

ON THE THEOLOGY OF THE ICON

Posted on January 1, 2022 by Olivier Clément



Olivier Clément (1921-2009) was a French Orthodox theologian who actively engaged with modernity. This essay, which reviews a book about icons, was published in the journal Contacts in 1960. Contacts was founded by Clément in 1949. We are pleased to present the first English translation.

[The Theology of the Icon](#) (1960), by Leonid Uspensky, is a book that will be a milestone. On a hot topic and essential, because art becomes for many of our contemporaries a quest for the absolute, and because Christian art therefore directly questions our ability to confess and live our faith. Here is one of the first efforts at synthesis that is not primarily aesthetic, or philosophical, but fundamentally theological, in the full sense of the word that implies and requires contemplation. Moreover, it is the work not of a theorist but of one of the best iconographers of our time, who in collaboration with Fr. Gregory Croug, has just painted important frescoes, in the middle of Paris, in the new [Cathédrale des Trois-Saints-Docteurs](#), Paris [5 rue Pétel, Paris (15th arrondissement)]. I would simply like to take this work as a starting point to identify some fundamental themes in the theology of the icon.

The author reminds us first of all that the veneration of the holy images, the icons of Christ, the Virgin, the angels and the saints, is a dogma of the Christian faith, a dogma formulated by the 7th Ecumenical Council. The icon is therefore not a decorative element, nor even a simple illustration of Scripture. It is an integral part of the liturgy, it constitutes "a means of knowing God and uniting with him." We know that the celebration of a feast requires that one exhibit in the middle of the nave the (transportable) icon that reveals, with the immediate evidence of vision, the meaning of the event that is being commemorated.

More widely, the whole church, with its architecture and its frescoes (or mosaics), represents in space what the liturgical unfolding represents in time: the reflection of the divine glory, the anticipation of the Messianic Realm. The liturgical word and the liturgical image form an indissociable whole—this medium of resonance, this "pneumatosphere" one could say, by which the Tradition makes present and alive the Good News. Thus, the icon corresponds to the Scripture not as an illustration, but in the same way that the liturgical texts correspond to it: "these texts do not limit themselves to reproducing the Scripture as such; they are as it were woven from it; by alternating and confronting its parts, they reveal its meaning, they indicate to us the means of living the evangelical preaching. The icon, by representing various moments of sacred history, visibly transmits their meaning and their vital significance. Thus, through the

liturgy and through the icon, the Scripture lives in the Church and in each of its members" (pp. 164-165).

The veneration of icons is thus an essential aspect of the liturgical experience, that is, of the contemplation of the Kingdom through the actions of the King. Although "veiled" and through faith, this contemplation is nevertheless lived by the whole being of man; it has the immediate character of sensation; it is a "sensation of divine things" realized by the total man. The Orthodox conception of the liturgy appears thus inseparable from the great certainties of the oriental asceticism on the transfiguration of the body begun here below, on the perception of the Taboric light by the spiritualized bodily senses; that is to say, not "dematerialized" but penetrated and metamorphosed by the Holy Spirit. The liturgy, in fact, sanctifying all the faculties of man, initiates the transfiguration of his senses, makes them capable of glimpsing the invisible through the visible, the Kingdom through the mystery.

The icon, stresses Leonid Ouspensky, sanctifies sight, and readily transforms it into a sense of vision: for God did not only make himself heard, he made himself seen; the glory of the Trinity was revealed through the flesh of the Son of Man. When we think of the importance of the sense of sight in modern man, how much he is torn apart, possessed, eroticized by the eyes, how much the flow of images of the big city makes him discontinuous, makes him a "man of nothingness," one understands the importance of the icon, because the icon, systematically freed from any sensuality (unlike so many works, though admirable, of Western religious art), has for its goal to exorcise, to pacify, to illuminate our sight, to make us "fast with the eyes" according to the expression of Saint Dorotheus (quoted p. 210).

In our civilization of possession by the image, a Protestant friend wrote to me, the icon has become an emergency of the cure of souls. It was during the iconoclastic crisis, in the 8th and 9th centuries, that the Church had to clarify the meaning of the icon, and Leonid Ouspensky's book is nourished by the doctrinal and conciliar texts of that time. Monsieur Ouspensky devotes a brief chapter to iconoclasm, but it has the merit of going straight to what was essential for the antagonists: their religious motivations. Indeed, iconoclasm seems to be explained in depth by a violent surge of Semitic transcendentalism, by Jewish and Muslim influences that increased, in the Orthodox tradition, the sense of divine incognoscibility to the detriment of the sense of "Philanthropy" and of the Incarnation. "The argument of the iconoclasts about the impossibility of representing Christ was a pathetic attachment to the ineffable" (p. 152).

