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THE BYZANTINE HESYCHASM AND HUMANISM AND THEIR REFLECTION IN EASTERN ICONOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The Palaeologos era was, paradoxically, a period of rebirth and flourishing of spiritual and cultural life, amid a deep political-military and economic decline, which led to the Byzantine Empire's disappearance from history. The two movements that brightened this era, the spirituality of Hesychasm and the palamite theology, on the one hand, and classical Byzantine humanism, on the other hand, influenced all the fields of life of the Byzantine Empire, including sacred art. The present study aims to highlight how and to what extent they have left their mark on the Byzantine iconography, enriching it both thematic and modal, that is, the way in which the painters of the past have transposed into the icons the influences of the two movements.

Keywords: hesychasm; humanism; icon; sacred art; Orthodox iconography; the Palaeologos era;

1. INTRODUCTION

In his work *We and the Icon*, Sorin Dumitrescu stated that „any thesis of a historical evolution of the icon” should be excluded, which is considered to be „a mere cultural prejudice”, evidence put forward in support of this statement being „the frescoes from the Roman catacombs hair painted during the rebirth of the Palaeologos” (S. Dumitrescu, 2010, p.128).

Referring to the schism after Schism, as the rupture of the Duecento icon of the righteous belief in the West, the same author agrees that „the icon registers fine and accurately, as an unimaginable iconographic seismograph, the seismic waves detached from the terrible magnitude of the axiological and iconological earthquake from Duecento” (S. Dumitrescu, 2010, pp. 92-93).

Thus, without talking about a historical evolution of the icon, its iconography is imprinted in its being, and the spiritual, theological or cultural reverberations of the different epochs that crossed Eastern sacred art throughout the time can be observed. There is no exception to this rule nor the sacred art in the Byzantine Palaeologos, which has been felt in a positive, fortunately manner, by the influences of two opposing currents, the hesychasm and humanism, which left their mark both thematic, as well as iconographic and iconological.



2. HESYCHASM AND HUMANISM

The Renaissance of Hesychastic spirituality in Byzantine monasticism as a reaction to affirmation and defense of Orthodox identity and resistance to the attempts of the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII the Palaeologos (1261-1282) to impose the church union ended in 1274 in Lyon between the Eastern Church and Rome ones through an unacceptable theological compromise on the basis of the Orthodox teaching of faith, led to the renewal and flourishing of spiritual life in the Byzantium of the 13th-15th centuries.

In parallel with the unprecedented spread of the spirituality of the Hesychasm, both among the monks and laity, theological disputes continued around the main doctrinal points separating the two Churches, especially around Filioque, reaching the apogee at the beginning of the 14th century, when, despite the failure of the union of Lyon, new covenants of church union were initiated.

If the initiator of the revivalist movement of spirituality was a Catholic converted to Orthodoxy, the nobility named Nikephoros (Pr. D. Stăniloae, 1993, p. 42), another Western monk, Barlaam of Calabria, a humanist formation, came from Italy to Byzantium to study Aristotle in the original, assumed the task of combating the Filioque thesis and defending the Orthodox faith teaching. Unfortunately, the rationalist-philosophical theory to which Barlaam had called, who had affirmed in one of the Filioque treaties that no demonstration was valid with regard to the truths concerning God as one that is inscrutable and incognostible in his being (J. Meyendorff, 1953, p. 118), was in flagrant contradiction with the Orthodox tradition. That is why he came into conflict with Saint Gregory Palamas, who defended the Orthodox faith teaching about the Holy Spirit's procession by appealing to the Holy Fathers of the Church.

Saint Gregory Palamas revealed that the God who is unknowable in His essence is fully revealed in the person of the Savior Jesus Christ and, after Ascension to heaven, reveals himself through uncreated divine grace and thus can be known in His works, thus touching for the first time the issue of essence and divine energies (J. Meyendorff, 1953, p. 118), a matter that would become the subject of theological controversies that marked the 14th century Byzantine and the central doctrine of its theology.

So, the controversy did not address the matter of the Filioque itself, but the way Barlaam addressed it and the importance given to it by profane philosophy and rational knowledge of God at the expense of theology and mystical knowledge, through revelation, knowledge that they valued the hesychasts.

Against Barlaam, who affirmed that the only possible knowledge of God is the rational one, the mind becoming „God-seeing when cleansed not only of passions, but also of ignorance” (Sf. Gregory Palama, 1997, p.278) because, according to him, the supreme knowledge of God was by negation, which necessarily followed the intellectual one – „So those who are pure in heart do not see God differently either by analogy or by cause or by negation. And the more God-seeing of all is the one who knows many parts of the world or the highest. But also the one who knows better what he knows. And the most God-seeing of all is the one who knows the visible parts and the unseen powers of the world. For he who can contemplate all these things can know God by analogy as the cause of all these things. And placing Him above all this by negation, he knows Him again as being above all. For only God is known of things. And the very way of God's knowledge through negation, which seems to despise the knowledge of things for God, can not be produced without the knowledge of all things. For we can only know the negations of the things we know of our existence” (Sf. Gregory Palama, 1997, p. 350), - Saint Gregory Palamas, without despising the knowledge gained by reason through the study of the sciences, said that he who devotes himself to this knowledge can only deduce and know that God exists, but without sharing with God.

