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THEOLOGY OF ICON IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH. Lecture at St. Vladimir's Seminary, 5 February 2011

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Archpriest Alexander Schmemann was very sensitive to the significance of beauty and harmony for the spiritual life. He himself was highly knowledgeable in the arts and possessed faultless artistic taste which imbued his essentially profound reflections with a rare subtlety of form and style. A considerable place in his legacy is occupied by theological interpretations of art: "What makes a genuine work of art and where is the secret of its perfection? It seems to me that it is in the complete coincidence, the blending of law and grace... Without law, grace is not possible precisely because they are interrelated: like image and fulfilment, form and content, idea and reality... This is especially obvious in art. Art begins with 'law', i.e., know-how, obedience and humility, acceptance of forms. But art is fulfilled in grace: When the form becomes the content it reveals the content, it is the content".**[1]**

Father Alexander rightfully reckoned the icon among the highest manifestations of human artistic genius, giving to this affirmation clear theological and Christological substantiation: "The icon is also a fruit of this renewal of art and its appearance is inextricably connected with the unveiling in the Church's consciousness of the meaning of the Incarnation: the fullness of the Godhead that dwells corporeally in Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the Man Christ reveals Him in full. In Him God becomes visible. But it also means that He also becomes describable. An image of the Man Jesus is therefore an image of God, for Christ is the God-Man… In the icon there is at once a further revelation of the profundity of the

dogma of Chalcedon and the gift of a new dimension in human art, because Christ has given a new dimension to man himself".**[2]**

In this lecture I would like to speak about some of the most typical features of the icon in the Orthodox Church's understanding. I will make an attempt to consider the Orthodox icon in its theological, anthropological, cosmic, liturgical, mystical and ethical aspects.

The theological meaning of the icon

The icon is above all *theological*. Ye. Trubetskoy described the icon as "contemplation in colour"**[3]**, while Father Pavel Florensky called it "a reminder of the prototype in the highest".**[4]** The icon reminds us of God as the Prototype in whose image and likeness every human being is created. The theological significance of the icon is that it speaks in the language of art about dogmatic truths revealed to human beings in Holy Scripture and Church Tradition.

The Holy Fathers saw the icon as a Gospel for the illiterate. "Images are used in churches so that the illiterate could at least look at the walls to read what they are unable to read in books", wrote St. Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome.**[5]** According to St. John of Damascus, "The image is a memorial, just what words are to a listening ear. What a book is to the literate, an image is to the illiterate. The image speaks to sight as words to hearing; through the mind we enter into union with it".**[6]** St. Theodore the Studite stressed that "what is set forth in the Gospel on paper and in ink is depicted in the icon through various paints and other materials"**[7]**. Act 6 of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787) reads: "What a word communicates through hearing is what art shows silently through an image".

Icons can play a catechetical role. "If one of the heathens comes to you saying: show me your faith... you will take him to church and put him before all kinds of holy images", says St. John of Damascus.**[8]** At the same time, the icon cannot be seen as a simple illustration of the Gospel or a depiction of events in the life of the Church. "The icon does not represent anything, it rather reveals something" affirms Archimandrite Zenon.**[9]** In the first place, it reveals the Invisible God to us – God Who, according to the Evangelist, "no one has ever seen" but Who was revealed to humankind in the person of God-Man Jesus Christ (Jn 1:18).

As we know, the Old Testament places the making of images of God under a strict ban. The first commandment of the Mosaic Decalogue reads: "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God" (Ex. 20:4-5). Any image of the invisible God would be the fruit of human imagination and falsehood towards God; worshiping an image would be tantamount to worshiping a creation instead of the Creator. The New Testament, however,

reveals a God Who became man, visible to human beings. With the same insistence of Moses' assertion that people *did not see* God on Sinai, the apostle asserts that they *did see* Him: "We *have seen* his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father" (Jn. 1:14); "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we *have seen with our eyes,* which we *have looked at…* the Word of life" (1 Jn. 1:1). And while Moses declares that the people of Israel did not see "any form" but only heard God's voice, St. Paul calls Christ "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), and of Himself Christ says: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father". The invisible Father reveals Himself to the world through His image, His icon, through Jesus Christ, the invisible God who became a visible man.

What is invisible cannot be depicted but what is visible can be since it is no longer the fruit of one's imagination but a material reality. The Old Testament prohibition to make images of the invisible God, according to St. John of Damascus, adumbrates the possibility to do so when God becomes visible. St. John says, "It is obvious that at that time [before Christ] you could not make an image of the invisible God, but when you see the Formless One become man for your sake, then you will make images of Him in His human form. When you contemplate God becoming man, then you can depict Him clothed in human form. When the invisible One becomes visible to us, you may then draw His likeness…Paint everything with words and colours both in books and on boards".**[10]**

