

EPISCOPAL AUTHORITY, HIERARCHY, AND MONASTICISM IN EARLY
SYRIAC SOURCES AS A CONTEXT FOR DENYS THE AREOPAGITE'S
ECCLESIASTICAL HIERARCHY

MIKLÓS VASSÁNYI*

Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I intend to discuss three early Christian Syriac sources in relation to the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (Περὶ ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ἱεραρχίας) of Saint Denys the Areopagite (*floruit cca 500*), with particular regard to the concept and nature of “hierarchy” appearing therein, as well as to the monastic virtues and especially the relationship between monasticism and the institutional Church, more precisely the grace-mediating authority of the bishop. My source texts are the *Acts of Judas Thomas* (*cca 200*); a 4th-century Syriac ritual handbook, editorially titled *De ordinationibus*; and *Homily 12* of the anonymous collection known as the *Liber graduum*, the *Syriac Book of Steps* (4th century). With this short investigation, then, I would like to reinforce the historical and philological argument for Denys’ Syrian background. (This paper is a revised and substantially upgraded version of a short article I first published in Hungarian, Vassányi 2023).

KEYWORDS: Denys the Areopagite, Syrian Christianity, Acts of Judas Thomas, Book of Steps

Based on the current state of research, Denys’ Syrian cultural and ecclesiastical context appears to be an unquestionable fact, while it also stands as an undoubtable fact that the Greek text of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is not a translation from an assumed Syriac original. However, it is both interesting and essential to review and verify the evidence for this, which is twofold: ecclesiastical-institutional and dogmatic-theological. The latter connects certain Dionysian statements – particularly Christological ones – to the Antiochene Theodore (*cca 350–cca 428*), bishop of Mopsuestia, “the Exegete” of the Syrian Church of the East, and Philoxenus, monastic theologian and bishop of Mabbug (*cca 440–523*). Namely, Raymond Tonneau and Robert Devreesse suggest the existence of a historical link between the sacramental rituals described by Theodore in his *Catechetical Homilies*, and Denys’ account of the same in the *Ec-*

*MIKLÓS VASSÁNYI (PhD in philosophy 2007, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven; PhD in history 2017, Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest) is associate professor of philosophy at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. Email: vassanyi.miklos@kre.hu

clesiastic Hierarchy (Tonneau – Devreesse, eds: *passim*); whilst outstanding Syriacist Emiliano Fiori refers to Philoxenus' *Contra Habib* VII, 26 and VI, 105, as well as to the *Epistle to the Monks of Senun* 61, 25–26 and 62, 3–5, as potential sources for Denys (Emiliano Fiori, ed.: lxvii, note 93; see Philoxenus' relevant works in Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., 1892–1894).

While these authors are not my present focus, I shall follow in the footsteps of Joseph P. Stiglmayr SJ (Stiglmayr 1895, 1909), archbishop Alexander Golitzin (Golitzin 1994), Andrew Louth (Louth 1989), Sebastian Brock (Brock 1987), and István Perczel (Perczel 2008, 2012), guided by the beacons of earlier major Syriacists such as the epoch-making Anton Baumstark's (1872–1948) *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* (Baumstark 1922) and the equally epochal Arthur Vööbus' (1909–1988) *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* (Vööbus 1960; see also *idem*, 1951), to examine the above-mentioned three sources textually or thematically linked to the Dionysian corpus with respect to the motif of the distribution of power within the Church, especially regarding the administration of the sacraments. I will discuss the relevant parts of these sources in thematic order, not necessarily chronologically, proceeding from the more “revolutionary” to the more “regulative,” as follows: 1. *Acts of Judas Thomas* (cca 150–250); 2. *De ordinationibus* (late 4th–early 5th century); 3. *Liber graduum* (4th century).

Throughout this paper, the Library of Congress system of Syriac transcription is applied to transcribe citations from the Syriac. This is a simplified transcription of the Syriac language insofar as it does not indicate spirantization or the doubling of consonants etc.; its vocalization corresponds to the East Syriac pronunciation (<https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsoroman.html>). Again, throughout this paper, translations from the Syriac are by the author of this paper; translations from Denys are taken from Thomas L. Campbell's excellent work, *Dionysius the Areopagite: The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (Campbell 1981), or from John Parker's classic translation (Parker 1897).

