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THE HOLY SCRIPTURE AS FOUNDATION OF THE ICON

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Abstract

The Gospel, this great news, reveals God to the world Incarnated as Jesus Christ – true God and true Man. The Apostles, the witnesses to and the beneficiaries of this revelation, confessed that „...which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have gazed upon and touched with our own hands – this is the Word of life... we proclaim to you” (I John 1, 1-2). The content of the new-testament writings is therefore based on the authors’ personal experience or, at most, on exact sources, and aims to use words as to introduce readers into the atmosphere of grace experienced by the disciples so that they themselves become witnesses to and proclaimers of true Life, „in Him was life and that life was the light of all mankind” (I John 1, 2-3). Therefore, the interdependence between word and image, between Gospel and icon is created. The Apostles saw the Saviour „face to face”; we absorb His words from the Holy Books and we feel as if addressed to us and, through these words, we feel the presence of One who speaks them. Similar to icons, the words render the Person present and also lead towards that closeness to This One and that dialogue of the prayer.

Keywords: Holy Scripture; gospel; Saviour; apostles; icon;

1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of the Orthodox Church, icons have played an important part in relation to the catechization and religious instruction. The religious painting depicts the Bible in colours, colours by which the illiterate have come in contact with the learning on salvation, whereas nowadays they teach those who no longer have time to read. „The iconography is a form of the Holy Scripture”, Archbishop Lazăr Puhalo says. „This is nothing else than the Bible, the accurate interpretation of the Bible, through colours and mosaics”¹.

Throughout times, improvement of pictorial styles and iconographic registers enabled painting of the Holy Scripture on the church walls and often these walls are fully covered by frescos. Each corner,

¹ Archbishop Lazăr Puhalo, *The Ikon as Scripture*, translation by Marian Rădulescu, Theosis Publishing House, Oradea, 2009, p. 12.

each nook of the churches used to be covered in bible representations and the iconography became thus another means by which the Holy Scripture unveiled itself. In fact, one gradually reaches the stage when religious paintings imprint bible ideas and forms in the onlooker's eyes².

The Greek word „eikon" from which the term „icon" originates means „alikehood", „face", „representation". Christians started using icons as early as the first century AD. In the first two centuries, Christians had a primitive form of art which used forms such as „the dove" (symbol of Christ's peace), „the fish", and „the shepherd" (symbols of Christ), as well as the „peacock" (symbol of the resurrection). Moreover, it seems that, as early as the first century AD, the Christians used representations of the events in the Holy Scripture to embellish their tombs; pictorial representations of Christ's life, possibly going back to the first part of the second century, were discovered in catacombs in Rome and Alexandria.

These proofs demonstrate that the iconographic images came to life as early as the first centuries of our Christian life. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea (+ 339) wrote in his *Church History* that he saw the icons of the Saviour and the Apostles Peter and Paul which had been kept until his lifetime³. We notice that, in time, despite all opposition from those who condemned them, the icons came into prominence in the cult of the Church and the faces painted on them still keep the same beauty which awakes the souls of the Christians.

As there is a close relation between the icons, of the one hand, and the divine cult and the Christians' devotion, of the other hand, the icons became part of the Church's life and tradition, in line with the possibility and the needs of each and every era, and they have always expressed the teachings promoted by the Church. Therefore, during persecution times, the iconography was symbolic and allegoric. It was in the catacombs that the few Christians confessed their faith through symbols (fish, anchor, lamb, vineyard, deer etc.) or the monogram of Christ the Saviour (also known as the sign *XP*), as well as *A* and *Ω* and the cross. The catacombs also hosted representations of bible scenes which, though lacking a stylised form and being less artistic, brought their contribution and strengthened Christians' faith in God Almighty, making Christians courageous before the persecutors.

