

THE ORTHODOX LITURGICAL CHANT AND THE NEW MEDIUMS OF COMMUNICATION

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A. Between Tradition and Modernity. Theology

The Orthodox Church and its cult (liturgy) can be described as (very) traditional. The liturgical music of the Orthodox Church, as part of its divine services (liturgy), is also characterized by some traditional aspects: it is «chant» (only vocal music is allowed), monodic (in its Byzantine roots) or purposely limited to simple harmony/polyphony (the «ison» use, for example) and remains rooted in the «eight modes/tones» (The Octoechos). The fact that the orthodox liturgical music is only «chant» (vocal music) and no musical instruments are allowed, can rise questions about the use of new mediums of communication for the orthodox liturgical music - if those mediums are considered as instruments, or some sort of musical “instruments”. Radio, Television, Internet and various forms of recording (starting with the photo- or phonograph and all the way to CD’s and DVD’s), are all, technically speaking, “instruments”, capable of transmitting music in various states, but none of these mediums are traditional – they are not “well verified, old, good things.” They have been around only for the past one hundred, one hundred and fifty years or so.

For a deeper analysis of the problem it is necessary to try to better understand the interdiction of musical instruments in the orthodox liturgical music, because it appears that there may be a theological background behind such interdiction. And the most important seems to be the intimate relation of the liturgical chant with the (inter)personal reality of the orthodox liturgy. What does the (inter)personal reality of the orthodox liturgy mean? It means, all Christian liturgy (/divine service) has its roots, its beginnings in the presence of our Savior Jesus Christ, the Son of God, among humans, us. Jesus Christ, God becoming human being, came to speak to the man directly, to teach the way of Salvation in a face to face dialogue, as in Paradise (Gen.2-3) and with respect to the personal character of “man” (person/prosopon - «face to face»), created «after the image and likeness» of God (Gen.1,26) in body and soul (Gen.2,7). The Savior did not manifest its power through the use of instruments, tools or media (except, perhaps, for some singular and maybe paradigmatical miracles), but through the power of the word in dialogue, between simple human beings. Throughout the history of the Church, and maybe more so within the Orthodox side of the Christian Church, the Tradition guarded that aspect of the direct dialogue with God, like between humans, a dialogue with a present God, possible in the liturgy in the light of the divine Grace, in the light of the Holy Spirit.

1. The liturgical chant, as embellished word, as chanted word (uncommon to be chanted in this world, but common to the angels in Heaven), does not need other «mediums» for «communication», because the aim of the liturgy - an of its chant - is the plenitude of communion.

After many centuries (two millenniums) of traditional liturgical life, what “new” can be brought through the use of some “latest” technological medium of communication? If that “new” can contribute to the salvation of mankind (the aim of Christianity), then it is also important to understand the possible relation, the theological relation of that new medium of communication to the (inter)personal meaning of the orthodox liturgy, as a possible link to the liturgical life in the Orthodox Church.

B. The new mediums of communication and the traditional liturgical elements

a. Some old liturgical symbols: the Bible - as writing, the icon - as image and the bell - as (sound of musical) instrument

The new mediums of communication are working with writings (printings, e-mail, Internet etc.), images (photos, cinema, television, DVD's etc.) and sounds (telephone, radio, phonographs, CD's, Mp3 etc.) - all of those produced and transmitted/communicated with/trough technical (material) means. For the purpose of researching the possible integration of the kind of technical instrumental, mediums, in the orthodox liturgical services, it may be useful to compare new mediums to old liturgical symbols, whose material and instrumental appearance is somewhat similar to the new mediums – such as writing, image or sound.

1. One of the most important Christian liturgical symbols is the Holy Writings of the Bible. As manuscript or printed, the written Word of God reveals its entire, life-giving power through its reading and interpretation within the orthodox divine services and more so within the Holy Liturgy. Within that liturgical frame the Word of God is creating (inter-personal) communion between believers. Consequently, the Bible is spiritually linked to the liturgical service - and to its (inter)personal character.

A mass-mediatic treatment of the Bible, as mass-printed and mass-distributed book seems to favorise a protestant («pro testament») approach to the Word of God. We could be brought to that conclusion, for instance, by the historical and geographical synchronization, in the XV-XVIth centuries and in the Western Europe, between the rising of the Protestantism and the Gutenberg printing, together with the general introduction of the alphabet teaching in schools, introduction aimed at helping and encouraging individual reading of the printed and generally distributed Bible. (As a worthy mention, the XVth century also represents, historically and geographically, the decrease in influence of the Eastern Orthodox Church, through the fall of the Byzantine Constantinopolis under muslim occupation, under the Turkish Empire.)

The individual reading of the Bible, however, can induce an individual interpretation of the Holy Scripture, an individual and subsequent sectant nuance (in time, not one, but thousands of different variants) of the Christian faith. It is the path taken by the western Christianity in the last five centuries, but it is not a path the Eastern Orthodox Church can follow. For that purpose, the true faith and meaning of the Bible is that which is revealed within the liturgical communion as a whole, and of the whole (and only one) community of the Church.

If, as in the above example of mass-printing, the treatment of other mediums of communication of the Bible (Internet, data-base etc.) produce the same sectant effects, then such mediums are not recommendable for the orthodox liturgical use.

