
THE GATEWAY IN THE HEAVEN'S WALL

SYMBOLIC PECULIARITIES OF THE ICONOSTASIS

IN ORTHODOX CHURCHES

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Abstract

Although, at first sight, it seems similar to the dividing wall between the narthex and the nave, as a final 'barrier' between the nave and the holy altar, the iconostasis evinces certain peculiarities defining it in antinomic terms, as both a dividing wall and a gateway to the altar. After the fall, the first people were cast away from heaven, and a cherub with a flaming sword has guarded its gate ever since; man became able to enter it again only through the redemption brought by Jesus Christ, and the good thief was first citizen of Heaven.

In the Orthodox churches, the altar symbolizes the Paradise, from where our foreparents were cast out, and which we hope to reach in the afterlife, always driven by the nostalgia for the Paradise. The altar is separated from the nave, but it is also accessible. The iconostasis thus is a dividing wall (it is often part of the masonry) as a constant reminder of the separation between Heaven and Earth, the Paradise and the rest of the world. But it is, at the same time, a gateway to the Paradise, a permanent call to enter not necessarily the physical altar area (which is allowed only to certain persons, under particular circumstances), but the spiritual realm of Heaven. The present study highlights these inherent attributes.

Keywords: altar, window, gateway, icon, cross

1. Introduction (the wall around Eden)

At the dawn of creation, after God the Lord made Adam, He planted a garden eastward in the Eden, and there he placed the man he had created, "to dress it and to keep it" (Genesis 2.7-8, 15-17). However, man trespassed on God's commandment and was banished from Heaven: "So the Lord God banished him (...) After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life." (Genesis 3.23-24)

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Thus, in his new state and altered condition, exiled from the Paradise, Adam began to lament and wished to return to the place that had been originally his, as show the beautiful Triodion prayers on the Sunday of Adam's expulsion from the Paradise: "oh blessed Paradise, you precious adornment... ask the Creator of all to open for me the gates which my transgression has closed; so that I may taste again of the tree of life and joy..." [1] This was the first painful time when the wall separating the Paradise from the rest of the world manifested its presence, as a distinct barrier between the realm of death and that containing the tree of life. For this reason, all iconographic scenes representing the Paradise also depict the wall separating it from the surrounding world (Figure 1).

2. The wall, between obstacle and permeability

By definition, due to its structure and constructive role as a load-bearing element, the wall is opaque and impenetrable. However decorative it might be, however interesting and aesthetically fascinating, it is perceived as an obstacle, a seemingly insurmountable barrier; a solid, compact structure is the opposite of the void. Therefore, the impossibility of overcoming opacity is a challenge, prompting man to seek ways of penetrating the wall.

A gap in a wall is not a honourable way of penetrating it, but a reprehensible break-in. A gate, however, even when it is closed and so it seems forbidding, is the only possible way to pass beyond the wall (Figure 2). Between an 'illegal' break and a legitimate one, we choose the latter even if the door is locked (Figure 3).

The window is another opening in the wall, a very common one. Paradoxically, the window is an obstacle that allows only the dream to pass through, while the body is denied passage; this is why it has been a preferred motif of the painters intending to render the nostalgia and dreaming entailed by the impossibility of transcending the closed space of a room confined by walls (Figure 4). A window is an opening made into a wall in order to provide light to an enclosure and not to allow access.

Unlike the window, the *gate* is an aperture through which one may pass *beyond* the wall. The gateway symbolizes "the juncture of two states, two worlds, the known and the unknown, light and darkness, wealth and poverty. The gate opens onto the mystery. It also has a dynamic, psychological dimension; it marks a threshold and invites one to cross it. The gateway is an invitation to another realm (Figure 5). Symbolically, passing through a gate is passing from the profane to the sacred." [2]

3. The altar, symbol of the Paradise lost

Of the three parts of the church architecture, the altar "through the awe-inspiring place of sacrifice, that is, the Holy Table, symbolizes the Lord of Heaven, and is also the Holy of Holies titled throne, place of God, resting place, purification, place of the great sacrifice, Tomb of Christ and dwelling place of

His Grace“ [3]. In other words, it is precisely the space of the lost Paradise, and is likewise oriented towards the East.



Figure 1. The Last Judgment. The porch of Hurezi Monastery katholikon (1690-1693), detail.



