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Deification as a Transfiguration of Man: Toward a Theology of the Holiness in Orthodox Iconography

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Abstract

This paper examines the theme of holiness as reflected in Orthodox iconography. In this sense, we divided the paper in two parts. In the first section, we consider the icons as doors to heaven, and, in this sense they are states of mind. In other words, the heaven or holiness is activated through icons. In the theology of Holy Fathers, the icon participates with the spiritual reality it symbolizes. In the second section, we will explore the iconic significances of the holy places, and the ways in which these charismatic places transcend our time and space. In other words, we highlight that the topographic features prefigured higher spiritual meanings about our vocation. Briefly, God did continue to speak to humans through iconic topographies.

Keywords

deification, icon, holiness, Orthodox iconography, spiritual seeing, natural contemplation

I. The Holy Beauty of the Visible: Activating Holiness through Holy Icons

As we know, heaven descends in the Holy Eucharist in a strong, ontological sense. Therefore, the central significance of the heaven is non-spatial. In other words, heaven is not a physical place, because from a theological

point of view it is a state of the mind attainable “here” and “now” and made eternal after this life. As Veronica della Dora has remarked “heaven in Orthodoxy can thus be thought through glimpses of divine grace, as an interior and more-than-representational spiritual state, as «the way we individually experience the sight of Christ, depending on the condition of our heart» (G. Metallinos)”¹.

The icon is possible through the incarnation of the eternal Logos, so that it seeks to incarnate the visible of the invisible. In Christ we see something which could be revealed by God but which could not even be dreamed of by man: the fullness of Divinity in human flesh. Here is the essence of holiness. It is accessible to us because of the fact of the Incarnation. In other words, our holiness can be nothing else that participation in the holiness of God. From this perspective the icons emphasizes natural objects and theophanies, which means they make the invisible visible through symbols. In this sense Sf. John Damascus wrote: “it is impossible for us to think without using physical images... through sight we attain spiritual contemplation. Thus Christ took both soul and body, for man is made of both”². Therefore, icon correlates the prototype, its image and its beholder, enabling access to the dimension of the divine.

Therefore, icon is a statement, a vehicle of Grace which “make the intangible tangible, the invisible visible, divinity accessible to humans, as the incarnated Christ did”³. As Saint Maximos the Confessor has remarked, in the theology of Holy Fathers, the icon participates with the spiritual reality it symbolizes:

“The world is one... for the spiritual world in its totality is manifested in the totality of the perceptible world, mystically expressed in symbolic pictures for those who have eyes to see. And the perceptible world in its entirety is secretly fathomable

¹ The best discussion of the subject, to which I am much indebted, is Veronica della DORA, “The Heavens Declare the Glory of God: Mapping Cosmos and Activating Heaven through Holy Icons”, in: Alessandro SCAFI (ed.), *The Cosmography of Paradise: The Other World from Ancient Mesopotamia to Medieval Europe*, London: The Warburg Institute, 2016.

² Judith HERRIN, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 143.

³ Cf. Anna KARTSONIS, “The Responding Icon”, in: Linda SAFRAN, *Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium*, University Park PA, 2002. P. 58; Leonid OUSPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon*, Crestwood NY, 1982, p. 35.

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by the spiritual world in its entirety, when it has been simplified and amalgamated by means of the spiritual realities. The former is embodied in the latter through the realities; the latter in the former through the symbols. The operation of the two is one”⁴.

In the Byzantine theology an icon is a holy image used for spiritual purposes, such as providing a focus for the Christ, Holy Virgin and Holy Fathers who offered models for a spiritual life. Briefly, the icon is an instrument for participation in a spiritual reality which means that it is holy by participation, rather than holy in itself⁵. We understand that the icon is holy by participation because “God having been made flesh in Jesus Christ, humans are able to glimpse the very face of God in matter itself”⁶. The icon claims personal involvement in the act of gazing, an involvement that assumes our physical and material constitution, our body: “The flesh is also transformed”, writes St. Gregory Palamas, “it is exalted with the soul, communes together with the soul in the Divine, and itself likewise becomes the possession and dwelling-place of God”⁷.

