

Hymns of Repentance, brings together for the first time a selection of hymns by St Romanos the Melodist about repentance, featuring the original Greek opposite a new English translation. These hymns, which were sung in church during the Lenten journey to Pascha, explore the story of the prodigal son, the crucifixion of Christ, and other important themes. There are seven hymns in the volume, which are as follows:

1. On the Repentance of the Ninevites
2. On Fasting
3. On the Prodigal Son
4. On the Victory of the Cross
5. A Prayer
6. On the Infernal Powers
7. On the Rich Man and Lazarus.

The hymns have been translated by Dr Andrew Mellas who is a Senior Lecturer in Byzantine Studies at St Andrew's Theological College. Dr Mellas' research has explored the hymns of several Byzantine hymnographers, including St Andrew of Crete and St Kassia (Κασσιανή), but he believes Romanos' hymns are possibly the most exciting and dramatic.

St Romanos the Melodist composed many hymns in Constantinople during the reign of Emperor Justinian, an age of political and cultural transformation, when the synthesis of Christian, Roman, and Greek elements gave birth to a new civilization. Romanos straddled the worlds of antiquity and Byzantium, and his hymns are a unique fusion of classical rhetoric, Syriac poetry, and the theology of the Cappadocian Fathers. Scripture comes to life in his hymns, inviting the faithful to encounter biblical events in their own liturgical experience, where the human-divine encounter was enriched with sacred music and holy ritual, amplifying moments of desire, sadness, and joy.

Despite the fame that St Romanos the Melodist enjoyed in Byzantium and beyond, we know little about his life. The short narrative of his career emerges centuries after his lifetime (490–560 A.D.). The text that appears in one of the surviving manuscripts is as follows: "The venerable Romanos was from Syria and became a deacon of the holy church of Berytos. Arriving in Constantinople in the reign of the emperor Anastasios, he went and settled in the church of the most holy Theotokos in the ta Kyrou district, where he received the gift of the kontakia. In piety he would celebrate and pass the night, praying during the vigil at Blachernae, before returning to ta Kyrou. On one of these nights, the most holy Theotokos appeared to him while he was asleep and gave him a paper scroll and said, 'Take this paper and eat it.' It seems that the saint opened his mouth and swallowed the paper. Now it was the festival of Christ's Nativity. And, immediately awakening from his sleep, he was astonished and glorified God. Thereupon he mounted the ambo and began to chant: Ἡ παρθένος σήμερον τὸν ὑπερούσιον τίκτει, καὶ ἡ γῆ τὸ σπῆλαιον τῷ ἀπροσίτῳ προσάγει. He also composed nearly one thousand kontakia for other festivals before departing for the Lord."

While the text suggests Romanos wrote one thousand hymns, only 89 are attributed to him in surviving manuscripts of which almost 60 are considered genuine. Most notable is the account of Romanos' miraculous birth as a hymnographer, which sees the Theotokos act as a kind of Byzantine Muse who inspires the composition and performance of his most famous hymn (on the Nativity of Christ). The genre of hymnology known as the kontakion was an integral part of the cathedral rite in Constantinople until the Fourth Crusade in 1204. It formed part of the night vigil (παννυχίς), which was celebrated in anticipation

of major feasts in the liturgical calendar. Romanos himself describes this ritual in the following hymn: "The people of Christ, faithful in their love, have gathered to keep vigil with psalms and odes; unceasingly they sing hymns to God. Now that the Psalms of David have been sung, and we were gladdened by the well-ordered reading of Scripture, let us again raise a hymn to Christ and denounce the enemies."

As well as referring to the παννυχίς, these words evoke a vivid image of how the faithful experienced this liturgical gathering and the performance of Romanos' hymns. Scriptural meditation was combined with poetry and melody. The Miracles of St Artemios also mention the performance of Romanos' kontakia during the παννυχίς. According to this text, Romanos' hymns were sung a century after his death as part of the night vigil at the church of St John the Baptist in the Constantinopolitan quarter of Oxeia, which was where the relic of St Artemios was to be found. Miracle 18, which recounts a burglary, is particularly insightful: "There was a certain man who from a tender age used to attend the all-night vigil of the Forerunner and who sang the hymns of humble Romanos among the saints right up to the present day. In the time of the reign of Emperor Herakleios, this man was burglarized as the birthday of the holy Forerunner was dawning." What is remarkable in the account of this miracle is that a member of a lay congregation who was not the chanter (ψάλτης) participated in the singing of Romanos' kontakia.

Romanos' *Hymns of Repentance* have a recurring theme: they present sin as a sickness of the soul and repentance

as its remedy. The rhetoric of these hymns sought to evoke compunction, which spurred the faithful to the infirmary of spiritual healing. In retelling the sacred stories that defined the Byzantines, Romanos' hymns sought to frame and shape a liturgical community in Constantinople. Poetry, music and sacred drama showed forth the compunction of the prodigal son, Lazarus and other scriptural figures. Amidst the overarching narrative of the story of salvation that framed the Lenten journey, Romanos' hymns presented the hidden desires of scriptural characters, inviting the faithful to become part of the sacred drama unfolding before them and cry tears of compunction (δάκρυα κατανύξεως). The faithful were invited to partake in this liturgical event by hearing the words and melody of the hymn and singing the refrain (εφύμνιο). Even if a member of the congregation had no talent in singing, the action of listening to the sacred narrative that a hymn's performance enacted and hearing the voices of its biblical exemplars, perpetuated a shared world of aural images that were impressed upon the heart. In this way, the liturgical world that hymnody created and the compunction of its protagonists, could be internalized by the faithful. Hymns became a means of transforming the soul of the one who sang them.

Hymns of Repentance, published by St Vladimir's Seminary Press, will be available for purchase via the following means:

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