

The Icon in the Byzantine Liturgy

Miroslav Šimko
University of Prešov in Prešov
Faculty of Greek Catholic Theology

Introduction

The Icons offer to the believers the sight of the wonders that God performed on earth, especially in the work of the Incarnate Word, but also through the saints and the church. That is precisely why they have major importance in the worship life. One of the main characteristics of worship is to celebrate, remember and retrieve various moments in which mysteriously our salvation has been realized. Introduction to history of these events through images may also really contribute to the commemoration and remembering. Every detail of the history presents an act of God power. The specific meaning of icons in comparison with other images lies in remembering and showing not human and everyday things, that can be seen in earthly eyes, but in the absolute Christian newness of things, which "But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Cor 2.9), for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except Kingdom of God. (John 3:2).

Expression of the heavenly dimension of persons, which icons represent, gives them the sacred character and participates in some way of divine. Therefore they are direct objects of worship and are venerated as the actual images of the Lord, his works and the saints which images represent.¹

During centuries, Eastern and Western Churches have developed techniques, forms and canons of the holy images to express their faith and bring them closer to people. Whereas the Western Christian art of the last centuries has gradually proceeded towards naturalistic branch, Eastern Churches have remained more truly ancient method of perpetuation and vision of heavenly realities. Even today numerous different schools have maintained

¹ PETRO, M.: *Prednášky z morálnej teológie Dekalóg 1-3*. Prešov : PRO COMMUNIO, 2006, s. 64.

these traditions and they have created icons, murals, canvas or other objects, continuing in the old original not to ignore today's cultural sensitivity. Their high content of faith and art is being appeared by the West today.

Many Eastern Catholic Churches have been influenced by Western custom, often poor of quality, maybe easier, but foreign to the requirements and importance of their own traditions. Gradual re-acquisition of its own habits is essential if we want to avoid mixing and contradiction within the celebration. The disposition of space, icons, liturgical garments, equipment is not left up to individual taste. They all must be piece with the requirements of internal and inter-related ceremonies.²

Icons and the Liturgy

Architectural forms of church, paintings, icons and other cult objects do not represent simply collected unity, such as things in a museum. The items as part of one body, share the same mysterious life. They are involved in the liturgical mystery, and no icon can be seen outside of this mystery. The icon in its own liturgical sense consecrates temples and other places. In the houses it consecrates family church, in the believer's life makes one big celebration. Christian desires liturgical life. Once, the icons were not objects of decoration in the houses. When someone entered the house, first bowed before the icon and then greeted the master of the house. Guest honored God first and so sanctified his behavior toward other people. In it are hidden the sacred features. As well as we enter the eastern temple, we hit the atmosphere focus on infinite life. Here, every sacred secret is based on expectation. And we feel, that the one, who is Eucharist for believers, retrieves objects of the temple, as well.

During liturgy icon reveals the Church mission. When we sing: *Let us who mystically represent the Cherubim, and sing the thrice holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity*,³ we transfer from earth to heaven. Mysterious participates in Christ's heavenly liturgy. There, in front of the High Priest - Christ, *thousands of Archangels, tens of thousands of Angels, Cherubim and Seraphim, six-winged, many-eyed, soaring aloft on their wings*⁴ serve the Christ, we – believers mysteriously represent angels. During the Holy Liturgy we are live icons in the church. A place where you stand becomes angelic celebration and prayer. Here and now every community, victim and the presence is thanksgiving. And in this great symphony of believers

² *Inštrukcia na aplikáciu boboslužobných predpisov kódexu kánonov východných cirkví.* Roma : Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1998, s. 83.

³ *Svätá Božská liturgia nášho otca svätého Jána Zlatoústeho.* Prešov : Spolok biskupa Petra Pavla Gajdiča, 1998, s. 41.

⁴ *Svätá Božská liturgia nášho otca svätého Jána Zlatoústeho.* Prešov : Spolok biskupa Petra Pavla Gajdiča, 1998, s. 51.

looking at the icons, believers can see their own brethren: *forefathers, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs*⁵ – as are present here, who participate in the liturgy. Thus we see the heavenly abodes in the icons of the saints and we rejoice in pure joy.

