SUBBTO 70, no. 1 (2025): 77-92
DOI:10.24193/subbto.2025.1.05

The Church's *Liturgical Idiom*: Between Tradition and Modernity*

Radu HAGIU**

ABSTRACT. The liturgical language of the Orthodox Church stands at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, poised between reverence for inherited forms and the impulse toward renewal. This study seeks to transcend that polarity through the lens of Saint Sophrony of Essex's notion of the *liturgical idiom*. Far from being a mere instrument of communication, liturgical language is portrayed as a vessel of divine energy – a manifestation of the creative power of the Logos. It constitutes a sacred, mystagogical register whose ultimate aim is not semantic clarity but communion with God. Within this framework, the question of intelligibility assumes a spiritual dimension: understanding arises not from linguistic simplicity but from the believer's inward receptivity, as the idiom gestures toward realities that elude discursive thought. The argument unfolds through a reflection on the ontological status of divine names as verbal icons and on the anagogical, poetic vocation of liturgical utterance. In the end, the *liturgical idiom* emerges as a transformative mode of speech – one that elevates the soul, nurtures an unworldly ethos, and enables a genuine partaking in divine life, engaging the heart more profoundly than the intellect.

Keywords: Sophrony Sakharov, hermeneutics, semiotics, mystagogy, onomatodoxy, liturgical language

This paper originates from the pastoral concerns of a friend, a priest ministering to the Romanian Orthodox diaspora in the United Kingdom, who

* The present paper is based on the lecture "The *Liturgical Idiom* Between Tradition and Modernity: How Can We Rightly Understand the Language of the Church?" presented in Romanian on September 20, 2022, at the Orthodox Parish of Saint John the Baptist and Holy Martyr Alban in Luton, UK. The text has been subsequently revised for publication.

** Priest; PhD candidate at the 'Dumitru Stăniloae' Doctoral School, Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest, Romania; Editor at 'Cuvântul Vieții' Publishing House of the Metropolis of Muntenia and Dobrogea. E-mail: raduhagiu@gmx.net.

observed a need to address several practical issues within his community. While the initial lecture was conceived with a Romanian-speaking audience in mind, and certain examples may resonate less with an international readership, I believe the central theme that animated this inquiry is relevant to all Orthodox Christians, irrespective of the familiar language in which they offer worship to the Living God. In response to these pastoral needs, this article will explore several key aspects of the Church's distinct language – or, as Saint Sophrony the Athonite aptly termed it, the 'liturgical idiom.'[1]

Perhaps at least a few of the readers have wondered at one time or another, more or less profoundly or superficially, about the relevance of the way we speak to and about God. Some may have heard of the now-abandoned Western theory of 'sacred languages.' While first emerging within a Judeo-Christian framework, the concept of sacred languages ultimately denotes a principled mode of engaging with a text regarded as revealed and divinely inspired – a mode latent throughout human history and recurring in several long-standing religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism (with Sanskrit) or Islam (with Qur'ānic Arabic). This concept has sometimes been taken to extremes within religions like Judaism, where certain phonetic forms were absolutized (the Hebrew language is called by some Jews *Lashon Hakodesh*, 'the tongue/language of holiness'). The most well-known example is the replacement by the rabbis, even before Christ, of the sacred Tetragrammaton *YHWH* (the name by which God reveals Himself to the Prophet Moses on Mount Horeb[2]), which translates as *He Who Is*, with the somewhat generic term *Adonai*, 'the Lord,' in order not to transgress the commandment against taking the Name of the Lord in vain – a very interesting discussion in itself, which we will not delve into now, although I will try to return to some aspects of the issue of God's Name, which is closely related to hesychastic prayer.

What ought to be emphasized regarding the so-called 'sacred languages' – which, in the Judeo-Christian sphere, refer to Latin, Greek, and Hebrew – is that, on the one hand, the Church rejected this concept in its absolutist form as early as the 9th century. This rejection occurred in the context of the evangelization of the Slavic peoples, when Saints Cyril and Methodius translated both the Gospel and the Liturgy into the local tongue (today known as Church Slavonic),

[1] The theme originates in the chapter "Литургический язык" from Saint Sophrony's spiritual autobiography, *Видеть Бога как Он есть* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2025). All references in this paper are to the Romanian edition, Archimandrite Sophrony, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, Romanian translation from Russian by Hieromonk Raphael (Noica) (Bucharest: Sophia, 2004). While not ideal, I have provided my own translations for the relevant passages, as the currently available English edition of the book omits this chapter.

