
THE PLACE OF CHURCH ART WITHIN THE ORTHODOX WORSHIP AND SPIRITUALITY[†]

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Abstract

The study develops in its first part the idea that the church art and architecture came out and were developed within worship as its constitutive parts. Further the study points out the meanings of art in the Orthodox Church.

Firstly, it has an instructive meaning; secondly, the meaning of the church art is to remember or, in other words, it is the history of salvation images memory; thirdly, the church art reveals God to us and finally, the church art and architecture expresses, preaches and protects the doctrine. In the last part of this study, we pointed out the fact that modernistic tendencies of the church art and architecture could be dangerous if we forget that between worship and the two there is a very strong relation/tide and they condition reciprocally.

Keywords: Church art, spirituality, worship, revelation

1. The divine worship – the environment where the church art appeared and developed

The divine worship has a complex structure within the Orthodox spirituality, which confers a special identity and individuality, fundamentally distinguishing it from the meaning of the similar collocation in the other two big Christian denominations: Roman – Catholicism and Protestantism. According to the Eastern experience, deeply rooted in the Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition and faithful to both of them, the divine worship is a complex of rituals, acts, movements and liturgical gestures, experimented and developed within the consecrated space of the Church, in the presence and with support from saints, with Christ being the unique centre of all things and which is aiming for three things: to sanctify the believers, by renewing them, to worship God and praise the saints, and to teach the believers, guiding them in the knowledge of truth [1].

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Respecting these three purposes, the Orthodox Church avoids the extremes in which the two branches of Western Christianity have fallen, and which are an excessive emphasis on the venerating function of the worship or worshipping God, considering the other two functions of sanctification of life and instruction of believers, as being secondary, as it happened in the Roman-Catholicism; or reducing the content of worship forms only to the preaching of the Word, whilst almost completely giving up to the other two functions of the worship, as it happened in the Protestant world.

Considering all these three purposes as being parts of the same whole, and not only one being the main, the Orthodox worship maintained what we call *the liturgical equilibrium* [2].

The slow and timely process of development of the divine worship has touched all its components. Hymnography and church singing, prayer in its various forms as well as the rituals part, by that understanding the liturgical actions, gestures and movements, the church art and architecture, all have developed harmoniously as part of the same whole named divine worship.

Church art is a constitutive part of the divine worship, and it appears inside liturgical life and experience, as another way to express the divine message towards people and another way of expressing our feelings and experiences in relationship with God. Therefore, art appears inside the liturgical life and not outside the liturgical life, as something added all during the development process of the first. For example, in the second chapter of the Gospel of John, where we are told about the transformation of water into wine, in one of the weddings from Caana Galilee, the Holy Mother of God addressed the following words to the ones serving at the tables: „Do whatever He tells you to do” (verse 5). In these words, the Holy Mother of God reveals to us as the one who guides us to Christ, the one who *gives us advice* about Christ, the unique centre of the whole existence as well as the worship life. This quality that the Holy Mother of God possesses has been perceived by the Church from the very beginning and illustrated not only in liturgical hymns and prayers, but also in iconography. According to an old tradition, the first icon with the face of the Holy Mother of God has been painted by St. Luke the Evangelist and is called ‘The One Who Gives Advice who Guides us’ [3].

In a thorough study regarding church art and architecture, Fr. Ene Braniste (Romanian liturgist) builds in a history of their appearance and development [1, p. 279] in both Eastern and Western traditions, from the beginning to present [4, 5]. From all the things presented in this vast study, we can conclude the following important aspects related to the theme in discussion.

Firstly, church art and architecture appear in the same time with Church, within the liturgical life and determined by, and as constitutive parts of the simplicity that characterized the worship life within the first three centuries. This is being reflected not only in religious sermons, but also in art and architecture. The freedom of expression that characterized Christianity after the year of 313 has brought an unprecedented rhythm of development in all the areas of Church

life, and this rhythm could be profoundly felt in liturgical life, too. It is now when all the Church Praises (i.e. the seven daily moments of prayer) practiced until that moment only by some communities or in the private piety become general; also, the existent celebrations become general and new ones are added; it is now when a purely Christian inspirational hymnography appears and underlines the dogmatic teaching subject to heresies; last, but not least, it is now when church art and architecture appear developed and presented to a high level, summing, together with the authentic Christian ones, all the art pieces and architecture of the ancient world, transcended by a new spirit.

