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Item Type	Article
Authors	Miron, Vasile
Publisher	Dialogo / Research Center on the Dialogue between Science & Theology (Romania)
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Download date	2026-11-09 13:21:18
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/3978201

The Sacramental and Moral-Educational Function of the Christian Orthodox Cult

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Abstract: **The Christian Orthodox Cult intervenes for our Salvation and blessing, gives us the possibility to cherish God and to offer Him our gratitude for the bounties we receive through religious services. This divine Cult helps us stay in touch with Him, deepen our faith, clean our sense, enlighten our mind, become stronger in our decision of doing good deeds and live like brothers in the spirit of the Christian love.**

Keywords: Christian Orthodox Cult, Holiness giving way, moral-educational factor

I. Introduction

In the religious life and activity of every Church, the biggest weight have the factors that promote the spiritual climbing, the moral-religious progress and, in consequence, and the Salvation of the Christians' soul. These factors, even though they vary sometimes from Church to Church, from confession to confession, still, they follow the same purpose in the entire Christian cult, namely, the evolution of the spiritual life and the redemption of the Christians. This ideal can be achieved through different ways and different levels in Church, but what we are really interested in and is the central theme of the present work is the public divine Orthodox Cult, looked at through the Practical Theology, just like the way it is presented and interpreted by the Liturgics study. Orthodoxy has Its own history, its own grandeur, its heroism and sufferings, its past – sometimes triumphal, sometimes shattered and, all these realities have forced it to focus on its faith and purpose into this world, in order to find suited ways and methods, right and efficient means to lead the believers to Redemption. These ways and principles of Christian life are faithfully mirrored into its divine cult.

Our Orthodoxy is defined through its sublime, fascinating and solemn cult. This cult represents the living tradition of the Church itself, raised and lived under the shadow of the life giving power of the Holy Spirit.

Through divine Christian cult it is understood in the Orthodoxy the sum of ritualistic deeds and shapes established by our God Jesus Christ and by the Church, through which the religious life is displayed, meaning t the inner feelings of the believers. Through the divine cult are expressed, in words, in prayers, in songs, in symbols and liturgical acts or acts of cult, our feelings of adoration towards God, the Creator, the Savior of the entire world and the feelings of cherishing the Saints, of these heroes of the Christian cult. The divine Orthodox Christian cult can be defined as a drama of the Christian virtues on its triumphal roads, because "the entire Godish service penetrates us, it makes us understand that we all have a Father, that we are all sons of This Father, that we all need His help, that without the help of The Highest One we are powerless and that only through common prayers and songs we find comfort, we become stronger, we are easily heard and we receive unnatural gifts that we can achieve only through the intervention of Church".[1]

Through its cult, the Church does nothing but wake up the soul of the sinner, spurring him on the way of repenting himself, in order to make him able to communicate with God and able to receive the saving gift. In the ritual of our religious services there are various examples of soul building Christian moral life and full of ideas and Christian virtues. Thus, the struggle of chasing the evil thoughts, the practice of virtues, God living in the heart of the believer, the inner Rebirth, work together at the man's transformation, his transfiguration and his relation with God. This way, the orthodox public divine cult is no longer a simple formality in the life of the pious man, but an essential existence for him, a river of inspiration and religious life, an insatiable source of the Saints' gift and a living religious learning that can be understood by everyone. "All liturgical texts and the cult books are written documents of authentic Christian doctrine."[2] The public divine Orthodox cult is also a creative factor of solidarity of human knowledge. "It deepens the religious consciousness and it extends it in a religious experience. Once established, the religious consciousness becomes a solid base of the cult and the cult continues to strengthen the religious consciousness."[3]

1 Juvenal Stefanelli, *Liturgica Bisericii Ortodoxe-Catolice*, Bucureşti, 1886, p. 25.

2 Pr. Prof. Ion Bria, *Liturghie după Liturghie,* Bucureşti, 1996, p. 51.

3 Robert Will, *Le culte, étude D'Histoire et de Philosophie*

In the Orthodox cult, the vision of the spiritual beauty unites with the vision of the world's beauty. It is the manifestation of the fullness of the spiritual world."[4] Through all its brightness, especially through the God given religious ceremonies from morning and evening, the divine cult of the Orthodox Church is formed in such a manner that it shows the vital connection between the Earthly Church and the Heavenly one… This cult is a living embodiment of Christianity together with its Almighty Head, Jesus Christ".4 The beauty element, as an expression of God's glory, glory that fills the Church, has a very well established place in the Orthodox mass, besides prayer and religious learning. This cult, through its richness, drama, poetry, music and variety, is a mystery throughout the world, it has the gift and the power to influence the human soul and, at the same time, the destiny to lead towards Salvation and to spiritually lift the believers. "In the divine cult of our Orthodox Church, in totality and in its every piece, there is enough food for soul, mind and heart and for the lucrative powers; Its prayers and songs, the readings from the Old and New Testament are an undying treasure for a high mind, an open, energetic and lucrative heart. These litanies are God given, inspired by God; there is a pure love breathing inside them, a bright love, a Godlike ration; they contain all our real needs, all our requests for all and for everything."[5]

