

Rejoice O Unwedded Bride!

Romanos the Melodist and His Hymns of the Virgin Mary

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Introduction

Our discussion will center upon the major extant Marian *kontakia* of Romanos the Melodist as well as the *Akathist* hymn which has been attributed to him. We will endeavor to present an account of Romanos' Marian spirituality as seen through the lens of these hymns, and we will also provide some context for their continued use in the modern day. Finally, we will discuss the hymn *Agni Parthene*. This hymn was written in the modern era, and it aligns closely with the style and performative nature of the *Akathist* hymn.

We will begin with a short summary of the tradition surrounding Romanos' identity, and we will also discuss the context within which the most well-known of his *kontakia*—the first *kontakion* of the Nativity—was written and performed. After this we will move on to a discussion of the first *kontakion* of the Annunciation and the two *kontakia* of the Nativity. These will be listed according to their order within the life of Mary.

Then we will discuss the *Akathist* hymn and its modern-day counterpart, the *Agni Parthene*, which we have mentioned above. We will conclude with a general account of the spirituality which is evinced by the *kontakia* and the *Akathist*.

Romanos' Identity and Origin:

According to most sources Romanos was alive from the late 5th century until the middle of the 6th century A.D. Anecdotes from various sources identify him as a deacon of the Church in Constantinople who was regarded for his personal piety but not for his vocal talent. What is agreed upon is that he was assigned the responsibility for singing during the vigil liturgy of the Nativity in the church of Blachernae in

spite of his mediocre voice. The story goes that he stayed in the Church, implored the *Theotokos* to aid him, and fell asleep in the Church. While asleep he had a dream of the Blessed Virgin in which she came to him and handed him a scroll which she told him to eat. After this he awoke and proceeded to the liturgy. He received the blessing of the patriarch, vested in the proper garb of the principal cantor, and ascended the ambo to sing. The legend says that when he began to sing it was with a completely new and beautiful voice. The account also says that this is when he sang his most famous hymn on the Nativity. According to the legend the *kontakion* was directly inspired by the *Theotokos* through the dream and scroll which she gave Romanos to eat.

After this Romanos was said to have written a great number of *kontakia* on various scripture passages and subjects; there is disagreement between sources—and within them—concerning the exact number.¹ The most common claim is that Romanos wrote about a thousand hymns, but the veracity of this claim is difficult to verify as there are only between sixty and ninety which are still extant, and these cover the major events of the lives of Christ and Mary.²

As is mentioned by Mellas, the account of Romanos' dream and the eating of the scroll closely mirrors the story of the prophet Ezekiel in the third chapter of the eponymous book, as well as that of John the Evangelist in Revelations 10:8-9.³ This gives Romanos' preaching through song a pseudo-prophetic nature and provides a call narrative which echoes those of the Old Testament prophets. While the analogy of Romanos as the prophet of the *Theotokos* could conceivably be taken too far by an overzealous devotee—see the *Collyridian* heresy, for example—there seems to be no reason for excluding this identity in

¹ For instance, the Orthodox Wiki article on Roman the Melodist lists both 1000 and 8000 consecutively: https://orthodoxwiki.org/Roman_the_Melodist.

² Andrew Mellas. *Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium: Compunction and Hymnody*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 72.

³ *Ibid.*

our understanding of Romanos. After all, if the vocation of the prophet is to communicate the will of God, then one whose prophetic vocation came about through the intercession of Mary would be carrying this out *par excellence*.

If we understand Mary as both Mediatrix and Advocate with her spouse the Spirit, there is every reason to expect that she both could and would act according to the divine will in these matters. Therefore, the one who is called the “prophet of the *Theotokos*,” is not properly prophet of the *Theotokos*, but rather of her son as mediated through the Virgin.

