

## THE ICONOGRAPHIC CANON OF ORTHODOX CHURCHES: HISTORY, EVOLUTION, SYMBOLISM

Gheorghe Gîrbea

Pr. lect. PhD., University of Pitești, Faculty of Theology, Letters, History and Arts /  
Centre for Applied Theological Studies, ROMANIA, garbea\_59@yahoo.com

### Abstract

For Orthodox churches, iconography represents the way in which believers are helped to fulfil the purpose for which they were created, that is, the attainment of perfection in the mystical union with God through prayer and the grace of the Holy Mysteries. The painting of Orthodox churches is, in fact, a kind of theology painted in images. The paintings are not a simple means of decorating the place of worship, so as to delight the eye and satisfy the aesthetic sense of the viewers, but, furthermore, they give voice to the monuments. The painted icon has a special significance. It presents to us not the habitual face of man, rotten and mortal, but the glorious and eternal face. It is not the earthly body, but the transfigured, pneumatized body that it depicts. This is the body that is permeated by the uncreated divine energies of the Holy Spirit, the new body after the resurrection.

Contingency is not part of the Orthodox churches' painting plan, but, instead, rule and orderliness hold a place of honour. Depending on the inner and outer chambers of the churches, there is an iconographic system, program or pattern that shows the church painters which faces or scenes can be painted in each of these chambers. This system or program was not fixed and uniform but formed gradually, it varied by epoch and region, according to the evolution of religious architecture, depending on the variety of architectural types, the dimensions of the churches and the surface to be painted. The iconography of the Orthodox churches aims to integrate everything into the liturgical mystery so that, besides the sacred ministries, it all forms an expectation of the Holy Mysteries.

**Keywords:** iconography, ecclesiastical architecture, icon, altar, nave, pronaos.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For Orthodox churches, iconography represents the way in which believers are helped to fulfil the purpose for which they were created, that is, the attainment of perfection in the mystical union with God through prayer and through the grace of the Holy Mysteries. The painting of Orthodox churches is an entire "theology painted in images whose correct understanding requires the knowledge of Christian dogma, of the Holy Scripture, as well as of ascetic, cult, and church history" (Braniște, 1993, p. 445). The paintings are not a simple means of decorating the place of worship, so as to delight the eye and satisfy the aesthetic sense of the viewers, but rather "they give voice to the monuments. They crystallize ideas, feelings and life, represent documents and sources of history; iconography introduces us into the art world of our past" (Ștefănescu, 1993, p. 9).

The term iconography appeared in the second half of the seventeenth century, being first recorded in the *Dictionnaire universel de art. Furetiere* (posthumous work, published in Paris in 1690, reprinted in 1701)

(Braniște, 1962, p. 328). Eastern iconography came to the attention of the scholars with the first iconography handbook that was published by the two French scholars M. Didron and P. Durand in 1845 in Paris, entitled *Manuel d'iconographie chrétienne grecque et latine*, XLVIII+483 p. These painting handbooks or painters' Herminies are nothing but writings that contain rules on the craftsmanship of church painting, with an iconographic part and a technical one, that were transmitted from generation to generation.

Orthodox art is conventionally termed as "Byzantine", a denomination determined by the circumstances in which the Church developed either in Byzantium and in the other Eastern Patriarchs, or later in the autocephalous Orthodox churches. The traditions inherited by this art until the 15<sup>th</sup> century were mirrored in the history of the Byzantine Empire. It was here that Hellenism, Latinity, Christianity and, not less important, Oriental civilizations met. Byzantium had the power of synthesis to confront extremely contradictory elements, it synthesized some of them, whilst happily subordinating others, such as the advanced techniques and the luxury of the old Orient. "It, Byzantine art, connected the two hostile worlds, the Hellenistic and the Oriental ones, to each other, its originality consisting precisely in this fact" (Botezatu, 2013, p. 240).

Two Greek words compose this term: εἰκὼν (likeness, image, face, figure, graphic representation) and γραφεία (writing, description). In its broadest sense and according to its etymological origin, the word *iconography* means "a science dealing with the description and study of faces in general, regardless of their subject, genre or means of execution, that is, whether they are works of painting, sculpture, miniatures or creations of other fine arts" (Braniște, 1962, p. 328). In a narrow, but evolved, sense that is of interest to us, "iconography is the study of icons and church painting in general" (Braniște, 1962, p. 329).

