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THE IMAGE OF GOD WITHIN MAN – THE FOUNDATION OF SPIRITUAL PERFECTION

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Abstract

The human being is a mystery, he is not only nature, and he is not only soul, but these two together and more than that, he represents the divine seal on the individual. The human being can only be defined as a being impossible to define. Man created in God’s image is immortal, unique, non-recurring and we can even say impossible to clone. Beyond these statements, deep within himself, man discovers himself as a being animated by light and grace that do not come from within, but from the outside, as tension that is above all laws and mechanisms caused by it and which could be altered. Not only by means of his soul, but also by means of his body can any man achieve uniqueness, which makes it so that no body is completely identical to another. We find proof in finger prints or even in the composition of strands of hair, which differ from man to man. With each body, as with each soul, God wanted to make one of His special thoughts come alive. That is why it is not allowed to treat people as simple, identical copies of the same reality, but each person should be considered and treated as a unique value in time and space.

Keywords: man, person, perfection, dialogue, being

1. INTRODUCTION

The Holy Scripture teaches us that man was created in God’s image “and God created man in His image; in God’s image He made him, He made man and woman” (Creation 1, 27). Man is brought into existence within the council of the Holy Trinity, which proves He took special care in creating him, because He made everything else by the power of the Word “all were made through Him; and without Him nothing was made out of what was made” (In. 1, 3). God created man out of love so that man might enjoy life, all the bounties of earth and rule over “all creatures, who will obey him” [Saint John Chrysostom, 1987, 106] as if he were an emperor. “This is why – Saint Gregory of Nyssa says – man was created last among all creatures: not because he was thrown last into the world, with contempt, but because he was meant to be, from the very moment of his birth, an emperor over his subjects. Just as a master does not invite his subjects into his house before securing enough supplies, but only after having gathered enough supplies under acceptable circumstances and only after having prepared everything necessary for the feast does he invite the guest in, and the rich and the generous embellish their houses



just the same. Care taker of our nature, in all glow and glory, preparing a long and rich supply list, and only then does He bring man in..." [Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 1863, col. 134B]. Man's true greatness does not consist in his being related to everything that is to be found in the universe, but in his partaking in the divine life, in the sacrament within himself of being created in God's image [Lossky, 1993, 95]. Here as well, the Holy Scripture has a very important teaching for us: man has a unique position in the Universe and he lies between two worlds, the spiritual and immaterial one, on the one hand, and the material world of nature, on the other. But what sets man apart from these two is the fact that he encompasses both within. By being created in God's image and, as he even grows to resemble Him, man is related to his Creator, and, by means of his body, he is part of the material world and he participates in it. [Evdokimov, 1996, 89; Stăniloae, 2003, I, 406-407; Rose, 2001, 99]. The plenitude of this image is inherent only to man [Bulgacov, 1997, 139] and this is why God "seeded within him - Saint Gregory of Nyssa states – a blend of the divine and the human, so that he might taste the happiness of both, not only the joy of being connected to God, but also the enjoyment of worldly pleasures by feeling that he is no stranger to such joy [Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 1863, col. 134B].

2. MAN, THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN OF CREATION, MADE BY GOD IN A SPECIAL MANNER

The image should not be interpreted in a substantialist manner, as being placed by God in man as a component, added to the human being, but rather that man is made by God in His image as the totality of the human being [Evdokimov, 1996, 90]. God's image within man does not have man simply being, the way human existence simply is as a reference, but his capability of being a rational, free creature, enjoying his own authority [Yanaras, 2000, 65] – ultimately, man's quality of being a person capable of dialogue [Buchiu, 1997, 140].

The higher qualities that man was endowed with, such as biped walking, the physical build allowing him to move in all plans, the ingenuity Adam displayed in naming all animals, being self-aware, make man the king and master of all created before him. "Just like on Earth the craftsmen's tools – Saint Gregory of Nyssa says – are especially built to be used when life requires it, the same way the Craftsman of craftsmen endowed man with a nature that would lead him towards deeds worthy of a king, when He bestowed upon him not only superior spiritual qualities, but also the physical construction meant to rule the world." [Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 1863, col. 135B].

