

Orthodox Women’s Defense of the Theotokos: The Case of Empress Pulcheria and the Council of Ephesus

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This paper aims to highlight briefly the role of Eastern Orthodox women’s presence in the 5th c. *Theotokos* controversy. I comment on the presence of women here, scarcely documented and largely speculative as it is, as an illustration of the way Christian doctrine is tested in the Eucharistic assembly and a proof that theology is ultimately not an intellectual, but faith-based enterprise. In addition, I aim to draw attention to the fact that, in this context, the image of the Virgin Mary holds special significance for those who refer to her as an exemplar of a chaste Christian lifestyle. It is not accidental that the first recorded Marian appearance comes from the ascetic Gregory Thaumaturgus and that an Alexandrian-based treatise on virginity, ascribed to Athanasius, draws a similar parallel between Mary and Christian virgins. In a remarkable passage Gregory of Nyssa describes (Mary’s) virginity as a rock against which the devil dashes with all his force and is shattered.¹ Virginity and its accompanying virtues are seen as a “frontier between life and death” which faithful Christians establish in the act of imitating Mary’s piety. The existence of these texts shows that the antique conception of the merits of virginity was regularly discussed in reference to Mary and that, as Susanna Elm observes, the calling of virginity was seen as especially pertinent to women.² The social status of Mary’s female devotees ranged from the

¹ Bertrand Buby. *The Marian Heritage of the Early Church*, 3 vols. New York: Alba House, 1996, 3:246.

² See Susanna Elm. *‘Virgins of God’: the Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

imperial family to the common citizen. Even if the women's story is not told in their own words, it is fascinating to try and reconstruct it within the context of conciliar events, as the controversy over the Marian title *Theotokos* unfolded.

A theoretical model of ancient women's appropriation of the Marian cult needs to take into account the ways in which women celebrated Mary as related to their social class. The most conspicuous Marian devotee from this period is the Augusta Pulcheria, the sister of emperor Theodosius. Pulcheria's influence in the context of Ephesus and Chalcedon is interesting to consider, as the evidence does not give us the direct nature of her involvement, but suggests that it was substantial. She is often cast as the leading figure in the promotion and material establishment of the early cult of Mary.³ Pulcheria sponsored the building of three major churches dedicated to Mary: the Blakhernai, the Hodegoi and the Khalkoprateia, and brought over valuable relics from the East, including the Virgin's girdle.⁴ The Syrian historian Barhadbeshabba reports that Pulcheria had her image painted in the Great Church of Constantinople above the altar, a place which would later on traditionally be inscribed with the image of the Virgin.⁵ Thus the Augusta was one of the very few women who had the means to challenge (subtly but visibly) the social constraints of their era and craft a public *persona* whose claim to holiness was evident throughout their lifetime. Pulcheria's lavish philanthropy directed at the church, her acquisition of Marian relics, and church construction in Constantinople, testify to her prominent and intentional ties with the cult of Mary. Her engagement with the councils of both Ephesus and Chalcedon marks the culminating points of her Marian agenda.

³ See Kenneth Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*. Berkeley, 1982, 142-3.

⁴ Holum, *ibid.* Peltomaa notes that according to the Byzantine sources, Pulcheria was responsible for building only the Blakhernai; the Khalkoprateia was probably built together with Theodosius II. See Leena Mari Peltomaa, *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn*. Leiden: Brill, 2001, 76; cf. R. Janin, *La Géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire byzantin I, III: Les Églises et les monastères* (Paris: 1953), 169, 246. It is possible that Pulcheria tried to emulate the example of Constantine I's mother, Helena, who built a splendid church for Mary in Bethlehem.

⁵ Barhadbeshabba, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 27, in *Patrologia Orientalis* 9, 565.

Still, was the cult of Mary as *Theotokos* primarily an imperial creation? In examining the sources it will be misleading, I suggest, to consider separately and as irrevocably different the emergence and formulation of Marian themes in formal theological writings and liturgical materials. These three contextualizations of the Marian cult—doctrinal, historical, and liturgical, - easily and rather effortlessly compliment each other in the process of establishing Marian imagery and vocabulary as a whole. In this connection to divide the impact of the mariological message by compartmentalizing it in sections labeled “Mary of the hierarchs” or “Mary of the people” also rings false: as if it is not the single identity of the Virgin that informs the devotion of both the Christian “masses” and their better-educated leaders.

Kenneth Holum suggests that a “memorial of Mary had become part of the liturgical year by the time of Nestorius’s episcopacy, and that this Mary festival honored virgins and women in the most blessed exemplar of their sex.”⁶ Nicholas Constas specifies the possible object of such honor: for him the *laudatio* to the *Theotokos* is linked with the implicit praises of women from the imperial household who had dedicated their lives (and virginity) to God. Continuing along the same lines, Vassiliki Limberis argues that “Pulcheria understood [any] attacks on the *Theotokos* as a personal affront.”⁷ Limberis continues to say that, “Pulcheria had taken the Virgin *Theotokos* as the model of her life”⁸; hence, “[W]hen she claimed that her identity was the Virgin’s, suddenly the identity of the *Theotokos* was merged with the imperial power Pulcheria held as Augusta.”⁹

However, Leena Mari Peltomaa had cautioned about unbalanced interpretations of Pulcheria’s dedication of virginity to Mary.¹⁰ From

⁶ Holum, 156.

⁷ Vassiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress. The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople*. New York, 1994, 55.

⁸ Cf. Holum, 141: “She [Pulcheria] embraced Mary as a paradigm of her own asceticism, in the belief that by emulating the *Theotokos* she would receive the Divine Word in her own body.” This belief is not attested in Pulcheria’s own voice.

⁹ Limberis, 59, 60.

