

From Idol to Icon and Nowadays “Iconomahy”

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Abstract:

This study aims to pursue the missionary valences of icons in our society. Accepting as a premise that the Church has appropriated with certain reservations the worship of icons in parallel with the condemnation of idolatrous practices and based on the theological argumentation of the Holy Fathers of the 8th and 9th centuries, the Orthodox cult assumed this ontological necessity of representation, denouncing the excesses that, interpreted as idol worship, caused the Byzantine iconoclastic reactions. Like then, today's resistance to the religious symbol reflects, on the one hand, the inflation of representations and the sometimes ostentatious exposure of icons, and, on the other hand, highlights the misunderstanding of the true nature of the icon and the fear of a return to idolatrous practices.

Keywords:

icon honoring, Christian mission, Iconoclasm, idolatry

1. Introduction

One of the most famous phrases belongs to F. M. Dostoevsky, the one who said that “Beauty will save the world”. It is a meaningful phrase, and its meaning best transpires when we associate this beauty with the religious feeling, with holiness. In the Orthodox perspective, which the Russian novelist knew so well, beauty is not a simple aesthetic aspect, not even an ideal one; it presents a strong ethical aspect. Authentic beauty is related to the manifestation of goddess, that is, to holiness. More specifically, it is about the “communion of saints”, the interper-

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sonal relationship between God and saints, “the beautiful people”. (In fact, the subject of beauty, including the soteriological sense, appears to a number of Holy Fathers, such as Saints Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Maximus the Confessor, Simeon the New Theologian, or Gregory Palamas¹) Beginning from this world, in the Church, this communion will find its perfection in the other world, in the heavenly kingdom of God. Certainly, the eschatological aspect of beauty does not transpire with greater force than when it reflects on the nature and role of the icon.²

The present study aims precisely this: to highlight the role of icons in the life of the holiness of people, ie their role in mission par excellence. Thus, it will be emphasized that the honoring of icons is not idolatry. That honoring, at the same time, does not mean any abuse or falling into cheap formalism. Finally, the aim pursued is to emphasize the importance that the theology of the icon may have not only within Orthodoxy, but also in its dialogue with other Christian traditions and confessions. Why this? Because in Orthodoxy, “beauty bears eminently the meaning of transfiguration”. In other words, it is indissolubly linked to the meaning of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The icon, the embodiment of beauty, transcends decorative art: “Beauty (of the icon, emphasis added by the author) is something not only attractive but has a strange, deep and transcendence that most Western theologians have ignored”³. Once again, there is the responsibility of Orthodox theologians to remind not only the nature and meaning of the icon but also its missionary role par excellence.

2. Revelation, Image, Symbol

In a study, Dumitru Stăniloae emphasized, on the one hand, the dialogue that God, as Creator, initiates with the people, and on the other hand how this revelatory act is embodied by acts, words and images.⁴

First, the Romanian theologian recalled the indissoluble relationship between word and image, starting from what Patriarch Nichifor the Confessor said: “Words are icons of things”. Thus, even though the word prevails in the meaning, and in image the form, neither the meaning excludes the form, nor

¹ See John A. McGuckin (ed.), *The Concept of Beauty in Patristic and Byzantine Theology*, Thetokos Press, New York, 2012.

² Karl Christian Felmy, *Die Orthodoxe Theologie der Gegenwart. Eine Einführung*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1990, pp. 65-80.

³ Mihail Neamțu, *Credință și rațiune. Dialoguri, contradicții, împăcări* (Faith and Reason. Dialogues, Contradictions, Reconciliations), Lumea credinței, Bucharest, 2013, pp. 68-69.

⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Revelația prin acte, cuvinte și imagini* (Revelation through Acts, Words, and Images), *Ortodoxia* 20 (1968), no. 3, pp. 347-377.

the form is unimportant.⁵ Secondly, the images revealed are of several forms. For example, the image is springing from Jesus Christ Himself. "In the state of resurrection, Christ as man is... a human image of divine life, not subject to death, an image in which the Godhead is even more transparent. The risen Christ does not leave His image as God, because in this case he would leave mankind itself, and the Apostles were shown this human image of divine life not subjected to death".⁶

These divine-human realities represent "higher stages of spiritualization of the human by the divine", not myths. In the same sense, the honored icon in Orthodoxy is not an idol, but a "rendering the image of God through the means of art (that is the humanity created "after the image and likeness of God, emphasis added by the author) assumed by the Son of God. Christ as man is his human image as God, while he is God Himself".⁷

Thirdly, although it is hard to find a word about God that does not have imaginative character, this character is not one that has an absolute character. In other words, the image – that is, the icon – does not exhaust, does not fully discover the divine-human reality. Although they have a "objective" fund, real, and a "subjective" one, purely imaginary, the icons are symbols; in the original sense of the Greek word (sym-bolon), they unite two worlds, the transcendent and the immanent. It is precisely in this respect that the reality the icons express is one that forms it, it removes from the state of passivity the one who observes them or, in the words of Stăniloae, "exerts a pressure on the seer's spirit".⁸

Summing up, "man can only notice God through images, symbols. Human images are the highest form of divine intelligence, because, as an image in which the human spirit is expressed, they are also symbols of the divine spirit, whose model is the human spirit". But at the same time, "man does not have to confuse his images and not even his body with his own spiritual reality... much less should transpose the object-side on the divine spirit. When this is done, the idol or myth is born. In this sense, any image can become a myth, whether it has the character of a historical event or is borrowed from nature. Even the images of revelation can become myths in this case (or idols, emphasis added by the author)".⁹

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 360.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 363.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 362.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 373.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 375. Dumitru Stăniloae refers here to the corrective character that the apophatic must have in relation to any cataphatic expression of divine realities. No word and no image can substitute and replace the divine reality. In other words, any verbal or visual expression of God remains above these forms of expression.

3. Jesus Christ, Prototype of His Icon

The crystallization of a theology of the icon was not deprived in the history of the Church of controversy and ambiguity. We recall as an example the realities to which the canon 82 of the Trullan Council of 692 send. The relevant terms here, precisely because of their biblical origin, are those of “symbol” or “type”. In fact, the explanation of the theological terminology regarding the icon, and in particular the indissoluble relationship between the theology of the icon and the Christology, is found in holy fathers such as John of Damascus¹⁰ or, after him, Theodore the Studite.¹¹

Even a brief presentation of iconoclastic Byzantine controversies would far surpass the purpose of this study. However, it must be remembered that in the New Testament, Jesus Christ is explicitly called “the Word of God” (John 1:1) and also “the icon of the unseen God” (Colossians 1:15). On the other hand, we find a critical delimitation towards the transformation of the images of worship into idols, in the Eastern polytheistic religions, to which are added the religious traditions of the post-exile semiotic monotheism – both leading to severe bans (see Exodus 20:1; Deuteronomy 5:8) of radical nihilism in the representation of divinity. Recalling here also the imperial cult, ie the polytheistic-theocratic confusion between divinity, the emperor and the imperial image, we understand why some Christians were the advocates of the radical transcendence and absolute sovereignty of Christ-God, above and against His representation in icons. For the iconodules, the icon is made possible through the incarnation of the Son of God and confirms, in its turn, this divine fundamental act. As a result, the refusal of the icon equates to the denial of the Incarnation and, together with it, to all Christianity. Unlike the Old Testament where God was unseen, the New Testament attests that in Jesus Christ God has seen Himself in the body, He has gained a visible figure and, as such, representative iconographically.

But the iconoclasts had formulated the following reasoning: to be true, the icon must represent the person represented as it is; Christ is God and man; So the icon has only two possibilities, both unacceptable from a dogmatic point of view: either it represents also His divine nature non-representative considering that it is mixed in some way with His humanity (which led to the monophysite confusion) or it represents His human nature, but then separates it from the Godhead (which led to the Nestorian division).

