

LIFE AFTER LIFE IN THE ORTHODOX HYMNOGRAPHICAL THEOLOGY

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Abstract

The Christian Revelation encompasses the history of salvation not just as past, but also as future, as accomplishment of the creation in the eschaton. For this reason, the Church does not preach only what God has done for our salvation, but also what He has prepared for those who believe in Him. In this way, the creation, and especially man, has its whole life put under the sign of the hope of resurrection, of wakefulness / watchfulness (nepsis) and of the preparation for the celestial life. The eschaton must surely have been on the mind of the Christian hymnographers, the Holy Fathers who created the beauties included in the Orthodox cult books, especially the multitude of troparia, stichera, stichoi, kontakia and oikoi, prayers etc.; in them we find expressed with extraordinary artistry and special power of synthesis, the entire teaching of faith of our rightly-glorifying Church, the entire Eastern theology, starting with her cosmology, continuing with her anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology, pneumatology and ending with the eschatology or the new creation. The existence of eschatological ideas even since the first centuries in the cult books of the Church, proves the fact that the orientation to the future world and the hope in the universal resurrection was the living phenomenon that animated the life of the first Christian communities. The Christian's expressed desire to unite heaven and earth, to live the angelic life even since now, shows that the eschaton was, is and will always be conceived as a reality which is not foreign to the present life. Life after life can only be a life in communion with God, as it has been revealed by our Saviour Christ and preached by the Holy Apostles and by the Church to this day.

Keywords: death, resurrection, eternal life, prayer, hymnography, Church, aerial toll houses.

The word *death* comes from the Latin *mors, -tis*, and, according to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, death is considered to be the end of the earthly life, after which the next life follows, as a final aim of each Christian. Death is a general and necessary law not only for the believers, but also for those who have attained the most

perfect victory over sin¹. *You alone are deathless, You Who created and formed man with Your hand; while we were made out of earth and will go back in the same, as You commanded, You Who created me and said to me: You are earth and will go back into the earth, where all the people of the earth go, turning into burial wailing the song: Halleluiah².*

Death is the birth of man from the temporary earthly life, into the eternal life. During the accomplishment of the mystery of death, we get separated from the bodily coating, and we, with our light, esoteric spiritual being, pass into another world, in the mansion of the soul-like beings. The soul coming out of the body is unseen and inaccessible, all that we see being only the sudden emptying of life of the body, or lifelessness, from the time of the accomplishment of the mystery of death³. *Truly terrible is the mystery of death, the way the soul is, against her will, cut from the body, from the composition and the co-growth, the so natural connection, by the will of God. Wherefore we pray to You: for them whom You have withdrawn from among us appoint a place in the tents of Your Saints, Giver of Life, Lover of men⁴.*

Any man has the experience of death. Far from avoiding reality, taking refuge in illusory dreams, the biblical revelation, regardless of the stage examined, starts by looking death in the face lucidly, the death of the dear ones, which, after the farewell moments have been consumed, brings pain in the heart of those remained behind (Genesis 50: 1); death awaits every one, for all will see death (Psalm 89: 49; Luke 2: 26; John 8: 51).

However, true wisdom goes further, accepting death as a divine decision: *O death, your judgement is good to the man in need and failing in strength in his extreme old age, distracted by everything, and stubborn and short on patience* (Jesus Sirach 41: 3-4), and as something highlighting the humility of the human condition in front

¹ Ene Braniște, Ecaterina Braniște, *Dicționar enciclopedic de cunoștințe religioase*, Editura Diecezană, Caransebeș, 2001, p. 306.

²***, *Triodul*, EIBMBOR, București, 2000, Sâmbătă dimineața în a doua săptămână a Sfântului și Marelui Post, Icos, pp. 252-253; a se vedea ***, *Panihida, – adică slujbele înmormântării și alte slujbe săvârșite de preot pentru cei răposați*, ediția a III-a, EIBMBOR, București, 1992, „Rânduiala înmormântării mirenilor”.

³ Sfântul Ignatie Briancianinov și Teofan Zăvorâtul, *Cuoânt despre moarte*, Editura Pelerinul Român, Oradea, 1993, p. 5.

⁴***, *Triodul*, Stihiri de umilință, glasul al IV-lea, Sâmbătă, la Utrenie, la Stihavnă, Stihirile morților – alcătuire a lui Teofan, Stihira I, pp. 717-718.

of God: *Earth you are and to earth you shall return* (Genesis 3: 19). *You created man in Your image and likeness and put him in heaven to rule over Your creatures; but, out of the devil's envy, being deceived, he partook of the food, disobeying Your commandments. Wherefore, You fated him to return to the earth he came from and ask for his rest*⁵.

The living man feels in death an opposing power. Spontaneously, he gives death an image and personifies her. She becomes the funeral shepherd driving people to hell, entering homes to bring pain and wailing: *For death will come through your windows and enter your land, to destroy the children from outside and the youth from the streets* (Jeremiah 9: 21). In the Old Testament, death appears as the annihilating angel, executor of divine revenge, life becoming in this way anguished fight, a wrestling between man and death. *No sweet thing of life is exempt of waning, neither richness, nor kingdom, nor the flower of youth; because death stops them all and the unperishable things follow; for what is sown in corruption, raises in incorruptibility; what is sown in dishonour, raises in glory. Wherefore, Christ, give rest with the righteous to Your servants whom you have accepted*⁶.

