

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CONFERENCE OF RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
«ESCHATOLOGICAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH»
Moscow, 14-17 November 2005 z.

*Prof. Sava Viorel,
University of Yasi*

**THE ESCHATOLOGICAL DIMENSION
OF THE ORTHODOX DIVINE SERVICE**

1. The nocturnal Character of the public Divine Service in the primary Church

In the New Testament books, especially in the Acts of the Apostles, we find that in the first days of Christianity, the faithful were gathering on Saturday to Sunday evening of each week. They spent all the night in prayers (according to Acts, chapter XX). We know the content of this prayer from the same book of the New Testament (The Acts, chapter II). The first Christian community and, following its model, the Catholic (soborniceasca) Church of the first three centuries, had, as special way of living, **the prayer, the breaking of bread and the Apostles' doctrine**.

The committing of the official and public divine service during the night of Saturday to Sunday and not during the daytime, as it happens today, was due to three major motifs/reasons:

- a. First of all, the primary Christians desired to imitate our Lord, Jesus Christ, as much as accurate they could. He instituted the Holy Communion during the evening of the Last Supper. So, when they gathered to celebrate it, not only did they respect the words pronounced by our Saviour and the acts and gestures He committed, but also did they respect the moment of the day when Jesus officiate it. In our case, this moment is the evening, because at this moment of the day took place the Last Supper, during which He celebrated for the first time the Holy Communion.
- b. The second reason, an important reason for committing the divine service during night, was the historical context in which the Church had to develop its activities and to carry out its mission. Because of the persecutions against Christians, that took place in the first three centuries, they had to gather for praying during the night, in well-hidden places.
- c. The last but not the least reason is that the conception about **Parousy** determined the committing of the divine service during nighttime. The Christians of those times had the conviction that Christ will return on Earth very soon and that this will happen in the night, in the first day of the week, Sunday, the same day He had risen from the dead. Having this belief, they wanted to wait for Christ in prayers and vigil.¹

Following this latter reason, some considerations are taking by themselves into account. First, the fact that the Christian thought has been from the beginning **dominated** by the conception about **Parousy**, conception that influenced and inspired the public prayer, is the most evident consideration. This feature of the prayer suggests us that in the moment of the entry of one person in the Church through the Mystery of the Holy Baptism, she gains a citizenship that goes beyond the human passing laws. The Christian, as citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven, is entirely free, although the persecutors prosecute him and sometimes deprive him of his liberty. He experiences this freedom in the liturgical space of the orthodox worship. Secondly, through the committing of the divine service in the night of Saturday to Sunday and the prolonging of it until dawn daybreak, when Christ has risen, the entire orthodox liturgical spirituality enriched itself with a paschal meaning. Every Sunday became a remembrance and an anticipation of the Resurrection of our Lord and of our passing «from death unto life, and from Earth unto Heaven» (as we sing in the Canon of the Passover). Moreover, the Sunday became and anticipated experience of the resurrection of all humankind at the end of time. With this double symbolism, paschal and eschatological, the liturgical time differentiate itself of our finite time, becoming a part of eternity. In the liturgical space, the human space surpasses ordinary time, even if he is still circumscribed to this time, pre-tasting or experiencing in anticipation the eternity. This reality, as Reverend Alexander Schmemmann was writing, is underlined and expressed in the solemn blessing

¹ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene Braniște, „Liturgica specială”, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă al Bisericii Române, București, 1980, pp. 28-29.

that we utter in the beginning of the Holy Liturgy: «The celebrant opens the service with the solemn blessing of the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom of God ... is the **Kingdom** that will be manifested and communicated to us in the Eucharistic celebration. Thus, blessing indicates or announces the direction, the ultimate goal of the movement, which now begins, of the mystical «procession» which is now on its way. We have already left the Earth with its earthly cares; we are going up, following Christ in His eternal passage from this world to the Father.»²

2. How does the eschatological Dimension of the Divine Service reflect within it?

a. A first modality of the eschatological dimension to reflect within the divine service accomplishes through the confession of faith in the Creed. In the final words of the Symbol of Faith, we confess: «I look for the Resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.» The including of the Creed into the ordinary set of prayers demonstrates that this prayer is according with the doctrine of the Church. Saint Irineus of Lyon had settled the principle according to which one teaching of faith is correct if it corresponds to the Eucharist and the Eucharist is the one, which confirms a teaching of faith.³ On the other hand, the content of the Creed becomes the content itself of the prayer, and when the Creed refers to eschatology, the prayer itself gains an eschatological content, an eschatological dimension.

