

THEOLOGY OF THE ICON (WATCHING ICONS THROUGH A WESTERN EYE)

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Abstract: *The author, a Catholic priest, iconographer as well a member of a commission for the sacred fine art in Italy, try to understand the paradox as the spread of the icons after the 1995 Pope saint John Paul II apostolic letter "Orientale Lumen", even in places for liturgical worship in Western Latin tradition, where they stand side by side with historical and native Giotto and Raphael masterpieces. Perhaps the answer could be, looking at it in a different light, that this icon allows the reading of a theology that responds to contemporary needs and intuitively is recognized as an appropriate model to represent the Lord Jesus, the Mother of God, the angels and saints. Through an historical and theological path, focused on the XV century Christ of Moscow icon, he try to understand why icons are still very contemporary and should help the Western latin tradition to find a supply function, a regulatory function and an ecumenical one. If Icons are definitely not the most immediately beautiful paintings nor the closest to Western sensibilities; however, they contain a depth and density of theological meanings that latin tradition should not underestimate.*

Key words: *priest, iconographer, icons, tradition, theological path*

Understanding the theology of the icon has become all the more urgent as the spread of these images, even in places for liturgical worship in our Western Latin tradition, has increased recently. A marked growth occurred in the second half of the twentieth century with an initial spread in limited areas of interest, followed by a widespread permeation especially after the release of the Pope saint John Paul the second in the apostolic letter "Orientale Lumen"¹. I have

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¹ Vatican, *Orientale Lumen*. John Paul II, (Rome: Vatican, 1995), see https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1995/, (accessed 1. 2. 2022.); with "defined boundaries" I mean some newly formed religious communities inspired by eastern monasticism and the recovery of hesychast spirituality..

seen recently, in Umbria, Italy, a gothic cathedral that still preserves paintings from the early Renaissance, within which was placed, in front of the lectern set up for daily Masses, a copy of the Christ from Moscow icon pics. The fact that it was not a hand made painting, but a simple print pasted on a wooden board, leads us to think of it as a temporary and occasional arrangement, but clearly indicates the proportion and level of permeation of eastern icons in places of worship of the Latin tradition.

It should not escape the paradox with which we currently submit to the cult of the faithful, images that do not belong to the Western tradition, which are quite dated² and, perhaps, cannot stand up to a comparison with the artistic works of our most famous artists. For what motive, in a Latin Catholic church, does a picture of Christ, so far from our propinquity, appear? Why are you inclined to ignore the



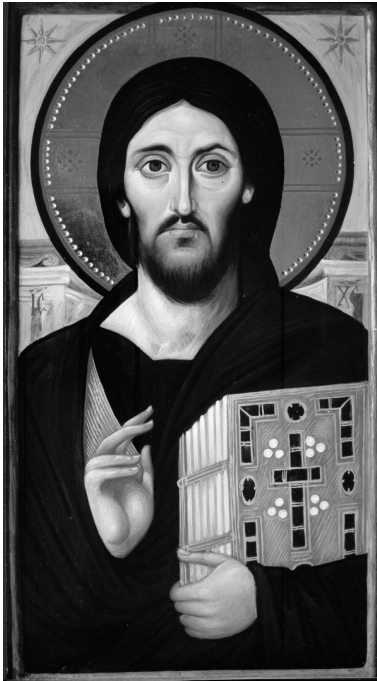
1 and 2. Modern icons in a catholic chure on Lectern

² Most of the prevalent icons actually date back to a period between 12C (such as Our Lady of Vladimir) and the first half of 16C. Since, however, they are unlikely to substantially change due to the "iconographic canon," you can say they all go back to the germinal period of the VI-VII century.

taxing process of inculturation that the religious image has traveled in the West, in an effort to reproduce, with their peculiar sensibility of a culture and a particular historical period, the mystery of God? Perhaps the answer could be, looking at it in a different light, that this icon allows the reading of a theology that responds to contemporary needs and intuitively is recognized as an appropriate model to represent the Lord Jesus, the Mother of God, the angels and saints.

The Icon of Christ at Moscow and the First Icons

In the wake of this challenge I propose to outline the fundamental theology of the icon of Christ from the School of Moscow³. The choice of this model was due to its pervasiveness. It is in fact one of the most famous iconographic representations of Christ in circulation today. The picture dates from the first half of the sixteenth century, but because of the "iconographic canon", it does not present



3. Giovanni Raffa, Christ, faithful copy to the icon preserved in the monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai (Egypt).

constitutive differences with icons dating back to the 6C to 7C. The virtual reunification with the first icons is important because it ensures continuity with the arduous path that led the early church to allow the representation of Christ in an image dedicated to worship and adoration.