But iconoclasm was also a reaction against a sometimes-idolatrous cult of images, against the contamination of this cult by the magical or theurgic notion (in the neo-Platonic sense of the word)

which wanted the image to be more or less consubstantial with its model. Thus, the icon was confused with the Eucharist, and certain priests mixed with the holy gifts the pieces of particularly venerated icons. Thus were opposed in the Church the two great non-Christian conceptions of the divine that only the dogma of Chalcedon could reconcile: on the one hand, the God of a static Old Testament who would not be "evangelical preparation;" a personal God but enclosed in his transcendent Monad, a God whom one cannot represent because one cannot participate in His holiness. On the other hand, the divine as sacred nature; or, rather, as the sacredness of nature, the omnipresence of which all forms participate.

Orthodoxy overcame these two opposed temptations by affirming the Christological foundation of the image and its strictly personal (and non-substantial) value.

It showed first of all that the image par excellence is Christ himself. In the Old Testament, God revealed himself through the Word; therefore, no one could have represented him without blasphemy. But the prohibition of Exodus (20:4) and Deuteronomy (5:12-19) constitutes a prefiguration "in depth" of the Incarnation—it sets aside the idol to make room for the face of God made man. For the unrepresentable Word became representable flesh: "when the Invisible One," writes St. John Damascene, "having clothed himself in flesh, appeared visible, then represents the likeness of Him who showed himself..." (P.G. 94,1239). Christ is not only the Word of God but his Image. The Incarnation founds the icon and the icon proves the Incarnation.

For the Orthodox Church, the first and fundamental icon is therefore the face of Christ. As Leonid Ouspensky suggests, Christ is par excellence the image made by man—this is the deep meaning of the tradition taken up by the liturgy, according to which the Lord printed on a cloth his Holy Face. Ouspensky interprets in a literal way the liturgical texts telling of Christ's sending to the king of Edessa a letter and the veil (mandilion) on which he imprinted his face. Would it not be better, since the letter to Agbar is obviously a forgery, to identify the symbolic meaning of this episode, as the Church has been able, for example, to authenticate the testimony, but not the historicity, of the Areopagitic writings?

Let us say then that the historical memory of the face of Jesus was preciously kept by the Church, first of all in the Holy Land and in the Semitic countries which surround it. It is a fact that all the icons of Christ give the impression of a fundamental resemblance. Not a photographic resemblance, but the presence of the same person, and of a divine Person who reveals himself to each one in a unique way (some Greek Fathers, starting from the evangelical accounts of the apparitions of the Risen One, have

underlined this plurality, in the unity, of the aspects of the glorious Christ). The resemblance here is inseparable from an encounter, from a communion: there is only one Holy Face, whose historical memory the Church has preserved (renewed from generation to generation by the vision of the great spiritualists), and as many Holy Faces as there are iconographers (or even as many moments in the mystical life of an iconographer). The human face of God is inexhaustible, and keeps for us, as Denys underlined, an apophatic character: face of faces and face of the Inaccessible...

Ouspensky emphasizes, with a large number of beautiful reproductions, that the image has existed since the earliest times of Christianity, and that the art of the catacombs, which is an art of the sign, sometimes offers, alongside pure symbols and allegorical representations, an undeniable concern for personal likeness. However, sanctity is then designated by a conventional language rather than symbolized by the artistic expression itself: it was in the third and especially in the fourth century that this incorporation of content into form, characteristic of properly iconographic art, began.

It would be fascinating, for a history of meanings, to study to what extent this evolution of Christian art coincided with the transformation of Hellenistic art into the "art of the eternal," in the sense that Malraux gives to this expression, and to what extent it differed from it; for the "art of the eternal" impersonalizes while the icon personalizes... If therefore the image that belongs to the very nature of Christianity, and if the icon par excellence is that of Christ, Image of the Father, this one, inaccessible abyss, cannot be directly represented: He who has seen me has seen the Father," said Jesus (John 14.9). The 7th Ecumenical Council and the Great Council of Moscow of 1666-1667 formally forbade the representation of God the Father. As for the Holy Spirit, He showed himself as a dove and tongues of fire; only in this way is He be painted. Couldn't we also say that the presence of the Holy Spirit is symbolized by the very light of every icon? Let us recall, although Ouspensky does not mention it, probably reserving this theme for the second volume of his work, that the "rhythm" of the Trinity, its diversity as one, is expressed by the Philoxenia (hospitality) of Abraham receiving the three angels, these Three of whom Rublev knew how to paint, with colors that seem like a mother-of-pearl of eternity; the mysterious movement of love that identifies them without confusing them...

