks of Egypt.

Initially, Cyril wrote this letter²⁹ in an angry style against Nestorius. His explanation about the letter to the Monks of Egypt was that it was written in order to counter the turmoil on doctrine caused by Nestorius' or Anastasius' preach. Anastasius, a presbyter whom Nestorius brought to Constantinople with him, preached a sermon in which the term *Theotokos* was criticized, rather attacked. It is claimed that Anastasius proclaimed: "Let no one call Mary *Theotokos*, for Mary was but a woman and it was impossible that God should be born of a woman."³⁰ Whether this attack on the terminology and meaning of *Theotokos* began with the presbyter Anastasius or with Nestorius is not the issue. Nestorius supported this vigorously and preached on the subject, regardless of whether he preached the first sermon. Thus, began what St. Cyril referred to as the "scandal" of the household of the Church (*σκάνδαλον οἰκουμενικόν*). Cyril indirectly asked Nestorius: "How is it possible for you to stay quiet when the doctrine of our faith is perverted?"³¹ Continuing his letter, Cyril explained to Nestorius that anything was taught, distorted the truth of the

he denied the Divinity of Christ: but he seemed scared at the term *Theotokos*, as though it were some terrible phantom. The fact is, the causeless alarm he manifested on this subject just exposed his extreme ignorance: for being a man of natural fluency as a speaker, he was considered well educated, but in reality he was disgracefully illiterate." (SOCRATES SCHOLASTICUS, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VII, 7, 32, PG 67, 81OCD).

²⁸ Cyril sent three letters to Nestorius. PG 77, 40C-41D, 44C-49A, 106C-121D.

²⁹ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. I ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 40C.

³⁰ SOCRATES SCHOLASTICUS, *Ecclesiastic History*, VII, 32.

³¹ *Ibid.* PG 77, 41A: "Πῶς οὖν ἐνι σιωπῆσαι, πίστεως ἀδικουμένης, καί τοσούτων διεστραμμένων".

Christian Faith and urged him to accept the term *Theotokos* for the Holy Virgin Mary in order to end the theological agitation of the refusal of the term *Theotokos*³² for the Virgin Mary. So it would be the end of “ecumenical scandal” in the Church's bosom.³³

The Christological argument was mainly about soteriology, redemption and worship, and this was why Cyril reacted so strongly against Nestorius' teaching. Cyril believed that Nestorius' teaching epitomized in his attack on *Theotokos*, presupposed a merely external association between an ordinary man and the Word. From this point of view the Incarnation was not a real fact. It was a simple illusion, a matter of “appearance” and “empty words”.³⁴ If Christ's passion, sufferings and saving acts were not those of the Word

³² “The term *Theotokos* — Θεοτόκος — does not mean the same as ‘Mother of God’ in English or the common Latin translation. In English one must translate *Theotokos* as ‘Bearer of God’. The correct Latin would be *deipara or dei genetrix*, not *Mater Dei*. Had Nestorius been more prudent he would have realized that the term *Theotokos* had a comparatively long usage — it had been used by Origen, by Alexander of Alexandria, by Eusebius of Caesarea, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Cyril of Alexandria. In the Latin West Tertullian had used the term *Dei Mater* in *De patientia* 3, and Ambrose also used it in his *Hexaemeron* V, 65 (*Patrologia Latina*. 14, 248A). More significant is that the Antiochene theologian Eustathius (bishop of Antioch from c.324 to 330), so often considered a forerunner of Nestorius, had some remarkably un-Antiochene tendencies in his Christology, one of which was the use of the term *Theotokos*. If there is a theological difference, however slight, between *Theotokos* and *Mother of God*, then there is certainly serious theological implications between *Theotokos* and the term favoured by Nestorius — Χριστοτόκος — *Christotokos*. But there is even a difference between *Theotokos* and *Mother of God*. Why would one want to stress the difference between *Theotokos* and *Mother of God*. Is it not becoming overly minute, insignificant, something that in reality is the same thing? But the fact is that there is a grammatical and conceptual difference between the two terms. If the Greek theologians had intended the diminished meaning of *Mother of God*, then they easily could have completely avoided Θεοτόκος by employing always the term *μήτηρ Θεοῦ*, a term readily at their disposal and one which they did use at times. But the point is that for them there was a difference between Θεοτόκος and *μήτηρ Θεοῦ*. The term *Mother of God* has no specificity — by and of itself but within the thought world of Christian Trinitarianism it could grammatically and conceptually mean that the Blessed Virgin is the *Mother of God* the Father or of God the Holy Spirit. But the term *Theotokos* has specificity because of the “*tokos*” — by and of itself it can only refer to *Bearing God the Son*. The English term is too abrupt, not precise enough, and does not have the internal integrity that *Theotokos* has. Further, the English term has a tendency to bring into prominence the glory of Mary's motherhood, whereas the Greek term focuses attention on the Godhead of him who was born. And the Greek term *Theotokos* protects in and of itself the revealed fact that Christ was very God who became man and, in assuming manhood from the Virgin, lost nothing of the Godhead, which was his eternally. Conversely, the term *Theotokos* protects the revealed fact that he who was born of the *Theotokos* must have been man as well as God. The point of the term *Theotokos* is not as abstruse as many historians of Christian thought assume.” (G. FLOROVSKY, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth Century*, trans. Raymond Miller, (1987), p. 223).

