

The Icon: The Unwritten Theology of Divine Light (with Patristic References)

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Orthodox theology is iconographical theology, since the icons are perceived to be windows to heaven. The icon originates in the incarnation of the Son of God, the perfect sign of the descent of his love into creation for the purpose of salvation. The icon communicates the divine beauty or glory through material means that are visible for the «bodily eyes». It is not just a simple portrait, because a portrait represents a mere human being. Instead, the icon portrays the human as united with God. The icon unites two worlds, which appear to be irreconcilable, but in fact are in perfect co-ordination in the transfiguration of the whole creation. It allows us to unite the past with the present, and to catch a glimpse of the future. The icon is an expression of eternity because the Face of the Unseen becomes transparent in it.

1. *Introduction*

Orthodox iconology is the confession of our faith in Jesus Christ, God made man, and by extension, in the power of those with whom he is well pleased: the angels, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. The icon expresses in an ineffable way the significance of the incarnation of the Son of God, the fulfillment of the divine plan concerning the human beings, and thus, the whole universe, a significance summed up in the well-known patristic expression: «God made himself human, that we might become God».¹

Saint John of Damascus provided the theological base for the veneration of icons, studying the problem from the perspective of christology. According to him, the reasoning in favour of the icon is based on the nature of the Son of God, who is both true man and true god in one person: Jesus Christ the Lord. The icon is in itself a clear answer to those who deny its cultic authority because it does not represent the *divine nature* nor the *human nature* of Christ, but his *divine person* in which the two natures are united, unblended and inseparable.²

In consequence of the faith in the Lord's incarnation, which is the fundamental dogma of Christianity, it is possible to declare the Virgin

¹ L. USPENSKY, *Teologia Icoanei în Biserica Ortodoxă*, Bucharest 1994, p. 104 (this and other quotations from the Romanian translated by N. Dumitrascu).

² For the biblical-theological foundations of the icon see: SAINT JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *Dogmatics*, book IV, chapter XVI, *Despre icoane*, in *PG*, 94, coll. 1168C-1176A. Cfr. also the translation into Romanian by Fr. D. FECIORU, XVI, Bucharest 1993, pp. 176-179.

Mary the true Mother of God. Using this as the starting point for their reasoning, the Holy Fathers state that the possibility to represent the God-Man is based exactly on the possibility to depict the human nature of his mother.³ Theology is a science of paradoxes, and the meaning of the icon can only be understood within this framework.

The icon communicates the divine beauty or glory through material means that are visible for the *bodily eyes*.⁴ The icon is not just a simple portrait, because a portrait represents a mere human being. Instead, the icon portrays the human as united with God.⁵ The grace of the Holy Spirit «awakens holiness both in the person represented and in his or her icon; and in him (in the Holy Spirit) operates the relationship between the believer and the saint, through the intercession of the saint represented on the icon».⁶

In our church, iconography has provided a veritable «illustrated Bible» for illiterates.⁷ The Holy Fathers mention on several occasions the pedagogical role – of guidance and strengthening in the orthodox faith – that the icons have had for the faithful.⁸ Father Dumitru Stăniloae said that just as the Holy Liturgy could not be celebrated without prayers, it could not be celebrated without icons.⁹ This is why iconography is so important for the Orthodox tradition.

³ In other words, «... if the denial of the human image of God leads logically to the denial of divine motherhood and, therefore, of the very meaning of our salvation, the reciprocal of this reasoning is also valid: the veneration of the icon of Christ implies the role of the Lord's Mother. «May it be to me as you have said» (Luke 1:38) was the indispensable condition of Incarnation, the only one which made possible that *God would become visible and representable*»; L. USPENSKY, *Teologia Icoanei*, p. 105.

⁴ «The icon takes out into the light and shows what is hidden. Man is limited by space and time and thus he has no complete knowledge about the unseen, neither about the past, nor about the future. The icon was found to guide knowledge, to show the hidden ones. The icon was made for advantage, benefaction and salvation, because knowing the hidden, we aim for the good and want to avoid the bad» (*PG*, 94, col. 1337 BC).

⁵ Saint John of Damascus differentiates clearly between the adoration of God and the worship of icons. The worship of the icon is not addressed at the material painting, but at the prototype that is represented by it. See BASIL DE CÉSARÉE, *Sur le Saint Esprit*, in *Source Chrétienne*, Paris 1978, p. 406.

⁶ In other words, the icon participates in the holiness of its prototype and through it (the icon) we ourselves participate in it, with the help of prayer. See L. USPENSKY, *Teologia Icoanei*, pp. 112-113.

⁷ See in particular, the iconographic programme on the walls of monasteries in Bucovina, Voroneţ, Moldoviţa, Suceviţa or Arbore, genuine spiritual treasures protected nowadays by UNESCO.

