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The Canon of the Lamentation of the Mother of God at the Cross. An Exegetical Introduction

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Abstract

The present study analyzes the text of the Canon of the Lamentation of the Mother of God at the Crucifixion of the Savior, included in the service of the Compline on Holy and Great Friday. It affirms the identity of Simeon “the Logothete”, presented as the author, with St. Simeon Metaphrastes (10th century), and highlights hymnographic similarities between the pattern adopted in composing this canon and those present on other days of Holy Week, as well as in other liturgical periods. Finally, the study advocates for rejecting a possible accusation of “emotionalism” that might be associated with the dramatic style of the composition, suggesting an approach from a spiritual and pedagogical perspective, in the light of the hope brought by the Resurrection, which gives ultimate meaning.

Keywords

hymnography, The Passions of the Christ, Mary of God, Saint Simeon Metaphrastes, *Thrēnos Theotokou*

The hymnographic richness of Holy Week could not exclude references, with profound dogmatic and spiritual significance, to the Mother of God, who shared in the Passion of her Son, experiencing it with the utmost intensity—discreetly recorded by the Gospels but masterfully captured by the inspired Fathers and hymnographers of the Church. While Marian pieces may not be as prominent in the early days of this week, they become increasingly numerous starting with the Paschal *Triduum*, encompassing a thematic and compositional variety that reflects the personalities of the hymn authors. These compositions complement and fulfill the Church's devotion to the events commemorated and relived during these holy days. A lesser-known canon with a Marian theme, found in the service of the Compline on Holy and Great Friday evening, is the subject of analysis in this study.

I. The Author

On Friday evening (liturgically, already entering Holy Saturday), the Romanian editions of the *Triodion* specify that at the *Compline* (which may be read, according to typikon indications, either in a cell or in the church, following custom and “if the superior wishes”), the *Canon for the Crucifixion of the Lord and the lamentation of the Most Holy Theotokos* is sung¹. The superscription attributes the canon to “Simeon the Logothete”²,

¹ *Triodul, care cuprinde slujbele bisericești de la Duminica Vameșului și a Fariseului până în Sfânta și Marea Sâmbătă* [henceforth *Triodul*], Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2010, p. 645-646. This piece is also preserved in PG 114, 209–218). The canon, in the 6th tone, is sung as follows: the *irmos* is repeated twice, followed by the troparia “on four” then again the *irmos*. This is, in fact, the usual structure for canons appointed for the *Compline* during the days of Holy Week, starting with Holy Monday (Palm Sunday evening), as indicated in the *Triodion*, p. 544, with the distinction that the number of troparia varies (“as many as there are”) and that the canons are found in the *Triodion*. The canon from Holy Friday evening, referenced here, includes all 9 (or 8) odes (similarly, the canon of the *Compline* on Lazarus Saturday, which even includes the second ode, a composition by St. Andrew of Crete-Jerusalemite). The second ode (usually found in St. Andrew of Crete's works) is preserved in the Georgian translations of other canons, which are more conservative. Anton BAUMSTARK, “Les textes liturgique (La poésie liturgique)”, in *Irenikon* 5 (1934), p. 362.

² *Triodul*, p. 646.

a figure whose only appearance among the authors of liturgical hymns for the *Triodion* period is under this cognomen. In the current church *typikon*, the author is omitted when the canon appointed for the Compline is mentioned³. In the Greek editions of the *Triodion*, it is only stated that the *Compline* is read in cells, and an *appendix* includes a canon in tetraodia, composed by St. Andrew of Crete⁴.

Ivan Karabinov clarifies that this canon for the Compline on Holy Friday evening was composed by Simeon Metaphrastes in the 10th century, along with another similar canon (a lamentation of the Theotokos), which, however, survives only in Slavic manuscripts⁵. *The Typikon* of St. Sabbas prescribes, for the same office, two separate hymnographic pieces: *the Canon for the Crucifixion of the Lord*, followed by the *Lamentation of the Most Holy Mother of God*, composed by St. Simeon Metaphrastes⁶.

That “Simeon the Logothete” (as the author is named in the current Romanian *Triodion*) is one and the same as “Simeon Metaphrastes”, the saint who lived approximately between the years 900–987, is relatively easy to demonstrate⁷. *Logothetēs* Greek term and initially referred to a

³ *Tipic bisericesc*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 1976, p. 170; *Anuar liturgic și tipiconal 2024*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2023, p. 254.

⁴ *Triōdion katanyktikon*, Tēs Apostolikēs Diakonias tēs Ekklēsiās tēs Ellados, Atena, 2014, p. 1036; canon at pp. 1226-1232.

⁵ Ivan Alekseevič KARABINOV, *Postnaia Triod, Istorichesii obzor ee plana, sostava, redaktsii i slavianskikh perevodov* [entitled *Postnaia Triod*], Sankt-Petersburg, 1910, p. 197, apud Ieromonah Makarios SIMONOPETRITUL, *Triodul explicat. Mistagogia timpului liturgic* [entitled *Triodul explicat*], 2nd edition, transl diac. Ioan I Ică jr, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 2003, p. 401.

⁶ *Tipicul Sfântului Sava. Text și comentariu liturgic* [entitled *Tipicul Sfântului Sava*], volumul I, diortosire, introducere și note: monahul Petru Pruteanu, Ed. Credința Noastră, Galați, 2003, p. 174. It is very likely that this is a confusion, in reality there is only one canon.

⁷ Fr. Petre Vintilescu, however, considers them to be two distinct figures. In his synthesis on hymnographers, he attributes the canon of the Compline on Holy Friday evening to the first (“the Logothete”) and identifies the second (“Metaphrastes”) as the author of the third prayer of thanksgiving after Holy Communion (“written in 12-syllable verses”). Pr. Petre VINTILESCU, *Despre poezia imnografică din cărțile de ritual și cântarea bisericească*, Ed. Pace, București, 1937, pp. 61-62 (in reality, St. Simeon Metaphrastus also composed the fourth prayer of the rite of preparation for Holy Communion.). Although they closely follow the study of Fr. Petre Vintilescu, both

variety of administrative functions in the Byzantine Empire. Over time, it became more narrowly associated with the military or legislative-financial sphere (as “the supreme guardian of laws and revenues”), akin to the role of “chancellor” in monarchies within the Latin-speaking world⁸. In Romanian, the Byzantine term (preserved in Latin-language documents as *cancellarius*) entered through the South Slavic cultural sphere. It referred to a high-ranking official in Moldavia and Wallachia, the head of the princely chancery. The primary role of this official was to draft princely documents, which they would validate with the ruler’s seal⁹.

Mihail Psellos (1018–1078), the author of the life of St. Simeon Metaphrastes, states that he was a *logothete* (a secretary of state with the title of *magister*), and furthermore, that he enjoyed the favor of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (912–959). This emperor commissioned the collection of saints’ lives that brought St. Simeon fame, a fact also attested by an Arab chronicler, Yahya ibn Said of Antioch (11th century), who mentions “Simeon, secretary and logothete who composed the lives of the saints and their feasts”. He has also been identified as Simeon the “Grand Logothete” who wrote a chronicle during the reign of Nicephorus Phocas (963–969). Simeon retained his rank under the emperor who ruled Byzantium between the two mentioned above, Romanos II Lecapenus (959–963), as well as under John Tzimiskes (969–973). By the end of his life, he still held the offices of *logothete stratiotikos* (treasurer of the army) and *logothete tou dromou* (responsible for foreign policy). Venerated as a saint by Psellos or St. Mark of Ephesus (†1451), who also composed a liturgical service in his honor, Simeon Metaphrastes/Logothete was introduced into the “official” calendar somewhat later, in the 18th century, through the efforts of St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite.