In his *Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* Archpriest Alexander Schmemann offers an excellent interpretation of the veneration of icons and its fundamental importance for the assertion of a truly Christological position: "Because God united with man fully, an image of the Man Christ is also an image of God; as Florovsky has said, everything that is human in Christ is now the living image of God. And in this union matter itself is made new and becomes worthy of praise. 'I do not bow down to matter, but to the Creator of matter, Who for my sake took on substance and Who through matter accomplished my salvation, and I shall not cease to honor matter, through which my salvation was accomplished.'**[11]** This Christological definition of the icon and its veneration forms the substance of the doctrine promulgated by the Seventh Ecumenical Council. The entire Christological dispute, in fact, reaches its climax with this council, which gave the icon its final 'cosmic' meaning… In this way the justification of icon veneration brought to a close the dogmatic dialectic of the age of the universal councils. This dialectic concentrated, as we have already seen, on two fundamental themes of Christian revelation: the Trinity and the Incarnation. In this respect the 'faith of the Seven Ecumenical Councils and of the Fathers' is the everlasting and immutable foundation of Orthodoxy".**[12]**

This theological guideline, given its final form during the struggle against the iconoclast heresy of the 8th – 9th centuries, had been implicitly present in the Church since early times. Already in the catacombs of Rome we can see images of Christ, typically in the context of particular episodes in Gospel history.

The accepted image of Christ and its theological justification were also formulated in the period of the

iconoclastic disputes. The doctrine is expressed with utmost clarity in the kontakion for the Feast of Orthodoxy: “No one could describe the Word of the Father; but when He took flesh from you, O Theotokos, He accepted to be described, and restored the fallen image to its former beauty. We confess and proclaim our salvation in word and images”. This poem, composed by St. Theophanes the Metropolitan of Nicea, one of the defenders of icon-veneration in the 9th century, speaks of God the Word becoming “describable” in the light of the incarnation. Having assumed fallen human nature, Christ restored in human beings the image of God according to which we were created. When divine beauty (Slav. ‘goodness’) merged with human malevolence it saved human nature. It is this salvation that is depicted in icons (“images”) and in sacred texts (“word”).

The Byzantine icon is not merely an image of the man Jesus but precisely God become man. This is what distinguishes the Orthodox icon from Renaissance religious art which represents Christ “humanized”. Commenting on this distinction, L. Ouspensky writes, “The Church has ‘eyes to see’ just as it has ‘ears to hear’. Therefore, she hears the word of God in the Gospel written in human words. She also sees Christ with the eyes of unshakable faith in His divinity. This is why she presents Him on an icon not as an ordinary man but as the God-Man in His glory even at the moment of His utter dereliction”… It is for this reason that the Orthodox Church never portrays Christ in her icons simply as a human being suffering physically and mentally, as in Western sacred painting.**[13]**

The icon is closely bound up with dogma and is unthinkable outside its dogmatic context. Through artistic means, the icon communicates the essential doctrines of Christianity of the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, salvation and human deification.

Events in Gospel history are largely interpreted in iconography primarily in a doctrinal context. Canonical Orthodox icons, for instance, never depict the resurrection of Christ but instead His ascent from hell, leading the Old Testament righteous. The representation of Christ rising from the grave, often with a banner in his hands,**[14]** is of a very late origin and is linked stylistically to Western prototypes. The Orthodox Tradition knows only the image of Christ emerging from hell, and this corresponds to the liturgical remembrance of the Resurrection of Christ. Liturgical texts from the Octoechos and the Pentecostarion interpret this event purely from the dogmatic perspective.

The anthropological meaning of the icon

Every icon is *anthropological* in its content. There is no icon without the image of a person, be it the God-Man Jesus Christ or the Most Holy Mother of God or one of the saints. The only exceptions are symbolic images**[15]** and the depictions of angels (but even angels are shown as manlike). There are no landscape or still-life icons. Landscapes, plants, animals, household objects – all can be found in an icon if the subject-matter so requires, but the chief protagonist in any iconographic image is a person.

At the same time, the icon is not a portrait. It does not claim to convey the exact appearance of a particular saint. We do not know how the older saints looked, though we do have at our disposal many photographs of holy persons recently canonized. The comparison of a saint's photograph with his icon demonstrates vividly that the icon-painter strives to present only the most characteristic features of the saint's appearance. He may be recognizable in the icon yet he is different; his features, refined and ennobled, give him an iconic semblance.

The icon exhibits a person in his or her transformed and deified state. L. Ouspensky writes, "The icon is an image of a human being truly filled with the passion-searing and all-sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, his flesh is depicted as essentially different from the ordinary corruptible flesh of a human being. The icon communicates a certain spiritual reality: sober, based on a spiritual experience and completely free of any exaltation. If grace illumines the whole person so that his entire spirit, body and soul are engulfed in prayer and dwell in divine light, then the icon visibly portrays this person who has become a living icon, the likeness of God".**[16]** According to Archimandrite Zenon, the icon is "the appearance of a transformed and deified creature, that same transformed humankind which Christ revealed in his person".**[17]**

According to biblical revelation, we humans were created in the image and after the likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). Some Church Fathers distinguish the image of God (something originally given by God to man) from His likeness (the goal man achieves through obedience to God's will and a life of virtue). St. John of Damascus writes, "God created man endowed with a visible and invisible nature by his own hands according to His image and likeness, forming the body from the earth and through His breathing upon it giving it a rational and intellectual soul, which we call the divine image. That which is 'according to the image' is manifest in the intellect and free will. That which is 'according to the likeness' is manifest in such likeness in virtue as is possible".**[18]**

As a result of the fall, the image of God in man was darkened and distorted, but not altogether lost. Fallen man was like an icon that had been darkened by time and candle-black and which needed to be cleaned for it to shine in its original beauty. This purification occurred with the incarnation of the Son of God Who, through the action of the Holy Spirit, restored the fallen image to its former beauty. But man himself needs to make an ascetic effort so that the grace of God may not be futile in him and that he may be able to receive it.

