

The Religious Carol – from 'Calendae' to 'Colinda'¹

Dan Alexandru STREZA²

Abstract: *The Feast of the Lord's Nativity or Christmas has a highly controversial history, because of the lack of old historical documents that would provide more details regarding its origins. However, the most plausible hypothesis states that the Feast of the Lord's Nativity is of equal importance with the Feast of Pascha, and was most probably instituted during the apostolic period in early Christianity. Christmas concentrates in the Romanian folkloric culture one of the richest and most complex ritual structures, which brings together people of all ages. The festive-ceremonial attitude, the dignity, the superior social status are the obvious prevailing themes in the message transmitted by traditional carols. Thus, the custom of going carolling with its plethora of meanings comes from the paleo-Christian tradition of the Latin speaking Eastern Roman Empire. In time, it evolved and was enriched by poetical texts that were arranged on specific melodies. These texts contained answers to issues and questions raised during the big theological disputes in the first Christian millennium, and later-on, to the inter-confessional frictions that followed.*

Keywords: *Carol, Carolling, Calendae, Christmas, Lord's Nativity, Orthodox Chant.*

The manifestation of human existence within well defined spatial and temporal frameworks has urged the researchers into folkloric culture to discover or create certain systems for organising space and time, by which the life of the group might be integrated in the general outlines of the process of existential becoming. The religious perspective employed by each community for the apperception of life itself, serves as a fundamental reference point in the appreciation of the values of space and time. For Christians, time was created at the same time with the world, and Jesus Christ is the “time axis”: in the wake of His arrival, the history points towards Him and is fulfilled in Him. The calendar-confined time uses the history division before and after Christ, due to the calculations done in the 6th century by monk Dionysius Exiguus (Dionysius the Small), who was originality from Scythia

¹ *n. colindă = carol*

² Dan Alexandru Streza, Deac. PhD, Teaching Assistant at the “Andrei Şaguna” Faculty of Orthodox Theology, “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Romania. Address: Mitropoliei 20, 550179, Sibiu, Romania; e-mail: dan_steza@yahoo.com.

Minor, and who counted the years passed from the birth of the Saviour, year 1 being the “year of our salvation” or the “year of our Lord's Incarnation”.

A great reference point in this calendar cycle is represented by the Feast of the Lord's Nativity or Christmas. This feast has a highly controversial history, because of the lack of old historical documents that would provide more details regarding its origins. However, the most plausible hypothesis states that the Feast of the Lord's Nativity is of equal importance with the Feast of Pascha, and was most probably instituted during the apostolic period in early Christianity. (Streza 2011, 265-263)

Also, it is interesting that the lyrics of the carols and some components of the ritual of going carolling itself did not emerge at the same time, rather their creation took place at different moments in the history of the Romanian Orthodox Christian community. In this sense, some poetical texts of the carols are enlightening, in that they record the very historical moment when Christmas and Epiphany were celebrated simultaneously by a blessing of the waters, people, houses, assets, crops, and of everything that belonged to the community, which reminded of the baptism of Catechumens. The carollers, messengers and actors prefiguring the rituals that were to take place in the church on the day celebrating the Epiphany of the Lord, were bid by hosts to come and bring Heaven's blessings upon their houses on Christmas Eve. The same ritual moment is suggested by the text of a carol in which the carollers typify some pigeons (an iconographic symbol of the Holy Spirit) that sprinkle water on the sleeping hosts and thus wake them up (Ispas 1987, 12)

Another important aspect for the Romanian tradition is the popular moniker given to the month of December, *Undrea* or *Indrea*, which derives from the Greek term *Andreas* (Candrea and Adamescu 1931, 652). The Romanian language is the only one that has kept Saint Apostle Andrew's name in the name of the month of December. He was the one who, according to tradition, preached Christianity in Pontic Dacia, and his name was associated with the month when many converts were baptised (Ispas 1998, 30-32).