Secondly, the crisis times Church has been confronted with, have also influenced the church art and architecture. Fortunately, certain crisis times positively influenced the worship life as a whole. Iconoclasm, for example, determined the Church to officially state its teaching about the Icons veneration, teaching that, especially in those times, reflected in both the hymns currently present in the worship books, and in the iconographic representations.

A real Theology of the icon is presented in the texts of the First Sunday of the Lent and in which the Orthodox Church celebrates the restoration of the icons. We have chosen out of the multitudes of the liturgical texts the that compose the service for this Sunday we have chosen the text of the Glory from ‘Lord I call...’ of the First Week of Lent, Saturday Vespers:

“The grace of truth has shone,
And the things foreshadowed of old have been openly fulfilled,
For behold, the Church has put on the incarnate likeness of Christ
An adornment transcending the world,
In accord with the prefiguring tabernacle of the covenant,
That we may not be lost in wandering
As we keep with us the icon of Him whom we worship and revere.
Therefore, let the non-believers be confused.
For our kneeling in true worship of the incarnate is a glory to us.
Let us venerate it, O believers,
Saying: O God, save your people and bless you inheritance!” [6]

Thirdly, the above – mentioned study outlines that church art and architecture bear a profound denominational seal. The styles that sometimes succeeded in the Western Christianity art and architecture, especially in the Roman–Catholic, are sometimes expressions of their alienation from the worship life and the teaching of faith the worship expresses, and other times attempts, more or less successful, to confer art and architecture a Christian spirit.

Lastly, closely related to the above, we shall say that church art and architecture are forms of expression for the teaching of faith.

2. Significances of church art in liturgical life

It has been said that Church area, in general, and church painting in particular, represent the Bible of illiterates [1, p. 425]. “What the Scripture is for those who know how to read, is the painting for those who do not know, since it is in it that even those who do not know, have to follow...” [St. Gregory the Great, *Epistolarum liber*, X, 13, in „P.L.”, t. XXVII, col. 1128, C] Starting from this statement, we shall try to see what is the content of this ‘Bible’ for the illiterates (or a ‘different kind’ of Holy Scripture, the Scripture in colours), and what is the message communicate by it.

Church art has a profound *catechetical function*, didactic or instructive - educational. It accompanies the wording and continues to speak when the word ceases to be voiced. The gospel, liturgical texts and the icon sit together in Orthodoxy [3, p. 86], mutually explaining one another. The face of the saint painted in icons colourfully expresses the chiselling of Holy Gospel in the human being.

Within the divine worship, church art has an *anamnetic function* [7]. It permanently reminds of the many, different kinds in which God has worked in the world. It is the memory in images of the history of salvation. The iconographic representation of holy people and events from the history of salvation, for permanent remembrance, is grounded on the words of our Saviour at the Last Supper „Do this in remembrance of Me.” (Luke 22.19) The commemoration and recollection of Jesus Christ Our Saviour is not made just by reproducing the words He said and the performance of the actions/gestures He performed, but impose also the rendition of what the eyes have seen. If the ones heard are commemorated and recollected by word, and the ones worked by Our Saviour are reminded through liturgical actions and gestures, the ones seen by the ones who followed Him are recollected through images. In other words, the icon is another way to recollect about and commemorate Christ, thus fulfilling His command.

