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Theological Value and Literary Expressiveness of the Orthodox Liturgical Hymns

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Abstract

The Church hymns represent an inexhaustible treasure of teaching on faith. They are the expression of Christian doctrine presented under the form of poetry, to be sung during the divine services in the place of worship. In them, we discover all the great chapters of Christian faith, with their biblical and doctrinal substantiation, with the clarity of their presentation and their unequalled poetical beauty. In the hymnographic creations and in the prayers contained in the liturgical books is made accessible, in a sublime way, the entire theological thinking, a brilliant synthesis based on the Holy Scripture, on the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils, on the works of Holy Fathers and on the piety of the clergy and of the believers.

Keywords

hymnography, cult, dogma, hymnographer

I. Introduction

The Orthodox Church is the holder of a true treasure of religious creations. They are indeed "masterpieces of the liturgical and patristic literature"¹,

¹ Nicolae D. NECULA, *Tradiție și înnoire în slujirea liturgică (Tradition and Renewal in*

composed and sung with tears and with a broken heart by her great practicing members. Orthodoxy has preserved these texts in its cult books with profound and holy piety.

These impressive works act like a sweet windwhirl carrying you into the heart of the mystery, an enchanting symphony produced by its variations, coming one by one, and multiplying the forms of the same unfathomable truth. The language is both fully musical and spiritual. Its impact is intense to such a great extent that, by the poetry of the hymns, prayer becomes holy music, the believers being literally immersed into the atmosphere of grace, the divine power lifting them into a new heaven and a new earth.

Without exaggerating, among Christians no other people have managed to produce works equal in value and beauty to the ones we owe to the Greek hymnographers. Byzantine religious poetry is at the forefront of all the religious poems by the incomparable richness of dogmatic content. The Byzantine hymnographers had unique inspirational motifs and, to give them shape, they created new forms in perfect harmony with the essence². These compositions have not preserved the old metric and have nothing in common with the metric of the political verse, so popular in the Byzantine Empire. They are the result of a new and distinctive poetry³.

Byzantine hymnody is widely regarded by international and Romanian scholars as a grace-filled expression of Orthodox worship, often described as a language permeated by the Holy Spirit. A distinguished assembly of theologians, poets, and musicians - possessing profound doctrinal expertise—dedicated their creative gifts to the Church. By countering historical heresies through their lyrical works, they established an invaluable spiritual legacy. Renowned figures, including Romanos the Melodist, John of Damascus, and the poetess Kassia, populated the liturgical books with compositions that harmonize artistic genius with dogmatic precision. These works function as a vital doctrinal repository where core tenets of faith are

the Liturgical Service), vol. II, Editura Episcopiei Dunării de Jos, Galați, 2001, p. 28.

² Constantin LITZICA, *Poezia religioasă bizantină (Byzantine Religious Poetry)*, Göbl, București, 1889, p. 7.

³ Henry STEVENSON, *Du rythme dans l'hymnographie de l'Église grecque*, Paris: Librairie de Victor Palmé, 1876, p. 44.

articulated with biblical depth and aesthetic brilliance. As noted by Petre Vintilescu, the poetic essence of these hymns arises from the emotional intensity through which complex theological dogmas are transformed into “metaphors and winged forms”⁴.

II. Stylistic Figures Used in Liturgical Poetry

Consequently, we see that one of the characteristic features of the liturgical genre is the abundance of the figurative expressions and the literary images rendered by stylistic figures or “flowers”, as Church Fathers used to call them. These give to the Church hymnographic genre its specific note, of intuition, authenticity, expressiveness and beauty, being able to influence the believer’s receptiveness.

The divine service books most frequently include the following stylistic figures: simile, personification, allegory, epithet, metonymy, synecdoche, antithesis, parallel (type-archetype), interrogation, metaphor and symbols, and so on.

In the hymns of the Holy and Great Friday, the way the entire creation takes part in Christ’s death is underlined by appealing to personification: “[T]he sun saw Thee hanging on the Cross, it wrapped itself in darkness: the earth quaked with fear (...)”⁵. Or: “When the sun beheld Thee hanging upon the Cross but a little while past, it shrouded itself in darkness; and the earth quaked in fear (...)”⁶.

⁴ Petre VINTILESCU, *Despre poezia imnografică din cărțile de ritual și cântarea bisericască* [On the Hymnographic Poetry in the Ritual Books and the Church Songs], București: Editura „Pace”, 1937, p. 21.

⁵ “Glory at the aposticha” (tone 5), Vesper, Holy and Great Friday, in: *The Lenten Triodion*, translated from the original Greek by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, South Canaan, PA, 2002, p. 615; See also: 26th troparion, First Stasis (tone 5), “The Lamentations of Holy Saturday/ The Praises”, in: *The Lenten Triodion...*, p. 626: “The whole earth quaked with fear, O Word, and the daystar hid its rays, when Thy great Light was hidden in the earth”. (In parish churches the service of the *Lamentations* is usually held on Friday evening).

