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The Order of the Funeral “Pillars” (Another Type of Approach)

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Abstract

Regarding the tradition of our Church, it must be specified first of all that the practice of reading the “pillars” for the laity is a local custom, in the sense that it is not found in other Orthodox traditions, such as Greek and Russian (at least this is clear from various studies), and that it does not represent a substitution of the readings indicated by the church tradition, but rather an addition. In other words, the order of the “pillars” does not represent in any way, in the vision of our Romanian Orthodox Church, a departure from the church tradition, but rather an “enrichment” of it. About some of the peculiarities of the funeral “pillars”, less addressed, but not only, we will try to write in this study.

Keywords

Order, vigil, pillar, Psalter, prayer, Church, funeral

I. The Order of the Funeral “Pillars” - peculiarities

In the tradition of our Church, the practice of reading the “pillars”¹ for the laity is a local custom, in the sense that it is not found in other Orthodox

¹ “Pillar; see Prayers for the dead - religious service performed for the dead at home, before burial, or on the road, and which consists of reading a large number of evangelical pericopes (11-15)”, Fr. PhD. E. BRANIȘTE and Prof. Ecaterina BRANIȘTE, *Dicționar enciclopedic de cunoștințe religioase*, Diocesan Publishing House, Caransebeș, 2001, p. 464.

traditions, such as Greek and Russian (at least this is clear from some studies); it cannot also be considered any substitution of the readings indicated by the church tradition during the vigil², but it is rather an “addition”.

Numerous articles³ have been written about this practice, some of them very interesting, but there are still some aspects of this ordinance, which were not even taken into account, such as the way in which the readings of the Holy Gospel, originally attributed only to deceased priests (see St. Simeon of Thessalonica), and which were originally integral, will in practice become selective (pericopes)⁴, once inserted in the order of the deceased lay (the so-called “pillars” of the Gospels).

Therefore, the attempt to clarify, at least in part, this evolution seems to be welcome, since the lack, but especially the diversity of clues, only make it difficult to understand this “evolution” and reduce our argument to a simple chain of hypotheses.

II. The Order of the Funeral “Pillars” - Practice or Custom?

Starting from the principle of readings to the dead, already mentioned by Saint Simeon of Thessalonica († 1429), in chapter 361, entitled “For the burial of Bishops, Priests, Monks and Laypeople”⁵, we notice that there is no clear specification regarding the readings for the vigil of a deceased layman.

² “Vigil, watch (lat. *per-vigilium*) - Staying at night with a dead, in his house...”, Fr. PhD. E. BRANIȘTE and Prof. Ecaterina BRANIȘTE, *Dicționar enciclopedic...*, p. 390.

³ One of the few articles on the order of funeral “pillars” is that of M. APOSTOL, “Despre «stîlpii» care se citesc la morți. Originea, rostul, conținutul, rînduiala și importanța lor pastorală”, in *Glasul Bisericii* 16 (1957) 4-5, pp. 265-278.

⁴ “Pericope (a cutting-out) (περικοπή, ἡ - *perikopi* = cut, lesson) they are reading units from the books of the New Testament. They are read during the divine service and are called *Apostles* and *Gospels*, according to the character of the writing to which they belong...”, Fr. PhD. E. BRANIȘTE and Prof. Ecaterina BRANIȘTE, *Dicționar enciclopedic...*, p. 258.

⁵ T. TEODORESCU, *Sfântul Simeon Arhiepiscopul Tesalonicului. Tratat asupra tuturor Dogmelor Crediinței noastre Ortodoxe, după adevăratele principii puse de Domnul nostru Iisus Hristos și urmașii Săi*, Reprinted from the original, translated from Greek in 1765, and corrected in some places, in the days of His Highness Lord of the Romanian United Principalities in 1865, Alexandru Ioan I, Toma Teodorescu Publishing, Bucharest, 1865, pp. 243-244.

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In our opinion, the diversity of practices related to these readings probably appeared in the Orthodox East, on the one hand, due to the lack of clear liturgical clarifications, and on the other hand, due to the freedom of interpretation of those clues already existing in the common liturgical ecclesiastical tradition.

It is interesting that the order of the “pillars” does not represent in any way, in the vision of our Romanian Orthodox Church, a departure from the church tradition, but rather an “enrichment” of it.

What would be the exact reason for this mutation (evolution) is difficult to say. Isn't it simply a “wonderful means or method of pastoral care”?⁶

III. The Practice of Reading Funeral “Pillars” - Origin and Evolution

Another aspect, just as difficult to specify, is the time when this liturgical practice began to take root in our Romanian church tradition, a custom that is missing from both Greek and Russian liturgical practice, both somewhat conservative of liturgical principles, mentioned by St. Simeon of Thessalonica:

“As funeral pillars being generally a «biblical» reading on the occasion of a funeral, it is difficult to say whether they are a liturgical practice per se and should be discussed from a liturgical point of view, or are simply a means or a wonderful method of pastoral care, therefore, it must be discussed from a pastoral point of view (...) That they wore this liturgical garment can be seen both from current practice and from the fact that eventually, the ritual books began to mention, in their contents, the practice of funerary pillars”⁷.