Later on Emperor Constantine the Great gave Church its freedom and this was the time when the representations through symbols and allegories were no longer sufficient. This is the reason why representations of the Saviour's activity, Virgin Mary's life, Apostles' activity or acts of martyrdom found their own place in the cult. Every century the number and the diversity of the iconographic representations increase, and the iconography becomes progressively more mature and stylised.

2. REVELATION THROUGH WORD AND IMAGE

God communicates to us through things in the world and through people as if He communicated through some words or, better said, some echoes of His words. The Old Testament forbade the image in favour of the word; however, the New Testament restores the image as means towards discovering God through embodiment of the Son of God. From a soteriological perspective, icon painting has the same status and is, to the same extent, as mandatory as written conveyance of the Gospel.

Both the word and the image become therefore yet again means of communication and sharing, which, once accepted at sensory level, enlighten the mind of the person intercepting them. The holy image goes back to the very beginnings of Christianity and is one of the main ways towards spreading and preaching the Holy Scripture. The image as language or, better said, as embodiment of the Holy Scripture words, developed gradually, at the same time as the Church did and while the Church was laying down their dogmas. This explains why the Church initially talked to Christians using a language that was more accessible and more appropriate than the direct image which they were not prepared to receive.

² I. D. Ștefănescu, *Iconography of the Byzantine Art and Romanian Feudal Painting*, Meridiane Publishing House, Bucharest, 1973, p. 50.

³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, Book VII, XVIII, 4, translation by Priest Prof. T. Bodogae, Publishing House of the Bible and Orthodox Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1987, p. 288.

In its activities, the Church was a language of symbols of which meanings were revealed to catechumens while they were preparing for the Christian Baptism. At the beginning, Christianity manifested itself on a small scale and had to cope with numerous issues springing from the society which found it difficult to surpass old conceptions, which originated both in Judaism and in the ancient Greek and Roman tradition. This was the case of images of which acceptance met, on the one hand, with interdictions of the Old Testament on representation of God, all the more so as Christian communities were surrounded by paganism and the unfortunate experience of pagan idolatry made the early Christians avoid any forms of artistic manifestation which could have contaminated their religion, and, on the other hand, with the shortage of an appropriate artistic language to properly represent the face of Christ. Moreover, in those times, the dogma of the Incarnation, which would have offered the reason, the certitude and even the duty to represent the face of Christ, had not yet been developed.

It is worth noting that, as father Dumitru Stăniloae pointed out, the Old Testament Law forbade worshiping of idols, yet admitted the presence of symbols, images or even objects placed in direct connection with God, in other words sanctified objects. This idea leads to the affirmation that the symbols of the old law „provide knowledge about God; however, this is limited, obscure, as God Himself appears in these symbols only as shadows. God will completely reveal Himself in Christ, in Whom God comes in full closeness and light”⁴.

The first Christians used above all bible symbols. In addition to the rare explicit images of Christ, there is a multitude of symbolic representations. Among the ones using the human form we firstly see the image of the Good Shepherd (see Figure 1), which existed as early as the first century. It is inspired from the bible texts, where the world is depicted as a flock of which shepherd is God, as it is Jesus Christ the Saviour Himself Who said: „I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10, 11) and „and I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15, 24).



(Fig. 1
– Jesus Christ –Good Shepherd – mosaic of the 5th century, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna)

⁴ Priest Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Symbol as Anticipation and Foundation of the Possibility of the Icon*, in magazine „Theological Studies”, No. 7 – 8/1957, p. 429.

By adopting this image, Christianity confers it a precise meaning: The Good Shepherd – God Incarnate – takes the lost sheep, namely the degenerated human nature, and unifies it to His godlike glory⁵.

In the art of the catacombs, the lamb represented the Christians, the souls redeemed by Jesus Christ, according to the words spoken to Peter: „Feed my lambs” (John 21, 15) and the image of the Good Shepherd with the lamb over His shoulders. The lamb also represents Jesus Christ as depicted by John the Baptist: „look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1, 29). Later on, when the image of the God Shepherd is accompanied by the new Saviour, the oriental type, having with beard and wearing a kingly costume, the lamb continues its symbolism, yet it no longer is the mystical lamb, „the lamb which sacrifices itself and is sacrificed”, but an apocalyptic figure (see Fig. 2).