⁶ “Glory at the aposticha” (tone 5), Vesper, Saturday of the Myrrh-Bearers, in: *The Pentecostarion of the Orthodox Church: which beginneth with Mattins of the Holy and Great Sunday of Pascha, & endeth with the Sunday of All Saints*, translated from

Hymnographers often use the *parallel*. In hymns, using the *type*, as a stylistic figure, has the value of a prophetic image. Examples of parallel (type-archetype): the old Adam – the New Adam (“Lifting to life, by Your death, the old Adam killed by sin, You have shown Yourself a new Adam in the body now”)⁷, Eve – the Holy Virgin, the New Eve (“From you, Virgin, you Who are the second creation of Eve, we truly saw God with body being born”)⁸, the wood by whose fruit Adam was killed and the wood of the Cross which brought to the people salvation and life (“The wood of the tree brought in heaven corruption to the ancestor; while the wood of the Cross flourished life...”)⁹ etc.

We find, then, countless *comparisons*, such as: the comparison of Jesus to “a lamb” – symbolizing kindness, innocence and sacrifice: “Beholding Christ hanging like a lamb upon the Tree, the most immaculate one, lamenting and weeping, magnified Him”¹⁰.

John’s image regarding the grain of wheat (John 12, 24-26) is rendered in The Holy Saturday Lamentation, by an exquisite *simile*: “Buried in the earth like a grain of wheat, Thou hast yielded a rich harvest, raising to life the mortal sons of Adam”¹¹.

Another comparison of Jesus Christ used in hymnography is the biblical one likening Him to a lion: “As a lion hast Thou fallen asleep in the flesh, O Saviour, and as a young lion hast Thou risen from the dead, putting off the old age of the flesh”¹².

the Church Slavonic by the Reader Isaac E. Lambertsen, The St. John of Kronstadt Press, Liberty, TN, 2010, p. 116.

⁷ 33rd troparion, First Stasis (tone 5), *The Lamentations of Holy Saturday/ The Praises*, in *The Lenten Triodion*.

⁸ Theotokion, Ode III, tone IV, Friday Mattins, in *Octoechos or The Book of Eight Tones. A Primer constaining the Sunday Service in Eight Tones*, vol. II (tones III & IV), translated from the Church Slavonic by the Reader Isaac E. Lambertsen, Liberty, TN: The St. John of Kronstadt Press, 1999, p. 134.

⁹ Stavrotheotokion, Wednesday, Mattins, tone VI, in *Octoechos...*, vol. III (tones V & VI), p. 132. 2nd troparia On the Beatitudes, tone VI, On Wednesday Morning at the Liturgy, in *Octoechos...*, vol. III (tones V & VI), p. 126.

¹⁰ “Now & ever..., On the Beatitudes”, tone II, On Friday Morning at the Liturgy, in: *Octoechos...*, vol. I (tones I & II), p. 139.

¹¹ 29th troparion, First Stasis (tone 5), “The Lamentations of Holy Saturday/ The Praises”, in: *The Lenten Triodion...*, p. 626.

¹² 38th troparion, First Stasis (tone 5), “The Lamentations of Holy Saturday/ The Praises”, in: *The Lenten Triodion...*, p. 627.

All these antithetic images, used to express the salvific death and Resurrection of the Lord, echo a biblical background, i.e. the slain Lamb and the conqueror Lion, King of all Kings, depicted in Revelation 5, 5-6¹³.

A comparison, which reminds us of St. Ephrem the Syrian's poetry¹⁴, identifies the Virgin with the Lightning and Jesus Christ with the Pearl: "Rejoice, Lightning, Who has brought forth the Pearl in the world"¹⁵.

The *metaphor* is, also, frequently used as a stylistic figure by the hymnographers. For example, in the *Canon of Pascha*, attributed to St. John of Damascus: "Come, let us drink a new drink..."¹⁶. To drink from "the source of incorruption", namely from the Person of Christ, is to be in communion with a spring of infinite spiritual power (John 4,14; 7,37).

The series of metaphors, designating the Saviour Jesus Christ, can continue again and again in the realm of the divine light of the Resurrection: "gladsome Light"¹⁷; "Though Thou didst descend even into the tomb, O Immortal One"; "the Light hath in the flesh shone forth upon all from the tomb"¹⁸; "never-waning splendor"¹⁹; "unapproachable Light"²⁰; "the Light

¹³ "Then the elders said to me: «Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. (...)». Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it has been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth".

¹⁴ Tudor Dragoș PARASCHIV, ««Mărgăritarul de mare preț», Euharistia cosmologică a poetului sau botezul unui simbolism uitat în Imnele Sfântului Efreem Sirul», in: *Glăsuț Bisericii*, LXXXI (2022) 1-3, pp. 63-143.

¹⁵ For more details, see: Virgil CÂNDEA (signed with the pseudonym Gheorghe BRATU), "Textele liturgice ca izvor de învățătură" ("Liturgical Texts as a Source of Teaching"), in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, IX (1957) 9-10, pp. 586-602.

¹⁶ "Irmos", Ode III (tone 1), Pascha Mattins, On the Holy & Great Sunday of Pascha, in: *The Pentecostarion of the Orthodox Church...*, p. 6.

