THE SACREDNESS OF THE ICON AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN OUR RELIGIOUS-MORAL LIFE

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Abstract: For us, as Orthodox Christians, the icon represents one of the essential aspects of our faith. Understanding and assuming the veneration of holy icons brought about the triumph of Orthodoxy over the heresies of all times. Approaching iconology implies, first of all, presenting the reasons and grounds for which the icon is painted, thus showing the key of understanding the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ and the subtlety of the commandments that God gave to the Jewish people. In order to argue for the veneration of icons, the Holy Fathers emphasized the metaphysical connection between the icon and the prototype, these being comprised in sensibility and in thinking without being confounded. The legitimacy of the act of veneration is based on the natural and innate inclination of the human being of understanding the real presence of the prototype through the senses as well. Through holy icons we are given the possibility of a living and continuous connection with the heavenly world of God and of the Saints. For the Orthodox Christian, the icon is a meeting or a communion between the one who prays, on the one side, and God or the Saints, on the other side.

Keywords: *icon, prototype, veneration, grace, sanctification.*

1. The reasons and grounds for which the icon is painted

The Greek word *εἰκὼν* originally means *resemblance* and today it may have several meanings. According to Saint John of Damascus, “an image is a likeness and representation of someone, containing in itself the person who is imaged”¹. For us, as Orthodox Christians, the icon is

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¹ ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *Cele trei tratate contra iconoclaștilor* (Apologia Against

the pictorial representation of a saint or a holy scene, usually made on a piece of wood, canvas, metal or paper, or even on the wall of the church, which is consecrated and which serves as a liturgical object. The icon is “the image of beauty as resemblance with God”². According to Holy Tradition, there have been icons made without hands (*ἀχειροποίητα*), on which was imprinted the face of Christ³. Among the most well-known, we can mention the veil of Saint Veronica⁴ and the mandylion sent to the king of Edessa⁵. As for painted icons, the first icon is attributed to the Holy Evangelist Luke⁶.

The icon exists first because we cannot always have in front of our eyes the original, the Savior or the saints after their departure from this life and thus, we must do with a copy or an image. Being limited in time and space, the faithful cannot have direct awareness of the unseen, or of things in the past, in the future or far away. The image of these supplies their absence. The icon was revealed in order to guide knowledge and to discover what is hidden and unseen. In *Apologia Against Those who Decry Holy Images*, Saint John of Damascus makes an ample analysis of the role of the icon, mentioning one of the essential aspects: “for a remembrance of past events, of a miracle or a good deed, for the honor and glory and abiding memory of the most virtuous, or for the shame and terror of the wicked, for the benefit of succeeding generations who contemplate it”⁷.

Those who Decry Holy Images), Romanian translation, introduction and notes by Dumitru FECIORU, București, EIBMO, 2016, p. 180.

² Anatolie KUZNETOV, “Icoana ortodoxă ca expresie a învățăturii dogmatice a Bisericii” (The Orthodox Icon as an expresion of the Dogmatic Teaching of the Church), translated by I. Georgescu, in *Ortodoxia*, no. 4/1971, p. 595.

³ Heinrich PFEIFFER, “The concept of *acheiropoietos*, the iconography of the face of Christ and the veil of Manoppello”, in *Proceedings of the International Workshop on the Scientific approach on the Acheiropoietos Images*, Frascati, ENEA, 2010.

⁴ Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica generală cu noțiuni de artă bisericească, arhitectură și pictură creștină* (General Liturgics with Notions of Ecclesiastic Art, Christian Architecture and Painting), Galați, Partener, 2008⁴, p. 712.

