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The Mystery of the Holy Trinity – Reflected in the Quality of Man as the “Image” of God¹

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Abstract

This study presents in the light of Orthodox theology the concept of man being created “in the image of God”, the fundamental element which distinguishes him from all other creatures of God. So, it is shown that the “image” of God sometimes refers to its quality to express the imperial dignity of man, referring to his superiority over the sensible world, other times it is meant to be seen in his spiritual nature, in his soul or the principal and guiding part of his being, in his mind, in the higher faculties like intelligence, reason, or in man’s freedom, the faculty of self-determination... sometimes the image of God is assimilated with some quality of the soul, with its simplicity, with its immortality or with the faculty to know God, to live in connection with Him. The next step is the clarification, from the patristic perspective, of the relationship between human being created “in the image of God” and the incarnate Logos who is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation”. And, finally, the “image” of God in man, is presented as a reflection of the internal communion of the Holy Trinity, with special reference to St. Maximus the Confessor’s theology.

Keywords:

Image of God, anthropology, Orthodox theology, St. Maximus the Confessor

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I. General considerations

It has been rightly asserted that the twenty-first century will be the century of anthropology or anthropologies, as the issue of man is at the forefront of all human efforts to decipher human life on earth, its origins, the meaning of life, and its purpose. Therefore, in almost all sciences, attempts are made to find as many answers as possible regarding human life, whether it is viewed in the dimension of his biological existence, the struggle with diseases, or his capacity as a creator of culture and spirituality, or simply as a consumer of culture and civilization. Certainly, in all these compartments of various concerns and sciences, attempts have been made and are being made to find answers that satisfy the human need for immediate concreteness or to capture certain connections regarding human needs of material, spiritual, and cultural order. However, the essential issue regarding man is the reflection of what he truly is, how he is unmistakably distinguished from other existences, and what distinguishes him from these, or, in other words, how this unmistakable “specificity” of a human being can be understood, what it is, and how the distinctive reference point of man in the context of the created world should be understood. Theology in general, and Orthodox theology in particular, strongly and convincingly highlights the fact that this differentiation of man from other created existences constitutes the image of God in man.

II. The broader meanings of understanding the image of God in man

First, the image of God in man was understood in a more general way even by the Church Fathers, so that later, various more precise manifestations of this image in human life were retained. Both the Holy Fathers and many theologians start from the reality of the existence of the image of God in man mentioned in the Scriptures: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (Genesis 1, 26).

“The Fathers often suggest that «in the image» expresses the perfect state of man from the beginning of creation, the way

he was created by God, while «after the likeness» refers to the state of fullness of his being, which man will acquire at the end of time, when, finally, he will see God «face to face», and the communion of the created with the uncreated is perfected. Then, in the eschaton, man will also be the likeness of God, for he will be free like God”².

Therefore, the general meaning of the image of God in man is identical to the state of perfection in which man existed in the primordial state, as he emerged from God’s act of creation.

Related to this, however, the “image” of God in man has also been understood as a manifestation of his freedom. In other words, the fact that man has freedom testifies to his quality of existence created in the image of God. Saint Gregory of Nyssa understood the “image” of God in man in the sense of his capacity for “self-governance”. But this capacity of man to govern himself is closely related to his rationality³. Understanding the “image” of God in man in this sense means perceiving it as the fundamental distinguishing dimension between man and the rest of the created world.

Also, in the sense of understanding the divine “image” in man, Saint John Damascene expresses it, seeing this “image” closely linked to the act of the creation of the world and man.

“God created man with His own hands in His image and likeness (Genesis 1, 26). He made the body from the earth, and the rational and thinking soul by His breath (Genesis 2, 7). We call this «divine image», for the words «in His image» indicate the

² Ioannis ZIZIOULAS, *Prelegeri de dogmatică creștină*, transl. Florin Caragiu, Editura Sophia, București 2008, p. 191; see more aspects related to man and his understanding in Orthodox thinking: Nicolae Răzvan STAN (ed.), *Antropologia ortodoxă din perspectivă eclezială: provocările postmodernității*. Al VI-lea Colocviu Național de Teologie Dogmatică, Facultatea de Teologie Ortodoxă din Craiova, Editura Universitaria, Editura Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2018.

³ Ioannis ZIZIOULAS, *Prelegeri de dogmatică ortodoxă*, pp. 191-192: “Those fathers who connect the «image» with the logos and rationality of man understand that the *logos* of man is his freedom, which means self-government. Thus we properly represent the patristic tradition as a whole when we see the element of freedom or self-government as the difference between man and the rest of the created world”.

reason and free will, and «after His likeness» show the likeness to God in virtue, as much as possible”⁴.