¹⁷ "O gladsome Light...", Saturday, Vesper, tone I, in: *Octoechos...*, vol. I (tones I & II), p. 3.

¹⁸ 4th troparion, Ode VII (tone 1), Pascha Mattins, On the Holy & Great Sunday of Pascha, in: *The Pentecostarion of the Orthodox Church...*, p. 10.

¹⁹ 7th stichera of the Praises, Sunday, Mattins, tone 1, in: *Octoechos...*, vol. I (tones I & II), p. 18.

²⁰ 2nd of the *The Resurrectional Stichera*, Saturday, Great Vesper, tone 6, in *Octoechos...*, vol. III (tones V & VI), p. 82.

that no man can approach”²¹, “who deckest Thyself with light as with a garment”²², taken from Psalm 103, 3 (antithesis); “the never-waning Light, Who in the flesh shone forth upon the world as in a mirror”²³.

St. Maximos the Confessor compares the *θέωσις* of our nature in Christ’s body to the act of lighting a lamp:

“When, like the image on the face of the *silver coin*, man became tarnished by the passions and bereft of his original beauty, the Word in His wisdom, as if *lighting a lamp*, made His flesh to shine by the light of his own divinity (ὡς σοφία τὴν εαυτοῦ σάρκα λύχνον τρόπον ἐζάψας τῷ φωτὶ τῆς εαυτοῦ θεότητος ὁ Λόγος εὔρε), and *found him*, and made this finding the occasion of great *joy*, insofar as it restored what had gone missing from the divine decad”²⁴.

The functions of the liturgical stylistic figures generally coincide with those from literary works yet have specific features and aims and finalities of their own. Besides their ethical, pedagogical and esthetic functions, their fundamental function is to express the divine Revelation.

The inspired hymnographers, just as, previously, the Saviour Christ, the Holy Apostles, and so many Holy Fathers and Church writers, used plenty of these artistic means of expression. The revelatory character of the divine teachings required the choice of means of communication and presentation able to grasp the divine realities.

To illustrate or to depict the unfathomable spiritual word means to be able to seize the respective realities. “Not even the most brilliant thinker

²¹ Kontakion (tone 4), Mattins, The Holy Theophany of Our Lord (6 January), in: *The Festal Menaion*, translated from the original Greek by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, with an introduction by Archpriest Georges Florovsky, Faber and Faber, London, 1969, p. 375.

²² “Glory...” (tone 5) of aposticha, Holy Friday, Vespers, in: *The Lenten Triodion...*, p. 615.

²³ 4th of the *The Resurrectional Stichera*, Saturday, Great Vesper, tone 5, in: *Octoechos...*, vol. III (tones V & VI), p. 4.

²⁴ “Ambiguum” 31, in: ST. MAXIMOS THE CONFESSOR, *The Ambigua*, vol. II, edited and translated by Nicholas CONSTAS, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA & London, UK, 2014, p. 45.

can escape the human condition, which wants us to lift ourselves to the rational only by means of representations (images)”²⁵. One can say that “language is metaphorical par excellence..., it incorporates the spiritual and spiritualizes the corporal...”. This is why all the semantic modifications undergone by the words in the affective speech are in essence metaphors, and language is “an immense repository of metaphors”²⁶.

The melodists were determined also out of pedagogical reasons to express themselves metaphorically, because an artistic and expressive way of speaking, in images, can stimulate the audience’s attention and thinking, and help record and keep in memory what has been heard.

The writers of Church hymns endeavored to render as faithfully as possible the teaching of faith, helping themselves with the necessary literary means, creating in this way stylistic beauties that make the respective creations illuminating and inspiring. It is true that sometimes they used “veiled words/obscure say”²⁷, but they did it with the intention of teaching us by these metaphors, analogies and so on.

Here are some more examples of revelatory metaphors, with correspondence in the Scriptures and expressed as artistic images by the Christian hymnographers: the Son of God as the brilliance or the icon of the Father’s glory (Hebrews 1, 3, “the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His Person”), the door to the Father (John 10, 9); Christ the Saviour – the One Who promises to dwell, together with the Father, in the believers and doers of His commandments (John 14, 23) etc.

We need to emphasize, nevertheless, that “it would be an unserious and unpious thing for these expressions to be considered simple metaphors... All that is most essential in the Revelation would then be

²⁵ Georges DWELSHAUVERS, *L’étude de la pensée: méthodes et résultats*, P. Téqui, Paris, 1945², p. 92.

²⁶ Alfred BIESE, *Die Philosophie des Mataphorischen in Grundlinien dargestellt*, Verlag von Leopold Voss, Hamburg und Leipzig, 1893, p. 15.