## 2. THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAM OR PATTERN IN ORTHODOXY

If, at some point, Church leadership was not preoccupied with formulating general rules and norms for the guidance of church painters - (the first rules issued by the church authority in relation to church painting are contained in the famous *Stoglov*, 100 chapters drafted by the Synod of the Russian Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) - the Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church published only a short regulation in 1912 with a few articles on the iconographic program, the modest authors and anonymous copywriters of the Herminies manuscripts filled this void, from generation to generation, with their notebooks which set in order the field of church painting and prevented deviations from the tradition, taking away the good pleasures and excesses of the painters' fantasy or the pressure of the tastes and the will of the church founders. Due to them and to their work, the unity of the artistic tradition was maintained with its unmistakable reflexes on the unity of faith in orthodoxy that is fractured administratively in national churches with an autocephalous regime, "the icons being the meeting place of a good artist created by different races and nations belonging to Orthodoxy" (Dejaife, 1936, p. 66). Contingency is not part of the Orthodox churches' painting plan, but, instead, rule and orderliness hold a place of honour. Depending on the inner and outer chambers of the churches, there is an iconographic system, program or pattern that shows the church painters whose faces or scenes can be painted in each of these chambers. "This system or program was not fixed and uniform, but was rather gradually shaped, it varied by epoch and region, according to the evolution of religious architecture, depending on the variety of architectural types, the dimensions of the churches and the surface to be painted" (Braniște, 1993, p. 445).

Starting with the VIII<sup>th</sup>-IX<sup>th</sup> centuries, and especially after the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Synod (Nicaea 787) and the local one from Constantinople (843), the caprices, fantasies and personal tastes of the church founders and painters began to be placed under the closer supervision and control of the Church, which directed from that point on the evolution of sacred arts based on rigorous principles and precise rules (Ștefănescu, 1936, p. 41). The holy scenes, the faces depicted in the churches are in a close relationship. They are not to be seen and interpreted in isolation, but, on the contrary, they are part of an ensemble linked to a purpose, such as the pages of a book that cannot be joined and be sewn in an unruly manner" (Ștefănescu, 1973, p. 54). Through their iconographic compositions, the painters of Byzantine churches seek to translate visually the dogmas and ideas of the theologians, the feelings of godliness of the faithful laity and of the clergy. "Throughout church painting, iconographic decor has a theological substrate and a symbolic intent" (Diehl, 1926, p. 486).

During the iconoclastic period, after the IX<sup>th</sup> century, the foundations of the gradual formation of a more or less fixed and stable iconographic program are established, one that will become obligatory for all painters, the rules of this program being included in the Herminies or Handbooks of the Byzantine painters. Among the first Byzantine monuments to which the rules of this iconographic program were applied were the *Theotokos Pharos* Church of Constantinople, sanctified in 864 (Lazarev, 1960, p. 36). This iconographic program must respect the artistic canon of all humanity, known and verified by universal consciousness.

"When respected, this artistic canon becomes a guarantee that the icon - the iconographic program - renders an acknowledged truth, that it - the icon - reveals yet another element of truth. When the canon is not observed, the work is either below the admissibility limit, or brings a new revelation to be verified" (Florenski, 1994, p. 171). When analysing the structure of the very iconographic program of the Orthodox Church, we start from a basic idea that the fresco is indissolubly linked to the church through which its true value is perceived. The church has dogmas, the fresco has canons" (Maximovici, Melniciuc Puică, 1999-2000, p. 293).

The secrets of the fresco technique were not a privilege to be granted to whomsoever. "The true painters or church painters have kept this technique in mind and heart" (Dionysius of Furna, 2000, p. 54).

## 2.1 The theological Bases of the Iconographic Program

The guiding idea underlying this iconographic program, an idea whose role is that of fixing and ordering the place of each scene and sacred figure on the walls of the church, is theological conception. To come to make a case for the iconographic program through the theological conception, it was necessary to go through the great theological troubles that characterized the period of the VIII<sup>th</sup>-IX<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. and the question was asked: What is the icon? An idol or a theophany/Theology of Presence? Unfortunately, most of the times the Orthodox icon represented one of the problems submitted to subjective research" (Branîşte, 1979, p. 1135-1140). It has come to the point that the worship of Orthodox believers was seen as an act of idolatry that was presented as grim and disparaging as possible, talking about the "wild and retrograde idolatry of the faithful" (Necula, 2006, p. 67), some authors of dictionaries situating the veneration of icons in the area of idolatry (Bêrtholet, 1995, p. 200). In its history, the icon has always had its attackers, but also its apologists. "The first were influenced by the spirit of pride, discord, and passion, the spirit that offered reasons for madness and misunderstanding, the latter inspired by the Holy Spirit with the strength of the answer, the depth of the theological argumentation, the argumentation of unbeatable logic" (Botezatu, 2013, p. 252).

