

## THE ICON IN ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

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The place of the icon in the Orthodox Church is unique and so central that the restoration of icons after the long period of iconoclasm has been characterised as a triumph of Orthodoxy as a whole.

In order to justify this central place of the icon, one should not see particular icons only as religious instruments in their concrete environment and function. Rather, one should understand icons as an expression of a theological reality which includes all possible relations between the entire created world and its uncreated Creator. For icons, in general, presuppose a *prototype* which is reflected in different ways and in varying degrees throughout the entire course of divine economy, so that the divine plan of salvation is served accordingly from the very first steps of *revelation* to the final stage of *parousia*. The very concepts of "revelation" and "parousia" presuppose and clearly indicate the visual joy of the icon as the most characteristic way of understanding salvation. This means that the icon is the only immediate presence of the invisible Holy in historical time, and for this reason precisely do icons become the sole refuge and consolation for the faithful as they yearn for the *eschaton*.

If one does not appreciate these general preliminary remarks concerning the importance of the icon in the history of salvation, one would not be able to approach properly the whole complex of related problems.

Before dealing with the various aspects of the place of the icon in the Orthodox Church, one should offer a brief account of the historical process which ended in the definite Restoration of the Holy Icons through the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787.

The history of the icon in the life of the Church signifies a long adventure dictated on the one hand by the requirements of the Decalogue and on the other by the overwhelming influence of the Incarnation. The struggle between iconoclasts and iconophiles endured entire centuries, with intervals of peace, and divided the people of God into two opposing sides. For a long time, it was not easy to discern who was correct and to what extent, because extreme attitudes on both sides rendered such judgment almost impossible. Both parties saw the involvement of such distinguished personalities as bishops and emperors, or influential monks and theologians. Each side insisted that the fight was for the purity and integrity of the faith. However, what were the fundamental arguments of the two sides?

The first iconoclasts justifiably referred to the example of the early Christians who had no icons. The Old Testament clearly dictates: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth below, or that is in the water under the earth" (Ex. 20:4). This warning prevented not only the veneration but also the simple use of icons. For the first Christians, then, icons were regarded as idols, which characterised the heathen world. Early Christian art was mystical and symbolical. In portraying the Lord

as fish or lamb and not in the form of man, this art served more the purpose of secret communication than worship itself. Yet from the third century, the ever increasing conversion of great masses to Christianity caused a dramatic change. Simple folk are not satisfied with abstract concepts and symbols, but demand tangible representations. Since Jesus Christ had lived as man among men, they were unable to understand why He could not be depicted as man. The multitudes of martyrs who shed their blood courageously for their faith in Christ further kindled in the soul of the Christians the desire to keep alive in their memory and in their life the image of these saints and confessors. There was no other way of achieving this than through painting their faces in the form of icons, thereby preserving their beneficial presence among themselves. The icons of the Virgin Mary and the angels also came about in the same way. Besides, the Christian faith had ceased to be an illegal religion, and there was no reason for its art to remain symbolical. It therefore became historical, just as the whole event of the Church is grounded in history.

Since this turn towards the icon was originally observed in the circles of the well-known heresiarch Karpokrates, the Church looked upon it with reservation and reacted accordingly through the Council of Elvira around 306. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, and other Church leaders even attempted to develop theological arguments against the use of icons. They insisted that the faith and tradition of the Church prohibit the use of icons because God cannot be described. Although Jesus Christ lived and acted in human form His human nature was, they claimed, so deeply immersed in the divine nature that not even He could be depicted. The same was held of the saints: how could one paint them when they were transfigured and no common human features could be ascribed to them?

These were more or less the most fundamental arguments of the first reaction against icons. How did the iconophiles counter them? Among them there was no lack of distinguished theological personalities, since the whole movement in favour of icons was led by the monastics, which, as will be seen below, was no accident. In general, the first response given was that in using icons one should speak neither of heresy nor of idolatry. In order to make this clear, they underlined the basic belief that the honour rendered to the icon "refers to the prototype". In parallel, in order that the icons may not be considered human or even heathen constructions the theory of the so-called "icons not made by human hands" began to spread during the sixth century. Written sources of such a theory appear from as early of the late fourth century.

