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Prayers of the Byzantine Liturgy of the Word as an Introduction to Meditation on the Holy Scriptures¹

There is an opinion, especially among “pastorally” oriented and zealous priests, that, as they say, the prayer of the Church should be such that anyone who enters the church could understand it. What will the “man from the street”, “the average Christian”, “non-churched person”, etc. think about that word, that phrase, the rite, the address, or liturgical robes? How will they like our more than 2,000-year-tradition of prayer? Should we simplify it, make it “closer to its simple apostolic origins”, to “the language of simple fishermen from Jerusalem”? These questions can be heard too often from the zealots of catechetical enlightenment, and even from church leadership — bishops. This is true especially about the introductory part of the Byzantine Liturgy — the Liturgy of the Word. Some believe that the Liturgy should begin directly with the reading of the Holy Scriptures.² All

¹ Tekst pierwotnie opublikowany w “Polonia Sacra” 27 (2023) nr 3, s. 65–78.

² For a monographic study of the Liturgy of the Word in the Byzantine tradition, see: *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, vol. 1, *The Liturgy of the Word*, transl. J. Mateos,

these “preparatory” rites are only unnecessary “burdens” for the simple reading of the Holy Scriptures, written in “simple” language for “simple” people. Therefore, here are some thoughts on this topic.

1. Both a Simple and Complex Gospel

Indeed, when reading the beginning of the apostle Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, one may think that the Gospel was entrusted by the Lord to simple, uneducated people: “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth” (Cor. 1:26–28). And at first glance, one may think that these people simply and uneducatedly preached this gospel further. However, one needs simply to look at the Gospel texts to see that everything is not as simple as the holy apostle Paul has said. The texts of the Gospels are extremely complicated. To read them properly, one needs additional knowledge of the salvation history of the Old Testament and even ancient philosophy. In order for the “foolish preaching” to really “save believers”, it is not enough just to repeat certain phrases from the Gospel. During his first sermon after the descent of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14–39), the apostle Peter appeals to the Old Testament history of salvation and quotes passages from biblical books, which would mean nothing to anyone without knowledge of their context and, even less, without knowledge of the tradition of commenting on them. The “people from the street” of that time would not have understood them the same as the “people from the street” of nowadays. Reading the prologue (Jn 1) and the priestly prayer of Christ from the Gospel of John (Jn 17) is enough to understand that this is not even close to a simple and uneducated Gospel. These texts are complex and comprehensive that require years and decades of intensive study to understand them even at the level of the text, not to mention their deep spiritual contents, “sealed to the curious, but

eds. S. Hawkes-Teeple, T. Hawkes, Virginia, Fairfax 2016. See also V. Rudeyko, *Ty ody z Sviatoi Troitsi?*, “Theologos” 2016, p. 111–125. J. Mateos, *Autour d’un projet de restauration de la Liturgie Byzantine*, “Proche Orient Chrétien” 7 (1957), p. 250–260.

open to those who worship the mystery with faith.”³ Christ himself admits that the parables he told apostles are complicated: “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, ‘though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand’” (Lk 8:10; cf. Mk 4:11). The apostle Peter testifies to the wisdom of Paul and to the difficulty of understanding some of his writings and statements:

Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand (2 Pet 3: 15–16).

Therefore, one must come to the conclusion that biblical texts and the preaching of the Gospel are not necessarily simple. They refer to the history of the salvation of God’s people, they require a deep knowledge of it (“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Lk 24: 27)), have their own depth, which goes beyond the Old Testament history and is intended to permeate all creation.⁴ The apostle Paul studies the traditions of the Greeks and speaks to them in the language of their culture in order to be able to preach the simple Gospel of Christ in complex words (Acts 17: 22–28). Preaching the Gospel of Christ presupposes growing into it, the ever deeper study of its context and the deep meaning hidden in it so that we constantly seek it.

