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The Valorization of Catechesis in the Context of Church Music

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Abstract

Orthodox church music is a form of expression showing man's religious feeling towards God. This aspect, however, has an important liturgical dimension. The divine cult itself is based on church music or liturgical singing. Church singing is an element without divine worship cannot exist, an indispensable element of worship. Almost all Church services are officiated with the help of church music¹. Every single person lives and express different kinds of religious feelings. These can be expressed through church music, which give a deep spiritual understanding. Church music, beside these spiritual meanings of human soul, discovers artistic experiences. That's why we encounter a relationship of insight between religion and church musical art². Thus, a symbiosis is born between the dogmatic text of the song, between the gracious and the artistic-spiritual element.

Keywords

Orthodox church music, religious feeling, catechesis, grace, art, spirituality

¹ Pr. Dr. Ioan-Eugen BUTA, *Reglementări canonice privind cântarea liturgică în Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, Editura Andreiană, Sibiu, 2016, p. 5.

² Ioan-Eugen BUTA, *Reglementări canonice privind cântarea liturgică în Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, p. 5.

I. Introduction

In order to take a deeper look at this, we must start from the position in which we say that church music is an integral part of the Holy Liturgy, and of the holy services in general.

For an uninformed participant, the Holy Liturgy, in the form in which it is today, appears as a complex of rituals and symbols difficult to understand: processional exits and entrances to the altar, litany, ecphonises, chants, biblical readings, etc., which seem to have no connection between them.

As a result we may be tempted to believe that the relationship between Liturgy and catechism has only one meaning: the catechism must explain the Liturgy, to make it understood in order to consciously participate in it. To speak of a catechetical character of the Holy Liturgy (except for biblical readings, homilies, and the Symbol of Faith) seems rather unrealistic and the assertion that the Holy Liturgy is a perfect catechism and the center of the Church's catechetical activity can be considered aberrant and triumphalist. However, a serious analysis of the significance of the Holy Liturgy and the profound meaning of catechization leads us to this conclusion.

In order to understand the catechetical character of the Holy Liturgy and virtually of liturgical music, it is necessary first to clarify the meaning of the terms of catechism and catechization.

With the root in the greek word *κατήχεῖν*, and the meaning of: "saying something from a highest place", and the meaning "to teach another by live speech"³, catechesis is "living transmission of the treasure of faith to new members who join the Church"⁴, an initiation in faith mysteries of those who wants to receive Baptism and become members of Church. Broadly, however, the terms catechism and catechization refers to the pedagogical vocation of the Church, to its entire teaching activity. It is certain that it is addressed not only to outsiders but also to all its members, regardless of their age and the time when they were baptized.

"Catechesis is the living echo of the maternal, biblical and spiritual speech of the Church, and catechesis is the process of birth and maturation of the faith according to Baptism, the

³ Pr. Prof. Dr. Vasile GORDON, *Introducere în Catehetica Ortodoxă*, București, Editura Sophia, 2004, p. 10.

⁴ Jean DANIELOU, Regine DE CHARLAT, *La Catechese aux premiers siècles*, Paris, 1968, p. 7.

fundamental work of uttering, listening and personalizing the mother tongue of the Church, rooting the Logos in the depths of the human heart by shadowing the Spirit, laying the foundation of the house of the Living God in the living man, a true personal Annunciation”⁵.

II. The catechesis expressed through church music – shades and termes

Catechesis is a fundamental dimension of the Church’s work, an expression of her pedagogical vocation, a continuation of the Saviour’s teaching ministry and, as a result, is not limited to the transmission of knowledge. Christ did not incarnate to give us a doctrine that would satisfy our intellectual curiosity, but to give us eternal life by making us partakers of the kingdom of heaven. And the eternal life, He teaches us, means the knowledge of God. “And this is eternal life, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (cf. In. 17, 3), by engaging in a living, loving personal relationship with God, fulfilling the words of Christ.

