

THE ICON OR THE THERAPY THROUGH IMAGE

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Abstract: In traditional thinking, human existence was conceived like a fall from a state of grace in consequence of the original sin. Thus, life did not have any other purpose, but to recovering the initial state by healing off the disease of being in becoming and ephemeral. Holy places or objects have always mediated the contact between the human being and the absolute, perceived like the only true reality. As an expression of the “sacred”, the icon becomes a way of spiritual healing, implicitly a way to heal the soul. Therefore, all the levels at which it can be deciphered do not have another purpose but to justify this function. From a formal perspective of the elements that make up the image, the sacred is suggested by some geometrical forms with colors having a symbolic value or by relations considered to be perfect - relations and proportions that are to be found again in the intimate structure of the whole universe and of the human being itself. That is why the contemplation of an icon determines the resonance with its enciphered rhythms meeting the need for the sacred, and it harmonizes the human being. From a phenomenological point of view, the icon proves to be a place of presence, of meeting. It is the part of transition to the transcendental horizon. The look of the bystander crosses the visible and the objective in order to meet a prototype, which is not an original or a second visible beyond the first one, but it is a second look that penetrates the materiality of the icon. This second look is a commanding authority to the perceiver. It is the light of the invisible divine eye, which lightens and purifies the spirit of the one contemplating it.

Keywords: icon, proportions, contemplation, place of presence, prototype

“Man is progressively moulded by that he does contemplate”¹

PASSIONS, DISEASES OF SOUL

Most origin myths tell us about a golden age in which the human existence was not altered by the fall through time and growing. As a

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¹ Michel Quenot (1987). *L' Icône: fenêtre sur l'absolu*. Romanian translation (1993): *Icoana, fereastră spre absolut*, Bucharest: Encyclopaedic Publishing House, p.101.

consequence of an original sin, this state of grace will be lost, and the ontological status of the human being will be radically altered. In Christian belief, this original existence appears as an absolute state of health, both of the spirit and of the body: at the beginning “God created man glorified with every virtue and adorned with all that’s good”, says John of Damascus². The virtue is in the human nature, since “we have the virtues in ourselves, which we were given by God”³. Knowing the presence of the God’s energies, man was not going to “fear inside of him of any disease” and in this life lacking in sadness and worry was without any kind of “startle or movement or madness and irrational yearning of the bosom”⁴.

This ideal existence of the human being will be ended by falling into sin, ontological rupture generating gradual removal by his Creator. Divine image imprinted on humans, brilliant by illumination of the Holy Spirit, is getting darker and destroys the relationship with God. *Fall* means fall into matter, into lasting, into time. The consequences are those of the matter being affected by the act of growth, of becoming: the original health once lost, destruction, decomposition and death attack human beings in nature and diseases install into the gap where aspiration to absolute was sent away. The mirror the human soul ceases to reflect God⁵, and disease, this separation from reality, this removal from the essence, this wandering away from health, not only does it find nest inside the human body, but also in his soul, because the soul can be also corroded and undermined by the darkness of the diseases that drive human beings away from God.

Evils, misfortunes and diseases, foreign for spiritual human nature, arise from sin and represent His punishment. Sins that affect the spiritual health and bring the human being out of its true existence, “its true reality, have been described by the Holy Fathers as passions manifesting externally, either in the body or in the soul.

The collapse of spiritual being begins by forfeiture of knowledge and its branches. The man already fallen no longer seeks to

² John of Damascus, apud Jean-Claude Larchet (1997). *Thérapeutique des maladies spirituelles*, Paris: Les Editions du Cerf. Romanian translation (2001). *Terapeutica bolilor spirituale*, Bucharest: Sophia Publishing House, p.18.

³ Dorotheus of Gaza, apud Jean-Claude Larchet, *op.cit.*, p.16.

⁴ Symeon the New Theologian, apud Jean-Claude Larchet, *op. cit.*, p.20.

