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The Byzantine icon as an expression of the composition of the “Beautiful” with the “Sublime”

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Abstract: In this article I attempt to discuss the encounter between Christian Theology and the philosophical branch of Aesthetics. As a basis I have the icons of the Byzantine tradition, which also express the ecclesiastical way of its culture. First of all, I refer to what is defined as the aesthetic interpretation of a work of art and then to how its process receives theological characteristics in the style and approach of Byzantine icons. Next, I present the main characteristics of the artistic-aesthetic categories of the “Beautiful” and the “Sublime” and I undertake the responsibility to show how they function in Byzantine icons, with the former mainly expressing beauty and the latter mainly the intensive direction towards the divine. I also attempt to present some of the conditions by which a Byzantine icon is created, so that it captures, in an artistically and aesthetically remarkable way, holiness and is interwoven with the devotional life of the Christian church. In this perspective, I emphasize that the Byzantine icon reveals: a) how Jesus Christ, as an expression of manhood, fully realizes the immanence of the Holy Trinity and b) how his example is realized as a feat and as an expression of “image of God” from the saints. As an example of the above, I bring the icon “The Vaiophoros” of the Stavronikita Monastery of Mount Athos, which is the work of Theophanes from Crete. I choose it to show how the main directions of the Byzantine style regarding the composition of the “Beautiful” with the “Sublime” also meet during the post-Byzantine period.

Keywords: Byzantine icon, aesthetic interpretation, Beautiful, Sublime, The Vaiophoros

Introduction

In the following concise article, I move in two directions and I attempt a synthetic inclusion of them in a single theoretical model. Specifically, I will present some judgments about the theological and aesthetic approach of the Byzantine icon, under the conditions of an abstract generalization. At the outset, let us point out that in the perspective of the ecclesiastical life of Eastern Christianity, the icon is an artistic factor which reflects in a sensible way the process by which the created world becomes a carrier of the divine uncreated energies, of the manifestations of which it itself has come into being. In terms that specifically describe human creative action, we could say that the icon highlights the conscious course of its creator for a qualitative change of the physical information and for their reduction to an ontological level, which, although it goes beyond them, gives them meaning repeatedly.¹ Joining this transcendental perspective, each icon is not just a work of art, but above all, a creation full of the intention to expand human existential horizons and democratic communication with this world. At the same time –and this expresses a capital, if not the main, mission– its creator, without losing sight of the historical coordinates of development of the theological and ecclesiastical way of life and reflection, undertakes to detect and project the super-historical “openings” of spatiotemporal becoming. And this undertaking is not carried out so abstractly and theoretically, but mainly through the depiction of specific persons of the

¹ See indicatively Kalokiris K., *Η ζωγραφία της Ορθοδοξίας (The painting of Orthodoxy)*, P. Pournaras, 1972, pp. 202-216. Cf. Yiannaras Chr., *Η ελευθερία του ήθους (The freedom of morals)*, Grigoris, 1979, pp. 300-344. We also need, however, to refer to L. Ouspensky’s great study, *La théologie de l’icône dans l’Eglise orthodoxe*, Cerf, 1980, where the icon is inscribed in the ecclesiological liturgy and in the aim to update the Gospel of the new times in the perspective of the Kingdom of Heaven, with the consequence of sanctifying the perspective of those who turn towards its viewing. Also, the above-mentioned scholar adds particular importance to connecting the icon with the Christocentric-theandric orientation of the Church both in the beginning and teleologically.

ecclesiastical historical “adventure”, who proved with their lives that they liberated themselves in a powerful ascetic way from their individual passions and evolved consciously and practically to receivers and exponents of the supernatural archetypes. And obviously in this perspective the top position is occupied by Jesus Christ, as the incarnate divine Word and as the theandric archetype of the above persons, the Virgin Mary and the angels. Therefore, under a synthetic view, the icons constitute the artistic depiction of the theological truths, of those experienced within the ecclesiastical-worshipping becoming.²