²⁷ *Ancient Sermons for Modern Times by Asterius, Bishop of Amasia (c. 375-405 A.D)*, put into English from the Greek by Galusha Anderson and Edgar Johnson Goodspeed, The Pilgrim Press, New York & Boston & Chicago, 1904, p. 49; ASTERIUS OF AMASEA, *Homilies I-XIV*, text, introduction and notes by C. Datema, Brill, Leiden, 1970, p. 17: “Τοῦτο δε ἐστὶν οὐ γενομένου πραγματος ἐξήγησις, ἀλλὰ πλάσις παραβολῆς τοῖς ἐπεσκιασμένοις τῶν λόγων ἠθικὴν ἀρετὴν ἐκπαιδεύουσα”.

emptied of meaning”²⁸. Indeed, while from a literary perspective, these expressions meet all the aesthetic criteria for being appreciated also as very successful metaphors, from a theological viewpoint, they have the extraordinary role of expressing divine realities that surpass the human understanding, because only in this way they could have been somewhat “caught”, conceptualized, allowing them to be communicated. Moreover, we also need to mention that the revelatory metaphors have precisely this role, namely, to bring a mystery to light, to render the very meaning of the fact they refer to and which had the aspect of a mystery²⁹.

For this reason, the Church hymns, with all their semantic adornment (“Today He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung [crucified] upon the Cross”³⁰ etc.), are not just simple stylistic figures of speech or hyperboles of a gifted fantasy, but doubtlessly express a spiritual reality; just as the “new birth” or the “shining robe”³¹ given by the Mystery of the Holy Baptism, the communion with the Body and the Blood of Christ, which takes place in the divine Eucharist³² are not metaphors, but realities. If we do not take seriously the Christological, cosmological and anthropological frameworks in which the Church lives and moves, it is impossible to understand the liturgical, biblical and patristic texts (as well as the Byzantine art, in general).

Also in this sense, we need to take note of the fact that Fr. Prof. Nicolae D. Necula justly upholds the keeping of certain older liturgical terms and expressions, when it comes to translating or correcting the cult books, as with their help it will be possible to keep the richness of

²⁸ Nicolae CHITESCU, Isidor TODORAN, I. PETREUTA, *Teologia Dogmatică și Simbolică*, vol. I, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2004², p. 257.

²⁹ Mircea ANGHELESCU, Cristina IONESCU, Gheorghe LAZARESCU, *Dicționar de termeni literari (Dictionary of Literary Terms)*, Garamond, București, 1995, p. 153.

³⁰ 1st troparion of Antiphon Fifteen (tone 6), Holy Friday, Mattins, The Service of the Twelve Gospels, in: *The Lenten Triodion...*, p. 587.

³¹ *The Great Book of Needs (Expanded and Supplemented)*, vol. I: *The Holy Mysteries*, translated from Church Slavonic with notes by St. Tikhon’s Monastery, St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, South Canaan, PA, troparion (tone 8) sung before de Office of the Holy Anointing (Chrismation), p. 38.

³² Communion verse (tone 8): “Receive ye the Body of Christ. Taste ye of the fountain of immortality. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.”, On Monday of Bright Week, At Liturgy, in: *The Pentecostarion of the Orthodox Church...*, p. 31.

meanings from the liturgical texts. These, as he argues, “bear the clear mark of archaism and give this language its special perfume” For example: the archaic Romanian term for the noun *tombs* (*mormânturi*, instead of *morminte*), for the adverb *similarly* (*așijderea*, instead of *de asemenea* or *la fel*), for the noun expressing the quality of intriguer or slanderer of the snake (*mozavirie*, instead of *viclenie*, *răutate*, *parșivenie*) etc. Employing this terminology, it will be possible to keep “the beauty, the archaisms, the perfume and the significance”³³ of the Orthodox cult entirely.

III. Poetry and Theology

Among the most brilliant Byzantine hymnographers we cannot forget to mention Romanos the Melodist. Constantin Litzica, for instance, considers Romanos the Melodist to be “the most brilliant Byzantine poet”³⁴, while the great Byzantinist Karl Krumbacher called him “the Pindar³⁵ of rhythmic poetry”³⁶.

His most important creation is the well-known *Nativity Kontakion*. It is actually a proode (κουκούλιον) or antistrophe of a whole poem, of 24 strophes or troparia. These had 21 short verses, unequal as number of syllables. The initials of the first words in each strophe gave as acrostic³⁷ the author’s name: Του ταπεινού Ῥουμανού υμνούς [The Hymn of humble Romanos]. The *Menaion* preserved of the entire hymn only the actual so-called ‘kontakion’³⁸ (*The Virgin today...*) which in Romanos’ time (and to the end of the 7th century) was a *prooimion* of the *kontakion* of that time³⁹,

³³ Nicolae D. NECULA, *Tradiție și înnoire...*, vol. II, pp. 26-27, 29.

³⁴ Constantin LITZICA, *Poezia religioasă...*, p. 11.

³⁵ Pindar – Greek lyric poet (518-438 B.C.) from whose work, most of it lost, the triumphal odes, *Epinicia*, have been preserved almost in full.

³⁶ K. KRUMBACHER, *Studien zu Romanos*, Verlag der K.B. Akademie der Wissenschaften, in Kommission des G. Franz’schen Verlags (J. Roth), München, 1898, p. 84.

