

The Importance of Church Iconography

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ABSTRACT: The holy icons and church painting represented on the inner walls of the holy places of worship never had a decorating role but a purely religious and teaching-educational purpose. Through these sacred images, the Church opened a way of communion with God and His saints and produced a way of initiation and guiding the believers into knowing the teaching of faith and the rules of moral life. Each icon and each holy painted scene expresses, intuitively, a historic or dogmatic truth, a moral-Christian principle, a deep meaning, and a rich content of religious ideas, revealing and guiding for the spiritual building and growing of the believers. The instructive-educational importance of the holy icons and of the church painting has always been acknowledged by the Holy Church and, that is why, they are so much used in the Christian cult and in the religious life of Orthodox Christians.

KEYWORDS: icon, religious painting, iconographic programme, biblical scene, holy character

Introduction

The dogmatic teaching of our Holy Church defines man as being the crown of the creation or micro cosmos, because he unites in himself, harmoniously, the elements of the material and spiritual worlds. Being the face and the icon of the Creator, man always reaches for the resemblance with Him, since he was made for this, as David, the psalmist says: “Just like the deer wishes for the waters of the springs, so does my heart wish You, God” (Ps. 41: 1). When God made him, He said: “Let us make a human after Our face and appearance... And God made man after His face; after God’s face he was made; He made man and woman” (Making 2:7).

In the history of the tradition and religious life of the Church, the icon and the church painting had a very well-defined role. Through these visual and intuitive images, Church has kept alive the memory of the holy people and deeds, has presented the biblical history of the Old and New Testament and has cultivated the ghost of devoutness among the believers.

The icons and the pictorial representations have entered liturgical use ever since the beginning of Christianity, as means of expressing the veneration brought to God and saints. In the cult of the icons our steady faith in God and in His saving, work is reflected and, at the same time, the faith in the help and the saints’ intermediary power. Church has always taught that we don’t venerate the matter from which the icon is made, but the face represented on it, since “the veneration given to the face passes onto the prototype” (Comițescu 1988, 60). The icon is an open book which reveals to us the history of godly revelation and the entire work for the salvation of the world.

So, the icons and the church painting on the walls of the holy places are means of religious education and of expressing the truths of faith. This painting does not have an aesthetic and purely decorative purpose, but a teaching and instructive-educational

purpose. In folk language it is called “The Bible of the illiterate ones” or “catechism in pictures”, because every icon or religious scene has got a symbolic function, showing in the shape of images the deep meanings and understandings of the Bible and teaching of the faith, eloquently painting certain important facts and events from the holy history or some sacred ceremonies of the Christian Orthodox cult.

Iconographic tradition

The iconographic tradition was formed in time, the painters orienting themselves by certain rules of forming the iconographic scenes, and all these guiding marks were collected in collections called erminies. Erminies showed the painters which images and faces are painted in the pronaos, in naos and in the altar, so that the pictorial decorum of the church will represent a unitary ensemble. Each group of saints and each register of holy scenes takes a particular space and fulfills a well-defined role in the presentation of the theological doctrine, which the church place has the mission to reveal to believers through looking at the holy images painted in it. These erminies have evolved in time and have established themselves according to the following factors:

- 1) The development of the church architecture, also influenced a long time, by the religious currents an idea that has dominated the Christian life and thinking.
- 2) The history of dogmas, synods and religious controversies appeared in the bosom of the Church.
- 3) The regional traditions of different people, since there were different ways to paint a church in Moldavia, another one in Ardeal or Muntenia.
- 4) The officiation of the cult of saints, the evolution of the divine cult and the development of the ritual of the Holy Liturgy.

The painting differs accordingly to the destination of the Church because there is a way to paint a monastery church and a different one to paint a parish church. There is a different way to paint a cemetery church (where the Savior’s post-Resurrection scenes predominate) and there is a different way for a chapel of ease or a chapel.

In all the cases reminded above, church painting must reflect the image of the triumphant Church in the skies, because the earthly Church mirrors the beauty of the heavenly paradise. “Church is the earthly sky, where the heavenly God lives and walks, representing Christ’s crucifixion, funeral and resurrection, more glorified than Moses’s confession tent” (Explaining the Holy Liturgy 1974).