In our opinion the icon is created to involve the transfiguration of the material world. In this context we stress that the icon is epiphanic because it is understood as “a form of art which both promoted and supported Christian faith and worship, and which communicated the ways in which believers may understand their world”⁸. It is important to say that this world is not realistic, but symbolic or spiritual because its elements define the essential dimension of the icon, namely holiness. As Veronica della Dora has remarked in Byzantine iconography

“cycles earthly and heavenly natural elements typically give the scenes narrative continuity. For example, on icons of the Nativity, the infant Christ is usually portrayed in a cave, indicating the earth itself taking the glory of divinity through

⁴ St. MAXIMOS THE CONFESSOR, *Mystagogia* 2, PG 91, 669.

⁵ For more details, see Paul EVDOKIMOV, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, Redondo Beach CA, 1990, p. 178.

⁶ Belden LANE, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 125.

⁷ St. GREGORY PALAMAS, *Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, 1.2.9, quoted from Kallistos WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000, p. 68.

⁸ Robin CORMACK, *Icons*, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 8.

Incarnation (see Nativity, Monastery of Hosios Loukas, Greece, 11th century). Likewise, on icons of the Theophany, the banks of the river Jordan generally feature in a cave-like shape (see Theophany, Monastery of Hosios Loukas, Greece, 11th century) and are sometimes enclosed by symmetrical rocky pinnacles bending towards the centre”⁹.

Therefore, the earth is the visible manifestation of the divine, the world radiating is a beam of light (Fig. 1), signifying the descent of Logos and its incarnation. Also, in the Theophany (Monastery of Hosios Loukas, Greece, 11th century)

“the mystery of Holy Trinity is mapped out through a vertical axis: Father – Holy Spirit – Son (the first commonly still symbolized by the concentric circles and the last as a dove sometimes enclosed within smaller circles)... In these scenes of the Life of Christ the concentric circles are partial and relegated to the upper part of the icon. The Logos, the voice of the Father, is heard from above, often from within a cloud, as it was heard by Moses on Mount Sinai”¹⁰.

Also, we see similar motifs in the Byzantine iconography, namely the God speaking from above represented as concentric semicircles, on icons of Holy Fathers and saints. In this sense the icon indicates the revelation of the divine. This idea is consistent with patristic theology because Christian conception on holiness is both apophatic and kataphatic. In fact, Eastern theology develops this tension: absence and presence, image and darkness, language and silence. For example, Fr. Andreas Andreopoulos has noted that Christ on the top of Mount Tabor reveals His divine nature to Peter, James, and John, that He opens heaven for them to see¹¹. In this context we recall the image of Moses ascending Mount Sinai to map out spiritual

⁹ Veronica della DORA “The Heavens Declare the Glory of God...”, p. 187.

¹⁰ V. DORA “The Heavens Declare the Glory of God...”, p. 189.

¹¹ Andreas ANDREOPOULOS, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, Crestwood, New York, 2005, p. 240. For more details on this theme, see Andreas ANDREOPOULOS, *Gazing on God: Trinity, Church and Salvation in Orthodox Thought and Iconography*, James Clarke & Co, 2013.

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progress towards holiness¹². In the *Life of Moses* by Gregory of Nyssa Moses is seen as a model of for one who seeks the spiritual life:

“These things concerning the perfection of the virtuous life (...) we have briefly written for you, tracing in outline like a pattern of beauty the life of the great Moses so that each one of us might copy the image of the beauty which has been shown to us by imitating his way of life. (...) we consider becoming God’s friend the only thing worthy of honor and desire. This, as I have said, is the perfection of life”¹³.

From this perspective, the ascent to the top of Mount Sinai as a spiritual progress is interpreted by Gregory of Nyssa as a mystic journey from light to darkness, from the known to unknown, from kataphatic to apophatic theology. As Andreopoulos has observed for many early Saints Fathers – as St. Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea and Gregorius of Nazianzinos – Moses is

“a model of ascetic ascent in a way that expressed a particular strand of mystical theology. The connection between the iconography of the Transfiguration and the ascent of the soul as it was understood through the metaphor of the ascent of Moses on Sinai”¹⁴.