For Saint Gregory Palamas the only means of knowing God is the union of the highest-minded view with and through the work of divine grace, not reason, which is clearly stated when it says: „Sensitive and Intelligent faculties are means of knowing beings; they are limited by beings and make known to God by departing from these beings. But those who do not possess only the faculties of sensation and intellectual understanding and who have acquired supernatural spiritual grace will not be limited by beings in their knowledge, but they will also know spiritually, above all meaning and reason, that God is the Spirit, for they become God in their entirety, and know God in God” (J. Meyendorff, 1959, p. 241).

In this union-mind view, and by the mind of the whole man, he shares the light of the divine grace that Saint Gregory Palamas learns to be enipostatic, subsistence in the Divine Persons. That light can not therefore be „the being beyond the being”, which is „inaccessible and non-shareable” (J. Meyendorff, 1959, p. 274), neither is it an angel, because „it has dominant features”, neither the mind itself, because this light is the deifying and „preface the body by adapting it and communicating it to its own splendor” (J. Meyendorff, 1959, p. 274), denying it. In this state of complete union with the divine and deifying light, the body itself becomes light and perceives this light even with the material senses: „it is seen - a miracle! - and the bodily eyes” (J. Meyendorff, 1959, p. 274, Saint Gregory repeatedly said.

We note from the words of Saint Gregory Palamas the importance given by the Hesychasts, according to the whole Orthodox anthropology up to them, to the body of man, who comes to bear the signs of deification, to be the bearer and seer of the uncreated divine light of the grace of the Holy Spirit. In fact, this deified body, the bearer of uncreated divine light through which the spiritual part of the human soul manifests itself, is the „object” whose likeness is surprised in the icon.

Also, from an iconological perspective, it is extremely important to clarify the meaning of divine darkness, to which Barlaam is often referred. To prove that the supreme knowledge of God is, as he believed, theology by negation and not knowledge through unity-view in the uncreated divine light, Barlaam has repeatedly referred to the theology of Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite, but confusing the divine darkness that he spoke (Sf. Dionysius the Areopagite, 1996, pp.247-250) with his theology through negation and concluding that „the most perfect view is this darkness, or theology by negation. So the light that you speak, whatever it is, you have to leave it to go to your theology and vision through negation” (J. Meyendorff, 1959, p.327).

Saint Gregory Palamas responded to Varlaam that the divine darkness of the Areopagite is not a mere rational negation of what the mind knows for, on the one hand, this knowledge through negation is within everyone`s reach, even of those who do not restrain the passionate part and, on the other hand, by denying everything he knows, the mind is „in front of a void that does not unite with God” (Filocalia, VII, 1997, note 488). It is, on the contrary, the superabundance of the light of the divine glory and cites Dionysius himself, who, in the epistle To Dorotheus the liturgist (the deacon), said that „the divine darkness is the unapproachable light ... for the overflowing of overwhelming light above the being ...” (J. Meyendorff, 1959, p.329; Sf. Dionysius the Areopagite, 1996, p. 258).

So, the dark background, almost black sometimes, sometimes a very intense marine bleach, in the mural painting is meant to signify precisely this superabundance of uncreated divine light that the saints experienced in their mystical experiences and about which theologians spoke (N. Gusev, M. Dunaev, R. Karelin, 2007, p. 340). The same role plays, this time in icons made in mosaic, the gold background, which refers to the same superabundance of uncreated divine light.

The teaching of the deification of man by the mystical union with God and His vision in the uncreated divine light of grace in which God reveals himself to the whole, but being distinct from the Being above the Being of his actual work, is justified by Saint Gregory Palamas by the act of Incarnation The Son of God. According to him, the human nature assumed by the Incarnation of the Son in His divine Hypostasis is the only point of concealment between uncreated and created, between God and man, the only deck whereby the divine grace shares to the whole man, the body and the soul, interior and not just exterior until the Incarnation.

According to Saint Gregory Palamas, the deification of man is a teandric work, implying the gift of Christ, „which by the divine baptism, as by the grace of the divine Spirit who dwells in Him, has begot us again” (Sf. Gregory Palama, 2000, p.34), and the Christian's effort to live „according to the divine commandments”, a work that is fulfilled in the Church.

