
THE ICON

A THEOLOGICAL AND CATECHICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

Our study tries to evidence the triple role of the holy image - the icon (i.e. theological, catechical and educational). The sense and theological content of the icon becomes obvious from the teaching of the Church, the teaching-answer given to the iconoclasm. The catechical aim of the icon is evidenced by the relation between Gospel and icon, relation that contributes to the spreading of the Christian teaching, the icon being a spiritual guide for those who love the prayer. The educational perspective of the icon is given by its role of didactical mean fulfilled during the transmission of the Christian faith. The aim of the icon is to make from every human being a new one in the Christic perspective.

Keywords: icon, functions, education

1. The theology of icon - a preliminary overview

The icon represented from the very beginning an inexhaustible source of semantic interpretations. The explanation of the icon reality stirred many mutations in which the ambiguity and polysemy dispose the main role. The examples are relevant in this sense. For instance, from the metaphor: 'Theotokos is an icon of womanhood' it comes to the invocation of the iconic function increate to the symbolic knowledge, and the word 'icon' enters the informatics field, too.

The iconicity of a 'religious representation' is neither the "result of a conceptual mixture nor that of an emphatic, irrational reference. That is to say that icon - the ecclesial event - is the gift of the Church for the human eye." [1]

The biblical Anthropology starts from the text which seals the cosmogonical event in the Book of Genesis: "And God said: Let's make man in Our image, according to Our likeness". (Genesis, 1.26, 27) Therefore, the man is before everything else, an 'imago Dei', an 'eikon tou Theou'. Needless to say that, at the beginning of creation God reveals as an Icon, the man himself inheriting this iconic vocation. Man's capacity to plasticise iconic the divine

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Reason is not an exercise of inborn sensitivity: the externalisation of the divine type through the icon, presupposes the communion with the prototype, the perihoretical and feast relation between the creation and its Creator. It is a fact that a real icon is a consequence of the Embodiment of the Word of God, of the possibility of seeing God in blood and flesh. In other words, not every hieratic or sacred piece of art is included in the universe of the icon. In order to produce this axiological leap, the artistic work must devolve from a Christ-centric premise.

The everlasting and, implicitly, the up-to-dateness of icon has an empirical base: in the same way in which the holy orders are based on the apostolic succession, the icon - as John the Evangelist says - is a testimony based on 'what we ourselves have seen' (I John 1.1). The chronological series of icon begins from the early times when real people could see our Lord or the saints. Thus the iconic ideas don't represent "the randomly fantasy, an apologetical programme or an idealistic scheme, but the fidelity for the memory of the initial image. In this respect, the icon is the re-production of a certain Presence, the manifestation of 'the eschatological present' specific to St. Paul's epistles, the anamneses of a charismatic Event, the emergence of a salutary Act. The meeting with God being exclusive and irreversible, the icon appears as the only organic 'background' adapted to the psychodrama of our redemption". [1]

2. The origin and the development of the icon

The word 'icon' has Greek origin: *eikôn*, meaning 'image' or 'portrait'.

Coming out from a new culture (the Byzantium), which lasts more than a millennium (330-1453), icon is in one way, the result of a synthesis of the Hellenistic, Roman and Christian cultures.

The pagan symbols, assumed and transformed by the Christians are numerous. Thus, spring means the Resurrection, ship - the Church, the peacock, the dove or the garden suggests the Heaven. But the Christians are not content only with the changes of the existing symbols, but they also invent many other new symbols, beginning especially with the second century. Consequently, the magi worship leads to the conversion of pagans to real faith; the multiplying of bread to the Last Supper; the grapevine is associated with the mystery of holy life of the baptized ones.

