



Platytera

The Platytera is often of such a large scale that it overwhelms and overshadows in emphasis the other icons in a church. This can present a rather odd first impression especially to a non-Orthodox visitor. Even to Orthodox Christians it may present a bit of a dilemma. How is it that in a Christian church, a place where life centers around Christ, an image of His mother Mary would appear to have dominance? In reality, Christ is found in the Platytera at bull's eye center on Mary's lap. His presence is small in size and sublime in nature. These things show Jesus' humility. At the same time it is a balanced image in that it does not forget or omit Mary. It is a delicate theological balancing act that is perfectly articulated and resolved in the Platytera. This icon presents the perfectly balanced view of the place and role of Mary. These beliefs, found in Holy Scripture, echo the Tradition of the Church, which is that Mary is never separated from her relationship to Jesus. When Orthodox Christians have pondered Mary they have come to the conclusion that Jesus could not have been born without Mary's free consent, on the one hand, while on the other, She is made significant by the One she bore. Mary provides the throne. She provides the womb and nourishing breasts. She provides the loving care to a fragile infant. Mary washed, fed and changed the diaper of the One who was God become man! These acts and characteristics reveal her humility, and the Platytera icon glorifies Her because of it. Mary is a significant figure to Orthodox Christians in a personally impactful way. She is significant to us as an example of our own personal potential. This example shows us that the way to fulfill our magnificent potential is a result of free-will, informed, not blind, submission to God's goodness. By example we see that She is indispensable to God's birth. Without Mary, Christ's birth could not have taken place. And for us, Her example shows us that without submission we cannot have Christ in us. By submission She becomes a home and a temple of God. She bears Jesus in her womb. By free-will, informed, not blind, submission to God's goodness we can have Jesus in us too. And Mary, by having Jesus ACTUALLY within her, becomes the first, true, flesh and blood, temple of God. She is the first but not the last. When Mary became the first, true, flesh and blood, temple of God She opened the flood gates for all of humanity. When She said "be it to unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1: 38) we, all humans, were shown the excellent and perfect way! NOW we know how to be temples! NOW anyone can be, like Mary, a temple of God. We do not have to travel to a special place. We who are believers ARE the special place when we say and believe and live "be it to unto me according to thy word." And this is exactly what happens at our Chrismations, which are our personal Pentecosts and our personal Annunciations. At Pentecost and at the Annunciation the Holy Spirit takes action and comes into those who submit and believe. These are wonderful things that happened at these events. At the Annunciation the Holy Spirit came to Mary! At Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes to all of the Church! The thing which happened initially with Mary was revealed even more powerfully to be a possibility and a reality for everyone at Pentecost! Just as Mary had God ACTUALLY within her, we can ACTUALLY have God within us. This IS what happens at our Chrismations. We become temples of the Holy Spirit! Mary was and is a temple. We see this clearly in a Platytera icon. And when we see this icon of Mary we are reminded of the human potential to be a temple. When a person's faith allows them to say "be it to unto me according to thy word" they become a temple of God just like Mary! The idea that everyone has the potential to have God dwelling in them would have been a radical, new and different concept to the Jews before Christ. They saw God's throne as a physical structure, the Temple BUILDING in Jerusalem. The concept that God's home was or could be a temple building was morphed when Jesus was born and God became incarnate. Jesus' birth showed Mary's womb to be THE TEMPLE! Her womb is a temple "more spacious than the Heavens." The idea of "temple," now, is elevated by way of Mary. And with Mary a new pattern is set. This new pattern is now not a temple made of brick and mortar. This new temple pattern is human! And by this NEW, FLESHY, pattern ALL believers who follow Mary's example become living, human temples of God. All believers can be and are like Mary. She is the first and most excellent example of what Saint Paul discusses as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (in 1 Corinthians 6:19). Becoming a temple, like Mary, is what we experience personally at our Chrismations. And the fulfillment and understanding of becoming a temple at our chrismation is helped along by pondering icons of Mary. And when we ponder icons of Mary we should be able to hear her "words of wisdom" by making her words to be our words when we can respond to God, "be it to unto me according to thy word." Since Mary is the prime and perfect example of being "a temple," the wisdom of a prominently placed icon of Her in the apse of a church is confirmed to be appropriate and right. When we ponder Pentecost, Christmas and Annunciation we will begin to ponder where it is that God lives. When we see Mary prominently displayed in a church's iconography we are nudged to remember and ponder exactly that. Where DOES God live? And then maybe we will ponder the question... Can God live in me? This detail contains a message God's personal, tender all-encompassing love! It is a message worth discovering. It is a message front-and-center just like a Platytera is front-and-center.