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DOCTORAL THESIS

**The Mystagogical Dimension of the Holy Week.**

**Elements of spiritual anthropology**

Summary

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### ***Keywords:***

Holy Week, Great Lent, Paschal *Triduum*, mystagogy, anthropology, hymnography, liturgical life, askesis, virtues

### ***Introduction***

The feast of Easter represents the heart of the worship of the Orthodox Church, the centre of gravity of the entire church year, and the preparation for this feast is out of the ordinary in terms of duration, intensity, involvement of the worshippers and concrete effects on one's spiritual life. This several weeks preparation reaches its climax during Holy Week - a liturgical time for reliving the final days of the 'earthly' life of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which culminate with his Passions, Death, and Resurrection from the dead. The preparation for these celebrations takes multiple forms: physical askesis, behavioural sobriety, refreshing inner reconversion (*metanoia*), an even more substantial participation in this week's special liturgical services characterised by rich biblical readings (in the past, even patristic ones), a spiritual depth of the ceremonies, and an inexhaustible hymnographic treasury.

The main purpose of this intense preparation is that of gradually introducing the faithful into the mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Christ through a mystagogical partaking in His Passions and Crucifixion, in order for the faithful to be resurrected together

with Him from the death of sin and raised onto a new life. Thus, the faithful is initiated in the mystery of Jesus Christ, the God-man, but, at the same time, through this, (s)he is also initiated in the mystery of the human person

Thus, man and God-man are key elements of the Church's Great Lent catechesis, which has as apex the Holy Week. No other more appropriate way to understand this – in part, of course – can be found anywhere else than in the teachings of the Church now imparted through its holy services. Those having to do with God only God can reveal to His creatures and man cannot know himself except in the light of the God-Man, the True and complete Man - fulfilment of God's will with the first Adam from the beginning. The source of this perpetual renewal of one's spiritual knowledge about man and the God-man consists in that which God tells us about Himself and about His beloved creation through the Scriptures, which are explained by the God-bearing Church Fathers on the one hand and, on the other, by the no less important hermeneutical source represented by the hymnography of the Church.

### ***Motivation***

This dissertation has a dual purpose: to show *how* through its rites and practices, the Church prepares its members to relive the Holy Passions and the Resurrection of Christ, the God-Man, here and now (which can only be achieved by learning *Who* He Who comes towards the Passions is) and to show how, by knowing Him, worshippers get to know themselves as human persons created by God and destined to be gods through grace. The two visions intertwine, as they cannot be dissociated, not even for considerations of methodological rigour, thus supporting the argument that Christian Orthodoxy is not an accumulation of doctrines/teachings meant to become intellectual assets, but *life* lived fully, not in a historically recollected past, but in God's today which becomes man's today as well, akin to eternity foretasted through the Church.

The study at hand comes as a humble stance in relation to a dual context which is, at the same time, unfavourable, yet perhaps for that very reason, no less stimulating. On the one hand, worshippers' participation in the celebrations of Holy Week, although more substantial and more effectively involved than in other periods of the liturgical year, remains, nevertheless, often characterised by an unacceptable level of superficiality, with the risk of degenerating into hollow formalism and a standardising ritualism that fails to stimulate deep spiritual experiences. As such, the present research seeks to constitute an introduction in the

mystagogical meaning of the holy services during Holy Week, revealing the spiritual content of the ritual elements – such as they have come to be as a result of the evolution of the practices, of the meanings, of the scriptural selection, and of the teachings offered by the hymnography to those willing to understand it, beyond the moving music, in the depth of the content of the hymns composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, the need to provide a perpetually renewed answer regarding man and God is highlighted by the distorted view of God and, implicitly, man, harboured by a society that rejects Him. Thus, the topical nature of the theme is all the greater considering that history periodically registers what we might call ‘anthropological crises’ derived out of ‘theo-logical’ ignorance (a lack of discourse about and with God). Man forgets its divine origin and destiny, reduces its life to basic biological functions, exalts pleasure as the ultimate meaning of human existence and is defeated by pain to the brink of suicidal despair. In the face of communist materialism, the lack of meaning, and the horror of facing death – which constitute the framework within which the man without a theocentric perspective – in which the ‘recent’ man – uprooted from his own identity (‘earth’) and deprived of transcendency (‘heaven’)<sup>1</sup> – lives his life, the anthropological solution proposed by the *Triodion* may come as a flicker of hope in the midst of a levelling and often crushing darkness.