The entire divine cult reproduces in a symbolic and sacramental way the mystery of life and the rewarding activity of our Lord Jesus Christ. This cult is " the continuation of Christ's life in the Church to save the humanity. He is forever alive in His Church and He continues to live for everybody, in order to make everyone live for the ones around them and for the One that died and resurrected in the third day."[6] Through its divine cult, the Church updates and prolongs in time the life and activity of Jesus Christ to save us. In this way, "the divine service of the Church is amongst the highest ministry of our Savior Jesus Christ, or, in some other words, a continuation of His Saint work for our salvation."[7] Through this cult, the Savior is always present in His Church and He continues working in order to be Life for everyone, so all men alive may have a piece from the Heavenly treasure obtained for us by the One that died and resurrected in the third day (2 Corinthians, 5, 15). This thing is achieved by the Church through the cult. "Through Its divine service, the Church sanctifies all the important parts of the day and brings to memory the most important events from the history of the Christian Church."[8]

This way, the life of Jesus Christ, renewed in spirit along the church year, must become an example for the Christian, and this one, at his turn, has the supreme duty of matching his life with the one of Jesus Christ, holly and pure. By taking part at the divine cult, the Church offers the believers the possibility to become part of Christ's life and holiness and, maybe, live this life since "living in God and for God doesn't mean going out in the world and protest against it, but transfiguring it through the spirituality and holiness that your person accumulates from the intimate and permanent contact with God."[9]

Through the cult, the Orthodox Church has established an admirable moral-religious instruction of the believers and cherish of God. It has put at their disposal an entire theology populated under the shape of hymns and prayers with the purpose of spreading and defending the Orthodox belief against sextant propaganda. "The big ideas of our cult, are borrowed from the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ; and they are covered in the cult like a beautiful and fruitful germen, with a special blanket, set on top, by the greatest teachers of Christianity. Even the prayers and the liturgical blessings with the content of the Saint Liturgy; in their totality, they are built on the stone of the messianic learning."[10]

The strict respect of the regulations and traditional forms of cult has been a mean of defense and protection of the Orthodox doctrine. Thus, the attachment of the believers to the shapes of the Orthodox cult has always represented the symbol of belonging somewhere and the symbol of undeterred willingness for the unity of the Orthodoxy and, at the same time, the supreme way of manifesting their resistance in front of the menaces came from other confessions and religions.

Through Its divine service, our Holly Church has cultivated the idea and sense of closeness between people, of brotherhood beyond the walls of the Church, in the social relationships as tendencies towards unity, solidarity and mutual help. We are all called to take part at the spiritual life of the Church, and, this is why, the liturgical prayer is conceived in a communitarian spirit, since, if we all made ourselves participants at the death of Jesus Christ and at His Resurrection (Romans, 6, 8-10; Colossian 2, 12-13), we all must pray one for another and love each other, "so we can all confess Father, Son and The Holy Spirit, Trinity one being and undivided."

Through the harmony, the poetic beauty and the depth of dogmatic and moral teachings of the hymns and prayers that form it, the public Orthodox divine cult has a moral-educative and teaching role, helping the ones that take part at it to grow spiritually and strengthens them in their work towards perfection. "The Orthodox cult recommends the defeating of the heart, the right teaching, self humility, love of people and good deeds."[11] Especially, the Holy Liturgy, the heart of the public Orthodox divine cult, "tends to develop in the hearts the life of Christ."12 Actually, "through all the sacramental means, the formulas and the liturgical rites, Church wants to show the Christian that

religieuses, tome I, Strasbourg, 1925, p. 23.

4 Sf. Ioan din Kronștadt, *Liturghia: cerul pe pământ*, trad. în rom. de Boris Buzilă, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 1996, p. 182-183.

5 *Ibidem,* p. 187.

6 Prof. Dr. Vasile Mitrofanovici, Prof. Dr. Teodor Tarnavschi, Arhiepiscop și Mitropolit Dr. Nectarie Cotlarciuc, *Liturgica Bisericii Ortodoxe,* cursuri universitare, Cernăuți, 1929, p. 107.