Christian asceticism is a path to the spiritual transformation – such as revealed in an icon – of a human person. The Orthodox icon is a teacher of the ascetic life in as much as it teaches us the doctrine of faith. The iconographer paints a saint's hands and feet thinner than they are in real life, while the facial features: the nose, eyes and ears, more oblong. In some cases, as in Dionysius's icons, the proportions

of the human body are distorted by elongations of the body and by the reduction of the head size by a half. All these and many other artistic techniques are employed to convey the spiritual change that happens to human flesh as a result of the ascetic feat of a saint and the transforming impact made on it by the Holy Spirit.

Human flesh as depicted in icons differs radically from the flesh that is drawn in conventional painting. This is manifestly obvious when icons are set side by side with the realistic art of the Renaissance. Comparing Old Russian icons with Ruben's canvases that depict corpulent human flesh in all its naked ugliness, Ye. Trubetskoy affirms that the icon sets a new understanding of life against the biological, bestial, idolatrous life of fallen man.**[19]** The most important thing in an icon, Trubetskoy believes, is "the joy of the definitive victory of the God-Man over bestial man and the bringing of all humanity and all creatures into a church". He adds, however, that "man should be prepared for this joy by performing a feat. He cannot enter the membership of a church of God just as he is because there is no room in it for an uncircumcised heart, corpulence and self-satisying flesh. *It is for this reason that icons cannot be painted of living people*".**[20]**

The icon of a saint shows not so much a process as a result, not so much a way as a destination point, not so much a movement towards a goal but as a goal in itself. In an icon we see someone who does not struggle with the passions but has overcome them, who does not seek the Heavenly Kingdom but has already reached it. In this sense, the icon is not dynamic but static. The principal character of an icon is never depicted in movement: he or she is either standing or sitting (exceptional are the hagiographical border scenes which will be considered shortly). Only secondary characters are shown in motion, such as the Magi in the icon of the Nativity of Christ, or heroes of highly populated compositions, these being only illustrative in nature.

For the same reason, an icon never portrays a saint painted in profile but almost always frontal or sometimes, if the subject so requires, in semi-profile. Only those not venerated are painted in profile, as are subordinate characters such as the Magi, or negative figures, such as Judas the betrayer at the Mystical Supper. Animals are also depicted in profile. The horse mounted by St. George the Conqueror is always in profile, as is the snake struck by the saint, while the saint himself always turns to the viewer full face.

According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, after the resurrection everyone will receive a new body which will differ from the previous material one, just as the body of Christ after His Resurrection differed from His earthly body. The new, "glorified" human body will be immaterial, luminous and light, but will preserve the likeness of the material body. At the same time, according to St. Gregory, it will have none of the defects of the material body, such as mutilations or signs of old age.**[21]** In a similar way, an icon should preserve the bearing of a saint's material body but should not reproduce his or her physical defects.

The icon avoids depicting pain and suffering naturalistically. It does not set itself the goal of making an emotional impact on the viewer. It is altogether alien to any emotionality, any anguish. For this reason the Byzantine and Russian icon of the crucifixion, unlike its Western version, depicts Christ as dead rather than suffering. Christ's last words on the cross were "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30). The icon shows what happened after that, not what preceded it, not the process but the result, thereby presenting what actually happened. Pain, suffering, and agony were what attracted Western Renaissance and they abound in representations of the suffering Christ. In an icon, however, all of this remains out of sight. The Orthodox icon of the crucifixion may show a dead Christ, but He is no less beautiful than in icons depicting Him alive.

The most significant point of an icon is the face. Early icon-painters distinguished between "the personal" and "the pre-personal". This understanding included the background, landscape, and clothes, which were painted by apprentices, while the face was painted by the master himself.**[22]** The spiritual center of an iconic face is the eyes. Seldom do they look straight into the viewer's eyes but more often as if over the viewer, not so much into his eyes as into his soul. "The personal" includes not only the face but also arms. On icons, arms are often very expressive. Saints are usually depicted with their arms raised and palms open to the viewer. A typical gesture, such as the icon of Our Lady of the Sign (Oranta), symbolizes an appeal to God in prayer.

The cosmic meaning of the icon

While the principal character of an icon is a person, its background often represents an image of the transformed cosmos. In this sense, an icon is *cosmic* since it shows nature but nature in its eschatological and changed state.

According to Christian understanding, the original harmony which existed in nature before the fall, was violated by an act of disobedience. Nature, therefore, suffers together with man and awaits redemption together with man. St. Paul says of this: "For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole**[23]** creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom. 8:19-22).

