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## ***John Climacus's theological teachings on Psalmody, in his classic ascetic treatise "The Ladder of Divine Ascent".***

### ***Abstract***

Saint John Climacus, who was abbot in the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine's on Mt. Sinai, was the author of the famous ascetic treatise "**The Ladder of Divine Ascent**" (literally, **the ladder of the virtues**). In this classic work, Saint John describes a wise method for waking man up from the sleep of ignorance and for approaching God, through the spiritual way of life. During this fight against his ego, man must try to progress through a scale of thirty <30> virtues, in order to reach the last steps of the "ladder", which is the acquisition of faith, hope and, finally, love.

According to the teachings of the Orthodox Christian Fathers, Psalmody is a very useful tool, a necessary instrument for everyone who wishes for his soul to be saved. It is a very good way for praying, thanking and glorifying the Holy Trinitarian God. In addition, Saint John Climacus describes not only the positive effects of Psalmody on the human soul, but he warns the faithful about the dangers that they may face if he does not make the right use of Psalmody. That means that in man's soul there are many passions, like coquetry, vanity, egoism, egocentricity, bad pride and many others, which can turn Psalmody from an instrument for salvation into an instrument for the soul's perdition and death.

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Mr. Chairman, honored members of the Organizing and Scientific Committee of the Conference, I'd like to thank you for inviting me to participate in this prestigious International Musicological Conference.

Esteemed colleagues, it is a pleasure to be involved in such constructive and high-level scientific meetings.

Before I begin, please allow me to publicly thank His Eminence Metropolitan Ignatius of Dimitriadis and Almyrou (Volos), the Director of the Academy for Theological Studies Dr. Pantelis Kalaitzidis, for their support of our work here at Oradea and my great friends, Fr. Gregory Edwards (Metropolis of Dimitriadis), Costis Drygianakis and Zoi Manini-Naoum, for the translation of the Greek text of my paper.

## **FIRST PART - Introduction**

### **A. The Orthodox Patristic Texts as sources for the science of "Musicology of the Psaltic Art".**

The title of my paper, which you see on the transparency is: "Saint John Climacus's theological teachings on Psalmody, in his classic ascetic treatise "The Ladder of Divine Ascent'." Apart from its enormous theo-

logical and ascetic interest, “The Ladder” is also extremely valuable for St. John’s theological teaching on Psalmody because it reflects the Orthodox patristic tradition on the position and the role of music in worship, and also on Psalmody as a means of common and personal prayer. The fundamental goal of my presentation is to show the usefulness of the Orthodox Patristic Texts and of the ecclesiastical literature in general as direct and indirect musicological sources<sup>1</sup>. These sources, I maintain should be studied via the scientific musicological branches “Literature of the Psaltic Art”<sup>2</sup>, “Theology of Psalmody”, “Pastoral Theology of Music”, “Psychology of the Psaltic Art” and, finally, the “Ethics of Psalmody”.

In reality, however, my ultimate goal is to demonstrate the necessity, henceforth, of treating Byzantine Musicology (I prefer the term “Musicology of the Psaltic Art”), as an independent science together with its own specific disciplines, many of which have yet to be explored by the international musicological community. I think that Byzantine Musicology is entitled, finally, to a full curriculum, as well as the strict specialization of its researchers and the showcasing of the full range of disciplines belonging and related to it.

The rapid development of the science of Musicology of the Psaltic Art (Psalmody) has brought about a new necessity: While the primary concern of the scientific community has been to this point the labeling and study of the **primary** sources of Orthodox Church Music, namely, manuscripts of musical codices of the Psaltic Art, a new phase has emerged which focuses on the identification, labeling and investigation of the **secondary** sources of Orthodox Church Music.

Among these secondary sources should undoubtedly be included (and recognized as **secondary** sources) the Orthodox Patristic Texts, which spotlight the Orthodox life of the Church and, as **direct** and **indirect** sources, provide a great deal of information also about Church Music. This data can feed research into different areas of the musicological science, such as **Historical Musicology**, **Comparative Musicology**, **Musical Anthropology** and most importantly, **Literature and Theology of Psalmody**, the latter as a subdomain of the **Theology of Orthodox Worship**.

## B. The Author and His Treatise “The Ladder of Divine Ascent”.

John Climacus was born, according to some researchers, about 525 AD, while others maintain 579; his origin, however, is not certainly known. It is known that he went to Sinai, to be a monk, in the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine, when he was sixteen <16> years old. By then, he had acquired a good knowledge of worldly wisdom, and that is why he was called “scholastic” (“bookish”). According to tradition, he was tonsured a monk at the age of twenty <20 > years old. At Sinai he entrusted his soul and he put himself under obedience to the confessor elder Martyrios for nineteen <19> years, and, in this way, he renounced his worldly wisdom, to acquire the “heavenly ignorance”, as his synaxarion mentions. After the death of the elder, at the age of thirty-five <35>, he chose the ascetic hermit life, and he remained for forty <40> years in the now famous cave “of Tholas”, eight <8> miles from the Monastery of Sinai. There, away from the world, with the aid of fasting, vigil, silence, prayer and tears of compunction, he cultivated all the great virtues. Due to the recognition of his intellectual superiority, John was forcibly elevated to the abbot’s throne of the monastery of St. Catherine’s Sinai. Later, however John left the abbacy and again withdrew to his beloved silence, leaving in his place his blood brother, who also was a monk at Sinai, Abbot George. John passed away, according to some, about the year

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<sup>1</sup> As far as I know, it was professor Antonios Alygizakis who first made the distinction between direct and indirect sources of Church Music, in his book, *Θέματα Εκκλησιαστικής Μουσικής*, Thessaloniki: Pan. Pournaras 1978.

