

The Gospels in Icons according to the Eastern Orthodox Tradition

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ABSTRACT

The Gospels in Icons according to the Eastern Orthodox Tradition

Adriana Bara

Since the beginning of Christianity, Christians have been faced with the ambiguous nature of "image" and the risk of idolatry. Is Christian art fundamentally blasphemous? Are not icons 'idols' and are they not prohibited in the Old Testament? Those were the questions aggressively put forward by the Christian iconoclasts of the eighth century in a hostile controversy. The iconoclasts (those who fought against use of icons) stated that every image must be identical with its prototype; therefore, an icon is an idol since it pretends to be God. For the iconodules (those who venerate icons) the icons are not idols because icons are not consubstantial with or identical to their prototypes. My focus in this research is to explore the reception of scripture – specifically the Gospels in the icons of the Eastern Tradition.

The first part, of my thesis "Short history of icons," offers a brief overview of the history of the icons in the first seven centuries of Christianity, and presents the dispute between iconoclasts and iconodules. The second part, "The Gospels in Icons according to the Eastern Orthodox Tradition" describes eight icons from historical, aesthetical and liturgical points of view. In my research I attempt to explain the icons as a convergence of the canonical Gospels, apocrypha writings and liturgical texts.

In the Conclusion I stress the connection between icon and Incarnation in the context of today's Orthodoxy. The Orthodox Church endeavored to direct the human senses, including sight in its use of icons, in faith to the greater knowledge and glorification of God.

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INTRODUCTION

My love for icons goes back more than fifteen years. Since then I have been drawn towards the study of icons and their role in the faith community of the Orthodox Churches. The icons play a significant role in public and private devotion – the icons are ubiquitous in Orthodox churches and in the homes of Orthodox believers – while the study of icons is a very important indicator of the historical development of the theological tradition in the Orthodox Churches. In particular, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of the study of iconography in the comparatively new field of the “reception of Scripture.” This field of study focuses on the way in which the liturgy and visual arts witness to the “reception” of biblical texts within the Christian communities.

But this reception should not be limited to the canonical Gospels, since icons draw a lot on apocryphal writings as well. There are several excellent books on the history of icons, interpretation of icons, or aesthetics and technique of painting (writing¹) icons, but the theme of the convergence between canonical Gospels and apocryphal writings in icons has been somewhat neglected, or not treated as a specific theme. This lack of specific attention to this theme can be seen in the excellent study *The Meaning of Icons* by Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky. In the chapter titled “Explanation of the main types of icons,” these great theologians explain important icons from theological and aesthetical points of view, but they do not focus on the convergence between canonical Gospels and apocrypha in icons. The same holds true for Paul Evdokimov’s *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, Leonid Ouspensky’s *Theology of the Icon*, which provides the reader with a deep and serious

1. Some iconographers use the word “writing” instead of “painting” icons because there are canons of representation and every line or color has a meaning to enable the viewer to “read” them.

approach to the mystery of the sacred image and is perhaps the most comprehensive introduction available to the history and theology of the icon, as well as John Baggley's *Doors of Perception: Icons and Their Spiritual Significance*, which offers Western Christians an initiation into the significance and spirituality surrounding the great tradition of iconography. While presenting several icons focusing on canonical Gospels, my thesis touches upon the theme of the convergence between canonical Gospels and apocryphal writings. However, given the vastness of the theme, it is not possible to treat it extensively and exhaustively in an M.A. thesis. In the future I would like to deepen this unexplored theme in a doctoral dissertation.

The reception of the text of the canonical Gospels can be explored from different perspectives. Along with icons, the reception of the Gospels is actualized in the life of the community in the liturgy, the forms of worship celebrated by the community. Another way is by focusing on the selection of Gospel texts for a particular feast, in the formal prayers and hymns of the liturgy. Yet another way of reception of the canonical Gospels is by studying the writings of the Fathers of the Church² mainly from the first eight centuries, where one can find commentaries on the events and lives of Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, celebrated as its Great Feasts by the Orthodox Church. In my thesis I tried to describe the icons as a meeting place between these ways of receptions of canonical Gospels and apocryphal writings.

Although the present thesis is not a comprehensive historical presentation of the icon from the beginning of Christianity until today, in the thesis' first part I traced a short history of the icon of the first eight centuries. Also the thesis is not an exegesis of the Great Feasts of

2. Fathers of the Church are considered the educated individuals most of them bishops who lived in the first eight centuries of Christianity and who wrote, taught, explained, and defended the faith of the Church.

the Orthodox Church; some of the Church Fathers' writings on the feasts constituted part of icons' explanation I provide. In my thesis, I explained the role of the following icons: The Annunciation, The Nativity, The Transfiguration, The Resurrection of Jesus Christ, The Ascension, Pentecost and the icon of The Holy Trinity, from theological and artistic points of view.

The infancy narratives, particularly Matthew (Ch. 1 and 2) and Luke (Ch 1:26-56; Ch.2) which speak of the birth of Jesus Christ, are especially significant for my thesis because they concern the Christian teaching on the incarnation of the divine Logos, the assumption of our human nature. This teaching is central in the doctrinal disputes of the eighth century, wherein the iconoclasts argued that icons were forbidden by the commandment against idolatry, and iconodules replied that the Gospels were the validation of "picturing" the divine incarnation. The feast of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9) is the feast of light, which reminds that God can be seen through his uncreated energies. This feast is one of the most important in the spiritual and theological tradition of the Orthodox Churches. The icons that visualize the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Descent of the Holy Spirit together with the icon of the Holy Trinity (the icon of icons), are pivotal for understanding the role of the sacred icons in the liturgy, in private veneration and in the theological tradition of the Eastern Churches. These icons invite the viewer into a communion with them and through them with God; and I have chosen these icons because they represent the manifestation of the three persons of the Christian God: the Father, the Son (become incarnate in Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit.

The nature of the icon cannot be grasped by means of pure art criticism, or by the adoption of a sentimental point of view. Its forms are based on the wisdom contained in the

theological and liturgical writings of the Eastern Orthodox Church and are intimately bound up with the experience of contemplative life. "Icons form a door into the divine realm," says John Baggley. "They are the meeting point of divine grace and human need; moreover, they are also a way by which we enter more deeply into our interior life."³ An icon is not merely representation of a worldly reality. It is a dynamic manifestation of human spiritual power to redeem creation through beauty and art. "The icon is not intended to force an emotional response, but rather to create a silent one."⁴ No mouths are open in icons to create a smooth and comforting silence. However, silence is not entirely empty because "he who possesses in truth the word of Jesus Christ can hear even its silence."⁵ This silence creates an area that constantly invites prayer. It is the very opposite of the icy stillness of the tomb. It is the silence of Mary's contemplative heart, the silence of the transfiguration, the silence of the resurrection. It is the task of the iconographer to open our eyes to the actual presence of the Kingdom of God in the world.

3. John Baggley, *Doors of Perception: Icons and Their Spiritual Significance* (Mowbray London & Oxford, 1987), p. 4.

4. Jim Forest. *Praying With Icon* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 14.

5. St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, *Lettres / Ignace d'Antioche. Lettres / Polycarpe de Smyrne. Martyre de Polycarpe Sources Chrétiennes*, tr. Th. Camelot (Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1958), p. 84.

PART I SHORT HISTORY OF ICON

1. Christian Images in the first nine centuries, before the iconoclastic controversy

“Beauty will save the world”
Fyodor Dostoyevsky



St. Apostle Luke writing an icon of Mother of God. Moraca Monastery, Serbia

The word “icon” has its roots in the Greek word *eikon*, which means “image”, “picture” or “representation”. The word “image” is used in the Old Testament (Genesis 1:26-27): “then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him”, and in the New Testament (Col 1:15) “He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God.”⁶

For Eastern Orthodoxy the icon is a sacred image, indispensable to its spirituality and an integral part of its liturgy. The Liturgy is the greatest of the worship services of the Orthodox Church and constitutes a recalling (anamnesis) of the whole mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God, from his divine birth to his ascension into heaven. The icon is referred to as “liturgical” art, because it is not just decoration, but a visual aid for worship. In

⁶ All the biblical references in my thesis are from Holy Bible New International Version – International Bible Society, Grand Rapids Michigan USA: Zondervan Publishing House 1996.

other words the icon is seen as a spiritual tool that helps the individual to get closer to God. The icon presents the faithful with multiple levels of meaning. This tool is for the illiterate to read the Gospel in it as stated by Saint Gregory the Great (540 – 604):

Furthermore we notify to you that it has come to our ears that your Fraternity, seeing certain adorers of images, broke and threw down these same images in Churches. And we commend you indeed for your zeal against anything made with hands being an object of adoration; but we signify to you that you ought not to have broken these images. For pictorial representation is made use of in Churches for this reason; that such as are ignorant of letters may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books.⁷

At the same time, the icon is a spiritual tool for the most sophisticated theologians to “read” and study the Gospel in images, at their own levels. Thus, iconography is the study of God in images. In essence, the icon is an integral part of the Orthodox Church.

Concerning the origin of Christian art, the Orthodox Church holds and teaches that the sacred image has existed from the beginning of Christianity. The Church declares that the icon is a consequence of the Incarnation of God, is based upon this Incarnation, and therefore belonging to the very essence of Christianity, and cannot be separated from it. The idea of the existence of sacred imagery from the beginning of Christianity was contradicted by Edward Gibbon (1737-1791), an eighteenth century British scholar whose point of view challenged the notion of the origin of Christian art. In his book *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon maintained that the first icons appeared only at the beginning of the fourth century.

The primitive Christians were possessed with an unconquerable repugnance to the use and abuse of images; and this aversion may be ascribed to their descent from Jews, and their enmity to the Greeks. The Mosaic Law had severely proscribed all representations of the Deity; and that precept was firmly establish in the principles and practice of chosen people. The wit of the

7. Gregory the Great, Saint, *Selected Epistles*. Schaff Philip, et.al.ed, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2.13.(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956) Epistle 60 “To Serenus Bishop of Massilia”, p. 24.

Christian apologists was pointed against the foolish idolaters who bowed before the workmanship of their own hands: the image of brass and marble, which, had they been endowed with sense and motion, should have started rather from the pedestal to adore the creative powers of the artist. Perhaps some recent and imperfect converts of the Gnostic tribe might crown the statues of Christ and St. Paul with the profane honors which they paid to those of Aristotle and Pythagoras; but the public religion of the Catholics was uniformly simple and spiritual; and the first notice of the use of pictures is in the censure of the council of Illiberis, three hundred years after the Christian era.⁸

His opinion has been held in one form or other up until today. There are testimonies which confirm the Orthodox Church's teaching that icons existed before the fourth century. One early example can be found in Eusebius' of Caesarea *Ecclesiastical History* where he wrote:

Since I have mentioned this city (Caesarea Philippi) I do not think it proper to omit an account which is worthy of record for posterity. For they say that the woman with an issue of blood, who, as we learn from the sacred Gospel, received from our Savior deliverance from her affliction, came from this place, and that her house is shown in the city, and that remarkable memorials of the kindness of the Savior to her remain there. For there stands upon an elevated stone, by the gates of her house, a brazen image of a woman kneeling, with her hands stretched out, as if she were praying. Opposite this is another upright image of a man, made of the same material, clothed decently in a double cloak, and extending his hand toward the woman. At his feet, beside the statue itself is a certain strange plant, which climbs up to the hem of the brazen cloak, and is a remedy for all kinds of diseases. They say that this statue is an image of Jesus. It has remained to our day, so that we ourselves also saw it when we were staying in the city. Nor is it strange that those of the Gentiles who, of old, were benefited by our Savior, should have done such things, since we have learned also that the likenesses of his apostles Paul and Peter, and of Christ himself, are preserved in paintings, the ancients being accustomed, as it is likely, according to a habit of the Gentiles, to pay this kind of honor indiscriminately to those regarded by them as deliverers.⁹

Another testimony about the existence of the icons from as early as the second century in Christianity is in the apocryphal book, *Acts of Saint John the Evangelist*, cited by Grabar in

8. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 3 (New York: The Modern Library New York, 1984), pp. 1-2.

9. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1957), p. 175.

his book *Christian Iconography*. André Grabar's book is a study of the origins of the icons, and in it he asserts that the icon has existed and has been venerated since the beginning of Christianity:

The apocryphal Acts of Saint John the Evangelist tells about the making of a portrait of this apostle and the veneration that was accorded it in the house of one of his disciples. But it should be added that the veneration shown it took usual forms of the time: the portrait was placed on a table covered with a cloth, it was crowned with flowers, and two candles and an altar were placed before it. The apocrypha does not fail to put into Saint John's mouth a discourse in which the apostle disapproves of portraiture and forbids the veneration of portraits and of a representation of himself. In spite of this, the fact remains that a disciple of John, who considered himself a Christian, saw nothing wrong in possessing a portrait of his spiritual father, the apostle, or even in devoting to it a certain cult of veneration. The text is one that according to philologists comes from Asia Minor and goes back to the second century. It is thus acceptable evidence as to the customs of the time of the apostles.¹⁰

One can see that through two millennia, the Gospels have been translated into icons. Icons represent in color the life of Christ that is described in words in the Gospels. That is to say, icons represent an alternative medium for expressing the same views about Jesus Christ and salvation as those described in the written word of the Gospels. "Icons form a door into the divine realm," says John Baggley and they are "the meeting point of divine grace and human need; moreover, they are also a way by which we enter more deeply into our interior life."¹¹

According to Grabar, the first generation of Christians possessed portraits of Christ, the apostles, and martyrs, and they saw no wrong in surrounding them with material symbols

10. André Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, tr. Terry Grabar (Princeton, N.J.:Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 84-85.

11. John Baggley, *Doors of Perception: Icons and Their Spiritual Significance* (Mowbray London& Oxford, 1987), p. 4.

of respect in memory of the person portrayed. It was probably later that the clergy, fearing a tendency to idolatry, opposed the practice and forbade the cult of veneration of icons.¹²

The primitive Church might have had icons of Christ, Virgin Mary, and saints, but besides them there was a practice of using pagan symbols and subjects from Greek and Roman art and giving them a new Christian meaning. The earliest Christian iconography, which consists mainly of the paintings in the catacombs, is a manifestation of a new spirit, developing its beauty upon encountering ancient art. Ouspensky in his book *Theology of Icon* explains several of the symbols of the early Christians iconography.¹³ For instance, for non-Christians of the time, the seasons were a sign of life beyond death; for Christians, they became a symbol of resurrection. The dove in Christian art is the representation of the Holy Spirit, while in ancient times the bird represented the human soul which aspires to eternal life. One of the most widespread symbols in the first Christian centuries was the fish. For the Jews, the fish had been a symbol of messianic food. For Christians the fish represents the soul immersed in water of baptism, or represents a symbol of Christ: there is a mysterious meaning of the five letters, which make up the Greek word for fish, ΙΧΘΥΣ – Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ – Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Savior. Another symbol is the vine and the branches representing Christ and the Church. “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:5). The vine reminds Christians of the central sacrament the Eucharist. A very widespread symbol of Christ in the catacombs is that of the lamb, harkening St. John the Baptist words: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

12. André Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, p. 85.

13. Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, tr. Anthony Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), pp. 71-73.

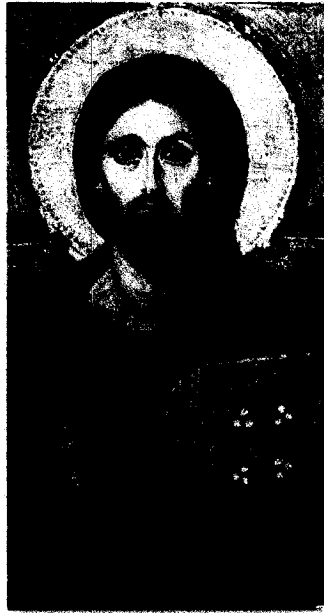
As the main symbol of Christ, the lamb appeared in a place of direct representation of Jesus Christ for a long time. Nonetheless, there are direct images of Christ, as mentioned above.