The spire shows the image of the victorious Church in heavens and represents the inhabitants of heavens. In her peak, it is painted the Pantocrator’s icon (God Almighty), surrounded by the holy angels. On the inner walls of the spire, are painted the angels, apostles and prophets who harbingered Him, served Him into this world and who now, rejoice and enjoy the sight of His face, and in the four corners at the base of the spire are painted the four evangelists, who left us, in writing, the Savior’s life, miracles and words.

In the Holy Altar are painted the ones that sit close to the godly throne. On the northern absis (on the arch) is painted the Lord’s Mother with the infant in Her arms, for her the sky was united with the earth, giving birth to God’s Son embodied, and on the inner walls are painted the author of the three Holy Liturgies: Saint John Golden Mouth, Saint Vasile the Great and Saint Gregory the Dialogue, as well as other hierarchs: Saint Nicholas, Saint Spiridon of Trimitude, Saints Atanasie and Chiril and the serving deacons (Saint Stephen and Saint Laurențiu).

In the Holy Altar, also, are painted scenes from the holy history of the Old and New Testament related to the Christian Liturgy, such as: The Secret Meal, the heavenly

Liturgy, the receiving of the Eucharist by the Apostles, the Altar of the Old Law, Isaac's sacrifice, and the dinner in Emmaus etc.

In the naos, on the arch of the absis found on the right side is painted the Savior's Birth icon, and on the arch of the absis found on the left, the icon of the Resurrection. On the semi-circular walls of the absis are painted the holy martyrs and confessors of the right faith: George, Demeter, Eustratie, Theodor Tiron, Theodor Stratilat, John the New from Suceava, the Holy Emperors Constantine and Helen and the holy martyrs: Tecla, Varvara, Ecaterina, Filofteia, because due to their martyred sacrifice Christ's Church strengthened and spread.

In the pronaos are painted the faces of the austere persons who struggled in this earthly life with fast, prayer and bridling, to obtain the crown of redemption. That is why, on the right wall of the pronaos are painted the holy pious people: Antonie the Great, Pahomie the Great, Macarie the Egyptian, Eftimie, Teodosie, John the Staircase man, and on the left wall are painted the faces of the pious women: Parascheva, Mary the Egyptian, Teodosia, Pelaghia, Anastasia, Teodula, Teodora from Sihla etc.

In the porch are painted the faces of the patriarchs of the Old Testament (Avraam, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aron, Noe), as well as those of the prophets and righteous who harbingered the messianic times and aspired to them, but did not become able to enter the Law of grace. In some churches is also painted the scene of the Judgment Day, to suggest the idea that nobody can enter the heavenly realm (embodied by the church) without passing through the threshold and the judgment chair.

On the exterior walls of churches are painted the philosophers of the pagan world: Plato, Aristotle, who, through their wisdom, led the pagan world towards Christ and foresaw the arrival and embodiment into the world of the divine Logos.

The place of the church, as a liturgical space, means, for the believers, a different world, a transfigured world, in which is over fulfilled the separation between past, present and eschatological future, between earth and sky, between created and non-created. To the intuition and the life of this truth contributes, mainly, the icons from the holy place.

The Christian Icon

The Christian Icon is a religious scene painted on canvas, glass or paper, framed and hallowed through the prayers of the Church and through sprinkling holy water. In the icon is represented in colors the face of a holy character or a special event from the history of redemption. Through sanctification, the icon becomes a sacred object, being taken out of the profane use and included in the patrimony of the Church. From the moment of sanctification, the icons become carriers of grace and the believers kiss them piously. They fulfill a sanctifying function, but not like the Holy Secrets and religious services, but through the connection to their prototype, as means of communication with the person represented by them.

The ground for the representation of the icon is the embodiment of God's Son. "And the word turned into body" (John 1:14), says the holy evangelist John. Through Christ's embodiment, his human nature united with the godly nature and, because for this, Christians paint the unseen God, due to the fact that He made Himself seen through the body, „since we do not represent the unseen divinity, it is not It that we turn into icon, because not even the holy angels can understand it and penetrate it in Its wholeness. But ever since His only Son, He, Who is in the bosom of the Father, has condescended to turn into a man, according to the benevolent will of the Father and Holy Spirit, to redeem His own creature..., we draw the face of His human appearance after the body and not at all the face of His unseen and not understood divinity" (Ciubuc

1998, 14), and, because the human nature has received as Eucharist the divinity, being thus saved through the work of the Holy Spirit, we also cherish the icons of the saints, as ones who “received the godly nature” (II Peter 1:4), becoming „sons and heirs of God and, together- heirs with Christ”(Romans 8:17).

