

**Church as a Mother in the Teachings of the Church of the East**  
**By**  
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The idea of the motherhood of the Church develops from the writings of the New Testament. It is recorded in the gospel of Matthew (Matthew 23:37) that Jesus Christ is comparing Himself to a mother. Saint Paul in his epistle to Galatians refers to the Church as a fruitful Mother. It is written: *“But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.”* (Gal. 4:26). Yet the theme of the Church as a Mother is not found explicitly in the writings of the early Church fathers such as Ephrahat and Ephrem. The given reason for that, is simply because the fathers of the Church gave the rule of Motherhood to the Holy Spirit not to the Church. The fathers of the Church have confirmed the idea of the motherhood of the Holy Spirit by presenting her always as feminine. The fathers of the Church have always spoken of the Holy Spirit as a mother bird hovering upon the water of baptism in order to sanctify them. The dove which descended and rested upon the head of our Lord has become the symbol of the Holy Spirit. Robert Murray in this regard says:

*“There is no similar development of the theme of the Church as Mother in the other early Syriac Fathers. It is not found in the Odes of Solomon nor the Acts of Judas Thomas; In Aphrahat, apart from the passage on Esther quoted above, the only hint of the Church’s motherhood is in his readiness to call Christians sons or children of the Church. Otherwise the image does not seem to interest him greatly. A reason for this backwardness suggests itself in a curious fact about early Syriac Christianity. For Aphrahat the ascetic, just as in the Odes of Solomon and in the Acts of Judas Thomas, the place of Mother is occupied by the Holy Spirit, (Ruha) is always construed as feminine in early Syriac, including the authentic works of Ephrem.”*<sup>1</sup>

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Again Robert Murray in regard to the motherhood of the Holy Spirit says:

*“The biblical roots of the idea seem to lie in the use of bride imagery in connection with the Spirit, especially by means of the verbal root ‘rhap’ (Hebrew riep, Syriac rahhep), used of a mother bird hovering. Thus in*

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<sup>1</sup> (R. Murray, symbols of the Church and Kingdom, Cambridge University Press 1975. Pp.142-143.)

*Deuteronomy 32:11 (doubtless developing the simple, Exodus 19:4), God is described caring for the people in the desert.*

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*‘As an eagle watches over its nest, hovers (rahep) above its young, Spreads its pinions and takes them up and carries them upon its wings, Yahweh alone led him.....’”<sup>2</sup>*

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Nevertheless the Church is seen as a mother of all those who are born again spiritually from the fond of Baptism. The liturgy of the Church of the East speaks of the Church as the bride of Christ and the mother who constantly conceives and gives birth to spiritual sons and daughters into the godly life. The Holy Church as a mother nurtures her children at the table of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, brings them to Christ and sacramentally unites them with Him. Robert Murray says:

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*“Because of this, this Church [i.e. the visible] is greater than all things and she is the mother of all the baptized; but specially because the face of our Lord dawns on her and illuminates her. Now this Church, with its altar and baptism, bears mankind like children; they suck [her] milk, till they are weaned.”<sup>3</sup>*

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The following anthem speaks of the Church as a mother of all the baptized believers.

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*“Your Resurrection O Lord is the first fruit of our lives. Glory and richness increased in your Holy House. Behold, your Church, which you have earned by your honorable (precious) Blood, in every corner, **like a bride adorned by you, and like a mother with her children is joyful about you.** Guard her O Lord from all the harms. And save us so that we may glorify you within her.”<sup>4</sup>*

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Briefly the Subject of ecclesiology was not known to the early Church fathers. Thus they did not write any article specifically dealing with ecclesiology nor did they speak about it distinctly. Yet we can understand the inner thoughts of the early Church fathers in regard to ecclesiology by studying attentively their literature and the liturgical prayers of the Church. Robert Murray says: “*certainly*

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<sup>2</sup> (Ibid P 313)

<sup>3</sup> (Ibid P 265)

<sup>4</sup> (Khudra Vol. II, P 557, Printed at the Mar Narsai press, Trichur, South India 1962)

*in Hymn on Nativity 25, 5, however the Church is seen as a virgin mother, typified by Mary as foretold by Isaiah: ”*

“Blessed art you, O Church, in whom rejoices  
Even Isaiah in his prophecy.  
‘Behold a virgin will conceive and bring forth  
A child’ whose name is a great mystery.  
O for the explanation that was revealed in the Church!  
Two names, were joined together and become one,  
Emmanuel, El is with you always,  
Who joins you with his members.”<sup>5</sup>

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The theme of the motherhood of the Church is clearly seen in Saint Ephrem’s Hymn on Faith. Because of the Schism of Arianism the church in Nisibis was divided. In the following Hymn Saint Ephrem is praying for gathering of the scattered children of the Nisibi’s church in the bosom of the Mother Church.