<sup>2</sup> “Literature of the Psaltic Art” is that which would examine the relevance of Chanting and Hymnography, as well as anything else encompassed by the term Literature, such as, for example, the study of Patristic Texts on Church Music and exploring secular, non-ecclesiastical works, of all literary genres, which may directly or indirectly refer to the Psaltic Art.

600 AD, and according to others around 649. His life was written by the monk Daniel Raithinos. The Orthodox Church celebrates his memory on March 30th, and also on the Fourth Sunday of Lent.

Now, his famous treatise, "The Ladder of Divine Ascent", from which he also received the name "John of the Ladder", is one of the most famous and widespread ascetic writings. It is favorite reading in the Refectory of monasteries, and that's why it is found in numerous manuscripts as well as printed versions in their libraries. John, abbot of Raitho's monastery, asked John Climacus for a report of his perceptions about spiritual exercise, to which request John Climacus sent him "the Ladder," which, according to experts, had already been written and completed. In the "Ladder", the author illustrates the stages of the believer's spiritual perfection. He develops them in thirty <30> levels (Jesus Christ's age), as steps of a ladder, which he took from Jacob's vision in the Old Testament<sup>1</sup>. These thirty <30> spiritual steps are as follows:

1. On renunciation of the world, or asceticism
2. On detachment
3. On exile or pilgrimage; concerning dreams that beginners have
4. On obedience (On blessed and ever-memorable obedience [in addition to episodes involving many individuals])
5. On painstaking and true repentance, which constitutes the life of the holy convicts, and about the Prison
6. On remembrance of death
7. On joyful mourning (On joy-making mourning)
8. On freedom from anger and on meekness
9. On remembrance of wrongs
10. On slander or calumny
11. On talkativeness and silence
12. On lying
13. On despondency
14. On that clamorous mistress, the stomach
15. On incorruptible purity and chastity to which the corruptible attain by toil and sweat
16. On love of money, or avarice
17. On non-possessiveness (that hastens one Heavenwards)
18. On insensibility, that is, deadening of the soul and the death of the mind before the death of the body
19. On sleep and prayer, and on Psalmody in the monks groups and on Psalmody in the monks accompaniment (On sleep, prayer, and psalmody with the brotherhood)
20. On bodily vigil (On bodily vigil and how to use it to attain spiritual vigil, and how to practice it)
21. On unmanly and puerile cowardice
22. On vanity (On the many forms of vainglory)
23. On mad pride
24. On unclean blasphemous thoughts; concerning unmentionable blasphemous thoughts
25. On meekness, simplicity, and guilelessness, which come not from nature but from conscious effort, and on guile
26. On the destroyer of the passions, most sublime humility, which is rooted in spiritual perception
27. On discrimination (On discernment of thoughts, passions and virtues; on expert discernment; brief summary of all aforementioned)
28. On quiescence (On holy solitude [quiet / contemplation] of body and soul; different aspects of stillness and how to distinguish them)
29. On prayer (On holy and blessed prayer, the mother of virtues, and on the attitude of mind and body in prayer)

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 28, 12.

30. *Concerning Heaven on earth, or Godlike dispassion and perfection, and the resurrection of the soul before the general resurrection*
31. *Concerning the linking together of the supreme trinity among the virtues; a brief exhortation summarizing all that has said at length in this book*

## SECOND PART

### *The Teaching on Psalmody of St. John of Sinai*

If I had to give a general outline of St. John Climacus's teaching about Holy Psalmody in his "Ladder", I think there would be no better introduction than a quote on Psalmody from another Sinaite monk and ecclesiastical author, St. Gregory of Sinai, who expressed the Orthodox theology in a magnificent way. St. Gregory, who lived, according to experts, from the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> until the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> c., noticed a difference in the attitude of the Fathers of the Eastern Church on Chanting. In his work entitled *"15 chapters on peace and on the two modes of prayer"*, in response to the question "On the difference of those who chant" he wrote: "Why is it that some recommend a lot of chanting, others a little and others not at all, recommending instead only prayer and physical effort, from handiwork or from prostrations or from other tiring work? The reason for this difference is as follows: Those who found grace from ascetical practices, after many labors and much time, taught this to others. According to St. Isaac the Syrian, they neither believe nor accept those who, with deep knowledge, by God's mercy, reach divine grace in a short amount of time because of their fervent faith. They condemn these people because they are misled, unawares, by ignorance and arrogance, and they insist that any other path, is delusion and not the power of His Grace... So, because of their disbelief and high-mindedness, they do not accept the excellent properties of prayer given to some by the Spirit in a special way."<sup>1</sup>