⁵ Jean-Claude Larchet, *op. cit.*, p.20.

know God, and ignorance joins madness⁶, becoming a disease of the soul. The opposition between knowledge and ignorance, more precisely between the two kinds of knowledge, spiritual knowledge and awareness of sensible appearance, is due to the original sin that closes Adam's spiritual eyes, to open the ones in his flesh. The eyes of the soul, which gave him the ability to see the unseen and spiritual knowledge, are blinded by sin, by which the body's eyes are open. That is why Adam and Eve see one another for the first time naked. For the first time they see each other in the material body. The forbidden tree, the tree of knowledge of good and evil is understood by St. Maximus the Confessor as a seen creation: "Spiritually contemplated, it gives knowledge of good and taken in a bodily form, it provides knowledge of evil. For those who partake of her bodily shall become teacher in passions, making them forget the divine"⁷. Matter is revealed with a double meaning. It can be seen as the fruit of Creation, accompanying the man on the path to divinity, or can be understood as a source of evil, as the origin of sin: instead of knowing God, man is filled with passionate knowledge given by the senses.

Desire and pleasure, planted in human nature to want God, supreme joy and immense pleasure, goes, for the fallen man, to bad things, to the sensible reality, that God, by His command, had wanted to defend him from. Distortion of the original desire and initial pleasure becomes the root of the passion of the senses, the pleasures and the bodily pleasures.

Aggressiveness and anger, reasonable for Adam's state of health, as well as for the health of the man restored in Christ, where they were intended to resist all the temptations that remove the man from God, become, after the Fall, unnatural and unreasonable, since they are intended not to acquire the spiritual, but against others and to preserve the material goods.

Passions or vices are born from the turning of the spirit and body abilities to know God towards the pleasure and desire for the sensible world. They are not in the human nature, not in the face that was given to man from the very beginning, through creation⁸, but are

⁶ St. Maximus the Confessor, apud Jean-Claude Larchet, *op. cit.*, p.41.

⁷ Cf. Emmanuel Ponsoye, trad. (1992). *Maxime le Confesseur: Questions à Thalassios*, Paris: Editions de l'Ancre.

⁸ Saint Basile de Césarée (1970). *Sur l'origine de l'homme, première homélie : l'Etre à l'image*, in "Sources chrétiennes", no. 160, Paris: Editions du Cerf.

“alien and in no way pertaining to the nature of the human soul”⁹. Greed, fornication, pride, avarice, anger, fear, sadness, vain glory and more destroy and remove the spirit from the source of health and joy.

Created in the image of God, man has freedom of choice and will. Passions cannot attain the divine face of man. It exists as a potential in the human nature. Likeness to God is, however, prevented by vices to reach the fullness of his image. Human will alone is the one that can fulfil in act which is in potency and can cleanse the soul of the darkness of sin. And the true purpose of life is none other than restoring the lost link between man and absolute. “The real man is the spiritual man who is in us”¹⁰. The true destiny of man, his true nature is to receive the Holy both in body and soul, to live in the Holy Spirit and in God with his whole being. Health is, as the Holy Fathers state, reaching the perfection of the human being as God intended it, renewed with the image of Christ and in the Holy Spirit. Life in Christ and union with God is man's natural state. This is true health that Adam had, and that Christ came to remind people lost in the depths of sin. Love of God is the only way that, following it, a man succeeds to resemble Him.

THE ICON, DENIAL OF PASSIONS

In traditional thinking, life has no purpose other than that of retrieving the initial spiritual health status by healing the disease of becoming and lasting a defined period of time. Sacred places and objects have always fulfilled the role of mediators between man and God and facilitated the restoration of relationship with the Absolute, viewed as one only valid reality. The icon, image of the divine world, is one of the sacred objects, which states itself as a denial of the material world, seen as a source of sin and passion. Expression of the sacred, it becomes a means of healing the soul and spiritual healing tool. Therefore, all the levels where it can be deciphered do nothing else but to justify this function.

The world in the icon seems to be a well known world. However it is not as familiar as the visible world around us, the world around us and which we got used to. It's the same world and yet it's another one. It's different. It's the spiritual world; it's the world as

⁹ Nicétas Stéthatos (1961). *Opuscules et lettres*, in “Sources chrétiennes”, no. 81, Paris: Editions du Cerf.

¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, II. Romanian translation (1982). *Scieri. Stromatele*, Bucharest: EIBMBOR.

seen by the eyes cleansed from the passions abominations. It's not the bodily eyes or the eyes altered by the sin and the depths of the visible that had been allowed the seeing and understanding of the icon. The world of the icon is the world that surrounds us; it has mountains, buildings, people, trees, stars, things. But all these cannot be seen with the eyes already enslaved by the sensible world, by the glassy crust of the visible materiality. With icons, matter is no longer subject to the laws of visible because it is not the matter seen with eyes of sin. It's not the matter itself that is bad, but how we relate to it. Man forgot the spiritual look, and just kept the bodily, the phenomenal, sensible look. The icon appears not as a denial of the matter itself, because the image of the world is reflected in the iconography, but a denial of its sensibility, superficiality and ephemeral. The world is not seen with the physical eye any more, but with the spiritual one. Space, time, things are no longer subject to ordinary laws of a natural optical perspective.

With icons, space and time no longer meet the requirements of painting reproductions true to the sensible world. Linear perspective, with a background point on the horizon line, perspective that made all parallel lines actually meet in the image on the horizon line, is no longer obeyed in the icon. *The Divine Throne*, as it appears on the western wall of Voroneț Monastery (II.1) has hind legs higher than the front ones and parallel lines in nature, rather than unite in the background of the image, are headed towards the viewer as an invitation to participation and contemplation. Same way to cancel the natural, ordinary sight, the same denial of space and perspective is reiterated in most Byzantine representations of buildings. One example is *The Siege of Constantinople* at the Monastery of Moldovița (II.2), where one can see three or all four edges of the towering and buttressing walls simultaneously; same with the books, the Gospels, various other objects, and even characters.

Cancellation of the spatiality is also illustrated in icons by other means. Not only linear perspective is abandoned, but any other means of perspective that might suggest natural, illusory perception of the space: background objects and sights are more pronounced and detailed as the foreground, the mountains are represented as mere rocks drawn with care for detail, even if the distance from them is assumed to be long – see icons such as: *Entrance into Jerusalem* (II.5), *Resurrection of Lazarus* (II.6) or *Descent into Hell* – distant characters are much higher than other characters closer to the viewer, or even

than the buildings they stand next to: in the icon of the *Crucifixion*, soldiers in the foreground are much lower than Christ on the cross, saints or other figures near buildings, on the walls or even inside are as high or even higher than the construction itself. Representation in overlapped registers (II.3, II.4), as images often appear in wall paintings of Orthodox churches, is also a waiver of spatiality. Aerial or colour perspective is abandoned.

Temporality, with the duration and the normal sequence of events, leaves a spare room to the absolute time, to the time of glory, for which there is no forward or backward, no past or future. Events that natural perception would receive as successive occur concurrently represented in icons such as: *The Holy Birth* (II.7). The sacred time, the icon time is actually a non-time, a denial of time as succession, a time in which everything is going “at the same time”, which is not a time of destruction and death but of resurrection and glory.

Through all these plastic procedures of denial natural, normal, sensible perception of spatiality and temporality, the icon becomes an affirmation of spiritual, absolute space and time. The viewer is urged to caress with the eyes not only the glassy futility of things, but to go into the essence beyond them, to perceive the face of the glory that every creature carries in it.

From the perspective of an ordinary human being, the world of icons is an inverted world, a world upside-down, a non-world. Nothing that is normally seen can be recognized likewise in the icon which became a denial of the visible world. This is a “bottom-up” perspective, if we can design such a hierarchy, from the fallen man for whom the normal world, the real world is the altered one, fallen along with him. He will require a pictorial representation to render as faithfully as possible the appearance of this deceptive world, the phenomenal crust, the surface crust which the eyes slip over, considering what he sees as real. The world of icons, a world of glory, appears to him in this situation as a world upside down, as a denial of reality, because none of these representations seeks to reveal the world as we see it with our physical eyes.