³³ “Καὶ οὐχὶ μᾶλλον ἐπανορθοῖ τὸν ἐαυτῆς λόγον, ἵνα παύσῃ σκάνδαλον οἰκομενικόν; Εἰ γὰρ καὶ παρερρή λόγος, ὡς ἐπὶ λαοῦ τρέχων, ἀλλ’ ἐπανορθούσθω ταῖς ἐπισκέψεσι, καὶ λέξιν χαρίσασθαι τοῖς σκανδαλιζομένοις καταζῶσον, Θεοτόκον ὀνομάζων τὴν ἁγίαν Παρθένον.” (CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. I ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 41B).

³⁴ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Apologeticus pro XII capitibus contra Orientales*, PG 76, 324AB.

incarnate but of a mere man, there was no redemption for mankind race.³⁵ Nestorius' refusal of the term *Theotokos* was a "scandal" for the whole Christian world. For this reason Cyril said to him that the Pope of Rome Celestine had been informed for his heretic teaching.³⁶ Finally, Saint Cyril asked him to heal the confusion by the use of the one word *Theotokos*, of the Holy Virgin.

Cyril had an excellent knowledge of church history, so he had realized that the heretic falsehoods of Nestorius would not be solved through discussions or letters between him and Nestorius. It should be convened a Regional Council or even an Ecumenical. Patriarch of Alexandria was absolutely sure that Nestorius had fallen into dogmatic error. Cyril underlined to Nestorius that he always advocated the same on the doctrine of our Church. For fear of misapprehension he invoked as irrefutable witness the book had been written earlier about holy and consubstantial Trinity.³⁷ In this book, which he called "The Treasure", he refuted the whole system of Arianism. He answered in it all the objections of those heretics, and established from Holy Scripture the divinity of the Son of God, and of the Holy Ghost. Also he explained in it the Incarnation of the Word.³⁸ He explained that in this book he had interwoven some things on the Incarnation, like what he had now written.

This holy doctor emphasized that the rejection of the term *Theotokos* was tantamount to a refutation of Christ's divinity and a falsification of the Divine Incarnation. Then, Christ would not be true and "perfect" God and "perfect" man at the same time, he would be a mere tool of the Deity, a God-bearing man.³⁹ He underlined with passion that Christ was not a God-clad man, nor did the Word of God merely dwell in a man, but rather that He was made Flesh, or Perfect Man, according to the Scriptures.⁴⁰

Cyril supported that: "the holy Virgin is able to be called the Mother of God. For if our Lord Jesus Christ is God", he wondered, "how should the holy

³⁵ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Adversus Nestorii Blasphemias*, III, 2, PG 76, 129C. Ibid, IV, 4, PG 76, 189BC. *Ibid.*, V, 5, 1, PG 76, 220C.

³⁶ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. 1 ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 41AB.

³⁷ The holy doctor wrote between 424-428 two books in order to speak about Holy and Consubstantial Trinity. It was called "The Treasure" (PG 75, 9-656), which was divided into thirty-five titles or sections. The other book of Cyril was "On the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity" [PG 75, 657-1124, G. M. de Durand, SC 231(1976), 237(1977), 246(1978)], consisted of seven dialogues, and was composed at the request of Nemesius and Hermias. This work was also written to prove the consubstantiality of Christ but is more obscure than the former.