Icon in the Byzantine churches

Upon arrival into the Byzantine church, thanks to the icon, east-located believers are in higher, sublime and happier world, where it is surrounded by heavenly beings. At the entrance to the church the believer comes to realize that icon speaks spiritual language and urges him to follow. Therefore, he comes to the icon first and then, after greeting of triple bow, accompanied by the sign of the Holy Cross, he kisses the icon or eventually touches the forehead.⁶ Apart from he lights a candle, which means constant prayer and victim of their own abilities.⁷ Priests or deacons worship them by incense. The temple is sacred public place to celebrate and magnify God, where the holy sacrifice of Jesus Christ - Holy Eucharist is made, where the believers gather, in order to participate on salvific gifts and truths mediated by the Church into his life.⁸

According to brief definition of the temple, we can distinguish a triplex symbolic significance of the Temple:

- Church represents Christ and his kingdom, because in the temple of bread and wine mysteriously dwells Eucharistic Jesus Christ.
- Church depicts Jesus Christ and the Kingdom here on the earth, because believers, as members of His Mystical Body, gather here

⁵ *Svätá Božská liturgia nášho otca svätého Jána Zlatoustebo*. Prešov : Spolok biskupa Petra Pavla Gojdiča, 1998, s. 55.

⁶ Všetky štyri „svätyne“ , a to ikona, evanjeliar, pozostatky svätého kríža, pozostatky svätých, o ktorých hovorí aj Druhý nicejský snem (Actio VII, 13 Oct.787m DS 601) majú spoločnú charakteristiku v tom, že nie sú uctievané sami pre seba, ale vo vzťahu so svätou osobou, ktorú predstavujú. Zatiaľ čo evanjelium slovom a písmom v sebe obsahuje obraz života, činnosti a smrti Pána Ježiša Krista s jeho zmŕtvychvstaním a tým aj pravidla božského života, ikona taktiež zobrazuje kresbou a farbami, zatiaľ čo pozostatky svätého kríža nám približujú jeho vykupiteľskú smrť. Pozostatky svätých (relikvie) obnovujú spomienku na vzory dokonalosti, ktoré svojím spôsobom vyjadrujú ich ikony. To všetko v sebe odráža platónsku náuku o ideách, ktoré pre aténskeho filozofa mali skutočnejšiu existenciu ako realita sama, pretože sú to príčiny a vzory tohto sveta. Tu práve nachádzame najpodstatnejší rozdiel s úctou eucharistie, kde premenené spôsoby Tela a Krvi nášho Pána sú vlastným výrazom jeho prítomnosti.

⁷ Modlitba pred ikonou so zapálenou sviecou v ruke znamená nielen čistotu života, ale aj milosť a tajomstvo, ktoré ikona poskytuje. V predvojnovom Rusku boli ročne rozpredané tri až štyri milióny libier vosku, aby sa zadosťučinilo potrebám veriaceho ľudu (ruská libra /ruský funt/ = 409,5 g).

⁸ MIRKOVIČ, L.: *Pravoslávna liturgika*. Prešov : Pravoslávna bohoslovecká fakulta UPJŠ v Prešove, 1994, s. 78.

- Temple depicts the true Christianity - Christian ideal, which is united in the Lord's Church through Jesus Christ.⁹

Temple as a large icon, a place of conversation with God, has got sanctifying strength. First, the building helps to inner prayer, and prayers sanctify the building. Origenes notes that some places are devoid of sanctity, and are inappropriate for inner prayer because they used to be for sinners and there was a presence of evil spirits. It is better to pray in the temple than at home, because prayers in the temple occur in the presence of angels, saints and Jesus Christ himself. And so the idea of the church as God's dwelling among men evokes image of heavenly Jerusalem in people. Since morning Christians have gathered in the temple of the breaking of bread. At the beginning of morning christian buildings did not have importance, they used to be only places of meetings. Gradually sacred buildings began to be considered as symbols and represent mutual spiritual union between believers and God. Christian symbols are sacred and so the temple began to worship as a great icon, symbolizing different aspects of the descent of God among his people. Euzébius confirms Christians begin to be proud of their temples, "*Temples are re-built from the ground up to great heights and are much nicer than the old, demolished temples. In the cities we begin to celebrate the feast of renewal and sanctification of the new churches.*"¹⁰