First of all, this art must have a didactic function. So, preserving the essence, the Christian artists try to maintain through their work, the faith of the new baptized people. In a pagan and hostile world, the symbolic language becomes a sort of 'secret code' revealed gradually to the catechumens. The first three centuries present often the cross as an anchor or the Greek monogram of Christ. Another symbol, much spread during the second century, is the fish. A sign of fertility during the ancient ages, then a mark of eroticism for the Roman people, it becomes a 'condensed formula of the creed'. Composed of five letters, the word *ih̄tis* (fish), comprises the idea 'Jesus Christ Theou Uios Sotir', which means 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Saviour' [2].

The symbol of fish is also present in the work *The educator*, by Clement the Alexandrine: “Our seals must be decorated with a dove or a fish or a sailing ship or a lyre, as Policarp did, or an anchor”. [*The Pedagogue*, III, 59, 2]

During the Ecumenical Synods, much Christological, the icon ‘testifies for the reality of the Embodiment’.

The second period (9th-16th century), a pneumatological one, answers to the need of defining “the Holy Spirit and His work upon man, meaning the effect of the Embodiment” [1, p. 8]. The icon becomes an illustration of St. Irineu’s statement: “God made Himself a man for man to be able to become god”.

The same content it is found in John Damaschin’s work: “If you have understand that the Unconceivable One made Himself man for you, then obviously you can to represent His human image. Because the Unseen One made Himself visible, taking human body, you may describe the face of That we have seen.” [3]

3. The content and the importance of the icon

The content and the importance of the icon result from the answer of Church against the iconoclasm.

The dogmatic basis for the icon worship, and the sense of it, can be found in the Holy Liturgy, mainly, in two special red-letter-days: the Saint Sash Liturgy [1, p. 104] and the Sunday of Orthodoxy Liturgy:

Kontakion: “The indescribable Word of the Father, became describable taking shape from you, Theotokos, and restoring the image in its initial worth, He united it with the divine beauty. And testifying the redemption, we show this in our work and our words”.

The first part of this kontakion expresses the humbleness of the second Person of the Holy Trinity, what underlines the Christological foundation of icon. The second part shows the meaning of the Embodiment and, therefore, the sense and the content of the new-testament image: “restoring the image in its initial worth, He united it with the divine beauty”.

Through His Embodiment, the Word of God recreates and restores in man the divine image shadowed by the sin of Adam. To touch this target it was necessary the return to the origin. The meaning of the biblical story about the Holy Trinity project concerning the creation of man “in Our image and Our likeness” (Genesis 1.26), and the creation ‘according to God’s image’, is explained by the Saint Fathers, with the meaning that: man is asked to get this likeness. That is to say that man has to fulfil the likeness with God.

The spiritual reality of icon “receives its whole practical teaching value in the last sentence of the kontakion from the Sunday of Orthodoxy [1, p. 113]”: “Admitting the redemption, we show it in our deed and our word”.

The content of the icon represents a spiritual guide for the Christian life and especially for the practice of prayer: the icon shows the attitude we must have during our prayer: towards God and towards all the people around us. St. Gregory the Theologian says: “So, brethren, let us not do unclean the holy

things, in a dirty way the sublime ones, in an inadequate way the worthy ones, in short, in a worldly manner the spiritual ones". [*The XIth Discourse to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, PG 35, 480 a] As a result, the icon is both a way to follow and also a mean. It is a prayer because it teaches us – as Saint Dorotei says – ‘fast with our eyes’.

The aim of icon is to focus us on the transfiguration of our feelings. The value of icon is not given by its objective beauty, but by the content of it: an image of beauty as a divine likeness.

The colours of the icon express the colours of the human time. Moreover, they reveal beauty seen as spiritual purity, an internal beauty: “adornment of the kind and peaceful spirit that is very worthy for God” (I Peter 3.4). The icon renders the work of grace, which, as St. Gregory Palamas states, “paint in us, the likeness with God upon the divine image [...] so that we can change into His likeness”. [4]

The light of the icon is not the natural brightness of the faces, but the work of the divine grace. This light of the sanctified body must be understood not only as a spiritual phenomenon, or a simple physical appearance, but as a joining of the two, and what is more, as a revelation of the next spiritual body [5].