2. The Biblical Context of the Prayers of the Liturgy of the Word

All that has been said above about the Gospel can automatically be applied to the prayer of the Church, primarily because it is thoroughly

3 See Oktoechos, Stichera on Lauds for Sunday of the 5th tone.

4 See *Liturgiam authenticam*. Instruction on the use of vernacular languages in the publication of the books of the Roman Liturgy, 28.03.2001, 19.

biblical.⁵ A huge part of the prayer of the Church is simply literal biblical texts. The entire Psalter, as one of the biblical books, is at the same time a prayer book of the Christian church, which can be prayed both as a whole (psalm by psalm), and situationally (selected psalms according to the time and place of prayer) or partially in the form of the prokimená in different church services.⁶ Of course, the “man from the street” will not immediately be able to feel either the beauty or the need to repeat these texts. Living and praying them involves slowly growing into the church prayer tradition, finding the meaning of their use there and, most importantly, a way to use them for your own spiritual life. Along with the psalms, there is a whole series of biblical poetry from the Old and New Testaments, which are used in the church as an appropriate way of communicating with the Lord and experiencing His life-giving presence.⁷ The prayer of the Church and the preaching of the Gospel are two inseparable realities that cannot be thought of separately from each other.⁸ Every experience of God involves an attempt to define it precisely in the context of the prayer of appeal: “My Lord and my God!” calls the Apostle Thomas, enjoying the opportunity to touch the glorified Body of Jesus Christ. The liturgical prayer of our tradition is penetrated primarily with the experience of reading the Holy Scriptures and meeting Christ in the Holy Scriptures. This is very easy to see in critical editions of liturgical texts, which accompany the text with biblical quotations and allusions.⁹ This is how Myroslav-Ivan Liubachivskyi outlined it in his work on St. Basil’s Liturgy:

If the Holy Scriptures are used in the Liturgy, one should not think that the editor simply transferred entire separate lines of the Holy Scriptures to the Liturgy, as, for example, the Holy Scriptures are quoted in some scientific article. Rather, he takes certain words from

5 P. Bradshaw, *The Use of the Bible in Liturgy: Some Historical Perspectives*, “*Studia Liturgica*” 22 (1992), p. 35–52.

6 See J. Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, London 1962.

7 J. Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, Indiana 2001.

8 T. O’Loughlin, *A liturgy of the Word and the words of the liturgy*, in: *Liturgical Language and Translation: The Issues Arising from the Revised English Translation of the Roman Missal*, ed. by T. O’Loughlin, Norwich 2014, p. 31–38.

9 See *L’eucologio Barberini gr. 336*, eds. S. Parenti, E. Velkovska, Roma 2000.

the treasury of his knowledge of the Holy Scriptures and combines them with his own words and sentences into a single whole. Thus, his own prayerful thoughts acquire a sacred character. Of course, this often happens involuntarily, because it is known that the Fathers often spoke with the words of the Holy Scriptures unintentionally and subconsciously.¹⁰

“Intelligent” (with knowledge of biblical origins and meanings) reading of these texts opens the possibility to learn about the course of prayer and to enter into it not as an observer, but as an active member of the community that has gathered to witness the life-giving presence of Christ. Prayers spoken by the priest, for example, make it possible to “enter” the integrity of the church’s prayer.¹¹ I will try to illustrate this in the example of well-known and problematic (because priests always try to “shorten”, but actually omit them) prayers of the antiphons of the Divine Liturgy.

These prayers should be viewed in light of the biblical allusions used in them (which is often extremely important for the interpretation of the place of prayers in the context of liturgical structures), and perceived first of all not as an introduction to specific psalms, but as an introduction to entering the temple and listening to the Holy Scriptures (and we believe that this was their original purpose).

The Prayer of the First Antiphon:

Lord, our God,¹² Whose dominion is incomparable and glory incomprehensible;¹³ Whose mercy is immeasurable, and love for mankind ineffable: Look upon us and upon this holy house¹⁴ in Your loving-kindness, and grant to us and to those who pray with us Your abundant mercy and compassion. For to You belong all glory, honor,¹⁵ and worship, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.

10 M. I. Liubachivskyyi, *Liturhiina borotba sviatoho Vasylia z arianizmom: shchodo istorii tekstu liturhii sv. Vasylia Velykoho*, „Naukovi zapysky UKU: Bohoslovia” 7 (2020), p. 66.