[2] Exodus 3:14.

despite the protests of certain Roman clerics. On the other hand, as the erudite Archimandrite Julius Scriban observed in the early 20th century, once the Church's principal liturgical texts were translated (into Romanian, as into any other language), the very idiom of worship underwent a process of 'churching,' of ecclesial metabolization: it acquired, to some degree, an iconic and archetypal character, embodying a "past [that] carries with it sound ordinances and worthy forms," for

> "language ... is bound to our soul from our earliest childhood. For this reason, speech in its native idioms reaches deeper than all the poultices and patches from other tongues that we might lay over our inherited speech";

the arbitrary adoption of a lexicon foreign to this ethos, he warned, puts us in danger of being "swept away by the torrent of perilous innovations."[3] Between these two extremes – on the one side, the conservative absolutization of archaic forms, and on the other, the relentless drive toward neologizing modernizations – the 'liturgical idiom' of the Church seeks to find the balance of the patristic 'royal path.'

1. The Word: Life-Bearing Energy

Before moving on to more specific issues, I would like first to define a concept essential to our discussion: what is *the word*. We know from Saint John the Evangelist, whom the Church has honored with the title (sparingly granted) of 'Theologian,'[4] that in its essential sense the Word (in Greek, *Logos*) is one of the names of God, through whom "all things were made, and without Him was not any thing made that was made".[5] We also know that man is made in the image of God and after His likeness,[6] and this 'image,' this divine icon in man, includes the creative capacity (on a human scale) of words. As Saint Sophrony the Athonite remarked,

---

[3] Iuliu Scriban, *Datoria preotului către limba bisericească* [*The Priest's Responsibility for the Ecclesiastical Language*] (Sibiu: Editura Revistei Teologice, 1938), 5-6. He also refers to the "idiom of the ancient Cazanii [Homiliaries]" as "the beautiful gift which the Church possesses in the language with which she has worked until now in the bosom of the nation. [...] In the language of the Church books, we hold a treasure that we must cherish and from which we ought to draw inspiration."

[4] In Greek, *θεολόγος* means literally *God's word-bearer*, someone who expresses the words of God.

[5] John 1:3.

[6] Genesis 1:26.

> "The human word is an image of the pre-eternal Word of the Father: 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made... For He spake, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast' (Psalm 32:6,9). And our word carries creative power. 'The word of our God shall stand for ever' (Isaiah 40:8); and our word touches eternity, if it is uttered in the ways of His will."[7]

Father Raphael Noica develops this thought further, noting that in the context of the creation of the universe,

> "The 'word of God' may be understood, in our [human] language, I would say, as energy, creative energy. But what is the word of man? If man is the image of God, an image capable of attaining likeness with God, then the word of man is an energy ... – an energy that lives in God Himself."[8]

This is why Adam receives from God the responsibility of a 'name-giver,' assigning names to "all the animals and all the birds of the air and all the wild beasts".[9] This is why

> "Christ speaks to us words not of a superior ethical code, but as God, 'words of eternal life.' ... Insofar as man allows himself to be partaker of the word of God, he finds in this word God Himself, a life-giving energy."[10]

In the same vein must be understood the dogmatic disputes of the early Christian centuries (and later as well), in which a series of terms were defined, essential for understanding the mystery of the Triune God and His relation to the world – terms such as *consubstantial*, *hypostasis*, *nature*, *procession*, *theandricity*, *synergy*, *uncreated energy*, *theosis*, and so forth.

Ecclesiastical Terminology Between Convention and Analogy

I will make here a parenthesis, because our discussion reached a very actual issue: the nature of the concepts, statements, and words through which divine truths are expressed. In the case of God, knowledge is antinomic, surpassing human reason; therefore, the Church Fathers emphasized, on the one hand, the disanalogy between God and man (to avoid anthropomorphizing

7 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 362.
8 Rafail Noica, *Cultura Duhului* [*The Culture of the Spirit*] (Alba-Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2006), 9.
9 Genesis 2:20.
10 R. Noica, *Cultura Duhului*, 12.

the divine), yet, on the other hand, they did not entirely eliminate the analogy between God and man (to prevent regarding revealed names as arbitrary). In our days, this concept of arbitrariness is generally found in philosophical and theological currents that reduce words to mere conventions, denying their ontological adequacy to a supra-intelligible reality. For example, in certain Neo-Protestant circles it is argued that the title of 'Father' attributed to God is a social-historical convention and that Divinity has an androgynous character; therefore, God could just as well be called 'Mother.'

