

## History and eschatology in the old Syrian Christianity

The Ecclesiastes from the Old Testament remains stockstill in front of the great passing of the historical time, leaving the famous reflection concerning the temporality: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1, 2). Saint Gregory of Nyssa comments this expression in the first homily to Ecclesiastes in this way: “This means that the whole apparitions by nature are not simply worldliness, but they are worldliness in the superlative”<sup>1</sup>, being in the same time in the necessary shades that this explanation will not degenerate in a gnostic or Manichean tone. The Greek philosophical wonderment has been born from the stupefaction lived by the man in front of the passing of the world and its things. There are not any permanent periods in the world of “panta rei”, but everything is a great passing. The whole world is a spectacle of changing<sup>2</sup>.

From an anthropological perspective, Martin Heidegger expresses the whole reality of temporality in the famous saying “in der Welt geworfen sein”, that is to say the fact of being thrown in the world and time, meaning to live among people, means to give time a prey, being eaten by it.

The only science which suggests a solution for the temporality problem is theology, which says that time has immortality as a last purpose, the eschaton. According to the classical division of the dogmatic manuals, eschatology is presented as a last chapter of the faith learning of Church, in which it is talked about the particular and universal judgment, the resurrection of the dead people and the Lord Jesus’ second coming at the ages of ages. Thus, we can talk about a futuristic eschatology of dogmatic, which does not fit entirely with the ecclesiastical experience of the Orthodox Church, whose inaugurated and presentistic eschatology is its own and which implies the real presence of the eternal God and the pretasting of God’s Kingdom which is already here and now. After a deeper and accomplished fulfillment in the Kingdom of God<sup>3</sup>, the partial one from this age is the one which keeps awoken the desire. This dichotomy,

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies to Ecclesiastes*, in idem, Writings. Second part, translated by Rev. prof. dr. Theodor Bodogae, (PSB, 30), IMBOR ed., Bucharest, 1998, p. 200.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jeanne Hersch, *Philosophical Wonder. The History Of European Philosophy*, translated by Dragan Vasile, Humanitas ed., Bucharest, 1994, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Christian Felmy, *Dogmatic of the ecclesiastical experience. The innovation of the modern Orthodox theology*, translated by rev. prof. dr. Ioan I. Ica, Deisis ed., Sibiu, 1999, p. 309-310.

already existent in the orthodox theology, was marked out and condemned by reverend George Florovsky who talked at the First Congress of the Faculties of Orthodox Theology in Athenes, in 1936, about the “pseudomorphoses” through which the orthodox theology had passed during the last 3-4 centuries, proposing a return to the theology of the Fathers of the Church, but a return which will not be a simple escape in the past, but a spring of new life for the contemporary theology.

The definition of History as “magistra vitae” is apparently applicable to the Christian history where the eternal truth of divine revelation is similarly lived by the ecclesiastical communities which had come throughout time. In this text, we will return some centuries before in history to see the way in which the Christian people from Nisibi, Edessa and Anthiohia went out of history, they passed “through time” for saving themselves from the determinism of death. A fundamental problem both in theology and philosophy is the problem of positive capitalization of time or that of the transcendence of temporality. Laughter in front of death, which is actually laughter in front of time, is possible only for real Christians. The monks of desert are the first ones who had laughed in front of time. In this text we are not interested in monks’ laughter in front of death, but in the way in which the Syrian Christians from 4<sup>th</sup> century, living in the flourishing centers above-mentioned, solved the problem of time’s irreversibility, the way those had met in with the eternity of eschaton.

This text underlies itself on the texts of two great Syrian theologians who lived at the end of 4<sup>th</sup> century, Saint Ephraim the Syrian (306-373) and Saint John Hrisostom (354-407). From Saint Ephraim’s huge work of hymns I have chosen some “Hymns at Lord’s Birth”. Saint John has the basis of the analysis made up of the text of the Holy Liturgy itself which bears his name.

### **1. The theology of time in Saint’s Ephraim the Syrian work of hymns (306-373)**

Called in the Syrian tradition as “the teacher of the world”, “column of the Church”, “Syrians’ prophet” and “guitar or harp of the Holy Spirit”<sup>4</sup>, Saint Ephraim the Syrian (306-373) was indeed one of the greatest Christian poets and one of the deepest

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rev. Prof. Dr. Ioan G. Coman, *Patristic*, The Holy Monastery Dervent, 1999, p.146.

theologians of the Christian tradition. Deacon, writer of hymns and catechist in Nisibi and Edessa, Saint Ephraim offers in his hymns one of the most fascinating theologies of time, especially regarding the way in which the Christian living in the historical time, crosses eternity or time of God by tasting something from the eschatological mystery.