⁸ W. NYSSEN, *The Outsets of Byzantine Painting*, Bucharest 1975, pp. 44-47. Saint John of Damascus says: «What is the book for those who know it that is the icon for those who do not know the book. And what the word is for hearing, that is the icon for sight, for with help mind blends us with the icon» (*PG*, 94, col. 1248C).

⁹ D. STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în liturghia Ortodoxă*, Bucharest 2004, p. 115.

2. *The Liturgical Dimension of Iconography*

Within the framework of the ritual of the liturgy, the mysterious encounter with the painted saints of the icons represents a prefiguration of our meeting with Christ, the Son of God, in the eucharist. The prayers of the priests and the believers as well as the saints' faces of the icons represent means to strengthen the faith: both of them have the same purpose to facilitate the encounter with Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

In the liturgy, Christ offers himself through the transformation of bread and wine into his flesh and blood. His saving actions which are represented in the icons are present in the space of the church and are a part of an iconographical assembly which shows the saving work of Jesus Christ in its totality, ranging in its forms from historical scenes to those with a profound soteriological character. The saints are those who show us the effects of the salvation through Jesus Christ in the past, and at the same time they open for us a way to our future enlightenment.¹⁰ More concretely, they are models for us how to accomplish our own spiritual process and through their unseen presence in the icons, they ensure us of the help of their prayers.¹¹

The prayers of the believers are «accompanied and warmed» by the prayers of the angels and saints, especially those of Mary, because within the framework of the Orthodox liturgy and tradition, Christ is not an isolated figure, but the relationship between him and the believer takes place in the context of the church and the community of all who believe in him. Christ is not «enclosed» in a transcendental and inaccessible space, but he is continually communicating with the whole world, both with the redeemed, the saints, and with those who are still on their way to salvation, the church. The prayers of the saints, together with those of the believers, rise to Christ in a continuous movement full of love.

The prayers and hymns, expressed with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, are strengthened by looking at the icons, and rise up in the spirit contained within them, to Christ himself, surrounded by his angels and saints.¹²

Living this relationship with God and with his saints by means and through the icons and the invocation of his name and those of his saints, is above and beyond the realm of reason. This cannot be explained and understood in any other way but through the Spirit and prayer. The icon facilitates the connection between those who are contemplating it and the divine reality, the inaccessible and infinite.

The icon thus unites two worlds which appear to be irreconcilable, but, in fact, are in perfect co-ordination in the transfiguration of the whole

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

¹¹ The icon reminds of God, of our Savior's deeds and benefactions and is a motivation to imitate the example of the saints.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 117.

creation. It allows us to unite the past with the present, and to catch a glimpse of the future. The icon is an expression of eternity because the Face of the Unseen becomes transparent in it.¹³

3. *Iconographical Theology: The Light of our Salvation*

Orthodox theology is iconographical theology, since the icons are perceived to be windows to heaven¹⁴, to open the view for the light that springs from the divine existence of the three ὑπόστασις: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The icon originates in the incarnation of the Son of God, the perfect sign of the descent of his love into creation for the purpose of salvation. If God loves us, then we have the duty to return this love. In other words, denying the importance of the icon shows a lack of trust in his love and a certain ingratitude, because in this way, «the One beyond nature» took human form in order to show the whole world the hidden depths of his infinity.

In the icon, the greatness of God (incomprehensible by itself), becomes accessible in a finite image and offers itself as a way of communicating the glory of God. In the icon, his divinity *transpires* in the human face and induces the idea that:

«God himself rests within the human face, in which the spirituality of the human nature is concentrated; or that God made the human being after the image of his spirituality as being capable of communicating with the divine».¹⁵

God is the light where no shadow darkens, the harmony above all harmony which embraces all human beings, who in their turn are distinct lights characterised by an internal order. But these persons, even though they have an internal light, understand each other through a solidarity among them which rests on their being created as «the face of God». That is why everybody has a *proper name*, because through that name he/she becomes manifest as a *unique existence* in a universe of rational lights, as in a mystical interpersonal eucharist. On the other side, every person has a face because «this is the organised form of the rationality which is specifically human». And the *face of God in the human being*, based in his/her soul, is also *reflected* also in his or her body and, especially, *in his or her face*. This reflection gains cosmic dimensions in the human nature of Christ.¹⁶

¹³ See *supra*, note 5.

¹⁴ Michel Quenot calls the icon the window through which the people of God, the church, contemplates the kingdom of God, and the purpose of the iconography the spiritualisation of the closed reality. See M. QUENOT, *ICOANA, fereastră spre absolut*, Bucharest 1993, pp. 49, 59.

¹⁵ D. STĂNILĂ, *Spiritualitate și comuniune*, p. 119.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

For the Orthodox world, the human being, being created by God, participates in God's uncreated energies. More concretely, all were created by Christ, the centre of the world, the centre of light and the centre of divine love.

