IMAGE AND ICON

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Abstract: *The difference between icon and image is obvious and fundamental; while the icon intercedes and raises us to the spirituality, the image claims self-sufficiency. Actually, the true possibility of saving the image is in the icon, in its humility. The icon is not a good in itself, but its truth lies in its link with its prototype, while the image lacks content.*

Keywords: *icon, image, likeness*

The Veneration of Saints in Orthodox Theology

The Orthodox Church teaches that the people who in life proved to be perfect parables of a religiously moral life and who, after passing away, partly enjoy the happiness of the communion with God (happiness that they will fully enjoy after the Judgment Day) deserve a relative honouring and worship that cannot be mistaken for the veneration that every man gives to God. The honouring which is appropriate to God is called adoration, and the one which is for the saints is called veneration; unlike this honouring for the saints, the veneration to Mary, Mother of Jesus is called super-veneration or great honouring. The Church honours the saints through the celebrations dedicated to them, through the churches built in their honour, through the Masses kept to their honour and memorial, through venerating their relics and icons and through the prayers addressed to them in order to intercede with God for us.

Adoration is proper and ought to be shown only to God as the One who is the source of holiness and of the entire existence. The very characteristic of "saint" can only be attributed to God, because He is the absolute Goodness, and everything other than Him is imperfect and relative. And because God is identical to Goodness, and His will is identical to Goodness, then God is the Saint par excellence, He is the plenitude of Goodness. Yet absolute, apophatic and ineffable holiness of God manifests in the world, thus becoming a quality, but not one's own, but of creatures by participation. This is why man can become a saint, but only through participating to the absolute holiness that is God. And this possibility of sanctification of man is given to him by Jesus who sanctified Himself for people, who sanctified, renewed and deified to the fullest the human nature assumed in the person of the Son of God. Christ calls the man to Himself to sanctify him through His holiness, through the Holy Spirit in the Church: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" " (Matthew 5: 48).

Jesus or His Spirit come hypostatically into the saints' souls, in an ineffable union, without intermingling and without nullifying the man as a person. This unity which is so

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intimate and profound is shown through the words of Saint Paul the Apostle: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20). The spirit of Christ is imprinted into the soul of the saint and no longer appears as a distinct, dialogical ego, but identifies itself without intermingling with the ego of the saint. This proves that the realisation of man as a person is done through the Spirit, in Christ, through a proximate intimacy between man and the Holy Spirit. To further explain this, Father Stăniloae states: "This is why it has been said that the saints are the incorporations of the Spirit, obviously not in the sense that their human nature has the Spirit as a hypostasis in the same sense as Jesus is the hypostasis of His human nature; but in the sense that their subjects are realised in a supreme intimacy with the Spirit, and not just their knowledgeable and willing subjects, but also their bodies, namely their whole being" (Pr. prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, PhD, 1997: 203).

The saint, through his holiness, participates in a sacred sense to the holiness of God; holiness represents the transfiguration of matter through the spirit, the rise above addictions and the continuous growth in Christ, until "we all [...] become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

The honouring of the saints is based on the Divine Revelation which has been kept and transmitted through the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition. From these follows that the saints, living into Christ, have become a parable for us which is to be followed in life: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." (I Corinthians 11:1); the saints intercede with God for the people: "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—[...] This is good, and pleases God our Savior (I Timothy, 1-3), "And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people." (Revelation 5:8). By honouring the saints, we honour the One who made them chosen vessels of holiness, which is God.

The Icon in the Orthodox Church

In the teachings of the Orthodox Church, the icon is defined as the visible representation rendered through painting, of the faces of God, Christ the Saviour, the Holy Spirit, the Mother of Jesus, the saint angels, the saints as well as of some biblical scenes. Thus the icons are real representations, not imaginary ones.

The fundamental basis for venerating the icons as well as for their ability to represent God is given by the incarnation of the Son of God. Through incarnation, the Son of God gave the possibility of having his face/likeness represented in the holy icons; the Holy Scripture says that Christ the Saviour is "the image of God" (II Corinthians 4:4) or the "the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3) or that "God was manifest in the flesh" (I Timothy 3:16).

There is a distinction between the icon and its prototype because in the icon the face of the prototype is rendered, but not its nature. It is for this reason that honouring the icon cannot be the same as honouring the prototype. The icon does not render and does not

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contain the Godhead, because It cannot be contained; the icon renders the hypostasis, the subsistence of the being. Thus one can speak about a hypostatic presence of Christ in His icon, not a substantial presence (through a hypostatical union), but a charismatic, relational one (St. Theodore the Studite, 1994: 153). The icon is the place of a charismatic presence which is assured by blessing the icon in order to establish a link between what is shown in the icon and the prototype of the icon.