¹⁰ Saint John of Damascus, *Cultul sfințelor icoane* (Original title – *Apologetic Treatises against those Decrying the Holy Images*), translated by Dumitru Fecioru, Bucharest, 1937.

¹¹ See Saint Theodore the Studite, *Iisus Hristos, Prototip al icoanei sale – Tratatetele contra iconomahilor* (Original title – *Theodori praepositi Studitarum Antirrhethici adversus Iconomachos*), translated by Ioan I. Ică Jr., Deisis Publishing, Alba-Iulia, 1994.

Both Theodore the Studite and John of Damascus, however, showed that the icon does not represent natures, but persons, although seemingly subtle, the iconoclastic argumentation was thus disfigured. Moreover, it was emphasized that the icon is "likeness", as "printing a prototype, but different from it". As an analogous notion, the image was found in the Holy Scripture in very varied senses and contexts to express: 1. The relationship of the Son with the Father (the natural, consubstantial icon), 2. The relationship between the created, cosmic realities and their divine models – paradigms (the exemplary, ideal icon), 3. The relationship between God and man, the latter being created "after the image and likeness of God" (the anthropological icon), 4. The relationship between visible/ sensitive and invisible/ intelligible realities (the cosmological icon), 5. The relationship of present realities – a typological icon of future realities (the historical icon) and finally, 6. Fixing the memory ("for remembrance") of past events through words – books – and pictures – paintings – (the artistic icon).

The solemn and final restoration of the icons that took place on March 11, 843 is commemorated annually by the Orthodox Church as a triumph of Orthodoxy, every first Sunday of Lent. In the philokalic vision, "the art of arts" It is not primarily the iconography, but the asceticism and prayer, holiness. Since human nature itself has an iconic and personal character, the whole soteriological process that is triggered in the Church in all that is being baptized, is constituted in an act of updating the "iconic" and "personal" potential. On the one hand, before being painted on wood, the icons of Jesus Christ are "painted" by the saints in their own existence. On the other hand, possessing a dual reality, at the same time Trinitarian and human, eschatological and historical, spiritual-ascetic and political, the icon has implications on all these plans.

4. The Nature and Role of the Icon

"The icon belongs to a category in which the personal and immediacy means are articulated. The icon is immediate as the look and mediator as the one whose look makes it present. It is the place of circulation of the sacred in its polymorphism, and this until its integration as a profane object, but immediately crossed by sacredness".¹²

As we have already explained, the Old Testament forbade the images and likenesses of God, although we find here sacred symbols: Pascal lamb, Aaron's

¹² Marie Hose Mondzain, *Imagine, icoana, iconomie. Sursele bizantine ale imaginarului contemporan* (Original title – *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*), translated by Măriuca and Adrian Alexandrescu, Sophia Publishing, Bucharest, 2009, pp. 192-193.

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rod, holy tabernacle, the ark of the law, etc. The latter represent an anticipation of the icons, and the justification of the icon of Christ – which justifies the icon of the Mother of the Lord and of the saints – finds its reason in the act of incarnation. The reality that the New Testament attests justifies the nature of the icon, because it “Is no longer an idol identifying a piece of nature, made or not by man, and thereby all nature or its various forces, with God, nor a symbol that attests in it the presence of God, but affirms its distinction from Him, but the representation of God Himself become the personal hypostasis of the human being, without identifying with this nature or confusing with it. The icon holds the distinction between the creature and God, as the symbol, but sees in a human face created by the divine hypostasis itself become its subject”.¹³ It must be remembered that the icon confers true communication with Christ of the faithful. This connection is a living and present one that explains why at the 7th Ecumenical Synod it was stated that the worship of the icon “passes”, “climbs” to the person represented, or to the prototype, to its living model. (At the same time, though, the prototype and the image represented on the icon are together, they are not confused; they are tied but not identical.)¹⁴

It is now understood the act of honor of the icon: when the believer prays, he does not pray to it, but to Christ. Dumitru Stăniloae explains this real presence of Jesus Christ in His icon through the presence of the created energies brought in creation by the Holy Spirit. It is the presence of divine energies that defines the separation or synthesis between Christ and His icon. It also explains the practice of sanctification of icons in the Church.¹⁵