The union between the visible and invisible worlds, of the saints in heaven and the believers on earth is represented through liturgical acts and iconographical images. The light of the icon is not a light of this world, it does not come from outside of itself, but from within itself, from the face painted on it. This is the reason why the icon reveals the light whether it is day or night, because it is full of the uncreated light, the hidden light that spreads in the whole of creation and transfigures it. The light of the icon symbolises the uncreated *Glory of God*.

Iconography calls the foundation of the icon, light. The face of the saint in the icon is enlightened because it is open for and opened by the love for God and for the faithful, and this is the reason that it is joyful. The light of the face, which is full of the saint's love, comes from the contemplation of the infinite, loving transcendence of God.¹⁷ It is this which unites all paradoxes and opens the prospect of salvation.

4. *The Icon between Art and Divine Light*

Christ is the image (εἰκὼν) of the unseen God. As Jesus Christ is true God and true man, it follows that Christ's visible humanity is the icon of his invisible Divinity. This revelatory function of Christ's humanity becomes true for any human being in the sense that the human being is true only in as far as he or she reflects the divine.¹⁸

The image of God in the human being, redeemed through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, can be found in ascetic contemplation, with the ultimate aim of the deification of the human.

For the Orthodox church, «being in a state of deification means to contemplate the uncreated light and to let it impregnate one's being».¹⁹

The icon *is* transfiguration. It does not receive the light from the outside, because the light is its essence. As you cannot light the sun, so you cannot light the icon, provided that the vision of its author has become theology through spiritual contemplation. The interpenetration of the artistic element with mystic contemplation represents the beginning of a visionary theology, expressed through authentic faith and living.²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 125-126.

¹⁸ P. EVDOKIMOV, *Arta icoanei – o teologie a frumuseții*, Bucharest 1992, pp. 161-162.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 163.

²⁰ As a representation of the transcendental reality, the icon fills our sight with a universe of beauty. The icon «immortalizes» the spirit in the image that reflects it and concentrates it on the symbolised reality (M. QUENOT, *ICOANA*, p. 102).

Therefore, in order to better understand the importance of the icon in Orthodox spirituality one has to correlate artistic imagination, and art itself, with its theological message. This is the sensitivity and the power of representation achieved in contemplation.

The icon's reality does not ignore the author's imagination, since this is a necessary part of any artistic approach. It belongs to a complex of values acknowledged in the patristic tradition, but it does not represent everything. If the icon were reduced to human imagination, it would be incapable of offering access to the metaphysical reality and would be constricted to a fictional space, directing us towards phantasmagoria and demonic illusions instead of towards supra-rational realities. And it would not radiate light, but shadows of ignorance, insufficiency and finiteness.

If instead it is part of a spiritual vocation, joined by a profound knowledge of the religious truths and the contemplation of the unseen through the *sight of the heart*, then the icon becomes a cult object in which might become possible the connection between these two planes of existence, the divine and the human, which do not exclude each other but interpenetrate each other in a mysterious embrace.

The artist's ability to immortalise the *contemplation of the spiritual world* generates the vision of the light with the eyes of the heart (sight of the heart), not just a harmony of colours achieved by fantasy and aesthetic taste.²¹ It frees the spirit of the human being, restoring in him or her the possibility to «rest» in the Lord, to reintegrate him- or herself into the spiritual ascent towards God, for which he/she was created. The truth revealed by the icon is a spiritual one, it is the visualisation of God's light in all created forms.²²

5. Conclusions

Revelation and iconography are intricately and irresolvably related because both address the human being. The source and origin of the icon is the light which is the symbol of the divine. God is light and his incarnation amounts to the coming into the world of the light. Because its background symbolises the light, regardless of its colour, the icon always radiates the light at the same time.

God cannot be known by his being, but only by his divine energy. The icon transcends the separation between the created world and the unseen world, depicting the latter in a spiritual manner by transcending

²¹ When the painter expresses his spiritual vision in an image, he does this so that this *embodiment* may serve as a starting point for others' spiritual ascent. This requires from the praying person an effort similar to the painter's but in a reverse movement, i.e. the ascent of the mind from the drawing to a spiritual vision (T. SPIDLİK, *Spiritualitatea răsăritumi creștin II: Rughiunea*, Sibiu [Romania] 1998, p. 306).

²² *Ibidem*.

temporal and spatial categories. Unified by the light, the figurative content of the icon participates in an existence that differs from an existence which is dominated by the conditions of a fallen world.²³ The icon is an indispensable means for the spiritual ascent of the faithful aspiring to attain eternal salvation.

²³ L. USPENSKY, *Teologia Icoanei*, pp. 208-209.