¹² In the fourth century, St. Gregory of Nyssa argued that *holiness* or *theosis* is a mountain steep and difficult to climb. The knowledge of God was realized in darkness for “when Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in the darkness, that is, that he had then come to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension” (St. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Life of Moses*, trans. A. J. Malherbe and E. Ferguson, NY: Ramsey and Toronto, 1978, p. 164).

¹³ St. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Life of Moses* 319 and 320, pp. 136-137. In this context Solrunn Nes said that Moses is a model for monks, because “like Moses the monks have withdrawn into the loneliness of the desert in order to seek God and strive after «the perfection of life». Moses serves as a model both for the coenobitic monk who lives a sacramental and liturgical life within the community of the monastery and for the contemplative hermit who comes to church once a week in order to celebrate the eucharist. Moses himself alternated between life in a community and the life of a hermit” (Solrunn NES, *The Uncreated of Light: An Iconographical Study of the Transfiguration in the Eastern Church*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007, p. 64).

¹⁴ Andreas ANDREOPOULOS, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology...*, p. 91.

In this context we stress that deification is a dynamic process, not a static state of being. This vibrant and vivifying conception of spiritual progress is well expressed by Gregory of Nyssa:

“This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the God can be found nor is the increasing desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied”¹⁵.

Orthodox iconography saw in Mount Sinai a prefiguration of Tabor, where Christ revealed Himself in an intensive and white light. The essence of this teaching is encapsulated in the following words: “The mystery of the incarnation is disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth, his clothes glistening and intensely white. The disciples know themselves to have encountered the living God in human flesh. What was not given to see and know to Moses, becomes manifest in the New Testament”¹⁶.

In this sense, Tabor becomes a point of encounter between God and man, but also a prefiguration of the eternal light. It is known that in Orthodox iconography the transfigured Christ is embedded within a *mandorla*¹⁷ of light. Obviously this light is not the natural or artificial light but the luminous body of Christ-light — occasionally creatively enhanced by a mandorla of light. At this point it may be helpful to say a very few words about the icon of Transfiguration from the monastery of Saint Catherine

¹⁵ St. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Life of Moses* 239, p. 116.

¹⁶ Belden LANE, *The Solace of Fierce Landscape...*, p. 35.

¹⁷ Mandorla, (Italian: “almond”), is an ancient symbol or sphere that describes the Christ’ majesty, glory and divinity in holy icons. In other words, the mandorla representing Christ’ glory, which means an iconographic depiction of light. And indeed, in Christian iconography is the aureole of light surrounding the entire figure of a holy person; it was used usually for the figure of Christ, so that by the 6th century the mandorla had become a standard attribute of Christ in scenes of the Transfiguration (in which Christ shows himself to his Apostles transformed into his celestial appearance) and the Ascension (in which the resurrected Christ ascends to heaven). On this subject, see Andreas ANDREOPOULOS, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, Crestwood, NY, 2005; Solrunn NES, *The Uncreated Light: An Iconographical Study of the Transfiguration in the Eastern Church*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grands Rapids, Michigan, 2007.

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(The Transfiguration: apse mosaic, 6th century, St. Catherine's monastery, Sinai, Egypt)¹⁸.

First of all, this icon represented the oldest example of a figurative representation of the Transfiguration¹⁹. This transfiguration was understood as a manifestation of the uncreated light, briefly as deification (*theosis*). In other words, “the Transfiguration at Tabor becomes the Transfiguration in the monastic church at Sinai. The Church repeats liturgically what Christ did historically”²⁰. Thus, the ascension of Jesus was a physical ascent to heaven, the deification of man is a spiritual ascent to heaven.

