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**PHENOMENON OF LOVE IN *SYMPOSIUM* BY PLATO AND
SYMPOSIUM BY METHODIUS OF PATARA**

In their search for the truth, philosophers of Antiquity gave correct answers to many interesting questions and produced doctrines that were at least partially correct on a lot of problematic issues. Plato's teaching on immortality of soul is one of such doctrines.¹ For its part, the teaching provided grounds for a teaching on Love set forth in the well-known dialogue *Symposium*. Thus, the concept of spiritual Love or Love that is concentrated not on people's attractive appearances, but rather on their beautiful soul, existed back in the Pre-Christian Hellenistic theology and *Symposium* by Plato was its source. It is noteworthy that even today; the expression "physical love" is often opposed by "Platonic love", not "spiritual love".

It is known that in *Symposium*, men assembled at tragic playwright Agathon's house in Athens deliver speeches in praise of Love, trying to clarify its essence and its importance in human life. It would be erroneous to identify Plato's understanding of Love with Socrates' encomium. We believe that it is necessary to take into account the speeches of all participants in the dialogue to provide a systemic description of the philosopher's teaching on the phenomenon of Love. It is believed that their views on Love (except those of Socrates) were quite widespread among the public of that time.²

¹ It is noteworthy that Plato himself disparaged the importance of his teaching on immortality of soul by creating at the same time the theory of transmigration of souls.

² Рабинович Е., Афродита Урания и Афродита Пандемос, in Античность и Византия, Москва 1975, 307.

It is true that Plato depicts Love – Eros – in a personified manner in accordance with the pagan religious tradition, but at the same time, it is abstract and it is identified with one of the initial causes of the origin of the universe. The first orator, who makes the first speech in praise of Love – Phaedrus – agrees with what Hesiod writes: "First Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundations of all the deathless ones ... and Eros (Love)" (*Theogony*, 117-118). Therefore, he is the oldest god among the deathless, which is also confirmed by the fact that unlike the others, he does not have parents. Such an understanding of Eros is a kind of pre-image of the Christian teaching on God as Love that is, at the same time, an initial cause of the emergence of visible and invisible worlds. Phaedrus' speech also correctly defines Love as simultaneously the cause and force of humans' beautiful and sublime deeds, including the peak of such deeds – self-sacrifice, which is the best test of genuine existence of Love.

It is also impossible to disagree with Plato, when through one of the characters of the dialogue – Pausanias, he distinguishes between "earthly" lover, who loves a body, and genuine lover, who is in love with a beautiful soul. The sentiments of the former are changeable and transient like the subject of his love, but the sentiments of the lover of a beautiful soul are as eternal and intransient as the beautiful soul itself. However, it should be mentioned here that Plato's pagan religious mind makes itself felt again in this case, because he speaks about two Aphrodites – Aphrodite Urania (heavenly) and Aphrodite Pandemos (of all the folk) – and correspondingly, two Eroses. In reality, there can be no two kinds of Love. What Plato terms as earthly Love (this is how the Georgian translator translated "Pandemos"),³ is merely physical attraction and passion with no room for soul. Therefore, the name – Love – is also inappropriate.

I will not say much about Aristophanes' androgyneon. Although Aristophanes' encomium of Eros is based on mythological ideas, his conclusion that Love implies the aspiration of two creatures for becoming one and whole can be shared, if the unity is regarded as existent at the spiritual level.⁴

The force and importance of Love in the artistic creation are correctly described in Agathon's encomium. "In the case of the arts, whomever this god teaches turns out to be renowned and conspicuous in craftsmanship,

³ Plato, *Symposium*, translated from Old Greek into Georgian and published with the Introduction and comments by B. Bregvadze, Tbilisi 1964.

⁴ *Mat.*; XIX.

and that he whom Eros does not touch remains obscure?"⁵ However, the dividing line between the sentiments of true Love and passion is not distinct in his speech.

As for Socrates' speech, which Plato himself regards as the core of his work, attaching major significance to it, it differs from other speeches first and foremost in that in this case too, Socrates remains loyal to his habit to state his opinion about Love in the shape of dialogue – questions and answers. In my opinion, this dialogue with Agathon is based on sophistic methods. Skilfully using these methods, Socrates makes Agathon reject what he said in his encomium of Eros. In particular, Agathon denies that Eros-Love is beautiful and kind and finally he even says that Eros is not a god.

