



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

Remarks on Writing Services to the Saints: The case of St. Justin

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Crucial for the veneration of a newly glorified saint is the composition of a service. As far as I can see, the service to St. Justin of Čelije is not widely known. It was written by Fr. Athanasios of Simonos Petras, the chief hymnographer of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Before him, this position was in the hands of St. Gerasimos,¹ after whose death Fr. Athanasios was especially chosen by the Serbian Church to write this service. He also got charged with the service for St. Nikolaj Velimirović, because the disciples of Fr. Justin understood that the art of hymn-writing is not something which can be taken as a matter of likes. And I strongly emphasize this because hymn-writing is an art in its own right, with special rules, like iconography.

Yesterday evening we sang the service to St. John Maximovitch. I consider it a blessed circumstance that we commemorate St. John Maximovitch today. He, after all, was a contemporary of St. Justin, and they met for quite a while during St. John Maximovitch's stay in Serbia. The great difference between both services lies in the fact that, even though written mostly by Father Seraphim Rose, a devoted follower of St. John Maximovitch, this service has the flavor of... - how should I call it - a 'personal' account of things. There is no structure to that service at all - forgive me for saying that. And I would strongly suggest that, if a Church

¹ St. Gerasimos the Hymnographer of Little Anne's Skete on Mount Athos, also known as Mikrayannanitis (1903 – December 7, 1991) He went to Mount Athos in 1922 and started writing church services in 1926. Acknowledging the high quality of his hymnography, the Patriarchate of Constantinople appointed him (official) „Hymnographer of the Great Church of Christ“ in 1959. His work is estimated at more than 2000 sacred services. He was canonized by the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople on the 10th of January 2023 and his memory is celebrated on the 7th of December.



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has no really well-trained hymn writer, one should turn to the Greeks and let the service be written by the Greeks.

What we see in St. John's service is that, for instance, while it seems „churchy” enough in the sense of “sounding nice” to one accustomed to the tones used in church services, in this case, the Slavonic ones, the choice of those tones is arbitrary. One finds a quasi “mercy-engagement” of the 7th tone (presumably because it is used so seldom), and so something is written for that tone, but enhanced with phrases from the 8th tone or from the 4th tone and so on, because the writer does not really know what the 7th tone is all about. Working with church tones requires study, and in my opinion it is a „no go” to write just something which pleases the ear. Special tones have special rules and special phrases, and these belong only to that very tone and not to another.

So the Serbian Church should be commended for her decision to turn to the Greeks and have the service written by them. I have translated that service from ancient (Church) Greek into German, and the parts to be discussed here I translated into English.

Let us start with the Lauds, 2nd Sticheron:

*You appeared, father, as a radiant vessel of the Mother of God,
for on the day of her Annunciation you came into this life
and on this very feast you gave your pure soul again to the Word of God,
who became unspeakably flesh and honored you in many ways.*

This, I think, aptly describes the driving force for Fr. Justin. He understood that he was born on the day of the Annunciation, on the day when the Godman was announced by the archangel Gabriel. He understood that this birthday was not something „nice,” but that it imposed a task. That is what he did all his life: he proclaimed the Godman, as did the archangel Gabriel to the Mother of God. He proclaimed the Godman everywhere. That is why he did all he did. That is also why - although he had the mind and education needed – he did not opt for the „scientific” model of theology in the West. Proclaiming the Godman, that was the task that he understood from the day that God had given him birth on Earth. And the amazing - indeed glorious - thing is that God called him on that same day. He died on the day of Annunciation. And I think it is because Fr. Justin was very isolated during his life, I think God guided things this way to show:

*-He was born on the day, he understood his task and he did it very well and I let him
die on the same day.*



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In my opinion this coincidence is a proof of the fact that St. Justin really did what God wanted him to do.²

I now turn to the Kontakion which I think is a truly inspired text.

*You have shaped the course of your life in a godhuman way,
because you have taken the Godman as your measure in everything
and have thus reached the highest heights of theology,
and since now you stand with boldness close to the Word beloved by you,
grant us the grace of your intercessions, oh Saint,
who cry out to you, rejoice God-wise Father Justin.*

The line,,

You have shaped the course of your life in a godhuman way

refers to the fact that St. Justin had „taken the Godman” as his “measure in everything” and thus had “reached the highest heights of theology.” So, this is what we can learn from him. I mean, everybody ought to learn precisely that.

A further text from the Vespers, the 3rd Sticheron, affirms the same message:

*Since you had the Godman as your beginning and foundation, you hated every new wisdom.
Therefore, blessed Justin, you became an exceedingly clear interpreter
of the teachings on deification, of which you became a partaker,
after you gave the blood according to your intent,
and now you intercede for those who honor you.*

It was not that he was martyred, - even though there had been several attempts to kill him. Once, for example, the political authorities took him out of Célie and put him into prison. Here they wanted to kill him, - but never succeeded. Still, he was a martyr by intent, but the intent was never fulfilled.