As we know, from an Orthodox perspective, landscape was akin to a holy icon. In this sense, the spirituality is inherently geographical in the patristic theology. It is sufficient to remember that deserts, mountains, caves and rivers deeply mark the Eastern spirituality. This holy places have spiritual power because they are the means through which the process of spiritual transformation takes meaning. Not coincidentally, the prophets and ascetics have chosen these places as sites for withdrawal and spiritual pathways, because these places are spiritual maps. According to Veronica della Dora has remarked “Like a holy icon, the earth and its variety of *topoi* were thus symbolic in the ancient, strong sense of the word, since «symbol», *sym-bolon*, denotes coming together of two halves, the visible and the invisible”²¹.

In this context it may be helpful to say a very few words about iconic seeing. It is known that this seeing of the invisible within the visible, is just as much the ability to apprehend beauty: the beauty of the icon and the beauty of the earth as well. In this sense, St John of Damascus writes: “From the creation of the world the invisible things of God are made clear

¹⁸ For more details on this icon, see Andreas ANDREOPOULOS, “The Mosaic of the Transfiguration in St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai: A discussion of Its Origins”, in: *Byzantion* 72 (1), 2002, pp. 9-41; Jaś ELSNER and Gerhard WOLF, “The Transfigured Mountain: Icons and Transformations of Pilgrimage at the Monastery of St Catherine at Mount Sinai”, in: Sharon E. J. GERSTEL and Robert S. NELSON (eds.), *Approaching the Holy Mountain: Art and Liturgy at St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2010, pp. 37-71.

¹⁹ For an ample discussion on this icon, see chapter 6 (“Saint Catherine Monastery on Mount Sinai”, in: Andreas ANDREOPOULOS, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology...*, 2005).

²⁰ S. NES, *The Uncreated of Light...*, p. 73.

²¹ Veronica della DORA, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium*, Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 8.

by the visible creation”²². For example, referring to the burning bush seen by Moses St. Maximos says that “the unspeakable and prodigious fire hidden in the essence of things, as in the bush, is the fire of divine love and the dazzling brilliance of his beauty inside everything.” The *logoi* of created things, the presence of the invisible within them, is at the same time their hidden beauty that can be apprehended by noetic vision. It is not by accident that the Septuagint Greek text of Genesis I uses *kalon* rather than *agathon* to render the Hebrew, which itself contains both meanings: After each act of creation, the Creator saw that it was *beautiful*. The beautiful, then, is “a shining forth, an epiphany, of the mysterious depths of being” – the visible illuminated by the invisible. Sacraments, icons, liturgies, and the lived experience of God in nature all manifest the *kosmos noetos* through the *kosmos aisthetos*. All are part of the shared redemption of humanity and nature through the disclosure of divine beauty. It is this vision, not a private predilection nor an effete aestheticism, that Dostoevsky expresses when he writes, in his sketchbook, that “beauty will save the world”²³.

Therefore, the earth is the visible manifestation of the divine, the world radiating is a beam of light. Such reflection on the meaning spiritual seeing is in accordance with the patristic tradition. As we know, the spiritual contemplation of the inner principles (*logoi*) is a theme that St. Maximos the Confessor (seventh century) fully developed in Eastern theology:

“The world is one . . . for the *spiritual world* in its totality is manifested in the totality of the perceptible world, mystically expressed in symbolic pictures for those who have eyes to see. And the *perceptible world* in its entirety is secretly fathomable by the spiritual world in its entirety, when it has been simplified and amalgamated by means of the spiritual realities. The former is embodied in the latter through the realities; the latter in the former through the symbols. The operation of the two is one”²⁴.

²² St. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *On the Holy Images*, 1.11, quoted from Veronica della DORA, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium*, p. 58.

²³ Bruce V. FOLTZ, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2014, pp. 147-148. For more details on this theme, see Bruce FOLTZ, “Nature Godly and Beautiful: The Iconic Earth”, in: *Phenomenology*, 31, 2001, pp. 113-155; Veronica della DORA, “Mapping Journeys of the Soul: Spiritual Landscapes and Apophatic Self in the Patristic Tradition”, in: *Athens Dialogue*, 2014.