⁵ Leonid USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei în Biserica Ortodoxă* (The Theology of the Icon in the Orthodox Church), introductory study and Romanian translation by Teodor Baconsky, București, Anastasia, 1994, p. 28.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁷ ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *Cele trei tratate...*, p. 185. On guarding the conscience and leading the mind to the divine through the veneration of the holy icons, see

The Jews received the commandment not to “make thee a graven image or likeness of anything whatsoever is in the heaven above, and whatsoever is in the earth beneath, and whatsoever is in the waters beneath the earth” (Deut. 5, 8-9). This commandment is part of a divine pedagogy, as they lived among pagan and idolatrous peoples that would have tempted them into a material representation of God, Who is a purely spiritual Being, imperceptible to the senses. The symbols of the Old Law – the paschal lamb, Aaron’s rod, the holy tabernacle, the coffin of the law etc. – constituted the sensible signs of the presence of God among the chosen people. These symbols were an anticipation of icons, just as the Old Testament was an anticipation, a guide, a teacher towards Christ. Father Dumitru Stăniloae said: “It was not the acknowledgment of God’s work in natural objects, and especially in the sacred symbols indicated by God in a supernatural way that was forbidden in the Old Testament, but the identification of these with God Himself”⁸.

Holy Scripture tells us that God Himself allowed icons, as He gave birth to His Son, Who is the natural icon of the Father, Who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1, 15). God also made man according to “Our image and according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1, 26). Saint Clement of Rome attests that above all, “with His holy and undefiled hands He formed man, the most excellent [of His creatures], and truly great through the understanding given him - the express likeness of His own image”⁹. And Saint Gregory the Theologian confesses that “Christ is the image of the Father and man was created in the image of God”¹⁰. This is the reason why the mystery of Holy Icons attracts and conquers the believer, causing profound and unique spiritual experiences. This mystery certifies his belonging to the plenitude of the Church, intensifies his faith, hope and love towards Christ and the Holy Trinity, but also towards the Theotokos and the saints of Christianity.

Ildephonse DIRKS, *Les Saintes Icônes. Essai de syntèthèse pour les faire comprendre et aimer*, Belgique, Prieuré d’Amay-sur-Meuse, 1939, p. 14.

⁸ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Icoanele în cultul ortodox” (The Icons in Orthodox Worship), in *Ortodoxia*, no. 3/1978, p. 476.

⁹ ST. CLEMENT OF ROME, “Epistola către Corinteni” (Epistle to the Corinthians), in *PSB* 1, București, EIBMBOR, 1979, p. 63.

¹⁰ ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, “Discours 1-3”, French translation by J. Barnardi, in *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 247, Paris, 1978, p. 77-78.

The icon also imposes itself out of a psychological necessity, demanded by the insufficiency of human nature, as well as by the wish to know the holy persons (their image) and the miraculous deeds which led them to holiness. The icons remind us and make us think of the persons painted and of the way in which they worshipped “in spirit and in truth” (Jn. 4, 24). Looking at the painting and at the icons in the church, the faithful learn through images what the Holy Scripture teaches through words. Therefore, the icons in the churches were called “the Bible of the unschooled”. Saint Gregory the Theologian said: “What the Scripture is to those who are illiterate, so is the painting to the untaught, as in it, even the ignorant see what has to follow, in it the illiterate can read. Thus, especially for the untaught, the painting supplies reading”¹¹. Indeed, holy icons form “the unwritten Bible”, but painted, which everyone can read.

Only the image offered by the icon of the Orthodox Church, which suggests the beauty of the renewed man, the image of the world to come, can guide life towards God. Only this image, with this message, is called an icon. We venerate it, as it guides our life towards the future life and it shows us the image of the man in whom Christ was formed (according to Gal. 4, 19), as it is described in the very words of Holy Scripture (according to Gal. 3, 1). All the images of the saints, starting with the Theotokos and ending with the righteous of the Old Law are bright, but also mysterious. They reveal the passage from the image to the resemblance with God, which coincides with the complete fulfillment of the humane through the holiness they partook¹². However, at the same time, the holy icons suggest the mystery of the persons reaching perfection, who concentrate in themselves, spiritually, the whole existence which has its source in God’s will.

