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The Theology of the Church through Liturgical Hymnography and Theological and Spiritual Aspects of Psalmody

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Abstract

The present study refers to the theology of the Church through liturgical hymnography, also addressing the theological and spiritual aspects of psalmody. Thus, at the beginning of the study, in: the preliminaries, I referred to the theology of the Church through the ecclesial experience of the Church's faith. In the first part of the study, I referred to hymnography, as an expression and doxological expression of the Church's faith. In the second part, we considered the interrelationship between hymnography, psalmody, and spiritual life in Orthodox spirituality. In the end, I presented the conclusions that are required from the content of this study.

Keywords

theology, Church, hymnography, liturgical, aspect, theological, spiritual, psalmody

I. Preliminaries. Towards an experience within the body of the Church

Everything that happens in the Church, the entire liturgical order, must be seen in the soteriological-eschatological perspective, as a re-actualization of the entire economy of the salvation of the human race towards the dimension of the Kingdom. Thus, any problem of faith descends from the

conceptual sphere into the sphere of the life event, towards its finality - the perfection of the Eschaton. Of course, even the “event of life” does not cancel the conceptual sphere, as it needs it to express some of the mystery that embraces the “event of life”. This is the great challenge of theology, to hold together the word and the mystery, the apophatic and the cataphatic, both realities meeting in full, in: a close twinning during the Liturgy and worship of the Orthodox Church. We end up, therefore, affirming that

“In Orthodoxy, the unity between theology and mysticism, dogma and spirituality is fundamental, in: the sense that one cannot think of a theology that is not mystical and a dogma devoid of spirituality, a dogma that is not embodied, lived, that does not indicate an experience of the Trinity realized in the ecclesial framework”¹.

This relationship between dogma and worship, dogma and Liturgy

“avoids the separation between the rational aspect and the liturgical content of the dogmas, both the rational and the mystical aspect harmoniously coexisting in the dogma. Thus, the dogmas encourage living, experiencing them at a personal and community-ecclesial level, through the cultic-sacramental dimension of the Church, and not towards sterile speculations, which are not related to life and its purpose, which is the deification of man and cosmos. Speculations on dogmas that have nothing to do with the embodiment of dogmas in the life of the person and the community are a sign of the divorce between reason and mysticism. This divorce drastically diminishes the visibility of the mystery of faith, of the revealed truth that cannot be conceived outside of a paradoxical and comprehensive dimension, which is fully supported by the relationship between reason and mysticism”².

¹ Dr. Cristinel IOJA, *Rațiune și mistică în teologia Ortodoxă*, Editura Universității “Aurel Vlaicu”, Arad, 2008, p. 26.

² Dr. Cristinel IOJA, *Rațiune și mistică în teologia Ortodoxă*, p. 39.

In this respect,

“to overcome the divorce between theology and the life of the Church, it is necessary to return to the sources, to rediscover the sacramental-liturgical consciousness, as well as to emphasize the qualitative, spiritual aspect of Orthodox theology”³.

Looking at things from this perspective, we must affirm that in Orthodox theology we cannot leave the truths of faith only at the level of understanding them with the mind, because these truths must be experienced, embodied in our lives, and liturgically affirmed, in: the divine worship of the Church and through expansion in the social-cosmic dimension of our existence. In this sense, we affirm the need to approach all theological issues from a liturgical perspective, emphasizing their cataphatic-apophatic dimension.

If it is not based on worship and does not turn into doxology, dogma risks becoming distant, cold, and incomprehensible for people’s lives. In Orthodoxy, worship becomes doxology, and dogmatic tradition becomes cultic, doxological tradition⁴, accessible and prominently present in the community and personal life of Christians. Saint Basil the Great talks about the indissoluble connection between dogma and its cultic experience:

“as we received from the Lord, so are we baptized; as we are baptized, so we make a profession of our faith; as we make a profession of our faith, so do we offer our doxology, not separating the Holy Ghost from Father and Son, nor preferring Him in honor to the Father, or asserting Him to be before the Son, as blasphemers’ tongues invent”⁵.

³ Dr. Cristinel IOJA, *Homo Adorans - între Iisus Hristos și politeismul lumii contemporane*, Editura Universității “Aurel Vlaicu”, Arad, 2008, p. 115.

⁴ Aurel GRIGORAȘ, “Dogmă și cult privity interconfesional și problema intercomuniunii”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXIX (1977) 3-4, p. 352.

⁵ SFÂNTUL VASILE CEL MARE, “Epistola 251”, 4, in: *Scrieri*, Partea a III-a, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 12, transl. Pr. Prof. Dr. Constantin Cornițescu, Pr. Prof. Dr. Teodor Bodogae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1988, p. 521.

The liturgical hymn, through which the transfiguration of faith into praise and the transfiguration of dogma into spirituality is operated, but also the transfiguration of communion between believers into communion with the Holy Trinity, is a constitutive part of theology and not a simple addition to it⁶.

Trying to capture and express something of the specificity of Orthodox liturgical singing, Father Dumitru Stăniloae showed that it concerns

“depths of mystery, immeasurable values of the realities, persons, and gifts sung ... Through singing we live the mystery of God, we unite with his unspeakable existence ... Through singing we say more than we can express with any words ..., we express the inexpressible, the apophatic⁷”.