³⁸ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. 1 ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 41C.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ See a very similar expression in a little treatise of Saint Athanasius on the Incarnation, quoted by S. Cyril, *de recta fide to the Princesses Arcadia and Marina*, p. 48 a c, and in S. Cyril's Defence of his eighth chapter against the scriptures of the Eastern Bishops, p. 178 b and c. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Scholia on the incarnation of the Only-Begotten*. LFC 47, Oxford (1881), 185-236. A library of fathers of the holy Catholic church: anterior to the division of the East and West, vol. 47, 206-207.

Virgin who bore Him not be the Mother of God.”⁴¹ Nestorius avoided answering to Cyril’s letter clearly. He referred to Cyril’s attitude against him and presented himself as a victim of Cyril’s misunderstanding and empathy.⁴² Nestorius avoided exacerbating the already critical ecclesiastical state and at the same time he gave no apologies to Cyril’s charges on the rejection of the name *Theotokos* for the mother of Christ.

3.2.2. The second letter of Cyril to Nestorius. The answer of Nestorius to the patriarch of Alexandria.

The answer of Cyril to the letter of Nestorius was quite clever. He didn’t make an attack to Nestorius. He explained to Nestorius that he was accused of doubting Nestorius’ piety, in order his accusers to hide their wrong actions:

hear that some are rashly talking of the estimation in which I hold your holiness, and that this is frequently the case especially at the times that meetings are held of those in authority. And perchance they think in so doing to say something agreeable to you, but they speak senselessly, for they have suffered no injustice at my hands, but have been exposed by me only to their profit; this man as an oppressor of the blind and needy, and that as one who wounded his mother with a sword. Another because he stole, in collusion with his waiting maid, another's money, and had always laboured under the imputation of such like crimes as no one would wish even one of his bitterest enemies to be laden with.⁴³

He took little reckoning of the words of such people, because at last they would give an account to the Judge of all, Jesus Christ.⁴⁴ Also the holy doctor underlined to Nestorius that their obligation was their teaching as bishops should be in accordance with the teaching of the predecessor Fathers of our church. They should be in the faith according to that which is written, and conform their thoughts (Cyril and Nestorius) to their upright and

⁴¹ *Epist. ad monachos Aegypti*. “They say that God the Word had taken a perfect man from out the seed of Abraham and David according to the declaration of the Scriptures, who is by nature what they were of whose seed he was, a man perfect in nature, consisting of intellectual soul and human flesh: whom, man as we by nature, fashioned by the might of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Virgin and made of a woman, made under the law, in order that he might buy us all from the bondage of the law, receiving the sonship marked out long before. He in new way connected to Himself, preparing him to make trial of death according to the law of men, raising him from the dead, taking him up into Heaven and setting him on the Right Hand of God.” (CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Quod unus sit Christus*, PG 75, 1273A-D).

⁴² PG 77, 44C.

⁴³ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. II ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 44C.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

irreprehensible teaching.⁴⁵ Otherwise, if they didn't propose the word of teaching and the doctrine of the faith with all accuracy to the people, they would tempt their flock. And something like that it would be a great sin, because the giving of scandal to one even of the least of those who believe in Christ, exposes a body to the unbearable indignation of God.⁴⁶

Following this letter, Cyril made a short reference to the symbol of Nice-Constantinople. He spoke of the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God. He explained clearly that the only begotten Son, born according to nature of God the Father, came down, and was incarnate, he partook of flesh and blood like to us; he made our body his own, and came forth man from a woman, not casting off his existence as God, or his generation of God the Father, but even in taking to himself flesh remaining what he was.⁴⁷ Cyril insisted on the Incarnation because this was the sentiment of the holy Fathers; therefore they ventured to call the holy Virgin *Theotokos*, not as if the nature of the Word or his divinity had its beginning from the holy Virgin, but because of her was born that holy body with a rational soul, to which the Word, being personally united, is said to be born according to the flesh.⁴⁸ Christ became perfect man and remained perfect God, the two natures being brought together in a true union, there was of both one Christ and one Son; for the difference of the natures was not taken away by the union, but rather the divinity and the humanity make perfect for us the one Lord.⁴⁹

