

# Saint Roman the Melodist, „the sweet singer”. Life and work

## Abstract

*The work of the great melodist [Roman] from the 6<sup>th</sup> century played a central part in the shaping of Byzantine Christianity, different from the Latin, Syrian, Egyptian and Armenian one<sup>1</sup>.*

Byzantine hymnography reached a maximum stage of development in the time of Saint Romanos the Melodist (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>2</sup>), whose hymns, through their rhetorical elegance, their artistic sublimity, their psychological complexity and their theological profoundness that Byzantium has never known before, were considered to be true masterpieces of the universal literature<sup>3</sup>. Up to this point, Byzantine hymnography went through an entire process of development, which included both using some features of the Jewish and pagan cult and defining some elements characteristic to the Christian teaching and living. Knowing the history of Byzantine hymnography is necessary for a complete and correct understanding of its climax for which Saint Romanos the Melodist is the representative figure.

Based on these considerations, the present thesis is conceived as a monograph that wishes to inaugurate a series of PhD theses dedicated to the most important figures of Eastern Christian hymnography.

BRIEF HISTORICAL AND THEMATIC CONTEXTUALIZATION. For the first Christians, chanting hymns was a manifestation of the enthusiasm that took over the newly formed communities, perceived by those from outside the community as the most remarkable aspect of the Christian meetings. Thus, Pliny, governor of Bithynia, wrote in his rapport to Emperor Trajan that the

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<sup>1</sup> John MEYENDORFF, *Teologia bizantină. Tendințe istorice și teme doctrinare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, revised, translation from English and forward by Rev. Alexandru I. STAN, Editura Nemira, Bucharest, 2013, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the period in which Saint Romanos lived and worked there are many and diverse opinions. Two of them which were preferred by a larger number of supporters are the following: according to one of them, Roman lived in the time of Emperor Athanasius I, and according to the other he lived in the time of Emperor Athanasius II.

<sup>3</sup> William L. PETERSEN, „A New Testimonium to a Judaic-Christian Gospel Fragment from a Hymn of Romanos the Melodist”, in *Vigilae Christianae*, vol. 50, no. 2 (1996), p. 107.

adherents to this new faith gathered before sun rise to sing to Christ, their Lord<sup>4</sup>. Christians from the apostolic ages were used to the cult of the synagogue with the chanting of the hymns with messianic content, expressing their enthusiasm amplified by the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies<sup>5</sup>.

Thus, one of the characteristics of the first communities was the tendency to keep in touch with the Jewish tradition, but also to create new hymns according to the pattern of the structures that they already knew from the Jewish services. The subsequent contact with the Hellenistic pagan culture lead to the introduction of a new type of hymn adapted to the model of Greek poetry, since chanting hymns for a deity was not completely unknown to Christians that came from amongst the Greeks<sup>6</sup>. Thus, one cannot reject completely the theory of possible links (and, of course, influences) between the early Christian chanting and the pagan music of Hellenistic tradition<sup>7</sup> but, because of the clear priority of Jewish roots, we will focus within this thesis especially on the latter.

If, in the beginning, such enthusiast manifestations of chanting were encouraged by the Church, in a short period of time it observed the danger created by their placement at the heart of religious life, through the introduction of certain ideas that were possibly inconsistent with the teaching of faith. That is why, towards the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Council of Laodicea (360 AD) limited the chanting in the church to the texts taken or inspired exclusively from the canonical books of the Holy Scripture<sup>8</sup>. This step was made to prevent the spread of the heretic ideas, but it seems that this did not stop the hymnographers to write poetry that was not dedicated to the use of the cult and through which they expressed their religious feelings<sup>9</sup>.

The fact that non-biblical hymns were excluded from the liturgical service resulted in a retrenchment of the activity of the hymnographers as well as in the reaffirmation and elaboration

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<sup>4</sup> Testimonies about the practice of the prayer that Christians had may be found in *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (The Didache)*, in Clement of Alexandria, in Hippolytus of Rome, in Tertullian, in Saint Cyprian of Carthage or in *The Apostolic Constitutions*, apud Ierom. Petru PRUTEANU, *Evoluția rânduielilor tipiconale în răsăritul ortodox. Studiu liturgico istoric*, in *Studii Teologice*, seria a III-a, anul II, nr. 1, ian.-mar., 2006, p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> E. WELLESZ, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1961, p. 146.