This service is a continuation of Christ in the Church, His Body extended into humanity, through the work of the Holy Spirit who came down into the Church at Pentecost. The Church is the “dwelling” of the Holy Spirit who has transported through the troubled ages the treasures of the Truth revealed by God. The mission of the Church is nothing less than to take her sons into the realm of God’s Being⁶, to lead them to deification, uniting them organically and personally with the Person of Christ so that their personality becomes a personality in Christ and through Christ, in them no longer living themselves but Christ living in them (cf. Gal. 2, 20).

Catechesis is a continuous call that the Church addresses both to outsiders and to her members to immortality and eternity, to living the new life in Christ and to deification. It is a proclamation of the great deeds that God has worked and is working for our salvation and a call to share their fruits in the Church through the Holy Liturgy. “Through the intercession of

⁵ Pr. Lect. Nicolae JAN, “Clopotul din noaptea de Paști. Pledoarie pentru un reviriment catehetic”, in: *Logos. Revistă de Pastorală catehetică*, Editura Centrului de Cercetare în Pedagogie pastorală și Psihoterapie ortodoxă, Alba Iulia, I (2007) 1, p. 14.

⁶ Arhimandritul SOFRONIE, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, translation by Hierom. Rafail (Noica), București, Editura Sophia, 2005, p. 136.

the Holy Sacraments, Nicolae Cabasila wrote, Christ comes to us, makes a shelter in our soul, becomes one with us and awakens us to a new life⁷.

Through Baptism we die and rise in Christ, through Anointing we acquire the Holy Spirit and in Eucharist we feed with the Body and Blood of the Lord as members of His Body. This inner transformation that the Holy Sacraments works in us is prepared and completed by catechesis by cultivating faith through initiation into the saving teaching and the exhortation to the ascetic effort of despair.

Father Florin Botezan says:

“The Holy Fathers distinguish between the faith of hearing which brings us to Christ and the faith which constitutes the very life of the Church and its members, and which St. Paul says it makes Christ dwell in our hearts (cf. Eph. 3, 17). Saint Maximus the Confessor calls the first a simple faith or a heard one and the second the absolute or seen faith, the union of men with God⁸.”

Salvation fulfills only when men reaches from the simple to absolute faith⁹. And from simple to absolute faith is reached by receiving grace in the Holy Sacraments of the Church (especially Baptism, Anointing and Eucharist) and by engaging in an ascetic effort that seeks to cleanse the passions and acquire virtues according to divine commandments¹⁰.

In conclusion we can say that by catechesis, as a teaching activity of the Church, is meant not a simple theoretical teaching, but an education for salvation that shares with people the saving truths of the true faith to know “the love of Christ, the highest knowledge” (cf. Eph. 3, 19), committing himself in repentance to renewal in the sense of being clothed in “the new man, the one after God, built up in righteousness and in the holiness of truth” (cf. Eph. 4, 24), to be filled, in the power of the Holy Spirit, “with all the fullness of God” (cf. Eph. 3, 19). The purpose of the catechetical

⁷ NICOLAE CABASILĂ, *Despre Viața în Hristos*, I, translated by Pr. Prof. Dr. Teodor Bodogae, București, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Bucureștilor, 1989, p. 146.

⁸ Pr. Florin BOTEZAN, *Sfânta Liturghie–cateheză desăvârșită. Studiu asupra caracterului catehetic al Liturghiilor Ortodoxe*, Alba Iulia, Editura Reîntregirea, 2005, p. 81.

⁹ † Hierotheos VLACHOS, *Cugetul Bisericii Ortodoxe*, București, Editura Sophia, 2000, p. 64.

¹⁰ Sf. PETRU DAMASCHINUL, “Învățăături duhovnicești”, II, 1, in: *Filocalia*, vol. V, translation, introduction and notes by Fr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1976, p. 194.

activity of the Church, which cannot be detached from the general mission of the Church, is to lead us to the existential knowledge of God which is eternal life (cf. In. 17, 3) and which presupposes our transformation that “in everything we may grow into Him who is the head, Christ” (cf. Eph. 4, 15) until he reaches “the state of the perfect man, according to the age of the fullness of Christ” (cf. Eph. 4, 13).