The adequacy of divine names and attributes is, however, determined and confirmed by their use by Christ, God incarnate as man. The names of 'Father' and 'Son' are not arbitrary designations; all that is divine constitutes archetypes for humanity and for the cosmos/creation: divine fatherhood is the model of human fatherhood, without being exhausted in the human, and human fatherhood carries a (admittedly limited) value as a symbol/image for the divine. In Orthodoxy, this issue gave rise, on a different but similar level, to the onomatodox dispute of the early 20th century in Mount Athos, regarding the nature of the name of Jesus Christ, as used in the practice of the Jesus Prayer (a controversy that led to the conclusion that the name of God the Son is neither of divine essence, nor a mere human convention; it is human, yet ontologically connected to His Person) – a matter to which I will return later in this paper.

2. The Nature of the 'Liturgical Idiom'

Returning to the central thread of our topic, I would like to move on by defining the concept of 'Church language', or 'liturgical idiom,' one that is intimately connected with the capacity of words to carry creative energy and to express, as faithfully and appropriately as possible, a given reality (in the case of liturgical language, this refers to the realities of the "plan and language of the Divine Revelation, of prayer, of theology, and of the manifold links between God and men – of the Liturgy"[11]). As Saint Sophrony observes, each form of language has its own specialization, determined by the purpose it serves: some are suited for daily life, others for politics, science, philosophy, or poetry. Every language, by its very nature as a "conditionally reflexive" medium, seeks to bring the recipient into the domain it addresses. For this reason, the Church is entitled to its own specialized linguistic mode, which performs the highest function among all forms of human expression: that of

[11] Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 359.

> "giving birth in the minds and hearts of those who pray to the feeling of another world, of the world above; ... it helps the faithful to abide in the consciousness of the Perfect One and contributes to their fuller participation in Him."[12]

In the second half of the 20th century, the issue of updating, renewing, or even simplifying ecclesiastical language became increasingly prominent throughout the Christian world. Within this context, Saint Sophrony had experienced first-handedly the tragic consequences of the

> "change of the liturgical idiom in the Anglican Church: Thus, the introduction of the simplest vernacular into its services has extinguished to some extent the experience of prayer, leading to a considerable decrease in the number of the faithful."[13]

Against the argument advanced by proponents of adopting everyday speech in worship – that contemporary people no longer understand ecclesial terminology – Saint Sophrony points out that, in fact, nearly all moderns now receive formal education, with the theoretical level of today's schooling being among the highest in history. Just as many strive with determination to master the technical vocabularies of science, law, technology, or even philosophy and poetry, it would be entirely natural to expect at least some effort in learning the 'liturgical idiom,' "which, in a wondrous manner, corresponds to the great mysteries of the Divine worship," conveying "the highest forms of theology and its spiritual experiences."[14]

Moreover, the distinctive features of Church language foster the cultivation of the unworldliness in our lives, drawing us away from any concerns unrelated to the plane of Divinity.

> "The words of the Liturgy, and especially of the prayers, are not merely human, but given from Above. The language of the Church belongs to the realm of the Divine Being; it must articulate the Revelation of the Spirit and the visions of the mind born of that Revelation."

For, concludes Saint Sophrony,

> "through the 'hearing of the word of God' (cf. Romans 10:17), man is inspired to believe, and it is faith that 'overcomes the world' (1 John 5:4; cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:13)."[15]

---

12 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 360.
13 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 360, n. 1.
14 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 361.
15 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 362.