However, the strongest and most fundamental theological argument for the use of holy icons was the true Incarnation of God. Since true God became true man, and did not simply appear as man as was the teaching of docetism rejected by the Church as a blasphemous heresy, it was quite obvious that one could legitimately depict the human form of Christ. It must be said that in painting Jesus Christ, the Church did not depict mortal human characteristics but on the contrary His human nature as sanctified and transfigured according to its original beauty

as this was safeguarded by its undivided (hypostatic) union with the pre-existing divine Logos.

The Fourth Ecumenical Council, that of Chalcedon, which finally defined the relationship between the two natures of Christ human and divine indirectly yet decisively assisted icons to prevail in the life of the Church. One could say that the two key adverbs of the Chalcedonian definition, “undividedly” and “unconfusedly”, which are the *conditio sine qua non* for the authentic Christian Christology, are of equal importance for the proper understanding of icons in the Christian Church and worship. For the divine prototype and its material icon in the Church behave towards each other in the same way as the two natures in the one person of the Lord.

This relation of the holy icons to the doctrine of the divine Incarnation was more directly and precisely emphasised by the Council in Trullo (692). Canon 82 of that council constitutes one of the most fundamental synodical witnesses in this crucial issue. This is why one should present the text of this Canon which reads as follows:

In certain reproductions of venerable images, the Precursor is pictured pointing to the lamb with his finger. This representation was adopted as a symbol of grace. It was a hidden figure of that true lamb who is Christ our God, shown to us according to the Law. Having thus welcomed these ancient figures and shadows as symbols of the truth transmitted to the Church, we prefer today grace and truth themselves, as a fulfillment of the Law. Therefore, in order to expose to the sight of all, at least with the help of painting, that which is perfect, we decree that henceforth Christ our God be represented in His human form and not in the form of the ancient lamb. We understand this to be the elevation of the humility of God the Word, and we are led to remember His life in the flesh, His passion, His saving death and, thus, deliverance which took place for the world.

The above text clearly summarises the entire history of the icon in the life of the Church. The products of the archaic and symbolical art which depict Christ as lamb, fish or vineyard, are characterised as “types” and “shadows”, as “symbols” and “prefigurations” of truth, which had to be replaced at some stage by truth itself. This truth was the fact that Christ was incarnate in human form in order to re-create the new man with His own flesh. Any other form assumed by Christ at His Incarnation would not contribute to the salvation of humanity, as this would not have been the human form which was corrupted through the fall and sin.

It is precisely this overwhelming event which one should always bear before one’s eyes in order to draw strength in the struggle to which one is called by Christ. Thus the Council in Trullo points out that the icons of our Lord are necessary on the one hand “for the commemoration of His fleshly life, passion and redemptive death” and on the other for the understanding of “the height of the *kenosis* of the God Logos”.

Since, then, in this manner the icon of Christ became theologically legitimate, it was clear that the same legitimacy also includes the icons of the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the saints. Thus the icon is rendered a solemn confession of the most basic and significant doctrine of Christianity which may be summarised in the formulation of St Athanasius that "God became man in order that man might become God".<sup>1</sup> It is precisely for this reason that St John Damascene, one of the most fervent and profound theologians and defenders of icons, could epigrammatically state: "I saw the human face of my God and my soul was saved".<sup>2</sup>

However, the spiritual content of the icon is inexhaustible, should one wish to ground it more analytically. One could even insist that there is no fundamental truth of the Christian faith which is not implicitly included in the reality of the icon. This conviction is presented by Prof. K. Kalokyris throughout his various relevant works which are most significant for their originality. For, as he correctly observes, that which is expressed in the Church through the liturgy, the hymns and the sermons, finds an excellent commentary through the silence of Orthodox iconography.<sup>3</sup>

