

The Trisagion Hymn

Commentary – *The Trisagion Hymn*

The solemn singing of the *Trisagion*, the Thrice-Holy Hymn praising the Most Holy Trinity, is one of the most important and oldest of our Orthodox hymns.

Background

The account about the origin of this hymn connects it to an earthquake that shook Constantinople sometime in AD 450. The earthquake proved catastrophic and people gathered in the streets and began praying, asking God to have mercy on them, singing *Kyrie eleison* or *Lord, have mercy*.

During this tragedy a small boy came forward and said that, in a vision, he had heard the hymn of the angels gathered around the throne of God, singing what we today call the *Trisagion: Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us*. The people took up this chant and the aftershocks ceased.

Clearly based on the song of the angelic Seraphim heard by the Prophet Isaiah (6:5), by the end of the 6th century, the *Trisagion* had been incorporated into the text of the Liturgy.

Today, the *Trisagion* is always sung at every Divine Liturgy, constitutes the last part of the Great Doxology at Matins, and is an essential part of every Orthodox Christian's morning and evening prayers. It is even sung in Greek and Latin on Holy Friday at Saint Peter's Basilica in the Roman Catholic Church.

Understanding

In the Orthodox tradition the *Trisagion* is primarily understood as a hymn to the Most Holy Trinity. Saint John of Damascus (AD 676-749) wrote a whole book explaining the meaning of this hymn.

The teaching is best summed up in a hymn written by the Emperor Leo the Wise (AD 866-912) for the feast of Pentecost, which we still sing at Vespers on that Feast:

“Come, peoples of all nations, and let us worship God in three persons: the Son in the Father, with the Holy Spirit. For the Father, before time began, begot the Son, co-eternal and co-reigning with Him; and the Holy Spirit was in the Father, and glorified with the Son; one power, one essence, one God, whom we all worship as we sing: Holy God, who created all things through the Son, with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit! Holy Mighty, through whom we have come to know the Father, and through whom the Holy Spirit came into the world! Holy Immortal, the Comforting Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son! Holy Trinity, glory to you!”

Broken down:

Come, O you peoples, let us worship the Godhead of three Hypostases: the Son in the Father, with the Holy Spirit;

for the Father timelessly begat the Son, Who is co-eternal and of one throne; and the Holy Spirit was in the Father, glorified with the Son; one Might, one Essence, one Godhead,

which we all worship, saying:

Holy God, Who did create all things through the Son with the co-operation of the Holy Spirit.

Holy Mighty, through Whom we have known the Father, and through Whom the Holy Spirit came to the world.

Holy Immortal, the Comforting Spirit, Who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son.

O Holy Trinity, glory be to You.

Why do we Recite and Chant the Trisagion?

What does it mean for us to sing this ancient hymn and call God thrice-holy?

First, it signifies that the God whom we worship is completely, totally and utterly transcendent. The one, true and living God stands outside the created universe of time and space as we know it. Because of this we can never fully grasp the divine Reality and must approach God in worship with a sense of reverence and awe.

God is, as the Liturgy says in one of its prayers, *“ineffable, beyond comprehension, invisible, beyond understanding, existing forever and always the same, You and Your only-begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit.”*

Saint John Chrysostom wrote a treatise entitled *On the Incomprehensibility of God* in which some of these very phrases are used to describe God.

For this reason, the one God, our Father, is not and should never be pictured as an old, white-bearded man sitting on a throne. Whenever this occurs in art, even in so-called Christian art – and even in the iconography found in some of our churches – it is completely idolatrous and wrong.

Yet, this utterly transcendent and holy God, the Creator of the universe whom we cannot even begin to comprehend, has chosen to reveal Himself to us as complete and total Love, Truth, Light and Life in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the *“Christ in whom the fullness of the Deity dwelt in bodily form”* (Colossians 2:9).