Therefore, according to this Holy Father, the “image” refers to reason and free will or the freedom of man, with which he was endowed at the moment of his calling into existence, through God’s creative act⁵.

The Church Fathers have shown so fascinatingly the greatness of man, but they have always seen it closely linked to the quality of man being in the image of the Godhead. All the Church Fathers, both those from the East and those from the West, agree to see in the fact of man’s creation ‘in the image and likeness of God’ a certain pre-established order, a kind of fittingness from the beginning between the divine being and the human being. However, the theological emphasis of this revealed truth will often be different in the Eastern and Western traditions, although by no means contradictory.

Starting from the image of God in man, the thinking of Saint Augustine

“seeks to form a notion about God by trying to discover in Him what is found in the human soul, made in His image. It will be a method of psychological analogies applied to the knowledge of God and theology. On the other hand, Saint Gregory of Nyssa chose what Revelation tells us about God as a starting point, to find in man what corresponds to the divine image in him. This is the theological method applied to the knowledge of man, anthropology. The first path seeks to know God starting from

⁴ Sf. IOAN DAMASCHIN, *Dogmatica*, transl. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Fecioru, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (abrv.: EIBMBOR), București 2005, p. 82. By virtue of this “image” man was in the primordial state “innocent, righteous, virtuous, free from anger, without care, enlightened with all virtue, loaded with all goodness, like a second world, a microcosm within the macrocosm, another angel worshipper, composed, observer of the seen world, initiated into the spiritual world, king of the earthly, ruled from above, earthly and heavenly, temporal and immortal, seen and spiritual, midway between greatness and humility, same as spirit and body; spirit because of grace, and body because of pride” (p. 83).

⁵ This variety of understanding of the “image” of God in man is highlighted by the Greek theologian Panayotis NELLAS, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit. Pentru o antropologie ortodoxă*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1994, pp. 7-10.

man made in His image; the second path aims to define the true nature of man, starting from the notion of God, in whose image man was created”⁶.

The understanding of the “image” is further shown by other Fathers, emphasizing the quality of man to be a rational and free being, meaning that the manifestation of man’s reason and freedom is a direct testimony to his quality as the “image” of God⁷.

Beyond all these expressions regarding the “image” of God in man, it represents a mystery, a secret, according to the measure of the mystery of God Himself, in whose “image” man was created. Moreover, by this fact, the meaning of understanding the “image” is multiple, as it cannot be reduced to a single definition or understanding.

Therefore, the “image” of God sometimes refers to its quality to express the imperial dignity of man, referring to his superiority over the sensible world,

“other times it is meant to be seen in his spiritual nature, in his soul or the principal and guiding part of his being, in his mind, in the higher faculties like intelligence, reason, or in man’s freedom, the faculty of self-determination... sometimes the image of God is assimilated with some quality of the soul, with its simplicity, with its immortality or with the faculty to know God, to live in connection with Him”⁸.

⁶ Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, translation, introductive study and notes, Pr. Vasile Răducă, Editura Anastasia, București, p. 144.

⁷ Ilarion ALFEYEV, Metropolitan of Volokolamsk, *Taina credinței. Introducere în teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, transl. Felicia Dumas, Editura Doxologia, Iași 2014, pp. 104-105: “The Holy Fathers perceived the features of the divine image in man’s nature, created as rational and spiritual, in his quality of being endowed with reason... It is considered that in man, the image of God consists in his free will and the ability to choose. God created man completely free: in His love, He does not want to compel him either to do good or to do evil. In turn, He expects from man not a blind obedience, but a love in response to His love”.

⁸ Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, p. 144.

III. Man – into the “image” of the Son or the divine Logos and its meaning

Although man was created in the “image” of God – a perfect communion of love, he must also be viewed about the special relationship of this “image” with Him who is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him, all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him, all things exist...” (Colossians 1, 15-18).

“A great theologian of the past century rightly observed that in this text there is not a Trinitarian teaching, but rather a purely cosmological and anthropological one. In other words, it emphasizes not so much the relationship of the Word with the Father – a relationship certainly presupposed and developed elsewhere by the Apostle – but the significance of Christ for man. This aspect contains great importance because it makes evident the Christological dimension of the Apostle Paul’s anthropology. This dimension of the term «image» is also manifested in the Apostle Paul’s fundamental teaching, according to which, to be complete, man must bear the «image» of the heavenly man, that is, of Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 15, 49), to reach «the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ» (Ephesians 4, 13). For Saint Apostle Paul, the fulfillment of man coincides with his Christification”⁹.