If the Old Testament prohibition was lifted by and for Christ, it was also lifted for his Mother, and for his friends, for the members of his Body, for all those who, in the Holy Spirit, participate in his deified flesh.

However, in order to cut-short the accusations and confusions of the iconoclasts, as well as the abuses of certain Orthodox, the Church has vigorously emphasized that the icon is not consubstantial with its

prototype: the icon of Christ does not duplicate the Eucharist; it inaugurates the vision face to face. By representing the deified humanity of its prototype (which implies a transfigured but resembling "portrait" element), it is a person, not a substance that the icon brings forth. In an eschatological perspective, it suggests the true face of man; his face of eternity; this secret face that God contemplates in us and that our vocation consists in realizing.

If it is possible for human art to suggest the sanctified flesh of Christ and his people, it is because the very material used by the iconographer has been secretly sanctified by the Incarnation. The art of the icons uses and, in a certain way, manifests this sanctification of the material. "I do not adore matter," wrote St. John Damascene, "but I adore the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake... and who, through matter, made my salvation" (P.G. 94, 1245).

Obviously, however, the representation of the light that transfigures a face can only be symbolic. But it is the irreducible originality of Christian art that the symbol is placed at the service of the human face and serves to express the fullness of personal existence.

The Hindu or Tibetan mandala, to take a theme made fashionable by depth psychology, is the geometrical symbol of a resorption in the center. What one might call an Orthodox mandala—for example a square nave surmounted by a dome—has for its center the Pantocrator, and unites us to a personal presence...

This is why Ouspensky cannot be praised enough for having highlighted the iconographic decisions of the Quinisext Council (692) which ordered to replace the symbols of the first Christian art—especially the Lamb—by the direct representation of what they prefigured: the human face transfigured by the divine energy, and first of all the face of Christ. The Quinisext Council triumphantly put an end to the prehistory of Christian art, a prehistory that revealed the Christ-like meaning of all the sacred symbols of humanity, "figures and shadows... sketches given in view of the Church." The true symbolism of Christian art now appears as the way of representing the human person in the perspective of the Kingdom. This is why, as Ouspensky shows, the symbolism of the icon is based on the experience of Orthodox mysticism, as a personal "appropriation" of the glorious Body (appropriation by participated grace, that is to say, by de-appropriation of all egocentrism). The immense eyes, of a softness without brilliance, the reduced ears, as if interiorized, the fine and pure lips, the wisdom of the dilated forehead, everything indicates a being pacified, illuminated by grace. Let us mention in this connection a text by Palamas, [recently translated](#) by Jean Meyendorff. Ouspensky does not quote it, but he could without

difficulty add it to his file of ascetic quotations: it is necessary, therefore, to offer to God the passionate part of the soul, living and acting, so that it may be a living sacrifice; the Apostle said this even of our bodies: I exhort you, he says in fact, by the mercy of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God (Rom. 12:1). How can our living body be offered as a sacrifice pleasing to God? When our eyes are gentle, as it is written, "He who is gentle will be forgiven" (Prov. 12:13); when they attract and transmit to us mercy from above; when our ears are attentive to the divine teachings, not only to hear them, but, as David says, "to remember the commandments of God in order to fulfill them" (Ps 102 (103), 18); when our tongue, our hands and our feet are at the service of the divine will (Triads Louvain 1959, p. 364). It is a sacrifice of God (p. 364).

It would be particularly important to compare this iconographic expression of the transfiguration of the senses with the *lakshanas* of Buddhist art, which also designate through a distortion of the sense organs, the state of "deliverance." An analysis of the similarities and differences would be very significant. Let us confine ourselves to a few suggestions: in the icon, the symbol is at the service of the face. It expresses the accomplishment of the human face through encounter and communion. It suggests an interiority where transcendence is given without ceasing to be inaccessible. In Buddhist art, the face is identified with the symbol; it abolishes itself as a human face by becoming a symbol of an interiority where there is neither self nor the Other but an unspeakable nothing. In both cases, the face is surrounded by a nimbus: but the Christian face is in the light like iron in the fire; the Buddhist face becomes spherical, dilates, identifies itself with the luminous sphere that the nimbus symbolizes. In the icon, the treatment of the senses suggests their transfiguration by grace. The *lakshanas*, on the other hand, symbolize powers of clairvoyance and clear hearing through the excessive enlargement of the sense organs, the ears for example. Finally, the Christian face looks on and welcomes, while the Buddhist non face, with closed eyes, meditates.