But, in fact, the fear of death, this so-called angst, is in reality the respect for the life we live day by day, from birth till death, according to the laws and moral principles left to us through the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition. The state of fear is highlighted and accentuated by man's clinging to the materiality of this world, bringing therefore unrest, fear, fright, anxiety. Fear highlights a lack of faith at first, of which we can free ourselves by foregoing our own will in front of God's will and implicitly a state of profound humility merged with fasting and prayer. Love is the key point of the relation between man and God, *terrifies the soul, giving her the chance of delighting herself with the spiritual delights*⁷.

Saint Basil the Great highlights on several occasions that throughout our life we need to be aware of death as the bridge

⁵***, *Molitifelnicul*, EIBMBOR, București, 2002, „Rânduiala În mormântării Mirenilor”, Stihirile, Stihira a VII-a, glasul a VII-lea, p. 229.

⁶***, *Octoiul Mare*, Tipografia cărților bisericești, București, 1952, Glasul al V-lea, Sâmbătă dimineață, la Stihovavă, Stihirile mucenicești, Stihira a IV-a, p. 455.

⁷Gheorghe Anghelescu, „Frica de Dumnezeu sau înțelegerea deplină a sensului vieții după moarte în viziunea Sfinților și Marilor Ierarhi ai Bisericii: Vasile, Grigore și Ioan”, în *Analele Universității Valahia*, Facultatea de Teologie din Târgoviște, Târgoviște, 2003, p. 164.

between time and eternity, the fear of God giving us and facilitating for us the chance of a passage as easy as possible of this bridge that needs to be crossed, inevitably. *Strange is the mystery of death, because it comes over all without prior warning; nature gets corrupted; death takes against their will the old, clerks, scholars, teachers and thinkers of futile thoughts; death brings down bishops, shepherds and all mortals*⁸.

Death is the mystery we need to go through to enter the full meaning of existence, equal to its plenitude. The earthly life acquires after death the meaning of passage to life's full meaning, given by the plenitude of life in God⁹, as what God desired for man since eternity, what was prepared for man even since he was in the Edenic paradise, a plenitude that the man forged in His Creator's image was meant to reach, by the process of divine perfecting or divine likeness.

In this way, death appears as natural separation of the soul from the body, as restauration of man through the passage to the eternal life, to perfection and mysterious union with God, to be together with God and to get to the eternal accomplishment and happiness. This is how our Saviour Christ Himself portrays the passage to eternal life by the words: *do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul* (Matthew 10: 28), as, regarding man, at the end of the earthly life, *the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it* (Ecclesiastes 12: 7). *God, our God, out of love of men, as a God of our fathers, You ordered this mixture and composition and ineffable bond created by You, by Your divine will, to get undone and to vanish, for the soul to go where she took her being from, until the universal resurrection, and the body to decompose into the parts it was made up of.*¹⁰

The day of death is considered by the Church as a day to celebrate, as the departed get born on this day for the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore *come, brothers, all before the end, so that, seeing our dust and the powerlessness of our nature, we may see our end and*

^{8***}, *Molitfelnicul, Rânduiala Înarmorântării Preoților și a Diaconilor de mir, la Laude, Stihirile, Stihira a II-a, glasul al VI-lea*, p. 289.

⁹Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, ediția a II-a, EIBMBOR, București, 1997, p. 146.

^{10***}, *Molitfelnicul, Rânduiala Înarmorântării Mirenilor, Rugăciunile de iertare, Rugăciunea întâi*, p. 234.

*the parts of our bodily vessel; and see that man is dust and corruption; that our bones are dry and have no breath. Let us look in the tombs, to see where is the glory, where is the beauty of the countenance, where is the tongue that was speaking beautifully, where are the eyebrows or where is the eye? All are dust and shadow. So have mercy on us sinners, O Saviour!*¹¹

Physical death is called by the Holy Scripture *separation from the body* (Philippians 1: 23), *departure* (2 Timothy 4: 6), *destruction of our earthly house* (2 Corinthians 5: 1), *putting off the tent* (2 Peter 1: 14), *sleep and sleeping* (Deuteronomy 31: 16; Matthew 9: 24), *yielding one's spirit* (Matthew 27: 50).

Immediately after death, it seems that the soul “plunges in a light simultaneously tender and lucid, permitting her to see again her life, to understand it in its most hidden depths. It is that sensation, so well and painfully known by everyone, experienced every time a spiritually bright being scrutinizes your soul, whose piercing eye easily sees through the ugliness of your character. This purifying sleep is by no means a state of unconsciousness. Death sets the person free from this leather jacket, from this skin we have been closed in upon our exit from the paradisiacal condition and through which we have been chastised after having had transparent participation to the universe. The form, the faculties, the senses of the body, aspired by the infinity, get interiorized and it is no longer the soul inside the body but the body inside the soul. The senses become those of a spirit, the perfect memory permits true personal encounters, not just between the dead, but also between the dead and the living. The place of these meetings can only be Christ, this centre to which all lines converge, Christ in Whom we are, all, one another's limbs. The prayer of the Church facilitates and accompanies the soul's exodus. Prayer redoubles on the third, ninth and fortieth day after the physical death”¹². *All those departed in faith, ordain them, O Bestower of Life, on the side of the living, in the resting places, in the eternal tents, where the light of Your countenance shines abundantly, where the delight*

¹¹ ***, *Triodul*, Sâmbăta Lăsatului sec de carne, la Utrenie, la Laude, Stihira I, glas VIII, p. 37.