1. A general approach of the aesthetic interpretation

The theological dimension of the icons, however, is inextricably linked, precisely because they are artistic products, with the philosophical branch of Aesthetics. However, it is clearly an aesthetic evaluation of a special type, that is, one that reflects the realization of holiness by personal ascending degrees or the a priori possession of it when speaking about Jesus Christ. In spite of this theocentrically defined approach, Byzantine icons highlight a number of details of Aesthetics, and in fact without putting its philosophical foundationalism on the sidelines, and thus with theoretical legitimacy they can be classified in the categorical schemes that it itself defines as a general branch.³ From this point of view, we will attempt to shed light on this inclusion, with some general remarks regarding the artistic-aesthetic categories of “Beautiful” and “Sublime”. But before proceeding to the identification of these characteristics in the icons, we consider it necessary to briefly present some general

² Cf. Evdokimov P., *Η Ορθοδοξία (Orthodoxy)*, trans. in Greek Agg. Mourtzopoulos, B. Rigopoulos, 1972, pp. 291-314. Also, Zanas T. (trans. in Greek), *Περί ύλης και τέχνης (On matter and art)*, (collective volume), Athina, 1971.

³ Cf. Evdokimov P., *Η τέχνη τής εικόνας. Θεολογίας τής ωραιότητας (The art of the icon. Theology of beauty)*, trans. in Greek K. Charalambidis, P. Pournaras, 1980. Mathew G., *Byzantine Aesthetics*, Murray, London 1963.

theoretical approaches regarding the aesthetic interpretation and the aesthetic categories, with the perspective of bringing to the fore certain transformations which exist in the Byzantine environment.

First of all, let us note that the essential theoretical approach and the evaluation of a work of art presuppose as their inviolable epistemological condition a coherent meta-path, which is inscribed in what is undertaken as an interpretation. By the term "aesthetic interpretation" we refer to the methodical process required for the aesthetically functioning subject to pass successively from the direct visual experience, from the cognitive acquisition and the in-depth experiential familiarization of a –literary, musical, architectural and, more broadly, artistic– creation. In other words, from the attempt for a conscious "translation" of it, so that behind the material with which its form is imprinted, its messages, its ideological substratum, so to speak, and its dialectical relationship with the physical, the historical, social and political reality. Finally, whether it emits the necessary messages to transform for the better the collective processes and the personal choices of each individual person. That is to say, to examine whether it also works meta-analytically in relation to what it declares. According to these -later-information, each authentic work of art is initially an object not immediately accessible, with the consequence that it is open to various explanations and evaluations. In other words, it can be perceived as a secret space, whose central thematic axis and its details have not been clarified to the proper extent, with the consequence that a highly idiosyncratic and strict approach is required in order to become, as far as possible, the property of the exegete. Thus, the exegete is called upon to study at an initial level in detail all of the above parameters of the artistic product under consideration and then to reconstruct it at the semantic, experiential and theoretical levels.⁴

⁴ Cf. Papanoutsos E., *Αισθητική (Aesthetics)*, Athens 1969, pp. 375-413, where particular importance is given to the purification that occurs to man when he consciously and experientially participates in a work of art.

