

## Is a painted icon monastic?

**Mario ATTARD**

Nowadays we are witnessing a phenomenon in the christian west: there is a renewed interest in icons. It is, as if unconsciously, the west is realising how far it has gone, and how urgent it is to go back to its origins and roots. This paper will be briefly investigating the question whether an icon is monastic, and if it is, what makes it so? What I shall be doing is, first and foremost, endeavouring to explain what do we mean by an icon and monasticism, and then I shall be trying to see how they converge. It is hoped that this limited study would contribute, towards its end, to the healing of today's western malady: a broken self.

### *What is an icon?*

An icon has been defined as a sacred image.<sup>1</sup> In the attempt to broaden the concept of an icon, it needs to be borne in mind that it is not merely a piece of art just like any other painting. It is rather a sacred image. Its sacredness has been defined in the second general council of Nicea convened to explain the logic behind the veneration of the images, thus putting an end to the iconoclastic crisis. It defined that

“the honour given to an image goes to the original model”;  
and one who venerates an image, venerates in it the person  
represented by it.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, the history of dogma attests to the fact that around the icon there is more than just a painting. Behind it there is a person whom that image symbolises. Obviously, when we say a person we mean many things, such as, for instance, his personality and mentality. All these features contribute, in turn, to create a complete picture of that person. Having said that, these features, which are filtered through a long process of reflection, generate a theology. When this is applied to icons, we

<sup>1</sup>*Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford University Press; London 1964) 600.

<sup>2</sup>“*The Christian Faith*” in the *Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, Jaques Dupius (ed), (Theological Publications in India; Bangalore 1999) 507.

can truly say that we have a theology of the icon. This point is well expounded by Edward Farrugia in his book *Tradition in transition* whereby he refers to the theology of the icon as the theology of the real symbol.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly enough, this kind of theology is written on wood or formed by mosaics. This is shown by the word iconography, which is related to the study of icons. Iconography comes from two Greek words *icon*, image, and *graphein*, to write. Therefore, iconography is icon writing. An icon is written because it has a message to convey to the spectator, who, as a consequence, is invited to read. It is written by somebody, who has himself or herself, experienced the image he or she later wrote. This person is none other than the monk, who after an intense spiritual preparation which he has undergone, would project his divine experience either in colours on wood or by formed mosaic. Put in another way, the icon is both the ending and the beginning of a spiritual journey, which is done in, with, and for the image. It is precisely here whereby theology comes into play since the latter is a reflection on the experience of God, in this instance it is taking place in the context of art. The symbolism brought about by the icon, does talk about God and spiritual realities. It provokes our attention to delve deeper into the strange figures that, according to western rational and illusory tastes, would sound odd and without sense. It offers us the opportunity to experience the mystery it intends to represent.

What is an icon? I think that Farrugia's definition of an icon can throw a clear light on the subject matter of this paper. For our intents and purposes an icon is

a sacred image' painted on wood or formed by a mosaic. Icons are flat pictures. Even if sometimes the outlines of clothes may be portrayed on a protective shield. Rather than realistically representing persons and scenes, icons present them symbolically and have an integral function for public and private worship in eastern churches.<sup>4</sup>

The first curious thing that one comes across in reading this definition is that icons are flat pictures. Icons are not illusionary. They intend to be what they are.

<sup>3</sup>Farrugia, E.G. *Tradition in transition*, (Mar Thoma Yogam, St. Thomas Christian Fellowship; Rome 1996) 9.

<sup>4</sup>O'Collins Gerald & Farrugia E.G. *Concise Dictionary of Theology*, (Harper Collins; London 1991) 99.

From an artistic point of view, in the icon composition, the inverse or rather multiple perspective is endorsed. In this artistic approach, lines of focus of the icon seem to converge in the spectator himself.<sup>5</sup> It is as if the icon is there to incorporate the spectator who is looking at it by making him or her one with it.