The *Kontakia*

1. What is a *Kontakion*?

The *Kontakion* was originally a long hymn of up to thirty stanzas in which the Scriptures were elaborated upon in creative manner. The performance of these works occupied a similar place as the homily, and Romanos’ *kontakia* were often coupled with a refrain which the people would respond with, thereby engaging the congregation in the didactic action. Romanos’ first and most famous *kontakion* was the first *kontakion* of the Nativity, and its refrain was the phrase, “an infant now, yet God before all ages.” Thus, the singer is able to engage his audience with a central theme and message which they themselves learn through repeated singing. The antiphonal nature of the *kontakion* is also suited to that period in time when there was no such thing as a pew missal, and when it is entirely possible that a large portion of the congregation would have been illiterate.⁴

Today the *kontakion* has taken on a different role in the liturgy. Instead of being sung in its entirety as a type of homiletic performance, it has

⁴ For a discussion on the place of the *kontakion* during the time of Romanos, see Mellas’ ‘Romanos the Melodist,’ in *Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium: Compunction and Hymnody*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 71-77.

been abbreviated to one or two stanzas which serve as a type of antiphon within the context of the Divine Liturgy and the various Offices of the Byzantine Churches. The *kontakion* of the Nativity has been reduced in practice to only the *prooimion* which is the introductory verse to the entire hymn. We will see this reproduced when we discuss the individual *kontakia* later in this section.

Worthy of cursory note is the hymn known as a *kanon*. This is similar to the *kontakion* in some ways, but it is comprised of multiple types of antiphons and prayers in addition to the repetitive antiphonal structure by which the *kontakion* may be recognized. The *kanon* is still used today in its full form, and it may be seen in the performance of the Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete which occurs during Great Lent in the Eastern Churches.⁵

2. The Annunciation

Though there are two *kontakia* of the Annunciation we will focus only on the first for the purposes of this discussion. In the first *Kontakion* of the Annunciation we see Mary meeting the angel Gabriel in her house at Nazareth. Romanos has added details to the scene such as the inner thoughts of Gabriel regarding the virgin as well as providing context for the mission with which he has been entrusted. He sings, "...it is not only fitting for the general to salute the queen, but it is also possible for the humble to see her and address her."⁶ This echoes the concept of the queen mother which we find in the Old Testament, and it also brings the mother of God into a realm which the people of Constantinople could understand. At this time there was still an emperor, and it was a readily accessible concept that a queen—or in this case empress—could be lofty, though the concept of one who was also approachable would add to the motherly dimension of the Virgin.

⁵ For a more full treatment of this see Orthodox Wiki's article, "Canon (hymn)," [https://orthodoxwiki.org/Canon_\(hymn\)](https://orthodoxwiki.org/Canon_(hymn)).

⁶ Marjorie Carpenter, *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*. Vol. 2, *On Christian Life*. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Columbia Press, 1973) 9.

As it is impractical to reproduce the *kontakion* in full in this context, we will comment on three further points before moving on to the *kontakia* of the nativity: first, it is worthy of note that the refrain of this hymn is the phrase, “hail, virgin wife.”⁷ This juxtaposition of virginity with marriage is unusual to any ear, and it demonstrates what was foremost on Romanos’ mind when teaching of the Annunciation. The controversies regarding Christ’s divinity and humanity were fresh in the minds of everyone, and it was fitting that in addition to Mary’s role as *Theotokos* there should be emphasized her perpetual virginity and her miraculous maternity. Other hymns use a similar phrase—rejoice, o unwedded bride—which we shall later see is used in the *Akathist* hymn and which continues to be used by hymnographers into the modern age.

Our second observation regards Romanos’ use of the title, “Lover of man,” in the second strophe of the hymn. The full context of this is the line, “when the archangel of the heavenly host received the command of the Lover of man, he hastened to appear to the Virgin, as is written.”⁸ This title of our Lord appears today in the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom in multiple doxologies throughout the Liturgy, and many would recognize it as referring to Our Lord: however, we will see in the *kontakion* of the Nativity that Mary is also referred to by this title.