<sup>6</sup> As the Epidaurian inscriptions show. One of the stars that contain fragments of hymns in the form of a breviary for the six daily hours of prayers, E. WELLESZ, *A History of Byzantine Music...*, p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> A.W.J. HOLLEMAN, „The Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1786...”, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Arhid. Ioan N. FLOCA, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe. Note și comentarii*, 3<sup>rd</sup> improved edition, supervised by PhD. Sorin JOANTĂ, Sibiu, 2005, p. 254.

<sup>9</sup> The canon was renewed at the Council of Braga in 536 in a formula that was less rigorous, E. WELLESZ, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, p. 147.

of certain poetical ideas from chants and psalms<sup>10</sup>. Thus, because of the Church's hostility towards the chants of praise composed freely, the writing of the hymns lost its element of personal adoration that it had in the early days of Christianity, and became much more simple and schematic<sup>11</sup>. Hence, the hymnographer is called to work within the limits required by the dogma and by the liturgy<sup>12</sup>, so that the hymnographic creation to be always one of the features of the ecclesial liturgical experience.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries – during which the specialists determine the chronology of the life of Saint Romanos the Melodist –, the Church went through a troubled period of time, in which there were a lot of heretic teachings, many of them spread through music, based on the idea that music is the easiest way to take the text to the ears and hearts of the listeners. This reality from the history of the Church generated the need to introduce within the missionary practice a new type of catechesis that had a greater effect on the believers and that countervailed the heretic groups with their own weapon: chanting. The representative of the Byzantine hymnography who achieved to the greatest extent this priority of the Church for that time was Saint Romanos the Melodist.

Through his talent and through an impressive knowledge of the Holy Scripture, both of the Old and of the New Testament, as well as of the teaching of faith, Saint Romanos consecrated a new hymnographic form: *the homiletic poem* or the *kontakion* (κοντάκιον or κονδάκιον). He remained in the history of the Church not only through the originality of his creation, but also through the fact that he was an extremely prolific hymnographer – if we give credit to the sources of the Tradition, he composed over 1000 hymns. His work, through the biblical, dogmatic and spiritual content remains until today an endless source of the homiletical-parenetic and missionary work of the Church. Precisely this contribution of Saint Romanos to the apologetic and missionary discourse of the righteous Church makes of his life and work a proper subject for profound research in the theological field, which is my goal in the present thesis.

PREVIOUS APPROACHES OF THE SUBJECT. In Romanian, up to this moment, there have been published four editions of the hymns of Saint Romanos, as follows: SFÂNTUL ROMAN MELODUL, *Imne*, translation, footnotes and introductory study by Cristina ROGOBETE and Sabin PEDA, Ed. Bizantină, Bucharest, 2007; SFÂNTUL ROMAN MELODUL, *Imnele pocăinței*,

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<sup>10</sup> Pr. Petre VINTILESCU, *Despre poezia imnografică...*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> E. WELLESZ, *A History of Byzantine Music...*, p. 147.

<sup>12</sup> E. WELLESZ, *A History of Byzantine Music...*, p. 148.

introductory study by Andrew LOUTH, translation and footnotes by Parascheva GRIGORIU, Ed. Trisagion, Iași, 2006; SFÂNTUL ROMAN MELODUL, *Imnele Sfintei Scripturi*, translation from old Greek, introductory study and footnotes by Alexandru PRELIPCEAN and Alexandru IORGA, Ed. Doxologia, Iași, 2012; SFÂNTUL ROMAN MELODUL, *Imne Teologice*, translation from old Greek, introductory study and footnotes by Alexandru PRELIPCEAN and Alexandru IORGA, Ed. Doxologia, Iași, 2012. The Romanian theology does not have yet a critical edition of the entire poetical creation of Saint Roman, and the number of studies and articles does not go over twenty, being mostly fragmentary researches.

The authors that were interested, in our country, by Romanos the Melodist, focused most often on the hymnographic fragments composed by him that were maintained into the cult of our Church. A special contribution to such a fragment, namely the Kontakion of the Nativity of Christ “The Virgin brings forth today...”, had father I. D. Petrescu, who, in 1940, printed a study of compared musicology, a study in which the author focused on the music that arranges the text of the kontakion, followed by its transformations, researching Romanian, Greek and Latin musical documents. In the foreign specialized bibliography there are many critical editions of the work of the melodist, the most complex of them being the one published by the French editor Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode – Hymnes I-V*, published in numbers 99, 110, 114, 128 and 283 of the collection *Sources Chretiennes*, in Paris. The amplitude and the complexity of the introductory study and of the footnotes of these editions recommend them as reference points for every research of the life and work of Saint Romanos.