In the 4th century was a period of receiving of new members into the church. This increasing number of converts resulted that it was necessary to build spacious temples and also change the way of evangelization. While the symbols had been understood by small number of believers in the first centuries, neochristians did not accept these symbols due to not easy understanding. For that reason more clearer and specific visual expression was necessary. The church did not only teach through images, but it mainly relied on the fight against heresy. A new mosaic, new painting, which shows specific biblical events or people, began to discover on the church walls of the temples. Later, over time, it is noticeable that the painting of sacred pictures has obtained its consistent form and style. Each icon has been able to show precise theological statements and therefore has been dogmatically true. This rule has been valid until these days: Every icon must include a dogmatic truth. Without

⁹ BOHÁČ, V.: *Liturgika I*. Prešov : Gréckokatolícka bohoslovecká fakulta PU v Prešove, Spolok biskupa Petra Pavla Gajdiča, 1997, s. 49.

¹⁰ ŠPIDLÍK, T.: *Spiritualita křesťanského Východu – Modlitba*. Velehrad : Refugium, 1999, s. 367 - 371.

this condition, even if all the elements of art are retained, an icon will lost to be the icon itself.¹¹

Temple, as a sacred building, is a sign that shows direction to him, who is Lord of heaven and earth creatures, the Lord of Serafins, the King of Israel, the only saint who came to dwell among us due to bring us into his kingdom, because "our homeland is in the heaven "(Phil. 3:20)¹²

The Byzantine church - view the universe filled with God

The Church of st. Wisdom in Constantinople became the prototype of Byzantine temples, image of the world, where God is stayed. The church does not have the special privileged place as it used to have in the Old Testament.¹³ Christian church represents the whole world. Gateway between heaven (altar area) and ground (space for believers) is being opened during liturgy. Christ and the saints are presented in the icons themselves, apostles themselves are pillars of the building.

Evdokimov tells that: *"The temple shows the world, God's work and also reveals the presence of the transcendent, it is God's house, the gate of heaven"* (Gen. 28.17). Ancient cathedrals had strength, and dynamism causes to us breathtaking and ecstasy today. Verticals and quantities of stone in the Gothic violence plunges into infinity, and driven away the human spirit. But in the Cathedral of Sts. Governed by wisdom all around the central axis, which is topped with a cupola and magnificent beauty expresses more esoteric way. Beauty comes from the mysterious depths of up to unlimited heights, descends on man and fills him transcendent peace. The whole universe is intended to become a temple of God.¹⁴

For Eastern Christians the Temple is a large icon, the kingdom of heaven on earth, which gives out religious instruction and the grace of God, leads people to heaven and provides the first taste of heaven in the liturgy itself. The temple in its form of round rotunda or square (perfect space like the earth with four cardinal points), or in the form of a Greek cross reminds our salvation. Christ Pantokrator is depicted in the main cupola. He presents the universe, divine cosmos, blessed by presence of

¹¹ PRUŽINSKÝ, Š.: *Pravoslávna duchovnosť I. časť*. Prešov : Metropolitná rada Pravoslávnej cirkvi v Prešove, 1997, s. 147.

¹² *Inštrukcia na aplikáciu boboslužobných predpisov kódexu kánonov východných cirkví*. Roma : Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1998, s. 78.

¹³ SLIVKA, D.: *Posvätné miesta v Izraeli – Jeruzalemský chrám a chrámová hora*. In: *Dom Pana*. XIX. Miedzynarodowe seminarium sacrum i przyroda. Kraków - Prešov : Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II W Krakowie, Prešovská univerzita v Prešove, Gréckokatolícka teologická fakulta, 2011. s. 131 - 142.

¹⁴ ŠPIDLÍK, T.: *Ruská idea, jiný pohled na člověka*. Velehrad : Refugium, 1996, s. 341.

God,¹⁵ inhabited by divine beings, saints, especially angels, who bring the heavenly liturgy in the presence of the believers during liturgy.¹⁶

Also, the sanctuary of the temple moves us into another world, into God's presence. The relationship between the two worlds, heaven and earth, is often expressed in all Christian rites.

God is moving in the temple as well as when he has been walking through history. This movement between heaven and earth is depicted by clergy at a small and a main entrance, first with the Gospel, and then with prepared offerings as they pass through the door of iconostasis from the presbytery to the nave of the church and back.