Along the constant upward movement of this life, there is a perfect coordination and inter-relation between all the feasts in a calendar year, as all are ceremonials that play a part in a grand and unique scenario, which has three moments of maximum spiritual intensity: Christmas, Pascha, and Pentecost. These three are followed by periods of relaxation which allow the committed and faithful people to prepare for the next spiritual trial. This sinusoidal placement of the feasts in the church calendar is in fact a spiral, and not a full circle, and through it the faithful are called to partake - more and more each seasons and in a mystical way - of the goods prepared for them in the Kingdom of Heaven: “[...] *each calendar stage is not a beginning but a continuation of the experience and upward transition to a superior stage, for a better understanding and reception of the teaching that brings men salvation and, of course, eternal life [...]. The experience of time must be*

a spiral-like upward motion, in which generations that never sever their inter-connection engage [...]”.(Ispas 2003, 181)

This continuity ensures the interdependency of holidays in the case of winter celebrations as well. After having spent some time under the protective sign of the cross, through the celebration of Saint Simeon Stylites (or “pillar dweller”, the pillar being a primary form of the cross) on September 1 and that of the Elevation of the Holy Cross on September 14, on November 3, the New Year of the Church starts the step-by-step, progressive, physical and spiritual preparation for the feast of Nativity. Along the way, each moment that is marked by customs has a dramatic unfolding. The entire complex of rituals starts with the Soul Saturday at the beginning of November, and is followed by the Synaxis of Archangels Michael and Gabriel on November 8, and by the start of the Christmas fast on November 14 (a fixed date that involves a complex of manifestations within families and the Church, when the young people ask their elders - parents and godparents - for forgiveness) (Ispas 2007, 14).

The next step is November 30, the feast of St. Andrew, when people perform rituals meant to ensure the protection and purification of their houses and assets, and a rite for the preservation of life and the strengthening of germinative powers, where they set the wheat and the tree branches for sprouting. Then, the feast of St. Nicholas arrives on December 6, when the Church remembers the activity of this follower and advocate of the true teaching of the Christian Church, according to whom Jesus Christ is both God and man. This feast is succeeded by the bloody sacrifice of purification and redemption, which is symbolically represented by St. Ignatius Theophorus on December 20 (Ispas 2007, 14).

At the core of this spiritual ascent is Christmas, which falls on December 25, a fixed date that marks the celebration of the Lord Jesus Christ's Nativity, with rituals such as going carolling, wandering with the *Star* (*n. transl.* in memory of the Star of Bethlehem), the traditional drama of the *Vicleim* (*n. transl.* derived from the name Bethlehem) and the *Irozii* (*n. transl.* plural from Irod, the Romanian name for Herod). These feasts are followed by a period of intense joy, marked by St. Basil's day and the New Year on January 1, with drama activities that are carried out for purification reasons (*Plugușorul* and *Sorcova*), i.e. they are supposed to ensure the vitality and abundance of germinative powers.

The Theophany is celebrated on January 6, and it revives Lord Jesus's Baptism and the *Epiphany* or “*manifestation*” of the Holy Trinity. At last, January 7 celebrates the Synaxis of St. John - an exceptional person who prepared the Saviour's coming and activity into the world. It is interesting how this winter celebration time is guarded by two saints possessing outstanding virtues and relationships with Jesus Christ, i.e. Saint Andrew, the first called to be an Apostle,

also an apprentice of St. John the Baptist, and Saint John the Baptist himself, who initiated the baptism of repentance in order to prepare the way of the Lord.