Starting from the works published in Romania and referring to all the resources that I found available in the international environment, I wish to achieve a coherent and, as much as possible, complete presentation of the personality and creation of the great Roman the Melodist.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH. The information available today on the life of Saint Romanos the Melodist come from three sources: 1) the Synaxarion of the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, the date of his celebration in the Orthodox Church, 2) an anonymous hymn dedicated to Saint Romanos and noted by Paul Maas and 3) the tradition of the Church in its hymnographic and iconographic expression. Taking into account this situation and, also, wishing to attain a coherent and complete presentation – as much as the bibliographical resources allow – of the personality and creation of Saint Romanos the Melodist, we assumed the following objectives of research, corresponding to the chapters and subchapters of the thesis:

**1) Outlining the image of the great melodist in the context of the history of Byzantine hymnography** through:

*a) the assessment and systematic presentation of the various theories formulated with respect to his life and activity regarding different aspects: his origin (Jewish, Syrian, Greek), the chronology of his life, his profile, his status within the Church and other aspects that will be presented in detail within the PhD. thesis.*

*b) historical-cultural and theological contextualization of his work.*

*c) studying the image that the Saint melodist has in the tradition of the Church, in its hymnographic and iconographic dimension.*

**2) Presentation of the Christian hymnography previous to Romanos, as well as of the possible sources of inspiration:** the Jewish background, the hypothesis of his Syrian dependence, the theological contextualization of his work based on earlier patristic literature, as well as the most important hymnographic forms consecrated in our Church: the troparion, the kontakion, the canon.

**3) Studying the hymnographic work of Saint Romanos through:** analyzing and understanding Roman's poetical language, indexation of the manuscripts that kept his work until today and, finally, through the selective analysis of the hymns with biblical, parenetical, penitential and of circumstance themes (isagogic and theological aspects).

**4) Thorough analysis, within a series of case studies, of some hymns or fragments of hymns that were maintained until today in the Orthodox Church:** *Kontakion of the Nativity* ("The Virgin brings forth today..."), *Kontakion to the Baptism of Christ* ("On this day Thou hast appeared..."), *Kontakion of the Pascha* ("Though Thou didst descend into the grave...") and the *Akathist Hymn*.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE THESIS TO THE FIELD OF RESEARCH. This PhD. thesis brings a real contribution to the study of Church music by the fact that it presents amply the life and work of Saint Romanos the Melodist, which was never done before in Romanian bibliography. Thus, in comparison with the consulted bibliographical sources, I intended: a) to present in an equilibrated manner all the theories formulated with respect to the life and activity of Saint Romanos, because each theory has plausible arguments and is worth being taken into account, because of the ambiguity that characterizes the life of Saint Romanos; b) to offer a complete image of the contribution of Saint Romanos to the Christian hymnography, including the

reference of the selections from his work to the Orthodox theological discourse; c) to align to the international research in which Romanos the melodist is much more present.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS AND DIFFERENTIATED METHODOLOGY. The PhD thesis is structured on four chapters preceded by introduction, followed by conclusions, bibliography and appendices. I will present briefly the content of each part in the following, emphasizing the methodological characteristics of each chapter.

**Chapter 1 – Preliminaries regarding the place of Saint Romanos the Melodist in the history of the Byzantine hymnography** – starts with the systematic presentation of different theories regarding the life and activity of Saint Romanos as follows: his origin constituted the main subject of three distinctive theories: the supporters of the Jewish origin counted especially on his non-combatant attitude towards the Jewish as it is reflected within his hymns; the supporters of the Syrian origin based their theory on the place of his birth – Emesa (Homs today) – as well as the rarity of the name Roman, belonging to a Syrian martyr; finally, the supporters of the Greek theory invoked elements of affinity of his hymnographic poetry with the Greek poetry. The chronology of his life was fixed between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, all the chronological marks proposed by the researchers being presented within the thesis. I only want to mention here the fact that most of the researchers incline to accept the epoch of Emperor Athanasius I (491-518). His intellectual and moral-spiritual profile, his vocation of theologian, missionary, musician or poet may be deduced from an analysis that mixes information coming from historical documents of the time, as well as from the study of his work with emphasis on the passages in which the presence of the author is more significant. His status as monk/lay, deacon, priest, defender of the Church also constituted the subject of divergent opinions along the years that I will present in an objective manner within the thesis. Finally, every study of the life and work of Saint Romanos cannot leave aside the protection of the Mother of God as a determining reality for his service in the Church.