Thirdly, we would be remiss if we did not note the words of Joseph in the fifteenth strophe where he says to the Virgin, “protect me and do not consume me!”⁹ Joseph is seeing the Virgin for the first time after her conception of Christ, and she is described by Romanos as shining with an otherworldly brilliance. In the presence of this great flame of purity and holiness Joseph petitions the Virgin to protect him and in so doing the concept of Mary as Advocate and Mediatrix shines

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Marjorie Carpenter, *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*. Vol. 2, *On Christian Life*. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Columbia Press, 1973) 15.

through Romanos' preaching. Even at this early stage in the Church's life there was an understanding of Mary as one whose role is to protect and who holds the power to do so through her divine maternity and espousal.

3. The *Kontakia* of the Nativity

A. On the Nativity I

In the first of these two *Kontakia* the refrain is the phrase, "an infant now, yet God before all ages."¹⁰ This is apropos as the first *kontakion* tells of the birth of Christ, the visit of the Magi, and the decision to flee to Egypt. According to the legend of Romanos this is the hymn which the Blessed Virgin inspired on that night when Romanos first received his gift of song. While this is not a guarantor of its total orthodoxy or accuracy, it in some way lends the voice of the Virgin to its narrative. The introductory verse of the hymn is that which is still sung in the liturgy of the Nativity, and its full text is as follows:

Today the Virgin gives birth to the supersubstantial
one.

Earth offers a cave to the unapproachable one.

Angels and shepherds join in a hymn of glory,

As the Magi are guided on their trek by a star.

On our behalf there has been born

An infant now, yet God before all ages.¹¹

Included in the themes of the hymn are Edenic redemption and Davidic covenant fulfillment, but more than that we see several themes regarding the Virgin and her role. First among these themes is that of the Virgin Mother. The second stanza of the hymn begins with the dramatic pronouncement, "the Father of his mother willingly became

¹⁰ R.J. Schork. *Sacred Song from the Byzantine Pulpit: Romanos the Melodist*. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995) 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

her Son.”¹² Mary is the *Theotokos*. This is not open for doubt or debate, and Romanos is not shy about teaching all people about this truth. The dialogue in this same stanza between Mother and Son further cements this:

My Son, how was your seed sown in me, how did it
grow within me?

I gaze at you, Lord of mercy, and I am thunderstruck;
Though never a bride, I have become your nurse.

...

I know that the seal of my virginity is still unbroken.
You protected it, cherished it, and were born...¹³

As she prays to her infant Son we see an affirmation of her maternity but also of her perpetual virginity. Christ himself is said to have guarded it and preserved it. These few lines manage to communicate a threefold reality: Mary is the Mother of God; Mary is not herself God, but has given birth to God; and, finally, Mary was a virgin before and after her conception of Christ, and she remains so even after his birth. Over and above these three, the repeated refrain reminds us that God indeed became man according to the flesh while remaining, “God before all ages.” Worthy of remark as well is the humility shown in the next stanza when the Virgin recalls that even though she is the Mother of the Redeemer she “does not even own this stable.” Christ has been born into utter humility, and his Mother is of the poorest.

With the arrival of the Magi in the next few stanzas we see this poverty come to a miraculous end, and we see another role of Mary come forth: that of the Queen Mother who mediates between the people and her Son the king. The Magi have come to the stable asking after the newborn king, and Mary receives them while in dialogue with her Son. The infant Christ tells Mary, “welcome those whom I have guided with my word; my word has shone on those who search for me...the star

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid

escorted the Magi here, acting as my deacon.”¹⁴ Later in the same stanza Christ says that he is in the Magi just as he is in the arms of the Virgin. In this we see a foreshadowing of the maternity of the Virgin as it applies to the Church. Mary is the Mother of the brothers of her Son, and inasmuch as they have been incorporated into his Mystical Body they are in him and he is in them.

Mary’s queenship is further evinced when the Magi question the presence of Joseph in the same house as Mary, since she is said to have virginally conceived Christ. Her response is telling, for she says that she keeps Joseph in *her house* in order to refute would-be slanderers, for Joseph can attest to the divine and virginal conception of her Son. It is her house, not Joseph’s.