Iconostasis wall, which divides and connects these two different areas such as the presbytery and the nave, its numerous icons, which are concentrated around the icon of Christ, symbolically expresses the work of our salvation and provides basic religious education to the believer. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the temple becomes a prognostic of consecration of a man and the world as well, the future vision of the world, renewed, where God meets "all in all" (Eph 1, 23). And all this adds further decoration of the temple itself. You can see many scenes from the Old and New Testaments, portraits of saints on the walls of the temple. For Maximus the Confessor (from 622) and Sofronie of Jerusalem (from the year 637) a temple is image of the intangible and sensual world, spiritual and physical man. Presbytery of a temple corresponds to the first and nave to the second, in the sense that the first intangible and spiritual enlightens and alives them, the second one is sensual expression of the other one.

Teutons Constantinopolitan (from r.733) explains that the church is the earthly heaven where God dwells and rests, which is above the heavens. This temple is more famous than ark, in which Moses met with God. Ancient altars were allegory of church and its temples, which were built by the Old Testament patriarchs. Church were predicted by the prophets, sacred by martyrs and its altar is built firmly on the memory and relics of these martyrs. Simeon Thessaloniki (from 1492), as well-known teacher of Byzantine liturgy, describes the temple as what is on earth, in heaven and above the heavens. In narthes of the temple, as a man is on the earth. In the cupola of the temple Christ Pantokrator, the Creator and Savior is carried by angelic powers, to which the Incarnation takes participation in any matter, including icons, and in which every matter is of sanctified.

According to him, the iconostasis in the church is the border between two worlds- divine and human world, the continuing and interim world. Icon of Christ Pantokrator, Almighty, which is located in the cupola of the

¹⁵ NOVOTNÝ, J.: *Světlo ikon*. Velehrad : Refugium, 1997, s. 18.

¹⁶ *Inštrukcia na aplikáciu boboslužobných predpisov kódexu kánonov východných cirkví*. Roma : Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1998, s. 78.

church, shows Christ rising or his second coming in glory. Virgin Mary Oranta praying for mankind accompanies hierarchs or bishops, and the scene of the Eucharist is found in the apse,¹⁷ while scenes from the New and the Old Testament are painted on the walls and paintings of saints on pillars. Believer, who comes into this temple with lots of icons depicting scenes from the Scriptures, or a particular saint, so quickly forgets secular noise and problems of his life. On the contrary, by singing of liturgical songs he “Duc in altum” with his prayers into the transcendental world and begins communication with his Creator.¹⁸

The iconostasis

In the late times, all these views were duplicated by transferring into the iconostasis – on a wall that separates presbytery as the symbol of heavenly space, where the priest represents Christ himself, from the nave, the land for believers, but transformed into the image of the higher world. Simultaneously the iconostasis unifies these two worlds in the idea, which is a reflection of the universe, where everything is overcome and where reconciliation between God and his creation has happened. The whole history of salvation is presented in the iconostasis as instruction for believers. Icon of the Incarnation is situated in the center of the iconostasis, as a symbol of the connection of the Old and New Testament and the expression of Christ’s redeeming sacrifice, which God has sent down from heaven due to pay a high price for a man. Likewise, there God’s gradual Revelation is also reflected by patriarchs and prophets, through the feasts to the lowest range, where the offering takes place at the present moment. So, iconostasis separates the presbytery, where the Eucharistic rite is performed, by boat, where believers have a contact with Him. It also helps to contemplate in silence. According to above-mentioned Simeon Thessaloniki, iconostasis columns hold up the sky and connect spiritual and sensual world. Architrave,¹⁹ beam means the unity of love between heaven and earth. Therefore, there are also placed icons of Christ and Virgin Mary, who live both in the heaven and with God’s people.²⁰

¹⁷ Apsida (z gréckeho apsis - oblúk) je polkruhovitý, polovičnou kupolou zaklenutý priestor za prestolom. (*Apsida <architektúra>*. http://sk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apsida_%28architekt%C3%BAra%29. <19.03.2010>)

¹⁸ NOVOTNÝ, J.: *Světlo ikon*. Velehrad : Refugium, 1997, s. 19 -21.