In an antagonistic manner, the word *icon* was associated with two other words: idol and symbol. Prophet Isaiah emphasizes that "the gods of peoples are not gods, but things made by the hands of man, of wood and stone" (Isaiah XXXVII, 19). The use of this term has given rise to a stable and precise definition: "the idol is the image, statue or statue of a false divinity" (Besanson, 1996, p. 73). The idol thus presents itself as a "man-made object, as a piece of nature" (Necula, 2006, p. 69). In other words, "the idol is a face of divinized nature" (Stăniloae, 1982, pp. 14-15). The idol culminates in "the visible glory it imposes on you, the icon is perfected in the paradox of an invisible holiness from which it departs" (Jean-Luc Marion, 2000, p. 131). The icon sets its roots in Truth. "The icon is not an object of art, it confesses something great, profound and amazing, the icon is a presence" (Constantin, 1999, p. 8). The icon is not art. The iconography that we have been given is sufficient to itself, it does not need more. "It is dangerous when things mingle or something is asked from something that cannot offer it, that is to say, to expect from the art presented in the exhibition to convey the Christian experience" (Constantin, 1999, p. 10). The icons are not venerated on the material basis, essentially as gods, "but on the basis of the likeness of the image represented by the person whose name must be represented in the icon" (Bria, 1994, p. 195). Icons are given honour, not divination, adoration or latria as to God or hyperdulia, or superveneration as to the Mother of God. Christ is present right there, in the icon, not as a mere symbol. This is an essential thing for understanding the icon as a bearer of presence, as a body that constantly embodies itself. "It is a body, it is there, it is not just a symbol that symbolizes something *in absentia*. It is as present as I am and not only so, it is in a relationship with me. It is there in a relationship with me" (Constantin, 1999, p. 10).

The history of the icon is "first, the ever-new history of the encounter with this being, the Logos of God. It is continually repeated and is never considered to be overcome. The icon is never a mechanical copy of the pattern, but it is always proof of a new encounter with the uncreated mystery of this Being. It is the presence that reveals God" (Necula, 2006, p. 73). We must understand that "the icon is a testimony of liturgical life and divine love, it is not the creation or improvisation of any genius, it simply serves artistic purposes, it does not fragment history. For the world of the icon, there is no space distance, no time. It does not express the fragmentation of the present age, but the unifying power of the Liturgy (John of Kronstadt, 1996, p. 195). In order to understand the icon, you need to approach it with great piety. Similarity with God is gained through unceasing effort, through sacrifice and asceticism with and in Christ, in the most profound sense of life, living in Christ. "As, dying for Christ, we enter the ways of the resurrection, and it is necessary that a Face respond to all the names in the world" (Clement, 1996, p. 122). The apostle urges us, "I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak" (II Corinthians IV, 13). On the icon on which there is no shadow, there is light because in grace everything acquires the value of revelation language, "the seen

memory of Orthodoxy that is the faith of the light of the Risen One” remaining forever (Botezatu, 2013, p. 256).

The painted icon has a special significance. It presents to us not the habitual face of man, rotten and mortal, but the glorious and eternal face. It is not the earthly body, but the transfigured, pneumatized body that it depicts. This is the body that is permeated by the uncreated divine energies of the Holy Spirit, the new body after the resurrection. “The icon, thus, depicts to us the spiritual man or the holiness seen with bodily eyes. The icon is a living presence of God Which is wonderful in His saints” (Leonte, 2008, p. 66-67). Icons have grace. The grace of the holy icons is not one that is not working, but it is shared to the faithful who worship them with faith and even tears. “This virtuous grace heals the bodily and soul sufferings and is a strong covering against demonic temptations” (Leonte, 2008, p. 67). Through Canon 82 of the Quinisext Synod (682), the Church forbids the representation of Christ symbolically. “From that moment on, the Church through the pictorial art represented Christ in His state of glory after the Resurrection with a spiritual body led to sublime, a body that can indeed be a testimony to the eyes of the faithful about the maintenance of the two entities He carries with Himself in eternity in the state of worship” (Mariotti, 1987, p. 531). The Incarnation of Christ is “the theological foundation of Christian iconology, a foundation present in the iconophilous argumentation of St. John of Damascus” (Chifăr, 2000, p. 121). In the argumentation regarding the theological bases of the iconographic program, Christology is linked and identifies itself with iconology. The substantiation of the icon is the reality of the Incarnation of the Son of God, “but its necessity lies in the thirst for the salvation of the believing human being” (Moise, 1990, p. 102). St. John Damascene adds to his iconology the anthropology argument. The double constitution of human body and soul was not destroyed by the work of salvation: “we cannot reach the spiritual without the help of the spiritual” (Chifăr, 2000, p. 123). Speaking of the icon as “an image different from the other” (Clement, 1998, p. 122), we cannot but remember the theology of beauty or the theology of the beautiful.