³⁷ On how the acrostics were composed, see: Καριοφίλη ΜΗΤΣΑΚΗ, *Βυζαντινή υμνογραφία. Από την εποχή της Καινής Διαθήκης έως την Εικονομαχία*, Γρηγόρη, Αθήνα, 1971, pp. 239-260.

³⁸ After the 9th century, the term began to indicate the hymns sung after the sixth ode of the kanon.

³⁹ The first strophe of these verses, following the προοίμιον, is today’s Nativity *icos*. The

with the role of stating the theme for the feast day and the setting for the Nativity⁴⁰:

“The Virgin today gives birth to the superessential One,
And the earth proffers the cave to the unapproachable One.
Angels with the shepherds sing songs of praise;
The Magi, with the star to guide, pursue their way.
For us there has been born,
A newborn babe, the God before time”⁴¹.

All the stanzas end with the refrain: “A newborn babe, the God before time” (Παιδίον νέον, ο προ αιώνων Θεός) and their melody is in the 3rd tone⁴².

After the solemn proclamation of the Nativity event (προοίμιον), the author invites the believers to go to the place of the Nativity, to see themselves the great miracle⁴³. There, the Virgin, in awe for what had happened with her, addresses the divine Infant...⁴⁴. These hymns lead the action into a beautiful dramatic progression, being true theatre plays, where

prooimion is preserved nowadays as the ‘kontakion’ of the feast.

⁴⁰ *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Meodist. I: On the Person of Christ*, translated and annotated by Marjorie Carpenter, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, p. I.

⁴¹ Prooimion of the hymn “On the Nativity I (Mary and the Magi)”, in: *Kontakia of Romanos...*, p. 4.

“Ἡ Παρθένος σήμερον, τὸν Ὑπερούσιον τίκτει,
καὶ ἡ γῆ τὸ Σπήλαιον, τῷ ἀπροσίτῳ προσάγει.
Ἄγγελοι μετὰ Ποιμένον δοξολογοῦσι.
Μάγοι δέ, μετὰ ἀστέρος ὁδοιποροῦσι.
Δὶ ἡμᾶς γὰρ ἐγεννήθη,
Παιδίον νέον, ὁ πρὸ αἰώνων Θεός”.

(*Μηνναῖον Δεκεμβρίου*, Της Αποστολικῆ Διακονίας τῆς Εκκλησίας τῆς Ελλάδος, Αθήνα, 1820, p. 511. We rendered the text in original Greek for the reader to be able to grasp its artistic beauty, due to the loss implied in the translation of a poetical text).

⁴² From a musical perspective, see: I. D. PETRESCU, *Condacul Nașterii Domnului, Studiu de muzicologie comparată*, București, 1940.

⁴³ The *heirmos* (εἰρμός) and the beginning of the second strophe give the narrative.

⁴⁴ Virgil CÂNDEA, “Condacul Nașterii Domnului”, in: *Studii Teologice*, XLV (1993) 5-6, pp. 26-35.

the dialogue lets the acts unfold often with the finest grace and artistry. One can see the repeated emphasis on the Saviour's two natures in one person.

This kontakion is the best known of Saint Romanos the Melodist's hymns and was the result – according to the old tradition recorded in the biography of the Saint from *Synaxarion* – of a miraculous intervention of the Holy Virgin Mary, who in this way made the author known to the Byzantine public. It was probably composed during the first years of Saint Romanos' stay in Byzantium, coinciding with the end of Emperor Anastasios I's reign (July, 518), when Monophysitism was on the rise in the capital of the Empire. For this reason, without showing a polemic intention, the author has his heart, however, set on affirming and emphasizing, on each occasion, the reality and the union of the two natures in Jesus Christ. The qualities of the kontakion's form and essence indicate an author in full possession of his creative means. Enjoying great success, this kontakion was sung for a long time at the imperial table on Christmas Day⁴⁵.

Romanos' hymns stand out by the richness of thought, depth of feeling and greatness of language, staying away both from bombastic affectation and triviality. This is why he rightly gained the surnames: “the Lyre of the Holy Spirit”, “the cicada of divine songs” etc.

Another great creator of Church hymns, whom we often quoted in our work and needs no more introduction, is St. John of Damascus. His Church poetry also includes anacreontic pieces, enjoying a great reception in the divine service books⁴⁶.

Among other significant hymnographers and saints, remarkable by their personal contribution to the enrichment of the poetic patrimony of the Eastern Church, we shall remind of: Sophrony of Jerusalem, Andrew of Crete († 740), Bishop of Crete, Cosmas Hagiopolites (the Melodist or of Jerusalem, † 781), Bishop of Maiuma in Phoenicia of the year 743 and foster brother of St. John of Damascus, Theophanes Graptus or the Confessor (†

⁴⁵ We find it in most of the old manuscripts containing kontakia (*Kontakaria*), the oldest being the *Sinaitic Codex 925* of the 10th century. It is the most studied, most edited and best known, of all of Saint Romanos' hymns. See the manuscripts and the critical editions enumerated in ROMANOS LE MÉLODE, *Hymnes*, tome II, coll. *Sources Chrétiennes*, v. 110, introduction; texte critique, traduction et notes par José Grosdidier de Matons, Les Édition du Cerf, Paris, 1965, pp. 49-51.