However, the preeminent interpretive parameter –and precisely the one that differentiates it from any other cultural product– in the process of approaching a work of art is aesthetics, without post-aesthetic reductions and extensions for a certain period of time. The term “aesthetics” in its so-called refined meaning indicates a special relationship of the human interiority with the world that surrounds it, a peculiar and at the same time open attitude, which the personal “ego” develops towards the objects it encounters or with which it is related. It refers to the movement that consciousness makes, to discover and bring to light a value of things, which is not put at the service of any situation and rather of utilitarian expedients. On the contrary, it is the value that is offered for its pure enjoyment and that transformatively. These limitations clearly state that, in order to place the human ego in an aesthetic attitude toward an object, it must control, suspend, or even abolish the gratification of its instinctive and animal appetites, as well as detach itself from the usual and necessary activities. In other words, to distance itself from the various coldly practical and calculative terms by which it is connected to the existing things and happenings in the surrounding space. These mean to deny the utilitarian perspective of satisfaction, through physical and social data, of any kind of unequivocal materialistic need and the preeminent realization of the aggressive instinct for dominance. It is a direction that excludes the criteria of instrumental activity, the selection of skillful strategy and the establishment of systems that reconstruct data and events based on the “logic” of limitless efficiency.⁵ Moving aesthetically, interiority asks to be purified, to enjoy what is outside of everyday conventions, to contemplate with a different perspective the values of life within an atmosphere of claimed and experienced communicability. Therefore, the aesthetic interpretation of a work of art attempts to discover

⁵ Cf. Papanoutsos E., *Αισθητική (Aesthetics)*, pp. 13-27, where both the historical and the systematic consideration of the subject can be found. This is a discussion that has been thoroughly processed by Kant based on the definitions he attributes to the “Beautiful”. Cf. Kant Im., *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, K. Kehrbach, Leipzig, pp. 44-90.

those characteristics which, with the pleasure they will offer, will move and purify the inner world of people, as long as they participate in their content. These are situations that are associated with those which will oppose any tendency to control or total intervention in things, precisely because they introduce a transcendental mentality against the pathologies brought about by a sterile and competitive secularization.⁶

2. The aesthetic categories and the terms of their emergence

The aesthetic interpretation, both during its process and at the moment when - it gives the impression that - it is completed, is formulated in specific terms, which in the philosophical language are called "categories", the composition of which has plagued the relevant research since Plato. Under a general approach, aesthetic categories can be understood as the inclusive mental schemes with which thought, accompanied by intentionality –which includes the "turbulences" and expectations of emotions and experiences–, approaches the representational data of each work of art, in order to interpret it, to include it in a specific eidological scheme and to value it. Possibly –and according to a realist approach to the ontological determination of human interiority– they are in consciousness as mental and emotional subjects or as possibilities for their formation. In other words, they constitute in a way the epistemological equipment of the spirit or the forms through which it "invests" its relationship with the work of art under interpretation. However, this a priori possibility does not mean that determinants are imposed on the content of the work of art or that they determine its essence and accidents. And this limitation is due to the fact that each work of this kind as an objective creation exists before any approach to it –and this is where its intimate realism emerges– and,

⁶ Cf. Marcuse H., "Remarks on a redefinition of culture", *Daidalos: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Science* 94:1, 1965, pp. 190-207.

therefore, this defines the conditions of its theoretical formulation and expressive representation. The work inherently contains its “what” and “how” and independently possesses its particular characters, which are unquestionably the results of the concrete intellectual activity of its creator - regardless of the scholar’s interpretive categories, which during the historical development have been proven that they vary. And here another dimension of realism emerges. The aesthetic interpretation does not function as a favoritism or as an nominalism, it does not possess self-sufficient categorical schemes for each particular case of reference, but it intervenes synthetically a posteriori, obviously not as an unwritten map. Therefore, its mission lies in discovering, as far as possible, the exact content of the work of art to which it refers –which, despite its partial similarities to others, is unique– and inscribing it in mental contours and highlighting it in the theoretical field through the categories. Thus, with the formation or application of the categories, the transition is made from the participation in the work of art to its scientific description.⁷

It becomes obvious from the above that in the process of aesthetic experience and interpretation, conceptual realism is applied, i.e. initially the identification –and conditional respect– of the properties and they meet in a work of art and then their mental reconstruction and their depiction with specific categorical schemes. Of course, the categories are formed with their particular inclusive content, since first of all the thinking subject has studied a series of works of art and has identified the common characteristics between them, provided, of course, that it has the –perhaps transcendental– possibilities to function aesthetically. In other words, human consciousness constructs the categories inductively, i.e. reducing abstractly from the comparison of individual creations to the formulation of general concepts. These