¹⁰ Peltomaa, 51.

public records, Peltomaa states, we know nothing of Pulcheria's self-perception of her spiritual practice as Mary-like or of her ambitions to promote the cult of the Virgin.¹¹ Similarly, she continues, Holum's "exceptional and excessive identification of Pulcheria with Mary" and conversely, of Mary with an Augusta-like figure, ignores the theological significance that Mary would hold for the (female) ascetic movement as a whole.¹² How this significance was translated into practice is difficult to discern. The theological idea of *imitatio Mariae* is attested far better in pre-Nestorian Constantinople than specific cultic practices at which we can only guess. Our sources are too meager to permit a solid judgment about the precise nature of the connection between Mary and female asceticism. The very nature of the *Theotokos* controversy indicates that a doctrinal framework of the popular veneration of the Virgin was lacking.

It is plausible, even if not provable, that Pulcheria built her attachment to Mary (rather than a cultic practice *per se*) on the merit of the Virgin's significance in female asceticism. In one anecdotal incident, Pulcheria, the consecrated virgin, referred to herself as having 'given birth to God', while seeking access to the sanctuary to receive the Eucharist. It is significant, I believe, that in order to affirm her right of access to the Holy of Holies, Pulcheria did not refer to her imperial privilege as an Augusta, but to the character of her Christian vocation. As a woman and a Christian virgin she felt entitled to approach a territory that was traditionally reserved for ordained males. The incident is all the more interesting, for it indicates that by identifying with Mary female candidates for sainthood like Pulcheria could succeed in subverting the existing order of powers by appealing to a powerful female figure whose special relationship with God enabled them to plead for what a male-dominated society would ordinarily refuse them (i.e. entering the sanctuary).¹³

¹¹ Ibid., 62.

¹² Ibid., 51.

¹³ Pulcheria was eventually canonized; her feast day is celebrated in the Orthodox church on September 10.

Devotion to Mary was not the only venue in which women could excel. The philosophical aspect of the controversy would also be offered to Pulcheria's scrutiny. In 430, Cyril of Alexandria sent several theological treatises to the imperial family, two of which were titled *Address to the Princesses* (emperor Theodosius's sisters, Arcadia and Marina) and *Address to the Empresses* (Pulcheria and Eudokia, Theodosius' wife). Three of the presumed recipients have taken vows of virginity. To them Cyril offers them a lengthy christological argument, in the context of which the Virgin Mary is depicted as a Birthgiver of the divine Word. The treatise is supplemented by a collection of patristic proof-texts asserting the validity of the title *Theotokos*. Finally, Cyril cites lengthy excerpts from Scripture, selecting texts which encourage faith in the mission and miracles of Jesus Christ, including his birth from a virginal woman.¹⁴

Cyril's works indicate that ascetic women, no less than their male counterparts, would have a special reason to venerate the Virgin as a *Theotokos*. The female addressees of the letter should be seen as capable of reading, understanding, and relating to the theological message it contained. They are also expected to act, as Cyril would have it, in defense of Marian orthodoxy. Thus, even if no direct account of the women's reception of the letters is available, we could speculate that, in both theory and practice, they would act on behalf of the Marian party and promote its doctrinal agenda. Thus women, especially those who were educated and in high social standing, would be instrumental in the formulation and perpetuating of early Marian theology.

What could be said with certainty is that orthodox women's endorsement of Mary's figure casts a powerful shadow across the contents of both doctrine and tradition; the influence of her image is not restricted to the sphere of abstract speculation or the intricacies of imperial politics. Mary the *Theotokos* could prove to be an inspiration

¹⁴ Examples include Romans 1-4; Galatians 4:6; 2 Corinthians 3:14-17; Hebrews 1:6; Matthew 1-3 (the birth narrative). The Scriptural quotations are overwhelming in quantity and occupy more than two thirds of the contents of this text.

and an outlet for genuine feelings of devotion. In a telling episode, during the council of Ephesus in June, 431, when Mary's title of *Theotokos* was confirmed as legitimate by the bishops, led by Cyril of Alexandria, the Ephesian crowd waiting at the door erupted in jubilant celebration. As Cyril relates, "as we came out of the church, they [the people waiting] preceded us with torches as far as the inn, for the evening was near; and there was much joy and lighting of lights in the city, so that even women carrying censers led the way for us."¹⁵ It is worth repeating that this picture of communal celebration contains a special reference to women both at the head of the procession and as censer bearers. Even if they remain nameless, unlike Pulcheria, their contribution to the early developments of the Marian cult deserves additional scrutiny.

Likewise in Constantinople the people gathered to express their support for Cyril and the *Theotokos* party. In a large gathering at the Great Church of Constantinople on July 4, 431, the people acclaimed the victory of Mary the *Theotokos* and Pulcheria as Mary's advocate: "Mary the Virgin has deposed Nestorius! Many years to Pulcheria! She is the one who has strengthened the faith!"¹⁶ Pulcheria's mention in the popular acclaim could be seen as a blatant example of political flattery, but also an indication of the significance of female support for the Virgin's cause. Thanks to such efforts the *Theotokos* had become an object of praise for the laity, a role model for virgins and ascetics, and an inspiration for theologians like Cyril. In regard to the ascetics and especially the community of the virgins of whom Pulcheria was a most illustrious representative, Mary exemplified the holiness of a life dedicated to God.¹⁷ Thus political considerations alone could hardly

¹⁵ Ibid., trans. McEnerney, 1:107. See John McEnerney. *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Letters. Fathers of the Church*, vols. 76-77. Washington, 1987. Cyril does not mention Mary as the object of this celebration. Holum suggests that the celebrations were in honor of the Virgin *theotokos* and this is the reason why women led the triumphal procession throughout the city. See Holum 166, also Peltomaa, 58.

¹⁶ Eduard Schwartz ed. *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum, I: Concilium Universale Ephesinum* (5 vols); II: *Concilium Universale Chalcedonense* (6 vols). Berlin, 1927-1932, I.1,3, 14; Holum, 170.