God gave man both outer and inner beauty, according to the model of His own beauty. Man's inner beauty consists in his love for the absolute, for God, as a response to the Creator's love and as communion within love.

Adam, insisting in his love for God, by his own will, was growing ever more handsome, became ever more accomplished, he became ever brighter light, sharing God's light every day, but aware that there is no limit in this sharing God's light, the brighter Adam became, the thirstier for the Light of Knowledge he grew, being wrapped in divine beauty that "does not shine in the outer charm of appearance, in a ravishing outfit, but it can be seen in the indescribable happiness of inner peace and perfection. For, just as painters portray people's images on canvas, by means of lines and colours, highlighting, by the touch of the brush, in shades adequate to what they need to express, to render the beauty of the original as correctly as possible, the same way, you should know that our Painter placed within us virtues, as coloured shades, wonderfully embellishing them according to the model of His own Beauty [Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 1863, col. 138A].

As a dichotomic being, man is a blend of dust and soul, dust being modelled by God as body. With regard to the matter and the soul that make up man, Saint Apostle Paul, in the Epistle to Thessalonians, mentions not only the body and the soul, but he also talks about the spirit as part of man: "May the God of peace Himself bestow His full blessings over you, and may your entire spirit, and soul, and body be safe, without sin, for the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ," (I Thess. 5, 23). This spirit represents the rational part of the soul, and the soul can become holy or be spiritualized by the constant connection to God, which consists in living in the spirit of the commandments.

The body and the soul are the elements that must simultaneously participate in the act of perfecting the human being, as the body was created to entirely fulfil the organic and spiritual needs. "The

organic body, which, united with the mind and soul, reveals man, then he who says that the soul or the body is a part or a limb of man, does not stray away from the truth. But the body is an organ of the soul and mind (or of man), and the soul, permeating the whole body, gives it the strength to be alive and to move, without dividing itself or without being restricted to the body as something which is simple and bodiless by nature, but it is to be found in the entire body and in every limb that receives it according to the extent of its natural capability of working the soul. For it keeps together the limbs worthy of it in various ways, in order to preserve the wholeness of the body” [Saint Maximus the Confessor, 1865, col. 1099AB].

The organic needs refer to food, hygiene and protection of the body, whereas the spiritual ones are represented by bowing in reverence, praying, worshiping and doing good to others, “because man is a thinking being, he deserved being given a bodily organism adequate to his needs” [Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 1863, col. 147C].

When we want to find, in the writings of the Holy Fathers, a clear definition of what corresponds to God’s image within us, we are at risk of getting caught up in various statements, which, without opposing one another, cannot just reduce the image to any part of the human being. Indeed, we sometimes assign the characteristic of God’s image to man’s king-like dignity, to his superiority in the sensitive world, whereas other times, we attribute it to his spiritual nature, within his soul or the main, ruling part (hegemonikon) of his being, within his mind (nous), within his superior faculties, such as intelligence, reason (logos) or within man’s own freedom, his faculty to determine himself from within – autexousia –, according to which man is the true principle of his actions. Sometimes, God’s image is assimilated to some quality of the soul, to its simplicity, to its immortality, or to the faculty of being aware of God [Lossky, 1992, 144].

Man’s accomplishment on his path to perfection consists in his capability of living in the spirit of the commandments for the benefit of his fellow-men, and as a carrier of God’s image, for the one who serves God’s fellow-men serves, in the words of our Saviour, Jesus Christ: “In truth I speak to you, as you have done something for My lesser brothers, you have actually done something for Me” (Mt. 25, 40). Obeying the Saviour’s command to serve his fellow-men, man’s life is not restricted only to animal, biological behaviour, where fulfilment refers exclusively to the mere satisfaction of one own’s needs, but it unravels by a synergic communion between man and God, as from rational to the Rational, manifested in a progressive and gradual process of spiritualization, for “God, our teacher, gave us this great commandment, that we shall do, with the help of our reasoning, what animals do out of instinct, He ordered us that what animals do instinctively we shall do aware of our actions, and with permanent control over our thoughts” [Saint Basil Magnus, 1857, 202B].

