

MONASTICISM AND ARTISTIC TRADITION

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Holy Athos, the Holy Mountain, is a place where nobody is born. It is perhaps because of this that the spiritual rebirth of many people who wish to go together with the God-man Jesus Christ in his sacrificial course takes place there: a course where the risk, the escape presented by the confidence of an easy life, is at the same time an opening to beauty. This is where iconography flourished and tradition is preserved and continuously recreated.

It is perhaps because of this that the monasteries are interwoven with the beauty, with the ‘filokaliki’ or artistic attempt to experience deification. It is not by chance that the monasteries are where all the arts have flourished, more than in any other place. It is here the entire ancient and later patristic scriptures that were about to be annihilated by wear were copied. But they did much more than merely copy; they embellished them with their famous miniatures, which propelled the scriptures into visual marvel.

Here the chants were perfected and preserved, here the rituals of the services remained unaltered over the course of time, echoing the life eternal and implying the unspoken glory of the heavenly hierarchy. Here, finally, we will meet the unparalleled teachers and masters of byzantine iconography. The great Manuel Panselinos in the renowned temple of Protato in Carries mysteriously left behind his presence. Here Theophanis the Kris, the monk and hagiographer, under the heavy veil of Turkish occupation, rescues and entertains the Greek *genus*. Here a crowd of anonymous and eponymous humble deacons of byzantine iconography mixed—along with the pigments—their heart and their desire for the glory of God. In such a manner, the *Panagia Portaitissa* worked wonders and healed the daughter of the Tsar of Russia through the copy of her icon.

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The uniqueness of this place is plain to see; here our spiritual eyes see ‘the heaven opened and the angels of God climbing and going down towards the Son of man’ (Gospel of the Sunday of Orthodoxy, of the restoration of the icons). For this we are grateful to God, whose Providence established us here, in this most beautiful orchard of the Holy Mother.

Here, everything has a spiritual meaning, everything implies the unspoken. This is why iconography flourished in this place—because the meaning of iconography is to demonstrate this grace, the unspoken beauty of the Word that transforms all creation and gives new eyes to decipher the mystery.

Living in such an admirable place, spontaneously the hagiographer-monk assimilates the spirit he carries and the conditions for a living and creative approach of the icons. Seeing, side by side, the different hagiographic interpretations over the ages, he perceives that the best way to learn this art is to study the icons and the spirit they carry. He perceives their creational power, assimilates every element that could be useful, while also submitting it at the same time to the tradition in which he exists. The tradition is like the mould in which we cast our own materials, which adjust to the form we gave it. Tradition is not a museum for the preservation of a great legacy, but rather the base for supporting our creation. A true education and not just a collecting of facts is the way for a healthy approach to tradition.

In our times, times of spiritual sedimentation and decay, unable to comprehend these fine differences, we deviate either to the right or to the left. This is the reason we see either a passionate copying of old prototypes or a naive sense of self-sufficiency and impulsive originality. Both approaches, I think, express immaturity.

Originality cannot function as a demonstration of impressive skills. This merely reveals that we do not understand what precisely we seek. Simplicity has sublimity which is not easily impressive. It takes boldness in order to stop when required. The enemy of the good is the better, when we want to improve what cannot be improved, when we can perceive the unattainable greatness we received from byzantine art, but at the same time do not get torn into pieces by its weight.

Certain voices are often heard saying new things should be done with inspiration and creativity. But the issue is to which extent can the artist prove worthy of the expectations of a healthy creation. Because if the aim is only the new and not the beautiful and good, then we jump to a commonplace caricature of civilization, and it would not be prudent to bring them to our Churches only to prove the shallowness of our creational inspiration, no matter how genuine and true this could be.

The true artist is not the one who reproduces prototypes, but rather he who prophetically foresees and directs his inspiration to the desires and the expectations of the community of the Church. This is what the great hagiographers in the centuries that have passed have done. Having crystallized certain standards of the great celebrations, they did not feel obliged to try to do something else, more impressive. But in spite of their seemingly identical composition, an incomparable quality emerges in which, in some instances, one almost imperceptible brush-stroke gives the icon a completely different spirit.