1. The Acts of Judas Thomas

According to Alexander Golitzin's monograph, notable for its exceptionally broad perspective (Golitzin 1994: 352), the birthplace of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is Syria-Palestine. This is also evidenced by the description Denys provides in Chapter VI of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and in *Epistle VIII* concerning unordained hermits (*anachōrēteis*) and monks (*koinobiteis*) – followers of Christ, striving for perfection and consecrated to God. We may affirm that because his account stands in striking harmony with the presentation of the ascetic lifestyle of the apostle Judas Thomas (Golitzin 1994: 356) in the *Acts of Judas Thomas*. As is well known, these *Acts* are an early source of Syrian origin preserved in both Syriac (*Praksīs dālhūdā T'ūmā šliḥā*;

Syriac *textus receptus*: Wright, ed. 1871; English translation: Klijn 2003) and Greek (Πράξεις τοῦ ἁγίου ἀποστόλου Θωμᾶ; Thilo, ed. 1823; Tischendorf, ed. 1851; English translation: Drijvers 2003; see further Bremmer, ed. 2001; Muñoz Gallarte – Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, eds 2024). The *Acts* were originally written between 150–250 in either Syriac or Greek, probably in Edessa (ʿŪrhāy, today Şanlıurfa in Turkey) or in Nisibis (Nšībīn, today Nusaybin in Turkey – for geographical and chronological coordinates of the *Acts*, go to Bremmer 2001: 74–79; Schneemelcher, ed. 2003: 322–338; Myers 2003, 2010).

The *Acts of Thomas* (significantly shorter in Greek than in Syriac) describes the travels and successful conversions of the Apostle (*šliḥā*) named alternatively as Īhūdā / Judas or Tʿūmā / Thomas in the text, sent on an evangelical mission to “India.” (Scholarly literature points out that place names and historical concepts utilized in the text actually direct us to Persia rather than to India; Drijvers 2003: 332; Poirier 1981: 265.) The narrative is divided into eight “acts” (Syr. *praksīs*, Lat. *actum*), concluding with the religiously motivated dissolution of a high noblewoman’s marriage and the subsequent martyrdom of the Apostle. The text is not merely a historical narrative; it abounds in theological expositions (such as several long prayers and the celebrated *Hymn of the Pearl* in *Praksīs VIII*) and detailed descriptions of religious rites, particularly Baptism and the Eucharist.

Perhaps the most crucial section of the *Acts* is the conversion of a high-ranking lady, Mygdoniā, in *Praksīs VIII*. As a married woman and relative of King Mazday, her conversion to the “new God” is contingent upon the virtue of *qadišūtā*. While the primary lexicographical meaning of this term is “holiness” (cognate to the Hebrew term *qodeš*, “holiness”), the text itself and scholarly literature clarify that it primarily denotes sexual abstinence, specifically within marriage; hence, it is often translated as “purity” (meaning sacramental marriage). This abstinence is practiced to imitate the holiness – and thus the “separateness” – of God. As under the influence of Thomas’ preaching, Mygdoniā unilaterally decides to practice sacramental marriage without the consent of her husband, her faith leads to the tragic and topsy-turvy collapse of their marriage, entailing the execution of Apostle Thomas by King Mazday.

Praksīs VIII hence highlights a defining feature of early Syriac Christianity: the requirement of total sexual encratism (Vööbus 1951). It is in concord with this that the text describes any and every sexual act as “disgusting” and “hateful.” Furthermore, the body of the “pure,” abstinent believer becomes a “clean temple of the Anointed,” says the *Acts of Thomas*, following a New Testament passage (1Corinthians 6,19) – which is a topos of early Syrian Christianity, insofar as it appears several times in the *Book of Steps* as well.

In contrast, however, the moral excellence of purity / holiness (*qadišūtā*) is pre-

sented as the most powerful virtue and the quintessential path to God, possessing almost miraculous effects (even though such a strict requirement of bodily purity for every new church member ultimately conflicts with the divine command given in Genesis 1,28). Consider the following statement, one of Thomas' beatitudes: "Blessed are ye pure, for power is given to you for the forgiveness of sins" ("Tūbaykūn qar dīše, dtešbqūn ḥtāhe 'eštalattūn;" Wright, ed. 1871, vol. I, Syriac page numbering *rs'* = p. 261). Essentially, this strong statement suggests that the purified but unordained *anachōrētēs* who has achieved "perfection" may administer a sacrament that is, at least in the later church, theoretically reserved for the ordained priest or bishop.

