

#### IV. PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

## THE TABORIC LIGHT IN THE HYMNS OF THE VESPERS OF THE TRANSFIGURATION FEAST. CATECHETIC CONSIDERATIONS

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**ABSTRACT.** Man's purpose, by his own nature, is deification; he is called to mysteriously become god through his free collaboration with the grace of the Holy Spirit. In other words, man must partake in the radiance of godly glory and become a light similar to the One Who is Light and the source of Light. This calling is underlined many times in the writings of the mystics who experienced the becoming into light. The transfer of these mystical experiences can be found in a catechetical form in the liturgical rites gravitating around the feast of the Lord's Transfiguration. The content of these odes helps us understand that the partaking in the light radiating from the Being of the Trinity is not a request reserved only for those initiated in the Hesychastic life, but an offer made to all Christians who take part in Eucharistic life. They mysteriously rejoice at their partaking in the mystical Body of Jesus Christ. This suggests that actually living in the light of God's glory is a *sine qua non* condition for salvation.

**Keywords:** Light, God's glory, Transfiguration, catechetical, Vesper

### Introduction

In the present study, we aim to analyse the subject of man's partaking in the uncreated godly light. The objective is to discover the catechetical mastery of the hymnographer and, for that purpose, our source will be the liturgical odes of the feast of Transfiguration, celebrated every year on- August 6<sup>th</sup>. The choice of the texts we rely on was not fortuitous, as, from the first sticheron (ode) with which Vespers begins on the day of the *Forefeast*, an invitation is launched to the real partaking in the light radiating from the transfigured body of the Lord.

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The first sticheron from “Lord, I have cried” asks us to climb the mountain together with our Saviour and to partake in the theophany so that, later on, “illuminated in mind, let us gaze upon Light amid light”<sup>1</sup>. The hymnographer urges us to walk beside Christ on the holy mountain in order to be filled with light. We notice in this ode that the author states the purpose of his invitation from the very beginning: the enlightenment of the mind, the filling with light and the sight of godly light. It is not by chance that, upon analysing the words of Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, Saint Justin Popović underlined the following: “without any doubt, the mind of the first man created was pure, bright, undefiled, capable of deep knowledge, (...)”<sup>2</sup>. Enlightenment, illumination and sight, as stages of plenitude, will be found in the vespereal hymns. The process of enlightenment entails inner purification and preparation for the attainment of the state of plenitude, of gracious radiance. In other words, in order to partake in the godly glory, man must prepare his soul and, by living like God, he must get closer to the One Who reveals Himself to human sight. This illumination is in fact a sight which was clearly translated by the theologian Vladimir Lossky as being knowledge<sup>3</sup>.

One of the most important studies, this time from the field of practical theology, belongs to father Viorel Sava, professor of liturgical studies at the Faculty of Theology of Iasi (Romania)<sup>4</sup>. He highlighted the way in which the human person experiences the divine in the liturgical service and in the icon of the Lord’s Transfiguration. After outlining a few exegetic reference points, the priest and professor mentions the main theological subjects developed in the services of the feast. Among them, he also refers to the subject we wish to tackle in the present study, namely the partaking in godly light.

Unlike him, who covered all the liturgical services which are specific to a great feast, we shall focus only on the odes of Vespers (Small and Great) which introduce us into the theological subject of our partaking in the Taboric light. We shall concentrate on the texts of the odes which refer to godly light, to the manner in which it shines forth from Jesus Christ, our Saviour, to the way in

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<sup>1</sup> “Come, let us go up with Jesus Who ascendeth the holy mountain, and there let us listen to the voice of the living God, the all-unoriginate Father, which through the divine Spirit beareth witness by a cloud to His true Sonship; and, illuminated in mind, let us gaze upon Light amid light” (The first sticheron from *Lord, I have cried*, the Vespers of August 5<sup>th</sup>). *Mineiul lunii August* [The Menaion for August] (Bucharest: Tipografia Cărților Bisericești, 1929), 55.

<sup>2</sup> St. Justin Popović, *Dogmatica Bisericii Ortodoxe* [Dogmatics of the Orthodox Church], vol. 1, trans. by Zarko Markovski (Iași: Doxologia, 2017), 371.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu* [The Sight of God], trans. by Remus Rus (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1995), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Viorel Sava, “Aspects of the Human Person’s Experience of the Divine as Reflected in the Service and the Icon of the Feast of our Savior’s Transfiguration,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 8.3 (2017): 114-141.

which it overflows unto the five protagonists of the transfiguration (the prophets Moses and Elijah, the apostles Peter, John and Jacob), to the manner in which they perceive it and to the blissful state in which we are called upon to partake in godly glory. Moreover, by illustrating through texts the theological richness of the feast, we will analyse the mysterious harmonisation between hymn and preaching. Behind the hymnographer, there is always the preacher and the catechist inspired by the text. To accomplish this endeavour, we shall resort to the Eastern exegetic instruments, which will generate short theological reflections that will highlight the message hymnographers<sup>5</sup> wanted to convey to the Eucharistic community<sup>6</sup>. As such, after presenting the prolegomena of the partaking in the Taboric light, which are developed in the Small Vespers of the feast, we will examine the odes which refer to the subject of godly light in the Great Vespers of the Lord's Transfiguration.