Man, the jewel in the crown of creation and made in God’s image, is open both to his Creator, and to his fellow-men, while proceeding down the path towards knowledge and perfection. He is open to the Creator with a view to collaborating with Him, accepting Him as the supreme Teacher and as a loving Father who advises His son to walk the right path. He makes himself available to his fellow-men, so that, out of what he lives and learns along the way, they might use his experience, living in communion, according to the supreme Model of communion of the Holy and Life-Giving Trinity.

So as to achieve this man – God dialogue, Theology defined man as a person. The term “person” in Orthodox Theology has such great value that, by means of this concept, we can genuinely acknowledge God’s Son becoming man [Săniloae, 2003, III, 113]. In the Icon of the Birth, the Orthodox Church discovers the real, true Teaching, regarding the Birth of the Saviour, Jesus Christ [His Holiness Casian, 2007, 38], but it also discovers the mystery of each man coming to life. Any child coming into this world represents Christ’s image. In the Holy Gospel, the Saviour Himself indicated the purity, the gentleness of the child as a model of entering His kingdom in Heaven [His Holiness Casian, 2007, 38]. That is why human life must be received with joy and gratitude. It must be cherished, preserved and protected, as the most sublime expression of God’s activity of creation. Which raised us from non-existence into existence, not only for a biological existence [Breck, 2007, 15]. And the first remark in this respect is the fact that the dignity of being a person is bestowed by God, not by people, according to the Christian Moral Tradition, from the very moment of conception.

Man is a personal being, alike God, and not blind nature. Man no longer finds redemption by means of the Universe, but it is the Universe that finds salvation by means of man; in this, man is the hypostasis of the entire Cosmos, which partakes in his nature, and earth finds its personal hypostatic

meaning in man. Man's perfection does not consist in him resembling all the other creatures, but in what sets him apart from the cosmos and makes him resemble the Creator. In the Teaching of the Holy Fathers, they underline the fact that the body is an intrinsic part of the human person and, thus, participates in man's achieving perfection according to what God intended for him: man becoming holy. The Christian doctrine on creation firmly excludes a metaphysical or cosmic duality, as it teaches us that the whole Universe, both spiritual and material, was created by God, who looked upon it as being Very Good. Along the same lines, the Christian Teaching of the Embodiment of God's Son states that the body is an intrinsic part of the person and that it partakes in the salvation brought about by Christ's divine acts, even displaying an eschatological dimension by Raising the Dead Back to Life. In fact, it is only within the Great Sacrament of the Embodied Logos that the mystery is revealed to each man.

3. GOD'S IMAGE WITHIN MAN AS GOD'S GIFT

Within the human person, due to its wholesome character, the image and the resemblance co-exist. We can, thus, identify a Christological destiny of the human being. Man, made in (God's) image, is called to surpass the enclosing limitations of creation and to make himself infinite. The image is both GIFT and PURPOSE [Răducă, 1996, 140]. It was given to man so that he might aim at holiness and becoming one with God. The distinction between image and resemblance is regarded, in the Holy Fathers' theology, as a temporal extension, a movement towards moral perfection. Resemblance means moral perfection, but the image has a moral aspiration. The image aspires towards the model lying at an infinite distance. Being created in God's image and resemblance does not imply being stable complete moral perfection, but experiencing responsible, gradual development.

The evolution of human nature towards becoming accomplished by actualizing the reason according to which it was created is a process that will never ever come to a solid end, because the Logos, where the reason within human nature originates, is **infinite**. That is why, the same way that God cannot be assigned a satisfying definition, human nature does not have either a concrete definition, or a strictly defined wholeness. Father Stăniloae talks about the fact that we can never know the heights that human nature can rise up to, as it is "the evolving undefinable" [Stăniloae, 1974, 396].

All these theological aspects debated above regarding human nature do not make any sense unless we consider the individual's concrete state. It is the person who provides human nature with a concrete form, the one to reflect all the divine attributes and characteristics, the one that man enjoys in his created nature. On his own, due to this attribute – of a free and spiritual person, endowed with reason – man can dialogue with his creator and with his fellow-men, thus stating his special value among all things created.

