
THE LITURGICAL AND THE HYMNOGRAPHIC EXPRESSION OF THE CHURCH-STATE RELATION IN THE BYZANTINE RITE

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Abstract

The Church has always kept in mind the advice of Saint Paul from the *Epistle* addressed to the Romans, "let every soul be subject unto the higher powers; for there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God" (13.1) and, therefore, the Eastern Church has prayed for the civil rulers. But these prayers had been accomplished according to the real situation of the relationship between the Church and the State. When the civil powers were hostile towards the Church, the Christian people prayed God to grant their rulers wisdom, to render them peaceful and to make them favourable, in order not to menace the Church; but, when there were true Christian rulers, the Church prayed God to stay aside them, to guard them and to grant them victory in all their struggles and deeds. In the present Byzantine Rite, we still have many examples of litanies and prayers for the rulers, as well as stichera or troparia which mention the civil powers, most of them having an 'imperial' content, due to the fact that they were written in the golden era of the Byzantine Empire. Among them, we can mention the 'Royal Service' which today is read at the beginning of the morning service – at its origin, a service for the commemoration of the Byzantine emperor and his family – and the present day troparion and kontakion of the Holy Cross, which, in the Greek original, explicitly mention the emperor. This study intends to identify some of the major byzantine liturgical texts (litanies, prayers, troparia and stichera) which mention the civil rulers, to analyse their content and the modality in which they have been continuously adapted in order to become a real and adequate expression of their contemporary political conditions.

Keywords: Byzantine rite, rulers, imperial troparia, Royal service

1. Introduction

The Orthodox Church has constantly taken into consideration the relations with the civil authorities and, during the vast majority of her services, has

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specific commemorations for the rulers – either nominal or general. This ancient practice has its roots in the advice given to the Christians by Saint Paul in the *Epistle to the Romans* (13.1-7, *KJV*): “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.”

Furthermore, in the *First Epistle to Timothy*, Saint Paul reiterates this commandment and advises every Christian to accept and to pray for the emperors and for the civil rulers (2.1-4, *KJV*): “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.”

The direct expressions of this advice are the numerous litanies, stichera, troparia, and even complete services for the civil rulers – whether they were favourable or against the Church. Therefore, the real political conditions led to different types of prayers for the rulers: when they persecuted the Church, the Christian people asked God to ‘tame’ them and render them favourable to the Church, while when the rulers were true Christians, the Church prayed God to keep them safe, to grant them glory and victory, and to preserve them in the Orthodox faith, and in loving God and the people.

Our study intends to present some of the Eastern liturgical texts which mention the rulers and to trace their evolution, to draw an image of the relation between the Church and the State in these texts, and to identify and suggest the most important changes which might be applied to these texts in order to put them in agreement with the present day situation.

2. The commemoration of the rulers in the Byzantine liturgical texts

A thorough analysis of the Easter hymnographic corpus and Euchologies, especially of those belonging to the Byzantine liturgical tradition, will reveal a constant and continuous adjustment in the tone and of the contents of the prayers concerning the rulers accordingly with their attitude towards the Church of Christ. Three major stages can be easily identified.

2.1. The Primary Church and the adverse imperial power – the martyrs

The imperial party was hostile towards the Church. The hymns are more than explicit: “You bound yourselves to noble tasks, o Saints, enduring the tortures of lawless men steadfastly, *confessing Christ before the kings* (τὸν Χριστὸν ὁμολογοῦντες, ἐναντίον βασιλέων). After departing from life, you still act in the world, healing the sick of their passions. Saints, pray that our souls may be saved” (*Aposticha of the Matins, Tuesday of the 4th week of the Lent*) [*The Lenten Triodeion*, English translation, <http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/prayers/triodion/lent4tue>, accessed on 20.04.2013] or “The Soldiers of Christ *rejected the fear of kings* and tyrants (Βασιλέων καὶ τυράννων τὸν φόβον ἀπόσαντο οἱ Χριστοῦ Στρατιῶται) and bravely and courageously they confessed him, the Lord and God and King of all, and they intercede for our souls” (*Aposticha of Matins, Tuesday of the 3rd tone of Octoechos*) [*Octoechos*, English translation, http://www.anastasis.org.uk/tuesday_matins2.htm, accessed on 21.04.2013].