The catechetical aspect of church music is liturgical in its character. The conclusions of the theologians who have studied the holy services of the Church highlight what the Church has experienced from the beginning, namely that these are her life, “the public act that eternally updates the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ, an act that is not partial, referring only to a function of the Church (its common prayer) or expressing one of its aspects, but embracing, expressing, inspiring and defining the whole. The church, its whole essential nature, its whole life”¹¹. Orthodox services are the true and living life of the Church, in which every member of the Church takes part, by living everything that is God-human, everything that is apostolic, everything that belongs to the Holy Fathers¹². The cult of the Church expresses the gift of knowledge, of the new life coming from the Father, through the Son, onto the Holy Spirit. All services place us in God’s Word. And this not only gives us, from now on, the understanding of the revelation of the Truth, but, moreover, it categorically promises us eternal life by receiving the Truth. For the Word of God is the Word of Truth, the Word of God incarnate revealing Himself as the Truth itself (cf. In. 14, 6). And the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth (cf. In. 15, 26). And both are communicated to us, in the liturgical prayer, coming from the “Father of Lights” (cf. Jas. 1, 17) to reveal it¹³. Music and services therefore lead us to the liturgical knowledge, in the Holy Spirit, of God as an expression of the encounter in love with Him, a knowledge that is repentance, the death of the old man, subjected to sin, and our resurrection to a new feeling because

“the whole contemplation of divine realities is possible no other than if the spirit of man acquires a state which, to some extent,

¹¹ Alexander SCHMEMANN, *Introducere în Teologia Liturgică*, trans. by Ierom. Vasile Bârzu, București, Editura Sophia, 2002, p. 53.

¹² Sf. Justin POPOVICI, *Biserica Ortodoxă și ecumenismul*, trans. by Adrian Tănăsescu, Petru Vodă, Mănăstirea Sfinții Arhangheli, 2002, p. 65.

¹³ Constantin ANDRONIKOFF, *Le sens de la liturgie. La relation entre Dieu et l’homme*, Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1988, p. 9.

corresponds to what he contemplates. Only by living in the grace of the Holy Spirit does man become entitled to the vision of immortal glory and the light without sunset.”¹⁴

It is natural, however, that the catechetical activity of the Church be closely related to the services and especially to the Holy Liturgy, an obvious reality especially in the life of the early Church when “catechetical teaching was in itself a liturgical act active in the first Liturgy and the first communion”¹⁵. The cult itself, from the beginning, had a deep catechetical character, being a means of transmitting the true faith.

“To the extent that they can be detected in the New Testament, the liturgical elements are invariably kerigmatic or catechetical character, revealing the divine truth necessary for salvation and teaching this truth to those who have recently become enlightened members of the Body of Christ.”¹⁶

The life of the early Church teaches us that the catechetical activity of the Church is liturgical in its character. On the one hand, the catechesis transmits the truths of the faith in order to experience them in worship and explains the services so that they can be lived fully, and on the other hand, the worship itself is a catechesis in the deepest sense of the word, not only through the contained kerygmatic elements, but also especially through the liturgical knowledge of God that he gives.

The catechetical function of church music, which, understood as a communion with saving truth, is fundamental along with the charismatic-sanctifying and the laetitic, we find in all three means of expression of worship: word, act and matter. The word takes as a concrete form of manifestation prayer, hymnography, confession of faith, biblical readings.

All these forms have a deep catechetical character, clearly expressing the Orthodox dogmas. Bible readings bring to life the word of God contained

¹⁴ Arhimandritul SOFRONIE, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, p. 59.