Let us now, out of this silence of the Orthodox icon, decipher the most fundamental messages:

i) The first and foremost datum suggested by the Orthodox icon is the *unity and continuity between the visible and invisible world*. Since the entire life of the Church on earth is structured according to the heavenly hierarchy, constituting the reflection of the latter, there is no more tangible and faithful manner of expressing this inner bond than by means of the holy icons. For these transform the mortal surfaces of this world into windows leading to eternity. Just as the original fall of man led to the alienation of the entire creation from its divinely-given purpose and to its expectation "sighing and groaning with us" for its hour of redemption, likewise after the Incarnation of God, which restored man to his original beauty, the entire creation was called to glorification of the Redeemer. So no material element is any longer profane, but rather through proper spiritual use becomes an expression of the new order of reality, namely of the recreated new world. Colours, light, wood and whatever other material could lose its gravity and proclaim the event of salvation, becoming a precious vessel in the service of Church worship.

In this way, the sacred icons constitute the normative expression of the entire visible world, that once again is able to find its true dimensions and sanctity so long as it is able to reflect God's majesty. According to the inspired words of St Paul "the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (Rom. 1:20). It is in this sense that one should note the profound observation by the most distinguished scholar of holy icons, the Russian Leonid Ouspensky, who states that the icon opens for us a boundless vision which includes the past and the future of the world.<sup>4</sup>

ii) With this last remark, a second central datum already emerges

from the inexhaustible spiritual wealth of the Orthodox icon, namely the factor of the *dogmatic memory* which replaces and transforms the immediate. When we claim that the Orthodox icon opens a boundless vision which at the same time embraces the past and future of the world, this clearly signifies that the Orthodox icon does not re-present the immediacy of the secular present, but on the contrary expresses the world of God as it was before the fall and as it will be in its eschatological perfection.

How then can this transcendence of the immediacy of the present occur? Is not the icon itself a tangible and most concrete immediacy? Herein precisely lies the most wonderful and paradoxical. *Just as Christ conquered death through death, so also the icon, with its immediacy, abolishes the naturalistic immediacy of the world and turns it into memory in God.*

Orthodox iconography has been correctly called *the art of depth* precisely for this wholistic purification realised by the icon, not merely in the corruptible matter of this world but also in our senses. The dogmatic memory preserved by the icon in its sacred silence is the mystical force which renders the spectacle a spiritual laver of all human senses. If the icon were not the root and at the same time the fruit of the dogmatic memory of the Church, then the spectacle would not be purifying; it would at most be an aesthetical pleasure of the eye which would by no means suffice to verify the primacy of sight among the other human senses. Yet it is of this primacy that Christ spoke unreservedly when He stated "the light of the body is the eye. If then your eye is single, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness" (Matt. 6:22-23). This spiritual principle is solemnly verified only through the dogmatic memory incarnated by the Orthodox icon.

It is clear that all theological aspects presented above derive from our study of the Orthodox icons in general, and do not in the first instance refer to concrete persons depicted in these. However, should one attempt to offer a brief analysis of the depicted figures, then once again the Orthodox icon - through its overall technique which might be termed theandric - reminds of fundamental truths of our faith engraved with the same intensity in the conscience of every faithful.

The Christ of the Byzantine style, which is never the portrait of an actual man, reminds us equally of the terrifying Lord of Powers, as well as of the loving kind Son of the Virgin who sacrificed Himself for our sake. Were He not the incarnate Emmanuel, it would have been impossible for us to look upon His countenance. However, since the Gospel testifies that Christ assumed "the form of a servant", becoming for us "the icon of the invisible God", how could we servants not see this icon? Byzantine art, in contrast to Western art, does not permit even the figures of the saints to be based on the models of common mortals of the surrounding natural world. For this would imply a conscious isolation and estrangement from the sacred prototype. The saints are depicted by the Church according to the elements preserved through the memory of the faithful concerning their overall life. This means that

for the dogmatic memory of Church, what is decisive is not so much the physiognomic details of a certain saint but rather the spiritual impression created by the saint in the conscience of the faithful. Thus, on the one hand, the subjective improvisations of each iconographer are excluded while, on the other, a stereotyped similarity to the sacred prototype is from generation to generation preserved and handed down. In other words, for the icon it is not of primary importance to keep an absolute physiognomic resemblance with the historic person, but rather to maintain the event of the good mutation wrought by the transfigured life in Christ.