According to the teaching of female seer Diotima of Mantinea,⁶ which Socrates shares, Eros' features are intermediate between beautiful and ugly, wise and ignorant, good and evil. By essence, Eros is neither mortal nor immortal god, but a demon that plays the role of mediator between gods and humans, filling the space between them. Incidentally, his origin also points to his intermediary nature, as his mother is Penia – personification of poverty – and his father is Poros, a word that usually means "ford", "road" or "flow", but is used in this case as personification of abundance.

Thus, Eros himself is neither beautiful nor ugly, neither kind nor evil, neither ignorant nor wise. He is the adoration of beauty, kindness, and wisdom. To be more exact and put it in Plato's words, Love is craving for good and happiness for each of us.⁷ In addition, this is the craving to eternally possess good and as it is unable to give birth in deformity, it is definitely born in beauty, when the time comes for a fecundated soul, as well as body, to give birth.

In his subsequent judgement, Plato tries to further specify the essence of Love, writing that it is not the desire for beauty per se, but for being conceived and born in it. Since birth gives immortality to mortals and since Love is the desire to eternally possess good, it follows that it is also the desire for immortality. The keen desire for immortality expressed in the aspiration to raise up descendants is characteristic of not only humans, but subconsciously of dumb brutes. Plato distinguishes here between the

⁵ Ibid., 43-44.

⁶ Some researchers of Plato regard Diotima as a real person, while others think she was invented.

⁷ Ibid., 55.

pregnant in the body and pregnant in the soul. The former betake themselves to women, trying to obtain immortality by giving birth to an offspring and the latter aspire to produce wisdom and other supreme spiritual virtues, searching for an appropriate match.

We can see that Plato regards Love only in close connection with the aesthetic category of beauty. In its aspiration to be born in beauty, it gradually becomes refined and elevated, turning from the contemplation of beautiful bodies to beautiful deeds, and from beautiful deeds to beautiful souls (when souls may already be residing in ugly bodies) until it reaches gratification with the contemplation of absolute beauty, which is eternal, unchangeable, and everlasting.

Christian authors managed to overcome their unilateral dependence on ancient literature in the very first centuries AD. Although the literature was unacceptable to them from the religious viewpoint, they found a lot of useful aspects in its best pieces from moral, artistic, and aesthetic viewpoints. Ideological obstacles never motivated Christian thinkers to reject the achievements that raised the ancient Greek literature to the level of universal values. They provided a new interpretation of the issues and genres in the classical Hellenistic literature. They skilfully used the literary language and artistic and aesthetic methods for their own purposes.

Methodius of Patara is one of the first among the early Christian authors, who can be described as a precursor of the Byzantine Christian literature proper. He presumably lived in the late 3rd and early 4th century. Unfortunately, there is very little information about his life. According to historian Socrates, Methodius, who was probably born in Patara, became bishop of Olympus in Lycia.⁸ In his writing *De Viris Illustribus* (*On Illustrious Men*),⁹ St. Hieronymus of Stridon mentions Methodius' works known to him as well as different opinions on the date of his death. The most reliable of the opinions is that the bishop of Olympus was executed for his loyalty to religion in the town of Chalcis on the Euboea Island in 311, two years before the well-known Edict of Milan (which granted Christianity equal rights with other religions).

Symposium, or on Virginity deserves particular attention in the literary legacy of Methodius of Patara. It should also be noted here that *Symposium* is the only work by Methodius, which has come down to us complete in a

⁸ Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6, 13.

⁹ PL, V 23, col. 723-729.

Greek text.¹⁰ We can see that the title contains an allusion that Methodius' work is close to Plato's well-known dialogue *Symposium*, or on Love".

The first thing to mention is that the bishop of Olympus borrowed from the pagan philosopher not only the title, but also the form. Like almost all works by Plato, including *Symposium*, his *Symposium, or on Virginité* was written as a dialogue. In addition, Methodius's composition is also similar to that in the work by Plato, which means that like Plato in *Symposium*, he uses a double scenario in his work. It is known that the bulk of Plato's work describes a dialogue on Love between the guests (including Socrates) invited to Athenian tragic playwright Agathon's house. However, the description comes from someone named Apollodorus, not Aristodemus, who participated in the dialogue. The work starts with a dialogue between Apollodorus and his friend, who asks the former to tell him, what the guests assembled in Agathon's house spoke about. Apollodorus says in response that he did not attend the feast in Agathon's house, but he heard the dialogue from Aristodemus, who was among Agathon's guests. This is followed by the main dialogue reproduced by Apollodorus in the form he heard it from Aristodemus.