While in the early phases of ecclesiastic growth and development, in a temporary dearth of ordained ministers, this practice may have been admissible down to normal, Denys' *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and *Epistle VIII* will explicitly oppose this anti-hierarchical tendency a couple of centuries later. During the celebration of the eucharist, says *Epistle VIII* emphatically, the place of the *monachoi* is at the door of the sanctuary – closer to the "common people" than to the altar:

Καὶ γὰρ οὐχ ἀπλῶς ἀπάντων μὲν ἐξήρηται τὰ ἅγια τῶν ἁγίων, πλησιάζει δὲ μᾶλλον αὐτοῖς ὁ τῶν ἱεροτελεστῶν διάκοσμος, εἶτα τῶν ἱερέων ἢ διακόσμησις, ἐπομένως δὲ τούτοις ἢ τῶν λειτουργῶν τοῖς δὲ τεταγμένοις θεραπευταῖς αἱ πύλα τῶν ἀδύτων εἰσὶν ἀφωρισμένοι, καθ' ἃς καὶ τελοῦνται καὶ παρεστᾶσιν οὐ πρὸς φυλακὴν αὐτῶν, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τάξιν καὶ ἐπίγνωσιν ἑαυτῶν μᾶλλον τῷ λαῷ παρὰ τοὺς ἱερατικούς πλησιάζοντες. (Heil – Ritter, eds. 1991: 176–177)

...for is not the Holy of holies altogether simply separated from all, and the order of the consecrators in closer proximity to it than the rank of the priests, and following these, that of the *leitourgoi*; but the gates of the sanctuary are bounded by the appointed *therapeutae*, within which they are both ordained, and around which they stand, not to guard them, but for order, and teaching of themselves that they are nearer the people than the priesthood. (Parker 1897: 154)

The *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* adds that at the moment of the sacramental act, only the deacons, priests, and the bishop may surround the altar to witness the mysteries directly. In Part III, section subtitled Μυστήριον συνάξεως εἴτ' οὖν κοινωνίας, Denys describes the eucharist in detail as he says that

καὶ νιψαμένων τὰς χεῖρας ὕδατι τοῦ ἱεράρχου καὶ τῶν ἱερέων ὁ μὲν ἱεράρχης ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ θεοῦ θυσιαστηρίου καθίσταται, περιστάσι δὲ μόνοι μετὰ τῶν ἱερέων οἱ τῶν λειτουργῶν ἔκκριτοι. (Suchla, ed. 1990: 81.)

After the bishop and the priests have washed their hands in water, the bishop takes up

his position at the center of the divine altar, and the chosen deacons alone stand nearby with the priests. (Campbell 1981: 35)

It is the role of deacons, priests, and the bishop, then, to mediate the sacraments to the monks, “pure” as the latter may be. By these ritual regulations, Denys intervenes in the ongoing, 4th–5th century Syriac debate regarding the claimed prerogatives of monasticism; the tone and tendency of his message to monks is clearly one of a call to submission and subordination to ecclesiastic hierarchy.

2. The De ordinationibus

Following Father Joseph P. Stiglmayr’s (1851–1934) scrupulous philological investigation (Stiglmayr, 1895) into the origins and dating of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* (hereinafter referred to as *CD*), Patriarch Ignatius Ephrem II Rahmani of Antioch (1848–1929) first noted in 1908 that the ordination liturgies described in Chapter V, Section 2 of Denys’ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* were adopted almost verbatim from a 4th–5th century Syriac document, which Patriarch Ephrem, a subject to Ottoman sultan Abdülhamid II, also published in a careful, bilingual Syriac–Latin edition (Rahmani 1908). This document, an *ordo liturgicus* titled *De ordinationibus* in Rahmani’s Latin translation and *Ṭaksā ūqānūne dkīrāwṭāwnyoh d’idṭā qdīštā* in the Syriac original (“The order and rules of the *cheirotonia* [‘ordination by imposition of hands’] of the Holy Church”), displays in the descriptions of the ordination rites for bishops, priests, and deacons, a close match, down to identity, with how Dionysius narrates the same rites in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Following Patriarch Ephrem, then, Stiglmayr explained in slightly more detail – though still very briefly – that certain elements of the *CD* point to a close familiarity with the Syrian liturgical tradition, and that therefore, the *CD* itself was presumably composed within a Syrian ecclesiastical context (Stiglmayr 1909).