Cyril made use of the words "Christ" and "Son" on purpose, in order to make obvious to Nestorius that the first one referred to the humanity of Jesus and the second expressed his deity as the Word of God. There was a real union of two natures, "*hypostatic union*". This term was introduced for the first time by Cyril's Christological teaching, in order to Nestorius' falsehoods.⁵⁰

As had been the case earlier with the Trinitarian doctrine, Cyril was fully conscious of the necessity of positing the union of incarnation at the level of person, not that of the nature. As in the Trinity there were not three natures and three persons –which would be tritheism— or one nature and one person in different three modes of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit –which would be modalistic monarchianism—, so in the incarnation there was one person, but two natures. The bishop of Alexandria tried to explain that neither the divine nature overwhelmed the human, nor the human and divine natures juxtaposed. The two natures found their union in the one divine hypostasis and yet maintained their distinction. In Cyril's words:

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, PG 77, 45A.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Math. 18: 6.

⁴⁷ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. II ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 45B.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, PG 77, 45C.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Andrew THEODOROU, *The Christological terminology and the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria and of Theodoret of Cyrus*, Athens, 1955, p. 81.

The natures, however, which combined into this real union were different, but from the two together is on God the Son, without the diversity of the natures being destroyed by the union. For a union of two natures was made, and therefore we confess One Christ, One Son, One Lord... two natures, by an inseparable union, met together in him without confusion, and indivisibly.⁵¹

In Christ's person, there was a true union –hypostatic— of the two natures and this followed from the *Exchange of Properties* or *Communion of Idioms*. By this way someone could understand that Christ suffered and rose again; not as if God the Word suffered in his own nature stripes, or the piercing of the nails, or any other wounds, for the Divine nature is incapable of suffering, in as much as it is incorporeal, but since that which had become his own body suffered in this way, he is also said to suffer for us; for he who is in himself incapable of suffering was in a suffering body. In the same manner he himself had suffered death for people, not as if he had any experience of death in his own nature (for it would be madness for someone to say or think this), but because his flesh tasted death. In like manner his flesh being raised again, it is spoken of as his resurrection, not as if he had fallen into corruption (God forbid), but because his own body was raised again.⁵²

The divine Word became true human with flesh and blood “not merely as willing or being pleased” (‘οὐ κατὰ θέλησιν μόνην ἢ εὐδοκίαν’).⁵³ On this point Cyril referred to Theodorus’ of Mopsuestia teaching, which had been adopted by Nestorius. Cyril wrote that it would be “absurd and foolish”, to say that the Word who existed before all ages, coeternal with the Father, needed any second beginning of existence as God.⁵⁴ Mary didn't give birth of a mere holy human, but She gave birth Christ, the one person of the incarnate deity. In Christ, there was a hypostatic union of Godhead and manhood. This meant that Godhead and manhood took place dynamically because there was only one individual subject presiding over the both, the person of Christ.

Cyril proposed the concept of hypostatic union to summarise his central objections to Nestorius' theories:

Rather do we claim that the Word in an unspeakable, inconceivable manner united to himself hypostatically flesh enlivened by a rational soul, and so became man and was called son of man, not by God's will alone or good pleasure, nor by the

⁵¹ St. Luke, vol. 1, serm. 1,i cf. Scholia, 200. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. LV- In Sanctum Symbolum*, PG 77, 304A. *Epist. XXXI (XXIX) ad Maximianum Constantinopolitanum Episcopum*, PG 77, 152AB. *Epist. XL (XXXV) ad Acacium Melitinae Episcopum*, PG 77, 200A. *Epist. XLVI (XXXIX) ad Succensum epistola I*, PG 77, 232A,C. *Epist. L (XLIV) ad Valerianum Iconiensem Episcopum. De Verbis Incarnatione exegesis*, PG 77, 260C.

⁵² CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. II ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 48B. Hebr. 2: 9.