The Syrian monachism is characterized through an ardent ascetic instinct – Syria being the motherland of “stylits” and of “the mad people about Christ” – but also through a great lyricism of soul, engraved in the spectacular liturgical and poetical hymns left by Jacob of Edessa, Jacob of Nisibi, Jacob of Sarug and especially by Saint Ephraim the Syrian (306-373)<sup>5</sup>. Saint Ephraim’s theology is characterized by a typological interpretation of the Scripture and by a liturgical sacramental reality, in which historical time is overtaken and transfigured by the eternal time of God, we enter through faith in.

Saint Ephraim’s hymns are homilies in lines with stanzas and refrain (madrashe=learning) for the liturgical space, homilies which are sang by a chorus or a vocalist after defined melodies and introducing the participants into a mystagogic manner during the history of salvation making them accomplice at eschaton and at the ages to come. These madrashe of Saint Ephraim preceded the famous *kontakia* from the Byzantine hymnography, kept until today in a very short way in the liturgical orthodox book.

Concerning the following, we will try a theology of time of Saint Ephraim the Syrian, using only “The Hymns at Lord’s Birth”. The first hymn begins like this:

*“This is the day that gladdened them, the prophets, Kings, and Priests,  
for in it were their words fulfilled, and thus were the whole of them  
indeed performed!*

*For the Virgin this day brought forth Immanuel in Bethlehem. The  
voice that of old Isaiah spoke, today became reality  
He was born there who in writing should tell the Gentiles’ number!  
The Psalm that David once sang, by its fulfillment came today!*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. André Srima, *Orthodox Monachism: history, tradition, spirituality*, in Idem, *About hesychasm*, Humanitas ed., Bucharest, 2003, p.35

*The word that Micah once spoke, today was come indeed to pass! The light that spoke in Zachary, today shined in Bethlehem!*

*Risen is the Light of the Kingdom, in Ephrata the city of the Kings. The blessing wherewith Jacob blessed, to its fulfillment came today!*

*That tree likewise, [the tree] of life, brings hope to mortal men! Solomon's hidden proverb had today explanation!*

*Today was born the Child, and His name was called Wonder!*

*The King that in Judah was hidden, Tamar stole Him from his thigh; today arose His conquering beauty, which in hidden estate she loved.*

*Ruth at Boaz's side lay down, because the Medicine of Life hidden in him she perceived. Today was fulfilled her vow, since from her seed arose the Quickener of all.”<sup>6</sup>*

Saint Ephraim distinguishes in his hymns the historical time and the sacred time of the history of salvation. The common time is linear and each point of it has a “before” and an “after”. But the sacred time does not have “before” and “after”, but only “the eternal now”<sup>7</sup> which is expressed by the writer of hymns from Edessa, through the word “today”, which comes back in an obsessive manner most of the lines of the first hymn at Lord's Birth<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Hymn on Lord's Birth, 1-3, 9, 13, 12. Ephraim's hymns are quoted after: Saint Ephraim the Syrian, *The Hymns of Lord's Birth and Appearances, Hymns II*, translated by Deacon Ioan I. Ica jr., Deisis ed., Sibiu, 2000. The English translation is taken from the Internet: Ephraim the Syrian (306-373), On the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh, (*Translated, I.-XIII. By Rev. J. B. Morris, M.A. [Oxford Library of the Fathers]*), <http://newadvent.org/fathers/3703.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Sebastian Brock, *Ephraim the Syrian. I. The Bright Eye. Saint Ephraim the Syrian's spiritual view of the world; II. The hymns about Paradise*, translated by Rev. Mircea Ielciu and Deacon Ioan I. Ica jr., Deisis ed., Sibiu, 1998, p.54

<sup>8</sup> The same place is until today the great prayer for consecrating the water at Lord's Baptism, where the word “today” appears for 23 times.

