

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN COMMENTARIES ON CHANTING  
(Part II)

St. Cyril, the bishop of Jerusalem (+386), gave a series of lectures in the year 350 to a group of catechumens who were baptized on Holy Saturday that year. In one of those lectures, he made reference to the Psalm that is still chanted in our Baptismal service today:

Even now let there ring in your ears that sweet sound which you desire to hear the angels sing after you have been saved: "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered" (Ps 31.1), when you enter in, like stars of the Church, shining in body and luminous in soul.

*(Procatechesis, PG 33:360)*

In his work *Mystagogical Catechesis* v6, (*PG 33:1113*), the same author makes reference to another hymn that is still chanted in the Divine Liturgy:

We call to mind the Seraphim also, whom Isaiah saw in the Holy Spirit, present in a circle about the throne of God, covering their faces with two wings, their feet with two, and flying with two, and saying: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Sabaoth", (Is. 6:3). Therefore we recite this doxology transmitted to us by the Seraphim, in order to become participants in the hymnody of the superterrestrial hosts.

In the same work, St. Cyril makes reference to Ps. 33, which is still chanted at the time when the faithful partake of Holy Communion. This is the earliest extant reference to this practice:

After these things, listen to chanter, who invites us with a sacred melody to communion in the Holy Mysteries, and says: "Taste and see that the Lord is good."

*(Ps 33.9). (Mystagogical Catechesis v, 20 (PG 33:1124))*

St. Chrysostom, in *PG 55:156*, tells us why hymnody is so useful:

When God saw that the majority of men were slothful, and that they approached spiritual reading with reluctance and submitted to the effort involved without pleasure — wishing to make the task more agreeable and to relieve the sense of laboriousness — He mixed melody with prophecy, so that enticed by the rhythm and melody, all might raise sacred hymns to Him with great eagerness. For nothing so arouses the soul, gives it wing, sets it free from the earth,

releases it from the prison of the body, teaches it to love wisdom, and to condemn all the things of this life, as concordant melody and sacred song composed in rhythm.

St. John Chrysostom tells us some other things that we need to hear today — this time about weddings:

Do you not see with what dignity weddings were celebrated in antiquity? Hear this, you who flutter after Satan's pomp and who from the very start dishonor the nuptial solemnities. Were there reed-pipes there? Were there cymbals, or diabolical dances? For what reason, tell me, do you straightway bring such shame into your house, and summon people from the stage and orchestra pit, so that with extravagant expense you spoil the modesty of the maiden and make the groom more wanton?

(PG54:486)

In his hymns for Pascha, St. Ephraim the Syrian (+373) tells us something about the church celebrations of his day. There is more than images involved here. After making reference to the historical Palm Sunday, the Saint goes on to describe the contemporary church festival. Also, young maidens join in the chanting of the *madrāshe* (metrical hymns) composed by St. Ephraim.

Beautiful and eloquent blossoms  
the children scattered before the King.  
The foal was crowned with them  
the path filled with them.  
They scattered praise like blossoms  
and songs like lilies.  
Even now, my Lord, during this festival  
the band of children scattered before Thee, my Lord,  
Alleluias like flowers.  
Blessed be the One Who was praised by the children.

Lo, our hearing, like one's lap  
is filled with the voices of children;  
Again, my Lord, the recesses of our ears are filled  
with the musical strains of virgins.  
Let everyone gather all the blossoms,  
mingling what is his own with them,  
Flowers which have sprouted in His land,  
for this great festival —  
Let us plait a magnificent crown for Him;  
Blessed is the One Who has called us to His crowning.

The bishop weaves into it  
his biblical exegesis as his flowers;  
The presbyters their martyr stories,  
the deacons their lections,  
The young men their alleluias,  
the boys their psalms,  
The virgins their *madrāshe*,  
the rulers their achievements,  
And the lay people their virtues.  
Blessed be the One Who has multiplied victories for us.  
(*Hymns for Paschaltide II:7-9*)