

## Transfiguring Matter

### The Icon as Paradigm of Christian Ecology<sup>1</sup>

Monk Aidan

#### Introduction

A monk of the Egyptian desert said to his disciple: "If you wish it, you too may become all fire". His astonished disciple had just witnessed flames flickered from his fingers as he stood in prayer.

To be filled with the fire of God, the glory of God, the uncreated light of God; not just to follow God at a distance but to be united to Him; to become gods by grace - this what the soul of man, what his whole being yearns for. This fire is the saint's life, even if he must gain it by death. Using the opposite image of water to express this ineffable mystery, the second century St Ignatius the God-bearer wrote to those trying to deflect him from his pending martyrdom:

*My birth pangs are at hand...Do not coax me with material things. Allow me to receive the pure light; when I arrive there I shall be a real man...there is not in me any sensuous fire, but living water bounding up in me, and saying inside me, 'Come to the Father'.<sup>2</sup>*

It is to this end that all the Scriptures and all the life and liturgical art of the Church lead us:

*His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature. (2 Peter 1:3,4)*

But if this divine fire is man's ultimate food and drink, why has God made us of matter as well as of spirit, and placed us within a world full of density? Is all this density a sort of labyrinth, through which we must painfully struggle until we emerge into the world of pure spirit, a labyrinth which is the work of a God who delights in making things difficult?

Or perhaps the material world is the progeny of some ghastly mistake we humans have made, something inherently bad and by its very nature an obstruction to our progress towards some utopia of disembodied spirit?

Or is the material world an essential part of our call to become "partakers of the divine nature", to become "gods by grace" in the phrase of St Athanasius the Great? This is a vital issue for sacred art: Since the raw stuff of all art is matter, a sacred cosmology is the essential foundation of sacred art.

The Christian answer is, of course, that matter is created by God, is good, and is, somehow, part of the divine plan for our deification. Somehow, matter can become like Moses's bush which burned with God's fire without being consumed. As is sung in every Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church:

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of Thy glory*

If matter as such is good, then our bodies too must have a place in the divine plan. St Gregory of Nyssa affirms this when he writes:

*Since the human being is a twofold creature, compounded of soul and body, it is necessary that those to be saved lay hold of the Author of the new life through both their compound parts.<sup>3</sup>*

G.K. Chesterton praises the incarnational character of our faith with his characteristic wit:

<sup>1</sup> A Talk given in St Aldates, Oxford, 28 November, 1998, for the Kairos Study Day, "Images of Heaven: Christian Sacred Art in East and West.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to the Romans, vi and vii (transl. Henry Bettenson)

<sup>3</sup> "Greater Catechism" (XXXVII):

*(True religion) is always trying to make men feel truths as facts; always trying to make abstract things as plain and solid as concrete things; always trying to make man, not merely admit the truth, but see, handle, hear and devour the truth.*

(in “Alarms and Discourses”)

But it is the *somehow* which I want to explore in this talk -the *how*, according to the Orthodox Church’s iconographic and patristic tradition, we as humans are called to knit together the worlds of spirit and matter, and so be deified. St Gregory Nazianzus tells us that we are in transition, toward deification, and that our compound nature of matter and spirit is with in the whole of this journey into eternity:

*This man he set upon earth as a kind of second world, a microcosm; another kind of angel, a worshipper of blended nature. ..Thus he is a living creature under God’s providence here, while in transition to another state, and (this is the consummation of the mystery) in process of deification by reason of his natural tendency towards God.*

St Gregory Nazianzus “Orations” 45.8 (transl. Henry Bettenson)

Biblical and patristic teaching on our divinely appointed task can be summarised in the three classical images of *prophet, king* and *priest*. Another way of expressing these roles is to say that we were created to be the *poets, artists* and *musical conductors* of the cosmos. These are our tasks which, like steps, will lead us up Mount Tabor not only to behold Christ transfigured, but to be transfigured with Him. These are all aspects of the single divine-human workshop of the Church, whose task is to weave a garment for Christ from the whole cosmos so that it might be transfigured with Him.

Let us look at each of these images of poet, artist and conductor, exploring how icons both illustrate them and are themselves a fruit of them.