The Church did not have images of Christ that represented Him in His personal individuality, or, in other words "portraits", until the sixth century⁴.

³ The picture is slightly anterior to the Stoglav of 1551. This Council ends up fitting the criteria to evaluate the possibility of a contemporary icon to join in the tradition. Above all is given a "iconographic canon".

⁴ I am referring here neither to the representations of Christ through symbols (Lamb, Good Shepherd), nor to the narrative depictions of the life of Christ (the miraculous catch of fish, Peter's call), which date back to the early centuries.

The principle reason is to be found in the biblical prohibition of "making images of gods" (*Dt 4:12-19*), and the popular reception of neoplatonic thought on the relationship between the image and the real person. There was, in the early centuries and especially for the Christians of gentile origin, the tendency to identify, as in worship of idols, the image with the beloved person.

The first attempts to make an icon of Christ can be traced back to the sixth century⁵. They are related to the "Acheropite" module, that is, images "not painted by the hand of man." These representations were reproductions on canvas, of the veil that Jesus Himself during His life delivered to the court painter of King Abgar of Edessa. Tradition relates that King Abgar, having heard about the deeds of Christ, sent to Galilee the best painter of his court so that he, the painter, could paint a portrait, which would then be preserved. The painter after several attempts wasn't able to execute the portrait because "too bright was the face of Christ" and you could not represent Him. However, before returning to Edessa he went up to Jesus, handing him a veil after having bathed in the Jordan and asked Him to dry His face with it. During the return trip a miracle happened: the veil, upon drying, had retained the likeness of Christ that had been indelibly imprinted. The veil was preserved in Edessa and later would be called "Mandyliion".



4. Mandyliion, Saint George of armenians, Genova, Italy

The iconographer, when representing the person of Christ faithfully by copying the Mandyliion, declared not to add any human invention; he confined himself to reproducing what Jesus Himself actually had delivered as a template. The ploy with which the acheropite icons were made allows us to understand what games of balance were used to make possible the introduction of images of Christ in worship and how difficult it was to be able to achieve their realization.

⁵ One of the oldest known mentions relating to a Acheropita image is in the text of the Doctrine of Addai.

After the spread of the use of acheropite images, half-length portraits of Christ emerged, and artists were picking up the Egyptian use of the "death mask": paintings of the Roman School that reflected the stylizing influence of the Egyptian School.

Originally these paintings were executed before the death of a person and subsequently applied on the face of the mummified body. The interesting aspect of this forerunner of the modern portrait is the close relationship that is established between the person and his image: the person in flesh and bone diminishes, but his presence is animated in the image. Iconographers recovered this kind of painting because it helped to identify the person and made the portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth possible, not as it had previously occurred, through symbols or in the description of His deeds, but in the peculiar traits of His person. This change constitutes the necessary acquisition that will give legitimacy to the painting of icons. The best known among these portraits derived from funerary masks is the icon of "Christ of Sinai"; therefore, we can depict the images that were painted in the time that preceded the iconoclast fight. (726-843).



5 and 6. Images from Fayum (Egypt) set on mummies

The Theological Problem

The representation of Christ in His person sought by the icons, raises a significant theological problem, linked to the foundations of Christology already fixed at Chalcedon in 451. In this council Christ is recognized "in two natures, without confusion, immutable, undi-

vided, inseparable, not being failed the difference of the two natures because of their union, but having been, indeed, safeguarded the property of each nature, and helping to form one person and hypostasis; he is not divided or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son ” This doctrine will find a more elaborate expression and a final insurance when referring to painting the images, in the context of the iconoclastic crisis.⁶

The central argument of the ”detractors of the images” or ”iconoclasts”, who collect other less valuable ones, is related to the claim advanced by the iconoduli⁷ to be able to capture in an image the person of Christ⁸. The Iconoclasts, related to Monophysite theology, argued that a representation of Jesus of Nazareth contained a fundamental theological error: that only human-divine nature could not in fact be expressed conceptually nor, a fortiori, made through an image. Each icon of Jesus of Nazareth was just a representation of the human form of the Son of Mary, and could not claim anything referring to his divinity.

