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# Prayer as the Poetry of the Soul in *The Great Canon*

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## Abstract

In this article, I explore how the prayers of The Great Canon are built around the most innovative Christian concepts. The melancholy of The Canon is communal, not solitary. Its sadness is filled with hope because in Christianity there is no circular spirituality. As we cannot understand The Canon without the belief in an inner self, I depicted the similarities that I found between Saint Andrew’s Canon and Blessed Augustine’s Confessions. The Canon also gives voice to the idea that we can sanctify matter and speaks against two types of idolatry which deny the value of matter. Because Christianity broke the circle into a cross, I showed how the repetition of the prayers leads us straight into the mystery of the Cross. This article also investigates how we can apply the prayers of The Canon in our lives so that we can create our own prayers.

## Keywords

The Great Canon, Christian melancholy, sanctified matter, prayer, the mystery of the Cross

*The Great Canon* is as vast and varied as Noah’s Ark, and embarking upon it, I chose to capture what prayers emerge from reading it. The effort of the soul in trying to translate itself to God, by praying, seemed to me a

step that is worth measuring, situated on firm levels of knowledge. It had the cadence of a heart that climbs the transparent ladder of the mind in order to reach God<sup>1</sup>: “Thou knowest, my soul, the ladder that was shown to Jacob, reaching up from earth to heaven. Why hast thou not provided a firm foundation for it through thy godly actions”<sup>2</sup>?

## I. The melancholy of repentance

When we analysed the composition of *The Canon* and attended the evening services during Lent, we were left with a special state of mind, of Christian melancholy<sup>3</sup>.

The trace<sup>4</sup> that these experiences left in our mind made us realize that what we were feeling was not a *solitary* melancholy, fractured by a sadness beyond remedy. Melancholy insinuates itself when the passions of the soul overthrow reason and people lose their original state, a fact that

<sup>1</sup> I draw inspiration from the words of Father Andrei Scrima, quoted in Ioan Alexandru TOFAN's book (*André Scrima, un gentleman creștin. Portret biografic*, our translation, Digital Edition, Humanitas, București, 2021, pp. 18-19), based on the documents that he researched at the *New Europe College*, in ‘The *André Scrima* Archive’, marked with N19.51: “I’m calling you to a certain tenderness and to a sacred attention toward knowledge. Never forget that it’s a staircase of transparent and celestial silk, a true Jacob’s ladder, seen in the prophetic dream, and you must know how to walk on it, you must learn how to walk on it”.

<sup>2</sup> *The Great Canon. The work of Saint Adrew of Crete*, Ode III.2, text by Kallistos WARE, Kindle Edition, Holy Trinity Publications, New York, 2021, 37. S. ANDREAE CRETENSIS, *Magnus Canon*, PG 97, 1344C: Τὴν Ἰακώβ κλίμακα ἔγνως, Ψυχὴ μου, δεικνυομένην ἀπὸ γῆς πρὸς τὰ οὐράνια· τί μὴ ἔσχες βάσιν ἀσφαλῆ τὴν εὐσέβειαν;

<sup>3</sup> “*The Great Canon* is sung on the sixth tone, music of sadness and sweetness, songs of tears” (Olivier CLÉMENT, *Le chant du larmes suivi des trois prières*, our translation, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 2011, Kindle Edition, location p. 321).

<sup>4</sup> For a luminous analysis of the traces left by God in the world, in our souls, and into words and images, as a method of theological knowledge, similar to that of Spectroscopy in Physics, see Horia-Roman PATAPIEVICI, “Hermeneutica Părintelui André Scrima: despre metoda unui stil de insolitare”, in: André SCRIMA, *Duhul Sfânt și unitatea Bisericii: Jurnal de conciliu*, Anastasia, București, 2004, pp.13-23. I. A. TOFAN (*Omul lăuntric. André Scrima și fizionomia experienței spirituale*, Humanitas, București, 2019, p. 19) even speaks of a detective’s point of view, necessary in Theology for investigating and following the scents of the divine savours left by God in the world.

can have a tragic outcome<sup>5</sup>. By contrast, Christian melancholy overcomes the pathology of the passions through hope<sup>6</sup>. The Beatitudes appear as the surprising burst of a swarm of starry bees, in the night of the sinful soul<sup>7</sup>. When we got to this part of *The Canon*, we felt like Exupéry's pilot when he sees the apparition of The Little Prince in the desert.