The icon is itself a mediator of the real image it stands for. According to my point of view the logic behind every icon recalls what Dale Carnegie, said “you make more friends by becoming interested in other people than by trying to interest other people in yourself.” The icon, so to speak, is not so much interested in itself as a work of art, rather it focuses more on the image it depicts. This is what St Basil and the second general council of Nicaea (787 A.D.) meant by veneration of icons. Christ is the image of the Father (Col 1,15). Replying to Philip’s question who, wanted Jesus to show them the Father, the former affirmed that he who has seen him has seen the Father (Jn 14,9). That is why it is justifiable to identify the icon as the door to eternity, for it renders visible what is invisible; it brings the not yet into our midst. This suggests that an icon is in fact a glimpse of the *eschaton*.

### *What is monasticism?*

Religious life is a signpost to the eschatological life both for the Church and the world. Thus monasticism comes into play. As we find in the Word of God, holiness is a universal call and gift. It is the purpose and culmination of christian vocation to be transformed in Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God. This is the idea behind being a monk, in letter and spirit although it needs to be said that being a monk in letter is a privileged means. As Paul Evdokimov pointed out, everybody is called to be monk in spirit. In other words, interiorised monasticism is everybody’s job.

‘Monks are the sinews and foundations of the Church,’ said the ninth-century monastic reformer, St Theodore the Studite. This statement explains why the Byzantine Church was fundamentally monastic in nature because via the life of prayer undertaken by monks and nuns, it was considered as a necessary aid of both the civil and ecclesiastical framework. To put it in a nutshell, the primary vocation of monks and nuns was holiness. Sr Filoteia Cosma gives a very relevant insight of how this holiness is brought about:

<sup>5</sup>Farrugia, *Tradition in transition*, 12.

The roots of the monastic life are deeply rooted in penitence and faith in a permanent *metanoia* in which he lives the corrupt human nature as well as the new reality of salvation through Jesus Christ, a reality intensely lived. Through penitence and humility the monk lives that permanent *metanoia* as a renewal of the baptismal grace, as growing in God, growing to a single purpose: unity with God in Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

From the above quotation it results that *metanoia* is at the heart of monasticism. The latter is none other than the urgent need to repent in order to be one with God in the person of Jesus Christ. This message is so deeply embedded in the whole being of the monk, that with St Paul he could say that is not he who lives, instead it is Christ who lives in him. This intimate union with God in Jesus Christ makes of the monk an active agent for the world's transformation. This is precisely what happened in the tenth-century, when St Nikon, nicknamed *ho metanoite* – ‘the “Repent ye”’, after his typical introduction to his homilies - brought back the people of Crete to the Christian Faith.

After the period of Constantine's conversion when being a christian was regarded a privilege, martyrdom of blood vanished. Monasticism was the response for another form of martyrdom. The monks stood as the martyrs in the heart and conscience. The rationale behind this assertion is that life is found in death, which in itself carries the seeds of death to sin and regeneration to a life of grace. The monks' prophetic vocation served as recalling to the instituted church that the kingdom of God has nothing to do with worldly visible reality. Their role within the church was eschatological since they were, as St Gregory Palamas put it, the prophets of Christ's *parousia*.

Thus seen, monasticism is a global vehicle so that the whole world would believe in Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, in the view of St John Chrysostom monasticism is merely a temporary means till the world would embrace christianity. Thus, the monk's vocation is universal. He is called, after Christ's example, to be the man for others. The monk becomes so much involved in his solidarity towards others that he desires their salvation as much as he desires his own. Dwelling briefly on this point, I'd like to propose what Evagrius the Solitary has to say about this desire:

<sup>6</sup>Cosma Filoteia St “*The Variety of Religious Life: The Romanian Orthodox Way*” in *Devoted to Life*, E.G. Farrugia (ed) (Melita Theological Supplementary Series; University of Malta, Malta 1994) 83.