First among such representations in human form, is one of the types of the good shepherd. In Roman pagan art, the shepherd with a lamb on his shoulders was a symbol of philanthropy. For Christians the shepherd became the symbol of Christ, the Good Shepherd, according to Christ's words: "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:14). Using many symbols, and indirect representation of Jesus Christ, the art of the first Christians reflects rich doctrinal and liturgical depth. Heresies became a challenge for iconographic art: it was impossible to refute Christological heresies with the image of a lamb, for instance, because the image of the lamb is not as powerful as that of the *Word Incarnate*. Word Incarnate is a symbol for Christ, or "word made flesh" which is also called "the Word of God" (cf. John, 1:1-4). The difficulties of refuting Christological heresies with the symbolical images of Christ, called for specific canons of iconic representation. For this reason the Quinisext Council (692 AD) elaborated a canon concerning sacred art (Canon 82), according to which Christ the incarnated God be represented in His human form, and not in the ancient form of the lamb.

In some picture of the venerable icons, a lamb is painted to which the Precursor [i.e., John the Baptist] points his finger, which is received as a type of grace, indicating beforehand through the Law, our true Lamb, Christ our God. Embracing therefore the ancient types and shadows as symbols of the truth, and patterns given to the Church, we prefer 'grace and truth', receiving it as the fulfillment of the Law. In order therefore that 'that which is perfect' may be delineated to the eyes of all, at least in colored expression, we declare that the figure in human form of the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, Christ our God, be henceforth exhibited in images, instead of the ancient lamb, so that all may understand by means of it the depths of the humiliation of the Word of God, and that we may recall to our memory his conversation in the flesh, his passion and salutary death, and his redemption which was wrought for the whole world.¹⁴

14. Canon LXXXII of Quinisext Council. *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*. Schaff Philip, et.al. ed Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2.14.(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956), p. 401.

This canon expresses, for the first time, what we call the “iconographic canons”, a set criterion for the liturgical quality of the image.



Jesus Christ Pantokrator Saint Catherine Monastery – Mt. Sinai; 6th century

Jesus Christ Pantokrator (Almighty) from Saint Catherine monastery is one of the oldest icons with Christ represented in human form, which has survived until our days. Because Emperor Justinian (527 - 565) had built the Monastery of St. Catherine, it is commonly presumed that this encaustic¹⁵ icon was painted in a Constantinopolitan workshop and given by Justinian as a gift to the monastery.

The icon represents Jesus Christ Pantokrator,¹⁶ the One who holds in his hand the whole of creation. He is looking directly at the viewer, in a gently authoritative way. His face is not symmetrical, indicating his dual nature (divine and human), as well as his protective

15. Encaustic is an ancient Greek technique of painting using pigments mixed with hot wax.

16. In Byzantine art, the term Pantokrator is used to refer to the representations of Jesus Christ as the master of the universe.

and judgmental sides. His right hand is raised in the sign of blessing. The fingers are curved in the shape of the letters abbreviating his name in Greek language (IC XC). The index finger is straight, forming the "I," the middle and little fingers are curved into "C" shapes, and the thumb and ring finger cross slightly to form the "X." The shape of his fingers can be read in an alternate way: three fingers touch representing the Holy Trinity to whom he belongs and the two fingers up symbolize that he is fully God and fully man. In his left hand, he holds the Scripture (there are Pantokrator icons in which Christ holds in his hand a scroll) symbolizing the new covenant given to humankind, as well as the "Book of Life" mentioned in the Apocalypse (Rev:4). In other Pantokrator icons, the Scripture is open, at one of the passages from the Gospels. In his *Painter's Manual (Hermeneia)*,¹⁷ Dyonisius of Furna indicates the passages which are written on pages of the opened Scripture: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls"(Matthew 11:28-29); "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." (John 6:51); "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12).

The Pantokrator is habitually the fresco that decorates the central dome of the Church; the background of the icon is worked in gold leaf. Gold represents the "light" of God, and has a stronger radiance than does a painted background. In the Christ Pantokrator from Sinai, the iconographer did not use gold leaf, probably because of technical difficulties, but also because the icons had not yet acquired a deep and precise theological meaning. Christ's tunic is purple-red, hearkening back to the words of Isaiah's prophecy where

17. Dyonisius of Fournas, *Erminia Picturii Bizantine* (Painter's Manual - Byzantine Painters' Manual, or Hermeneia) (Bucharest, Romania: Editura Sofia, 2000), pp. 225-226.

Messiah is presented wearing red garments (Isaiah 63:1-4). In the ancient world, purple was reserved for the royalty, and it is presumed that the purple color on Christ's tunic is a consequence of emperor Justinian's order for this icon to be painted.

In iconography, there is no color canon, but as Egon Sendler stated, the masterpieces of iconography indicate, that the color was of primal importance in the icon and definite colors were applied to particular persons.¹⁸ For example the red color on Christ garment symbolizes His human blood shed for us in order to break the bondage of sin and death. Red color symbolizes as well the humanity that Christ took upon himself. In icon this reminds that Jesus is the second Adam. In the teaching of the Orthodox Church the first Adam is first man created by God who fell from God's love; the last or second Adam is Jesus Christ, God incarnate who came on earth to destroy the power of sin and death. The New Adam (the Hebrew word *adamah* means earth) washes away the sin and brings that which was dead into life abundant. It is the representation of Saint Paul's words: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.... And so it is written, the first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam [was] a quickening spirit... The first man [is] of the earth, earthy; the second man [is] the Lord from heaven." (1 Corinthians 15:22, 45, 47)

Christ's halo is inscribed with a cross. The cross represents death to the world – but in iconography the tree of death has become as for Christians the tree of life, thus being stated by Saint Athanasius in his book *on the Incarnation*.

On the cross he dies with arms outstretched: it was that He might draw His ancient people with the one and the Gentiles with the other, and join both together in Himself.... The Lord came to overthrow the devil and to purify the air and to make 'a way' for us up to heaven... It had to be done through death, and by what other kind of death could it be done, save by a death in the air,

18. Egon Sendler, *The Icon, Image of the Invisible: Elements of Theology, Aesthetics and Technique*, tr. Steven Bigham (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications 1999), p. 150.

that is, on the cross? Here, again, you see how right and natural it was that the Lord should suffer thus; for being thus 'lifted up,' He cleansed the air from all evil influences of the enemy. 'I beheld Satan as lightning falling,' He says; and thus He re-opened the road to heaven, saying again, 'Lift up your gates, O ye princes, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors.' For it was not the Word Himself Who needed an opening of the gates, He being Lord of all, nor was any of His works closed to their Maker. No, it was we who needed it, we whom He Himself upbore in His own body—that body which He first offered to death on behalf of all, and then made through it a path to heaven.¹⁹

The cross on Christ's halo is marked with Greek letters O, Ω, N, which means "I Am Who I Am" the name used for God in Exodus 3:14, and represents his divinity. On his right and left sides, are inscribed the initials of his name in Greek language: IC HX. Through these inscriptions the icons testify to two natures of Jesus Christ: divine and human.

The author of this Pantokrator icon is unknown. Usually the icon is unsigned, because painting icons is not a work of self-advertisement, but a spiritual exercise. If an icon is signed, the signature of the iconographer is on the back of the icon, usually with the words "Through the hand of the sinful servant of God." The greater the iconographer is, the less he or she seeks personal recognition whose only desire is to serve the Lord and glorify the Church. Thus, the greatest iconographers are pious monks or fervent Christians. We know the names of certain iconographers (Theophanes the Greek, Andrei Rublev, Photios Kontoglou, Arsenie Boca) through their iconic masterpieces.

Orthodox piety holds that the first icon of Christ appeared during His life on earth. This is the image called "the Holy Face" in the West; and "the icon not made by human hands" (ἀχειροποίητος) in the East. The name ἀχειροποίητος, receives its real meaning in Gospels, because Christ is the "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), "not made by human hands," the Word who took flesh, and allowed us to see "the temple of his body"

19. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, tr. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 54.

(John: 2:21). Many stories are told about the icon not made by human hands. A legend, quoted in 17th century by Dionysius of Furna in his *Painter's Manual*²⁰ and passed down to us, describes how Abgar V King of Edessa (4BCE-50CE) sent a portrait painter to paint a likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ. When the painter could not paint because of the brightness that shone from His countenance, the Lord Himself put a garment over His own divine and life-giving face, impressed on it an image of Him, and sent this to Abgar, to satisfy thus his desire.²¹ Edward Gibbon rejected the legend of the icon not made by human hands, and considered it a story for “credulous Greeks” although he mentioned early sources such as Eusebius of Caesarea (4th c) and Evagrius of Edessa (6th c), who wrote about the existence of a miraculous icon in Edessa.²² It is worth noting that Eusebius (*Ecclesiastic History* I, xii-xiii) makes no mention of an image of Jesus, while Evagrius declares for the first time that Jesus offered a cloth with the imprint of his face.

According to Dionysius of Furna,²³ the first icons painted by human hands have been traditionally attributed, to Saint Luke the Evangelist who allegedly painted three icons of the Virgin Mary. First icon is called “Eleousa” (*Ἐλεούσα*)– Our Lady or Mother of Tenderness in which Theotokos embraces cradling the Child who in turn presses his cheek against his Mother’s cheek. The Mother of Tenderness was an especially frequent subject of Byzantine art. This type of icon is also called “Glykophilousa” (Of the Sweet Kiss). The symbolism of this icon stresses both the fragility of the infant Christ and the sadness of the Mother of God who already glimpses the sacrifice of the Cross.

20. Dionysius of Furna, *Erminia (The Painter's Manual)*, p. 87.

21. Cf. also " Abgar legend ." *Encyclopædia Britannica* from Encyclopædia Britannica Online. <<http://0-search.eb.com.mercury.concordia.ca:80/eb/article-9003338>> [Accessed March 10, 2006].

22. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol.3, pp. 4-5.

23. Dionysius of Furna, *Erminia (The Painter's Manual)*, p. 87.

The second icon is of the type called "Hodigitria" (Ὁδηγήτρια), she who leads the way, one of the most popular representations of the Mother of God with the Infant Jesus. Jesus is sitting on his mother's arm, with his right hand raised in blessing and holding a scroll in his left, a sign that he is the fulfillment of the Old Testament's prophecies. Occasionally he is shown holding the Scripture, but that is more like the canonical form of the Christ Pantokrator. In this presentation the principal theme is that of the coming into the world of its heavenly King and Judge, and the veneration due him, reminding us of the Virgin Mary's words at the wedding which took place at Cana in Galilee: "Do whatever he tells you," (John 2:5). The Mother of God Hodigitria is one of the oldest representations of the Virgin Mary, even though the title Hodigitria was not used very often until the ninth century.

The third icon, represents the Virgin without the Child "Oranta". The Virgin Mary is shown with her arms in an orante (praying) position, extending her arms, as did Christ on the cross: "We not only lift up our hands, but spread them out, modeling them after the Lord's passion."²⁴ A most popular form of this style is the "Lady of the Sign" (Virgin of the Incarnation) or "Platytera" (Greek for incarnation), in which Mary is shown with her arms in an orante position, with Christ-Emmanuel enclosed in a medallion on her chest. This is not the historical Christ of the Gospels, but the Word, which pre-exists time and history. He is the one proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah (Is.7:14), "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel." This iconographic type of the Mother of God is usually found in Orthodox churches, in the vault of the apse, directly beneath the representation of the Pantokrator. In

24. Tertulian. *On the Prayer*, ed. Ernest Evans (London Cambridge: University Press, 1953), p. 19.

this interpretation, the Virgin represents the Church, welcoming the Incarnate Word and then revealing him to humankind. The Virgin Mary is portrayed standing upright as the “Seat of Wisdom.”

Tradition tells us that Saint Luke wrote these icons and then brought them to the Virgin Mary to learn whether she was pleased with them. When she saw the icons, she reportedly said: "May my grace and that of Him who was born of me be with these icons."²⁵

One of the famous icons of Mother of God is the twelfth century icon from Vladimir. It is one of the types Hodigitria and Umilenie, and probably it is a copy of an older one, knowing that usually the iconographers use old patterns. This icon represents the Theotokos dogma, Virgin Mary the Mother of God, the one who carries God in her hands. The inscriptions *MP ΘY* identify her as Mother of God, *Theotokos*.



**The Mother of God of Vladimir
Uspensky Cathedral, Moscow, Kremlin 12th century icon**

25. Dionysius of Furna, *Erminia*, p. 87.

One can recognize the icon of Vladimir by the intimate union between Theotokos and her divine Son. It is a union between the things of God and the things of men expressed in the touching of the faces and the halos. The eyes of the Virgin are looking towards us with love and comprehension, but also with deep sorrow. It is an image of the Mother grieving deeply at the coming Passion of her son. Christ presses his face affectionately against his Mother's as he says "Do not cry for me, O Mother..." Theotokos represents in this icon the Church of Christ that bridges heaven and earth, emphasizing the love between God and man.

Her mouth is small representing silence: "verbal communication is transcended by the silent speech of the soul."²⁶ It is the silence of Mary's contemplative heart: "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). She is dressed in a dark purple garment. In Byzantine culture purple was the color reserved for the Byzantine emperor's clothing. In Byzantine icons, the Mother of God wears a purple garment, as the queen of humankind. There are three stars on the forehead and shoulders of her garments symbolizing her perpetual virginity: before, during, and after the Nativity of Christ. The three stars are also a symbol of the Holy Trinity. In this icon, there are only two stars, while the Christ Child covers the third. The significance of this is the incarnation of the second Person of the Holy Trinity - God, the Word.

In iconography, Christ is represented with adult features, revealing that even though he lived as a child among us, he was also God, and with a long forehead symbolizing his wisdom. In this icon Christ's garments are permeated with light. The iconographer realized this effect by adding gold leaf over Christ's orange garment. This iconographic technique is called "inocopie." The technique requires a thick and sticky liquid obtained by mixing garlic

26. Igor G. Kutash, "Icons: A Means of Knowing the Unknowable" *Word in the World* Vol. 1, No. 3 (2005), p. 42.

juice with few drops of red color pigment. On the very dry base layer color, this liquid is used to draw the lines that will be gilded. Then a small round ball of fresh bread impregnated with gold leaf is pressed on the lines prepared to be gilded. In iconography, these lines of gold on garments symbolize the divine which, as a melted metal, flows through the spiritualized bodies.

Another source of light in this icon is the background, which is predominantly gold, symbolizing the divine presence. The radiant light of God has no shadow, represented by using gold leaf. Although there is inner light specific to Christ, the Mother of God and the Saints, in the icon from Vladimir, according to Egon Sendler there is a very strong “external” light, which come from the right side of the icon, and falls on Christ and his Mother’ faces. The area where the faces touch remains in shadow.

The effect is surprising. The hieratic impression that we can feel in other icons, here gives way to intimacy; eternity seems to become incarnate in the moment. It is the artist’s intention thus to express the mystery of the incarnation, the irruption of God in time. The effect of light seems to be one of the reasons why the Virgin of Vladimir has fascinated the faithful of all times.²⁷

There are many icons of Mother of God attributed to Saint Luke, but nothing that he allegedly painted has survived. So-called “St. Luke icons” have their place in a tradition for which he furnished the prototype. The Orthodox Church maintains that these icons are painted according to reproductions of St. Luke’s originals.