Drd. C. STRUGARIU, “Imnografii Triodului. Studiu liturgic”, in: *Mitropolia Moldovei și a Sucevei* 58 (1982), nr. 1-2, pp. 27-40, here, p. 38, and Mircea OROS, “Imnografi creștini, autori de imne liturgice în Cartea Triodului”, in: *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai – Theologia Orthodoxa*, 48 (2003), nr. 1-2, p. 182-188, consider it to be one and the same person .

⁸ “Logothete”, in: Hugh CHISHOLM (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edition, New York, 1911, vol. 16, p. 921.

⁹ Mihail M. ANDREESCU, *Instituții medievale în spațiul românesc*, Ed. Fundației România de Măine, București, 2003, p. 115.

He is commemorated on November 9 (initially, he was remembered on November 28, considered to be the date of his passing into eternal rest)¹⁰.

The late provenance of the canon (belonging to the stage of final systematization, as the period of the X-XI centuries was called¹¹) is also supported by the fact that there is no mention of a (possible) office that includes something similar, neither in the Jerusalem liturgical documents of the 5th-8th centuries, such as the *Armenian Lectionary*¹², or the *Georgian Lectionary*¹³ nor, as we might expect, in Anastasie's *Typikon* (Stavrou 43), attested at the beginning of the twelfth century, influenced, moreover, by the Constantinopolitan ordinances¹⁴. Edmond Bouvy pointed out that, even in the Greek tradition (which has preserved the poetic richness of the ancient hymnographers much more carefully compared to the Western tradition), not all hymnographic creations are present in printed editions. For example, for Good Friday, the ancient (and relatively small) *Tropologion* provides the option to choose between "the lamentations or dialogues between the Crucified Jesus and His Mother, Mary" (most likely referring to the Canon of St. Simeon or a similar one), and two other compositions: Peter's denial or the narrative of the Passion¹⁵.

¹⁰ Adrian FORTESCUE, "Symeon Metaphrastes", in: *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 10, Robert Appleton Company, New York, 1911, (electronic edition, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10225a.htm>, accessed on 14.12.2024). For biographical details and an overview of his works, Marie-Hélène CONGOURDEAU, "Syméon Métaphraste", in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 14, col. 1383-1387; see a study on the identification of the two (the Logothete and Metaphrastes) and an analysis of the writings, at Jean GOUILLARD, "Syméon Métaphraste", in: *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* 14/2, col. 2959-2971.

¹¹ Makarios SIMONOPETRITUL, *Triodul explicat*, p. 26.

¹² "At 12 o'clock" there was an office in the Martyrion, after which it went down to the Anastasios, where the Gospel was read, the sections of the lectionary then going directly to the office on Holy Saturday. Cf. Charles RENOUX, *Le lictionnaire de Jérusalem en Arménie. Le Čaşoc. II. Edition synoptique des plus anciens témoins*, Turnhout (Belgia), 1999 [PO 48/2], p.198.

¹³ *Le Grand Lectionnaire de l'Église de Jérusalem (V^e-VIII^e siècle)*, tome I, traduit par Michel Tarchnischvili, Louvain, 1959 [CSCO 188-189], pp. 106-107. Moreover, both lectionaries mainly contain only indications of biblical readings, some indications of "topography" etc.

¹⁴ A. PAPADOPOULOS-KERAMEUS, *Analecta Ierosolymitikes stachyologias*, vol. 2, Pietrogrado, 18944 (repr. Bruxelles, 1963), pp. 161-162.

¹⁵ Edmond BOUVY, "La Semaine Sainte et la poésie liturgique", in: *Échos d'Orient* 7 (1897),

Simeon Metaphrastes also contributed hymnographic compositions during the period of the *Triodion*. In addition to this composition, some liturgists and biographers attribute to him the 24 stichera of the Great Canon sung at *Vespers* on the *Thursday* of the fifth week of the Great Lent¹⁶ and the first stichera at *Vespers* on the *Wednesday* of the fifth week of the Great Lent¹⁷. Other hymnographic works whose authorship is also attributed to St. Simeon include a series of canons for the days leading up to the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord¹⁸, Acrostic stichera for the Feast of St. Simeon of the Wonderful Mountain (May 21), other stichera or prayers dedicated to the Mother of God, a synaxarion for the Crucifixion, a hymn about the Incarnation etc¹⁹.

II. Short approach to text

The canon is conceived as a dialogue between the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, and her Son, Jesus Christ, now crucified on the Cross. The majority of the text consists of the “words” or “lamentations” of the Mother of God,

p. 193. Saint Roman the Melodist is the author of three hymnographic compositions exactly on these themes; they were translated into Romanian (and even placed one after the other), under the names of the Denial of Saint Peter, the Hymn of the Holy Mary at the Cross, the Hymn of the Passion of the Saviour, in Sf. ROMAN MELODUL, *Imnele pocăinței*, introductory study by Andrew Louth, translation and notes by Parascheva Grigoriu, Ed. Trisagion, Iași, 2006, pp. 119-134, pp. 135-153 and pp. 154-166.

¹⁶ In the printed edition, they are attributed to St. Andrew of Crete. See the superscript from *Triod*, p. 404.

¹⁷ Ivan ALEKSEEVICH KARABINOV, *Postnaia Triod*, p. 197, apud Makarios SIMONOPETRITUL, *Triodul explicat*, p. 401.

¹⁸ An analysis of the eight canons (complete or in fragments) attributed to St. Simeon Metaphrastes reveals their distribution primarily at Compline —most of them— or at Matins. One of these canons, found in a codex for December 20, explicitly mentions that it is “the work of Simeon the *Logothete*” although the current Menaion (Greek, Romanian, or Slavonic) does not name the author. These canons exhibit fascinating similarities with the hymnography of Holy Week, at Cezar LOGIN, *Înainteprăznuirea Nașterii Domnului în ritul bizantin – origine, dezvoltare, structură, ritual și imagografie* – [from now on *Înainteprăznuirea Nașterii Domnului în ritul bizantin*], Ed. Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2020, pp. 223-249.

¹⁹ Details and discussions regarding the list of hymnographic works, authenticity and some characteristics, with reference bibliography, at Jean GOUILLARD, “Syméon Métaphraste”, in: *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique* 14/2, col. 2963-2965.

with only a few brief “interventions” from other characters. After a period of apparent silence, the Savior offers His “response”, encouraging and full of hope, only at the end of the “lamentation”.

Right from the first troparion, the reason for this “weeping” is revealed: “the pure Virgin beheld her Son and Lord crucified on the Cross”²⁰. The details unfold later, painting a desolate image of the Crucified One: “Seeing You wounded and without glory, naked on the wood, my Son”²¹; “For now I see You, my sweet light, naked, dead, and wounded”²²; “Pains and troubles and sighs have found me, woe is me, lamented the Pure One, sighing bitterly, seeing You dead, my beloved Son, naked and forsaken, and anointed with myrrh”²³.

Also in the first troparion, three words from the same semantic field illustrate the soul’s anguish that triggers the Mother’s reaction: “lamenting”, “crying bitterly”, and “sighing”²⁴. The expressions will diversify in different variations throughout the canon: “I am crushed by pain, weeping, said the Pure One”²⁵; “woe is me”²⁶; “I am consumed with grief in my

²⁰ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 1 tr 1a)*. The system of abbreviations used in the present study is taken from the model proposed by Ierom. Makarios SIMONOPETRITUL, *Triodul explicat*, pp. 391-392, and used, with adaptations and additions, in † DAMASCHIN DORNEANUL, *Dimensiunea mistagogică a Săptămânii Sfintelor Pătimiri. Elemente de antropologie duhovnicească*, Ed. Crimca, Suceava, 2022, pp. 20-23. Also, several hymnographic texts were taken from the thesis about Holy Week (the advantage being that of the thematic selection already made), or ideas that, in one form or another, are present in the respective work (the canon from Compline did not benefit from a separate analysis).