¹¹ ST. GREGORY THE THEOLOGIAN, *Epistolarum liber XI*, 13, P.G. 77, col. 1128C. ST. THEODORE THE STUDITE, *Iisus Hristos, Prototip al icoanei Sale. Tratatete contra iconomahilor* (Jesus Christ, Prototype of his Icon), introductory study and Romanian translation by Ioan I. Ică jr., Alba Iulia, Deisis, 1994, p. 130 sqq.

¹² The revelating power of icons is much greater than the one of speculative theology: “The painting of icons tells us about the afterlife and its aspects. It does not constrain through the force of arguments; it persuades and triumphs through the evidence itself” (Giovanni Domenico MANSI, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, t. XIII, col. 116).

2. The metaphysical connection between the icon and the prototype

There is a radical and essential difference between the idol and the icon, the idol or the graven image being always related by the Holy Scripture to the invented gods (products of lie, of inexistence), and the image in the good sense or the icon related to the only God Who really exists. The idol or the graven image of gods is the product of a pantheist conception, according to which the world is the final reality. The icon is the sign of God's transcendent reality, the one above nature. The icon helps the person who venerates it to fulfill the act of a transcendence of nature. The icon relies on the faith in a plan above nature and the will to go beyond nature, to enter a relation with the divine transcendence. The person who venerates the icon always refers to a reality beyond the icon. The veneration of the icon is brought to the prototype painted in it, "the prototype and the icon are correlative, just as there are two halves. For the prototype brings with itself the icon instantly, whose prototype it is; and the half will instantly bring with itself the other half, in relation to which it is called half"¹³.

When we see the icon of Christ, we think of the Person of Christ. The believer is convinced that, when he watches the icon, he talks to Christ and, venerating it, he venerates Christ. If he offered the icon a type of veneration different from the one to Christ, he would make an idol out of the icon, even if he granted it a smaller power than Christ. Actually, the power which is manifested through the wonderworking icons is the power of Christ, not of the icon itself. In this respect, Patriarch Nicephorus said: "I would say that the icon is present where Christ is present. As through the relation, the image is present where the

¹³ ST. THEODORE THE STUDITE, *Antirrheticus III*, col. 429B. Assuring us of the christological realism of the holy icons, St. Nicephorus the Confessor, Patriarch of Constantinople emphasizes the face as revelation of resemblance: "These two realities are united and connected through the same appearance even when they are different according to their nature. And even when both of them (image and model) are two different realities according to their nature, they are not *someone* and *someone else*, but one and the same" (Christoph SCHÖNBORN, *Icoana lui Hristos. O introduce teologică* (The Icon of Christ. A Theological Introduction), Romanian translation and preface by Vasile Răducă, București, Anastasia, 1996, p. 165).

prototype is”¹⁴.

The icon and the prototype are comprised altogether through sensibility and thinking without being confounded. Or the believer can forget about the icon, experiencing the relation to the prototype. When he prays in front of an icon he does not pray to it, but to Christ. Watching it, his regard is directed spiritually towards Christ, just like a mother, watching the photo of her son, talks to him, although she does not confound the photo of the son to the son himself. The mother forgets about the photo in the same way in which the believer forgets about the icon. Watching the photo, the mother smiles to the son and the believer, watching the icon, prays to Christ or to the saint presented in it¹⁵. Indeed, venerating holy icons, we do not limit ourselves to the relative, modest matter of the icon, we do not make idols out of icons, considering them the supreme reality. On the contrary, we transcend with the thought and the veneration from the matter of the icon to Christ God the Incarnate or to His saints.

In order to illustrate convincingly the inseparability between the prototype and the icon, Saint Theodore the Studite invokes the example of the relation between the prototype and its shadow. Thus, “the icon exists in Him in potency and it can always be seen in Christ, even before being achieved technically, just as the shadow subsists forever in the body, even if it is not yet configured by a ray of light, way in which it is not beyond plausibility to say that Christ and His icon are simultaneous... (and just as) the shadow stands out more through the sun rays, in the same way, Christ’s icon becomes obvious to all when it appears imprinting itself in substances”¹⁶. Saint Theodore the Studite supports not only the subsistence of the icon in the prototype, but also the presence of the prototype in the icon. Divinity is present in the Savior’s icon through “relational communion”, that is, through grace.