The liturgical hymnography presents the truth of faith, the economy of salvation in a doxological dimension, that is, in: the dimension of its fulfillment and embodiment by each believer in the church service.

We thus arrive at the concept of “ecclesial experience”⁸ of the faith we profess in the liturgical rhythm of Church life. Especially for the Orthodox - as I mentioned before - “dogma expresses the experience of the Church and not simple theoretical principles” - and the Orthodox experience “sends to the Church, to divine worship, to the Holy Mysteries”⁹. In this sense, we understand that all the issues of dogma must be followed in the epiphanic experience of the Church because it is impossible to conceive of a split between Christian thinking and living as the realization of the truth

⁶ Iacob COMAN, *Theo-Doxa- Loghia. Semnificația teologico-doxologică a innelor religioase în marile religii ale lumii din perspectivă creștină*, Editura Episteimon, București, 1999, p. 154.

⁷ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Cântarea liturgică comună, mijloc de întărire a unității în dreapta credință”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXIII (1981) 1, p. 58-59.

⁸ The phrase “ecclesial experience” is brilliantly used and explained by the reformed theologian Karl Christian FELMY, *Dogmatica experienței eclesiale - înnoirea Teologiei Ortodoxe contemporane*, transl. prof. dr. Ioan I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1999.

⁹ K. Ch. FELMY, *Dogmatica experienței eclesiale - înnoirea Teologiei Ortodoxe contemporane*, p. 49.

of faith. From this point of view, we affirm that Orthodoxy emphasizes the ecclesiality of the experience. Therefore, Orthodoxy cannot be conceived, without its liturgical tradition, unable to live without it, because it represents its vital element, being its power and being part of its being, sustaining its life. The theologian Serge Bulgakoff affirms in this sense that “Orthodoxy is liturgical by its very being”¹⁰. From this perspective, we affirm that the Eastern Church is characterized by the fact that it “lives and teaches its theology liturgically”¹¹, worship in the Orthodox Church, being nothing but “heaven on earth”¹² and the manifestation of the beauty of the spiritual world¹³, helping to elevate and transfigure the believer.

Thus, we understand the fact that

“in Orthodoxy, spiritual experience is an expression of the living content of faith that theology does nothing but systematize. The life of every Christian must be structured on the dogmatic element, the dogma itself being a liturgical formula, a kind of living doxology, lived and proclaimed as such throughout the Holy Liturgy”¹⁴.

The ecclesial experience of the faith we profess finds its justification in the fact that the liturgical life of the Church is the living expression of a presence, the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the One who actualizes the entire economy of the salvation of the human race, in: an epiphanic way (that is, by discovery, by showing the unspeakable glory of God in the church service) realized in Jesus Christ.

The entire performance of the Church’s services is nothing but an update of the economy of salvation as “today”, making us partakers, witnesses to

¹⁰ Sergiu BULGAKOFF, *Ortodoxia*, transl. Nicolae Grosu, Editura Paideia, București, 1993, p. 143.

¹¹ Ioannis ZIZIOULAS, *Ființa eclezială*, transl. de Aurel Nae, Editura Bizantină, București, 1996, p. 12.

¹² † Kalistos Timothy WARE of Diokleia, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe*, transl. Alexandra Petrea, București, 1997, p. 265.

¹³ Sergiu BULGAKOFF, *Le ciel sur la terre*, coll. *Una Sancta*, Munchen, 1928, p. 143.

¹⁴ Pr. Ilie MOLDOVAN, “Spiritualitate și responsabilitate în viața creștină”, in: *Studii Teologice*, XXXVII (1985) 1-2, p. 136.

all the events we celebrate. The liturgical order of the Church is nothing more than an expression of dogma in a doxological form. Dogma affirmed doxologically, does not remain something external to us, but integrates us. And the Christian, once integrated into the content of the dogma, only has to testify in a doxological way what he lives, the reality he embodies. That is precisely why, although in the lives of the saints of our Church, “there is no theological system, instead there is a theological experience and its testimony”¹⁵. Thus, through their holy life,

“the saints of God convincingly and truly entrust all the other dogmas about the Church, grace, the Holy Mysteries, the Holy Virtues, man, sin, the Holy Relics, the Holy Icons, the future life and about all the other which make up the divine-human economy of salvation. Yes, the Lives of the Saints are practical Dogmatics. They are experimental Dogmatics, that have become experience in the holy life of God’s holy people”¹⁶.

Starting from these brief considerations, we understand that any content of our faith must not be separated from the living experience of the Church.

The whole work of saving the human race finds its rich nuances and meanings if it is studied in the content of the worship books, used in the pew during the liturgical year. We will achieve an authentic understanding of the saving work of the Holy Trinity in the history of mankind, through a deep reflection from the perspective of the Church’s Tradition on the Holy Scriptures, but also of the texts of the Eastern Church worship. The soteriological message of the Gospel of Christ is faithfully expressed opposite to the data of Revelation, both in the Holy Scripture and in the hymnography of the Church, which has a pronounced biblical foundation.

