

Theological Aspects in the Hymnography Of the Orthodox Church

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The hymnography of the Orthodox Church was defined from the beginnings by his dogmatic character, developed in the struggle against heresies . But the orthodox liturgical hymns are more than “concise statements of doctrine” , because “in Byzantine worship the Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon were not simply «transposed» from the language of philosophy into the language of sacred liturgical poetry; they were revealed, fathomed, understood, manifested in all their significance” .

The next pages propose a short anthology of texts, just for illustrate the theological dimension of the orthodox liturgical chanting.

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A first collection of hymns we can find in the fixed yearly cycle of the twelve books of the *Menaion* (one book for every month). Works of the Holy Fathers of the Church , the texts to Vesper and Matins for every liturgical day are sometime surprising by their theological meaning, in strength relation to the Bible, but revealing unexpected aspects.

For example, on 3.January a small *dogmatically synthesis* about *the two natures of Jesus Christ* explain us in the same time the apparent paradox why God is coming to be baptized by a simply human, in relation to the Salvation of all: “O marvelous wonder! He who baptizes in the Holy Spirit and in fire, is coming into the Jordan to be baptized by John; not bare God, nor simple human, but in two natures one and the same only-begotten Son. *As a human he seeks baptism from a mortal, while as God he takes away the sin of the world and grants his great mercy .*”

Ecclesiological aspects are revealed in relation with the Holy Virgin Mary, the Most Holy Theotokos (Mother of God), as an image (Icon) of the Church, on 21.November, at the *Presentation or Entry of the Most Holy Theotokos into the Temple* . She is “the living Ark of God” and “thymself a Temple most pure, hast gone within the Temple of God ” .

In other worship books (and at the same time hymnographical collections) , like *The Book of Hours (Horologion)* and *The Book of Eight Tones (Oktoichos)* , the Most Holy Theotokos is represented as “land of promise... from whom floweth milk and honey” , “tabernacle of God the Word” , “sanctified temple and spiritual paradise” , all symbolistic images of the Church, understanding “the faith of Christians in the ontological newness of the Church as the eschatological beginning in this world, in this aeon, of the Aeon of the Kingdom” and “the powerful and exclusive experience of the Church herself as *Parousia* , as the Presence of the Risen Lord, as the Beginning of His Kingdom”.

Through the Most Holy Theotokos t he *ecclesiological* aspects are related too to the *eucharistic* aspects, while Christ take His *Flesh and Blood* from the pure Virgin: “The King of heaven through love for mankind appeared on earth and lived among men; *for taking flesh from a pure Virgin ...*” ; “O undefiled; for you gave birth to the Word, cause of all things, beyond cause and word, who became embodied by the holy Spirit, *taking his flesh from you ...*”; “Virgin Mother of God, we praise you as the means of the salvation of our race; for your Son and our God, who through the Cross accepted suffering *in the flesh he had taken from*

you , has redeemed us from corruption, for he loves mankind” ; “Hail, All-blameless Virgin, beyond explanation who conceived and gave birth in the flesh to the Son of God, *who from your blood truly took that which was ours ...*”

In this relation we must remember “the Eucharist is *the* Sacrament of the Church, i.e. her eternal actualization as the Body of Christ, united in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Therefore the Eucharist is not only the <most important> of all the offices, it is also source et goal of the entire liturgical life of the Church”. And so, in the orthodox hymnography, the great mystery of the Virgin Mother of God is at same time the mystery of the mystical Body of Christ, the Church.

It is necessary to remark that the mentioned problem of *the two natures of Jesus Christ* is present too in the “eucharistic” Hymns of the Mother of God: “Truly fearful and ineffable is the mystery that has been wrought in you, O undefiled; for you gave birth to the Word, cause of all things, beyond cause and word, who became embodied by the holy Spirit, taking his flesh from you, while his own nature remained unchanged. *For when both had come together self-subsistently in a single hypostasis, he came forth double in nature, wholly God and wholly man, displaying the wholeness in both with active properties. For having suffered the passion in the flesh on the Cross, he himself remained impassible in his godhead; having died as a mortal he came to life again as God on the third day* , after destroying the might of death and delivering humanity from corruption...”

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An other collection of liturgical hymns are the *Triodion* , the liturgical book employed in “the period of the Triodion”, the time of the Great Lent, ten weeks before Easter.

Among the many “theological” chants of this period, very interesting are the hymns of the Great Saturday at the Matins (“The Burial of the Lord”), who can be considered like a biblical recapitulation of all the history of our Salvation, from the Genesis until the Passion of the Lord. In the three Sections of chants of the worship, some time only in a few words, we wonder for example how the “King of all, O Jesu, who established earth's bounds, on this day you make your home in a little tomb” .

Past moments are brought in the “sacramental present” of the worship, sometime together with the (prophetical) promise of the future immortal life, from the “old” to the “new Adam”: “By your death, O Saviour, you lead back into life Adam, who of old by envy was brought to death, as in flesh as a new Adam you appear.” Trough that, and here is a important theological (*soteriological*) idea; we are all called to true life: “When the lance, O Saviour, pierced your side, you let fall drops of life on Eve, who from life had banished me, giving life to her you gave me life as well” and “from one fountain as from only one spring, from the double stream that flows from your side we drink, and we pluck the fruit that grants immortal life”. And, again, “Adam lay asleep, and, while sleeping, from his side brought forth death. You, O Word of God, who are sleeping here, now are pouring from your side life for the world ” and “O my Christ, my Jesus, king and monarch of all, seeking what have you descended to those in Hell? Was it not to liberate the mortal race?” .