A closer look at the relevant chapter of the *De ordinationibus* reveals that all three ecclesiastic orders – bishops, priests, and deacons – are ordained solely by a bishop through the laying on of the right hand (χειροτονία), and that each rite concludes with a “holy invocation.” In a first approach, they are distinguished by the placement of the Scripture on the head (which is reserved exclusively for bishops), and the number of knees used when kneeling (as the deacon kneels on only one):

1. Riš kāhne hākīl mā dmetqarab lšūmlāyā drīšūt kāhnūtā, ʿal tartayhēn būrkawhi qʿed qdām madbhā qadišā. Kad sīmān lʿal men rīseh mele ʿalāhāyātā dʿewangeliywān qadišā, wʿaydeh drīš kāhne, ūhākan baznā hānā meštāme men rīš kāhne, hū damšāme

leh baqrāyātā qadišātā dhāwyān ʿlawhi. (Rahmani 1908: Syriac page numbering *kd* = p. 24)

The head of the priests, therefore, when approaching the consecration of the leader of the priesthood, kneels on both knees before the holy altar, as the divine words of the Holy Gospel are placed upon his head, and the hand of the head of the priests is laid upon him – and thus, in this manner, he is consecrated by the head of the priests <the bishop> who ordains him with holy invocations that are pronounced over him.

3. Mšamšānā dēn ʿal ḥdā būrkeh balḥūd qʿed qdām madbhā ʾalāhāyā, hānū dēn dyaminā, kad sīmā yamīneh drīš kāhne, damšamlā leh, lʿal men rišeh. ūmeštamle meneh baqrāyātā tūb. Hānū dēn šlūte hālēn, dabhēn meštamlēn mšamšāne. (*Ibidem*: Syriac page numbering *kd* = p. 24)

The deacon, however, kneels on only a single knee before the divine altar – namely, his right knee – as the right hand of the head of the priests who consecrates him is placed upon his head. And he is consecrated by him, again, with invocations. That is to say, with prayers – it is by these that the deacons are consecrated.

An additional paragraph of the ritual book separately describes the common elements of the rites: according to this, at the end of the ceremony, the bishop makes the sign of the cross over the ordained, publicly announces his name, and is the first to give him the kiss of peace, followed by all the concelebrants present:

4. ʿAl kul ḥad menhūn dēn men bātar qrāytā ūšūmlāyā qadišā. ḥātmā drūšmeh dašlibā metṭbaʿ men riš kāhne, hū damšamle leh, wʿal kulḥad menhūn; hāwyā tūb kārūzutā qadištā ūšlāmā mšamlyānā, kad yahbīn leh šlāmā – lhū, dmeštamle bḥad men ṭeksēh dkāhnūtā – kul kāhnā dmeštkaḥ bāh, bkūhānā; hū riš kāhne tūb, hū damšamle leh qadmāyat. (*Ibidem*: Syriac page numbering *kd–kh* = pp. 24–25).

In the case of each of them, there follows an invocation and a holy confirmation. The seal of the sign of the cross is placed <upon them> by the head of the priests <the bishop>, who consecrates him and every one of them; furthermore, there is a holy proclamation and a consecrating kiss of peace, when every priest present at the consecration gives a kiss to him – to the one being consecrated into one of the orders of the priesthood; however, it is the head of the priests, the one who consecrates him, who <gives the kiss> first.

In Part V, Chapter 2 of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Denys describes these elements almost literally and in the exact same sequence, as if a copy of the Antiochene ritual book lay open before him. The passages almost literally corresponding to the

above-cited Syriac rites of consecration read as follows in Pseudo-Denys – first for the consecration of the bishop:

Ὁ μὲν ἱεράρχης ἐπὶ τὴν ἱεραρχικὴν τελείωσιν προσαγόμενος ἄμφω τῷ πόδε κλίνας ἐπίπροσθεν τοῦ θείου θυσιαστηρίου ἐπὶ κεφαλῆς ἔχει τὰ θεοπαράδοτα λόγια καὶ τὴν ἱεραρχικὴν χεῖρα καὶ τούτῳ τῷ τρόπῳ πρὸς τοῦ τελούντος αὐτὸν ἱεράρχου ταῖς παναγεστάταις ἐπικλήσεσιν ἀποτελειοῦται.