Figure 2. The wooden church of Poarta Sălajului, [http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Biserica_de_lemn_din_Poarta_Salajului\(5\).JPG](http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Biserica_de_lemn_din_Poarta_Salajului(5).JPG).



Figure 3. Surrounding wall with gate tower. The reformed church, Șard village, Alba county (http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Zid_de_incint%C4%83,_cu_turn_de_poart%C4%83,_biserica_reformat%C4%83,_sat_%C8%98ard.jpg).

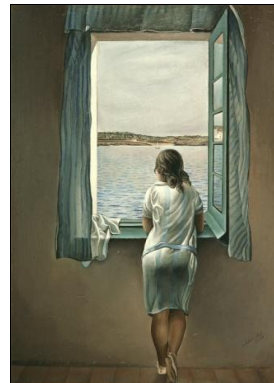


Figure 4. Salvador Dalí, ‘Figure at a Window’, 1925, Museo Nacional, Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain (<http://www.friendsofart.net/en/art/salvador-dali/figure-at-a-window>).

It contains the tree of life from which we receive communion to partake of the eternal life, as shows the troparion chanted on the forefeast of Lord's Nativity: "Make ready o Bethlehem, for Eden has been opened onto all! Prepare o Ephratha, for the tree of life has blossomed in the cave from the Virgin! For her womb proved to be a spiritual Paradise, wherefrom there came the divine plant, whereof eating we shall live and not die like Adam. Christ is born to raise the image that fell of old." [4] The analogy between the Universe and the church was emphasized in the seventh-century liturgical commentary of Sophronios, patriarch of Jerusalem. For him, "the [earthly] sanctuary imitates the heavenly sanctuary; and just as the angels of God performed the liturgy, thus the living priests are present in the holy sanctuary, standing by and adoring the Lord through every means" [5].

The arch separating the nave from the altar and opening the vault of the altar apse is called *triumphal arch*. Symbolically, the arch represents the door or gate of the temple in Ezekiel's prophecy, "the gate facing east" (Ezekiel 43.4), a gate closed to people. This temple vision of the prophet pointed to the Holy Virgin, the Mother of God, "the spiritual (noetic) paradise", who is symbolized by the gate of the God of Israel: "The Lord said to me: This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered by it. Therefore it shall remain shut." (Ezekiel 44.2)

Not coincidentally, the iconography of this triumphal arch renders the Lord's Ascension, 'to illustrate the open Paradise', and under it stands the iconostasis.

4. The iconostasis, the wall at the gateway to Paradise

Paradoxically, while the triumphal arch calls us to enter the Paradise once lost, the iconostasis looks like a wall barring the entrance, and even hinders the sight. Thus, although it seems to be near and accessible, the iconostasis appears like an insurmountable barrier. This is why most of its descriptions define it as an obstacle, a barrier. It is peculiar to Eastern Christian churches of Byzantine tradition: a solid screen of stone, wood, or metal, usually separating the sanctuary from the nave. The *iconostasis*, or icon-screen, "separated the sanctuary from the nave in Byzantine churches" [6], it is the screen decorated with icons that divides the sanctuary from the nave of an Eastern Orthodox church.

However, this 'separation', 'setting apart' the nave from the altar, postulated by all the definitions of the iconostasis, evinces a shallow understanding of its role. It plays no architectural role, it is not a functional element. Its use is iconographical; from it derives its theological, spiritual function [7]. It is a permanent reminder of Adam's expulsion from the Paradise, when he went to weep and lament for his sins somewhere outside it. This is why the hymnography of the Sunday preceding the Great Lent is based on the image of Adam, weeping before the locked gates of Heaven (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Basilique Ste-Madeleine, Vezelay, 11th century, the south-west church portal (http://www.paradoxplace.com/Photo%20Pages/France/Burgundy%20Champagne/Vezelay/Vezelay_2007.htm).



Figure 6. The triumphal arch of Dealu monastery katholikon (1501) and the iconostasis (1958).



Figure 7. The masonry iconostasis of the katholikon of Curtea de Argeş monastery (14th century), added in the 18th century.



Figure 8. Iconostasis project proposal, <http://www.puiugheorghe.ro/noutati.Html>.