Other bases to honour the holy icons have been seen by the Holy Parents in the theophanies through which God revealed Himself to the people in a sensible guise, as well as in the quality of man of having been created in the likeness of God (Genesis I, 26) in order to become similar to Him.

The icon is not a symbol, but a reality; it is not just a simple object of worship, it is the place of a presence; through the icon, God Himself *is* in our midst. Regarding an icon this way, we can refer to it as a "window towards the transcendental", but we believe that it is more appropriate to see it as a "charismatic presence" because the hypostatic (personal) God appears in the icon, relationally, on the basis of the formal resemblance between the prototype and the painted image. It is not the content, the material, and the image which define the icon. Its final reality resides in its prototype, in God and His saints. It is the most appropriate expression of the words of Saint Athanasius the Great: "He was made human so that he might make us gods" because in the icon we see the kenosis of God Who humbled himself for our redemption.

Honouring the holy icon does not imply honouring the material the icon is made of; honoring the icon goes to the prototype and the one who prays to the icon prays to the being painted on it.

An old saying states that "the eye is the icon of the soul". If the eye is the icon of the soul, then we can say that the icon is the eye of faith. Because the icon is the sensible representation of the unseen. And "faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" as Saint Paul the Apostle stated (Hebrews 11:1). Through the icon, our faith sees and entrusts the things "we hope for". We see God in the icon as an advance for the future goods, as were the words of Saint Paul the Apostle: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face." (I Corinthians 13:12). Our link to God through the icon is not complete, it is relative and subjective. This does not diminish at all the role and importance of the icon in our lives as believers, but, on the contrary, it makes us wish a complete union with God, an union that should not be conditioned by anything. Let us imagine someone who is far away from his/her beloved one, but who has a photo of him/her. By looking at that photo does he/she not wish from the bottom of his/her heart to be together with that person during that moment? In the same way, the one who loves God, by looking at the icon, wishes an union as complete as possible with Him.

Likeness, image, icon

Man was created in the likeness of God; this shows the special relationship between man and God, but also the kinship of man with God. Through the breath of life, man received not only a biological life, but also the spiritual support of the dialogue with

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God; he became a separate conscience, a created alter-ego of God. This actually signifies the beginning of the dialogue between man and God. And this dialogue is possible only because man was made "in the likeness" of God.

> Through the breath of God appears in man a *you* of God, who is the "likeness of God", for this *you* can also say *I* and can also call God *You*. God creates, out of nothingness, a partner of dialogue for Himself, but contained in a biological organism. The spiritual breath of God produces a spiritual breath which is ontologic to man, the spiritual soul rooted in the biological organism, in a conscious dialogue with God and his fellows. (Pr. prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, PhD, 1996: p. 269).

The likeness of God in man is actually the likeness of the Holy Trinity; this is why the likeness has a community aspect: man is not a solitary being, it is the being who goes up to reach the similarity with God and the Trinity through the continuous community dialogue with his fellows and God as a tripersonal reality. The likeness of God in man is thus a gift, but also a responsibility. As the likeness has to be the same as its Model, it can only be the Personal absolute, namely God. Only this way the endless aspiration of man for the absolute can be fulfilled. Man is not content with remaining in a monotonous, circular, finite relationship, but always wishes to fulfil himself in an always new, infinite relationship which goes beyond the contingence of creation. The likeness is not a static reality, but a reality in permanent movement, an ascendent movement after its absolute model. This is why the Holy Fathers made a clear distinction between likeness and similarity, showing that similarity is acquired through man's personal effort helped by divine grace. If the likeness of God in man is a gift, an ontologic given, the similarity is a mission, implying the permanent updating of his freedom to the more and more complete concordance with its model.

The image is a mixed category which lies halfway between concrete and abstract, between reality and thought, between sensible and intelligible. The image is, in its own sense, a medial and mediating representation.

Nowadays it is said that the image overcame this acception that it is just a simple representation, as it tends to become the original, even more so, reality itself. The image no longer needs an original, a support of the representation, but it becomes itself the final foundation. The reverse effect of this movement of understanding is that in this context the image loses not only its foundation, but also its meaning, becoming empty of content, an utopian expression of imagination.