¹⁷ Ibid., 72: "It is probably correct to characterize early fifth-century Constantinople as the 'city of virgins', because female asceticism had spread to every social class, and because the Virgin had become an object of imitation, not only to unmarried women, but to married women, mothers and widows as well."

have motivated the crowd to merge Pulcheria and Mary. Perhaps the importance of virginity as a late antique way of empowering devout women, seamlessly led to their praise and defense of Mary as the Virgin par excellence.

In conclusion, in the context of late antique devotion and theology it is fitting to describe Mary the Theotokos as an “archetype of both mothers and virgins.”¹⁸ She is an especially suitable model for women who live like her, from the imperial court to the nameless participants in the crowd cheering Cyril’s victory at Ephesus. In the context of early Mariology this affirmation of Mary’s role in the life of the ecclesiastical community and its special significance for women is a theme worth additional study.

¹⁸ Theodotus of Ancyra, *Homily Six*, PO 19.331, trans. Gambero, 261. In: Luigi Gambero. *Mary and The Fathers of the Church: the Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*. San Francisco : Ignatius Press, 1999.

Following the Command of Christ: Philanthropy as an Imperial Female Virtue

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Byzantine Empresses and women within the imperial court were brought up and educated in an environment rich with awareness of the *philanthrōpia* of God, the forgiving and patient generosity of God's mercy. Several of those responding in obedience and gratitude to the love of God for humankind leave a record of their patronage in church and monastery-building projects, which stands as a tribute to their faith. The Christian virtue of philanthropia was preached by bishops and patriarchs in the Cathedral and cited in the traditional Orthodox liturgies of the Church. Women in the imperial family also would have been taught philanthropy by the example of the empresses and princesses who had gone before them. After its august beginnings in Attic drama,¹ the term *philanthrōpia* is mentioned only a few times in the New Testament,² and in the Septuagint as well,³ but the exhortation to charitable works was established early in the development of Byzantine thought. It is well attested in the patristic teachings of the Church,⁴ which could assist in the formation of a God-fearing empress; so that philanthropia, as it was

¹ Its first use is reported in the Aeschylus tragedy, *Prometheus Bound* (ca. 463 BCE) and again in the Aristophanes comedy, *Peace* (ca. 421 BCE); later it appears in Plato's dialogue, "Euthyphro" (ca. 399 BCE), and the treatises of Aristotle as well.

² Acts 28:2, and 27:3 as an adverb, and Titus 3:4: "But when the goodness and loving kindness (*philanthrōpia*) of God our Savior appeared, he saved us"

³ Septuagint references to *philanthrōpia*, some as a verb or adjective: II Macc. 4:11, 6:22, 9:27, III Macc. 3:15, 3:18, 3:20; IV Macc. 5:12, Esther 8:13, I Esdras 8:10, Wisdom 1:6, 7:23, 12:19.

⁴ References to philanthropia in the Fathers of the Church include but are not exclusive to: Clement of Alexandria, Homily 2.45, Homily 11.10, Homily 12 (6 times), Homily 16.19, *Epistle of Clement* 8, *Protrepticus* 1, 10; *Quis Dives Salvetur*, 3; *Paedagogus* 1.8, 2.18; *Stromateis* 2.9,18; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.27, 67; Commentary on Mt. 10:1; Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 1.3, 4.2,3; 15.2, *Orationes Tres Adversus Arianos* 3.67, 2.51; John Chrysostom, Homily "In Parabolam Debitoris" in Mt. 18.23, Homily 28.1 in Jn., Homily 14.3 in 2 Cor., Homily 3.2 in Philem., Homily 3.6 in Heb., Homily 4.9; Justin Martyr, *Apologiae* 10, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 47.5, Basil the Great, *Homily VI*, Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Oratio, XV*, Gregory Nazianzen, *Oratio 14*, Ambrose, "Naboth."

reflected in its theology and liturgy, was a significant inheritance for the Byzantine Church.

From the treasury of patristic teaching in place before the establishment of the Byzantine Empire, let us look at some of the texts that shed light upon the virtue of *philanthrōpia*. Clement of Alexandria (ca.150–ca.215) characterized philanthropia as the greatest of God’s attributes, God’s love of humankind manifested through the gift of God’s incarnate Son. The philanthropia of Christ was seen as deriving “from His personal experience of becoming flesh and feeling its weaknesses,” and therefore even a crowned empress could attain to philanthropia by “becoming poor” and identifying with those in need by way of her philanthropic acts.⁵ Her theological advisors could demonstrate how a wealthy empress might nevertheless become poor in spirit by reciprocating God’s love of humankind. “If one is faithful and surveys the magnificence of God’s love of mankind,” surely she will “use wealth rightly, so it ministers to righteousness; for if you use it wrongly, it is found to be a minister of wrong.”⁶ The theologian Origen (c.185–c.254), Clement’s successor to the catechetical school of Alexandria, provided encouragement for the philanthropic dimension in religious life by describing Jesus as the *Logos Philanthropos* and teaching that the loving influence of Christ inspires a profound transformation in the human character; so each in turn become themselves humanitarians and philanthropists.⁷ Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (c.296–373) wrote that love for humankind is a principle motive of God for the Incarnation because “our transgression called forth the loving-kindness of the Word that the Lord should both make haste to help us and appear among men.”⁸ He taught that the loving attitude of God demands that we generously emulate it in our relationships with one another. The

⁵ Clement, *Paedagogos*, Bk. I.VIII.10ff, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Erdmann’s, 1951), vol. II, 228.

⁶ Clement, “The Rich Man’s Salvation” (*Quis Dives Salvetur*) 3, 14 *Clement of Alexandria*, G.W. Butterworth, trans. (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1968), 277, 299.

⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, Bk. I.67, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 62.