Unlike any painting or portrait, which represents man in his state

¹⁴ PATRIARCH NICEPHORUS, *Antirrheticus II, Adversus Iconomachos, VII*, in *P.G.* 100, col. 357.

¹⁵ The image makes the bridge between the real prototypical existence in the essence of the person represented and between the representation of the prototype in a foreign substance. The prototype as essence is beyond the icon.

¹⁶ ST. THEODORE THE STUDITE, *Antirrheticus III D*, 3 and 12, in *P.G.* 99, col. 429B and 433B; ST. THEODORE THE STUDITE, *Iisus Hristos, Prototip al icoanei Sale...*, p. 164.

after the original sin, the Orthodox icon presents humanity restored, created again, strengthened through grace as a consequence of the sacrifice, death and resurrection of Christ. It does not present an imaginary, hypothetical man, but one that lived in history, just that through faith and Baptism he started his free relation, through the power of the Holy Spirit, with Christ's completely restored and transfigured humanity. For an Orthodox Christian, icons remain visible features of the supernatural representations, having the purpose of raising our soul in the spheres of heaven¹⁷. Orthodox icons render with assiduity and acribia that deification of human nature, that *theosis*, a direct consequence of Christ's incarnation and of that "heavenly perspective in its ontological identity"¹⁸, which is characteristic only to Eastern Orthodoxy.

To a certain extent, icons can be considered holy in themselves, as a whole – matter and shape (face), just as they are actually conceived and venerated by the Orthodox faithful. The holiness of icons derives from the relation between the prototype and the icon and from the fact that icons are consecrated. The supernatural, indestructible connection between the icon (image) and its prototype (the original) makes that part of the inner force, of the personal holiness, the prerogatives and the graces the original possesses by nature (God), or which it acquired through personal merits (the Saints) go to the icon, lending it a nimbus of holiness, which makes it worthy of being venerated in itself. "We must believe – confesses Saint Theodore the Studite – that divine grace is present in Christ's icon and that it communicates holiness to those who approach it with faith¹⁹. For the Orthodox Christian, the icon remains above all a liturgical object, as it is consecrated through "the divine name and through the name of God's friends, therefore, it received the grace of the Holy Spirit"²⁰.

¹⁷ Leonid USPENSKY, "Icoana, vedere a lumii duhovnicești" (The icon, vision of the spiritual world), in vol. *Ce este icoana?* (What is the icon?), Romanian translation by Vasile Manea, Alba Iulia, Reîntregirea, 2005, p. 28.

¹⁸ Pavel FLORENSKY, "L'icône", in *Contacts*, no. 88/1974, p. 310, 313.

¹⁹ ST. THEODORE THE STUDITE, "Scrisoare către Plato despre cultul sfințelor icoane (Epistle to Plato on the veneration of the holy icons)", in *P.G.* 99, col. 505B; ST. THEODORE THE STUDITE, *Iisus Hristos, Prototip al icoanei Sale...*, p. 190.

²⁰ ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, "Despre cinstirea sfințelor icoane" (On the Veneration of the Holy Icons), in *P.G.* 94, col. 1300.

3. The legitimacy of venerating the icon

The iconoclast admits that he respects icons, but he does not worship them, because he confounds veneration and worship. We venerate icons, we do not worship them, as the honour we give the icon goes to the prototype. We must venerate the icon relatively, but not adore or idolize it, because we worship only Christ as Son of God, of one essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit, as Saint Basil asserts²¹. As for the nature or character of the cult of icons, mention must be made of the fact that the Church Fathers have never confounded this with the way we worship God. We honour God through adoration or latria, whereas the Saints, their relics and the icons are offered only veneration or - as Saint John of Damascus calls it – relative veneration²², as it is in relation to the prototype it refers to.

