

A Theology of Processions  
in the Byzantine Churches  
as means of Sanctification  
of Time and Space



## A THEOLOGY OF PROCESSIONS IN THE BYZANTINE CHURCHES AS MEANS OF SANCTIFICATION OF TIME AND SPACE

by **Petro B.T. Bilaniuk**

University of Toronto, University of St. Michael's College,  
and the Ukrainian Free University

The greatest Ukrainian philosopher and theologian, Hryhorii Skovoroda (1722-1794), in his work, "Friendly Dialogue on Spiritual Peace," makes Gregory, one of the *dramatis personae*, ask the question: "First of all: to find out in what true happiness consists and then to appropriate it." To that, Athanasius, the second of the *dramatis personae*, replies: "Verily, we are born for true happiness and we proceed towards it, and our life is similar to a path which flows like a river."<sup>1</sup> These statements sum up the theology and philosophy of procession in any serious religion. The goal of life, and by the same token its true meaning, is the search for true, absolute, eternal and divinizing happiness, or definitive eschatological fulfillment. Our life itself is a progress or procession through the space-time continuum in search of true happiness.

Space-time is the single entity which unifies both three spatial dimensions (height, width, and length) as well as time into one unified four-dimensional structure. Thus a complete description of relative motion and by the same token of processions requires equations including time as well as the three spatial dimensions.<sup>2</sup>

Ronald L. Grimes defines procession as follows: "procession is the linearly ordered, solemn movement of a group through chartered space to a known destination to give witness, bear an esteemed object, perform a rite, fulfill a vow, gain a merit, or visit a shrine."<sup>3</sup> However, this is a description of the visible and external side of procession. The spiritual and mystical contents of procession and a theological elaboration of its meaning are usually inadequate.

There are many types of processions in the Byzantine churches. During the Divine Liturgy alone there are both the Little Entrance and the Great Entrance processions.<sup>4</sup> The Little Entrance, with the Gospel Book, symbolises Christ as Teacher and Illuminator moving through the world; this dynamic procession thus also symbolizes the spreading of the Divine Word and Truth from the Divine Wisdom. The Great Entrance, with the Holy Gifts of bread and wine, symbolizes the funeral procession of Jesus as the Victim (that is, the Sacrificial Lamb of the New Testament); it also symbolizes the redemption of the cosmos in time and space.

On Good Friday there is a procession with the Holy Shroud around the church three times. This is also obviously a funeral procession leading to the Holy Sepulchre - and all the symbolism entailed. On Easter Sunday, there is the

procession of the Resurrection around the church three times. This is the victory procession of Christ and His Cross over the forces of evil; it is also the expression of joy for the gift of salvation.<sup>5</sup> These processions symbolise our mystical participation in the life, miracles, suffering, death and resurrection of the Lord; and conversely they symbolize the participation of the inhumanized Logos in our human condition, history and nature - and all that entails.

On the Holy Theophany (feast of the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan River) there is a procession to and from a river (lake, sea, or other container of water) where the Great Hallowing of the water takes place; this symbolizes the dominion of the Trinity over watery space, representing the whole cosmos. The procession symbolizes the *progress* in the sanctification of the church and the cosmos by the Uncreated Divine energies.<sup>6</sup> On the first Sunday of Lent there is a procession with the holy icons commemorating the victory of the iconophiles over the iconoclasts; this is the "feast of Orthodoxy."

During the ceremonies of the Mystery of Crowning - that is, of the ritual of matrimony - there is a procession from the entrance to the nave towards the tetrapod (small altar in front of the iconostasis). Then there is a procession around the tetrapod three times; this symbolizes the beginning of married life with the blessing of the Holy Trinity, the whole course of married life in the company of Christ ... and so much more.

In the days when Constantinople was a deeply Christian city, there was a feast day on the first of August called "The Procession of the Venerable Woods of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross." This procession around the whole ancient city symbolized the victory of Christ and Christianity over the pagan world. The prayers that have been preserved are very extensive.<sup>7</sup>

In the Byzantine Ritual, we find other processions: for the consecration of a church (this being a communal Sacrament), and for the blessings of homes and fields. There is also an elaborate funerary procession including chants, hymns, readings of the Gospel, office for the departed, burial and sealing of the grave.

All of these processions have many things in common, for their symbolism is always multilayered. The symbolism and the underlying reality are rooted in the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity which is foundational to Christianity. The eternal and inaccessible inner life, light and love of the Most Holy Trinity is revealed to us as infinitely dynamic and by no means as static. Thus, in the Divine ontology the category of being and of becoming are equally important. This fact is strengthened by the teaching of the Divine processions.<sup>8</sup> There are two processions in the Trinity: *first*, the procession of the Son from the Father called generation, that is the Divine Logos is an intellectual emanation from the Father, and *second*, the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father called spiration, that is the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of love and goodness emanating from the will of the Father. Thus it is God the Father only, Who does