⁸ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, 4:2, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), Vol. IV, 38.

commandment of the LORD exhorts us to humanitarian concern and philanthropy for the poor and needy, and for widows, strangers, and orphans.⁹

The wisdom of the Cappadocian Fathers may have been influential to succeeding generations of the Byzantine imperial family as well, particularly the women closest to the throne. Basil the Great (c.330–c.379) taught that by philanthropic generosity, “God will welcome thee, angels will laud thee, mankind from the very beginning will call thee blessed. For thy stewardship of these corruptible things thy reward shall be glory everlasting, a crown of righteousness, the heavenly kingdom;” since, after all, “the grace of good works returns to the giver. Thou hast given to the poor, and the gift becomes thine own, and comes back with increase.”¹⁰ In his *Catechetical Oration*, Gregory of Nyssa (335–394) calls philanthropia “a special character of the divine nature,” and therefore “the cause of the presence of God among men.”¹¹ He thus considers it responsible for the Incarnation.¹² Gregory Nazianzen (c.325–c.389) in his innovative *Oration 14* “On the love of the Poor” showed how by becoming “friends of the poor” (*Philoptochos*), bishops and laity, empresses and merchants alike, can learn to emulate the transactional aspect of God’s saving love of humankind in generosity to the poor.¹³ “Let us share what we have with the poor that we may be rich in the bounty of heaven. Give a portion of your soul too, not just your body; give a portion to God too, not just the world; take something from the belly, dedicate it to the Spirit.”¹⁴ By one fortunate enough to be chosen as empress, patriarchal teaching could

⁹ Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1968), 33.

¹⁰ Basil the Great, Homily VI on Luke xxi.18, *Writings of Basil*, Blomfield Jackson, trans. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895).

¹¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Oration*, XV, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 15, 487.

¹² Glanville Downey, “Philanthropia in Religion and Statecraft in the Fourth Century after Christ,” in *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 4:2/3 (1955), 204.

¹³ John A. McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 147.

¹⁴ *Oration 14* in *St. Gregory Nazianzus: Selected Orations*, M. Vinson, trans. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 22, 55.

well be taken as cautionary advice as well. Ringing through the “Verses against the Rich” is Gregory’s cry for a humanitarian Christian response to the needs of the poor, and as Shewring charmingly renders it:

Give to the poor; they before God can plead,
And win, and richly give, the grace we need...
Honour in him God’s handiwork expressed;
Reverence in it the rites that serve a guest.¹⁵

Ambrose (339–397), while Bishop of Milan in the Western Church, was influential to Emperor Theodosius I, and his advice may have been familiar to the Theodosian empresses in court circles, reminding them that “it makes your debtor God the Son, who says ‘I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, and I was a stranger and you took me in, naked and you clothed me’ (Mt. 25:35–36). For he says that whatever was given to any of the least ones was given to him.” Having given birth herself, the message of St. Ambrose may have registered even more deeply with an imperial Byzantine lady than with her husband: “Earth was established in common for all, rich and poor alike. Nature, which begets everyone poor, knows no wealthy for we are not born with clothing or begotten with gold and silver. Naked, it brings us into the light, wanting food, clothing, drink, and naked the earth receives us whom it brought forth, not knowing how to compass our possessions in the tomb.”¹⁶ Closer to home, Patriarch of Constantinople John Chrysostom (347–407) also vigorously proclaimed the Gospel imperative of Matthew 25, for which he came under criticism from the imperial court and endured temporary exile. He cited it and alluded to it numerous times in his preaching, in Homily 79 on Matt 25:31–41, he calls it “this sweetest passage of Scripture” (*tes perokopes tes hedistes*),¹⁷ for “great indeed was Christ’s regard

¹⁵ Gregory Nazianzen, “Verses against the Rich,” (Moral Poems, XXVIII), quoted in *Rich and Poor in Christian Tradition*, 49.

¹⁶ Ambrose, “Naboth,” quoted in *Ambrose*, Boniface Ramsey (London: Routledge, 1997), 138, 118.

¹⁷ Greek translation by Rudolf Brandle, in “This Sweetest Passage: Matthew 25:31-46 and Assistance to the Poor in the Homilies of John Chrysostom,” in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, Susan R. Holman, ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 132. For what follows, Homily 79, St. John Chrysostom, “Homily LXXIX,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*,

for philanthropy and mercy.” Poignantly illustrating the theology of philanthropy, he shows that it is Jesus himself—hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, sick, and imprisoned—whom we encounter among the poor in the streets in need, “for no costly table did He seek, but what was needful only, and His necessary food, and He sought in a suppliant’s garb” and teaches that Christ sees what is offered to the poor as offered to him; “the dignity of the one receiving, for it was God, who was receiving by the poor.”

The early fifth-century historian Sozomen describes how philanthropia is acquired by imitating the prototype, the Heavenly King, who is its source. He illustrates how it functions as an imperial virtue by praising Emperor Theodosius II (401–450), to whom the *Ecclesiastical History* is dedicated.¹⁸ Like the emperor, the Christ-loving empress also “promoted the salvation and welfare of the people, placating God of the sake of the empire and emperor.”¹⁹ The women in the imperial court attending the Liturgy heard the exhortation to philanthropia numerous times in each service. Although the Liturgies of St. Basil and John Chrysostom may have evolved to their present forms in the eighth and ninth centuries, and as such have been attended by empresses from those centuries and afterward, philanthropia is repeated as an attribute of God in the former ten times, and in the latter, twelve times. “The services of vespers and orthos, the hymns and prayers of everyday services, reveal that sinful man is redeemed through the philanthropia of God, which is described as ‘unfathomable,’ ‘indescribable,’ ‘immeasurable.’”²⁰ In times of catastrophe, litanies rang out invoking the philanthropia of God and galvanizing the humanitarian efforts of, for example, Empress Irene after the earthquake of 740.

Philip Schaff, ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 474-479.