27. Sendler *The Icon, Image of the Invisible*, pp. 176-177.

2. Iconoclasts and Iconodules



Iconoclasts. Part of a Miniature of a Greek Psalter, c. 850-875.

After the Quinisext Council, the *iconoclasts* - those who fight against the icons started an open fight against the icons and against *iconodules* - those who loved the icons. Iconoclasm, which means “the breaking of icons,” was a conflict in the Byzantine Empire between 727 and 843 regarding the use of icons in the church. It was seen as one of the most terrible of heresies, undermining the very basis of Christianity.

There were many reasons for the spread of iconoclasm, which included first the misunderstandings and abuses that distorted the veneration of icons. Ouspensky explains which these abuses were.²⁸ He explains that there existed an excessive veneration of icons in the practice admitted by the Church. Thus, icons were sometimes used as godfathers or godmothers in baptism and at the monastic tonsure. There were even stranger cases. Some priests removed, by rubbing, the colors of the icons, mixed them with the Holy Gifts and distributed this mixture to the faithful as if the divine Body and Blood still had to be

28. Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, p. 107.

perfected with something more sacred. Other priests celebrated the Liturgy on an icon instead of an altar. The faithful, in turn, sometimes understood the veneration of icons too literally. They would venerate not so much the person represented on the image as the image itself. This practice clearly began to resemble magic.

Ouspensky cites Saint Augustine (354-430) describing how during his time some artists arbitrarily represented Christ, following their own imaginations, just as it often happens today.²⁹ Some images scandalized the faithful by their subtle sensuality that did not conform to the holiness of the person represented in them. Such images made the holiness of the icon doubtful. Even worse, they provided the iconoclasts with a powerful weapon against sacred art in general.

Norman H. Baynes accentuates that the iconoclasm was not a fight only against the icons, but against the ascetic life also:

Modern historians have explained the Iconoclasm revolution on economic grounds: the monasteries were absorbing wide lands and enjoying immunity from taxation; or on the ground of the needs of military defense: men were deserting the State and escaping into asceticism. But the essential thing to remember is that this was a religious revolution which had its source in the protest of Anatolian bishops against idolatry: the struggle centered in the question whether the God-Man Christ could be represented in an image.³⁰

Iconoclasm started officially in 726. George Ostrogorsky stated that the hostile attitude towards icons of Emperor Leo II the Isaurian was due to Jewish and Muslim influences.

It is true that Leo III persecuted the Jews and forced baptism upon them, but this does not exclude the possibility that he was influenced by the Mosaic teaching with its strict repudiation of image-worship. In the same way, his struggle with Islam does not preclude a possible susceptibility to Muslim

29. Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, p. 103.

30. Norman H. Baynes, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London: Athlone Press, 1960), p. 18.

culture. The persecution of the Jews under Leo III, one of the relatively rare persecutions in Byzantine history, should be regarded rather as evidence of an increase in Jewish influence at the time. From the seventh century a good deal of Byzantine theological polemic was concerned with Jewish attacks upon Christianity. More significant still is the indication of Leo's friendly attitude towards the Muslims revealed by the nick-name of 'Saracen-minded' (σαρακηνόφρων) which his contemporaries gave him. The Arabs, who from some years had ranged through Asia Minor, brought not only the sword, but also their own civilization and their peculiarly Muslim abhorrence of any pictorial representation of human countenance.³¹

The emperor Leo III the Isaurian, was influenced not only by Jews and Muslims, but by Asia Minor's bishops who were hostile to the veneration of images, and under these influences he openly took an aggressive position against the veneration of icons. Leonid Ouspensky³² describes the measures that Leo III took against the iconodules. The emperor tried to persuade Patriarch of Constantinople Saint Germanus (he was Patriarch between 715 and 730) and Pope of Rome Saint Gregory II (Pope between 715 and 731) to adhere to iconoclasm, but he did not succeed. The emperor deposed and deported Saint Germanus and replaced him with Patriarch Anastasius, an iconoclast. The iconoclast decree against the veneration of icons appeared in 730. It was signed by the emperor and the Patriarch, and after this decree, icons began to be destroyed everywhere. A fierce struggle began, marked by the blood of martyrs and confessors. Orthodox bishops were exiled; the faithful laity was persecuted by torture and death. The persecution against the Orthodox was very cruel, especially during the reign of Constantine Copronymus (741-755). On February 10, 754, the iconoclastic council started in Hieria and ended on August 10, in the Church of Vlachernae. Three hundred thirty-eight bishops participated. These were the iconoclasts who had replaced the deposed Orthodox bishops. For some of them, new Episcopal sees were created by the

31. George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, tr. Joan Hussey (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), pp. 142-143.

32. The Iconoclast period is described in Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, pp. 107-119.

emperor. The council decided that whoever painted or possessed icons would be deprived of his priesthood if he was a priest, and excommunicated if he was a monk or a layman. At the end of the council the confessors of Orthodoxy, Saint Germanus, Saint John of Damascus and Saint George of Cyprus, were excommunicated. They were called traitorous worshippers of images, teachers of impiety, and bad interpreters of the Scriptures. Even the believers were required to make an iconoclastic confession of faith. The persecutions became particularly cruel. This was the first iconoclastic period, and lasted until the reign of the Empress Irena. She was regent for her son Constantine VI (780-97), who was nine years old when his father died. In 787 she convoked at Nicaea the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Three hundred fifty bishops and many monks participated. The Council reestablished the veneration of icons and relics, and took a series of steps to reestablish normal life in the Church. Peace lasted for 27 years, and then a second period of cruel persecution against icons and iconodules started.

The second period of cruel persecution lasted until the year 843. In the year 843, during the reign of Empress Theodora, the veneration of icons was decidedly reestablished by a Council held in Constantinople, under the Patriarch Saint Methodius. The Council confirmed the dogma of the veneration of icons (established by the Seventh Ecumenical Council in the year 787), excommunicated the iconoclasts and established, in March 843, the feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy to be celebrated on the first Sunday of Lent. The controversy had lasted for more than 100 years.³³

The iconoclastic teaching about the icon is expressed in Emperor Constantine Copronymus' (741-775) treatise, which conveys the point of view shared by all the leaders of iconoclasm. They argued that:

33. All the historical dates that I used in the text are from Leonid Ouspensky's *The Theology of the Icon*, pp. 107-119.

“Whoever, makes an image of Christ, either depicts the Godhead which cannot be depicted, and mingles it with the manhood (like the Monophysites), or he represents the body of Christ as not made divine and separate and as a person apart, like the Nestorians.”³⁴

The Iconoclasts seemed to ignore the “Council of Chalcedon”, which declared:

Following the holy Fathers we teach with one voice that the Son [of God] and our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same [Person], that he is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, very God and very man, of a reasonable soul and [human] body consisting, consubstantial with the Father as touching his Godhead, and consubstantial with us as touching his manhood; made in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of his Father before the worlds according to his Godhead; but in these last days for us men and for our salvation born [into the world] of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God according to his manhood. This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son [of God] must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, inseparably [united], and that without the distinction of natures being taken away by such union, but rather the peculiar property of each nature being preserved and being united in one Person and subsistence, not separated or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten, God the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Prophets of old time have spoken concerning him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ hath taught us, and as the Creed of the Fathers hath delivered to us.³⁵

In other words each nature preserves its own manner of being and meets the other (nature) in the single hypostasis. For Orthodoxy an icon of Jesus Christ does not represent his divine nature nor his human nature, but the person.

According to the iconoclasts, a true icon must be of the same nature as the person it represents; it must be consubstantial with its model. They believed that the only acceptable icon of Christ is the Eucharist:

The only admissible figure of the humanity of Christ, however, is bread and wine in the holy Supper. This and no other form, this and no other type, has he chosen to represent his incarnation. Bread he ordered to be brought, but not a representation of the human form, so that idolatry might not arise. And as the body of Christ is made divine, so also this figure of the body of Christ, the

34. *The Seventh Ecumenical Council*. Schaff Philip, et.al. ed, p. 544.

35. *The Seventh Ecumenical Council*. Schaff Philip, et.al. ed, p. 265.

bread, is made divine by the descent of the Holy Spirit; it becomes the divine body of Christ by the mediation of the priest who, separating the oblation from that which is common, sanctifies it.³⁶

Orthodoxy had a much different view on the Holy Gifts, which are not an icon precisely because they are identical to their prototype. The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 Constantinople) responded to this saying that neither the Lord, nor the Apostles, nor the Fathers, ever used the term ‘images’ to speak of the unbloody sacrifice offered by the priest, but always called it the very Body and Blood.

For the Orthodox, not only was the icon not consubstantial with or identical to its prototype, as it was for the iconoclasts, but on the contrary, according to the Orthodox apologists, the very idea corresponding to the word ‘icon’ implies an essential difference between the image and its prototype, because the representation is something different from that which is represented. John Meyendorff³⁷ explains Saint Theodore the Studite’s (758-826) position against the iconoclasts. Thus, Theodore Studite affirmed that no one could be so foolish as to think that reality and its shadow, the prototype and its representation, the cause and the consequence, are by nature identical. For Saint Theodore the Studite, iconoclasm was a serious error, which alienates its followers from God as much as any other heresy. The rejection of Christian veneration of images effectively denies God’s incarnation, which alone makes human salvation possible. According to his teaching, if Christ could not be portrayed, then He was not truly man, and humanity was not truly united with God in Him. Christ is describable according to His hypostasis, remaining indescribable in His divinity. In essence, the Orthodox teaching explains that those who not understand the difference between an image and its prototype can be called idolaters. In this respect Saint John Damascene

36. *The Seventh Ecumenical Council*. Schaff Philip, et.al. ed, p. 544.

37. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), p. 48.

emphasized that the icon is connected with its prototype not because it is identical to that which it represents, but because it portrays his person and carries his name. Saint John of Damascus wrote in his *Defense of Icons*:

If we made an image of the invisible God, we would certainly be in error....but we do not do anything of the kind; we do not err, in fact, if we make the image of God incarnate who appeared on earth in the flesh, who in his ineffable goodness, lived with men and assumed the nature, the volume, the form, and the color of the flesh.³⁸

The iconoclasts also used scriptural arguments to substantiate their teaching against the icons. First, the Old Testament prohibition, "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exodus 20:4-5) to which the Orthodox answered that the existence of the icon is based on the incarnation of the second person of the Holy Trinity. Referring to the revelation of the Father's Face, Thomas Cardinal Spidlik, Professor Emeritus of Eastern Christian Spirituality at the Pontifical Oriental Institute Rome explains:

Jesus, the Son, reveals the face of the Father. On one hand, the principle of the Old Testament according to which no man has seen God, continues to be valid; on the other hand, the Face of God the Father appears there where we find Christ. From this stems the patristic thesis according to which the Face of Christ appears in the Church. As Spouse of Christ, the Church reveals the Father's face that is also reflected in each one of the faithful.³⁹

The icon teaches that the divine incarnation was not an illusion. For the Orthodox Church, the attack against the icon of Christ is an attack on His incarnation. Before the Incarnation of God, and Nativity of Jesus Christ, any representation of the Lord would have

38. John of Damascus Saint, *On the Divine Images*, tr. Andrew Loth (Crestwood, N.Y: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), pp. 52-53.

39. Cinnews Archives: Daily Dispatch – Nov.5, 1999; Available on line : www.cin.org/archives/cinnews/199911/0004.html

been the fruit of human imagination about God, whose nature and essence is indescribable. When the time was fulfilled, the Indescribable One became describable. From then on, the iconography represents God, as he has become visible. As the Apostles proclaimed, “We have heard Him, we have seen Him with our eyes, we have looked upon Him and have touched Him with our hands” (I John 1:1), and “He is the image [*eikon* in the original Greek] of the invisible God, the first born of all creation” (Colossians 1:15). Thus, the Church permitted the painting of Christ, while condemning icons of God the Father, since He never took on a visible shape.

Second, the iconoclasts referred to the absence in the New Testament of any indication that icons should be made or venerated. The Orthodox argument is that nowhere did Christ order that even a few words be written, although his image was drawn in writing by Apostles and preserved up to the present. What is, on the one hand, represented with ink and paper, is represented in the icon with various colors on wood, frescoes, mosaics, etc.

“It is only the personalism of patristic theology that makes it possible to overcome the essential dilemma of the iconoclastic controversy and provides a solid basis for the veneration of images in the Orthodox Church.”⁴⁰ We owe the possibility of picturing the divine beauty, to the theology of St. John of Damascus, St. Theodore the Studite, and Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople.

The beauty of Orthodoxy and implicit of icons, impresses Christians and non-Christians alike. A perfect example of a non-Christian embracing the beauty of Orthodoxy was Prince Vladimir of Kiev (958-1015). Vladimir was one of the first publicly known

40. Gabriel Barrow, “The Iconoclastic crisis”, *Word Magazine*, February 1975, p. 11.

figures at the time to learn of the existence of different faiths, examine them, and decide which was best.

He asked the Jews the home question of a statesman; why they are scattered over the face of the earth; and they replied “for their sin,” so that Judaism was discarded. Islam was also rejected because, as Vladimir explains, it is quite impossible to be happy in Russia without strong drink. Papal Christianity was hardly likely to appeal to Vladimir; with Rome the spiritual chief was above all secular rulers. Much stronger and also much nearer was the attraction of the Orthodox confession. Envoys whom Vladimir sent to Constantinople returned entranced with the beauty of the Orthodox (Church and) services which have ever since made so powerful an appeal to Russian hearts.⁴¹

On the one hand, from the beginning of the use of icons in Christianity there have been common people as well as theologians who loved icons; on the other hand, there have been people and theologians who consider them idols, or at least unnecessary for Christianity. Edward Gibbon wrote:

The worship of images had stolen into the Church by insensible degrees, and each petty step was pleasing to the superstitious mind, as productive of comfort and innocent of sin. But in the beginning of the eight century, in the full magnitude of the abuse, the more timorous Greeks were awakened by an apprehension that, under the mask of Christianity, they restored the religion of their fathers.⁴²

The Orthodox Theology of the images is very different from Gibbon’s. For the Orthodox the whole of public worship is an anticipation of the liturgy of Heaven, and “the icons - painted images of Christ and the saints – bear witness to the spiritual presence of the world of Heaven.”⁴³ For the Orthodox believers, “the icon is not intended to force an emotional response, but rather create a silent one”⁴⁴ Icons of Jesus Christ and the saints portrait them with their mouths closed in order to convey the silent attitude of prayer.

41. Bernard Pares, *A History of Russia* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 29.

42. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol.3, pp. 5-6.

43. M.J. le Guillou, *The Tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), p. 54.

44. Jim Forest. *Praying With Icon* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 14.

However, in prayer the silence is not empty but echoes Saint Ignatius (50- 117) words: “he who possesses in truth the word of Jesus can hear even its silence,”⁴⁵ This silence leads the believers into prayer.

45. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed. *The Apostolic Fathers Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 1*. (Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956), p. 56.

PART II

THE GOSPEL IN ICONS ACCORDING TO EASTERN ORTHODOX TRADITION

1. Introduction

The New Testament Gospels have inspired many iconographers over the centuries. It is difficult to determine which Gospel(s) had the greatest influence on iconography, because certain episodes from the life of Jesus Christ are told only in the synoptic Gospels or in the Gospel according to John, whereas other events are told in all four Gospels. However, we can identify influences of a particular Gospel when an icon depicts a scene found only in one Gospel. Examples found exclusively in the Fourth Gospel include the stories of the wedding at Cana, the Raising of Lazarus, and the Washing of the Feet. The details of the journey of the Magi described only in Matthew, and of the meeting between the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary narrated only in Luke can be found in all Nativity and Annunciation icons. There are as well some details in Nativity and Annunciation icons, representing passages from apocryphal literature. These writings from the first century after Christ “neglected for almost two millennia”⁴⁶, constitute part of the iconographic representation.