The vestment outlines the work of man and becomes, somehow, a picture of the glorified vestment, a ‘cloth of immortality’. The ascetic experience is shown in a specific external expression suggested by an obvious gravity of forms, lights and directions of the lines.

The internal tidiness of man represented in the icon, is reflected by a certain attitude or movement: the saints do not gesticulate and their movement and their attitude towards the body has a sacramental significance. Generally they seem to look at the onlooker.

With reference to the architecture represented in the icon, it is always the same perfect harmony. It specifies the place where the event takes place: a church, a house, a town.

The unusual appearance of the icon is identical to that of the Gospel, for the Gospel is a challenge for any kind of order, for all wisdom in the world: “I shall shatter all the wisdom of the wisest and the science of the most learned, I shall ruin” (I Corinthians 1.19). The Gospel invites us to Christ’s model of life, which is described in the icon. That’s why, it uses some strange, unusual forms, such as the holiness often pretends extreme formulas, which may seem wired for the ordinary people, as the holiness of the mad for Christ, the Gospel review turns over the worldly one [1, p. 129]. The universe of the icon is that of the divine grace. This explains its hieratism, simplicity, calm and beauty. The icon is the sufferance that turns into ‘the joy of God the Living’, the new order of a renewed creation.

4. Some theological elements of the icon

4.1. The Transfiguration of Christ

The Transfiguration of Christ is settled in the centre of the icon. It is the clear seeing of God made a man and the presence of the divine grace in man. Prototype of the transfigured human nature, the icon expresses the new order of the world, a order announced by the Transfiguration of our Saviour Christ, on the Tabor Mountain. The Saints Evangelists relate the following aspects: "And He transfigured in front of them, and His face shone as the sun, and His garments turned white as the light" (Matthew 17.2; Luke 1.27-36; Marcus 9.1-8). This deiform state seems to be what each man must get: "Then the righteous will shine as the sun in the Kingdom of Father" (Matthew 13.43).

The four symbols of the light may be interpreted like this: the beams symbolize the sun; the hachure stands for the coming of the divine life in the world; the nimbus reminds the solar sphere, an image of holiness and spiritual energy which irradiate to the world; the white of the garments symbolizes the purity, the immortality, the perfection.

The light allows seeing the other, to know each other, what is a premise for any communion.

Perceived with bodily eyes, the natural light becomes dark by its submission before the passing things. St. Dionisie the Pseudo-Areopagite says that God is 'dazzling dark'. Both icons - The Transfiguration of Christ and The Descending of Christ in Hell - present Christ dressed in white or golden vestments, shining in light. His all-glorious body is settled in the middle of four concentric circles that symbolize the divine light. Each circle gets a more intense colour once it comes closer to the blue centre, a very dark blue usually. Fading its intensity, the natural light spiritualises itself, the dark becomes light [2, p. 108].

If the man turns into what he contemplates then he can say together with St. Macarie the Great: "The soul that was fully illuminated by the ineffable beauty of the shining glory of the face of Christ, and was filled up with Holy Spirit... becomes totally eyes, entirely light and completely face..." [Homily I, 2 P.G. 34, 451 AB]

Without neglecting its pastoral and didactic role, the icon is firstly, 'a personal meeting', as the 7th Ecumenical Synod proclaimed. Leonid Uspenski explains this assertion: "The grace of the Holy Spirit allows the holiness both for the person represented in the icon and for the icon too, to be revealed, and it is the Holy Spirit too, that produces the relation between the faithful and the saint represented there." [1, p. 15] Serge Bulgakov says: "According to the orthodox belief, the icon is the place of the presence of the grace, a epiphany of Christ (of Theotokos, of saints, or other saint persons); and this is because we can pray in front of it [...], for the icon facilitates a support, as if the painted persons would help us." [6]