Saint John Climacus seems to have studied the issue of Sacred Psalmody in the Church ascetic tradition of the East. And it is clear from internal evidence in his writing that he had good knowledge of the patristic writings of the earlier era. And while he compiles, somehow, all the traditions and tendencies about Holy Psalmody, he does not choose to write a chapter specifically on it, but he scatters his relevant theological teachings amongst the thirty <30> chapters of the "Ladder". From this fact alone, one could draw a first general conclusion: *John Climacus does not consider Holy Chanting to be one of the virtues, which the faithful are called to acquire and cultivate, but he treats it as a means, an auxiliary tool in the effort (ascesis) in Christ to acquire the virtues. Indeed, as a tool, it may not be appropriate in all cases, and in some it may be useless. In other cases, especially when we do not use the tool in a right and reasonable way, it may even prove injurious and damaging.* But, let's look analytically at each of the cases.

The processing and presentation of the material is not in accordance with the order of the thirty <30> steps of the "Ladder", but according to the subject classification of the quotations, which were highlighted. Note also that the passages on Psalmody do not necessarily share the same theme with the chapter from which they originated.

#### **i.CONDITIONS FOR PARTICIPATION IN PSALMODY**

*It is a given that in order for one to engage in Holy Chanting and in order for the Psalmody to be pure*

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<sup>1</sup> St. Gregory of Sinai, *On Stillness: Fifteen Texts, On Two Ways of Prayer*, Chapter 5 (*Philokalia of the Neptic Fathers*), translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text* (Faber & Faber). Vol. 1 (1983) (ISBN 8-0571130139); Vol. 2 (1982) (ISBN 978-0571154661); Vol. 3 (1986) (ISBN 978-0571175253); Vol. 4 (1999) (ISBN 978-0571193820).

and beneficial, he must have certain criteria. One would expect these conditions to be a good voice, theoretical and practical studies in music, the acquisition of appropriate techniques etc, but John does mention any of these, not even once. He seems not at all interested in a good voice and music training. The conditions for Chanting, rather, are similar to those for prayer. Moreover, he considers it obvious that Psalmody is prayer; it is a form of prayer. He writes: "He who realizes that he is standing before God will be as still as a pillar during prayer and will pray with heart-felt feeling; and none of the aforesaid demons will make sport of him." [R. 4 (4) On sleep, prayer, and psalmody with the brotherhood] (pg. 70 / ch. 19 / pr. 3b) <sup>1</sup>

Thus, one fundamental condition for chanting that is pleasing to God is for the believer to be aware that he stands before the Holy Triune God. If he realizes this, he will be conscious of his smallness, and also about the grandeur of God's boundless love, tolerance and condescension toward His creature. Then he can't be praying to the Lord with arrogance, audacity and boastfulness. Of course, the holy author of the "Ladder" recognizes that: "Psalmody in a crowded congregation is accompanied by captivity and wandering of thoughts; but in solitude this does not happen." However, those in solitude are liable "to be assailed by despondency, whereas in the former (i.e. Psalmody in a crowded congregation), the brethren help each other by their zeal." [AB. 35 (37) On prayer (On holy and blessed prayer, the mother of virtues, and on the attitude of mind and body in prayer)] (pg. 122 / ch. 28 / pr. 32)

Aware, therefore, of his position, the faithful must run with zeal to prayerful Chanting. He himself has to cultivate this zeal, and then this willingness will be a helper and supporter in the difficult moments of despondency and the various temptations.

In the Ladder's step on purity, we discover another precondition for Chanting, that of chastity. Of course, it is a given in the Church that "praise from the lips of a sinner is not good", here, however, St. John goes further, considering prerequisite for Psalmody not only to be purity of the body, but also chastity even of the thoughts.

"And so let them look to their own affairs, and let them cast out of their heart with all speed the snake mentioned above, killing it by much humility, so that when they have got rid of it they may in time be stripped of their clothing of skin and as chaste children sing to the Lord the triumph song of purity." [O. 79b (76c) On incorruptible purity and chastity to which the corruptible attain by toil and sweat] (p. 64-65 / ch. 15 / pr. 79)

Also very interesting is a related incident, which the holy author describes. He writes: "Noticing that one of the brothers stood during the psalm singing with more heartfelt feeling than many of the others, and that his movements and the changes of his face made it look as though he was talking to someone, especially at the beginning of the hymns, I asked him to explain what this habit of the blessed man meant. And knowing that it was for my benefit not to hide it, he told me: 'I have the habit, Father John, at the very beginning, of collecting my thoughts, my mind and my soul, and summoning them, I cry to them: O come, let us worship and fall down before Christ, our King and God.'" [D. 42 (32c) On obedience (On blessed and ever-memorable obedience [in addition to episodes involving many individuals])] (pg. 19 / ch. 4 / pr. 38)