¹⁵ P. Svetlov, *Opyt II*, p. 25-27 quoted by K. Ch. FELMY, *Dogmatica experienței eclesiale - înnoirea Teologiei Ortodoxe contemporane*, p. 59.

¹⁶ Arhimandrit Iustin POPOVICI, *Omul și Dumnezeu-Om. Abisurile și culmile filosofiei*, transl. Pr. Prof. Ioan Ică, Diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1997, p. 106.

II. Hymnography - expression and doxological utterance of the Church's faith

In the Orthodox Church, the texts of the hymns that are sung have an obvious theological character, expressing the Christian faith¹⁷. Father Professor Ene Braniște shows in this regard the fact that “Orthodox teaching or dogma found its forms of expression within its cult, both in Byzantine hymnography (canons, troparia, kontakia, etc. -s.n.) and especially in Eastern liturgical texts”¹⁸.

The services with their entire hymnographic composition, as they have been composed since the first centuries of Christianity, “meet ... the spiritual requirements of the Church faithful”¹⁹. Here we must find the explanation for the fact that the entire Orthodox church cult

“through the extension and variety of his chants, through his dogmatic and teaching content, fulfills the catechetical function of the Church to a good extent. The great believers of the faith, the Holy Fathers, and the teachers of the Church, together with the kneading and definition of dogmatic truths, also took the holy struggle to give the Church, through the religious services and chants that they prepared, a most appropriate prayer framework for the soul and at the same time as close as possible to the expression of the content, the joys and the divine goodness of the new life, given by Christ the Lord to His Church”²⁰.

As it is known, the worship books with their prayers and hymnographic contents are

¹⁷ Pr. Vasile GRĂJDIAN, *Studii de Teologie imnografică*, Editura Universității “Lucian Blaga”, Sibiu, 2008, p. 9.

¹⁸ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica Generală*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1993, p. 692

¹⁹ Pr. Prof. Vasile IGNĂTESCU, “Penticostarul în viața duhovnicescă a Bisericii Ortodoxe”, in: *Mitropolia Moldovei și Sucevei*, XXXVI (1960) 5-6, p. 326.

²⁰ Pr. Prof. Vasile IGNĂTESCU, “Penticostarul în viața duhovnicescă a Bisericii Ortodoxe”, p. 326.

“the most reliable sources of knowledge of the Church’s teaching of faith and its religious life”, because, “the prayers and liturgical hymns... are nothing but the transposition into ritual forms of the Church’s teaching of faith and the piety of believers...”²¹.

It is very important to follow the dogmatic structure of the liturgical hymns, which are the bearers of the teachings of the faith within the Church, accessible in this way to the faithful, to whom they present the authentic faith. In this sense, referring to the hymnology present in the Octoechos, professor Nicolae Buzescu states that it can be considered, without any exaggeration, a poetic sum of Orthodox dogmatic theology, because we find in it absolutely all the fundamental themes of Orthodox theology²². From this perspective, as the theologian Constantin Andronikof defined it, the church service becomes “the theological place par excellence”²³.

Therefore, the Orthodox hymnography, included in the cult books,

“as an integral, an overwhelmingly important part of Holy Tradition is that which reflects the faith teaching of a Church in an extremely rigorous way. In the hymnographic creations and in the prayers that these books contain, all theological thinking is exposed, based on the Holy Scriptures, on the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils, on the works of the Holy Fathers, and the piety of the clergy and the faithful”²⁴.

From the hymnography of the liturgical books, “excerpts could be drawn up regarding the Holy Trinity, incarnation, salvation, mysteries, the cult of holy angels, icons, saints, as well as the cult of the dead”²⁵.

²¹ Pr. Prof. Dr. Nicolae D. NECULA, “Doctrina și viața religioasă a Bisericii Copte reflectate în rugăciunile și imnele sale”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXVIII (1976) 3-4, p. 538.

²² Pr. Prof. N. C. BUZESCU, “Eclesiologia Triadocentrică în canoanele Octoiului”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXVIII (1976) 2, p. 349.

²³ Constantin ANDRONIKOF, *La sens de la Liturgie – la relation entre Dieu et l home*, Les Editions du Cerf 29, Paris, 1998, p. 26.

²⁴ Constantin ANDRONIKOF, *La sens de la Liturgie – la relation entre Dieu et l home*, p. 490.

²⁵ Dr. Ioan ZUGRAVU, “Cultul nostru văzut de cunoscători străini”, in: *Candela*, Homage

Therefore, the liturgical texts have a rich doctrinal content, although “the teaching of faith is not formulated in the systematic form of catechism articles, the liturgical books being neither treatises on dogmatics nor collections of synodal definitions...”²⁶.