The Hellenistic Synthesis of Orthodoxy

I would like to make here another brief digression in order to clarify the nature of certain spiritual terms. Without implying anything immutable or intangible, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that, by God's providence, the language in which the Church's liturgical patrimony was composed (the scriptural texts, the prayers of the Divine Liturgies and Church Services, but also a good part of the ascetical-dogmatic terminological apparatus) is Ancient Greek. This Hellenistic character of Orthodoxy is not a mere historical accident; as Saint Sophrony (a Russian, by the way!) remarked,

> "the Greeks, through philosophy, attained the highest measures of development of the spirit and, through language, forged the most perfect possible form of expression of the human word."[16]

The great Russian theologian Georges Florovsky takes the point even further, stating that "Hellenism can be said to have become a perpetual dimension of the Church, having been incorporated into the very fabric of Church life as an eternal category of Christian existence,"[17] which is why the theology of the Church Fathers represents, among other things, a "Hellenistic synthesis."[18]

Without entering into the debate – raised by some contemporary authors[19] – that such an approach might appear somewhat limiting, insofar as it seems to exclude the Syriac, Latin, and other patristic traditions, it should nevertheless be noted that Florovsky appears to understand the 'Hellenism' of Orthodoxy less as a linguistic characteristic than as a conceptual one: namely, the capacity to articulate certain 'metaphysical' realities with a richness of nuance and at the highest level of human expression.

What, then, is the relevance of this 'Hellenistic character' of Orthodoxy for our present discussion? It lies in the fact that many of the Church's most significant theological terms – such as those mentioned earlier, and many others besides –

---

16 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 360.

17 Georges Florovsky, 'Breaks and Links', in: Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 168.

18 G. Florovsky, 'Preface to *In Lingo Crucis*', in: B. Gallaher and P. Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky*, 68. Fr. Florovsky draws a conclusion as harsh as possible regarding the importance of this Hellenistic character: "Today a renunciation of the 'Greek heritage' can only signify suicide of the Church" (172).

19 See Paul Ladouceur, "'Hellenism' and 'Byzantinism'", in his volume *Modern Orthodox Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 419-422.

are, to a considerable degree, 'calques' of the Greek language. This has profound spiritual significance, both because, as Fr. Raphael Noica observes, "today, if Greek [texts] were lost and you were to translate word for word from Slavonic, you would fall almost exactly on what was before – [and] this, too, must be the case for Romanian"; and also because this terminology "expresses in a worthy manner what it wants to express."[20]

3. The 'Liturgical Idiom' in its Romanian Expression

Let us now turn briefly to the issue of ecclesiastical language in its Romanian utterance. Since the 16th century, the Church in Romania has exhibited the particularity of sharing to a certain extent its liturgical language with the 'vernacular'. I say 'to a certain extent' because the early ecclesiastical translators consistently displayed a preference for certain words and an avoidance of others, while also striving to coin new terms capable of expressing spiritual realities as worthily as possible. This overlap was, on the one hand, a strength, as it greatly facilitated the preaching of the Word of God and the incorporation of the faithful into the Church through language; yet on the other hand, it also constituted a weakness, for it was not a finished work but an ongoing process – leaving room for occasional 'deviations' at particular historical junctures (I am thinking, for instance, of the forced Latinization of Church language within the 'Transylvanian School' and the Uniate movement in Transylvania of 18th century[21]).

The importance of ensuring that liturgical language expresses eternal realities as worthily as possible was exemplified in the work of St. Paisius Velichkovsky, the founder of the 'Neamț School,' where it reached its fullest maturity on the threshold of modernity. The translators of Neamț Monastery,

[20] R. Noica, *Cultura Duhului*, 145-146.

[21] In an article entitled *Limba liturgică. O hotărîre care poate fi un nou obstacol în calea unirii bisericilor* [*Liturgical Language: A Decision That May Pose a New Obstacle to the Union of the Churches*], signed by A. C. Albinus for the Greek-Catholic publication *Unirea*, XXXVII, 14, published on Saturday, April 2, 1927, in Blaj, the author says: "The Consistory of a Uniate eparchy has denied approval for a prayer book, because the liturgical text was written according to the 'Dumnezeeștile Liturghii' ('Divine Liturgies') printed at the Seminary in Blaj, in 1807, and not according to the last edition of the 'Liturgier' from 1905. Consequently, the replacement of the words [of Slavic origin] was requested: *vreme, ceas, rob, rod, preacinstitul, vrăjmașul, protivnicul, cinste, milostiv, se cade, milă, gând, dragoste, biruință, glas*, etc., with [neologisms of Latin origin]: *timp, oră, serv, fruct, preaonoratul, inimicul, contrarul, onoare, îndurat, se cuvine, îndurare, cuget, iubire, învingere, vers*, etc." It is also worth mentioning the conclusion of the article: "There is no doubt that the Romanian liturgical language, to which our Orthodox brethren are so devoutly attached, is a precious treasure."

all highly proficient in both Greek and Romanian, continued the creative work of their predecessors. The Romanian Church remains indebted to this day to the 'Neamț School' for its liturgical, scriptural, and patristic texts.

