

Liturgia

Liturgie & musique sacrée
traditionnelles

Privé : the oldest prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary : Sub tuum præsidium

Publié le 1 février 2011 par Henri Adam de Villiers

The *Sub tuum præsidium* is probably the oldest Christian prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This prayer was long in use in the rites of the East & West, with numerous textual variants, when, in 1917, the John Rylands Library in Manchester had acquired a lot of papyrus from Egypt (the exact location where they were discovered was unspecified), including a fragment of 18 cm by 9.4 cm containing the text of this prayer in Greek.

I. An Egyptian papyrus of the third century.



C.H. Roberts published it in 1938 (in *Catalogue of the Greek and Latin Papyri in the John Rylands Library, III, Theological and literacy Texts*, Manchester 1938, pp. 46-47). Roberts then dated it from the fourth century, thinking it was impossible to find an invocation to the *Theotokos* before this century (we'll see below, however, that the expression *Theotokos* was in use in Alexandria before 250). But his colleague E. Lobel, with whom he collaborated in editing the Oxyrhynchus papyri, based on pure paleographic analysis, said the text can not possibly be later than the third century, probably dating between 250 & 280. Because of the beauty of the uncials, H.J. Bell, a contributor to Roberts, even considered that we might be in the presence of a « model for an engraver. » The *Sub tuum præsidium* thus precedes by several centuries the *Ave Maria* in the prayer of Christians.

<p><i>On the papyrus, we can read:</i></p> <p>.ΠΟ ΕΥΣΠΑ ΚΑΤΑΦΕ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΕΤ ΙΚΕCΙΑCΜΗΠΑ ΕΙΔΗCΕΜΠΕΡΙCΤΑC ΑΛΛΕΚΚΙΝΔΥΝΟΥ ...ΡΥCΑΙΗΜΑC ΜΟΝΗ ...ΗΕΥΛΟΓ</p>	<p><i>That is this greek text:</i></p> <p>Ἰπὸ τὴν σὴν εὐCπλαγχνίαν καταφεύγομεν Θεοτὸκε· τὰς ἡμῶν ικεCίας μὴ παρ- ίδης ἐν περιCτάCει ἀλλ' ἐκ κινδύνου λύτρωCαι ἡμὰC μόνη ἀγνή μόνη εὐλογημένη.</p>
<p><i>A literal Latin version might be:</i></p> <p>Sub tuam misericordiam confugimus, Dei Genitrix ! nostras deprecationes ne des- picias in necessitatibus sed a perditione salva nos sola pura, sola benedicta.</p>	<p><i>And an English translation could be:</i></p> <p>Under your mercy we take refuge, Mother of God! Our prayers, do not despise in necessities, but from the danger deliver us, only pure, only blessed.</p>

II. A prayer of great value.

Like all ancient liturgical prayers, the *Sub tuum præsidium* has a noble simplicity and conciseness in expressing feelings, combined with a fresh spontaneity.

Several biblical reminiscences may be seen, the last term, « blessed », referring to Elizabeth's salutation: *Benedicta tu in mulieribus* – Blessed art thou among women (Luke I, 42).

An historical value.

The supplication to the Virgin Mary by the Christian community in danger place without doubt the invocation in a context of persecution (that of Valerian or that of Decius).

A theological value.

A first remarkable point is that the Egyptian Christian community turns directly to Mary and asks her protection. Christians have realized that the Virgin is close to their suffering and asked his help explicitly, thereby recognizing the power of her intercession.

Three fundamental theological truths are admirably synthesized:

1. The special election of Mary by God (« only blessed »).
2. The perpetual Virginity of Mary (« only pure »).
3. The Divine Motherhood (« Mother of God »; well, « Mother » may be considered as a poor translation of *Genitrix*).

A designation of Mary as *Theotokos* during the third century, two centuries before the debates related to the theses of Nestorius and their resolution by the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431, had been a problem, as

we have seen, fo C.H. Roberts, editor of the Egyptian manuscript. However, the term *Theotokos* (« *Dei Genetrix* ») is not an invention of the fifth century.

