

Convoluted Conjuality: Hymnographic Repression, Transference and Co-optation in the Byzantine Sanctoral's Commemoration of Married Saints

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Abstract

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The author examines the hymnography of the Byzantine *Menaion* in order to identify and critically analyze the theology of marriage in its texts. The first part surveys the theology of marriage in various Eastern authors, including Alexander Schmemmann (whose methodology for liturgical theology is employed), Stavros Fotiou, William Basil Zion, David Petras, Paul Evdokimov, Michel Evdokimov, John Meyendorff, Bishop Kallistos (Ware), Archbishop Peter (L'Huillier), John Chryssavgis, and Anthony Ugolnik. This theology is then analyzed vis-à-vis the texts of various saints found in the *Menaion*, a work which, the author suggests, presents a radically different picture of marriage by treating married saints (whom he divides into righteous Israelites, martyrs, celibate spouses, absentee husbands, monastic widows, and “wonder women”) through one of three means: a repression of mention of their marriage, a transference of their struggle in marriage into a monastic milieu, or a co-optation of them for other disembodied purposes. He concludes with reflections on what work needs to be done to repair this wide chasm between Byzantine *lex credendi* and *lex orandi*.



I. Introduction

This essay will put in question the principle *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*¹ by examining the liturgical theology of the Byzantine tradition to see if it can indeed be credited with the vision of marriage espoused by modern Eastern theologians. While the *lex orandi* is by no means to be identified exclusively with hymnography, it is nonetheless true that the Byzantine tradition gives overwhelming pride of place to the liturgical singing of hymns. Thus it is appropriate to use this hymnographic corpus – especially the propers of Vespers and Matins – to determine the extent to which the *lex credendi* of marriage taught by modern Eastern² theologians is reflective of the texts that they and their communities pray. What follows, then, is an exercise in liturgical theology, understood by David Fagerberg as “theology from worship,” that is, the exercise of “trying to unify liturgy and doctrine by showing that the worship of the Church has influenced doctrine and the doctrine of the Church has influenced worship.”³

Given that – typically – the rite of Crowning appears but once in a couple’s lifetime, our question here is: does the *daily* prayer of the Church celebrate married saints, thereby illustrating on a regular basis, through the particularity of a given couple, the luminous theology of the sacrament that the wed-

¹ Cf. Robert Taft, *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding* (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 2001), 189.

² Throughout this work, the terms Orthodox, Eastern Christian, and Byzantine will be used interchangeably, it being understood that there are some “Orthodox” who are not Eastern at all, and many who are not of the Byzantine tradition. “Eastern Christian,” while susceptible of referring to all the Churches of the East, in our context signifies Eastern (Byzantine) Orthodox as well as Byzantine Catholics.

³ David Fagerberg, *What is Liturgical Theology? A Study in Methodology* (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 12. Fagerberg identifies his own observations about liturgical theology as “secondary reflections upon [its] meaning and method,” and distinguishes these also from actual liturgical theology. While he credits Alexander Schmemmann and the Orthodox tradition at large with a proclivity for the latter, he notes that Schmemmann wrote “secondary reflections” as well. Given Fagerberg’s nuances, it is fair to add that certain of Schmemmann’s works may be better termed “theology from worship” than “liturgical theology.”

ding rite so clearly propounds? Given the tradition of the Eastern Church regarding what she has always considered, if not defined, as one of her “mysteries,” one might expect to find among the roster of her saints some examples of how married holiness has been lived.⁴ Finding out which models there are, and to what extent – if at all – they embody the Church’s understanding of marriage, are the goals of this paper. Simply put, is there congruence between the theology of the rite of Crowning and the theology of the sanctoral? Is the Church’s understanding of marriage truly incarnate in her full cycle of daily and yearly services? If not, what are the theological consequences? This paper will endeavour to respond to these questions.

The study of the Byzantine hymnographic tradition by scholars writing in English or French is of recent origin and suffers *lacunae* both in textual and philological criticism as well as in liturgico-theological exegesis and hermeneutics.⁵ Eva Catafygiotu Topping has argued that “the study of this complex and important subject [i.e., hymnography] is, it can be said, still at the beginning. Much remains to be done. Among other things, important texts need to be established, published in critical editions and then studied. Furthermore,

⁴ Concerning marriage as *mysterion*, John Meyendorff makes this dramatic claim: “Never, in her entire history, did the Christian Church show more clearly that she was bringing into the world a new and unprecedented divine reality and presence. And the New Testament texts quoted above show that this new reality also implied a completely new attitude towards marriage, different from both the Judaic and the Roman concepts. This new reality was not originally expressed in any specific and independent marriage ritual.... What mattered, therefore, was not the particular ceremony used to conclude the marriage, but *who* was accepting the marriage contract. If the parties were Christian, their marriage was a Christian marriage, involving Christian responsibility and Christian experience. For them, marriage was a sacrament, not simply a legal agreement.” *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 17–18.

⁵ For an itemized agenda for further research, see Taft, *Beyond East and West*, 292–95.