The significance of this endeavor was further demonstrated by the fact that the first confrontation between modernity and the Church concerned precisely this language – the revised editions of liturgical books (and more) produced between 1870 and 1910 were analyzed in detail by Professor Constantin Chiricescu, Dean of the Bucharest Faculty of Theology, at the beginning of the 20th century in the context of the so-called 'scandal of the Church books.'[22] The challenges faced by the Church at that time, brought about by modernizing trends and the gradual distancing from the traditional Orthodox ethos among the elites, were compounded by the advent of communism, through which society was officially secularized, further weakening the fragile spiritual thread that connected it to the linguistic heritage of the past.

Therefore, Romanian 'liturgical idiom' remains one of the languages that has not undergone radical changes since the first translations of sacred texts (Scripture and the Liturgy) in the 17th and 18th centuries, passing through the pinnacle of the 'Neamț School' in the 19th century, and on to the modern 20th-century versions. This 'sociolect,' both in terms of morphosyntactic structure and lexical content, can, with varying degrees of effort, be understood by a contemporary reader without needing to study it as a foreign language – unlike Church Slavonic or Ancient Greek, which are far less accessible to today's Russians, Serbs, Bulgarians, or Greeks. Nonetheless, in certain circles, there exists a somewhat depreciative tendency towards the Romanian ecclesiastical idiom, which is often considered outdated, archaic, or even elitist (in the negative sense of the term).

The Problem of Intelligibility

At this point, I would like to make a few lexical clarifications highly relevant to our topic. First, we must avoid confusing 'archaic' with 'old': the linguistic age of a word does not automatically imply its obsolescence (see, for example, the well-known list of terms of Dacian origin: *barză* [stork], *varză* [cabbage], *viezure* [badger], *mânz* [colt], etc.). As the distinguished philologist Octavian Gordon notes, "it is more appropriate to evaluate a word as archaic (or not) based on its degree of usage within the system to which it belongs, rather

[22] Constantin Chiricescu, *Răspuns Prea Sfințitului Atanasie Mironescu, Episcopul Râmnicului Noului Severin* [*Reply to His Grace Atanasie Mironescu, Bishop of Râmnic – New Severin*] (Bucharest: Tipografia Cărților Bisericești, 1905), 79-132; see especially 122-123.

than in relation to its use in another linguistic system"[23] – in other words, for instance, the formula "Blagosloviți" (as opposed to "Binecuvântați", both meaning "Your blessing!"), is improperly deemed archaic, since it has never ceased to exist in the ecclesiastical sphere, within a "linguistic system that is autonomous, well-established, and a continuator of the old Romanian literary language."[24]

Second, we cannot speak of a true stagnation of liturgical language; a simple comparison of textual versions from the 19th and 20th centuries shows that the 'liturgical idiom' is in a state of "perpetual renewal – not ... a complete adjustment to the everyday language, but a renewal that nevertheless preserves the defining distance of a non-secularized mode of expression."[25] In Romanian, we no longer say *Troiță*, but *Treime* (for *Trinity*); not *Bogoslov*, but *Teolog* (for *Theologian*); not *Blagovești*e, but *Bunăvestire* (for *Annunciation*) – and the list could continue. 'Renewal' of this kind, along with other changes at the level of morpho-lexical translation options, represents rather a process of refinement, of metabolization and maturation of the liturgical texts.

This brings us, thirdly, to the issue of intelligibility – the same issue addressed by Saint Sophrony in the text to which I referred previously. Octavian Gordon also concludes: "Practically, we may discuss the need to renew ecclesiastical language where it becomes unintelligible. But unintelligible for whom? For everyone? For the uninitiated?"[26] Intelligibility, he observes, also depends on the degree of cultivation of the recipient:

> "The demand for intelligibility in liturgical language is absurd for very profound theological realities, yet it is legitimate for more prosaic aspects. ... These realities [expressed in liturgical and scriptural texts] are 'supranatural,' 'beyond mind,' and – as all who have sung them in words testify – inexpressible, ineffable."[27]

Indeed, Christ Himself does not address everyone plainly and comprehensibly, but He often speaks to people in parables; He explains to His disciples:

> "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest [I speak] in parables, that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand. ... Therefore *take heed how you hear*. For whoever has, to

[23] Octavian Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc – între vechi și nou" ["Romanian Ecclesiastical Language: Between Old and New"], in: *Mișcarea literară*, XVII, no. 2 (66), 2018, 122.
[24] O. Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc...", 125.
[25] O. Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc...", 123.
[26] O. Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc...", 123.
[27] O. Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc...", 123.