The theology of Saint Gregory Palamas is not, therefore, how it would appear from the writings of defense of mystical hesychast, a spiritualist and intellectualist theology, with a psychological mysticism, in which the body finds no place, but is a Christocentric and ecclesiological theology, with a monistic anthropology very well-defined and in accordance with the teaching of the Church, which saves the unity of man restored in Christ in the face of the danger of the Platonic dualism professed by Barlaam. In this context, the honoring of the icon of Christ the Savior and of the icons of the saints, the wood of the Cross that Christ suffered, and the image of the Cross of Christ, the holy vessels and holy places, finds their natural role in the teandric work of deification of man as means through who shares the sanctifying grace, „for God dwells in them” (Sf. Gregory Palama, 1985, pp. 210-211; 1991, p.157).

On the other hand, the cultural flourishing was under the sign of humanism, understood not as a rebirth of the interest of the Byzantine intellectuals for the Hellenistic antiquity and as rediscovery of it, whose heirs were increasingly aware that they were, and especially as an intensification of the study of the works of the authors belonging to the classical Greek antiquity and their revaluation (Pr. C. Gagu, 2007).

Reporting to the classical Greek antiquity did not just summarize the imitation of the forms, models and canons of rhetoric, or other humanities, and the cultivation of taste for good and beauty - *καλοκαγαθία*, but also borrowed from this rich treasure. These loans would also influence Byzantine sacred art, manifesting in a paradoxical symbiosis with the elements of the hesychast theology, „both in the actual conception of art and in its character or its subjects” (S. Dumitrescu, 2010, p. 156).

The pictorial style of this period, called the Palaeologoi`style by historians, reflected, therefore, both the Hesychast theology and the humanistic current.

The influences of the humanist current in the Byzantine sacred art of the Palaeologoi era are well emphasized both by L. Uspensky, in *The Theology of the Icon*, and by Charles Delvoye, in *Byzantine Art*. From ancient art, the Byzantine iconographers of this era borrowed the volume of forms, rendered by creating the deep feeling, the representation of the lost or back profile and the technique of the raccourci (a process of rendering a subject through painting, sculpture or photography reducing dimensions through the perspective effect). From the same source, through the miniaturization of manuscripts, they adopted the linear perspective process by converting the lines to an imaginary axis behind the scenes, a perspective that often coexists with the reverse perspective (Ch. Delvoye, 1976, p. 221).

The holy persons represented in the icon are no longer exteriorized to the viewer, but are often turned to themselves and closed as in a picture, losing or making it more difficult to realize the spiritual connection between the holy person in the icon and the believer in front of the icon (L. Uspensky, 1994, pp.156-157).

The taste of the narrative is more and more prevalent, exemplified by the diversification of subjects, some entirely new, borrowed both from the Holy Gospels and apocryphal writings, from the life of the saints or from the Acatist Hymn, with the presentation of scenes from the family life rich in pictorial details, which led to the diversification of the represented physiognomies. The looks of the characters are more expressive, conveying feelings of gentleness, melancholy, amazement in the presence of the miracle or fear of the torment of hell (Ch. Delvoye, 1976, p. 219). Also, to the simplicity of the backgrounds it is preferable to load them with trees, rocks, constructions between which curtains are made, elements that do not have a „rather ornamental than realistic” role, as Ch. Delvoye (1976, p. 220) says, but on the contrary, are symbols loaded with theological meanings of the highest, as S. Dumitrescu interprets in his work *We and the icon* (2010, pp.242-244, 307-316).

Uspensky shows that unlike the previous period, when Christian iconography caught the attitude, the hieratism of the saint at the expense of gesturing, the spiritual state rather than the emotions, one of the defining features of this period is precisely the surprise of the transfigured emotions, the expression of the most intimate movements of the soul (L. Uspensky, 1994, p.156). The faces are no longer hieratic, tried with harsh, but milder, more human lines, contributing to the colors used, brighter and more joyful, even compared to the austere ones. As the archimandrite Sofian Boghiu notices, the image of the Savior Jesus Christ Pantocrator represented at that time in the mosaics of the Chora monastery or those of the Virgin Mary's Church in Constantinople, expresses „both heavenly and endless love for men”, „an endless goodness” (S. Boghiu, 2001, p.80). Delvoye notes, however, that even in this context of the obvious influences of the humanist current, Byzantine iconography of the Palaeologos`era, both the mural and the icons, keeps the holy characters „in the world of transcendence, very far from Italian realism” (Ch. Delvoye, 1976, pp. 221, 256).

The humanist influence has manifested its influence in the sacred art of the epoch including the introduction of new iconographic themes or new elements in traditional themes, taken from liturgical literature, apocryphal or folk literature. In the churches adorned with mosaic or mural paintings there are scenes from the Virgin's childhood, according to the information in the Jacob's Proto-Gospel, scenes from the life of the Savior, such as the Bethlehem Road, The Quirinus census, The Purple Wreath Distribution, or episodes of the Old Testament interpreted in Christian hymnography as prefigurations of the Virgin. Representative is the church of the Chora monastery in Constantinople, the work of the great logothete Theodor Metochites (Ch. Delvoye, 1976, pp. 221, 256).