⁷ Cf. Moutsopoulos E., *Αι Αισθητικές Κατηγορίες (The Aesthetic Categories)*, Athens 1970, where it is generally argued that the system of aesthetic categories is open to continuity, since the dialectical relationship with the work of art is subject to renewal or the very evolution of human culture leads to new techniques and, therefore, to new readings

concepts express and reflect the common substratum or the common way by which the creations become the mental and experiential property of the consciousness and, finally, theoretical formation of. It is understood here that, in order to do the above, the corresponding intentional movement of consciousness, its coordination with the special situation it is about to encounter, is also presupposed.⁸

This general discussion also has a scope of application in the Byzantine icon, but under the condition that it is an artistic creation with a specific purpose, which captures with its expressive means the Christian teaching. According to the Byzantine spirit, the Christian hagiographer should first participate in the principles of his faith and then proceed to the manifestation of his artistic talent. Or, else, he should activate the fact that he himself is a creation in the “image of God” and in the field of his construction activities he should gradually actualize the “likeness of God”. So in what is communicated here, the divine image inherent in the Christian artist constitutes his metaphysical realist infrastructure, which through the sensible icons also becomes inner worldly. From this point onwards, the intervention of the exegete is activated, who is also called upon to participate in the principles of the Christian faith, in order to construct in an objective manner the relevant aesthetic categories. We will come back in this topic at the last paragraph of our epilogue.

⁸ The above-mentioned situation of the encounter takes place mainly in the preeminent space of the icon, that is, in the worship of the ecclesiastical community, founded by Jesus Christ. Within the Church, man as a believer “claims”, apart from the rest, to meet those challenges that will broaden his horizons. And the icon provides the challenges for realizing this communication-enlargement. Cf L. Ouspensky, *La théologie de l'icône dans l'Eglise orthodoxe*, 15-58.

3. The aesthetic categories of “Beautiful” and “Sublime”

Traditionally, the pre-eminent aesthetic category is that of “Beautiful”. It expresses harmony and measure, balance and proportion, the fact that a situation is at the most crucial moment of its evolution or formation. The “Beautiful” causes a pleasant emotion, an internalization due to the fact that, expressing itself a situation in its almost complete normality and rhythmicity, it tends to give the authentic measure to human activities and prevent from choices that degrade and trivialize the phenomenon of life.

It is the category of the possible fine limits in terms of artistic purpose and its aesthetic depiction. We could argue that “Beautiful” reflects, in a pragmatic way, the moment when a situation or a person has reached that point where stability and permanence must prevail and there is no need for any development or reform. This delimiting characteristic does not mean that with the “Beautiful” a static version of life or an anti-historicism are proposed and established, but that the fascinating for its quality dimension that has been reached by a particular field of personal and historical becoming is captured. Despite the fact that it is not primarily a source for raising concerns about further spiritual penetrations, it offers a high level and purified indulgence.⁹

While the category of “Beautiful” places works of art primarily on the anthropological level, the category of “Sublime” moves the approaches to the metaphysical and the transcendent, not necessarily in a theological sense. It refers to situations and persons who possess –or reach– an infinite spiritual power, and in moral areas where the usual choice and action are overturned and transformed, with results in that the way of being takes on or reveals perspectives of greatness. In its presence the conventional measures of virtue are completely lifted and any definite urge for vulgar and expansive access to the outside world is overcome. The man who enjoys the “Sublime” or participates in its infinite depth becomes its face and is even led to a profound purification.

⁹ Moutsopoulos E., *Αι Αισθητικές Κατηγορίες (The Aesthetic Categories)*, pp. 18-25.