### **1. Prolegomena of the Partaking in the Taboric Light (the Small Vespers of the Transfiguration)**

The first sticheron of the Small Vespers held on the day of the feast of the Lord's Transfiguration (the 6<sup>th</sup> of August) is centred on theophany. The hymnographer makes a comparison between the events which took place on Mount Sinai, when the Lord revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush, and the episode which occurred on Mount Tabor, when Moses saw the One Who had spoken to him from the burning bush in front of him: "He Who of old spake with Moses on Mount Sinai in images, saying: I am God Who am! today, transfigured on Mount Tabor, showeth forth the Prototype, shining with rays of splendor. Wherefore, O Christ, I magnify Thy power!"<sup>7</sup> The author of the ode establishes a relation of identity between the God Who spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and the One Who spoke to him on Mount Tabor. Differently put, the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Covenant, an idea whose theological force cannot be challenged. If then the Word of the Father spoke to Moses mysteriously, by means of elements which mediated the dialogue (the burning bush, the burning fire, etc.), now Jesus Christ openly engages in a dialogue with him, speaking about His Passion. The text of the ode also suggests that, in the act

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<sup>5</sup> The odes of the feast of the Transfiguration have four authors: Cosmas the Monk, Anatolius, the Monk Cosmas of Maiuma, and St. John of Damascus. The odes analysed in this study belong mostly to Cosmas the Monk. Sava, "Aspects of the Human Person's Experience of the Divine", 127-128.

<sup>6</sup> The believers with whom the hymnographers are concerned are encouraged not to approach a feast day coldly, but to actively participate in it as an integrating part of the liturgical rituals, whose purpose is to sanctify man and, through him, the entire creation.

<sup>7</sup> *Mineiul lunii August*, 69.

of transfiguration, our Saviour reveals the face man had when he was created. And this face, which radiated in the Protoimage, was surrounded by light<sup>8</sup>.

In the following two odes, the hymnographer presents the historical thread of the events which took place on Mount Tabor. Here, we see him embodied in the catechist whose preoccupation is to have the neophytes who are ready for enlightenment poetically recapitulate the historical reality. Christ takes the three disciples (Peter, John and Jacob), He climbs up the mountain and is transfigured before them and they are afraid, but also full of joy<sup>9</sup>. Afraid because they could not stand the radiance shining forth from the face of their Teacher, who, as they had understood, was the Son of God, and full of joy for they had partaken in the godly light and their eyes became open to see the Godly grace<sup>10</sup>. However, we must not forget to mention the following expression, which is almost a leitmotif: "as far as they could bear it". In the sticheron of *Glory, Now and ever*, the hymnographer introduces the prophets Moses and Elijah, as representatives of the Old Covenant, in the thematic structure of his plan: "The cloud of the law, in which Moses and Elijah stood, received the radiant darkness of the transfiguration; and, vouchsafed all-radiant glory, they said unto God: "Thou art our God, the King of the ages!"<sup>11</sup> It is important to notice that the author of the ode directs the Lord's Transfiguration towards the two leading figures of the Old Law. They were found worthy of seeing the godly grace on Mount Horeb and now they clearly see the One Whom they had only guessed "face to face". Moses asked the Lord to show him His grace, but the Lord told him he could not see His face. This is why God put him in the cleft of a rock and, after His glory passed before him, the prophet could see His back (Ex. 33:18-23). But now, when

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<sup>8</sup> We infer that, as Saint Gregory of Nyssa pointed out, man was a spark of light, because his origin was in the source of light, in the Father of light.

<sup>9</sup> "The apostles of old, trembling at Thine unapproachable advent, O Christ, falling prostrate on the ground, marveled at the power of Thy divinity, which shone forth more brightly than the sun, O Good one, with Thine ineffable might." (The second sticheron of Lord, I have cried, the Small Vespers of August 6<sup>th</sup>) *Mineiul lunii August*, 69.

<sup>10</sup> In the second ode of the Vespers held on August 5<sup>th</sup> ("Come, let us dance beforehand, let us purify ourselves and faithfully prepare for divine entry into the dwelling-place of the transcendent God; and let us receive the glory which the forechosen apostles were vouchsafed to behold mystically on Mount Tabor"), the hymnographer makes the believers aware of the fact that what they will see, namely the light shining forth from the Saviour Himself, is nothing other than godly grace. Any revelation of God entails the overflowing of heavenly light unto those who partake in the godly sight. *Mineiul lunii August*, 55. Details on God's glory and on its manifestation in the Old Testament can be found in Chirilă, "Kavod și Şekina – Slava lui Dumnezeu spre luminarea creaturii [Kavod and Shekinah – God's Glory for the Enlightenment of the Creature]," in *Anuarul Facultăţii de Teologie Ortodoxă* [Annual of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology] 17 (2013-2014), Vasile Stanciu ed. (Cluj-Napoca: Renaşterea, 2015), 20-26.

<sup>11</sup> *Mineiul lunii August*, 69.

Moses was also full of heavenly glory, he could look directly at the Saviour and talk to Him. We also observe that this ode, just like others from the canon of the feast, closes with the following firm assertion, which is extremely important for those coming towards baptism, but also for those already baptised: "Thou art our God and the King of the ages". Likewise, we would like to underline the presence of the bright cloud as a sign of the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit<sup>12</sup>.

In the aposticha, the hymnographer repeats the subjects already mentioned<sup>13</sup> and develops them separately in a few short odes, whose catechetical importance is essential. These subjects are: the transfiguration of the face of the "old man", which is brought to the primordial state;<sup>14</sup> the purification of the soul is an indicative of the sight of godly glory; the dullness of astral light in comparison with the one radiating from Jesus Christ<sup>15</sup>; and the fact that Moses and Elijah see God embodied from the Virgin. Out of these odes, we will analyse only that which compares the solar light with the godly one. "The sun, illumining the earth, straightway setteth, but Christ, having shone forth with glory on the mountain, hath enlightened the world."<sup>16</sup> In the beginning, God commanded light to be on earth as it is in heaven. This uncreated light offered the necessary framework for the accomplishment of all the acts of creation. For this reason, with the apparition of the sun, the godly light did not disappear, nor was it replaced. The purpose of astral light is that of showing the beauty of creation<sup>17</sup>. In other words, the uncreated primordial light still exists in the world today, it just cannot be seen with material eyes, but only with the spiritual ones. The saints who experienced the sight of godly light claimed that the difference between it and the material light was so big that they could see shadows in the solar light even when it was at its brightest<sup>18</sup>. As such, the author

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<sup>12</sup> Edmond Jacob, *Théologie de l'Ancient Testament* (Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1955), 63.