²⁴ St. MAXIMOS THE CONFESSOR, *Mystagogia*, cited and translated in: Olivier CLÉMENT, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, London: 1993, New City Press, p. 219. For more details

St. Maximos of the Confessor propounds a natural contemplation (*theoria physike*) of the *logoi* inherent in the natural world. The spiritual principles of things (*logoi*) of St. Maximos denotes the deifying presence of Christ the Logos in the world. The essence of this teaching is encapsulated in the following words by B. Foltz:

“Humanity and nature are retrieved from opposition and confrontation because both are restored to unity with the *Logos* from whom they commonly derive their own being. Because heaven has come down to earth, earth and heaven are now essentially reunited—a theology that underlies all Byzantine art, but which is most characteristically embodied in the art form of the icon. Here, in the icon, the terrestrial is infused with the celestial. The icon, properly understood, is not a representation, but a presentation – not a *Vorstellung*, but a *Darstellung* – of the invisible by means of the visible, a temporal epiphany of the eternal, a visible window upon the invisible”²⁵.

In other words, St. Maximos talks about the essential features of the inner principles of world, and one of the most distinctive features of these *logoi* is that they represent the way that Christ the Logos²⁶ is present to each creature.

This doctrine becomes the foundation of the theology of the icon in the Orthodox iconography, but the focus is now on material, rather than

on this subject, see Bruce V. FOLTZ, “Seeing Nature: *Theoria Physike* in the Thought of St. Maximos the Confessor”, in: B. FOLTZ, *The Noetics of Nature...*, pp. 158-174.

²⁵ Bruce FOLTZ, *The Noetics of Nature...*, pp. 82-83.

²⁶ As we know, at the heart of the Eastern iconography was the doctrine of Incarnation. In other words, God could be depicted because He assumed the condition of the creature, clothed in flesh and blood. For more details on the Christian icon, see Cornelia A. TSAKIRIDOU, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity: Orthodox Theology and Aesthetics of the Christian Image*, Routledge, 2013; Charles BARBER, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm*, Princeton University Press, 2002; Gary VIKAN, *Sacred Images and Sacred Power in Byzantium*, Ashgate, 2003; Clemena ANTONOVA, *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God*, Routledge, 2009; Hans BELTING, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before The Era of Art*, Chicago University Press, 1994; Henry MAGUIRE, *The Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and their Images in Byzantium*, Princeton, 1996; Gilbert DAGRON, “Holy Images and Likeness”, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45, 1991, pp. 23-33.

textual²⁷. Therefore, physicality was an essential vehicle of divine presence in the world. The essence of this teaching is encapsulated by the one of the most fervent advocates of icons in the words:

“Therefore I venture to draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes through flesh and blood”, and continues St. John of Damascus “I do not draw an image of the immortal Godhead. I paint the visible flesh of God, for it is impossible to represent a spirit, how much more God who gives breath to the spirit”²⁸.

The patristic interpretation understands the human salvation history as steps of prefigurations of the inner principles (*logoi*). From an iconographic perspective, we can say that the world constituted a vast reservoir full familiar symbols and holy persons through which the God revealed Himself. One of the most important holy person through which God appears us is the monk or the saint. Therefore, in the next section we will point out some considerations on the relationship between asceticism and the icon theology.

II. Asceticism and Holy Icons: Some Considerations

As we know, the use of icons to declare theological ideas and establish the historical reality of saints is Christianity’s way of affirming the Incarnation of the divine Logos.

But, as C.A. Tsakiridou has remarked

“Egyptian and Palestinian desert asceticism embraced the notion that visual objects (both external and internal) are an obstacle to the intellect’s (nous) ascent to God. By their presence and visceral power, images keep one’s mind attached to the world,

²⁷ The best discussion of the subject, to which I am much indebted is Fr. Maximos CONSTANTAS, *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography*, Sebastian Press, 2014.

²⁸ Cf. St. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *On the Holy Images*, Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir, 1997. For John’s theology of the icon, see Andrew LOUTH, *St John Damascene. Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 193-222.