The icon sanctifies the place where it belongs to, and it creates the feeling of a tangible divine presence. To pray in front of the icon of Christ, means to pray, in fact, in front of Christ Himself: “Very much as in the Eucharist, the form of bread and wine is not Christ, but the place of His presence, the same, in the icon it isn’t Christ, but the place of His spiritual presence.” [2, p. 109]

4.2. The Christian – a testifying icon

The symbolical content of icon has as a premise the Eucharistic essence of Church: “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, is the blessing at the beginning of the Saint Liturgy. Through its Liturgy the Church enters a new time; the ordinary categories of time and space give place to a new dimension. The action represented in the icon interpenetrates with the space in front of it, and the past event becomes present, authentic: “The Virgin *today* gives birth to That above nature”; “*today* the King of glory is nailed on the cross”. The present is associated to the eschatological reality: “Of your Mystic Supper, O Son of God, accept me *today*...”. By the communion with the Body of the resurrected and glorified Christ, whom the icon presents, the seen Church unites with the unseen one, so that, their nature changed through the power of the grace, fulfil their unity on the model of the unite image of the Holy Trinity.

As much as Christ is the image of the Father, as well the Christian, who contemplates our Saviour and tidy his soul, gradually regains ‘the initial beauty’ re-becomes an icon of God.

The man is an icon of God only if he has love for the others. “The Christendom is the religion of faces [...]. To be a Christian means to discover, even in the centre of absence and death, a face open forever as a door of light, the face of Christ, and around it, imbued with His light, with His love, the faces of the forgiven sinners, which do not judge but receive the Gospel, means the announcing of this joy.” [7]

Model of holiness, the icon reveals us as an open book. “You must know reading it in order to decode the faces you meet in the street and to find that ‘unique off-spring’ grafted on Christ.” [2, p. 110]

5. The catechical and didactical importance of the icon today

The icon and the religious painting have a very important didactic role. It is a supply, a visual means of the Holy Scriptures, of the sermon, of the catechism, in short, of the written and spoken Holy Logos.

The icon is a Christian didactical supply: “What the Scripture is for the people who do not know to read, that is the icon for those who are not trained, because in the paintings even the illiterate can see what they have to follow.” [St. Gregory the Great, *Epistle X*, 13 (Migne, PL XXVII, col. II28C)]

The Gospel and the icon are closely related, and they support each other, facilitating the spread of Christian faith. According to S. Bulgakov “icon is a gospel in colours, beyond the Gospel there is a verbal icon of Christ” [6, p. 195].

The icons are reminders of the gifts received from God, of the truths of belief, of the sacred history. The icon sustains the memory of the glory of God through the sacrifices of the saints and martyrs.

In order to know the supernatural realities, the icon is not only useful, but also necessary and indispensable. The icon reminds us the Prototype, leading us to Him. The revealing power of the icon is bigger than that of the speculative Theology: “The paintings in the icon tell us about the other life and about its aspects, it doesn’t demonstrate, but shows. It doesn’t constraint through the power of arguments, but it convict and win through its obviousness.” [6, p. 195]

The icon gives a picture or a spiritual vision of the heavenly world, vision according to the man’s possibility of understanding. The icon is the visible aspect of the Church tradition, completing the oral, written and monumental one. The icon is a religious contemplation transposed in image, colours and shapes. It is a revelation in an artistic way: it deals with concrete and not abstract idea [6, p. 198].

The catechetical role of the icon implies its educative impact. Thus the icon is a method of arousing, keeping and strengthening the religious life, an impulse for getting the virtues [8]. The icon sight urges to do good deeds, to follow virtue and to avoid sins. Looking at the icon of Christ we glorify the power of His holiness: “For the sun lights the bodily creature and Your face the spiritual part of it”, we find in the religious service books [9].