Another name for the sacred time is that of “The Lord’s Day”, an eternal day, because He Himself is Eternal, and the entering means accomplishment for eternity, tasting from eschatology; it is the exit from the world of “panta rei” and the solution of the heideggerian fact of being thrown into the world:

*“The day of the transgressor passed away like him; Thy day like  
Thyself abideth for ever.*

*For great is Thy day beyond comparison! Nor can it be compared with  
our days.*

*The day of man is as of the earthy: the day of God is as of God!  
Thy day, Lord, is greater than those of the prophets”.<sup>9</sup>*

God’s eternity is situated beyond the world being at the beginning of the world, but it transcends the world in such a manner, that it has to wait the end of the time from the perspective of future which borders its end:

*“Blessed be that first day of Thine, Lord, wherewith this day of thy  
Feast is stamped I*

*Thy day is like Thee, in that it shows mercy unto men, in that it is  
Handed down and comes with all generations.*

*This is the day that ends with the aged, and returns that it may begin  
With the young! A day that by its love refreshes itself, that it may  
refresh by its might us decayed creatures.*

*Thy day when it had visited us and passed, and gone away, in its  
Mercy returned and visited us again: for it knows that human nature  
needs it; in all things like unto Thee as seeking us”<sup>10</sup>.*

The sacred time becomes important through its saving content because it does not know “before” and “after”, but it is an eternal today. The Birth, the Baptism, the Crucifixion, Lord’s descent into Hell, the Resurrection and Lord’s second coming represents the content of the sacred time, and the whole content of these saving events

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<sup>9</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> Hymn, 71, 77-78.

<sup>10</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> Hymn, 3, 5-6.

can be concentrated on each point of the linear time. In other words, each moment from the historical time is opened for the divine eternity and can be transfigured into a sacred time, into an eschatological time. Mainly, each moment of time is opened for eternity, in other words, in each moment of time eternity<sup>11</sup> can come into the time of the world. This thing is related by Saint Ephraim in the fourth hymn at Lord's Birth:

*"All the days from the Treasure of thy bright day gain blessings. All the feasts from the stores of this feast have their fairness and their ornaments.*

*Thy bowels of mercy upon Thy day make Thou to abound unto us, O Lord! Make us to distinguish Thy day from all days!*

*In this Thy day, Lord, which is near unto us, we see Thy Birth that is far off!"<sup>12</sup>.*

Knowing Lord's Day in all the days means realizing the passing through the profane time, or better saying its exceeding and arrival into the heart of each moment from the time's line. For Saint Ephraim eternity is not outside the temporal moments, but it is present inside time, giving its own value to it. All days feed themselves from the treasure of Lord's Day, world's time is death and it dies outside the historical time of salvation which feeds and fills it with sense.

Through faith the community of Edessa from the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century was passing through time and entering the "eternal today" of the history of salvation could sing that the prophets of the Old Testament were joying "today", that Ruth had slept "today" with Boaz and that "The Virgin is giving birth to Immanuel today". The events from the Old and New Testament as well as those from Church history become co-temporal. We can observe a contemporaneity among the events that took place throughout thousands of years in the linear time. From the linear time's point of view the community of Edessa may see how the Virgin gives birth, Isaiah and David prophesy and

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<sup>11</sup> André Scrima distinguishes between the eternity of time and God's eternity: "The *Eon* is the commensurable time of eternity, but essential different of the eternity of God". André Scrima, *Time of the Ardent Pyre*, translated by the 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, Humanitas ed., Bucharest, 2000, p.94. Saint Maxim the Confessor says that the eon is time stopped in movement, and time is eon measured through movement. Starting from here, Reverend Staniloaie infers that the eternity which will be at the end of time will be a concentration of the entire time which will be penetrated by the divine eternity. Cf. Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Staniloaie, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 1<sup>st</sup> volume, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, IBMBOR ed., Bucharest, 1996, p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> Hymn, 18-21, 12.

Ruth and Tamar participate at the history of salvation through their great faith and intuition mediated by the Holy Spirit. This view is possible because within faith Church gathers different points from the historical time in the temporal unit of the sacred time, meeting the God of Universe in a real way.

We are here in front of a threefold typology which is also met only at a few theologians of the ancient Church, led by Saint Gregory of Nyssa, but then inherited by the liturgical Byzantine tradition. The Christian interpretation of the old-testamentary “typos”-es presumes that the events from the Old Testament were images from the Savior’s life and that they found their fulfillment into Christ. Thus, Jesus Christ’s Birth, Death and Resurrection are the center of the history of salvation. This is the typology in two stairs. But Saint Ephraim represents a typology in three stairs because the events from the Old Testament, which found their fulfillment into Christ, are relived in Church and then totally fulfilled in eschaton. Because the life of eschaton belongs to the eternal today of the sacred time it might happen that this should be experienced in different degrees by persons who are still on earth, but this experience only a pretasting of the final perfection.

