UNIVERSITY "OVIDIUS" OF CONSTANȚA

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DOCTORAL FIELD: THEOLOGY

DOCTORAL THESIS - ABSTRACT

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THE IMAGE AND TYPOLOGY OF HUMAN REPRESENTATION AS A MEDIUM OF CONVERSION

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INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion is the change from one religious belief to another. As generally understood, it simply means that an individual accepts a new set of religious beliefs and that he or she now usually attends a different church on Sundays. This may be true for some people for whom religion is just a matter of rationalization, or a convention or a social issue. For those for whom religion has been a matter of conviction and belief, conversion can cause considerable ethical and emotional concern that affects the whole personality. Inevitably, it means a profound change in one's whole intellectual, emotional and social life. It may even mean breaking with professional or business life and being forced to start again, socially or economically, and make completely new adjustments. In other words, a real conversion can mean a period of severe inner turmoil, suffering and even emotional upheaval, total psychological damage.

The nature of conversion, its mechanisms, the analysis and explanation of the reasons that lead people to conversion is a constant and important concern for all researchers in different fields of knowledge. The interest in this phenomenon is justified from several points of view, but the most important ones are: firstly, by the attitude of internal search represented by the individual who adheres to that religious movement and secondly being represented by the mass media which plays a role of pressure through the visuals through which some religious movements try to obtain conversions, leading to the involvement of researchers, such as theologians, psychologists, sociologists or anthropologists and artists in unravelling the truth of these conversions. Another factor is the secularisation of contemporary society and its flight in search of a tangible and visual divinity. "Thomas Robbins"[1] , clarifies that the spiritual would be an "unnatural and problematic phenomenon in a secularized society, which is why the total abandonment of many young people to the arms of religious groups needs to be explained in some way."[2]

Religious conversion represents a powerful challenge to anthropological theories of the connection between culture, art and the self. Anthropologists have long argued that "religion

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[1] Dick ANTHONY, Thomas ROBBINS, *Conversion and "Brainwashing"*, in *New Religious Movements*, James R. Lewis Publishers, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004, p. 68.
[2] Lorene L DAWSON, Raising LAZARUS, *A Methodological Critique of Stephen Kent's Revival of the Brainwashing Model*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 63.

involves more than ideas about the supernatural; it constitutes a theory of the world, a way of constructing reality that seems uniquely real to those who experience it."[3]

Conversion also raises important questions about the social processes in which religion is embedded. Conversion is usually an individual process, involving a change of worldview and affiliation by a single person, but it takes place in a context of institutional procedures and social relations. Religious groups structure the ways in which adherents can enter and exit and, in many cases, place converts in a unique social position. These processes articulate with other dynamics within the groups - their internal divisions, their authority structures, their political rivalries and more.

The relationship between art, theology and science is one of contrasts and commonalities. One common ground between art, theology and science is the central role of iconic images. Iconic images are reference symbols in both art, theology and science and provide similar functions for both. Iconic images provoke an openness and receptivity to our deepest emotional capacities and a connection between these and the dynamics of socio-religious systems that often lead individuals to ascribe to new cults. Such iconic images can also act as attractors that provoke the emergence of increasing levels of intellectual and aesthetic self-organisation, not only at the individual level, but also in relation to the wider social, theological, scientific or artistic domains. Ultimately, through a combination of these attractions and connections, iconic images can play a role in the transformation of the individual.

The role of the symbol in general is to explain that the symbol lies at the heart of the image that symbolism can play in a religion. Religions use symbolism which is meant to explain the existence of meaning in the use of symbol that leads to a level of metaphysical validation.

The icon is an expression of divine iconomy, which is summed up in the teaching of the Orthodox Church. Throughout most of Christian history, images of the church have been drawn from liturgical texts, scripture and pedagogy and rendered in styles specific to the time and place in which they were used. In modern times, the sources of Christian iconography have expanded to include psychological, socio-political and non-traditional elements.

The Church has given so much importance to the Icon that she has preached and still preaches that the victory against the iconoclasts was a triumph of Orthodoxy, which we celebrate in the first week of Lent.

