

Theology of Byzantine Icons (by Archimandrite Vasileios, Abbot of the Holy Monastery of Stavronikita)

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The Lord is «the unchanging icon of Being» (St John of Damaskos, canon of the Transfiguration). Every icon is related to but is not identical with its archetype. The Lord, being of one essence with the Father, is the most perfect icon that can exist. The creation of man in the image of God is the ground of the inner relationship and communion between God and man. «But because we darkened and afflicted the likeness of the divine image with the impurity of the passions, (He confers) a second communion... and the archetype mingles with the image... and is hypostatically identified with it» (St John of Damaskos, P.G. 96,55A). This hypostatic identification of the archetype (the Son of God) with the image (man) is the precondition and actuality of our salvation or - to put this in a different way - is the forming anew of our original state of beauty. In all His divinity He became perfect man and in all His humanity He remained perfect God. He assumed, beautified and saved the obscured image of God in man: it was «blended with divine beauty». And this beauty is synonymous with our deification and our salvation. «Because the divinity is mingled like some life-giving and salvatory medicine with our nature, our nature has been glorified and transformed into incorruption» (St John of Damaskos, P.G. 94, 1332D).

This truth and this fulfillment of salvation is lived by the Church as «inconceivable beauty» from the day of Pentecost, when «He who fulfils with more than beauty» in His divine economy sent down His Holy Spirit and established the Church. Yet when heresies began to try to adulterate this salvatory reality; when an alien spirit - an idolatrous mentality- began to protest and to deny the truth and grace conferred through Jesus Christ to understand transcendent realities in a worldly manner, things uncreated as though created, to deny the divinity and the humanity of the Lord, the God-bearing of the Virgin Mary, the divinity of the Spirit and the union of the two natures in Christ: then the Church reacted as one body. It convoked the ecumenical Councils; it formulated the articles of the faith; it expressed clearly and simply what it had held within it from the beginning.

In the iconoclastic furore, which broke out later and continued for almost a century and a half (726-843), the Church experienced the revival of the old heresies and

persecutions, the frenetic and many-sided attack on its own being, the denial as a whole of the divine economy. But by God's grace truth triumphed. The relevant theology was formulated with greater clarity. The icons were restored, the Church clothed itself in divine beauty: «the splendour of the truest doctrines shines forth». And this victory is described not as the victory on behalf of the holy icons, but as the triumph of Orthodoxy. «For with the orthodoxy of the doctrine blending the brilliance of the colours and reverently decked on all sides with holy beauty... it is recognized by fitting beauty» (Photios).

There is an affinity between truth and beauty. There is a relationship between theology and iconography. «For what the narrative word presents through the ear, the picture silently reveals in a mimetic form» (St Germanos of Constantinople, P.G. 98, 172C). Thus the truth that is hypostatically made incarnate through the holy Mother of God is formulated dogmatically by the ecumenical Councils and the holy Fathers; and the same truth is represented iconically by sacred iconographers. All this is accomplished through the power and the activity of the Holy Spirit: through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, the Mother of God gives birth to the Theanthropos, the Lord, ground of man's deification.

With the illumination of the same Spirit the divinely inspired Fathers «with concise speech and great understanding» formulated the dogmas of the true faith and safeguarded the presupposition for the fulfillment of life. And with the same divine energy iconographers delineated the image of the figure of the Theanthropos, thus making the Lord's presence with us more manifest.

These three activities of the Holy Spirit are all different revelations of the incarnate Logos of God. And if a person is to participate in the grace of the incarnation - if he is to know the Lord, be initiated into «the mystery of theology» and to discern the beauty of the icon - he must be endowed with spiritual senses, share in the grace of the Holy Spirit that «establishes the whole order of the Church». It is on account of this that we are incapable of saying Lord Jesus other than in the Holy Spirit. And we cannot look on the icon of the Lord except through the illumination of the Spirit: «It is through the illumination of the Spirit that we see the radiance of the glory (the Son) of God, and it is through the form that is the form and exact image of the Father that we are led to the Father» (St Basil the Great, P.G. 39, 185C).

Within the Church Christ is known not as some initiate or religious leader but as the Theanthropos through whom we approach the Father, the source of light. And theology is not a science - not even sacred science- but the «mystery» that initiates the whole man into what is above nature and sense. And the icon is not a simple work of art or a religious picture but an incommutable and sacred liturgical vessel that sanctifies man and brings him into immediate relationship with the grace and state of being of the saint it shows forth. «With respect to the archetype the icon abides in it, makes it visible and is venerated with it» (St Theodore Studite, P.G. 99, 433A).