Under these circumstances and living in the blessing of the Lord, we tried ourselves to join in the large and very important circle of the hagiographic tradition of this place. Our first and basic concern is to honour and to deepen our connection to the legacy of byzantine art. In the legacy they have left, the Byzantine hagiographers, quite unconsciously, were themselves great teachers; their work continues to guide and instruct all subsequent generations.

All Orthodox people embrace their own way of expressing the Orthodox teaching. We do not speak of Orthodox hagiography because Orthodoxy is not concerned so specifically to define the quality of hagiography. And for this, we see various saints, especially of our days, such as St Nektarios, that were praying in front of western type icons, without sacrificing something of their Orthodoxy. We call Orthodox hagiography byzantine, because it is Byzantium that dictated the way, receiving the achievements of late antiquity without at all fearing its connection with pagan art.

This also is an excellent example in order to understand what tradition means. This can be seen particularly in the forms sculpture that the Church borrowed from antiquity in order to construct various objects used for worship, such as the iconostasis of the temple, the holy chalices and the reliquaries. They traditionally used ivory and

semi-precious stones and imitated ancient Greek sculptures. Certain holy glasses derived their form from ancient chalices. Although these forms were eventually abandoned, they remain one of the most glorious points in byzantine art.

In all these years of our settlement on holy Mount Athos, there has been an effort to absorb this spirit we previously mentioned in various forms of visual expression. Please allow me to make a deposit in the spiritual bank of artistic life.

It was previously mentioned that not only hagiography but also music and poetry are inseparable pieces of tradition. The fact that poetic and musical texts are preserved until today within our liturgical wealth is a miracle.



One such wonderful hymn that is repeatedly chanted during Palm Sunday is the hymn: 'Today the grace of the Holy Spirit got us together. And we all carry your Cross saying, blessed be he who comes in the name of Lord. Hosanna in Heaven'. This most jubilant hymn made me wonder why it is chanted so many times, while there are so many other hymns that are even more relevant to the celebration. I asked an elder and he replied: The fathers in Palestine, in the old years, after the Epiphany, would leave their monasteries and practice in the desert alone before God. They returned on the eve of the Palm Sunday in order to celebrate Great Week and Easter Sunday all together. This custom is connected with the story of St Mary of Egypt and Abba Zosimas.

So, this hymn is dedicated to the fathers that were returning. It was the welcoming in the monastery, holding palm leaves. So, the celebration of the palm leaves as an introduction to the Week of the Passion, introduces us in the Cross path of our personal life. We have to ascend the ladder of virtues, painfully cut off the passions in order to reach the brilliant and inexhaustible eighth day of the Resurrection of the Lord and our own co-resurrection. Palm Sunday is the after the prelude of the Resurrection of Lazarus from the dead, the glorious entrance of the Lord in the Upper Jerusalem, where with palm leaves and branches those infants in wickedness welcome him. Thus, this celebration becomes not just the commemoration of the entrance of the Lord in the earthly Jerusalem, but also our spiritual entrance in the freedom of the first-born, the staying and eternal, with our own co-crucifixion with the Lord.

In this manner, the icon becomes not just the story of a certain event, but a theological approach in another language, which aims to embroider certain unseen chords of the spirit, to educate people in the ways of Christian life and about Christ himself.



On Great Thursday in Holy Week, Lord Jesus, the Wisdom of God serves his own wine. This most wonderful canon of the day is illustrated in a verse by St Kosmas the poet. Even though the general mood of these days is heavy and mourning as we remember the Passion of the Lord, the canon of the day breathes an epic style praising the Wisdom of God. It is inspired by the Wisdom of Solomon, where Solomon resembles Jesus as the actual Wisdom of God, who after building his own house from a pure, unwedded Mother, intervenes Kosmas, he calls his own friends—the Apostles—and all those who believe in his name. He calls them in ‘high preaching’ and serves them his Blood and his Body—‘the actual ambrosia of God’. ‘Feast my Body and strengthen in faith’.