Considering the opposite „top-down” approach, i.e. from the perspective of the Holy Fathers, the true, real world is the world of the icons, the divine world or the world in the Holy Spirit. This is the original moment when, later on, it began the alienation, destruction and degradation of perception, leading to the simple, visible, sensory world. In this case the world upside down is exactly the perception of

the natural, sensory, bodily world, and the world of icons becomes true, real, divine, a world the man fell from and always yearns to return to. The thick fog of his passions prevent him from seeing clearly any more, from distinguishing between good and evil, between value and non-value, between truth and lies. He considers to be real this world of needs and material goods, but exactly this is the reversed one: “Man’s wandering desire makes him live in a world upside down, in which values are inverted, where things have lost their order and true proportions”¹¹.

The world, actually, is one and the same. The eye which sees it is different. An eye which is blinded by the darkness of the sin will stop to the surface of the things, his perspective will remain a strictly sensible, superficial one, and the iconic rendering will appear to him as a clumsy and inexperienced deformation. A clean eye will distinguish in the world the invisible hand of the Creator, and the cleanness of his soul will allow him to see beyond the contingent and to distinguish the ultimate reality of the glory.

As an image of Christ’s world of glory, the icon rejects not only the visibility of this world but also all the passions joining the perverted look of the fallen man. Passions arise from the alienation of the three powers of the soul, quickness, desire and reflection of mind¹². Originally all directed to knowing and wanting God, their power will be corrupted when man falls, losing their original meaning. Healing these three powers leads to recovery of the virtues of a ruler and through them, of all the other virtues. The desire or lust part is healed by the virtue of moderation or self-control. The quickness part is healed by the virtue of manliness and the mind part is healed through rational thoughts.

Contemplation of a real icon with faith can lead to understanding error and to start healing. Each malady of the spirit can find its comfort in the sacred image.

The “power of desire” of the soul must be turned from earthly things to wanting spiritual goods. The canons of icons suggest so, by the way in which the different plastic elements are made. Fornication and bodily passions are denied by the asceticism of faces, by the slimness of the bodies and by the abstraction of the garments. Before

¹¹ Jean-Claude Larchet, *op. cit.*, p.63.

¹² Nicétas Stéthatos (1987). *Philocalie des Pères neptiques*, No.4, Editions de l’Abbaye de Bellefontaine.

the fall, all the parts of the human being had the meaning of working into the Lord. All faculties and all senses were directed toward service to God's Will. The bodies of the characters in icons are divine bodies, lacking the passion for materiality and temptations of the flesh. The faces are spiritualized, large eyed, slim nosed, thin lipped. Bodies are usually hidden under the weight of garments, which still fits not the bodies, but they cover them, forming large patches of colour almost abstract. The perception of the body shape is completely abandoned, and the image shows creatures sanctified by asceticism and prayer, spiritually healthy, freed from passions, temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6, 19).

Anger and aggressiveness are rejected by the calmness of all characters. Even when the icon shows the saints fighting with dragons and mighty creatures, their gestures remain peaceful and harmonious. Only characters that embody the temptation and sin, demons or humans mastered by them, are crossed by a sick, chaotic and destructive violence. At the Monastery of Dobrovăț, on the west wall fresco of the nave, where there is painted the *Passion of the Christ*, Jesus, crowned with thorns and clothed with a red robe, standing tall, calm, quiet, is two times higher than the other characters in the same scene. In total contrast to the vertical image of Jesus, characters, stunted and restless, are dancing grotesquely around Him, in a riot of ridicule, with scattered violent movements.

Pride and vain glory are opposed to the humbleness and kindness of the faces with serene and healing looks.

Colours, together with light, their sum, are used in a totally peculiar manner in the icon, stressing the idea of a world opposed to the visible one. The light has no other source, external to the characters, which makes them lack shadows or chiaroscuro. They seem to be lit from within, by a light which characterizes the inner, divine being. It's the cystic light that gives the world a meaning (II.9). Gold-coloured backgrounds as well as thin lines of gold light decorating Jesus' garments (II.10), as well as the angels' or the Virgin's garments separate more and more the iconographic image from the mere representation of the visible world. Using precious stones, ivory or pearls are a symbol for inner, spiritual wealth. The images of the icons prove to be good guides for the souls who have lost the path to the real spiritual world, without sorrow and bright.

