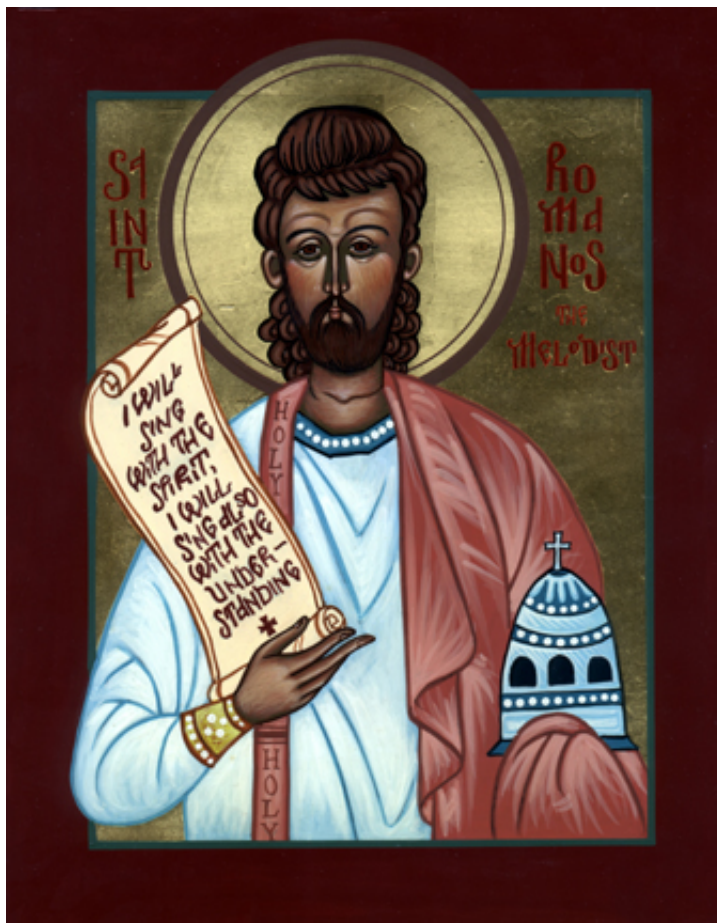




Saint Romanos Melodos: The Lyric Poetry and Drama of Great Friday

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For the first and best edition of Great — St. Melchior Melos and St. Romanos Melos





The Orthodox Church inherits its "writing with understanding" (Pr. Akk. 1.10. 14-15), that is, its main form of artistic expression or "verbal culture" – a model of education results as if we actively seek out and study its resources for the spiritual life – poetic writings, forms of action, church history, iconography, and Divine services. The Church has inherited its own treasures, including church music and hymnography, which are often wrongly regarded as belonging only to certain "regions." In the creative participant, the wealth of liturgical verse begins every question: What and by whom were the texts of the nation's books composed? What are the names of those composers, icons etc. and how are they distributed in services of different types? How did the poetry and music of the Church develop and how do they differ from secular ones? No account of this subject would be complete without mention of Saint Romanos Melode, whose many scholars consider to be not only the greatest poet of the Byzantine period but the greatest poet of the early Middle Ages in any language. He was the recipient of a poetic tradition that looked back to Saint Ephraim of Syria, Proclus, and Melchior of Sardis. His icons, for instance, were the great hymnography of the following centuries: Saint Andrew of Crete, John Chrysostom, Germanos and Constantine among others. His prominence in the field of Orthodox hymnography is emphasized in many scenes of the Presentation of the Theotokos, such as the "Nuptial enough" painted here. In that edition, I remember Saint Romanos as a Christian appropriation of ancient "epic" and "epigram" – concepts for which St. Andrew of the Theotokos supplies a vital dimension.

At many points throughout the various cycles of services, the Church looks back to sixth-century Byzantium for a fragment of the creative oeuvre of Saint Romanos. When we sing his hymns of the Nativity, "Today the Virgin Gave Birth," or of Pascha, "Though This Didst Descend into the Tomb," we but grasp the surface of a rich legacy that is today little known and appreciated. It would be hard to underestimate the importance of Saint Romanos as a creative, composer, and interpreter of the Orthodox world-view. His beautifully crafted poems are a model for all time in art that clearly and accurately communicates the teaching and spirit of the canonical Church and its liturgical traditions. (Last revised "hymns." These contents are to be confused with the designation, "antiphons," for short verses in certain songs.)