All those, who in a way or another waited for Christ and wanted Him, meet in the “eternal today” through faith. Not only the Christians from Edessa become contemporans with those from the Old Testament, but also the rights of the Old Testament too had outmatched the time for seeing Christ. The passing through time of some old-testamentary persons is extraordinary, being illustrated by the Syrian writer of hymns in a lot of verses. All the rights and prophets of the Old Testament were looking forward to Savior’s Birth Day. These got out of their time and entered the time of salvation’s history, where all events become contemporary, through faith, justice and helped by the Holy Spirit. An example is enough: “*Enoch was looking forward to Him and, without seeing the Son on earth; he increased in faith and justice, for rising and seeing Him in Heaven.*”(Genesis 5, 24)<sup>13</sup>. Here we see a dynamic of passing through time which does not take anymore into account the big distance between heaven and earth. As Enoch rose in Heaven and saw Christ, the Christian as well may live the time of eschaton through faith. The calling of faith is so irresistible that the time of waiting is canceled. Faith is the condition of passing through time, because only through it people may get to know

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<sup>13</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Hymn, 53.

something from God. But besides faith, Saint Ephraim discloses to the reader or to the beseecher the work of the Holy Spirit whose rights of the Old Testament opened his heart and mind in order to be able to transcend time:

*“He looked for the Son Who makes heirs of life that never ends! Grace itself in hidden mystery was beseeching on their behalf that their Lord might come in their age and fill up their shortcomings.*

*For the Holy Spirit in them, in their stead, besought with meditation:  
He stirred them up, and in Him did they look on that Redeemer, after  
whom they longed.*

*The soul of just men perceive in the Son a Medicine of life; and so it  
Felt desires that He might come in its own days, and then would it taste  
His sweetness.*

*Abraham perceived in Spirit that the Son’s Birth was far of; instead of  
Him in person he rejoiced to see even His day”.*<sup>14</sup>

Eternity crosses the historical time, offering it the possibility of transfiguration in a unique manner. This thing is expressed by Saint Ephraim as it follows:

*“Thy day reconciled Heaven and earth, because therein the highest  
came down to the lowest.”*<sup>15</sup>

Saint Ephraim’s liturgical realism operates in a time of salvation, the Church has unlimited access at. Having Christ’s blessings “today” means accomplishment at the eternal youth of the eschaton. The overtaking of the interval between the linear time and the “eternal now” remains always insufficient during our earthly life, permanently anxious because of sin and selfishness.

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<sup>14</sup> Idem, 51-52, 59.

<sup>15</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> Hymn, 14.

In Saint Ephraim's the Syrian vision, the priest realizes the total transcendence of the historical time. "*Priesthood*, he said, *is suspended from the highest vaults of Heaven; he enters without foreclosure in the Heavens of Heavens themselves and walks brightly and easily in the middle of angels and unbodied powers. But why am I saying in the middle of the heavenly powers? He talks with the Lord of angels Himself, with the Creator and the Light Giver*"<sup>16</sup>.

If the priest enables to speak with the Creator by rising in Heaven in the liturgical time, God's judgment and the end of the world is certainly a deeper living of this meeting with Jesus Christ, which begins here and now and will end with the "total rest in God".

## **2. The inaugurated and presenteistic eschatology in liturgical theology of Saint John Chrisostom**

The second witness of understanding the proportion between history and eschatology in Christianity from the Syrian space is no one but Saint John Chrisostom, whose Holy Liturgy has a central role in the cult of the Orthodox Church<sup>17</sup>.

Concerning the eschatological content of the texts of the Holy Liturgy whose name is bearing, the Metropolitan of Pergam, Ioannis Zizioulas, remarked: "The Orthodox Liturgy is so deeply touched by Eschatology, that we ask ourselves how Orthodox theologians could write books of dogmatic without always referring at and without ever mentioning the value and the place of Eschatology. The Orthodox Liturgy begins and ends with the announcement of the Kingdom and in its general structure; it is nothing but an icon of the Eschaton"<sup>18</sup>.