Furthermore, Mary is said to “ratify” the words of the Magi as they tell her of their journey to find the newborn king, and she accepts gifts on behalf of her Son when the Magi present them. The words of the Magi to the infant Christ regarding the gifts that they have brought are eloquent. They say, “do not reject them as you did the offerings of Cain, but take them in your arms like the sacrifice of Abel, through the intercession of your Mother, who bore you for us, an infant now, yet God before all ages.”¹⁵

Here Mary’s role as mediator to Christ is clear. What the wise men desire to offer to her Son they place into the hands of Mary to convey it to the one who is indeed, “God before all ages.” What is no less wondrous is Romanos’ portrayal of the Mother’s own prayer to the Son who lies in her arms. She makes a petition that Christ may be reconciled to the whole of creation through her. What greater display of Mary’s role as mediatrix than that could be had? Mary asks that the Son be reconciled to the world through her who bore him.

¹⁴ Ibid, 53

¹⁵ R.J. Schork. *Sacred Song from the Byzantine Pulpit: Romanos the Melodist*. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995) 58.

The rest of the Virgin's prayer spans two stanzas and, though long, is worth reproducing in its fullness, so we will do so below:

I am not merely your mother, most merciful Savior,
nor by chance do I nurse the one who supplies my
milk; but I beg on behalf of every man.

You made me the watchword and the boast of the
human race,

The entire universe has me as a mighty fortress, its
rampart, its foundation.

Those who have been exiled from the pleasures of
Paradise look to me, because I direct them how to
comprehend all things through me, the Mother of **an
infant now, yet God before all ages.**

Savior, save the world. This is why you came here.
Establish your kingdom.

This is why you have shed your light on me and the
Magi and all your creatures.

See, those kings to whom you showed the light of your
face fall before you and offer gifts, magnificent,
beautiful, avidly desired.

I shall use these gifts, since I am destined to flee to
Egypt with you, because of you.

Guide me, my Son, my Creator, my Redeemer, **an
infant now, yet God before all ages.**¹⁶

The titles of Mary which are applied by Romanos are enough to make the more Mariologically squeamish squirm: watchword and boast of the human race; mighty fortress; rampart and foundation. These are not the attributions of a Marian minimalist. Finally, the attribution that all fallen man looks to her for understanding echoes the title Seat of Wisdom. Mary is Queen, Mother, Virgin, Mediatrix, and Advocate in this *Kontakion*. A more evocative account of Mary's relationship with

¹⁶ Ibid, 58-59

her Son could not be hoped for in such a brief account, save for the Gospels themselves.

B. On the Nativity II

The second Nativity *kontakion* is somewhat different in that it enters into an inner prayerful dialogue between the virgin and the infant Christ. In this hymn great emphasis is placed upon the intercessory power of Mary in her role as Advocate as well as her mediative action as Mediatrix. The scene described is that of Mary kneeling beside the manger and engaging in interior dialogue with the persons of Adam and Eve while they languish.

Mary acknowledges her own quality of virginity, and she also recognizes her impeccability in being “full of grace.” In fact, the phrase “Mary, full of grace,” is the refrain for this *kontakion*. Her plenitude of grace becomes the watchword of the entire dialogue and the reason for the effectiveness of her prayers.

Further, she then acknowledges her position as queen saying, “...I rule over the whole world, since, bearing Thy power in my womb, I am sovereign over all. Thou hast transformed my worthlessness by Thy condescension.”¹⁷ This self-acknowledgement is paired with the words of Eve when she says, “[Mary’s] voice alone has released me from my torment. Her childbirth has wounded the one who wounded me.”¹⁸ Mary has become for Eve the cause of her salvation, though this was accomplished solely through her divine maternity.

After Eve awakes she attempts to rouse Adam, announcing to him the salvific work which the Virgin has accomplished through her offspring. Eve petitions Adam saying, “come, follow me to Mary and with me cling to her immaculate feet, and she will at once be moved to pity.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Marjorie Carpenter. *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*. Vol. 1, *On the Person of Christ*. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Columbia Press, 1970) 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 17.