<sup>13</sup> For a better understanding of the subject developed in Small Vespers, it is advisable to read the odes of the Vespers and of the Matins held on the day of the *Forefeast* (August 5<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>14</sup> "Today, on Mount Tabor, Christ, transforming the darkened nature of Adam and enlightening it, hath made it divine" (The first sticheron of the aposticha, the Small Vespers of August 6<sup>th</sup>). *Mineiul lunii August*, 69.

<sup>15</sup> The radiance of Jesus Christ's glory surpasses that of the light of the sun, which fades before the Source of Light. Paul Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor. Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: University Press, 2016), 81-2.

<sup>16</sup> The third sticheron of the Aposticha, Small Vespers. *Mineiul lunii August*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> See details in Ioan Chirilă, "Teologia luminii în Vechiul Testament" [The Theology of Light in the Old Testament], in *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă din Cluj-Napoca* [Annual of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology], 2<sup>nd</sup> tome (1992-1994), Alexandru Moraru ed. (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 1994), 47-58.

<sup>18</sup> Ioan Chirilă, Stelian Pașca-Tușa, Ioan Popa-Pota and Claudia-Cosmina Trif, "Light – icon/stained glass – illumination," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 50 (2018): 104; Jean Gouillard, *Mica filocalie a rugăciunii inimii* [Small Philokalia of the Jesus Prayer], trans. by Ilie and Ecaterina Iliescu (Bucharest: Herald, 2008), 120.

of the ode says that the solar light set as soon as light emerged from Christ. Moreover, so big was the impact of this enlightenment that the entire world became filled with light. This assertion must be understood in the key of the aforementioned, namely that godly light can only be seen with spiritual eyes<sup>19</sup>.

## 2. Enlightenment and the Becoming into Light (the Great Vespers of the Transfiguration)

The correlation between the Transfiguration and the Passion of the Lord is not accidental<sup>20</sup>. The hymnographers chose to tackle the subject of the passion because the dialogue between the two prophets and the Saviour, which took place on the mountain, was thus oriented, but, what is more, it is supported by the narrative of the Holy Gospels. The first ode of Vespers captures the perspective of the Passion as follows: "Before Thy crucifixion, O Lord, the mountain emulated the heavens and the cloud spread itself out like a tabernacle when Thou wast transfigured and borne witness to by the Father. There were Peter, James and John, for they were to be with Thee also at the time of Thy betrayal, that, beholding Thy wonders, they might not be afraid of Thy sufferings, which do Thou vouchsafe that we may venerate in peace, for the sake of Thy great mercy."<sup>21</sup> The hymnographer, with the care of a thorough catechist, even with that of a preacher, also clarifies the reason why the Lord chose the

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<sup>19</sup> Ioan Chirilă, Stelian Pașca-Tușa, Adrian Mărincean, Bogdan Șopterean, "The divine light. The sight and experience of it in Gregory Palamas theology," *Astra Salvensis* 13 (2019): 222. See also John Meyendorff, *O introducecere în studiul vieții și operei Sfântului Grigorie Palama* [An Introduction in the Study of the Life and Work of Saint Gregory Palamas], trans. by Măriuca and Adrian Alexandrescu (Bucharest: Nemira, 2014), 344-349.

<sup>20</sup> The Transfiguration of the Lord and the experience of the Taboric light were meant to make the disciples trust in the Godhead of their Teacher: "Shining forth like the sun on the mountain today, before undergoing His sufferings, Christ showeth to the initiates of His mysteries a divine sign of His divinity" (The second sticheron of the Aposticha, the Vespers of the *Forefeast*). The Apostles should not have doubted the Godhead of the Son when He was hanging on the wood of the Cross. The One Who was willingly suffering was none other than the One Who once radiated a light brighter than that of the sun on Mount Tabor. The subject of the passion is also addressed in the following ode, in which the hymnographer mentions Adam. Christ climbs up the mountain to show the disciples the reason why He came into the world, namely to change the fallen nature of Adam and to deify it. This saving work was not limited only to our forefather, but also extended towards his descendants. In another sticheron<sup>20</sup>, God is entreated to enlighten the believers with the light of His conscience so that they would walk on the paths of the commands which deify them: "O Christ God who (...) showed the glory of Thy divinity to Thy disciples" illumine us also with the light of the knowledge of Thee, and guide us to the path of Thy commandments, for Thou alone art good and lovest mankind." The sticheron of *Glory and now* from the Aposticha of the Vespers held on August 5<sup>th</sup>. *Mineiul lunii August*, 56.

<sup>21</sup> The first sticheron of Lord, I have cried, Great Vespers. *Mineiul lunii August*, 70.

three. Both Peter (2 Pet. 1:16-19) and the two sons of Zebedee told the Saviour that they were ready to suffer for Him, should it be necessary. As such, the Lord wanted to strengthen their eagerness so that they would not be afraid during the Passion. We also see a few figures of speech in the text, which describe the event of Mount Tabor from a cosmic perspective: the mountain is likened to the sky and the clouded sky is compared with a tent. The second image is taken from the doxological psalm of creation (Ps. 104).