The iconographer must represent with line and color the *mystical* realm of nature and humanity sanctified and the Mother of God and the Saints *transmigrated* and *glorified*. In other words, the iconographer’s problem is: how does one express by created means that which is beyond creation? The same problem is faced by theologians: how can one describe God who is perfect with words that are imperfect and insufficient? Therefore, the iconography can necessarily only be figurative and symbolical.

46. Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 8.

In the silence of their contemplative lives, monks and nuns carried out the vocation of being an iconographer. Dyonisus of Furna said that if one wants to become an iconographer, has first to become a monk or nun, then has to do drawings until he or she becomes proficient; when he or she starts to paint icons, must pray and ask for blessing from a priest.⁴⁷ Today iconographers are monks or nuns, priests, lay persons, or professional artists. The iconographer who lives according to the word of God believes that writing of icons is the work of the Holy Spirit through his or her hand in an attempt to approach the beauty of the divine by the intercession of art. On the other hand, there are iconographers who do not consider the spiritual life to be important, and so treat the icon as any other piece of art. In general, though, iconographers prepare themselves for the task of painting icons. Before the painting of an icon, they study the event to be depicted as well as the dogmatic and liturgical tradition of writing icons. Through their icon, they teach and witness to the Orthodox Church's faith. Iconographers pray before writing icons. Dyonisus of Furna⁴⁸ suggests a long prayer for the iconographer to recite, but Egon Sendler present a shorter prayer:

O Lord, and Divine Master of all that exists, enlighten your servant, and direct my soul, heart, and mind. Guide my hands so that I may worthily and perfectly represent your image as well as those of your holy Mother and all the saints, for the glory, joy and beautification of your holy church.⁴⁹

For an iconographer the prayer is essential because he or she believes that iconography is a "divine action". This idea of "divine action" comes down to us from Theodore the Studite. John Meyendorff, citing Theodore the Studite, explains why the iconodules understood that iconography is a divine action:

47. Dionysius of Fournia, *Erminia*, p. 3.

48. Dyonisus of Furna, *Erminia*, p. 22.

49. Egon Sendler, *The Icon Image of the Invisible*, p. 185.

The humanity of Christ, which makes the icons possible, is a “new humanity” having been fully restored to communion with God, deified in virtue of the communication of idioms, bearing fully again the image of God. This fact is to be reflected in iconography as a form of art: the artist thus receives a quasi-sacramental function. Theodore compares the Christian artist to God Himself, making man in His own image: ‘The fact that God made man in His image and likeness shows that iconography is a divine action.’ In the beginning God created man in His image. By making an icon of Christ the iconographer also makes an ‘image of God’, for this is what the deified humanity of Jesus truly is.⁵⁰

The ancient iconographers prepared themselves well before starting painting, with prayers and drawing exercises. Many ancient iconic masterpieces, are prototypes for today’s iconographers, and are results of the iconographer’s skill to combine the Byzantine art with a spiritual, unworldly essence; this comes only from within the depth of one’s life of prayer.

In this thesis I would like to present a few icons of the great feasts from theological and aesthetical points of view following chronologically the event connected with the life and activities of Jesus Christ. I will start with the presentation of the Annunciation and Nativity of Jesus Christ, because these feasts concern the Christian teaching on the incarnation of the Son of God, the assumption of our human nature. Then I will present the feast of the Transfiguration because this feast is one of the most important in the theology of the Orthodox Church. According to Orthodox teaching this feast reminds that God can be seen through his uncreated energies. The next two icons will be the icons of the Resurrection and of the Ascension. I choose these icons because I consider them pivotal for understanding the theological tradition of the Eastern Churches through icons in the sense that they emphasize the divine nature of Son of God. Finally, the last two icons will be the Descent of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity. The reason for which I choose them is to emphasize the inseparability of Father, Son and Holy Spirit within the Holy Trinity.

50. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 48.

2. Icons of the Great Feasts

2.1 The Annunciation

“How near is the Lord unto him who believes!”
St. John of Kronstadt

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’ Mary was greatly troubled at the Angel’s words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But he said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.’ ‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’ The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.’

‘I am the Lord's servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May it be to me as you have said.’ Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-38)



The Annunciation
Macedonia - Ohrid XIV century

Icons of the Annunciation, which pictured the Gospel story, were painted especially after the third century, although there is a fresco in the Roman catacomb of Priscilla on the Via Salaria representing the Annunciation, which is thought to be from the second century.⁵¹ Schiller Gertrad asserts that only from the fifth century onwards did icons of The Annunciation contain certain motifs taken from accounts in the apocryphal *Protoevangelion of James* (a commentary of these motifs will follow); up to the fifth century the icon was only a representation of canonical Gospel accounts.⁵²

During the ages, there developed three different types of The Annunciation icons. The first type is one in which the Virgin Mary expresses her perturbation when the archangel Gabriel brought her the momentous message from God. The second type depicts in Mary a sense of confusion and prudence; she turns away from Gabriel and raises her hand as though to ward him off. ("How will this be, seeing I know not a man?"). The third type represents the Virgin's consent; she presses her palm to her breast in a gesture of fidelity and bows her head to the Angel ("May it be to me as you have said."). The Annunciation icon from Ohrid, we can consider as a fourth type as it comprises all three depictions above; one can see the Virgin Mary's attitudes: perturbation, prudence and consent. The Virgin Mary is pictured enthroned, because she is believed to have descended from the line of King David (according to Luke 1:27). Though she was poor and lowly in the world, she was enabled by God's providence to be the Mother of the promised Messiah, and thus she became 'more honorable than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim'⁵³. She is pictured

51. Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Lossky. *The Meanings of Icons*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), p. 173.

52. Schiller Gertrad. *Iconography of Christian Art*. (London: Lund Humphries, 1978), p. 34.

53. *The Divine Liturgy*, Theotokos hymn, p. 89.

enthroned, because God has put an honor upon her, greater even than that of Eve, the mother of *all* living humans. According to Orthodox Church teaching, with her perfect obedience and humility, the Virgin Mary has transformed woman from the ancient gateway of sin to the gateway of salvation.

In the icon of The Annunciation Virgin Mary is pictured having a spindle in her left hand, representing the tradition that she is the one chosen from seven virgins to spin the wool and make the curtain for the Temple's Holy of Holies⁵⁴ which was "rent in two" at the Crucifixion (Luke 23:44-46). Adding this detail in the Annunciation icon, the iconography enriched the icons in which the representation of the canonical Gospels meets the representation of passages from apocryphal writings. This detail which has to be shown⁵⁵ in all The Annunciation icons highlights the belief that the Virgin Mary belongs to the House of King David. The apocryphon *Protoevangelion of James* describes how the Jewish priest decided to put a new curtain in the Temple, and choose eight maidens of the house of David dividing the wool among them. Mary was given purple and scarlet wool. The Angel appeared to her when she was spinning, and the visiting of angel is described as in Luke's Gospel.

The same archangel Gabriel, who in the Book of Daniel reveals the time of the Messiah's coming (Daniel 9:21-27), came to the Virgin Mary to bring her the tidings of joy that she will give birth to a son, the Son of God. Traditionally believed to have been written in the sixth century BC, the Book of Daniel is nowadays dated to the second century BC:

MT Daniel (MT - Masoretic text: one finds in Hebrew Bibles) is a composite work, the result of a complicated process of composition and redaction that incorporated what for its author/redactor were both contemporary and older materials. In addition, it is widely held that it was not composed during the

54. Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, p. 64.

55. Dyonisius of Furna, *Erminia*, p. 101.

time of its sixth-century BCE setting in the Babylonian Exile, but rather reached its present form around the year 164 BCE, sometime around the end of the crisis precipitated by actions of the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes.⁵⁶

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite names the angels “winds”, referring to some passages from the Bible: “He makes winds his messengers.”(Psalms 104:4); “In speaking of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds’” (Hebrew 1:7), accentuating that they move very quickly from one place to another:

They (the angels) are also named ‘winds’ as a sign of the virtually instant speed with which they operate everywhere, their coming and going from above to below and again from below to above as they raise up their subordinates to the highest peak and as they prevail upon their own superiors to proceed down into fellowship with and concern for those beneath them.⁵⁷

In the icons the angels are represented with wings, suggesting their quickness and readiness to go wherever God sends them, as direct messengers of God. In the icon of The Annunciation, the angel has one of his wings elevated, although his feet show that he is on the ground. This symbolizes that the archangel Gabriel had just descended from Heaven. This same symbol was transferred into Orthodox Liturgy, when the deacon as an angel⁵⁸ elevates his stole; the deacon elevates his stole during the prayers that recite in front of the central iconostasis doors where the icon of The Annunciation is located. In The Annunciation icon, and Gospel text, the angel comes down to earth from heaven; in the Liturgy the deacon invites the believers to elevate their hearts and minds in prayer.

56. Lorenzo DiTommaso, *The Book of Daniel and the Apocryphal Daniel Literature* (Leiden ; Boston : Brill, 2005), p. 3.

57. Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works*. tr. Colm Luibheid. (New York: Paulist Press 1987), p. 187.

58. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, p. 180. He draws a parallel between deacons and angels.

The icon of The Annunciation is represented especially on iconostasis on central doors, harkening to the words of Ezekiel: "The gateway ... that faces towards the east shall be shut..." (Ezekiel 46:1), accenting the fact that the Virgin Mary gave birth without human intercession. Therefore, it is through the central doors, that only the priest can come out or go into the altar, when he reads from the Gospels, when he blesses the congregation and with the Holy Gifts⁵⁹ in his hands. During these Liturgical moments the priest represents Christ, thus he is allowed to open the central doors.

The Annunciation icon shows the Archangel's garment as green. In iconography, green is the symbol of hope, youth, and life. With the news that Archangel Gabriel brought to the Virgin Mary, he brought hope of new life for the whole world. There are two sources for iconographers using green as a color for life. First, in his book *The Celestial Hierarchy* Pseudo-Dionysius explains the significance of four colors: "With regard to the multicolored stones, these must be taken to work symbolically as follows: white for light, red for fire, yellow for gold, green for youthful vitality."⁶⁰ The second source is the Scripture, where green (*chloros* in Greek) expresses the life of vegetation (Job 7:12; Isaiah 57:5; Psalms 37:35; etc), symbolizing growth and fertility.

As the Archangel Gabriel in Annunciation icon, the angel representing the Holy Spirit in the icon of the Holy Trinity is dressed in green, because the Holy Spirit is the one who gives life. Green is also used in icons for martyrs' garments, symbolizing the sacrifice of their youth and the triumph of life over death.

59. The Eucharist is the principal sacrament or mystery of the Orthodox Church. According to Orthodox theology, the bread and wine are transformed mystically into the body and blood of Christ when the priest or bishop's asks God the Father to send his Holy Spirit over the material elements presented to him. Thus, according to Orthodox belief the Eucharistic cup has in it Christ's body and blood which are called also the Holy Gifts.

60. Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works*, p. 188.

In the icon of the Annunciation, the radiance of green from the Archangel Gabriel's garment is situated between two colors. The gold background which helps the view to move into the light of God, and the purple from the Virgin Mary's garments, which moves out towards the viewer. Mary's cloak is purple-red, which is the symbol of royalty as such the sign of her consecration as Mother of God. Red color is characterized by Pseudo-Dionysius as an "incandescence" and active color: "the red is the power and sweep of fire."⁶¹ Being an active color, the touches of red in Mary's garment shows that the Incarnation was not only the work of God, but also the work of the will and the faith of the Virgin. The *Theandric*⁶² work at Annunciation is synthesized by Kalistos Ware as follows:

At the Annunciation the Father sends the Holy Spirit upon the Blessed Virgin Mary, and she conceives the eternal Son of God (Luke 1:35). So God's taking of our humanity is a Trinitarian work. The Spirit is sent down from the Father, to effect the Son's presence within the womb of the Virgin. The Incarnation, it should be added, is not only the work of the Trinity but also the work of Mary's free will. God waited for her voluntary consent, expressed in the word, "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to your word" (Luke 1:38); and had this consent been withheld, Mary would not have become God's Mother. Divine grace does not destroy human freedom but reaffirms it.⁶³

That God was fully active in the event is depicted in this icon by the spear coming out of the heavens towards Virgin Mary. The fabric swag above Virgin Mary's throne is used to indicate that the Annunciation took place indoors.

61. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, p. 189.

62. "Theandric" is a word coined using two Greek words, "theos" and "aner" to indicate the collaboration of God and man in his or her total liberty. A more inclusive word that would include women would be "theanthropic" and some theologians use it.

63. Kalistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (London & Oxford: Mowbrays, 1979), p. 44.

In the icon of the Annunciation, the Virgin Mary is facing us, emphasizing that this holy event is for the benefit of all. The message of the Annunciation of the Incarnation of the Son of God icon is the same as the message of the troparion of the Feast:

“Today is the beginning of our salvation, the revelation of the eternal mystery! The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin as Gabriel announces the coming of Grace. Together with him let us cry to the Theotokos: Rejoice, O Full of Grace, the Lord is with you!”⁶⁴

64. A troparion is a short poetic hymn, in the Orthodox Liturgy, referring to the Feast of the day. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 515.

2.2 The Nativity of Christ

“To serve God is bliss itself.”
St. John of Kronstadt

In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger’. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests’. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about’. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

(Luke 2: 1-16)



The Nativity Russian icon XV century

According to Ouspensky, the classical representation of Nativity of Christ which is reproduced above has its prototype in the “fifth and sixth century ampullae, in which pilgrims used to bring home from Holy Land oil from the lamps burning in sacred places.”⁶⁵ The icon visualizes in the upper part the words of Gospel, and in the lower part the apocryphon *Proto-Gospel of James*.

The Gospel part of the icon starts with the heavenly realm. The star with triple ray coming from heaven represents the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At this holy event, all three Persons of the Holy Trinity were involved. The triple rays indicate that although the Son is incarnated, He is not separated from the Father and the Holy Spirit. In

65. Leonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, p. 157.

other words in being made Man, He has remained God. Above the star, there is a black semicircle, which in iconography represents apophatically God's transcendence⁶⁶.

To the heavenly realm belong the angels also. One angel brings to a shepherd tidings of great joy that Christ the Lord is born. The shepherd is singing demonstrating that men are singing with the angels the birth of Christ. This is pictured in the icon as part of the Liturgy. Thus, during the Liturgy the congregation sings the same hymn as angels sang at the Nativity of Christ, including human music with the highest song of Angels: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:14) The angels are shown with their hands covered, a sign of their reverence for the newborn child. The sign of the angel's reverence for Christ is found not only in icons of The Nativity but also of The Baptism of Christ.

Christ's birth was without impurity, from a Virgin, and the iconography shows that this birth is beyond the laws of nature by the white swaddling clothes of the baby. White represents in iconography divinity, and purity, and because of its total absence of coloration, white is closest to light itself. Christ is the light of the world, and in some icons, especially in the icons of Transfiguration and of Resurrection, he is depicted in white garments. A corresponding atmosphere is created in the monasteries of the Orthodox Church in the vesper service the evening before Christmas, which is sung in darkness leaving only the tiny flames of the vigil candle. This candle represents the star that guides the magi in Bethlehem. The candle represents also the light of Christ who illumined through his grace the Old Testament people who lived under the law.