In the tradition of Oriental Christianity, inaccessible God transcends His own transcendence to give Himself, to embody Himself, to become a participant. One of the most loved names in this tradition, the name given to Jesus, is “beauty (*beauté*)” (Slăvescu, Mihaescu Cârsteanu, Giroveanu, 1992, p. 81). Dionysius the Areopagite in the treaty *On the Divine Names* (Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, 1996, pp. 135-245) celebrates “the beauty that produces all communion” (Clement, 1998, p. 51).

## **2.2 Symbolism of the Place of Worship**

In addition to the theological and symbolic explanation of divine services, “the interpreters of the Orthodox worship have in their writings dealt in particular with the explanation of the Divine Liturgy and the Place of Worship” (Necula, 1990, p. 129). Seen as a symbolic worship place, the church has a threefold symbolism:

### **2.2.1 The Church - the Image of the Kingdom of God in Heaven**

Firstly, the church is the image of the kingdom of God in heaven. “The church of God imagines paradise together with the heaven that bestows the heavenly gifts because it has in itself not only the wood of the then life, but rather the life that sacrifices and offers itself. It does not have the wood of consciousness that causes the nakedness of those who will eat, but the living wisdom that is offered as victuals and drink, calls upon and makes the unconscious wise, and shares its sacrifice with them, that is, His Body and Blood, and no longer says what He said to Adam, “You must not eat of it or you will die”, but rather “Those who come to eat my bread, my body, and drink the wine that I have prepared for you, My Blood, for we enter into the divine dwelling in heaven or in paradise” (Teodorescu, 1865, p. 103). The church is “the house of God ... it is not like the other houses, but is made for God and He dwells there; it is here that His glory, power and gift lie” (Teodorescu, 1865, p. 120). St. Germain, Patriarch of Constantinople (+733), states: “The Church is heaven on earth, in which heavenly God lives and walks” (Petrescu, 1974, p. 825).

### **2.2.2 The Church - The Symbol of The Kingdom of God on Earth**

The church is the symbol of the kingdom of God on earth, resembling a ship that saves Christians from the waves of this world’s temptations, just like, in the Old Testament, Noah’s ship saved him and his own from the flood. Now it is piloted by Jesus Christ Himself, it is directed towards the sunrise, wherefrom the light comes, “because God is spiritual light (I John 5, 5), says St. John Damascene, and Christ in Scripture is called the Sun of Justice (Malachi IV, 2) and “sunrise” (Luke I, 78). We must affirm to Him the rising to worship” (Necula, 1990, p. 131). The living church reproduces the internal structure of the universe, “it is a cosmic centre, it is heavenly Jerusalem, which shows the union of heaven and earth” (Revelation XXI, 16), is the eschatological ship” (Damascene, 1993, p. 162).

### 2.2.3 The Church - the Image of the Kingdom of God in the Hearts of the Believers

The Church is the image of the kingdom of God in the hearts of the believers (Botezatu, 2013, p. 248), who are themselves called “temples of the Holy Spirit” (I Corinthians III, 16). Regarding what has been said, St. Maximus the Confessor says, “The holy Church of God is the image and likeness of man, after the image and likeness of God. And vice versa: man is like a mysterious church, through his body he fulfils the divine commandments as through a naos; through his soul, like through a sanctuary, he brings to God the meanings of things by reason, and through his spirit, like a sacrificial altar, he ascends to God uniting himself with Him by knowing the divine secrets for as long as this is allowed to man” (Maximus the Confessor, 1981, p. 17). For him, “the Church is a spiritual man, and man is a mysterious church” (Maximus the Confessor, 1981, p. 17). Through its three constituent parts, “the place of worship imagines what is on earth, in heaven and above heaven” (Teodorescu, 1865, p. 103).

The essential elements of the Byzantine style, the shape of the cross and the dome, have profound symbolic meanings. The shape of the cross expresses the fact that the Orthodox faith teaching has at its centre the teaching of the Saviour's sacrifice on the Cross and His Resurrection from the dead, which are salvific events that are reiterated in the divine worship and especially in the Divine Liturgy. The arms of the cross symbolize the four sides of the world or the entire universe “called through Christ and the Church to become new heaven and new earth” (Botezatu, 2013, p. 249). The dome is the visible image of the mercifulness and care of God constantly directed toward us. St. Maximus the Confessor says, “It is worthy of wonder that, in its smallness, the worship place resembles the vast universe. Its high dome is comparable to the sky of heaven. It rests firmly on its lower side, its springs representing the four sides of the world” (Necula, 1990, p. 133).

