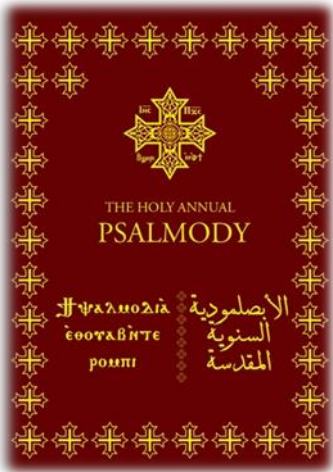


The Theotokias and the Curricula of Sunday School

By Fr. Yohanna Nassif



As we conclude 2018, in which we celebrated the centennial of Sunday School, I would like to share an important idea that I have been reflecting on for a while. The Sunday School curricula lack, to some extent, having a component of the rich Church praises, and in particular the Theotokias*. During the opening service of Sunday School, we could teach, in addition to songs, some of the responses and simple hymns of the Divine Liturgy as appropriate for each age group. We could also add simple parts from the daily Psalis** that praise and glorify the sweet name of Jesus, chanting them together in English (or any other local language). The important addition, which I believe is necessary, is to teach parts of the daily Theotokias and to also chant them in Sunday School meetings.

The Theotokias are praises containing beautiful and rich meanings. They explain to us the Orthodox doctrine, clearly and simply, such as the doctrines of the Holy Trinity, Incarnation, Redemption, and our unity with God. They also explain a number of the symbols in the Old Testament about the Virgin, Mother of Light, St. Mary, who is the new Eve, as well as symbols about the virginal birth, the Tabernacle with all its details, the burning bush, the mountain of Moses, the small stone that Daniel saw, and Ezekiel's door. Furthermore, they contain plenty of beautiful spiritual contemplations that relate to our spiritual life and our communion with the Holy Trinity. As you may already know, some of the famous hymns in the Divine Liturgy are taken from the Theotokias and the Psali of midnight praises (Tasbeha) such as the hymn '*Rejoice O Mary*', and '*Pi Oik - The Bread of Life*', along with many of the Aspasmos***.

Therefore, why not include the Theotokias in the core of the Sunday School curricula so that our children and future generations are planted firmly in the spirit and doctrine of the Church from a young age? Furthermore, teaching through chanting and praising, while explaining what we chant, is a participation-based type of teaching that plants firmly what is being taught in the mind and heart. Please note that we will use English (or any other local language) while the Coptic language will be used in the specialized hymns classes but not in Sunday School meetings.

I specifically suggest the following:

- **For the elementary school age group:** we teach the children the refrains of the Theotokias, such as; '*He took what is ours, and gave us what is His, we praise and glorify Him, and exalt Him*', and the rest of the refrains in their beautiful tunes. In addition, we teach some of the symbols of the Virgin St. Mary in the Old Testament, such as the burning bush, Jacob's ladder, and the golden censer.

Sunday, December 30, 2018

- **For the middle school age group:** we chant a few parts from the Theotokias every week in Sunday School, and we teach the remainder of the symbols of St. Mary and her titles listed in the midnight praises (Tasbeha).

- **For the high school age group:** we chant a few parts from the Theotokias every week, and we explain the deep meanings in them. In addition, if possible, we can teach some of their hymns, even if only simple hymns like *'evol hiten Maria'* ('Through Mary, the daughter of Joachim' - Sunday Theotokia).

- **For college and new graduates:** in addition to having a regular section in their meetings to chant a part of a Theotokia, for example for 5 minutes, we can hold discussions around many of the deep spiritual and theological parts in the Theotokias, such as:
 - ❖ *'And they made an ark, of wood that would not decay, overlaid with gold, within and without. You too O Mary, are clothed with the glory, of the divinity, within and without. For you have brought, unto God your Son, many people, through your purity'* (Sunday Theotokia - second part)
 - ❖ *'Hail to the uniting place of the undivided oneness of the natures that came together, without ever mingling'* (Wednesday Theotokia - Fifth part)
 - ❖ *'Hail to the bridal chamber, decorated in every way, for the true Bridegroom, Who united with humanity'* (Wednesday Theotokia - fifth part)

Truly the Theotokias are a great treasure that could significantly enrich Sunday School curricula.

Translation and footnotes by: Sherif Gayed