The hymnographer takes a step further; he does not remain only in the sphere of the Passion, but moves towards the Resurrection<sup>22</sup>. Christ enlightens His disciples with the rays of power, wishing to show them the radiance of the Resurrection<sup>23</sup>. The bright face, man's restored and complete face, the Saviour's face after the Resurrection is that which the Lord showed to the disciples (1 Jn 3:2) on Mount Tabor (in fact, the interdiction put on the disciples would be terminated after the Resurrection). This light of which God found the apostles worthy would be a reference point and a stimulus for all those who wanted to get closer to God. If man rises towards the spiritual, he will be found worthy of this radiance and will partake in the godly glory<sup>24</sup>, just like the disciples and the two prophets.

Special attention must be granted to the ode of *Glory, Now and ever*, which ends the series of stichera from *Lord, I have cried*<sup>25</sup>. As we well know, on

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<sup>22</sup>“Taking the disciples up upon the lofty mountain before Thy crucifixion, O Lord, Thou wast transfigured before them, illumining them with effulgence of power, desiring both in Thy love for mankind and in Thine authority to show them the splendour of the resurrection... .” The second sticheron of *Lord, I have cried*, Great Vespers. *Mineiul lunii August*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> Sava, “Aspects of the Human Person’s Experience of the Divine”, 132.

<sup>24</sup> “Transfigured on the high mountain, the Savior, having with Him His pre-eminent disciples, shone forth most wondrously, showing them forth as illumined by the loftiness of the virtues and as vouchsafed divine glory.” The third sticheron of *Lord, I have cried*, Great Vespers. *Mineiul lunii August*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Among these odes, the fourth sticheron, which synthesises the most representative elements of the theophany that took place on the mountain, stands out: “The mountain which before dark and gloomy is now honorable and holy, for thereon did Thy feet stand, O Lord; for in the latter days Thou didst make manifest the hidden, pre-eternal mystery, Thine awesome transfiguration, to Peter, John and James. But they, unable to endure the radiance of Thy countenance and the brightness of Thy raiment, fell prostrate on the ground and covered themselves. And, seized with terror, they marveled, beholding Moses and Elijah conversing with Thee as they stood with Thee; and the voice of the Father bore witness, saying: This is My beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased: Him do ye obey! He Will grant the world great mercy!” (*Mineiul lunii August*, 71). The ode starts with an obvious allusion to the theophany of Mount Sinai, in which Moses and the entire Israeli people took part, when the Lord gave the Law. If then the mountain was frightening, because of frightful phenomena (fire, lightnings, thunders, a dark cloud), now everything was full of light. In addition, the hymnographer draws attention to the fact that the mystery of man’s salvation through the revelation of the deified, bright face of the One Who took on our nature, with

Sundays, this ode is called Dogmatikon, as the teachings presented in its content are deep and focus on salvific truths. The text of this ode is the following: "Foreshadowing Thy resurrection, O Christ our God, Thou didst take three of Thy disciples – Peter, James and John – and didst ascend Tabor. And as Thou wast transfigured, O Savior, Mount Tabor was clothed with light. Thy disciples cast themselves upon the ground, O Word, unable to endure the sight of Thine invisible countenance. Angels ministered to thee in fear and trembling; the heavens were afraid and the earth quaked, beholding the glory of the Lord upon the earth."<sup>26</sup> The hymnographer identifies the Resurrection as an objective of the Transfiguration. The disciples would see how the pneumatized bodies of men would look after their resurrection. Likewise, the hymnographer also specifies the reason why the disciples kept their face to the ground. The three apostles could not see God's unseen face, shining in its full glory. The author of the sticheron includes a detail in the ode, which is not mentioned explicitly in the Scripture, namely the fact that the angels served the Lord during the Taboric Transfiguration. In the course of a theophany, the Lord was never alone, but surrounded by the heavenly powers. Isaiah's (ch. 6)<sup>27</sup> and Ezekiel's (ch. 1)<sup>28</sup> inaugural visions bear witness to this. Moreover, when the godly light is revealed, the one who looks at God's glory can also see the angels, who are also light.

For this liturgical day, two readings from the Book of Exodus and one from the Books of Kings have been established. The former two refer to two

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all its defects, is also revealed here. The ode mentions for the first time the Scriptural detail regarding the Lord's clothes, which were white as light (Mat. 17:2). This image is taken on by terminologists when representing the icon of this Scriptural event. Fotie Kontoglu, *Expresia iconografiei ortodoxe* [The Expression of Orthodox Iconography] (Athens: Gamma, 1993), 166. Constantine Cavarnos, *Ghid de iconografie bizantină* [Guide to Byzantine Iconography], trans. by Anca Popescu (Bucharest: Sofia, 2005), 88.

<sup>26</sup> Glory..., Now and Ever..., Great Vespers. *Mineiul lunii August*, 70.

<sup>27</sup> For details, I recommend the subchapter "Serafimii în contextul vedeniei profetului Isaia" [The Seraphim in the Context of Prophet Isaiah's Vision], in Stelian Pașca-Tușa, "Iconizarea serafimilor – reperele biblice și patristice care au stat la baza realizării acestei morfologii iconice și a mesajului ei teologic [The Iconic Representation of the Seraphim – Biblical and Patristic Reference Points on which this Iconic Morphology and its Theological Message were Based]," in *In honorem pr. prof. univ. dr. Vasile Stanciu* [In honorem Fr. Prof. Vasile Stanciu, PhD], ed. Daniel Mocanu (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2018), 337-54.