> him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him."[28]

The intelligibility of Christ's words, and more generally of spiritual texts, thus depends on "the readiness of the audience, on their will – or, rather, on the lack of readiness and will,"[29] not on the form of the message itself.

The distinction between everyday language and ecclesiastical language, noted by Saint Sophrony (or, if you prefer, the issue of apparent unintelligibility discussed above), can be assimilated to the distinction made by Saint Basil of Caesarea between *kērygma* and *dogma*: the former represents the Church's public teaching, which could be communicated to the unbaptized (pagans or catechumens); the latter pertains to the liturgical and mystical life of the Church, as well as to the spiritual meanings of these practices, of which only Christians sacramentally initiated through Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist could partake.[30]

Thus, the use of modern, everyday language can be justified in a missionary context, for the proclamation of Christ's message in a form comprehensible to those not yet incorporated into Church – or, at most, tangentially connected to it – as a kind of "milk" feeding, suitable for those still unlearned in "the first principles of the words of God",[31] those not yet versed in the terminology and spiritual meanings, who can receive only preliminary and less profound aspects of the mysteries of eternal realities. Within the Church, however, "solid food" is required "for the mature",[32] which is expressed in this regard through a mystagogical language: far more nuanced, rich, and profound, appropriate to those with the spiritual capacity to receive and comprehend the mystical meanings of the Godhead.

In brief,

> "the realities indicated (without being exhausted) by ecclesiastical language are, on the one hand, profoundly theological and, practically, inaccessible to our mind – or at least inaccessible through linguistic means"

(as in certain liturgical expressions such as *ἀνεπαίσχυντα ... τὰ τέλη τῆς ζωῆς*, *ἔμψυχος κιβωτός*, etc.), and

---

[28] Luke 8:10,18; Matthew 13:11-12.

[29] Constantin Coman, *Dreptatea lui Dumnezeu şi dreptatea oamenilor* [*Divine Justice and Human Justice*] (Bucharest: Editura Bizantină, 2010), 321.

[30] See Milton V. Anastos, "Basil's Κατὰ Εὐνομίου. A Critical Analysis", in: Paul Jonathan Fedwick (ed.), *Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic. Part One* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1981), 131-132.

[31] Hebrews 5:12.

[32] Hebrews 5:14.

> "on the other hand, prosaic realities, accessible to the human reason. Among the latter, some linguistic expressions are specific to ecclesiastical language and define it as such. For these to be intelligible, they simply need to be learned"

(for example, expressions such as *στάμνος χρυσοῦς*, *ὁρθρίσωμεν ὄρθρου βαθέο*, *δυνατὸς ἐν ἰσχύϊ*, etc.).[33]

The Name and Essence of God

I shall now make one final parenthetical remark, which I consider important, regarding the nature of the Name of God. This issue was the subject of a very fierce dogmatic dispute that took place before the First World War in Mount Athos and Russia, called the onomatodox dispute – the identification made between the name of God and His Person. Without delving into historical details, I will highlight only a few theological aspects that emerged from this controversy.[34]

A name ('Jesus Christ,' for example) is not merely a conventional sign, but a symbol that signifies or points to another reality, which it invokes through a physical medium. The syllables and sounds of this name (which, in our case, indicates God Himself) are only the external 'envelope' of the symbol, which resides in the meaning or reference of the syllables and sounds, not in the syllables and sounds themselves. What a symbol invokes is somehow present within the symbol itself: thus, God is present in a mystical way in His Name, without, however, identifying Himself with it. From this perspective, the Name of God may be considered a verbal icon. Saint Sophrony states that all the revealed Names of God possess a special quality: "We know that not only the Name 'Jesus' but also all the other Names revealed to us are ontologically linked with God. And we know this by experience in the Church."[35]

Saint Sophrony points out that every Mystery – and indeed the whole of Christian worship – is performed through the invocation of the divine Names and, above all, of the Name of the Holy Trinity. He further states that the name *Jesus* existed before the creation of the world, not being a human invention:

---

[33] O. Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc...", 125.