¹² Olivier Clément, *Trupul morții și al slavei*, traducere de Eugenia Vlad, Editura Asociația Filantropică Medicală Creștină *Christiana*, București, 1996, pp. 100-101.

and the joy and the peace of the righteous is; waiving their mistakes by action, by word and by thought, O Master, out of Your great goodness¹³. After Your resurrection from the dead, O Christ, death no longer rules over those who died in the rightly-glorifying faith. This is why we pray intensely, give rest in Your courtyards, in Abraham's bosom, to Your servants, who served You in cleanliness, since Adam to this day: our fathers and brothers, friends and relatives; all the men who worked the works of life with faith and moved to You, O God, in many ways and in many manners, make them worthy of Your celestial Kingdom¹⁴.

The body that the soul came out of does not return into nothingness and its elements, even scattered, and mixed with other elements from nature, are not just any relics. For this reason, the conception that the relation between bodies and their souls is broken forever is wrong. Death, indeed, separates the soul from the body, yet the natural relation between them is kept under a certain form. Beyond death, the soul and the body keep an indestructible connection, based on their belonging to the same person (hypostasis).

Saint Maximus the Confessor explains this clearly and rigorously: "After the death of the body, the soul is not called simply soul but soul of man, moreover soul of a certain man. Because even after the death of the body, the soul keeps as her full form, the entire human being of which she is a part, based on the relation. Similarly, the body is mortal by nature, yet not untied to the entire human, due to the way it comes into existence. Because the body is not called just body, after its separation from the soul, but body of man, moreover body of a certain man, even if it were to get corrupted and decomposed into the elements it is composed of. Because it has even so, being part of the human entirety, as its complete form, this human entirety, based on the relation. In both the soul and the body, the relation being conceived as something unbreakable, since they are both parts of the human entirety, this relation shows their bringing into existence at the exact same time and proves the difference between them from the perspective of

¹³***, *Octoiuhul Mare*, Glasul al VI-lea, Vineri seară, la Doamne strigat-am, Stihirile Stăpânești, Stihira a III-a, pp. 533-534.

¹⁴***, *Triodul*, Sâmbăta Lăsatului Sec de Carne, la Vecernie, Stihira a III-a, glasul al VIII-lea, p. 25.

their being. So, it is never possible to find or name any body or any soul outside the relation between them. Because at the same time as the part, what is shown is that it is part of something and that in it is involved, as well, the entirety that it is part of. Because their relation is unremovable”¹⁵.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa speaks about the oikonomia of the separation of the soul from the body making an analogy with the parable of the merciless rich and of poor Lazarus: “After the separation from the body, in the soul are kept certain signs that testify for the fact that we previously were a unity, an entirety, as the parable about the merciless rich and poor Lazarus proves, from which we see that after the bodies have been put in the grave, the soul kept a certain bodily sign from which both Lazarus was recognized and the rich did not remain unknown”¹⁶.

The Orthodox tradition presents countless moments and experiences lived by the souls after death, based on the Holy Scripture or on revelations of holy persons who related about such mystery moments. Therefore, after the mystery of death is accomplished, the human soul gets separated from the body and for two days she lives on earth. She wanders together with the angels around her home, through those places where she was in the habit of uttering good words, supporting the truth and doing good deeds. She spends time around the house where she got separated from the body and around the coffin, where her body rests. Then, following in our Saviour’s footsteps, Who resurrected on the third day after His death, every soul needs to go up to heaven, to worship the Lord, God of the entire universe. The moment the body is descended in the tomb, the soul leaves for heaven. The change that intervenes is just of situation and place. The soul is no longer on earth, but her capacities and faculties are the same as during her time on earth. What she loved here on earth she loves as well beyond the grave¹⁷. “Behold, pulling out, they drew out painfully from the body, without warning, my wretched soul, and they are taking her to the Judge, Who you need to fear and be frightened of. So, remembering, my

¹⁵ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Tradiția Ortodoxă despre viața de după moarte*, traducere de Marinela Bojin, Editura Sofia, București, 2006, p. 81.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 82-83.

¹⁷ Nicodim Măndiță, *Priveghiul creștinesc*, Editura Agapis, București, 2004, p. 93.

*beloved, the way I spent my life with you, remind God about me*¹⁸. Yet, we have the confidence and hope of our resurrection and salvation realized in the Person of our Saviour Christ: *You changed the pain of death into sleep, by Your dormition in the grave, and gave life to the dead. Therefore, make the departed worthy, O Saviour, of the state of the chosen ones; for the prayers of the holy martyrs*¹⁹.

Man, the work of God's hands, is the witness of his Creator's glory and power, wherefore he cannot be a mortal being, neither by his soul, nor by his body. "God did not create His work to be destroyed. The soul and the body are God's works and, consequently, are immortal. The soul, after her separation from the body, lives in the spiritual world, while the body returns in the earth. The work of the soul on earth represents always, to a greater or smaller extent, a mixture of good and bad, of truth and lie. The body is a hinderance to the soul's work on earth, yet, beyond the grave, this obstacle vanishing, the soul will be able to work freely towards her aspirations and faculties, good or bad, from beyond the grave, the soul will be again under the influence of the body with which she will get united, yet this influence of a transformed body, turned spiritual and incorruptible, can only be favourable to her in her work, because, being set free from the bodily needs specific to her in her earthly life, she will be endowed with new abilities, entirely spiritual"²⁰.