The icon reflects the eschatological, apokatastatic, redeemed and deified state of nature. The features of a donkey or a horse are, in an icon, as refined as those of a person, and, accordingly, the eyes of animals in icons are human, not those of a donkey or a horse. We see in icons the earth and the sky, trees and grass, the sun and the moon, birds and fish, animals and reptiles yet all are subjected to a

single design and constitute a single church in which God reigns. In iconographic compositions such as “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!”, “Let them praise the name of the Lord”, “Let all those that seek thee be glad and rejoice in thee”, Ye. Trubetskoy writes, “one can see all the creatures under the skies united in the glorification of running animals, singing birds and even fish swimming in water. And in all these icons, the architectural design to which all of *creation* is subjected is invariably depicted in the form of church – *cathedral*: to it the angels aspire, in it the saints assemble, round it the paradise green twine, and at its foot or around it the animals throng”.**[24]**

The philosopher sees “conceived in man, this new order of relations spreading to the lower creation. A whole cosmic revolution is accomplished: love and compassion open up in man the beginning of *a new creation*. And this new creation finds its own image in iconography: through the intercession of saints the church of God opens for the lower creation, giving room in itself to its spiritual image”.**[25]**

In some, though quite rare cases, nature is shown not as the background but as the principal object of the church artist’s attention, as for instance, in mosaics and frescoes devoted to the creation. An excellent prototype of this kind is in the mosaics at St. Mark’s Basilica, Venice (8th cent.), in which the six days of creation are depicted inside a gigantic circle divided into a multitude of segments. These mosaics, together with a number of icons and frescoes, both Byzantine and Old Russian, depict nature as animated. In the mosaic of the Ravenna baptistery (6th cent.), dedicated to the Baptism of the Lord, Christ is immersed in the waters of the Jordan up to His waist, with John the Baptist on his right and the Jordan on his left personified as an old man with long grey hair, a long beard and a green branch in his hand. In old icons of the Baptism we often see in the water two small creatures, male and female, resembling human beings. The male symbolizes the River Jordan; the female the sea (an allusion to Ps. 114:3: “The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back”). Some see in these figures certain relics of heathen antiquity. But I think they point rather to an iconographer’s perception of nature as a living organism capable of receiving the grace of God and responding to the presence of God. Coming down into the waters of the Jordan, Christ by Himself sanctifies the entire nature of water, which joyfully met and accepted the incarnate God: this truth is shown by the human-like creatures depicted in the icons of the Baptism of the Lord.

In some Old Russian icons of Pentecost, a man wearing a royal crown is depicted in a dark niche at the bottom, with the inscription “cosmos” over him. This representation is sometimes interpreted as a symbol of the universe enlightened by the action of the Holy Spirit through the apostolic message. Ye. Trubetskoy sees in the “cosmos tsar” a symbol of the ancient cosmos enslaved by sin to which the church embracing the world and filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit is opposed: “It appears from the very opposition of Pentecost to the cosmos tsar that the church in which the apostles preside is understood as a new world and a new kingdom: it is the cosmic ideal which should deliver the real cosmos from captivity. To give a room in itself to the royal captive who is to be saved, the church should

coincide with the universe: it should include not only a new heaven but also a new earth. And the tongues of fire over the apostles clearly show how the power that is to accomplish this cosmic revolution is understood".**[26]**

The Greek word "cosmos" means beauty and goodness. In Dionysius the Areopagite's treatise "On the Divine Names", beauty is interpreted as one of the names of God. For Dionysius, God is perfect Beauty "on account of the beauty communicated from Itself to all beautiful things, in a manner appropriate to each, and as Cause of the good harmony and brightness of all things which flashes like light to all the beautifying distributions of its fontal ray, and as calling all things to Itself), and as collecting all in all to Itself. And it is called Beautiful". Every earthly beauty pre-exists in the divine Beauty as its first cause.**[27]**

In his book, characteristically entitled "The World as the Fulfilment of Beauty", the Russian philosopher N. Lossky writes, "Beauty is an absolute value, that is, a value which has a positive meaning for every person capable of perceiving it... Perfect beauty is the fullness of Being which contains the totality of all absolute values".**[28]**

Nature, cosmos, the entire material universe is a reflection of divine beauty, and this is what the icon is called to reveal. It is possible for the world to participate in divine beauty but only to the extent that it "has not submitted to vanity" and has not lost the ability to sense the presence of God. In the fallen world, beauty co-exists with ugliness. However, just as evil is not a full-fledged "partner" of goodness, but only the absence of goodness – its inability to oppose what is good – neither does the ugliness of this world prevail over beauty. "Beauty and ugliness are not spread in the world evenly: on the whole, beauty prevails", asserts N. Lossky.**[29]** In the icon, however, there is the absolute prevalence of beauty and almost total absence of ugliness. Even the serpent in the icon of St. George and the devils in the scene of the Last Judgment look less threatening and repulsive than many characters in the art of Bosch and Goya.