Also, for the Orthodox Church, the Face is a language through which it expresses its doctrines and commandments as well as through words. It is theology expressed in shapes and

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[3] Andrew BUCKSER, Stephen D. GLAZIER, *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, United States of America, 2003, p. 6.

colours that the eye can see. In other words, it is like a mirror that reflects the spiritual life of the Church and through which the doctrinal struggles of every age can be judged.

The most distinctive feature of Christian iconography is its concern with the person and role of Jesus Christ (and his followers). The image of Christ as earthly founder and heavenly saviour is central to this religion, especially as the Church defines itself as the body of Christ on earth. Thus, the changing repertoire of images of Jesus and his followers reveals the nature of religion in its many cultural and historical manifestations.

Dogmatic icons exist in many of our churches and especially in our villages and monasteries. It was only at the end of the 10th century that experts discovered that the icon exists, the Byzantine icon, because only this is an icon, the others are paintings.

Icons have played an important role in religious traditions throughout history. Icons are visual representations of religious figures, events or concepts that are used to aid worship and prayer. They serve as a means of connecting the believer to the deity as well as a reminder of the central tenets of the faith. The use of icons in religious traditions has proven particularly important in areas where oral traditions predominate, as they provide a tangible representation of faith.

Icons have also been used in religious conversion because they can serve as a powerful symbol of the new faith. In many cases, the use of icons has proven to be particularly effective in converting non-religious people or people from different religious backgrounds. This is because icons can provide a visual representation of the new faith, making it more accessible and understandable to those who are unfamiliar with it. The use of icons in religious conversion has been found to be particularly effective in areas where literacy rates are low or where there is no access to religious texts - it is also the bible of the unlearned.

Icons are also rich in symbolism and meaning, making them an important aspect of religious art. The use of symbols in religious art can serve to deepen the spiritual experience of the believer, as well as providing a means of conveying complex theological concepts. For example, in Christian iconography, the image of Christ on the cross serves as a powerful symbol of sacrifice and redemption. Similarly, the image of Buddha in Buddhist iconography represents enlightenment and the path to spiritual liberation. In general, the use of icons in religious art serves to deepen the spiritual experience of the believer and to convey important theological concepts in a tangible way.

1.Argument

In the course of time, the image as a medium of conversion, in general, has been written about. In this field, Romanian and foreign theologians have conducted scientific research of theological studies on conversion. In scientific theological research on religious conversion we find the conversion perspective analysed from anthropological, psychological or sociological perspectives combined with aspects of morality and Christian vocation. Summing up the above, we can say that, in its general lines, the field of conversion theology from the perspective of the iconic aspect has been a real temptation for researchers. In this context, there is a need for a thematic deepening, in the sense of elaborating a monograph that approaches this theme from several perspectives: symbolic-dogmatic, historical, anthropological, aesthetic, artistic. Drawing up such a monograph represents going beyond the common perimeter and banal repetition.

The motivation for choosing this topic for my doctoral dissertation is the desire to carry out an in-depth study, with the main objective of presenting the icon as a medium of conversion from the perspective of the image revealed in the theology of the icon while revealing the relationship between iconology, Christology and pnevmatology and their spiritual-anthropological implications: "The grace of the Holy Spirit writes with light on the human face revealed in prayer, the unseen image of God transforming the saints into mystical mirrors or icons of Christ."[4]

2.Difficulty of approaching the topic

As mentioned above, the number of works, studies and articles dealing with the iconic aspect of religious conversion through religious images in Romanian and other languages is extremely limited. These works explore the importance of the beauty of icon theology in the context of the light of Holy Scripture and the impact of icon theology and religious conversion. As a result, it was necessary to research and translate studies, articles and works from foreign

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[4] Drd. Gina SCARLAT, *Theology of Icons in the Romanian Orthodox Church*, in "*R. T*", year XIX(88), no. 3, 2006, p. 188.

languages, as well as to consult bibliographical references that address both the scriptural foundations of icon theology and religious conversion, as well as historical, canonical, dogmatic and artistic aspects. This foreign language bibliography includes a total of 90 works, studies and articles, 10 online foreign language sources plus 95 in Romanian. In the present work, we have carried out an extensive research on iconic content in the context of religious conversion from the theological, anthropological, psychological, sociological, dogmatic, aesthetic and artistic perspective of the icon.