¹⁹ Architráv - priečne brvno nad stĺpmi prenášajúce zaťaženie na hlavice stĺpov. (Porov. IVANOVÁ- ŠALINGOVÁ, M.: *Vreckový slovník cudzích slov*. Bratislava : Kniha – spoločník, 1993, s. 70.)

²⁰ NOVOTNÝ, J.: *Světlo ikon*. Velehrad : Refugium, 1997, s. 22.

The iconostasis - boundary between two worlds

The temple is output on the path of the mountains. It takes place at the time: liturgy, this internal movement, internal division of the church leads to – like on the fourth axis - the depths of the world to the top. The arrangement of the temple has got the same meaning. The church is James Temple, a ladder leads from the visible to the invisible, from earth to heaven. The entire altar area,²¹ as a unified whole area is no longer the visible. The place taken out of this world, this is an area that is no longer in this world, because the rite of liturgy is the revelation of another world, another time. This world condemned Christ, crucified Him, therefore bloodless sacrifice is going on in the new world and a new time, in the time of Holy Spirit. The entire altar area is a sky.

Simeon of Thessaloniki explains in Christological interpretation that the temple means Christ Godman, the altar area has a sense of an invisible divinity of its godhood and the temple itself symbolizes visible and human Christ. When the interpretation is anthropologically oriented, then the altar area, according the same interpretation, symbolizes the human soul and the temple itself. According to theological interpretation of the temple, temple altar is necessary need to see in the symbol of holiness.

The invisible is due to its invisibility, sensory view of itself and altar area does not exist for non spiritual eyes. These facts are available for the human senses, but they also represent a kind of invisible reality. Division of the altar area is necessary due to its importance. However, this separation is only possible with the facts, which are dual possibilities of perception. If they were purely spiritual essence, we would be inaccessible because of our limitedness, and would be nothing better in our consciousness. Conversely, if they were only in the visible world, they could not show us the invisible border.

Heaven and earth, the top and bottom, or the altar area and temple can be separated only by visible witnesses of the unseen world - living symbols of one and the other world. That they - the saints in the icons, the visible in the invisible, free of this world, they live "high above the chaos of this world" in the invisible world. Therefore, they are witnesses of the invisible world - they show about themselves in the icons, with their appearance, face. They live with us and are generally available, even more available than ourselves. They are living ideas of the invisible world. We can say that these witnesses live in the border of the visible and invisible world as symbolic images in the transition from one

²¹ Oltárny priestor – rozumej svätyňa, presbytérium, miesto za ikonostasom, kde sa nachádza prestol.

consciousness to another. The saints in the iconostasis are living soul of humanity.²²

In the countryside we can observe a phenomenon, when among air currents of different heights and different directions of flow are creating wavy clouds. They occur just on the surface of contact between two layers of ocean circulation, so air currents that have created them, they can not take them away, and the "mountains" of clouds, in the spite of intensive speed of air streams remain motionless. It is also the same with a mist that enshrouded mountain peaks, although some strong wind blows around and forest remains motionless. This mist is created on the boundary of the visible and invisible. It veils everything, what is inaccessible for eyes, but also shows the existence of which is much higher than this world. If we open our spiritual eyes and turn to the throne of God, we will see the revelation of heaven, cloud above the Mount Sinai - the mystery of God's presence, due to his covering, simultaneously it is also a symbol that announces and proclaims. It's a crowd of witnesses (Heb 12:1), the saints. They surround the altar area of them, they are like "living stones" (1 Peter 2:5) a built wall of the iconostasis, because they are simultaneously in two worlds and unify this life with local life.

The iconostasis is a boundary between the visible and invisible world. And this altar barrier, which divides two worlds, gives a vivid picture of the saints, crowd of witnesses who surround the throne of God – the sphere of heavenly glory, proclaiming the mystery, as well.

The iconostasis is a revelation - a revelation of saint angels, is a hagiography "angelofany," a revelation of heavenly witnesses, and in particular is the epitome of the Mother of God and Jesus Christ himself. On the iconostasis are clear, sharp and bright heavenly revelation formed to the materials and colours. Tangible iconostasis, as a spiritual veil, is not due to hide something, to cover liturgy behaviour or priest activities. It shows Eucharist space to the half-blinds.

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²² FLORENSKIJ, P.: *Ikonostas*. Brno : L. Marek, 2000, s. 35 – 36.

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