7 Arhimandrit Melchisedec Ștefănescu, *Manual de Liturgică sau servirea de Dumnezeu a Bisericii Ortodoxe,* București, 1862, p. 11.

8 Petru Lebedew, *Liturgica sau explicarea serviciului divin,* trad. și prelucrare de Iconomul Nicolae Filip, București, 1899, p. 224-225.

9 Pr. Prof. Grigore Cristescu, *Supremația idealului creștin în viața socială,* Sibiu, 1928, p. 56.

10 Prof. Dr. Badea Cireșeanu, *Tezaurul liturgic,* tomul III, București, 1910, p. 14.

11 *Ibidem*, p. 14.

12 Dom. M. Festugiere, *Qu'est ce que la Liturgie?,* Paris, 1914, p. 81.

he has to shape his life after the one of our Lord, Jesus Christ."[13] In the public divine service, the Holy Spirit fulfills His secret work of transforming and renewing the souls of the believers, by sharing with them the fruits of our Saviors' Sacrifice, updated in the Holy Liturgy. This religious service is the center of the entire divine Orthodox cult, "because it renders the Sacrifice Itself or the death on the Cross, through which it was plentifully fulfilled the price of the ransom of the human kind from sin."[14]

The Liturgy is the sacramental way of individual appliance of the universal Sacrifice's fruits on Golgotha. "It is the Cross of Christ, let at the disposal of the souls from everywhere and from every century"[15], because the price of forgiveness and our ransom from the sin, won through Sacrifice by the Savior on the Cross, is renewed and continued every time we fulfill the Eucharistic bounty of the Body and Blood of our Lord in the Holy Liturgy. "In Liturgy, we bring to God as a gift, everything we hold precious, meaning, our earthly and passing life itself, symbolized in the gifts of bread and wine, and He gives us in return His divine and eternal life, meaning the Body and the Blood of His Son Himself, in which these gifts turn to."[16]

More, Liturgy realizes and proclaims the Gospel. The Gospel is made known through Liturgy, as bread and wine proclaim the God as Creator, whereas the blessing and the breakage confess that He bought back the world and that everything finds its meaning, sense and unity in His death and resurrection that have transfigured the entire creation.

Liturgy and the entire Church cult is the doctrine itself, put into prayer and songs and preaching. "It is nothing else but truth dressed up in the cloak of prayer."[17] Believers express their belief through the cult under the shape of a doxology. Thus, the cult is a doxology pointed towards God. Widely, Orthodoxy is doxological because it represents our consciousness about God and about His redeeming work turned into prayer, in straight thinking towards God, in the content of our dialogue with God. On the other hand, believers communicate with God through the Holy Secrets and through all the acts and shapes of cult. "Due to the Holy Secrets – that announce the death and burial of the Lord- we to are born to the spiritual life, we grow in it with their help and we get to unite in such a wonderful way with our Savior, Himself. Through these Holy works we live, move and exist."[18] So, all the means and forms of expressing the public divine cult have sacramental power, which means that the Holy Spirit spreads Its bounties and Its holy gifts over the willing ones with whom He enters in the communion, in living dialogue with Christ. "The entire religious service gets the value of a divine life, for which the Church becomes Its own place."[19]

As a consequence, during the Holy Liturgy, Christ makes Himself present in a sacramental way, from Birth to the Elevation in all its major acts and moments. It prolongs in time and space the entire life and saving work of our Lord, Jesus Christ, making us contemporary with His deeds, "because their sight, being in front of our eyes, would sanctify our souls and thus, become worthy of receiving the Holy Gifts."[20]

The presence of Christ among us, during the Liturgy, can be divided into three important stages: during Proskomedia, until the small entrance from the Liturgy of teaching men, Christ is present in a typical-symbolic manner; from the small entrance to transformation, in the Liturgy of the believers, Christ is present in a mystical-symbolic manner and, at last, starting with the Eucharistic transformation, Christ is present in a real and substantial manner. The transformation of the natural elements of bread and wine in His Body and Blood "is not physical, but meta-physical, meaning that it is beyond the limits of this world"[21], being secret, wonderful and supernatural. This Secret is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work, since "God made everything with the energy of the Holy Spirit, exactly like that, the energy of the Spirit is now working things that are above senses, things that can only be covered by faith"[22], says a great father of the Church. The sacrifice takes place in the moment of the sanctification of the Gifts. "How does Jesus receive our gifts? By sanctifying them and turning them into His Body and Blood."[23], says the greatest preacher Nicholas Cabasilas. In the act of sanctification and transformation of the Gifts the identity between the Sacrifice from Golgotha and the liturgical or Eucharistic Sacrifice is produced. As a consequence, "the Sacrifice does not consist in the stabbing of the Lamb when the Gifts are sanctified, but in the transformation of the bread in the stabbed Lamb."[24]