3.Objectives

- Explaining the role of image in religious conversion;
- Facilitating conversion through perceptions of psychology and ethics;
- Promote and understand selective affinity between group and recruit during the conversion process;
- Identify and understand conversion types;
- Description and understanding of the main causes leading to conversion
- Recognition and acceptance of the importance of image in religious conversion;
- Understanding the sacredness of the image in relation to the religion of conversion;
- Promotion and use of icons in communicating and expressing faith in the lives of believers;
- Knowledge of the history and importance of icons in Orthodoxy and in conversion processes, and their role in expressing and understanding the life of the Church;
- Explaining the differences between image and body in relation to spiritual reality in order to avoid confusion about myth, idol or the objectivity of the image.

4.Originality of the theme

The originality of this theme lies in its detailed approach to the iconic aspect as an element of religious conversion and in the identification of image and symbol as key elements in determining sacredness and the sacred as a means of conversion. This approach is based on

a theological, anthropological, psychological, sociological and artistic analysis. A distinctive note of originality of this work is the extensive research on iconic content in the context of religious conversion, addressing several perspectives such as theological, anthropological, psychological and artistic perspectives. This research is based on 90 bibliographical references in foreign languages, 10 online sources in foreign languages and 95 in Romanian.

5.Topicality of the theme

From a spiritual point of view, it is important to note that a conversion involves both an individual psychological and a religious experience. An essential factor in the process of religious conversion is also the image, which has a visual impact that stimulates the inner search for compatibility with a particular religious cult. This process involves many psychological and ethical aspects, and religious leadership can help facilitate and enhance the conversion process.

In a contemporary secularised society with a spiritual vacuum, the importance of icons in the Orthodox Christian faith and in the process of conversion stands out. Beautifully ornate hagiographic icons are described as "windows to the kingdom of God."[5] They are used both in the church, as an integral part of the expression of faith, and in the private spaces of the homes of the faithful. For the faithful Orthodox Christian, the icon is a form of prayer and a means of approaching the divinity. Icons usually depict scenes from the life of Christ, the Virgin Mary or the Bible, as well as figures of saints.

6.Significance of the study

Through this paper, we aim to address the iconic aspect of religious conversion and highlight the fact that conversion is an individual-level experience, both psychological and religious. A fundamental element in the process of religious conversion is the image, which has the role of creating a psychological impact and awakening in the individual the inner search to find the religious cult that best suits him. There are certainly multiple psychological and ethical implications associated with this process. In addition, we wish to highlight the differences in

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[5] Paul EVDOKIMOV, The *Art of the Icon. A Theology of Beauty*, Sophia Publishing House, 2012, p. 146.

the use of images in religious conversion in various contexts and ways that are influenced by the religious content they present. The sacredness of an image varies from one religion to another and has a distinct symbolic meaning within the symbolic-dogmatic aspect.

7.Research questions

- What role does image play in the religious conversion process?
- How can religious leadership facilitate the conversion process?
- Is there a selective affinity between group and recruit in the conversion process? What implications does this have?
- Are there limits to the groups into which people can convert?
- What role does image play in the religious conversion process?
- How can religious leadership facilitate the conversion process?
- How does the sacredness of the image differ in different religions?
- What is the role of the icon in the Christian life?
- What is the warning about confusing image with spiritual reality?
- What important role do icons play in the Orthodox Christian faith and in conversion, and what themes are depicted in most Orthodox icons?
- What is the importance of icons in the tradition of the Orthodox Church and what is the historical context of the use of icons in the Church?