We receive the Holy Baptism as the beginning of life in Jesus Christ only after we confessed the Symbol of Faith. In addition, the priest examines the Christian that comes to receive the Mystery of the Confession through questions upon the doctrine of faith, according to the instructions of the Prayer Book (Evchologion). This means that the Holy Mysteries, because of the confessing of the Creed, orient us towards eternity and help us to experience it in anticipation.

b. A second modality of the eschatological dimension to reflect within the divine service is the theological and symbolical significations that the liturgical commentators attributed to some ritual acts and gestures or to some of the services that we officiate within the Church.

During Vespers, right in the beginning of the service, while the priest reads the Psalm 103, he goes out of the Holy Altar and stands in front of the Holy Doors, which are closed. Here, with his head uncovered, he reads inaudibly the seven prayers of the Vesper, called the Prayers of Light. The Holy Altar symbolizes now the Paradise from which were banished the first humans, Adam and Eve. The priest who recites the prayers in front of the closed Holy Doors is the symbol, the icon of all Saints of the Old Testament that besought the Mercy of God.⁴ However, in its whole, the Vesper does not orient us towards the past, but opens an eschatological perspective. By inaugurating a new liturgical day and through the reading of Psalm 103, in which we glorify God's creation, the Vesper suggests us that by the means of the divine daily service, God re-creates the person. The priest, who stands in front of the Holy Doors, oriented towards the Holy Altar, expresses that we are facing the Kingdom of Heaven, preached by Saint John The Forerunner and by our Lord from the beginning of His activity (according to Mathew 3, 3; 4, 17) and not the Paradise of the first days. In other words, the Holy Altar is the icon, the image of the Kingdom of Heaven, made accessible for us, a Kingdom that we bless at the beginning of the Holy Liturgy.

During the same service, the Vesper, one important moment is the ritual of the Lesser Entrance. The solemn ritual of taking the sacerdotal vestments, the going out and re-entering of the priest in the Holy Altar symbolize the Incarnation of Christ, His Crucifixion, for us and for our salvation and His Ascension into Heaven. Moreover, it is also the icon of the Second Coming of Christ as the Judge of the World. We find these symbolical significations of the ritual of the Lesser Entrance expressed in the liturgical commentary of Saint Simeon, Archbishop of Thessalonica. He says «... (Through the ritual of the Lesser Entrance) we learn that the Only Begotten, the Son of God, descending to us from Heaven, ascended again into Heaven, ascending us with Him... Because the going out and the descending of steps of the priest symbolizes the humbleness of Christ. Taking the vestments symbolizes the Incarnation. The standing in the center of the Church and the lowering of the head means that our Saviour had been crucified in the center of the Earth, had died and had descended till Hell for us... Re-entering the Holy Altar means that (our Lord) ascended from the Earth into Heaven and sit on the right hand of the Father, from where He came down, together with the body that He assumed... The Lesser Entrance of the Vesper symbolizes the descending of God that will be at the end of time.»⁵ In other words, the liturgical time is the time between the First and the Second

² Alexander Schmemmann, "Liturgy and Life: Christian Development through Liturgical Experience", Second Edition, New York, 1983, p. 42.

³ Karl Christian Felmy, "De la Cina cea de Taină la Dumnezeiasca Liturghie a Bisericii Ortodoxe. Un comentariu istoric", trad. Românească de Pr. Prof. dr. Ioan I. Ică, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2004, p. 38.