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to desires formed by past experience, and to the memories that revive them”²⁹.

The Desert Fathers was agree with the implications of this idea³⁰. Mental images are rooted in the senses and since perception is their foundation, so that the guarding of the soul should start there. In the spirituality of the desert, sensuous forms must be abandoned because, as St. Isaiah the Solitary (late fourth or fifth century) has remarked: “The monk should shut all the gates of his soul, that is, the senses, so that he is not lured astray”³¹. Similarly, Evagrius Ponticus notes: “If the intellect has not risen above the contemplation of the created world, it has not yet beheld the realm of God perfectly”³². Central to Evagrius’ pedagogical program is the interdiction of visualization in prayer, particularly of God:

“When you are praying, do not shape within yourself any image of the Deity, and do not let your intellect be stamped with the impress of any form”. “Do not long to have a sensory image of angels or powers of Christ, for this would be madness: it would be to take a wolf as your shepherd and to worship your enemies, the demons”³³.

Therefore, spiritual purity results from the complete removal of sense impressions, and the purpose of this process is a mind open and receptive to the Holy Spirit. Desert asceticism was understood as a complete detachment from external sensations. Since in the desert the reality of the

²⁹ Cornelia A. TSAKIRIDOU, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity: Orthodox Theology and Aesthetics of the Christian Image*, p. 152. In fact, this idea was expressed by Plato (cf. *Philebus* 39de-40ab) where we find that the soul is like a tablet that contains “written words” (*grammata*) and “pictures or images” (*zographemata, eikones*). Retained in memory, they come alive in imagination (*phantasmata*). Their activation induces intense and vivid pleasures (*hedonae*).

³⁰ The best discussion of the subject, to which I am much indebted, is C. A. TSAKIRIDOU, “Asceticism and Iconoclasm”, in: C. A. TSAKIRIDOU, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity...*, pp. 151-166. In fact, a large part of this section is a synthesis of the arguments from this chapter.

³¹ *Philokalia*, ed. by Palmer, Sherard and Ware, vol. I, p. 23.

³² *Philokalia*, vol. I, p. 62. For more details on Evagrius Ponticus’ ascetic pedagogy, see Columba STEWART OSB, “Evagrius Ponticus on Monastic Pedagogy”, in: John BEHR, et al., *Abba. The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West: Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia*, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, pp. 241-272.

³³ *Philokalia*, vol. I, p. 68.

visual objects is almost eliminated, the monk must fight with demonic temptations in the interior space of the intellect. This “invisible war” can explain the importance of removing all images.

In this context is very important to focus on a spiritual exercise in the desert, namely *nepsis*³⁴, an ascetic practice consecrated the guarding of the mind: “Once our thoughts are accompanied by images we have already given them our assent; for a provocation does not involve us in guilt so long as it is not accompanied by images. Some people flee away from these thoughts like a «brand plucked out of the fire» (Zech. 3.2)...”³⁵.

In other words, monks strive to have a dispassionate relationship to all thing sensible that are associated with desire and pleasure. Only by recovering holiness through repentance and ascetic struggle the monk could assume the Adam’s original stature. In the one of the earliest, and most popular of ascetic literature, Athanasios’s *Life of Antony* this theme appears in various passages. For example, in enumerating Antony’s virtues, Athanasius wrote:

“It was not his physical dimensions that distinguished him from the rest, but the stability of character and the purity of the soul. His soul being free of confusion, he held his outer senses also undisturbed, so that from the soul’s joy his face was cheerful as well, and from the movements of the body it was possible to sense and perceive the stable condition of the soul. He was never troubled, his soul being calm, and he never looked gloomy, his mind being joyous”³⁶.

Also, as W. Harmless has remarked:

“Athanasius has chosen his words carefully: Antony’s soul is «calm»; his character is «stable»; his senses are «undisturbed»; his face has an imperturbability that radiates joy. This is divine passionlessness rendered visible. This is the way Athanasius

³⁴ This spiritual exercise is accompanied by stillness (*hesychia*), and the last is associated with a paradisiac state. In fact, the monk’s role was to recreate paradise on earth. For more details and bibliography on this theme, see Dumitru-Mitruț POPOIU, “Paradisul în viziunea Părinților din pustia Egiptului”, in: *Studii Teologice*, VII (2011) 2, pp. 29-58.