Indeed, several Church Fathers, including Saint Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, etc., have strongly argued that Jesus Christ is the Image of God, and man is the “image” of Christ, meaning that man is the “image of the Image”¹⁰.

⁹ Ștefan BUCHIU (ed.), *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă I*, Editura Basilica, București, 2017, p. 399; see also: Panayotis NELLAS, pp. 7-8

¹⁰ Ștefan BUCHIU (ed.), *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă I*, p. 399 sq.

The Church Fathers saw a close connection between Saint Apostle Paul's assertion that Jesus Christ is the "Image of the living God" and the assertion in Genesis that man was created "in the image of God" (Genesis 1, 26). The rationality of the human being is based on the fact that man, as a rational and speaking being, was built in the image of Christ, who is the Reason – the Hypostatic Word of the Father. Saint Athanasius the Great has insightful words in this regard: "He made them in His Image, giving them the power of His Word/Reason, so that having it within them as a kind of shadow of the Word/Reason and becoming rational, they might remain in happiness"¹¹.

Furthermore, the other attributes or qualities that man possesses: his ability to rule over creation, to be a free being, to be responsible for the entire creation, as he is the being that recapitulates the whole creation, being at the same time its living conscience, as well as his constitution, being soul and body, person and nature, illustrate the fact that man is "in the image of the Creator and Savior Logos"¹².

IV. The mystery of the "image" of God in man, as a reflection of the communion of the Holy Trinity

The fact that man is the "image of the Image", meaning of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity – the Logos – does not contradict the theological assertion that man reflects the mystery of life and love of the Holy Trinity. It has rightly been said that man is a great mystery, as Alexis Carrel stated, "l'homme c'est inconnu" – "man is unknown". This phrase illustrates the same anthropological reality, namely, that man is created in connection with the mystery of the Trinity and its image of it. Alexis Carrel's statement leads in the same direction of understanding man, namely, that in his being, he highlights its profound, complex, and impossible-to-fully-describe nature, which cannot be exhaustively captured in descriptions or precise definitions. There always remains an aspect of man's description

¹¹ ATANASIE CEL MARE, *Despre Întruparea Cuvântului 3*, PG 25, 101 B and 104 CD, apud: Panayotis NELLAS, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit*, p. 9.

¹² See: Panayotis NELLAS, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit*, pp. 11-12.

that escapes any specification. This is because man is a profound mystery, which is reflected in the ineffable image of the tri-personal Godhead.

“Man is generally a unitary person and, at the same time, complex. The unity of the human person and, at the same time, its complexity is shown in the fact that a unified self manifests itself in an infinite multiplicity of thoughts, feelings, and actions, through which it seeks to achieve and express its full realization, but never succeeds. Through this, he tends towards a fullness but knows that it is beyond his power to attain it, that it is beyond his abilities. He cannot fully grasp himself and, at the same time, sees his inadequacy”¹³.

Man was created by God in His image. But, it is about a God in Three Persons. Therefore, man was created according to this image. Through the act of creation and by the “breath of life” breathed into man created in the “image” of the Creator, he was placed in a special relationship with God.

“The Holy Fathers say that through this breath God planted in man not only the understanding soul, related to God, but also His grace, as a manifestation of His relationship with man, which provokes in man his response to God’s foundational act of relationship”¹⁴.

¹³ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos, lumina lumii în îndumnezeitorul omului*, Editura Anastasia, București 1993, p. 17.

¹⁴ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică Ortodoxă* (abrv.: TDO), EIBMBOR, București 1978, vol. I, p. 390. In relation to this depth of the “image” of God in man, St. John Damascene expressed himself so complexly and profoundly as follows: “God made man innocent, righteous, virtuous, loaded with all goodness, like a second world, a microcosm within the macrocosm, another worshipping angel, composite, observer of the visible world, initiated into the spiritual world, king of the earthly, ruled from above, earthly and heavenly, temporal and immortal, seen and spiritual, midway between greatness and humility, the same also spirit, because of grace, and body because of pride; spirit, that he may abide and praise the Benefactor, body, that he may suffer, and through suffering he may remember and instruct himself when he boasts of greatness”. (*Dogmatica*, EIBMBOR, București 2005, p. 85).

In his capacity as a being created by God “in His image”, as mentioned above, man has a spiritual structure constituted by mind, intellect or reason, feeling, will, and endowed with freedom, which gives man the ability to connect with God and remain permanently in connection with Him, in the perspective of likeness with Him, inscribed in his being. Thus, this image received by man at creation means a reflection of the Holy Trinity in his being, that is, a participation of man, through this image received at creation, in the life of love and communion of the Holy Trinity.