I have attempted to imprint on this icon of Great Thursday these incomparable and unrepeatable words written by St Kosmas the poet, inspired by the deep meaning of the day. As in all the days of Holy Week, the meaning of the hymns and readings, filling the Church like incense, is not by any means depressing in nature. The hymn ‘Glorious your forbearing Lord, glory on You’ is a triumphal procession that continues through the day.



The Lord and king of Glory on the Cross is the victory over death, not the pitiful tortured dead. It is he who succeeded in making the defeat of death into resurrection, victory, and glory. It is for this reason that during the Crucifixion the Lord is calm and cheerful. It is the day of rest of the Lord from the reconstruction of the whole world—and as he retreated, he slept like a lion. Who will wake him up? With this question it is implied that he is the only capable of rising by himself.



In the icon of the De-fixation from the Cross, we see the eternity of the first holy Liturgy, which remains perpetual. In the dramatic motion of the figures appears and the perpetual standing of the New Testament in which Christ is the victim and the perpetrator enters as the Eternal High Priest in the Sanctum Sanctorum. On behalf of humanity, the Holy Mother, the new Eve, holds in her hands the dead body of her Son and her God. The passage in Genesis in which Adam is put to sleep by God in order to extract Eve from his rib now shows its deeper meaning. The new Adam asleep allows his punctured rib to be carried by the new Eve, his most-immaculate Mother.



In the icon, the direct relation of the rib and his Mother is quite clear, a clear reference to the lux creation of Eve, but going even deeper with the spurt of blood and water from the punctured rib, we have and the revelation of the mystery of establishment of the Church. In this icon, the mystery of salvation without words is particularly mystified—it elevates us in the heights of theory with the novel language of the icons, a language that can contribute to the cultivation of the faithful, not as knowledge, but as experience of the theory of the mysteries of God.

It is necessary that the icon becomes the joyful message, the gospel, especially in our modern era in which we have an overabundance of speech, of void speech which eventually disappoints. For this the icon of the Annunciation, of the Holy Mother particularly, calls us to participate in the divine compassion where God descends to the human, wistful of his salvation. The Archangel Gabriel, like the statue of Victory, has not yet stopped fluttering from his descent from the heavens and greets the Virgin Mary, who, obviously surprised, leans her head, accepting the weight of such grave responsibility.