Once received in the depth of our being, the Holy Communion operates an inner transformation and, if we do this worthily, with a pure, honest and loving heart, the Face of Christ from inside us becomes brighter and more beautiful until It touches Holiness, since "Christ's thinking becomes one with ours, His will becomes one with ours, His Body and Blood become one with ours! And then, how mighty must our thinking be, when mastered by the thinking of God, how strong our will if God Himself is the One that drives it, and, how hot our thinking is when Fire Itself spreads over it."[25]

But the structure of the Holy Liturgy Itself, adorned

13 L. A. Molien, *La priére de l'Église,* IV édition, vol. II, Paris, 1924, p.69.
14 Pr. Prof. Petre Vintilescu, *Sacrificiul religios ca principiu al Liturghiei,* Bucureşti, 1927, p. 53.
15 Dom. Gaspar Lefebre, O. S. B., *Liturgie, Les principes fondamentaux,* 4-ème édition, 118, mille, Bruges, 1929, p. 56.
16 Diacon Ene Branişte, *Explicarea Sfintei Liturghii după Nicolae Cabasila,* teză de doctorat, Bucureşti, 1943, p. 69.
17 Romano Guardini, *L'Ésprit de la Liturgie,* Paris, 1930, p. 112.
18 Nicolae Cabasila, *Despre viaţa în Hristos,* trad. în rom. de Pr. Prof. Dr. Teodor Bodogae, cartea I, Bucureşti, 1989, p. 136.
19 Serghei Bulgakov, *Ortodoxia,* trad. în rom. de Nicolae Grosu, Bucureşti, 1994, p. 130.
20 Nicolae Cabasila, *Tâlcuirea Dumnezeieştii Liturghii,* cap. I, trad. în rom. de Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene Branişte, Bucureşti, 1989, p. 30.
21 Sergiu Bulgacov, *Dogma euharistică,* trad. în rom. de Paraschiv Angelescu, Bucureşti, 1936, p. 75.
22 Sf. Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica,* partea IV, cap. 12, trad. în rom. de Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, Ed. Scripta, Bucureşti, 1993, p. 165.
23 Nicolae Cabasila, *Tâlcuirea Dumnezeieştii...,* cap. XLII, p. 99.
24 *Ibidem*, cap. XXXII, p. 79.
25 Idem, *Despre viaţa...,* cartea a IV-a, p. 195.

with hymns and prayers create a spiritual atmosphere that brings the man closer to God. It is a school for training the virtues, an endless rive of moral-religious life and a lab where human life is sanctified, in which the presence and the spotless work of the Holy Spirit regenerates human souls, renewing and cleaning them of the impurities of the vices and all sorts of sins. "During the Liturgy, the priest honors God, he makes the angels cheerful, he builds the Church, finds help for vineyards, brings rest to the dead and he makes himself part of the goods of the world."[26] If the Holy Liturgy is the medium of real Christian life, than, it is more than self-understood why it is more than necessary to explain to the believers the mystical-symbolic significance, its importance and moral-educational role in the Christian life.

Preaching and teaching are two irreplaceable ways of preaching the right faith in the divine cult. In the Church and in the light of the religious service the teaching process becomes better when joined by preaching, taking into consideration that both types are well defined and divided and full of biblical and liturgical substance. Between the cult elements and the ways of passing on the faith there are strong complementarities, because the divine public Orthodox cult contains a richness of moral-dogmatic teachings, and for its opulence, brightness and beauty, it was called by some "Heaven on Earth". The entire treasure of doctrine and Christian life, of symbolic significances and depths of ideas, is valued in the public Orthodox divine cult through the fundamental elements of the Christian preaching: readings from the Bible, synaxaria, preach and teaching. These complete each other, making a whole, tempting with prayers. "The liturgical action and the liturgical prayer have, undoubtedly and ethic layer beneath and it promotes moral feelings such as: the wish for justice, repentances and the spirit of sacrifice"[27] in order to achieve the moral good.

Knowing and assimilating ideas and moral-religious teachings and social rules expressed in the divine Orthodox cult, opens for the priest a wide horizon and vision of this cult with, helping him penetrate under the cover of the external forms that he does, to understand their deep meanings, the idea and the purpose they have been instituted for, as well as their symbolic significances.

As to the believers, knowing these aspects help them take part at the holy Services with all their might and being: with inner feelings, with faith, determination and willingness, fully living the sacred moment together with the priest. In the gifted and explanatory climate of the Church services the believer lives the experience of the presence of the Revived Jesus Christ and of the spiritual communion with Him, but also with the entire community, linked by the Christian love and the religious feeling and through the unity of the cult forms that came from the Savior and the Holy Apostles and later established by Church.