When a bishop is elevated to episcopal consecration, he kneels on both knees before the altar. He has the God-given Scriptures and the hand of the bishop on his head. In this way, he is consecrated through the all-holy invocations of the consecrating bishop. (Campbell 1981: 67)

Denys describes the consecration of the deacon with the following terms:

Ὁ δὲ λειτουργὸς ἕνα τοῖν ποδοῖν κλίνας ἐπίπροσθεν τοῦ θείου θυσιαστηρίου ἐπὶ κεφαλῆς ἔχει τὴν τοῦ τελούντος αὐτὸν ἱεράρχου δεξιὰν τελειούμενος ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ταῖς τῶν λειτουργῶν τελεστικαῖς ἐπικλήσεσιν.

The deacon kneels on one knee before the divine altar with the right hand of the ordaining bishop on his head. He is ordained by him with the prayers used for consecrating deacons. (Campbell 1981: 67)

And he sums it all up with the following passage:

Ἐκάστῳ δὲ αὐτῶν ἡ σταυροειδὴς ἐνσημαίνεται πρὸς τοῦ τελούντος ἱεράρχου σφραγὶς καὶ καθ' ἕκαστον ἀνάρρησις ἱερά γίνεται καὶ τελειωτικὸς ἀσπασμὸς ἀσπαζομένου παντὸς ἱερατικοῦ παρόντος ἀνδρὸς καὶ τοῦ τελέσαντος ἱεράρχου τὸν πρὸς τι τῶν εἰρημένων ἱερατικῶν ταγμάτων ἀποτελεσθέντα. (Heil – Ritter, eds. 1991: 110)

The consecrating bishop signs the head of each one with a cruciform seal. For each, there is the sacred calling of name and consecratory kiss. Together with the ordaining bishop, all the members of the clergy present kiss the one who has been ordained to any sacerdotal order of which we have spoken. (Campbell 1981: 67–68)

Crucially for our comparison with the *Acts of Thomas*, Denys insists that only the leader of the earthly (*kath' hēmas*) hierarchy can act as ordainer. Already in the opening sentence of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the Areopagite drives home the point that divine grace and redemption operate exclusively through the hierarchy. He even seems to suggest that instead of grace and redemption, the primary gift of God's *philanthrōpia* is the hierarchy, exclusively tasked with leading the initiated (*memyēmēnoi*) toward a deeper understanding of the divine mysteries, and ultimately toward a union with God (*theōsis, henōsis*). By bypassing the hierarchy – Denys professes quite openly – there is simply no channel of grace; God's great plan (the

leading back, or *epistrophē*, of the phenomenal multiplicity produced by creation, into God) is fulfilled only through the hierarchy. This ascent, this return to God, is a hierarchically controlled process; Denys' *Epistle 8*, on the subject of ecclesiastical discipline, specifically stipulates that an unordained – though initiated – anchorite or cenobite cannot pass judgment on a consecrated priest, nor can they override or criticize his sacramental acts. In strong terms, Denys rebukes a monk for disciplining a consecrated priest:

Νῦν οὖν ἄκουε τῶν ἡμετέρων οὐ θεμιτὸν ἱερέα πρὸς τῶν ὑπὲρ σὲ λειτουργῶν ἢ τῶν ὁμοταγῶν σοι θεραπευτῶν εὐθύνεσθαι, κἂν ἀσεβεῖν εἰς τὰ θεῖα δοκῆ, κἂν ἄλλο τι τῶν ἀπειρημένων ἐξελέγχοιτο δράσας. Εἰ γὰρ ἀκοσμία καὶ ἀταξία τῶν θειοτάτων ἐστὶ καὶ ὄρων καὶ θεσμῶν ἔκβασις, οὐκ ἔχει λόγον ὑπὲρ θεοῦ τὴν θεοπαράδοτον ἀνατρέπεσθαι τάξιν. (Heil – Ritter, eds. 1991: 175–176.)