Closer to the sadness that we felt while listening to *The Canon* was the melancholy described by Orhan Pamuk<sup>8</sup>. The Christian melancholy is collective, belonging to human nature, as the particular carries within itself the echoes of the entire fallen humankind. This communal aspect is also marking Pamuk's melancholy. *Hüzün*, the Turkish word for melancholy, denotes a deep spiritual loss, a spiritual agony, and pain. But on further examination, *hüzün* is a rich and generous concept, encompassing a way of life that implicates the entire community. It not only denies life, but also affirms it poetically<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, no matter if solitude is the cause or the result of melancholy, it appears as the very essence of melancholy in past and present treatises<sup>10</sup>. By contrast, Pamuk notes masterfully, *hüzün* belongs to the entire community of Istanbul. It's a state of mind shared by millions of people, it's *the melancholy of the ruins*, of a whole city, determined

<sup>5</sup> The most famous example is that of Hamlet: "Something have you heard/ Of Hamlet's transformation; so call it / Since nor th' exterior nor the inward man / Resembles that it was" (William SHAKESPEARE, "Hamlet", II, 2, 5-8, in: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Race Point, New York, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> PG 97, 1384C: Μὴ χεῖρων, ὃ ψυχὴ μου, φανῆς δι' ἀπογνώσει τῆς Χαναναίας τὴν πίστιν ἀκούσασα. Ode IX.20 (76): "Be not overcome by despair, O my soul; for thou hast heard of the faith of the woman of Canaan".

<sup>7</sup> I'm drawing inspiration from a prayer that is Cherublike and has many eyes: "And on the third night, when from celestial hive, / in golden bees, the stars swarm / the black flower of the night, your hermit body/ was buried". (Sandu TUDOR, "Acatistul Preacuviosului Părintelui nostru Sfântul Dimitrie cel Nou, Boarul din Basarabov", our translation, in: *Akathists*, Christiana, București, 2009, pp. 27-28).

<sup>8</sup> Nobel Laureate in literature, Pamuk writes the ingenious chapter on Turkish melancholy in *Istanbul. Memories and the City*, translated by Maureen Freely, Deluxe Kindle Edition, Alfred Knopf, New York, 2017, pp. 155-181.

<sup>9</sup> Melancholy can bring joy or death, in the same way that many religious motifs are ambivalent: darkness can stem from the mystery of the Resurrection or from sin, and the desert can express the aridity of sin or the avidity for God.

<sup>10</sup> Pamuk discusses the case of Robert Burton, who wrote the exhaustive tome *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, in vogue in Shakespeare's time, and who inspired many modern researchers.

by the disintegration of the Empire. Nonetheless, the melancholy of *The Canon* sees the future, it derives its strength from the future, because the sadness for the sins that we committed betrays a desire for renewal: “The ladder which the great Patriarch Jacob saw of old is an example, O my soul, of approach through action and of ascent in knowledge. If then thou dost wish to live rightly in action and knowledge and contemplation, be thou made new”<sup>11</sup>.

Saint Andrew’s melancholy is a city full of lights and saints, which burns the sky with the refreshing fire of repentance. And which gives rise in our souls to hopeful prayer: “May our sadness always have the sun in it, like snow in summer”.

## II. The main characters of *The Canon*: the body and the soul

In *The Canon*, the soul addresses itself or God<sup>12</sup>. But we cannot forget that we are incarnated beings. The quarrel or the happy marriage between the body and the soul is one of the main topics of *The Canon*.