⁴ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene Braniște, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁵ Sf. Simeon, Arhiepiscopul Tesalonicului, "Despre sfintele rugăciuni", cap. 333-334, în vol. "Tratat asupra tuturor dogmelor credinței noastre ortodoxe", Editura Arhiepiscopiei Sucevei și Rădăuților, vol. II, Suceava, 2003, pp. 80-81.

Coming of Jesus Christ, and our life within this time is the life with Christ and in Christ, the One who we are expecting for («And He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead») and who had already come.

A particular symbolism for the major theme that we present belongs to one of the Daily Cycles of Prayer, respectively the Nocturne or the Midnight Service. Following the example of the wise virgins, the Church waits in prayers for Christ, who will come as a Judge of the World. According to the Typicon, this service is officiated in the porch of the church, on which walls the faces of the Righteous Saints are usually painted. They remind us that we have to spend our whole life in vigil and to look upon it from the perspective of the Last Judgment of God. Therefore, the Nocturne, which recalls us the end of our earthly life and of Christ the Judge, is the service that directs our life and consciousness eschatologically and imparts an eschatological dimension upon the divine service.

c. The eschatological dimension of the orthodox worship is evident, in a clear and profound manner in hymnography. Two hymns (troparion) of the Nocturne are very suggestive for this idea: «Meditating on that terrible day, O my soul, watch, keeping thy lamp alight and filled with oil; for thou knows not when unto thee shall come the voice, saying: Behold the Bridegroom! Beware, therefore, my soul, lest thou fall into slumber and be left outside, knocking, as were the five virgins; but wakefully watch, that thou may come to meet Chris with good oil, and He shall bestow upon thee the divine chamber of His glory.»⁶ These hymns belong to the Nocturne Office for weekdays, which mean that the Parousy is not an incidental liturgical event, but a permanent one.

We chant the first of these two hymns during the Matins Office of the first three days of the Week of Passions (The Great Week) in order to remind us that we are advancing not only towards the Resurrection of Christ from the dead, but also towards the resurrection of all humankind into the Kingdom of Heaven. As Reverend Alexander Schmemmann was indicating, «we are living always after the Passover and move always towards Passover»⁷ (Passover comes from the Hebrew word «pesah», meaning «passing»). Therefore, with every liturgical day and every liturgical year, we are always moving towards the great passing, towards the great Passover, towards the final leap from this world into the Kingdom of Heaven, from finite time into eternity.

The Triodion hymnography express these ideas with much more insistence. The beginning of our Saviour's preach gives to penitence a place into the Kingdom of Heaven, that approaches us: «Repent: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand» (Matthew 4, 17). The period of the Lent and the hymnography of Triodion, insist both on this idea, and on other important ideas. Even from the beginning of the period of Triodion, we start chanting: «As I ponder in my wretchedness the many evil things I have done, I tremble for the fearful day of Judgment. But, trusting in Thy merciful compassion, like David do I cry out to Thee: have mercy upon me, O God, in Thy great mercy.»⁸ This theme of the penitence is met again in the Canon of Saint Andrew, Bishop of Crete, that we sang during the first and the fifth week of the Lent: «My soul, my soul arise! Why are you sleeping? The end is drawing near, and you will be confounded. Awake, then, and be watchful, that Christ our God may spare you, Who is everywhere present and fills all things.»⁹ Or «The end is drawing near, my soul, is drawing near! But you neither care, nor prepare. The time is growing short. Rise! The Judge is near at the very doors. Like a dream, like a flower, the time of this life passes.»¹⁰ In addition, such examples may continue. The consciousness of the Church, reflected in hymnography, emphasizes that the end, the «eschaton», is not just an event placed in a very far-off future, but an immediate one, «at the very doors». That is the reason why in all the important services we pray to God for «a Christian ending to our life, painless, blameless, peaceful; and a good defense before the dread Judgment Seat of Christ».

d. As a prolonging of the liturgical experience within the Church, the thought about the end of the earthly life and the dread Judgment of God that waits for us marks the private spiritual life of the faithful. When some faithful asked a great confessor of the twentieth Century that lived in the Sihăstria Monastery, in Romania, which is the first and the prominent thought that we should keep in our mind day by day, he answered «The thought about Death». «And which is the second?» In addition, he answered «The thought about Death.» «And which is the third one?» «The thought about Death», answered him again.