Between the idolatry and the veneration of the holy icons there can be no resemblance. The prototypes of the idols (the gods) cannot be identified with the prototypes of the holy icons. Saint Theodore the Studite affirms clearly that the relational veneration of Christ the Savior in the icon is a veneration of Christ the Savior Himself, not in idolatry, and the one who equates these is a heretic. In the same way, venerating holy icons of the Theotokos and of the saints cannot be identified with idolatry, but it relates to the holy prototypes, without referring to the substance of the icon²³. Between the icon and the prototype there is resemblance, but not identity of nature. Hence, the quality of the resemblance with the prototype is justified and it legitimates the cult of icons, and that of distinction through nature determines the degree or the essence of this cult²⁴.

We do not adore, but we venerate the Theotokos and the saints, whom the Holy Scripture calls “gods” (Ps. 81, 6). They are gods not by

²¹ ST. BASIL THE GREAT, “Epistole” (Epistles), 161, in *PSB* 3, Romanian translation, introduction and notes by Teodor Bodogae, București, Basilica, 2010, p. 251.

²² ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *Cele trei tratate...*, p. 192-199.

²³ ST. THEODORE THE STUDITE, “Antirrheticus I”, 20, in *P.G.* 99, col. 352A and III, C.1, in *P.G.* 99, col. 420D-421A; IDEM, *Iisus Hristos, Prototip al icoanei Sale...*, p. 93.

²⁴ Ene BRANIȘTE, “Teologia icoanelor” (The Theology of Icons), in *Studii Teologice*, no. 3-4/1952, p. 194.

nature, but by position. Once the saints take part in divinity, we venerate them as servants of God and by venerating them, we venerate the God Whom they serve. Their veneration is conditioned by worshipping God. This is why we venerate icons, a veneration since the time of the Apostles. This reality can stand for dogmatic reason or patristic references. Replying iconoclasts, who claimed that venerating icons is indicated neither by the Holy Scripture nor by the Holy Fathers, Saint Theodore the Studite affirms that the veneration of the icon is indicated in all the places where the veneration of the prototype is indicated²⁵.

Consequently, we understand that the holiness and the veneration of the icon derives from its relation to the prototype. The icon bears the name of the prototype and their veneration is common. Even if the resemblance between the icon and the prototype is not perfect, veneration is granted to the icon, as they resemble, the icon has the same figure as the prototype and the veneration is not addressed to two realities, but only to one and the same. The veneration addressed to the icon is only the echo of the inner feeling the believer has for the prototype: "If you cannot express your love for God in words, but you express it in a visible way, that is, through an icon, the Church will blame the one who judges you wrongly, as he condemns your love"²⁶. On the one hand, the believer addresses the prototype, on the other hand, he does this through the icon. The prototype and the icon contain each other. Saint Theodore the Studite says: "The honor of the icon rises to the prototype. Through this, there are not two venerations (one for the icon and one for the prototype), but one and the same, just as the same is the venerated prototype even if it is represented in the icon"²⁷.

The cult of the icons is founded on a natural innate inclination of the human being. The reason and the grounds for which the icons are venerated represent the formal element of the icon, that is, the image painted on it. The object of my veneration is not the matter, but the image of the saint person presented in it. We do not venerate the wood

²⁵ ST. THEODORE THE STUDITE, "Antirrheticus II", 3, in *P.G.* 99, col. 353C; IDEM, *Iisus Hristos, Prototip al icoanei Sale...*, p. 97.

²⁶ Alexei S. HOMIAKOV, *Biserica este una* (The Church is One), translation by Elena Derevici and Lucia Mureșan, Alba Iulia, Reîntregirea, 2017, p. 118.

²⁷ ST. THEODORE THE STUDITE, *Iisus Hristos, Prototip al icoanei Sale...*, p. 186.

or the metal out of which the icon was made, but the saint painted on it, to whom our mind or our thought rises. This principle was established in a concise way by Saint Basil the Great in the well-known formula: “the honor given to the image passes over to the prototype”²⁸.