He clears his mind, his emotional states and his experiences and realizes the inexhaustible reductionism of human existence. He comes into contact with what it means to appreciate his existence and how he himself can center at every level of his activity the mystical or not at first sight explainable messages or the metaphysical conditions or even the archetypes of the natural and historical world.¹⁰ So, from any point of view, the “Sublime” constitutes an accomplishment.

Synthesizing the above in the Christian context, we would mention that, when a Byzantine icon includes the categories of “Beautiful” and “Sublime”, it performs or highlights the ecstatically held mutual dialectical relationship of the human with the divine. The “Beautiful” is mainly associated with the external morphological characteristics, while the “Sublime” is mainly related with the internal order of consciousness and the feats depicted. This distinction certainly does not mean that there is a dualistic intersection between the form and the content in an icon.

These two factors of a work of art are mutually connected and one emerges through the other, but in any case they are also determined by the particular worldview adopted by its creator. In fact, in most details of an artistic composition, their overlap is pervasive. However, the parameter which is usually shown in a Byzantine icon is that the reductive

¹⁰ To Edm. Burke we owe the first systematic and autonomous reading of the aesthetic category of the “Sublime” (cf. *Philosophical Inquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful*, London 1976). This scholar adds to the category of “Sublime” also psychological characteristics, mainly in the sense of a personal deficit on the part of man against it. For his part, Im. Kant, without denying the above reading, gives also an optimistic tone, clarifying that the “Sublime” reflects the inner overcoming of an obstacle by man. See Kant Im., *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, pp. 110-112. However, for the directions of our study here, we will agree with Papanoutsos’ position that the “Sublime” intensifies and prolongs our emotional life with the impression of the infinite size, the infinite power it gives us and with the admiration it inspires us (cf. *Aesthetics*, pp. 279-284). These are situations which, from the Byzantine approach, derive their cause from the manifestation of the divine providence, expressed in a tangible way in the person of Jesus Christ.

dimension of life towards the transcendent is mainly expressed by the “Sublime”, which is linked to an advanced degree with the thrilling in intensity and grandeur conditions of formation of the event described or with the internal dramatic “adventure” of the persons depicted. On the other hand, the “Beautiful” in every case, since it expresses the human measures in their highest position, it contributes to the fact that it cannot be cut off from the meaningful perspectives of the icon, which does not destroys but highlights the cosmic fields in their fullness. In both modes of presence, however, the dominant thing is the ecclesiastical spirit. Thus, we could argue that the category of “Beautiful” expresses mainly in current terms what “Sublime” constitutes as a present and prospective situation. That is, as a form the “Beautiful” captures what is connected with the eschatological “opening”, with a dynamocratic contemplation of the future century, that is, with what is included in the category of the “Sublime” as well as what puts forward in a regulative way the super-empirical and super-historical dimensions of worldly life. Transcendence is expressed by Jesus Christ as the divine Logos and worldliness by his incarnation. For their part, humans begin by assimilating embodiment and move on to participate in transcendence.

4. “The Vaiophoros” as an example of presence of the categories of “Beautiful” and “Sublime”

As a case study to prove all these we will take the Byzantine –or more accurately the post-Byzantine– icon named “The Vaiophoros”, which is located in the Holy Monastery of Stavronikita on Mount Athos and was created by Theophanis from Crete. This icon -belonging to the Christological or the Theandric cycle- presents one of the most important and inclusive scenes of the life of Jesus Christ and conveys in a concentrated and perceptible way the deeper meaning and prospective significance of the incarnate divine Logos’ march to Jerusalem during in its completeness in space -but not only in it. Christ, sitting in a white donkey,

a choice indicative of his humility –which is also expressed by the style of his face–, and blessing, heads towards Jerusalem, whose walls can be seen really close in the background. Small children spread clothes and vagia on the street. On the left a group of his disciples follows with Peter first, while on the right and outside the walls of Jerusalem a group of Jews is ready to welcome him in rather formal attitudes and a self-controlled style. On the slope of a prismatic painted mountain, a child is shown on a tree cutting branches with a pruner. In terms of material means, the colors are sacred and warm, red, green, yellow and strongly projected in the golden background with the golden yellow mountains and gray building. It should be noted that each group is framed by a part of the general landscape, whose outline, in terms of interactivity, follows the shape of the forms of the persons in the realized perspective of a mutual participation.

