

Marian Devotion as a Form of Legitimization of the Imperial Authority

DRAGOȘ BOICU*

The present research addresses matters concerning the relationship between Church and state during the reign of Theodosius II of Rome, analyzing especially the case of legitimization of the imperial authority found in the first half of the fifth century when the Empress Pulcheria tried to identify herself with the Virgin Mary before her subjects in order to further maintain control of the state alongside her brother, Theodosius II. This paper also attempts to connect the problem of the political experiment with the development of a Marian devotion in Constantinople as a solution for pagan cults' inculturation, reassessing Nestorius' reaction in parallel with the position of Epiphanius of Salamina.

Keywords: *Virgin Mary, Pulcheria, Theodosian dynasty, imperial ideology, civic religion, inculturation*

The Edict of Mediolanum provided to all subjects of the Roman Empire freedom to profess any faith, but also created conditions conducive to the institutionalization of Christianity. “Surrendering” to the state, the Church became part of the mechanism of imperial propaganda and was used to justify different public identities by the emperors as *christianissimi principes*. This mechanism could already be observed during the Constantinian dynasty and it was in some way excused by the given political, religious, and ideological context. As the process of Christianisation of the Roman Empire continued, so the political experiments went on during Theodosius the Great and his descendents as a reply to the Gothic crisis. A very special case of legitimization of the imperial authority is to be found in the first half of the fifth century when the Empress Pulcheria tried to identify herself with the Virgin Mary before her subjects in order to further maintain state control alongside her brother, Theodosius II.

Arcadius's death on May 1st, 408 A.D. landed the Theodosian dynasty in a new impasse. Theodosius II, the 7 years old emperor (born on April 10th, 401 A.D.), was in an odd situation that became more precarious as Pulcheria (399–453) and, finally, the other two sisters Arcadia (400–444) and Marina (403–449) approached marriageable age¹, leaving room for the possibility

* Dragoș Boicu, Research Centre for Theology, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania. Contact details: Mitropoliei 35 – Sibiu 550179, Romania; e-mail: dragosbcu@yahoo.com

¹ In late Antiquity girls could be engaged as early as the age of 7 and legally be married at 12, see: Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles*, Oxford 1994, p. 13.