11 See V. Rudeyko, “Tykhi” molytvy yak dzherelo dlia komentuvannia liturhiinoi tradytsii, in: *Liturhiini komentari yak dzherelo liturhiolohii*, Lviv 2015, p. 112–122 (Ad Fontes Liturgicos, 5).

12 Dan 9, 15.

13 Prayer of Man, 6.

14 3 (1) Kings 8, 28, 29.

15 1 Tim 1, 17.

The Prayer of the Second Antiphon:

Lord, our God,¹⁶ save Your people and bless Your inheritance.¹⁷ Protect the fullness of Your Church. Sanctify those who love the beauty of Your house.¹⁸ Glorify them in return by Your divine power, and forsake us not¹⁹ who have set our hope in You.²⁰ For Yours is the dominion, and Yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.²¹

The Prayer of the Third Antiphon:

Lord, You have granted us to offer these common prayers in unison and have promised that when two or three agree in Your name, You will grant their requests.²² Fulfill now, O Lord, the petitions of Your servants as may be of benefit to them,²³ granting us in the present age the knowledge of Your truth,²⁴ and in the age to come eternal life. For You, O God, are good and love mankind, and to You we offer glory, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.²⁵

The prayers of the first and second antiphons begin with an exclamation, the basis of which is the text of the prayer from the book of Daniel (9, 15), which places the petition for the deliverance of the supplicant in the context of the event of the exodus and the creation of a new people

16 Dan 9, 15.

17 Ps. 27, 9.

18 Ps. 25, 8.

19 Cf. Ps 26, 9.

20 Cf. Ps 16, 7.

21 Mt 6, 13.

22 Cf. Mt 18, 19–20.

23 Ps 19, 6.

24 Cf. 1 Tim 2, 4; Heb 10, 26.

25 English text of prayers according to The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom — Liturgical Texts of the Orthodox Church — Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (goarch.org).

by God to glorify His name.²⁶ Further, both prayers talk about the establishment of a place of worship to God — the temple — and supplications are spoken for those who come to this place, take care of it and fulfill in it everything the Lord calls His people to do, people who were brought out of Egyptian slavery, — to glory in His name. In particular, the first prayer mentions precisely the blessing of the newly built temple (See 3 (1) Kings 8, 28, 29), and the second one uses a whole series of psalmical allusions of expressions of love for staying in the temple, running to the right hand of the Lord, asking for the supplicant to be accepted by Him. Especially beautiful in this prayer is the mention of the „fullness of the Church“, which fits very well just before the arrival of the bishop and “the entrance of the gathered community together with him into the temple”. The fact that exactly the same text is repeated at the end of the liturgy at the ambo prayer also fits very well into the theological understanding of the liturgy, because in ancient times this prayer was the last one in the liturgy, which the faithful prayed together with the bishop (= the fullness of the Church): *the arrival and departure* of the bishop is indicated by a prayer for the “fullness of the Church”. The third prayer is somewhat different from the previous two, and this is explained by the fact that its “task” is to lead the faithful to reading of the Holy Scriptures and their mysterious meaning in the context of the Divine Liturgy. The key biblical and theological theme in it is the following: perceiving the truth through hearing and accepting the Holy Scriptures should lead us to a joint petition to the Lord for what will benefit us and give us the opportunity to receive His Kingdom. This prayer, like the two previous ones, sets the tone for the entire Liturgy of the Word:

- the Lord who brought His people out of the slavery of sin through repentance,
- created a home for Himself in this people and filled it with His presence (the fullness of the Church),

²⁶ This is not the only case when two prayers in a row begin with the same phrase. Similarly, the 2nd and 3rd prayers of Matins, which in the modern worship are read by the priest during the singing of the six Psalms and whose ekphoneses are in small litanies after the second verse and polyeleum, also begin with the same phrase (*My soul yearns for you in the night*, Is 26, 9).

- Nowadays He is still building the church with His Word, revealing the knowledge of the truth and giving the promise of future blessings,
- this truth, in its turn, entails responsibility and punishment for frivolity before His Truth.