The rulers persecuted the Church and this led to the martyrdom of many Christians of the Primary Church. However, the Church endured all this terror, and “the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church” [Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 50, PL 1]. Furthermore, the Church, even during these troubled times, raised prayers for the rulers. Not necessary to praise them, but to beseech God to calm them and to turn them peacefully towards the Church and even to inspire them with the good thought of becoming themselves Christians.

In this regard, one of the oldest liturgical prayers commemorating the rulers (i.e., the emperor) is found in the Egyptian rite and represents one of its peculiarities. The Egyptian Liturgies – among which we have the Divine Liturgy of Saint Mark [1, 2] – begin with three prayers: “The first prayer of the morning”, a prayer of thanksgiving for the entire community, followed by two specific prayers: “for the king/emperor” and “for the patriarch (and the bishop)” [2]. The second one – for the king – is of special interest for us. In almost all the manuscripts, it is introduced by a specific exclamation of the archdeacon – *Προσεύξαστε ὑπὲρ τοῦ βασιλέως* (*Pray for the king*) – and has this text (ms. *Vatican Gr. 1970*, 13th century): “O Master, Lord God, Father of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, we beseech and pray Thee to keep our King in peace and fortitude and righteousness. Subdue unto him every foe and adversary, lay hand upon the shield and buckler and rise up to help him. Grant him victories, O Lord, and *dispose him peaceably towards us and to Thy holy name*, that we also in the tranquillity of his days may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and uprightness...” [3].

The underlined phrase: „dispose him peaceably towards us and to Thy holy name (δὸς αὐτῷ, ὁ Θεός [...] εἰρηνικὰ φρονεῖν πρὸς ἡμᾶς καὶ πρὸς τὸ ὄνομά σου τὸ ἅγιον)”, is already found in the Anaphora of the *Strasbourg papyrus Gr. 254* [4], one of the oldest testimonies of the Egyptian Liturgy. In G. Cuming’s opinion, this places the prayer in the 3rd or even from the 2nd century [2, p. 92], when the Church was persecuted. Although the later versions of this

prayer include some textual variants, which suggest the presence of civil rulers favourable to the Church, our phrase was kept unchanged. There is no equivalent for this prayer in the Byzantine Rite.

The prayers of the Church received a favourable answer. In 313 AD, Saint Emperor Constantine – ‘equal to the Apostles’ – offered the Christian Church the long expected freedom; the event was solemnly commemorated this year by the Romanian Orthodox Church.

2.2. A change of attitude: the emperor – protector of the Church

Thus, the imperial party became Christian and the sign of the Cross became the battle flag of the emperor; this led to the compositions of specific hymns. Paradigmatic are the ancient hymns of the Cross which, almost without exception, relate the victory of the Christian Emperor to the help of the power of the Cross.

“...the right believing emperors speak highly of You [the Cross], since with Your power they subdued the power of the pagan people (Ἐν σοὶ οἱ πιστότατοι Βασιλεῖς ἡμῶν καυχῶνται, ὡς τῆ σῆ δυνάμει, Ἰσμηλίτην λαὸν κραταιῶς ὑποτάττοντες)”

“...the horn of the emperors also exalts, since through you [the Cross] they crushed the horns of the enemies (τὸ κέρασ τῶν πιστῶν, συνυσοῦται Βασιλέων ἡμῶν, ἐν αὐτῷ τῶν δυσμενῶν συντριβόντων τὰ κέρατα)” (*Stichera at the Exaltation of the Cross, 14th of September*) [*Menaion, September*, <http://analogion.gr/glt/texts/Sep/14.uni.htm>, accessed on 20.04.2013].