Apart from the proclamation of the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" at the beginning of the Liturgy of the catechumens, extremely important are for the understanding of the eschatological feature character, those moments in the

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<sup>16</sup> Saint Ephraim the Syrian, *Word on Priesthood*, in Saint John Hrisostom, Saint Gregory of Nazianz, Saint Ephraim the Syrian, *About Priesthood*, translated by Rev. Dumitru Fecioru, IBMBOR ed., Bucharest, 1998, p.242.

<sup>17</sup> It is possible that Saint John Hrisostom would have been under the influence of an anaphoral which already exists.

<sup>18</sup> Ioannis Zizioulas, *Die Eucharistie in der neuzeitlichen orthodoxen Theologie*, p. 175 apud Karl Christian Felmy, *Dogmatic of the ecclesiastical experience. The innovation of the modern Orthodox theology*, translated by Rev. Prof. Dr. Ioan I. Ica, Deisis ed., Sibiu, 1999, p 258.

Holy Liturgy when both the angels and the faithful glorify the unspeakable and infinite God, that is when the bound between heaven and earth is abolished<sup>19</sup>. In this way, in the prayer that the priest speaks during the little entrance, he prays together with the saint angels:

*“O Master, Lord our God, who have established the heavenly orders and hosts of angels and archangels in heaven to minister unto thy glory. Grant that the holy angels may enter with our entrance, to minister with us, and with us to glorify them goodness.”*

In the quite and mysterious prayer during the Trisagion or in the Cherubic-hymn, the people’s and angel’s celebration are very obvious, as in the end of the prayer which precedes the Sanctus when the priest prays:

*“We thank you for this liturgical service which you deign to accept from our hands, though before you stand thousands of archangels, and tens of thousands of angels, the many-eyed cherubim and the six-winged seraphim who in flying, soar high. Singing the triumphant Hymn, crying calling aloud and saying:  
Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord of Sabaoth! Heaven and earth are full of thy glory!...  
With these blessed powers, O master and lover of mankind, we also Shout out and proclaim: You are holy, all holy etc.”*

Especially, at the beginning of the anaphoral prayer which follows the Sanctus, the together-singing and the human-angelic celebration are sensitively made evident by both Saint John Hrisostom, and Saint Basil the Great<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Revealing in this sense is the stanza which is sang after the **Stihoavna** of the **Utrenie** from the first Monday of the Great Fast, where the Christian people sing: Being in the Church of your glory is like being in Heaven, Mother of God ...”.

<sup>20</sup> One of the older anaphoral where the together-talking with the Angels is mentioned, is the one from the **Evhologhion** of the bishop Serapion of Thmuis. Cf. Nicolae I. Popoviciu, *Eucharistic Epiclesis*, Nemira ed., Bucharest, 2003, p.148.

The most important eschatological moment of the Holy Liturgy, overlooked by the majority of the modern commentators, is by far the anamnesis of the anaphoral which follows the words of setting-up and precedes the epiclesy:

*“Therefore, remembering this commandment of salvation and all Those things which came to pass for our sakes: the cross, the tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into Heaven, the Sitting on the right hand, **the Second Coming in glory.**”*

Here, the Church recalls the future as an event from the past. The archimandrite Ciprian Kern said: “In the Eucharistic anamnesis the borders between past, present and future are abolished. The Metropolitan Ioannis Zizioulas comments further: „Recalling future attacks the classical scholastic issue concerning Eucharist’s significance as memorial. It is not the Eucharistic commemoration of the past event. The Eucharist as anamnesis is not rooted in past-in Christ’ s cross – but in future, in Resurrection and in the kingdom to come<sup>21</sup>”. Introducing the realities of eschaton, in history, the Holy Spirit who transcends the linear history, transforms the historical continuity into a presence<sup>22</sup>. It is God’s presence who comes in the middle of the ones gathered in the church on behalf of God, following His commend. In the Gospel according to Saint John, Jesus Christ speaks about this inaugurated eschatology as it follows: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life*” (John V, 24).

The text is almost the same with the liturgical one, because it postulates the entering into Christ’s kingdom without passing judgment. Recalling the future in the Eucharistic anamnesis is possible by virtue of Christ’s word which makes the present eschatology possible.

The remembering or the mentioning of the second coming as a past event shows that this already happened or at least is happening in these moments, due to the very abolition of the bound between heaven and earth. We are now in God’s time which

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<sup>21</sup> <sup>21</sup> Ioannis Zizioulas, *Die Eucharistie in der neuzeitlichen orthodoxen Theologie*, p. 175 apud Karl Christian Felmy, *op.cit.*, p. 259.