This process of the purification of thoughts passes through the purification of the soul from the two generative passions of love for the evil world (gr. word, "filokosmia") and sensuality, which make "pure" prayer impossible, and thus also "pure" (without thoughts) Chanting. Moreover, the mind must be purified from cares and thoughts, and the body should cease to be an earthly weight and drag in order for the mind (nous) to engage in divine meanings: "Rise from love of the world and love of pleasure, lay aside cares, strip your mind, renounce your body; [and then pray / chant], because prayer is nothing other than estrangement from the world, visible and invisible." [AB. 27 (28) On prayer (On holy and blessed prayer, the mother of virtues,

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers in parentheses indicate the pages, chapters and paragraphs of the English translation.

and on the attitude of mind and body in prayer)] (pg. 121 / ch. 28 / pr. 25)

When these conditions prevail, the mind is warmed and given over, with ever more intensity, to the praise of God, like a strong and invincible horse: "A good horse when mounted warms up and quickens its pace. By pace I mean psalm-singing; and by horse, a resolute mind. He scents the battle from afar, he is all ready, and remains master of the field." [AB. 50 (49) On prayer (On holy and blessed prayer, the mother of virtues, and on the attitude of mind and body in prayer)] (pg. 123 / ch. 28 / pr. 47)

As much as the mind is warmed in Chanting, so also is the heart warmed. Thus, the God-loving soul longingly seeks after prayer. According to St. John: "The God-loving monk, when the bell rings for prayer, says: 'Good, good!' The lazy one says: 'What a nuisance!'" [S. 6 (4b) On bodily vigil (On bodily vigil and how to use it to attain spiritual vigil, and how to practice it)] (pg. 70 / ch. 20 / pr. 7)

## ii.CONDITIONS FOR LISTENING TO PSALMODY

We spoke about the conditions for participating in Chanting. But even the simple act of listening during the services must be performed under certain conditions: As is well known, where the devil is, there is confusion and disorder. Of course, his purpose is to spoil the order and the atmosphere of prayer. That's why the holy author of the "Ladder" advises: "At all times, but most of all during the singing in church, let us keep quiet and undistracted. For by distractions the demons aim to bring our prayer to nothing." [D. 111 (101) On obedience (On blessed and ever-memorable obedience [in addition to episodes involving many individuals])] (pg. 25 / ch. 4 / pr. 101)

Elsewhere, again, St. John reminds his readers: "It is not proper for anyone to engage in any accessory work, or rather distraction, during the time of prayer. For the angel who attended Antony the Great taught him this clearly." [R. 7(6) On sleep, prayer, and psalmody with the brotherhood] (p. 70 / ch. 19 / pr. 7)

This is an affront to God and, of course, does not allow the mind to concentrate on the divine meanings of Psalmody. The wise father recognizes, however, that, "in singing with many it is impossible to pray with the wordless prayer of the spirit", which he considers as the highest step of prayer. Thus, he exhorts, instead of another mental prayer, for the mind to be concentrated on the meanings of the chanted hymns. He notes: "But your mind should be engaged in contemplation of the words being chanted or read..., while you are waiting for the alternate verse to be chanted." [R. 6(5) On sleep, prayer, and psalmody with the brotherhood] (p. 70 / ch. 19 / pr. 6)

## iii.PSALMODY AS THE WORK OF THE ANGELS

Why, however, does John Climacus attribute so much importance to Chanting? Is it really so valuable? Yes, since the psalmist on earth imitates the primary and unceasing work of the Holy Angels. This work can be experienced by anyone who has been deemed worthy, here on earth, to reach the heights of the virtue of stillness (*hesychia*)<sup>1</sup>: "Come and follow me to union with most blessed solitude, and I will teach you the visible activity and life of the spiritual powers. They never weary of praising their Maker to all eternity, and he who ascends to the heaven of solitude never ceases to praise his Creator." [AA. A30b (A26b) On quiescence (On holy solitude [quiet / contemplation] of body and soul; different aspects of stillness and how to distinguish them) (A)] (pg. 113 / ch. 27 / pr. 28)

Indeed, in some way, and even literally "The celestial powers unite in worship with him whose soul is quiet, and dwell lovingly with him." [AA. A10 (A8) On quiescence (On holy solitude [quiet / contemplation] of body and soul; different aspects of stillness and how to distinguish them) (A)] (p. 112 / ch. 27 / pr. 9)

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<sup>1</sup> «Solitude is unceasing worship and waiting upon God» *The Ladder*, 26, B61 (B25), Περὶ ησυχίας (B').