From this perspective, we must specify the fact that church services do not only have a “decorative” character²⁷, so that the chants contained in the cult books “are not a simple mechanical addition of some isolated and arbitrary creations of a harmful mysticism and an over-elaborated symbolism”²⁸, its theological character being emphasized more, in: the dogmatic sense of the Orthodox liturgical hymnography²⁹. This fact becomes evident if one considers the text of many chants, which we could say sometimes expose “teachings of a dogmatic, Christological and Trinitarian character, or regarding pneumology, soteriology, Mariology and other aspects of Salvation”, in: a direct way, as dogmatic formulation³⁰. What constitutes above all a permanent theological value of the liturgical text is the fact that

“in the Byzantine services, the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon were not simply ‘transposed’ from the philosophical language to that of liturgical poetry, but they were interpreted, deepened, understood, and manifested in all their significance”³¹.

volume, 1938, p. 41; Pr. Ioan Gh. CHIRVASIE, “Învățătura despre sfinții îngeri în cărțile de slujbă ale Bisericii Ortodoxe”, in: *Glăsur Bisericii*, XXVIII (1969) 5-6, p. 572; G. LEFEBVRE, *Liturgia*, ed. V, 1936, p. 173.

²⁶ Dom Lambert BEAUDUIN, “Liturgie et catéchisme en Occident et Orient”, in: *Irenikon*, tome VII, no. 6 (nov.-dec.), 1930, p. 656; See also Pr. Asist. Nicolae D. NECULA, “Cultul divin, mijloc de apărare a dreptei credințe”, in: *Glăsur Bisericii*, XXXV (1976) 9-12, p. 902.

²⁷ Evangelos THEODOROU, “La phénoménologie des relations entre l’Eglise et la liturgie”, in: *Eglise dans la liturgie* (Conférences Saint-Serge, XXVI-e semaine d’études liturgiques, Paris, 1979), Rome, 1980, p. 290 ș.u.

²⁸ Evangelos THEODOROU, “Le sens, l’esprit, la méthodologie du Triode”, in: vol. *La liturgie: son sens, son esprit, sa méthode – liturgie et théologie* (Conférences Saint-Serge, XXVIII-e semaine d’études liturgiques, Paris, 1981), Roma, 1982, p. 305-320.

²⁹ Pr. Vasile GRĂJDIAN, *Studii de Teologie imnografică*, p. 86.

³⁰ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica Generală*, p. 731.

³¹ Alexander SCHMEMANN, *Introducere în Teologia Liturgică*, p. 219.

Besides, according to the words of Saint Theodore the Studite, “the services of the Church recapitulate the Economy of salvation”³².

The doxological form that the dogmatic teachings take on in Orthodox singing is what protects us from conceptualism on the one hand³³. This is because, “the divine being cannot be expressed by concepts ... (and) every concept relative to God is a simulacrum, a false image, an idol ... of God, instead of revealing God himself”³⁴.

From this perspective, we must specify the fact that hymnographic poetry

“constitutes a more authentic vehicle of theology than scholasticism, both for its dynamism and for the fact that at the morphological level, it operates not through abstract notions, but with the fundamental images of both the Bible and human experience from all time...”³⁵.

The hymns of the Church are creations of great Holy Fathers of the Church which

“through their liturgical use, to glorify God ... share in the work of illumination of the Grace of the Holy Spirit - always present in church services - carrying in them the life that can be lacking in only theoretical treatises, always animating the theological meanings”³⁶.

³² SFÂNTUL TEODOR STUDITUL, *Antirrheticus I*, 10, PG 99, 340C.

³³ Pr. Conf. Dr. Ion BRIA, “Spiritul Teologiei Ortodoxe”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXIV (1972) 2, p. 178.

³⁴ Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, transl. Pr. Dr. Vasile Răducă, Editura Anastasia, București, p. 31.

³⁵ Sebastian BROCK, *Efrem Sirul. I. Ochiul luminos. Viziunea spirituală a lumii la Sfântul Efrem Sirul*, transl. pr. M. Ielciu, Editura Deisis, 1995, p. 167.

³⁶ Vasile GRĂJDIAN, *Studii de Teologie immografică*, p. 17.

On the other hand, the word spoken liturgically, in: a doxological dimension, becomes the expression of “the amazement that encompasses the soul when it thinks of God”³⁷, when all I can do is “try to praise God, not talk about Him”³⁸.

If the liturgical life of the Church is constituted as a “theology incarnate” and supports the spiritual path, it is intensely poetic.

“It is poetic through its texts, which develop amazing symbolic analogies, dizzying symmetries, ‘apophatic antinomies’... It is poetic by arranging the themes and steps of the holidays, by their rhythm. It is poetic by celebrating a mystery beyond words in hymnic words. It is poetic, finally, by the fact that it shapes the participant as a being capable of celebration. Liturgy is a creator of beauty”³⁹.

Referring to the value of liturgical texts, Father Andre Scrima writes the following:

“A liturgical text is not a text to be read. As we advance in the interpretation of the liturgical text, it unfolds and delivers the meaning it contains for the confessing community... It is a kind of circular movement... A liturgical text is meant to pass into the life of the community that assimilates it and that restores it somehow, in: the celebration of the feast. A liturgical text is a guarantee of the presence of the resurrected Lord. It is a milestone on our route between his first and second coming, between Pentecost and the Parousia. The study of a liturgical text should, therefore, constitute a starting point for life, and not a stopping point for understanding”⁴⁰.

³⁷ Vasile GRĂJDIAN, *Studii de Teologie iconografică*, p. 32.

³⁸ SFĂNTUL CHIRIL AL IERUSALIMULUI, “Cateheza a VI-a”, in : *Cateheze*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2003, p. 83.