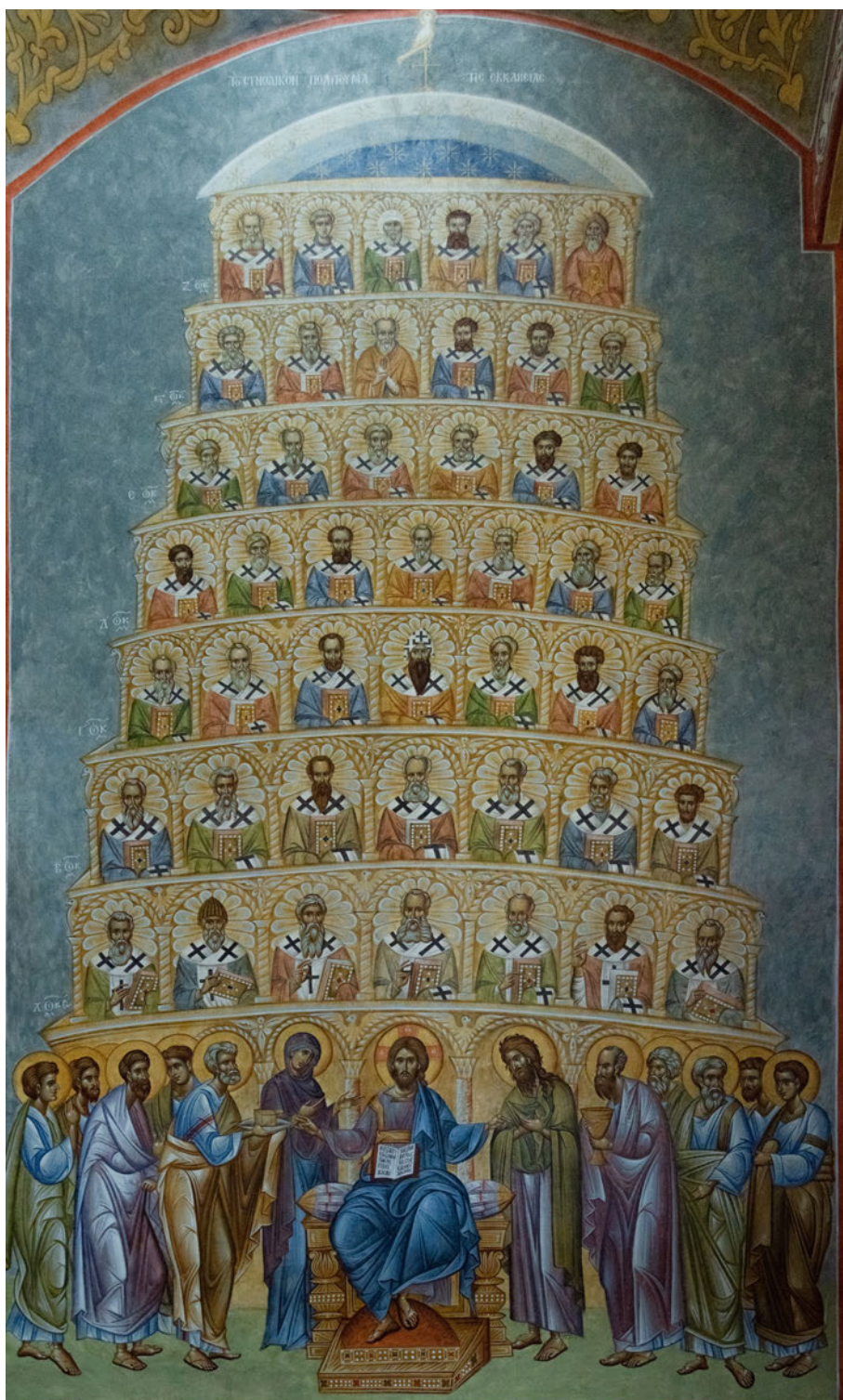
And at the same time, with the Virgin's acceptance, sighing and anticipating nature, the animals, the mountains, and the plants rejoice with the Angels and the people because the time of redemption and salvation has arrived.



‘Today is the chapter of our salvation’. Thus, all the creation celebrates and every breath praises the Lord. To show this, the byzantine artists wanted to return praises to the Lord with every material of creation, so they used precious metals, wood, and stone to render them participants in the hymning.



The treasures of Saint Marco in Venice are of particular interest; we can admire the chalices that were brought from Constantinople, the City of cities, synonymous with civilization itself. Byzantium did not only contribute to the artistic cultivation of the Christians, but it also stood in the centre of the declaration of the dogmatic corpus of Christianity.



In Constantinople were assembled the seven Ecumenical Synods who precisely defined the beliefs of Christianity. With the Greek language and the divine wisdom of the Fathers of the Church, truths were expressed that no other language could convey. They proved in practice the composition by the Holy Spirit of whole institution of the Church, which lives and expresses the last words of Jesus on earth: 'And behold I shall be with you all of the days until the end of time'. The Holy Fathers as unshakable pillars of the building of the Church are at the same time bright stars that illuminate and beautify the conceivable firmament of the universe.

Byzantium, as the West disparagingly wanted to call the capital of the Roman Empire, became the nickname of the spiritual and cultural ideals that worthily represented this city and remains the perpetual personification of courtesy, spirituality, and elegance.

Being ourselves deacons of these 'philocalic' experiences, we are struggling not to defame with our works the capital we received from the Lord by becoming bad farmers in his vineyard.