#### *iv.* PSALMODY AS A METHOD FOR THANKSGIVING

*Since small and shabby man has been found worthy to imitate, through Chanting, the Holy Angels, he ought to treat Chanting wisely, and use it primarily to give thanks and praises to the Holy Triune God, each time He helps man to achieve a spiritual victory.*

*In the chapter on cowardice, John advises the faithful how, through prayer, they can beat the terrible disease of cowardice. He urges: "When you get rid of the disease (of fear), praise Him who has delivered you. If you continue to be thank-ful, He will protect you for ever." [T. 7b (6) On unmanly and puerile cowardice] (pg. 72 / ch. 21 / pr. 7b)*

*Similarly, any spiritual victory should conclude with triumphant glorification of the Lord; but especially if this victory is against the accursed vanity, the chariot on which rides pride. When, through humiliation and self-reproach you beat vanity, shouldn't you burst into Psalmody of thanksgiving? John says this very poetically, borrowing lyrics from the 1<sup>st</sup> Biblical Ode of Moses: "For pride's saddle-horse... is vainglory on which I am mounted. But holy humility and self-accusation laugh at both the horse and its rider, happily singing the song of victory: Let us sing to the Lord, for gloriously has He been glorified: horse and rider He has thrown into the sea and into the abyss of humility." [V. 31 (28) On painstaking and true repentance, which constitutes the life of the holy convicts, and about the Prison] (pg. 79 / ch. 22 / pr. 37c)*

#### *v.* PSALMODY AS A WEAPON FOR DEFENCE AND ATTACK, AND AS A CURATIVE MEANS

*This gentle means, Psalmody, whereby the Lord is pleased and thanked can be automatically changed into a powerful weapon; a weapon for defense and attack against the terrible demonic temptations, but also against our personal weaknesses and passions. St. John knows and reminds readers of his work that, while the fathers characterized "...prayer as a wall, pure tears as a bath..." [D. 9 (10) On obedience (On blessed and ever-memorable obedience [in addition to episodes involving many individuals])]*

*They characterized Psalmody as a weapon. This weapon is very effective against sleep. John advises monks who are unable to fight the demon of sleep to resort to common Psalmody with the other brothers of the monastery: "Not until we are freed from this (the demon of sleep) should we beg to be excused from common worship, for often shame keeps us from dozing." [S. 17 (9c) On bodily vigil (On bodily vigil and how to use it to attain spiritual vigil, and how to practice it)] (pg. 71 / ch. 20 / pr. 17)*

*There is another relevant reference in the chapter on vigil, where he characterizes vigils done with the help of Psalmody as "monastic." "For some at their evening all-night vigil lift up their hands in prayer as if they were incorporeal and stripped of all care. Others stand at that time singing psalms.*

*Others are more occupied in reading. And some out of weakness courageously resist sleep by working with their hands. Others try to feel the horror of the thought of death, hoping thus to obtain contrition. And of all these, the first and last are in all-night vigil for the love of God; the second do what befits a monk." [S. 2b (1c) On bodily vigil (On bodily vigil and how to use it to attain spiritual vigil, and how to practice it)] (pg. 70 / ch. 20 / pr. 2a)*

*At the end of Chapter 13, John captures and forces despondency to reveal how it comes about and whom it torments: "Tell me, you nerveless, shuffling fellow, who viciously spawned you? Who are your offspring? Who are your foes? Who is your destroyer?" And despondency, under compulsion, may be thought to reply: 'My offspring who abide with me are: changing from place to place, disobedience to one's spiritual father, forgetfulness of the judgement, and sometimes breach of the vow. And my opponents, by whom I am now bound, are psalmody and manual labour. My enemy is the thought of death. What completely mortifies me is prayer with firm hope of future blessings.'" [M. 11-12 (10) On despondency] (pg. 53 / ch. 13 / pr. 16)*

How powerful a weapon against despondency, then, is chanting when it takes place as pure prayer? Moreover, hymnody may also be a therapeutic “drug” against the passion of anger, St. John contends: “Love of indignity is a cure for anger. Hymnody, compassion and poverty are the suffocation of sorrow”, [Z. C10(C3) On discrimination (On discernment of thoughts, passions and virtues; on expert discernment; brief summary of all aforementioned) (C)] (pg. 108 / ch. 26 / pr. 9)

#### **vi.PSALMODY AS A MEANS OF ASCETISM**

Similar to the previous are two more references to Psalmody in the “Ladder’s” step on stillness, where, besides a weapon, Chanting is recognized as a general means of spiritual asceticism, especially for beginners and ordinary strugglers, who have still not reached the heights of passionless stillness and unceasing mental prayer: “Devote the greater part of the night to prayer and only what is left to recital of the psalter. And during the day again prepare yourself according to your strength.” [AA. B92 (B47) On quiescence (On holy solitude [quiet / contemplation] of body and soul; different aspects of stillness and how to distinguish them) (B)] (p. 118 / ch. 27 / pr. 77)

And another: “Some diminish the passions, others sing psalms and spend most of their time in prayer, while some apply themselves to contemplation, and live their life in profound contemplation.” [AA. B32, 35 (B2, 3b) On quiescence (On holy solitude [quiet / contemplation] of body and soul; different aspects of stillness and how to distinguish them) (B)] (p. 114 / ch. 27 / pr. 33)