This Christian concern for welcome, for communion, explains why the saints, on the icons, are almost always represented from the front: open to the one who looks at them, they draw him into prayer, because they are themselves praying; and the icon shows this. Light and peace penetrate and order their attitudes, their clothes, the atmosphere that surrounds them. Around them animals, plants, rocks are stylized according to their paradisiacal essence. The architectures become a surrealist game, an evangelical challenge to the heavy seriousness of this world, to the false security of the architectures of the earth...

The word abstraction never emerges from the pen of Ouspensky; but one cannot help but think of it

when he speaks of symbolism or stylization. There is in the icon an abstraction which leads to a higher figuration, an abstraction which is dead to this world and which allows the inter-vision of the world to come. The icon abstracts according to the Logos creator and re-creator of the universe and not according to the individual, fallen, ultimately destructive logos... The abstraction of the icon is the cross of our carnal look. Its realism is Taboric and eschatological: it announces and already manifests the only definitive reality—that of the Kingdom.

The light of the icon symbolizes the divine light, and the theology of the icon appears inseparable from the distinction in God of essence and energies: it is the divine energy, the uncreated light that the icon suggests to us. In an icon, the light does not come from a precise focus, because the celestial Jerusalem, says the Apocalypse, "does not need the sun and the moon, it is the glory of God that illuminates it" (Rev. 21:23). It is everywhere, in everything, without casting a shadow: it shows us that in the Kingdom God himself becomes light for us. In fact, notes Ouspensky, it is the very background of the icon that iconographers call "light."

The author has remarkable lines on the "reverse" or "inverted" perspective: in most icons, the lines do not converge towards a "vanishing point," sign of the fallen space that separates and imprisons; they dilate in the light "from glory to glory." Could we not speak here of iconographic epectasis, epectasis designating precisely, in St. Gregory of Nyssa, this infinite dilation in the light of the Kingdom? One understands that the exercise of such art constitutes a charismatic ministry. The Orthodox Church venerates "holy iconographers" whom Ouspensky brings closer to the "apostolic men" of whom Saint Symeon the New Theologian remains the main spokesman. The "apostolic man" is the one who receives the personal graces promised by Christ to the apostles: not only does he heal souls and bodies and discern spirits, but, like St. Paul, he hears ineffable words; like St. John he has the mission to tell what he has seen (Revelation, as we know, means Revelation). In the same way the "holy iconographer" really glimpses the Kingdom and paints what he has glimpsed. Every iconographer who paints "according to tradition" participates in this exceptional contemplation, both through the liturgical experience and through the communion of saints. This is why the icon painter does not paint in a subjective, individual psychological way, but according to tradition and vision. Painting is for him inseparable from faith, from life in the Church, from a personal ascetic effort.

The Fathers insisted a lot on the pedagogical value of the icon. In fact, as Ouspensky shows all the history of the dogma is registered in the iconography. However, the value of the icon is not only pedagogical, it is mysterious. The divine grace rests in the icon. It is there the essential point, the most

mysterious also of its theology: the "resemblance" to the prototype and its "name" make the objective holiness of the image. The icon," writes St. John Damascene, "is sanctified by the name of God and by the name of the friends of God, that is to say, the saints, and that is why it receives the grace of the divine Spirit" (P.G. 94,1300). Ouspensky limits himself to posing this essential affirmation; he does not seek—at least not yet—the foundations of it. It is necessary to recall here, to take up a suggestion of Monsieur Evdokimov, the whole biblical conception of the Name as a personal presence, a conception which is also implied in the Hesychast invocation of the Name of Jesus (let us think of the power of this Name in the Book of Acts). The icon names by form and by color; it is a represented name: this is why it makes present to us a prototype whose holiness is communion; that is to say, offered presence, interceding... Like the name, the icon is the means of an encounter that makes us participate in the holiness of the One we meet; that is to say, in the end, in the holiness of the "Only Holy One".