³⁹ Anca MANOLACHE, *Geometria poetică a celebrării - notă introductivă - la Andre SCRIMA, Biserica liturgică*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2005, p. 20-21.

⁴⁰ Andre SCRIMA, *Biserica liturgică*, p. 119.

III. Hymnography, psalmody, and spiritual life and their interrelationship in Orthodox spirituality

Through the contributions of Saint Basil the Great, but also Saints Nicholas Cabasila, Dionysius the Areopagite, Theoliptos of Philadelphia, and Simeon the New Theologian, patristic literature especially emphasizes the importance of liturgical hymnography and psalmody for the spiritual life. The Fathers of the Church put a close relationship with psalmody as a way of hymnographic expression of the Church with the whole spiritual ascent of the Christian towards perfection. It can thus be observed the interrelationship between dogma (the content of the hymns), worship (their doxological expression), and spirituality, as a direct experience of God in a concrete way, in: the ecclesial experience of Christians. These aspects integrate the Christian in a process of sanctification and holiness within the ecclesial framework, as a space of communion with the doxologized God, par excellence. The chanting of the dogmatic content of the Church's hymns presupposes an awareness of their soteriological and communion message, as a delimitation from heresy and sin. Indeed, the hymnographic structure of the Church creates a strict delimitation of Christians against the "powers of darkness" in the world, manifested and embodied in the various heresies - understood as separations from the body of the Church - and sin. They create an ethos, a way of life which, although it takes place in the world, is superior to the world, it cannot be confused with any immanent ethos which the world proposes to share with people. Therefore, the frames of Orthodox spirituality are drawn in the worship life of the Church, which has a deep dogmatic foundation. Although psalmody has a different way of realization within Eastern monasticism, it is still not broken, definitively, from the rhythm of the Church, centered in its Mysteries, since monks and hermits also observed this rhythm through communion with the Body and Blood of Christ at certain periods.

In monastic environments, psalmody interrelated with spirituality diversifies depending on the experience of each hermit or living person - unlike monasteries, where there is a common form of psalmody, and

Christian communities living in the world - remaining, however, at its core, still a form of doxology of God. In the desert, but also the “world”, psalmody made an existential delimitation of the one who practiced it from all that was sin, passions, and heresies, expressing spiritually the total attachment of the Christian to the will and life in God.

Regarding this interrelationship, Saint Dionysius the Areopagite said that to those who want to be perfected, “the holy chants and readings from the Scriptures give them the teaching of the virtuous life and, before that, the perfect cleansing from the sin that causes corruption”. In his interpretation

“singing, which includes all the holy things (the entire economy of salvation - n.n.), prepares our soul powers for harmony with those that will be sanctified a little later and, through the homophonic execution of the divine hymns, will produce a common understanding of the divine and that between one and another, as through a united choir and a common confession of the holy ones, the most concentrated and shadowed in the utterance of the words of the psalms become more understood through more and clearer faces; and their expression or understanding is broadened through too holy readings of some written texts. In these, the one who looks in a holy way will experience a unitary breath and be moved by the One and divine Spirit”⁴¹.

In the same sense, in: his work *Interpretation of the Divine Liturgy*, Saint Nicholas Cabasila shows that:

“prayers, chants, and all that is done in the holy service sanctify us because in them we see Christ, His work, and His Passion for us. Indeed, the redemptive work of the Savior is symbolized both in the chants and the readings, as well as in everything performed by the holy clergy during the entire service”⁴².

⁴¹ SFÂNTUL DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, “Despre Ierarhia Bisericească”, III.III,5, in: *Opere complete*, translation, introduction and notes by Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Paideia, București, 1996, p. 80.

⁴² SFÂNTUL NICOLAE CABASILĂ, *Tâlcuirea Dumnezeștii Liturghii*, XXXVIII, transl. Pr.

At the same time,

“in terms of specifying the proper functions of hymns and liturgical singing, the contribution of Saint Nicholas Cabasila is an exceptional one. His reflections can be considered as basic elements of a theology of hymnography and church music, a fact for which this special contribution cannot be overlooked, or minimized when this very important chapter of the Orthodox liturgical tradition is deepened”⁴³.

Saint Maximus the Confessor also shows that psalmody is the direct expression of the unspeakable joy that envelops the soul at the taste of heavenly joys. Here is what he writes:

“the spiritual sweetness of the divine songs (...) indicates the joy that manifests the sharing of divine goodness and which, on the one hand, moves souls towards the pure and happy love of God, and on the other hand, stirs them even more towards hatred of sin”⁴⁴.

In his work *On Inner Work in Christ and the Monastic Profession*, contained in the Romanian translation of the Philokalia, vol. VII, Metropolitan Theoliptos of Philadelphia formulates a “ladder” of spiritual singing, whose “steps” make up a true mystical ascent to God. Here is what he writes:

“If you know what you sing, you receive the knowledge; and from the knowledge you gain understanding; understanding

Prof. Dr. Ene Braniște, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1997, p. 8.

⁴³ Ioan BIZĂU, “Imnografia și cântarea liturgică în mistica sacramentală a Sfântului Nicolae Cabasila”, in: *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai*, series “Tehologia Orthodoxa”, XLIV (1999) 1-2, p. 209.