In terms of technique, this icon –although it was probably created in 1546– follows the standards of the Middle Byzantine era and is distinguished for the deep harmony and perfection in the creation of the forms, for the balanced performance of the style and for the sensitivity of the communications in terms of how the forms work together with the landscape. It should be noted that the figures are painted with intense colors, while there are also lines. Special attention has been paid in the fact that their features are delicate and processed with sensitivity. The pale gold-yellow proplasm spreads over extensive surfaces, sarcomas are absent and the faces are shaped with sharp white strokes, which create bright foci. The general impression given by the faces is freedom, which is based on strong contrasts, which, however, do not remove the more general theological and anthropological goals. Rhythmic dynamism moves the masses and debases matter. The harmonious balance of the work together with the internally realistic and in moderate linear terms rendering of the forms feed the coexistence of the “Sublime” and the “Beautiful”. In the perspective of their reciprocity, “Sublime” lends the semantic tones to “Beautiful”, while “Beautiful” gives the expressive tones to “Sublime”.

Form and content have been completely harmonized, so as to give the icon a harmonious mixture realized by stability and dynamism. Thus, the icon has the integrity of sobriety and pulsates with vitality and strength with the situation mainly reflecting the “Sublime” and with the latter mainly the “Beautiful”. Both categories are presented in a supreme degree in the person of Christ, who enters Jerusalem as the prince of peace, while he is also aware of the course which he follows with a deep conscience towards the voluntary passion. So, this particular peacemaking current moment is not only experienced as a present situation but also as the dramatic beginning for a climactic rise which will be completed at the end of times. The immanence of the divine economy as personal theandric property is thus present, with peace reflecting the “Beautiful” and with voluntary passion reflecting the “Sublime”.

We close with some remarks regarding the Christian-approached artistic-aesthetic categories. First of all, regarding the iconographer-hagiographer, the following questions will be raised: does he stand before normative categorical imperatives that he must follow? Does he move with the transcendent or with the empirical function of the artistic-aesthetic criterion? What possibility exists for his non-response to the categorical proper thing? Examining the third question, we would note that this possibility is conscious in Byzantine and post-Byzantine iconographers. This awareness ensures that they are not led to an automatic acceptance regarding their precise expression of the transcendent criterion, which in Christianity is associated with the “image of God”. Therefore, they also use the empirical criterion, which is connected to two factors: a) with the historical-sensible presence of the Logos of God and b) with their historical-sensible expression by those who have conquered holiness. These are two extremely realistic data, which, through their gradual maturation in the consciousness of the iconographer-hagiographer, meet the transcendent criterion and validate it. This encounter is called upon to identify whoever undertakes the responsibility to interpret the Byzantine icon and to attempt to participate in its messages,

in order to activate similar situations in their inner world. The icons exemplify the Eighth Day, with the consequence that the iconographer-hagiographer, as the case may be, must have composed or discovered within himself the aesthetic categories of the “Beautiful” and the “Sublime” and subsequently recorded them artistically, with the observer-interpreter working the other way around. We therefore believe that it would not be a theoretical misstep if we argued that the categories found in an image of the Byzantine tradition are at the same time artistic and aesthetic and in fact theandric.