## 3. THE ICONOGRAPHIC CANON SPECIFIC TO EACH PART OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

Regardless of its architectural form - the Greek or Roman cross, ship or round - the church is architecturally divided into three distinct parts: the holy altar, the nave and the narthex - distinct by their form, their symbolism expressed especially by the painting specific to each side. “Liturgical theology synthesized in liturgical prayer - the theology of divine presence - relies on a theology of glory typically represented in the Orthodox iconographic program” (Ion, 1968, p. 103). The iconography of the Orthodox churches seeks to integrate everything into the liturgical mystery that, apart from the sacred ministries, forms an expectation of the Holy Mysteries. But this expectation is holy itself because it is completely filled with divine presence, which is the action of the icon. “The prolonged and uplifting figures from the icons and frescoes show the elevation to the height of the Pantocrator lying in the centre and in the highest place in the church, holding in his hand the life of all and everyone. This way, in the church iconography everything is joined in a liturgical cosmos in which all the breath praises the Lord” (Ion, 1968, p. 105).

The icon spreads the glory of the Lord, it becomes similar to doxology, it glorifies God by its own means. “The intelligible content of the icons is dogmatic and therefore not the icon – artwork – is beautiful, but rather its truth” (Ion, 1968, p. 105).

In what follows we intend to dwell on the main scenes imposed by the iconographic canon and which cannot be absent from the three main parts of the Eastern Churches, iconographic scenes that are adequate to the symbolism of each part.

### 3.1 The painting of the Altar

The altar – τό βῆμα, τό ιερατεῖον, *sacrarium, altare, sanctuaire* –, is the most mysterious and sacred part of the divine dwelling, it is the “room or hall of sacred mysteries” (Hackel, 1940, p. 293), is the place where the holy sacrifice of the liturgy is made, and to which only the clerics or the cohort of the holy ministers of the Mysteries have access. This is the place where the Holy Table - *Mensa Domini* – is, an image of the throne of the glory of the heavenly Father on which Christ Himself sits forever in the form of His Holy Body and Blood. “The altar is the seat of divinity, the meeting point of the Divine with the Human, of the supernatural with the natural, the boundary between heaven and earth, a gate to eternity” (Hackel, 1940, p. 303). In Orthodox churches, its holiness and tannic character are greater than in the Western ones (where the altar comes down to the Holy Table), by the fact that it is allocated a separate room, and especially by the iconostasis or rood screen that not only separates or delimits it from the naos, but keeps it from the gazes of the believers, stopping them from penetrating in, the visibility being allowed only in certain moments of the divine public worship. The iconography of the altar, according to the iconographic canon, is dominated by two categories of holy scenes and characters:

1. Historical or symbolic scenes about the Holy Sacrifice that is being carried out here;
2. Figures of great hierarchs and clerics, liturgy authors and ministers (deacons).

"All the subjects that adorn the vault and the walls of the altar refer to the liturgical sacrifice, thus forming an assembly of great theological unity" (Ștefănescu, 1929, p. 703-709).

Prior to the formation of the iconographic program, the iconography of the altar was dominated by the image of the Saviour who throned in the altar apse as can still be seen in some churches in Sicily and Cappadocia. Today, as a general rule, in the central place on the vault of the altar - the semi-dome of the apse - actually above the Holy Table is depicted the image of the Virgin Mary called by the painter's herminy ἡ πλατυτέρα των οὐρανῶν – that is, the highest, the most comprehensive, which stands at the border between the heavenly and earthly hierarchy, as a mediator between heaven and earth, a connecting link between God and the human being. This scene is justified by the fact that the Holy Virgin has traditionally entered the holy temple from the infancy to the age of 12, being called in church hymnography, speaking or spiritual heaven, sacred altar, embodying heaven. It is also a personification of the Church itself as a mediator for the world.

Typically, the image of the Virgin Mary is depicted in two iconographic variants or types, either the *Madonna of Majesty*, or the *Praying or Supplicating Virgin*, either, in the first version, with the Child in her arms, or, in the Praying image, accompanied by two angels or by the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, or, as we find in some older churches in Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, or Southern Italy, in addition to the angels, the faces of local saints or patrons of those founders in an attitude of worship. Thus, "at Perenzo the Mother of God appears surrounded by saints among whom Saint Maur presents to the Holy Virgin Bishop Euphrasius, the founder of the church and his two companions." (Ștefănescu, 1929, p. 52).

In the Moldavian churches, like Moldovita, there are also the faces of the righteous Joachim and Ana, the parents of the Mother of God, and in those in Muntenia, for example in St. Nicholas from Curtea de Arges, the Virgin is framed to the right by the Archangel Michael and by St. Nicholas, patron of the church, and to the left by the Archangel Michael and by St. John Chrysostom, prostrating to the Holy Virgin (Tafrali, 1900, p. 52; Vatamanu, 1965, p. 802, 808, Giugea, 2016, p. 579).

If the space is generous on the wall of the hemicycle, i.e. the east wall of the main wall of the altar, there are painted three liturgical themes in accordance with the symbolism of the altar: *The Tent of the Testimonies or the Tabernacle*, *the Angels Liturgy* and *the Sacred Apostles Communion*.