8.Research stakes

Through the scholarly research that we will undertake, we aim to produce a well-founded work that will bring to the forefront authentic teaching on the iconic aspect in the context of religious conversion, with a focus on the influence of image as a determining element. This work will be based on rigorous scientific documentation, highlighting the differences from the theological, anthropological, psychological, sociological, dogmatic, aesthetic and artistic perspectives of the icon.

9.Research methodology

To produce this paper, we used several methods, including documentation, literature search and analysis. We collected bibliographical material from libraries and systematised the information obtained thematically. We used the chronological method to highlight iconic typologies in the process of religious conversion.

We also used the quantitative method, collecting a wide and extensive range of bibliographical materials in Romanian and other languages that directly or indirectly address the theme of the iconic in religious conversion. This method is closely related to the comparative method, through which we checked the quality of the selected information. In the scientific research carried out on this topic, I used the deductive method, through which I formulated hypotheses, obtained and selected information and deduced new elements.

10.Research stages

In order to achieve a coherent theological approach, this thesis has been structured into three distinct chapters as follows: I. THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION; II. IMAGE AND SYMBOL ON RELIGIOUS CONVERSION; III. BYZANTINE ART-CANONICAL, CONCEPTUAL AND PERSPECTIVAL FEATURES;

In the process of writing this PhD thesis, I went through the following stages of work:

• **Analysis of selective bibliography:**

In the first stage, we carried out a review of the relevant bibliography in the field, in order to identify as many bibliographical references as possible related to the topic. I examined these bibliographical sources and drew up reading sheets to better understand their content and contribution to my research.

• **Defining the content:**

In the second step, based on the collected bibliographic material, we developed a detailed table of contents that included all relevant aspects of the chosen topic. This table of

contents was designed to adequately cover all aspects of the research and debates required within the thesis.

- **Development of the bibliography on the content format:**

As we progressed through the research process and discovered new relevant issues, it was necessary to identify, procure and study additional bibliographic material. This stage consisted of expanding and enriching the initial bibliography to provide a solid foundation to support the arguments and analyses presented in the thesis.

11.Structure of the work

The present paper is structured in three chapters, each with several sub-chapters, and before these I have included an introduction in which I have detailed technical aspects related to the development of the paper. In the introduction, I addressed the following aspects: the argument, the difficulty of the chosen topic, the originality, the topicality, the significance of the study, the research questions, the importance of the research, the research methods, their stages and the structure of the paper.

The first chapter of the paper, entitled "THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION", focuses on the theological premises underlying religious conversion. This chapter is divided into the following sub-chapters: Religious Conversion - Theoretical Aspects, Brief foray into Classifications, Types of Conversions, Types of Subject Attitudes, Causes Leading to Conversion, Conversion as a Process, Dominant Motives in Religious Conversion, Conversion Element of Two Religious Worlds, Normalism and Honest Belief, Double Jeopardy in Conversion, Psychological Aspects of Conversion, Brainwashing Paradigm from an Image Perspective, Chapter Conclusions.

In these sub-chapters, we have presented and described the importance of religious conversion as both an individual psychological and religious experience. We have highlighted the key role of imagery in the conversion process, as it is responsible for generating a psychological impact and awakening an inner search in the individual to find the religious cult that best suits him. We have also highlighted the existence of other psychological and ethical implications in this process. By accepting the perspectives of psychology and ethics, religious leadership can facilitate and complement the conversion process. Despite the existence of some situations in which groups may exhibit manipulation and deception in their self-presentation,

there is generally a "selective affinity" between the group and recruited individuals that initiates a process of interaction in which certain types of individuals and certain types of groups together create a distinct religious environment. The group can exert a strong influence on devotion and may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for the individual's transformation into a new identity, while devotees also influence the evolution of groups, especially when a group attracts unstable individuals or when the orientations of participants involve an expectation of a strong and charismatic leader.