¹⁸ “Girt with the purple robe and crown, a symbol of thy dignity to onlookers, thou wearest within always that true ornament of sovereignty, piety and philanthropy...thus, thou art humane and gentle, both to those near, and to all, since thou dost imitate the Heavenly King who is thy pattern.” Sozomen, Introduction, *Ecclesiastical History*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. II (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 236.

¹⁹ Liz James, *Empress and Power in Early Byzantium* (New York: Leicester Univ Press, 2001), 14.

²⁰ Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1968), 34.

These examples illustrate the foundation that was laid down in Christian thought by patristic rhetoric elucidating the theology of philanthropia. In reflecting on the relationship between poverty and merit, it showed the way forward for the development of the imperial patron-client relationship as a means of emulating God's love of humankind. The teachings of the Fathers clearly prepared the way for a humanitarian response to the needs of the poor, who were to be identified as the image of God, rather than cursed by the gods as they were seen in Greek society. Because of the love of the Creator, everyone owes generosity to one another, especially those raised to the imperial throne by birth or marriage. Thus, with the rise of the Byzantine state, and certainly by the fifth and sixth centuries, philanthropy along with piety was increasingly promoted as a principle of conduct for imperial women, with Helena (c.255–c.330), the first Christian empress offered as the definitive role model. Eusebius records that among Helena's several philanthropic pursuits, she built numerous churches in the Holy Land. Much of her philanthropic work resonated with the command of Christ in Matthew 25: "Especially abundant were the gifts she bestowed on the naked and unprotected poor. To some she gave money, to others a supply of clothing; she liberated some from imprisonment, or from the bitter servitude of the mines; others she delivered from unjust oppression, and others again, she restored from exile."²¹ Although her achievements might be in part legendary, her inspiration to generations of Byzantine imperial women was very real. By their endowment of charitable institutions and other philanthropic actions, several empresses, including Pulcheria, were acclaimed as "new" or "second" Helenas.²²

As the royal sister of Theodosius II (401–450) and crowned in her own right after his death, Empress Pulcheria was known to have corresponded with Pope Leo I,²³ and she was responsible for establishing

²¹ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* Bk III, 44, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. I (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 531.

²² "Pulcheria was saluted as a new Helena at the Council of Chalcedon, Ephemera by the Council of 518, Sophia at both Corippus and Venantius, who also compared her to the apostle Paul." Liz James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (New York: Leicester Press, 2001), 14.

²³ *Patrologia cursus completus*, series Latina. Paris: J.P. Migne, 1844–66, vol. 54, cols. 905–8, cited in Andrew Kadel, *Matrology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 56.

the education of her imperial brother. Her philanthropic projects reflected pious generosity on a grand scale; ancient sources record that Pulcheria, “possessing great wisdom and a holy mind, educated her brother Theodosios. She gave him a royal training, above all in piety towards God...After building numerous churches, poor-houses, hostels, and monasteries; she endowed all of them with appropriate income in imperial style.” She brought her sisterly influence to bear on her imperial brother’s philanthropic activities as well, “The pious Theodosius, in imitation of the blessed Pulcheria, sent much money to the archbishop of Jerusalem for distribution among those in need.”²⁴ Theodosius learned the virtuous habit of philanthropy in part from his pious sister Pulcheria, who was educated enough to have read it and heard it from the Patriarchs themselves. The writings of the court orator Themistius may have contextualized his understanding of philanthropia as well, because his addresses to the first Theodosius, when he was a new ruler, had taught him that philanthropia is the greatest of the imperial virtues, for by it the soul is fashioned into the image of God.²⁵

It was often through imperial philanthropic initiative that many of the most important relics of the saints were brought to the Byzantine capitol and reverently housed in churches built specifically for them. These churches became in turn the location where empresses were crowned and betrothed. Thus, Constantinople grew to be the greatest treasury of relics in Christendom, and this became especially significant after the loss of Jerusalem during the Crusades.²⁶ When the relics of John Chrysostom were translated from Komana to the capitol, “the blessed Pulcheria placed them in the Church of the Apostles, thus uniting those which had been separated following his deposition from

²⁴ Theophanes, the Confessor, *Chronographia: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284–813* / trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 125.

²⁵ Glanville Downey, “Philanthropia in Religion and Statecraft in the Fourth Century after Christ,” in *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 4:2/3 (1955), 201.

²⁶ The relics “functioned as instruments of power, investiture, and leadership, guaranteeing political authority and displaying divine approval to those who possessed them.” Ioli Kalavrezon, “Helping Hands for the Empire: Imperial Ceremonies and the cult of Relics at the Byzantine Court,” in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, Henry Maguire, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997), 55.

the Church.” Pulcheria also “built a wonderful church for the blessed First Martyr and deposited his holy relics there.”²⁷ By her benefaction, the Chapel of St. Stephen was added to the Daphne Palace complex to house the relic of the Protomartyr’s arm brought from Jerusalem and as a treasury for other important relics, such as the precious cross traditionally attributed to Constantine containing a relic of the True Cross. She was also responsible for building a church for the much-beloved icon with the Hodegitria in the Arsenal area of the capitol.²⁸

After the multi-faceted philanthropic projects of Empress Pulcheria, the bride chosen for her imperial brother, Athenais-Eudokia, carried on her pious work, especially later in life when exiled. Athenais was a convert to Orthodoxy from Athens; when she was baptized she took the name Eudokia, and like Helena, “carrying out the command of Christ in Matthew 25, she was able to offer service for people—especially for the sick, the hungry, the unclothed, the poor and the neglected.”²⁹ The imperial sisters-in-law, both hailed as “most-pious” by historians, each offered their robes to the service of the Church to be used as fair linens upon the Altar.³⁰ Among the many philanthropic institutions that Athenais-Eudokia established was a great poor-house, which was capable of housing four hundred. Empress Athenais-Eudocia was reported to have worked tirelessly to support the building up of the city walls through her patronage of Kyros of Panopolis, whom she influenced her husband to appoint as prefect of the city. He was said to have built up the walls and lit up the dark capitol.³¹ Her charitable works in the Holy Land were impressive as well. History has recorded her pilgrimage to Jerusalem

²⁷ Theophanes, the Confessor, *Chronographia*, 135–136,144.