⁴⁴ SFÂNTUL MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Mystagogia*, XI, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2000, p. 30.

brings forth the work of the known; work produces knowledge through practice; knowledge by trial gives birth to true sight. And from this arises the wisdom shown in the words of grace, which spread light, because wisdom fills the air of thought and interprets what is inside to those outside”⁴⁵.

Some Holy Fathers refer to the spiritual work that psalmody brings to the hearts of those who perform it. Thus, Saint Basil the Great shows that as its main fruit, psalmody brings the feeling of brotherhood and unity between those who sing:

“For who can be considered another’s enemy, when he joins his voice together to give praise to God? Psalmody brings with it everything that can be best: love, making the companionship of the voice a kind of vehicle of union between peers, gathering the faithful together in one choir voice”⁴⁶.

Saint John Chrysostom emphasizes the same idea by writing:

“Our voices are like the strings of a guitar, making different sounds but creating a harmony of piety. Because the faithful differ in age, but not in singing together. The same breath that regulates the voices, makes all one song, as David says, when he calls all ages, men and women to this symphony, saying: “Let all breath praise the Lord...”⁴⁷.

Blessed Augustine refers to psalmody as bringing repentance to the heart of the singer. Thus, he writes to St. Ambrose of Milan, to whom he owed much of his conversion:

⁴⁵ MITROPOLITUL TEOLIPT LA FILADELFI, *Viața și scrierile*, coll. *Filocalia sfintelor nevoițe ale desăvârșirii*, vol VII, translation, introduction and notes by Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Humanitas, București, 1999, pp. 73-74.

⁴⁶ SFÂNTUL VASILE CEL MARE, *Comentar la Psalmi*, Psalm 1, quoted at Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene BRANIȘTE, “Temeiurile biblice și tradiționale pentru cântarea în comun a credincioșilor”, in: *Liturghia - sufletul etern al Ortodoxiei în rugăciune - Studii de Teologie Liturgică*, vol. 1, Editura Andreiană, Sibiu, 2013, p. 431.

⁴⁷ SFÂNTUL IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Homilia ad Ps. 145, 2*, PG 65, 524.

“How many times have I not wept at your hymns and songs, deeply moved by the voices of your faithful, which echoed far! They entered my ears and with them your truth into my heart. I was filled with a feeling of piety; tears were falling and I felt reconciled...”⁴⁸.

The Holy Fathers also order the conduct of psalmody in the Church, so that it is useful for the spiritual growth of Christians. Interpreting verse 5 of Psalm 29: “Sing to the Lord, all his pious ones”, Saint Basil the Great shows what should be the spiritual state of the Christian during singing:

“If anyone pronounces (only) the words of the psalm with his mouth, such a one does not sing to the Lord, but only those who send up their psalmody from a united heart and all who are pious, keeping their righteousness before God, only those can sing to God, harmoniously following the rhythms of the spiritual. How many do not sit here, coming from fornication and hiding deceit and falsehood in their hearts! They think they are chanting, although, in: reality, they are not. Because this psalm calls only the pious to sing the psalms”⁴⁹.

Saint Nicholas Cabasila wrote about the spiritual state of Christians when they participate in Church services by chanting: “We (...) must sit and take part in the service, in: its chants and ceremonies, with decent thoughts if we do not want to take part in them in vain and waste our time”⁵⁰.

Theoliptos of Philadelphia also says that to bring spiritual benefit, psalmody must meet certain ascetic requirements, like pure prayer. Here is what he urges:

⁴⁸ FERICITUL AUGUSTIN, *Confesiuni*, IX, 6, translation, introduction and notes by Gh. I. Șerban, Editura Humanitas, București, 1998, p. 312.

⁴⁹ SFÂNTUL VASILE CEL MARE, *Tâlcuire la Psalmul XXIX*, 5, quoted by Preot Nicu MOLDOVEANU, “Sfântul Vasile cel Mare și muzica bisericească”, in: *Liturghia - sufletul etern al Ortodoxiei în rugăciune - Studii de Teologie Liturgică*, p. 527.

⁵⁰ SFÂNTUL NICOLAE CABASILĂ, *Tâlcuirea Dumnezeștii Liturghii*, XXI, p. 52.

“Do not think that you are praying, since you walk away from prayer, run without gain, toil in the desert. This happens when singing with the mouth when the mind is carried elsewhere and is divided between passions and things so that the meaning of the singing is also defiled (...) Chant with your mouth. But with a quiet voice and with the supervision of the mind, leaving nothing thoughtless from what is uttered. And if something escapes your mind, repeat the verse whenever such a thing happens, until you have your mind accompanying what was said because the mind can also sing with the mouth and keep the memory of God. You can learn this from natural experience. For just as the one who meets someone can talk to him, but also look at him with his eyes, so the one who sings with his lips can also remain attentive to God”⁵¹.

When the monk leaves his cell to go to church and take part in the holy services together with the community, he must control his thoughts, concentrate, and integrate himself into the liturgical work of the community: “...then entering the Church and joining the community, do not talk to the person next to you, nor wander with your mind in vain, but let your tongue occupy itself only with singing, and fix your thinking through prayer”⁵².