In such a string of events that make up a complex spiritual ascent centred on and ending in Christ, the custom of going carolling plays the role of an unimpeachable ritual, which claims a dramatic scenario wherein the characters utilize various types of language in order to present to the world the profound meanings of the entire succession of sacred events, from birth to baptism. *The entire world is, in its own being*, writes Father Dumitru Stăniloae, *and can become the means by which the man can preview transcendence. Thus, the entire world is, in its own being, a symbol. Yet, the man must uncover its character as a symbol...* (Stăniloae 2005, 96). The series of drama sequences in the ritual of carolling is founded on this very characteristic of the world, and the most active and explicit in this sense is the poetical text that is sung on specific musical structures. *“Generally speaking, the Christian meaning of the word symbol originates in the difference between the world and God, as well as in the connection it has with Him as its Creator. In this general Christian manner, a symbol may be any thing or being in the world, in any time-frame, therefore even today...”* (Stăniloae 2005, 69)

The feast of the Lord's Nativity or Christmas as it is known, concentrates in the Romanian folkloric culture one of the richest and most complex ritual structures, which brings together people of all ages. Consequently, in a 24-hour interval between December 24 and 25, children and adults go carolling, wander around with the Star, the Vicleim, the Irozii, and so the whole community is involved in the celebration of this feast.

Another very important aspect is linked to the relatively wide spread Christmas legend in the Romanian oral culture. This talks about an old man, rough and hard-hearted, who punishes his wife for offering shelter to Virgin Mary and for helping her to give birth to Jesus. This old man, who experiences the “fright” of sin and repentance, receives the baptism and thus becomes “the first Christian”.

Starting from mid 19th century, another representation of Father Christmas pervaded the Romanian folklore, vested in the garb of a legendary character, gracious and generous, who brought presents and made children and parents happy. Around the same time that this legendary character entered the Romanian oral tradition, another custom became generalized - decorating the Christmas tree, the tree under which the good old Father Christmas would place the presents (Ispas 1998, 41-42).

This character has a parallel existence with the one in the old Romanian tradition, which is graphically described in the text of the carols. His existence is based on a theological meaning that can be identified in the history of Eastern Christianity in the way people celebrate the saints. These are Christians who have toiled for the propagation and safeguarding of the Gospel, have led paradigmatic

lives, have dedicated a part of their existence to helping their neighbours and many of them have sacrificed their lives and suffered torments for their faith. Amongst these, the Great Hierarch Nicholas is one of the saints whose icon became imprinted on the memory of the Orthodox Christians due to his charitable actions, as much as for his defence of the true faith, as he participated in the First Ecumenical Council held in Nicea in the year 325, where he condemned the Arian heresy. He is also considered a great wonder-worker, and his personality has played a major role in the shaping of the modern image of Santa Claus (Ispas 1998, 43-44).

Besides that, there is a particularly meaningful indissoluble connection between the custom of going carolling and the feast of Christmas. Whatever the history and roots of this feast or of the cultural rituals and gestures that come with it, for over 1700 years now, it has preserved its unique significance unaltered, and this is not something to be ignored. The action of the rite itself lacks specificity - people go from door to door to announce something, to congratulate someone, or to wish health and happiness onto somebody's household. It acquires identity and power only when in association with an event or a person that can *mediate the access to the sacred and get involved in the domination of cosmical powers, in the consecration of the world* (Ispas 2007, 15)

Ethimologically, the term “*colindă*” or “*colindat*” (*n. transl.* “carol” and “carolling”) is connected exclusively to the Christmas ritual, such as it appears to have functioned for over one and a half millennium until its natural evolution brought about new elements in its semantic domain. As far back as 1879, G. Dem Teodorescu remarked that there were multiple senses of the verb *to go carolling*: “*to walk around everywhere [...] to leave no stones unturned*”; “*to go from door to door in order to receive something*”; “*to sing tunes known as carols*”; “*to congratulate someone by singing a carol containing his name in his honour*” (Teodorescu 1879, 14-15). Thus, the sense of the Slavic term *kolo*, *koleso*, which means a *wheel*, a *circle*, a *circular dance* must be associated with the Romanian term *căringă* and the Latin *colendae* so as to form a complete image of the meaning of the modern Romanian term of *colindă* (*i.e. carol*).