From this point of view, not only that the *Triodion* speaks of God, but it is also, *par excellence*, the book that contains the deepest reflections on man, his fall and rise (resurrection) - a genuine manual of spiritual anthropology, which, unfortunately, is little known, valued and put to good use, not only on a minimal level of enthusiasm for discovering these depths of probing human nature in a way that impresses us through its prosodic beauty, but all the less by transposing it into a programme of spiritual growth. The last week of the *Triodion* reminds us, as part of an annual cycle, about the solution for the healing of the human nature overwhelmed by sin, through its unification with Christ Who suffered and then resurrected, thus deifying His humanity and transforming it into an embryo for the sanctification of the whole of mankind.

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<sup>1</sup> Deacon IOAN I. ICĂ Jr., „Globalizarea – mutații și provocări” [Globalisation – mutations and challenges], in IOAN I. ICĂ JR., GERMANO MARANI (ED.), *Gândirea socială a Bisericii. Fundamente – documente – analize – perspective* [The Social Thinking of the Church. Foundations – Documents – Analyses – Perspectives], Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2002, p. 488.



## ***Compositional structure of the thesis – summary***

Appreciating and cherishing the liturgical, historical, biblical, dogmatic and spiritual diligence of those who leaned over the vast array of themes of Holy Week, the present work gratefully takes up and capitalizes part of the results of the existing research as an inspiring *background* and as a starting point for addressing and developing the planned topic.

Constructed, revised and rounded as the research project advanced, in its final form, the dissertation plan comprises four sections (chapters) and 14 subchapters, preceded by organizational elements (general abbreviations, liturgical abbreviations, a list of tables), an introduction (methodology, objectives, the state of the research, etc.) and followed by a section devoted to final conclusions and future research, as well as by bibliography.

### ***I. Holy Week. History of formation and ancient liturgical celebrations***

The first part of the dissertation is of a historical-liturgical nature and has three components. First, the relationship between Holy Week and Great Lent is presented as part of its formation as a preparatory period for Easter. The two directions which have taken shape in the academic environment of liturgical research are briefly analysed: the one of the evolutionary-progressive type (from a one/two-day fast to one week, three weeks and then to the *quadragessima*) and the junctional type (the strictly pre-Paschal fast of Holy Week merging with the ‘40-day’ fast, initially more with a baptismal component). The necessary nuances are followed by a brief explanation, inspired by the Church Fathers, of the ‘numbers’ encountered in the hymnography (‘one’; ‘seven’; ‘eight’; ‘forty’), to add a spiritual note to the end of an occasionally fairly dry historical endeavour.

The second subchapter outlines the general scheme of the week’s celebrations, starting with Lazarus Saturday, in Jerusalem and Constantinople in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and in the immediately following centuries. Hagiopolitan festivities and processions are opposed by the more austere, ‘spiritualising’ character of the church services in the capital of the Empire, the two rites subsequently enriching each other through mutual exchanges, traced until the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and eventually forming the Byzantine rite.

The last component of the first chapter broadly presents the way in which Holy Week was celebrated in other old Oriental Christian rites (mostly preserved until today): Armenian, Ethiopian, East Syriac, West Syriac, and Coptic. Common points are highlighted and the focus is placed on several details that create a special spiritual atmosphere within one ceremony or other.

## ***II. Askesis and prayer during Holy Week. An analysis of the typikon***

The second chapter examines three elements of the practices mentioned by the *typikon* of Holy Week (the fast, the biblical readings system and the patristic readings system) and attempts to centralise the hymnographic compositions of this period.