Chapter II is of particular importance and is entitled: "IMAGE AND THE SYMBOL ON RELIGIOUS CONVERSION", we have presented the theological premises of the iconic, symbolic and anthropological aspects of religious conversion. The second chapter consists of the following sub-chapters: Iconic and anthropological aspects of conversion, Religious image and symbol, Symbols in religious consciousness, Symbols as presence of the sacred, Symbols-indicator of the sacred, Role of sacred image in Hinduism, Sacred aspect of image, Canons of representation of man in Hindu art, Role of sacred image in Buddhism, Modes of representation of Gautama Siddartha, History of iconography of Buddha, Canons of representation of man in Buddhist art, The role of the sacred image in Islam, The portrayal of man in Islamic art, The role of the image in Orthodoxy, The image of God, Augustine's view of the image of God, Karl Barth's view of the image of God, The sources of Barth's bleak image of humanity, The interpretation of Augustine and his tradition, Chapter conclusions. In these sub-chapters, I have presented and described that conversion has significant implications for anthropologists, theologians and religious believers alike. In many religious traditions, conversion marks a moment when divine intervention is most evident. Symbolism itself lies at the intersection of culture, art and language, and religious symbolism is at the confluence of two worlds: the human and the divine. Knowledge, even to some extent, of religious symbols serves as a guide in this area of human expression and facilitates intercultural understanding. Conversion is both an individual psychological and a religious experience. A fundamental element in the process of religious conversion is the image, which is responsible for generating a psychological impact. The image awakens in the individual the inner search necessary to find the religious cult that best suits him. In addition to this inner search, there are many other psychological and ethical implications, and religious leadership can facilitate the conversion process, making it easier and more complete.

Conversion through images takes place in various contexts and ways and is influenced by the religious content they present. The sacredness of an image differs from one religion to another and has a distinct symbolic meaning. For example, in many religions, the spirit cannot

be represented visually, does not have a face, and their churches do not include icons, calling themselves houses of prayer. In Christianity, the icon has a deep meaning, representing the mystery, as we receive God in His totality and make sure that we do not just ascribe to Him an energetic form, but always strive towards a spiritual form. The reality present in an icon is realized in two ways: the icon has a soul aspect and an energetic aspect, but because of our weak faith, we only see the energetic aspect of the icon.

The third chapter of the work: "BIZANTINE ART-CANONICAL, CONCEPTUAL AND PERSPECTIVE SPECIFICS" presents the role of the icon which plays a very important role in the Orthodox Christian faith and in conversion. The third chapter consists of the following sub-chapters: Origins of Byzantine Art, Characteristics of Byzantine Art, Canons and Ermines, Symbol- Icon the Plastic Expression of Two Worlds, Perspective in the Icon, Axonometric Perspective, Curvilinear or Angular Perspective, Centered, Reversed, or Reverse Perspective, Double perspective, Theological foundations in Byzantine art, The dogmatic aspect of the cult of the icon in Saint Theodore the Studite, The position of Saint Theodore the Studite (759-826) within the Holy Tradition, The Incarnation of the Lord, the theme of the icon, The content of the icon. The relationship between the icon and the nature of the prototype, The relationship between the icon and the person, The veneration of the icon, Political interference and monastic sanctity in Byzantine iconography, Dogmatic aspects of the cult of the icon in Saint John Damasquin, Saint John Damasquin defender of the Holy icons, Treatises against iconoclasm, The possibility of painting icons, Perspectives of Orthodox iconography, The icon as an element of mysticism and miracles, Chapter conclusions. In these sub-chapters we have addressed the essential role that icons play in the Orthodox Christian faith and in the process of conversion. Beautifully ornate hagiographic icons are described as windows to the Kingdom of God. They are used both inside churches, as an integral part of the expression of faith, and in private settings, in people's homes. For the Orthodox believer, the icon is a form of prayer and a means of approaching God. Most icons depict themes from the life of Christ, the life of the Virgin Mary and scenes from the Bible or the lives of saints.

Icons are an integral part of the tradition of the Orthodox Church from its foundation to the present day and are perhaps the most characteristic feature of our churches. In the early years of the spread of Christianity, representations of saints, their stories, the figure of Jesus and the Virgin Mary were extremely limited, especially in murals, because of imminent persecution. The figures and scenes depicted in icons or murals were based on oral information passed down from generation to generation of believers, while the first icon is attributed to the evangelist Luke and depicts the Virgin Mary.