Similarly, Methodius' *Symposium* starts with a dialogue between virgins Euboulion and Gregorion, in which Euboulion asks Gregorion to tell him about the conversation between the virgins assembled in the house of Arete, the daughter of Philosophia. Like Apollodorus, Gregorion did not attend the feast of the virgins, but like Apollodorus again, she heard from the participant in the dialogue, Theopatra, what the virgins spoke about, which she tells Euboulion on the basis of Theopatra's story. This is the second and main part of Methodius' work.

In addition to aforementioned similarities, it is known that Methodius uses terms and expressions from Plato's well-known dialogue. At the same time, the morphology and syntax of Methodius' work as well as its rhythmical figures and artistic values in general have been studied in detail.¹¹

Miller found that along with Plato, Methodius often refers to Homer not only as a renowned author to make his views more convincing, but also to make his work more beautiful artistically. For example, in *Symposium*, Methodius conveys the teaching on freedom of will: "If people are evil, they are such because of the lack of reason, not by nature" (VIII,

¹⁰ Methodii opera et. S. Methodius Platonisans. Ed. Alb. Jahnus, Pars Halis Saxonum, 1865.

¹¹ Ruchheit V., Studien zu Methodius von Olympus, Berlin 1958.

16). Homer expresses the same view: "Through their own blind folly, [people] have sorrows beyond that which is ordained" (*Odyssey*, I, 34).

Although Methodius gave his work an old shape similar to Plato's dialogue, the content was new, which becomes evident immediately from the title. Plato's work was called *Symposium, or on Love* and served to clarify the nature of love. In Methodius' work, love is replaced by virginity in the second part of the title and the dialogue itself is written in order to praise the Christian ideal of virginity, although the author does not reject marriage either.

The second part starts with the description of the meeting of virgins in Arete's house. It is no accident that the author gave the host this name. Arete (ἀρετή) means "courage, virtue, dignity" which, together with her appearance and her blameless garments, expresses virtue and dignity and points to the nature of the woman.

The host invites guests to the garden, where fresh air illuminated by sunbeams stirs slightly and a pure spring, trees decorated by coloured fruits of autumn, and small meadows with fragrant flowers of different colours give viewers the impression of unspeakable beauty of the world created by God. The virgins choose one tall tree – Agnos – and sit down in its shadow. It is no accident either that the tree I called Agnos (ἄγνος) which means lamb. It is known that it is a symbol of Our Saviour in the Holy Scripture (*John*: I, 29, 36).

When the guests had had all kinds of dishes and various sweets, Arete asked them to make encomiums – speeches in praise of chastity. The speeches of ten virgins (Marcella, Theophila, Thalia, Theopatra, Thallousa, Agathe, Procilla, Thecla, Thysiana, and Domnina), which are not identical in their artistic values and the power of influence make the bulk of the work. On the basis of the analysis of the distribution of speeches, researchers have expressed the opinion that in the second part, which comprises encomiums by the virgins, Methodius tried to observe a certain symmetry: the first two and the last two speeches are of approximately the same length and sound like each other; the third and eighth are different from all others; and the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh speeches between them are regarded as a whole, because their length is the same and they convey nothing new about the issue discussed. If we assume that the virgins sat in a circle during the conversation, it will follow that the authors of the third and eighth speeches – Thalia and Thecla – sat one opposite the other. However, if we assume that they sat in a line, both

aforementioned speeches will be third, but one from the beginning (Thalia) and the other from the end (Thecla).¹²

It is noteworthy that all virgins start and end their speeches with addresses to Arete and these introductions and final words are almost always composed of phrases and expressions taken from Plato's dialogue.

To prevent readers from getting the sense of monotony from consecutive encomiums and from diverting their attention, Methodius inserts remarks into his treaty. The remarks are made both by those involved in the dialogue in the first part and the authors of encomiums.

Marcella, who is the eldest among the virgins, makes the first speech. She unambiguously supports chastity, which she regards as the supreme beautiful virtue. Marcella's opinion is based on Our Lord's words about those, who "have made themselves eunuchs", taking the path of chastity and virginity and will receive the kingdom of heaven (Matthew: 19, 12). People need to travel a long road to achieve the goal, because they need to keep pure not only their bodies, but also the altar of their bodies – souls, decorating the latter with the truth. It is possible to restrain insane desires of body only through religious teachings and Christ's commandments. The Book of Leviticus of the *Old Testament* (Leviticus: 2, 13) prescribed oblation of meat offering seasoned with salt, as salt prevents meat from decaying. Spiritual exercise with the Holy Scripture is such purifying salt for humans, who do not have any chance of sensibly sacrificing themselves to the Almighty without it.

