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#### PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD IN THE CULT OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

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#### *Abstract*

The memorial services that are made for the dead represent an important part of the Orthodox divine public cult, the divine cult representing the center and the specific and fundamental expression of the religious life, the Orthodox Church's life itself. We must, nevertheless, stress that between the teachings of faith and the cult of the Church there is an indissoluble connection. The prayers for the dead are based on the Christian faith that soul continues to exist after death, at which adds the teaching about the close connection or love communion between the live and the dead. The memorial services for the dead represent an act of cult, in the same time being a confession through which is asserted our belief in the immortality of the soul, in our resurrection, in the existence of the eternal life and in the God's kingdom, being in the same time the expression of love which makes possible the communion between the live and the dead as members of the Church..

**Keywords:** God; Church; cult; faith; prayer; confession;

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Orthodoxy is well-known first of all for its teachings of faith, which are characterized by a special depth, but also for its cult, characterized at its turn by a richness of content and sense, a thing which is not at all surprising, because the Orthodox divine cult is defined as being an expression of the teachings of faith. In the same time, because of the cult, the community of faithful are expressing their feelings of adoration of God, of honoring the saints and the Mother of God, mediating, during its fulfillment, the commune of the godly grace.

It is surely safe to say that in Orthodoxy the divine cult represents the center and the specific and fundamental expression of the religious life, the Orthodox Church's life itself. We must, nevertheless, stress that between the teachings of faith and the cult of the Church there is an indissoluble connection.

The role of the divine cult is to create a medium of connection and communication between God and man, fulfilling in this sense a double function: the laetetic function, namely of adoration of God, while the second function of the public divine cult is the charismatic one, sacramental of sanctifying, through which is shared the grace of God to the faithful, grace that is necessary to their spiritual growth and redemption (Ene Braniște, 2002, 54-56).

## **2. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Still, along with these two functions of the divine cult, we must also mention a third one, considered as secondary or auxiliary, namely the didactic, catechetical or teaching function, which considers the preaching of the evangelical truth in the specific forms of the cult, with the purpose of instructing the faithful in our Savior Christ's teaching, and of consolidating them according to the Christian virtues and faith.

## **3. FINDINGS**

If we consider Christ's words to the Saints Apostles before His ascension to the sky, *„Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28, 19), we may observe that He placed the didactic function at the beginning of any pastoral demarche. Since its very beginnings, the Church understood the importance of preaching the teachings of faith and the need, for those who wished to become Christians, to know the teachings of faith and this is the reason why the catechetical demarche was considered thoroughly since the Saints Apostles' times. Later on, immediately after gaining the religious freedom, the Church has organized, on solid basis, an institution which to fulfill this didactic, pedagogic and teaching need of the Church, namely the institution of catechumenate which in the history of the Christian Church had an existence of over three centuries (Saint Chiril of Jerusalem, 2003; Teodor al Mopsuestiei, 2008; Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, 2003).

Randomly or not, in the history of the Christian church the period during which the catechumenate institution existed is also called the golden period, because then the effervescence of the Church's religious life, in all its aspects, has reached an apogee that was never again attained. We assert here, with no exaggeration whatsoever, that a very special role in supporting such a manner of knowing and living Christ's teachings in that golden era from the history of the Church, was also played by this very church institution of catechumenate, which made sure that all who became Christians knew in detail the Church's teachings of faith, in all its important aspects and, consequently, the Christians' feelings and attachment to the Church's life and teachings were all the more special.

Today, more than ever, the pastoral realities of the Church claim imperiously a revitalization of the catechetical work and, within this preaching category, of the mystagogical catechesis, which to determine an enhancement of the attachment and sentient participation of the faithful at the liturgical life of the Church. A very important part of the Church's cult and practical life is represented by the mortuary arrangements that determine and include very important manifestations of devoutness from the part of the faithful. Concerning the theological foundations of the prayers for the dead, we must underline the fact that they are based on the Christian faith that souls exist even after death (Dumitru Stăniloae, 1997, 158 ș.u.), at which adds the conception about the close connection or communion of love between the live and the dead, without forgetting that, theologically speaking, we are referring to the fighting Church of the live and the triumphant Church of the saints, of the holy, of the dead (Dumitru Radu, 1986, 380-383).

The manifestations involved by the mentioning of the dead, be they ecclesial or with particular character, which make what we are calling the cult of the dead, have bases in the Scripture. Thus, man was created by God in body and soul, soul, as constitutive element of the human being is created for eternity, being the essential element which never perishes: *„Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul”* (Matthew 10, 28). On the other hand, the Holy Scripture shows us that the soul is apart the body, is not confounded with it, continuing to live after being separated from the body by physical death: *„For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven ... We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord”* (II Corinthians 5, 1-8). The existence of the soul after being separated from the body is shown more clearly by Lord Christ Himself, in the parable about the unmerciful rich man and pauper Lazarus: *„The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him: <Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus ...>”* (Luke 16, 22-24). These words demonstrate that man continues to live as soul, he can communicate, he feels, has feelings, he is aware of his being.