The recognition of Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great marked the beginning of the public use of icons in the church, until then they had been limited to private use.

In the Byzantine Empire in the 8th and first half of the 9th century, icons became the subject of intense theological and political disputes, which led to unrest and tension. These controversies created a rift between believers who supported and venerated icons and those who opposed their use.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The conversion process is a complex experience involving individual psychological and religious aspects. An essential element in the process of religious conversion is the image, which is of significant visual importance in generating a psychological impact and stimulates the individual's inner search for a religious cult that best suits him. This perspective has numerous psychological and ethical implications. By accepting and integrating psychological and ethical perspectives, religious leadership can facilitate the conversion process, contributing to a smoother and more complete experience.

While there are situations where certain groups may resort to manipulation and misrepresentation, in general there is a certain "elective affinity" between the group and the recruited individual that initiates a process of interaction where certain types of individuals and certain types of groups work together to create a religious environment. The group can exert a strong influence on the individual's commitment and may play a necessary, but not sufficient, role in the individual's transformation into a new identity. However, religious devotees also influence the evolution of groups, especially when a group attracts unstable individuals or when participants' orientations involve expectations of a strong and charismatic leader.

According to Jean-Luc Blaquard's perspective, the process of conversion implies the possibility for each individual to choose the religious cult in which he or she wishes to integrate, since it offers answers to his or her questions and searches. However, it is observed that selectivity in recruiting and defecting potential members seems to limit the application of the extrinsic model. Before someone converts, the group they wish to join should identify the reasons why the individual is changing religion, as these reasons can play a decisive role. Enzo Pace's studies highlight four distinct types of conversion: rational-instrumental conversion, value-oriented rational conversion, traditional-conformist conversion and subjective charismatic conversion. Limited evidence supports the idea that people are restricted to join totalitarian groups voluntarily, against their will, or that the "new self" resulting from a conversion experience in such groups is imposed independently of personal identity.

Research shows that people convert for a variety of reasons. However, in order to analyse and make decisions about the causes of conversion, David Snow and Richard Machalek identify five main causes that lead to conversion and carry out an analysis of them. During the conversion process, intellectual and ethical factors can play an important role, but the decision-making factor is closely linked to the collective emotional attachment that is formed. In

conclusion, theoretically, the groups and solutions sought by a person are unlimited, but the seeker cannot give up his own personality and choices.

It is particularly relevant that in Europe, since the Renaissance, the issue of art has been closely linked to religious images. The rise of art in this context was a crucial moment in the development of the history of images and was of fundamental importance in the development of art itself. The paintings were not only representative of the artist's name, but also reflected his personal views on the religious sphere. Artistic practice began without a defined concept of art, but evolved into a distinctive form that differentiated works of art from other forms of artistic expression. Initially, the notion of art was particularly associated with religious paintings, and religious themes continued to predominate. In a growing art market, personal artistic style has become a distinctive feature. In French writings of the period, the term 'art' was introduced in connection with science.

Specific features of Orthodox theological thought include a contemplative orientation and a predilection for mysteries and religious symbolism. Also, Eastern thought in general contains elements of Greek philosophy, which may explain, to some extent, this attraction to mysticism and meditation specific to Orthodox theological thought. Beyond the strictly literal meaning of the biblical texts, there is a deep and mysterious meaning which concerns the depth of the divine mysteries.

From its beginnings, Eastern theology has been remarkable for its admirable balance, choosing the middle way and benefiting from the gift of discernment, which keeps it from excessive errors and one-sidedness. In Orthodoxy, there is a perfect balance between the horizontal and vertical dimensions, whereby the ephemeral beauty of individuals is reflected in the depth of spiritual communion with God and with others.