The emperors, who were righteous believers and righteous worshippers, were, in fact in a position of ‘power’, even triumphal, as we saw in the above quoted hymns. At the turn of the first millennium, this attitude led to exaggerations. For example, there were some monasteries under the ‘direct’ supervision of the emperor, removed from the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop, in which only the emperor was commemorated at services (almost an ecclesiologic abuse). One of its expressions is the Royal Office celebrated at the beginning of the Morning service, during which, a few manuscripts and even some of the present day printed *Horologia* mention in the text of the litany only the emperor, but not the ecclesiastic authority [5, 6].

2.3. The Emperor in need – requires the prayers of the Church

Finally, a third attitude can be identified. The emperors were righteous believers, but their power was no longer so impressive. With all the ‘pagan’ or ‘barbaric’ menaces, it was difficult for them to maintain the same stable and forceful position. Once almighty, now they became less capable, if not incapable of protecting themselves and the Church against the threats. Even more, they found themselves vulnerable and, therefore, they need more than ever the prayers of the people of God: and we can see this from the tone of the hymns, which changes. The Church is beseeching God for the emperor and his family, to

guard them, to stay near them, and to keep them and their empire protected from imminent wars. Here are some examples: “O Lord, save Your people, and bless Your inheritance, granting to the emperors victory over the barbarians (νίκας τοῖς βασιλεῦσι, κατὰ βαρβάρων δωρούμενος), and guarding Your commonwealth by your Cross” (*Troparion of the Cross*). “Lifted up on the Cross of Your own will, to the new commonwealth that bears Your name grant Your mercies, Christ God; render the faithful emperors glad by Your power, granting them victories over their enemies (εὐφρανον ἐν τῇ δυνάμει σου, τοὺς πιστοὺς βασιλεῖς ἡμῶν, νίκας χορηγῶν αὐτοῖς, κατὰ τῶν πολεμίων); may they have your help in battle: a weapon of peace, an invincible trophy” (*Kontakion of the Cross*) [English translation, <http://www.anastasis.org.uk/mat-sun.htm>, accessed on 2.05.2013].

Even though the three above mentioned attitudes can be identified in the hymns, the most important Byzantine service for the emperor is the so called ‘Royal Office’, now found at the beginning of the daily morning service.

2.4. The ‘Royal Office’ of the Byzantine rite

At the beginning of the Byzantine Orthros, almost every day of the year (except the Paschal period and when there is a Vigil service), a short office is performed. Ideally, it is a narthex service, but in the present printed editions of the *Horologion* it is celebrated inside the church.

Immediately after the usual blessing found at the beginning of the monastic services, if there will be an ‘Alleluia’ celebration, the trisagion prayers are recited, followed by the Psalms. If “God is Lord...” will be sung, the two Psalms of the office (19 and 20, *LXX*) are read, while the priest will perform a full incensation of the church. Trisagion prayers are recited once more, followed by the troparion and the kontakion of the Cross and a Theotokion. The small service ends with a short form of the fervent litany.

This is a service designed exactly for the commemoration of the Byzantine emperor and his family. The reason for which the two Psalms have been selected is obvious; both repeatedly mention the emperor: “**Save, Lord, the king** and hear us when we call” (Psalm 19.8). “**The king shall joy in Thy strength, O Lord**; and in Thy salvation how greatly shall he rejoice! Thou hast given him his heart’s desire, and hast not withholden the request of his lips. **For Thou preventest him with the blessings of goodness: Thou settest a crown of pure gold on his head. He asked life of Thee, and Thou gavest it him, even length of days for ever and ever.** His glory is great in Thy salvation: honour and majesty hast Thou laid upon him” (Psalm 20.1-5, *KJV*). “**For the king trusteth in the Lord**, and through the mercy of the most High he shall not be moved” (Psalm 20.7, *KJV*).