If we stop only at the catechetical function, the one that describes events and people, and the anamnetical one, which treasures, records and keeps events and people in our memory, would only mean to under evaluate the role of church art within the divine Orthodox worship. Therefore, we need to say that church art *discovers and reveals God* [7], whilst also discovering truths that save us. At this stage, art gains content, apart from form and colour. Paradoxically, church art reveals and hides in the same time. It is revealing for the faithful soul or for the soul that seeks and hides from the one who looks only for the delight of his eyes, or to satisfy his curiosity, or from strictly professional reasons. For the faithful one or for the one who is seeking God “the distant image becomes a communication channel with God” [7]. This only happens when the one who looks is firmly committed and responsible in searching for the kingdom of God. “The icon is sending a message to us, without truly talking with us, apart from the moment in which we are turning our back to the kingdom, to receive the Holy Spirit. Only He can fill our soul with the perfect joy” [3, p. 63]. The ascent

to new spiritual steps helps us discover new dimensions of truth revealed through icons. As deeds speak more than words, the icon discovers the revealed truth more profoundly than the word does. „On one hand the word finds through the icon an irreplaceable support, and on the other hand the icon offers a bigger revelation of the stated mystery” [3, p.86].

The revealing power that church art has in it establishes a very close and profound relationship between this and the teaching of faith. *The teaching of faith is expressed, preached and defended through church art and architecture.* It is worth mentioning that one of the main functions of the church art is the didactic function and that the appearance of various types of icons came as a natural result of the teachings of faith stated, regarding the Holy Icons, in an official circumstance, at the seventh Ecumenical Council (Niceea, 787). Moreover, we shall persist in showing how church art expresses the truths of faith.

According to the iconographic program carried on in Orthodoxy [8], in the central steeple of the church, the steeple situated above the nave, in the middle they paint an icon called The Pantocrator Almighty God. The nine escorts of angels are painted around The Pantocrator, and on the vertical walls, where the construction allows, are represented portraits of the holy prophets. The next layer is dedicated to the representation of Holy Apostles, and underneath it is painted the Godly Liturgy, also named the Heavenly or angelical Liturgy [8]. This representation can also be situated in the upper side, between icon of The Pantocrator and the layer that represents the faces of the Holy Apostles. At the basis of the steeple, we paint the four Evangelists accompanied by their symbolic representations. What do all these representations want to express?

According to Saint Simeon of Thessalonica, „*The Church of God represents the sky and Heaven altogether which offers the heavenly gifts because it has Life itself inside, and not the wood of life from those times, and this Life sacrifices and offers itself. It hasn't got the wood of knowledge that would cause nakedness to the ones who will eat, but the living wisdom that offers itself as food and drink...we enter the Godly church as in Heaven or in Eden*” [9, 10]. Saint Maxim the Confessor says, in his *Poem about Saint Sofia from Edesa*: „*surprisingly, the Church in its smallness is similar to the great Universe...The Dome is alike the heaven of heavens... It is strongly built in the bottom. Its arches represent the four parts of the world.*” [11] And Saint Gherman – the Patriarch of Constantinople states that: “*Church is heaven on earth, in which the Heavenly God lives...*” [12]. The church is, therefore, the image of heaven, the image of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is represented in the church by the central steeple situated on the nave and especially by the way it is built and ornamented. Around the King, the Angels are gathered, they are the ones who permanently give praises to Him; the Prophets are the ones who brought the news and made Him known to the people even before His arrival; and the Apostles, the ones who witnessed and brought the news about Him after His resurrection and ascension to heaven. Additionally, at the basis of the steeple, the four Apostles appear again. They are the ones who registered in writing part

of what they have preached to the world about Christ, the One the Prophets talked about, who became flesh (human), then crucified and resurrected. This structure is the expression of teaching about the Church reflected in the Letter to Ephesians from Saint Paul the Apostle, in which we read: „*built on the foundation of Apostles and Prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*” (Ephesians 2.20).