⁶⁶ Apophatism – is a way of knowing God who is beyond words, through negative terms (in terms of what God is not).

There are icons in which the star is on the hand of an angel who accompanies the magi to the manger. Through the magi, the iconography depicts the beginning of the Gentiles' Church⁶⁷, and their different ages probably signify that the revelation of God is meant for all people regardless of age.

Iconic images are painted from dark to light. In depicting light, the main "color" in icon, the iconographer adds white highlights on garments and especially on holy faces; this is the last step in making the icon come to life. The color white is also used in iconography for burial clothes, thus the white shroud in Christ's grave in icon of the Resurrection, and the burial clothes of Lazarus in the icon depicting his coming out of the tomb, are white. The Christ-child is portrayed in swaddling white clothes laying in a manger, pointing his future burial, and the fact that he took flesh in order to die for us, destroying forever the power of death. The cave in Nativity icons represents the Old Testament wilderness, where people received manna, the symbol of the Eucharist represented in icon through the Child. In this interpretation, the manger is viewed as the Church's altar.

Christ halo is marked with a cross and on it are inscribed the letter O, ω, N, ("I Am Who Am" the name used for God in the Old Testament Exodus 3:14) representing the belief that Christ shares one essence with God the Father. Next to his image, there are the initials of his name in Greek language IC XC (*ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ*- *Iesus Christos*). This monogram is used in all Christ's icons, and is composed of the first and last letters of Jesus' name in Greek (iota and sigma) with the first and last letters of Christ's name in Greek (chi and sigma). The sigmas are both rendered in "C" form, resulting in "IC XC". By the inscription of the name, the image receives its spiritual dimension, because through the name, the icon is linked with the person represented in it.

67. Lonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, p. 159.

Next to the manger stand the ox and the ass. These details are not mentioned by the canonical Gospels, but they are depicted in every icon of the Nativity. This scene shows the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "the ox knows his Owner and the ass his Master's crib, but Israel does not know me, and the people have not regarded me" (Isaiah 1:3).

The Holy Virgin, now the Holy Mother, is depicted recumbent on a red mat showing her tiredness, witnessing to the effects of a human birth, and so to the humanity of the Christ child. In other icons, she is shown kneeling as a sign of the absence of labor pains, and so the divinity of the Child. These aspects of the Mother of God are celebrated in the Orthodox Church on the Nativity of Christ feast day:

What shall we call thee, o full of grace? Shall we call thee heaven because thou didst give rise to the Sun of righteousness? Or, shall we call thee paradise because thou didst bring forth the Flower of incorruption? Or a Virgin because thou didst remain without defilement? Or a pure Mother because thou didst carry in thy holy arms as a son the God of all? Therefore, plead with him that he may save our souls.⁶⁸

Saint Joseph is not depicted next to the Child, but in the left bottom corner, According to André Gabar, this discreet pose of Joseph was introduced by Christian image-makers to represent the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and, indirectly, the fatherhood of the Holy Ghost.⁶⁹ Ouspensky and Evdokimov⁷⁰ mention that tradition, transmitted also by apocrypha relates that Joseph is speaking with Satan. Satan is depicted in the icon as an old shepherd who came to tell Joseph that is impossible for a child to be born from a virgin. Neither Ouspensky nor Evdokimov mention the exact name of apocrypha which describe the scene

68. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 374.

69. André Grabar , *Christian Iconograph*, p. 130.

70. Leonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icon*, p. 160; and Paul Evdokimov. *The Art of the Icon*, p. 284.

of Joseph speaking with Satan. The scene in which Satan tries even at the birth of Jesus to introduce doubts about the purity of Mary is reminiscent of Joseph's own doubts and disappointment upon learning about Mary's pregnancy. Joseph's disappointment was recorded in a liturgical text which most likely relies on the Proto-Gospel of James 13:

Thus saith Joseph to the Virgin, what is this thing, O Mary, that I behold in thee. Verily, I am surprised and perplexed, and my mind is dazzled. Wherefore, henceforth from this moment be thou secluded in secret. What is this matter, O Mary that I behold in thee? For thou hast given me instead of honor, disgrace; and instead of gladness, sorrow; and instead of being extolled, thou hast brought me blame. Therefore, I cannot bear the reproach of men, from the Temple of the Lord I took thee; from the priests I received thee as innocent of all blame. What then is this thing I behold?⁷¹

With Joseph, the icon not only describes Joseph's own drama, but the drama of the whole world and its incapacity to accept what is beyond rationality and words: the Incarnation of God.⁷²

In some icons of The Nativity, the Mother of God is looking to the scene of ablution of the infant Jesus. In the icon reproduced above, Mother of God is looking with love and compassion to Saint Joseph, seeing the overwhelming effect of his doubt. This warm and gentle sight represents in icon the depiction of one of the troparion of the Nativity feast:

As Joseph was going his way to Bethlehem pierced with sadness, thou didst cry unto him, O Virgin, saying: Why frownest thou and art troubled when thou seest me great with child, completely ignorant of the terrible mystery that is in me? Drive away from thee all dismay, comprehending the strange matter; for God, for his mercy's sake, hath descended to earth and hath now taken flesh in my womb, and thou shalt see him born, as it pleased him, and thou shalt be filled with joy, and worship him; for he is thy Creator, whom the angels praise ceaselessly and glorify, with the Father and the Holy Spirit.⁷³

71. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 375. Cf. Proto-Gospel of James 13 in Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, p. 68.

72. Leonid Ouspensky. *The Meaning of Icon*, p.160; and Paul Evdokimov. *The Art of the Icon*, p. 285.

73. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 393.

In the right lower corner is a scene of the ablution of the infant Jesus by two women. This scene represents the Proto-Gospel of Joseph.⁷⁴ Over time, in some churches, this scene was erased and replaced with one of the shepherds, or bushes. There was an opinion that this scene was debasement of Christ, who had no need of washing, because he was born in a miraculous manner from the Virgin Mary. Stephane Bigham⁷⁵ argues that this scene was erased from very important monuments on Mount Athos – Greece: for example in the principal church of Big Lavra, in the Chapel consecrated to Saint Nicholas in Stavronikita Monastery, and in the Church of Saint Dionysiou Monastery. In his opinion, this erasure was a consequence of Catholic propaganda on Mount Athos, during the years 1636-1641, by the Catholic school at Karyes (capital of Mount Athos), and also by the Jesuits, who wanted to convert the Orthodox monks from Mount Athos to Catholicism.⁷⁶

Although, in the Painter's Manual Dionysius of Furna says that in the icon of the Nativity the Mother of God and Joseph have to be represented kneeling next to the manger where infant Jesus lays⁷⁷, most of Nativity icons, especially the Russian ones, retain the scene of the ablution of the infant Jesus, showing that the newborn Child is under natural human laws and needs everything that other newborns need. In this way the iconography stresses that through the Incarnation, God became man and took on himself all the weaknesses of human nature except sin.

74. Bart Ehrman. *The Lost Scripture*, p. 69.

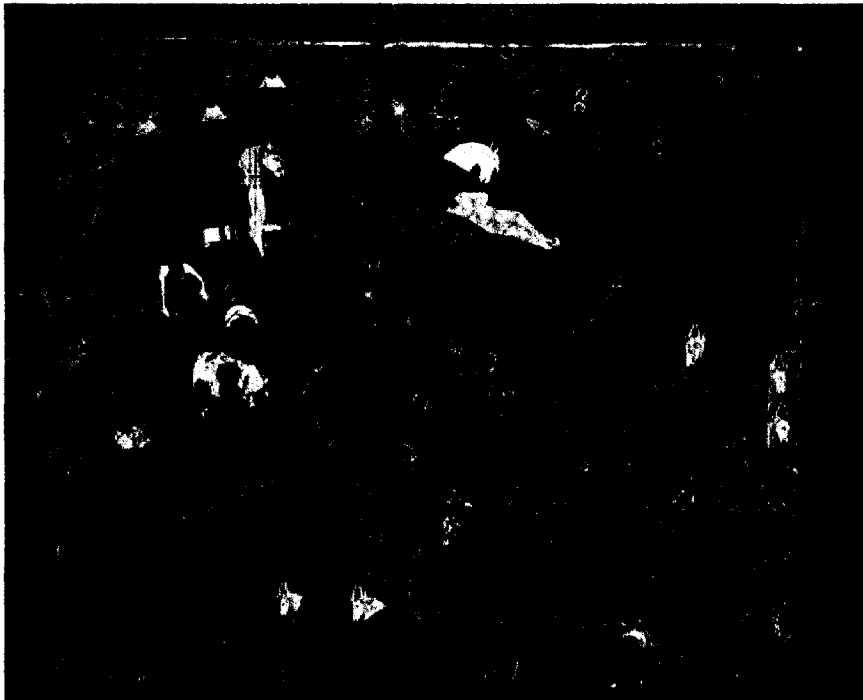
75. Stephane Bigham. *Iconologie; Neuf Etude* (Rollinsford, New Hampshire: Orthodox Reserch Institute, 2005), pp. 99-102.

76. Stephane Bigham. *Iconologie; Neuf Etude*, p. 103.

77. Dionysius of Furna. *Erminia*, p. 102.

In the sixteenth century, there appeared tendencies to depict the Nativity of Christ with more details, and different scenes were added such as: the flight into Egypt, the massacre of the innocents, and the salvation of the infants John the Baptist and Nathanael.⁷⁸ The flight into Egypt and the massacre of infants are depictions of the Gospel narratives. The scene of the salvation of John the Baptist is described in apocryphal Proto-Gospel of James.22:

But Elizabeth when she heard that they sought for John, took him and went up into the hill-country and looked about her where she should hide him: and there was no hiding-place. And Elizabeth groaned and said with a loud voice: O, mountain of God, receive thou a mother with a child. For Elizabeth was not able to go up. And immediately the mountain clave asunder and took her in. And there was a light shining always for them: for an angel of the Lord was with them, keeping watch over them.⁷⁹



The Nativity (Russian icon 16th century) with scene of the salvation of the infants John the Baptist and Nathanael

78. Leonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of the Icons*, p. 162

79. Proto-Gospel of James 22 in Bart D.Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, pp. 71-74.

The depiction of the salvation of the infant Nathanael is a representation of the interpretation of the text from John 1:45-50:

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, 'Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false'. 'How do you know me?' Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, 'I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you'. Then Nathanael declared, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel'.

In a homily on this text, Saint John Chrysostomos said:

Did he (Christ) not see him (Nathanael) before this with His sleepless eye? He saw him, and none could gainsay it... And what did Nathanael? When he had received an unquestionable proof of His foreknowledge, he hastened to confess Him, showing by his previous delay his caution and his fairness by his assent afterwards. For, said the Evangelist, He answered and said to Him, Rabbi, You are the Son of God, You are the King of Israel.⁸⁰

The iconography presents Nathanael under the tree sometimes as an adult and sometimes as a baby. Nathanael as a baby is perhaps a development from the above homily by John Chrysostom, and his presence under the tree symbolizes his whole life known to God.

Although I was not able to locate the source for the story of baby Nathanael, I can use a piece of oral history here. Long time ago, back in Romania, a priest explained to me that he knew of a tradition (the priest did not give me the name of the book where is described this belief) claiming that Nathanael was about the same age as Jesus Christ. During Irod's massacre of innocents, Nathanael's mother ran with him in her arms to escape from a soldier. Because the soldier followed her, she put Nathanael under a fig tree and continued her run. The soldier pursued her, caught her and killed her. After few days an old woman found Nathanael under the tree. She took care of him for a few years and on her deathbed, she told him the secret that she kept in her heart, of finding him under the tree. Nathanael did not tell anybody his secret, but there was somebody who knew his secret: God. The dialog

80. John Chrysostomos, *Homily on John's Gospel*, p. 199.

between Nathanael and Jesus Christ: “How do you know me?” “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree” “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”, was a dialog between man and God, the One who knew him, not as a man might, but as God does. By representing Nathanael as a baby under the fig tree, the priest said, the iconography emphasizes the divine nature of Christ, as he is the one who knows everybody’s life and secrets.

The scenes of the icon are not separate scenes but are linked together by yellow-ochre colored hills. The landscape is depicted in a ‘reverse or inverse perspective’. A closer scrutiny of icons reveals that they often show parts and surfaces that cannot be seen simultaneously; in consequence the laws of perspective are not respected. The fact that the icons violate the laws of perspective can lead one to the idea that the icons are painted in a naive way lacking artistic literacy. That is not the case, since icons usually are the work of first rank artists, and this diversion from the rule of perspective is an important way of representing a perception of a new Christian reality depicted in icons. This departure from the perspective rule constitutes a premeditated, conscious method of icon painting. In the inverse perspective, the vanishing point moves out towards the viewer of the icon. This technique causes the viewer “to take part” in the pictorial event. Pavel Florensky, referring to the inverse perspective characterizing Orthodox icons, says that these ‘illiteracies’ of drawings, which normally ought to avert any viewer who understands the ‘obvious absurdity’ of such a depiction, arouses pleasing and admiring feelings:

When the viewer has the chance to put two or three icons from about the same period and painted with approximately equal skill side by side, he perceives an enormous artistic superiority in that icon which demonstrates the greatest violation of the rules of perspective, whereas the icons which have been drawn more ‘correctly’ seem cold, lifeless and lacking the slightest connection with the reality depicted on it. It always transpires that the icons that are the

most creative in terms of immediate artistic perception are perspectively 'defective', whereas icons that better satisfy the perspective textbook are boring and soulless. If you allow yourself simply to forget the formal demands of perspectival rendering for a while, then direct artistic feeling will lead everyone to admit the superiority of icons that transgress the laws of perspective.⁸¹

In the icon of Nativity the mountain pictured in inverse perspective, almost touches the sky. This symbolizes that there is reconciliation between heaven and earth by God's Incarnation. The Orthodox Church teaches that the icon of the Nativity is the representation of joy, because on this great day God has become Man. Christ the incarnate God destroys the fear of death and brings humankind the joy of promised eternity. The pessimism from the Ecclesiast's words "God is in heaven and you are on earth" (Ecclesiastes 5:2) is dissolved and replaced with the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah's hope "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down..." (Isaiah 64:1). The troparions of the Nativity feast⁸² emphasize that no one is excluded from sharing in this happiness. The saint exults as he draws near to victory. The sinner is glad as he is called to be forgiven. Everybody is called to life, and the whole of creation is welcoming the Incarnate God.

81. Pavel Florensky, *Beyond Vision; Essay on the Perception of Art*, tr. Wendy Salmond (Great Britain: MPG Books, Bodmin, Cornwall, 2002), p. 202.

82. *Divine Prayers and Services of the Orthodox Church of Christ*, pp. 404-408.

2.3 The Transfiguration (17: 1-6; 9)

"The time shall come, when you will enjoy the sight
without ceasing, and dwell together with Him who
is light and life."

Saint John of Damascus

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up", he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." (Matthew 17:1-9)

In his research about The Transfiguration feast, Vladimir Lossky citing Nicephoros Callixtus maintains that the feast of the Transfiguration must be very ancient, because Saint Helen, mother of Emperor Constantine the Great (fourth century), had built a church on Mount Tabor (where it is presumed that Transfiguration of the Lord took place); this seems to have been confirmed by excavations.⁸³ Once the celebration of the Transfiguration was established, then probably the feast was embodied in iconography.