²⁸ Thomas F. Mathews, *The Byzantine Churches of Istanbul: A Photographic Survey* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 201.

²⁹ Constantelos, Demetrios J., “Women and Philanthropy in the History of Hellenism,” (available at <http://www.goarch.org/print/en/ourfaith/articles8144.asp>, accessed 1/18/2005), 4.

³⁰ Liz James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (New York: Leicester Univ Press, 2001), 154.

³¹ “From 439 to 441 there was feverish activity in Byzantium; the best men of the community were working for its welfare. ...Kyros wanted to satisfy Augusta Eudocia, to accomplish her assignment quickly...no poor man was idle in the capital. Out of the generosity of her nature, Eudocia stood by them, rich in her resources....In the few years of his consulship, this poet and builder accomplished miracles. He built the walls. He lit up the dark capitol.” Jeanne Tsatsos, *Empress Athenais-Eudocia: A Fifth Century Byzantine Humanist* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1977), 76.

in the company of St. Melania the Younger and their relic-collecting projects; after first visiting to set up the foundations, she commissioned designs for churches, a palace and a large inn for pilgrims, determining that it was not proper for them to sleep in the churches. “There must be no poor man without help, no old man without care.”

Her humanitarian generosity, especially toward the end of her life, became renowned. “She spent it all for Christ’s work. It is reckoned that in the last seventeen years of her life, she spent for the buildings and for the maintenance of the Holy City more than 20,000 pounds of gold; yet she herself lived in monastic simplicity.”³² The example of Empress Eudokia was undoubtedly an inspiration to the imperial women who came after her, perhaps most explicitly her own great granddaughter, Princess Anicia Juliana.

Recent archeological exploration has uncovered restoration and building expansion, which carried on the work of Empress Eudokia into succeeding generations and has brought to light a Byzantine princess who was a significant benefactress of philanthropic projects. In 1960, grading operations around Istanbul’s current city hall at Sarachane, in the center of the ancient city, uncovered a number of ornately worked cornices and marble blocks. Two of these carried an inscription describing the Byzantine princess Anicia Juliana, praising her royal lineage, and the elaborate church that she had constructed in honor of St. Polyeuktos; this church replaced a similar one, which had been built on the site by Empress Eudocia. The inscription, which adorned the upper periphery of the church, witnesses to the philanthropic generosity of her imperial granddaughter and her motivation for building.³³ The Church

³² Ibid., 96.

³³ It read, in part: “The Empress Eudocia, in her eagerness to honour God, was the first to build a temple to the divinely inspired Polyeuktos...she raised this building from its small original to its present size and form.” (from lines 1–10) “May the servants of the heavenly King, to whomsoever she gave gifts and to whomsoever she built temples, protect her readily with her son and his daughters. And may the unutterable glory of the most industrious family survive as long as the Sun drives his fiery chariot.” (from lines 34–41) “What choir is sufficient to sing the work of Juliana, who, after Constantine—embellisher of his Rome, after the holy golden light of Theodosius, and after the royal descent of so many forbears, accomplished in few years a work worthy of her family, and more than worthy? She alone has conquered time and surpassed the wisdom of renowned Solomon, raising a temple to receive God, to be the gift of Juliana.” (from lines 42–64) “Such is the labour that Juliana,

of St. Polyeuktos, which was built in only three years, was reported by the *Book of Ceremonies* to lie along the imperial processional route from the Theodosian Forum to the Church of the Holy Apostles. It was a remarkable structure to uncover, “a church of such evident grandeur securely dated to the period immediately preceding the accession of Justinian, and some ten years before St. Sophia.”³⁴ In the company of other more familiar characters discussed here, it is fascinating to ponder this lesser known Byzantine princess who “surpassed the wisdom of renowned Solomon” and raised a temple to receive God. There is an authoritative-looking portrait of her standing between personifications of Magnanimity (*Megalopsychia*) and Prudence (*Sophrosyne*) in the splendidly illuminated medical treatise of Dioscorides, which was said to be produced for her.³⁵ It has even been suggested that Anicia Juliana is represented in the large marble bust of an imperial woman of this period prominently displayed at the threshold of the Byzantine collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.³⁶

Anicia Juliana was born in about 462 and was descended on her mother’s side from Emperor Theodosius I. The archeological evidence witnesses to the artistic excellence of the church that she added to her palace, which for ten years was the largest in Constantinople. She spared no expense on its construction and embellishment, which were on a level of quality not seen before in the capitol. As her construction workers finished building the church, probably in 526, “their places on the scaffolding were taken by the decorators—sculptors, mosaicists and workers in revetment and inlay.”³⁷ Like the Sistine Chapel from the later Renaissance period, the church built by Anicia Juliana attempted to parallel in its dimensions the first Jerusalem Temple: “the sanctuary

after a countless swarms of labours, accomplished for the souls of her parents and for her own life, and for the lives of those who are to come and those who already are.” (from lines 74–76) Martin Harrison, *A Temple for Byzantium: The Discovery and Excavation of Anicia Juliana’s Palace-Church in Istanbul* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1989), 33–34.

³⁴ Ibid., 35.

³⁵ It is currently housed in the Vienna Osterreichische Nationalbibliothek. It is fascinating pondering what philanthropic intention inspired this Byzantine princess to commission a medical treatise!

³⁶ Martin Harrison, *A Temple for Byzantium*, 36.