God's Spirit will not desert the good souls in their development from beyond the grave, and neither will all the capacities and abilities of these souls, but they will get under the beneficial influence of the Holy Spirit, and then the soul will attain happiness and will taste from the promised goods of the Kingdom of Heavens. The life of the soul is the conscience that she has about her existence and her work and consists in the accomplishment of her spiritual and moral duties. The soul, in the eternal life, leads a purely spiritual and interior existence; she descends in the most profound depths of her being, comes to her senses and, by this, she gains her self-conscience.

¹⁸ ***, *Molitfelnicul*, Slujba la ieșirea cu greu a sufletului, Canonul-alcătuire a lui Andrei al Cretei, Ierusalimiteanul, Cântarea a 7-a, Stihira I, glasul al VI-lea, p. 178.

¹⁹ ***, *Triodul*, Sâmbătă dimineața în a doua săptămână a Sfântului și Marelui Post, Patrucântarea, Cântarea a 6-a, Stihira a III-a, glasul al VIII-lea, p. 251.

²⁰ Mitrofan de Konevets, *Viața repausașilor noștri și viața noastră după moarte*, vol. II, Editura Anastasia, București, 1996, pp. 36-39.

During the first part of the life beyond the grave, both the souls from heaven and those from hell remain in union, relation and in communion with the living on earth; they remember those who were dear to them on earth and whom they loved. However, those who had hate for their neighbour on earth and who did not heal themselves of this evil continue to hate also beyond the grave. The work of the conscience beyond the grave is the inner life and the work of the soul from the earthly life is the result of judgement, of condemning, after which either rest or contrition and absence of peace from the soul after the judgement of conscience follow. *The separation of the soul from the body is a frightening and terrifying mystery for all; because the soul goes away wailing, and the body gets covered, being given to the earth. Therefore, we too, knowing the death of the body, let us run with tears to our Saviour, crying: remember us, too, when You come into Your kingdom*²¹. *Staying with awe, before Your dreaded and terrible Judgement See, Christ, the dead of yore will await the decision of Your justice and will receive the just divine judgement*²²; wherefore cry for me the one who has disobeyed the Master's order out of lack of abstinence; who has become an inhabitant of hell, instead of Heaven; the food that seemed to me sweeter, has turned into gall; far from Your glory and from the angels I have shown myself, O Merciful One. Receive me, God, me who repents, as the Good One and Lover of men, for Your great mercy²³.

The Holy Fathers' theology minutely describes the state of the soul after death. The violent dispute waged between the [good] angels and the bad spirits for conquering the soul trembling terrified, the weighing of her good deeds and of her bad deeds, the side that the scales inclines to, all these decide the state of the soul. Consequently, we are masters of our life and our deeds, we alone prepare our death, it depends on us if it shall be easy or torture. Only by a continual repentance and a living faith and work in Christ the Lord are we going to be able to assure for ourselves a *sweet* painless peaceful death, unto the acquisition of eternal happiness. In view of passing this threshold of death, the Church

²¹ *** , *Molitfelnic*, Rânduiala Însmormântării Preoților și a Diaconilor de mir, Fericirile, Stihira a III-a, glasul al II-lea, p. 273.

²² *** , *Octoiul Mare*, Glasul al II-lea, Sâmbătă dimineață, la Stihovna Laudelor, Stihira a III-a, p. 187.

²³ *Ibidem*, Glasul al VI-lea, Vineri seară, la Doamne strigat-am, Stihirile Stăpânești, Stihira a II-a, p. 533.

Fathers of all the times and all the places prepared themselves permanently, intensifying their prayers and endeavours. *O Saviour, Who redeemed men with Your blood, and by Your death from death, by Your blood and by Your bitter death You redeemed us, and gave us eternal life by Your resurrection, give rest in the rightly-glorifying faith, in deserts or cities, in the sea or on earth, or anywhere to the kings, the archbishops and the priests, the hermits and those gathered together; and make them worthy of Your heavenly kingdom*²⁴.

In the course of time, the scientific world tried to explain the realities felt by those who leave this world, studying certain stages that the soul goes through when she gets separated from the body, using scientific methods, like those elaborated by doctor and philosopher Raymond Moody, in his book *Life after life*, after having corroborated the stories of about 150 patients returned from the boundaries of death²⁵, namely people that went through clinical death, remaining deeply marked by such an experience and later on changing their entire conception about life and death.

The Orthodox world is, generally, reserved in front of these experiences, given that the Holy Fathers approached in their writings the theme of the separation of the soul from the body, highlighting especially its mysterious character. Father Seraphim Rose analysed doctor Raymond Moody's writings, yet he neither gave them much credit, nor condemned them categorically, so that one can affirm that these experiences can be demonical or physiological, or determined by medicines, under the form of hallucinations or delusions. The patristic tradition recommends that one should not deny anything and should not accept anything without passing it through the filter of experience and the discernment of the deified people²⁶.

Actually, the priestmonk Serafim Rose in his work *The Soul after Death*, debates the theme of the *out-of-body* experiences in the occult

²⁴ *** , *Triodul*, Sâmbăta Lăsatului Sec de Carne, la Vecernie, Stihira a II-a, glasul al VIII-lea, p. 25.