⁴⁶ Petre VINTILESCU, *Despre poezia imnografică...*, p. 105.

843), who later in life was elevated to the rank of Metropolitan of Nicaea, the brothers Theodore († 826) and Joseph the Studites († 830), former priestmonks at the Studion Monastery in Constantinople and so on.

In the works of these Church theologians and poets, stylistic figures abound. In most of these liturgical pearls, we find metaphors unconceivable in inspiration even to the most talented lyricists. For instance, in the famous song of Kassia the Nun,⁴⁷ we find such unparalleled formulations as follows: "...O Thou who drawest down from the clouds the waters of the sea..."⁴⁸. We render, for its unmatched beauty, the text of this idiomela in full:

"O Lord, the woman who had fallen into many sins, feeling Your Divinity, taking on a myrrh-bearer's role, and lamenting, brought to You myrrh before Your burial, saying: Poor me! For night is to me the flame of debouchery and dark and moonless night the appetite for sin. Receive the springs of my tears, You Who take out, by the clouds, water from the sea; lower Yourself down mercifully to the sighs of my heart, You who lowered down the heavens with Your ineffable descent. For me to kiss Your most holy feet and to wipe them dry again with the hair of my head. You Whose sound Eve heard in the afternoon and hid for fear thereof. Who shall examine the multitude of my sins and the depths of Your judgements, O Saviour of souls, O my Deliverer? Do not forsake me, Your servant, You Who have immeasurable mercy"⁴⁹.

The history of this song is very interesting and, especially, the interpolation of the words: "and hid herself for fear". There is even a legend in this sense. It seems that the Empress Euphrosyne, wife of Michael II the Stammerer, called to the palace unmarried young girls from several

⁴⁷ Kassia the Nun was nicknamed "the Christian Safo".

⁴⁸ "Glory..." (tone 8) from aposticha, Holy Wednesday, Mattins, in: *The Lenten Triodion...*, p. 606. Another version of this verse, made by the Romanian translator renders like this: "You Who, by the clouds, take out water from the sea".

⁴⁹ Glory.... (tone 8) from aposticha, Holy Wednesday, Mattins, in *The Lenten Triodion...*, p. 574.

territories for his son, Theophilus (829-842), so that he may choose from among them a wife according to his liking. On the day when he made his choice, he is said to have had a short dialogue with a young lady called Kassia, to whom he is said to have addressed in an ironic tone: “By a woman came all evil in the world”, obviously echoing the fall and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. Unimpressed by this arrogant attitude, Kassia in turn replied with an unexpected and humiliating phrase: “Yes, but it is also by a woman that our salvation came as well”. Because she was not the emperor’s chosen one, she was going to withdraw to a monastery that she herself founded. Here, she dedicated her life to the composition of religious hymns, “characterized by richness of thought, stylistic beauty and depth of feeling”⁵⁰. One day, Emperor Theophilus came to the monastery in person, yet nun Kassia hid herself, leaving on the table the pen with which she was writing the stichera “The woman who had fallen into many sins”. Because she had not finished the composition, Theophilus added, with his own hand, “and hid herself for fear”, referring not just to Eve’s gesture in heaven, but also to Kassia’s gesture.

This Church song is appreciated as being one of the “masterpieces of the euchological and hymnographic literature..., excelling, beside the theological ideas, also by poetic beauty”. “Stylistic figures, similes and antitheses abound in this superb hymnographic creation”⁵¹.

Then, to continue to focus, liturgically, on the Passion Week or the Holy Week, we bring for exemplification the following verses of the Lamentations of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which, their author, Theodore the Studite (759-826), evokes the Lamentations of our Saviour Christ with a rare suggestive force, namely exactly like a Christian who scrutinized them to the point of having about them a strangely vivid vision.

This hymnographic creation, of a great poetic beauty, artistic sensitivity, profound and argued theological conception, delights our ear and our soul by the unequalled waves and rhythms of the Church song. For so many centuries, the Lamentations of the Lord Jesus Christ “fill the

⁵⁰ Ieronim MOTOC, “În Sfânta și Marea Miercuri: Despre femeia cea păcătoasă și cântarea Casiei”, in: *Glasul Bisericii*, XXXIV (1975) 3-4, p. 257.

⁵¹ Nicolae D. NECULA, “Pocăință și Înviere în Triod”, in: *Glasul Bisericii*, LII (1996) 5-8, p. 16.

Christians' souls with deep emotions, each year, preparing them for the great drama of the Divinity"⁵². From a poetic perspective, we can mention that the Lamentations of the Lord Jesus Christ is the only translation made in Romanian with the transposition in the syllabic system, "with the acrostics, with the exact number of syllables, with the verses prescribed and the tonic accent, specific of the original language"⁵³.

It is unbelievable, however, that such a poetic "jewel"⁵⁴, representing "the culminating point of the Orthodox liturgical creation"⁵⁵, of an unequalled artistic mastery, does not enjoy the attention it deserves from the literary analysts.