From the 19th century onwards, a number of writers, including those who were not Orthodox, saw in the work of Saint Romanos a model of artistic representation derived from classical antiquity, and particularly, Biblical epics. Some of them, with the exception of one, identified it with a literary narrative distinguished by conventional poetic techniques. The Oxford work of P. Maas and C. Trippani, for example, presents thirty-four hymns and stanzas of the Lord. One or two major forms such as the Annunciation and Nativity of the Theotokos, were on Old Testament subjects, three devoted to martyrs, and ten or other subjects such as fasting regulations, and the Resurrection. One of the most influential hymnographers of the Church, Saint Romanos was a cultural figure of the greatest importance (which has not been fully recognized). He is Melchior, "the Melchior," to the Greeks and Slavic peoples, "Saint Romanos," in the Latin tradition.

Saint Romanos was born in Syrian Damascus some twenty years or thirty years after the Council of Chalcedon (451) and came to Constantinople around the birth of the century. From references in his compositions On the Two Virgins (8) and On Earthquake and Fire, we know that he was – perhaps as a "court" dancer and cantor – in Constantinople to witness the Nika riot of January 532. There is also mention in the hagiography of the saint (Vita) (July 552, August 555) and apparently even the collapse and rebuilding of Hagia Sophia (May 518 – December 562). His life offers an inspiring example of a man who, despite health problems and several imprisonments, brought forth great fruit through prayer and perseverance (for details see Orthodox America Vol. XX, No. 11 (1972), September/October 1984, p. 76).

The Greek language had undergone fundamental changes since the Classical period and, by the sixth century A.D., had long been the vehicle of Christian theology and prayer. The departure from Latinism accompanied an aggressive suppression of pagan traditions. Still, the classical legacy in literature, science, philosophy and art remained "contemporary" Greek texts, so it does seem to bring both spiritually alive and, just as importantly, responsible. The lyric poetry of Alkaios, Pindar and other "court" of the genre had enjoyed a special privilege as did the dramatic classics of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Ancient inventors of particular beauty and application, the lyric marriage of music and words and the dramatic forms of poetry, song and dance were competitive art requiring considerable training and skill.

Significantly, Saint Romanos has been called the "Byzantine Pindar" and a "spiritual dramatic." That is, a Christian composer whose poetry was in the same league as that of the ancients, technically and artistically. It is important to note, however, that he helped forge a new and authentic Christian culture that was not tied directly to the language and forms of the pagan past. Indeed, unlike classical authors such as Saint Chrysostom of Alexandria and Gregory of Nazianzus, Saint Romanos was not bound by the strict jacket of secular expression and sanctification. His Greek is a rich blend of vulgarized phonology, traditional hymnographic patterns, and poetic contemporary speech.

The ancient concepts of "epic" and "drama" are fundamental to Saint Romanos' hymns, to be sure, but in a new manifestation, that is, elevated and sanctified in the context of Divine service. The mythology and socio-political competition of Greek texts such as the Pythian games and City Dionysia were replaced by Scripture, theology and prayer offered "with one mouth and one heart" by the Church. Thus, Saint Romanos' art reflects the cultural transformation of Hellenic from "secular, legislative assembly" (in classical Athens, for example) to "assembly of the Christian Church," the Church. The hymnology, in its developed form, was a lyric beauty in which tradition of the Church was bound to a living tradition "Every day" and realized as a play of words with characters and contemporary. Towards the end of the seventh century, the hymnology was replaced by the familiar forms of the laikon, a non-dramatic and non-terrestrial hymn of praise consisting of stanzas each with many stanzas and each having a different rhythm and melodic form. In the laikon, the lyric of praise pervaded over the laikon's dramatic and alluring mode of every willing as practiced by Saint Romanos.