#### **vii.PSALMODY AS A MINISTRY**

Of course, one of the most important practices for the acquisition of virtues is working for the common good. In the language of the ecclesiastical and ascetic tradition, this is called “ministry” (*diakonima*). Thus, while some choose to converse with the Lord through their personal prayer, others choose to work the “ministry” of Psalmody, in order to serve their brothers: “Some converse with God as with a friend and master, interceding with praise and petition not for themselves but for others.” [AB. 6 (4 [5]) On prayer (On holy and blessed prayer, the mother of virtues, and on the attitude of mind and body in prayer)] (pg. 120 / ch. 28 / pr. 6)

#### **viii.OTHER SPIRITUAL BENEFITS OF PSALMODY**

St. John Climacus, speaking about Psalmody, occasionally –although not systematically– refers to the diverse spiritual benefits it offers to the faithful. Indeed, at the end of Psalmody, the struggler collects his reward just as a merchant counts his profit at the end of the day: “When the day is over, the vendor sits down and counts his profits, but the ascetic does so when the psalm-singing is over.” [S. 18 (11) On bodily vigil (On bodily vigil and how to use it to attain spiritual vigil, and how to practice it)] (pg. 71 / ch. 20 / pr. 18)

John, in fact, acknowledges that Chanting does not have the same effect on all humans. He very aptly observes: “We have not all got the same needs, neither as regards the body nor as regards the spirit. For brisk chanting suits some, and more leisurely singing suits others. For the former are struggling with captivity of the mind, and the latter with ignorance.” [AB. 65 (60) On prayer (On holy and blessed prayer, the mother of virtues, and on the attitude of mind and body in prayer)] (pg. 124 / ch. 28 / pr. 62)

Let's look more carefully at this quotation, since it is very rich and interesting. First, the holy father gives us a valuable historical witness, useful from a musicological perspective, that, already in his time, two tendencies had distinguished themselves. The first tendency was those who argued that short Chanting is the most appropriate for them (I think that they mean short duration Chanting) because they thus avoid the captivity of the mind. This position is favored, as implied in John's text, by those who are more proficient in mental prayer and physical asceticism, love the sacred stillness (*hesychia*) and do not want to divide the concentration



of their mind. The other trend, i.e., remaining longer in Psalmody, is represented by the simplest strugglers, who claim that in this way they are fighting their ignorance, i.e., they are helping their immature spiritual state in matters of prayer.

#### ix. SPIRITUAL DANGERS THAT COME FROM PSALMODY

We now come to an important part of St. John Climacus's teaching about Psalmody, specifically about the spiritual dangers that lie in wait from uncritical or excessive or untimely use of Psalmody. First, I will convey here a vivid quote about the demons, who are tasked with impeding prayer and dishonoring Psalmody: "Let us observe and we shall find that the spiritual trumpet serves [in a monastery] as an outward signal for the gathering of the brethren, but it is also the unseen signal for the assembly of our foes. So some of them stand by our bed and when we get up urge us to lie down again: 'Wait,' they say, 'till the preliminary hymns are finished; then you can go to church.' Others plunge those standing at prayer into sleep... Some of them bring on waves of laughter during prayer, thereby desiring to stir up the anger of God against us. Some force us to hurry the reading or singing merely from laziness; others suggest that we should sing more slowly for the pleasure of it; and sometimes they sit at our mouths and shut them, so that we can scarcely open them." [R. 7(6) On sleep, prayer, and psalmody with the brotherhood] (pg. 69 - 70 / ch. 19 / pr. 3)

More specifically, for Chanting: The boundaries between healthy and "passionate" Psalmody i.e., Psalmody stimulated by passionate spiritual states, are delicate and blurry. Let us look now at a large number of examples, which John provides, warning about the dangers lurking in Chanting. The first fine line is between loving God and sensuality: "Let us be guided by the same rule in singing melodies and songs. For lovers of God are moved to holy gaiety, to divine love and to tears both by worldly and by spiritual songs; but lovers of pleasure to the opposite." [O. 59 (59) On incorruptible purity and chastity to which the corruptible attain by toil and sweat] (pg. 62 / ch. 15 / pr. 61)

In other cases, the use of Psalmody with discernment plays a large role, because: "Sometimes singing, in moderation, successfully relieves the temper. But sometimes, if untimely and immoderate, it lends itself to the lure of pleasure. Let us then appoint definite times for this, and so make good use of it." [H. 23 (19) On freedom from anger and on meekness] (pg. 45 / ch. 8 / pr. 17) Again, here sensuality...