### **The Church as Prophet and Poet**

God created each thing with a word, a *logos* spoken by the Logos Himself. Furthermore, the Fathers teach that each of these words continue within that created thing, be it rock, tree or creature. These are the *logoi* from the *Logos*. By the grace of God and our repentance, our senses are purified so that we can hear, can sense these words hidden within each created thing. Gradually we perceive that these individual words in fact form a pattern. We realize that the cosmos is in a poem of love from the Creator to us, a fragrance trailing behind the divine Lover which woos us to find Him. In the theological language of St Maximus the Confessor:

*He who has made his heart pure will not only know the inner essences of what is sequent [comes after] to God and dependent on Him but, after passing through all of them, he will in some measure see God Himself, which is the supreme consummation of all blessings.<sup>4</sup>*

Or in the poetic language of the Song of Songs, the beloved declares of the Beloved:

*Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;*

*your name is like perfume poured out.<sup>5</sup>*

(Song of Solomon 1:3)

*I slept but my heart was awake.*

*Listen! My lover is knocking...*

*I opened for my lover,*

*but my lover had left...*

(Song of Solomon 5:2,6)

Saint Maximos likens the spiritual life to a movement from beholding the light of Christ shining through His garments - that is, through created things such as nature and the Scriptures - to beholding this same light coming the face of Christ.<sup>6</sup> It is in God’s nature to descend, to embody Himself: “Always and in all His word God wills to effect the mystery of His embodiment (*ensomatosis* in Greek)” writes St. Maximos. It is in man’s nature to ascend toward God - not to disembody himself, but to ascend with and in his body to the divine Source of all.

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<sup>4</sup> St Maximus the Confessor, “Second Century in Theology” #80, in Vol. II of “The Philokalia” London (1984); transl. Palmer *et al.*

<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps pertinent that the Hebrew words for fragrance and name sound alike.

<sup>6</sup> See *Ambigua* 10

One task of iconography is to unveil these *logoi* hidden within creation, to make the invisible visible. The abstraction of the icon in fact makes the icon more real than the naturalism of, say, a Renaissance painting. The abstraction of an icon literally *draws out* the spiritual essence of each thing or event depicted. If the icon of the Nativity makes the Mother of God larger in scale than the shepherds or the angels, it is because she is more important than they. Or if it makes the Christ Child tiny, it is to affirm the astounding self-abasement of the Creator for our sakes.

Or again, we notice that trees, mountains, birds are not depicted as a naturalist would: trees, especially in mosaics such as those in Ravenna, are shown flecked with gold, shot through with light as in their true Paradisical state; mountains bow towards the saints; birds often have colour combinations not seen in this world. The whole arrangement of each person and thing in an icon reveals the poetical harmony of a redeemed creation, each thing operating according to its inner logos or essence, inclining towards its Maker. The cosmos is not so much an art gallery as a procession.

Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of icons is the absence of shadow. This is because the icon reveals all things as living and moving and having their being in God: as God is light, there can be no shadow.

One reason for the icon's unusual systems of perspective is to help us transcend a rationalistic way of seeing, to encourage us to perceive the world through the eye of the heart. The Greek Fathers called this eye the *nous*, and the Latin Fathers, the intellect. The icon invites us to see the world as God sees it. St Isaac the Syrian writes:

*Here is the sign that you are approaching the borders of this mysterious country: when grace begins to open your eyes so that they see things in their essence*

The background of icons is gold, or of some light reflective ground. This represents the divine glory, the uncreated light which sustains all things. But this same light is also within the saints, hence their haloes. God is not therefore to be known as some object entirely apart from ourselves, or from created things in general - although He of course transcends all categories of created existence.

*..the person found worthy to dwell in God will perceive pre-existing in God all the inner essences of created things.*

writes St Maximus the Confessor.<sup>7</sup>

One of man's first tasks, the first stage of his ascent to Tabor, is to discover these inner essences, these hidden words, to find the true name of each thing. In the words of that great Russian saint, Seraphim of Sarov:

*When the Lord commanded Adam to give names to all the creatures, he gave every creature a name which completely expressed all the qualities, powers and properties given it by God at its creation. Owing to this very gift of the supernatural grace of God which was infused into him by the breath of life, Adam could see and understand the Lord walking in Paradise, and comprehend his words, and the conversation of the holy angels, and the language of all beasts, birds and reptiles..."<sup>8</sup>*

Herein lies the prophetic role of the Church and its iconographic tradition: she is called to perceive and manifest the word of God within creation, to discover the true names of things, to read the poem of God's love for man written in letters of stars, moons, birds and soil.