But not only immediately visible forms can heal a wandering soul through its guidance towards the understanding of the truly

important things. Less visible structures, used with great skill in icons, have the same purpose, among them the number and proportion of gold, perfect geometric shapes¹³, circle, square, triangle, rhythms and symbols¹⁴. In a formal perspective of the elements making up the plastic image, sanctity is suggested by certain geometric schemes, colours with symbolic value or ratios considered to be perfect, ratios and proportions also encountered in the intimate structure of the composition of the entire universe and man as well. Therefore, the contemplation of an icon causes resonance with the ciphered rhythms, fulfilling the need of sacred and harmonizes the human being.

ENCOUNTER, HEALING AND DIVINITY

He who can truly heal human beings from the clutches of sin and death is Christ. “Only by the coming of Christ the world has been fully restored to its original nature, and man has regained the ability to reach perfection for which he was created”¹⁵. Only Christ is the one who can make man return to his original state, that of being united with God. There is no way of completion, other than in union with God, and the one who can guide us on this path is only the Saviour: “only by the resemblance with Christ man can achieve divine perfection in himself” because “through the person of Christ, human nature was accomplished by union with divine nature”¹⁶. By passions, death and resurrection, Christ makes man restore the natural enjoyment of earthly powers. Passion of Him who became man for us heals our passions and renews in the Holy Spirit the powers of our soul, making them turn to God. Restoring ontological human nature achieves itself through the sacrifice of God turned into man, not because mankind had so great a debt to God that only his son could pay it, but because it is God alone who can heal the human race from passions “and only He accepting to die, ‘He who alone has immortality’ (1 Tim 6.16), can spare the man from death, otherwise, as the Holy Fathers say, that which is not assumed, cannot be cured”¹⁷. God turned himself into man in order to rescue people, to save them from passion and death and to restore their

¹³ For icon’s geometric structures see Cristian Ungureanu (2006). *Dialog între sferă și cub [Geometria secretă a icoanelor bizantine]*, Artes Publishing House.

¹⁴ Iulia-Ioana Olaru, *The visual language of paleo-christian painting – before „Paix de l’église”*, in *Limbaj și context / Speech and Context*, an II, nr. 1/2010, pp 76-78.

¹⁵ Jean-Claude Larchet, *op. cit.*, p.21.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem, pp.245-246.

immortality. The body of Christ is mortal and alterable. But being God, his body could not be taken by death or attacked by alteration. And his soul descended into hell but could not be taken evil. Death and sin are deceived and rush to destroy the human body of Christ, but are crossed by the thrill of Godliness and are overcome by Christ the God. "Death is coming and swallowing the bait of the body is crossed by the hook of the Godliness; and, tasting the sinless and life-giving flesh, is destroyed"¹⁸. Christ destroys death by death, "trampling down death by death", and releases man from the tyranny of the sin, and by resurrection, the new creation is born in Christ. Christ resemblance is the path man has, from now on, in order to defeat death, sin, and rebirth into the Holy Spirit.

The icon is nothing else but the image of Christ who has conquered passion by his passionless nature. The faces of saints and martyrs in the icons are the faces of people unwilling to know Christ. It's still the image of Christ, reflected in people or, more precisely, the image of people living in and for Christ. Looking at an icon heals through contemplation of that divine face, the image of Christ that pervades from every icon, by harmonies and rhythms, by colours and symbols.

But beyond this interpretation of shapes and colours, the icon can be interpreted from a phenomenological perspective, which takes into account primarily the way the viewer is influenced by the contemplation of an icon, how the image is felt, lived by the faithful.

A first formal element, the facing of the characters, makes the reception of these images rather unusual. Facing is a key feature in Byzantine paintings. Holy Saviour and Virgin Mary do not appear as seen from the profile or from behind, but always facing the viewer. Facing means presence.

The face in the icon becomes a speaker. A direct contact (II.11, II.12) is established between the icon and the viewer, a "you and I" relationship that is not possible in a representation from the side or rear of the characters, representation where the viewer witnesses the scene as a spectator to a show, without being engaged in the dialogue. The icon is something else than a show, it is a meeting place between two interlocutors, the point where two gazes intersect one another. It is not a dark, opaque screen, limited to shapes and colours. The gaze directed to it, the viewer's gaze, crosses the visible objective in order to meet a

¹⁸ John of Damascus, apud Jean-Claude Larchet, *op.cit.*, p.247.

second gaze which pervades through the matter of the icon. This second gaze is constituted as a commanding authority for the one who receives it. It is the light of the divine, invisible eye, which shines and cleans the spirit of the one contemplating it.