If one views an icon of The Transfiguration before the 14th century, for example the mosaic in the Church of The Holy Apostles in Constantinople, and another after the 14th century, like the reproduction below, one notes major aesthetical differences between the two. This was due to the controversy concerning the nature of the light on Mount Tabor observed by a group of rationalist theologians and monks on Mount Athos in Greece. This

83. Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Lossky. *The Meaning of Icons*, p. 211.

controversy had a great influence on iconography, and I will explain this later on; first I will do a short presentation of the two concepts of the light on Mount Tabor.



The Transfiguration – icon painted by Theophane the Greek XV century

For explaining the rationalist theologian's and Athonite monks' concept of the divine light, I will use Bernard Lonergan's dialectic.⁸⁴ For Lonergan, dialectic has to do with being willing to allow our views to be challenged and corrected. Conflicts occur at the fourth level of decision, where values are acknowledged, and demand personal commitment. Dialectic does not resolve conflicts, it clarifies them and makes them explicit. Out of such clarification comes the need to make choices, to decide which are positions and which are counter-positions. Lonergan talks about how horizons can vary in different ways. Differences can be complementary (different but complementary), developmental (representing different stages of a development process), or totally opposed to each other so that each is incomprehensible from the viewpoint of the other. It is these totally incompatible horizons that are opposed

84. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 235-262.

dialectically. These latter types of differences arise from the converted and the unconverted developing respectively positions and counter-positions. Dialectically opposed horizons are not mere differences in perceptions, due to a lack of knowledge, or inadequate understanding. Rather these differences represent fundamentally different valuations on the part of those who adhere to them. Such fundamental differences are remedied only through conversion.

The conflict about the nature of the light on Mount Tabor appeared when the rationalist theologians led by Barlaam of Calabria insisted that on Mount Tabor the Apostles had seen ordinary physical light. They maintain that only through reason and philosophy is it possible for one to obtain knowledge of God, and that *Hesychasm* - the stillness in the presence of God - is a waste of time. Hesychasm is an orthodox doctrine and practice elaborated by Saint Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), a monk from Mount Athos, but present much earlier in the Orthodox Church.. This practice is a spiritual discipline combined with contemplative prayer (unceasingly repetition of the Jesus Prayer “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a sinner”) and stillness (a way of purification from passions and thoughts) through which one can see God in his uncreated energies. The practice unifies the mind and heart through unceasing prayer, and thus achieve the gift of seeing the light. The Hesychasts say that one can have the union with the light without mingling with it. This is one way to achieve “likeness” with God (“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness’” Genesis 1:26) to which man aspires, the equivalent of deification. In other words, Saint Gregory Palamas argued that the light on Tabor was only similar to physical light, but different by nature. He named this light, uncreated energy, and made a difference between the essence and uncreated energies of God. He argues that God is unknowable in His essence but He can be known through His uncreated energies.

The monks know that the essence of God transcends the fact of being inaccessible to the senses, since God is not only above all created things, but is even beyond Godhead. The excellence of Him who surpasses all things is not only beyond all affirmation, but also beyond all negation; it exceeds all excellence that is attainable by the mind... This light is not the essence of God, for that is inaccessible and incommunicable... However, the disciples would not even have seen the symbol, had they not first received eyes they did not possess before. As John of Damascus puts it, 'From being blind men, they began to see', and to contemplate this uncreated light. The light, then, became accessible to their eyes, but to eyes which saw in a way superior to that of natural sight, and had acquired the spiritual power of the spiritual light. This mysterious light, inaccessible, immaterial, uncreated, deifying, eternal, this radiance of the Divine Nature, this glory of the divinity, this beauty of the heavenly kingdom, is at once accessible to sense perception and yet transcends it.⁸⁵

The Orthodox doctrine of Hesychasm found expression in the icons of the Lord's Transfiguration. Thus, the iconography tries to depict the uncreated energies of God. The blue mandorla that surrounds Christ and the star that comes forwards from within Him, represent the uncreated light. The mandorla is formed by three concentric circles and emphasizes the presence of the Holy Trinity, and the fact that the Transfiguration is a theophany, that is, a revelation of all the divine Persons. The third darker blue circle represents the essence of God that remains unapproachable to humans. The star has three rays pointing towards the Apostles, and shows that the event is the work of the Trinity. Christ is the theological center of the icon and appears surrounded by the mandorla. His garments are white with touches of blue. Blue is the color of transcendence, in relation to all other colors which are earthly, and stands for the mystery of divine life. As in all icons of Christ, he is blessing the viewer with his right hand, and in his left hand he has a scroll signifying that he is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

85. Saint Gregory Palamas, *The Triads* tr. Nicholas Gendle, ed. John Meyendorff. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 57 and 80.

The icon of The Transfiguration was painted more often after the 14th century and introduces changes in all of iconography. Starting with the fourteenth century, the bodies of the saints were painted in an elongated form to accentuate their ascetic life. This represents an attempt at representing “the saint’s body transformed, transfigured by grace in prayer.”⁸⁶ One views the elongated form of Christ’s, Moses’, Elijah’s and Apostles’ bodies in the icon reproduced above. Before the 14th century, the bodies were not elongated because icons did not “speak” to the viewer about Hesychasm. The saints in an elongated form did not rely only on The Transfiguration icons, but passed into all icons of saints. Therefore, before the 14th century, a saint’s body in icons uses to have a proportion of 1:7 modules; 1:7 in iconography represents the number of modules for the length of the body. Usually a module is considered to be the head. Therefore, a saint’s body measures seven times the length of the head. As a consequence of the Hesychast teaching, which accentuates the ascetic life, icons of Christ and saints started to have a proportion of 1:10 modules. As a result, the “heavy” form of saints’ bodies in icons before the 14th century became from the 14th century on, ascetical and spiritualized forms in elongated bodies.⁸⁷

According to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, there are different degrees of vision of the uncreated light, and each person receives the light according to his or her thirst for it. In the Transfiguration icon, this teaching finds embodiment in the postures of the Apostles: Peter shields his eyes with one hand and with the other points towards Christ, John and James are overthrown by the light. At the same time, their posture depicts the words of the troparion of the feast, which tell that the light of God was proportioned according to what

86. M.J Le Guillou, *The Tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy* (London: Burns&Oates), p. 55.

87. For details on proportion of the body in iconography, see Egon Sendler, *The Icon –Image of the Invisible*, cap.7, pp. 107-118.

they could bear at that particular time: “When, O Christ our God, you were transfigured on the mountain, you did reveal your glory to your Disciples in proportion as they could bear it. Let your everlasting light also enlighten us sinners through the intercessions of the Theotokos. Giver of light, glory to You.”⁸⁸

The Apostles Peter, John and James are astonished by the vision of the Glory of the Lord. The Orthodox Church teaches that this is the splendor of the Resurrection, showed to the Apostles before the crucifixion, as comfort and consolation before they had to face the pain of Christ’s Crucifixion. They behold new and wondrous things and fall to the ground from the sight of the transfigured Christ. Vladimir Lossky says that by vision, they participate in God, just as they participate in light by seeing it.

Now the invisible God is revealed in Christ transfigured by the light of the father, the light in which man receives the incorruptible state of eternal life. The possibility of enjoying this deifying vision here on earth by receiving the light of the Father through the Incarnate Word is, for Saint Irenaeus, projected on to an eschatological plane – it signifies the millennial reign of the righteous.⁸⁹

The Apostles are pictured in icon barefooted, as they are on holy ground. It is a connection between the experience that the Apostles had and Moses’ encounter with the light of God in the burning bush on Mount Sinai when he received the command to remove his sandals as he was on the holy ground.

In the Transfiguration icon, Moses and Elijah are represented also. According to the common Orthodox interpretation, they represent the law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah), and they appeared on Mount Tabor to emphasize that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Law and prophecies. Another common interpretation is that Moses and Elijah were present at

^{88.} *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 577.

^{89.} Vladimir Lossky. *The Vision of God*. tr. Asheleigh Moorhouse (Leighton Buzzard, Eng.: Faith Press, 1973), p. 37.

the Transfiguration because Jesus Christ is the Lord over the living (Elijah, because he did not die, but he was raptured into haven bodily) and dead (Moses, because he died). The iconography represents Moses with the tables of Law in his hands, and Elijah pointing to Christ, sign which in icons means: "He is the One about whom the prophets wrote." That Elijah is alive is indicated in the icon by the small corner depiction of him being brought to Mount Tabor in a chariot carried by an angel. In the corner next to Moses we see a circle showing an angel retrieving him from his grave and transporting him to the scene of the Transfiguration. These sequences emphasize the eschatology of the Second coming of Christ. Although these characters are all on Mount Tabor, the iconography represents them on separate mountains' peaks, harkening back to the Old Testament events where both of them experienced visions of God: Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 33:18-23) and Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 19:9-18).

In the Orthodox Church, the feast of The Transfiguration is one of twelve major feasts of the liturgical year, connected with Christ's and Virgin Mary's life, and is celebrated on the 6th of August. On this day the icon of The Transfiguration is placed on a trestle (?), next to the iconostasis. The congregation not only hears the Gospel description of the feast, in Liturgical texts and songs, but also observes the icon of this holy event.

2.4 The Resurrection

"Life fell asleep and hell shook with fear."
Troparion for Holy Saturday –Orthodox Church

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him. 'Now I have told you.' So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. (Matthew 28:1-8)



Myrrh Bearer women 16th century
Stavronikita Monastery-Mount Athos



Descend into Hell or The Anastasis - Monastery Chora,
Istanbul

There are relatively few representations of the Resurrection Christ in icons. Ouspensky and Lossky⁹⁰ say that at the beginning of Christianity, the resurrection was depicted as one of the Old Testament prophecies about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, frequently the Prophet Jonah coming out from the whale's belly (Matthew 12:38-40):

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

The first representations of the Resurrection were not only symbolical, but there were representations of the Gospel' narratives also. One of the oldest types of Resurrection icon is the Myrrh-bearing women at the Lord's tomb, which existed already in the 3rd century at the church in Dura Europos.⁹¹ Similar versions of this image have been created in Palestine and Syria between about 200 and 230⁹². The holy women came to the Lord's tomb with spices, and they met the angel who showed them the empty grave. The angel sits upon the rolled-back stone, dressed in white. This detail of the rolling away of the stone represents in icon the mystical opening of the Christian Sacraments, which were held under the Law, for the Law was written on stone. On the empty tomb lays only the Lord's grave-clothes, the evidence of the resurrection's miracle. The mountains are pictured as steps, representing the spiritual ascent that one can have through faith and by understanding the significance of the empty tomb.

90. Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Losky. *The Meaning of Icon*, p. 185.

91. Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Losky. *The Meaning of Icon*, p. 185.

92. André Gaboré, *Christian Iconography*, p. 123.

The icon represents two or three women, depending on which Gospel is being depicted: Matthew (28:1) two women, or Mark (16:1), three women. There is no contradiction, but the teaching of the Orthodox Church says that the women went to the tomb more than once, in groups of different sizes. The faces of the myrrh-bearing women are wrinkled with bitter weeping at the Lord's death. These wrinkles are the trace of so-called "spiritual tears," and we see them in icons on many saints' faces. Saints' faces ascetical and wrinkled represent their work of cleansing the soul's darkness by a mixture between the water of tears and the "soap" of prayer. Early Christian iconography of the Resurrection did not bind itself to the representation of Myrrh-bearing women at the Lord's tomb, but followed the accounts of other eyewitnesses, especially the apostles. Especially popular was the image which shows Saint Thomas touching the wound of Christ with his finger, with an inscription above the figures: "My Lord and my God". This representation goes back to 4th century.⁹³

Gospel narratives are silent about the Resurrection, and the iconography respects this mystery. One of the odes of the Holy Easter in the Orthodox Church draws a parallel between the Nativity and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. "O Christ, you did not break the locks of virginity in your birth, did rise from the tomb, keeping its seals intact, and did open to us the gates of paradise."⁹⁴

Thus, the Resurrection is not depicted directly. The type of icon commonly associated with the feast of the Resurrection is the "Descent into Hell" which illustrates the New Testament passage from 1 Peter 3:18-19: "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous

93. André Gaboré , *Christian Iconograph*, p. 124.

94. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 924.

for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago.”

Anthony Cutler mentions an extraordinary opinion set out in an iconodule petition said to have been addressed to the emperor Theophilus by a council held at Jerusalem in 836. The petition stated that there was a series of Christological representations, which included the image of Descend into Hell, pre-dating even the composition of the Gospels.

While the image of Descent into Hell originated in an early cycle of illustrations to the Nicodemus Gospel, at least as early as the mid-ninth century it was understood as a full member of the cycle of Gospel illustrations, and in one case as part of the series of Christological representation antedating even the composition of the Gospels.⁹⁵

The icon of the Descent into Hell which expressed the spiritual, transcendental reality of the Resurrection, is according to Ouspensky the representation of the texts of Easter divine services: “Thou hast descendend into the abyss of the earth, O Christ, and hast broken down the eternal doors which imprison those who are bound, and like Jonah after three days inside the whale, Thou hast risen from the tomb.”⁹⁶ To the text cited by Ouspensky can be added another text from the Easter feast comprising the teaching of the Orthodox Church concerning the descent into hell being the last step in the act of the Incarnation of God: “You came down to earth to save Adam but not finding him here, O Master, you went looking for him even in Hades.”⁹⁷

95. Anthony Cutler. *Transfiguration, Studies in the Dynamics of Byzantine Iconography*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1975), p. 109.

96. Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Lossky. *The Meaning of the Icon*, p. 187.

97. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 930.

According to the liturgical texts, the icon of Descent into Hell represents the powerful meeting of the two Adams, the first Adam created by God, and the last Adam, Jesus Christ, God incarnated. Jesus Christ is shown bringing Adam and Eve (Adam and Eve represent here the human nature), and then all the righteous of former times, out of the place of death. The position of Jesus' hands on Adam's and Eve's wrists is a subtle detail "that must have left no doubt in the spectator's mind of the reality of this Resurrection."⁹⁸

The righteous and the prophets of the Old Testament, are depicted on the left side of the icon, among them John the Baptist, David, Solomon, and Moses recognize the Savior and express their recognition by their gesture and attitudes. On the right side are other righteous and prophets, and in front of them is Abel, the son of Adam, the first man ever to die. Christ, in a white robe and surrounded by a mandorla, a symbol of glory and radiant truth, the Conqueror of death and sin, stands over the gates of Hades. In some icons, the gates of Hades have the shape of the cross beneath Christ's feet. In the dark cave of Hades, death, personified in human form is defeated, bound up, and surrounded by shattered chains. The icon recalls Saint Paul's words: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). To emphasize Christ's victory over the death, in some icons he carries the cross, which does not represent Christ's Passion, but is now the symbol of his victory. As often happens in iconography, there developed very complex Resurrection icons. Thus, in some icons Christ is depicted in the centre in the act of harrowing the Hell, beneath are represented the myrrh-bearing women at the tomb, and above is depicted the Ascension of the Lord to heaven. This type of icon represents the omnipresence of Christ as one of the Liturgy hymns says:

98. Anthony Cutler. *Transfiguration, Studies in the Dynamics of Byzantine Iconography*, p. 109.

“As God, fulfilling all things, O Christ, you were in the tomb in your body, in Hades with your soul, in paradise with the thief and on the throne together with the father and the Spirit; O you that are boundless.”⁹⁹

In the Orthodox Church, the service for the Sunday of Great and Holy Easter starts a little before midnight on the Great Saturday.¹⁰⁰ All is dark, as in the Hades, or as in the tomb, and only a vigil candle is kindled. The priest gives the blessing, and after few prayers, he takes the candle from the altar, and comes to the royal doors¹⁰¹ and sings: "Come ye take light from the Light that is never overtaken by night. Come, glorify the Christ, risen from death"¹⁰² and all the people join him in singing this hymn. Suddenly the Church is flooded with light, as all the believers kindle their candles. The Easter service turns into joy and all people sing together: "Christ has Risen from the dead, by death trampling upon Death, and has bestowed life upon those in the tombs." For forty days, until the Ascension of the Lord to heaven, the people greet one another saying: "Christ is Risen", which is answered, "Truly He is Risen". This is the joy of Christ's Resurrection, which illumined humankind darkness, the same joy that one can see it looking at the Descend into Hell icon.