<sup>28</sup> See details in Stelian Pașca-Tușa and Ioan Popa-Bota, "The Byzantine Iconic Representation of the Cherubim – Scriptural Reference Points," *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai – Theologia Orthodoxa* 2 (2019): 5-20; Stelian Pașca-Tușa, "Implicațiile teologice ale reprezentărilor heruvimilor în sanctuarul biblic [Theological Implications of the Cherubim's Representations in the Biblical Sanctuary]," in *Icoană. Mărturie creștină. Totalitarism* [Icon. Christian Testimony. Totalitarianism], eds. Vasile Stanciu and Cristian Sonea (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2017), 57-72 and Ioan Popa-Bota, "Taina și înfățișarea Heruvimilor la Sfinții Părinți [Mystery and Image of the Cherubim in the Writings of the Church Fathers]," *Astra Salvensis* 13 (2019): 195-204.

theophanies experienced by Moses on Mount Sinai and the latter to the godly glory seen by prophet Elijah after his forty-day journey towards that same mountain (1 Kgs 19 et seqq.). The former theophany marks the moment when Moses enters the cloud to receive the Law (Ex 24:12 et seqq.) and the latter recalls his experience when he asked to see the Lord's glory (Ex 33:11 et seqq.)<sup>29</sup>. These Old Testament readings are not accidental. Through them, the reason why the two prophets were present on Mount Tabor together with the Saviour is explained to the worshipper. They both experienced unique moments when the Lord's glory was shown to them as far as they could bear it. If then they did not have the privilege of revelling in the splendour of godly glory, now, on Mount Tabor, they enjoyed a special status: they found themselves in front of the Lord, talking to Him about the forthcoming Passion. Likewise, we must acknowledge that these readings are also aimed at inviting listeners to become more closely acquainted with the text. It is the biblical "framework" of the evening liturgical service, it is the pillar of the bridge built towards the day of the feast, when the Gospel read during the Holy Liturgy represents the other pillar and, at the same time, the end point of the bridge. It is an occasion for biblical catechesis and, why not, for homily.

The third sticheron of the Litia summarises a theological perspective whose temporal span stretches forth from eternity and aims to integrate us into God's endless Kingdom: "Dwelling bodily on earth, Christ, the Light from before the sun, Who before His crucifixion fulfilled all things of His awesome dispensation in godly manner, today hath mystically shown forth on Mount Tabor the Image of the Trinity; for taking His three excellent disciples, Peter, James and John, He led them up to it together, and having hidden His guise of flesh for a little while, He was transfigured before them, revealing the majesty of His original beauty, though not completely. And while making it known to them, He also took pity upon them, lest they in anywise cease to live because of what they saw: yet were they able to grasp with their bodily eyes, holding fast. And Thou didst summon Moses and Elijah, the foremost of the prophets, who bore witness reliably concerning Thy divinity, and that it is the true effulgence of the essence of the Father, O Thou Who hast dominion over the living and the dead. Wherefore, the cloud enfolded them like a tabernacle, and the voice of the

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<sup>29</sup> Moses' experience of light is presented in detail in the chapter "Întunericul luminos din Sinai" [The Bright Dark of Mount Sinai] in Ioan Chirilă, "*Luminează-te, luminează-te, Ierusalime!*" (Is 60,1) – revărsarea luminii dumnezeiești și devenirea întru lumină [Arise, Shine, Jerusalem! (Isa. 60:1) – the Overflowing of Godly Light and the Becoming into Light]," in *Sfânta Scriptură în Biserică și Istorie. Studii Teologice în onoarea pr. prof. dr. Vasile Mihoc* [The Holy Scripture in the Church and in History. Theological Studies in honorem Fr. Prof. Vasile Mihoc, PhD], eds. Alexandru Ioniță and Daniel Mihoc (Sibiu: Ed. Andreiană/ Astra Museum, 2018), 166-85.

Father testified, speaking forth from the cloud like thunder, saying: This is My Beloved Son, Whom I begat incorruptibly from within Me before the morning star, and Whom I have sent to save those who are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and who confess with faith that the one dominion of the Godhead is indivisible! Hear ye Him And do Thou Thyself, O Christ God Who lovest mankind, illumine us with the light of Thine unapproachable glory, and show us forth as worthy heirs of Thy kingdom Which is without end, in that Thou art all-good.”<sup>30</sup>

The sticheron begins with a direct reference to the primordial light. In the hymnographer’s view, Jesus Christ, Who was transfigured on the mountain, is the Light that shone and emanated the uncreated light onto the world from the very first day of creation<sup>31</sup>. That which occurred then, at the beginning of the world, takes place again now, on Mount Tabor. The divine light flows onto the earth and is seen by God’s disciples and by the two prophets. In other words, the uncreated light is identical to the light that shone on Mount Tabor, for they both originate from the same source: the Word of the Father, the Light of the world. The first sentence also indicates that, through His divine transfiguration, our Lord mystically and brightly revealed the Trinity.

The hymnographer then refers to the mystery of God’s incarnation and mentions that, during the transfiguration, our Saviour “concealed His incarnation”. Thus, through incarnation, the Word made Himself smaller, shed His Celestial Glory and became like us to such an extent that people did not realise that He is God. In the act of transfiguration, our Saviour allowed His Godly Glory, which was mystically concealed within Him, to become visible. This unparalleled beauty was also imprinted in the face of the first man made by the Father in the image of His Son. Jesus Christ is the Protoimage that served as a model for the creation of man<sup>32</sup>. Otherwise put, by looking at our Saviour’s face, the apostles could intuit what the initial face of Adam looked like. It is not without reason

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<sup>30</sup> The third sticheron of the Litia, Great Vespers. *Mineiul lunii August*, 72-3.

<sup>31</sup> This view is grounded in the Johannine prologue and the examinations from a Christological perspective made by the fathers of the Church when analysing the text of creation. In that sense see: Origen, *Omilii la Cartea Facerii* [Homilies on Genesis] in *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* [Fathers and Writers of the Church] 6, trans. by Teodor Bodogae et al. (Bucharest: IBMBOR, 1981), 131; St. Basil the Great, *Omilii la Hexaameron* [Homilies on the Hexaameron], in *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* [Fathers and Writers of the Church] 17, trans. by Dumitru Fecioru (Bucharest: IBMBOR, 1986), 133; and St. Augustine, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 5.20, *Fathers of the Church* 84, trans. by Roland J. Teske, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 158.