³⁵ *Philokalia*, vol. I, pp. 119-120.

³⁶ *Vita Antonii* 67 (SC 400:312–314; trans. Gregg, CWS, 81).

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imagines the deification made possible by Christ. Note also how Antony's deification brings about a reintegration of body and soul, such that Antony's body becomes a perfect instrument of his soul. Athanasius repeatedly stresses that Antony's «face had a great and marvelous grace» and that one could pick him out of a crowd, even if one had never met him before, drawn by his eyes³⁷.

Therefore, it is “natural” to be a holy man because we are made in the image of Christ, who is the essence of holiness. W. Harmless summarizes this view in the words:

“Athanasius portrays Antony as the «natural» man, humankind as it would have been had there been no Fall. It is no accident that when Antony retires to the Inner Mountain, he creates a miniature Eden, planting a garden and getting the wild beasts to obey him”³⁸.

Also, in *Apophthegmata Patrum* the monks sought to recover the “glory of Adam”:

“They used to say of Abba Pambo that, as Moses received the likeness of the glory of Adam when his face was glorified, so too did the face of Abba Pambo shine like lightning, and he was like an emperor sitting on his throne. Abba Silvanus and Abba Sisoës were similarly distinguished”³⁹.

Desert Fathers was seeking the glory of Adam before the Fall and the glory of heaven with the resurrected body. For Desert Fathers the ultimate goal of the ascetic life is glory of Adam, namely deification (*theosis*). The desert monasticism provides ample evidence to see monks living a heavenly

³⁷ William HARMLESS, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 92.

³⁸ William HARMLESS, *Desert Christians...*, p. 93. For more details on this subject, see Nancy P. ŠEVCENKO, “The Hermit as Stranger in the Desert”, in: Nancy P. ŠEVCENKO, *The Celebration of the Saints in Byzantine Art and Liturgy*, Ashgate, 2013, pp. 75-86.

³⁹ Abba Pambo 12, in: *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. by J. Wortley, p. 3263.

life, elders whose bodies were illuminated with flashes of angelic light⁴⁰. In fact, one of the striking features of this asceticism is presentation of the monks' emaciated bodies as angelic bodies full of light. This foundational element of the spirituality of the desert is powerfully expressed by Georgia Frank:

“Angelic faces became a shorthand for any monk who lived in perfect imitation of angels. (...) Radiance and Light were typically thought to be features of divinized bodies for ascetics. Rather than present a body broken by ascetic practice, the pilgrims could use references to light and angels to show asceticism's highest achievement, the reversal of the body's decay and its transformation into the glorified body of the resurrection”⁴¹.

In this context we stress that the Desert Fathers cultivated holiness through rigorous ascetic effort, and the purpose of this *praxis* was the spiritual transformation of the monk⁴². According to desert hermits, ascetic life is a process by which we strive to refine our fallen nature, in order to achieve gradually a state of tranquility or deification. In the words of Tsakiridou

“total tranquility come only after the complete purification and illumination of the intellect which is the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus asceticism gradually transforms the imaginal landscape of the mind and ultimately brings it to a state of lucidity, order and spiritual discernment. The divine light illuminates all areas of the intellect and in the process identifies and dissolves even minute remnants of demonic incursions and their objects”⁴³.

For example, for Diadochus, the deified soul bathes in the “luminosity of love” and this experience is described in aesthetic terms: “When the intellect begins to perceive the Holy Spirit with full consciousness, we

⁴⁰ For discussion of the “angelic” bodies of desert ascetics in the early ascetic tradition, see Dana MILLER, “Desert Asceticism and «The Body from Nowhere»”, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1994, pp. 137-153.