²¹ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 4 tr 4)*.

²² *ViM/SbM (Pavod 7 tr 1b)*; “He who clothes himself with light as with a garment, stood naked at the judgment”, *ViM (Ut ant 10 tr 1)* “The whole building mourns, seeing Him hanged naked on the wood”, *SbM (Ut od 6 ic)*. Moreover, with few exceptions, the first Christian literary testimonies show that Jesus did not wear the cloth around his body; it was introduced, out of piety and respect, by the iconographers. Raymond E. BROWN, S.S., *The Death of the Messiah. From Gethsemane to the Grave. A commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospel*, vol. I, New York-London-Toronto-Sydney-Auckland, 1994, p. 870; vol. II, pp. 952-953.

²³ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 5 tr 4)*.

²⁴ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 1 tr 1)*.

²⁵ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 1 tr 4)*.

²⁶ There are six occurrences of the phrase in the canon: *ViM/SbM (Pavod 1 tr 4) (Pavod 3 tr 2, 3) (Pavod 5 tr 4) (Pavod 6 tr 2) (Pavod 7 tr 3)*.

heart”²⁷, “weeping bitterly”²⁸, “sighing”²⁹; “kissing Him bitterly, she wept and spoke”³⁰; “I grieve badly and my heart hurts”³¹; “sighing bitterly”³², “sighing and weeping”³³.

The Theotokos is not alone in this “crying”; beside her, in discretion and deep sadness, are the Myrrhbearers (“together with the other women ... she was saying”)³⁴. Moreover, the Mother of God is mentioned in the passages that relate the Passions, as being in their company (John 19, 25)³⁵, as it was during most of her Son’s journeys. The dialogue is also imagined between the Virgin Mary and the group of Myrrhbearers, to whom she appeals for *sympathy* in experiencing the intensity of the moment: “Sighing and weeping, the Immaculate One spoke to the Myrrhbearers: Weep with me and lament bitterly, for behold, my sweet Light and your Teacher is given to the tomb”³⁶.

On the other hand, the Mother of God remarks on the loneliness of Christ, abandoned by His closest disciples out of fear: “Because of the fear of the Jews, Peter hid himself, and all the faithful fled, leaving Christ, the Virgin said, sighing”³⁷.

²⁷ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 3 tr 2b); ViM/SbM (Pavod 3 tr 4b); ViM/SbM (Pavod 4 tr 4b).*

²⁸ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 4 tr 2a).*

²⁹ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 3 tr 4b); ViM/SbM (Pavod 4 tr 4b); ViM/SbM (Pavod 9 tr 1a).*

³⁰ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 5 tr 2b).*

³¹ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 6 tr 1b).*

³² *ViM/SbM (Pavod 7 tr 3a).*

³³ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 7 tr 4a).*

³⁴ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 1 tr 1); mentioned in ViM/SbM (Pavod 7 tr 3a), where they are even called mirophores: “together with the other women bearing myrrh”. (Our note).*

³⁵ The fourth Gospel, alone, also mentions the presence of St. John the Evangelist (cf. John 19, 26-27); and in the canon of Compline from *ViM*: “Virgin, standing before the Cross with the beloved apostle”, *ViM/SbM (Pavod 1 tr 3).*

³⁶ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 7 tr 4).*

³⁷ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 3 tr 1).* Fear (in its varying intensities), which was the motive for Peter’s denial, is also mentioned in other compositions from Holy Week, such as: “Peter, seeing what was happening, was seized with fear (emphasis added); when questioned by a maid, he denied You, Lord, not only as You had said, but as You knew, O One who knows all things”, *JoM/ViM (Pav. od. 5, tr. 5)*; and “Out of fear of the Jews (emphasis added), Peter, Your friend and closest one, denied You, Lord, and, weeping, thus he cried: Do not pass by my tears in silence, for I said I would keep the faith, O merciful One, and I did not keep it. And our repentance thus He receives and shows mercy to us”, *ViM (C Împ 3tr 4/12).*

In an act of co-suffering, the wounds of the Son become the wounds of the Mother— not physical, but internal, spiritual wounds, no less painful: “I see You now, my beloved and desired Son, crucified on the Cross, and I am deeply wounded in my heart”³⁸. Just as on the Cross there was no room for words (and any attempt to utter a word came with an added effort, exacerbating the suffering³⁹), neither does the Theotokos find her words, and therefore she prays to her Son: “Give a word to Your servant, O Good One”⁴⁰. A little further, in the silence of Golgotha⁴¹, The Mother of God longs to hear a word from her Son, but this will not happen, just as God the Father will respond in silence to Jesus’ plea in Gethsemane (Matt 26, 36-46): “Do You not speak a word to Your servant, Son of God? Will You have no mercy, O Master, on her who gave birth to You? lamented the Pure One, sighing and weeping, and kissing the body of her Lord”⁴². As many times in the hymnography of the Holy Passions⁴³, here it is also recalled that the

³⁸ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 1 tr 2)*.

³⁹ For the physiological reactions occurring during crucifixion, see Dr. Eugenia SCARVELIS CONSTANTINOU, *Răstignirea Împăratului slavei*, transl. Monahia Xenia Hurmuzache, Ed. Crimca, Suceava, 2024 [*Biblioteca Crimca – Seria Traduceri 1*], pp. 304-307, 310-317, based on several studies, referenced in the footnotes.

⁴⁰ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 1 tr 2b)*. Indeed, many canons include this mention, usually in the first troparion (or at least in the initial troparia) of the first “ode”, specifically the request for a “word” (“enlightenment”, “wisdom” or other variants) in order to be able to praise or evoke a saint or event. An inventory, from this perspective, of the services for saints celebrated in the month of December would present the following picture: *December 2 (Ut od 1 tr 1)*; *December 4 (Ut od 1 ca 1 tr 1)*; *December 6 (Ut od 1 ca 2 tr 1)*; *December 7* [service of St. Martyr Philothea] (*Ut od 1 tr 1*); *December 8 (Ut od 1 ca 2 tr 1)*; *December 11 (Ut od 1 tr 1)*; *December 14 (Ut od 1 tr 1)*; *December 15 (Ut od 1 ca 1 tr 1) (Ut od 1 ca 2 tr 1)*; *December 17 (Ut od 1 tr 1)*; *December 27* [service of St. Nicodim of Tismana] (*Ut od 1 tr 1*); *December 28 (Ut od 1 tr 1)*; *December 30 (Ut od 1 ca 1 tr 1) (Ut od 1 ca 2 tr 1)*;

⁴¹ “Today there is great silence on earth; great silence and stillness now; great silence, for the King is asleep. The earth is terrified and speechless, for God has fallen asleep in the flesh and has raised up those who have been asleep from the ages”. Sf. EPIFANIE DE SALAMINA, “La Sâmbăta Mare”, transl. pr. Ilie Toader, in: Sf. MACARIE EGIPTEANUL, Sf. GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, Sf. EPIFANIE DE SALAMINA, *Scrieri duhovnicești și omilii*, Coo. Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești (abrv. PSB), vol. 12, Ed. Basilica, București, 2014, p. 456.