<sup>32</sup> St. Theodore the Studite, *Iisus Hristos, prototip al icoanei Sale* [Jesus Christ, the Prototype of His Icon], trans. by Ioan Ică jr. (Sibiu: Deisis, 1994); Ioan Chirilă, “Présence du Logos dans l’«image»,” *Echinox* 12 (2007): 231-232.

that we said that they could intuit it, for they never fully saw God's face, but only in part, such as was appropriate<sup>33</sup>.

The hymnographer goes on to talk about an Old-Testament belief according to which man could not see God's face and live<sup>34</sup>. Moses once asked the Lord on the mountain to show him His Glory and God replied that he could not live after He has shown him His face (Ex. 33:18-20). Reminiscences of this reality can be found in other writings of the Old Covenant as well, especially in the Book of Judges. The author of the ode professes that the Lord strengthened and spared His disciples so that the unmediated sight of God's glory should not bring about their death. It is necessary for us to understand that this limitation is of a pedagogical nature and was compelled by man's spiritual immaturity, which renders him unable to look upon heavenly realities with mortal eyes<sup>35</sup>. In the mystical literature, the fathers unanimously claim that this blindingly bright godly light cannot be regarded except with the spiritual eyes which the Holy Spirit opens in him whom He enables to partake in the theophany<sup>36</sup>.

In the view of the author of the ode, the two prophets were brought there to give testimony as to the Divinity of the Son and confirm the fact that He is "the reflection of the Father". Moses and Elijah experienced that light in which God revealed Himself to them and, as such, they were able to understand much more of what they saw on Mount Tabor than the Lord's disciples; they were capable of dialoguing and beholding. That which they saw in the form of reflections and symbols they could now see clearly and, in the ecstasy of their full knowledge, they were able to say who the One shining on the mountain was. In order to make the connection to the theophanic events on Mount Sinai, the hymnographer includes in his ode a reference to the bright cloud which covered the mountain like a tent (acc. Ex. 24:18)<sup>37</sup>.

Towards the end of the hymn, after the hymnographer has specified the meaning of the words which the Father uttered from the heavens, a prayer is

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<sup>33</sup> Sava, "Aspects of the Human Person's Experience of the Divine," 132.

<sup>34</sup> Ioan Chirilă, "Întru lumina Ta vom vedea lumină (Ps 35,9) – despre lumină și taina întinericului în care se află Dumnezeu (Ieș 20,21) [In Your Light Do We See Light (Ps. 36:9) – About the Light and the Mystery of the Darkness in Which God Abides]," in "Voi pune înaintea Ierusalimul, ca început al bucuriei mele". In Honorem Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan la împlinirea vârstei de 80 ani [I Consider Jerusalem My Highest Joy. In Honorem Fr. Prof. Dumitru Abrudan, PhD, on his 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary], eds. Aurel Pavel and Nicolae Chifăr (Sibiu: Astra Museum, 2018), 234.

<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu* [The Sight of God], trans. by Maria Camelia Oros (Sibiu: Deisis, 1995), 1.

<sup>36</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Cele cinci cuvântări teologice* [Five Theological Orations], trans. by Dumitru Stăniloae (Bucharest: Anastasia, 1993), 23.

<sup>37</sup> Details on the theophany on Mount Sinai and the bright darkness into which Moses went can be found in Chirilă, "Întru lumina Ta vom vedea lumina," 214-237.

addressed to our Saviour asking to partake in the light. This kind of phrasing can be found in several hymns. Usually, after referring to the experiencing of the light, either by the apostles or by the two prophets, Jesus Christ is entreated to enable us, too, to partake in His glory. Such an illumination confers upon us a privileged status, namely that of heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven. The hymnographer thus brings the ode to a full circle by returning to the initial statement: may Christ Who showed Himself at the beginning of the world and imprinted His bright image upon man lead us into eternity by making us like Him through grace<sup>38</sup>.

The stichera canon of the Litia is concluded with an invitation addressed by the hymnographer to the faithful, asking those who celebrate to join the disciples and climb the mountain in order to become filled with light: "Come ye, let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the habitation of our God; and let us gaze upon the glory of His Transfiguration, the glory of the Only-begotten of the Father; and let us receive light through the Light; and, exalted by the Spirit, let us hymn the consubstantial Trinity forever."<sup>39</sup> The ode is made up of several phrases ("the mountain of the Lord", "the house of our God") found in previous stichera and of biblical expressions that speak of the Son's divine glory. The sight of this glory can only be experienced from inside this light, which is only attainable through the work of the Holy Spirit, Who raises us to that spiritual state. The ode is concluded with an urge to praise the divine Trinity. Such doxological manifestations characterise the state that people are in when faced with a theophany<sup>40</sup>.

The first ode of the aposticha reminds us of one of the Old-Testament theophanies whose protagonist is Moses. The hymnographer does not limit himself to the two theophanies which Moses partook in on Mount Sinai, as recounted in chapters 24 and 33, but also refers to the revelation in the burning bush<sup>41</sup>. Although it is the fire which burned<sup>42</sup>, yet was not consumed, that is mentioned there, the theophanic framework is the same. Both Moses and the apostles fell with their faces to the ground before that wondrous sight. The

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<sup>38</sup> Sava, "Aspects of the Human Person's Experience of the Divine," 133.

<sup>39</sup> *Glory* at the Litia, Great Vespers. *Mineiul lunii August*, 73.

<sup>40</sup> In that sense, see the attitude of the seraphim in the inaugural vision recounted by the prophet Isaiah 6.