Now, then, hear our view. It is not lawful that a priest should be corrected by the *leitourgoi*, who are above thee, or by the *therapeutae*, who are of the same rank with thee; even though he should seem to act irreverently towards things divine, and though he should be convicted of having done some other thing forbidden. For <even> if want of order, and want of regulation, is a departure from the most Divine institutions and decrees, it is not reasonable that the divinely transmitted order should be changed on God's behalf. (Parker 1897: 153–54)

3. The Syriac Book of Steps (*Liber graduum*)

Several pieces of the anonymous sermon collection known in the original manuscripts as the *Ktābā dmasqātā* (*Book of Steps / Liber graduum*) lend themselves to an investigation of ecclesiastical hierarchy and the distribution of power within the Church. This collection was edited – with a lasting impact that remains valid to this day – by Mihály Kmoskó (1876–1931), the parish priest of Pusztazámor (a village in central Hungary) and a university professor of Semitic philology, who provided it with a Latin translation and a monumental historical-philological introduction (Kmosko, ed. 1926; English translation Kitchen – Parmentier 2004; historical context and theological analysis Heal – Kitchen 2014).

We only suspect that the author of the homilies, who carefully preserved his anonymity, may have been active in Upper Mesopotamia near the Little Zab River, based on a single simile hidden in the final (30th) homily. The recipients of these sermons – which are primarily paraenetic and concerned with practical rather than systematic theology – are clearly a community of brethren striving for holiness and perfection: *ʾAḥay!* (*My brethren!*) says the opening salutation of *Homily 12*.

Father Kmoskó, the editor of the collection, considered it to be Messalian (from

Syriac *mšalyāne*, “those who pray”) heresy due to its implicit theology emphasizing prayer and moral, ascetic perfection, as well as its sharp practical-theological distinction between the “perfect” (*gmīre*) and the “upright” (*zadīqe*; Kitchen 2004: 205–220). However, modern research – specifically the international doyen of Syriac studies today, Sebastian Brock – rightly disputes and even refutes this, arguing that *Homily 12* in particular insists upon the indispensable role of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in mediating the sacraments (Brock 1987: 42). Brock summarizes the content of *Homily 12* as follows:

Christian growth is seen as a growth in awareness and the discovery, made possible by the visible Church, of the hidden church of the heart. This discovery then leads to an awareness of the heavenly Church upon which the visible Church had been modelled by Christ and his apostles. Awareness of the existence and functioning of the heavenly Church in turn results in a deepened perception of the significance and reality of the visible Church which had been the starting point of this growth. (Brock 1987: 43–44)

Nevertheless, the possibility of Messalian heresy remains present in both the *Liber graduuum*, just like it is there in the Pseudo-Macarian homilies (see the *50 Spiritual Homilies of Saint Macarius*, addressed to a community of Greek-speaking monks living in 4th-century Syria; Dörries *et al.* 1964) – in the former, it is present by the very fact that, according to its framing, the visible Church must be explicitly defended against those who believe it is unnecessary. *Homily 12* essentially teaches that although the primary goal of Christian spirituality is to reach the Heavenly Church (*‘idtā dbašmayā* or *‘idtā drawmā*) through the discovery of the Church of the Heart (*‘idtā dlebā*), the sacramental functioning of the Visible Church (*‘idtā dmetħazyā*) remains fundamental and indispensable on this journey.

One of the main themes of the collection is the distinction between the “lesser commandments” (the Golden Rule) and the “greater commandments” (virginity / *btūlūtā*, and poverty). Those who keep the lesser commandments are the “righteous” (*k’ine* or *zadīqe*, Lat. *iusti*), while those who keep the greater ones are the “perfect” (*gmīre*, Gr. τέλειοι, Lat. *perfecti*). The lesser commandments are like “milk” (*ħalbā*) and “potherbs” or “vegetables” (*yarqā*) – that is, “soft food” –, while the greater commandments are like “solid food” (*qšayā*; cf. Hebrews 5,13–14). Thus, there is a difference in degree, intensifying into a contrast or even a strong opposition, between the morality and sacramental status of the justified lay believers (*kine*) on the one hand, and the morality and sacramental status of the monastic community striving for perfection (*gmīre*), on the other.