⁴² *ViM/SbM (Pavod 6 tr 3)*; “Give me an answer, my Son, do not pass me by in silence, You who have kept me pure; for You are my Son and my God”, *ViM/SbM (Pavic)*.

⁴³ *DmSt (Vcm Dst 4) (Vcm Dstslavă și acum) (Ut se 1 tr 1) (Ut se 3) (Ut rug stâlpări)*; *JoM (Ut od 3 tr 1)*; *JoM (Ut laslavă și acum)*, reluat și *JoM (Vc/LitEuh Dst 5)*; *JoM/*

passions endured by Jesus on the Cross are voluntary (“Willingly, my Son and the Creator suffered a terrible death on the wood”⁴⁴); the death of Jesus is not merely the result of a plot, a scheme between the Jews and Romans, or an initiative of the Jewish religious authorities, who had the support of the foreign political powers. Rather, in full knowledge, Jesus accepts it with His prior knowledge and through the omnipotence of His free will: “I lay down My life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10, 17b-18).

The death of Jesus represents, for the Mother of God and for all, ultimately, a separation that is synonymous, in the hymnographer’s language, with an “absence”, for the presence, word, and work of Jesus among those who followed Him and believed in Him meant a state of “joy” and “gladness” that gave hope for the fulfillment of the promised salvation, long awaited: “Now I am deprived of my expectation, of the joy and the gladness of my Son and my Lord”⁴⁵; “You were my hope and my

ViM (Pav od 8 tr 4, 6) (Pav od 9 tr 3, 9); *Vi* (Ut ant 3 se) (Ut ant 6 tr 3) (Utst 1) (C Împ 3tr) (Vc Dst 5); *SbM* (Ut Pr 1 tr 21, 27, 57); *ViM* (Vc st slavă și acum); *ViM/SbM* (Pav od 1 tr 3). Christ “did not lay down His life under compulsion, nor was He killed under compulsion, but willingly”. Sf. CHIRIL AL IERUSALIMULUI, *Cateheze*, 13, 6, translation from Greek and notes by Preot profesor Dumitru Fecioru, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2003, p. 192.

⁴⁴ *ViM/SbM* (Pavod 1 tr 3); “You buried yourself willingly”, *ViM/SbM* (Pavod 9 tr 2b). Death is designated as “accomplished”, for its tragic character, full of drama and torment. Explanations of how the crucifixion was carried out and the psycho-somatic reactions of the crucified, in, for example, Louis GOUGAUD, “Croix et crucifix”, in: *Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* 3/2, col. 3045-3088; H. MARUCCHI, “Croix”, in: *Dictionnaire de la Bible* 2, col. 1127-1134; ALEXANDRE DE BIL, “Croix”, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 2, col. 2607-2623.

⁴⁵ *ViM/SbM* (Pavod 1 tr 4); Christ was seen as the fulfillment of the “expectation” that both the Jewish people and, consciously or not, all peoples longed for: “You, the One whom Jacob long ago called the *expectation of the Gentiles*”, *December 25* (Ut od 4 ca 1 tr 1a), cf. *Fc* 49, 10, In the edition by Bartolomeu Anania: “A ruler shall not depart from Judah, nor a leader from his descendants, until He comes to whom it belongs; the One whom the nations await (emphasis added)”; similarly, in the Septuagint edition, Polirom 2004: “... He is the expectation of the nations [pagans]”. The Synodal edition does not reflect this idea: “... until the peacemaker comes, to whom the nations will submit”, which follows the Masoretic Text (in the Romanian translation of the book of Genesis, in the Humanitas edition, 2017: “... and to Him shall the obedience of the nations be”).

life, O Master, my Son and my God, in the light of my eyes, Your servant. But now I am deprived of You, my sweet and beloved Son”⁴⁶. The paradox that the Virgin Mary observes is that the One who raised the dead, the One who gave life, is now seen devoid of life: “Seeing You dead, O Lover of mankind, You who raised the dead, I mourn deeply and am wounded in my heart”⁴⁷; “A strange and most glorious mystery I behold, said the Virgin to her Son and God: How do I place You in the tomb, You who, by Your command, raise the dead from their graves?”⁴⁸.

Christ is the true Sun, the Light that sustains life, and for this reason, His death is likened to the “setting” of the sun: “Behold, my sweet Light, my hope and my good life, my God, has set on the Cross”⁴⁹; “I think, O Master, that I will no longer hear Your sweet voice, nor will I see the beauty of Your face as before; for You have set, my Son, from my eyes”⁵⁰.

The tendency, like that of any mother who loves her prematurely departed son, is to try to be “a partaker” in bearing the suffering together: “I would have wanted to die with You, said the Immaculate One, for I cannot bear to see You dead and breathless”⁵¹; life seems futile and impossible to live with this pain, which could only be alleviated by sharing in the condition of the Son, even through His descent into *Sheol*:

“You who soothe pain, receive me now to You, my Son and my God, so that I may descend, O Master, into hell with You; do not leave me alone, for I cannot bear to live any longer, not seeing You, my sweet Light”⁵².

“I will not rise from Your tomb, my Son, nor will I cease to shed tears, until I too descend into hell; for I cannot bear the separation from You, my Son”⁵³.

⁴⁶ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 5 tr 3)*.

⁴⁷ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 6 tr 1a)*.

⁴⁸ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 8 tr 3)*.

⁴⁹ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 3 tr 4)*. There are six occurrences in the Canon of St. Simeon of naming Christ as “Light”: *ViM/SbM (Pavod 3 tr 4a)*; *ViM/SbM (Pavod 5 tr 3a)*; *ViM/SbM (Pavod 7 tr 1a, 2a, 4a)*; *ViM/SbM (Pavod 9 tr 1a)*.

⁵⁰ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 6 tr 4)*.

⁵¹ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 6 tr 1b)*.

⁵² *ViM/SbM (Pavod 7 tr 2)*.

⁵³ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 8 tr 4)*.

“From now on, joy will never touch me again”, said the Immaculate One, sighing. “For my light and my joy have set in the tomb. But I will not leave Him alone; here I will die and be buried with Him”⁵⁴.

Unlike “horrible death”⁵⁵, at the other pole, the “entry” into the world (the birth of Christ) is called by the Theotokos “wonderful and fearful”⁵⁶. Then, as she received, nine months earlier, the announcement from the angel, the Virgin Mary was “greater than all mothers”⁵⁷. It’s just that the “good news” of that time (that the One who will be born is the Son of the Most High and the throne of David will be given to Him, cf. Lk 1, 32) now corresponds to a “news” full of pain: “Where is, my Son and my God, the good tidings of old, which Gabriel spoke to me, calling You the King and the Son of the Most High God? For now I see You, my sweet light, naked, dead, and wounded”⁵⁸.

If at birth, says the Mother, “I carried the child in my arms”, those same hands are now urged to hold the same Body, “removing Him” from the Cross: “I would take Him down from the wood”, but she painfully

⁵⁴ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 9 tr 1)*.

⁵⁵ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 1 tr 3)*.

⁵⁶ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 3 tr 2)*. The “wondrous” and “awe-inspiring” nature of the event of the Birth of the Son of God from the Virgin is recalled, as expected, in the liturgical offices surrounding the feast of Christmas itself. For example: “Let the foundations tremble, and those beneath be shaken with earthquake! For God in a bodily form has clothed Himself”, *December 24/25 (C Împ 6 tr 8/12a)*; “Come, O peoples who bear Christ, let us see the wonder that astonishes and overwhelms every thought”, *December 24/25 (C Împ 6 tr 9/12a)*; “Great and wondrous is the miracle accomplished today”, *December 25 (Vc st 1a)*; “Why do you marvel, Mary? Why are you afraid of what is within you?”, *December 25 (Ut se 2a)*; “How can I not marvel at the Virgin who gave birth, at the star that proclaims the One who was born?”, *December 24 (Ut ic a)*; “What is this great and wondrous miracle?”, *December 24 (Ut od 7 ca 1 tr 3a)*; “Angels, marvel in heaven”, *December 24.(Ut st slavă a)*.