The Holy Scripture ensures us that, after the physical death, man lives a happy life or a life of torment, according to how he understood to live on earth, subsequently to the particular judgement of the soul about whom we learn from the aforementioned parable (Luke 16, 19-31), and in the same time it shows us that besides the particular judgement, there is also a universal or public judgement, which will take place at the end of the world. Then man will be judged in body and soul and, according to this, he will have a happy live or a life of torment (Matthew 25, 31-46). This means that, after the particular judgement and up until the public judgement, the state of the souls that were separated from the bodies is not final. They go either in heaven or in hell, according to the moral condition from the time of death, but we must make the necessary observation that the dead cannot make anything more for his redemption (John 9, 4; Matthew 25, 13), his soul being either happy or in sufferance, according to the deeds of his life (John 14, 2). In the same time, the Orthodox teachings show us that after death, the state of those who passed to God is a conscious one. The good ones benefit of the joy of God's kingdom, enhancing their happiness by the work of the godly grace, whilst those who sinned are unhappy, thinking, sensing and having feelings and wishing to change their unfortunate state, without being able to do so. Those who are in such a state cannot change it in any way whatsoever by their will or doing, but only through the prayers of the living, of those who are part of the fighting Church (Dumitru Stăniloae, 1997,176) .

According to Saint Apostle Paul, the Church is called the body of Christ, and the faithful are parts of this body, between them existing a natural connection: *„While our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and (each) one of you is a part of it”* (I Corinthians 12, 24-27). From the Church, the body of Christ, are part not only the living, but also those who passed away to God in the Christian faith, with the hope of resurrection and of eternal life, as the saint apostle is telling us: *„Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord”* (Romani 14, 8). Considering the communion between the living and the dead, our prayers to God and His Saints for those who passed away are necessary and useful (Dumitru Radu, 1986,903), because the prayers of the saints to God are well received, and our prayers to the saints, God's friends, for us and for our dead, are recommended by the Church, as they are justified by the Scripture: *„Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication and to that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints”* (Ephesians 6, 18); *„I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people”* (I Timothy 2, 1).

We must say that the practice of prayer and alms giving for the dead is not specific only for Christians, for we encounter proofs that justify it in the Old Testament (II Maccabees 12, 43). Savior Christ Himself shows us clearly that the prayers made for others, thus also for the dead, are necessary and useful: *„Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you”* (Matthew 7, 7); or *„If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer”* (Matthew 21, 22).

The prayers and rituals for the dead are to be found in the liturgical life of the Church from the very beginning of its existence, representing an essential part of the spiritual manifestations of the first Christians. The Church held services for mentioning the dead, and holy days and terms or monthlies for memorials, that are included in our teaching, ritual and cult books.

Among the days dedicated to a general memorial of the dead, we mention:

- the Saturday before the Sunday of meat Quinquagesima (of the Tremendous judgment) also called “the winter Saturday of souls” when we mention all those who have passed away in our families, the Church praying for all those who died with the hope of resurrection, so that God will make them worthy of His mercy and to judge them with kindness and to place them amidst the rightful ones.

- days of general memorials for the dead are the second, third and fourth Saturdays from the Lent, in the liturgical orderliness of these days existing special canticles for the public memorial of the dead, with the necessary specification that, in practice, all the Saturdays of the Lent (except the one from Holy Week) are marked in the calendar as Saturdays for memorials of the dead.

- The Saturday before the Whit Sunday, also called “the summer Saturday of souls”, is also a day in which the Church generally commemorates those who died with the hope that they will enjoy the gifts of the Holy Spirit whose coming upon is celebrated the following day. This faith is based on the teaching

according to which the Holy Spirit is the one who continues into the world and fulfills the redeeming workings of Lord Christ, working which is not limited only to the living, but also is extended to the faithful who passed to the Lord, because these too are members of the Church.

- even if there are no specific mentioning in the cult books, by analogy with the two Saturdays of souls, the Church organizes in autumn (usually in a Saturday in between the holy days of Saint Dmitry and of the Holy Archangels) an autumn Saturday of souls, when the dead are generally commemorated.

- under Russian influence, in certain areas of the country there is the tradition to make a general commemoration of the dead, usually on the Tuesday (or Wednesday) after the Bright Week, a commemoration also known under the name of the Blajinilor Easter (D.L. Balaur, 1936183) (lb. Slavic – blajenâi = happy) or the Easter Saturday of souls. With this occasion the faithful pray to God so that Lord Christ, the One who came down with His soul and godliness to hell (a moment that is mentioned in the Easter Eve, a day when no more intercessions can be made for the dead), to untie also those who are in hell because of their sins.