This week's fast, of increased ascetic intensity, as evidenced by all the monastic rules of the first millennium and the beginning of the second one (presented comparatively), lacks a hymnological catechesis that specifically refers to the spiritual fasting, but the latter is assumed to have already been 'learned' at the end of the 40 days that have passed. The specificity of this last week's fast consists in its manifestly Christocentric character, as a Eucharistic/Paschal fast par excellence.

A consistent subchapter is devoted to the biblical lections of these days; it opens with some introductory considerations (reading the Bible in church and its contribution to shaping the spiritual dimension of the *Triodion*). The current content of the biblical readings, accompanied by historical-liturgical comments, as well as some spiritual explanations for the choice of certain texts, are presented in the form of summarising tables. Using the information provided by the old lectionaries (Armenian, Georgian, and Anastasius's *Typikon*), several comparative tables provide a synoptic perspective on the evolution of the readings to this day, on the common correspondences and occurrences, the analysis of which becomes a source of valuable spiritual conclusions.

In order to save space, the next subchapter, dedicated to patristic readings, renounces the comparative analysis (according to various *typika*) and limits itself to presenting the current (and, unfortunately, impracticable) system of readings from the Church Fathers, of Sabaite origin. In a way exiting the domain of homiletics and acquiring a status similar to that of hymnography, the old readings from the Church Fathers demand to be reactivated in order to benefit from substantial support in the initiatory enterprise proposed by the Church during this period.

The fourth subchapter in this section attempts to clarify the paternity of this week's hymns, based on the little data provided by the *Triodion* itself and, moreover, on the indications in manuscripts and *typika*. As we hold that a mere hymnographic repertoire would have been insufficient for the purposes of this thesis, some considerations were added regarding the spiritual dimension of the hymnography which supports the 'iconization' of the hymnographers as genuine mystagogues of the Holy Week.

### ***III. Holy Week – structure and content. An analysis of the hymnography***

The third chapter, the most dense one, is reserved for the thorough analysis of the hymnography of the days of Holy Week, grouped into four sections: Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday (1); The Bridegroom's *Triduum* (Holy Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday) (2); Holy Thursday (3); The Paschal *Triduum* (Holy Friday, Holy Saturday, and a short incursion into the Paschal Vigil) (4).

The approach is interdisciplinary, seeking to show how the biblical texts of the Holy Week days enjoy a hymnographic hermeneutic that reveals new theological and spiritual meanings, which can easily be lost by a superficial approach of this ritual treasure. Finding itself in an obvious impasse when faced with such numerous instances of hymnographic beauty, the present work has only selected part of the texts, some rendered in full, others in fragments, and most of them only as a reference to support an idea, able as they are at any time to constitute the starting point for a deeper analysis of the various themes, for which the present section is a considerable reference inventory.

Some recurring themes could be identified in the hymnography of these days: emphasising the simultaneous divinity and humanity of the incarnate Son of God and the theandric character of virtues; the progressive preparation for the Passion by inviting the faithful to partake spiritually in the Passions together with Christ; spiritual crucifixion through the killing of one's passions in order to worthily worship the Holy Cross on Holy Friday; the eschatological theme; Christ's humility; the constant presence of the Cross/Resurrection binomial, etc. Similarly, each day of the Holy Week contains a specific set of themes, in line with the biblical readings, but also 'exceeding them' in the direction of a spiritual theo-anthropology (e.g. 'the stone of the mind and of the heart'; the palms of virtues; the fruits of virtues *versus* idleness that attracts curses; merciful love *versus* barren askesis; redeeming repentance *versus* sin as treason; the *sympathōs* of the cosmos during Crucifixion, the descent into hell and the raising of Adam as a renewal of humanity, etc.).