"Man is related to God"[6] , being an image of the ineffable glory of God, although he bears within himself the marks and wounds of sins. Therefore, he longs for God, the source of Goodness and Beauty. Through his Incarnation, the Son of God opens for us humans the way to eternity, becoming for us the ladder to heaven and revealing to us our true destiny by virtue of this spiritual bond with him. Man, "created in the image and likeness of God, is ontologically rooted in the desire to seek, create and discover beauty."[7]

Man's thirst for knowledge (a recurring motif in Socrates' philosophy) can be satisfied only by the discovery of man's true destiny, which consists in a permanent ascent towards

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[6] GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Great Catechetical Word, On the Need*, IBMBOR Publishing House, 2011, p. 60.
[7] GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Great...*, p. 61.

"likeness" with his God, through the divine grace communicated to him as the fruit of the redemption accomplished through the God-One Jesus Christ.

Man's ascent to the likeness of God is completed in glory, transforming the fallen image into the image of divine glory. This legitimizes the theology of the icon within Orthodoxy. In fact, "the icon becomes so rooted in Orthodoxy that one cannot discuss Orthodoxy without mentioning icons."[8] The icon is integrated into the doctrinal essence of Orthodoxy and is closely related to the central themes of Orthodox theology.

The art of the icon cannot be understood without a detailed study of the scriptural, patristic, historical, dogmatic and canonical orthodox foundations. The absolutely symbolic character of the icon lies in the fact that none of its motifs represents a perceptible reality, but a transcendent reality. "The icon represents an attempt to contemplate God through the incarnation of the Word in a human aspect, through the human face of the divine, which is theological beauty."[9]

The patristic writings contain several expressions that highlight the pedagogical function of the icon to instruct and edify the faithful. The icon is called "the visual Gospel", "Holy Scripture in the ineffable language of colours", "the Bible of the unlettered", "the pictorial language of the Gospel" and others. The purpose of iconographic art is to communicate the Truth, and symbols are its main elements. The symbol is an indirect and analogical representation that brings together the conventional meanings of a reality.

The veneration of icons cannot be considered idolatry because the act of veneration is not directed towards the material aspect of the icon, such as the pictorial support, the colours or the lines through which the holy personage is represented in it. Instead, veneration is directed towards the actual person of the saint depicted in the icon, not for its own sake, but for the divine grace with which it has been endowed during its lifetime. In this characteristic of icons as means of divine grace, they are essentially different from ordinary religious paintings.

For Christians, iconographic art receives legitimacy through the Incarnation of the Word of God. The Old Testament prohibition against iconographic representations before the Incarnation of the Son of God serves a pedagogical purpose, to protect the Jewish people, in the midst of other pagan peoples, from falling into idolatry. Throughout history, there have been currents which have claimed that God remains isolated in His transcendence, such as Byzantine

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[8] Pr. N. Macsim, Theophany of the Icon in Orthodoxy. Doctrinal Implications, in: *MMS*, year LXIV, no. 1, January-February, 1988, p. 28.
[9] Ierom. Luca Diaconu, The Icon, God's Eye to the World and the Soul's Window to Heaven, in *Theology and Life*, Series Nine, Year I (LXVIII), Iasi, No. 1-3, January-March 1991, p. 96.

and Muslim iconoclasm, and such currents are still manifest today in various 'Christian' sects which reject the veneration of holy icons.

The central theme of the depiction of the events of the Saviour's life in icons is based on His coming in the flesh, as the Son of God became the Son of Man. Adam, the first created man, was made in the image of the Son, and the Incarnate becomes the New Adam. Through the old Adam, sin and death entered the world, but through the New Adam, who is God made perfect, all creation is renewed. The incarnation of the Son has a solid foundation in Holy Scripture. The Son became incarnate in order to redeem mankind from sin and death through sacrifice. No sacrifice offered by any man can have the infinite value of God's sacrifice.

The early church did not preserve an authentic representation of Christ's physiognomy, and the scriptural texts do not provide details of His physical appearance. Throughout the ages, there have been many discussions about the appearance of the Saviour, depending on the psalmo-davidic luminous conception which supports a beautiful appearance or the description of the prophet Isaiah who presents Him as the "Man of Sorrows". The Church originally used mythological symbols of pagan Greco-Roman origin which it adapted to represent its teaching in a plastic form. All the events of the Saviour's earthly life can be portrayed through images, because the Son made Himself visible and appeared in the flesh.