Christ received an icon blemished with our numerous sins in order to enable us to regain the initial undefiled divine icon. He grew the body, but kept it incorruptible through chastity. Therefore, if we want to be similar to God, we should share His human lifestyle and features and try to observe virginity, Marcella said.¹³

Theophila is the next to speak after Marcella. She says that Marcella's speech was indeed beautiful, but it was incomplete, because she did not mention that along with observing chastity, Christ did not reject giving birth to children. Although Moon is larger than stars, this does not destroy the light of stars. God's plan of giving birth to children – "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis: 1, 28) – is still in force. He continues to create the

¹² Миллер Г. А., Мефодии Олимпийский и традиция Платонского диалога, Античность и Византия, Москва 1975, 184.

¹³ Methodii ..., 13.

universe and man up to now, as Our Lord Himself says: "My Father is always at his work to this very day" (John: 5, 17). Had light and darkness been finally divided, had rivers stopped flowing, had Earth stopped producing reptiles and four-legged animals, and had the number of humans set in advance been reached, we should have refrained from giving birth to children, but as the world continues to exist and be created, it is necessary for humans to behave like God. It was said: "Be fruitful and increase in number" (Genesis: 1, 28). So we should not shun fulfilling God's order, because we too came to exist in accordance with this order.

Theophila admits that chastity is predominant, but she also firmly believes that giving birth to children is not something to be shunned and ashamed of. Just because honey is the sweetest, we should not regard as bitter other fruits that also have natural and agreeable taste.¹⁴ The particular force of Theophila's speech lies not only in her deep knowledge of theology, but also temperance. She is a truly loyal disciple of the great teacher of the Christian Church - Apostle Paul, who wrote: "He who gives his virgin does well and he whoever does not give his virgin girl does all the better" (I Corinthians: 7, 38). It should be noted here that rejecting marriage implies preserving the chastity and purity of not only the body, but also the soul, which is much more difficult and which is the main reason why half of those, who take the path, cannot reach the end and fall halfway.

The third virgin, Thalia, said that she liked Theophila's speech, but regarded her explanation of Biblical verses in the direct physical sense as a shortcoming: "Adam said: This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Genesis: 2, 23-25).

In Thalia's opinion, Theophila failed to pay attention to Apostle Paul's comparison of the first-created man and his wife with Christ and His church: "In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Ephesians: 5, 28-32).

¹⁴ Ibid., 16.

Although Thalia admits that it is dangerous to disregard the direct meaning of texts, particularly that in the Book of Genesis, which carries God's firm ordinances for creating the world, Theophila is nevertheless not moderate regarding the texts, when she says that in the aforementioned verses of Genesis (2, 23-25), Apostle Paul implies only Christ and His church, although it is impossible to deny that Adam's words have first and foremost direct sense and are understood as an appeal to unity between man and wife and firm connection between them. As regards Apostle Paul, he moved this great mystery ("this mystery is profound") – physical and spiritual unity of two humans – to the spiritual level alone in order to symbolically present in this manner the unity of Christ and His church.

The fourth virgin, Theopatra, admits that the talking point has already been discussed, but relying on help from God, who inspires "at many times and in various ways" (Hebrews: 1, 1), she nevertheless makes her encomium of virginity, the luminary of Christianity.

In Theopatra's opinion, there is no other path truer than chastity for returning to Eden, restoring incorruptibility, reconciling with God, and saving humans. Giving pardon to the human race evicted from Eden, fallen in sin, doomed to decay and die, and with no longer any force to rise, God sent them magnificent help from Heavens – chastity – in order to enable us to attach our bodies to it, take delight in calm, and get to heavens unharmed. According to Theopatra, this is the meaning of *Psalms* 136, in which the souls that have already left this world and are already with Christ in Heavens, happily chant hymns to thank God for allowing them not to follow earthly and physical desires in this world: "By the rivers of Babel, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps" (*Psalm*: 136, 1-2).

Theopatra explains that the verse is allegorical, as the hymns imply the bodies of the souls that glorify God – carnal huts decorated with boughs of chastity, which they hang on poplars in order to prevent torrents of audacity from taking them away. In this verse, Babel, which means "unrest" and "mixing" (Genesis: 11, 9), points to life in this world surrounded with water. So long as we are in this world, we plunge into the rivers of vileness that incessantly flow in our direction. This is why we entreat God, weeping, to prevent hymns, or our bodies, from being torn off the tree of chastity by the waves of lechery and from perishing. Poplar is the image of chastity on the Holy Scripture (Leviticus: 23, 40; Isaiah, 44, 4). Drinking its blossom mashed in water puts out the fire of longing and lechery and can sometimes cause infertility. This is why Homer described

it as fruit shedder (*Odyssey*: 10, 510). Like poplars (willows) usually grow from water, virginity grows from holy expressions, flourishes and becomes so firm that everyone is able to hang their hymns or bodies on it. God gave us chastity as the most useful and truthful means to achieve incorruptibility. In its shape, God sent an ally to those, who aspire for it and whom the author of Psalms implies by the name of Zion, as Zion denotes splendid love and the testament on it.¹⁵

