Theotokos - Mother of God

There are five main types of representation of the Theotokos in Orthodox iconography:
1. Praying;
2. The Guide;
3. Tender Mercy;
4. All Merciful;
5. Intercessor.

The Theotokos is always represented with her hair, upper forehead and shoulders hidden beneath a veil (maphorion) having a gold fringed border. Three golden stars decorate the maphorion, one above the forehead and one on each shoulder symbolic of her virginity before, during and after childbirth.

1. "Praying" ("Oranta", "Panagia", "Lady of the Sign")

"Praying" ("Oranta", "Panagia", "Lady of the Sign"). This image of Theotokos was already evident in the catacombs of the first Christians. The Theotokos is depicted on these icons "en face" and half face, with her hands lifted up to the level of her head, with elbows bent. From time immemorial this gesture signified a prayerful appeal to God. The Child-Jesus, the Emmanuel, is often depicted on Her bosom, within a spherical circle. The icons of this type are also called "Oranta" (Greek "praying") and "Panagia" (Greek "all-holy"). When it reached the Russian land, this image acquired the name "Our Lady of the Sign". It is often portrayed with Child Jesus who is represented in a mandorla in front of the bosom of His Mother. Suspended mysteriously he seems to escape the laws of gravity. The face of the child is that of an adult with a large forehead full of wisdom. He holds a scroll containing the Scriptures and blesses with His right hand. In Orthodox churches, this icon is normally placed in the upper part of the altar, the apse, as in our Cathedral.


This icon shows the Theotokos with her right hand pointing at the Child Christ sitting on her left hand. The images have regular features, faces are serious, the heads of Christ and the Most Pure Virgin are not touching. It is as if the Theotokos is saying to the human race that the right path is the path to Christ. This icon shows the Theotokos as a guide to God and salvation. This is also one of the oldest types of the icons portraying the Theotokos and is believed to have originated with the first iconographer, the Evangelist Luke.

3. "Tender Mercy" ("Eleusa")

The icons of the "Tender Mercy" type show Christ Child pressing his left cheek close to the right cheek of his Mother. Here the Theotokos again represents the Church of Christ, thereby displaying the fullness of love between God and man, a love that can
4. “All Merciful” (“Panakranta”)

All icons of this type have a common feature: the Mother of God is depicted sitting on a throne. She holds the Christ Child on her lap who blesses and presents a scroll of scripture. The throne symbolizes the royal glory of the Theotokos, who alone is perfect among those born on earth. The best known icons of this type are “The Powerful” and “The Queen of all”.

5. “Intercessor” (“Agiosortissa”)

The icons of this type show the Theotokos in her full height, without the Child, turned to the right, sometimes holding a scroll. In orthodox churches, this icon occupies a place of honor: to the left of the icon “Our Savior in Powers”, the main icon of the iconostasis. Here we see the Virgin with Saint John the Evangelist - Thessalonika, between 1371 and 1393.