Adam's final reply is long, but his final statement is striking, for he says, "I advance to her who causes the fruit of our life to grow."²⁰ As the first woman gave the fruit to Adam which caused the downfall of humanity, so the first woman of the new creation wrought in Christ causes the saving food of Christ to grow in her womb by her *fiat*. Mary is indeed Cause of Joy for our first parents, and she is also Advocate, interceding for them as she kneels beside the infant Christ. Moreover, she is the Mediatrix between man and Christ for the sake of the brothers of her Son.

Mary's mediation is made inescapably present when she says, "I shall become mediator for you in the presence of my Son,"²¹ and again, "accept me as your mediator in the presence of my son."²² What is said next is extraordinary, and it bespeaks an honor for the Virgin which is heretofore unparalleled in our discussion. Romanos narrates the approach of Mary to the manger of her Son saying, "with these words, Mary as *lover of mankind* cheers Eve and her husband."²³ As we mentioned earlier, the phrase, "lover of mankind," regularly appears in reference to Our Lord during the Divine Liturgy and in other places, and its use to describe the Virgin is exceptional. While many centuries before Saint John Eudes and his work on the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, this may be seen as an early precursor to that theology and indicative of the union between Mary and her Son which was understood even from this very early age of the Church.

Lastly, we would be completely remiss if we did not call attention to the exchange between the infant Christ and his Mother:

As soon as the immaculate one brought these petitions
to the God Lying in the cradle, at once he received
them

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Marjorie Carpenter. *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*. Vol. 1, *On the Person of Christ*. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Columbia Press, 1970) 18.

²² Ibid, 19.

²³ Ibid.

and subscribed to the writings of the prophets;
He says: “O mother, I save them because of thee and
through thee.
Had I not willed to save them, I should not have dwelt
in thee,
I should not have allowed my light to shine from thee,
And thou wouldst not have heard thyself called my
mother.²⁴

It does not seem too much to say that Mary’s actions reveal the will of the Father and of her Son. If we take as granted that Mary’s will is in complete union with that of her Son, then we must come to the conclusion that the actions of Mary are indicative of that which Christ desires to happen. Indeed, the above short exchange reveals this as a principle of the Virgin’s actions in the thought and preaching of Romanos.

The final cementing of this principle may be drawn from the sixteenth strophe of the hymn, when Christ says to his mother, “I shall let thee know, O Mary, what I intend to do.”²⁵ What follows this declaration is a complete accounting of his destiny as suffering savior. He tells her of his coming passion and death, and when she entreats him not to allow himself to be crushed, he simply replies that his death ought to be considered a sleep from which he will wake after three days. The implication that Mary knew beforehand of both Christ’s death and his resurrection on the third day is powerful, and it brings to mind as well the pious tradition that Mary was the first to see Christ after his resurrection. Romanos himself supports this in his *kontakion* regarding Mary at the Cross.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Marjorie Carpenter. *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*. Vol. 1, *On the Person of Christ*. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Columbia Press, 1970) 20.

²⁶ Ibid, 201.

The *Akathist* Hymn & the *Agni Parthene*

The word *Akathist* translates as “unseated” or “standing,” and this informs the custom surrounding its usage: when an *Akathist* is prayed the congregation stands throughout the prayer service. This is similar to the practice surrounding the celebration of the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete which we mentioned earlier. It should be here noted that scholars disagree on the authorship of the hymn known as the “Akathist to the Mother of God.” While it shares many similarities with the rest of Romanos’ work, there is not a definitively attributable manuscript. Though the wider community recognizes that it is likely written by him, most scholars refuse to claim his absolute authorship, and they instead note the similarities while including it in collections of Romanos’ works. For the purposes of this discussion we will attribute authorship to Romanos, and brave whatever scholarly disagreement may come as a result.²⁷

There are different *Akathist* hymns, though the most well-known is the *Akathist* of Romanos which was written to honor the *Theotokos*. Similar hymns exist which are directed to various other persons, both saintly and divine, and there are even other *Akathist* hymns to the Virgin.