According to their destination and place of usage, the icons are divided into two categories:

a) Icons used in the church, at the officialization of the divine service: fixed icons, like the ones on the rood screen and mobile icons, like the ones that are put on the iconostasis, in the porch and in naos.

b) Icons used outside the church (in the private cult), such as: family or domestic icons, meaning the ones kept in our houses or worn around the neck and at chest (portable little icons) and traffic icons, like the ones set at the triptych from the crossroads.

Church iconography has evolved rapidly after the seventh Ecumenical Synod (787) after the local Synod from Constantinople in 843, when iconographic heresy was condemned forever and the holy icons cult was definitely reestablished. In the dogmatic definition of the Seventh Ecumenical Synod it was established the fundamental truth forever that the veneration given to the holy icons is relative and it is not mistaken with „the true godly worship, that is only granted to the godly Being, but its kind of worship that is only given to the honest and life giving Cross and Holy Gospel and the other holy objects through incensing and the lighting of candles, which pious habit was had by the ancient ones. That the veneration given to the face goes to the prototype and the worshiper of the icon worships the being painted on it (Ștefănescu and Melchidescu 1980).

The icon represents a precious legacy of a faraway past. The tradition of the Church states that the first icon of the Savior dates from the period of His earthly life. It was the image called in West “The Holy Face”, and in the Orthodox Church „the not made by the hands of man image” (Uspensky 1994, 28), representing the pure face of Christ the Savior, sent to the faithful king Abgar of Edesa and kept in this town until the middle of the Xth century (944), when the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porfirogenet and Roman the Ist Lecapen bring it to Constantinople and set it in the Church of the Holy Virgin in Pharos. (Uspensky 1994, 29) The feeling of deep piety of the first Christians was displayed as the wish to always have before their eyes Savior’s face, Holy Virgin’s face and of the Holy Apostles in concrete shapes, visible, which would continuously stimulate the ardor of following their divine example of holy and pure life.

Even if, as reference, the cult of icons is certified from the IVth century (Bodogae 1987, 288), we have to admit their existence even from the period following the grounding of the Church, when the Christian life pulses stronger than ever. The holy tradition confesses us that the holy evangelist Luca painted the Savior’s icon and that of Lord’s Mother, which were prototypes for other icons. Another icon dating back from the time of Savior’s earthly activity is the holy shroud which pious Veronica (one of the prudent women) laid on His face while He was climbing the Skull’s Hill, carrying the cross on His back to the place of crucifixion. A great church priest stated that the practice of painting the icons has existed even from the time of the Apostles. „I cherish and venerate in a special manner the traits of the holy icons –says this holy priest – because they were passed on to us by the Holy Apostles, that they weren’t stopped and that they are even represented in all our Churches” (Bodogae 1988, 618). So, the cult of the holy icons was not imposed, but spread spontaneously, just like the seed thrown on earth germinates and bears fruit. This cult „was not surprisingly introduced into Church, but naturally blossomed from the Christian heart, continuously staying under the ruling of the grace” (Radu 1975, 6).

Since the first Christians could not show their feeling of veneration freely even from the beginning, having to endure countless hardships from pagans and the Roman emperors, the first iconographic elements appear in catacombs, the painters using, for the representation of religious ideas, different symbols: the fish, the anchor, the dove, the lamb, the olive branch, the lily (Cireșeanu 1910, 197) etc. The painting of the catacombs represents, for the entire Christianity, a priceless treasure of artistic and religious values who stand as testimony over centuries and millennia about the existence of icons even from the early times of Christianity, about the feeling of profound religious feeling and about the theological conception of the first Christians.

The oldest catacombs in which are kept religious paintings date from the second century. The paintings of the catacombs did not miss the allegoric subjects representing Savior's teachings and the ways in which He describes Himself, as: grape vine, the good shepherd with the sheep on his shoulders, the lamb and the fish (Mitrofanovici, Tarnavski and Nectarie 1929, 27). From the end of the second century things move on to a portrait painting phase, appearing, thus, scenes that represent Savior in different moments of life, or the Holy Virgin and the Holy Apostles, as well as other characters from the New Testament.