First of all, while reading *The Canon*, we were swept away by the Christian revolutionary spirit, which created the idea of a personal, inner self. *The Great Canon* cannot be understood with a mindset that denies the belief in an inner self. *Mise-en-scène* of *The Canon*, the personal self, with its biblical and penitential meditation, reminded us of Blessed Augustine. The meditation on the beginning of *The Book of Genesis* was an essential starting point both for Saint Andrew when he wrote *The Canon* and for Blessed Augustine, who, in the eleventh chapter of *Confessions*, starts his overwhelming meditation on time with the first verse from *Genesis*<sup>13</sup>. The

<sup>11</sup> Ode IV.6 (56). PG 97, 1348C: Ἡ κλῆμαξ, ἣν εἶδε πάλαι ὁ μέγας ἐν πατριάρχαις, δαίγμα, ψυχῇ μου, πρακτικῆς ὑπάρχει ἐπιβάσεως, γνωστικῆς τυγχάνει ἀναβάσεως· Εἰ θέλεις οὖν πράξει, καὶ γνώσει καὶ θεωρίᾳ βιοῦν, ἀνακαινίσθητι.

<sup>12</sup> Doru COSTACHE (“Înțelegeri bizantine: Cartea Facerii, Teologie și Spiritualitate în Canonul cel Mare al Sfântului Andrei Criteanul”, in: A. IONIȚĂ [coord.], *Imnografia liturgică bizantină: Perspective critice*, our translation, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2019, p. 198) says that the main character of *The Canon* is the human soul: “It can be said that, in fact, as a result of the hermeneutical transformations operated by Saint Andrew, the main character and the topic of *The Canon* is the conscience of the reader – you, soul of mine”.

<sup>13</sup> *Confessiones* (XI, 3, 5, CSEL, vol. 33, sectio I, pars I, 283: “audiam et intellegam, quomodo in principio fecisti caelum et terram” / ‘May I hear and understand how in

Augustinian interrogation on time includes the exercise of an inner self, his created and finite life which is not divinely generated, and the experience of human freedom. This is unlike the Greek categories of necessity and consubstantiality that dictated any approach between the human and the divine, between the temporal and the eternal<sup>14</sup>. His aporia of time is an extension of the aporia of the self, which foreshadows<sup>15</sup> an Andrew-like stylistic, the soul being a land of hardships and effort<sup>16</sup>.

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the beginning you made heaven and earth (Gen 1, 1)” (Saint AUGUSTINE, translated by Henry Chadwick, Kindle Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p. 223).

- <sup>14</sup> Philip CARRY (“Philosophical and Religious Origins of the Private Inner Self”, in: *Zygon. Journal of Religion and Science*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2011, pp. 122-128) places the origin of the inner self in the context of an epistemological theology belonging to a tradition that tried to find a place where God could be found. Plato, with his Intelligible World of Ideas, prepared the philosophical instruments for the invention of the inner self. Plotin transforms the Intelligible World into an internal one. But his world is not personal or individual. He places the Platonic Ideas inside the Divine Mind (νοῦς), which, in its turn, is situated in the Soul. Ours souls must look inward if they are to understand the Intellect. This process of turning inward does not lead to a private, individual self, because all souls are one. Though he found a great appeal into the Plotinian movement of turning inward, Blessed Augustine cannot accept the divine nature of the soul, as if there were no ontological difference between the Creator and the created (or only a difference of degree). He operates a substantial transformation of the Plotinian metaphysics, emphasizing that the inner space of the soul is not divine, and turning inward is not sufficient for knowing what is divine. The mind must follow not only an inward direction, but also an upward one to see God. Here, for the first time, it is clearly postulated the existence of a personal, inner world.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Canon* is organized by the method of the antitype, of positive prefigurations (what is anticipated in the Old Testament, Our Lord fulfils in the New Testament, e.g. Joseph’s well prefigures the Lord’s tomb). But we can also trace negative prefigurations, as the sinful soul ‘fulfilled’ the examples of the unrepentant, explains O. CLÉMENT (location 1087).