Before going to sleep, the Christian use to meditate before the bed in which he will rest, praying in this way: «O Master that love all men, will not this couch be my grave. Or wilt Thou again enlighten my

⁶ «Ceașlov», Ediția a II-a, București, 1990, p.25.

⁷ Reverend Alexander Schmemmann, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁸ «Triodul», București, 2000, p. 7.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 133 (Kontakion, Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete).

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 131 (Song 4, Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete).

wretched soul with the day; Behold, the grave lie before me, death stand before me. Thy judgment, O Lord, I fear, and the unending torments, yet I cease not from doing evil.»¹¹

The monastic way of living expresses thoroughly this eschatological dimension of the quotidian life. In some certain monasteries, there is the custom that the monks should keep in their small rooms a coffin or a skull in order to remind them permanently of the end of earthly life. In the countryside, the faithful use to prepare while they are still young all; that they need for their funeral, which means that the preparing for the beginning of the eternal life is a part of the life that they live. Coming back to the monastic experiences, we have to say that in the moment that one becomes a monk, he accepts to crucify himself and to be like a dead man for this world, as if this life has already ended. As such as for the one who is baptized, his life ends because he accepted and buried together with Christ through the Mystery of Baptism (Romans, chapter 6). Otherwise said, the eschaton begins for a monk in the moment in which he accepts the three vows implied by the monastic life. For a Christian, the eschaton begins in the moment he receives the Holy Baptism.

e. But, beside all these arguments, we have to say that, as Joannis Zizioulas has affirmed it, the whole structure of the Holy Liturgy is «an icon of Eschatology»¹². The same author registers: «The Orthodox Liturgy is so strongly linked together with eschatology, that we might wonder how it was it possible for the theologians that live into the Orthodox Church to write manuals about Dogmatique Theology without referring one time to the value and the place of eschatology?»¹³ Indeed, we may add, a theology that is not inspired from the liturgical experience is a pure speculation, with no strength, likewise a prayer of the Church that, not without the dogmatically support is just religious folklore. How does the eschatological dimension of the Church reflect in the structure of the Holy Liturgy?

Primary, we have to say that the Holy Liturgy cannot be committed without having some obligatory liturgical objects. In this category, a very important role is ascribed to the to those two Holy Icons: the Icon of Our Lady Theotokos with the Holy Child (the image of His First Coming on the Earth) and the Icon of our Saviour sitting on the Judgment Throne (the image of His Second Coming on the Earth). Therefore, the Holy Liturgy «fills» the temporal space between these two Comings of our Saviour, and, consequently, the Holy Liturgy bears the imprint of these two major events.

Secondly, we have to say that the way, in which the Office of Oblation takes place in the Orthodox tradition and the way of the disposal of the particles on the Holy Paten, surrounding the Holy Bread, the Lamb, reflect, in fact, the image of the Kingdom of Heaven. Even if Nicolas Cabasila speaks about a relationship between the Office of Oblation and the Nativity and Passions of Christ¹⁴, the image of the Holy Paten is the Kingdom of Heaven in which all those people that believed and hoped in Him, from all times and all countries, surround Christ.

