

# WHEN IS A LENTEN SERVICE NOT A LENTEN SERVICE?

*When it is the Akathist Hymn to the Theotokos.*

In Byzantine Churches of the Greek or "Southern" tradition it is customary to serve Compline with the Akathist to the Theotokos on the Friday evenings during the Great Fast. Due to the pressures of the work and school week this is often the only Lenten weekday service many parishioners attend. In fact this is not an actual Lenten service, such as Great Compline or the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. Rather it is a weekend service, ushering in our Saturday observance. Saturday and Sunday, remember, are generally not fast days. This is why our Churches observe festivals like the Saturday of the Ascetics or the Sunday of Orthodoxy on weekends during the Fast. The Akathist service is connected to one of these feast days called, appropriately enough, the Saturday of the Akathist.

*What is this festival?*

The Saturday of the Akathist recalls three important events in Byzantine history. On August 8, 626 the imperial capital, Constantinople, was attacked by both the Persians and the Scythians (Iranian tribes living along the Black Sea in today's Crimea and Ossetia). A sudden hurricane scattered the invading ships and the attackers retreated. The Byzantines ascribed this turn of events to the intercession of the Theotokos. As the Synaxarion relates, they spent the entire night giving thanks for their deliverance. Two later victories over Muslim Arab and Turkish invaders in the seventh and eighth centuries occasioned the observance of a common feast of thanksgiving to the Theotokos during the Fast (the Muslim sieges took place in the spring). The Saturday of the Akathist is observed on the fifth Saturday of the Fast. The following well-known kontakion ascribes the victory to the Holy Virgin: "Triumphant Leader, to you belongs our prize of victory! And since you saved us from adversity I offer you thanks. I am your city, O Theotokos! So, as you have that invincible power, continue to deliver us from danger that I may cry out to you: Hail O Virgin and Bride ever pure!" Translators in later ages widened the application of this hymn by changing "I your city" to "We your servants."



*What is the Akathist?*

According to the Synaxarion, the night of thanksgiving prompted by the defeat of the Persians and Scythians included the enthusiastic singing of a popular ode to the Theotokos. To this day everyone remains standing while this ode is sung to recall the excitement of that victory night. The Greek word Akathist means "without sitting." This hymn, which dates to the sixth century, is attributed to St Romanos the Melodist, the Syrian-born deacon who served in the Great Church of Constantinople, Hagia Sophia (+556). St Romanos is the author of a number of poetic odes, many of which survive. Besides the hymn to the Theotokos, his most famous odes are those on: the Nativity of Christ, the Raising of Lazarus (for Lazarus Saturday, the day before Palm Sunday), Adam's Lament (for Palm Sunday), and the Treachery of Judas.

The first of these canticles was said to have been his ode on the Nativity of Christ. According to the Synaxarion, Romanos was unable to sing and he very much desired to do so. The Theotokos appeared to Romanos, gave him a scroll and commanded

him to eat it. When Romanos did so, he received a beautiful, melodic voice and, the gift of poetry resulting in his ode on the Nativity, "Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent in Essence." During the Byzantine period this ode was sung every year at the imperial Christmas banquet by alternating choirs. The first verse of this hymn is still sung in our worship as the Kontakion of the Nativity. Another of Romanos' odes that has remained a perennial favorite is the kondakion, "My soul, my soul, awake! Why do you sleep?" which is chanted on the Thursday of the Great Canon, the fifth Thursday of the Great Fast. Each of these odes has a similar structure. There are a number of verses in two alternating forms, a kondakion and an oikos, each with a particular refrain. The singer would chant the kontakion and the oikos to which the people would reply with the appropriate refrain. In the Akathist to the Theotokos these refrains are "Hail, O Virgin and Bride ever pure" and "Alleluia." In addition to the Akathist itself, Compline on Lenten Fridays includes the singing of a canon to the Theotokos by St Joseph the Hymnographer, the ninth-century monk in Constantinople who composed many of the canons in our service books, the Menaion and the Paraklitiki. The troparia in this canon are written as an acrostic, with the first letter of each troparion combining to spell out the phrase "Vessel of joy, to you alone 'Hail!' belongs." These acrostics are almost never evident in translation of these hymns.

### *Preparing for the Annunciation*

On the Saturday of the Akathist the entire hymn is sung at Compline. On the previous four Fridays parts of it are sung in anticipation of this feast and of the Great Feast of the Annunciation, which falls on March 25. Since this feast falls during the Great Fast or the Great Week it does not have the extended celebration – sometimes a week or more – which marks the other Great Feasts during the year. The Church "makes up" for this by celebrating the Annunciation in advance on these weekends. The final kontakion of the Akathist service clearly points us to the celebration of the Annunciation: "At the magnificence of your virginity and your exceedingly splendid purity Gabriel stood amazed and cried out to you, O Theotokos: 'What praise may I offer you that is worthy of your beauty? By what name shall I call you? I am lost and bewildered! But I shall greet you as I was commanded: Hail, O full of grace!'" And this troparion, on the last Friday does the same: "Bearing in mind the mystical order, the bodiless angel made haste to the house of Joseph and said to the Virgin who knew not wedlock: 'He, who has bent by His descent the heavens, is wholly and changelessly contained in you. So, when I see Him in your womb taking the form of a servant, I cry out to you in amazement: 'Hail, O Virgin and Bride ever pure!'"

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### *Triumphant Leader*

to you belongs our prize of victory,  
and since you saved us from adversity  
we offer you our thanks,  
we are your people, O Theotokos.  
So as you have that invincible power  
continue to deliver us from danger.

That we may cry out to you: "Hail O Virgin and bride ever pure."

The Kondakion of the Annunciation