The Fifth Encomium of Virginity was made by Thallousa. In the introduction, she enumerates the kinds of offerings people sacrifice to God. In her opinion, sacrificing gold or silver, one-tenth part of harvest, and even the whole property cannot be compared with the offering of a man, who sacrifices himself to God. Thallousa maintains that training with virtues should start from childhood, because only those, who start caring about preserving the purity of not only their bodies, but also their souls, can completely sacrifice themselves to God.

Thallousa's explanation of what she means by completely sacrificing oneself to God is much more interesting. In particular, she says that only those do so, who keep lips, tongues, eyes, ears, hands, and feet away from sinning, using them only for obtaining virtues and accomplishing good deeds. For example, humans should open their lips to correctly clarify the Holy Scripture and praise God, not for vain and vile speeches. Tongues should be a tool for conveying wisdom – the pen of a skilful writer (Psalm: 44, 1) – and as the medium for divine wisdom, they should be more expressive than poets and orators conveying human teachings. Eyes should become accustomed to contemplating the sublime, not physical beauty or unseemly sights. Our ears should be close for evil speeches, being open only for apprehending God's words. If we keep our hands from doing evil and feet from following the path of immorality, they will be chaste like lips, tongues, eyes, and ears and will be devoted to God.¹⁶

Sixth virgin Agathe believes that she will show her silliness, if she considers herself equal of the exalted, i. e. the authors of previous speeches. She asks her listeners to be benevolent to her, as her speech is going to be as good as she is capable of making it.

According to Agathe, humans emerge in this world awarded with incomparable beauty related to wisdom, or Jesus Christ. Souls are particularly related to their Creator, when they shine with the pure beauty of being similar to him, retaining the features of the original Icon. The

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

Creator Himself, who is unborn, incorporeal, infinite, unchanged, ever-youthful beauty, light in itself, and permanently residing in an inarticulate and unattainable haven, created human soul in his image. That is why soul is of sensible, immortal and incomparable beauty and that is why spiritual forces of evil struggle against it in the heavenly realms (Ephesians: 6, 12), trying to set a trap for it in order to dirty this divine and desirable image. The best means for preserving this beauty is to wall it off with chastity, which makes it remain identical of itself. Being promised in marriage to God, it is decorated with truth.

Agathe explained that in the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew: 25, 1-13), the virgins denote souls faithful in Christ and number 10 symbolizes the single and direct path up to the heaven. However, five of the virgins are reasonable and wise and the other five unreasonable and foolish. The latter did not take care to fill their vessels with oil. They are those, who aspire to the goal of chastity and fulfil everything that can draw them closer to the goal correctly and vigilantly. However, they declare the aspiration aloud and with smugness, which weakens them and being defeated by the ephemeral vanity of life, they remain ghosts of chastity rather than the implementers of the spiritualized truth.¹⁷

All those, who retained undamaged and blameless the five senses of virtue - vision, taste, smell, touch, and hearing - and submitted all the five senses like a brightly luminescent torch to Christ, are called the first five virgins here. Agathe calls the human body a candleholder with five candles, which the soul holds like a torch and hands it over to the bridegroom - Christ, expressing brilliant faith with all senses. Thus, observing the purity of soul and body, Agathe says that "I become the bride of Logos, receive the eternal crown of incorruptibility and riches from my Father as dowry, eternally celebrate, being decorated with the crown of brilliant and unfading flowers of wisdom, and celebrate together with Christ, who gives payment in heavens, close to eternal and infinite Lord".¹⁸

Seventh virgin Procilla says that only those, who can call to witness the one, who is greater than any praise and anyone praised, can bestow truthful and grounded praise, because this is the way to firmly convince listeners that verbal praise is based on the truth, not on one's own views, and that it is not aimed at winning someone over or pronounced because that is necessary. Therefore, when prophets and apostles made prophecies

¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

on Son of God, they supported their praises not with the words of angels, but with those of Father, who is greater (John: 14, 28). Given the aforementioned, praising virginity, Procilla refers to Christ, who takes care of us and loves beauty, not to people's words. Christ himself praises virginity in Solomon's Song of Songs: "Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens" (*Song of Songs*: 2, 2), comparing lily with the gift of virginity due to the latter's purity, fragrance, attractiveness, and beauty. According to Procilla, virginity is indeed the flower of spring, which bears the colour of incorruptibility on its eternally white petals. That is why Christ does not shun showing love of its flourishing beauty: "You have captured my heart, my treasure, my bride. You hold it hostage with one glance of your eyes, with a single jewel of your necklace. How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice! Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride, milk and honey are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like that of Lebanon. You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain" (*Song of Songs*: 4, 9-12).