<sup>22</sup> A detailed presentation of the pneumatological dimension of the ecclesiology in idem, *Die Pneumatologische Dimensio der Kirche*, in “Internationale katholische Zeitschrift”, 2 (1973), p. 111-127.

includes everything, in that “today” of the Church, where all the events of good’s plan occur in the heavenly<sup>23</sup> comprised in the time of the history of salvation which touches history, but does not transform itself in history.

All Church participates in a very real manner to God’s eternal life, as it is offered to the world at the Eucharistic table. The Holy Liturgy is “the most dramatic testimony of a meeting between eschaton and history, between the absolute and the relative in the human existence here and now<sup>24</sup>.” This meeting and pre-tasting from God’s life must not remain without consequences, because we have seen how the present ages are changing into a new creation, in Christ.

An analogy may be offered by the language of icons which reproduce not just the past, but the past in the perspective of what it is to come. The Orthodox icon illustrates a transfigured world; it has an eschatological feature, similar to that of the Holy Liturgy. The same happens with the monachism which is the “visible prophesy” of the divine kingdom, the attempt to show, yet from this world, “the new heaven and the new earth” in a prophetically way, a world in which God will be everything in everything through a similar life with the angels’ and monks’ one. Monks’ departure in the desert does not represent “the issue from the heart of the Church, but, on the contrary, it represents the deeper entrance in the Church up to touching its heart”<sup>25</sup>. Monachism itself became the heart of the Church, the “bodyguard” and the “laboratory” of practicing the knowledge of the Church.

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<sup>23</sup> There is a sacred time in which any type of profane time is overtaken; it is the time of the divine iconomy. The history of salvation develops itself in the time of divine eternity, but it also intersects the profane history and it gives it a sense. Christ’s Death and Resurrection are the fulfillment of the “typos”-s of the Old Testament. A “typos” creates a relation between two events or persons, in which one of them is not he himself, but is also the other one, and the other one includes the first one too. Both poles are temporally separated, but they are inside history as real figures. From the point of view of the sacred time both persons and events are modern. They exist in the liturgical time of “today”. ( See the entire stanzas of the great Christian holy days, according to which each event of the iconomy of salvation occurs “today”, that is during the divine iconomy, in which the Church enters through its celebration and makes the feast not just a remembrance.)

In order to distinguish the eschatological character of the “typos”, Origen and Saint Gregory of Nazianz developed a typology in three stairs. The event of the Old Testament which is Christ’s “typos”, so it fulfills into Christ. The fulfillment into Christ becomes “typos” for the human fulfillment in Church and Eschatology. Concerning the theology of typology in the old Church see: Wolfgang Huber, *Passa und Ostern. Untersuchungen zur Osterfeier der alten Kirche*, Verlag Alfred Töpelmann, Berlin, 1969, p.89..

<sup>24</sup> Ioannis Zizioulas, *Creation as Eschatology*, translated by Caliope Papacioc, Byzantine ed., Bucharest, 1999, p.23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p.27.

All through the centuries, the interpretation of the Holy Liturgy has known different accents. If this eschatological feature was very present in the early Byzantine comments of the Holy Liturgy, it came to be repressed later. The German professor Karl Christian Felmy, one of the most remarkable scholars of the history of the interpretation of the Holy Orthodox Liturgy, demonstrated in a study a great refinement by comparing Saint Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagitus` and Saint Maxim the Confessor`s commentaries with the one of Nicholas Cabasila, that in the last commentary the eschatological feature of the Holy Liturgy had been repressed. For Saint Dionysius the Holy Liturgy is an “icon of the liturgy celebrated by angels”, and for Saint Maxim it is the pretasting of the goods of ages to come. These aspects are not present in Nicholas Cabasila`s commentary, in its core being the symbols of the historic events of Christ`s life<sup>26</sup>.

The dissemination of this commentary in the Eastern space to the detriment of the early Byzantine ones brought about the repression of the eschatological understanding of the Holy Liturgy<sup>27</sup> and its transformation into a service full of symbols which imitatively recalls Christ`s life as it occurred 2000 years ago.

In Russia, for instance, due to a broad spreading of Saint Maxim`s commentary the eschatological understanding of the Liturgy as a pretaste of the ages to come was maintained until the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Savior`s icon among the angelic powers (Spas v silach), a deeply eschatological icon, which dominated the iconostasis was eliminated in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, becoming an expression of the repression of the eschatological feature of the Holy Liturgy.