The voices of those ‘Christians’ who attend the Church only at Christmas and Easter and demand the removal of the iconostasis, considering it to be a brutal barrier between the worshippers and the priest, are supported by the opinions put forth in treatises asserting that the iconostasis continues to divide any church into two parts, “separating the clergy from the faithful who can take

part only mentally in the Eucharistic sacrifice“ [8]. However, “the more or less cognizant participation in the liturgy does not depend on the place where one is, or what one can or cannot see happening in the altar“ [9]. For, according to Saint Gregory of Nazianz, the curtain and later on the iconostasis separating the altar from the nave signify the border between two worlds, the atemporal and the temporal one [9]; the border is visually represented by the iconostasis.

5. The iconostasis, the gateway in the Heaven’s wall

Although it seems to be perceived as a barrier between nave and altar, the iconostasis is also a paradoxical bridge to the world of the lost Paradise. This attribute is highlighted when it has a concave shape, which seems to enter into the altar. Irrespective of its form, be it rectangular, concave or convex, its structure renders it permeable.

This is mainly due to the three openings into the iconostasis; it is defined as a “type of screen made of wood or masonry, separating the sanctuary (the altar apse) from the nave, with which it *communicates* through the Holy Doors and the two Deacons’ Doors“ [<http://lacasedecult.cimec.ro/Ro/Documente/AlcatuireaFunctionala.htm>]. In the Old Testament, the Temple’s chambers were separated by two curtains – one between the court and the first chamber, the Holy, and the other at the entrance to the Holy of Holies; the latter was rent in two, from the top to the bottom, when the Saviour died (Matthew 17.51, Mark 15.38, Luke 23.45). This signified that since that moment, mankind has gained access to the true Holy of Holies in heaven, which is the true dwelling place of God, not made of human hands. This is one of the reasons why, unlike the clear-cut separation between the three components of the Old Testament tent or temple, which completely forbid any communication, the New Testament church imposed less strict restrictions (Figure 7).

For instance, during the Bright Week, the Holy Doors are never closed, or they are even removed altogether, and the curtain is not drawn so that the altar is visible at all times; this indicates that heaven has been opened. The most impressive moment, however, is the consecration of a church, when both the church’s doors and the Holy Doors are opened, “which means that the Heaven is opened and is united with the Earth“ [3, p. 186]. It is the moment when laity, even women – who are not normally allowed to enter the altar – are admitted not only into the consecrated space of the church, but also into the Holy altar.

Another reminder of the access granted by the iconostasis-gate to the altar-heaven, is the portrayal of the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel on the Deacons’ Doors, as “keepers of the Paradise doors“; more seldom, they are replaced by two military saints (Saints George and Dimitrios), with the same significance [7, p. 465]. The entire iconostasis represents a gateway through which the celebrant (priest or bishop) passes symbolizing the ‘Emperor of the world’.



Figure 9. The iconostasis of the former Cotroceni Monastery (1682), currently in the National Art Museum of Romania (http://www.artline.ro/Salvati_Iconostasul_de_la_Cotroceni_-12556-1-n.html).



Figure 10. Holy Doors, Moldavia, 16th century. The National Art Museum of Romania (<http://europeana.cimec.ro/detaliu.asp?k=1713BB23514D4C468054433169B3212B>).



Figure 11. The iconostasis of Căluu monastery katholikon, 16th century.

Beside the three openings punctuating the iconostasis, Christians have another means for penetrating the seemingly opaque wall: the icons displayed on it. They appear to be mere apertures through which the other world is visible (Figure 8). An icon, however, is not just an empty portion on the iconostasis wall, filled with specific aesthetic forms (lines and colours) and is more than a window, as it seems at first sight. It has been said that an icon is a “window onto eternity“, a phrase that lent the title of a book [10]. But an icon is more than a window one stops to look through; it is a gateway offering access to the Kingdom of heaven – not actually but potentially. Symbolically, any gate has “a dynamic, psychological dimension; it does not only mark a threshold, but also invites one to cross it. The gate invites to a journey into a different realm...” [2]

Traditionally, the layout of an iconostasis contains tiers of icons – the Sovereign tier, the festal icons, the icons of the apostles and the prophets. They cannot be deemed as mere aesthetical devices, but must be seen as actual intercessors for our reaching the Paradise. It may be asserted that the area in the immediate vicinity of the altar was certainly programmatically significant in the Byzantine church, but in a special way, “because the sanctuary screen and the adjacent area were the focal point of lay piety. Lay people could approach the screen to pray and to venerate the icons placed there or nearby. During the execution of the liturgy inside the sanctuary, they could contemplate the Deësis and the Great Feasts, represented on the architrave or the epistyle. These iconographical themes recalled the necessity of the intercession of the saints and the major events of Christ’s redemptive mission which were being re-enacted behind the screen.” [11]

The iconostasis iconography sums up that of the entire church, and recapitulates the economy of salvation, by depicting the major characters and episodes of both the Old and the New Testament, all centred around Jesus Christ who is the common link between the two. Like a gateway, this painting allows us to grasp the meaning of the Holy Liturgy as well as its purpose, namely achieving the union between worshippers and Christ, earth and heaven, the Church triumphant and the Church militant, [7, p. 471-472] making us citizens of the Paradise (Figure 9).