This is the song Christ sings for those, who are on the path of virginity, using one name – bride, referring to them. With their purity and chastity, they should be like a locked up garden, where all flowers of heavenly fragrance grow, because only Christ is to pluck flowers arising from bodiless seeds.¹⁹

After Procilla, it is the turn of eighth virgin Thecla to speak. Before starting her encomium proper, Thecla does not shun calling herself skilled in eloquence. She compares her own spiritual world with a tuned cithara, which is ready to produce appropriate harmonious sounds.

In the introduction to her speech, Thecla poses questions, which, as she believes, should definitely be answered in an encomium of virginity: What is virginity? What is its force? What fruits can it produce? Virginity excels other virtues, which we resort to in order to purify and decorate our souls. It sustains, grows, and lightens the wings of the soul, which take people to heavens, and the soul becomes accustomed to rising above small affairs. As wise men say, if our lives are public performances and we appear in the arena like in the theatre in order to stage a drama when evil souls act against us and set traps for us, we should definitely look to heavens, fly upwards and rise to avoid their magic and tempting influence like Homer's Sirens. Unfortunately, many fall under their influence, losing

¹⁹ Ibid., 31.

wings and disappearing in the whirlpool of savage enjoyments. Those, who have good wings, on the contrary, find it easy to rise to heavens, being able to see, albeit from a distance, incorruptible meadows, where flowers of incomparable beauty grow. Therefore, they constantly aspire to them and compared with them, ostentatious virtues of this world – riches, glory, nobility, or marriage – seem insignificant to them. To obtain heavenly virtues, they are even ready to doom their bodies to torture by fire and beasts. They live in this world, but they are not here, because only their bodies are in this world and their thoughts and desires are already among those inhabiting heavens.

After departing from this world, those, who have wings of virginity, are the first to receive from Christ awards for winners – crowns of incorruptible flowers. Angels accompany their souls to the aforementioned meadows eternally covered with flowers, which they could previously see only from a distance. There, they can view beauties that cannot be expressed in words, because justice, wisdom, love, truth, chastity and other beautiful flowers, whose imaginary shadows can only be seen in dreams in this world. No one in this world has ever seen the glory, face, or beauty of justice or wisdom, but in that world, they can be visible in the shape they exist – whole and obvious. There are trees of chastity, love, and wisdom there and their fruits can be plucked and tasted like those of fruit trees in this world, for example, grapes, pomegranates, and apples. The difference is that, being plucked, the former do not fade and die. On the contrary, they become stronger through their immortal and godly nature. Virgins enter this treasury of virtues and take delight thanks to the fruits that are watered by lavish and desirable light, which illuminate the life there with eternal light poured by God. Virgins are surrounded by a holy atmosphere that the sun can never penetrate. They celebrate and glorify God.²⁰

Thysiana is the next to make a speech. She recalls how God taught true Israelites how to celebrate the holiday of harvest: "So beginning with the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the Lord for seven days; the first day is a day of sabbath rest, and the eighth day also is a day of sabbath rest. On the first day you are to take branches from luxuriant trees – from palms, willows and other leafy trees – and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. Celebrate this as a festival to the Lord for seven days each

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

year. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come; celebrate it in the seventh month." (*Leviticus*: 23, 39-41).

Thysiana explains that this passage from Bible is metaphorical, as it describes the holiday of harvesting earthly crops that heralds the resurrection of our fallen body, which we will regain as immortal in the seventh millennium and will celebrate the harvest of genuine crops in the eternal world. The harvest of earthly crops will also be completed, the birth of people halted, and God relieved of His affairs in the universe.

Our tabernacle was intact previously too, but sins shattered and demolished it. However, God destroyed sins with death to prevent immortal man, in whom sins were also to live eternally, from being under permanent punishment. Therefore, He became mortal (obeyed Death). Soul separates from body, when the latter dies in order to kill sins through death. They cannot continue to live in a dead body. Thus, after man dies and sins are destroyed, he resurrects as immortal, sings praises to God, who saves His sons from death by death, and celebrates in His honour, decorating his tabernacle, or body, with good deeds.