“That from all Churches there may be  
a single Church of truth;  
and let her children be gathered,  
righteous in her bosom,  
that we may confess goodness...  
praise to the reconciliation”.<sup>6</sup>

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### **Motherhood of the Church through Baptism:**

An earthly mother conceives children in her womb and gives birth to them physically. After the same manner the holy Baptism as a spiritual mother through the hovering of the Holy Spirit conceives in her womb ‘the font of Baptism’, and gives birth to the spiritual and immortal children of God. This is the reason in the Tradition of the Church of the East Baptism is associated with the idea of the motherhood of the Church. In the following hymn saint Ephrem calls the font of Baptism the womb of the holy Church.

*“Since the people withheld and did not approach the King’s Son,*

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<sup>5</sup> (Kathleen E. McVey, Ephrem the Syrian Hymns, Hymns on Nativity 25, 5.p. 201, R. Murray, symbols of the Church and Kingdom, Cambridge University Press 1975. P. 149)

<sup>6</sup> (R. Murray, symbols of the Church and Kingdom, Cambridge University Press 1975. P. 150. St. Ephrem the Syrian on Church Unity “ECQ, XV (1963), 174-5. H. Fid. 52.15. CSCO154, Syr.73, p. 164. Cf.)

*His ambassador went out to the peoples and brought them with their offerings.  
But it did not bring all of them since the small womb of Bethlehem  
Could not suffice for them, so that the womb of the Holy Church  
Opened wide and enclosed her children. Blessed is He who made fruitful the  
barren one!”<sup>7</sup>*

In the Baptismal Liturgy of the Church of the East, the consecration of the holy water, the Priest takes the horn of oil and signs the water, pouring the oil upon in the form of Cross, and saying, “*This water is singed and consecrated and mingled with the holy oil, that it may become a new womb bringing forth spiritually in absolving baptism. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit forever.*”<sup>8</sup>

Saint Ephrem in his Hymn on Epiphany clearly talks about Baptism as a mother that gives birth spiritually to the children of God.

*“Glory to them that are robed, glory to Adam’s house! in the birth  
that is from the water, let them rejoice and be blessed!  
Praise to Him Who has robed, His Churches in glory! Glory to Him Who has  
magnified, the race of Adam’s house.”<sup>9</sup>*

The following anthem says: those who in repentance and true faith approach Baptism will be born of God.

*“The Savior of creation, Christ as the Son of the blessed one, gave baptism for the remission of sins, to all of us in His mercy. And all those who in repentance approach the true faith will be born of God. For all those who are prevented from receiving it are deprived from the gift of life and eternal Salvation.”<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Ephrem the Syrian hymns, translated and introduced by Kathleen E. Mcvey. Paulist press, New York. Mahwah, Hymns on the Nativity, Hymn 24. p. 196.)

<sup>8</sup> (The Liturgy of the Holy Apostles Adai and Mari and the order of Baptism, Urmiae , Typis Missionis Archiepiscopi Cantuariensis, 1893, P. 79)

<sup>9</sup> (Ephrem, Hymns on Epiphany, 13.21, 22 Quoted from Christian classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf213.toc.html>)

<sup>10</sup> (Khudra Vol. III P. 622, Printed at the Mar Narsai press, Trichur, South India 1962)

Mar Narsai who sees the sanctified water of the font of Baptism becoming a fruitful womb and the power of the Holy Spirit like the seed that begets life says:

*“Every hour he opens the door of mercy before the beholders; and he appoints and gives forgiveness of iniquity to the sons of his race. With the waters of the Spirit he casts them, as in the furnace; and he puts off (from them) iniquity, and puts on the garments of righteousness. He calls and entreats the hidden life. The waters become fruitful, as a womb; and the power of grace is like the seed that begets life, Body and soul go down together into the bosom of the water and are born again, being sanctified from defilement.”*<sup>11</sup>

### **The Mother Church Conceives through the Word and Spirit:**

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Saint Paul believes in the generating character of the Divine Words of God and that he has been sent by Christ to preach the gospel of Salvation to gentiles and to bring forth children unto him. It is written:

*“I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as **my dear children.** Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, **for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.**”*<sup>12</sup>

Therefore the Church through preaching the divine Words of God and the celebration of the Holy Sacraments conceives and gives birth to her spiritual children into faith, and into the divine life of the Holy Trinity. Then as a mother nurtures them spiritually with both: the Body and Blood of Christ in the holy Eucharist and with the divine words of God written in the Sacred Scriptures. In regards to the nature of the motherhood of the Church, it is written:

*“The Church begets men, for Jesus Christ, not like other mothers, By bringing them forth from her womb, but by drawing them Into her womb from the outside, by incorporating them into Herself, and by means of this incorporation into the Holy Spirit Who animates her and through the Holy Spirit into the Son Who bestowed Him upon us by the breath of His mouth and Through the Son into the Father who sent Him; so that we*

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<sup>11</sup> (Dome R.H. Connolly, M.A. The liturgical Homilies of Narsai Homily XXXII on the Church and on the priesthood. P. 66.)

<sup>12</sup> (1 Corinthians 14:14-15)

*Attain fellowship in and with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”<sup>13</sup>*

### **The Children of the Church:**

The idea of the Motherhood of the Church is derived from her spiritual children. Even though the fathers of the Church have not addressed the Church specifically as a mother, yet in their writings there are many references and hints to the children of the Church. This expression “children of the Church) indicate the theme of the motherhood of the Church. The following anthem asks the mother Church to gather her scattered children.

*“Blessed is the one who has built His Holy Church, upon the rock of faith. And placed in her Apostles and Prophets. And teachers who are knowledgeable of the truth. **O Church gather your children. You were barren from the beginning. But now your children grew in number.** Rise up and shake yourself from the dust. O Virgin betrothed through the Apostles. The Bride that John proclaimed. You who were lonely and abundant. Kings became nursing parents unto her. **Reveal the veil from your face. And rejoice with your young children.** And be proud about your Virgins. For singing glory within you every day. The rise of the sun you do not need. The rising of your Lord will shine upon you. Behold the sources of the living water and salvation flow forth in you. **Behold your sons will come from far away. Your daughters from the ends of the earth.** And will enter in your edifice the mighty ones of the nations. And the kings will worship unto your honor. And the nations will give up their engraved sculptures. And they will come and take refuge within you. Arise O Church and become a shelter unto all the nations and ethnic groups.”<sup>14</sup>*

### **The Church as a mother Imparts Spiritual gifts:**

The responsibility of the Church as a mother is not restricted in her obligation to conceive, give birth, nurture and protect her children from the arrows of Satan and his hosts. The Church as a Mother has many other responsibilities which she has to fulfill towards her children. We learn from the Liturgical prayers, that the Church as a Mother through the Sacraments entrusted to her offers

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<sup>13</sup> (Sr. Sophy Rose C.M.C. The Church as Mystery and Communion, Oriental Institution of religious studies India, Vadavathoor, Kottayam -680010, Kerala, India. 1998, p.314, (Bossuet Letters a une Domoiselle de Metz, Letter 4 (Oeuvres Completes) Tome 8 p. 298)

<sup>14</sup> (Khudra Vol. III P. 597, Printed at the Mar Narsai press, Trichur, South India 1962)



Salvation, forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, eternal life in the Kingdom of heaven etc. to her spiritual children. Thus by means of the following anthem, the Sons and daughters of the Church, as a sign of their thanks giving, are offering *glory and thanksgiving*, unto Jesus Christ, the heavenly bride groom.

*“O Church, filled with oblations. The Lord of treasures and all wisdom. Worship and confess to Christ the King, your savior, for raising your children and making them spiritual treasurers in the world. And entrusted to their hands the keys of the heavenly treasure. And gave them authority: whatever they will bind on earth it will be bound in heaven. **And behold today the Church thunders with their voices. And raise glory and thanksgiving, unto Jesus the heavenly bride groom, for giving her by His mercy and kindness a true shepherd in order to shepherd her in love and guard her from the evil one, all the times.**”*<sup>15</sup>

### **Mother Mary: Type of the Mother Church:**

The fathers of the Church described the motherhood of the Church in relationship to the Virgin Mary the Mother of Christ. In many writings of the Church fathers, Mary and the Church are sharing titles. The relationship of Mary and the Church is established on the doctrine of the second Eve. According to the doctrine of the second Eve, the first Eve, the mother of mankind was born from the side of the first Adam and the second Eve, Virgin Mary, the holy Church, the Mother of all the believers, was born from the side of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. Thus Eve, as mother of all the children of Adam, is a type of the Church who begets and gives birth to all the faithful in eternal life. Saint Ephrem in his Hymn on crucifix makes Mary the type of the Church.