In the fourth century, the term is particularly popular in the area of Alexandria (St. Alexander of Alexandria, St. Athanasius, St. Serapion of Thmuis, Didymus the Blind), but also in Arabia (Tite of Bostra), in Palestine (Eusebius of Caesarea, St. Cyril of Jerusalem), Cappadocia (St. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, Severian of Gabala) and even the Arians (Asterius the Sophist).

Previously, we encounter the term during the third century, precisely in the school of Alexandria. The testimony of the ecclesiastical historian Socrates (Hist. Eccl. VII, 32 – PG 67, 812 B), Origen would have used it in a comment book – unfortunately lost – on the Epistle to the Romans. His disciple Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria also uses the term of *Theotokos* around the year 250 in an epistle to Paul of Samosata. It is interesting to note that the term *Theotokos* was not remained merely a theological concept but had also received a liturgical use in Egypt at the same time, but we can not decide if it is the theological discourse that influenced the liturgical prayer, or if the reverse happened. Still, we understand better the extraordinary pugnacity of St. Cyril of Alexandria against the Nestorian theses in the fifth century, since obviously, the term *Theotokos* was part of the deposit of the faith lived & sung in the liturgy of Alexandria since a long time.

The different versions of the text.

Besides the Greek text, ancient versions can be found in Coptic, Syriac, Armenian & Latin.

In Latin, the version used by the Roman rite has surely been done directly on the Coptic version of the text (like in Coptic, it uses the term *praesidium* instead of *miseriordia*) without going through the Greek. The Ambrosian form of the text closer depends on the Byzantine tradition.

<p><i>The Roman text:</i> Sub tuum praesidium confugimus, sancta Dei Genetrix : nostras deprecationes ne despicias in necessitatibus, sed a periculis cunctis libera nos semper, Virgo gloriosa et benedicta.</p>	<p><i>The Ambrosian text:</i> Sub tuam misericórdiam confúgimus, Dei Génitrix : ut nostram deprecatiónem ne indúcas in tentatióem, sed de perículo líbera nos, sola casta et benedícta.</p>
<p><i>A literal translation of the Roman text:</i> Under your patronage we take refuge Holy Mother of God; our petitions, do not despise in necessities, but of all dangers deliver us always glorious Virgin & Blessed.</p>	<p><i>A literal translation of the Ambrosian text:</i> Under your mercy we take refuge Mother of God; may our petitions not be abandoned into temptation, but from danger deliver us, only pure & blessed.</p>

In the Roman text, the adjective « *gloriosa* » has replaced « *casta* »: it is a later interpolation, absent from the oldest evidence of the text (the Antiphony of Compiègne) and also from the Dominican version; they both only say *Virgo benedicta*. The musical phrase has also affected the sense of the Roman text, wrongly attributing « *semper* » to « *libera nos* » when it should clearly be attributed to « *Virgo* »: we should read « *libera nos, semper Virgo* » instead of « *libera nos semper, Virgo* ». French musicologist Amédée Gastoué thought that the change in allocation of « *ever* » was made in the Roman antiphon to fit in a preexisting musical phrase, may be an Eastern one. The Ambrosian text has also an interpolation of the Greek text: « *ne inducas in tentationem* » – a clear influence of the Lord's Prayer – has replaced « *ne despicias in necessitate* ».

Diffusion & liturgical use.

The antiphon was used at vespers during Christmas time in the Coptic liturgy. It is also known in Byzantine, Roman and Ambrosian rites. In each of these rites, though venerable & ancient, the *Sub tuum præsidium* has a discreet place, very marginal one might say. Yet, despite this modest place in the liturgy, piety of the faithful Christians have always held in esteem this venerable prayer, both in the East and the West, even before its great antiquity was known by the analysis of the papyrus of the Rylands collection.