⁵⁷ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 3 tr 2)*; “Now the Virgin is more glorious than the heavens”, *December 25(Vc lit 3b)*.

⁵⁸ *ViM/SbM (Pavod 7 tr 1)*. In the Canon of the Resurrection, the angel brings back the good news of joy to the Virgin: “The angel called out to the one full of grace: Virgin, rejoice, and again I say rejoice, that your Son rose from the grave on the third day”, *DmÎnv (Ut od 9 tr 1, stih)*.

acknowledges that “no one gives Him to me”⁵⁹. Therefore, she appeals to Joseph of Arimathea to intervene with Pilate for this: “The one untouched by marriage, weeping, said to the noble-looking man: Hurry, Joseph, go to Pilate and ask to take your Teacher down from the wood”⁶⁰, which Joseph, animated by the same feelings as the Virgin, fulfills: “Seeing the Pure One weeping bitterly, Joseph was troubled and, crying, went to Pilate, pleading sorrowfully: Give me the Body of my God”⁶¹. Joseph’s plea to Pilate is preceded by an imagined dialogue with Christ Himself, in which Joseph expresses his unworthiness (“the servant” before “my God”) to carry out this act. This dialogue is inspired by the Virgin Mary’s words: “Seeing the Virgin weeping, Joseph lamented and bitterly cried: O my God! How shall I now bury You, I, Your servant? With what cloth shall I wrap Your Body?”⁶².

The narrative also introduces Nicodemus, who assists in lowering the Lord’s body from the Cross (cf. John 19, 39). The scene transcends human understanding, evoking astonishment and wonder: “Your *strange sight*, O Lord, Who uphold all creation, *surpasses the mind*. Therefore, Joseph, together with Nicodemus, carries You as a dead man in their hands and

⁵⁹ ViM/SbM (Pav od 3 tr 3).

⁶⁰ ViM/SbM (Pav od 4 tr 2).

⁶¹ ViM/SbM (Pav od 4 tr 3). In the newer editions of the *Typikon* of St. Sava (for instance, the 1816 Iași edition, p. 549, electronically available chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpajpcgclefindmkaj/https://manastirea.petr-voda.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Tipicul-cel-Mare-2003-transcriere-dupa-ed.1816.pdf, accessed on 16.12.2024), it is mentioned that after the singing of the Lamentations and the procession with the Holy Epitaph around the church, during the veneration of the Holy Aer (or more recently, the passing under it), the calophonic sticheron “Come, let us bless Joseph...” is sung. This sticheron imagines a dialogue between noble Joseph and Pilate, where he asks for Jesus’ body: “... give me the Stranger, Who has nowhere to lay His head; give me the Stranger, Whom the deceitful disciple sold to death; give me the Stranger, Whom His Mother saw crucified and lamented, saying: Alas, my Son, alas, my Light, and my beloved heart, for what Simeon foretold to me in the temple has come true: A sword shall pierce your heart. But turn my mourning into the joy of Your Resurrection”. This sticheron is not found in the printed Triodion but is set to Tone Five by composer Kyrillos Popescu in chant collections, such as *Cântările Sfintei Liturghii și alte cântări bisericești*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2013, pp. 326-330.

⁶² ViM/SbM (Pav od 8 tr 1).

buries You”⁶³. Although Joseph sees a dead body, of the One he loved, he does not cease to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is true God: “Lamenting, Joseph sighed and marveled with Nicodemus. He took the most pure Body and, kissing it, sighed and groaned and *sang to Him as to God*”⁶⁴. The Virgin Mary, of course, shares the same assurance, as the suffering and Crucifixion did not shake her faith in her Son’s Divinity: “Come, all, let us praise Him Who was crucified for us, for Mary saw Him on the wood and said: Though You endure the Crucifixion, You are my Son and my God”⁶⁵.

Once the act of taking the body down from the Cross is completed, the image of the Virgin holding Jesus on her knees is contemplated (in Western tradition, this image is known as *La Pietà*): “Taking Him with tears, the Mother untouched by man placed Him on her knees, and, pleading with tears and bitterly kissing Him, she wept and said”⁶⁶.

The face of Christ, once revealed in glory on Mount Tabor⁶⁷, now appears utterly dishonored, as Isaiah had foretold (cf. Is 53): “Seeing You, O most gracious God and compassionate Lord, without glory, breathless, and disfigured, I marvel and weep, holding You as I never imagined I would see You! Alas, my Son and my God!”⁶⁸.

In another composition from the Lenten services, the contemplation of the One without beauty becomes synonymous with the Virgin’s “vision” of her Son’s act of utmost humility, God lowering Himself before humanity: “You, the One adorned with beauty, were born by the beautiful Virgin. Yet seeing You without beauty, nor form in Your Passion, Savior, she lamented,

⁶³ ViM/SbM (Pav od 8 tr 2); “a strange and most glorious mystery”, ViM/SbM (Pav od 8 tr 3a); and in other compositions from the Triodion: “a new and strange wonder”, and in other compositions from the *Triodion*: “a new and strange wonder”, Vi II (Ut se 1 tr 2a); the Crucifixion is “a strange mystery”, Vi IV (Vc st 3).

⁶⁴ ViM/SbM (Pav od 5 tr 1).

⁶⁵ ViM/SbM (Pav cond); ViM (Ut cond). “The Canon” is, in fact, the *prelude* to “The Hymn of St. Mary at the Cross”, p. 142, composed by St. Romanos the Melodist, just as “the icos” is the first stanza of the hymn.

⁶⁶ ViM/SbM (Pav od 5 tr 2).

⁶⁷ August 6 (Ut od 6 cond).

⁶⁸ ViM/SbM (Pav od 6 tr 2). “Fairer in appearance / Than all men, / Now as a Man You lie dead and disfigured, / You Who adorned all creation”, SbM (Ut Pr 1 tr 9).

saying: I marvel at Your humility, beyond comprehension, my Son, by which You save human nature that humbles itself”⁶⁹.

The Canon of Compline borrows from the *Matins* service both the kontakion (quoted above) and the ikos of Holy and Great Friday (Matins of the Twelve Gospels):

“Seeing the Lamb, Mary the ewe, led to the slaughter, she followed after Him, crushed, together with other women, crying out thus: Where are You going, my Son? Why are You making this hurried journey? Is there another wedding in Cana, and are You hastening there to turn water into wine again? Shall I go with You, my Son? Or shall I wait for You? Answer me, my Son, do not pass me by in silence, You Who kept me pure; for You are my Son and my God”⁷⁰.

The conclusion of the Canon is filled with hope. The promise of the Resurrection, made by Christ the Lord to His disciples and all those with Him (cf. Mk 8, 31; 9, 9-10.31; 10, 34), is the only fulfillment that can heal the sorrow in the soul of His Mother: “Now heal the wound of my soul, my Son, the Most Pure One said, weeping; rise and calm my sorrow and anguish. For You can, O Master, do whatever You will, even though You willingly were buried”⁷¹.

In response to this plea, the only words attributed to the Savior Christ appear in the entire canon (the “dialogue” being, in fact, more of a “monologue”⁷²). The events of the Passion, Crucifixion, and Burial are part of the work of salvation, described as “the mystery hidden from eternity

⁶⁹ *Mi IV (Ut od 9 ca 2 tr 4)*; “Beloved Son of mine, where has Your radiant beauty gone, which adorned human nature?”, *Mi II (Vc st glory and now)*.