For Thysiana, resurrection is a symbol of erecting tents and truthful deeds are necessary to do this. As regards the luxuriant trees, the fruits of which we are obliged to have on the very first day of the festival of tents (*Leviticus*: 23, 40), it is the tree of life, which previously grew in Eden and is now the Church, which produces beautiful fruits of faith.

Those, who want to attend the celebration of erecting tents together with saints, should first and foremost obtain the luxuriant fruit – faith, then branches of date palm, or the knowledge of the Holy Scripture, then branches of leafy trees, or, as Thysiana explains, love, and branches of poplar, or truth, as, according to the Prophet, those truthful "will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams" (*Isaiah*: 44, 4). At the same time, it is necessary to bring branches of agnos²¹, because the name of this tree is chastity, which decorates everything mentioned above. We can see that it is the Holy Scripture itself that places virginity higher than any other virtue. Incidentally, those who live like virgins with their husbands are also virgins. In resurrection, they will also bring branches of virginity, albeit small ones, to the celebrations. However, those unable to control themselves living with one husband alone, will be unable to celebrate, because they will be unable to decorate their tents, or bodies, with branches of agnos, as they did not apprehend the following

²¹ ὁ ἄγνος, vitex castus, "chaste lamb" (name of tree).

words: "Let those who have wives live as though they had none" (*I Corinthians: 7, 29*).²²

Unlike others, the tenth virgin, Domnina, finds herself in a difficult situation, because it is, of course, difficult to say something new to praise virginity after encomiums so diverse in theological content and artistic methods. She nevertheless obeys Arete's order.

Like Thysiana, Domnina refuses to pronounce an introduction, moving directly to the main issue. Religion could not have relieved man from corruptibility until virginity started governing humans through Christ's commandments. Ancient people would not be bent on arguing with and killing each other so often, and on lewdness and idolatry, had the truth of religion been sufficient for their salvation. However, after Christ was incarnated, he decorated and equipped flesh with virginity; the cruel tyrant governing the lack of self-control was overthrown and peace and faith came to dominate. To support her opinion, Domina quotes a long passage from the Book of Judges.

"One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree: 'Be our king'. But the olive tree answered: 'Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and humans are honoured, to hold sway over the trees?' Next, the trees said to the fig tree: 'Come and be our king.' But the fig tree replied: 'Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?' Then the trees said to the vine: 'Come and be our king.' But the vine answered: 'Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and humans, to hold sway over the trees?' Finally all the trees said to the thornbush: 'Come and be our king.' The thornbush said to the trees: 'If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!" (*Judges: 9, 8-15*).

Of course, this was said not about trees, but about souls burdened with sins, who entreated God before Christ's incarnation to pardon them and be their king with mercy and peace, which is symbolized by the olive tree in the Holy Scripture, as oil is good for body, it relieves torments and illnesses and is used for blessing. Like light increases by adding oil to the lamp, God's mercy will save humanity from death and nourish the light of heart.

Judge for yourselves, Domnina told the virgins, whether the Holy Scripture implies the commandments from the very beginning until Christ. In the Holy Scripture, the fig tree is the commandment given to

²² *Ibid.*, 45.

man in Eden, because they immediately covered their nakedness with fig leaves after the temptation (Genesis: 3, 7). And vine is the commandment given to Noah during the Deluge, because he became drunk and fell asleep, becoming ridiculous (Genesis: 9, 22). The olive tree implies commandments given to Moses in the desert, because talent for prophecy – the holy oil – reduced among the next generations, who became followers of paganism. As regards thornbush, it is the image of the commandments given to apostles to save the world, because it was from them that we learned virginity, which Satan failed to confront with a tempting similarity.

There are four Gospels, because humankind received four annunciations from God and was governed with four legislations, the periods being marked with various fruits. For example, fig with its sweetness and beauty represents the sweetness of Eden before man's fall (Genesis: 3, 23). Vine – joy from wine and the cause of happiness of those, who survived God's wrath and the Deluge – expresses freedom from fear and concern. And the olive tree is a symbol of God's mercy: although people bent on godlessness even after the Deluge, He nevertheless gave them legislation, appeared to some of them and, like oil, lit the light of virtue that had been put out. As regards thornbush (ἡ ρᾶμνο), it is the same as agnos. Some call it thornbush and others agnos. It might have received the two names due to their similarity to virginity, as thornbush is astringent and unfit for pleasure and agnos is the expression of eternal virginity. The tree of virginity grew for those, who wanted to avoid earthly pleasures, after first virgin Christ's coming, because the first law given to Adam, Noah, and Moses failed to save humanity and it was only the law of Gospel that saved everyone.