* In the Byzantine:

The *Sub tuum* is sung during Vespers in Lent, in the middle of the final prayers, after 3 troparia: the *Ave Maria*, a Troparion to St. Jean Baptiste, a Troparion to the Holy Apostles. This place assimilate it as an apolytikion troparion, which changes each day during the rest of the year. The apolytikia troparia are related to the singing of the Canticle of Simeon, which begins with the words in Greek *Νῦν ἀπολύεις (Nunc dimittis)*. It is likely that this series of fixed troparia at the end of Vespers during Lent is an old state of the rite. The variables troparia were probably substituted to them for other days of the year. Moreover, the Horologion Grottaferrata seems to assign them at the end of ferial Vespers also during the year (Horologion, Rome 1876, p. 104).

In the Russian tradition, the *Sub tuum præsidium* is often sung for devotion, even outside of Lent, with the addition of the invocation « Пресватаа Богородице спаси насъ » (« Most Holy Mother of God, save us ») added to the end. Russian believers are very attached to this troparion. Parishes still use widely the text that predates the liturgical reforms of Patriarch Nikon in 1586, this is a clear sign of the strength of this attachment (such an attachment to the pre-nikonian version is not observed for other famous pieces of the repertoire – like the Easter Troparion or « More honorable than the Cherubim » –).

The « Old Believers » text:

Подъ твою милость,
прибѣгаемъ богородице дѣво,
молитвъ нашихъ не презри в скорбѣхъ.
но ѿ бѣдъ избави насъ,
едина чистаа и благословеннаа.

The reformed text by Nikon:

Подъ твое благоутробіе
прибѣгаемъ Богородице,
моленіа наша не презри во обстояніи,
но ѿ бѣдъ исбави ны,
едина Чистаа, едина Благословеннаа.

Here is the reformed version of Nikon in Slavonic writing:

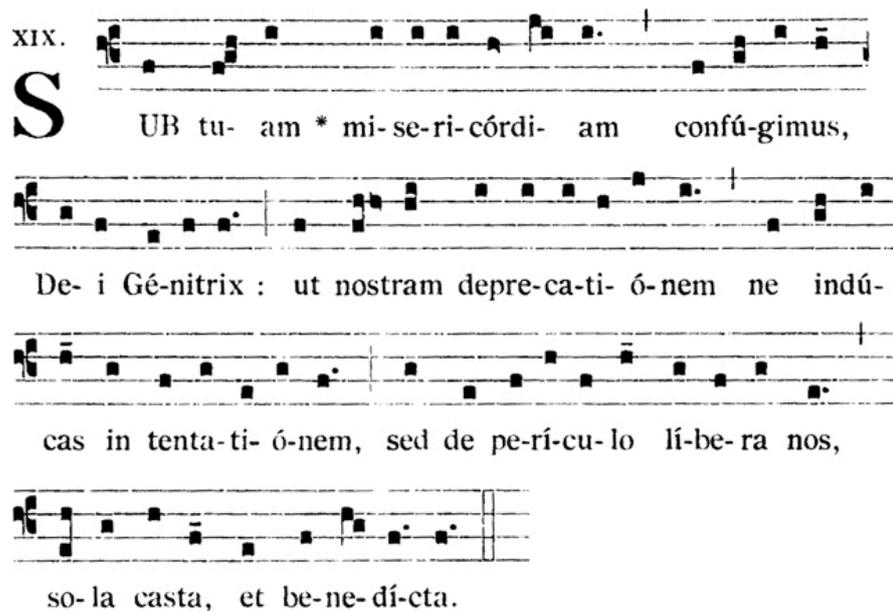
ПОДЪ ТВОЕ БЛАГОУТРОБИЕ ПРИБѢГАЕМЪ БЦѢ, МОЛЕНІА НАША НЕ
ПРЕЗРИ ВО ОБСТОАНІИ, НО ѿ БѢДЪ ИЗБАВИ НЫ ЕДИНА ЧСТАА,
ЕДИНА БЛГОСЛОВЕННАА.