The liturgical meaning of the icon

The icon's purpose is *liturgical*; it is an integral part of liturgical space, which is the church, and an indispensable participant in divine services. "The icon is essentially... by no means an image intended for private devotional veneration", Hieromonk Gabriel Bunge writes, "Its theological place is primarily *the liturgy* in which the message of the Word is complemented by the message of the icon".**[30]** Outside church and liturgy, the icon largely loses its meaning. Certainly, every Christian has the right to hang an icon at home, but he has this right only in so far as his home is a continuation of the church and his life a continuation of the liturgy. A gallery is the wrong place for icons. "An icon in a gallery is nonsense, for it does not live there but only exists as does a dried flower in a herbarium or a pinned butterfly in a

collector's box".**[31]**

The icon participates in the liturgy along with the Gospel and the other sacred objects. In the tradition of the Orthodox Church, the Gospel is not only a book for reading but also a liturgically revered object: during the liturgy the Gospel is solemnly brought out for the faithful to kiss. In a similar way, the icon as "Gospel in color" is an object not only to be contemplated but also to be venerated with prayer. The icon is kissed, censed and venerated with ground and waist bows. It is not the painted board before which a Christian bows but before the person depicted on it. According to St. Basil the Great, "the **honour** paid to the image passes on to the prototype".**[32]**

The meaning of the icon as an object of liturgical veneration was expounded in the dogmatic definition of the Seventh Ecumenical Council which resolved that "icons should be kissed and that they are an object of veneration and honor, but not of real worship, which is reserved for Him Who is the subject of our faith and is proper for the divine nature". The fathers of the Council, following St. John of Damascus, distinguished between worship (*latreia*), which is due to God, and veneration (*proskynesis*), which is due to an angel or a deified man, be it the Most Holy Mother of God or one of the saints.

Early churches used to be decorated not so much with icons painted on boards as with frescoes, which is the earliest model of Orthodox iconography. Even in the catacombs, frescoes occupied a place of importance. In the post-Constantine era churches existed that were painted with frescoes all over, from top to bottom and on all four walls. The richest churches were decorated with mosaics along with the frescoes.

The most obvious difference between a fresco and an icon is that a fresco cannot be removed from a church. It is tightly "fastened" to the wall and is tied for good to the church where it has been painted. The fresco lives with the church; it ages together with it, is restored together with it and dies together with it. Bound as it is with a church, the fresco is an organic part of its liturgical space. The subject-matter of frescoes, just as that of icons, corresponds to moments in the liturgical year. During the course of a year, the Church remembers the fundamental events of biblical and gospel history, events from the life of the Most Holy Mother of God and from the history of the Church. Each day of the church calendar is devoted to the memory of particular saints – martyrs, holy bishops, venerable fathers, confessors, most pious princes, fools in Christ, etc. Accordingly, a fresco can depict church feasts of our Lord, our Lady, the saints, as well as scenes from the Old and New Testaments. Events related to a particular theme are normally placed in a row. The church is designed and built as a single whole, hence the themes of its frescoes correspond to the liturgical cycle and also reflect its specific dedications. For instance, in a church dedicated to the Most Holy Mother of God, the frescoes will depict Her life, while in a church dedicated to St. Nicholas there are illustrations related to the life of the saint.

Icons painted on wooden panels in tempera on ivory ground or executed in the encaustic technique became widespread in the post-Constantinian period. In the early Byzantine church, however, there were few icons. Images of our Saviour and of the Mother of God could be placed before the sanctuary, while church walls were decorated exclusively or almost exclusively with frescoes. Byzantine churches did not have multi-tiered iconostases; the sanctuary was separated from the nave by a low barrier which did not conceal the actions in the sanctuary from the eyes of the faithful. To this day, most iconostases in the Greek East are single-tiered with low holy gates and more often without holy gates at all. Multi-tiered iconostases became widespread in Russia in the post-Mongolian era, and the number of tiers tended to increase with the centuries, with three-tiered iconostases appearing in the 15th century, four in the 16th century, and five, six and seven in the 17th century.

The development of the iconostasis in Old Russia has a profound theological rationale which has been studied in detail by a number of scholars. The architectonics of the iconostasis is integral and complete. In that its themes correspond to those of the frescoes, the subjects of the icons often repeat those of the frescoes. The theological objective of the iconostasis is not to conceal anything from the faithful but rather to reveal to worshippers the reality of which every icon is a window. According to Florensky, the iconostasis "does not conceal something from the faithful… On the contrary, it points out for them, half blinded as they are, the mysteries of the sanctuary, opening for them, lame and crippled, the entrance to a different world locked for them by their own stagnation and crying out to their deaf ears about the Kingdom of Heaven".**[33]**

In the early Christian Church it was typical for all the faithful, both clergy and laity, to take an active part in the liturgy. In wall paintings of that period an important place was given to depictions of the Eucharist. The underlying Eucharistic message was already borne by such early Christian wall symbols as a cup, a fish, a lamb, a basket with loaves of bread, a vine, or a bird pecking at a vine. In the Byzantine period, all church frescoes were centered thematically on the sanctuary, which remained open and painted with images bearing an immediate relation to the Eucharist. Among such images was "the Communion of the Apostles", "The Mystical Supper", images of the writers of the Liturgy, especially Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, as well church hymnographers. All of these images were designed to attune the faithful to a Eucharistic mode and to prepare them for fully-fledged participation in the Liturgy and the partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ.