The position of the Council of Nicaea in 787, deeply inspired by the work of John Damascene⁹, takes objection and refutes AT- across the Christological categories already established at Chalcedon: ”We confess the two natures of the one who became incarnate for us, (..) recognizing that he is perfect God and perfect man, as proclaimed at the Council of Chalcedon” from this data it is stated then that the iconographer does not portray human nature of Christ, but the singular person who is in two natures, human and divine without confusion. Because of this, one could say correctly that the Second Council of Nicaea and the subsequent resolution of the iconoclast crisis seals the iconography of Christ as a model translation into an image (theology expressed through the use of color) of Christology already set at Chalcedon.

⁶ The iconoclast crisis is commonly enclosed within two dates: the beginning is due to a measure of the emperor of Constantinople, Leo III the Isaurian, who decreed the destruction of icons in 730, and ends with the proclamation of the ”Festa dell’orthodoxy” promulgated by the regent Theodora and the Patriarch of Constantinople in 843 (See Methodius).

⁷ Less widespread use of the term ”iconoclast”, the term ”iconodulo” means one who worships icons and exposes them to public worship.

⁸ That testimony, however, is not treated as a receipt of the Christology of Chalcedon.

⁹ In particular, the three speeches in defense of sacred images, written toward the 730 texts were translated into Italian in: John of Damascus. *Defense of Sacred Images*. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/johndam-icons.asp>, (accessed 3.2.2022.);

The icon then does not represent Christology other than that of Chalcedon, and not less important underscore, claims its peculiarities in dealing and makes it explicit, through the image, the center of dogmatic definition given in the Council. Christ is one person in two natures, and the only access to the figurative and descriptive of him comes from this acquisition; the strength of the Christology of the icon is then the emphasis on the coexistence of these two natures and the attempt to represent them both simultaneously in the one person.

Two Natures in One Person

With regard to the model chosen as a reference, the Christ of the School of Moscow, I will now point out some salient points, taking into account the fundamental criterion of hermeneutics that the particular iconography is never significant in itself, but as constitutive of all.



7. Christ, Moscow School, XVI Century, A. Rublev Museum, Moscow

Describing the icon from the top down you can see particular inscriptions in the halo: it presents itself marked by a lieutenant cross¹⁰ containing an inscription. By decoding the symbols: the holiness of God expressed through the hoop, highlighted by gold foil and marked from the sentence of Exodus 3:14, "I am the one who is"¹¹ (prerogatives of the divine nature) is marked by the historical life of Jesus of Nazareth, which finds its final expression in the death of the cross (the prerogatives of human nature).

The halo itself is wedged between the "cradle" and the outer edge of the icon. In the iconographic vocabulary a "cradle"

¹⁰ The red lines included within the halo in fact indicate the cross.

¹¹ Only the letter omega remains in the original, that is, the initial letter of the present participle. The inscription refers to the episode of the burning bush, where Moses asks the revelation of God's name to present to the Pharaoh. God is presented as fact: "I am the one Who is" (Ex 3,14).

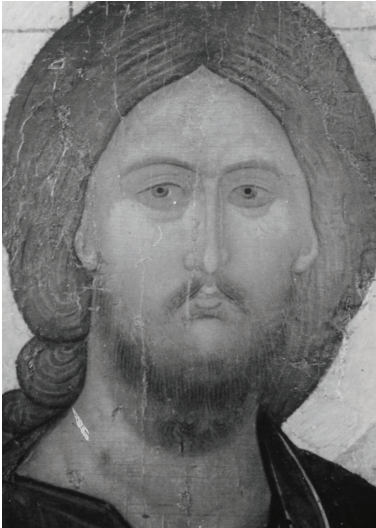
inside indicates the supernatural reality as if it were an "open window", and the outer edge, on the contrary, the consistency of earthly realities. The particular location of the halo embracing the cradle board indicates this in the person of Christ, who despite being only one combines the two realities, divine and human, without confusion.

In the lower left corner we see the right arm that extends and opens into the hand of blessing: it has a particular motion expressed by a sign that accentuates the outward shift. At the same time, however, the band mantle that crosses the arm does not present the bulge that you would expect from the movement of an arm going outward. In contrast, the transverse band has been drawn with clear signs that tighten and compress the arm inward. The representation indicates so and, paradoxically, a double movement in which the arm tends to exit to the outside while the mantle, holding it, pushes it toward the inside. The idea is to manifest an extraordinary strength retained and compressed with great ease. It is emphasized that the following paradox: the nature of God, in his almighty power that "bares the power of his arm" (cf. also Lk 1.51) is consistent with the weakness of human nature's "gentle and humble of heart" (Mt 11:29), which expresses this force in mercy and blessing.