Second, because the *Trisagion* is based on the hymn of the angels, Saint Nicholas Cabasilas (c.1319-c.1391) comments that in singing the *Trisagion* during the Liturgy “*human beings and angels form one Church and one choir.*”

During the celebration of the Liturgy, heaven and earth intersect and our worship here becomes an icon of the worship going on around the throne of God in heaven (*cf. Revelation 4:1-10*).

Third, to call God thrice-holy implies His absolute purity. For us as human beings, this carries moral connotations, for “*Your eyes are too pure to look upon evil and You cannot tolerate wrong*” (*Habakkuk 1:13*).

The holiness of God demands repentance: the cleansing and purification of one’s mind and heart, and the consecration of one’s life in love to Him. In the Old Testament, God said to the people of Israel through Moses, “*Be holy because I, the Lord Your God, am holy*” (*Leviticus 19:2*) prior to issuing the commandment to “*love your neighbor as yourself*” (*19:18*).

And in the Sermon on the Mount, after the Lord Jesus tells us to love even our enemies, He concludes by issuing, in essence, the same challenge: “*Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect*” (*Matthew 5:48*).

This call by God for us to share in and reflect His holiness is the fundamental axiom of the Christian life, “*As Christians, we have been created for great things. We have been created to be holy since we have been created in the image of God.*”

More about the Origin of the Trisagion Hymn

The traditions of our Church are indeed beautiful but, most importantly, they originate in God’s revelation and are filled with the Grace of the Holy Spirit.

The Trisagion hymn is an excellent example of this.

This is the familiar prayer which is recited or chanted in probably every set of prayers and services of the church: “*Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us!*”

What is the origin of this Hymn?

One ancient but lesser-known tradition has it that the Trisagion originated from Nicodemus. While taking the body of Christ off the cross with Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus saw Jesus Christ's eyes open[citation needed] and then shouted "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal". Traditionally, it is also considered proof that his Divinity did not part from his humanity.

Here is the account by Saint John: *“After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus. And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews’ Preparation Day, for the tomb was nearby.” (19:38-42)*

The most well-known tradition has it that the Trisagion was revealed to a young boy during the Great Earthquake at Constantinople in AD 447.

During the reign of the Emperor Theodosius the Younger (AD 408-450), the city of Constantinople endured four months of bear-continuous earthquakes for almost four months. Many of the largest and most beautiful buildings were destroyed by this terrible earthquake.

The Patriarch (Saint Proclus a disciple of St. John Chrysostom, who reigned AD 434-446), with Emperor Theodosius, the clergy, nobles and people joined in a barefoot procession beseeching God for their safety. As was customary prior to that time, the clergy and the laity sang, *“Lord, have mercy”* during the procession interspersed at certain intervals by prayers and petitions.

As they were praying, the earthquake tremors increased dramatically during the procession in the open field outside the city, and a young boy was suddenly and miraculously lifted high in the air until he was out of sight before the people, who fearfully cried out even more fervently, *“Κύριε ἐλέησον – Lord, have mercy.”*

The child subsequently returned and was lowered gently to the ground. When asked where he had been, the boy replied that he had been lifted up to heaven among the choirs of Angels who sang, *“Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us!”*

The boy also said that a voice had commanded him to tell the Patriarch that the people should make supplication to God, chanting in this way. The Patriarch promptly instructed the people to chant this hymn, whereupon the ground stopped shaking.

The child soon reposed, and was interred in the Church of Αγία Ειρήνη (Holy Peace) which is located behind the Great Church of Christ Holy Wisdom.

The Empress Pulchéria (AD 399 - 453) asked the Patriarch to have this hymn chanted henceforth in the Divine Liturgy, as it still is today. From that time on, this

beautiful hymn was adopted by the Church not only during the Divine Liturgy but in all our prayers and services.

Notably, we continue to chant “*Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us!*” in our processions in and around the church.

Notice the comparison of this account with that of the Prophet Isaiah: “*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!” And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts.” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin purged.”* (Isaiah 6:1-7)