⁷⁰ *ViM/SbM (Pav ic)*; *ViM (Ut ic)*; “Alas, what do I see? Where are You going now, my Son, leaving me alone?”, *ViM/SbM (Pav od 7 tr 3)*

⁷¹ *ViM/SbM (Pav od 9 tr 2)*.

⁷² Compared to the kontakion (hymn) of St. Romanos the Melodist, it has been noted that the Virgin does not necessarily expect an answer from her Son (Who is dead, on the Cross), creating a “silent meditation”, likely understood as an inner utterance. See “Introduction”, in: ROMANOS LE MÉLODE, “Hymne de Marie à la Croix”, in: *Hymnes*, IV, introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par José Grosdidier de Matons, coll. *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 128, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1967, p. 145.

and unknown to the angels”⁷³. Yet this mystery remained unknown even to the Theotokos, who kept these mysteries “in her heart” (Lk 2, 19), not strictly at a rational level. Accepting the Passion and its culmination in death is the “price” for the salvation of the faithful. And the Resurrection, an act of Divinity, will bring not only glory but also joy to His Mother⁷⁴. “Oh, how the depth of My mercies was hidden from you, My Mother, in secret”, said the Lord, “for wanting to save My creation, I accepted to die. But I shall rise as the God of heaven and earth and glorify you”⁷⁵.

The final hymn of the Canon represents the response of the Mother to the single sign, the only reaction from her Son, whom she has mourned so deeply. The tone changes; now the great “mercy” of God is evoked, a sign of His love for His creation (cf. John 3, 16). This mercy is invoked again and again, remembering not only His Passion but also glorifying the Resurrection on the third day: “I will sing of Your mercy, O Lover of mankind, and I will bow down before the multitude of Your mercies, O Master. For desiring to save Your creation, You accepted death”, said the Most Pure One. “But for Your Resurrection, O Savior, have mercy on us all”⁷⁶.

III. Hymnographic Similarities

The general tone of the canon from the Compline service is not unique within the hymnography of the *Triodion*. Particularly during the days of the Holy Passion, but also in the preceding weeks⁷⁷, we encounter compositions that emphasize the sorrow of the Virgin Mary in the face of the crucified Jesus, as well as elements of an “imaginary dialogue” between the Mother

⁷³ Troparion of the Theotokion-the Resurrection, tone 4; cf. 1 Tim. 3, 16; “the mystery of salvation” *LuM* (*Vc st 1*); “the ineffable mystery of Your dispensation”, *LuM* (*Ut st 1*); “Your unspeakable mystery”, *JoM* (*Ut od 4 ir*); “the shroud and the tomb reveal the mystery within You, O Word”, *SbM* (*Ut od 5 tr 1*).

⁷⁴ “You, Pure One, Theotokos, rejoice in the Resurrection of the One you bore” *DmÎnv* (*Ut od 9 ir a*).

⁷⁵ *ViM/SbM* (*Pav od 9 tr 3*).

⁷⁶ *ViM/SbM* (*Pav od 9 tr 4*).

⁷⁷ e.g., *Vi IV* (*Ut od 8 ca 2 tr 4*); *Lu IV* (*Ut od 1 ca 1 tr 4*); *Vi VI* (*Vc st glory and now*); *Vi II* (*Ut st glory and now*); *Mi II* (*Ut se 2 tr 2*); *Vi II* (*Ut se 2 tr 2*), etc.

and her Son: “Standing beside Your Cross, O Savior, Your Mother, seeing Your unjust slaughter, cried out: Woe is me, my Son, the unsetting Light! Shine light upon all, O Sun of Glory!”⁷⁸.

Many stanzas of the Burial Hymns (*Prohod*), sung during the Matins of Saturday, reference the lamentation of the Virgin Mary at the crucifixion of her Son⁷⁹: “O Word, O Lord, O my sweet Son, how shall I endure Your three-day burial? My heart breaks as a mother’s heart”⁸⁰; “When shall I see You again, eternal Light, joy, and sweetness of my soul?” cried the Virgin, lamenting⁸¹; “Your Mother now pours out rivers of tears, O Christ, and cried out when she saw You laid in the tomb: Arise, O Son, as You have said!”⁸² etc⁸³. In the third section of the Burial Hymns, the hymnographer even records a dialogue reminiscent of what we encounter in the Canon from the Compline of Great and Holy Friday: “O my Light, my sweetest Son, how have You hidden Yourself in the tomb?”//“Weep no longer, Mother; I suffer these things to free Adam and Eve”// “My Son, I glorify Your great compassion through which You endure all these things”⁸⁴.

Following the same thematic and stylistic framework as the Ikos of Great Friday (also present, as we have seen, in the Compline service after the sixth ode), this composition is offered as an announcement, an anticipatory experience of the Passion, as early as the second week of Great Lent:

“The Ewe, seeing her Lamb once hastening toward slaughter,
zealously followed Him, crying out to Him thus: Where are You

⁷⁸ *LuM/MaM (Pav od 9 tr 7)* [a composition by St. Andrew of Crete]. As will be seen, the theme of Christ as the “Light” that sets recurs in the compositions cited in this section.

⁷⁹ The proportion of hymns mentioning the Mother of God in the stanzas of the *Burial Hymns* is approximately one-tenth in the first section and about a quarter in the other two. Alexis KNIAZEFF, “La Theotokos dans les offices byzantins du temps pascal”, in: *Irénikon* 1 (1961), p. 27.

⁸⁰ *SbM (Ut Pr 1 tr 67)*.

⁸¹ *SbM (Ut Pr 1 tr 71)*.

⁸² *SbM (Ut Pr 2 tr 18)*.

⁸³ In an inventory of the Burial Hymns, references to the sorrow, weeping, and lamentation of the Mother of God appear in these compositions: *SbM (Ut Pr 1 tr 28, 61, 67-71)*; *SbM (Ut Pr 2 tr 5, 18, 20-22, 32, 46-54)*; *SbM (Ut Pr 3 tr 16-18; 29-32; 37-38; 43)*.

⁸⁴ *SbM (Ut Pr 3 tr 30-32)*.

going now, my sweetest Son, Christ? Why do You hasten so joyfully on this swift journey, O Long-suffering One? Beloved Jesus, You who are without sin, most merciful Lord? Grant me a word, Your servant, my beloved Son; do not pass me by in silence, I who gave birth to You in a most wondrous manner, to You, O God most merciful, who grant the world great mercy”⁸⁵.

The intensity of sorrow reaches near-paroxysmal levels in the hymnography of Great Friday, accompanied by (imagined) physical gestures that reveal the inability to manage a grief that exceeds the boundaries of emotional tolerance:

“Today, seeing You, O Word, crucified on the Cross, the spotless Virgin, lamenting with a Mother’s compassion, was bitterly wounded in her heart, and sighing deeply from the depths of her soul, she *scratched her face* [emphasis added], tortured by pain; therefore, *beating her chest* [emphasis added], she cried out in anguish: Woe is me, my divine Son! Woe is me, Light of the world! How have You vanished from my sight, Lamb of God? At this, the hosts of the bodiless ones were struck with fear, saying: O Lord, who are incomprehensible, glory to You”⁸⁶.