- <sup>16</sup> *Conf.* X, 16, 25, *CSEL*, vol. 33, sectio I, pars I, 244: “Ego certe, domine, laboro hic et laboro in me ipso: factus sum mihi terra difficultatis et sudoris nimii. Neque enim nunc scrutamur plagas caeli aut siderum interualla demetimur uel terrae libramenta quaerimus: ego sum, qui memini, ego animus.” (Saint Andrew strongly reiterates the Augustinian miracle of the *ego animus*. More on the magnitude of this Augustinian miracle see Veronica ANTON, *Timp și eternitate în filosofia greacă și în gândirea patristică*, Doxologia, Iași, 2018, pp. 310-386). “I at least, Lord, have difficulty at this point, and I find my own self hard to grasp. I have become for myself a soil which is a cause of difficulty and much sweat (Gen. 3, 17 f). For our present inquiry is not to examine the zones of heaven, nor are we measuring the distances between stars or the balancing of the earth. It is I who remember, I who am mind” (translated by H. Chadwick, p. 193).

Operating with a de-cosmology of time, Blessed Augustine became the father of all artists and theologians. A Dali before Dali<sup>17</sup>, with time melting inside us: “That is why I have come to think that time is simply a distension. But of what is it a distension? I do not know, but it would be surprising if it is not that of the mind itself”<sup>18</sup>.

Saint Andrew’s poem takes over the stage full of lights and penumbras<sup>19</sup> belonging to the inner self: not being subordinated to nature, the self is now free to sanctify it, through penitence and with the help of our Lord. *The Canon* contains several references to Christ as Creator: “Thou art my

<sup>17</sup> We are referring to Dali’s famous painting *The Persistence of Memory* or *Melting Clocks*, which expresses visually what Blessed Augustine does with cosmological time, he erodes it in order to make place for the time of the inner self. It’s the time ‘out of joint’ (*Hamlet*, I, 5, 194), but within a redemptive framework.

<sup>18</sup> *Conf.* XI, 26, 33, CSEL, vol. 33, sectio I, pars I, 304: “inde mihi visum est nihil esse aliud tempus quam distentionem; sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi” (translated by H. Chadwick, pp. 239-240).

<sup>19</sup> They both see sin as a tearing of the soft, sunlit fabric of the soul, like the unstitching of Japanese embroidery. Blessed Augustine says: “et tumultuosas uarietates dilaniantur cogitationes meae, intima uiscera animae meae, donec in te confluum purgatus et liquidus igne amoris tui” (*Conf.*, XI, 29, 39, CSEL, sectio I, pars I, 308, our emphasis / “the storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul, until that day when, purified and molten by the fire of your love, I flow together to merge into you”. Translated by H. Chadwick, pp. 243-244). Saint Andrew tells us of *the slaying* and *the tearing* of our souls and bodies through sin (see below Ode II. 8 and II.35, at notes 25 and 33). I associated sin with the tearing of a Japanese embroidery, though Andrei Tarkovsky is the one who employs it to describe the revelation of God through art, which he personally experienced: “I had a strange dream last night: I was looking up at the sky, and it was very, very light, and soft; and high, high above me it seemed to be slowly boiling, like light that has materialized, like the fibres of a sunlit fabric, like silken, living stitches in a piece of Japanese embroidery. And those tiny fibres, light-bearing, living threads, seemed to be moving and floating, and becoming like birds, hovering so high up that they could never be reached. So high that if the birds were to lose feathers the feathers wouldn’t fall, they wouldn’t come down to the earth, they would fly upwards, be carried off and vanish from our world forever. And soft, enchanted music was flowing down from that great height. The music seemed to sound like the chiming of little bells; or else the bird’s chirping was like music. *They’re storks*, I suddenly said someone say, and I woke up. A strange and beautiful dream. I do sometimes have beautiful dreams.” (*Time within Time. The Diaries, 1970-1986*, translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair, Seagull Books, London, 2018<sup>2</sup>, 63).

sweet Jesus, Thou art my *Creator*; in Thee shall I be justified, O Savior”<sup>20</sup>. Thus, he refutes the Arian trap of a humanity in Christ that is deprived of cosmological meaning. This idea is in perfect harmony with the realism of the Incarnation in the Primary Church and with Saint John’s Gospel<sup>21</sup>. Because Jesus is God and Creator, his earthly activity implies a profound restoration of creation, which leads the poet to see the cosmological magnitude of redemption<sup>22</sup>.