<sup>41</sup> Saint Gregory holds that there are obvious similarities between the two/three theophanies, as each represents a stage in Moses' partaking in the radiance of God's glory. St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Despre viața lui Moise sau despre desăvârșirea prin virtute* [On the Life of Moses or Fulfillment through Virtue] (Bucharest: Sfântul Gheorghe Vechi, 1995), 31.

<sup>42</sup> To Saint Makarios, this fire is identical to the one in which Elijah found himself while he was being raised to the heavens and represents the divine fire which illuminates our souls (*Spiritual Homilies* V.8).

hymnographer states that He who spoke with Moses from the burning bush is the same One Who was transfigured before him, Elijah, and the disciples. Aside from this, the image of the original face of man is emphasised<sup>43</sup>, as is the restoration of the radiance which it used to possess, but which was altered through sin. This anticipated gift was shown to the apostles, who were to wait for the resurrection in order to see it materialise<sup>44</sup>.

The bright light of divinity made Mount Tabor itself leap with joy. This was miraculously seen by the prophet David, who exclaimed in his psalms: "Tabor and Hermon sing for joy at Your name." (Ps. 89:12) The hymnographer suggests that mystical joy and ecstasy were not experienced by the apostles alone, but by the whole of nature. However, it is man's partaking in the light which is stressed: "The foremost of the apostles, beholding Thine unbearable splendour and Thine unapproachable divinity, O unoriginated Christ, were stricken with godly awe; and covered with a radiant cloud, they heard the voice of the Father proclaiming the mystery of Thy becoming man; for Thou alone, even after Thine incarnation, art the only-begotten Son and Savior of the world."<sup>45</sup> This text describes the way in which the Apostles related to this theophanic episode. First of all, the overflowing Light mentioned by the hymnographer was unapproachable. It spread over the mountain and covered everything in light. For a few moments, Mount Tabor was the centre of the Universe. The Apostles were able to see this light because they were in a state of ecstasy<sup>46</sup>. Moreover, in his state of mental rapture, they were transformed and became like our Saviour<sup>47</sup>. Naturally, the radiance which the apostles possessed was incomparable to that of the Lord. And

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<sup>43</sup> This idea is presented even more clearly in the second sticheron of the aposticha, which says that, through His transfiguration, the Lord restored the radiance to Adam's nature, which had been blackened by sin.: "... For, having ascended that mountain with Thy disciples, O Savior, Thou wast transfigured, and didst cause the darkened nature of Adam to shine again, imparting to it the glory and splendor of Thy divinity..." *Mineiul lunii August*, 73.

<sup>44</sup> "He Who of old spake with Moses on Mount Sinai in images, saying: "I am He Who is", is today transfigured before His disciples on Mount Tabor, and having shown forth the pristine beauty of His countenance, hath taken upon Himself human nature. And having set before them Moses and Elijah as witnesses to this grace, he made them partakers of gladness who, for the sake of the Cross, proclaim His glorious and saving resurrection" The first sticheron of the aposticha, Great Vespers. *Mineiul lunii August*, 73-74.

<sup>45</sup> The third sticheron of the aposticha, Great Vespers. *Mineiul lunii August*, 74.

<sup>46</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Omiliile la Matei* [Homilies on Matthew], in *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* [Fathers and Writers of the Church] 23, trans. by Dumitru Fecioru (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1987), 651.

<sup>47</sup> St. Gregory of Sinai, *Discourse on the Holy Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ*, in Ioan I. Ică jr., "Teologia taborică a Cuviosului Grigorie Sinaitul și probabila ei iradiere în spațiul românesc" [The Taboric Theology of Saint Gregory of Sinai and its Probable Echo into the Romanian Sphere] *Tabora 1* (2007): 24.

yet, unless they became light, they could not see the light. This occurred as soon as the luminous cloud covered them. The cloud indicated the presence of grace and, implicitly, of the Holy Spirit. Since the Trinity was visibly present here, the author does not hesitate, when the theme he approaches allows it, to underscore the trinitarian character of this theophany.

The *Glory, Now and ever* ode is a synthetic presentation in which the apostles' mystical experience is described. The text of the ode is centred on the description of the manner in which the disciples received God's Transfiguration<sup>48</sup>. The hymnographer recalls the details in the Gospel (God's clothes were as radiant as light and His face more brilliant than the sun) and specifies that the three apostles could not bear the light which enshrouded them, which is why they fell with their faces to the ground<sup>49</sup>.

### 3. The Troparion and Kontakion – Syntheses of the Light-Filling Feast

Of all the hymns of a feast, its troparion and kontakion are the most relevant, as they enable us to capture the specificity of the event being celebrated. As we have done so far, we will not insist upon the details in the text which have already been explained and expanded on. We will focus on the new elements or on the nuances which highlight the teaching about the godly light. In the troparion we are told that the Lord revealed all of His glory before His disciples, but they were only able to understand as much as the Lord showed them: "Thou wast transfigured on the mountain, O Christ, our God, showing to Thy disciples Thy glory as each one could endure. Shine forth Thou on us, who are sinners all, Thy light ever-unending. Through the prayers of the Theotokos, Light-Bestower, glory be to Thee."<sup>50</sup> Their eyes were not prepared to behold and understand the beauty of divine glory. That is why they are portrayed in icons as sleeping, with their faces turned towards the ground, or covering their eyes with their hands. Besides, the biblical text tells us that they found themselves in a state of numbness or dormancy. Their state was caused by their lack of spiritual readiness and incapacity to freely behold the light of God's

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<sup>48</sup> Sava, "Aspects of the Human Person's Experience of the Divine," 128.

<sup>49</sup> "To Peter, James and John, Thy foremost disciples, O Lord, Thou hast shown the glory of Thy divine countenance today on Mount Tabor; for they beheld Thy garments illumined as with light, and Thy face shining more brightly than the sun. And unable to endure the unbearable sight of Thine effulgence, they fell face down upon the ground, in nowise able to look further. And they heard a voice from above bearing witness, saying: "This is my beloved Son, Who hath come into the world to save man!"." *Glory, Now and ever* of the aposticha, Great Verspers. *Mineiul lunii August*, 74.