⁵³ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. II ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 45C.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

assumption of a person alone. Rather did two different natures come together to form a unity, and from both arose one Christ, one Son. It was not as though the distinctness of the natures was destroyed by the union, but divinity and humanity together made perfect for us one Lord and one Christ, together marvellously and mysteriously combining to form a unity. So he who existed and was begotten of the Father before all ages is also said to have been begotten according to the flesh of a woman ... If, however, we reject the hypostatic union as being either impossible or too unlovely for the Word, we fall into the fallacy of speaking of two sons. We shall have to distinguish and speak both of the man as honoured with the title of son, and of the Word of God as by nature possessing the name and reality of sonship, each in his own way. We ought not, therefore, to split into two sons⁵⁵ the one Lord Jesus Christ.⁵⁶

In the second letter of Nestorius to Cyril,⁵⁷ the bishop of Constantinople remained stable in his dogmatic teaching. He didn't answer to "the insults"

⁵⁵ In this point, Cyril rejected Diodorus of Tarsus' teaching about the two Sons. Diodore claimed that the divinity must be compromised if the Word and the flesh formed a substantial (or hypostatic) unity analogous to that formed by body and (rational) soul in the man. In his reaction, his own theory led him into holding them (the divine and the human) apart and thus he was led to distinguish the Son of God and the Son of David. He said that the Holy Scriptures draws a sharp line of demarcations between the activities of the two Sons. Otherwise, why should those who blaspheme against the Son of Man receive forgiveness while those who blaspheme against the Spirit (the Holy Spirit) do not? Diodore of Tarsus argued that the Son of God is not the son of David; there are two sons. He depended on the teaching of Jesus Christ when He said: "And anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but to him who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven." (Lk 12: 10). Diodore said that blasphemy against the Son of Man is not considered blasphemy against the Son of God because Jesus said that blasphemy against the Son of Man will be forgiven, and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not. The Holy Spirit is God; the Lord Jesus Christ explained that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not forgiven because it is blasphemy against God. Since Jesus is not God, blasphemy against the son of man receives forgiveness. Through this trick, and cunning interpretation, he sub-graded, or subordinated the Son of God to the son of man. He said that they have a relationship together, or that they are linked to each other by some type of conjoining or indwelling. Blasphemy against the son of man is not against the Son of God. This distinction between the two sons is the core of the teaching of Diodore of Tarsus. See Vlassios FEIDAS, *Ecclesiastical History*, I, Athens, 1992, p. 591-592. B. STEFANIDIS, *Ecclesiastical History*, (1995), p. 194,195. A. THEODOROU, *The Christological terminology and the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria and of Theodoret of Cyrus*, Athens, 1955, p. 15-17.

⁵⁶ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. II ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 48B. See also: CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. III ad Nestorium*: "Rather we deprecate the term of 'conjunction' (*synapheia*) as not having sufficiently signified the oneness. But we do not call the Word of God the Father, the God nor the Lord of Christ, lest we openly cut in two the one Christ, the Son and Lord, and fall under the charge of blasphemy, making him the God and Lord of himself. For the Word of God, as we have said already, was made hypostatically one in flesh, yet he is God of all and he rules all."

⁵⁷ PG 77, 49-57.

against him contained in Cyril's second letter.⁵⁸ He believed that they would be cured by his patience and by the answer which events would offer in the course of time.⁵⁹ It is obvious that he referred to the audacity of the Patriarch of Alexandria to challenge the reverence and appropriateness of Nestorius' teaching. He answered to Cyril's accusations of heretic teaching, arguing that everything was said, based on the previous patristic tradition of the Church. He insisted that Cyril had realised the words of his teaching and of the Fathers in a superficial way. Nestorius urged: "By reading in a superficial way the tradition of those holy men (you were guilty of a pardonable ignorance), you concluded that they said that the Word who is coeternal with the Father was passible."⁶⁰ He asked Cyril to look more closely at their language and he would find out that divine choir of fathers never said that the consubstantial godhead was capable of suffering, or that the whole being that was coeternal with the Father was recently born, or that it rose again, seeing that it had itself been the cause of resurrection of the destroyed temple.⁶¹ Nestorius underlined that Cyril's belief was that the coeternal Word to God-Father was passible. This was impossible and he used the passage from Paul's letter to Philippians: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, and so on until, he became obedient unto death, even death on a cross",⁶² to explain that in Christ, in one person there were both the impassible and the passible natures, in order that Christ might be called without impropriety both impassible and passible, impassible in godhead, passible in the nature of his body.⁶³ The "conjunction of the two natures of Christ in one person"⁶⁴ was a superficial union and not a hypostatic, a real one.⁶⁵