The first cult book in which the so-called “funeral pillars” were introduced (i.e. the 11 Gospels of the Resurrection) is Panihida (Panikhida)⁸,

⁶ M. APOSTOL, “Despre «stîlpîi» care se citesc la morţi...”, p. 266.

⁷ M. APOSTOL, “Despre «stîlpîi» care se citesc la morţi...”, p. 266.

⁸ “Panikhida it is also called the church book comprising the funeral service and other services performed for the dead (remembrance, memorial services); this book was originally part of the Euchologion...”, Fr. PhD. E. BRANIŞTE and Prof. Ecaterina BRANIŞTE, *Dicţionar enciclopedic...*, p. 337.

the 1948 edition⁹. However, certain “pillars” (that is only seven evangelical pericopes, called more precisely the Gospels of “states”¹⁰) were remembered and rendered, much earlier, by Trifon Lugojan¹¹:

“Finally, we must also remember that the pillars, which were read on this occasion (funeral, author’s note), as well as the gospels, which are read during the states, which are also called pillars in some parts of Bukovina...”¹².

Also interesting is a valuable liturgical mention indicated by T. Lugojan, on how to read these evangelical pericopes:

“The introduction of the Gospels in this book does not relieve the Priests of the duty to have at hand, at all liturgical services «the Holy Gospel», which symbolizes the presence of the Savior”¹³.

Details regarding the practice of reading the funeral “pillars”, their number, their content, the place and time where these readings took place, and about their purpose, we find in the cult books (recent editions), in the studies and articles¹⁴ already mentioned, in the Typikon¹⁵, as well as in the textbook of the Special Liturgy¹⁶, which is why we will not place particular emphasis on them.

⁹ “Gospels Read at the Pillars”, *Panihida cuprinzând Sfintele Slujbe de înmormântare și pomenire*, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1948, pp. 119-133.

¹⁰ “At the request of the family, several states are made, the Gospels and the Litany of the Dead being read; and at the tomb, the Gospel on the Raising of Lazarus is read”, T. LUGOJAN, *Carte de rugăciuni și cântări bisericesti*, Publishing House of the Romanian Orthodox Diocesan Library, Arad, 1931⁴, p. 268.

¹¹ *Carte de rugăciuni și cântări bisericesti...*, pp. 269-275.

¹² S. FI. MARIANŪ, *Înmormântarea la Români. Studiū etnograficū*, Carol Göbl Litho-printing, Bucharest, 1892, p. 225.

¹³ *Carte de rugăciuni și cântări bisericesti...*, p. 269, footnote.

¹⁴ See especially M. APOSTOL, “Despre «stîlpii» care se citesc la morți...”.

¹⁵ Cf. *Tipic bisericesc*, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1976, pp. 263-264.

¹⁶ Fr. Ph.D. E. BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica Specială pentru institutetele teologice*, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1985², pp. 534, 535; the indications on page 535 also refer to the funeral “pillars”, more precisely to the so-called Gospels of the “states”, mentioned above.

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Returning to the evolution of this practice over time, we assume that it is due to some extent to the inconsistency in the exact content of the “pillars”, in the sense that some sources indicate them as integral readings¹⁷, and the cult books and some liturgists present them as selective readings (pericopes)¹⁸. Moreover, according to some sources, even the readings in the Psalter were considered “pillars”:

“Instead of the priests, however, the cantors read the Psalter, always at night, that is, during the vigil, at the head of the dead, and in four periods, which are also called **pillars**. After each pillar, which contains five kathismata, the cantor takes a short break...”¹⁹.

IV. The Connection between the Order of the “pillars” and “The Order of the Prayer That Is Read after the Soul Leaves the Body”

Next, we consider it appropriate to point out some aspects regarding the connection between the practice of reading the “pillars” and “The order of the prayer that is read after the soul leaves the body”²⁰.

The first aspect that needs to be clarified is the fact that, in this Service Ordinance, nothing is mentioned about the practice of reading the so-called “pillars”, which is very logical, given that the order appears in a tradition that does not know this custom (that is the Slavo-Russian tradition).

The only indication of the connection between the practice of reading the “pillars” and “The order of the prayer that is read after the soul leaves the body” appears in the study of St. Fl. Marian, where it is clearly stated

¹⁷ V. MITROFANOVICI, *Prelegeri academice despre Liturgica Bisericii Dreptcredincioase Răsăritene*, Bukovina Printing Society, Chernivtsi, 1909, p. 806; I. Șt. POPESCU, *Noțiuni Liturgice sau Explicare pe Scurt a Serviciului Divin a Bisericii Ortodoxe Răsăritene*, Albina Publishing House, Iași, 1922, pp. 137-138.