Having had mercy on people for a fourth time, God dispatched virginity called thornbush in the Holy Scripture to rule them.²³ Destroying earthly pleasures, it threatens to destroy with fire all those, who fail to obey unquestioningly and that happens because there will no longer be any religion or teaching, but there will only be judgement and fire. From that time, people started behaving themselves correctly and acquiring firm trust in God, alienating themselves from Satan. This means that Adam's race was given virginity as the most useful means, as it is only virginity that Satan failed to confront with a tempting similarity, which he managed to do with the previous three laws.

²³ Ibid., 47.

Domnina also deserved Arete's praise, because her encomium was made to call for sobriety, not to please the listeners. In her final speech, Arete stressed that observing virginity does not mean refraining from physical pleasure alone. Those, who keep not only their bodies, but also souls away from vice, are the ones, who truly observe it. For example, what is the sense in observing the purity of the body, if the heart is made impure by arrogance and haughtiness, or is obsessed with the desire to gain riches, or is in love with himself, forgetting to take care of his friends. Such people not only fail to respect virginity, but on the contrary, disrespect it, because they have lost love of humans, who should be virgins. Therefore, those, who want to observe virginity, should keep sinless all parts of the body (tongue, eyes, or ears). Only in that case will they take the path of genuine virginity.

Arete declared all the ten virgins, who competed in the art of rhetoric, as winners deserving crowns. However, she nevertheless distinguished Thecla, saying that she deserved the largest and thickest crown.

As S. Averintsev writes, the prosaic fabric of the plot is unexpectedly violated by a hymn the virgins sing to Christ.²⁴ In this case, it would probably be conditional to describe as unexpected the hymn that appears at the end of the prosaic work. The hymn is not unexpected, as the virgins speak about sublime spiritual love with inner inspiration, which is a necessary precondition for making a verse. The words of Thecla, the author of the eighth encomium, confirm this: "... I am happy that verbal wisdom is my companion. I feel like a cithara, which is tuned inside and prepared to speak beautifully" (VIII, 1-2). It is natural that the soul that resembles a musical instrument will definitely produce harmonious voices. Therefore, it is no accident that it is Thecla, whom Arete offers to sing a hymn to praise Christ.

The hymn that Thecla sings is devoted to the same issue as the encomiums made by all the ten virgins: obtaining eternal joy by rejecting earthly happiness and observing chastity which can be achieved through aspiring to spiritual marriage with Christ.

"Evading mortals' lamentable happiness of delightful life and love, I want to find refuge in your life-giving bosom in order to eternally view your beauty, blessed," Thecla addressed Our Lord.²⁵

²⁴ Аверинцев С., Византийская литература IV-VIII вв., История Византии, т. I, Москва 1974, 410.

²⁵ Methodii ..., p. 49.

The hymn consists of 24 strophes, which is equal to the number of letters in the Greek alphabet. It is decorated with the same number of alphabetic acrostics. It has the same lines as refrain at the end of each strophe. The virgins address Christ as their bridegroom, obviously implying spiritual marriage with Our Lord: "I observe chastity for You, o my husband to be. We welcome you with lighted torches in our hands," sings the choir of the virgins as the refrain.

As noted above, Methodius wrote his work *Symposium, or On Virginity* as an analogy of Plato's well-known dialogue.²⁶ The analysis of Plato's *Symposium* has shown that this analogy is not limited to external decorations and a general model. Similarities can also be found in the understanding of the phenomenon of love. This is first and foremost true of such features of love as permanence, immortal soul's aspiration to eternal beauty, eternity originating from it, and various fruits of virtues. What is particularly noteworthy, for Methodius, the genuinely sublime feeling implies man's aspiration to his initial icon – God – or consecration. For Plato, it is non-material, absolute, and eternal, always expressed in the aspiration to homogeneous beauty, which is the supreme idea in his system of ideas and a kind of replacement of god.

Unlike Plato, Methodius does not try to find the truth, by using dialectic methods. He communicates it with authority based on the Holy Scripture. Researchers have also noted differences between the two works in external decoration. With Plato, we encounter constructive use of decorative details. With Methodius, ornaments that decorate the work are woven from borrowings from Plato.²⁷

²⁶ Martin I., *Symposion. Die Geschichte einer literarischen Form*, Paderborn 1931.

²⁷ Миллер Г. А., *Op. cit.*