Although the *Akathist* hymn of Romanos is itself considered a *kontakion* in style, it seemed appropriate to consider it separately from the preceding *kontakia* on account of its petitionary character. In many respects the structure of the hymn mirrors the rhythm of a western litany, with its repeated “hail” acclamation and its multitude of titles. Indeed, in that respect it aligns closely with the Litany of Loreto as a praise of Our Lady.

In its original Greek the hymn of Romanos follows an acrostic pattern with the capital of each of the twenty-four stanzas. Thus, the Greek

²⁷ For a more full discussion of this, see R.J. Schork. *Sacred Song from the Byzantine Pulpit: Romanos the Melodist*. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995), and Marjorie Carpenter. *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*. Vol. 2, *On Christian Life*. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Columbia Press, 1973).

alphabet of Alpha through Omega is represented in order across the hymn. Schork notes that the litany-like praises of the hymn earned it an earlier title of “the Salutations (*chairestismoι*) of the Mother of God.”²⁸ He notes in the same place that the *akathistos* title is a latter derivation based upon the liturgical practice of standing, hence our earlier commentary. He further notes that this *Akathist* is still chanted today on the fifth Saturday of Great Lent which is its own special feast day.²⁹

As the entire hymn is twenty-four stanzas it is far too long to perform a detailed analysis within the context of this discussion. We will instead focus on a select number of the “hail” acclamations which are made throughout the hymn. It is also worthwhile to note two of the stanzas: the second introductory stanza in its entirety, as it is understood to be a late interpolation, and the twenty-fourth stanza since it is reminiscent of the *Sub Tuum* in its petitions. In light of this similarity we will produce all three below in parallel.

<i>Koukoulion II</i>	<i>Akathist Hymn, 24th stanza</i>	<i>Sub Tuum Praesidium</i>
Mother of God, Constantinople chants its thanks to you in a victory paean. You are my champion, my commander. You have rescued me from the terrors of the siege. Now since you possess unassailable power, free me from every sort of peril, so that I can cry out to you: “Hail, unwedded bride!” ³⁰	O Mother praised in every hymn, you gave birth to the Word who dwells in every Holy of Holies. Receive this offering of our song, Rescue us from every misfortune, and save from punishment to come those who cry to you “Alleluia!”	We fly to thy protection, O Holy Mother of God; Do not despise our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O Glorious and Blessed Virgin.

²⁸ R.J. Schork *Sacred Song from the Byzantine Pulpit: Romanos the Melodist*. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995) 207.

²⁹ Ibid, 208.

³⁰ Ibid, 209-210.

The second introductory stanza—referred to by Schork as *koukoulion II*—was added in commemoration of the miraculous deliverance of Constantinople from the siege of 626, and it evokes much the same confidence in the power of the Virgin as do Romanos’ earlier hymns. The last stanza of the hymn is similarly confident, with trust that the virgin can and will save her children from whatever danger assails them. The *Sub Tuum* is the most concise of the three petitions, yet it still manages to convey the same confidence and trust. What is singularly fascinating is that the three prayers become progressively longer and more elaborate in order of the time in which they were written. The *Sub Tuum* is widely recognized as being from the 3rd century A.D. at the latest,³¹ and the scholarly agreement that *koukoulion II* was a later addition shows that the final stanza of the hymn was written in between the other two prayers. This gradual lengthening of the prayers is not simply a case of using more words to communicate nothing more, but it shows an increasing devotion to the Virgin under ever-increasing titles and patronages.

Finally, let us consider several of the titles which are applied to the Virgin throughout the hymn. Many are reminiscent of the Litanies of the Western Church, as has been noted above, and they show again the same depth of trust in, and love for, the *Theotokos* which has been evident throughout our exploration of Romanos’ work. The titles are:

- Compendium of the teachings of the Lord; fold open to all the human flock;
- woman who unlocked the gates of paradise;
- silent voice of all God’s messengers;
- invincible courage of all God’s champions;
- unshaken pillar of our faith;
- undimmed beacon of our charity;
- hope of eternal happiness;
- you enlighten many with knowledge;
- harbor of those who have finished life’s voyage;

³¹ Henri de Villiers. “The Sub Tuum Praesidium.” *New Liturgical Movement* (blog). (February 3, 2011).