Among the polyphonic settings, taht of Dimitri Bortniansky is most in favor. Here is a great interpretation:

Note that our prayer is currently unknown to the Syriac and Armenian liturgies, if not by penetration of Latin influence in the Uniate churches (the Maronites use it with the Litany of Loreto).

* **In the Ambrosian rite:**

XIX.



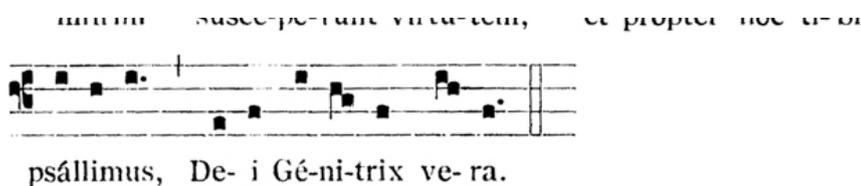
S UB tu- am * mi-se-ri-córdi- am confú-gimus,
 De- i Gé-nitrix : ut nostram depre-ca-ti- ó-nem ne indú-
 cas in tenta-ti- ó-nem, sed de pe-rí-cu-lo lí-be-ra nos,
 so-la casta, et be-ne-dí-cta.

In the Ambrosian rite, this piece is sung as the 19th antiphon of the procession of the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin on Feb. 2, a procession of 21 antiphons, many of which are originally Greek. Its music is similar to that of a Roman second tone. The 20th antiphon of the procession, that follows, presents a text quite similar and is built on the same melody:

XX.



S UB tu- am * pro-lecti- ó-nem confú-gimus, u- bi
 infími susce-pé-runt virtú-tem et propter hoc ti-bi



This antiphon might have been introduced in the Ambrosian rite for this procession of Oriental origin (remember, Pope St. Sergius I, born in Antioch, is said to have brought the procession of Candlemas from East in Rome).

However, the antiphon has been reused in other parts of the Ambrosian liturgy. In the Middle Ages, the antiphon is a litanic psallenda for the sixth Sunday of Advent (according to the codex T 103 Sup. from the Bibliotheca Ambrosiana). Today it also serves as *Antiphona Post Evangelium* for the two votive Masses (ferial & solemn) of the Holy Virgin on Saturdays. Two feasts, on July 16 (Our Lady of Mount Caramel) & August 5 (Dedication of St. Maria-ad-Nives), employing both the pieces of the votive Mass on Saturdays, therefore have it also as *Antiphona Post Evangelium*. The singing of this antiphon was in favour in the people of Milan.

*** In the Roman rite:**

The *Sub tuum præsidium* is used as an antiphon at the Nunc Dimittis for Compline of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. Here is the plain-song of tone VII, from the Roman Antiphonal of 1912:

Ad Nunc dimittis, Antiphona.

VII. a

SUB tu-um prae-sí-di-um confú-gimus, * sancta De- i Gé-
nitrix: nostras depre-ca-ti-ónes ne despí-ci-as in ne-cessi-tá-
ti-bus: sed a per-í-cu-lis cunctis lí-be-ra nos semper, Virgo
glo-ri-ó-sa et be- ne- dí-cta. E u o u a e.

More anecdotally, the *Sub tuum præsidium* is cited as verse of the fifth responsory of the second nocturn of the feast of the Motherhood of the Virgin on October 11, feast instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1931 to celebrate the 15th Centennial of the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus.

Historically, the oldest evidence of the use of *Sub tuum* in the Roman rite is found in the antiphonal of Compiègne (from the IX-Xth century), which provides it among the Benedictus antiphons for the Feast of the Assumption (Migne, PL 78, 799).

*** In the Dominican rite:**

As in the Roman liturgy, the Dominican rite also uses the *Sub tuum* as an antiphon for the *Nunc dimittis* at Compline for several feasts of the Virgin and at the office on Saturdays. The brothers kneel for singing the

antiphon after the *Nunc dimittis*. Here are the plain-song and the rubrics from the book of Compline of 1949:

¶ Sequens Antiphona ad Nunc dimittis dicatur in Compassione B. M. V., in festo B. Mariæ V. omnium gratiarum Mediatricis, in Assumptione B. M. V., in festo SS. Nominis Mariæ et in festo Septem Dolorum B. M. V.