In the same sense, Saint Simeon the New Theologian exhorted the monk, as during Matins

“to stand together with everyone at the doxology and to follow it carefully and soberly, paying close attention to the beginning of the hymnody, that is, to the six psalms, to the stichology, and the readings without delay, not relaxing the body and supporting - from one foot to another, or leaning against walls or columns, but must keep his hands tied tightly, his feet resting on the ground, and his head steady, without bending to and fro, without elevating his mind with smugness or prying with inquisitive

⁵¹ MITROPOLITUL TEOLIPT LA FILADELFIEI, *Viața și scrierile*, p. 56, 64.

⁵² MITROPOLITUL TEOLIPT LA FILADELFIEI, *Viața și scrierile*, p. 66.

thought, without gathering with the heedless, whispering among themselves, but rather he must have his gaze unraised, and the soul, as far as it lies in its power, falls to take attention only to psalmody and reading, and to the meaning of what is sung and the words read from the divine Scripture, so that he does not let any useless word enter him, but the soul, feeding on all these, comes to breakthrough and humility and the divine illumination of the Holy Spirit”⁵³.

Saint Gregory the Sinaite, whose work is also included in *Philokalia* vol. 7, understands psalmody in a natural relationship with the prayer of Jesus, more precisely at the level of an alternation between the two, especially in the case of those who are at the beginning of the experience and practice of this prayers. Here is what he writes about it:

“And I consider those who sing a little are doing well respecting the measure, for all measure is good, as the wise say. They do not waste all the power of their soul in doing it. For by this, the mind in prayer tiring loses its vigor in it. But, singing a little, the mind perseveres most of the time in prayer. But it sometimes happens that the mind, tired from the continuous understanding cry and the persistent concentration, has to take a little rest. Then set it to free singing from the strait of silence. This is the best order and teaching of wise men”⁵⁴.

And he says again, a little further:

“When you sit day and night quietly, praying often to God without thinking, in: humility, and your mind weakens to cry out, and your body and heartache from the strong fixation of the frequent call of Jesus, so that you no longer feel the heat

⁵³ SFÂNTUL SIMEON NOUL TEOLOG, “Cateheza 26”, in: *Cateheze. Scrieri II*, transl. Diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1999, p. 271.

⁵⁴ SFÂNTUL GRIGORIE SINAITUL, “Despre liniștire și despre cele două feluri de rugăciune, în 15 capete”, coll. *Filocalia sfintelor nevoițe ale desăvârșirii*, vol. VII, p. 180.

and no longer are happy and, therefore, you no longer have the zeal and patience that is born from this state, stand up and sing alone or with the disciple who is with you (...) When you sit and sing alone, say 'Holy God'. Then pray again with the soul or with the understanding, the mind being attentive to the heart. And if laziness oppresses you, say two or three psalms and two penitential troparia, without singing..."⁵⁵.

Three centuries before Saint Gregory the Sinaite, the great Byzantine mystic, Saint Simeon the New Theologian also pointed out the purpose of singing in prayer for those who practice the Jesus prayer. Here is what he writes:

"sit at prayer singing and praying quietly to God as one who is not heard by anyone. Stand bravely collecting your thoughts and not letting them wander elsewhere, clasp your hands, join your steadfast feet together in one base, and close your eyes so that they see nothing else, and raise your mind and heart to heaven, calling His mercy from there, with tears and sighs"⁵⁶.

Venerable Nikitas Stithatos, another Philokalical father, disciple, and first biographer of Saint Simeon the New Theologian, also discusses in his works, the problem of balance between the quantity and quality of chanting prayers, a balance that often risks being lost through distraction and the right judgment. Here is what he writes:

"Quantity is also good in the singing of prayers when it is controlled by perseverance and memorization. But what gives life to the soul is quality; this also causes the fruit. And the quality of singing and prayer lies in praying with the spirit and the mind. And someone prays with the mind when praying and singing, he looks at the meaning that is found in the divine Scripture and

⁵⁵ SFÂNTUL GRIGORIE SINAITUL, "Despre liniștire și despre cele două feluri de rugăciune, în 15 capete", p. 182.

⁵⁶ SFÂNTUL SIMEON NOUL TEOLOG, "Cateheza 26", p. 279.

through this receives ascents of meanings in his heart, through thoughts worthy of God... Where the fruit of the Spirit is seen, there is also the thoughtful quality of prayer. And where there is this quality, there is also a very good amount of singing. And where the fruit is not shown, the quality is also dry. And if this is dry, the quantity is also superfluous, which, although it means training the body, still does not bring any profit to most”⁵⁷.