Regarding the meaning of holy icons in the Orthodox Church, the same theologian referred to the ways of Christ’s presence in the cult of the Church. Thus, Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharistic sacrifice, in the other Mysteries, in other church service, in the scriptural word read by the priest in the church, in the priest’s sermon, in the prayers spoken and performed by believers in the church, respectively in the dialogue between them and the priest during services, and, last but not least, in icons.¹⁶ This communion of Jesus Christ through icons also determines their placement in the church. We are talking here of a fullness of holiness, which does not substitute for the Eucharistic communion: “The place of the church – wrote Stăniloae – renders the order in which the icons are placed in it the recapitulation of all in Christ, recapitulation made to a certain extent by the

¹³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturgia ortodoxă (Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy)*, 2nd edition, Publishing House of the Mission and Bible Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2004, p. 93.

¹⁴ See *Ibidem*, pp. 100-103.

¹⁵ See *Ibidem*, pp. 106-108.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

saints and in the process of realization on our part by a progression in the likeness of Christ and by His approaching to union with Him. Even if not all the saints are painted in the church, the painted ones represent them all, as if not all the living believers in the church or in one church are present, those present in a church represent all. The saints and believers on the earth all share the same Christ, the latter under the image of bread and wine, but also in other ways before it, the first, spiritually".¹⁷

Returning to the importance of the icons, we will say that they primarily have a function of guidance and strengthening in the right faith. Likewise, the Holy Fathers, when they spoke of the role of the icons, also spoke of the way in which they plant in believers the teachings of faith and the parables of fulfillment by the saints.¹⁸

Another role is the epiphanic one: through the holy icons, those depicted in them become a presence in the church. The soteriological role is seen in the act of sanctification of the icon by the priest. What is important here is not the matter in which it is made, but the fact that it testifies to the presence of the saint, becoming a "leader of grace".¹⁹ At the same time, the presence of Jesus Christ, the Mother of God and other saints determines the anamnestic character of the icons: Painting scenes and happenings of their lives, the icons make them alive, present in the lives of believers, becoming models to follow by them. When we talked about how icons accomplish the communion of believers with the Savior Jesus Christ, we anticipated somewhat another function that icons have: "In the Divine Liturgy, the mysterious encounter with the persons represented in the icons is like a preparation for a fuller encounter with Christ in the Mystery of the Eucharist, as are also the prayers of the priest and those of the priest-guided community".²⁰ The advancement towards fuller communion with Christ at the altar explains the main theme of the icons in the church, which is a Christological one. At the same time, the community's appeals to Christ alternate from time to time with addresses to the saints. The ecclesial communion through the word is doubled by a communion that also takes place through the icons representing the Mother of God, namely the angels and saints who surround Jesus Christ.

From the above, the mysterious, apophatic character of the icons also appears: "This living of God, the Mother of God, the connection with the saints, by looking at their icons by calling their name, is above what can be rationally defined. It is apophatic. That is why the icon itself is apophatic because it occasion-

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp.110-111.

¹⁹ See *Ibidem*, pp. 111-112.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 115-116.

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ally connects the viewer with contemplation, with the living, mysterious reality beyond the senses of God or of the saints represented, filled also of God...”.²¹

The mysterious character comes from another character of the icons, the eschatological, of the future realities. Namely, recalling Pavel Florensky’s expression, after whom “the icon is a face of eternity”, Stăniloae linked the icon to the eternity as a divine attribute – “we could add that the icon is an image of living eternity, because through it transpires the One Who has no beginning and end and border in His powers. It is a face through which the infinity of God transpires”.²²