Changes introduced over time in the iconography were equally dictated by changes in Eucharistic awareness. In the Synodal period (18th-19th centuries), the custom of taking communion only once or several times a year finally prevailed in Russian Orthodox devotion. In most cases, people came to church to "stand through" the liturgy, not to partake of Christ's Holy Gifts. The decline in Eucharistic sensitivity corresponded fully to a decline in church art, which led to the substitution of iconography by a realistic "academic" painting. At the same time ancient modal chant was replaced by polyphonic

singing. Church frescoes of that period, bearing only a distant thematic resemblance to the old prototypes, were gradually stripped of all the age-old features of iconography that distinguished it from secular art.

The revival of Eucharistic devotion in the early 20th century and the desire for frequent communion by the faithful, as well as attempts to surmount the barrier between the clergy and the people, were processes that coincided with the "discovery" of the icon and with a new interest in traditional iconography. Church artists of the early 20th century began to find a way to revive canonical icon-painting. This search continued among the Russian émigrés, especially in the work of iconographers such as Father Gregory (Krug). It has been fulfilled in our own day in the icons and frescoes by Archimandrite Zenon and other masters who seek to restore old traditions.

The mystical meaning of the icon

The icon is *mystical.* It is inseparably bound up with the spiritual life of a Christian, with his experience of communion with God and his relationship to the spiritual world. At the same time the icon reflects the mystical experience of the whole Church, not only her individual members. The personal spiritual experience of an artist cannot reflect this mystery in his icons; rather it is perceived in the life of the Church and tested by it. Theophanes the Greek, Andrew Rublev and other masters of the past possessed profound inner spiritual life. But they did not paint "from themselves"; their icons are deeply rooted in church Tradition, which embraces the total age-old experience of the Church.

Many revered icon-painters were also great contemplators and mystics. With reference to Daniel the Black and Andrew Rublev, St. Joseph of Volotsk acknowledges the "illustrious icon-painters, Daniel and his disciple Andrew..., who have nothing but virtue and nothing but zeal for fasting and monastic life so that they may be considered worthy of God's grace and succeed only in gaining God's love for them never to be exercised about what is temporal but to have their mind and thoughts uplifted to the immaterial and divine light..., on the very feast day of the radiant Resurrection, sitting in the clergy stalls with the all-honorable and divine icons before them and looking at them unceasingly, they are filled with divine joy and luminosity, and they work and appear like this not only on days such as this but also on days not devoted to painting".**[34]**

The experience of contemplating the divine light mentioned in this text is reflected in many icons, both Byzantine and Russian. It is characteristic especially of icons painted in the period of Byzantine hesychasm (the 11th-15th centuries) and of Russian icons and frescoes (the 14-15th centuries). In accordance with the hesychastic teaching on the light of Tabor as the Uncreated Light, the face of the Saviour, of the Most Holy Theotokos and of the saints in icons and wall paintings of that period were often highlighted by zinc white, a classical example being Theophanes the Greek's frescoes in the

church of the Transfiguration of Our Saviour in Novgorod. Among widespread images of that time is that of our Saviour in a white garment with golden rays emanating from His body – an image based on the Gospel account of the Lord's Transfiguration. The ample use of gold in icon-painting during the hesychastic period is also believed to be associated with the teaching on the Uncreated Light.

The icon grows from prayers, and there can be no real icon without prayer. Archimandrite Zenon says, "The icon is an embodied prayer. It is created in prayer and for prayer, whose driving force is the love of God and yearning for Him as perfect Beauty".**[35]** As the fruit of prayer, the icon is also a school of prayer for those who contemplate it and pray before it. By its entire spiritual structure the icon disposes one to prayer. At the same time, prayer takes us beyond the icon, placing us before the very prototype – the Lord Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, a saint.

There are known cases when, during prayer before an icon, people have seen the person depicted come alive. This occurred to St. Silouan of Mount Athos. According to his biographer, Archimandrite Sophrony, St. Silouan saw the living Christ "during vespers, in the church... on the right side of the holy gates where there is a local icon of our Saviour, he saw living Christ... It is impossible to describe the state he was in at that hour. We know from the mouth and writings of the blessed Starets that he was illuminated at that moment by Divine light, that he was taken out from this world and raised to heaven by the Spirit where he heard ineffable words and that at that moment he was given as if a new birth from above".**[36]**

Icons appear not only to saints but also to all Christians and even to sinners. The story behind the icon of the Theotokos, the Unexpected Joy recounts that "a certain man, a criminal, who used to come to the Most Holy Mother of God every day to pray". Once during a prayer, the Mother of God appeared before him and reproached him for his sinful life. In Russia icons such as this were called "miraculously appearing".

The question of miracle-working and, more generally, of the relationship between icons and miracles requires special consideration. At this time I would like to dwell on a certain phenomenon which has become widespread, namely, the seeping of holy myrrh or fragrant essences from icons. How is this phenomenon to be understood? First of all, it should be said that the exuding of myrrh is an undeniable and repeatedly recorded fact which cannot be challenged. But a fact is one thing and its interpretation is another. When this phenomenon is seen as the sign of an encroaching apocalypse or the coming of the antichrist, this is no more than a private opinion which bears no relationship with the seeping miracle. I should think that the outpouring of holy essences by icons is not a gloomy foreboding of impending disasters, but on the contrary, a manifestation of God's grace sent to give consolation and spiritual strength to the faithful. An icon exuding myrrh testifies to the real presence of the one who is depicted on it: it assure us that God, His Most Holy Mother and the saints are close at hand.