<sup>50</sup> *Mineiul lunii August*, 70.

glory<sup>51</sup>. Such an unpreparedness was also explained by the fact that a crucial moment, namely that of the Pentecost, had not yet occurred. Unlike the three apostles, Moses and Elijah do look directly at Jesus Christ and speak to Him. That is due to the divine grace which they collaborated with during their lifetime and to their spiritual preparedness. This is not the first such experience for them. Both have seen God in His glory on Mount Horeb.

The hymnographer then goes on to beseech the Lord (in everyone's name) to bestow his light over people, even though they are sinful. Before uttering this entreaty, he specifies that the apostles, too, were made worthy of that glory through His intermission. The Lord allowed them to see as much as they were capable to. As such, God can make sinners partake in the light of His divine glory, too, inasmuch as He sees fit, according to His grace and mercy, not to the state of righteousness of those who wish to partake in the light. This uncreated light, which is eternal, enables man to become eternal. The everlasting light can make man live forever. And it is no coincidence that the hymnographer asks Jesus Christ for this light. He is the Giver and source of the light. In this context, the intermission of the Virgin Mary is invoked for a reason. The hymnographer refers here to her capacity as the one who gave birth to God, for Christ's transfiguration is directly related to the mystery of the incarnation. We have just mentioned that the two prophets of the Old Testament partook in an extraordinary event: they saw God during the theophanies on Mount Sinai, while on Mount Tabor they saw Him in His capacity as complete Man. During the transfiguration, human nature, acquired through birth from the Virgin Mary, shone and became enlightened and thus deified.

This troparion is included in the ritual for the blessing of icon painters by the priest. Tradition says that, at the end of the ritual, the priest used to utter the troparion of the Transfiguration, thus urging the icon painter to long for the state of enlightenment which the apostles attained on Mount Tabor.<sup>52</sup> Given that the troparion summarises the theological synthesis of the feast, it stands to reason that the icon painter is persuasively guided to very conscientiously take part in the liturgical rites dedicated to this feast. Aside from gaining a better understanding of the Transfiguration event, through the hymnographer's repeated urgings to climb the mountain together with the disciples and become filled with light, the icon painter will become more capable of experiencing the godly light. Thus, he will be able to experience something similar to what Saint Symeon the New Theologian did, who saw other people than the Apostles on Mount Tabor<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Sava, "Aspects of the Human Person's Experience of the Divine," 129-130.

<sup>52</sup> Kontoglu, *Expresia iconografiei ortodoxe*, 169.

<sup>53</sup> St. Niketas Stethatos, *Viața Sfântului Simeon Noul Teolog* [The Life of Symeon the new Theologian], trans. by Ilie Iliescu (Bucharest: Herald, 2003), 34-5.

Given the importance of the troparion and kontakion for the understanding of the feast being celebrated, we have found it fit to analyse the kontakion here, even though it will only be featured later, during Matins, after the sixth ode of the canon. The kontakion of the feast stresses the limitation which the Lord's apostles incurred when looking upon God's glory and underscores one of the practical purposes of the event on Mount Tabor: "On the mountain wast Thou transfigured, and Thy disciples beheld Thy glory as far as they could endure, O Christ God; that when they would see Thee crucified, they would comprehend that Thy suffering was voluntary, and proclaim to the world that Thou art of a truth the Effulgence of the Father."<sup>54</sup> The Lord's Transfiguration was meant to show the disciples who the One who was to suffer on the cross was. Even though this sight was reserved only to the coryphei of the apostles, they were meant to understand that their Teacher is the Son of God. Thus, when they were to behold the Lord's tortured face bereft of beauty, they should remember how greatly His face shone when he was on Mount Tabor. This sight was to determine the disciples to make Him known to the world and bear witness as to the fact that the One on the cross was none other than the Son of God. We note the expression "the radiance of the Father", which keeps the hymnological discourse within the sphere of light.

### Conclusions

Church services are not limited to an anamnesis-centred perspective which allows Christians to commemorate various events in our Saviour's life or in the history of the Church, but transpose them into a sanctifying time where they become contemporary with that redeeming history. In the case of the feast of the Lord's Transfiguration, liturgical hymnography lays the premises for the genuine integration of all the members of the Eucharistic community within the historical framework described by the evangelists, thus fulfilling the catechetical and homiletic dimension of the feast. Worshippers are invited to join our Saviour and His disciples in climbing Mount Tabor to see the way in which Jesus Christ shows His divine glory. Moreover, the hymnographer's prayers asking for the heavenly light to be bestowed upon all those present at the feast makes Christians partake in the mystical experience which both the apostles and the two Old-Testament prophets participated in. Even though the exigencies entailed by such an experience are high and not meant for those who are just starting off on the path of knowledge, the authors of the hymns of these feasts' Vespers suggest that no one is left out. Even sinners can be allowed to partake in the divine sight offered to people out of God's great mercy. The phrase "as much as

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<sup>54</sup> *Mineiul lunii August*, 80.

they could behold” employed by the hymnographer in the troparion indicates that the Lord allows each person to see inasmuch as (s)he is able the radiance of His glory, which can be revealed through symbols as well. In other words, the authors of these hymns make worshippers aware of the greatness of the feast that they are participating in and calls upon them to partake in the light which the Son of God spreads over the world as He once did on Mount Tabor.

Given that in the present study we have focused exclusively on the odes sung during Vespers, it would be desirable that, in the future, the way in which the teachings of the Church are made known through the hymns of Matins and the other liturgical rites around the feast of the Lord’s Transfiguration should be studied.

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