Opposing this cosmological aspect means falling into an idolatry directed toward the soul<sup>23</sup>, into an immoderate and subtle appetite for the spirit. This idolatry is against matter and seeks the salvation of the soul at the expense of abandoning with disdain the body and the world. But the body is a miracle, a brother<sup>24</sup>. Bestowing a spiritual significance to the body is an act of Orthodox faith, which is centred on the reality of the Incarnation and of sanctified matter<sup>25</sup>. Radical asceticism, which seeks to

<sup>20</sup> Ode III.6, (7). PG 97, 1341D, our emphasis: Σὺ εἶ ὁ γλυκὺς Ἰησοῦς, σὺ εἶ ὁ πλαστουργός μου. Ἐν σοί, Σῶτερ, δικαιοθήσομαι. “You are the One who moulded me”, D. COSTACHE translates (our translation from Romanian into English, p. 204), emphasizing that, for Saint Andrew, soteriology is never separated from the theology of creation. He notes that in the first week of Lent, we have readings from *The Book of Genesis*, a thing that is by no means accidental.

<sup>21</sup> “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1, 1-4, *The Orthodox Study Bible*, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> D.COSTACHE, “Înțelegeri bizantine...”, p. 207. Blessed Augustine’s de-cosmology process is strongly related to that of sanctifying the cosmos. You need an inner, free self in order to sanctify the world.

<sup>23</sup> PG 97, 1352C: Αὐτείδωλον ἐγενόμην, τοῖς πάθεσι τὴν ψυχὴν μου βλάπτων, οἰκτίρμων. Ode IV.26 (58): “I have become mine own idol, utterly defiling my soul with the passions, O compassionate Lord”.

<sup>24</sup> PG 97, 1340C: Ὡ πῶς ἐξήλωσα Λάμεχ τὸν πρόην φονευτὴν! τὴν ψυχὴν ὥσπερ ἄνδρα, τὸν νοῦν ὡς νεανίσκον· ὡς ἀδελφὸν δέ μου τὸ σῶμα ἀποκτείνας, ὡς Κάϊν ὁ φονεὺς, ταῖς φιληδόνοις ὀρμαῖς. Ode II.35 (50): “Ah, how I have emulated Lamech, the murderer of old, slaying my soul as if it were a man, and my mind as if it were a young man. With sensual longings I have killed my body, as Cain the murdered killed his brother”.

<sup>25</sup> With a theological mind that possesses the clarity of someone who drank from The Fountain that Saint Andrew talks about (see below at Ode V.20, note 39), L. Ouspensky amplifies this idea in *Theology of the Icon* (volume I, translated by Anthony Gythiel, with selections translated by Elizabeth Meyendorff, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press,



nullify the body, is alien to Christianity, because it denies the reality of the Incarnation. If the body is outside the range of redemption, an obstacle to be removed if we are to be united with the Absolute, then the Incarnation and the Resurrection of Jesus are void of meaning.

Secondly, there's an idolatry directed toward the body, which seeks the meaning of the world only within its borders. Joseph being thrown into the well foreshadows the Lord's tomb<sup>26</sup>, but it also suggests that we are accomplices in this nefarious and idolatrous history, where we regard others in a *transactional* way<sup>27</sup>. Materialism denies matter any value, condemning it to absurdity and hazard. Materialism is anti-materialist, and not only does not elevate matter to its superior meaning, but also forces the human beings to deny one another any belonging to the image of God<sup>28</sup>. Our existence in the image of God and with the perpetual possibility of attaining the likeness of God, means that our biological processes are included in the process of sanctification. In the end, in this idolatrous and reductive history, there are many living dead. In other words, the living dead are the opposite of Christians, who are alive in death.