The troparia have also been selected due to their content. We have seen the first two of them (the troparion and the kontakion of the Cross) above. The Theotokion, also mentions the rulers: “Dread Champion who cannot be put to shame, do not despise our petitions, O Good One. All-praised Mother of God

establishes the commonwealth of the Orthodox (στήριζον ὀρθοδόξων πολιτείαν), save the emperors and give them victory from heaven (σῶζε οὖς ἐκέλευσας βασιλεύειν, καὶ χορήγει αὐτοῖς οὐρανόθεν τὴν νίκην), for you gave birth to God, O only blessed one.” In a recent article, entitled *The Commemoration of Civil Authorities in the Byzantine Rite as an Expression of the Church’s Conception of the State*, written by Vassa Larin, the text of this service was fully analysed [7].

Furthermore, dating from the 11th century, the Typikon for the Monastery of the Mother of God *Kecharitomene* in Constantinople, founded by the Empress Irene Doukaina, the wife of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos, gives us an interesting rubric, containing the structure of a similar service, performed, however, when the emperor is deceased. “After the bronze semantron has been struck, the priest will give praise to God making the sign of the venerable cross with his censer before the holy table. Then when you have completed a trisagion to accompany the praising of God, you will sing the nineteenth and twentieth psalms with the usual troparia and the *Kyrie, eleison* as evenly and attentively as possible. These will be sung by you as long as my most mighty emperor is alive – and may it be a very long time, O Lord and O Mother of God – but whenever he departs this life, the psalms sung by you will be ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ (Psalm 22.1) and ‘Praise is due to thee, O God, in Zion’ (Psalm 64.1); the troparia will be those for repose: ‘Remember, Lord, give him repose,’ ‘Our Savior,’ ‘Gloria,’ ‘And now’” [8].

Even if the ‘Royal Office’ is quite a unique structure, it is only vaguely mentioned in the most important studies concerning the Byzantine Hours [5, 9]. However, recently, Sister Vassa Larin, dedicated an entire study to this topic [6], taking into consideration a large number of sources. We do not intend to present the entire article, but to point out the most important of its conclusions relevant to our topic, which will help us draw a few suggestions concerning the present day practice. The Royal Office, placed at the beginning of the Matins, represents an influence of the cathedral rite, which had a preparatory service before the beginning of the Morning Prayers [6]. The later structure of the present Midnight service sent the Royal Office at the beginning of the Matins, while the Midnight service preserved, during its final part, the second type of Royal Office, mentioned in the Typikon of the Kecharitomene Monastery – the prayers for the deceased. Therefore, “the Royal Office is nowise extraneous to the structure of Matins” [6].

The use of the Royal Office in ‘non-imperial’ monasteries demonstrates that this service was not the result of the jurisdiction of the emperor over some monasteries, but of a need; it was a prayer request addressed to the monks by the imperial family [6, p. 217].

All the above mentioned texts have been written during the time of the Byzantine Empire. The fall of Constantinople and the beginning of the use of printed books led to an almost definitive form for the Eastern liturgical texts. Their creativity was silenced. Therefore, even if the political context changed, services written for a specific need – now inexistent – kept being used, in a more

or less literal form. Observing this reality, the Orthodox Churches tried to adapt those litanies and hymns written in regard to the emperor to actual conditions. It will suffice to read the various editions of the present day Greek, Russian [7] and Romanians service books. In the Greek *Ieratikon* (Athens, 2000), there is even a full rubric of how to ‘modify’ the texts mentioning the emperor [10].

3. The adaptation of the hymnographic corpus according to the present day political situation

We already saw that the hymns mentioning the Byzantine emperors and the prayers for them were related to a specific, concrete situation. Those hymns have been composed in regard to and reflecting a need of that era. Furthermore, we saw that their logic and their contents periodically changed. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves two fundamental questions. (1) Do the texts relative to this topic still reflect the reality? (2) The performed adaptations – and, as we already saw, there were many of them, even in the Romanian liturgical space – are they adequate, reflecting the very ‘logic’ of the Byzantine rite?