³⁷ Ibid., 77.

may have been exactly twenty cubits square, the precise dimensions of the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Solomon;” and similar to the description in 1 Kings 6:29 and Ezek. 41:18, “the Temple included palm trees alternating with pairs of cherubim around the interior... The conclusion that Anicia Juliana was attempting to evoke the Temple is hard to resist.”³⁸ The Church of St. Polyeuktos now stood as the most sumptuous church in Constantinople, and thus, Justinian’s St. Sophia, in its scale, design, and comparative austerity, “is best seen as a deliberate reaction to it.”³⁹

Although philanthropic foundations were erected by Byzantine imperial women primarily to the glory of God, some may also have been established as an atoning gesture. Empress Theodora, the sixth-century wife of Justinian I (483–565), used her own humble origins to good philanthropic effect by establishing the girls school “Of Repentance” (*Metanoia*) for wayward women around 530; Kuleli College now occupies the former site of this charitable foundation. “Girls who had been exploited by greediness and lascivious desires of some unscrupulous men found attention, protection, home and food in the philanthropic establishments of Theodora. There, they were prepared to be able to face the difficulties of life, either as wives and mothers or as nuns and social workers.”⁴⁰ Thus, the philanthropia of God was able to absolve sin, provided that prayers and charities were offered on one’s behalf. So, for example, Empress Theodora, wife of Theophilos (829–42), asked a group of bishops and monks to pray that her husband be absolved of the sins he had committed through his iconoclastic policy, and was assured by Symeon of Studios the New Theologian that, relying on the philanthropia of God, the emperor had indeed been received among the Orthodox with his sins forgiven.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid., 138-139. “He carved the walls of the house all around about with carved engravings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers.” (1Kgs. 6:29) “It was formed of cherubim and palm trees, a palm tree between cherub and cherub.” (Ezek. 41:18)

³⁹ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁰ Demetrios J. Constantelos, “Women and Philanthropy in the History of Hellenism,” (available at <http://www.goarch.org/print/en/ourfaith/articles8144.asp>, accessed 1/18/2005), 4.

⁴¹ Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1968), 38.

Empress Irene, the wife of Emperor Leo IV (750–780) and Regent for Constantine VI (771–797), offers an instance of humanitarian action as a thanksgiving to God for healing. Throughout her life exercising imperial authority, Irene demonstrated an increasingly spiritual sense of the imperial duty to practice philanthropy by patronizing building projects. Particularly after Constantinople was stricken in 740 by a disastrous earthquake, Irene responded generously by funding restoration to churches and monasteries which were ruined, and was perhaps inspired to her generous humanitarian action by the litanies offered on the behalf of the “Philanthropos Theos.” One example of this restorative work is the Church of the Virgin of the Spring (*tes Peges*), where the source of the water was a spring known for its miraculous healing cures; a spring in fact marked by a mosaic thank-offering by the empress herself.⁴² She may have also had a hand in the building of the new complex of the Eleutherios Palace.⁴³ It has been said that the building of a new silk-weaving workshop among its structures may indicate Empress Eirene’s charitable interest in this traditionally imperial enterprise. The treasured purple silk designs, such as the “eagle” silk and “charioteer” silk, used as the shroud for Charlemagne were produced at workshops of this sort.⁴⁴ It is recorded that around the Church of St. Luke, Empress Irene “built three most important [monuments] for death, life and health. Thus, for death she built the cemeteries for strangers (*xenotaphia*) and for life she built the dining halls (*triklinous*) of Lamias of Pistopeon, and for health she built the hostel (*xenon*) called the Eirene (*ta Eirene*).”⁴⁵ Her building projects also included senior center dining halls (*gerotropheia*), soup kitchens, and retirement homes. The St. Luke complex came to symbolize her imperial calling to philanthropy. “This extraordinary combination

⁴² “Healed at Pege, [she] dedicated gifts to God in thanks—but also so that her healing, this sign of divine favour, would not be forgotten. Religious patronage is a way open to empresses to display their special relationship with God.” Liz James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (London: Leicester University Press, 2001), 158.

⁴³ “Since there is no independent evidence that Constantine was concerned with building, I think we can safely assume that the empress took most of the initiative.” Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 102.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

of life, health and death with clearly philanthropic aims and public functions, embodies Irene's concerns for the well-being of the city."⁴⁶

Although the early Byzantine historians have left a narrative record rich with detail, monastic foundation documents (*typika*) also provide an invaluable treasury of textual resources, illustrating in greater interior depth the imperial virtue of *philanthrōpia* lived out by Byzantine empresses. It is always possible that humanitarian projects funded by imperial women were simply part of the social duty expected of every Roman aristocrat by virtue of her rank. After all, if a royal foundation was funded only to increase social standing, it could hardly be said to be truly "philanthropic." However, even allowing for the contributions of editors and the occasional ghostwriter, *typika* for monasteries founded by empresses offer insights into the spiritual intent for their philanthropic projects, often in their own words; their Christian response to the love of humankind by the "Philanthropos Kyrios" is richly evident in this material.

Such is the case with Empress Irene Doukaina Komnene, wife of Alexios I Komnenos (1082–1118): her philanthropic work is not only reflected in the *Alexiad* written by her daughter, but also in the *typikon* of the Convent of the Mother-of-God Kecharitomene in Constantinople, which she founded. She was known to have beneficially influenced not only her son the future Emperor John II Komnenos and her daughter, Anna Komnene, but also her sixth child as well. Isaac Komnenos was the founder of the Monastery of the Mother of God Kosmosoteire and benefactor of the reconstruction and magnificent mosaic work in the Chora monastery still evident to visitors today. Anna Komnene describes her mother giving charity to beggars while on military campaign with her husband,⁴⁷ encouraging them not to lose heart or to beg. She exhorted them to find active work, which suggests that her philanthropic projects could be "viewed as a way of obtaining God's mercy through

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, E.R.A.Sewter, trans. (London: Penguin, 1969) Bk 12, Ch iii, 378.