The icon as a material, as the actual image, is nothing but a place where it's carried out a "visible transit"¹⁹, an exchange between two glances. As mediator, the visible needs to be deleted, to fade, not to assert itself since the icon doesn't exist by itself (hence the rejection of naturalistic representation by deformations and disproportions which deny any natural perception).

It is "a manifestation seen by that which cannot be seen"²⁰ and facilitates the transition, the delivery, the intersection of the two looks. "The icon does not require us to see it, but offers us the fact of seeing it or allowing ourselves to be seen through it"²¹. It disposes of its own visibility in order to let another look rise through it; more specifically, another presence. This is the essence of the icon, the image that surrenders itself, renounces its own vision in order to reveal the presence of the God's will, to show His glory. Christ's face, disfigured by human cruelty, becomes the prototype of the icon because, beyond its own image, one must see the glory of the invisible God²². In this respect, the icon asserts itself as a *kenosis* of the image. The image disappears in order to leave a room to the look and the presence of the invisible One. It is not the image that should be seen, not what one can see materially speaking, but That that one cannot see, the gaze that looks at you from beyond the image, the invisible presence of the Creator. Through the icon, you are being looked at by the gaze of The Other, let yourself broken through by the divine harmony and thus cleansed of any disease. It is an existential, fundamental and edificatory encounter, since it involves a radical change, a return to faith and God, thus healing and salvation through Christ retrieval.

¹⁹ Jean-Luc Marion (1991). *La croisée du visible*. Romanian translation (2000): *Crucea vizibilului. Tablou, televiziune, icoană. O privire fenomenologică*, Sibiu: Deisis Publishing House, p.96.

²⁰ Michel Quenot, *op.cit.*, p.57.

²¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *op.cit.*, p.97.

²² *Ibidem*.

Illustrations:



II. 1



II. 2.



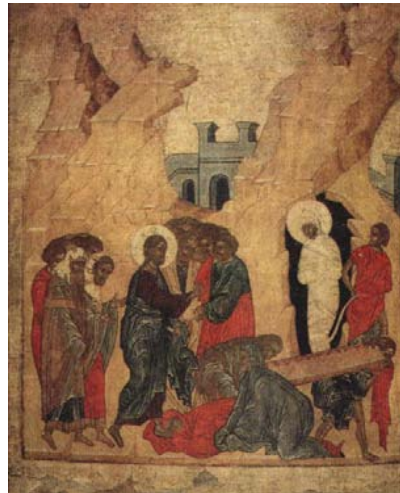
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II. 4.



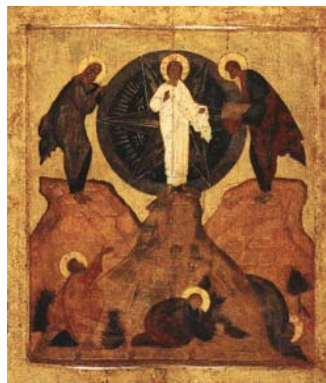
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II. 6.



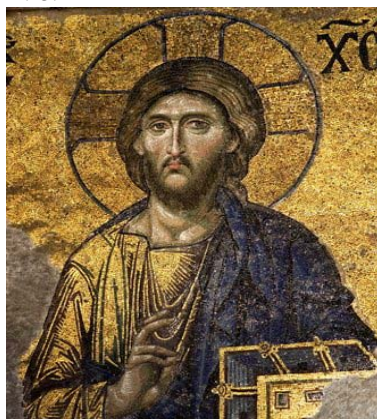
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II. 8.



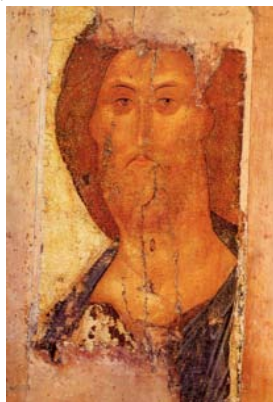
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