The lower zone of the hemicycle wall in all Eastern churches illustrates the essential scene of the liturgical sacrifice made in the altar – Ὁ Ἀρνός or *The Lamb*. A number of great hierarchs, including the authors of the liturgies - St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory the Great - dressed in a silk cassock (phelónion, polystavrion and homophore), with the heads uncovered, painted most of the times in profile, looking from the two sides of the altar, the Proskomidiar and the Diaconicon, to the centre of the hemicycle, where, usually under the window of the altar, the victim of our Mass sacrifice, i.e. the Saviour, is either portrayed under the image of a new-born or of a lamb sacrifice, under both appearances placed on the Holy Disk and guarded by angels or seraphims that hold ripidas above His head .

In the two lateral apses, to the north the Proskomidiar and to the south the Diaconicon or the Vestments Room, the central theme recommended by the iconographic canon revolves around the idea of sacrifice and offering, both in the New Testament and the Old Testament, the sacrifice of the Saviour Jesus Christ, crowned with His Resurrection from the dead.

### 3.2 The iconography of the Iconostasis or Rood Screen

The iconostasis is quite a recent appearance, in the form of a wall with icons separating the nave from the altar. The ancient churches in the East and West did not have it. "The present iconostasis is the fruit of a secular development that followed a theological development" (Botezatu, 2013, p. 267). The iconostasis developed spontaneously: "it has never been the object of a decision or any provision of church authority as it was neither theologically substantiated nor explained except by very general definitions" (Uspensky, 1965, p. 91).

The evolution of the iconography of today's iconostasis begins with the icons of the Saviour, of the Holy Virgin, of the Holy Angels and of the Holy Apostles mentioned in documents from the sixth century, as well as the icon of the *Deesis* group, Intercession, mentioned in documents as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century. These icons first adorned the columns that supported the partition grid between the altar and the nave, as well as the architrave, the horizontal girder above it, from the old Christian churches. This evolution ends only in the sixteenth century when the iconographic program of the Eastern churches was fixed definitively and began

to be fixed under written forms, as the so-called Herminies or handbooks of the painters we mentioned. The Western Church criticizes the iconostasis with an attitude of mistrust, natural, we might say, because, as we see, its actual form was completed after the separation of the West from the Ecumenical Church. "This negative attitude is aggravated by the fact that the Union made the iconostasis also penetrate within the Roman Church where it was considered a hindrance created by the Oriental rite for frequent communion and for the worship of the Holy Eucharist" (Dwirnyk, 1960, p. 45).

The iconostasis, through the iconographic motifs painted, recaps the symbolism of the church from heaven and earth. The iconographic motifs expose a dogmatic message and a theological understanding to the believers. "In its brilliance of colours, this variety of composition allows the presentation of what the Apostle Paul calls the mystery of Christ" (Evdokimov, 1995, p. 187). All this composition takes place in "three stages:

- The first alliances and prophecies about the coming of Christ - the Messiah;
- The highlight of the plan of salvation made possible by Incarnation;
- The eschatological perspective that places faith in the hour of judgment" (Evdokimov, 1995, p. 187).

In general, the iconostasis strongly illustrates the theme of reconciliation between the Divine and the sinful man. Starting from the bottom down, the iconostasis is dominated by the Holy Cross on which Christ is depicted crucified, at the feet of the cross, to the right of the Saviour - the Mother of God, and to the left - St. John the Evangelist, the Beloved Apprentice.

The main body of the iconostasis, with the space to be painted from the upper cross to the top of the altar doors, is divided into three parallel horizontal registers on which the following are painted:

- The first upper register has paintings of the faces of the twelve prophets, centred on the Mother of God with the Divine Child in her arms. The prophets are painted in standing posture or only as a bust, facing the centre, carrying in their hands rolls with their messianic prophecies or symbols;
- In the middle register, there are depicted the 12 Holy Apostles pointing to the central icon where the Saviour is depicted either alone or in the Deesis iconographic group or the *Prayer of Mediation* or *Trimorphism*. This level is called the Deesis level. (Evdokimov, 1995, p. 188).
- In the third register, from the bottom, the royal feasts are depicted, either in the chronological order of the celebrated events, from left to right, starting with the Nativity, or in the order of the church year, beginning in September. In the centre of this register the scene of the Lord's Resurrection or the Last Supper can be depicted. If the space permits it, under one of the central icons mentioned there is placed the Saviour's icon, not made by man, *the Sudar* or *St. Veronica's kerchief*, or the brick of Abgar of Edessa.