The second part of our very short prayer values the spirituality of the body and is made on the margins of these verses: "May the Blood from Thy side be to me a cleansing *fount*, and may the water that flows with it be a drink of forgiveness. May I be purified by both, O Word, anointed and refreshed, having as chrism and drink Thy words of Life"<sup>29</sup>. We felt that the

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New York, 1992, p. 121): "Incarnation, in turn, is confirmed and proven by the image. In other words, the icon is a proof that the divine Incarnation was not an illusion". The refusal to venerate the icons is connected to the refusal to accept the possibility that matter can be sanctified, a refusal very strongly supported by the Ancient Religions and by the philosophical schools. Thus, true idolatry means to reject the veneration of the icons.

<sup>26</sup> PG 97, 1353C: Εἰ καὶ λάκκῳ ὥκησέ ποτε Ἰωσήφ, Δέσποτα Κύριε· ἀλλ' εἰς τύπον τῆς ταφῆς καὶ τῆς ἐγέρσεώς σου. Ode V.6 (60): "Once Joseph was cast into a pit, O Lord and Master, as a figure of Thy Burial and Resurrection."

<sup>27</sup> O. CLÉMENT speaks about this transactional attitude with which Joseph is looked at by his brothers and which we perpetuate throughout a tyrannical history (location 954).

<sup>28</sup> Clive Staples LEWIS, who tasted to the full the honey from Samson's dead lion, discusses at length about materialism in *Mere Christianity*, Harper San Francisco, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Ode IV.21 (57). PG 97, 1352A: Γενέσθω μοι κολυμβήθρα τὸ αἷμα τὸ ἐκ πλευρᾶς σου· ἅμα καὶ πόμα, τὸ πηγάσαν ὕδωρ τῆς ἀφέσεως, ἵνα ἐκατέρωθεν καθαίρωμαι,



font spoke about God's maternity, and we said: "God, listen to our unborn heart and lungs, You carry them within You."

### III. Prayer as the mystery of the Cross

Attaining the state of prayer is the last act, from the last scene of *The Canon*. The prayers of *The Canon* are part of a *theology of failure*: we made a detour through sin, we even chose the longest way in this detour<sup>30</sup>, but we cross the winding path toward God by praying. We live in a time that maximizes success and forgets the formative importance of failure. We can fail well. Failure must not be rejected, but acknowledged and exposed to God. Sin, as an expression of failure<sup>31</sup>, is a wound, a tearing,

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χριόμενος, πίνων, ὡς χρῖσμα καὶ πόμα, Λόγε, τὰ ζωνηρά σου λόγια.

<sup>30</sup> Let's not forget for one moment the positive dimensions of the detour, of going round things, as a method of knowing the Truth, though here we bestowed it a note of negativity. H.-R. PATAPIEVICI ("Hermeneutica Părintelui André Scrima", p. 22) speaks about the detour that Father Andrei made through culture, as a method of concrete theological knowledge: "He didn't leave you somewhere precisely, but he left you on the road – it was essential to his pedagogy to never reach the destination, but to leave you in progress, to let you inhabit the space of his discourse, the space that made the problem in question have real existence". I. A. TOFAN (*André Scrima, un gentleman creștin*, p. 63) asserts that the detour is even a way of being: "It's a communal way of being *par excellence*, sometimes theatrical. He never delivered the result, but only made allusions to it, delaying its apparition which would have suspended its search. The detour through verse and chromatic incarnations is not a deviation from the road, but a specific technique for crossing it, replacing the running around in scowls with dance steps." Andrei PLEȘU ("Foreword" to *Timpul Rugului Aprins*, Humanitas, București, 2000, 6) analyses the puzzling speech of Father Andrei, filled with tangents which led you straight to God: the sentence is filled with unending intercalations and with baroque volutes, so that the revelation, the gist, the disclosure of the idea – come later and sometimes find you tired. The introductions are ample, coiled, the ability of delaying the clarifying sentence is practically infinite. All along the path, this uncomfortable rhetoric is accompanied by a charming erudition, by intuitions, refinements, and an unequalled spiritual voluptuousness" (our translations). We should say that the detour through culture as a method of theological knowledge is a liturgical act, which embraces the beauty of *all* of God's creation, and protects us, the Orthodox, from the sin of reducing things to the non-essential.