The term conjunction (*synapheia*) had been used by the holy Fathers⁶⁶ and by Cyril himself, but now its meaning was heretic. We must not forget that the term conjunction was *technicus terminus* for Antiochians who supported the two natures of Christ. If the union had the same meaning with the conjunction,

⁵⁸ NESTORIUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Epist. II ad Cyrillum*, PG 77, 49B.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, PG 77, 49C.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, PG 77, 49CD.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, PG 77, 49D.

⁶² *Ibid.*, PG 77, 52B. Filip. 2: 5-8.

⁶³ NESTORIUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Epist. II ad Cyrillum*, PG 77, 52C.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ "In Nestorius eyes was important that the impassibility of the God should be preserved, and that the man for his part should retain his spontaneity and freedom of action. Hence, though speaking on occasion of a *union* (*ένωσις*), the term he preferred was *conjunction* (*συνάφεια*), which seemed to avoid all suspicion of a confusion or mixing of the natures." (J. N. KELLY, *Early Christian Doctrines*, (1968⁴), p. 314.

⁶⁶ JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homiliae super Johannem*, XII, PG 59, 80BC. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Contra Apollinarium*, PG 45, 1156A. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Contra Eunomium*, V, PG 45, 705C. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *Contra Arianos*, II, 70, PG 26, 296B.

then there would be two *prosopa* of Christ. This was quite wrong. In the earlier patristic tradition, the term conjunction was generally used to explain the perception of human nature by the Only-begotten Word of God during the incarnation. It meant the true union of two natures rather than welding them.⁶⁷ In Nestorius' letter it meant the not real, natural union of the two natures of Christ, so Cyril wrote:

One therefore is Christ both Son and Lord, not as if a man had attained only such a conjunction with God as consists in a unity of dignity alone or of authority. For it is not equality of honour which unites natures; for then Peter and John, who were of equal honour with each other, being both Apostles and holy disciples [would have been one, and], yet the two are not one. Neither do we understand the manner of conjunction to be apposition, for this does not suffice for natural oneness (*πρός ἔνωσιν φυσικήν*). Nor yet according to relative participation, as we are also joined to the Lord, as it is written "we are one Spirit in him". Rather we deprecate the term of "conjunction" (*synapheia*) as not having sufficiently signified the oneness.⁶⁸

Nestorius insisted that each nature had its own *prosopon*. In order to avoid consuming that if the Son had two natures, he would have two *prosopa* too, he referred to the conjunction of the natures on one person, Christ:⁶⁹ "...division of natures into manhood and godhead and their conjunction in one person". He spoke with ironic way about the Word's second generation from Virgin Mary.⁷⁰ He disallowed the birth of Word as a human, because he supported Mary gave birth Christ not God. He said: "Holy scripture, wherever it recalls the Lord's economy, speaks of the birth and suffering not of the godhead but of the humanity of Christ."⁷¹

The conjunction of Christ's natures had as consequence the rejection of the title *Theotokos* for the Virgin Mary: "...the holy virgin is more accurately termed mother of Christ (*Christotokos*) than mother of God (*Theotokos*)."⁷² He cited biblical passages which were misinterpreted, and were presented to make a reference only to Christ's human nature.⁷³ He wrote that Holy Gospels

⁶⁷ Eirini ARTEMI, "The mystery of the incarnation into dialogues of Cyril of Alexandria: 'Quod unus sit Christus' and 'De incarnation unigeniti'." *Ecclesiastic Faros*, 65 (2004), p. 237.

⁶⁸ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. III ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 112BC.