[34] I wholeheartedly recommend to those interested the excellent work of Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Holy Mystery of the Church. Introduction to the History and Problems in the Debates on the Onomatodoxy* (Saint Petersburg: Oleb Abyshko Edition, ²2007).

[35] Archimandrite Sophrony, *Sa Vie est la mienne* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1981), 133. The English version differs significantly, therefore I am compelled to rely on a translation of this French edition (passages which we owe to P. Ladouceur).

> "The Name 'Jesus Christ' was given by revelation from on high. It originates in the divine and eternal sphere and is in no way the product of human intelligence, even though it is expressed by a created word."[36]

The distinction between the divine essence/nature and the uncreated energies/actions of God represents the key to understand the significance of the Name of God, and especially of the name *Jesus*:

> "As a vehicle of meaning and knowledge, as an 'energy' of God in his relation with the world and as his proper Name, the Name 'Jesus' is ontologically linked with him. ... For us it is a bridge which unites us to him; it is channel by which we receive divine strength. Coming from the Holy God, it is holy and sanctifies us when we invoke it. ... God is present in this Name as in a receptacle, as in a precious vase filled with perfume. Through it, the Transcendental becomes perceptibly immanent. As divine energy, it proceeds from the divine Essence and is itself divine."[37]

Saint Sophrony is careful not to attribute any magical power to the words of prayer themselves, including the Jesus Prayer, but he emphasizes the stresses of the disposition of the one who prays:

> "When pray conscious of what we have just said, our prayer becomes a formidable act, and at the same time a triumphant one. ... We do not attribute magical power to the words [of the divine Names] as such, as audible phenomena, but when they are pronounced as a true confession of faith and in a state of fear of God, reverence and love, then in truth we have God together with his Names."[38]

He also speaks of the power of the Name from personal experience that can only be called mystical:

> "Now that the most profound sense of all divine Names has been unveiled by Christ's coming, we also should tremble – as this happens to numerous ascetics among whom I had the possibility of living – when we pronounce the holy Name of Jesus. An invocation of the divine Name fills our entire being with the presence of God, transports our intellect to other spheres, communicates a special energy and a new life to us. A divine light, of which it is not easy to speak, accompanies this Name."[39]

> "I remember starting the Lord's prayer, 'Our Father', and my soul swooned in blissful awe. I could not continue. My mind stopped, everything in me fell silent.

---

36 Archimandrite Sophrony, *Sa Vie est la mienne*, 137.
37 Archimandrite Sophrony, *Sa Vie est la mienne*, 132-133.
38 Archimandrite Sophrony, *Sa Vie est la mienne*, 133.
39 Archimandrite Sophrony, *Sa Vie est la mienne*, 133.

> ... Only once did it happen to me with such force. ... Some time afterwards, something similar happened to me when I was invoking the Name of Jesus Christ. I was obliged to stop pronouncing his Name: the effect was too much for me: my soul, without word, without thought, trembled at the nearness of God. ... The following day I celebrated the Liturgy and Christ-God was in me and with me and outside of me and in the holy sacraments of his Body and Blood. And the divine Name and the words of the liturgical texts issued from my mouth like a flame. I continued in this state for three days."[40]

4. The 'Liturgical Idiom' between Lexical Clarity and Mystagogical Poetics. An Attempt of Conclusion

Returning to the main theme of this paper, I would like to unfold the significance and the stakes of this 'liturgical idiom' from a quite pragmatic perspective. Much has been said about the issue of intelligibility – the capacity of the post-modern individual to grasp the meaning of ecclesiastical language. The *phronēma* of the "whole Adam"[41] has undergone an irreversible change within the dynamics of the Fall, a change rendered even more acute in our age. Certain realities, which we, in Romania, experience with a kind of 'historical latency' compared to the West, nevertheless overflow upon the whole of humanity and, sooner or later, reach everywhere – and, above all, at the level of the spirit. Even we, those within the Church, are affected to some extent by this condition (to some extent, I say, because on the spiritual plane we are sustained by grace, and on the rational plane by the vision of the Fathers' tradition). From this perspective, the desire that ecclesiastical language should not be gratuitously cryptic, nor defined by a meaningless hermeticism, is entirely understandable. In a word, it ought to resemble iconostasis, which does not divide but unites the heavenly and the earthly.