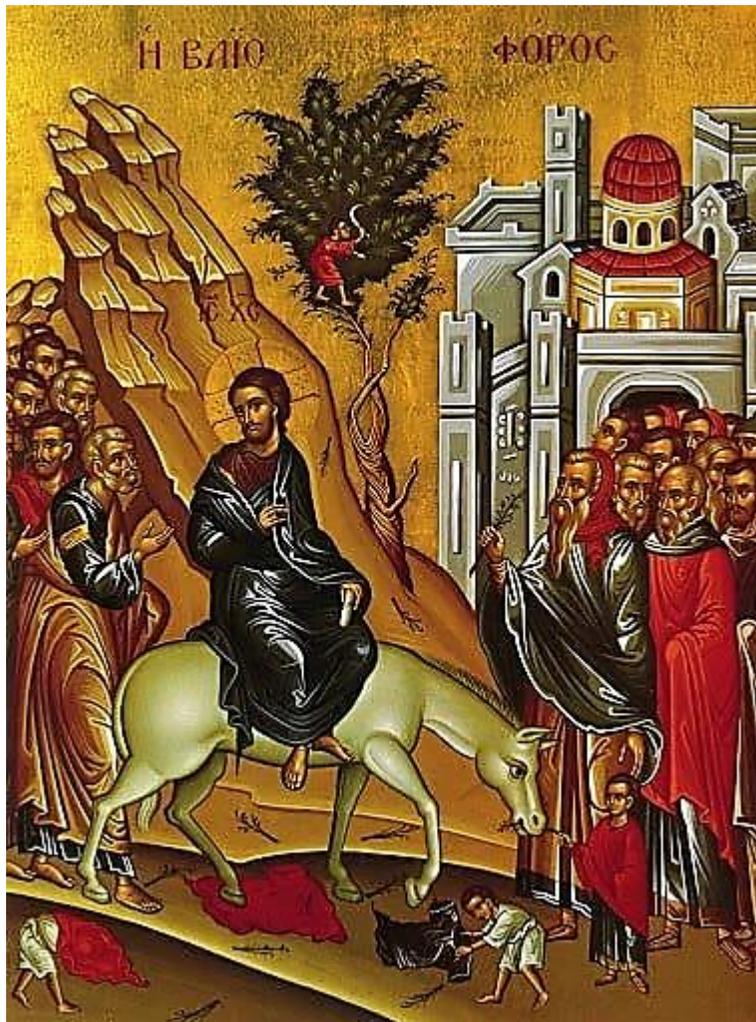
Epilogue

Evaluating the artistic-aesthetic atmosphere emitted by the Byzantine icon, we would argue that it is not limited to spirituality, but that it dynamocratically refers to the ontological depth of being and existence. And the reason for this characterization arises from the fact that the terms of its foundation are Christocentric-theandric, that is, they are drawn from the person and teaching of Jesus Christ and from those who participate in his mystical presence. The Byzantine iconographer-hagiographer therefore does not work autonomously with his subjective talent and inspirations, but is called upon to start from his penetration into divine reality and its archetypal projections. In other words, by keeping in mind the symbolic language of art, he highlights the transcendent reality in natural and human terms. Thus, even though in the Byzantine icon there are top artistic achievements and aesthetic categories, its content is governed by metaphysical realism in its immanent presence and in its conscious imitation by those people who conquer sainthood. And it must be noted that sanctity does not constitute a simple moral and intellectual achievement, but mainly represents the “likeness of God”, which constitutes the realization on the part of man of “image of God”, which represents the very fact of creation of man, the ontological foundation of his existence. It is actually necessary to

mention that according to the Byzantine Fathers of the Church, the artistic-aesthetic categories of “Beautiful” and “Sublime” are originally of divine content and express the mode of existence of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, what constitutes a self-founding situation for God, for man is defined, normatively and reductively, as a feat in progress. The above causes the interpretation of a Byzantine icon to be defined as a synthetic judgment, which includes the divine a priori and the human a posteriori, the paradigmatic and the initiatory respectively. Jesus Christ in the –at least post-Byzantine icon– “The Vaiophoros” realizes and infers ontological normativity, so to speak, in his person. This development obviously has nothing to do with Jesus Christ himself, but with how his teaching and his life are handled and received by people.

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