Alongside these moments at the Crucifixion, other hymnographic pieces conclude with the remembrance of victory through the Resurrection, a sign of God’s “great order”: “Seeing You crucified upon the wood, Christ, You the Maker and God of all, she who bore You without seed cried out bitterly: My Son, where has the beauty of Your form set? I cannot bear to see You unjustly crucified; but hasten to rise, that I too may behold Your resurrection from the dead on the third day”⁸⁷;

⁸⁵ *Vi II (Vc st Glory ad now)*.

⁸⁶ *ViM (Ut st 2)*.

⁸⁷ *ViM (Ut st 3)*. “The pain I did not endure when I gave birth to You, Son, has now swiftly pierced my heart. I cannot bear to see You nailed to the Cross, Light of my eyes! Hasten, therefore, and arise, that I may glorify with the world Your dreadful order”, *Vi II (Ut st Glory ad now)*.

A segment of the dialogue between the Mother of God and her Son at the Cross is encountered in the order of Holy Saturday, during the Matins service, in the first three stanzas of the ninth ode. This composition, written by St. Cosmas of Maiuma (the Aghipolitan), who lived in the eighth century, predates the canon of St. Symeon Metaphrastes from the Compline service by almost two centuries. The balance of the dialogue is reversed: there are two responses from Jesus and one from the Mother of God: “In Your strange birth, free from pain, I was blessed beyond nature, my beginningless Son; but now, my God, seeing You dead and lifeless, I am terribly torn by the sword of sorrow. Yet rise, so that I may be glorified”⁸⁸.

The response of Jesus is similar to the one found at Compline, emphasizing the luminous end brought by the Resurrection, which will surpass the Passion (again highlighting that it is voluntary) and will demonstrate the definitive victory (through the Cross and Resurrection) over hell and the demons: “The earth covers Me as I will it, but the gatekeepers of hell tremble when they see Me, Mother, clothed in the blood-stained robe of victory; for, as God, I will slay the enemies with the Cross, and I will rise again and glorify you”⁸⁹.

The Resurrection of Christ is also accompanied by the promise of glory that the Mother of God will enjoy: “Weep not for Me, Mother, as you see Me in the grave, your Son, Whom you conceived in your womb without seed; for I shall rise and be glorified, and I shall lift up in glory, as God, those who with faith and love unceasingly magnify you”⁹⁰.

The same dialogue, full of suffering, wonder, and compassion, with the crucified Jesus, is also held by Joseph and Nicodemus; they express their astonishment at the entire scene of the Crucifixion and, in a spirit of humility, the tenderness with which they commit themselves to fulfilling the burial rites. Even in this famous composition which accompanies the procession of the Holy Epitaph during the Vespers of Holy Saturday, the conclusion is optimistic, as the “burial” is not the final point in Christ’s divine-human biography but is praised along with (and necessarily) the anticipated moment of the Resurrection:

⁸⁸ *SbM (Ut od 9 tr 2)*.

⁸⁹ *SbM (Ut od 9 tr 3)*.

⁹⁰ *SbM (Ut od 9 ir)*. Cf. *ViM/SbM (Pav od 9 tr 3)*.

“You, who clothe Yourself with light as with a garment, Joseph, along with Nicodemus, took You down from the wood. Seeing You dead, naked, and unburied, they lamented humbly and sorrowfully, saying: ,Woe is me, most sweet Jesus, whom just a little while ago the sun beheld crucified on the Cross and clothed itself in darkness; the earth quaked in fear, and the veil of the Temple was torn. Yet now I see You submitting to death willingly for my sake. How shall I bury You, my God? Or how shall I wrap You in burial linens? Or with what hands shall I touch Your incorrupt body? Or what hymns shall I sing at Your departure, O compassionate One? I glorify Your Passion, I praise Your burial together with Your Resurrection, singing: Lord, glory to You!”⁹¹

Hymnography bears witness that not only humans are astonished by what is happening, but nature itself participates in the events so intensely experienced by the Virgin Mary. All cosmic phenomena (the earthquake, the darkening of the sun, etc.), abundantly evoked in hymnography, join the lamentation of the Mother of God, as well as those who, alongside her, manifest their spiritual sorrow here and now: “O mountains and valleys / And multitudes of people, / Lament and weep with me, all of you, / And mourn with the Mother of the heavenly Lord!”⁹².

An imaginary dialogue between the Mother of God and her Son is also present in the hymnography of the Nativity of the Lord. Although the feeling of pain and sorrow has no place here, these compositions share

⁹¹ *ViM (Vc st glory and now)*; Almost in the same words by St. John Damascene: “He is wrapped in a clean shroud, the only pure and whole One; the One who clothes the heavens with clouds, the One who is clothed with light as with a garment is laid in the tomb; the One whose throne is heaven and whose footstool is the earth, the One who fills and encompasses all as the infinite God, the One who holds creation in His palm is now bodily enclosed in the tomb”, Sf. IOAN DAMASCHIN, “Cuvânt la Sâmbăta cea Sfântă”, 29, in: *Cuvântări la sărbători împărătești, la sărbători ale Maicii Domnului și la Sfinți*, translated from ancient Greek by Pr. Dr. Gabriel Mândrilă și Laura Mândrilă, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2010, pp. 140-141.

⁹² *SbM (Ut Pr 1 tr 66)*.

with those of the Passion period the sense of wonder at the mystery and the overwhelming humility of God made Man:

“O most sweet Son! How shall I nourish You, the One who gives nourishment? How shall I hold You, the One who holds all things by His will? How shall I wrap You, the One who wraps the whole earth in mist?” cried out the Most Holy Sovereign, whom we faithfully magnify⁹³.

“Sun, my Son! How shall I cover You with swaddling clothes? How shall I hold You in my arms, the One who rules over all? How shall I dare to look upon You, whom the cherubim do not dare to behold?” Thus spoke she who knew not wedlock, holding Christ in her arms⁹⁴.

Although included only in part (the *prooimion* and the first stanza of the 17) in the *Triodion*, the canon of St. Roman the Melodist dedicated to the lamentation of the Mother of God at the Cross is one of the most representative creations of this approach to the theme. The dialogue alternates here, with the leitmotif (and the conclusion of each stanza) being the dogmatic expression “My Son and my God”. Although it would be interesting to compare the two compositions—those of St. Roman the Melodist (6th century) and St. Symeon Metaphrastes (10th century)—here we highlight, for exemplification, two successive stanzas:

“Calm yourself, Mother, calm your sorrow, / And walk in joy,
for I, who descended, / Hasten now to fulfill the will of Him
who sent Me. / For it was ordained for Me by the Father from
the beginning, / And My Spirit did not resist at that time, /
That I should take flesh and suffer for the fallen. / Go forth,
then, Mother, / And proclaim the good news to all: / That ,By
suffering, He has subdued Adam’s foe, / And, as a victor, comes
My Son and my God”⁹⁵.

“I am overwhelmed, O my Son, overcome by longing,/ and truly,
I cannot bear to remain in a room while You are on the Cross. /I in
the house, and You in the tomb. /Let me come with You, /for it is
healing even just to see You. /I will witness the audacity of those

⁹³ December 24 (*Ut od 9 ca 1 tr 4*).

⁹⁴ December 24 (*Ut la 5*).

⁹⁵ SF. ROMAN MELODUL, *Imnul Sfintei Marii la Cruce*, 14, p. 151.

who honor Moses, /for it seems, in their so-called righteousness, that these blind ones have come to kill You. /Yet Moses himself told the people of Israel: ‘You shall see life on the tree’, /and who is life, if not You, my Son and my God?”⁹⁶

It is also worth mentioning that in the Armenian tradition, the Virgin Mary’s Lament has a counterpart in the well-known hymn *Oor es mayr im* (Where are You, my Mother?), sung mournfully (with no candles lit on the altar, almost in darkness) on Good Friday⁹⁷.