The Kingdom of God, represented by the central steeple of the church, is not isolated and closed in itself, but is oriented towards the world. „*With His looks down to the believers gathered in the church, Christ appears to scrutinize the depth of the hearts*” [3, p. 90]. Conferring an expression for the same truth, Paul Evdochimov says: “*The old cathedrals were filled with a supernatural force and intensity; their dynamism is taking our breath away today...in the Gothic the verticals and the table of stones are violently thrown towards infinite and are dragging the human spirit after them. On the contrary, in Saint Sofia everything is organized around the central axis, crowned by the majesty of a dome, and expresses beauty in a more esoteric way (more inward), coming from a mysterious depth and an unlimited height, that descends over man and fills him with a transcendent peace...Through its lines, the dome translates the descending movement of the divine love; its spherical shape reunites all the people in the ‘sinaxis’ (liturgical gathering), in the mystical body of Christ. Under the dome we feel protected, away from the Pascalian type of anxiety of infinite spaces.*” [11, p. 129]

The central steeple is summarized by the Altar (Holy of Hollies), the place where Heaven and Earth meet and the boundary where eternity starts, due to the way it is made and ornamented. Here, on the vault, the image of Saint Virgin with baby Jesus is painted. Although at a first glance the painting of Holy Virgin the Holy Altar might contradict the teaching, that is common to Orthodoxy, Roman–Catholicism and Oriental Churches, saying that the serving in the altar is only the privilege of the man, in reality the painting of Mother of God in the Altar is the expression of a fundamental truth. The Mother of God is the One in whom heaven met the Earth, divine with the human, through Jesus Christ, Son of God. Heaven and Earth always meet in the Holy Altar, within the Holy Liturgy, as it is here where we remember and recall „*everything that has been done for us: the cross, the grave, the resurrection in the third day, the ascension to Heaven, the sitting on the right, and the second and blessed coming on Earth.*” [13] That is why the presence of the Mother of God, of the One who united the Heaven and Earth through the birth of Son of God, in the Altar, where Heaven permanently meets and unites with the Earth, is possible and justified. We have mentioned above that the Altar synthesises the central steeple. This is determined not only by similarities of some of the painting scenes [8], but also through the way in which the Holy Table is being made up of. During the service by which a newly built church is dedicated on the Holy table, in all four corners are posted the icons of the four Evangelists. This fact shows, according to the Saint Simeon of Thessalonica, that the Church gathered out of the four edges of the world and was built by preaching the Good News [St. Simeon of

Thessalonica, *On the Holy Church*, cap. 101 and 105, trans., q., p. 120-129]. What is interesting and important in the same time is the fact that the Kingdom of God, symbolically represented by the ornamentation of the central steeple, is founded on the four Saint Evangelists, in the same way the Altar, in which Heaven and Earth unite and in which the Kingdom of God permanently extends to us and surrounds us, and we permanently enter in it, is also supported by the four Saint Evangelists. Saint Simeon says “*Without Altar there’s no church, only a prayer house that shares holiness only through prayer, without the Glory of God living there, and neither His house and not having the divine power to hear to our prayers through his gift toward God.*” [St. Simeon of Thessalonica, *On the Holy Church*, cap. 10, trans., q., p. 109] The Altar confers the quality of a Church, because it synthesises what Church is in its whole: the image of the Kingdom of God. Another proof is the Antimension, (‘instead of the table’), on which the faces of Saint Evangelists also appear in the four corners, while the rest of the saint apostles surround the icon representing the burial of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Its content makes of the Antimension a ‘portable’ church. In this church the sacrament of Eucharist is celebrated permanently on the the Antimension that remains on the Altar table. When, due to various reasons, the Eucharist is celebrated outside the Church, it cannot be celebrated without the Antimension. In other words, even when we celebrate Liturgy outside the Church, due to the Antimension we can still celebrate it in the church, because church art and architecture are not added elements and exterior to the liturgical life in the Orthodox Church, but they are constitutive parts and together with it, is closely connected with the teaching of faith and its expressions.

3. Conclusions

As a conclusion, we can say that church art represents for the Orthodox spirituality paths to dialogue between man and God, but also a way through which God reveals Himself to us. This art represents the Church’s identity where it appears and develops. The Church is seen as the expression of the truth of faith represented through liturgical prayer, but also through art and this is why in the Orthodox tradition the Holy Scripture, the doctrine, the divine cult, the sacred image and the church architecture stands together and explains each other.

Church art should not be seen only as a vertical way of communication between man and God but also a horizontal one between people of the same faith, people of different religions, between different generations, different peoples and cultures. From this perspective, church art has a profound unifying content.

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