When we talk about man as person, we refer either to his irreducible identity and the inner universe which is part of him, or to the relationship man has with the others, which can only be possible due to him being a person. Being a person is related to the ontological order: either man is a person, or man is not a person. The status of being a person is not achieved by physical or cultural gradual development, in the same way that man does not lose his status as a person even if personal functions are not performed. The manifestation or non-manifestation of person-specific functions does not alter the ontological status of being a person [Aramini, 2006, 104-105].

From a Christian perspective, this personal identity, which also represents reaching for others, essentially springs from the Trinity of divine Persons. Christian teachings talk about only one God tripled as Person. One single divine nature and three divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Nature is common to the Three, but each of the three Persons owns it completely. For Christianity, God reveals Himself not as nature, but as Person. For a Christian believer, God's nature is inaccessible, distant, and the Person is essentially revealed in the Embodiment of God's Son. Within His Embodiment and all miracles performed by Christ, man reaches the climax of personalization, that is dialogue and communion with God according to the supreme trinity model [Buchiu, 1997, 139-140].

It is the same situation with man. He reveals himself essentially as a person, but his nature is common to all people, and what makes man unique in the universe is precisely the non-recurring person. Men are so different from one another that there are no two men alike in all of mankind's history. What makes man so unique and non-recurring? The Holy Fathers and the Christian Tradition understood this uniqueness of man by the reality of the person, a concept unknown before Christianity [Ică, 2003, 58].

When we say that man is a person, we state that he is not just a fragment of matter, an individual element of nature, such as other individual elements of nature: an atom, an ear of wheat, a fly, an elephant. Man is indeed an animal and an individual, but not like all the rest. Man is an individual guiding himself through life by means of his intelligence and will: he does not exist only physically, but he encompasses within him a richer and more spiritual existence springing from knowledge and love. In philosophical terms, this means that, within human flesh and bones, there is a soul that is worth more than the entire universe. The human person, no matter its dependence on the smallest accidents of matter, exists by the very existence of its soul, which dominates time and death. The root of the person is the soul [Maritain, 1977, 4-5]. “Without soul, there is no sort of life either in those that occur in nature, or in those encompassed in the ever-moving orb of the sky, and no sort of life exists, after the rational judgement, without soul” [Saint Maximus the Confessor, 1865, col. 1388C]. “In fact, – Origen claims as well – not only the Christians and the Jews, but also the Greek and the barbarians believed that man’s soul lives on after being separated from the body” [Origen, 1857, col. 1426]. Man is, on the one hand, a being different from all physical nature, and, on the other hand, a complete and composed creature.

4. CONCLUSION

Man is and should always be treated as a finality in itself and never as a means to an end, man is an absolute reality [Vidal, 1995, 120], and not a relative one: that is, the human person has a moral dimension and, at the same time, he is an instance that opens up to others and to God. The human person is “protocategoria,” which essentially pertains to the ethical universe and which, consequently, is the origin of any moral endeavour. For Christianity, the human person is God’s image, an icon of Christ, an active presence of the Holy Spirit. In this manner, human dignity is provided with an even greater quality, by means of the fact that man is called upon to resemble God, who is Absolute and Infinite.

The fact that, according to the Holy Scripture, man was created differently from the other creatures shows the unitary, but also dichotomic or bifurcated character, as father D. Stăniloae would say, of man. By means of being created not only out of nature, out of dust, but also out of the breath of life given by God, the soul, he is clearly bestowed upon a special status, not only towards the nature where his body was taken from, but also in his relationship with God. Father Stăniloae gives us an example here, of flour and dough, saying that just as the dough makes the flour rise, man is made up of a part of nature where soul, or life, was introduced, so that all nature might rise [Stăniloae, 2001, 406].

The purpose of the entire Christian life is, thus, communion with God, which may be accomplished by a constant spiritual progress of never-ending love. As the image of the Prototype, the Christian is seeded, through the waters of baptism, with the permanent years towards resembling Him, struggling in his earthly existence, living a life within Christ and through Christ. In order to experience the condition of a divine person, which represents man reaching spiritual perfection “the perfect man, at the age of Christ’s perfection” [Efes. 4, 13], he shares and revels in God’s uncreated energies, flooding the world by means of the Holy Sacraments of the Church.