3. The Context of the Prayers of the Liturgy of the Word

In order to better understand the meaning of the prayers of the Liturgy of the Word for listening to the Word of God and meditating on it, it is necessary to turn to the principle that called to life the tradition of our symposia — *ad fontes liturgicos*. In the modern order of the Byzantine Divine Liturgy, the prayers of the antiphons are preceded by the so-called peaceful litany — collection of petitions for the various needs of the church.

However, in ancient sources, such petitions appear only after reading of the Holy Scriptures, as a consequence of the proclaimed Word of God and meditation on it in the sermon.²⁷ The illogicality of the modern order of the Liturgy of the Word has been criticized by one of the leading liturgists in the area of the Byzantine Liturgy, Fr. Juan Mateos. In his lectures on the development of the Byzantine Liturgy, he says:

The change of the synapses place to the very beginning of the Liturgy, that took place in the twelfth century, put the emphasis on man's needs rather than on God's praise. We think that this anthropocentric opening has less religious value than the old theocentric one. The very celebration of the Liturgy is a school of Christian spirituality; the faithful should be educated to consider God more important than themselves and their needs.²⁸

Another forgotten element of the modern order of the Byzantine liturgical tradition, which needs a deeper understanding in the context of *ad fontes liturgicos*, is the ancient tradition of the "sitting" of the leading priest

²⁷ See *Konstytucje apostołskie oraz Kanony Pamfilosa z apostołskiego synodu w Antiochii, Prawo kanoniczne św. Apostołów, Kary świętych Apostołów dla upadłych, Euchologion Serapiona*, S. Kalinkowski (przeł. Konstytucji), A. Caba (przeł. innych pism), układ i oprac. A. Baron, H. Pietras SJ, Kraków 2007, p. 224–233.

²⁸ J. Mateos, *The evolution of the byzantine liturgy*, in: *John XXIII Lectures*, vol. 1: 1965 *Byzantine Christian Heritage*, John XXIII Center For Eastern Christian Studies, New York 1966, p. 84.

before the reading of the Holy Scriptures. In the order of the Divine Liturgy celebrated by the bishop it is still possible to see that, during the singing of the antiphons, the bishop is sitting on the platform — the ambo — in the nave with the faithful.²⁹ This “sitting” in the context of the Divine Liturgy has a double meaning. First of all, it indicates that hearing of the Word of God involves preparation. Proclamation of the Word of God does not happen in haste. It requires calm and attention. That is why the bishop sits down, sings together with the church gathered around him and encourages the faithful to praise and glorify the Lord for the opportunity to gather in the church, to gather as a church, in order to listen and meditate on the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist according to the commandment of Christ in this Word.

In the already mentioned lectures, Fr. Juan Mateos emphasized the importance of the bishop’s or priest’s sitting in the ambo in the church not only during the singing of the antiphons, but also during the entire Liturgy of the Word:

One important highlight is the community as a whole listening to the Word of God in the first part of the Liturgy. The platform in the middle of the church, called ambon or bema, around which the people stood, helped to create a unity between clergy and the faithful. In this initial part of the Liturgy there is no remarkable difference between bishop, priest and laity. All need to hear the Word of God and be purified by it. The Liturgy seems to point out to us the important lesson that in its initial part, all, regardless of any dignity or ordination received, are equal as concerns their personal need for instruction in the Word of God, and for purification, before the awesome mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice begins. This is the reason why some old documents indicated that the bishop put on the liturgical vestments only at the offertory, when the clergy advance to the altar as chosen ministers after this purification has been attained.³⁰

Some churches of the Syrian tradition in the context of their liturgical reforms have already returned to such a tradition — celebrating of the Liturgy of the Word by priests and the faithful in the nave —, on the contrary,

29 V. Rudeyko, *Sluzhinnia arkhierarchyeia u bohosluzhbakh dobovoho kola*, “Bohosloviia” 71 (2010–2011), p. 12–17.

30 J. Mateos, *The evolution of the byzantine liturgy*, 96.

in the liturgical practice of the churches of the Byzantine tradition, there are facts of celebrating the liturgies by the bishops in a “priestly way”, as a result of which the Liturgy of the Word loses even this connection with old liturgical sources.