The same can be observed if we stop to focus on the face: a look that ties the majesty and elegance of the deity with the delicacy and subservience of humanity. All the descriptive details concur with the precise clarification of Christology fixed at Chalcedon.

Finally, of great importance, the inclusion of the book that takes a liturgical text, "Do not judge according to the face (appearance) oh sons of men, but judge through informed opinion. Judge with the same judgment, measure by the same measure". He expresses the call not to stop the outward appearance, but to penetrate the mystery hidden in the divine-humanity expressed in the visible figure of Jesus.

More overall balance between the characteristics of human nature and the divine that is found individually in the person of Jesus is described by the peculiar metaphysics of light (highlight) peculiar to the icon. If you look carefully you will notice soon that the icon does not have shadows and the light seems to come from the inside of the persons and objects rather than from the outside. In fact, the research iconographer was precisely to represent as much as possible the mode of interpenetration of the two natures in Christ, according to what had already been expressed in a systematic way in the seventh century in the First Council of Constantinople III against



7. Christ, the detail, Moscow School, XVI Century, A. Rublev Museum, Moscow.

the monoteliti¹² and that finds a remote echo in Scripture, "and he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no washerwoman on earth could bleach them" (Mk 9, 2- 3); "There will be no more night there and they will not need light of a lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord will give them light" (Rev 22:5). The person of Christ is the prototypical case of the way in which divine nature approaches human nature, transforming it from within. The divine nature does not mix with the human, but elevates it intimately. And this delicate theological balance that will represent the iconographer then making use of the vocabulary peculiar to him.

Some Implications

The icon is linked directly to the origins of the depiction of Christ through an image: appreciating and proposing an icon to venerate, therefore, is precisely a "shift back" to one of the decisive settling of systematic Christology .

I believe that the spread of icons within the places deputized to the worship of our Latin tradition is not, however, neither a point of arrival, nor marks a definitive shift; those who would accept this position as their own would deny the typical dynamic principle of evangelization, which crosses always a history and a unique culture.

So recent a phenomenon, not sufficiently evaluated and treated as such, will require a slow process of settling in view of a proper theological and pastoral interpretation.

¹² "We affirm that there are two natures which shine in his one hypostasis in which, during the whole economy of his incarnate life, worked wonders and suffered pains in appearance but not really. The difference of nature in this unique hypostasis recognizes that each nature, without division or confusion, he wanted to and operated in accordance with its being in communion with each other".

In the meantime, while waiting for processing to enable a position on the effective assimilation of the icon; there could be three functions that can be attributed to the rediscovery of contemporary art in the Western tradition of these ancient images. I would indicate, a "supply function", a "regulatory function" and an "ecumenical" one. "Deputizing" in the sense that the revival of the cult exposure of an icon fills a vacuum of universally appreciable proposals, indicating the current absence of a consolidated artistic vocabulary for the representation of sacred images. "Statement" as a point of reference indispensable, if you were to judge the alleged "theologicity" of a new image that depicts Jesus of Nazareth. "Ecumenical" because it proposes to worship an image that is linked to the tradition of the undivided Church.

Beauty will save the world, the famous phrase of Dostoevsky, is increasingly being applied to the icons (at least in our western area) and maybe a little too exclusively. Icons are definitely not the most immediately beautiful paintings nor the closest to Western sensibilities; however, they contain a depth and density of theological meanings that we should not underestimate.

Bibliography:

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ТЕОЛОГИЈА ИКОНЕ
(РАЗМАТРАЊЕ ИКОНЕ ИЗ УГЛА ЗАПАДНЕ ЦРКВЕ)

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Резиме: Аутор, католички свештеник, иконограф, као и члан комисије за свету ликовну уметност у Италији, покушава да схвати парадокс као што је ширење икона нарочито после апостолског писма Папе Јована Павла II из 1995 године. Такви модели приметни су чак и на местима за литургијско богослужење у западно латинској традицији, где често стоје раме уз раме са историјским и домаћим сликарима попут Ђота и Рафаела. С тим у вези, теолошки поглед на ову тему фокус истраживања поставља ка могући моделима помоћу којих би се лепота источне традиције приближила западној католичкој цркви. Разматра се начине набавке икона, њихово регулисање и примена као и екуменски значај. Иако иконе дефинитивно нису на први поглед слике нити су блиске западном сензибилитету, оне ипак, садрже дубину и густину теолошких значења које традиција католичке цркве не би требало да потцењује, стога се кроз овај чланак отвара још једно питање на пољу потенцијала икона са источном традицијом.

кључне речи: свештеник, иконописац, иконе, традиција, богословски пут.