The icon “gives an example of heroism, a model of holy and virtuous life, a stimulation and an urge to glorify God, who loved them in this life.” [8] *The Confession of Dositei of Jerusalem* expresses this idea like this: “To the saints and to the holy icons we pray [...] for them to impel us to imitate the good deeds of the saints [...], and to contribute to the multiplying of love, to the keeping awake and invoking the name of God as our Master and Father, and the Saints as His servants, and our intermediary.” [10] This idea can be found in *The Orthodox Prayer Book* in *The Service for Blessing the Icon of a Saint*: “O, Lord, God [...], who even now, the images and likeness of the beloved saints, You do not leave, but You receive, for Your faithful looking at them to glorify You That extolled them, and to strive to be followers of their life and deeds by which the others succeeded in getting Your gift and kingdom”. [11]

Today more than ever the revival of the icon is a necessity of the victory of the good. The icon renews at the same time with the church: “The Church always alive and creative doesn’t protect the old forms as they are, and doesn’t oppose them to the new ones as they are. For the Church, both the today’ art and the past art and that belonging to the future signifies the same thing: the realism. This means that the Church – the upholder and foundation of the truth – asks for a single thing: the TRUTH.” [12] The icon must be renewed. But this renewal must be the expression of a unique truth. The revival of icon does not mean anachronism, or attachment for the past, not a simple trial of a painter to

rediscover the sacred art. The revival of icon means an awareness of Church, a return to the authentic transmission – by means of the patristic experience – of the real knowledge of Christian revelation. It is conditioned and characterized by and through the return at the Tradition of Fathers, for “the fidelity for the tradition doesn’t represent the fidelity for the old, but a strong relation with the plenitude of the ecclesial life” [1, p. 217], and the spiritual experience of the Holy Fathers.

The specific character of the orthodox icon, its structure indicates the possibilities, the means and the limits of Christian knowledge with the purpose to reveal the man the sense of his historical existence, his destiny and the ways he must follow in order to reach the supreme aim. The icon uncovers a vision that unites the past and the future in continuous present. For the Church the human creation represents the language through which is revealed the mystery of the future age.

Conceived from a faith that looks for Theophany, the icon interpellates us in the peaceful atmosphere of a face-to-face meeting. “Neither pure esthetical, nor pure spiritual, the beauty of icon has its origin in its archetype. Of course, this beauty is hidden for a simple aesthetician, because the discovery of the profound essence implies an internal illumination of the onlooker. This one must receive the Light, which is God Himself, in order to perceive with a chaste look, the taboral light transfiguring the creation.” [2]

The icon is a real spiritual guide and an lively model for those people who love the improved life, the prayer, for the icon in itself expresses by the means of colours, a personal example of virtue, in which the power of the soul are blended with the feeling [13]. The icon show us, in a magisterial way, what we are to do with our life in order to mirror the image of God in ourselves, and it also tells about the life and the virtues of the saints, showing us the way to get that kind of life. The icon addresses the calling, which God makes through His Word, because in its representation we can see the eternity and the communion with God. “The reason of the existence of the icon and its value does not consist in its exterior appearance but in what it represents: an image of beauty as a divine likeness.” [1, p. 22] The icon reveals the human nature transfigured through the power of grace, and it invites the man to take part in this spiritual renewal, showing him how to order his life and what he must get. In this respect, The Orthodox Church considers the icons ‘sacred pictures’ [1, p. 15], a ‘vehicle’ [1] and a ‘channel’ [14] of the divine grace, means of sermon, of defending and of the strengthening of the faith.