The religious freedom given to the Christians through the Edict of Milan (313), as well as finding Savior's Holy Cross by Empress Helena, in year 324, supports the rapid development of religious art. Christians leave the catacombs; mighty churches are built and adorned with icons, holy images and crosses. The IVth and the Vth centuries were the crucial eras in which are formed and established in written the Christian dogma, and iconography will become, more significantly, a religious language, which will illustrate the victory of Orthodoxy in its fight against heresies.

Icons were a means of spreading the teachings of faith, which was passed on not only orally or in writing, but through the beauty of the holy images. They have always served as a precious auxiliary of the Holy Scriptures, because the inspirational book of the Christian iconography was the word revealed of the Holy Book. Icons have always had an educational-religious purpose, being a live plasticization of the moral-religious ideas and precepts expressed in the pages of the Holy Gospel. Between icon and Gospel there is a tight correlation, since both contribute to explaining and spreading of the teachings of the right faith. We could describe the icon as being a Gospel in colors, and the Gospel a verbal icon of Jesus Christ. The icon speaks about God, it reveals Him.

Everything that is being said in the Godly Liturgy, in the Church songs and in the teaching words of the Holy Scriptures and of the Holy Priests, which are spread or read in the holy place of worship, find an eloquent and bright commentary in the silence of frescos and of holy icons. What is demonstrated by the word, is expressed and shown by the icon through colors. The art of speaking through colors is necessary and useful to expressing the godly things, because this is demanded by our psycho-physical nature itself. The orthodox icon is a window towards the sky, an opening towards the absolute. In icons, Christians reveal Savior's deeds and teachings, observe the patience, the moral courage and the sense of sacrifice of the martyrs and acknowledge the wonderful virtues of the saints who offered their lives to God and sacrificed themselves for the triumph of the truth of the right faith and for achieving redemption. „I do not have too many books and I do not have too much spare time to read them, says a holy priest, I enter the Church, the common hospital of souls, smothered by thoughts as if they were thorns; the ornament of the icon urges me to look, it spoils my eyes as an orchard and, without feeling, God's glory sneaks into my soul. I watched the patience of the martyr, the reward of the crowns and I lit, as if through fire, by the wish to imitate Him. Falling to the ground, I bow to God, through the instrumentality of the martyr and I redeem myself (Fecioru 1998, 30).

Final Words

In conclusion, icons had their well-determined role in the history of Christianity, being, for the Orthodox believers, sacred objects used to express religious piety and means of cultivating the communion with God and with His saints. And Saint Teodor Suditul reveals the identity between the cult of the icon and the one given to the prototype. “We do not venerate the matter of the icon – he says - but the figure of the prototype that is shown, the matter of the icon remaining without worship. Since not the matter is the one we worship, but the prototype, along with its figure. So, the worship brought to the icon is the same with the one heading for the prototype, and the resemblance is the same” (Ică 1994, 36). The cult of icons met eras of amazing blossoming, and iconography gave expression to the rules regarding icons. „The painted icon is for us a holy light, a saving memory because it shows us Christ in His birth, baptized, performing miracles, crucified, buried, resurrected, rising to the sky. In all of these, we are not wrong, seeming like all of these never happened, cause the sight adds to the contemplation of the mind and, through both, faith and the secret of iconomy are strengthened (Schönborn 1996, 180).

Regardless the color or the shape and the material that is made of, the Christian icon reveals to our mind and eye a great enigma which is, the untold secret of our encounter with God. It supports our dialogue with God and with His saints. The icon sets the eyes of our mind towards God and urges us to get closer to Him. Looking piously at the holy faces on the icons, believers lit with spiritual ardor to imitate Savior’s deeds and life and to practice the virtues of the saints, who dedicated their lives to God and suffered for Christ’s love and for the confession of the right faith. Thus, icons fulfill an educational-instructive function, bending our will to do good deeds, avoid evil, and fulfill God’s wish. That is why the Orthodox Church, understanding the religious and educational-teaching importance of the holy icons, confirmed their cult in the canonic dispositions, in the dogmatic definitions of synods and in the works of the holy priests, cherishing them like a priceless sacred treasure and giving them the proper veneration in the cult and Christian life.

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