Theology Paper

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***The dogma of the “Theotokos” defined at the council of Ephesus in 431 AD***

A significant number of the Christian leaders from various Churches in Rome gathered at a council known as the "***Third Ecumenical Council***", for dealing with the "Nestorian controversy". Several sessions were held at the Church of Mary in Ephesus, Asia Minor that is in modern-day Turkey. Since ages Council of Ephesus has been regarded as the manifestation for a longstanding power struggle, between the Christian schools of two different countries, namely those of Syria (Nestorius) and Egypt (Cyril). Disputes that used to be raised between the Roman and Constantinople authorities sorted out by this council. The atmosphere in which this dispute was conducted was quite heated[[1]](#footnote-1). The whole dispute arose because of a Syrian churchman, Nestorius who was a pupil of Theodore of Mopsuestia. Nestorius emphasized that concept of having both divinity, as well as humanity in the existence of Jesus, was questioning. He insisted that Mary, the mother of Jesus, did not give birth to God but to Christ. One of the main concerns raised by the other religious leaders against Nestorius was, he used term ***Christokos*** (Christ-bearer) rather than ***Theotokos*** for Mary.

***Theotokos (Mary, Mother of God)***

***Council of Ephesus*** rejected this notion that was being presented by Nestorius who claimed that Jesus Christ had two natures, one divine and another human. Cyril filed a petitioned and wanted the Pope to give a verdict over Nestorius's views. They demanded the Pope to declare Nestorius heretical. On the other hand, he also requested Emperor Theodosius II for settling this dispute. This fact cannot be denied that Nestorius played well and got him clear from all the issue. Nestorius planned to denounce Cyril for heresy and as could be expected the ultimate decision of the council was exactly opposite, so Nestorian was rejected as heretical.

Under the guidance of the ***Pope John Paul II***, Church proclaimed Mary as Mother of God (Theotokos). Council of Ephesus taught, this fact cannot be challenged that Mary is truly Mother of God, and she gave birth to the Second Person of the ***Trinity***. The Catholic Church and the first Christian community were taught by the Council of Ephesus that Jesus is the Son of God which cleared all the confusion about the usage of term ***Theotokos***, the Mother of God[[2]](#footnote-2). This council also supported its claim with evidence from the Holy Bible that though this title Theotokos was not directly used in the Bible, but still, the usage of the word, Mother of Jesus affirms that Jesus is God (Jn 20:28;cf.5:18;10:30,33). Council of Ephesus discussed and negated the claim of Nestorius that Mother Mary deserves title of “Theotokos” rather than the suggested title of Nestorius, "Christokos” by giving a piece of strong evidence that Mary has been presented as the Mother of Emmanuel and Emmanuel means that "***God with us***".

Council of Ephesus believes that after giving references from Bible that Mary is the Mother of God, “Theotokos” though no need was there of future explanation. Yet, spinning the wheel of the history for making this sensitive matter more clear, the Council of Ephesus also gave a reference from history. For supporting the dogma of Theotokos, this council also quoted, how the Christians of Egypt in the third century used to address Mary in their prayers. They used to prayer, “***We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God: despise not our petition in our******necessities, but deliver us from all evil, O glorious and blessed Virgin***” (from the Liturgy of the Hours). As per the pieces of evidence, when the Title Theotokos was first used in this century. This context provides support to the claim and usage of title Theotokos, "Mother of God" and this term is mainly used for Mother of Jesus.

Council of Ephesus not only presented affirmation from the Bible and history but at the time authentication was presented from pagan mythology. In pagan mythology, it has been witnessed that certain goddesses were presented as mothers of some gods. It could be seen that one of the greatest God of the pagan mythology, Zeus was also born by a lady Rhea, his mother[[3]](#footnote-3). Here, one thing that must be noted is that this title Theotokos was not created by the Christians for expressing the belief which surely has nothing to do with the pagan mythology. Belief in the Virginal womb of Mary became one of the core believes in Christianity that was the eternal word of God since the beginning of time.

According to the Council of Ephesus, the term Theotokos was frequently used in both East and West. Theology and devotion started using this reference more and more and has now become a part of Church’s patrimony of faith. This flaw was highlighted by Council of Ephesus that Nestorius was mistaken about the title of Mother of God, and gave a view that word Mother of Christ should be used only as a theologically and doctrinally correct expression. He was led toward this failure of understanding as he found it difficult to admit unity of Christ’s a human.