Ouspensky also offers us an important chapter on the "symbolism of the church." An entire church must be an icon of the Kingdom. According to the ancient Apostolic Institutions, it must be oriented (for the East symbolizes the eternal daybreak and the Christian, says St. Basil, must always, wherever he prays, turn towards the East); it must evoke a ship (for it is, on the waters of death, the ark of the Resurrection); it must have three doors to suggest the Trinity, the principle of all its life. The altar is located in the eastern apse, slightly elevated—symbol of the Holy Mountain, the Upper Room—and called par excellence, the "sanctuary." The altar represents Christ himself (Dionysius the Areopagite), the "heart" of Christ whose body the church represents (Nicholas Cabasilas). It is perhaps regrettable, in this connection, that Ouspensky did not use, in order to study the symbolism of the sanctuary, Cabasilas' "Life in Christ," and the corresponding studies of Madame Lot-Borodin... The altar is the heart of the whole building; it loves it and sanctifies it. The "sanctuary" that surrounds it, reserved for the clergy, is sometimes compared to the "holy of holies" of the Tabernacle and the Temple of the Old Covenant. It is the "heaven of heavens" (Saint Symeon of Thessalonica), "the place where Christ, King of all things, is enthroned with the apostles" (Saint Germain of Constantinople), as is, in his image, the bishop with his "presbyterium."

An eschatological vessel, the "nave", often surmounted by a dome, represents the new creation, the universe reunited in Christ with its creator, just as the nave is united to the sanctuary: "The sanctuary," writes Saint Maximus the Confessor, "illuminates and directs the nave, and the latter thus becomes its visible expression. Such a relationship restores the normal order of the universe, overthrown by the fall of man; it therefore restores what was in Paradise and will be in the Kingdom of God" (P.G. 91-872). One might ask if the union of the dome and the square does not repeat, in a vertical mode, this descent of heaven to earth, this theandric mystery of the Church...

Ouspensky does not pose the problem of the iconostasis, no doubt reserving to return to it in the second, as yet unpublished, part of his work. We know that the sanctuary was separated from the nave, until the end of the Middle Ages only by a very low chancel, a kind of balustrade in the middle of which stood, preceding the altar, the triumphal arch, a true door of life before which the faithful receive communion (these are today our "royal doors"). But, from the 15th and 16th centuries, as Orthodoxy, in a secularized world, closed in on its sense of mystery, the chancel was replaced by a high partition covered with icons: the iconostasis. The paintings of the iconostasis represent the total Church, one through time as well as through spiritual spaces. The angels, the apostles, the martyrs, the Fathers and all the saints are arranged on either side of a central composition that surmounts the Royal Doors, the Deesis (intercession) representing the Virgin and the Baptist interceding on either side of Christ in majesty.

Frescoes and mosaics normally cover almost the entire interior of the church. If Ouspensky does not speak of the iconostasis, he lists the main themes of this wall decoration. One is struck by their theological depth which gives an organic character to the overall symbolism of the building. In the apse of the sanctuary, it is the whole mystery of the Eucharist, "sacrament of the sacraments": below, the communion of the apostles which evokes the memorial; on the vault, the Pentecost, evoking the divine response to the epiclesis; between the two, the Virgin in prayer, figure of the Church (her arms are raised like those of the priest), pointing to Christ, our High Priest, himself a sacrifice and a sacrificer... The decoration of the nave recapitulates the theandric unity of the Church: in the center of the dome, the Pantocrator, source of the heaven of glory that descends to envelop all, bless all and transfigure all. He is surrounded by the prophets and apostles. At the four corners of the square bearing the dome, the four evangelists. On the columns, the column-men: martyrs, holy bishops, "apostolic men." On the walls, the great moments of the Gospel.

Orthodox iconography has experienced a late but profound decadence, in Russia from the seventeenth century, in Greece in the nineteenth. Ouspensky vituperates, with a purifying violence, the jumble of mediocre images which too often clutter the Orthodox churches and most of which constitute, under the label of icons "of Italian taste," distressing by-products of what is most questionable in the religious art of the modern West. (About this art, one could notice, not without malice, that Ouspensky has chosen as a counterpart to the icons he reproduces, the blandest productions of Italian and Spanish "mannerism." It is perhaps a good pedagogy to bring out the specificity of Orthodox sacred art. It is certainly not a valid approach to evaluate from an Orthodox point of view Western art, sacred or "profaned"—an urgent evaluation which has yet to be done).

The fact remains that it is not a question of taste but of faith. This is why we must thank Leonid Ouspensky for having so vigorously specified the theological and liturgical foundations of the Orthodox icon. This article would like to be nothing else than a testimony of gratitude and above all an invitation to the reader: whoever loves icons not as an aesthete but as a man of prayer, must read this book, which is a great book.

Featured image: "Theotokos Deesis," Mount Athos, 14th century.