The veneration of the holy icons relies not only on the nature of the subjects themselves presented on them, but on the faith in this presence full of grace that the Church invokes through the power of the consecration of the icon. The ritual of the consecration of the icon establishes a connection between the image and its prototype, between what is presented in the icon and the image itself. We venerate icons, because after consecration, they are “signs of the effusion and presence of grace”²⁹, not only in themselves, but also in the places around them. After consecration, the icons acquire the divine energy and the authentication of the image represented. Not honouring them and not believing in the power given to them by the Holy Spirit means not honouring God and denying His power of consecration. The thaumaturgical virtue and effects of icons rely both on the power of prototypes and on the service of their consecration. This places them in the category of sacred things³⁰, for there is a great correlation between the consecrated icon and its Consecrator.

4. The educational and spiritual role of the icon

Icons are a means of awakening, supporting and strengthening the religious spiritual life, an impulse towards the cultivation of moral

²⁸ ST. BASIL THE GREAT, *Despre Sfântul Duh* (On the Holy Spirit), XVIII, 45, in *P.G.* 32, col. 149C; IDEM, *Despre Sfântul Duh*, (On the Holy Spirit), in *PSB* 12, translation, introduction, notes and index by Constantin Cornițescu, and Teodor Bodogae, București, EIBMBOR, 1988, p. 59.

²⁹ Ilie BRĂTAN, “Sfintele icoane” (The Holy Icons), in *Mitropolia Olteniei*, no. 7-9/1977, p. 578; Dumitru Stăniloae affirms: “The service for the consecration of the icon, strengthening the trust of the person who venerates in the power that irradiates from the prototype over him through the icon, intensifies the thoughts full of faith of the person who venerates towards the prototype of the image and this urges the prototype to approach more carefully the person who venerates his icon” (*Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturgia ortodoxă - Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy*), București, EIBMBOR, 2004, p. 113.

³⁰ *** *PIDALION* (The Rudder), Romanian translation by Veniamin Costachi, Neamț Monastery, s.n., 1844, p. 226.

values and of superior feelings of love and sacrifice for the Church of Christ. The contemplation of icons makes us reflect upon the bravery and heroism of the martyrs and saints painted in them, and the mere sight of them urges us to imitate their style of life, lived according to the Gospel. Icons are a strong support of Christian life. They have an instructive role, as they are always a remembrance of past events, miracles and good deeds, “for the honor and glory and abiding memory of the most virtuous”, but this is done for an educational purpose: “so that we may avoid evils and imitate goodness”³¹.

Through the holy icons we are given the possibility of a living and continuous connection with the heavenly world of God and of the Saints. For the Orthodox Christian, the icon is a meeting or a communion between the one who prays, on the one side, and God or the Saints, on the other side. It is not a simple image, on the contrary, it gives us the real feeling of the presence of God and of the Saints³². We believe the icon is the place where Christ exists through grace or in a ideal manner, it is the place of a secret presence of Christ, of the Theotokos and of the other Saints. Bishop Adrian I of Rome said: “We make the icons of the saints and of the martyrs, who suffered for the Lord, so that we remember them, so that everyone who sees them in icons should remember them and give glory to God, Who gave them glory”³³.

Holy icons present us with how the life of the saints was a continuous transcending from the humanity which is subject to passions

³¹ ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *Despre cinstirea sfintelor icoane* (On the Veneration of Holy Icons), in *P.G.* 94, col. 1341C-D; IDEM, *Cele trei tratate...*, p. 185.

³² The icon offers us a meeting and a communion, making the prototype present before our eyes. Father Dumitru Stăniloae paid special attention to the “theology of the image” in order to underline the importance of the icon. On this aspect, he asserted: “The human face is by itself the means of communication between people. The face is not man’s face for his existence in the individualist isolation... The Son of God, taking a human face, extended to the climax the anchoring in the divine infinity, the desire to communicate to people this experiencing of the humanity assumed by Him... Christians want to have with them not only the word of Christ to the end of time, but also His human face, and, through it the Face of the divinity as source of all human faces” (*Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturghia ortodoxă - Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy*, p. 58-59).