In direct correlation, it is important to remember that the orthodox liturgical chant has a strong, biblical character. A different treatment of the Bible can also affect the biblical meaning, the liturgical meaning of the orthodox chant.

Similarly, icons, representing God and various Saints, have, within the Orthodox Church, a liturgical, sacred meaning and use. They reveal the presence of God or other Holy Saints through the Grace of the Holy Spirit. The frame of an exhibition or a museum totally change that perception and use of the icon. In those frames, the icon is losing its religious condition and becomes a simple cultural object. For the orthodox liturgical chant, same can be said with respect to the religious concert outside the church – In such setting, the chant become more artistic, but it can no longer be referred to as liturgical.

Finally, the bell - a musical instrument used in the Orthodox Church. The bell is used outside the context of the orthodox liturgy, outside of its time and space. It is used generally before the liturgy, only to call the Christians to the liturgy, rather like an audio signal.

As only an instrument, material, the bell lacks the word and spirit. The divine Word, during service, requires the use of an other «instrument», both material and spiritual, a chanting human, the Cantor. For the liturgical reality the sound of the bell remains like a simple

material «atom» or a «bit» of information, which can synthetically represent the harmonious «play» of the whole material world - but only of the material world, in its specific «liturgical concert» brought to God.

b. The orthodox chant as liturgical symbol

A couple of words are necessary in reference to the liturgical meaning of orthodox church music (/chant). After the Holy Fathers of the Church, today's orthodox theologians also present the music in the Orthodox Church as a liturgical action, in the frame of the general liturgy of the Church.

Liturgical, with a symbolical meaning. As such, the liturgical orthodox chant symbolizes the chant of the heavenly angels, revealed through the inspiration of the melodies to the humans - which can so join in the divine light and together with the angels can bring a common glory chant to God.

However, the joining in chant of angels and humans is an eschatological vision of the Kingdom of heaven - and the liturgical chant symbolically intermediates the participation to this reality. Humans chanting together, and humans chanting together with God's angels also represents a symbol of unity in faith.

That kind of symbolism characterizes the orthodox chant in all its Christian history. And it is important to observe that, as the orthodox chant and the other old liturgical symbols before presented, if the new mediums of communication have the potential of similar symbolical capabilities, that could open a way for their liturgical use in the Orthodox Church - alone or together with the traditional liturgical chant.

c. The scope and common means of utilisation of new mediums of communication

If we try to find the roots and purposes for the discovery and introduction of various new mediums of communication, in their spiritual causality, we can talk about the need of people in love, family love or friendship love, to defeat distance as an obstacle, corporal/material distance, sometimes great distances. Sure, we can speak about interest over distance, like in commerce or military interest, war, but in those cases we move to a different spiritual level, which could explain the rise of even greater distances between humans.

Why do people travel ?, sometimes to such great distances? Exploration, tourism, immigration, war campaigns, what do we hope to find? Something better, material or spiritual, a piece of the lost Heaven (/Paradise) !?

But that kind of search for happiness brings us the spiritual un-happiness of being far away from the loved ones. What might help? Regular Post Office letters? The classical («traditional» ?) mail is too slow. The new instant means of communication promise us a better contact, in real time, to the loved ones. But not in «real space», while finally I need to meet, to touch the other, to share the meal and the word «face to face» and «by mouth (to mouth)» (2 John 12; 3 John 13-14). It is like a necessary liturgical action. While in a liturgical action we need to meet the others and the Other, God - that One in his liturgical/sacramental and spiritual presence.

The new mediums of communication do not bring us anything «new» on the level of real presence or proximity to the loved one, and nothing new about the presence or proximity to the Other, God. So, there appear to be some contradictions between the «far-condition» of the users of new mediums of communication and the importance of the corporal presence in the traditional liturgical activities. But the biggest problem for the liturgical use remains the reference to God. What essential new revelation about God do these new mediums of communication bring us? We don't need faith to use them.

The common use of (new) mediums of communication is only a human use, a material, neutral and immanent use. We can not communicate through the new mediums of

communication to heaven, to God. And, in the human context, we can not communicate through the new mediums of communication with the loved one from which we are separated by the ultimate distance, death.

But, this can be done through any Christian liturgy. That is because any Christian liturgy and symbol has its roots in the Resurrection of the Son of God and so we participate to the victory over death, the farthest distance between humans, between those in love. Through the divine chant and all the other symbols of the liturgy we try to communicate not only beyond material death, but beyond the spiritual death represented by hate and evil. The spiritual distance of hate between humans can be sometimes greater than space distance, and how can the new mediums of communication help when no space distance is to be covered, but a greater spiritual distance, the distance of love ?

On that level, the efficiency of the traditional liturgical and symbolical «mediums» was verified by many generations of Christians.

C. Conclusions

The conclusions about the liturgical use of the new mediums of communication seems to be skeptical to say the least. It remains to be seen, in time, if or how any of those mediums, in the long run, may be able to help the communion. To the point, in the case of the liturgical chant, it is to be seen how can some of the new mediums (radio, Tv, Internet, CD's etc.) help towards the same liturgical goal of communion...

The spiritual and possibly liturgical significance of the new mediums of communication is still to understood. Maybe, they express indirectly and para-liturgically the need of the whole world for a way to communion, a call of the world to love, to communion in love.

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