At the same time, the ecclesiastical idiom necessarily requires continuity with the past – a continuity that is not static ('frozen in its project,' and thus bound to fail), but one that is creatively renewing, involving the reception of what is to be received, the abandonment of what is to be abandoned, and the forging of what remains to be forged. Yet all of this must be undertaken within the mind (*phronēma*) of the Fathers. What is at stake is the worthiness of words to express, withing the framework of a correct understanding, those unworldly,

---

40 Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 47.

41 A key phrase in Saint Sophrony's theology, signifying the wholeness of humankind; see, for instance, Archimandrite Sophrony, *St Silouan the Athonite* (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 47-48, 108, 222, 240.

eternal, and ineffable realities – in other words, to constitute a kind of 'specialized language,' as one might speak of medicine, history, or law, in the manner suggested by Saint Sophrony. Behind every word stands an energy, a creative spiritual potential. The Cappadocian Fathers – whose use of language was never a mere exercise in rhetoric or intellectual play, but rather an outpouring of the Life they experienced – had a capacity to discern linguistic nuances far subtler than us moderns. The 'energy' behind a word does not lie in its form, but in its potential. There are two modes of energy or operation in a word: the general or potential, and the hypostatic or personal. A word born within an ethos alien to Orthodoxy is, from the very outset, impoverished and weaker – no matter how much it may be enriched by the spiritual state of the one who utters it (though such enrichment is indeed possible). Moreover, certain ancient linguistic forms (retained in the liturgical idioms of other local Churches as well) serve precisely the purpose to lift the mind away from worldly concerns, to "be separate",[42] and to introduce another Spirit than the spirit of the age, the spirit of the world. Finally, ecclesiastical texts in general – and prayers in particular – do not have an informative or academic function, but a spiritual and catanyctic one. Alongside the theological realities apprehended by reason, both soul and heart are sweetened, contrived, and filled with the energy of these words – as Fr. Raphael Noica puts it: "and the words themselves understand you!"

Beyond its evident rational and dogmatic dimension, the 'liturgical idiom' also bears an important, one might say, poetic character. I use the term here with the words of Saint Porphyrios of Kafsokalyvia in mind: "He who wishes to be a Christian must first be a poet."[43] Likewise, I recall Saint Sophrony of Essex's exhortation to his community: "Oh, how I wish you could all be poets!" (And, as Father Raphael explains, Saint Sophrony always had in mind also the Greek, etymological sense of *poietēs* – that is, 'maker,' 'creator').[44] The language of the Church, especially that of prayer, carries a poetic spirit, inspired and life-giving, that is, *a maker unto eternity*.

Therefore, the 'liturgical idiom' is, above all, something alive: it moves the heart, it does not merely satisfy the mind. Clearly, it depends on the 'mystery of the person' (on someone's readiness and disposition) how much each a man partakes of and is benefited by the Church language. Father Raphael, speaking about the significance of the words we use in prayer, affirmed:

---

42 2 Corinthians 6:17.

43 *Ne vorbeşte Părintele Porfirie* (Galaţi / Alexandria: Bunavestire / Biserica Ortodoxă, 2003), 181. This is the Romanian edition of the Greek classic Γέροντος Πορφυρίου Καυσοκαλυβίτου, *Βίος καὶ Λόγοι* (Χανιά Κρήτης: Ἱερὰ Μονὴ Χρυσοπηγῆς, 2003).

44 See Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Convorbiri duhovniceşti* [*Spiritual Conversations*], vol. 1 (Alba-Iulia: Reîntregirea, ²2011), 242.

> "God, through the energy of the word, tries to contact man. Man, through the word of prayer, tries to respond to God. Man shows his freedom and free will when he responds to God in prayer, when he can say 'Amen' to God, to His call. But what saves man is not what man does in his weakness, but what the word of God accomplishes dwelling within us. I would summarize what I have tried to say so far: we understand the word, in its deepest sense, as energy; and I would like all of us to understand this, so as not to remain at the level of the word as mere information. In the spiritual life, the word is participation."[45]

The stake of the 'liturgical idiom' for the spiritual life, therefore, is precisely that of Life itself – us in He, and He in us.[46] For the very unerring voice of Christ promises us: „If you abide in Me, and *My words abide in you*, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you, ... that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."[47]

[45] R. Noica, *Cultura Duhului*, 10.
[46] John 15:3-4.
[47] John 15:7,11