A contrasting style indicate us a complex, *antinomical* theological knowledge: “human-kind you formed, with your own hand fashioned us , O Saviour, now, O Sun, you set underneath the earth, raising companies of mortals from the fall” and

“He who at the start by His will alone set Earth revolving, lifeless as a mortal sets under earth”

Many *biblical associations* are concentrated in a few words: “A great sword was sharpened against you, O my Christ, but the strong one's mighty sword has been blunted now, and the sword that guarded Eden is turned back.” (Lk 2,35; Gen..3,24); „those he fed with manna bring vinegar and gall now to offer to the Saviour” (Ex.16; Jn 19,29); “Jesus stayed the sun, as of old he smote the foreign foe, Lord; you, Christ, hid its light as you overthrew that great prince, the Lord of darkness and of death” (Josh.10,13; Mt..27,45) etc.

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Other some examples we selected from *Pentecostarion* , the worship book employed in the Orthodox Church eight weeks after the Resurrection - who has in common with the *Oktoichos* the fact that both worship books are collections of *Resurrection hymns (chants)* .

From the beginning of the book, the first *Irmos* of the Canon of the Resurrection introduce us in a whole theological expression, explaining the meaning and the importance of the Great Holiday of the Resurrection: “The day of Resurrection, let us be radiant, O peoples! Pascha, the Lord's Pascha; for *Christ God has brought us from death to life, and from earth to heaven* , as we sing the triumphal song.” After that, all hymns remain in the same theological atmosphere .

Forty days after the Resurrection, a chant at the Great Vesper explain the reason of the *Assumption* of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ: “ *The Lord has been taken up into heaven, that he may send the Advocate to the world.* The heavens have prepared his throne; clouds his ascent. Angels marvel to see a human high above them. *The Father receives him whom he holds eternally in his bosom . The Holy Spirit orders all his Angels: Lift up our gates, you rulers. All you nations, clap your hands: for Christ has gone up to where he was before .*” The *Trinitarian* aspects are easy to be observed.

At the same Holiday of the Assumption we can find an other small *theological synthesis of the whole economy of the Salvation* , from the Nativity and Baptism (according to the flesh of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ) until His Assumption and the Pentecost: “ *You were born* , as you yourself willed; *you appeared* , as you yourself wished; *you suffered in the flesh* , O our God; *you rose from the dead* , having trampled on death; *you were taken up in glory* , who fill the universe, and *you sent us the divine Spirit* , that we might hymn and glorify your Godhead.” Related to this hymn it is very interesting the fact that the Pentecost will be celebrated only ten days later.

Finally, at the Pentecost, the chants are rich in *pnevmatical* explanations: “We celebrate Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit, the appointed time of the promise and the fulfillment of hope. How great is the Mystery? Great indeed and revered! And so we cry out to you: Creator of all, Lord, glory to you!” We learn by chanting that “the Holy Spirit gives all things: makes prophecies flow, perfects priests, taught the unlettered wisdom, revealed fishermen to be theologians, welds together the whole institution of the Church. Consubstantial and equal in majesty with the Father and the Son, our Advocate, glory to you.” The final doxology is both a reference to the mystery of the Holy Trinity and an anticipation of the next Holiday , the Monday of the Holy Trinity (the second day of the Pentecost).

But, for the moment, the Pentecost is associated to the Old Testamentary episode of the Babel Tower (Gen.11, 1-9), remembering how “Once tongues were confused through the presumption of building the tower; but now tongues have been made wise through the glory of the knowledge of God. There God condemned the impious for their offence; here Christ has enlightened the fishermen with the Spirit. Then discord was wrought for punishment; now concord is renewed for the salvation of our souls.”

On second day of the Pentecost, on the Monday of *the Holy Trinity*, *his mystery is possible to be understood only in the light of the Holy Spirit* : “The holy Spirit always was, and is, and will be, neither beginning nor coming to an end, but always ranked and numbered with the Father and the Son; life and giver of life; light and bestower of light; goodness itself and source of goodness; through whom the Father is known and the Son glorified and by all is known, one power, one order, one worship of the holy Trinity.” So, we can better understand why we are all called to “(Come, you peoples, let us) worship the Godhead in three persons, the Son in the father, with the Holy Spirit; for the Father timelessly begot the Son, co-eternal and co-reigning, and the Holy Spirit was in the Father, glorified with the Son; one power, one essence, one Godhead, whom we all worship as we say: *Holy God* , who created all things through the Son, with the co-operation of the Holy Spirit. *Holy Strong* , through whom we have come to know the Father, and through whom the Holy Spirit came into the world. *Holy Immortal* , the Advocate Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son. *Holy Trinity* , glory to you.” There is here an exegesis of the well-known *Trisagion* : “Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us.”

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Through the some examples presented we hope to have demonstrated enough the rich theological character of the orthodox hymnography.

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