

“Why does the priest say, ‘Most Holy Theotokos save us!’ at the end of Vespers? Surely only Jesus saves us!”

First it must be said that the Orthodox Church has never considered that the Theotokos is in some way the “Medatrix” or even the “Coredemtrix” with Jesus as the Roman Catholic Church teaches. Your question is a good and reasonable one and it raises two very important issues, what is our vision and understanding of salvation and what is the place of the Mother of God in our vision of salvation.

First, what does it mean to save? We might know the bumper sticker axiom “Jesus Saves!” But what does the Church teach us? Scripture (the books of the Church) reveals that the Word implanted in our hearts saves us (James 1:21), baptism saves us (1 Peter 3:21), prayer saves us (James 5:15), preaching saves us (1 Corinthians 9:22), we save others (James 5:20, Jude 23), we save ourselves (Acts 2:40), the holy Apostle Paul hoped to save others (1 Corinthians 9:22), and Apostle Timothy, Bishop of Ephesus, was commanded to save himself and others by holding to his own teaching (1 Timothy 4:16)! Jesus himself speaks of a person’s faith having saved them (Luke 7:50). All of this is right and true because the content of the preaching and the faith as well as the baptism and the prayer is Jesus Christ.

Salvation is Jesus Christ! The name Jesus means “the one who saves” and Christ means Messiah or “the anointed one” who comes to establish the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom that reigns, even now, that Jesus came to overthrow is death. Salvation and the Kingdom of God is LIFE—communion and union with God! Jesus Christ is the Way the Truth and the Life. He has come and offered himself for the Life of the World, for us and for our salvation!

Does the Theotokos Save us? Yes, just as preaching, prayer, baptism, our neighbour and our action or our repentance can and does save us. The Theotokos has been chosen by God and she also freely chose to answer the Angel Gabriel “Behold I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let be to me according to your word.”

It is in knowing all of this that the Church sings:

Hail, O Theotokos, deliverance from the curse of Adam.
Hail, holy Mother of God; hail, living Bush. Hail, Lamp;
hail, Throne; hail, Ladder and Gate. Hail, divine Chariot;
hail, swift Cloud. Hail, Temple; hail, Vessel of Gold. Hail,
Mountain; hail, Tabernacle and Table. Hail, thou release of
Eve.

It is because of this that we find in the life of the Church the focus is often on the Theotokos. It is because she has been chosen of God to be all of these things for us and for our salvation. The Theotokos has, by her humility love and offering her very self, accomplished salvation, by making her will the will of God. But in saying this she is NOT the Medatrix nor is she the Coredemtrix. In accomplishing this she is not, as Fr Alexander Schmemmann would often say, the great exception, but she is rather the great

example! As we are baptized into Christ we are ourselves, each one of us personally and collectively, as His Body, are called to become the temple, the lamp, the salt, the light, the prophet, the priest & the king. The Theotokos has revealed to us both What Salvation is, her son Jesus, and how it is accomplished, Christ Jesus being born in us through Water and the Spirit.

So by looking to the Theotokos as an example, an intercessor and image of what it is to be the beloved disciple of Jesus we come to know Salvation. When the Priest cries at the end of Vespers, the service inaugurates the new day the people respond:

More honourable than the Cherubim, and more glorious
beyond compare than the Seraphim, without defilement
you gave birth to God the word, true Theotokos, we
magnify You.

It is in magnifying the Mother of God that we know and experience the reality of Immanuel—God with us—Who has accomplished Salvation Who offers us salvation Who is Salvation.