Last but not least, we have to refer to the cosmological character of the icons, the direct consequence of the Christological one.²³ The light of Christ flows not only on His image, but also on the image of those who live according to His pattern, organizing their lives and their relations with their fellowmen and all creation according to the evangelical precepts. That is why the icons show not only the image of Jesus Christ surrounded by light (mandorla), but also the image of the Mother of God and of the other saints. Uncreated divine energies penetrate the whole creation, to which, in varying degrees, all men and creation take part. “For this the holy icons show us the saints alike after grace and participation with Him Who, being the whole God, fills them with Himself and leaves nothing empty of His presence in them (adică a lui Hristos, emphasis added by the author). Through the deified nature of man, in which He is recapitulated, God Himself is made all in all”.²⁴

5. The Missionary Function of the Icon. Its Distortions

Taking into account the aspects listed above, it is almost self-evident that being orthodox is synonymous with honoring the holy icons. This statement demonstrates its veracity for anyone coming into contact with the religious life from the Southeast Europe, that is, that part of the world in which we find an Orthodox majority. Not only the religious places, but also the houses of ordinary people are decorated with icons, their role being not as aesthetic as sanctifying.

Certainly, such a spiritual practice is in opposition to the everyday mentality and use of post-modern man, marked by secularism.²⁵ Although surrounded by

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 117-118.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 118.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 122: “... The ability of man to encompass all of them in an organized way and in the depth of the full light (the light being associated with the icon, *emphasis added by the author*)... man gains in Christ, in whom the image of God is fully restored, since it is intimately crossed by the divine archetype”.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

²⁵ Regis Debray, *Viața și moartea imaginii. O istorie a privirii în Occident* (Original title – *Vie et mort de l’image*), translated by Irinel Antoniu, European Institute, Iași, 2011.

various types of images²⁶, the man of our day seems more immersed in a senseless world, being more and more incapable of recognizing and cherishing the "iconicity" of the world. And here the icon, with its profound theological and spiritual significance, can play an important role.

One of the traditional Christian practices related to the feast of the Nativity of Jesus Christ the Savior is "walking with an icon", that is, the visit the priest makes to the homes of the faithful on the eve of Christmas or, if the parish is extended, a few days before this feast. On this occasion, the priest carries an icon that represents the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ, singing the troparion of the feast and giving an icon to kiss the believers.

The icon walking is nothing more than a pastoral visit that the priest does on the occasion of the feast of the Birth of Christ the Savior. Pastoral visits are one of the most direct and effective ways for knowing the parish. They are important and necessary because the priest is directly connected with the families of his parishioners, knowing them in all aspects: religiously, morally, economically, culturally, socially, politically, professionally, and health. Pastoral visits are an opportunity to know the believers and their condition, to discuss with them, to discover their joys, tribulations, trials. On this occasion, believers are more open to sharing with the priest their mental states and more receptive in receiving his advice and guidance. At the same time, believers feel honored, taken into account and protected by the care and love of their soul priest, who is interested in their lives, creating a true soul connection and a greater rapprochement between the priest and parishioners.

Pastoral visits represent the presence of the pastor of souls in the life of believers who desire it, await and receive their priest with love in their families and homes. The priest does not go to his believers for returning a visit to the Church, but because he has such preoccupations with his pastoral duties. They come from their conscience of parishioners and their belonging to the parish body, the Christians led by the priest. They come to the Church because there is the only place where salvation works, where they hear the word of God and share the gifts of the Holy Liturgy and the Holy Mysteries performed in the Church.

The pastoral visits of the Orthodox priests, which must be cultivated and practiced with care and responsibility, are also ways of knowing the parish and believers, but also a pastoral method of instructing believers in the truths of faith and morals. They honor the believers and create a true soul connection and a rapprochement between the priest and parishioners. They have always been recommended and practiced and are the expression of the true missionary action of the Church.

²⁶ Lucian Ionică, *Imaginea vizuală. Aspecte teoretice* (The Visual Image. Theoretical Aspects), Marineasa Publishing, Timișoara, 2000.

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Here's how the icon can be a good occasion for the pastoral-missionary function of the priest. At the same time, however, in the parochial life can appear distortions of the authentic sense of the icons. Thus, they can fall into kitsch, their painting leaving the traditional, canonical line. It should never be forgotten that the icon is not just a religious picture, nor the original creation of a painter.