Being in the “image” of the triune God, man tends towards Him, but he will never be able to fully comprehend Him.

“The Trinity cannot be understood by man. Rather, the Trinity encompasses man and urges him to glorify it. Apart from glorification and worship, outside of personal relationship through faith, when we speak of the Trinity, our language is always false”¹⁵.

And, this relationship of man with the Holy Trinity through faith is possible for man and allowed by the Holy Trinity, as man bears the seal of the “image” of the Holy Trinity.

Another perspective of understanding the “image” as a reflection of the Trinity is offered by St. Maximus the Confessor. He starts by explaining this connection of man with God by highlighting the correspondence between the spiritual, profound structure of the “image” with the reality of the fullness of the triune life.

“In Ambigua 7, he affirms that the intellect, reason, and spirit of man must conform to their archetypes. The Great Intellect, the Logos, and the Spirit. In a paragraph from Ambigua 10, he confirms that this triad of the human soul constitutes an image of the Trinitarian Archetype, but also the fact that its simplicity and unity reflect the divine simplicity, that the goodness expressed in the imitation of true virtues reflects divine goodness, and

¹⁵ Vladimir LOSSKY, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, transl. Lidia și Remus Rus, Editura Enciclopedică, București 1993, p. 59.

ultimately that man's liberation from everything that divides reflects God's unifying work. It is not difficult to find in these references to three fundamental human activities references to the three Persons of the divine Trinity. The Father is the principle of unity, the Son is the manifestation of goodness, and the Spirit is the unifying power"¹⁶.

St. Maximus sees the depth of understanding of the "image" closely linked to the mystery of the Holy Trinity, which is present in the entire work of God in the world, closely linked to what God represents in Himself, in the communion of life and love of the Holy Trinity.

"For Maximus, the history of salvation, the «economy» is never a revelation separate from the trinitarian life of the Godhead. It represents the triune divine life in the destiny of creation, and this is not only because of the fall but for the perfection of creation through Man, a man who is always a corresponding «you», the «iconic» partner of God. The economic Trinity is the mystery that is presented to be imitated in human life. For Maximus, the problem is never just to imitate the incarnate Christ. We are called to imitate the Father, who offers His Son, and Himself in Him, and thus to imitate the Trinity in its entirety"¹⁷.

For St. Maximus, everything is imbued with trinitarian meanings: creation, providence, man, salvation etc. Only to that extent can the true meaning of human life be known, if the trinitarian dimension of his existence is not overlooked, more precisely, the quality of man to be "in the image" of the Trinity, which grants human existence not only exceptional value and dignity but also a profound, mysterious depth of life on earth. From here stem some consequences in the human, social, medical, cultural, and, of course, soteriological levels.

¹⁶ Lars THUNBERG, *Omul și cosmosul în viziunea Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul*, EIBMBOR, București 1999, p. 44.

¹⁷ Lars THUNBERG, *Omul și cosmosul...*, p. 37.

V. Conclusions

Presenting the importance of humanity requires the utmost attention and rigor from those who wish to portray the human person and its relevance in the world they inhabit.

However, depicting this depth of mystery that is man cannot be achieved if he is seen only within his biological limitations and the power of his thought and creativity.

To at least partially succeed in presenting the human being, it must be seen what constitutes its specificity, about everything that surrounds it; in other words, that fundamental difference between man and the surrounding world, i.e., the world of plants, vegetation in general, and that of animals.

That essential “difference” between man and the entire creation is seen in Revelation as being the “image” of God in man. This “image” confers value, importance, and responsibility upon man.

The content of that “image” is represented by the fact that man is in the image of God-Love, an eternal communion of eternal Persons, which gives him uniqueness and the character of a person. The person is endowed with consciousness, freedom, and responsibility. The other creatures do not have these values, and therefore, they are not “in the image of God”.

Therefore, dignity, freedom, the capacity for thought and feeling, responsibility, etc., are natural manifestations of man, created in the image of the Creator. But it is not about a mono-personal Creator, but One who has within Himself full, perfect, and eternal existence, yet who has created a partner for dialogue with this being, created “in His image”.

For contemporary man, such a fascinating vision has numerous consequences, which man should not ignore for a moment. Ignoring these consequences of his quality of being “in the image” of the triune Creator has disastrous consequences for man’s existence on earth, personally and socially, disfiguring him and lowering him from the dignity to which God has raised him, making him “in His image”. Reflecting on this fundamental dimension of human existence is a necessity and a permanent responsibility.