But of course most of don't see or hear these hidden words. This is because we are impure. It is only through ascetic struggle in the Church and her Sacraments that we allow the grace of God to reveal these mysteies to us. "Give God you blood and He will give you His spirit" is a favourite saying among Orthodox monks. There is no room for romantic dreaming; there are no easy ways through the veil of blindness.

### **The Church as King and Artist**

In secular circles it has become common practice to blame our ecological crisis on the Biblical mandate to "fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion..." (Genesis 1:28). But how has the Church traditionally understood this dominion?

A helpful way of bypassing the negative associations which many have of man's dominion over the earth is to think of it as artistic skilfulness. In order to make a beautiful icon, or sculpture, or piece of

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<sup>7</sup> St Maximus in "Second Century in Theology", #4 in Vol. II of "The Philokalia" (transl., Palmer et al)

<sup>8</sup> St Seraphim of Sarov, in "Conversation with Motovilov", Jordanville, N.Y. (1962); page 11.

furniture, a craftsman must be *master* of his material, he must have loving dominion over it. And such mastery entails a *sympathy* with the materials, a desire to bring the best out of them, to discover and bring to fruition the inner essence of each material. The craftsman raises his material to a higher plane by, as it were, mingling it with his intelligence -and of course by contrast a poor workman will debase his material by mingling it with his ineptitude. Surely it is as a skilled artist and craftsman that man is called to exercise his dominion - to mingle it with his spirit, and through him, to mingle it with God's Spirit, to sublimate it, to transfigure it; not to enslave creation but to save it:

*God is our king before all ages; he has worked salvation in the midst of the earth*  
declares the psalmist. (*Psalm 74:12*)

The corollary to man's dominion on earth is his citizenship of heaven, or as St Gregory Nazianzus puts it,

*Adam was king of all upon earth, but a subject of heaven; earthly and heavenly; transient yet immortal...*<sup>9</sup>

Our task is not to merely reorganise this created world, let alone treat it as an endless supply of free goods. Our task is rather to marry earth to heaven, to unite it to God. We are called to weave the beautiful raw creation into a garment for the Church, so that it might participate in its transfiguration. The very word *cosmos* - adornment - suggests that this is its purpose. A Russian bishop, Metropolitan Macarius wrote that man is destined to be

*the head and king of creation, so that by concentrating the aims of all existing visible creatures in himself, he might through himself unite all things with God, and thus keep the whole chain of earthly creatures in a harmonious bond and order.*<sup>10</sup>

Our supremacy over the cosmos does not entail aloofness from it. We can be its artist not only because as spiritual beings we are superior to it, but also because we are part of it. St. Maximus compares our relationship with the world to that between the soul and the body of the human person: they are distinct but not separate facets of the single person. The supremacy of the soul exists to invigorate, to transform the body, not to constrict it;

*The spiritual world is in the material world like the presence of a soul in a body, and the material world is fused with the spiritual like a body with its soul; as soul and body make one man, so the two make one world*<sup>11</sup>

In Christ, man is called to lead the cosmos from being a jungle into a verdant city. But to so rule what is outside himself, he must first rule what is within himself; he must be inwardly united to God if he is to unite the world to God. A king must also be an ascetic and a man of prayer:

*The man who does not pray remains a slave, enclosed in the complex mechanisms of the natural world and of the movements of his own passions, by which he is dominated even more than by the world outside.*<sup>12</sup> (Dimitru Staniloae)

How is this sacramental dominion affirmed in icons?

Firstly, the iconographer does not work as a lone despot over his materials, to paint what he wishes. His dominion over his pigments serves a higher purpose: His icons are a window between heaven and earth, helping to make the fellowship of the saints real. And traditionally he does not sign his work, since he seeks to serve rather than impress.

Each icon is a microcosm of the whole world offered to God; what has been said of the priest in the Divine Liturgy can be seen in a more limited way of the iconographer: he holds the whole world in his hand like an apple. The iconographer takes representatives of all three levels of creation and fashions them into an ark for God. Pigments are mainly from the mineral kingdom, the wooden panel represents the whole vegetable kingdom, and the egg yolk binder represents the animal kingdom. Operating within the inspired council of the Church, he is meant to skilfully "weave" these materials into a "garment" for Christ and His saints, to make the invisible visible. In fact the Russian word for the hollowed out section found in most icons is means ark.