¹⁵ Pr. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, “Le culte byzantine comme expression de la foi orthodoxe”, in: *La liturgie expression de la foi*. Conférence Saint Serge, XXV Semaine d’Etudes Liturgiques, Paris, 1978, p. 85.

¹⁶ Pr. Prof. John BRECK, *Puterea cuvântului în Biserica dreptmăritoare*, transl. by Monica Hergelegiu, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1999, p. 179.

in Holy Scripture by bringing it into the midst of the liturgical assembly. Hymnography is a true poetic sermon, foreign to subjective lyrism and sentimentalism, which exposes in doxological form the scriptural word and patristic theology. Through the beauty of liturgical hymns, singing and icons, through the intuitive language of rituals, worship discovers the saving truth in perceptible forms with great force of attraction, making the believer live these truths not only knowing them rationally.

III. The musical-catechetical aspect of Liturgy

Liturgy is a perfect catechesis. At the center of Orthodox worship is the Liturgy which is a Sacrament and a Mystery. It is a true sacrifice because, whenever we perform it, the Holy Spirit updates the redemptive work of the Savior focused on His death and Resurrection. It is, at the same time, the Sacrament of union with Christ and between us in the Church through communion with His Body and Blood. Saint Dionysius the Areopagite calls Liturgy the Mystery of the Mysteries because it crowns all that has been given through the other services and unites most fully each believer and all in the One and infinite God in love, perfecting communion with God¹⁷. It is the Mystery of Christ and the Church, the continuous Pentecost, and the Mystery of the Church's entry into the Kingdom of God.

Liturgical singing is a "catechetical-Eucharistic and sanctifying structure"¹⁸ of salvation in the gratitude atmosphere and consecration through the word and communion with the Body and Blood of Christ. Even more, we can say that the Holy Liturgy is a perfect catechesis, the type of any catechesis that must not only transmit an exact faith, but introduce it into a living faith by placing us in a direct relationship, of communion, with God and with the other members of the Church because "the Liturgy embraces in itself our whole life: it includes all the plans of our existence in relation to God"¹⁹.

¹⁷ Sf. DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, "Despre Ierarhia Bisericească", in: *Opere Complete*, translation, introduction and notes by Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Paidea Publishing house, Bucurest, 1996, p. 78.

¹⁸ Fr. Constantin GALERIU, "Mărturisirea dreptei credințe prin Sfânta Liturghie", in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXIII (1981) 1, p. 34.

¹⁹ *Ne vorbește Părintele Sofronie – Scrisori*, Galați, Bunavestire Publishing house, 2003, p. 75.

The Holy Liturgy is the paradigm of unity between the word and the Mystery, the Mystery, through which the Divine Grace is shared and Christ Himself unites with those who believe, confirming and giving power to the word, which it transforms from a message about Christ into a real participation in His divine life.

The Liturgy, music and word is catechesis and Eucharist, in its first part, the Liturgy of the Catechumens, predominating the catechetical aspect and in the second, the Liturgy of the faithful, the Eucharistic and thankful. Prayer and singing are two complementary aspects of the liturgical act in general and of the Liturgy in particular. In Liturgy, singing and prayer are perfectly intertwined, culminating in communion with the Incarnate Truth itself.

The music of Liturgy is revealed to us as a true mystagogy²⁰, an initiation into the great mystery of salvation, fulfilled by the incarnation of the Son of God and by His redeeming economy, which means deification in Christ, a mystery given in Baptism, to every Christian and experienced in the Eucharistic communion.