With these presuppositions, the Orthodox icon clearly becomes the most convincing proclamation that indeed the human person was created "in the image and likeness of God". In spite of this, the Byzantine icon, due precisely to its idiorhythmic style, was often misunderstood to the point of total contempt, not only by non-Orthodox but even sometimes by the Orthodox themselves. The Byzantine icon does not normally have the perspective of geometric space, but an entirely different kind of perspective, which might be named a *perspective of theological values*. Herein lies the great scandal for the uninitiate. For the faithful, on the contrary, and for those initiated, this is not only natural but also absolutely necessary. This is what the specialist Leonid Ouspensky says on this subject:

The Seventh Ecumenical Council emphasized the perfect correspondence between the icon and the Holy Scripture and that the icon calls us to the life which the Gospel reveals. But in the Gospel everything is, so to speak, in inverse perspective: "The first shall be the last," the meek and not the violent shall inherit the earth, and the supreme humiliation of the cross is truly the supreme victory.

Thus the life of the Christian is placed in this same perspective: the death of the martyr is his victory, his coronation, and privations of the ascetic struggle are transformed into an incomparable joy. If we consider the inverse perspective of the icon from this point of view, we will be able to understand its meaning. The inverse perspective is not an "optical illusion". It does not fascinate the spectator and lead him into a futile game of appearances. On the contrary, it calms him, makes him concentrate and makes him attentive to the message of the icon. It is as if man were standing before a path which, instead of losing itself in space, opens on to infinite fullness. A door which leads to divine life therefore, is opened before the Christian.<sup>5</sup>

Similar to these observations of Ouspensky are also the thoughts of the modern and at the same time so traditional writer, Nikos G. Pentzikis. Explaining the well known architectural detail that Orthodox church buildings in principle have the altar facing the East, Pentzikis repeatedly presented the following original and very deep observation: when the altar faces the East, the main entrance of the church building

faces the West. The spiritual message behind this is that we find the proper entrance to the life of the Church only where the natural light of this world comes to its sunset!

What has thus far been said is primarily concerned with the general style of Orthodox icons. However, parallel to this it must be observed that even the details in Byzantine iconography are not irrelevant to a deeper meaning and dogmatic doctrine of the Church. For an example, it would suffice to note that the very stance of the saints in their icons, which is normally a frontal stance, is not without significance. On the contrary, it underlines the continual contact and solidarity between the world of the perfected spirits and the members of the Church still living in this world. We are confronted here by the so comforting doctrine that at each moment we are never essentially alone, since we are invisibly surrounded by the cloud of saints and angels (cf. Heb. 12:1). Therefore the frontal stance of the saints is the most expressive way of formulating the official teaching about the communion of saints. In this way, the icons do not simply reveal the transfigured creation of God but at the same time help us to participate in it more experientially.

At this precise point one should be most careful in order to avoid exaggeration and heresy. For we should not forget that the more refined and sacred an object is, the more easily it is stained with the slightest abuse. And we know from Church history that Byzantine forefathers were not always able to avoid this temptation, and so gave cause to later iconoclasts to demand the abolition and disappearance of holy icons from churches. The information that there were iconophiles who scratched paint from the icons and mixed it with holy Communion points to the danger of heresy and spiritual perversion. They believed, it seems, that the wood and paint were in some way transubstantiated, and they dared to mix them with the body and blood of Christ in holy Communion.

Of course one would not deny that according to the official view of the Church, icons of saints become instruments that convey to the faithful the grace of the depicted holy persons. Yet this does not imply that the wood has ceased to be wood, nor the colours from being mere chemical substances. What occurs to the holy icons is, one could say, that which happens with the water of blessing and the oil of holy unction: they convey divine grace to the faithful, but this does not mean that the water or oil have changed in nature.