99. *Holy Liturgy*, p.71.

100. Saturday before the Easter Sunday.

101. The central doors of the iconostasis, placed in front of the altar's table.

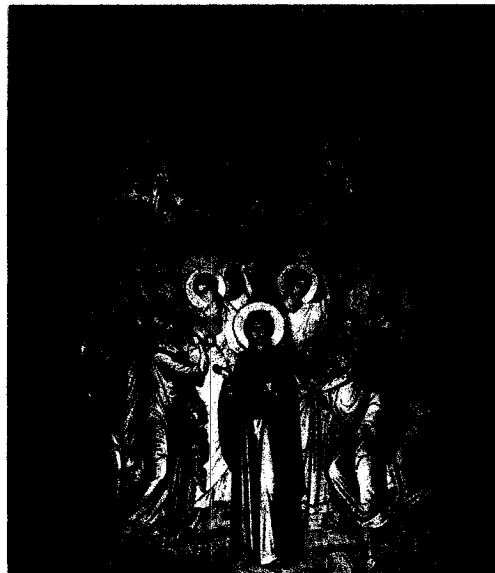
102. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 920.

2.5 The Ascension

“The glory to which man is called is that he should grow more godlike by growing ever more human”
Fr. Dumitu Staniloe

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

So when they met together, the Apostles asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:1-11)



The Ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven – 16th century Russian icon

The Gospels of Mark and Luke are the only Gospels which relate the Ascension event, both without many details. Only in the Acts of the Apostles, do we find a fuller account of this event. After the Resurrection, Jesus Christ remained on earth for forty days, appearing at intervals to his disciples in various places. He ate, drank, and conversed with them, thus confirming his Resurrection. After forty days, he ascended into heaven. The Apostles spent forty days in the presence of resurrected Christ, and then they had seen his ascension, and through the ascension the glorification of the human nature, because the nature of humankind was raised to a dignity beyond any expectation and hope. Vladimir Lossky, making a synthesis of Saint Maximus the Confessor's teaching, explains mystically the birth, the crucifixion and ascension of Christ, which unites the earth to the heavenly spheres:

By his birth of the Virgin, He suppressed the division of human nature into male and female. On the cross He unites paradise, the dwelling place of the first men before the fall, with the terrestrial reality where the fallen descendants of the first Adam now dwell; indeed, He says to the good thief, "today thou shalt be with Me in paradise", yet he nevertheless continues to hold converse with His disciples during His sojourn on earth after the resurrection. At His ascension, first of all, He unites the earth to the heavenly spheres that is to the sensible heaven; then He penetrates into the empyreum, passes through the angelic hierarchies and unites the spiritual heaven, the world of mind, with the sensible world. Finally, like a new cosmic Adam, He presents to the Father the totality of the universe restored to unity in Him, by uniting the created to the uncreated.¹⁰³

In the Bible, as in iconography, the focus is on the consequences of the Ascension of the Lord for the Church, rather than on the Ascension itself. Thus, Christ is not the center of the icon, but the gathering at this event of the Apostles and Mother of God. Mother of God is

103. Vladimir Lossky. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. (Cambridge&London: James Clarke& Co., 1973), p. 137.

represented, although the Scripture does not mention her presence at the Lord Ascension.

Leonid Ouspensky explains her presence in icon, due to Church Tradition:

The presence at the Lord Ascension of the Mother of God, of which there is no direct mention in the Holy Scriptures, is categorically affirmed by the Tradition passed on in the texts of the Divine service, such as 9th canticle of the Canon: “Rejoice, thou Mother of Christ our God, seeing with the Apostles Him whom thou didst engender ascending to Heaven and glorifying Him.”¹⁰⁴

Dionysius of Furna gives exact the place where the Mother of God has to be pictured in the icon of Ascension. Thus, she has to be depicted in the middle of the Apostles, and the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, flank her, right under Christ, with her hands in prayer, representing the Church in prayer.¹⁰⁵ Ouspensky emphasizes that the representation of the Mother of God directly under Christ can be interpreted as her intercession for the world.¹⁰⁶ Christ is the head of the Church, thus Christ and the Mother of God are depicted on the same axis. He ascends in glory, and the glory is represented by the mandorla. Within mandorla, there are two red ribbons: one represents Heaven (the throne of God) and the other represents the Earth (His footstool). He blesses the assembly with his right hand; this gesture pictured the Lord in heaven as the source of blessing, and in his left hand he has a scroll, which represents his teaching. As in all icons of Christ, his halo is marked with a cross and on it are inscribed the letter O, ω, N., and next to his image, the initials of his IC XC. In other icons, above the mandorla the opened doors of heaven are represented. Through the Ascension of Christ, heaven’s doors that had been closed to men since the Fall of Adam were opened again. It is a depiction of the psalmist David’s words: “Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors that the King of glory may come in.” (Psalm 24:7)

104. Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Lossky. *The Meaning of Icon*, p. 196.

105. Dionysius of Furna. *Erminia*, p. 118.

106. Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Lossky. *The Meaning of Icon*, p. 197.

In Lord's left and right sides, there are two archangels: Raphael and Uriel. Dionysius of Furna did not give the reason why these two Archangels are depicted in the icon. Christ does not need their help in ascending, and probably their presences want to emphasize his glory. In some icons, they are represented not touching the mandorla but with their hands in a prayer position, or singing in clarions.

The Gospels narrate that the ascension took place on Mount of Olives, and this is represented iconographically by the fact that the mountain where the Apostles and the Theotokos gathered was covered in olives trees. In this icon two angels flank the Theotokos. According to Dionysius of Furna, the two men mentioned in Acts of Apostles (Acts 1:10) are the Archangels Michael and Gabriel¹⁰⁷. The Archangels Michael and Gabriel are dressed in white, because they live in the presence of God, and are filled with his light. They point to the Lord, and in some Ascension icons, they have in their hands two opened papyrus. On one papyrus it is written: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?", and on the other it is written: "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." According to the Archangels words, the icon represents the Ascension and at the same time, Christ's second coming in the glory at the end of time.

Next to Archangels are represented the Apostles. On their right side is Saint Peter, and on their left is Saint Paul.¹⁰⁸ Saint Paul was not there at the time of the ascension. In some icons, he is depicted with a hand raised in front of his eyes, recalling the fact that he was blinded on his way to Damascus, before becoming a Christian. His presence together

107. Dionysius of Fournia, *Erminia*, p. 118.

108. For the details on how Saints Peter and Paul faces are depicted in iconography, see *Erminia* of Dionysius of Fournia, pp. 170-171.

with the other Apostles and with Theotokos, represents the whole Church, awaiting the return of Christ. The icon includes not only persons who were present at the historical event, but rather it reunites persons from different times and places representing the Church of Christ. Thus, time and space are abolished in icons.

Before the Ascension, Christ gave to the Apostles his last commandment, to go forth and preach in his name to all the nations, beginning with Jerusalem, promising that he will be with them until the end of time. At the same time, he told them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to remain there a while until they were clothed with power from on high by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them.

“O Christ our God, upon fulfilling your dispensation for our sake, you ascended in Glory, uniting the earthly with the heavenly. You were never separate but remained inseparable, and cried out to those who love you, ‘I am with you and no one is against you’.”¹⁰⁹

Since then, “in the same way as God walked in the human nature through the incarnation of His Son, humanity walks in God through the Ascension of Christ.”¹¹⁰

109. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 1002.

110. Metropolitan George of Mount Lebanon, “The Christ in His Ascension,” *An-Nahar* (Lebanese news paper translated from Arabic) April 22, 1999 www.annahar.com.

2.6 The Descent of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity

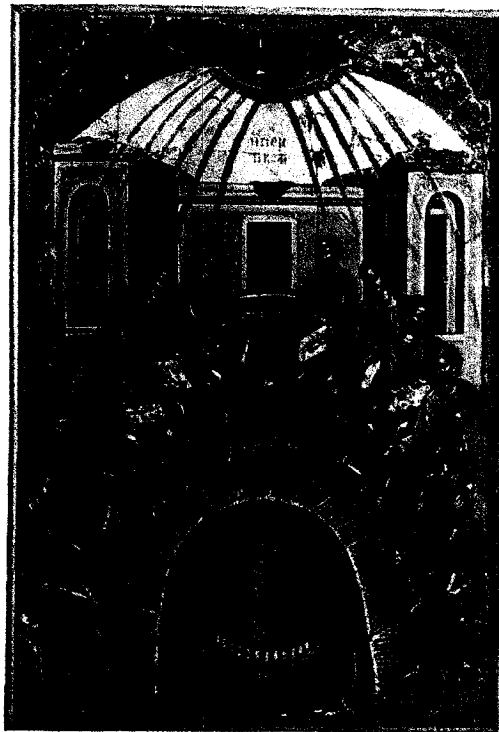
“God is a fire that warms and kindles the heart and inward parts.”
St. Seraphim of Sarov

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome both Jews and converts to Judaism Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:1-13)

The feast of Pentecost had its roots in the Old Testament. The Jews celebrated it in remembrance of the law which was given to them at the hands of Moses on that day on Mount Sinai. The Holy Church of Christ, however, celebrates it in remembrance of the descent of the Holy Spirit, on the tenth day from the Ascension of Lord Jesus Christ to heaven, and the fiftieth from His Resurrection. The Greek word for Pentecost means fifty and it is no coincidence that the Christian Churches have adopted a feast by the same name. This signifies that if the grace was foretold through the Law, now the Law was fulfilled through the descending of the Holy Spirit. It can also be seen as the presence of the Spirit to seal the new covenant introduced by Jesus Christ. Orthodox believers affirm in the Liturgy “Light is the Father; and Light is the Son; Light is the Holy Spirit descending upon the Apostles in fiery tongues, through which the whole universe was illuminated to worship the Holy

Trinity.”¹¹¹ On that day Jews from Diaspora congregated from distant places. This is the moment of the birth of the Church, and because “the Majesty of the Holy Ghost is never separate from the Omnipotence of the Father and the Son,”¹¹² on Pentecost, the Eastern Church celebrates also the feast of the Holy Trinity.

The Icon of Pentecost



Theophanis the Cretan. The Pentecost 16th
Stavronikita Monastery Mount Athos

The icon of Pentecost depicts the moment of descent of the Holy Spirit, as the Acts of the Apostles describes. The Apostles, who represent the Church, are seated in two groups on a semicircle bench. At their gathering there is an empty place (in some Pentecostal icons this

111. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 1003.

112. Saint Leo the Great, *The Letters and Sermons*. Schaff Philip, et.al. ed. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2.12.(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956). Sermon LXXVII *On Whitsuntide, III*, p. 192.

place has the shape of the altar table), which, according to Ouspensky and Losky, represents the place of Jesus Christ, the leader of the Church.¹¹³ There is an open space between the Apostles and heaven, because the Holy Spirit is believed to have “filled the whole house”. The same Holy Spirit, who at Christ’s Baptism is said to have come upon the head of Christ in the form of a dove (Matthew 3:16), at Pentecost came and rested on the Apostles’ heads as tongues of fire (Acts 2:1-3).

That the Holy Spirit comes from the Father is represented in iconography through thin and gentle lines that connect the tongues of fire with heaven. Lucian Turcescu in his book *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons* mentions Gregory of Nyssa when he said that: “The ultimate cause of everything that exists is God the Father. All that exists, including the Holy Spirit, comes into being from the Father through the Son.”¹¹⁴ This is what the eastern patristic tradition believed; the iconography pictured God the Father through a black semicircle, from which the Holy Spirit, represented through gentle lines, is coming out. The color black symbolizes God’s apophaticism, his depth and the teaching of Orthodoxy that he cannot be known in his essence.

The Apostles receive the Holy Spirit inside the house, represented in the icon through the fabric cloth that unites the building from the background. The space under the fabric cloth represents the upper room where the Lord’s disciples gathered after the Ascension. One of the hymns of the feast of Pentecost in Orthodox Church emphasizes that at Babylon there was confusion of tongues because of the boldness of the tower-builders, but at the Pentecost

113. Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Losky, *The Meaning of Icons*, p. 200.

114. Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 56.

the unison of the tongues has been renewed for the salvation of our souls.¹¹⁵ Romanian Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae inherited that tradition:

Staniloae sees the Pentecost as the event that sealed the birth of the Church. Therefore, along with the authentic patristic tradition (*The Shepherd of Hermas*, Gregory Nazianzos, John Chrysostom), he believed that during Pentecost the Holy Spirit infuses “a common way of thinking in those who come to believe which makes them understand one another despite all the differences of expression which may exist among them.” This makes the Church the opposite of the Tower of Babel. At the same time, the common way of thinking symbolizes the unity in diversity that the Church should reflect, because those who have received the same understanding preserved their distinctive languages.¹¹⁶

The unity in Christ is emphasized in this icon through the Apostles seated in a semicircle. The attitude of the Apostles is one of calm and harmony because when the Holy Spirit comes, order abounds, as he is the Spirit of unity.

The Apostles are the teachers who instruct all the Church’s children into becoming temples of the Holy Spirit. Thus, in this icon they are represented with books or scrolls in their hands. Because Peter and Paul are considered as first in prominence among the Apostles, in the icon of Pentecost they are portrayed as leading the group of Apostles.

As in the icon of Ascension mentioned earlier, Paul appears in the icon of Pentecost although he was not present at this event. Through the work of the Holy Spirit Saul (the persecutor of the Christian Church), was to change into Paul (the Apostle of Christ), and thus his place in the icons is among the Apostles. The Evangelists Mark and Luke, like Saint Paul, were not present at Pentecost, but through the inspiration of Holy Spirit they wrote two of the

115. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 999.

116. Lucian Turcescu editor. *Dumitru Staliloae. Tradition and Modernity in Theology*. (Iasi: The Center for Romanian Studies, 2002), pp. 99-100. Turcescu’s own chapter entitled “Eucharistic Ecclesiology or Open Sobornicity?” is available in pdf format on Lucian Turcescu website <http://artsandscience.concordia.ca/facstaff/s-u/turcescu/sobornicity.pdf>

synoptic¹¹⁷ Gospels. The icon of Pentecost represents the Apostles and the writers of the books which form the New Testament, since the Holy Spirit inspired their writings. Those who wrote one or more books are portrayed holding in their hands a book, which is the sign that they are the writers of the books comprising the New Testament: Saint Paul is holding his Pauline Epistles; the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are holding their books of Gospels. The rest of the Apostles are each holding in their hands a scroll representing their teaching authority received from the Lord Jesus Christ after his Resurrection, through the words:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Below the Apostles there is an elderly figure wearing royal robes and a crown; this is the personification of the world. He holds a piece of fabric containing twelve rolled scrolls, which represent the teaching of the twelve Apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit who “is the Author of spiritual regeneration.”¹¹⁸ Their teachings renew the face of the earth since they were sent by Jesus Christ to preach the Gospel to all parts of the world (Luke 24:47).