Another liturgical composition of the Lent Period, of a great literary and spiritual value, is the *Great Canon*. Its author, Saint Andrew of Crete, called "the poet of the canons", was born in Damascus towards the year 660 and died as an iconophile martyr, executed in the Forum Bovis of Constantinople at the orders of Emperor Constantine V (around the middle of the 8th century)⁵⁶. The Canon is read during the Compline on the four days of the first week (from Monday to Thursday, in fragments), and in the evening of the Wednesday from the fifth week of the Great Lent, in the services of Thursday's Matins, known also as "the Great Canon Denia" (in its entirety).

This Canon received the appreciation of "great" not just because of its many stichera and troparia (250), but also "for the sublimity of the ideas, for the depth of the feelings presented and for the power or the energy of the expression"⁵⁷.

⁵² Nicu MOLDOVEANU and Nicolae IONESCU-PALAS, «*Prohodul Domnului Dumnezeuului și Mântuitorului nostru Iisus Hristos*». *Studiu poetic-muzical*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2001, p. III.

⁵³ Nicolae M. POPESCU, "Despre ediția prohodului Ieromonahului Macarie și edițiile altora" ("About the edition of the *Prohod* of Hieromonk Macarius and the editions of others"), in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, XXII (1908) 4, pp. 427-441.

⁵⁴ Nicu MOLDOVEANU and Nicolae IONESCU-PALAS, «*Prohodul Domnului Dumnezeuului și Mântuitorului nostru Iisus Hristos*»..., p. IV.

⁵⁵ Sergiu BULGAKOFF, *Ortodoxia*, transl. Nicolae Grosu, Tipografia Arhidiecezană, Sibiu, 1933, p. 165.

⁵⁶ Raymond JANIN, *Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et répertoire topographique*, Institut Français d'Études Byzantines, Paris, 1964, p. 70.

⁵⁷ Vasile MITROFANOVICI, Teodor TARNAVSCI, Nectarie COTLARCIUC, *Liturgica bisericeii*

This Canon is believed to have been created before 685 when Saint Andrew of Crete, coming to Constantinople, brought and introduced it in the liturgical practice of the Orthodox Church.

The 250 troparia are put into nine series of odes or songs, each ending with a theotokia, namely a strophe in honour of the Mother of the Lord.

During Saturday's Matins (on the Friday evening of the fifth week of the Great Lent), the Annunciation Akathist is read in four shares, with the repetition, several times, of the first kontakion: "To thee, our leader in battle and defender, O Theotokos" (Παναγία Ὑπέρμαχος Στρατηγός)⁵⁸.

This is a true poetic and musical masterpiece, realized in iambic verses⁵⁹. The content of the akathist refers to the dogma of the embodiment.

The authorship of this work remains a subject of historical debate, with various scholars attributing it to Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople (†638) or his deacon, George of Pisidia. Other traditions suggest Romanos the Melodist (active between 536-556) as the primary composer, with subsequent additions made by Andrew of Crete⁶⁰.

Extraordinarily beautiful there are also, in terms of content and form, many other songs of the Holy and Great Week. During the Friday of the Passion of the Lord, for example, we meet a great hymn in which Christ addresses His crucifiers with the following words:

“Thus says the Lord to the Jews: ‘O My people, what have I done unto thee? Or wherein I wearied thee? I gave light to thy blind and cleansed thy lepers, I raised up the man who lay upon his bed. O My people, what have I done unto thee, and how hast thou repaid Me? Instead of manna thou hast given Me gall, instead of water vinegar; instead of loving Me, thou hast nailed

ortodoxe: cursuri universitare, Editura Consiliului Eparhial Ort.-Rom. din Bucovina, Cernăuți, 1929, p. 354.

⁵⁸ 1st Kontakion (tone 8), Saturday of the Akathistos Hymn to the Most Holy Theotokos, Matins, in: *The Lenten Triodion...*, p. 422.

⁵⁹ Teodor TARNAVSCHI, “Characterul poetic al serviciului divin ortodox”, in: *Candela*, XXIV (1905) 8, p. 450.

⁶⁰ Sebastian BARBU-BUCUR, *Lexicon pentru cursurile de Paleografie muzicală bizantină, muzică psaltică, tipic, liturgică, imnografie*, București: Academia de muzică, 1992, p. 3.

Me to the Cross. I can endure no more. I shall call My Gentiles and they shall glorify Me with the Father and the Spirit; and I shall bestow on them eternal life”⁶¹.

Or this extraordinary hymn from the Holy and Great Thursday:

“Already the unjust judges dipped their pen in ink, and Jesus is sentenced and condemned to the Cross; the creation suffers, seeing the Lord crucified. O loving Master, who in Thy bodily nature hast suffered for my sake, glory to Thee”⁶².

From the exemplifications given, one can see that the Orthodox hymns have an ineffable poetic richness in which literary beauty, poetic lyrism and thematic variety occupy a special place. All these have been achievable only because the Orthodoxy has preserved the texts of the service books with holy piety.