<sup>31</sup> "Sin is the failure of a relationship (with God, therefore with others and with things)" (O. CLÉMENT, our translation, location 857).

and an unwanted addition: “I have clothed myself in the *torn* coat that the serpent wove for me by his counsel, and I am ashamed”<sup>32</sup>. But Christ has a predilection for these uneven terrains, in which He can make Himself visible as long as we embrace the meek attitude of the tax collector.

Being reminded of our sins and repenting give rise to repetition. *The Great Canon* bears the mark of one refrain: *Have mercy on me, O Lord, have mercy on me!*<sup>33</sup> If we were to apply the technique of the palimpsest to *The Canon*, we would erase<sup>34</sup> the initial text, which is the invocation *Lord, have mercy on me*, to overwrite it with a gallery of biblical examples. But the matrix of *The Canon* would still be this invocation, which we repeat in different ways, until the white spaces and the silence between words become light. Repetition is a ritual of such force that it can save the world<sup>35</sup>. The reason it possesses such force is due to its cross-like constitution. Christian repetition does not fall into the sadness and the boredom of the circle. It is not circular because the human being evades spiritually the cyclicity. One of the greatest Christian contributions consisted in making the human beings evade the natural captivity of circularity<sup>36</sup>. A great sadness<sup>37</sup> permeates the reading of the Greek philosophical texts, because

<sup>32</sup> Ode II, 8 (our emphasis, 50). PG 97, 1337A: Ἐνδέδουμαι διερρηγμένον χιτῶνα, ὃν ἐξυφάνατό μοι ὁ ὄφεις τῇ συμβουλῇ, καὶ κατασχύνομαι.

<sup>33</sup> Ἐλέησον, Κύριε, ἐλέησόν με!

<sup>34</sup> O. CLÉMENT speaks about ‘stripping off’ the masks of sin, that I dared to compare with a triple ‘erasure’ (of the text, and of our own body and soul, beyond which our Lord is to be found): “asceticism appears as an active abandonment to grace, which strips us off, little by little, of our dead skins, of masks, of characters and roles, and allows us to breath deeper, with our whole being, the Breath of Life.” (our translation, location 47).

<sup>35</sup> In the movie *Offret*, Andrei Tarkovsky’s final masterpiece, we are shown that repetition regenerates the world. The disciple that Alexander talks about climbs the hill day after day, step by step, and filling bucket after bucket, in order to water the barren tree until it comes to life, its boughs being covered in small leaves.

<sup>36</sup> The divinity and the humanity of Christ meet on the liturgy of the Cross, not in a circle, a shape of sad, arid, and disincarnated perfection.

<sup>37</sup> David Bentley HART notices that the cardinal gift that Christianity brought to Ancient culture was freedom and the gift of a friendly body: “Whatever else Christianity brought into the late antique world, the principal gift it offered to pagan culture was a liberation from spiritual anxiety, from the desperation born of a hopeless longing for escape, from the sadness of having to forsake all love of the world absolutely in order to find salvation, from a morbid terror of the body, and from the fear that the cosmic powers on high might prevent the spirit from reaching its heavenly

we cannot escape the circle through them. Instead, the repetitions of *The Canon* exude vitality. Prayer is water: “Thou art a deep well, O Master: make springs gush forth for me from Thy pure veins, that like the woman of Samaria I may drink and thirst no more; for from Thee flow the streams of life”<sup>38</sup>. Prayer is desert, a space for essential reductions, without the addition of sin, where *all is grace*<sup>39</sup>: “Moses the great went to dwell in the desert. Come, seek to follow his way of life, my soul, that in contemplation, thou mayest attain the vision of God in the bush”<sup>40</sup>.