Icons can also include landscape or architectural elements, but they always fulfil one essential condition: at their centre is one or more persons, such as Christ, the Mother of God or certain saints.

At the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787, it was agreed that icons should not be worshipped (since worship is reserved for God alone), but honoured, with veneration directed not to the representation itself, but to the prototype or person represented.

From the perspective of plastic language, the icon can be seen as a portrait focused on the most representative features of the person, especially the face; however, it pursues a much deeper dimension than that of an ordinary portrait. The figures depicted in the icon are not presented in their immanent, human, corporeal and earthly reality, subject to corruption, but in their transcendent, divine-human reality. In the icon, the holy figures are depicted in a state in which human nature has been restored to its original beauty, in which the person, remaining in his or her natural essence, has risen to a life that transcends the limits of human nature.

In the same context, the icon of Christ represents neither His divine nor His human nature, but His Person in whom the two natures are united in an inseparable and unmixed way. Icons depicting the Mother of God and the saints are representations of holy persons in whom the human nature is enriched and transfigured by divine energies. Therefore, the faces and

bodies of the saints depicted in icons do not express the marks of sin or signs of the fallen nature, but prefigure the glorified bodies of the righteous in the general resurrection (Philippians 3:21; Corinthians 15:44). The faces of the saints in the icons shine with heavenly peace, with the immortal beauty of the virtues acquired during life, with their belonging to the world beyond. In Byzantine icons, the saints do not smile, their joy is inner; their faces show humility, repentance, constant awakening and love for God and man. According to the canons of Byzantine art, the saints are depicted with an elongated, hieratic stature and are enveloped in the uncreated light of God, which is symbolically represented by the golden background. This uncreated light shines on the saints' faces and garments, springing from within them, and there are no shadows or chiaroscuro techniques in Orthodox icons. In the icon, the entire pictorial space is enveloped and transformed by the grace that springs from the holy person depicted, becoming a space in which the laws of fallen nature no longer operate.

This is the real reason (contrary to modern theories which claim that it is the naivety of the painters) why plants and animals are depicted in the icon in a way alien to their usual nature, the architecture of the buildings does not follow the principles of modern perspective, and the clothes and objects depicted in the icon seem to defy the laws of gravity. In the icon, the replacement of the modern central perspective with the inverted perspective symbolises the overthrow of the values of this world, as preached in the Holy Gospel.

Western iconographic art, in the period after the 13th-14th centuries, departed from the canonical tradition and resorted to a series of plastic improvisations, such as naturalism and spatial depth, dealing with religious themes foreign to orthodox theology. These deviations are clear evidence of doctrinal errors. Consequently, some contemporary theologians have used the phrase "Schism after Schism" to illustrate this break of Western art from the Orthodox canonical tradition.

The existence of the two-dimensional plane in Orthodox icons, through the use of reverse perspective and the avoidance of spatial perspective, can in no way be attributed to a lack of knowledge on the part of Orthodox icon-makers. These features actually represent Orthodox beliefs about salvation.

According to Orthodox dogma, in order to acquire subjective salvation, the believer must fulfill certain conditions. However, the fulfillment of these conditions cannot be considered a merit to such an extent that God is obliged to offer His saving help to man. In accordance with these dogmas, we can understand the reason for the lack of a relationship between the saintly personage and spatial reality, as well as the internalization of his image in a state of transfiguration. The absence of the relationship between the saint and spatial reality

has an explanation in the Orthodox conception of salvation, in the sense that man's salvation does not depend on man's connection with earthly aspects, but on his relationship with God, a personal power that transcends and dominates immanent reality. "This theocentric view, characterized by absolute dependence on God, is eloquently illustrated by the rigidity and inwardness present in the faces of saints depicted in Orthodox icons." [10]

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[10] Paul EVDOKIMOV, *The Art of the Icon...*, p. 96.

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