⁶⁹ NESTORIUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Epist. II ad Cyrillum*, PG 77, 52C.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, PG 77, 53B.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, PG 77, 53BCD. Math. 1: 16,18, 20. Math. 2:13. Jo. 2:1. Act. 1:14. Rom. 8:3. I Cor. 15: 3. I Pet. 4: 1. Lk. 22: 19.

proclaimed only Christ and not God, son of David, son of Abraham.⁷⁴ The Son of God was sent by his Father “in the likeness of sinful flesh”.⁷⁵ By this phrase he explained that the Son of God had never become perfect human, but he was only perfect God. Thus, he proved that Christ was a man, in whom the Word of God dwelt. Consequently if something different was claimed, it would be “a mark of those whose minds were led astray by Greek thinking or were sick with the lunacy⁷⁶ of Apollinarius and Arius or the other heresies or rather something more serious than these.”⁷⁷

The bishop of Constantinople was so confident of the rightness of his teaching, so he urged Cyril to reconsider his assertion for Christ. Closing his letter he pointed out: “If anyone is disposed to be contentious, Paul will cry out through us to such a one, ‘we recognize no other practice, neither do the churches of God’.”⁷⁸

4. The Virgin Mary is *Theotokos* and not *Christotokos*.

Nestorius’ fear of confusing the two natures of Christ led him to be very reluctant to call Mary as *Theotokos*. He believed that Mary was a human being and God cannot be born of a human being.⁷⁹ Cyril denied the rejection of the term *Theotokos* for the Virgin Mary and its replacement with the words *Christotokos* or *Anthropotokos*. Mary bore in a fleshly manner the Only-begotten Word of God made flesh (body and soul the *Logos* was united with human nature hypostatically, and with his human nature (his flesh) is one Christ, Emmanuel, the same God and man. The disallowance of the term *Theotokos* and its supersession only with *Christotokos* created problems with the salvation of human race. If Mary bore only human Christ, in an indirect way there was a denial that Christ was God too.⁸⁰ In this point Christ would be one more of the saint people of Israel. From this matter of view the incarnation became an illusion and the redemption of the human race was undermined, since Christ’s sufferings were not those of the Word God incarnate but of one who was a mere man.⁸¹ In the incarnation of the Son of God the most important role belonged to *Theotokos*.

Cyril used the term *Theotokos* for the Virgin Mary as the Great Athanasius, predecessor to the throne of Alexandria had done before: “Our father

⁷⁴ NESTORIUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Epist. II ad Cyrillum*, PG 77, 53B. Math. 1:1.

⁷⁵ NESTORIUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Epist. II ad Cyrillum*, PG 77, 53C.

⁷⁶ The use of this term makes obvious the Nestorius’ hatred of Apollinarius and his teaching and the fear of Nestorius of any potential resurgence of Apollinarianism.

⁷⁷ NESTORIUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Epist. II ad Cyrillum*, PG 77, 56A.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, PG 77, 57A. I Cor. 11: 16.

⁷⁹ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. I ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 41C.

⁸⁰ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Quod unus sit Christus*, PG 75, 1273A.

⁸¹ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. ad Succensum Episcopum*, PG 77, 236A-C.

Athanasius of the church of Alexandria... called the Virgin Mary as *Theotokos*.⁸²

A common man was not first born of the holy Virgin, and then the Word came down and entered into him, but the union being made in the womb itself, he is said to endure a birth after the flesh, ascribing to himself the birth of his own flesh.⁸³

Because the two natures being brought together in a true union, there is of both one Christ and one Son; for the difference of the natures is not taken away by the union, but rather the divinity and the humanity make perfect for us the one Lord Jesus Christ by their ineffable and inexpressible union.⁸⁴

By this presupposition, the term *Theotokos*⁸⁵ declared the hypostatic union of the godhead and the manhood in one person, Jesus Christ. Of course he claimed that the Virgin Mary should be called *Christotokos* only if this term was related to *Theotokos* (*Christotokos* and *Theotokos* at the same time). Cyril's letter to the Monks of Egypt emphasized the unity of Christ as divine and human as justification for *Theotokos*.⁸⁶

Cyril rejected Nestorius' accusation of not understanding the real meaning of the Incarnation according to the patristic teaching.⁸⁷ He stressed him that the Only begotten Word of God, was incarnate and made man:⁸⁸

That was, taking flesh of the holy Virgin, and having made it his own from the womb, he subjected himself to birth for us, and came forth man from a woman, without casting off that which he was; but although he assumed flesh and blood, he remained what he was, God in essence and in truth.⁸⁹

He was a perfect man with body (*sarx*) and soul (*nous*) and was born by the Virgin Mary. So it was obvious that the holy Virgin Mary didn't give birth of a

⁸² CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. ad Monachos Aegypti*, PG 77, 13BC. Prbl. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *Contra Arianos III*, PG 77, 349C, 385AB. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *Dialogus de Holy Trinity*, V, PG 28, 1272B.