(Fig. 2)

In 313 the Roman Empire becomes Christian and in 330 Constantine the Great founds the new capital of the empire, Constantinople. Christianity comes out of the catacombs, „conquers” both the Roman Empire and the Near Eastern countries and expands rapidly. This change in the life of the 4th-century Church marks not only an era when Christian faith was victorious but also the start of a development in all aspects. After this *golden era* of the Church, of great importance was the reign of Justinian I, which may rightfully be considered as the apogee of the art in the Byzantine period. Among the religious buildings owed to this great emperor, Procopius of Caesarea enumerates churches such as *Holy Apostles* in Constantinople, *San Vitale* in Ravenna, *Saint Demetrius* in Thessaloniki.

San Vitale Church is garlanded with famous mosaics, of which the most popular represent Justinian and Theodora. The fame of Justinian I is associated to the large church Hagia Sophia of Constantinople, the capital of the empire, where „the genius of Rome and the Orient comes together as

⁵ Archimandrite Sofian Boghiu, *The Face of the Saviour in Iconography*, Bizantina Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, p. 40.

one in the most surprising ensemble”⁶. Hagia Sophia or the Great Church of the Orthodoxy was designated to be „the pantheon of the Byzantine art”. Constructed between 532 and 537, it was destined to surpass the great Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem. Upon completion of works, the emperor visited the masterpiece and is said to have exclaimed: „Oh Solomon, I have surpassed thee”. Of an impressive size (77m long, 72 wide, 65 high), this church is made of the best and most expensive materials: multicolour marble, cedar wood, gold, silver, ivory, gems, porphyry, oriental purple velvet fabric, Persian and Arabian carpets. Hagia Sophia fascinated all people who saw it. Procopius of Caesarea wrote in amazement: „Whenever one goes to this church to pray, one understands immediately that this work has been fashioned not by human power or skill, but by the influence of God”⁷.

This is the moment when we witness a time of Christianity being spread through art, not to small groups, but to masses of Christians. This is why the Church Fathers attach special importance to the pedagogical role of the art. Saint Gregorian the Theologian, bishop of Nazianzus and patriarch of Constantinople, explains how important the image is: „Images are used in holy churches so that the illiterate can at least read on walls what is impossible for them to read in books”⁸, and Saint Basil the Great ascribes painting a power of persuasion which exceeds the power of his own words. The icon is a genuine declaration of faith, of a profound dogmatic nature. Once again the Church uses iconography and therefore art to both preach and fight heresy. „The representation of the human face of God on icons serves in putting shame on the heretics who claim that He turned into man only in people’s imagination, never in reality”⁹ wrote Saint Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople, to bishop iconoclast Tomas.

Art represents an essential dimension of the Orthodoxy of all times. Art is a means to teach and, in consideration of the responsibility assumed, the church will be carefully watching its evolution. The Church Fathers will therefore try to use canons as to both enrich and protect the Christian art against infiltrations of pagan origin. In 692, on the occasion of the 6th ecumenical synod of Trulan, the Church formulates for the first time a basic principle on the content and the nature of the sacred art as means of teaching faith. Thus canon 82 specifies: „In some pictures of the venerable icons, a lamb is painted to which the Precursor points his finger, which is received as a type of grace, indicating beforehand through the Law, our true lamb, Christ our God. Embracing therefore the ancient types and shadows as symbols of the truth, and patterns given to the Church, we prefer grace and truth, receiving it as the fulfilment of the Law. In order therefore that „that which is perfect” may be delineated to the eyes of all, at least in coloured expression, we decree that the figure in human form of the lamb who takes away the sin of the world, Christ our God, be henceforth exhibited in images, instead of the ancient lamb, so that all may understand by means of it the depth of the humiliation of the Word of God, and that we may recall to our memory His conversation in the flesh, His passion and salutary death, and His redemption which was wrought for the whole world”¹⁰.