Not coincidentally, the Annunciation is depicted on the Holy Doors (Figure 10). The Mother of God was the ‘door’ through which salvation entered the world, while the Holy Doors gave the clergy access to the sanctuary in order to re-enact the mysteries of salvation [11]. The Holy Virgin Mary is depicted here, since she was the one who opened the doors of divine mercy symbolized by the Holy Doors, as shows the priest’s prayer uttered here, before beginning the Holy Liturgy: “The door of compassion open unto us, O blessed Theotokos, for hoping in thee, let us not perish; through thee may we be delivered from adversities, for thou art the salvation of the Christian race“ [7, p. 464]. The Lenten chants say: “In the Church of thy glory we stand and feel like dwelling in heaven, O Theotokos, the heavenly door; open the doors of thy mercy to us.“ [1, p. 118]

Another hymn dedicated to the Mother of God names her the 'heavenly door', who proved to be "Heaven and Church of the Godhead; by abolishing the dividing wall of discord, she brought peace and opened the Kingdom to us" (Dogmatics, tone 1, the Resurrection hymns). To highlight the fact that the Holy Doors are actually the entrance doors to heaven, the four Evangelists are depicted in the four corners of the Annunciation scene, because they heralded the good news and facilitated this overcoming of the dividing wall. Thus, the icons truly represent the gates through which we enter the Paradise lost then regained due to the sacrifice on the Cross.

6. The Cross, the key to the heaven's gates

Any gate will have a key that opens it; Adam failed to have this key and, seeing the angel "casting him away and locking the door of the heavenly garden, did sigh and said: O Merciful one, have mercy on me who have fallen" [1, p. 104]. The Triodion chants say: "through the wood of the tree, did the serpent lock Eden of old; but the wood of the cross opened it again to those who want to be cleansed through fasting and tears. Thus seeing the cross before us, let us the faithful bow before it in awe, saying: Open, o Cross, the gates of heaven to those who love thee." [1, p. 310-311]

Adam and his descendants fell through the wood of the tree; the wood of the Cross "restored them to heaven again" [1, p. 317]. Saint John Chrysostom stated that the Holy Cross opened the Paradise to us; it is the key to the heaven. The Paradise was locked and the Cross unlocked it; it made us "citizens of heaven, we who were alien to it" [12].

Thus the Cross is the key to the Christian life, the key to the existence of the entire world, the entire cosmos, history, and mankind. The Cross is essentially our existential sign. This sign also appears in iconography, for instance in the famous Last Judgment scene at Voroneț Monastery, where Saint Peter opens the Paradise gates on which the Cross is depicted. Everything is thus opened and closed through the Cross. [*Despre Crucea lui Iisus Hristos ca lege supremă a vieții noastre*, interview with Ioan I. Ică Jr, online at <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/sarbatori/duminica-sfintei-crucci/crucea-iisus-hristos-lege-suprema-vietii-noastre-124062.html>.]

The Lenten chants, marked by repentance, name the Cross a gateway to heaven or a ladder ascending to the Paradise, as demonstrates its constant presence at the top of the iconostasis, proclaiming it as a sign of the victory against sin and a key opening the heaven to us (Figure 11).

7. Conclusions

The role of the iconostasis as a gateway in the Heaven's wall is visibly signalled by the three openings (the holy doors and the deacon's doors) that perforate the wall, but also symbolically by the icons covering the iconostasis according to the canonical arrangement. The icon is not opaque, like a painting:

it is an invitation to enter, through material transparency, the realm of the spirituality predicated narratively and stylistically.

Due to these quality as a wall which that is not opaque but opens itself, to achieve the communion between nave and altar, as well as due to its character as a huge icon opening towards the Kingdom of Heaven, the iconostasis of Orthodox churches is a true gateway that constantly calls us to go past the wall of the Paradise.

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