Man’s ascent on the spiritual ladder, which has as its final aim man becoming divine, after receiving grace, is not restricted only to the Sacraments of the Church, but it is continued outside the ecclesiastic space, as a result of the effects of the Holy Sacraments.

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- [14] Saint Gregory of Nyssa. De hominis opificio. In J.P. Migne, PG., vol. 44, 1863, col. 125-250, here **col. 134B**: "Atque ut egregius convivator, antequam cibi parati sint, convivam domum suam non deducit; sed omnibus primum eleganter instructis, aedibus, caenaculo, mensa splendide exorantis, rebus denique ad victum necessariis omnibus comparatis, tum deinde convivam excipit: ita opulentus ille, sumptuosusque convivator noster, domo prius variis rebus eleganter ornata, epuloque magno instructo, quod omnis generis delicias haberet, tum demum hominem introducit [...]. Propterea duabus ut rebus hominis opificium constaret, fecit, commistis nimirum divinis ac terrenis, ut ipsi tam Dei quam terrestrium rerum fruitionem naturae suae consentaneam ac propriam statueret: Deoque per naturam diviniorem, bonis autem terrenis per sensum, qui eisdem esset generis, frueretur"; **col.135B**: "Nam quemadmodum in rebus humanis artifices iis instrumentis quae fabricantur, formam talem tribuunt, qualis esse ad usum, cui destinatur, aptissima videri potest: sic praestantissimus ille rerum artifex naturam nostram condidit velut instrumentum quoddam regno administrando idoneum, utaque esset ad hoc homo quam aptissimus, cum praestantissimis animi dotibus, tum ea, quam cernimus, corporis eum forma exornavit"; **col. 138A**: "Caeterum pulchritudo illa divina, non ulla forma vel eximia venustate externa respelendet, sed in beatitate secundum virtutem ineffabili consistit. Idcirco quemadmodum pictores coloribus quibusdam figuras humanas in tabulis expriment, omnique studio colores proprios et convenientes addere picturae suae conantur, ut pulchritudinem eius, quod expriment, exemplaris, accurate in imaginem ipsam transferit: sic nostrum etiam conditorem existimabis, indentem virtutes animis nostris, iisdem veluti coloribus imaginem suam ad similitudinem propriae pulchritudinis ornare, ut principatus sui imago in nobis perspiceretur"; **col. 147C**: "Homo igitur cum animal sit sermonis facultate praeditum, necesse erat corporis instrumentum parari, quod ad sermonis usum esset aptissimum".
- [15] Saint John Chrysostom. Omilii la Facere, Omilia a VIII-a [Genesis Homilies. Homily VIII]. In the Spiritual Fathers and Writers Collection, vol. 21. Bucharest: Edit. Institutului Biblic, 1987, p. 98-106.
- [16] Saint Maximus the Confessor. Ambiguorum Liber. In J.P. Migne, PG., vol. 91, 1865, col. 1031-1417, here: **col. 1099AB**: "Si autem intellectualis animae, utpote hominis, subsistit corpus organum, per totum vero corpus tota implens anima vivere ei et moveri dat, ut simpla per natura et incorporalis, non condispertita aut conclusa in eo, sed toti et unicuique membrorum eius sic consuevit eam suscipere iusta naturaliter subiectam sibi acceptivam operationis animae virtutem, tota praesens differenter eam accipientia membra proportionaliter ad observationem unum fieri corpus adiungit"; **col. 1338C**: "...sine anima enim nulla semel vitae species tam in eis unquam quae in naturam prolata quam quae in orbe coeli semper mobile intus comprehensa sunt, reperiatur, ac semper vitae species secundum rationis consequentiam exstat prorsus nulla nisi cum anima".
- [17] Saint Basil Magnus, Homilia in Illud, Attende tibi ipsi. In J.P. Migne, PG., vol. 31, col. 197-218, here col. 202B: "Quapropter et qui nos erudit Deus, magnum hoc nobis paeceptum dedit, ut quod

illa a natura acceperere, idipsum accedat nobis rationis ope; et quod sit a brutis inconsiderate, hoc a nobis perficiatur ex animi atentione et assidua mentis consideratione;”

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