IV. Psychological “Emotionalism”?

When read superficially, the Canon of St. Symeon Metaphrastes might seem disconcerting: does it not contain too much “human” emotion, too much pathos and lyricism? Shouldn’t the Theotokos have displayed a different attitude than that of an ordinary “mortal” in the face of a tragedy such as the death of her only Son? Doesn’t this overtly dramatic portrayal seem inconsistent with the sobriety and doctrinal depth of other hymnographic compositions?

As seen above, hymns composed in this manner are not new to Eastern hymnography⁹⁸. The dogmatic undertones of St. Roman the Melodist’s

⁹⁶ SF. ROMAN MELODUL, *Imnul Sfintei Marii la Cruce*, 15, pp. 151-152.

⁹⁷ Entire day’s Office in Charles RENOUX, “La Grande Semaine dans les textes du rite arménien”, in: Antonii Georgii KOLLAMPARAMPIL (ed.), *Hebdomadae sanctae celebratio: conspectus historicus comparativus. The celebration of Holy Week in ancient Jerusalem and its development in the rites of East and West*, Roma, 1997 [BELS 93], pp. 62-64. An audio version, from a collection of Marian hymns by Serouj KRADJIAN, “Mother of Light: Armenian hymns and chants in praise of Mary,” performed by the renowned Elektra Women’s Choir, can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VgGH9I5WZQ>, accessed on December 19, 2024.

⁹⁸ A rich medieval literature on the Virgin Mary’s lamentation has been highlighted by Margaret ALEXIOU, “The Lament of the Virgin in Byzantine Literature and Modern Greek Folk Song”, in: *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 1 (1975), pp. 11-40. Before St. Romanos the Melodist, a hymn depicting the Virgin Mary’s lament at her Son’s death already existed in the Syrian rite, composed by St. Ephrem the Syrian. Cf. G. KHOURI-SARKIS, “La passion dans la liturgie syrienne occidentale”, in: *L’Orient Syrien* 2 (1957), pp. 203-204.

hymn (who lived four centuries earlier) have been convincingly highlighted. The Canon's inclusion of its kontakion and oikos in the Great Compline emphasizes the Chalcedonian doctrine (451 AD): the Virgin Mary suffers alongside her Son, who is not only fully God but also fully human⁹⁹, and therefore subject to suffering. "In the light of the Virgin Mary's suffering, the full and complete humanity of the Savior is, in fact, brought to the forefront. Perhaps no other dogmatic formulation illustrates the perfect humanity of the Savior more fully than the Virgin Mary's lament at the Cross"¹⁰⁰.

St. Nicholas Cabasilas proves the "supernatural" nature of the Virgin Mary's experience at the Cross, encompassing a comprehensive understanding of the tragedy and injustices endured by Christ, the God-Man:

"When it was necessary for the Savior to suffer terrible things for us and to die, through what suffering did the Virgin not pass? What blows did she not endure? (...) With what soul did the Blessed One witness her Son, the common Benefactor of our nature, so meek and humble of heart, who neither cried aloud nor shouted, and who could not be accused of any fault, dragged by those wild beasts, stripped, scourged? (...) No one was as close to anyone else as the Virgin was to the Savior. Therefore, a supernatural and unparalleled grief overwhelmed the Virgin, the likes of which no human has experienced. Being both wise and a mother, she could see the full extent of the injustice"¹⁰¹.

⁹⁹ The hymnography of Holy Week often emphasizes the reality of Christ's two natures, human and divine, within the context of His Holy Passion. See, for example † DAMASCHIN DORNEANUL, *Dimensiunea mistagologică a Săptămânii Sfințelor Pătimiri. Elemente de antropologie duhovnicească*, pp. 371-378, 593-609.

¹⁰⁰ "Introducere" at Sf. ROMAN MELODUL, *Imnul Sfintei Marii la Cruce*, p. 136.

¹⁰¹ Sf. NICOLAE CABASILAS, *Cuvântări teologice: la Iezechiel – Hristos – Fecioara Maria. Scrieri I*, introductory study and translation by diac. Ioan I. Ică jr, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 2010, p. 230. See also † VISARION, Episcopul Tulcii, *Învățătura mariologică a Sfântului Nicolae Cabasila în spiritualitatea ortodoxă a secolului al XIV-lea*, Ed. Basilica, București, 2012, pp. 191-193 ["Părășia Fecioarei la Crucea, Moartea și Învierea Mântuitorului"].

Furthermore, it is impossible to fully express the spiritual anguish experienced by the Holy Virgin at the Cross. The attempts of hymnographers are ways of drawing closer to this in a form that makes it somewhat accessible, but its depth remains known only to her and her beloved Son:

“When she stood near the Cross, her sorrow was as boundless as the ocean, and the torments of her soul were incomparably greater than Adam’s anguish at being expelled from Paradise, because her love was incomparably greater than Adam’s love in Paradise. And if she remained alive, it was only because the Lord’s power strengthened her, as the Lord wanted her to witness His Resurrection and, after His Ascension, to remain on earth to comfort the apostles and the new Christian people”¹⁰².

“The Mother of God did not write down the sorrow of her soul (...), but we must consider that we cannot fully understand the depth of her love for her Son and God (...). We do not fully grasp the love of the Mother of God, but we know this: the greater the love, the greater the suffering”¹⁰³.

Following the example set by Christ Himself, who wept before raising Lazarus (John 11, 35), the Church does not “censor” human emotions; nor can those of the Mother of God be annulled. They are not expressions of a “feminine emotionalism”, the result of a fragile psychological state, but rather a sign of that human “weeping”, not without hope (cf. 1 Thess 4, 13), as concluded by the Canon from the Small Compline, precisely because the lament of the Mother of God is experienced in the light of hope in the Resurrection. Thus:

“Ecclesial sorrow never becomes pure dolorism that scourges human nature, as happened in the West, where the light of

¹⁰² SF. SILUAN ATHONITUL, *Între iadul deznădejdiei și iadul smereniei. Însemnări duhovnicești*, 11, revised 4th edition, introductory study and translation by diac. Ioan I. Ică jr, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 2001, p. 141.

¹⁰³ SF. SILUAN ATHONITUL, *Între iadul deznădejdiei și iadul smereniei. Însemnări duhovnicești*, 9, p. 121.

the Resurrection was overshadowed by the pain of the Cross, where the Paschal glory became evanescent in the face of the immense impact of Christ's Sacrifice on divine juridical order and satisfaction"¹⁰⁴.

Read year after year, in the midst of the accounts of the Holy Passion, *the Lament of the Most Holy Theotokos* invites us to join her inner state as much as we can, in accordance with our faith and piety. The entire purpose of Great Lent was to prepare us, through asceticism and prayer, through biblical and patristic readings, as well as through the profound hymnography, to relive, here and now, the events that took place in Jerusalem during that final week before Christ's Crucifixion. The intensity of this participation depends on a conscious and responsible engagement in this spiritual effort — both anamnestic and mimetic — to which the Church invites us.

In the hope that arises from suffering, the lament of the Theotokos at the crucifixion of her Son pedagogically encourages the acceptance of human pain by every person living in this age, but with a palpable sense (and realistic anticipation, through faith) of the Age to Come, in which mourning will be turned into joy, and expectation into fulfillment.

¹⁰⁴ Pr. Dr. Ioan Valentin ISTRATI, *Taina veacurilor – Unirea timpului cu eternitatea în rugăciunile Bisericii*, Ed. Doxologia, Iași, 2010, p. 368.