In those Orthodox countries under the rule of a king or emperor, the texts are still adequate. However, since most of the Orthodox countries (Greece, Russia, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, etc.) are now republics, the mentioning of a monarch in the liturgical texts is no longer viable, and adaptations are necessary. We will insist on the specific case of the Romanian Orthodox Church. We have multiple possibilities: to keep the texts as it was written, to adapt them or to omit them entirely. All three possibilities might be used according to the case.

The most obvious modifications, from the view point of the people, concern the text of the litanies. Two types of changes can be identified. The order of the requests was reversed, and the litany for the bishop received precedence as compared with the one for the rulers. Then, the two ‘classical’ litanies – the first, for the emperor, his family and his army, and the second, requesting God to subdue to the emperor all the enemies – formed a hybrid litany, to reflect the new political situation; furthermore, the contents changed, thus resulting a general commemoration of ‘the faithful people’ and, more or less explicit, of the ‘Orthodox rulers’, as directed by the Holy Synod. Both adjustments are logical, reflecting the reality. We can also find such changes in the Greek and Slavonic texts. Using the same rationale, the commemoration of the emperor in the diptychs [11], in the intercessions of the Eucharist and in the prayers from other services, with a similar structure (as is the case of the Service for the consecration of the waters), commemorations once said thrice, for ceremonial purposes, started to be said only once.

The adaptation of the ‘liturgy of the hours’ was not that simple. The biblical texts – especially those of the Psalms – maintained their original form, in order not to change the Holy Scriptures: a balanced attitude. However, the text of the hymns mentioning the emperor underwent significant changes. Almost everywhere the Byzantine emperor, his family, his court and his army were mentioned, a general commemoration of the ‘faithful people’ had been

introduced. Unfortunately, in some specific situations, these modifications altered the logic of the texts, because, not always, the entire text of the hymns was adapted in order to reflect this change (the reference to the emperor was dropped, but the rest of the text, mentioning royal attributes is still there).

Furthermore, as we already saw, there are some liturgical structures and services composed in the very context of the Byzantine Empire, which reflect, more or less, the somehow 'special' or 'privileged' quasi-hierarchical status of the emperor. No matter how much it will be tried, these services, or part of offices, cannot be put into accordance with the present day context, their adaptation leading to really 'new' structures which, when seriously studied, due to these changes, almost entirely lost their sense and logic. The best example is, again, the Royal Office of the Byzantine Matins, which we already discussed (the Psalms mention the emperor, the troparia have been modified, and now speak about the 'faithful people', while the litany, initially mentioning only the emperor, now mentions the people and the bishop).

And then, what can be done about them? A few possible suggestions can be attempted. They could be kept unmodified – as a remnant of their ancient role and of the context in which they have been created – and explained as such. Or, their contents can be completely modified. If we take again the specific case of the Royal Office, for example, a new selection of Psalms – inspired, maybe, from the ancient beginning of the cathedral form of the Matins – and other troparia, corresponding to the liturgical moment of the day and to the role of the service could be used. Or, as it happens when we have a Vigil, during the Paschal period, or, in the Greek practice, even in other periods of the liturgical year, this service could be entirely omitted. Again, it is only a hypothetical suggestion, since this kind of intervention can be done only under the supervision and with the permission of the competent ecclesiastic authorities.

4. Conclusion

Concluding, it can be said that there has always been a connection (positive or negative) between the Christian Church and the state and its representatives. The liturgical structures and the hymns reflect it. The 'tone' and the structure of the euchological corpus and of other liturgical texts changed accordingly. The changes in the government form of most of the Orthodox countries in the 20th century – from monarchy to republic – triggered the change of the text of the prayers and of the hymns mentioning the emperor/king, in order to reflect the new political situation. Some of them were excellent, some of them compromised somehow the logic of the texts and, maybe, some yet need to be done.

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