On the lowermost registry of the iconostasis, which houses the doors of communication between the altar and the nave, doors endowed with a liturgical purpose, the following scenes and sacred faces are painted:

- The royal doors in the middle, or the Holy Doors (called this way because they are always used by the clerics who, during the sacred masses, carry holy objects in their hands, they were also called the Great or Royal Doors because they were once used by the emperors or kings when they brought gifts at the altar and took Communion, and the King of the Heavens or Jesus Christ, in the form of the Holy Gifts, entered through them at the Great Contribution of the Divine Liturgy of St. Gregory the Dialogue); consisting of two leaves, they are painted with the scene of the Holy Annunciation, on one side Virgin Mary, on the other Archangel Gabriel, face to face, the four corners of the scene being guarded by the four evangelists.
- The single-leafed side doors, to the north and to the south, are called diaconous because it is through them that the deacons enter and leave at the litanies, contributions and other moments of the religious mass. The faces of the St. Archangels Michael and Gabriel or of St. Stephen and Lawrence are depicted on them.
- The spaces between the Royal and the Side Doors are painted on the right with the icon of the Saviour Jesus Christ standing on the throne as the Emperor or the Archimandrite, and on the opposite, to the north, with the icon of Virgin Mary on the throne with the Child in her arms. Further on, in the south, the icon of the titular saint or patron of the respective church, and to the north the icon of a saint who enjoys greater honour in the area.

### 3.2.1 The Purpose of the Iconostasis in the Worship Place

The rood screen or iconostasis, as has been established in the iconographic canon, constitutes an ensemble of perfect theological unity whose purpose is to first present to the faithful a concise summary of the whole iconography of the Church, and then a recapitulation of the whole sacred history of the salvation intuitively

depicted in the holy characters and in its major monuments from the Old and New Testaments. At the centre of this ensemble rests Jesus Christ as the Saviour, a God of love – Φιλανθρωπος.

The iconography of the iconostasis illustrates the gradual achievement of the human being's salvation during the holy history through Jesus Christ. It is the trait of union between the Old Testament - represented on the iconostasis by the prophets who foretold Him and maintained in the midst of the people the hope in His coming - and the New Testament represented here by the Holy Apostles, and recapitulated by its most important "episodes" at the moment of the Holy Annunciation, painted on the lower part of the rood screen - the Royal Doors - until the climax of the Sufferings, the Crucifixion and the Death of Jesus Christ culminated in His Resurrection through which the salvation of the world was achieved, depicted by the Cross of the Crucifixion placed on the tallest and central side of the iconostasis" (Braniște, 1993, p. 472).

The iconography of the iconostasis gives the believers a "sensible image of the unity of this spiritual body, whose Head and founder is Christ, and in which they are incorporated as members with the patriarchs, the righteous and the prophets of the Old Testament, the Mother of God, the Holy Apostles and the New Testament Saints" (Uspensky, 1964, p. 114).

The painting of the iconostasis helps to understand the meaning of the Liturgy and its ultimate purpose, "which is the union of the faithful with Christ, of the earth with the sky, of the Church with the triumphant, which is the final meaning of the religious history of humankind" (Braniște, 1993, p. 472).

### **3.3 Painting of the nave and the narthex**

#### **3.3.1 The nave**

The nave or the heart of the church is the central part of the Orthodox churches lying between the iconostasis (or the rood screen) and the narthex or the tomb room in the churches of Moldova. It should be noted that the iconographic program of the nave is very varied depending on the space, from one monument to another, from one region to another and from one epoch to another (Grecu, 2016, p. 348). Nonetheless, there are compulsory scenes, in accordance with the iconographic program, which are always present on any monument, in any region or age, the variety we mentioned consisting of scenes related to the basic iconographic themes of each side. Regardless of whether it has or not the big spire in its centre, on the vault, or at the top of the large spire, on its spherical cap, the naos depicts in a round medallion an icon called the Pantocrator, i.e. the image of God the Almighty, usually under the appearance of a bust of Christ, a severe face, with a glaring, grave look, giving blessing with the right and holding, in the right hand, the opened Holy Gospel on which there are the symbolic initials Alpha and Omega, the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet, symbolizing the eternity and omnipotence of God (Revelation I, 8: I am Alpha and Omega, Who Is, Who Was And Who Comes, The Almighty). Different biblical or liturgical formulas are written around the medallion's circular bush: "From heaven, behold, the Lord has seen those who dwell in the world" (Psalm LII, 6), "Heaven is my seat and the earth beside my feet" (Isaiah LXVI, 1) as well as, most of the time, "Lord, Lord, seek from heaven, and see and

through this which Your right hand has built and perfect it" (Psalm LXXV, 15-16), a formula uttered by the bishop in service when singing the Trisagion, during the Divine Liturgy.

The image of the Pantocrator in the central dome "dominates everything, giving unity both to the hierarchical and to the iconic theme. The hierarchical theme movement is vertical, ascending from the present community and gathered to veneration in the nave, through the steps of the saints, prophets, patriarchs and apostles, to the heavenly God, surrounded by the cohorts of angels" (Taft, 2008, p. 87).