In Liturgy, grace is expressed with the help of the liturgical art which thus acquires a special importance in the development of the service, contributing decisively to the fulfillment of its purposes. Liturgical art is an art inspired by the Holy Spirit being the fruit of prayer and the purification of the senses through asceticism in a life in the Church in communion with God. With the help of liturgical art, the services make us taste that “something else” that the Kingdom of God represents. Attendance at services becomes an experience that deeply marks the soul that seeks God. Liturgy is by excellence the place where art is called to expose the beauty of divine glory and to open us the catechetical work of the Word. Architecture, painting, poetry, and singing interconnect in an organic symbiosis to help us ascend to the Kingdom of God and reach His saving knowledge. All this enhances the catechetical character of the songs of Liturgy. Liturgical art not only provides the most suitable framework for the celebration of Liturgy through architecture and iconography, but, through poetry and music, integrates into the actual service, giving beauty and power to the liturgical text and ritual, and strengthening the catechetical character of the

²⁰ Hieromonk Alexander GOLITZIN, *Mistagogia - experiența lui Dumnezeu în Ortodoxie. Studii de teologie mistică*, translated by Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis, Sibiu, 1998, pp. 34-45.

Liturgy. Liturgy is a service sung from one end to the another in which the song sustains the word, making it penetrating the heart, and draws us by beauty to the contemplation of divine glory, and helping us to live fully the realities to which the service makes us partakers. When is performed with humility and piety, the song enhances the catechetical character of Liturgy, helping both to acquire the teachings of faith and to lift the soul to God in prayer, leading us to His saving knowledge. In Liturgy we encounter a symbolic language in words, gestures and models related to the historical and cultural past of the Church with which, in order to be able to understand them, you must be familiar. On the other hand, the dogmatic load of hymns and prayers makes it necessary to explain them.

Starting with the V-VI centuries, reasons that are either not related to the essence of the Liturgy (too long duration of services due to the introduction of hymns and the desire to shorten it²¹) or prove a misunderstanding of the sanctity of the service (the tendency to emphasize the sacredness of the holy text²²) they led to the secret utterance of more and more prayers, beginning with the liturgical anaphora, the main prayer of the Liturgy. This process took place without any decision of the Church approving it. On the contrary, the only regulation in this field is Novel 137 given in 565 by Emperor Justinian who, proving a deep understanding of the importance of reading aloud prayers not only at Liturgy but also at other services, commanded all bishops and priests not only to say the prayers so that they can be understood by the whole faithful people but also to know them by heart²³.

IV. Conclusion

The Mystery Character of Liturgy doesn't consist, however, in the concealment of believers, but in the fact that, in a way beyond our power of understanding, overwhelming for the mind, the Liturgy is sharing us the

²¹ Pr. Dr. Petre VINTILESCU, *Liturgierul explicat*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, p. 238.

²² Karl Kristian FELMY, *De la Cina cea de Taină la Dumnezeiasca Liturghie a Bisericii Ortodoxe. Un comentariu istoric*, translation by Pr. Prof. Ioan Ică, Deisis, Sibiu, 2004, p. 129.

²³ Karl Kristian FELMY, *De la Cina cea de Taină la Dumnezeiasca Liturghie a Bisericii Ortodoxe...*, pp. 129-132.

divine life, the saving work of Christ is actualized, we are fully united with Him in the Church, the Church is fulfilled as the Body of Christ and enters the Kingdom of God.

With a few exceptions, the prayers of the Liturgy are the prayers of the whole community, their catechetical character addressed to everyone. They are a living explanation of the liturgical action, helping the understanding of the service and the full participation in it by all its servants, that is, both by the clergy and by the faithful. As a result, more and more theologians see it as a pastoral emergency²⁴ the need to return to the practice of reading aloud the prayers of the Holy Liturgy, first of all the anaphora, will bring obvious beneficial effects on the catechetical character of the Liturgy²⁵.

Therefore, the catechetical character of church music is highlighted by the teachings that emerge from Liturgy, the most important service of Orthodox divine worship.

²⁴ Petre VINTILESCU, *Liturghierul explicat*, p. 282.

²⁵ Pr. Florin BOTEZAN, "Împărtășirea cu Dumnezeu Cuvântul prin cuvânt la Sfânta Liturghie. Citirile biblice și omilia", in: *Logos. Revistă de pastorală catehetică*, I (2007) 1, p. 83.