He who wishes to have the work of pure prayer will be careful not to make chanting an easy refuge, which does not bring refreshment of the soul’s powers, but only disturbance and discomfort, these states being incompatible with the spiritual state towards which the Hesychast mysticism tends. In this sense, Saint Gregory the Sinaït shows the following:

“Some sing a little, others a lot, and others not at all. Do not sing much, because this brings disturbance, but also do not completely abandon singing, because of the discomfort and carelessness that comes from it. But follow those who sing a little. Because in everything, the best is the measure, according to the word of the wise. Much singing belongs to those who occupy themselves with doing, for ignorance and toil; not of those who calm down, for whom it is enough to pray only to God, in: the heart, and refrain from thoughts... For if the mind wastes all its strength in many chants, it weakens because it can no longer pray strongly and diligently”⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ CUVIOSUL NICHITA STIATHUL, *Suta a doua a capetelor naturale*, 70-71, coll. *Filocalia sfintelor nevoițe ale desăvârșirii*, vol VI, translation, introduction and notes by Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Humanitas, București, 2004, pp. 274-275.

⁵⁸ SFÂNTUL GRIGORIE SINAITUL, *Despre felul cum trebuie să șadă la rugăciune cel ce se liniștește și să nu se ridice repede*, coll. *Filocalia sfintelor nevoițe ale desăvârșirii*, vol VII, pp. 191-192. For the role of psalmody in the teaching of Saint Gregory Sinaït and about the reception of this topic in the Romanian space, see D. RACCANELLO, *Rugăciunea lui Iisus în scrierile Stareșului Vasile de la Poiana Mărului*, transl. Maria-Cornelia Oros, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1996, pp. 108-126.

IV. Conclusions

1. Everything that happens in the Church, the entire liturgical order, must be seen in the soteriological-eschatological perspective, as a re-actualization of the entire economy of the salvation of the human race towards the dimension of the Kingdom.
2. In Orthodox Theology, we cannot leave the truths of faith only at the level of understanding them with the mind, because these truths must be experienced, embodied in our lives, and affirmed liturgically, in: the divine worship of the Church. If it is not based on worship and does not turn into doxology, dogma risks becoming distant from people's lives, cold and incomprehensible.
3. The liturgical hymn, through which the transfiguration of faith into praise and the transfiguration of dogma into spirituality, but also the transfiguration of communion between believers into communion with the Holy Trinity, is operated is a constitutive part of theology and not a simple addition to it. The liturgical hymnography presents the truth of faith, the economy of salvation in a doxological dimension, that is, in: the dimension of its fulfillment and embodiment by each believer in the church service.
4. Orthodoxy cannot be conceived without its liturgical tradition, unable to live without it, because it represents its vital element, being its power and being part of its being, sustaining its life.
5. The whole work of salvation of the human race finds its rich nuances and meanings if it is studied in the content of the worship books, used in the pew during the liturgical year. The soteriological message of the Gospel of Christ is faithfully expressed regarding the dates of Revelation, both in the Holy Scriptures and in the hymnography of the Church, which has a pronounced biblical foundation.

6. In the Orthodox Church, liturgical hymns have an obvious theological character, expressing the entire teaching of the Christian faith. Hymnology can be considered a poetic sum of Orthodox dogmatic theology because in it we find all the fundamental themes of Orthodox theology addressed, the entire theological thinking based on the Holy Scriptures, the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils, the works of the Holy Fathers and on the piety of the clergy and the faithful, although the teaching of faith presented in the hymns of the Church is not formulated in the systematic form of catechism articles, the cult books being neither treatises on dogmatics nor collections of synodal definitions. However, in: the Byzantine services of the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, they were not simply “transposed” from the philosophical language to that of liturgical poetry, but they were interpreted, deepened, understood, manifested in all their significance. The doxological form that the dogmatic teachings take on in Orthodox singing protects us from conceptualism.
7. Patristic literature especially emphasizes the importance of liturgical hymnography and psalmody for the spiritual life, through the contributions of Saint Basil the Great, but also Saints Nicholas Cabasila, Dionysius the Areopagite, Theoliptos of Philadelphia and Simeon the New Theologian. The Fathers of the Church put a close relationship with psalmody as a way of hymnographic expression of the Church with the whole spiritual ascent of the Christian towards perfection. One can thus observe the interrelationship between dogma, expressed in the content of hymns, worship, as a doxological expression of dogma, and spirituality, as a direct experience of God, in: a concrete way, in: the ecclesial experience of Christians.
8. The psalmody of the dogmatic content of the Church hymns presupposes an awareness of their soteriological and communion message, as a delimitation from heresy and sin, expressing the total attachment of the Christian to the will and life in God in a spiritual way.

9. The Holy Fathers of the Church emphasize the fact that for those who want to be perfected, the most holy chants and readings from the Scriptures teach them the virtuous life and, before that, the perfect cleansing from the sin that causes corruption and death. The prayers, chants, and all that is done in the holy service sanctify us because in them we see Christ, His work, and His Passion for us.
10. Some Holy Fathers refer to the spiritual work that psalmody brings to the hearts of those who perform it. In this sense, some emphasize the fact that psalmody is like a “ladder”, whose “steps” make up a true mystical ascent to God. Other Holy Fathers emphasize the spiritual work that psalmody works in the heart of the one who sings in the Church: the feeling of brotherhood and unity between those who sing; psalmody as a giver of repentance in the heart of the one who sings; the manner of performing psalmody in the Church, so that it is useful for the spiritual growth of Christians; the natural reality of psalmody with the prayer of Jesus; the problem of the balance between the quantity and quality of singing prayers, a balance that often risks being lost by distracting attention and right judgment.