The victory of palamite theology led to a return to the traditionalist style prior to the rebirth of the time of the first two emperors of the Palaeologos, with solemn and severe physiognomies, with precise lines, with a stunning attitude to the movement, but without losing the elegance and charm that had acquired until then.

The influences of the theology and spirituality of the hesychasts did not materialize in the Byzantine iconography of the time only by returning to the more austere traditionalist style. The taboric light experienced by the Hesychasts is reflected in the iconography of the time in the form of the blic ((N. Gusev, M. Dunaev, R. Karelin, 2007, pp. 312-13, 339), defined by Sorin Dumitrescu as „the brightest point of an iconic morphology, indicating the place where it was short-circuited by the uncreated energies” (S. Dumitrescu, 2010, p.219). According to the same author, the blic represents the iconic figure of „the highest coefficient of diaphanicity”, that is, of the most intense manifestation of the uncreated divine light „nestling in the density of the proplasma, illuminating it either gradually from within or shorting it in depth and then gushing out, in the brilliance of the accents” (S. Dumitrescu, 2010, p.225).

The influences of the hesychastic movement manifested itself, like those of the humanist current, including in the presentation of new themes springing up in the context of the sacramental theology promoted by Saint Gregory Palamas, and especially by Saint Nicholas Cabasila.

The latter highlighted sacramental life as another side of the same spiritual life of the Church, showing that union with God is possible to any Christian through the holy mysteries by which men „become God and Sons of God” (N. Cabasila, 1989, p.139), emphasizing this on the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist.

For Saint Nicholas Cabasila, „the highest target to which our work can be directed”, the highest peak of spiritual life, is the Holy Communion (N. Cabasila, 1989, p.196), through which „the Lord Jesus Christ Himself fills our soul, crossing the depths and all the outflows, enveloping from all sides”, penetrating „into the marrow and our members” and becoming together with the one „one and the same” (N. Cabasila, 1989, p.195). That is why he calls the Holy Eucharist „the greatest mystery, because beyond it can no longer go, nor can any more be added” (N. Cabasila, 1989, p.195).

Under the influence of this Eucharistic sacramental theology, Byzantine iconography introduced new themes inspired by the Divine Liturgy, such as The Angelic Liturgy, The Communion of the Apostles, or the Old-Testament prefigurations of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, such as Abraham's Sacrifice or The Three Young People in the Fire Oven, The Abraham Philoxenia, whose origins go down to the age of primary Christianity.

In the context of the same hesychastic sacramental theology, the iconography of the time redefined the symbol, though it constituted a ground of theological dispute between Saint Gregory Palamas and Barlaam of Calabria (Pr. D. Stăniloae, 1993, pp. 67-69; J. Meyendorff, 1959, pp.260-261; C. Gagu, 2007, pp. 180-182), both through the representation of the Savior Jesus Christ as the Lamb (Ch. Delvoe, 1976, p. 236) and as the Angel of the Great Council, in the scene of The Holy Communion of the Apostles or in The Feast of Wisdom (L. Uspensky, 1994, pp.157-158).

The attempts of the sacred Byzantine art of this period to reveal the Holy Mysteries of the Eucharist iconographically led to the need to reveal the whole iconomy of salvation, which was to materialize in the Russian space in the fifteenth century in the appearance of the iconostasis, as it is known today (L. Uspensky, 1994, p.157).

3. CONCLUSION

The Renaissance of the Palaeologos, manifested both as a revival of spiritual life and theology, as well as as a cultural-humanistic revival, left its mark, through the two movements, and in the sacred art, the icon impressively and precisely recording the influences of the two currents, often in conflict, of the Byzantine spiritual-cultural life. The extremely hot conflict between the hesychastic spirituality and the humanist culture, whose reverberations were felt in almost all areas of Byzantine life at that time, was translated into the sacred art of time rather into a happy synthesis of the main elements of the two movements, enriching it both from the point of view of the new themes approached and from the modal point of view of how it recorded the influences of the two currents. This positive effect is due to the fact that the painters, both the traditionalists, who were not always sheltered by the influences of humanism,

and those who were passionate of this movement, understood to remain „faithful to the traditional forms of Orthodox art represented by the hesychasm” (L. Uspensky, 1994, p.158). Thus, the Byzantine sacred art of the renaissance of the Palaeologos produced the extraordinary mosaics of the Chora Monastery (Khariye Djami) and Pammakaristos (Fethiye Djami), who enjoy the sight and exalt the soul.

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