Having a unique capacity in Christianity to grasp the beauties of the spiritual world and putting this capacity in the service of a strong and authentic vibration for God, it was natural for the Orthodoxy to pour its teaching of faith and its manifestations of piety into the mould of an admirable spiritual vision, namely in its hymnography, a true monument of piety and faith. With the help of this divine literary-musical work, the Orthodox Church emphasizes her treasure of teachings, of beauty and of theological depth that the Orthodox cult contains, to make it as fruitful and appreciated as possible in the life and spiritual living of her believers; the religious song becomes, in this way, the life of the prayer and the soul of the divine cult.

We then observe, with great joy, that lately it has been acknowledged increasingly, by all the Christian confessions, that indeed the most beautiful and the most characteristic manifestation of the Orthodoxy is her cult. Orthodoxy is liturgical by her very being. On the other hand, by its poetic beauty and variety, the Orthodox cult is unique in the entire Christianity,

⁶¹ 1st Stichera (tone 8), Holy Friday, Sixth Hour, in: *The Lenten Triodion...*, p. 606.

⁶² “Both now...” (tone 8) from Aposticha, Holy Friday, in: *The Lenten Triodion...*, p. 606.

because it combines harmoniously the spiritual beauty with the vision of cosmic beauty.

In the Orthodox divine cult, occurs permanently the event of the communion with Christ, just as in the riverbed one can experience the depths. Following the meeting with Christ, the Orthodox Christian glorifies God, expressing in this form the greatness discovered. In the cult, singing Him, we speak with Jesus Christ and of Jesus Christ. By the singing of the admirable Orthodox hymns, our being becomes even more sensitive to the experience of the mystery, produced by the living of the mystery, of the grace sprung from the vivifying Spirit, finding, at the same time, also, the adequate verbal form to communicate these profound feelings. Singing always managed to unchain the words from their intellectual and sophisticated meanings, giving them a power adequate for the expression of an ineffable spiritual life⁶³.

The hymnographic poetry, along with its music, moves, softens the heart and preserves the Orthodox spirituality. No sweeter hymns than the Byzantine ones have ever been lifted up to God. They are subtle, graceful, artistic and worthy of staying next to the greatest classical poetic compositions. This is an art to explore the depths of theology and to heal the depths of the soul, generating purely spiritual feelings, creating Orthodox living, not tending to impress the auditor by offering him just a simple aesthetic delight, but producing gentleness of the heart. It is truly a liturgical art.

IV. Conclusions

The hymnographers have successfully cultivated the stylistic figures in their creations and have endowed us with a wonderful poetic-doctrinal anthology. In the liturgical hymns, each believer can find teachings for all the spiritual needs, which, by the images in which they are expressed, lead to “the careful creation of a spiritual state”⁶⁴ adequate for allowing the

⁶³ Dumitru STANILOAE, “Câteva trăsături caracteristice ale Ortodoxiei”, in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, XXII (1970) 5-6, p. 735.

⁶⁴ ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *On Babylas Against Julian and the Gentiles*, <https://catholiclibrary.org>.

Word to penetrate the heart. In relation to this, Saint Basil the Great shows that the Holy Spirit put together with the dogmas the pleasure of singing so that, unknowingly, with the joy and beauty of what we are hearing we may also receive the spiritual benefit resulting from the words sung that we listen to⁶⁵.

Dressed in the apparel full of poetry of the Christian hymnography and enveiled in the mystery created by the beautiful Orthodox psalmody, these hymns, without respecting the smallest rule of classical versification, effectively make us taste of the atmosphere full of mystery spreading out everywhere in the places of worship where the Lord Jesus Christ is glorified.

Ultimately, the majority of Orthodox liturgical hymns serve as more than just doctrinal statements or intense spiritual petitions. They also stand as remarkable examples of religious verse, deserving of their esteemed place within the sacred continuity of *Church Tradition*.

org/library/view?docId=/Fathers-Synchronized-EN/John_Chrysostom_De_Babyla_contra_Julianum_et_gentiles.en.html;chunk.id=00000019, accessed on: 23.02.2026.

⁶⁵ “Homily 10. A Psalm of the Lot of the Just Man (On Psalm 1)”, in: SAINT BASIL, *Exegetic Homilies*, coll. *The Fathers of the Church. A New Translation*, vol. 46, trans. by Sister Agnes Clare Way, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., p. 152: “When, indeed, the Holy Spirit saw that the human race was guided only with difficulty toward virtue, and that, because of our inclination toward pleasure, we were neglectful of an upright life, what did He do? The delight of melody He mingled with the doctrines so that by the pleasantness and softness of the sound heard we might receive without perceiving it the benefit of the words, just as wise physicians who, when giving the fastidious rather bitter drugs to drink, frequently smear the cum with honey. Therefore, He devised for us these harmonious melodies of the psalms, that they who are children in age or, even those who are youthful in disposition might to all appearances chat but, in reality, become trained in soul. For, never has any one of the many indifferent persons gone away easily holding in mind either an apostolic or prophetic message, but they do chant the words of the psalms, even in the home, and they spread them around in the wrathful, when he beings to be soothed by the psalm, he departs with the wrath of his soul immediately lulled to sleep by means of the melody”.