On the other hand, it must be recognised that even the most fatal abuse in this regard by no means justifies the abolition demanded by the iconoclasts. Abuse is never healed with abolition but with enlightenment and correct usage. Imagine if, since we might at times abuse food, we were disallowed from eating. Imagine if God would deprive man from the gift of freedom because man abuses this gift to a smaller or greater degree. These simple thoughts could be applied also to contemporary iconoclasts, whether Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses or whatever Protestants. For all these start, as the early iconoclasts, from the dangers of abuse and, with their central argument being the purity and spirituality of God's worship, categorically reject holy icons.

However, what has been said above about icons would somehow

remain merely abstract and speculative, if we were not to attempt to locate more specifically the particular element that makes the faithful feel contrition and consolation before an icon. For it must be admitted that the rich theological content of the icon is not automatically reflected within us so as to explain the attraction and contrition inspired in our soul by the holy icons.

In order to locate this particular element one should begin from the human person and not from the icon. This endeavour might perhaps be helped greatly by the following experimental method. Let us imagine that a great Orthodox iconographer succeeded in representing through his icons, with the greatest possible faithfulness, the entire transfigured world of God, yet without anywhere depicting the human image, the human person. What would such an icon have to say to our soul? I believe that no matter how sacred this paradisiac panorama were, it would provoke in us all more anxiety than serenity, more terror than contrition. While, on the contrary, an icon could inspire the deepest religious emotion with the face alone of a saint, even if it depicted nothing more than the two ecstatic eyes. What then does all this mean? Surely only that the deeper mystery of the icon is especially anthropological. The human person, the human face, is the most immediate and profound yearning. This truth is in any case expressed even etymologically in the Greek term for person, namely "prosopon": "pros-opon" is the subject moving towards vision. The deeper essence of "prosopon" is *ecstatic*, which means that a person inwardly tends towards moving outside of itself towards encounter with another person.<sup>6</sup> Surely it was this deep mystery of existence that was already expressed by Plato in his divine myth that man was originally two faced, and even since being divided into two, is never peaceful until he rediscovers his second self. Translating this philosophical intuition into purely theological terminology, we understand still better to what this unquenchable thirst is due: it appears that the deepest trauma of man is the person, because precisely that which man spoiled with his fall was the human person, the image of God. The original fall, as the utmost form of self love, condemned personality to individuality, to "units without windows", as the German theologian E. Brunner characteristically said. Herein precisely lies the content of what we call hell. Well known is the dialogue with one of the early desert Fathers of the Church, Macarius of Egypt. Asked how he imagined hell, he spontaneously replied that hell would be like God binding us back to back so that we cannot even again see each other's eyes.

From this last remark, we can better understand why monasticism led from the outset the crusade in favour of the holy icons. If the monk is the most dynamic human being struggling for the restoration of the distorted image of God in the human person, then it is very natural that he will continually need to draw light and comfort from the transfigured faces of the saints as presented by Orthodox iconography.

One could of course justifiably ask: do the lives of saints and other sacred texts not suffice to inspire the faithful as to the manner in which the human person may be transfigured from corruption to incorrupti-

bility? Must we necessarily look at icons of the saints? Precisely in this question is the central nerve of the whole mystery of icons confronted: while the lives of saints and general texts describe the persons based on their *actions* and *thoughts*, the icon expresses the boundless depth which the human person by definition possesses since it is created "according to the image and likeness" of God. For whereas the actions and thoughts of a person may be measured according to its life in a limited place and time, the quality of the "image and likeness" tends towards the limitless, just as God too is without limitation.

## NOTES

- 1 Cf. *On Divine Incarnation* 54.
- 2 *Hom. I On Holy Icons* 22 PG 94:125A.
- 3 See his book *The Essence of Orthodox Iconography* (Brookline: Holy Cross, 1971).
- 4 See his *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 1978) p. 228.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- 6 Outstanding on this theme is the book by Prof. C. Yannaras, *Prosopon and Eros* (in Greek, Athens, 1976).