You hated every new wisdom,

² It must be remembered that while Fr. Justin was born on the 6th of April and died on the 7th of that month, both dates are devoted to the same feast, because in 1900 the New Calendar was changed. As a result, St. Justin's Old Calendar feast, the 25th of March, came to correspond to two different dates according to the New Calendar.



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because there is no new wisdom: The Godman is the measure in everything. There cannot be a new wisdom, - this is very clearly stated. And then, because he clung to God, he was

an exceedingly clear interpreter of the teachings on deification.

At issue here are not the individually framed private pursuits suggested by some modern “theologians”, but the clearly defined spiritual rules which those who have been spiritually illumined can render comprehensible to their respective contemporaries.

We now turn to the 8th ode, 2nd Troparion:

*As a pillar of Orthodoxy, you appeared on Earth, Justin, inspired by God,
for mystically you leaned on the breast of your Master.*

*From there you drew the life-giving streams
and imbued us exceedingly on the day of your commemoration.
That is why we call you a fourth Theologian.*

This last line is highly significant. It was authored by the official Grand Master of Constantinople hymn-writing, and his service was approved, both by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and by the Patriarchate of Serbia. Nobody found fault with this conclusive judgment:

That is why we call you a fourth Theologian.

As is generally known, theology is a term that combines two words which can be put together in three ways:

1. talk about God, i.e. most of what university theology aspires to;
2. talk with God; According to an ancient definition, everyone who prays truly is a theologian, and theologian is one who truly prays; and
3. then we have a third category, which applies very rarely: it encompasses the ones who speak “from God,” i.e., who have been so inspired and given grace to speak the Word of God. Only these are given the name „Theologian.“ Thus it is a really great matter if St. Justin is called „a fourth Theologian.“

In the evening service, the 1st sticheron of the Aposticha proclaims:

*Rejoice divine offspring of Vranje, glory of Ćelije and adornment of Serbia,
now a new among Theologians and wise among Fathers,
experienced authority of mystical dogmas,
confident of the saints, whose lives you have written down,*



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*ceaseless worker of spiritual prayer
and honorable gift for those who believe in the orthodox way,
intercede therefore, we pray, blessed one, with Christ,
whose beauty you loved and in whom you were enlightened,
that all those who honor you, Justin, may be granted great mercy.*

It is often forgotten that, while he wrote commentaries on the Holy Scripture, a *Dogmatic* (a large work in three volumes), articles and sermons, he also translated the lives of saints into the Serbian language. This amounted to twelve big volumes, in addition to all the other thirty volumes he composed. In his time, he accomplished the greatest compilation of lives of saints in any language in the orthodox world. His sources were mostly Russian and Greek. But it is a huge work, topped only today by the one compiled by the Holy Apostles Convent in Buena Vista, Colorado.³ In this work, he put all theology together; “It is all life,” he would say.

While imprisoned in Ćelije, knowing that he would have a lot of time, he decided to celebrate Liturgy every day. And he did. He celebrated Liturgy every day until he could not do it anymore. As the nuns of his monastery told me, for Father Justin everything was Liturgy, even what he did after Liturgy was Liturgy. This was because he *lived* Liturgy, as they said. He did not celebrate but literally *lived* the Liturgy. And this is how he took the Liturgy into his whole life, because all life is about the Godman. As we have heard before, the Godman was the foundation of everything he did. So he developed this spiritual attitude even for the whole of his life, and this was a great accomplishment.

The next text is the 5th Ode, 2nd Troparion:

*As a gift you have accepted your enclosure, blessed one.
You have transformed it all wisely
into the work of edifying the faithful through spiritual writings,
which now water the Orthodox Church.*

He might have become depressed. He had this brilliant mind. He had studied in Moscow, in Oxford, in Athens and everywhere. It was clear that his career was to be in the university. But then he was placed into the monastery of Ćelije to be imprisoned there. And it was really a prison, because there were four guards who guarded the monastery 24 hours a day. They took shifts, but there was only one entrance and that one was guarded. And because Ćelije lies deep down in a valley, they also looked from above with binoculars, supervising everything that was

³ <https://secure.holyapostlesconvent.org/hacwebstore/viewnormalitem.zul?itemModelNo=SYN-ALL>.



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going on there. Whenever somebody wanted to visit Father, at least during the early years, there was a complicated procedure; one had to secure a document of permission and so forth. Father Basilus knows about that.⁴ They were very hard on Fr. Justin. If he received visitors from outside, from Greece for instance, they would punish him in some other ways, e.g., by reducing his allowance of paper to write on, whatever... It was painfully ridiculous. He could have become very depressed under these conditions. But, as we see:

As a gift you have accepted your enclosure, blessed one.