“Blessed is the monk who looks with great joy on everyone’s salvation and progress as if they were his own ... A monk is one who regards himself as linked with every man, through always seeing himself in each.”<sup>7</sup> Is this not what Christ commanded his followers to do, namely, to do to others what they want others do to them? This attitude, which is so deeply rooted in the monk, is possible because the latter is pure of heart. In fact, for St John Climacus, the criterion for having a pure heart is when one considers every person as good. That is why it makes sense to speak of monasteries as homes. In today’s industrial and capitalist societies, people do really crave to be accepted, loved and be seen as good. Who can offer this security more than the monastery? The monastery is an oasis of a truly christian hospitality of love, compassion, and hope, in the midst of a burning desert of individualism, egocentrism and all kinds of excesses one can ever imagine. It is the monastery’s mission to quench the thirst of those who have been enduring the hardships of this desert for a long time. Only the monastic oasis could effectively bring about their healing and resurrection. Thus, in Edward Farrugia’s words

monastic hospitality makes of vagabonds pilgrims and of dilettantes who have lost their way searchers of the truth. Ultimately, hospitality means the capacity to make people feel at home away from home.<sup>8</sup>

In the words of the Capuchin and Blessed of God Solanus Casey, a monastic view to life would present religion as a science of the human person’s happy relationship with God and neighbour.<sup>9</sup> This evokes what Fr Zossima said to the young peasant woman, namely that people were created for happiness simply because it was God’s will that they be happy. Was this not the distinctive characteristic in the life of righteous, saints and martyrs which identified them from other people?<sup>10</sup> Is this not what is happening in those people who argue that in order for one to be free he has to loose his freedom? Are they not visible signs of what it means to live an integrated and harmonious life?

<sup>7</sup>*The Philokalia* Vol 1. translated from the Greek and edited by Palmer G.E.H. Sherrard Philip & Ware Kallistos (Faber and Faber; London, Boston 1983) 68–69.

<sup>8</sup>Farrugia E.G., *Every monastery is a mission*, Farrugia Edward & Gargano Innocenzo, eds. (Pazzini Editore; Verucchio (RN) 1999) 184.

<sup>9</sup>Crossby Michael H., *Thank God Ahead of Time: The Life and Spirituality of Solanus Casey* (Franciscan Herld Press; Chicago, 1985) 161.

<sup>10</sup>Dostoyevksy, *The Brothers Karamazov*, (translated with an introduction my Magarshack David) (Penguin Books; Middlesex 1971) 60.

### *The point of convergence*

To return back to Dostoyevsky's novel *Brothers Karamazov*, immortality is found only in God.<sup>11</sup> He is the point of contact, or rather the integrative power of both the icon and monasticism. He is the source that gives life and quenches the thirst of disintegrated people. Hence, an icon is monastic inasmuch as in it one finds the comfort and joy of being welcomed and accepted. An icon is always an oasis of peace, love, forgiveness, together with a well-founded hope of resurrection. Since we have been created on the image of God, the icon, being itself an image of the Image, is always our home. Its very artistic technique shows us that. Via its inverse perspective, it embraces the visitor to enter into the transfigured world whereby faithfulness in love not superficial achievement and honour, is highly appreciated and held in high-esteem.

For all of us who feel tired in this life of meaningless competition and self-affirmation? the icon teaches us, through the experience of monks who produced it, that transfigured love is the solution for the failures that we experience in life. The icon and the monk are so immersed in the love of God that they cannot not transmit what they actually are. In this sense, the icon becomes an expression of the real symbol in the manner of transforming love. Because the monastic icon is so imbued with God's love, it is a theophany of God's love for others. An icon is monastic because it lives in God's heart. Hence, as Khalil Gibran put it:

when you love you should not say 'God is in my heart,' but rather, 'I am in the heart of God.' And think not you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course. Love has no other desire but to fulfil itself.<sup>12</sup>

Also, the icon is monastic when it brings conversion (*metanoia*). The icon stands and acts as a reminder of the urge to convert, to partake in that spiritual beauty, of truly being and living as adopted sons and daughters of God. The icon, being monastic reminds us to change our lives so that we too like Christ would be resurrected and transformed in Him, the one and only Image of the Father. A real conversion therefore would instigate us to effect a change in our internal attitudes so that we too could experience the resurrection and healing earned for us by Jesus Christ in his paschal mystery. Death is just the beginning of a new life.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.* 156.