Praying means going through all the vectors of the Cross: in the first stage, on the horizontal line of a personal and communal history, the human being speaks the words of the prayer *Jesus, have mercy on me*, and on the divine vertical, the Word is silent and awaiting. On the second level, the Word speaks and the human being is silent<sup>41</sup>. On this step, prayer can be

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home”. (*Atheist Delusions. The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, Yale University Press, 2009, pp. 144-145). Hart goes on to say, in the overwhelming chapter “A Glorious Sadness” (pp. 129-145), that Pagan Antiquity viewed the divine as brutal and capricious, that some of its philosophical schools were morbid, that death was seen with much despair and the fear of the natural, occult forces was ever-present, that the sacrificial practices were violent, and that people had to submit to the blind, all-powerful force of fate. These points stand in egregious opposition with the false lenses that are usually applied to Antiquity: a Romantic, lost Paradise, a time of superabundant vitality, which Christianity would have supposedly darkened.

<sup>38</sup> Ode V, 20 (61). PG 97, 1357A: Εἰ καὶ φρέαρ, Δέσποτα, ὑπάρχεις βαθύ, βλῦσόν μοι νάματα ἐξ ἀχράντων σου φλεβῶν· ἵν’ ὥς ἡ Σαμαρεῖτις, μηκέτι πίνων διψῶ· ζωῆς γὰρ ρεῖθρα βλύζεις.

<sup>39</sup> «Tout est grâce» (Georges BERNANOS, *Le journal d’un curé de campagne*, Kindle Edition, Passerino, 2019, 276).

<sup>40</sup> Ode V.10 (60). PG 97, 1356A: Τὰς ἐρήμους ὤκησεν ὁ μέγας Μωσῆς. Δεῦρο δὲ μίμησαι τὴν αὐτοῦ διαγωγὴν· ἵνα καὶ τῆς ἐν βάτῳ θεοφανείας, ψυχῇ, ἐν θεωρίᾳ γένη. The language of prayer is paradoxical. All throughout his works, Saint Gregorius Palamas speaks of “a seeing beyond seeing” when experiencing grace and the uncreated light, and Nicolaus Cusanus emerges with the concept (with Augustinian roots) of “docta ignorantia” to express the way we experience the mystery of God and the enigmas of the world.

<sup>41</sup> Silence as a manifestation of prayer appears with brilliance in *The Canon*: Ἡ φιλοσόφρων Ἄννα προσευχομένη τὰ χεῖλη μὲν ἐκίνει πρὸς αἶνεσιν· φωνὴ δὲ ταύτης οὐκ ἐξηχεῖτο· ἀλλ’ ὁμως στεῖρα οὖσα, υἱὸν τῆς προσευχῆς τίκει ἄξιον. (PG 97, 1366A, our emphasis) / “Hannah, who loved self-restraint and chastity, when speaking to God moved her lips in praise, but her voice was not heard; and she who was barren bore a son worthy of her prayer”, *The Beatitudes*, 11, (66).

seen as what is left from the word, the wind, the spring breeze<sup>42</sup>. The cry of penitence turns into the diaphanous whispering of God in our hearts. In the third phase, the human being feels indebted to translate God's susurrus into the world, not necessarily *via* a textual *corpus*, but through all the good deeds of one's life. Here the Cross reaches its complete destination as an anti-Babel: the vertical arm of the Cross, of the *Logos* that speaks Himself incessantly to a person, coexists with the horizontal one, with that of the person speaking with and about God, so that God and the human being can speak at the same time<sup>43</sup>. In the end, the Cross creates the counterpoint.

The third and last part of our prayer, which arose on the margins of the Cross and of the invocation *Jesus, have mercy on me*, sounds like this: "God, we carried you on the tips of our fingers. We repeated you and sang you, without reaching the song. God, you carry us on the tips of your fingers. You made us the most beautiful song". And from here on, the rest is *not* silence<sup>44</sup>, all is telling.

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<sup>42</sup> Untranslatable play of words: in Romanian, word is *cuvânt*, and wind is *vânt*.

<sup>43</sup> There are simultaneous interpreters, people who translate at the same time with those who speak in their native language.

<sup>44</sup> "The rest is silence". (*Hamlet* V, 2, 359).