⁴¹ Georgia FRANK, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*, University of California Press, 2000, p. 161. For additional references, see Patricia COX MILLER, “Desert Asceticism and the Body from Nowhere” in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, no. 2, 1994, pp. 141-142.

⁴² Cf. Abba Antony 35 (trans. Wortley), p. 39.

⁴³ C. A. TSAKIRIDOU, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity...*, p. 156.

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should realize that grace is beginning to paint the divine likeness over the divine image in us”⁴⁴, and Diadochus explains that the final image is a mystical sight.

In this condition, the monk “is perfected in person and emerges from the divine *atelier* more fully and perspicuously himself, both physically and spiritually. Rather than *kallos* (for beauty), Diadochus uses *euprepeia* and *teleiosis*, comeliness or glory and perfection, to describe the final outcome”⁴⁵.

III. Conclusions

Generally, although images are avoided in spiritual life, the Eastern theology turned to the imagery for to understand of deification or holiness⁴⁶. For example, when Abba Anthony the Great compares the ascetic who traveler outside his cell to fish that stay for long out of the water:

“Just as fish die if they are on dry land for some time, so do monks who loiter outside their cells or waste time with world lings release themselves from the tension of *hesychia*. So we should hasten back to the cell (like the fish to the sea) lest while loitering outside we forget to keep a watch on the inner (self)”⁴⁷.

Also, Abba Agathon uses a pea to impart on his disciple the need for ascetic discipline in the monastic life, the physical world too is sanctified:

⁴⁴ *Philokalia*, vol. I, p. 288.

⁴⁵ C. A. TSAKIRIDOU, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity...*, p. 161.

⁴⁶ Maybe this explains why ascetics were opponents of Iconoclasm: “Iconoclasm failed, but not without leaving its mark on the iconology and iconography of the Eastern Church. Combined with the austere mentality of Orthodox asceticism and the monastic nature of Orthodox theology, it certainly contributed to a containment of the image within certain aesthetic and thematic parameters. This is evident in the absence from Orthodox art of statues, in the rhetorical ordination of images to their prototype (which is venerated in its image), in the use of biblical quotations and script to identify the holy persons depicted in images, and finally in the regulation of iconographic content” (C. A. TSAKIRIDOU, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity...*, p. 163). For this theme, see André GRABAR, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*, Princeton University Press, 1968; Thomas F. MATHEWS, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of early Christian Art*, Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁴⁷ Abba Antony 10, in: *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. by J. Wortley, St Vladimir Press, 2014, p. 33.

“The same (elder) was once travelling with his disciples, one of whom found a little green plant by the wayside. «Do you bid me take it, father?» he said to the elder. The elder looked at him in wonder and said: «Did you put it there?» «No», the brother replied, and the elder said: «So how can you want to take what you did not put?»⁴⁸.

As Tsakiridou has noted, “terse and aphoristic, these teachings have a kind of vivid spontaneity and often an iconic power that impresses on their audience not only the meaning but also the form of story. This is a form of speech that paints: the ascetic variety of *ekphrasis*”⁴⁹. In other words, the desert is a metaphor for asceticism and for spirituality in the broader sense. The experience of wilderness is an experience of overthrowing their human finitude. Briefly, the experience of encounter of the self with God. To conclude, we admit with Veronica della Dora that the Christian way of seeing explored in this paper suggests an alternative image, namely

“an iconic world view in which all the parts of the picture are required in order for it to be complete and to make sense; a luminescent image of which, wrapped by inverse perspective, we are an integrating part, rather than detached gazers. Our task then is ultimately that of regaining a sense of wonder; the same wonder that the Cappadocian Fathers experienced while contemplating the *topoi* of creation with their spiritual eye. We need to reconcile the world as whole. We need to restore a sense of place. In the words of John Chrysostom, we need to remember that we have been placed in the world «as in a royal palace gleaming with gold and precious stones»⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ Abba Agathon 11, in: *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. by J. Wortley, St Vladimir Press, 2014, p. 56.

⁴⁹ C. A. TSAKIRIDOU, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity...*, p. 161.

⁵⁰ V. DORA, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium...*, p. 260.