<sup>12</sup>Gibran Khalil *The Prophet*, (Wordsworth Editions; Kent 1996) 6.

The icon is well acquainted with the mystery it is representing. It is aware that it is only when it serves its function, that is to say, in making the Image increase and itself decrease, would it be faithfully serving its mission and purpose. This is the essential message that a monastic icon could give to all those who approach to it with humility and sincerity of heart: He must increase, but I must decrease (Jn 3,30).

According to Kallistos Ware, the tripartite contribution effected by monastic life in the Byzantine church was prayer, holiness and spiritual direction. As it turns out, the icon, being monastic in nature, is also capable of offering these three contributions, provided of course that those who pay it a visit leave their heart be fascinated by it. How?

First, icons are used both in the church liturgy as well as in private houses for prayer; and in so doing, they integrate the individual and communitarian aspects of life. Second, icons are also means of holiness inasmuch as what the second general council of Nicea (787) defined, “when we honour and venerate an icon, we receive sanctification.”<sup>13</sup> Third, icons are spiritual directors in that they remind us to struggle for what is really important in life. They serve as markers of that hope which reminds us that whether we are afflicted physically or distressed emotionally, or if we are robustly healthy in body and mind, we do have an eternal reason for which we are living. It is the belief that “for to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1,21). Is this not what a glorified humanity is all about? Are we not correct when we affirm that this precisely explains the universal vocation of humanity: being authentically monastic and iconic, integrated and holistic in, through and with the Image? Has not humanity now become a living doxology where praise is offered to the Father, through Jesus Christ in the Spirit? As it turns out, this is the remedy for our brokenness: a glorified and harmonious Trinitarian self! The icon, being monastic, bears witness to this!

*Capuchin Friary  
Floriana*

<sup>13</sup>Ware Kallistos, “Eastern Christendom” in *The Oxford history of Christianity* (John McManners ed.) (Oxford University Press; Oxford 1993) 150.

### **Bibliography**

- “The Christian Faith,” Jacques Dupuis (ed), in the *Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, (Theological Publications in India; Bangalore 1999).
- Farrugia E. G., *Tradition in Transition* (Mar Thoma Yogam, St. Thomas Christian Fellowship; Rome 1996).
- O’Collins Gerald & Farrugia E.G., *Concise Dictionary of Theology* (Harper Collins; London 1991).
- Cosma Filoteia Sr “The Variety of Religious Life: The Romanian Orthodox Way” in *Devoted to Life* edited by E.G. Farrugia (Melita Theologica Supplementary Series; University of Malta, 1994).
- The Philokalia* Vol 1. Translated from the Greek and edited by Palmer G.E.H., Sherrard Philip & Ware Kallistos, (Faber and Faber; London Boston 1983).
- Farrugia E.G. “Every monastery is a mission”, Farrugia Edward & Gargano Innocenzo (eds) (Pazzini Editore; Verucchio RN, 1999).
- Crossby Michael H., *Thank God Ahead of Time: the Life and Spirituality of Solanus Casey* (Franciscan Herald Press; Chicago 1985).
- Dostoyevsky Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov, 1*, (Translated with an introduction by Magarshach David (Penguin Books; Middlesex 1971).
- Gibran Khalil, *The Prophet*, (Wordsworth Editions; Kent 1996).
- Ware Kallistos “Eastern christendom” in *the Oxford History of Christianity*, (Oxford University Press; Oxford 1993).