Another striking observation: "He who is not alone but is with others cannot derive so much profit from psalmody as from prayer; for the confusion of voices renders the psalms indistinct." [D. 100 (87) On obedience (On blessed and ever-memorable obedience [in addition to episodes involving many individuals])] (pg. 24 / ch. 4 / pr. 91)

Here again questions are raised about monks' stillness and about their participation in the common act of worship. In the chapter on purity, which we saw earlier again, John has still other interesting examples of his godly wisdom. He observes: "Some say that it is from thoughts of fornication that passions invade the body. But some affirm on the contrary that it is from the feeling of the body that evil thoughts are born... And the latter adduce the malice of bodily passion in justification of their view, saying that often bad thoughts manage to enter into the heart as the result of a pleasant sight, or the touch of a hand, or the smell of perfume, or hearing sweet voices." [O. 76 (74a) On incorruptible purity and chastity to which the corruptible attain by toil and sweat] (pg. 64 / ch. 15 / pr. 76)

This sudden penetration of temptation into humans is called "**insulting**" (greek word "prosvoli"). However, there is something even worse than this "insult" or "attack" – the "**pararripismos**." He explains in detail: "Amongst the more precise and discerning Fathers there is mention of a still more subtle notion, something which some of them call a flick of the mind. This is its characteristic: without passage of time, without word or image, it instantaneously introduces (thus the "insult") the passion to the victim. There is nothing swifter

than this in the material world or more indiscernible in the spiritual... If anyone, therefore, with the help of mourning has been able to detect such a subtlety, he can explain to us how it is possible for a soul, by the eye alone... or the hearing of a song, without any notion or thought, to commit a definite sin of impurity.” [O. 75 (73e) On incorruptible purity and chastity to which the corruptible attain by toil and sweat] (pg. 64 / ch. 15 / pr. 75)

Allow me to open here a parenthesis: These terrible temptations, *insulting* and *pararripismos*, are made even more invincible, when accompanied by the equally dreadful *preconceptions* (greek word, *prolipseis*). According to Saint Mark the Hermit “*prolipsis* is advance involuntary memory of evil”, i.e., *prolipsis* is the recollection of old sins without trying to chase them away, which is certainly due to one’s sinful past. John is emphatic: “It’s hard to beat someone’s *prolipseis*.” [Z. A32 (A28) On discrimination (On discernment of thoughts, passions and virtues; on expert discernment; brief summary of all aforementioned) (A)]

I here close that parenthesis in our discussion.

John concludes that very sensual Chanting can be derived from the demon of fornication, which is clearly distinguished from the sweetness of Psalmody, which is derived from the Grace of the Holy Spirit: “In judging delights felt by us during psalmody, let us examine, ponder and observe what comes to us from the demon of fornication, and what comes from the words of the Spirit and from the grace and power contained in them.” [O. 47 (45) On incorruptible purity and chastity to which the corruptible attain by toil and sweat] (pg. 61 / ch. 15 / pr. 49)

Another monastic virtue is “joyful mourning” i.e., mourning for sins, which in no way coincide with the deadly sin of “sadness”. Excessive Chanting with shouts destroys this “joyous mourning”: “Just as a widow bereft of her husband and having an only son finds in him her sole comfort after the Lord, so for a soul that has fallen there is no other consolation at the time of its departure but the toils of fasting and tears. People like that never sing, nor do they shout loudly to themselves in songs, because such things dissipate mourning. And if you hope to summon it by such means, then you are a long way from achieving your aim. For mourning is the characteristic pain of a soul on fire.” [G. 56-57 (51) On joyful mourning (On joy-making mourning)] (pg 42 / ch. 7 / pr. 51 - 52)

Another common passion, which attacks those who deal with Chanting, is that of vanity. Behold, what vainglory can accomplish: “Vainglory incites monks given to levity to anticipate the arrival of lay guests... It stirs those who are slack at standing in psalmody to make an effort; those who have no voice become good singers and the sleepy wake up. It flatters the conductor, and begs to be given first place in the choir; it calls him father and master as long as the guests are still there. Vainglory makes those who are preferred, proud, and those who are slighted, resentful.” [U. 22 (18) On vanity (On the many forms of vainglory)] (pg. 74 / ch. 22 / pr. 22 - 23)

This passion of vanity can tragically mock the Chanter. John sees him as an object of ridicule: “Who will not laugh at the vainglorious worker, standing for psalmody and moved by this passion now to laughter and then to tears for all to see?” [U. 9 (7) On vanity (On the many forms of vainglory)] (pg. 73 / ch. 22 / pr. 9)

Even prayer and chanting are in danger of two related passions, indolence and despondency<sup>1</sup>. “Despondency is a slackness of soul, a weakening of the mind, neglect of asceticism, hatred of the vow made. It is the blessing of worldlings. It accuses God of being merciless and without love for men. It is being languid in singing psalms, weak in prayer...” [M. 2 (1) On despondency] (pg. 52 / ch. 13 / pr. 2) But, “when there is no psalmody, then despondency does not make its appearance. And as soon as the appointed Office is finished, the

<sup>1</sup> «Since despondency is one of the eight capital vices, and moreover the gravest, let us deal with it just as we have dealt with the others”, *The Ladder*, 13, 11-12 (8) Περὶ ἀκηδίας.

eyes open.” [M. 11-12 (8) *On despondency*] (pg. 52 / ch. 13 / pr. 13) *This is what St. John observed regarding despondency.*

How then does one avoid all these temptations and attacks? The ascetic father himself gives us the answer: “Let the remembrance of the eternal fire lie down with you every evening, and let it rise with you too. Then sloth will never overwhelm you at the time of psalmody.” [G. 24 (23) *On joyful mourning (On joy-making mourning)*] (pg. 39 / ch. 7 / pr. 21)

## x. MISCELLANEOUS

I realize that this lies somewhat outside the scope of the present paper, but, in order to provide a complete catalogue of the “Ladder”’s references to Psalmody, i.e., the Psaltic Art of the Eastern Church, as well as to music in general, I will cite here some additional passages from St. John Climacus’s work that may have a direct or indirect bearing on what we’ve said above.