Also, unfortunately, we find a number of aliturgical spaces where authentic icons can be found on improvised stalls alongside "icons" allegedly sanctified or protective. Some of them even offer the image of some persons who were not canonized by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church. It should be noted, however, that an icon becomes fully an icon only by the act of its sanctification, which "draws an unrelenting boundary between a religious picture – whether it is superior to its religious content and its artistic realization – and an icon, however modest it may be. The sanctification is the mysterious action of the Church during which "the icon is sanctified with the grace of the Holy Spirit" [...]. Therefore, we must say that not every representation, not every icon has the power of iconicity, but only the sanctified one".²⁷

Contemporary iconoclasm can have different faces. Here we mention only the struggle, by some secular associations (NGOs) or representatives of non-prot-estant cults, against the presence of the icon in the classrooms from schools or other public places. In the Orthodox vision, each of us needs the holy icons to rememorate the saving work of the Son of God and the actions of holiness of those who followed Him so that seeing their faces we will also feel the call to follow their strength in faith and their life of holiness. On the other hand, the icons help us express our love for God. If out of love love, we carry with us and in our homes images of relatives and close people, we are more obliged to show piety to the icons of the Savior, of the Mother of God and of the saints, decorating our homes for holiness and blessing. The holy icons are also a spiritual view of the beauties and teachings of the Holy Scripture presented in colors and a way of knowing and following the patterns of faith, love and mercy of the saints.

6. Conclusion

This study wanted to point out, on the one hand, the authentic nature of the icon and, on the other hand, the role of icons in the missionary work of the Church. In closing our considerations, we will refer to a well-known episode in the history of the Church – the Christianization of the Russians –, in which it is seen how important the icons were in the Orthodox Christian mission. From here we will

²⁷ Serghei Bulgakov, *Icoana și cinstitirea sfintelor icoane (Icon and Honoring Sacred Icons)*, translated by Paulin Lecca, Anastasia Publishing, Bucharest, 2000, p. 148, 153.

move to the present state, trying to show what could be the meaning of the icons in pastoral-missionary activity.

The Christianization of the Russians is related to the name of the great kneaz of Kiev, Vladimir (980-1015), and the episode is found in twelfth century writing, Primary Chronicle. Here is described a theological dispute between the representatives of Islam, a delegation of Roman Catholic German priests, a delegation of the Kazari rabbis, and finally a Christian-Orthodox delegation, made up of a single priest from Byzantium. At the level of discussion, the most pertinent arguments for the choice of a belief had the latter, but without being fully convincing the kneaz. As a result, he asked for time to think and sent his own messengers, "ten wise and working men", to investigate on the spot how the religious ceremonies of the four denominations take place. Without further elaboration, we say that the liturgy in the Byzantine worship place was considered more beautiful than other nations'. "So beautiful – the messengers added – that we did not even know if we were in heaven or on earth".²⁸

The Kneaz was finally convinced, and his conversion and his people's took place in the year 989. The Christian doctrine spread rapidly and in depth to Kievan Russia, both because the biblical and liturgical texts had already been translated into Slavic (see the work of the brothers Cyril and Methodius), As well as the fact that Byzantine ceremonies and icons have found here, in this new territory, the space in which to bloom in an original way.²⁹

The described episode should be a reflection for the Orthodox theologians and missionaries today. The theological, liturgical and iconographic wealth of Orthodoxy – recognized for the consideration given to holiness – may constitute the best missionary basis in the dialogue not only with other religious traditions but also with the postmodern secularized world. To keep this wealth in isolation is nothing more than an act of betrayal to the missionary dimension of the Church, without which it is not alive.

In conclusion we recall a work that is on this line.³⁰ (The great merit of it, in our opinion, comes from the image's priority to the detriment of words. Although

²⁸ See Andrei Oișteanu, *Mythos & Logos. Studii și eseuri de antropologie culturală* (Mythos & Logos. Studies and Essays on Cultural Anthropology), 2nd edition, Nemira Publishing, Bucharest, 1998, pp. 284-292.