¹⁸ I. TEODORESCU, *Indrumări Liturgice pentru preoți și popor*, SOCEC & Co. Bookstore Publishing House, Limited company, Bucharest, 1923, p. 168.

¹⁹ S. FL. MARIANŪ, *Înmormântarea la Români...*, p. 224.

²⁰ See also our study: *Rânduiala rugăciunii ce se face după ieșirea sufletului din trup, conform Psaltirii de la 1818*. (Noțiuni de Liturgică), Basilica Publishing, Bucharest, 2015.

that the “canon for the departure of the soul” precedes both the service of the Panikhida²¹, the reading of the “pillars”:

“In some parts of Moldova, namely in some villages in Suceava County, Muntele plateau, they are sometimes read directly after the dead was placed on the table or on the bed. As the priest comes, he first reads the canon for the departure of the soul, then makes the litany of the dead or the entire panikhida until the end, and then he places himself at the dead man’s head or on a bed and reads the pillars (evangelist)”²².

But what surprises us about “The order of the prayer that is read after the soul leaves the body”, is the fact that both Fr. Prof. E. Braniște, as well as M. Apostol and the other liturgists, who recall the study of S. Fl. Marian and the indications regarding the reading the “pillars”, do not mention anything about “canon read for the departure of the soul” (that is “The order of the prayer that is read after the soul leaves the body”).

V. The Gospels Read at the “Pillars”, according to the Latest Edition of Panikhida (2016)

We consider it welcome to record here the evangelical pericopes that are read at the pillars today.

Therefore, we will continue to list these Gospels, as they are arranged in the last edition of Panikhida, from 2016:

A. “The Gospels of the Resurrection”:

(1) Matthew 28,16-20; (2) Mark 16,1-8; (3) Mark 16,9-20; (4) Luke 24,1-12; (5) Luke 24,12-35; (6) Luke 24,36-53; (7) John 20,1-10; (8) John

²¹ “Panikhida - it is a service that the priest performs at the house of the deceased, either on the day of death or every day until the funeral. It is a pre-funeral service (from the Greek παννυχίς - *pannīhis*, formed from πᾶς - *pas* = everything, νύξ - *nix* = night and ᾄδω - *ado* = song); it means vigil or night service because it replaces the vigils, that is, the prayers and songs during the night that the faithful once did at the head of the dead, who were buried only at night, for fear of persecution...”, Fr. PhD. E. BRANIȘTE and Prof. Ecaterina BRANIȘTE, *Dicționar enciclopedic...*, p. 336.

²² *Înmormîntarea la Români...*, pp. 223-224.

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20,11-18; (9) John 20,19-31; (10) John 21,1-14; (11) John 21,14-25²³.

B. "Other Gospels that can be read as an addition to the pillars as well as on the way to the burial place":

(1) John 5,17-24; (2) John 6,40-44; (3) Luke 12,16-21; (4) Matthew 22,23-33; (5) Matthew 24,27-33, 42-51; (6) Matthew 6,22-33; (7) John 6,48-54; (8) Luke 14,1.12-15; (9) Matthew 25,31-46; (10) Matthew 5,42-48; (11) Matthew 13, 44-54; (12) John 8,51-59; (13) Matthew 12,30-37; (14) John 12,24-26.35-36; (15) Luke 12,32-40; (16) John 11,1-45²⁴.

VI. Conclusions

Regarding the tradition of our Church, it must be specified first of all that the practice of reading the "pillars" for the laity is a local custom, in the sense that it is not found in other Orthodox traditions, such as Greek and Russian (at least so it appears from various studies), and that it does not represent a substitution of the readings indicated by the church tradition, but rather an addition.

In our opinion, the diversity of practices related to these readings probably appeared in the Orthodox East, on the one hand, due to the lack of clear liturgical clarifications, and on the other hand, due to the freedom of interpretation of those clues already existing in the common liturgical ecclesiastical tradition.

The evolution of this practice over time, we suppose, is due to some extent to the inconsistency in the exact content of the "pillars", in the sense that some sources indicate them as complete readings, and cult books and some liturgists present them as selective readings (pericopes). Moreover, according to some of the sources, even the readings from the Psalter were considered "pillars".

In conclusion, the order of the "pillars" does not represent in any way, in the vision of our Romanian Orthodox Church, a departure from the church tradition, but rather an "enrichment" of it.

²³ *Panihida adică slujbele înmormântării și alte slujbe pentru cei răposați*, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2016, pp. 199-209.

²⁴ *Panihida adică slujbele înmormântării...*, pp. 209-222.