According to the Council of Ephesus, these objections of Nestorius gave others a chance to correctly understand and clearly interpret the title ***Theotokos***. Title “Theotokos” literally means, “***she who has begotten God***”. Questions were being raised that how a human can be a reason of God’s birth. This question was already addressed and exemplified by the Council of Ephesus. According to the Christian Church, divine motherhood of Mary points only to the human begetting of the son of God. Jesus was begotten eternally of God, the Father and is therefore consubstantial with him. No part has been played by mother Mary in this eternal birth of Jesus. 2000 years back, Son of God adopted the nature of human, came down and gave his life on the crucifix so that the broken connection of God and humans could be restored.

Council of Ephesus claimed that motherhood is a relation and a mother never says that she is only the mother of the physically born individual who is being born from her womb. One of the main arguments that have been presented by this council was that blessed Virgin’s consent was taken before the incarnation[[4]](#footnote-4). Christians from all over the world interpreted this concept of ***Theotokos*** correctly. They made this title a privileged expression for completing their faith in the divinity of Christ and his love for her mother, the Blessed Virgin.

Another major thing that has been proclaimed by this council is a claim that the Church recognized the title Theotokos as a kind of guarantee of reality of Incarnation. One of the most appealing statements has been given by St. Augustine, who says, "***If the Mother were fictitious, the flesh would also be fictitious…. and the scars of the Resurrection***”. As reported by the Council of Ephesus, the title, ***Mother of God*** refers towards the ***Word of God***, whose incarnation has been assumed as the lowliness for raising a man to divine sonship. This title proclaims purity and nobility of woman as well as her loftiest vocation. Mother Mary's consent was first taken by God as she was considered free to make her own choice. The incarnation was not brought until her consent was taken. Ecumenical is a conference of bishops that settles the issues of the Church doctrine and practices by taking the help of the holy teaching of Bible if any question is being raised. The earliest councils were convoked by Roman Emperors. In total seven councils were included in Ecumenical Councils.

So as a whole, it could be promulgated that the Council of Ephesus rejected this objection of Nestorius who failed for interpreting title “***Theotokos”*** correctly (Mother of God) and wanted to replace this title with “***Christokos***” (Christ-bearer)[[5]](#footnote-5). Three phases of sessions were conducted for dealing with this controversy (initial sessions, rival council under John of Antioch and the later sessions). Imperial and papal confirmations followed [[6]](#footnote-6). Cyril struggled hard for removing Nestorius and his supporters out of the power system. Some of his followers made their way to Iraq, Iran, India and China. Assyrian Church has not still denounced Nestorius, a heretic though, it has rejected the objection regarding the title ***Theotokos*** *(Mother of God)*, put forth by Nestorius.

End Notes:

1. Graumann, Thomas. "'Reading' the First Council of Ephesus (431)." *Price and Whitby, eds., Chalcedon in Context* (2011): 27-44.
2. Johnson, Maxwell E. "Sub Tuum Praesidium: The Theotokos in Christian Life and Worship before Ephesus." *Pro Ecclesia*17, no. 1 (2008): 52-75.
3. Constas, Nicholas P. "Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1995): 169-194.
4. Atanassova, Antonia. "Orthodox Women's Defense of the Theotókos: The Case of Empress Pulcheria and the Council of Ephesus." (2010): 137-143.
5. Peltomaa, Leena Mari. "Epithets of the Theotokos in the Akathistos Hymn." In *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium*, pp. 131-138. Routledge, 2016.
6. Cusack, Carole M. "Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion, by Stephen J. Shoemaker, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2016, xi+ 289 pp., US $38.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 3002 1721 8." (2018): 487-489.

1. Graumann, Thomas. "'Reading' the First Council of Ephesus (431)." *Price and Whitby, eds., Chalcedon in Context* (2011): 27-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Graumann, Thomas. "'Reading' the First Council of Ephesus (431)." *Price and Whitby, eds., Chalcedon in Context* (2011): 27-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Peltomaa, Leena Mari. "Epithets of the Theotokos in the Akathistos Hymn." In *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium*, pp. 131-138. Routledge, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Atanassova, Antonia. "Orthodox Women's Defense of the Theotókos: The Case of Empress Pulcheria and the Council of Ephesus." (2010): 137-143. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Constas, Nicholas P. "Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1995): 169-194. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)