However, according to the unknown preacher, this must not go so far as to lead the brethren to reject the authority and sanctifying power of the visible Church, as

without it, one cannot even reach the Church of the heart or that of heaven in the first place. Among other things, the anonymous preacher suggests his brethren that they should participate in the liturgy of the visible church:

...ūkad yādʿīnan, dhāwe pagrā hayklā kasyā, ūlebā madbhā kasyā ltešmeštā dabruḥā, nethapaṭ bhānā madbhā galyā, waqdām hānā hayklā galyā, dkad lāʿenan bhālēn niḥe lʿālam ʿālmīn bhāy ḥīʿrtā rabtā ʿīdtā dbašmayā, wabhaw madbhā dabruḥā mšabat ūmasaq, dmalaʿke mšamšīn qdāmawhi, ūkulhūn qadiše ūYešūʿ mkahen... (Kmosko, ed., 1926: col. 288)

And since we know that the body is a hidden temple, and the heart is a hidden altar for that worship which is in the spirit, let us be diligent at this public altar and before this public temple so that – as we labor within them – we may exist forever and ever in the free, great church which is in heaven, and at that altar which was adorned and raised by the spirit, before which angels serve, and all the saints, and Jesus functions as priest...

It is striking that this is also the position of Denys, especially in Part 6 of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* concerning the monastics, where the description of the initiation of monks makes it abundantly clear that, in terms of holiness, they are hierarchically subordinate to even the lowest ordained ecclesiastical order, the deacons:

Ὁ μὲν ἱερεὺς ἔστηκεν ἐπίπροσθεν τοῦ θείου θυσιαστηρίου τὴν μοναχικὴν ἐπίκλησιν ἱερολογῶν. Ὁ δὲ τελούμενος ὀπίσω τοῦ ἱερέως ἔστηκεν οὐκ ἄμφω τῷ πόδε κλίνων οὐχ ἓνα τοῖν ποδοῖν οὐκ ἐπὶ κεφαλῆς ἔχων τὰ θεοπαράδοτα λόγια, μόνον δὲ τῷ ἱερεῖ παρεστῶς ἱερολογοῦντι τὴν ἐπ' αὐτῷ μυστικὴν ἐπίκλησιν. (Heil – Ritter, eds. 1991: 117).

The priest stands before the divine altar and pronounces the sacred words of the monastic invocation. The one to be consecrated stands behind the priest. He does not genuflect on two knees, nor even on one, nor does he have on his head the God-given Scriptures. He just stands near the priest who is sacredly pronouncing the mystical invocation over him. (Campbell 1981: 75)

4. Conclusion

The *Acts of Thomas* thus record the values of the “small church of the perfect” – the *ecclesiola in ecclesia* – whereas the *De ordinationibus* and the *Liber graduum* (the Syriac *Book of Steps*) contrast this with the liturgical order of the “great church.” However, Pseudo-Denys’ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* is the text in which the great church’s position receives its most sublime formulation and apology, embedded within Neoplatonic metaphysics.

The Areopagite undoubtedly took part in the early Syrian “small church vs great church” debate regarding the role of the ordained ecclesiastical hierarchy as mediators of the sacraments and leaders of the community, because in the first three parts and Part V of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, he adopts the same moderate stance as the one found in *Homily 12* of the *Book of Steps*.

Yet, in Denys’ unique thought – shaped in the Athenian Platonic school through the metaphysical doctrines of the grand master Proclus of Athens (412–485) and perhaps even Damascius (480–cca 550) – the ecclesiastical hierarchy as “sacred governance” is simply a necessary extension of the celestial hierarchy on Earth. In this system, the bishop (through the lowest angelic orders and by God’s eternal decree) is in contact with the Holy Trinity itself. The divine “processions” (*prohodoi*) flow through him, and God’s powers (*dynameis*) are manifested through him – even if, as *Epistle 8* states, the bishop is morally censurable.

Hence ultimately, the power of the hierarchy, the authority of the sacred governance springs from God’s holiness itself, and it is the earthly church’s task to mediate it and to return to it, within the Dionysian all-encompassing salvific concept that evokes both Origen’s *apokatastasis* and the Neoplatonic *exitus-reditus* (departure and return) cycle. Consequently, there is no “shorter path,” no shortcut to God, not even through the “perfect” and radically ascetic *imitatio Christi*. The above-cited examples from the Syriac ecclesiastic tradition do in fact underpin the general claim that Denys too belongs into this strain of early Eastern Christianity.

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