A third argument is offered to us by the solemn blessing that we utter in the beginning of the Holy Liturgy: «Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now, and ever, and unto ages of ages.» The word **now** expresses the fact that the Kingdom of Heaven is a present reality, in the middle of us («The Kingdom of God is within you», said once our Saviour – Luke 17, 21). The words **and ever, and unto ages of ages** express the idea that the Kingdom of Heaven is a reality that we are waiting for and towards which we direct our lives. Otherwise said, the Kingdom that we are looking forward is already here, but not «yet». «The dialectical tension between «already» and «not yet», says Makarios the Simonopetrite, is the fundament of the liturgical time. It does not appear as a contradiction in itself, as it seems, but as an antinomy, not only dynamic but also divine and human. The eternity is effectively present and communicable in Christ, in the heart of time. But the effective deifying, the complete realization of the liturgical mystery needs the free co-operation of the faithful for his salvation.»¹⁵

The fourth argument is offered to us by the Anamnesis of the Holy Liturgy.¹⁶ At this moment, the priest commemorates the holy events from the past, but he also mentions some future events: «Bearing in remembrance, therefore, this commandment of salvation, and all those things which came to pass for us: the Cross, the Grave, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into Heaven, the Sitting on the right hand,

¹¹ Evening Prayer, “Ceaslov”, p. 172.

¹² Joanis Zizioulas, “Die Eucharistie in der neuzeitlichen Orthodoxen Theologien”, in Die Aumfung des heiligen Geistes im Abendmahl. Viertes Theologisches Gespräch zwischen dem Ökumenischen Patriarchat und der EKD vom. 6. – 9. Oktober, 1975, p. 175, apud Karl Christian Felmy, “Dogmatica experien’ei ecleziale, Jnnoirea teologiei ortodoxe contemporane”, (în românește de Pr. Prof. Dr. Ioan Ică), Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 1999, p. 311.

¹³ Ibidem, apud Karl Christian Felmy, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

¹⁴ Nicolae Cabasila, “Tâlcuirea Dumnezeieștii Liturghii”, cap. VI (în românește de Pr. Prof. Dr. Ene Braniște), București, 1989, p. 35.

¹⁵ Makarios Simonopetritul, “Triodul explicat. Mistagogia timpului liturgic” (în românește de Diac. Ioan I. Ică Jr.), Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 2000, p. 388.

¹⁶ Karl Christian Felmy, “Dogmatica...”, p. 312.

the Second and glorious Coming-again».¹⁷ Even if we are looking forward the Second Coming of Christ, this had been already accomplished, as we are also confessing, and the others were accomplished too: the Cross, the Grave, the Resurrection, the Ascension into Heaven, the Sitting on the right hand of the Father. That liturgical «today» («Of the Mystical Supper, O Son of God, accept me today as a communicant» or «Yesterday, O Christ, was I buried with thee, and today I rise again with thy rising. Yesterday was I crucified with thee: Do thou thyself glorify me, O Saviour, in thy Kingdom», as we sing on the Easter) comprises not only the past events, but also the future ones. That is the reason why we can say, «which came to pass for us», including the Second Coming of Christ. At the same time, remembering together event from the past and from the future, we affirm the fact that the past gains a meaning only in the perspective of the future.

An ultimate argument that I have chosen to present it here is the Holy Communion with the Holy Body and Blood of our Saviour Jesus Christ. The faithful receive the Holy Communion «unto the remission of my sins and unto life everlasting». It is a pre-tasting of the eternal life, of which we will enjoy it absolutely in the Kingdom of God. After we took part to the Holy Liturgy, in the moment in which we place into the Holy Chalice the particles for that were took out for the Nine Ranks of Saints, we pray, «O Christ, Passover great and most Holy! O, Wisdom, Word, and Power of God! Vouchsafe that we may more perfectly partake of thee in the days which know no evening of thy kingdom.»¹⁸ The Holy Communion is therefore an anticipation of the rich banquet given by the Lord in the Kingdom of Heaven that will come.

Instead of conclusions, I will say that in the liturgical space, within the orthodox worship, we are «no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.» (Ephesians 2, 19). Even if we are circumcised to a finite time, we are a part of eternity. Being a part of eternity, we live in a finite time, endeavoring ourselves to pass into eternity. If we look at the divine service in this perspective, the prayer of the Church that says «Standing in the temple of Your Glory, and we think that we are in heaven» has a meaning for each of us.

¹⁷ «Liturghier», București, 2000, p. 162.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 180.