What is important is that we should understand how the Church, living in Christ Jesus, sees the theology of the saints, their holy relics, the icons and all its sacred vessels. They are all organically interconnected and from all of them there rises a universal hymn to the life-creating Trinity. This happens because everything depends on a life-creating centre — the Theanthropos «through whom we know the Father and through whom the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in the world». And He reveals to us through His incarnation the life hidden in the Holy Trinity («I have made known to you all I have heard from the Father»). He reveals to us the relationships between the three Persons. He gives life to all of us. He sanctifies and deifies our nature, soul and body. He unites us to each other. He reveals to us that we are one body and one spirit and He gives us the strength to bring this into effect. Because He Himself discloses to us, as the precise icon of the Father and as the stamp of His Person, the single and unique relationship He has with God the Father and with the Holy Spirit. And he who has seen the Lord has seen the Father through the Holy Spirit. «Thus the road to divine knowledge passes from the one Spirit through the one Son to the one Father. And conversely natural goodness and sanctification according to nature and the royal dignity come from the Father, through the only-begotten Son to the Spirit» (St Basil the Great, P.G. 32, 153B-C).

The Orthodox liturgical icon is the irradiation of the life and faith of the Church that is itself the body of Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit. It is the manifestation of the new mode of life and grace. And through the icons the believer receives the divine favour and through them his mind is raised up to the heavens.

It is for this reason that while the iconoclasts smash the icons and so in effect deny the incarnation of the Logos; while the icon-idolizers worship the material aspects of

the icon and so lose sight of God; while in the West the icon is regarded as a decorative element (decision of the Council of Frankfurt, 794), the Orthodox Church remains faithful to the incarnate Logos of God and rejects all these erroneous attitudes. It does not reject matter like the dualists, but neither does it worship it as the pagans or regard it as without theological significance; but it confesses its faith through the mouth of St John of Damaskos: I worship the God who has saved me, who became material for my sake. And I do not cease to venerate the matter through which I have been saved and which is filled with divine grace.

The flesh assumed by Christ has been deified. In the transfiguration of the Lord, when He conferred on His disciples the capacity to perceive a ray of His divinity, His face shone with the pre-eternal glory that He possessed with God before the existence of the world. And it was revealed that with the incarnation the glory of the divinity became the glory and beauty of the body, the glory and beauty of creation. Matter is full of divine grace. It is for this reason, continues the Saint that I move with reverence in the created world, seeing it illumined with the light of the resurrected Christ which fills sky, earth and what is below the earth. «I venerate every holy temple of God and everything in which God is affirmed not on account of its own nature but because it is the receptacle of divine energy» (St John of Damaskos, P.G. 94, 1353B).

In the icon of Christ we confront neither the invisible and unimaginable divinity (who can circumscribe the uncircumscribable?) nor simply the humanity alone (how can one separate out the humanity in Him who in His Person indivisibly and unconfusedly united the divine and human nature?). In the icon is shown forth - is imaged - the single hypostasis of the incarnate Logos of God. And in venerating the icon we venerate the Theanthropos, the divinity and the humanity, the flesh of the Lord that has become one with God. «It is not the nature, but the hypostasis of the person portrayed that is shown forth in the icon» (St Theodore Studite, P.G. 99,405A). For this reason there are not two acts of veneration, but one, offered to the hypostatic unity: «A single act of veneration, not distinguished according to the distinction of the essence but on the contrary identified according to the unity of the single hypostasis» (St Theodore Studite, P.G. 99, 497B-C).

The icon does not merely assist the memory in recreating events and people that belong to the past, but it creates and imposes a sense of presence. It brings the believer into personal relationship and contact with the saint who is portrayed. He does not stand before materials — wood, stone, shapes, colours — bereft of the

«informing and coexisting power and grace» but before «what has been made holy, precious, glorified and sacred through participation in the celestial energy» of the saint whose person the icon shows forth and whose name it bears (The «Amphilochia» of Photios).

The icon is voiceless yet speaks. You have before you the person iconized. You unite with him. You discover him, you encounter him, you greet him with the lips, with the eyes, with the heart «icons... should... be venerated and kissed with eyes, lips and heart» (St John of Damaskos, P.G. 94, 1332B).

The sanctification and the succour fill the whole of man's existence. And the confession, the manifestation and portrayal of the Lord is achieved with the whole life of the faithful. «Eternal be the memory of those who confess the incarnate presence of the Logos of God with speech, mouth, heart and intellect, in writing and in icons» (Synodikon of Orthodoxy).

A true fellowship and commixture of life between God and men is consummated spiritually in the Church, in the person of Jesus. He comes. He manifests Himself. He abides with us. He blesses us. He sanctifies us, soul and body. He permits us to venerate Him, to love Him, to receive Him within ourselves. He is the vine and we are the vine-branches. Through grace we become like Him, although we bear a body and live in time.