As far as the term "likeness" is concerned, mention must be made of the initiative of some translators to replace this term with that of "image", a term which induces an impersonal characteristic to this reality (Epiphanius of Salamis, 2007: 345)[1]. We also have

[1] The response to this problem is wide: Sabin Preda, „Mângâietorul şi după chipul – două traduceri teologice" ("*Comforter* and *in the likeness* - two theological translations") in *Studii Teologice* (*Theological Studies*), Series III, IV year, No. 1, January-March 2008, p. 197-220; Adrian Muraru, „Câteva consideraţii privitoare la traducerea textelor patristice în limba română. Răspuns domnului Sabin Preda" ("Considerations on the translation of patristic texts into Romanian. Reply to Mr. Sabin Preda") in *Studii Teologice* (*Theological Studies*), Series III, IV Year, No. 3, July-September 2008, p. 231-276; Andrei-Dragoş Giulea „Problemele unei traduceri între Scila teologiei şi Caribda academiei.

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to remember the inconsistency of those same authors because in another translation made by Adrian Muraru, from the same collection that he himself had initiated, he uses the term "likeness"; see as examples in point Origen's *Homilies, Comments and Annotations on Genesis*, Bilingual Edition, Introductory study, translation and notes by Adrian Muraru, Polirom Publishing House, Iaşi, 2006, p. 523-529, where the term "εἰκών" is translated as "likeness". At the same time we also have to note the position of the philologist Eugen Munteanu, who mentions without having anything to do with this argument, that the Greek root word (radical) εἰκών is "perfectly reproduced as the Romanian term *chip* (=likeness)" (Eugen Munteanu, 2008: p. 291). Father Dumitru Stăniloae mentions in a study on icons that "for the term likeness with the accepted meaning, (the Holy Scripture, n.n.) exclusively uses the term likeness (εἰκών), without any addition" (Pr. prof. D. Stăniloae, 1982: p. 12)

Image and icon

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Understood as such, the icon becomes more than a work of art, a trade object or an attraction point in an exhibition. This kind of icon tends to be an image. How many times have we not found in many places icons for sale, with the "quality" engraving on the back of the respective "product" marked as *sanctified*? Or how many times have we not seen the so-called "icon painters" in markets or other less "respectable" places selling their icons as ordinary merchandise? (let alone the quality of those icons – both of the material and of the manufacture). Let's not forget that neither the material nor the refined manufacture makes the icon what it is. It is fair that both the good sense and the honour and piety for God and the saints impose decency and certain limits regarding the material and the graphic representation of the icon. At the same time we have to consider its graphic content, because not all icons comply with the orthodox iconographic canon, most times being alien even to the orthodox religious teachings. There are many icons of Roman-Catholic inspiration in which we see realistic representations where physical beauty and sentimentalism prevail, pictures which express the dogma of adoration of the heart of Jesus or representations of the scene of the Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci. Those are alien to the Spirit of Orthodoxy and can best find their place in a collection of religious pictures. In the Orthodox icon, the accent does not fall on the faithful and realistic representation of the scene or of the painted character, but on his symbolism. You cannot represent an ascetic saint or a martyr for Jesus

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Epifanie al Salaminei, *Ancoratus*, Traducere şi note Oana Coman, studiu introductiv Dragoş Mîrşanu. Iaşi, Polirom, 2007" ("Problems of a translation between the Scylla of theology and the Charybdis of academy. Epiphanius of Salamis, *Ancoratus*, Translation and notes by Oana Coman, Introductory study by Dragos Mirsanu. Iaşi, Polirom, 2007") in *Studii Teologice* (*Theological Studies*) Series III, IV Year, No. 3, July-September 2008, p.277-281; Ovidiu Sferlea, „Notă asupra traducerii" ("Note on translation") in Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius I*, Bilingual edition, Translation and notes by Ovidiu Sferlea, Introductory study by Mihail Neamţu, edited by Adrian Muraru Polirom, Iaşi, 2010, p. 10

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in a brightly coloured scene full of cheap sentimentalism. The orthodox icon sends a message with a variety of symbols; therefore it is not the holy character who is in the foreground, but his life as someone living in Christ and as a parable for the believers. It is not meant for the eye, but for the soul. In the same vein, it must be said that not everyone can paint an icon, because it is not the same as painting a random picture. Painting an icon implies prayer, fasting and a moral, distinguished Christian life.

For this kind of representation to become an icon in the true sense of the word, its sanctification by the church ministers through a particularly ordained Mass is necessary. There is a custom to keep the icons in church for 40 days and only after that to officiate their sanctification (Pr. prof. Nicolae D. Necula, PhD, 1996: p. 308). This custom certifies the orthodox piety to icons, but let's not forget that the sole keeping of the icon in Church for 40 days does not represent its sanctification.

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