The icon does not then merely *depict* the creation's redemption and transfiguration: it is itself one of the means of this and a fruit of it. Each icon is a miniature ark of the covenant, a grace bearer, a stone

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<sup>9</sup> St Gregory Nazianzus "Orations" 45.8 (transl. Henry Bettenson)

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky in "Orthodox Dogmatic Theology", California (1983); page 139.

<sup>11</sup> St Maximus the Confessor, in "Mystagogia" 17

<sup>12</sup> Dimitru Staniloae in "Prayer and Holiness" Oxford (1982); page 17

warmed by the spiritual sun which then itself can radiate that same warmth. In the words of the nineteenth century Russian thinker Ivan Kireevsky:

*For whole centuries [the Iviron icon] had absorbed the torrents of prayers which had poured over it, the cries of afflicted and unhappy souls. It has therefore been filled with this power of faith which now shines from it in order to be reflected in the hearts of these supplicants.*<sup>13</sup>

### **The Church as Priest and Conductor**

For all its beauty, the inanimate world cannot give thanks to its Creator. Nor can it can sacrifice itself to its Creator. Certainly, in the providential order of things there is sacrifice within creation: one animal is eaten to sustain another; a tree dies and becomes mulch which feeds insects and other trees, and so on. But without man, its priest, the universe cannot rise above itself. In the words of St Leontius of Cyprus:

*The creation does not venerate God directly by itself, but it is through me that the heavens declare the glory of God, through me the moon worships God, through me the stars glorify Him, through me the waters and showers of rain, the dew and all creation venerate God and give Him glory.*<sup>14</sup>

Icons are an integral part of this cosmic Eucharist. They are prayer and thanksgiving in paint. Through prayer offered to God through them, icons become grace-bearers:

*Matter is filled with divine grace through prayer addressed to those portrayed in icons*<sup>15</sup>. writes St John of Damascus.

Icons do not exist only to be contemplated through the brain, although much teaching can be derived from them in this way. They exist primarily to be used liturgically; they are, quite literally, loved to bits. They are hung and venerated in churches, homes, cars, roadside chapels, over gates. They are processed, and used as a blessing before departure on a journey. And there are icons which miraculously weep, or exude sweetly scented oils. Icons are in short a foretaste of paradise where all things are manifestly filled with light and grace.

### **The Incarnation the Fount of all**

To conclude, we must return to Christ, who is The Icon, The Prophet and Poet, The King and Artist, The Priest and Conductor. Our priesthood derives from participation in His priesthood. What we, the first Adam failed to do, Christ, the Second Adam accomplished. We can fulfil our task of uniting the created with the Creator only in the divine-human community of the Church, the Body of Christ. As St Gregory of Nyssa proclaims:

*...by means of the flesh which Christ has assumed, and thereby deified, everything kindred and related may be saved along with it.*<sup>16</sup>

The embodiment of God in Christ, the true humanity of Christ which can be seen and touched, is precisely the basis and fount of the icon. If there had been no Incarnation, no descent of God to earth, there could be no icons of God. Similarly, if there had been no Ascension of man into heaven in Christ, and if there had been no Pentecost, which is the descent of God into man, there could be no saints and therefore no icons of humans. We can become all fire only by participation in Christ. At the Feast of Transfiguration we sing

*You were revealed as immaterial fire which does not burn the material substance of the body... O Master, who is one in two natures, both of them perfect.*

It is because this uncreated fire slipped down to earth hidden in humble matter that sacred art is possible. Because of this Christians give enormous reverence to matter:

*I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take up His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honouring the matter which wrought my salvation!...I salute all matter with reverence, because God has filled it with His grace and power. Through it my salvation has come to me.*

St John of Damascus in "On Divine Images" 1:16

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<sup>13</sup> Ivan Kireevsky, quoted by Nicholas Arseniev in "Russian Piety", New York, (1975); page 84

<sup>14</sup> St Leontius of Cyprus, PG, xciii, 1604AB; transl. Kallistos Ware

<sup>15</sup> St John of Damascus, "On Divine Images", New York (1980); page 36.

<sup>16</sup> St Gregory of Nyssa in "The Great Catechism", XXXV

