

The Importance of the Liturgical Hymns and the Way of Their Interpretation in the Church

The year 2023 is dedicated, by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, as the homage year of the hymnographers saints and the Church singers, in Romanian Patriarchate. This is the reason for which I considered appropriate to make some short references on the theological value of the liturgical hymns and the way of their interpretation in the Church, in this last issue of year of the *Teologia* journal.

The Orthodox Church emphasizes the ecclesiality of the experience, that is, the appropriation and living of the mystery of faith at the level of the personal life of each believer, through his participation in Church life, in liturgical services and ordinances. In this sense, the content of the hymnography of Church services is of major importance, because through it, the Christian, on the one hand, begins to know his faith, and on the other hand, begins to experience it in his personal life, transforming it in spiritual living.

The Church's liturgical hymns have a deep theological content, summarizing its entire teaching of faith and updating the entire economy of the salvation of the human race. From the hymnography of the worship books of the Church we can extract and understand the entire teaching regarding the Holy Trinity, man or anthropology, the Incarnation, divine Grace, Salvation and the Holy Mysteries, the worship of holy angels, saints and holy relics in general, to the teaching about the Holy Icons, to the worship of the ones who passed away, to the teaching about the future life, but also teachings about the moral life, such as: virtues and sins. Even if these teachings of faith are not presented in the service books of the Church in a systematic way, as they appear presented in the manuals of

Dogmatic Theology, scholastically presenting the entire doctrine of the Church, they still manage to fulfill the catechetical function, that is, to explain and teach the faithful all that is necessary to be known by them in order to obtain salvation. From this perspective, the liturgical worship of the Church in general and the liturgical hymnography in particular fulfills the didactic or teaching function of the Church.

The liturgical worship of the Church and the hymnography in particular do not only have a didactic or teaching character, but have a soteriological or redemptive character in particular, in the sense that they offer the whole teaching of faith to the faithful of the Church, not just for a simple hearing and intellectual knowledge, but proposes it for embodiment, for acting upon it. Liturgical order of the Church is nothing but an expression of the teaching of faith in a doxological form, and the teaching of faith expressed in a doxological form through the liturgical hymn, does not remain something external to the believer, but integrates it into the very content of the confession. And the believer, once integrated into the content of the dogma or the teaching of faith, through the liturgical hymn, only has to testify in a doxological way what he actually lives, the reality he embodies in him. Starting from these brief considerations, we understand that any content of our faith must not be separated from the living experience of Church services. Thus, the worship books of the Church, with its prayers and hymnographic contents are the most reliable sources of knowledge of the Church's teaching of faith and the starting point for its embodiment in the Christian's religious life. This is because liturgical prayers and hymns are nothing more than the transposition into a poetic form of the Church's teaching of faith and the piety of the faithful.

Given the catechetical and soteriological importance of Orthodox hymnography, we understand how necessary good interpretation and musical execution of liturgical hymns is, first of all so that they can be accessible to the understanding of the faithful of the Church, and thus, their message is an intelligible one. The liturgical music must support this approach to assimilating the theological and spiritual message of the hymnography contained in the liturgical books, and in no case hinder the understanding of its content. The ecclesiastical melody must serve

primarily this purpose of expressing the ineffable of the Godhead, which cannot be expressed in simple words, so that through the sung form of the liturgical hymns we can more faithfully capture the divine harmonies of the cosmic Liturgy, sung by the holy angels in his Kingdom God.

The Holy Fathers of the Church, through the canons they created for the good development of Church life, were also concerned with the issue of singing in the Church. Thus, in canon 75 of the Quinisext Council, from the year 692, are stipulated the following:

“We want that the ones that are in the Church to sing, not to use roaring (without orderliness, groan), nor to add anything apart from what is ordained by the Churches which are neither suitable nor worthy of Him, but with much consideration and humility, to bring songs to God Who watches over the hidden, for the holy word of taught the children of Israel to be pious”¹.

First of all, the text of this canon refers to chanting, emphasizing the fact that this generally means the departure of the singer from the harmony of a well-executed chant and also the abandonment of the spiritual, heavenly realities that liturgical singing is meant to show and make us partakers of them. Thus, roaring actually expresses a disorder, a lack of spiritual harmony in the heard plane of the liturgical symbol, the one who interprets the liturgical hymn forcing his voice, by roaring, in an unnatural way.

On the other hand, shouting in singing or singing in a shrill and screaming voice is the expression of vain glory, of singing done to emphasize the singer's own voice, at the expense of the theological message of the text.

Therefore, the liturgical recitative must be as natural and decent as possible, quiet, accessible to all those who participate in the performance of the holy services. It must be and remain simple, cursive, natural, natural, like speech, not laced with artistic modulations or melodic variations or mournful melisma, which distort its meaning and purpose. The liturgical recitative must not be shrill, shouted, forced, nor loaded with many modulations, because the simpler it is, the more beautiful it is, the more it

¹ Archdeacon Prof. Dr. Ioan N. FLOCA, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe – note și comentarii*, Sibiu, 1992, p. 148.

is tasted and the more it is appreciated by the faithful. Church singing must therefore be expressed in the form of a simple and natural prayer.

In conclusion, the Church authority and the priests in each parish must remain constantly concerned with the way in which Church singing is performed in our liturgical communities, involving themselves with all their strength in the cultivation and education of the faithful in order for them to perform harmonious singing and pleasing to the ear and suitable for interpretation, to be able to make accessible the deep theological and spiritual message of the liturgical texts of our Orthodox Church, so that they can achieve their goal, namely to transmit the Orthodox faith and propose it to the believer for embodiment and realization.

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