And:

*you have transformed it all wisely
into the work of edifying the faithful through spiritual writings,
which now water the Orthodox Church.*

We may compare him to St. Theophan the recluse. That Russian saint was secluded by his own will, but he also used his reclusion to edify the people and to write. And father Justin did the same. As I already mentioned, he was very productive; his complete work encompasses many volumes in addition to these twelve volumes with lives of the saints. It is just impressive what he did!

Turning now to the 7th Ode, 1st and 2nd Troparion:

*We know you as a vigilant conscience of faith, blessed one,
for because you did not endure the falsification of dogma and tradition,
you have shown with proofs the true doctrine, Father Justin.*

We know you as a vigilant conscience of faith: Although he was enclosed, he received news from the whole world of Orthodoxy, and he was always vigilant about what was going on. He knew really everything about all the movements in Orthodoxy. He could not endure falsification of dogma and tradition, and he showed the true doctrine with proofs.

And the 2nd:

*Unconquered in persecutions and sufferings on the part of the ungodly,
you stood firm because you had the sufferings of the Lord in your mind, godly wise.
So you endured everything
and glorified the one who glorifies you so much, Justin.*

⁴ S'chi-archimandrite Basilus Grolimund, my own spiritual father, was a spiritual son of St. Justin. He had visited him a number of times in Čelije and had corresponded with him until he realized that, whenever the saint received letters from abroad, this would cause the authorities to worsen conditions of his confinement.



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Especially in our times now the miracles that appear through his relics are multiplying. So, “unconquered in persecutions and sufferings on the part of the ungodly, you stood firm because you had the sufferings of the Lord in your mind, godly wise. So you endured everything and glorified the one who glorifies you so much, Justin.”

8th ode, 3rd Troparion emphasizes the same subject:

*You are shown to the faithful, Justin,
as an example of an orthodox way of life,
since you imitated most excellently the ways of the lives of the saints,
which you handed down in writing
like treasures for the fullness of the Church of Christ,
which celebrates your memory with insight.*

And the Apolytikion itself:

*Since in word and deed
you have deeply implanted in the hearts of all the pious
the sweet nectar-like life of Orthodoxy,
like a marvelous treasure,
you have been shown to us as a living book of the Spirit, godly wise Justin.
Pray fervently that those who sing to you may be united with God.*

This is what he always said to the nuns: It is all about living the Gospel. Living the Liturgy, living the Gospel, living the life of Christ. That is the meaning of „since in word and deed you have deeply implanted in the hearts of all the pious the sweet nectar-like life of Orthodoxy, like a marvellous treasure, you have been shown to us as a living book of the Spirit“... This also connects him with St. John Chrysostom, who says that we wouldn't need books if we would have the Spirit. Fr. Justin had the Spirit, but he put it into books for others. „You have been shown to us as a living book of the Spirit, godly wise Justin. Pray fervently that those who sing to you may be united with God.“ His message is all about deification. We have already mentioned in the beginning that he was a teacher of deification.

Crucial here is what he says in his commentary on the *Beatitudes*, in his explanation of the Holy Gospel of St. Matthew. The teaching on the Beatitudes takes one hundred pages. Imagine, a hundred pages on the Beatitudes! It is so marvelous how he explains the Beatitudes. With just



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this portion of the whole book you have a full curriculum of how to make your life saintly. It is incredible!

I want to finish with what he said on „blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God:“

The man of Christ feels with his whole heart that it is an exceptional blessedness to be a human being.

Because as a human being you can become godlike. „The man of Christ feels with his whole heart that it is an exceptional blessedness to be a human being.“ This is such a strong word for our time! - So many people are fed up with life. It is an exceptional blessedness to be a human being. He lived it all! This is why his word has power. As we hear in the Gospel: The Gospel says about Christ that He did not speak like the Pharisees but with power. Being enclosed, kept like a prisoner, Saint Justin gathered all this strength from Liturgy, from the lives of the Saints, from Scripture ,and this is why his word as well is “with power.” That is also why I am very glad that we have this conference, in which we try to form a theological understanding in the spirit of St. Justin, not as an academic endeavor or a pious worldview, but as a way of adopting the life-giving energy communicated to us in the Divine Liturgy, through the Holy Scripture and by the example of the saints, in order for us to grow „to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ“⁵.

Thank you!

References

Popović, St. Justin, 2020. *Kommentar zum Evangelium nach Matthäus*. Translated by S.E. Metropolitan Mark of Berlin and Germany. Kloster des hl. Hiob von Počaeв.

⁵ Eph. 4.13b NKJV