⁸³ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. II ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 45C.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ From the time of Gregory of Nazianzus at least the bishops of the capital seem generally to have accepted the *Theotokos* without any doubt. The *Theotokos* was a powerfully evocative term which belonged to the "language of devotion". (J.F. BETHUNE-BAKER, *Nestorius and his Teaching*, Cambridge, 1908, p. 56-59).

⁸⁶ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. ad Monachos Aegypti*, PG 77, 20D.

⁸⁷ NESTORIUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Epist. II ad Cyrillum*, PG 77, 49B-57B.

⁸⁸ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. III ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 109C.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

common man in whom the Word of God dwelt,⁹⁰ lest Christ be thought of as a God-bearing man; for all of this the holy Virgin should be called *Theotokos*.

At last, when Cyril had managed to refute Nestorius' teaching through his letters and theological works, he underlined that in Christ his two natures were united hypostatically. And since the holy Virgin brought forth corporally God made one with flesh according to for this reason the Virgin Mary should be called *Theotokos*, not as if the nature of the Word had the beginning of its existence from the flesh. Cyril required Nestorius to accept the 12 Anathemas, proposed by Cyril and accepted by the Council of Ephesus. The first of them was: "If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is God in truth, and therefore that the holy virgin is *Theotokos* (for she bore in a fleshly way the Word of God become flesh, let him be anathema."⁹¹ The fact that Cyril put as the first *anathema* the acceptance of the title *Theotokos*, it showed clearly that the term *Theotokos* was very significant on the teaching of *Christology*. The rejection of the term put on a danger the teaching or the hypostatic-natural union of the two natures in Christ. If there was not a hypostatic union of the Godhead and the manhood in Christ, the redemption of the human race from the shackles of death and sin would be impossible. Also the man could not come near to God again.

For every Christian, *Theotokos* Mary is not only the mother of God but his mother too. For this reason Christians beg her with tears into their eyes to help them:

O all-praised Mother Who didst bear the Word, holiest of all the saints, accept now our offering, and deliver us from all misfortune, and rescue from the torment to come those that cry to Thee: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!⁹²

Finishing this small essay, we will chant:

More honourable than the Cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim, without corruption Thou gave birth to God the Word: True *Theotokos*, we magnify Thee⁹³.

5. Conclusions

Through his letters Cyril explained to Nestorius, why the Virgin Mary should be called *Theotokos*. He stressed that if Nestorius refuted the title *Theotokos* for the Mother of God, it would be clear that Christ was not God enfleshed (*Theos sesarkomenos*). Christ would be only a divine person and no

⁹⁰ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. III ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 112A.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, PG 77, 120C.

⁹² *Akathist Hymn to the holy Virgin*, Kontakion 13.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, Kontakion 8.

the incarnate God. Cyril declared that Christ was at once God and Man, and the union was real and concrete event, or we might say “a substantive reality” not a cosmetic exercise.⁹⁴ Nestorius’ heretic teaching put in a great danger the salvation of human race. The term *Theotokos* had been used by Athanasius the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus. The acceptance of *Christotokos* for the Virgin Mary should be in use only if it had related to the term *Theotokos*. Nestorius denial of the propriety of the title, *Theotokos*, for such a refutation, with its inherent denunciation of the communication of idioms, negated, for him, an authentic understanding of the Incarnation and so the efficacy of Christ’s salvific work.⁹⁵ Mary gave birth Emmanuel (God and man), for this reason she deserves the title *Theotokos*.

⁹⁴J. A. MCGUCKIN, *St Cyril of Alexandria, the Christological Controversy* (1994), p. 212. In the Third Letter to Nestorius, Cyril talked of the hypostatic union as a “natural union”, by which he meant a radically concrete union “such as the soul of man has with its own body”.

⁹⁵ Thomas G. WEINANDY, Daniel A. KEATING, *The theology of saint Cyril of Alexandria*, London, 2003, p. 31.