Participating in a symposium on the Byzantine Liturgy, in Washington, the great orthodox priest, Father Alexander Schmemmann, wrote down in his diary on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1979 as it follows: “Discussion about symbols: I know nothing more nonsensical. Profoundly they are a substitute for “plenty life”<sup>28</sup>. In other words, if we don`t want to taste directly from the plenitude of divine life, we must see symbols in all the liturgical objects or movements, and not gestures filled with divine life“.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf, Karl Christian Felmy, *Die Verdrängung der eschatologischen Dimension der byzantinischen Göttlichen Liturgie und ihre Folgen*, in idem, *Diskos. Glaube, Erfahrung und Kirche in der neueren orthodoxen Theologie. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, hrsg. Von Heinz Ohme und Johann Schneider, (OIKONMIA, 41), Erlangen, 2003, p. 180.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p.182-183.

<sup>28</sup> *The Biography of a missionary destiny. The Diary of Reverend Alexander Schmemmann (1973-1983)*, translated by Felicia Furdui, Reintregirea ed., Alba Iulia, 2004, p.351.

### 3. Conclusions

All the liturgical services of the church realize the transformation of time, because during them they reach its end which is the Resurrected Christ. Time can continue, in a paradoxical way, its immanent flowing, by reaching its end in the Holy Liturgy, a flowing which is made up of human decisions, because it had found its sense and direction of development towards the Kingdom of God.

It is very easy to remark from the presentation of eschatology from the last chapter, that while the orthodox dogmatic influenced by the Western ones presents **futuristic eschatology**, the orthodox ecclesiastical experience has rather a more presentistic and **inaugurated eschatology**. According to the last eschatology, the “partial fulfillment of <<now>> relights and keeps awoken the wish always renewed after a deeper and more accomplished<sup>29</sup> fulfillment”, which will occur in the Kingdom of God.

Starting from the liturgical experience from which the ecclesiastical dogmatic was born, we can say that in the vision of Eastern Fathers, composers of the holy services, eschatology is less a special part of the dogmatic theology, but rather a constancy which wanders like a red thread through the orthodox theology. The eschatological print of the real presence, but only as a handsel of the Kingdom, is met everywhere in orthodoxy: in saints and holy relics, in the holy icons, in the life alike the angels’, a monks’ and hesychastic’s life, who are able to see the uncreated light of Tabor, and, nevertheless, in the Christian people who sing at the end of each Holy Liturgy: “We have seen the Real Light, we have received the Heavenly Spirit.”

The liturgical experience of the Byzantine Church, heir of a theological Syrian wealth, keeps the same transfiguration of time and space. When God’s time crosses the historical time, not only the temporality through the cancel of the bound between heaven and earth, but also the ecclesiastical space itself transforms into one, in which God lives in the middle of people. Russian messengers, sent by prince Vladimir in the Byzantine Empire in 987, expressed this conception in the account about Greek religion and faith:

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<sup>29</sup> Karl Christian Felmy, *Dogmatic of the ecclesiastical experience...*, p. 310.

“And we went to the Greeks and they guided us in the place where they pray to their God (in the Aghia Sophia) and we did not know anymore whether we were in heaven or on earth; because you will not find such a view or such a beauty on earth. We are not able to tell you about it, but we know only one thing and that is the fact that God lives in the middle of people”<sup>30</sup>.

We have inherited this treasure in our whole liturgical tradition which is not anymore understood by many monks from monasteries and by theologians and priests. The rediscovery of this treasure depends only on us, on the way we will know how to understand it again and to get thoroughly into the hymnographic treasures of the cult books. One single example of perpetuating this theology of time can be found in one of the stanzas from the Utrenia on the first Monday of the Great Fast, when we sing: “Being in the Church of your glory is like being in Heaven, Mother of God ...”. Our entire perception of the liturgical time and of its relation with the historical time must be re-evaluated, changed from its pseudomorphoses into a simple liturgical rememorize, and transformed into Paradise and Kingdom through the understanding of the Church, but keeping the difference between the “already” of eschatology and the “not yet” of history.

Reverend Daniel Benga

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<sup>30</sup> *Nestor's Chronicle*, translation and commentes by G. Popa-Lisseanu, (The springs of Romanian History, VII), Bucharest, 1935, p.98.