The Orthodox Church teaches us that we cannot save ourselves, but in full communion with Christ and by imitating His sacrificing love. In the Church, the believer prays with the priest for "the unity of the faith and for sharing the Holy Spirit" for achieving the unity "in spirit and in truth" (Joan, 4, 24) with Christ and with his people, the living and the dead one. Through the divine cult, the communion of brotherly love is kept alive and, at the same time, the unity of faith, peace and Christian morality are promoted. Every hymn and prayer contains strong pieces of advice for love, brotherhood, justice, peace and truth. Therefore, there is a rich treasure of truths about faith, a huge source of moral virtues and an excellent way of stimulating the most noble ideas and humanitarian feelings, that the contemporary humanity aspires to.

Through its structure and the way it is officiated, the public Orthodox divine cult creates social and moral-religious profiles from the most ideal and the brightest ones: it erases the selfish barriers, turns off hatred and wickedness, overcomes the obstacles and brings people closer, thus trying to establish the eternal harmony and heavenly peace with ourselves, with God and with the others.

The divine cult also has a teaching function. It is the total reflection of the dogma. The dogma moves and endlessly spiritualizes the cult, which, in return, relays on the dogma. "The liturgical prayer is dominated by the dogma… Dogma is the only one that gives prayer the force, this impetuous force, that saves and, without which, prayer might degenerate into weakness"[28]. Through the Church service, the heart is moved and the mind accepts easier the dogmas that the Church ties to its rites.[29] The religious truth penetrates clearer and easier in the depth of the soul when expressed as a glorifying prayer, of thanksgiving or request, than when expressed in dogmatic formulas and in abstract definitions; but this cannot be achieved without and active and conscious participation of the believers at the divine cult. "The heat of the feeling must penetrate all the forms of the prayer."[30]

The content of the public Orthodox divine cult, at the same time, church-historical, dogmatic, moral, sacramental, praying and doxological, and its primordial purpose is the sanctifying one. It is meant to satisfy the neediest and burning needs of the human soul made after the looks of God, to lift it from the pit of falling, to protect it, to enlighten it, to cleans it, to sanctify it, to caress it, to feed it, to strengthen it and to bring it on the right path, in order to make it part at the true life. Through its splendor, depth and poetical and artistic beauty and through its doctrinarian and moral-educational value, the public Orthodox divine cult enlightens and adorns both the soul, as well as the body, because "man's senses must be strongly moved in order to be able to know the divine gift and to grow through faith, its ability of answering and joining the gift."[31]

In the content of the public orthodox divine cult there are enough elements that help the believers to deepen its contents and their secret meanings. Thus, the teaching about the cult of Virgin Mary, the Saints, icons, the Holy Trinity's adoration and many others, are displayed in an explicit and precise forms in liturgical hymns and prayers.

26 Toma de Kempis, *Urmarea lui Hristos*, cartea a IV-a cap. 5, trad. în rom. de G.Munteanu, Editura Buna Vestire, Bacău, 1996, p. 246.
27 Romano Guardini, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
28 *Ibidem*, p. 106, 109.
29 Paul Oltramare, *La religion et la vie de l'esprit*, Paris, 1925, p. 23.
30 Romano Guardini, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
31 Pr.Prof.Dr. Petre Vintilescu, *Curs de Liturgică Generală*, București, 1929-1930, p. 257.

There is no doubt that all these teaching aspects of the cult widen the horizon and the sphere of religious knowledge of the believers, helping them assimilate the truths about faith. They also have the gift of strengthening the souls of these believers on the stone of the right faith, making them understand it, cherish it and live according to it. The essence of the Christian Orthodox teaching is transposed in the acts, forms and rites of the cult, so, we can say that this divine cult is the living and dynamic tradition of the Orthodox Church, grown and shadowed by the light, heat and power of the Holy Spirit.

According to what was stated above, we can conclude that the spiritual work of sanctifying and redemption of the believers, of strengthening and protecting the Orthodoxy, as well as the work of promoting the Christian morality and the continuous spreading of the truths of faith has always used this fluid of spiritual life, of religious sense and feeling which is the public Orthodox divine cult. "It is the primordial and irreplaceable source of Christian spiritual truth and believers cannot have this Christian spirit unless they actively take part at the Holy masses and at the public and solemn prayer of the Church."[32]

32 Gaspar Lefebre, *op. cit.*, éd. V-e, Bruges, 1936, p. 17.