A theological interpretation of this occurrence requires spiritual wisdom and soundness. Any agitation, hysterics or panic is inappropriate and harmful to the Church. The pursuit of a “miracle for the sake of miracle” in general has never been normative for true Christians. Christ Himself refused to give the Jews “a sign”, stressing that the only true sign is His own descent to the grave and His resurrection.

The ethical meaning of the icons

In conclusion, I would like to say a few words about the *ethical* meaning of the icon in the context of today’s confrontation between Christianity and so-called “post-Christian” secular humanism.

“The present state of Christianity in the world is compared customarily to its situation in the early centuries of its existence”, writes L. Ouspensky. “But while in the early ages, Christianity had before it a heathen world, in our days it stands before a de-Christianized world which has grown on the ground of apostasy. And now in the face of precisely this world, Orthodoxy ‘is called to bear witness’ to the Truth which it transmits through its liturgy and icon. Hence the need to realize and express the dogma of the veneration of icons as applied to modern reality, to the demands and quests of the modern man”.**[37]**

The secular world is ruled by individualism and egotism. People are disunited, each living for himself and many suffering from chronic loneliness. The notion of sacrifice and readiness to give one’s life for the sake of the other is alien to modern man. Feelings of mutual responsibility have dissolved only to be replaced by an instinctive self-preservation.

Christianity, however, speaks to man as a member of a single conciliar organism responsible not only to itself but also to God and to other people. The Church binds people into one body whose head is the God-Man Jesus Christ. In eschatological terms, the unity of the body of the faithful is the prototype of that unity to which all humanity is called. In the Kingdom of God, all will be united with Him and with one another by the same love as unites the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. The image of the Holy Trinity reveals to humanity the spiritual unity to which it is called. And the Church, despite any disunity, individualism or egotism, will tirelessly remind the world of this lofty calling.

The conflict between Christianity and the de-Christianized world is especially obvious in the field of morality. What prevails in secular society is a liberal moral standard that rejects the existence of an absolute ethical norm. Under this standard, whatever is not unlawful or does not violate the rights of others is admissible. Any notion of sin is absent from secular vocabulary; each decides for himself his own moral criterion. Secular morals have repudiated the traditional idea of marriage and marital fidelity and desacralized the ideals of motherhood and childbearing. It has opposed these venerable ideals with “free love”, hedonism and the propaganda of vice and sin. Female emancipation and the desire for

gender equality in all things have led to a radical decrease in the birth rate and an acute demographic crisis in most countries where secular morality prevails.

In stark contrast to all modern tendencies, the Church continues to preach, just as she has done for centuries, chastity and marital fidelity and to insist on the inadmissibility of unnatural vices. The Church not only condemns abortion as a cardinal sin but also equates it with murder. The Church believes motherhood to be the highest calling of woman and having many children to be the highest blessing from God. The Orthodox Church glorifies motherhood in the person of the Mother of God whom she honors as “more honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious without compare than the Seraphim”. The image of the Mother with the Infant in her arms gently clinging to her cheek – is the ideal that the Orthodox Church offers to every Christian woman. This image, present in all Orthodox churches in an endless variety of types, possesses great spiritual appeal and moral power. And as long as the Church exists, she, regardless of the spirit of the time, will remind woman of her calling to motherhood and childbearing.

Modern morality has also desacralized death, turning it into a gloomy rite deprived of any positive content. People fear death, are ashamed of it, avoid speaking about it. Some prefer to leave life voluntarily without waiting for a natural end. Euthanasia, a suicide committed with the help of doctors, is becoming increasingly popular. Those who live a life without God die as aimlessly and meaninglessly as they lived, spiritually empty and abandoned by God.

An Orthodox believer asks God at every service for a Christian end to his life, painless, shameless and peaceful. He prays for deliverance from sudden death so that he may repent and die in peace with God and his neighbours. The end of a Christian’s life is not death but a transition to life eternal. A visible reminder of this is the icon of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos in which She is depicted lying on her deathbed surrounded by the apostles and angels, Her soul symbolized by an infant taken by Christ in his arms. Death is progress to a new life, more beautiful than that on earth. Beyond the threshold of death Christ meets the Christian soul: this is the message borne by the image of the Dormition. And the Church, in spite of all materialistic ideas about life and death, will always proclaim this truth to humanity.

One can produce many other examples of icons that proclaim particular moral truths. Essentially, every icon bears a powerful moral charge. The icon reminds modern man that, apart from the world in which he lives, there is also the other world; apart from the values preached by irreligious humanism, there are other spiritual values; apart from the ethical norms established by secular society, there are other standards and norms.

The defence of basic norms, of Christian ethics, has become one of the most important tasks for us today. It is not only a matter of mission but also a matter of the survival of the Christian civilization. For

without absolute norms in a human community that finds itself in a situation of total relativism where any principle can be challenged and abolished, society is ultimately doomed to complete degradation.