²⁵ Alin Constantin Boc, „Sufletul după moarte în lumina revelației divine. Rolul Sfintei Biserici pentru mângâierea sufletelor celor adormiți în nădejdea Învierii”, în *Mitropolia Olteniei*, anul LVII (2005), nr. 1-4, pp. 110-112.

²⁶ Serafim Rose, *Sufletul după moarte*, traducere de Dana Cocargeanu, Editura Sofia, București, 2007, pp. 16-18.

literature, in an entire chapter, where he disputes and explains from an Orthodox perspective the implications of the present theories concerning the separation of the soul from the body. The author brings on the table the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, Emanuel Swedenborg's writings, the astral plane of theosophy, the astral projection and travel, which he confutes by scriptural and patristic arguments, but also by a substantial knowledge of these things.

For this reason, the Orthodox Church does not forget the departed but is close to them and to those remained alive, family, friends, helping the departed by divine services and prayers. The pastoral care of the Church extends beyond the grave, forever remembering the departed, praying for rest and forgiveness of sins, according to the exhortation of Christ our Saviour *pray without ceasing* (1 Thessalonians 5: 17) and *the fervent prayer of a just man avails much* (James 5: 16), namely the prayer undertaken for the departed one, the remembrance services, the union of the voices of all those present in front of God can soften the sentence of the Righteous Judge and can break the gates of hell.

Consequently, the Church prays for all those who died of all the times and all the places, in all manners, as the following hymnographical texts state: *For the believers flooded, reaped by war, killed by earthquake, killed by thieves, and burnt by fire²⁷, for those departed in faith, on the sea, in rivers, in springs or in lakes or in wells, for those eaten by beasts and birds and crawling animals²⁸, for those who died suddenly, for those burnt by lightnings, for those who died bitten by frost and by any wound²⁹, for parents, grandparents, forefathers, ancestors, from the first to the last, who died in good law and in right faith³⁰, for those who happened to end their life in faith in the mountains, on the way, in desert places; for hermits and for those gathered together, for the young and for the old³¹, for those killed by frost or stolen away by horse or hail, snow and abundant rain; and for those killed by brick or stifled by earth³², for those who died in the right faith suddenly, and for those who died from anything thrown*

²⁷ *** , *Triodul*, Sâmbăta Lăsatului Sec de Carne, la Utrenie, Canonul, glasul al VIII-lea, Cântarea 1, Stihira a IV-a, p. 28.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, Cântarea a 2-a, Stihira a III-a, p. 28.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, Cântarea a 3-a, Stihira a II-a, p. 29.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, Cântarea a 4-a, Stihira I, p. 30.

³¹ *Ibidem*, Stihira a II-a, p. 30.

³² *Ibidem*, Stihira a III-a, p. 30.

at them, be it iron, wood or any kind of stone³³, for all the believers who perished due to God's anger, through all kinds of lightning fallen from the sky, or the earth opening or the sea falling on them³⁴, for those who died bitten by venomous bites, swallowed by snakes, runover by horses, being stifled or hanged, by their neighbour³⁵, for those of all age, old and young, children, infants and babies, male and female, give rest, O God, to all believer whom You took away³⁶.

Model and basis supporting the remembrance services that the Church does for the departed is the prayer that the Lord Himself prays at Lazarus' tomb before resurrecting Him: *Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, 'Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me.'* Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice: *'Lazarus, come forth!'* And he who had died came out... (John 11: 40-42), and this to show us until the end of the centuries that the Lord listens to our prayer for those who have left this world, and to whom God can give not just the resurrection or the return to the same life, but, on the contrary, entrance in His Kingdom, for rest and eternal life, which is much more important: *Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest* (Matthew 11: 28). *In Your rest, O Lord, where all Your saints rest, may You give rest to Your servants, for You Yourself are Lover of men³⁷.*

By the living prayer for the dead, the relation between the fighting Church on earth and the triumphant Church from heaven is maintained. The prayers for the departed are the highest expression of the intimate communion between the fighting Church and the triumphant Church. They keep us the Christians closely united to one another, as limbs of the Lord's Mysterious Body (the Church), make us keep our specific features and always be ourselves. The prayers and the mediations for the departed are recommended by the Holy Scripture. Saint Paul the Apostle exhorts *all that supplications, prayers, intercessions and giving of thanks be made for all*

³³ *Ibidem*, Cântarea a 7-a, Stihira a II-a, p. 34.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, Cântarea a 9-a, Stihira a II-a, p. 36.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, Stihira a III-a, p. 36.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, Stihira a IV-a, p. 36.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, Stihiri de umilintă, glasul al IV-lea, Sâmbătă, la Utrenie, la Laude, Slavă... a morților, p. 717.

men (1 Timothy 2: 1). Saint John Chrysostom teaches the Christians to pray for the departed: *if the dead is a sinner, that his sins may be loosed, and if he is a just that he may win a plus of payment and reward*³⁸.

For this reason, the prayers of the Church and of the families for those departed rely on God's unlimited love for man and of the Christian for his neighbour. It is the sacrificial love, by which God, the celestial Father, accepts the son by grace, in the kingdom of the Embodied Son. These prayers are very beneficial for those who passed into the eternal life, being able to take them out of the place of torment and bring them close to God, to eternal rest and happiness. Certainly, this action of the prayer supposes not just a mediation to the Creator, but also a direct action on the soul, an awakening of the powers of the soul, able to make her worthy of forgiveness. Prayers make God merciful to those who are less sinful, but this mercy is also a consequence of the inner change occurred in the souls of the departed. Christ has the power over the entire world, He has the keys of death and of hell. He sees the endeavour and the love of the living for the departed, can take from hell those departed and He passes them into the happiness of heaven, before the Universal Judgement.