After analyzing different perspectives and theories, I considered necessary a historical-cultural and theological contextualization of the work of Romanos. Although Saint Romanos lived in a flourishing period of the Church, even from his time some erroneous understandings of the faith started to occur, and thus, the Church was forced to formulate teachings of faith that would be assumed and promoted by hymnographers in their compositions. Saint Romanos, on

this background of dogmatic troubles, was preoccupied above all, by making the believers aware of the reality of Christ's incarnation.

A final part of chapter I presents the manner in which Saint Romanos was perceived in the hymnographic and iconographic tradition of the Church.

From a methodologic point of view, in this chapter I combine elements of historicity with aspects that belong to the poetic creation of Saint Romanos in an attempt to define a complex portrait of the great melodist. The last subchapter is a special part because it valorizes the Tradition of the Church, not because I wish to offer a status of doubtless historical correctness of the information taken exclusively from the iconographic representations and hymnographic descriptions, but because I wish to maintain this doctoral research anchored in Tradition which represents one of the main supports of any theological research within the Orthodox environment.

**Chapter 2 – *The profile of the Christian hymnography previous to Roman*** – represents an ample contextualization of the work of Roman by placing it in relationship first with the Jewish liturgical background, whose great influence on the Christian cult is unanimously recognized by the researchers. In this part of the research I studied the manner and the extent to which the Jewish cult managed to transmit to the Christian cult hymnographic and musical features.

Regarding the preoccupation for hymnographic poetry presented within the thesis as a lyric form of the Christian theological discourse, it is the result of the stake of this type of missionary-homiletical work (developed mostly by Roman the Melodist) in the history of the Church. But what made necessary such a new missionary-homiletical form? As we know, the life and the liturgical experience of the Christian Church has an inherent homiletical dimension through which the Church addresses to the world and which constitutes an important part of its mission. This homiletical dimension was an important constant from the first years of Christian life (*Acts* 2, 14-36; 3, 12-26; 14, 1; 17, 1-4). The homiletical component, although essential for the fulfillment of the mission of the Church, is somewhat broken from the context of the Byzantine liturgy in which it is integrated because, no matter how gifted an orator is – we may think here of Saint John Chrysostom or Saint Basil the Great, very appreciated and even haunted for their oratorical talent –, the sermon created a pause, a rupture within the service, always remaining as an “intruder” in the Liturgy of the Word. This led to a positive “abnormality” in the

history of the Church that eliminated the clear distinction between homily and the liturgical celebration<sup>13</sup>, during the reign of Emperor Justinian the Great<sup>14</sup>, *the chanted sermon*. In Hagia Sophia, but also in other churches from the imperial metropolis, the assembly assisted and contributed to the promotion of an exotic hybrid in the development of the Christian liturgy: the *kontakion* – a new and dynamic homiletical form, poetry written to be sung in the pulpit<sup>15</sup>, whose creation is attributed to Saint Romanos the Melodist.

In the same chapter, following the idea of a contextualization similar to the theological one, but on the hymnographic level, I will present the main hymnographic forms from the tradition of our Church: the troparion, the kontakion and the canon. The form of the kontakion, as the result of the creation of Saint Romanos, marks the climax of this transition of the hymnographic poetry of Byzantine tradition that stands under the sign of the three forms: troparion – kontakion – canon.

The last subchapter proposes a correlation of the work of Saint Romanos with the patristic literature, on two levels: on the one hand, from the perspective of the fact that some Holy Fathers themselves had preoccupations regarding the hymnographic creation, which they perceived as a form of expression of their own spiritual living as well as the missionary tool of the Church; on the other hand, based on the thematic affinity, Saint Romanos may also be analyzed comparatively with different works belonging to the Holy Fathers.

In the light of those presented about this chapter, one may observe from a methodological point of view the use of the historical-archaeological study (in order to exploit the relationship of the Christian cult with its Jewish and Syrian roots), the distinction of the theological background of the hymnographic theology and, finally, the exegetical analysis that allows us to correlate the work of Saint Romanos with the creations of several patristic writers.

**Chapter 3 – *The hymnographic work of Saint Romanos the Melodist*** – is the most ample chapter of the thesis and it has as objective the study of the poetical work of Saint Romanos regarding both the distinctiveness of the poetical language (prosody, dialogue-prayer, enactment, symbolical and analogical series, exegesis and typology, mnemonic character, rhetorical elements), the conservation of the hymns in manuscripts that were preserved until

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<sup>13</sup> R.J. SCHORK, *Sacred Song...*, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Justinian I, called “the Great”, Byzantine emperor who reigned from 527 to 565.