- at these days of general commemoration of the dead adds the holy day of the Ascension of the Lord, when is made the general commemoration of the national heroes and of those who died on the battlefield, for their soul to rise to God in His grace. Also occasions of general commemoration of those who died into Lord are those days when the titular saint of a church is being celebrated, and in such a day are organized love feasts and alms gifts for the living and for the dead (Ene Braniște, 2002, 219-222).

Considering the Christian faith, according to which the soul of the man continues its existence beyond the boundaries of earthly life, the Church is not forgetting the dead, after their funeral. This is why apart the aforementioned general commemorations, the tradition of our Church has established certain terms of individual commemoration of the dead, terms that are established after the day in which a faithful has passed to eternal life. According to this tradition of the Orthodox Church, the terms for commemorating the dead, when sermons and prayers are organized for him, are:

- the third day subsequent to someone's death, which usually corresponds to the day of the funeral;

- the ninth day;

- the twelve day (in certain places);

- forty days after death;

- three, six, nine months, and a year after the death of a Christian;

- each year, until the seventh year (Ene Braniște, 2002, 1980, p. 498).

All these commemoration terms are not randomly established, for they involve both a theological and physiological and natural signification, to which adds a mystical and spiritual signification that has to do with the popular belief about the customs of the air.

Therefore, according to the theological signification, the commemorations from the third day after the death of a Christian is made to honor the Holy Trinity, whilst on the other hand it reminds of Lord Christ's resurrection in the third day after death, a moment which become a guarantee of the resurrection of the dead (I Corinthians 15, 20).

The commemoration from the ninth day made is made with the conviction that the dead will be worthy of the companion of the nine troops of angels, reminding us in the same time about the ninth hour then our Lord Christ, whilst still on the cross, promised to the thief that he will go to heaven, what we also hope for our dead. The 40 days commemoration has the purpose of reminding us about the Ascension of the Lord, which took place 40 days after His resurrection, with the hope that the souls of the dead will be taken into God's kingdom. The commemorations which are made at three, six and nine months after someone's death have a trinitary symbolism, for the glory of the Holy Trinity, while the commemoration made after an year and, later on, each year up to seven years, is following the example of the ancient Christians who, each year, were gathering around the graves of the martyrs in the day of their death to honor them, because in the Christian conception the day of death is considered a day of birth in the eternal life (Nicolae Necula, 1996, 275).

As for the commemoration made at seven years, its signification is symbolical, for we know that seven is considered a sacred number, reminding us of the seven days of the Creation and of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. The commemoration of the dead at the aforementioned terms is done with dirge

and Liturgy, preparing *coliva*, wine, ring biscuit and other gifts that are shared to those in need, in the memory of the dead, and at the more important terms the commemoration is accompanied by alms-giving for the poor and things are doled for the soul of the dead, not before they are blessed by the priest in a special sermon. Usually, after the memorial service the procession moves at the tomb of the dead where is held the sermon of Panihida, and afterwards they will go at the place where the love feast is prepared and the alms are blessed, a reminiscence of the ancient love feasts. With this occasion will be recited the prayer for blessing the clothes (when they are prepared to be given to the poor) and the other things that are to be given to the poor, as a commemoration for the soul of the dead (Molitifelnic, 1992, p. 323). We have to mention that there is also the habit of offering dishes with food, cups or glasses for commemorating the dead, spoons or forks. Their number is not mentioned in any traditional book, but usually a symbolic number is chosen (six, seven, twelve etc.), but each person will offer as much as he can or believes is right, as the expression of generosity and love everyone has both for the dead and for the neighbor in need (Nicolae Neula, 1996, 277).

Moreover, to commemorate the dead there can be given the so-called masses for the dead (the Romanian term of *sărinđar* derives from the Greek ή σαρρανταρία which means a group of 40/ Ene Braniște, 2001, 432), namely diptych with the names of the dead which are to be commemorated at 40 Liturgies, and at the end of the 40 Liturgies is organized a Liturgy with Memorial meal, mentioning the settled diptych, a moment which is popularly called *dispensation of the masses for the dead*. If possible, this moment is accompanied by a meal for those in need.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The cult of the dead represents, therefore, an extremely important part of our religious manifestations. Apart from being a duty of the soul, the commemoration of the dead represent an act of cult, in the same time being a confession of faith through which is asserted our belief in the immortality of soul, in our resurrection, in the existence of the eternal life and of God's kingdom, an expression of the love which makes possible the communion between the living and the dead as members of the Church. The days when the dead are commemorated are moments filled with sensibility, in which is manifested the profound communion with those who died. They must be respected and encouraged for only in this manner will we maintain the connection and communion with our kin, with those dear to us with whom we hope to meet again in God's kingdom at the end of the world.

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