*“Mary who saw him  
Is a type of the church, which first  
Is to see the sign of his coming.”*<sup>16</sup>

Again Ephrem, in the Memre of the Holy week, compares Mary to the Church. In regards to the cause of the fusion of the name of the Virgin Mary with

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<sup>15</sup> (Ibid P. 567)

<sup>16</sup> (Saint Ephrem, Hymn on Crucifix 4, 17, quoted from Saint Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (Seeri) Baker hill, Kottayam -685001, Kerala, India P 24)

Mary Magdalene, it is believed that the name Mary is used as a functional title to imply Virgin, Mother and Spouse.

*“He drew Mary Magdalene  
To come and see his Resurrection.  
And why was it first to a woman  
That he showed his resurrection, and not to men.  
Here he showed us a mystery  
Concerning his **church and his mother**,  
At the beginning of his coming to the earth  
A virgin was first to receive him.  
And at his raising up from the grave  
To a woman he showed his resurrection.  
In the beginning and in his fulfilment  
The name of his mother cries out and is present.  
Mary received him by conception  
And saw an angel before her;  
And Mary received him in life  
And saw angels at his grave.  
Again, **Mary is like the church**,  
The Virgin, who was born the first fruits by the Gospel  
In the place of the church, Mary saw him.  
Blessed be he who gladdened the Church and Mary;  
**Let us call the church itself ‘Mary’**”<sup>17</sup>*

And again a little later:

*“But Mary type of the church  
Looked into the sepulcher.”<sup>18</sup>*

Once again Saint Ephrem in his first hymn on the pearl is comparing the Church with the Virgin Mary.

*“There was Mary whom I saw therein,  
The pure conception, there was the Church,  
And the Son within her; a likeness of that cloud  
Which carried him; symbol of heaven  
From whence streams forth his glorious radiance.”<sup>19</sup>*

<sup>17</sup> (Ephrem, Memre of the Holy week, (ef Lamy 1, 531-3. quoted from Saint Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (Seeri) Baker hill, Kottayam -685001, Kerala, India P. 25)

<sup>18</sup> (Lamy 1, 535)

<sup>19</sup> (Ephrem, Hymn on faith 81, 4. quoted from Saint Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (Seeri) Baker hill, Kottayam -685001, Kerala, India P. 26)



Saint Ephrem in his hymn on Nativity sees the Church as a virgin mother typified by Mary as foretold by Isaiah:

*“Blessed art thou, O church, for Isaiah also  
Exalted thee in his prophecy  
‘behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear  
A child’ whose name is a mighty symbol.  
O the meaning revealed in the Church,  
Two names, which have united and become one,  
Emmanuel, God with thee at all times,  
Since he united thee with his members.”*<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

The focus of our paper is the image of the Church as a mother of all believers. The idea of the motherhood of the Church develops from the writings of the New Testament. Jesus Christ compared Himself to a mother. Saint Paul refers to the Church as a fruitful Mother. Yet the early fathers of the Church did not explicitly write about the Church as a Mother. The given reason for that, is simply because the fathers of the Church gave the role of Motherhood to the Holy Spirit not to the Church. The idea of the motherhood of the Holy Spirit was stressed by always referring to Her (the Holy Spirit) in a feminine term. In the liturgy of the Holy Baptism the Holy Spirit is described as a mother bird hovering upon the water of baptism in order to sanctify them and make them become a spiritual womb, conceive and give birth to spiritual children.

Even though the fathers of the Church have not addressed the Church specifically as a mother, yet in their writings there are many references and hints to the children of the Church. This expression “children of the Church) indicates the theme of the motherhood of the Church. Thus the Church as a mother conceives, gives birth, nurtures and protects her children from the arrows of Satan and his hosts. The Church by means of the Holy Sacraments entrusted to her, also, offers

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<sup>20</sup> (Ephrem Hymn on Nativity 25, 5. quoted from Saint Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (Seeri) Baker hill, Kottayam -685001, Kerala, India P. 26)

Salvation, forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, eternal life in the Kingdom of heaven to her spiritual children.