²⁹ Details at Leonid Uspensky, *Teologia icoanei în Biserica Ortodoxă Rusă* (Original title – *La théologie de l'icône dans l'Église orthodoxe*), translated by Elena Derevici, Patmos Publishing, Cluj-Napoca, 2005. For example, here is the sophiological interpretation of the tealogy of the icon, as it appears at Serghei Bulgakov, *Lumina neînsurată. Contemplații și reflecții metafizice*, translated by Elena Drăgușin, Anastasia Publishing, Bucharest, 1999, pp. 489-513.

³⁰ Andreas Andreopoulos, *Gazing on God. Trinity, Church and Salvation in Orthodox Thought and Iconography*, James Clarke & Co, Cambridge, 2013.

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it is a written book, the words are used to illustrate a reality. This reality is the world of the icon, which, as the author points out, is the world of theology...)

Structured on three major chapters – “Theology of Experience”, “An Exhibition of Icons” and “Watching God” – , The book wishes to offer an exposure of Christian spirituality to the modern man, while avoiding the two extremes in which such an exposure can occur: on the one hand academism, on the other hand pietism. To this end, the author has as his starting point the biblical and patristic sources that underlie a “theology of experience” – But not any individualistic experience, but the sacramental-ecclesial experience itself. Thus, the introduction draws the perspective of the research and constitutes a genuine methodological program. Referring to the apophatic dimension of theology, we are reminded that the notions of “understanding” and “knowing” are too limited in front of the mystery of God. It is not an object of knowledge but a subject; we do not look at God but He looks at us...

Consequently, the first part emphasizes the necessity of faith and experience in theology. Only ascetic preparation and enlightenment through divine grace open the way of true knowledge, and this knowledge is that of the Logos. Theology is dialogue, that is, union with the Most Reasonable reason, in which they find the source and sense of being all the elements of the universe. It is not by chance that the Logos theology has a long history in Christianity, the brightest example being that of St. Maximus the Confessor. Although the term also appears in ancient Greek philosophy (eg in Heraclitus or Stoics), in Christianity the Logos is given a completely different meaning, referring to the Word of God Incarnate. In Jesus Christ a new reality is established, the Church; those who are part of His mystical Body participate in another time and space, obvious especially at the Divine Liturgy.

The second section has the following premise: “Perhaps studying the place and meaning of the icons in the Eastern tradition is for us the best way to observe and understand the theology of the experience”.³¹ This phrase may sound strange to a Western reader, for whom visiting an Orthodox icon exhibition may represent the penetration into an exotic space, alien to the Christian culture in which he was raised and educated. And yet, fr. Andreopoulos rightly points out that there is a theology of the icon, whose meaning is profound, connected with the very essence of the faith.³² Step by step, they are exposed (with images) and explained some of the most famous Orthodox icons, especially from the Greek and Russian

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 59

³² Here is quoted the classic book of Vladimir Lossky and Leonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, SVSP, 1995; translated into Romanian under the title *Călăuziri în lumea icoanei*, by Anca Popescu, Sophia Publishing, Bucharest, 2011.

traditions: The Crucifixion, The Descend to Hell, Theotokos, The Life-Giving-Fountain, The Burning Rust or All-Seeing-Eyes of God.

After this "icon exhibition", the author outlines in the last part of the book the frameworks of a "meta-linguistic theological methodology", in full accord with the considerations made in Introduction. Thus, unlike the intense social activity of Protestantism or philosophical education in Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy – believes Andreopoulos – could offer today's man, especially the Western one, "the experience of the presence of Christ in His Church". For this, it is imperative to overcome the scholastic approach in theology. Sometimes the authentic dimension of Orthodox theology was preserved not in school textbooks but in the work of some writers like F.M. Dostoevski (1821-1881) or A. Papadiamantis (1851-1911). So as a final conclusion, the author writes provocatively: "Perhaps the future theology will be written as poetry".³³ And we could add: or painted as an icon?

³³ Andreas Andreopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 153.