But the most important means by which we can really save souls from hell remains forever the Holy and Divine Liturgy for the departed or the offering of the bloodless Sacrifice for their salvation. This means of the Church is the strongest and the most effective to call the divine mercy on the departed. "During the Liturgy, the Lord Himself mysteriously stabs Himself on the altar and, by this, His divine mercy wants to forgive the sins of the departed, for whom the greatest Mediator mediates and the holiest and strongest sacrifice is brought forward. The parts taken out of the communion bread during the divine offering for the remembrance of the souls of the departed are put in Christ's life-giving Blood, after which the priest says: *Wash, O Lord, the sins of those remembered here, by Your precious Blood; through the prayers of all Your saints*, and Christ's Blood cleanses every sin. The Holy Church also commemorates the departed in a special manner at the ektenia (litany) after the Evangel and after the sanctification of the

³⁸ Constantin Cornițescu, „Judecata Particulară”, în vol. *Îndrumări Misionare*, EIBMBOR, București, 1986, p. 875.

Gifts"³⁹, at the diptychs: "*For the forgiveness of sins and the rest of the souls of God's servants in a place full of light, from where all pain, sadness and sighing are gone; give them rest, our God, and settle them where the light of your countenance shines brightly*"⁴⁰.

Indeed, by the prayers of the priests and the mediation of the Holy Gifts, the souls become truly cleansed and receive the forgiveness of sins just like the living. But leaving this aside, they do not sin at all and add no trespass to their old trespasses, as it happens to most of the living; they are cleansed from all sin or at least exempted from ever sinning again⁴¹. *To the souls that You moved from the passing life to You, give rest, O God, Christ our God, as a merciful and Almighty*⁴².

Consequently, the Church prays for the souls of the departed from the eschatological perspective of lessening the punishment and of receiving mercy from the Judge at the final sentence. The Christian life flourishes in the cult of the dead, the living endeavouring always both for themselves and for the departed.

Due to the cult of the dead, so developed and loved by the believers of the Church, different beliefs specific to the Christian religion emerged, too, without being contrary to the ecclesial teachings, namely, the belief in the 24 aerial toll houses⁴³, specific precisely for the period immediately after the separation of the soul from the body and during the 40 days after death. The Christian teaching about the aerial toll houses is not a dogma of the Church, but only a theologoumena, namely a theological opinion, which can constitute a basis of the ecclesial teaching, as it has a fundament in the Revelation, and in the writings of the Church Fathers.

According to the Church teaching, the souls, before the particular Judgement of God, are examined in the so-called aerial toll houses, through which these souls, accompanied by the angels, pass in

³⁹ S.A. Arhanghelov, *Tainele vieții viitoare*, traducere de Climent I. Bontea, Editura Bunavestire, Bacău, 2007, pp. 96-97.

⁴⁰ ***, *Liturghierul*, EIBMBOR, București, 1995, Rugăciunea pentru cei morți de la Diptice, p. 156.

⁴¹ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Tradiția Ortodoxă despre viața...*, p. 282.

⁴² ***, *Triodul*, Stihiri de umilință, glasul al IV-lea, Sâmbătă, la Utrenie, Sedealna I după întâia Catismă, Slavă... a morților, p. 717.

⁴³ I.C. Beldie, „Credința despre vămi în Biserica Ortodoxă, în *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, anul XLIX (1931), nr. 11, p. 702.

the aerial space, where the bad spirits are, stopping the souls and revealing all the sins committed⁴⁴. The demons' shelter in this fallen world, as well as the place where the souls departed from the body meet them is the air⁴⁵. *“When You Immortal will want, by Your command, to separate my soul from the bindings of the body, then have mercy on me and send to me a gentle angel looking to me with joyful countenance, to take me and to defend me from the boyars of darkness, to strengthen me, so that I may travel easily straightforward the ascent in the air and arrive without condemnation, to bow before Your dreaded see, Most Good God⁴⁶.”*

Saint Paul the Apostle sees the darkness of the air when he says: *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places* (Ephesians 6: 12). Speaking about the dead, the Apostle of the Nations affirms that *they once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air* (Ephesians 2: 2).

The teaching on the aerial toll houses passed inclusively in the cult books, in the prayer from the 4th kathisma of the Psalter saying the following: *Because I am going to pass through dreadful and terrible places, separating myself from the body and a multitude of terrifying and inhumane devils will meet me and no one will travel with me, to help me or save me.*

According to many writings on this theme, the space between earth and heavens is divided into 24 parts, aerial toll houses or tribunals, the soul passing through there is accused by the devils for her sins. Each aerial toll house, as the Holy Fathers call them in their writings, corresponds to a certain number of sins. These aerial toll houses and the events happening when the soul passes through them can be found in the relation of Saint Theodora, who narrated all these to Saint Basil the New, describing to him the order of progression of the aerial toll houses.

Going eastwards, the soul meets the 1st aerial toll house, where the bad spirits, stopping the soul who is carried away by the

⁴⁴ S.A. Arhanghelov, *Tainele vieții viitoare...*, p. 45.