The Romanian terms *colindă* and *calendar* come from the Latin word *calendae* as derivatives from the verb *calo-calare* which means “*to call*”. In the first day of the month, the pontiff of the ancient Romans would come riding in a *calabria curia* and announce when the Nones were during that month. The day they would make the *announcement* was called *calendae* and it was the first day of every month. This is the original meaning of the traditional types of carols and carolling, *i.e.* that of *awarding*, *proclaiming*, a meaning that survived also in the Romanian language. In the case of going carolling, the focus is on “*announcing*” or “*heralding*” the birth of Jesus Christ, the “*beginning of salvation*”. (Ispas 1998, 45)

In this respect, Al. Rosetti notes the following: “*the question we all need to ask ourselves is whether the word «calendae» has ever acquired within the Romance realm, a meaning that comes close to the «cantique de Noel», which is represented in the Romanian language by «colindă». We believe we may safely state that the Latin «calendae» was moving towards such a semantic nuance...*” (Rosetti 1920, 18).

The meanings and functions of congratulations and wishes are heavily underlined in the studies done by folklorists and ethnologists; they have become dominant only in the past century. As far as a potential incantatorial function, of bewitchment is concerned (Caraman 1983, 385-389), it is not only impossible to sustain it with arguments pertaining to traditional culture, but its mention alone proves a lack of understanding of the old Christian meanings implied by the Feast of Christmas, which have been around for almost two millennia.

Equally as interesting are the function and relevance of *motion* within the ritual of going carolling. Saint Gregory the Theologian's words are defining in this sense: “*exult with joy [...] at least as much as David did when the tabernacle stopped [...] Travel with the star and bring gifts with the Magi, gold, frankincense, and myrrh [...] Praise the Lord with the shepherds, chant with the angels, dance with the archangels...*” (Saint Gregory 1962, 22-23) These can all be construed as arguments in the process of deciphering the traditional mode in which the ritual of going carolling played. In the text of this sermon, Saint Gregory the Theologian seems to have gathered all the actual functions of the carolling custom, as well as their forms of direct expression, in the ritual. With regard to the way this ritual is brought to completion, the most important and, at the same time, the oldest and most efficiently structured form to that end is the group carolling.

In regard to the relation between the Romanian carolling custom and the noisy dramatic expression of the *calendae* feast in the Roman Empire, the difference between them is rather striking. St. John Chrysostom wrote a well-known sermon *against* the pagan “*ways*” of celebrating the *calendae*s. In it, he spoke about the Roman New Year festivity, which started on March 1 according to the old calendar, and on January 1, after the introduction of the Julian calendar, where people celebrated by taking part in ample spectacles accompanied by masquerades. The Church has always taken a strong stance against the pagan practices that some Christians continued to observe, by counterbalancing the worldly entertainment with church feasts that encourage people to cultivate spiritual joys, rather than worldly ones.

However, these practices seem to have existed simultaneously within Christian communities, but without having ever been interchangeable. Richard Campbell makes some remarks in this sense, noting that some pagan customs have a correspondent in some Christian ceremonies, such as is the case of carrying the light

from one year and into the next, the Saturnalia parties, the use of the mistletoe, and stating that “*their adoption does not mean that the Feast of Nativity is simply just a continuation of old pagan rites. The Christian vision statement on life can be regarded as a better way of living and doing whatever the man would live and do anyway, and the process is expressed in the catharsis of people's feasts, customs and behaviour*” (Campbell 1935, 60).

The festive-ceremonial attitude, the dignity, the superior social status are the obvious prevailing themes in the message transmitted by traditional carols. Thus, the custom of going carolling with its plethora of meanings comes from the paleo-Christian tradition of the Latin speaking Eastern Roman Empire. In time, it evolved and was enriched by poetical texts that were arranged on specific melodies. These texts contained answers to issues and questions raised during the big theological disputes in the first Christian millennium, and later-on, to the inter-confessional frictions that followed (Ispas 1998, 32).

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