The instructive and pedagogical role of the icon is underlined in the entire patristic literature. In the 6th century, the Pope Gregory the Great, addresses to Sereniu, the Bishop of Marseille (a hierarch opposing the idea of icon) the following words: “the icons shouldn’t have been destroyed. They are exposed inside the churches for the uneducated people to be able to read, looking at the walls, what they can’t in letters. You, brother, should keep the icons... what the Scripture is for the one who knows to read, that is for the illiterate one. The icon replaces reading especially for the foreigners.” [1, p. 69]

Therefore, the icon and the word expresses in different ways, but with the same value, The Gospel of Christ. What we can hear in a sermon we are communicated through the picture. But the picture has its particular reason and meaning: indicates a spiritual experience, the participation of man to the graceful life in Christ, it guides to the eternity [15]. In Church, stands Christos Yannaras, important is not the sermon, not the words - words after words - but the sacred art, because it expresses life not ideology [16]. The Fathers of the Church say that, the Gospel reveals through the word what the icon shows in images [17] "because not all the people knows to read, and it is not everybody's job to deal with the reading" [3, p. 177] so, they can 'touch' the divine word through their senses. "What is written with ink on paper, it is in the same way very well illustrated in the icon with colours or other materials." St. Basil the Great says: "what the word reveals to history, the picture shows silently, through imitation" the silence values more than the word; it is the voice of the icon [13, p. 84].

In other words, the icon doesn't speak, but it reflects, in silence, what the word can't express. It addresses more profound to our soul than the word [18] and it succeeds in its dumbness to tell about what you can't talk, but you must live [19]. That's why, when contemplate it, we must learn to listen to its silence. "The dumb art knows to speak", says St. Gregory of Nyssa [18, p. 235]. If the word, according to St. Isaac the Syrian, is the tool of these times, the silence is the language of the world that is to come, of the future life. While the word can depart us from God, if we don't take care at our words (St. Jacob 3.3-12), the silence in the spiritual acceptance, is "a technique of life in the Holy Spirit" [20], and "the ceaseless prayer and the remaining of mind in God" [21], the beginning of life 'in the Holy Spirit' and the top of it. Looking at the icon of Christ or of the Holy Virgin Maria, of the saints, if you have true faith, you feel that the Person it represents is there with you, you feel His presence, His warmth as if He would talk to you about the holy mysteries of God's Kingdom, as if God would talk to you about the Gospel.

So, together with the word, the icon is a way of God's revelation and of the communion with God. The word and the picture are completing reciprocal and form together, one of "the fundamental forms of self representation and human communication"[13, p. 5]. The Created Word always addresses to hearing and sight (I John 1.1-2), what mean that the image and the word are complementary. If the word addresses to hearing, but also touches the heart, the image addresses the sight, but also to the spiritual knowledge. Both the word and the icon consider man in what he is: body and soul. The power of the icon upon human soul is great, but this power is in fact that of the divine grace. Not the picture in itself, or the word can influence but the force of the divine grace, which is present in word and image.

The mission of the icon - not much different from that of the sermon - is not only to announce the embodiment of the Word, or to transmit the truths of faith revealed by God, but to make the Word of God to take life - alive in the believers' souls in order to transfigure them, making each human person a new being. Saint Teodor Studitul says: "Imprint Christ on your heart, where He

already lives; if you read about Him or look at Him in a icon, He will lighten your thinking in order to know Him through the two ways of perception. So, you will see with your eyes what you have learnt from the words. The one who listens and sees in this way will be blessed by God.” [22]

Completing each other (the word and the picture) as it is specified in the text of the 7th Ecumenical Synod (787), and having the mission to strengthen the faith in the Embodiment of the Word of God, the icon teaches the ones who don't know to read the truths of faith, it sanctifies the sight of those who look at it, raising their mind towards the knowledge of God, purify and transfigures the people who contemplate it, reveals the eschatological light, and makes present the person and the redeeming work of Her.

The fact that the Son of God embodied and came close to us, “He made Himself poor for us”, being not “ashamed that He made Himself what was assumed as flesh”, but, at the same time, remaining in His divine, unseen, uncircumcised grace, justifies us to represent in colours the image of His Person, through the Embodiment of the Word and the proof of the faith in That who by Himself, of His own accord, took the image of the man, finding in His sublime descending, the confirming of the divine grace [23].

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