⁴⁵ Serafim Rose, *Sufletul după moarte...*, p. 81.

⁴⁶ *** , *Octoiul Mare*, Glasul al VI-lea, Luni seară, la Doamne strigat-am, Stihiri de umilință, Stihira a III-a, p. 489.

guardian angel and the meeting angel, show her the sins she committed by word, and sinful conversations and laughter (vain words, offences, blasphemies etc.); the 2nd aerial toll house is that of lie and of the sins against the Holy Spirit (non-truth, breaking one's promises, taking God's name in vain, hiding acts during the confession of sins etc.); the 3rd aerial toll house is that of gossiping, judging and condemning one's neighbour (speaking evil, humiliating, offending etc.); the 4th aerial toll house is that of gluttony (drinking, not fasting, eating too much, looking for delights etc.); the 5th aerial toll house is that of laziness and wantonness (neglect at work); the 6th aerial toll house is that of stealing and deceiving; the 7th aerial toll house is that of thriftiness, squandering and love of possessions; the 8th aerial toll house is that of usury and deceit; the 9th aerial toll house is that of injustice and of blatant sin; the 10th aerial toll house is that of envy and enmity; the 11th aerial toll house is that of pride and her daughters (ambitions, vanity, disobedience); the 12th aerial toll house is that of anger and wrath; the 13th aerial toll house is that of revenge and remembrance of evil; the 14th aerial toll house is that of killing and suicide; the 15th aerial toll house is that of spells, witchcraft and incantations (magic, sorceries, poisons, enchantment etc); the 16th aerial toll house is that of debauchery and uncleanness (dirty thoughts, lusts etc); the 17th aerial toll house is that of fornication, adultery, and blood mixing (unfaithfulness in marriage); the 18th aerial toll house is that of the sin of sodomy and gomorry; the 19th aerial toll house is that of heresies and deviations from the Orthodoxy; the 20th aerial toll house is that of mercilessness and petrification of the heart; the 21st aerial toll house is that of idolatry and belief in demons; the 22nd aerial toll house is that of the use of makeup; the 23rd aerial toll house is that of smoking (drugs etc.); the 24th aerial toll house is that of simony⁴⁷.

The sequence and the teaching on the aerial toll houses is known and existent in the Orthodox Church of yore, being actually highlighted in Saint Cyril of Alexandria, in *Sermon on the Departure of the Soul from the Body*, who says: *What fright and torment await you, O soul, on the day of death! You will see terrible, dreadful,*

⁴⁷ Nicodim Măndiță, *Calea sufletelor în veșnicie. Vămile văzduhului*, vol. I și II, Editura Bunavestire, Bacău, 2001.

merciless and evil devils, like the dark Ethiopians, sitting before you. Their very sight is worse than all torment. Seeing them, the soul is troubled, feels unrest, tries to hide, hurries to the angels of God. The angel Saints take the soul; passing with them through the air, the soul ascends and reaches the aerial toll houses that guard the way from earth to heaven, which stop the soul, preventing her ascent to heaven. Each aerial toll house examines the sins it is in charge with; each sin, each sinful passion has its custom officers and calculators⁴⁸. Being shaken by the devils' invasions and pushed in the abyss of perdition, have mercy, O Sovereign Lady, and strengthen me on the stone of goods, and making the advice of the enemies vanish, make me worthy of doing what Jesus Your Son and our God has commanded, to find forgiveness on His Judgement Day⁴⁹.

We find this teaching expressed under several forms at the apologist Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and even Saint Ephrem the Syrian speaks about them, when he says that *“when the overpowering forces come, when the dreadful armies arrive, the executors of the divine orders command to the soul to leave the body, strongly drag the soul and lead her to the unescapable tribunal; the celestial executors, getting hold of the soul, ascend in the air where there is the hierarchy of the powers inimical to the human souls, there in the air are our accusers, those foreign powers from the aerial toll houses, they run in front of every soul departed from the body and ask her, examine her, count, calculate the sins and their notes where all the sins of the one arrived at the aerial toll houses are written, from her young age until her old age, the sins done willingly and not willingly, by actions, by words and by thoughts. There is fear and great torment for the poor soul. But the Holy Angels taking the soul of the rightly-glorifying believer lead her along that frightening way of the air”⁵⁰. Let the spiritual light shine on me to see You even a little bit, Christ; because from now on I will not see you again, because a multitude of devils, suddenly, came upon me, and the huge number of my shameful deeds is covering me⁵¹; Do not let the*

⁴⁸ Sfântul Chiril al Alexandriei, *Omilia despre plecarea sufletului* apud Serafim Rose, *Sufletul după moarte*, pp. 91-92.

⁴⁹***, *Octoiul Mare*, Glasul al IV-lea, Joi seară, la Doamne strigat-am, Stihirile Crucii, Stihira a IV-a, p. 343.

⁵⁰ Nicodim Mândiță, *Calea sufletelor în veșnicie...*, vol. II, p. 781.

⁵¹***, *Molitfelnicul*, Slujba la ieșirea cu greu a sufletului, Canonul-alcătuire a lui Andrei al Cretei, Ierusalimiteanul, Cântarea a 5-a, Stihira I, glasul al VI-lea, p. 177.

*devils rejoice over me, on the dreaded day. Do not let me hear, then, Jesus Christ, the voice that sends in the fire of the Gehenna*⁵².