³³ MANSI, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, t. XIII, col. 1070.

towards a life of complete devotedness to Christ. Their ascetic images, rendering their life of restraining, of detachment from the world and of following Christ, help us rise constantly towards what is good and beautiful. Drawing us to the infinity of the divine life where they are, the Saints, painted in the icons, urge us to transcend the relative, corrupted, earthly life. Just as divine grace is given “to the material things because of the names of the ones painted in the icons”, equally, “if the one presented in image be full of grace, men become partakers of his grace according to their faith”³⁴. This is what fully delineates the position and the role of icons in the Christian cult, in which they appear as a necessity of form through their educational and charismatic role. They become a “means of communion between the one who prays and God, the Theotokos or the saints”³⁵.

Any icon constitutes a call to a superior sphere, to a reality transfigured by God’s breath. In Orthodoxy, the educational role of icons has been associated with one of religion contemplation, of remembering the truths of faith and of holy history. The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council affirmed: “The word of the Scripture is not always sung (read) in the holy churches. But the representation through icons is, in churches, like a perpetual ambon which relates us and reminds us in the evening, in the morning and during the day to the truth of the things done. In relation to the preached word, the icon represents the superiority of a simultaneous and atemporal communication with the eternal realities”³⁶.

Through the holy icons, we are opened to a new, transcendent world, the world of eternity, as “God speaks through them in the soul of the faithful, and they open towards eternity”³⁷. Icons have always been of utmost importance for the faithful. In catacombs they were lights and guides of faith. Many martyrs died with icons in their arms, praying to the saints represented in them. The icons cannot be confounded with “a simple image or decoration”³⁸, being full of divine grace and also closely

³⁴ ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *Despre cinstirea sfintelor icoane* (On the Veneration of Holy Icons), in *P.G.* 94, col. 1266B-C.

³⁵ Dom C. LIALINE, “Un idéal de l’icone”, in *Irénikon*, no. 4/1934, p. 289.

³⁶ Giovanni Domenico MANSI, *op. cit.*, t. XIII, col. 361.

³⁷ I. IOANICESCU, “Iconografia creștină ca izvor omiletic” (Christian Iconography as homiletic source), in *Mitropolia Olteniei*, no. 1-3/1978, p. 98-105.

³⁸ Vasile COMAN, *Cuvântări liturgice* (Liturgical speeches), Oradea, s.n., 1974, p. 35.

connected to the teachings and to the tradition of the Church, whose ideas they present statically, in colours. They tend to bring the light of heaven and the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers. The consecrated icon brings in our churches and homes a certain presence of God, constituting itself a sacrament, as a sacred object full of uncreated light energies.

Through the icon, divine grace is indeed effused in the believer's soul who watches it, awakening in him devotion, prayer and new life. The icon is for the mind and the heart a ladder to heavenly realities, a bridge between the earthly and the heavenly life, a bridge that helps us grow in the resemblance with the model in front of us³⁹. Here is how a person in the West describes the unequalled importance of icons in the devoutness or in the religious life of the Orthodox:

“In the eyes of the Byzantine faithful, the icon was regarded as a channel of grace and divine power, the everflowing source which springs the saving power and all the benefits of redemption over the believers. They do not transmit the grace as the Holy Sacraments do, they irradiate in the soul the feelings of faith, love, repentance and other dispositions of the soul which precede grace and make it descend in hearts”⁴⁰.

References

1. SAINT BASIL THE GREAT, “Epistole” (Epistles), 161, in *PSB* 3, translation from Greek, introduction and notes by Teodor Bodogae, București, Basilica, 2010.
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⁴⁰ Henri LECLERCQ, “Culte et querelle des images”, in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, VII, Paris, Letouzey et Ané, 1926.

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