Nicolay Pokrovsky, cited by Ouspensky, gives an explanation of the elderly figure, who is beneath the Apostle’s feet:

Why at the descent of the Holy Spirit is there shown a man sitting in a dark place, bowed down with years, dressed in a red garment with a royal crown on his head, and in his hands a white cloth containing twelve written scrolls? The man sits in a dark place, since the whole world had formerly been without faith; he is bowed down with

117. The name given to the first three canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke); there are numerous passages which are common to them, but also portions which are peculiar either to only two, or even to only one, of them.

118. Saint Gregory the Great. *Selected Epistles*. . Schaff Philip, et.al.ed. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2.13.(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956), p. 384.

years, for he was made old by the sin of Adam; his red garment signifies the devil's blood sacrifices; the royal crown signifies sin, which ruled in the world; the white cloth in his hands with the twelve scrolls means the twelve Apostles, who brought light to the whole world with their teaching.¹¹⁹

The king whose name is "Cosmos" represents the world in prayer. The Orthodox prayer to the Holy Spirit is recited by the congregation not only at the feast of Pentecost, but in every rite and service known to Orthodoxy:

"O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, Who art everywhere present and fillest all things, Treasury of Blessings and Giver of Life: Come and abide in us and cleanse us from every impurity, and save our souls, O Good One!"¹²⁰

The icon of Holy Trinity

Although it is not canonical¹²¹ to picture God the Father in icons because he never took a shape of being seen by human eyes, there are representations which depict Him as an old man. There are two kinds of these representations. First is the Paternitas. The Father, pictured as an old man, has the Son in his lap, and Son holds a halo in which is represented the Holy Spirit in a form of a dove. This image represents the Son being born of the Father, and the Spirit proceeding from God and being sent through Christ. This image is not canonical because God the Father is represented in a human form, and because the third Person of the Holy Trinity is represented as a dove.

The acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council speak about the images of Jesus Christ, Mother of God, Angels, who as men appeared to the just, Apostles, Prophets, Martyrs and of holy men, but never about God the Father:

119. Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, p. 208.

120. Bishop Fan Stylian Noli, compiler, *Eastern Orthodox Pocket Prayer Book* (The Albanian Orthodox Church in America, Boston, Massachusetts, 1954), p. 45.

121. Canons are certain rules or norms of painting icons, prescribed by the Church.

These honourable and venerable images, as has been said, we honour and salute and reverently venerate: to wit, the image of the incarnation of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, and that of our spotless Lady the all-holy Mother of God, from whom he pleased to take flesh, and to save and deliver us from all impious idolatry; also the images of the holy and incorporeal Angels, who as men appeared to the just. Likewise also the figures and effigies of the divine and all-lauded Apostles, also of the God-speaking Prophets, and of the struggling Martyrs and of holy men. So that through their representations we may be able to be led back in memory and recollection to the prototype, and have a share in the holiness of some one of them.¹²²

Another reason why this image is not canonical is a certain ambiguity with regard to the “Filioque,” a question of great importance for the Orthodox Church. The dove representing the Holy Ghost is in Christ’s hand; as the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and from the Son, according to the Filioque dogma. Filioque (Latin: “and from the Son”), is a dogma of the double Procession of the Holy Ghost from Father and Son, a dogma added to the text of the Constantinopolitan creed of 381 AD by the Western church in the Middle Ages. The Orthodox Creed says that Holy Ghost proceeds only from the Father (John 15:26). The Filioque added to the creed is one of the major causes of the schism between the Eastern and Western churches.¹²³

The second uncanonical representations are of the Holy Trinity where the Father is portrayed as an old man, the Son is pictured as a young man, and the Holy Spirit is represented as a dove. Picturing the dove as the symbol for the Holy Spirit, the image does not take into account the idea of the identity of the three Persons within the Trinity. God one in essence and three equal Persons cannot be seen in the icon mentioned above. Therefore, this imagery is not canonical because it does not represent the dogma of the Holy Trinity:

122. *The Seven Ecumenical Council*, Schaff Philip, et.al. ed. , p. 542.

123. Encyclopedia Britannica Online; Concordia Libraries .

"the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God."¹²⁴

The canonical representation of the Holy Trinity in the Orthodox Church is the representation of the Old Testament story of the divine visit to Abraham.

The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great tree of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, 'If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.' 'Very well,' they answered, 'do as you say.'"(Genesis 18:1-5)



Andrei Rublev -The Holy Trinity 14th century
Tretyakov Museum Moscow

The icon of Abraham's hospitality accords with the Orthodox Church teaching about Holy Trinity because Jesus Christ said: "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." (John 8:56) The three men that Abraham received at

124. Athanasian Creed, available on line: <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/athanasian.creed.html>.

the oak of Mamre, represent a foreshadowing of the later revelation of the Holy Trinity¹²⁵. This icon also points to the equality of the three divine persons.

In the Orthodox Church, this icon is considered the “icon of icons”. The most famous icon of the Holy Trinity is the one painted by Andrei Rublev (1360/70?–1430?). Paul Evdokimov tells the story of how the icon, in 1515, one hundred years after it was painted, as it was stripped of all metallic ornamentation, the metropolitan, the bishops, and others in assistance cried out together: “In truth, the heavens have opened up, and we see God’s splendor.”¹²⁶

There are icons of the Holy Trinity in which Abraham, the father of the chosen people, and Sara, are depicted welcoming the three pilgrims, whom the Bible in book of Genesis chapter 19 calls “angels”. This model, named *The Hospitality of Abraham* or *Holy Trinity*, was painted at least from the fourth century on, as André Grabar asserts. He gives as examples a painting in the recently discovered cavern of the fourth century under the Via Latina in Rome and a mosaic from Saint Maria Maggiore in Rome (about 430)¹²⁷. This model was copied until the 15th century, when Andrei Rublev’s icon of the Holy Trinity, the dogmatic elements began to dominate the composition. Thus, Abraham and Sara are not pictured in the icon and their absence invites the viewer to penetrate deeper into the icon to speak with God in a very intimate way. The more one looks at this holy image with the eyes of faith, the more one realizes that the icon is meant to be a holy space one is ‘called’ to enter and stay in. As one faces the icon in prayer, one experiences a gentle invitation to participate

125. See the Baptism of Jesus Christ (Matthew 3:13-17), and the Lord’s Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9).

126. Paul Evdokimov, *The art of the Icon*, p. 246.

127. André Gaboré, *Christian Iconograph*, p. 114.

in the intimate conversation that is taking place among the three divine angels and to join them around the table. Everything in this icon has changed its meaning. Abraham's tent becomes the temple-palace; the oak of Mamre becomes the tree of life: "I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (Rev.2:7). The oak of Mamre reminds us of Christ's cross. The oak's trunk goes through the Eucharistic chalice and has its roots in a rectangle drawn at the bottom of the table.

In the Orthodox view the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. This change is not physical but mystical and sacramental. While the qualities of the bread and wine remain, Orthodoxy maintains that the believers partake of the true Body and Blood of Christ, and so Christ is truly present with His people in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The cup which contains the Body and the Blood of Christ is called Eucharistic chalice. In icon the Eucharistic chalice is represented on the table where the Angels are gathered. Thus, the table became in icon the altar on which the Eucharistic cup contains food for the soul. The Eucharistic chalice, with its divine content, takes the place of the sacrificed calf that was offered by Abraham to his divine visitors. The rectangle drawn at the bottom of the table represents the earth; in the 14th century the idea of the earth being flat was still believed.

This icon of the Holy Trinity radiates the transcendent truth of the Trinitarian dogma. There are three different angels representing the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. The angels have the same feature representing the unity in essence of the three divine Persons. The equality of the three Persons within the Holy Trinity is represented by the equilateral triangle, which is formed by the three halos. The unity of the three Persons is expressed by the circle which comprises them.¹²⁸ The fact that Rublev represented the Angels inscribed in

128. Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of Icon*, p. 250; Egon Sendler *The Icon Image of the Invisible*, p. 104; Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Lossky. *The meaning of Icons*, p. 202.

a circle is, according to Ouspensky, an echo of Dionysius the Areopagite's teaching, according to whose interpretation "circular movement signifies that God remains identical with Himself, that He envelops in synthesis the intermediate parts and extremities, which are at the same time containers and contained, and that He recalls to Himself all that has gone forth from Him."¹²⁹

Unity, equality and diversity are held together as representing the perfect communion within the Holy Trinity. Each of the angels has his head bent in mutual love, and holds a scepter showing his gentle authority. Within the Holy Trinity, there is no diversity of will. "Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as they are indivisible, work indivisibly."¹³⁰ The involvement of all the Persons of the Holy Trinity in the work of redemption of the world is represented by their blessing over the Eucharistic chalice.

There are two interpretations of Rublev's icon, regarding the identification of the angels. There was never a question of the angel on the right side, identified as the angel of the Holy Spirit. The confusion is around the other two angels. Thus, the first interpretation considers the angel in the middle as the Father and the angel at the left, as the Son. The second interpretation considers the angel at the left as the Father and the angel in middle as the Son. Paul Evdokimov followed the first interpretation on a testimony of Stephen of Perm, an elder contemporary with Andrei Rublev. Evdokimov explains that:

In his mission to Zyrianes who inhabited the vast regions of Great Permian, going up to the Urals, Saint Stephen carried with him an icon of the Trinity very similar to the one Rublev painted. Around each angel, we can read an inscription in the Zyrian language: the angel on the left carries the name *Py*,

129. Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Lossky. *The meaning of Icons*, p. 202.

130. Saint Augustine. *On the Holy Trinity Doctrinal Treatises. Moral Treatises*. Schaff Philip, et.al.ed. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 1.3.(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956), p. 20.

Son, and the angel on the right *Puiltos*, Holy Spirit, and the middle angel, *Ai*, Father.”¹³¹

The second interpretation is more used than the first one. Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky in their book *The Meaning of the Icon* follow the second interpretation.¹³² According to this second interpretation the angel on the left is considered the Father especially because of the colors of his garments. As the other two Angels, he has blue shadows in his garment, representing his divinity, but the cloak is yellow diaphanous meaning mystery: “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only He has seen the Father.” (John 6:46) Another reason why the left angel is considered the Father is because the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed¹³³ starts with God the Father, “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty.....” and the ‘reading’ of the icon starts from left to right. This is a way of highlighting the tight relation that exists between the liturgical prayers, the biblical texts and the icons. The angel in the middle represents the Son; his garments have two colors: blue, meaning his divinity, and purple red, meaning his humanity. On his right shoulder, there is a yellow ribbon, which in iconography always signifies that he came to serve, not to be served: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). The third angel is the Holy Spirit. His garment is blue, the color of divinity, and his cloak is green the color of life, since he is the one who gives life.

There is a strong sense of harmony, unity and love in this icon. It illustrates in colors the great Orthodox hymn: “We have seen the true light; we have received the Holy Spirit; we have found the true Faith. Wherefore, let us worship the indivisible Trinity; for he hath saved

131. Paul Evdokimov *The art of the Icon*, pp. 248-249.

132. Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky *The Meaning of the Icon*, pp. 201-204.

133. This Creed is unchanged until today, and is pronounced by the Orthodox congregation in each Liturgy.

us.”¹³⁴ The image of Holy Trinity, both one and three, is the unique *standard of all existence*.

This icon has a powerful human appeal for believers: “Be one as I and my Father are one.”

(John 17, 21)

134. *Divine prayers and Services*, p. 995.

PART III

CONCLUSION

In the Orthodox Church the first Sunday of the Lent is the day of celebration of the hanging of icons in the Church in remembrance of the act performed by the Emperor of Constantinople, Michael, and his mother Theodora, in the days of patriarch Methodius.

Theophilus, the husband of Theodora was the last Byzantine emperor who fought against using the icons in worship. After his death (824 CE), Empress Theodora restored and reestablished the veneration of icons. She kissed the icon of the Theotokos and of Jesus Christ before the Patriarch Methodius, not with a kiss of worship, as the worship is due only to God, but a kiss in veneration of the icon. Then she besought God asking of him forgiveness for her husband. After that in the presence of her son, Emperor Michael, and in the presence of all the clergy and the people, she hung the icons adorning therewith the Church.¹³⁵ In remembrance of this act since the year 843 CE, the first Sunday of Lent in the Orthodox Church commemorates the victory of Orthodoxy over the Iconoclasts; it is called the day of the “triumph of the Orthodoxy”.

Today in celebrating this feast, Orthodox Christians of various national backgrounds gather to proclaim the unity of Orthodoxy. In Montreal the celebration of the “triumph of the Orthodoxy” is held each year in a different Orthodox church. During the Liturgy, the priests of various Orthodox jurisdictions pray together, and at one point exit the altar, holding in their hands icons of the Savior, the Mother of God, and the Saints. This celebration confirms the importance that icons have in the Orthodox Church, as in picturing the incarnation of the Word of God, who became human in Jesus Christ. For believers this is a wonderful event

¹³⁵. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 674.

because in spite of the different national backgrounds, they are one in Christ. For them each icon in the priests' hands presents an unspoken narrative about the deification and transfiguration of human life through Christ; and the union of the heavenly and earthly realms, accomplished in the Incarnation. "Being of 'one mind and one heart' in all our inter-Orthodox diversity", said his Eminence Iakovos, Metropolitan of Chicago, "we form a remarkable mosaic icon"¹³⁶.

The teaching of the Church is briefly confessed on this day in one of the hymns:

"As the prophets beheld, as the Apostles have taught, as the Church has received, as the Teachers have dogmatized, as the Universe has agreed, as Grace has shown forth, as Truth has revealed, as falsehood has been dissolved, as Wisdom has presented, as Christ awarded, thus we declare; thus we assert, thus we preach Christ our true God, and honour His Saints in words, in writings, in thoughts, in sacrifices, in Churches, in Holy Icons; on the one hand worshiping and reverencing Christ as God and Lord; and on the other hand honouring as true servants of the same Lord of all and accordingly offering them veneration."¹³⁷

This means that faith, spirituality, liturgy, and theology within Orthodoxy are expressed not only in the spoken and written word but also through the lines and color of Christ's icons and of His saints. The Archbishop Nicolae of the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese in America and Canada emphasized that the representation of saints in the icon follow the representation of the Savior, and this is justified not only by the Incarnation, but also by the Resurrection of Christ, as symbolic representation of their transfigured life. Thus, icons help us to understand not only the saint's Christian life, but our life also as a participation in the divine life, as a tendency toward holiness, which means the shining on each one's face of God's

136. *Sunday of Orthodoxy 2000* Metropolitan of Serbian Church in America, Iakovos of Krinis
http://www.romarch.org/eng/archive/sunday_orthodoxy04.php

137. *Divine Prayers and Services*, p. 673.

image.¹³⁸ According to Iakovos, Metropolitan of Serbian Orthodox Church at Chicago through the icons that surround us in the church and at our home:

“We begin to realize the vision of Genesis 1 and 2, the vision of ourselves created as icons, as images of God [and] our own calling and destiny – to be living icons, holy icons of the living and holy God. Likewise, we learn to reverence and respect *all* other persons as living icons, even as we cense all persons present without distinguishing ethnicity, race, gender or any other difference.”¹³⁹

The icons as the Bible, the Liturgy, the texts of Holy Fathers, the incense and even the architecture of the Churches, which generally are build in the form of the cross, draw the human senses into the depth of Christian faith, to see, hear, feel, and witnesses to the sanctification of the matter by the Incarnation of God.

138. *Message of His Eminence Archbishop Nicolae for the Sunday of Orthodoxy 2004*
http://www.romarch.org/eng/archive/sunday_orthodoxy04.php

139. *Sunday of Orthodoxy 2000* Metropolitan of Serbian Chrch in America, Iakovos of Krinis
http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/resources/sermons/iakovos_sunday_orthodoxy_2000.htm

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