giving mercy to the less fortunate.”⁴⁸ In addition to the Convent of the Theotokos Kecharitomene, Irene Doukaina also jointly founded the male monastery of the Christ Philanthropos; thereby contributing to the reemergence in the twelfth-century of double monasteries. Although now a military depot, it can still be seen in the “colorful façade of its substructures” in the Arsenal-area ruins in Istanbul.⁴⁹

The Kecharitomene Typikon reflects issues contemporary to the Byzantine Monastic Reform Movement of the twelfth century, concern that checks and balances be set in place against financial misconduct among them. It also demonstrates the philanthropic Christian intentions of a deeply pious empress. The typikon is especially notable because it begins with an elegantly crafted prayer addressed to the Mother of God Kecharitomene, calling her the “ornament of our race with most saving power,” and the “adorned queen standing at the right hand of the Pantokrator,” who protects Constantinople, that “the great city entrusted to you be preserved as an ever-flourishing root and ever-flowing font of piety.”⁵⁰ Empress Irene credits the Mother of God with leading her to the position of empress, and granting her “much fruitfulness in the Purple” in the blessing of her many children. Empress Irene is quite specific in stating her philanthropic intention to respond to God’s saving love for humanity: “to praise and worship your greatness...and to thank you in a spiritual way for your compassion and mercy towards us; all that I bring to you in return is most fervent love, you who with your First-Born and Only-Begotten maintain the most providential and saving love for humanity.” Acknowledging that the stream of all good things on earth comes from God’s love of humankind, so that we “possess nothing of ourselves but are entirely God’s...I myself have

⁴⁸ Alice-Mary Talbot, “Byzantine Women, Saints’ Lives and Social Welfare,” in *Women and Religion Life in Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2001), 11.

⁴⁹ Thomas F. Mathews, *The Byzantine Churches of Istanbul: A Photographic Survey* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1976) 200.

⁵⁰ For this and the following, “*Kecharitomene: Typikon of Empress Irene Doukaina Komnene for the Convent of the Mother of God Kecharitomene in Constantinople*” in *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders’ Typica and Testaments*, John Thomas and Angela Constantinides Hero, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2000), 649-724.

built for you a holy temple.” Thus, the Convent of the Mother of God Kecharitomene is offered; intentionally giving back some of what God has given her, she establishes a nunnery of “solitary singers of praise... dispensing to each of them from your great gifts to me the yearly and daily necessities in accordance with their physical needs.”

Empress Irene’s typikon outlines the parameters of monastic life in specific liturgical detail: “I have set up the life of devotion for them coenobitic in everything, establishing and ensuring for this divine company an absence of distraction from all sides in the matter of their holy way of life.” The Divine Office is to order the lives of the nuns, “bowing down... to God seven times a day...rising with David at midnight...lifting holy hands during the night to the Holy of Holies.” Irene undergirds the instructions for her earthly support with numerous Scriptural citations and acknowledgement that all good monastic praise and work comes first from God’s loving support of humankind, for if “divine help is not present, no good action is easy to accomplish for anyone at all.” Citing Heb. 13:20–21, the typikon ends as it began with prayerful exhortation: “May the God of peace who called us to his eternal glory through his great and unspeakable goodness confirm and strengthen you in his holy will through his only-begotten Son Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the All-Holy Life-Giving Spirit through the intercessions of our Mother of God Kecharitomene,” signing herself, “Irene Doukaina in Christ Our God the faithful Empress of the Romans.”

Another example of the philanthropy of an empress illustrated in the textual record of the monastic typika is the patronage of Empress Theodora Palaiologina, wife of Michael VIII Palaiologos (1258–1282), whose building activities flowered when she was dowager empress. She restored the convent of Lips in Constantinople, adding the “south” church onto the three-hundred-year old Church of the Theotokos to house the tombs of her family, since the imperial mausoleum inside the Church of the Holy Apostles had been demolished during the Latin occupation. Of special interest is the benefaction of a twelve-bed women’s hospital Empress Theodora built next to the convent, leaving

careful instructions for the details of its appointment.⁵¹ This *typikon* is fascinating particularly in disclosing the spiritual origin of the empress's impulse to fund the restoration: "the wealth I have received from God I have dedicated to him and to our common Mistress, the Mother of God, in expiation of my sins in this life; may these gifts be found acceptable by God the Almighty, so that he may have mercy on me at the Day of Judgment and give me a share of his blessings...may you mention me constantly in both your common and private prayers to God."⁵² For the churches she restored, Empress Theodora received praise in an *enkomion*, asking that God bless "the Pious and Christ-loving empress who out of love for God restored this church and many others which were ruined and who built others from the foundations..."⁵³

These examples offer a glimpse of the impact imperial women had on Byzantine philanthropy from its earliest centuries. On balance, it may be that several generations of patristic teaching helped clarify the connection between poverty and merit before God, and the need for a generous Christian response to the needs of the poor. This evidence shows that Byzantine empresses did make significant contributions at a time when systems for supplying basic social services were yet underdeveloped. In their Greek-influenced culture, in which women were often regarded as invisible components of society and identified primarily with the home front, this data illustrates how they did make a difference, especially in times of critical need, such as earthquake, famine, and political catastrophe. In monastic *typika* in particular, imperial women, whose accomplishments may often have been under-reported, were able to make valuable contributions to the textual record. They reveal a more complete picture of several of the Byzantine empresses whose Christian response to the love of God for humankind inspired them to embark upon philanthropic building projects benefiting Byzantine society.

⁵¹ Alice-Mary Talbot, "The Byzantine Family and the Monastery," in *Women and Religious Life in Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2001), 124.

⁵² "Lips: *Typikon* of Theodora Palaiologina for the Convent of Lips in Constantinople" in *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2000), 1281.

⁵³ Alice-Mary Talbot, "Old Wine in New Bottles" in *Women and Religious Life in Byzantium*, 19.

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