It is He who gives us the capacity to paint icons, to theologize, to build churches, to make all the sacred vessels, to celebrate the liturgy, to live. And while we do all these things, it is He who works all things in all people. It is He who celebrates the liturgy. It is He who illumines the theologians. He is our sanctification, the way, the door, the passover to life and to the fulfillment of life. It is this that the Church has lived from the beginning. So too did the Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council live it. They were aware that the Church is Christ Himself. It is for this reason that they believed and confessed that the victory over the iconoclasts was not the temporary victory of human opinions, nor the result of the good-will of emperors or of the collective agreement of councils; it was the consequence and disclosure of the presence of the Lord Himself, who saves the Church and every believer, «as the prophet said: not

ambassador, nor angel, but the Lord Himself saved us. Following him and endorsing his voice we proclaim aloud: not council nor the might of emperor but the incarnate God, the Lord of glory, saved us and delivered us from the idolatrous deceit. Thus to Him the glory, to Him the grace, to Him the praise...» (Proceedings of the 7th Ecumenical Council).

Within that grace and glory the faithful live in Christ, without idols or deceits. And as the disciples saw the Lord's glory «in so far as they could», so all the faithful see and receive according to their capacity. All are transfigured according to their humility and to how much they offer themselves. All are blessed. All together «proclaim Christ our true God and His saints, honouring them in words, in writings, in thoughts, in sacrifices, in churches, in icons» (Synodikon of Orthodoxy). All become the occasion of theophany and all are assisted and all assist all. You cannot paint icons, you cannot theologize or live, you cannot be sanctified unless it is «with all the saints» (confessors, ascetics, martyrs, holy men, the righteous...) who constitute the body of the Church, the body of Christ, the true body of all of us. Thus the true icon-painter, being a living member of the Church, is nourished by all: theologians, hymnographers, the simple faithful in whose heart, mind, soul and body Christ the God dwells. And they are God-bearing, pure images of the Archetype. The icon of the holy iconographer radiates, transfuses the grace that it has received from the Church. It encourages the believer, illumines the theologian, inspires the melodist, companions the afflicted. It sanctifies the soul and body of the whole world. All is an icon, a melody, a theanthropic equilibrium.

Uncreated and deifying grace filled the soul, mind, heart and body of the saints while they were living. It united itself indivisibly and unconfusedly with their whole existence. It did not abandon them either when they rejoiced or when they were sad, whether they were free or in slavery, either when they lived in the flesh or had gone to their rest. «The grace of the Holy Spirit dwells inseparably in their souls and bodies, in their tombs, engravings and their holy icons, not according to essence, but according to grace and energy» (St John of Damaskos, P.G. 94,1249C-D). It is for this reason that whether they are present or absent they pour forth the same encouragement and possess the same fulness.

Through this life which is beyond life and through this grace that deifies they transcend divisions, they dwell with us. This uncreated energy is their life and their

consciousness. By its means they see the beauty of what is invisible and the comeliness of created things. With this life in grace they behold Christ Himself: «The world sees Me no more, but you see Me, because I live and you will live» (John 14: 19).

This same grace has sanctified the works of their hands and their minds. And so while the idols of the pagans are silver and gold, works of human hands - icons, sacred vessels, churches - are and are called «not made by hand», fashioned by God and built by God. For even if they are made of earthly materials, even if they have been wrought by the hands of men, they are holy and sacred. Their construction is not due to human invention, it is a spiritual service, the work of the Holy Spirit. They are «what is accomplished through the activity of the flesh by divine energy”.

There is an inspired apostolic and patristic tradition that shapes matter in a divine way and turns it into icons. Those reborn of water and the spirit create, shape, chant. Through their hands the church is built, tesserae are set in place, the wall-paintings are painted. «The Logos having dwelt among us according to the flesh...we beheld the brilliance of the glory that the Son possessed from the Father...we who have received Him ...having grown according to the Holy Spirit, have set up a house of prayer and we cry aloud: consolidate this house, Lord» (Kontakion for the inauguration of a church, Great Euchologion).

Thus the admonitions, «Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath» (Exod. 20:4), and, «Do not confine God with corporeal conceptions, do not circumscribe Him with your mind. He is incomprehensible in His majesty» (St Gregory of Nyssa, P.G. 44, 261B), are wholly in accord with the words of St John of Damaskos: «Write of His ineffable incarnation, of His birth from a Virgin... Set down everything in word and colour. Do not fear, do not tremble. I recognize the distinction of acts of veneration ... (P.G. 94, 1240A-B).

And this happens in the Church, because the iconographer does not improvise individually, nor does he idolize his own inspirations, but he submits to the exhortations and the wishes of the consecrating Spirit. Christ does everything

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through the grace of the Holy Spirit. As the priest celebrates the liturgy, so do the true theologian and the true iconographer create, exercise their sacred art and service. They become instruments, lyres of the Spirit. They advance from learning and energizing to suffering and upholding the divine. And in that state of spiritual maturity, surrendered totally to the divine will, they feel that Another acts, energizes and is made manifest through them. It is for this reason that icons are either unsigned or they bear the inscription: «through the hand of...»

(Source: www.nektarios.gr)