-true bastion of all virgins, Virgin Mother of God, you protect everyone who comes to you;
-supplier of divine goodness;
-you link all the faithful to God; -just as she kindled the immaterial light, so she guides everyone to God-like understanding.³²

Needless to say, there is nothing shy or retiring about the vision of the Mother of God which the author had.

The Virgin is here portrayed as a conquering army set in terrible array and as a firm foundation upon which may rest all of the trust of the people of God. There is no mistaking the underlying faith in Christ which the author had: no case of Mariolotry has occurred here. Rather, Romanos is telling forth the place of honor which the Virgin occupies as the Mother of God and Spouse of the Holy Spirit.

While the *Agni Parthene* is neither of the same scope nor in the same style as the *Akathist* of Romanos, it shares a common element: the petition at the end of every line is the same as that which closes each stanza of the *Akathist*: Rejoice, O unwedded bride! Furthermore, the *Agni Parthene* as a hymn is almost exactly in parallel with the litanies of the Western Church, with each couplet of praises being followed by the acclamation, whereas the *Akathist* has stanzas comprised of several praises which end with the acclamation “rejoice...” Finally, the closing petition of the *Agni Parthene* is not a contiguous prayer, but is broken up by the repeated ejaculation, “rejoice...” If we take the final prayer as a unit without the acclamations, we see this petition:

I supplicate Thee, Lady, I humbly call upon Thee;
O Queen of all, I beg Thee to grant me Thy favor.
O spotless and most honored Maid; O Lady all-holy,
I call upon Thee fervently, Thou temple most holy.
O Thou my help, deliver me from harm and all
adversity,
And by Thy prayers show me to be an heir of
immortality.

³² R.J. Schork *Sacred Song from the Byzantine Pulpit: Romanos the Melodist*. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995) 211-218.

Although this is greatly similar to the prayers which we looked at above, and it follows the manner of Romanos, this hymn was written approximately 1300 years after the death of Romanos. There is an obvious continuity in the hymnography, yet there is a crucial difference: the *Agni Parthene* is not a liturgical hymn, but rather a devotional one, and it is therefore not for use within the context of Divine Liturgy. Regardless of this difference, we can clearly see that the faith which was fired in the heart of Romanos over a thousand years ago is still burning brightly within the hearts and minds of those who have received his patrimony.

Conclusion

It is perhaps an understatement to say that Romanos the Melodist was simply devoted to the Mother of God. If the legend is true as it has been passed down to us, then he occupied a privileged place among the ranks of those who have received direct locutions from the Virgin and who have been hand-selected by her to further her will in the world. By extension, this furthers the will of the Only Begotten, for there is nothing that the Mother wills which was not first willed by her Son.

The *Kontakia* are clearly the works of a man who is totally in love with Mary. Mary gave him the gift of song, and he used that gift to proclaim the salvation wrought by her Son, which includes understanding and communicating the place of Mary herself in this economy. While not every one of the *kontakia* is about the Virgin and her life, those which are show the deep trusting devotion which he proclaimed for her.

His words recognize her as mother, mediator, advocate, boast of our race, the one through whom salvation has come, helper in distress, sovereign queen, and others which we have discussed above.

Augustine is famously quoted as saying that he who sings well prays twice, and it seems that such an attitude is apt here, but so is the analogy of a lover who writes poetry for his beloved. Romanos certainly did that for our Lady. Likewise we should recognize that the

Virgin's gift of song to Romanos was itself the beginning of a love poem by Mary for all of her children.

It is the author's opinion that we ought to understand the spirituality present in Romanos' work as one which seeks to interpret Mary's gift of song as love poem for her Son, about her Son, and in proof of her love for us.