In the struggle for preserving the ideals of the Gospel in human souls, in the struggle against the forces of evil which are so complicated and manifold that we sometimes cannot rely even on rational logic, what can come to our aid is the beauty of outstanding works of genuine art. In the words of Fr Alexander, "I believe that art (from 'the Christian point of view') is not only possible and, so to say, justified, but also that only art can be 'the one thing that is needed' in Christianity and possibly only art is justified. We can recognize Christ everywhere – in the Gospel (a book), in an icon (painting), in the liturgy (the fullness of art)".**[38]**

To end, I would like to say a few words about the exceptional importance of the icon in Orthodoxy and its witness before the world. In the minds of many, especially in the West, Orthodoxy is identified first of all with Byzantine and Old Russian icons. Few are familiar with Orthodox theology, fewer know the social teaching of the Orthodox Church, and even fewer enter Orthodox churches. But reproductions of Byzantine and Russian icons can be seen in the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and even non-Christian milieux. The icon is a silent and eloquent preacher of Orthodoxy not only within the Church but also in an environment that is alien and sometimes even hostile to her. According to L. Ouspensky, "While in the period of iconoclasm the Church struggled for the icon, in our time it is the icon that struggles for the Church".**[39]** The icon struggles for Orthodoxy, truth and beauty. Ultimately, however, it struggles for the human soul because it is in the salvation of souls that the goal and meaning for the existence of the Church lies.

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[1] The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann: Friday, September 27.

[2] Archpriest Alexander Schmemann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy, Ch. 5, 2.*

[3] *Е. Трубецкой*. Три очерка о русской иконе. Иное царство и его искатели в русской народной сказке. Изд. второе. М., 2003. С. 7.

[4] *Священник Павел Флоренский*. Иконостас. В кн.: Собрание сочинений. Т. 1. Париж, 1985. С. 221.

[5] St. Gregory the Great, Letters, Vol. 9. Letter 105 to Serenus (PL 77, 1027-1028).

[6] St. John of Damascus, *First Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images,* 17.

[7] St. Theodore the Studite, (PG 99, 340).

[8] *Преподобный Иоанн Дамаскин*. Цит. по: *В. Лазарев.* Византийская живопись. М., 1997. С. 24.

[9] *Архимандрит Зинон (Теодор)*. Беседы иконописца. СПб., 2003. С. 19.

[10] St. John of Damascus, *Third Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images,* 8.

[11] St. John of Damascus, *Second Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images,* 14.

[12] Archpriest Alexander Schmemann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy, Ch. 5, 2.*

[13] *Л. Успенский*. Богословие иконы в Православной Церкви. С. 120.

[14] In some churches this image painted, on glass and highlighted from beneath by electric light, is seen at the high place in the sanctuary. This reveals not only the poor taste of the artist, or of those who commissioned such a work, but also their ignorance or conscious neglect of the iconographic tradition of the Orthodox Church.

[15] For instance, the cross (not the crucifix) or “The Prepared Altar” symbolically represents the Throne of God.

[16] *Л. Успенский*. Богословие иконы в Православной Церкви. С. 132

[17] *Архимандрит Зинон*. Беседы иконописца. С. 19.

[18] St. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,* 2, 12

[19] *Е. Трубецкой*. Три очерка о русской иконе. С. 40-41.

[20] *Е. Трубецкой*. Три очерка о русской иконе. С. 25.

[21] *Святитель Григорий Нисский*. О душе и воскресении.

[22] См. *И. Языкова*. Богословие иконы. М., 1995. С. 21.

[23] That is, together with man.

[24] *Е. Трубецкой*. Три очерка о русской иконе. С. 44.

[25] *Е. Трубецкой*. Три очерка о русской иконе. С. 46-47.

[26] *Е. Трубецкой*. Три очерка о русской иконе. С. 48–49.

[27] Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names,* 4, 7.

[28] *Лосский Н. О.* Мир как осуществление красоты. М., 1998. С. 33-34.

[29] *Лосский Н. О.* Мир как осуществление красоты. С. 116.

[30] *Иеромонах Габриэль Бунге*. Другой Утешитель. С. 111.

[31] *И. Языкова*. Богословие иконы. С. 33.

[32] St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit,* 18.

[33] *Священник Павел Флоренский*. Иконостас. В кн.: Иконостас. Избранные труды по искусству. СПБ., 1993. С. 40–41.

[34] *Преподобный Иосиф Волоцкий*. Отвещание любозазорным и сказание вкратце о святых отцах, бывших в монастыре, иже в Рустей земле сущих. В кн.: Великие Минеи Четии митрополита Макария. Сентябрь 1-13. СПб., 1868. С. 557-558

[35] *Архимандрит Зинон (Теодор)*. Беседы иконописца. С. 22.

[36] *Иеромонах Софроний*. Старец Силуан. Париж, 1952. С. 13.

[37] *Л. Успенский*. Богословие иконы Православной Церкви. С. 430

[38] Archpriest Alexander Schmemann, *Journals, Tuesday, 13 April 1976.*

[39] *Л. Успенский*. Богословие иконы в Православной Церкви. Париж, 1989. С. 467.

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