### x<sub>1</sub>. PSALMODY AS A SCIENCE AND AN ART

If St. John were asked his opinion on the issue of the psaltic art and science, he would probably reply with the following: “In all the sciences, as everyone knows, there are differences of opinion and aim. For everything is not perfect in all, either from want of industry or from lack of strength.” [AA. A30b (A26b) *On quiescence (On holy solitude [quiet / contemplation] of body and soul; different aspects of stillness and how to distinguish them)* (A)] (pg. 113 / ch. 27 / pr. 29)

If, again, he had to respond to the question of how one can learn the Psaltic Art, he would probably say that two virtues are need above all else: obedience and humility. “It is impossible for those who have not first lived in obedience to obtain humility; for everyone who has learned an art on his own fancies himself.” [Z. A32 (A28) *On discrimination (On discernment of thoughts, passions and virtues; on expert discernment; brief summary of all aforementioned)* (A)] (pg. 96 / ch. 26 / pr. 72)

### x<sub>2</sub>. CONCERNING THE PASTOR/TEACHER

Teachers of the Psaltic Art would also benefit from St. John’s advice to them. The three (3) excerpts below constitute his advice “To the pastor”, taken from this father’s small work of the same name, which is usually published together with the “Ladder”, but also applies to teachers of Psalmody.

“An admirable teacher is not the one who made good and bright students wise but rather the one who made the dim and unskilled students wise.” AE (20) To the Pastor.

When the sheep graze, the shepherd should not cease playing the flute of teaching, especially when they are going to sleep. Because the wolf fears nothing so much as the sound of the pastoral flute...” AE (37) To the Pastor.

“Consider whether you see trees, which in your field catch unfairly place, while they may bear fruit in another. These you do not neglect to advise lovingly to detached from your own field and transplanted elsewhere.” AE (86) To the Pastor.

### x<sub>3</sub>. REFERENCES TO MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Finally, let us mention here some cases where the sacred writer treats examples and images of musical instruments (such as the trumpet), to decorate emphatically his words: “The God-loving monk, when the bell rings for prayer, says: ‘Good, good!’ The lazy one says: ‘What a nuisance!’” [S. 6 (4b) *On bodily vigil (On bodily vigil and how to use it to attain spiritual vigil, and how to practice it)*] (pg. 70 / ch. 20 / pr. 7)

*“At the sound of the trumpet the dead will rise, and when idle talk is afoot those who were asleep come to themselves.” [S. 6 (4b) On bodily vigil (On bodily vigil and how to use it to attain spiritual vigil, and how to practice it)] (pg. 71 / ch. 20 / pr. 13b)*

*And, also, the excerpt, which has already cited above from the work of John “To the Pastor”: “When sheep graze, and even when going to sleep, shepherd (Pastor) let not ceases to play the flute of teaching. Because nothing else fears the wolf as the sound of pastoral flute...” AE (37) To the Pastor*

## THIRD PART

### Epilogue

*In closing, in place of an epilogue, I would prefer to present another excerpt from a work by St. Gregory the Sinaite, which I referred to at the beginning of this paper. This is taken from his homily “How the Hesychast Should Sit for Prayer and Not Rise Again Too Quickly”, and specifically the chapter entitled “How to Psalmodyze”, published also in the “Philokalia of the Neptic Fathers”. “How Should We Psalmodyze? Some say that we should psalmodyze seldom, others often, others not at all. You for your part should not psalmodyze often, for that induces unrest, nor yet not at all, for that induces indolence and negligence. Instead you should follow the example of those who psalmodyze from time to time, for moderation in all things is best, as the ancient Greeks tell us. To psalmodyze often is appropriate for novices in the ascetic life, because of the toil it involves and the spiritual knowledge it confers. It is not appropriate for hesychasts, since they concentrate wholly upon praying to God with travail of heart, eschewing all conceptual images... If you are seated and you see that prayer is continuously active in your heart, do not abandon it and get up to psalmodyze until in God's good time it leaves you of its own accord. Otherwise, abandoning the interior presence of God, you will address yourself to Him from without, thus passing from a higher to a lower state, provoking unrest and disrupting the intellect's serenity.”<sup>1</sup>*

THANK YOU, EVERYONE.

K.Ch.K - Oradea Romania, December 14, 2013

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<sup>1</sup> St. Gregory of Sinai, «How the Hesychast Should Sit for Prayer and Not Rise Again Too Quickly», *Philokalia of the Neptic Fathers*.

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