VIIa
Sub tu-um. Cant. Nunc dimít-tis servum tu-um, Dómi-ne, *
 se-cúndum verbum tu-um in pa-ce.

Dum dicitur sequens Antiphona, sint Fratres genuflexi.

Anti-phona.
 Sub tu-um præ-sí-di-um confú-gi-mus, sancta De-i
 Gé-nitrix: nostras depre-ca-ti-ó-nes ne de-spí-ci-as in ne-ces-
 si-tá-ti-bus, sed a pe-rí-cu-lis cunctis lí-be-ra nos semper
 Virgo be- ne- dícta. T. P. Virgo be- ne- dícta, alle-lú-ia.

The list of feasts where the *Sub tuum* is used was originally smaller, as we can see in the antiphonal of 1862:

In Translatione almæ Domus Lauret., in Compassione et in Sabbatis de B. M. V.

Ad Nunc dim.
 Ant. t. 7.
SUB TUUM PRÆSIDIUM, CONFUGIMUS, SANCTA DE-I
 GENITRIX : NOSTRAS DEPRECA-TIO-NES NE DESPICI-AS IN NE-CES-
 SITATIBUS; SED A PERICULIS CUNCTIS LIBERA NŌS SEM-PER , VIR-
 GO BE - NE-DI-CTA. Nunc dim. e u o u a e.

*** In the Monastic use:**

The antiphon is for devotional use. Here is the *Sub tuum* as contained in the Appendix of the Antiphonale Monasticum of Solesmes published in 1934:

In honorem B. Mariae Virginis.

Ant.
VII

SUB tu-um praë-sí-di- um confú-gimus, * sancta De- i

Gé-ni-trix : nostras depre-ca- ti- ó-nes ne despí- ci- as in ne-

cessi-tá- ti-bus : sed a per-í- cu- lis cunctis lí-be-ra nos sem-

per, Virgo glo-ri- ó- sa et be- ne- dí- cta.

*** In the other Western uses and the piety of the faithful:**

The former medieval and post-medieval practice in several dioceses, especially in France, was to use the *Sub tuum* as final antiphon at Compline – as in the rite of Paris until the nineteenth century, instead of the *Salve Regina* by devotion.

Outside the strict frame of the liturgy, piety favoured the ancient prayer. Dom André Wilmart published in 1932 a curious medieval Office in honor of the 7 sorrows of the Virgin Mary attributed to Innocent IV (*Authors spiritual*, Paris, 1932, pp. 518, 523-26), in which the *Sub tuum praesidium* is the opening prayer of every hour, instead of the Pater or the Ave Maria.

In modern times, the Salesians used it in honor of Mary Help of Christians, while the Jesuits employed it for their exercises of piety in common.

In France, the catechism sessions organized by the Fathers of Christian Doctrine or the Jesuits included prayers easy to sing by children, among them the *Sub tuum*. Thus, Marc-Antoine Charpentier wrote his *Sub tuum presidium* (H. 352) to be sung as « second motet for catechism, for the middle break. » Here is its elegant melody:

SVB TVVM PRÆSIDIVM
SECOND MOTET POUR LE CATECHISME A LA PAUSE DU MILIEU,
A LA VIERGE - H. 352

Épigramme: Henri Adieu de Vêpres - 2004. Texte original: le Sâtral (saupé & jérome)
Mots: Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1661 - 1734) Maître de la musique de Saint de Lorraine, docteur de Grèce, du Dauphin, de la Louis. XIV, des Ursulines et de la Sainte Chapelle.

Ses yeux pleuraient, avec ses orphelins.

Voix:

Basse continue:

12. aller les annexes.

A partial indulgence is attached to the recitation of the *Sub tuum præsidium*.

J'aime

Soyez le premier de vos amis à indiquer que vous aimez ça.

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Liturgia

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