The realistic representation of Christ constitutes a proof of His Incarnation. The ecumenical synod speaks of Messiah’s symbols and figments of imagination as of an outdated stage in the life of the Church. The synod decided to replace the symbols of the Old Testament as well as the symbols of the first Christian centuries with the direct representation of what they prefigured, calling for disclosure of their meaning. Through Incarnation, the image in those figments of imagination becomes reality. Ancient symbols are removed just because now there is a direct image, in relation to which all these seem to be reminiscences of a „Judaic immaturity”. They end up being even negative, to the extent to which we diminish the paramount significance of the direct image and its meaning.

⁶ I. D. Ștefănescu, *cited works*, p. 57.

⁷ Iustina Andreescu, *Short History of the Byzantine Painting*, apud. <http://www.catacombeleortodoxiei.ro/index.php/artaortodoxa>

⁸ Paul Evdochimov, *The Art of the Icon. A Theology of Beauty*, translation by Grigore and Petru Moga, Sofia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014, p. 188.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 188.

¹⁰ *Can. 82 of synod II Trulan*, apud Priest Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *From Creation to Incarnation of Word and from Symbol to Icon*, in magazine „Voice of the Church”, No. 12/1957, p. 862.

In the 8th and 9th centuries the cult of the icons will go through a big crisis caused by the *iconoclastic movement*. Due to this phenomenon many worshippers of the holy icons were persecuted as they tried to defend icons and showed them as the fruit of the authentic faith which they expressed, wanted and preached. Ever since then the holy icons have been continuously kept in our Church¹¹. To honour the victory of the icons cult over the iconoclastic movement, Empress Theodora instituted the *Holiday of the Orthodoxy* on March 11, 1843. People celebrate it even nowadays, on the first Sunday of the Easter Lent, by a procession of icons, in remembrance of all those who fought and sacrificed in persecution times: martyred saints, patriarchs, bishops, emperors, monks. The peacetime which followed in the life of the Church contributed to the big and rapid development of the sacred art. This is the time when the edifices on Mount Athos and other religious masterpieces in Cappadocia or Constantinople stand out.

3. CONCLUSION

Both the word and the icon are means towards discovering God, towards communicating, supporting and experiencing faith and thus instruments of the Christian mission to teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Saviour, our God Incarnate. In its mission the Church uses the word, the image, better said the image accompanies the word, and together they lead to finding the Truth: „God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory” (I Tim. 3, 16).

The Apostles witnessed the earthly life of Christ; they saw Him „face to face” (according to Corinthians 13, 12) and could stand by his tortured and crucified body. They wrote down all their experiences so that future generations may know and experience them in their turn. They were able to listen to His words directly; we only hear them while reading their writings. Therefore, the same word, bet it spoken or read, may produce the same effect, irrespective of how the receptor receives it (by listening to or reading it). This explains why another name for the icon is the *Gospel in images*. Saint Basil the Great teaches us by saying:” What a word communicates through hearing is what art shows silently through an image”¹².

Ever since its beginnings, the Church has obviously appealed, besides the word, i.e. the verbal language, to the means of the pictorial (artistic) language, as to express its entire theology „in colours”. Being all in the service of God, the word and the icon, the preaching of the Gospel and the iconography, the Gospel word and the icon language, are closely related and convey the same Truth: the truth of God’s presence in the world.

¹¹ Priest Prof. Ioan Rămureanu, *Universal Church History*, vol. I, Publishing House of the Bible and Orthodox Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1992, p. 264.

¹² Saint Basil the Great, apud Leonid Uspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, translation by Teodor Baconsky, Anastasia Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994, p. 93.

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