According to the statements, on the tambour or the vertical walls of the spire, the following scenes are painted from the bottom upwards:

- A rainbow of angels, cherubims and seraphims, among which the throne of "Hetoimasia" can be depicted, i.e. the empty seat of universal judgment surrounded by the tools of God's Sufferings;
- The area immediately ahead - the faces of the holy prophets, usually 12 in number, represented in full posture, in movement or in a static attitude, holding rolls in their hands with texts from their messianic prophecies, or with the tools of God's Sufferings;
- Under this area there are the faces of the Holy Apostles, usually 12, represented as St. Prophets;
- The lowermost register of the tambour presents the heavenly or angelic liturgy, that is, the ministry in the heavens of the Saviour as the Great Archangel, surrounded by angels, priests and deacons, as in the altar painting.



The spherical angles at the base of the great spire or the pendants are always painted with the faces of the four evangelists sitting on chairs and writing, with the wing symbols holding the gospels. On the semi-domes of the nave apses, the Resurrection of the Lord cannot be absent from the north side, just like the Lord's birth cannot be absent from the south side. Also on the vertical walls of the nave there has to be present the Virgin Mary standing on the throne and guarded by the archangels, and on the south the Saviour sitting on the throne, dressed as a bishop, having St. John the Baptist to the right, i.e. the iconographic theme called Deesis or Trimorphion, but with another inscription on the Saviour's Gospel: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" (John X, 9). It is also here, on the southern wall, that there are the military saints such as St. Demetrius, St. George. On the opposite side, i.e. to the north, there are other military saints, such as St. Theodore Tyron, St. Theodore Stratilates, St. Constantine the Emperor and his mother Elena with the Holy Cross between them, and if space allows it, other saints who enjoy a special honour in the area: St. Nicholas, St. Parascheva, etc.

### **3.3.2 The Narthex**

The classic iconographic program of the Orthodox churches is provided by the Herminies of the painters, including the following themes:

- At the passage between the nave and the narthex, scenes with royal feasts dedicated to the Saviour Jesus Christ
- If the narthex has turrets, they are painted with scenes with the theme "All breath to praise the Lord" as well as the zodiac or the wheel of the world
- Most of the scenes from the narthex are dedicated to the Holy Mother, e.g.: The liturgical Axion of the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great - "Enjoy You", scenes from the Old Testament that foretell the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ as well as the seven Ecumenical Councils.

The western wall of the narthex is always occupied by the votive painting of the church builder, either worshipping the Saviour, or offering Him as a gift the church built by him, accompanied by his family or other donors.

## **4 CONCLUSIONS**

In the above-mentioned lines, we have intended to show how ecclesial Christian art, in all its forms, played a well-determined and experienced role in divine worship. It addresses the heart directly through the aesthetic emotion that helps mystical living, creating the elevating ambience of communion and prayer with God. "Nowadays, many groups prefer to return to primary simplicity, to approach the Gospel; it is enough to have a welcoming, human and agreeable place full of the Spirit of God and the joy of the new man" (Mateos, 2014, p. 30). This place is the church painted according to the iconographic canon because here we meet with the invitation of Christ "that calls us to personal change, but change cannot be experienced individualistically ... the reason for the coming of Messiah is not to bring a few people to individual perfection, but it rather is God's intervention in changing the course of history" (Mateos, 2014, p. 27).

Architecture and the iconographic program, through the specific forms, are designed to create a liturgical space in consonance with the teaching and canons of the Church, not just a functional and convenient space in the sense of a spectacle hall. The church is a "ship" on which believers travel along the tumultuous waves of this world to the unspoiled firth of salvation.

From the ideas presented we can state that church painting is not done by chance, but according to well-established canons and hermeneutical rules because "by its purpose the icon forms together with the church a whole being subordinated to its architectural conception" (Trubetskoi, 1999, p. 24).

The architectural forms of a church, "the frescoes, icons, objects of worship are not simply put together as the objects of a museum, but as members of a body that live in the same mysterious life and are integrated into the liturgical mystery" (Evdokimov, 1993, p. 155).

The problem of the sacred art is one of faith and the icon itself proves this in the most obvious way. "It is it who carries the testimony of the restored revelation in its fullness, demonstrating the unity of the word and the image that appeared in the Person of Jesus Christ" (Botezatu, 2013, p. 302). It is one that expresses the unity of faith, life and creation disintegrated not only in Western confessions, but often even in the Orthodox Church. By accepting the icon, we accept everything in it, everything that it confesses, that is, it enters into the true unity of the Church, unity expressed both by the church architecture and by the Orthodox iconographic program.

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