At the aerial toll houses, the sins followed by repentance and confessed, are no longer considered and no mention is made of them, neither at the toll houses, nor at the judgement, the good angels showing at the aerial toll houses only the good deeds. *“Alas poor me who have angered You, my good God and Lord! So many times, I have promised to repent, O Christ, and You found me a liar like the man without understanding. The first apparel of baptism – I have dirtied it; the promises made to You – I have been lazy about them; even this second promise, made in confession in front of You, Your angels and men, wearing sackcloth and ashes – I have deserted it; but You, O Saviour, do not let me die until the end”*⁵³.

Important is the fact that God’s great saints pass unhindered through the powers of darkness because during their earthly life they enter a direct and uncompromising war against them, and so they acquire in the depth of their heart full freedom from sin, becoming temples of the Holy Spirit and so being inaccessible to the fallen angels⁵⁴.

In short, regarding the teaching on the aerial toll houses, we need to always be aware that the way the examination of sins is carried out at the aerial toll houses should never be imagined as something sensual, but, as much as possible, must be understood in a spiritual sense as much as possible. We need to consider the unity of the fundamental ideas concerning the aerial toll houses, without giving much attention to the details, which often differ from author to author.

After this moment, the soul gets in front of the Righteous Judge and, according to the teaching of the Church, in the 40 days after her departure from the body, the soul sees God thrice. The first time on day three she worships the Lord, after which she is taken by the angels and led for six days to admire and give glory

⁵²***, *Octoiul Mare*, Glasul al VII-lea, Marți dimineață, alt Canon al Cinstiului Înaintemergător, Peasna a 6-a, Stihira a II-a, p. 495.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, Glasul al V-lea, Duminică seară, la Doamne strigat-am, Stihiri de umilință, Stihira I, p. 388.

⁵⁴***, *Profeții și mărturiile creștine pentru vremea de acum (selecție de texte de la Sfinții Părinți și autori contemporani)*, vol. 2, Editura Cartea Ortodoxă, Alexandria, 2006, p. 125.

to God for the wonders of heaven. In this contemplation she forgets all the sins she committed in the body, yet nevertheless if she had committed very serious sins she will reproach herself for having wasted her entire life and not having served God according to His commandments. Having finished her visit of heaven, on the ninth day after death the soul ascends again to God to worship Him. For this reason, the Church prays for the departed souls nine days after their departure. After this moment, the soul is taken to visit hell for 30 days, where she sees all the aspects of hell and trembles fearing not to be condemned there forever. On the fortieth day after death, the soul ascends again before God and then the eternal Judge decides the dwelling deserved by the soul according to her acts and according to her entire earthly life⁵⁵. *“Thinking about that dreaded day, O my soul, be vigilant lighting your candle, making it shine with oil, because you do not know when the voice saying ‘Behold the Bridegroom’ will come to you. See therefore O my soul, avoid sleeping unless you want to remain outside, knocking like the five virgins; instead, vigilantly await to meet Christ God with oil for anointment, and He will give to you the divine bridal chamber of His glory”*⁵⁶.

So, the Church remembers the soul of the departed because at first the soul receives the particular judgement, a sentence valid only up to the Universal Judgement when the soul shall be judged solemnly and publicly, together with the body in which she sinned, therefore completely, sentence that will be definitive forever. *“O the ones who will stay on twelve judgement sees together with the Judge and King where He will sit, then, save me, Apostles, from the terrible and frightful judgement”*⁵⁷; *“In the valley of lament, in the place ordained by You, when You will sit to judge righteously, O Merciful One, do not reveal my secret things, and do not shame me before the angels; but have mercy on me, God, and give me forgiveness”*⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ Mitrofan de Konevets, *Viața repausărilor noastre...*, vol. I, pp. 29-30; Nicodim Mândiță, *Priveghiul creștinesc...*, pp. 99-103.

⁵⁶ ***, *Octoiul Mare*, Glasul al VIII-lea, Luni dimineață, după întâia Stihologie, Sedelnele de umilință, Stihira a II-a, p. 652.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, Glasul al V-lea, Joi dimineață, Canonul Sfinților Apostoli, Peasna a 4-a, Stihira a IV-a, p. 427.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, Glasul al VI-lea, Marți dimineață, După întâia Stihologie, Sedelne de umilință, Stihira a II-a, p. 491.

Therefore, the benefit of these remembrance services, beside the things enumerated above, is to multiply the love between the living and the dead; the benefit is directly related to the Christian virtue; the faith in the life beyond the grave is reinforced; the hope in God's mercy is strengthened; the ceaseless presence of Christ in the world is preached; people learn that man is a citizen of heaven; the soul is moved from the fighting Church here on earth to the victorious one from heaven; Christ listens to the prayers of all and is made merciful by the saints' and the Most Holy Theotokos' mediations; the Christians' hope for salvation is not lost even after death; forgiveness is given for the sins of those for whom the remembrance services are held, because God, the Lover of men, always listens to the prayers of His Church; brotherly love is multiplied; the living, saddened for the death of their beloved person, are comforted, because death is bitter, causes grief and suddenly separates from one's beloved; prayer and remembrance services are the only way of communion with them, as there is no other way of communion with the dear ones; remembrance of death and of the vanity of this world and the things in it comes by these commemoration services, according to the scriptural words: *"For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's"* (Romans 14: 8).