4. A “Non-Traditional” Prayer before Reading the Gospel

Although Fr. Juan Mateos, followed by many other researchers of the history of the Byzantine liturgy, try to prove that the Byzantine liturgy did not have a special prayer immediately before reading the Gospel³¹, nevertheless, in view of the phenomenon of liturgical education, which forms the general theme of the current liturgical symposium, let us briefly point out the main ideas with which the church tries to prepare the faithful to listen and meditate on the Word of God. Here is the text:

Shine in our hearts, O Master Who loves mankind, the pure light of Your divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind that we may comprehend the proclamations of Your Gospels.

Instill in us also reverence for Your blessed commandments so that, having trampled down all carnal desires, we may lead a spiritual life, both thinking and doing all those things that are pleasing to You.

For You, Christ our God, are the illumination of our souls and bodies, and to You we offer up glory, together with Your Father, Who is without beginning, and Your all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

With the words of this prayer before reading the Gospel, the liturgy forms a certain attitude of the faithful regarding the phenomenon of preaching the Gospel. The words of the Holy Scriptures, according to this prayer, are not only a sacred text, which church members are called to read, listen to and study. The words of the Holy Scriptures are primarily a sacrament (imperishable light of the knowledge of God) of the living Christ, who Himself must explain their meaning to His faithful by “opening the eyes

³¹ J. Mateos, *The evolution of the byzantine liturgy*, 87; *The Liturgy of the Word*, transl. J. Mateos, p. 227.

of their minds" so that they listen and understand them not so much with their mind, but with their heart.

Without this cooperation of Christ, for those who are listening, the words of the Holy Scriptures remain only a more or less interesting text. Instead, the meaning of listening and meditating on the words of Scripture, according to this prayer, should become a powerful source (fear of the commandments) for the fulfillment of the proclaimed Word of God (to think and to act so that the will of God can be fulfilled).

I would like to conclude my short thoughts with the wonderful words about the liturgical formation by one of the pioneers of the liturgical renewal, Fr. Pius Parsch:

The liturgy leads us not only to training in the worship, polished over millennia by the Church, it also wants to shape and create our whole life, provided, of course, that we follow its internal laws and make them the norms of our lives. Therefore, we can talk about a liturgical life attitude, which differs in certain points from the usual modern life attitude, which we call subjective. This spiritual attitude in its rivalry with its younger sister may indicate its respectable age and noble birth. It is the piety and lifestyle of the early church and the Bible.³²

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Abstract

Prayers of the Byzantine Liturgy of the Word as an Introduction to Meditation on the Holy Scriptures

This article analyzes the prayers of the Liturgy of the Word in the Byzantine tradition with regard to meditation on the Holy Scriptures. In particular, the author draws attention to the fact of the need to prepare for participation in the divine service through a deeper knowledge of the prayer and patristic tradition of reading the Bible. Regarding individual prayer, the context of reading and commenting on the Gospel in the Eucharistic assembly is indicated. Among other things, the author encourages rethinking the modern rite of the Liturgy of the Word in the Byzantine tradition, which underwent significant changes during its formation and partially lost its authentic structural simplicity.

Keywords: byzantine liturgy, liturgy of the word, liturgical theology

Abstrakt

Modlitwy bizantyjskiej liturgii słowa jako wprowadzenie do medytacji nad Pismem Świętym

Artykuł analizuje modlitwy liturgii słowa w tradycji bizantyjskiej w odniesieniu do medytacji nad Pismem Świętym. Szczególną uwagę autor zwraca na potrzebę przygotowania udziału w liturgii poprzez głębszą znajomość modlitw i patrystycznej tradycji odczytywania Biblii. Na przykładzie poszczególnych modlitw ukazany jest kontekst czytania i komentowania Ewangelii w zgromadzeniu eucharystycznym. Autor zachęca, między innymi, do przemyślenia współczesnego obrzędu liturgii słowa w tradycji bizantyjskiej, który w historycznym procesie formowania się uległ istotnym zmianom, w wyniku czego jego struktura częściowo utraciła swoją pierwotną prostotę.

Słowa kluczowe: liturgia bizantyjska, liturgia słowa, teologia liturgiczna