<sup>15</sup> R.J. SCHORK, *Sacred Song...*, p. 9.

today and some isagogic and theological aspects with respect to the selection of hymns approached within the PhD thesis.

I must emphasize the fact that for chapter 3 I made a subjective selection of the hymns, because of the great number of hymns that are kept as belonging to Saint Romanos and whose analysis cannot be carried on entirely in the relatively restricted space destined to a PhD thesis.

Hence, I presented the list of hymns on categories (with biblical, parenetical, penitential, of circumstance thematic), followed by commentaries of the selected hymns, in which I combined elements of introduction, interpretation, theological and spiritual contextualization – with the specification that the extension of each commentary as well is the result of a personal option, depending on the interest for the theme and features of a certain hymn. This manner of tackling allows an approach with a high level of personal involvement in the study of the work of Saint Roman, which is what I intended to do within this research.

**Chapter 4 – Case studies** – approaches a selection of hymns or fragments that were maintained in the cult of the Church until today: *Kontakion of the Nativity* (“The Virgin brings forth today...”), *Kontakion to the Baptism of Christ* (“On this day Thou hast appeared...”), *Kontakion of the Pascha* (“Though Thou didst descend into the grave...”) and the *Akathistos Hymn*.

I chose to open the chapter dedicated to the case studies with the most representative hymn of Saint Roman, the kontakion “The Virgin brings forth today”. The first part tackles isagogic problems, being a preamble for the stylistic and theological analysis of the hymn. The theological value of this kontakion determined the keeping of the first stanza into the liturgical practice until today. The richness of the teaching from the prooimion may be found within the entire kontakion and it focuses on the theme of the Incarnation of the Son of God. The reality of this fact is expressed in the creation of Saint Romanos through a series of paradoxes that try to transpose in an accessible language the inaccessibility of the Mystery<sup>16</sup>. From the entire text of the Kontakion results the idea that the Christian faith cannot be known, assimilated and in cannot become efficient in the life of a man only through reason<sup>17</sup>: “Expressing a revealed truth, that to us seems to be an impenetrable mystery, we must live the dogma in a process in which instead of assimilating the mystery to our manner of thinking, we will have to watch for a profound change,

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<sup>16</sup> Acad. Virgil CÂNDEA, „Despre Condacul Nașterii Domnului”, in *Studii Teologice*, year XLV, no. 5-6, 1993, p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> V. CÂNDEA, „Despre Condacul Nașterii...”, p. 28.

to an inner transformation of our mind in order to become apt for the mystical experience”<sup>18</sup>. The appreciation that this hymn enjoyed right after being composed by Roman is emphasized by the tradition according to which it was sung for a long period of time at the royal lunch on the first day of Christmas by the choir of the cathedral from Constantinople<sup>19</sup>.

In the case of the *Kontakion to the Baptism of Christ* (“On this day Thou hast appeared...”) and that of *Kontakion of the Pascha* (“Though Thou didst descend into the grave...”), I carried out the musical analysis of the versions that were preserved until today in different regions of the country, since the theological analysis was not advisable here for two main reasons: the theological content is signally dogmatic, and on this theme there are a lot of studies, so an enrichment of this area of bibliography is no longer needed; the reduced extension of the two texts leave no room for a personal interpretation which would constitute a real contribution to the field of research. A theological analysis would be at risk here to be placed in the area of a repetitive style of research, which is not at all welcome.

A particular case is constituted by the *Akathistos Hymn* with which the thesis ends, and I call it “particular” because the paternity of Saint Romanos for this hymn was the subject of heated controversies amongst the specialists. However, because of the fact that there are many researchers who plead in favor of the paternity of Saint Romanos, as well as for its overwhelming importance within the cult of the Church, having a special day dedicated during the Lent, I considered it would be opportune to introduce it within the present research. Within the study I tried to find a way to equilibrate the different opinions of the researchers regarding the paternity of the hymn, its liturgical use and even the iconographic manner of representing its content.

From a methodological point of view, this chapter constitutes an interdisciplinary approach of the hymns or of the fragments that are the object of the case studies, and approach in which the isagogic aspects entwine with the exegetical-theological ones and with a technical component of musical analysis of the fragments that were preserved within the cult.

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<sup>18</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, translation by Pr. Vasile RĂDUCĂ, Editura Bonifaciu, Bucharest, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Pr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *O nouă ediție critică a innelor marelui innograf bizantin, Roman Melodul, Romanos le Mélode, Hymnes*. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes, par José Grosdidier de MATONS, agrégé de l’Université. Tome II : Nouveau Testament (IX-XX). Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1965, SC 110, 381 p.