Anticipated throughout the entire Great Lent, Resurrection is the seal that Orthodox spirituality places on every penitential gesture and every cultivated virtue, it is the spirit that animates the entire content of the tradition and demands to be made present every day in the theological (and semantic) sense of passage (*pascha*) from the old man to the new man, as the Church Fathers abundantly stress, whose fortifying testimonies accompany, in fact, the reflection of the whole hymnographic set of themes of Holy Week.

#### ***IV. 'The new man' in the crucified and resurrected Christ***

The final chapter focuses on a more specific highlight of several elements of spiritual anthropology (although they have been presented so far as well, in the background), also based on the hymnographic, biblical, patristic, and structural-liturgical content of these days.

The first subchapter of this final section stresses and completes with dogmatic considerations the hymnographic references that support the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, the passionless God who suffered in the flesh, which were manifest even in his Passions, Crucifixion, and Death. Pilate's *Ecce Hommo*, as an unintentional – of course – expression of the humanity of the Son of God, is the foundation of our partaking in the divine fullness of the life of Christ, while His godliness ensures the sanctification and deification of our human nature.

Then, it follows a few dense and concentrated pages of ascetic anthropology: the initial paradisiacal state, the fall into sin as treason of divine love, the dehumanizing and disintegrating nature of sin, the role in the recovering and restabilising of human dignity played by repentance as a passage from the old Adam, potentially present in each of us, to the New Adam, who is imparted on us sacramentally and ecclesially, as Life of our human life.

The third subchapter is dedicated to outlining two paradigmatic anthropological patterns: Joseph the Fair, the face of virtue, and the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume, as an example of an exponential type of repentance, after other models prodigiously provided by the hymnography. The chapter capitalizes on both Holy Week texts and hymns sung during the *Triodion* period, with substantial patristic support accompanying the biblical exegesis of the references to the two faces proposed for spiritual analysis. The models presented support a dynamic and Paschal anthropology: a move towards the 'better' can occur in anyone's life at any time, when the practice of virtue or the cultivation of repentance finds enough room and availability to bear fruit.

The man-cosmos relationship is the subject of the next subchapter of the fourth section, built around the Pauline idea of together-suffering (*sympathōs*): creation suffers together with man, after his fall from the state of being the priest of creation, just as it suffers together with the God-Man during Crucifixion, as the hymnography insists on stressing during Holy Week (but also in numerous earlier hymns, especially on Wednesdays and Fridays). The cosmological character of Christian Orthodox anthropology is explicit: the repercussions of a virtuous life or, on the contrary, a sinful one, will be mirrored in the way in which the surrounding nature positions itself in relation to the human person, as both are destined for a new status, in the Kingdom of God.

The last subchapter is devoted to the Sacrament of Holy Baptism in the context of Great Lent and Holy Week. This privileged period can be used as a mystagogical transposition into the status of new catechumens, called upon to make up for the catechetical programme worshippers were deprived of upon their baptism (and also the much needed and renewable subsequent catechetical preparation). Knowing the significations of one's own baptism, as a rebirth, as a death and resurrection with Christ, as well as knowing repentance as a way to refresh one's baptism, will turn Holy Week into a desired reason for spiritual transformation and renewal of one's baptismal promises, by renouncing Satan - hypostasised as sin, and becoming united with Christ, the God-man. He, the crucified and resurrected one, is the Archetype of true humanity, offsetting the false models treacherously offered by anthropocentric humanisms, which in reality are lethal to humans, having had the audacity to demand the 'killing' of God, two thousand years ago, in a hostile Jerusalem, as well as today, every time they refuse His sovereignty and betray His love.

Being aware of the succinct treatment of certain important aspects that demanded more attention and of the absence of elements which we hope will be added by other theological contributions in the same research area, the present dissertation recognises its limits and imperfections and makes no claim of being exhaustive. It humbly offers itself to all those interested in the topic, with the desire and prayer to bring at least the same joy and the same spiritual benefits that the author has experienced having fed day and night upon the beauty of the services of the Church, with its ceremonies and especially with the extraordinarily rich hymnography of the Church Fathers.