



Citation: Giuseppe Di Giacomo (2018)
The Icon as the Revelation of Eternity
in Time. *Aisthesis* 11(1): 55-66. doi:
10.13128/Aisthesis-23272

Copyright: © 2018 Author. This is an
open access, peer-reviewed article
published by Firenze University Press
(<http://www.fupress.com/aisthesis>) and
distributed under the terms of the
Creative Commons Attribution License,
which permits unrestricted use, distri-
bution, and reproduction in any medi-
um, provided the original author and
source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All re-
levant data are within the paper and its
Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The authors
have declared that no competing inter-
ests exist.

The Icon as the Revelation of Eternity in Time

GIUSEPPE DI GIACOMO
(Università “La Sapienza” di Roma)
giuseppe.digiacomo@uniroma1.it

Abstract. The essay proposes a notion of “icon” understood, according to the paradigm born of the Second Council of Nicaea (787 AD), as a visible image of the invisible *qua* invisible. In this light, the distinctive feature of the icon-image is its ability to manifest the paradoxical identity-difference relationship that links visible and invisible, and, consequently, representable and unrepresentable, immanence and transcendence, eternity and time. By offering itself as the privileged place for the presentation of an absence and of a “withdrawal” (the withdrawal of the invisible from the visible through the visible), the icon is distinguished in the first place by its *apophatic* and *kenotic* character. In this sense, the salient trait of the icon is its constitutive *disquiet*: it is founded on the “relational economy” of the image, which implies the need of an incessant articulation of the relation between visible and invisible. We can thus see in the icon the paradigm itself of “great art”: indeed, like the icon, great art is always primarily characterised by its disquiet, that is its ability to make transcendence appear in immanence, the Other *of the* visible appear in the visible.

Keywords. Icon, visible-invisible, incarnation, apophatic character, art.

1. To understand the icon we must look at it from a theological point of view, otherwise we are left with a solely aesthetic, and therefore incomplete, understanding. The icon – the sacred image – is one of the manifestations of the tradition of the Church, representing the fundamental dogma of faith in God become man. The fact that it bears witness to the Incarnation makes it a true and proper “theology as image”. It is thus understandable that its content and its meaning form part of the study of theology, in the same way that the sacred texts do. In the icon the image of Christ has a paradoxical definition. As Saint Gregory puts it: «It is the same thing as the prototype, even if it is another thing». The Son is therefore actually the image of the Father, while being an “other thing”. Against the notion of an image considered as identical to its model, which is refused by the iconoclasts, the Patriarch Nicephorus emphasises the *radical difference* between the two. And Saint John of Damascus also argues that there is a difference: the image is an image and not the proto-

type itself (AA.VV. [1997]). After the attacks of the iconoclasts it is necessary to give a clear definition to the image. By affirming the substantial difference between the image and its prototype, it is possible to understand what is specific to the image. Saint Paul says of Christ: «He is the image of the invisible God», and Christ says of himself: «He who has seen me has seen the Father». In the Son, the Father becomes visible and so the Son is the image of the Father. The iconophiles respond to the iconoclasts, who believe that painting an icon of Christ means wanting to circumscribe the divinity of Christ, that the Word has been made flesh, the Word itself is circumscribed, making itself visible to our eyes. In the affirmation that «Christ is the image of the invisible God» there is this notion of the “image” expressing something essential about Christ: his intimate link with the Father.

The great paradox of the Christian revelation is that God himself became man and that this Incarnation is real. It is not the veiled presence of the universal *Logos* in flesh, but the identity between the Word and its humanity, in an indissoluble union. If the *Logos* «did not inhabit a man, but *became* man» then taking the Incarnation seriously requires us to see in the humanity of the Word not a means but «the flesh of the incorruptible God». Faith consists in believing in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, one and indivisible: God and man. Thus flesh is not seen as a veil that prevents us from seeing the hidden reality of the Word but, in as much as it is the «flesh of God», it *is* in a certain sense the Word. The work of our salvation would not mean anything if the Word was not made flesh: if He had not died He would not have been resurrected. The mystery of the Incarnation consists in the fact that the divine hypostasis of the Word is made human, not *a* man in general, but *this* man, Jesus of Nazareth, and that the human traits of Jesus, which are in the icon, are also the traits of his divine person. If the icon circumscribes the Word of God, it is nevertheless not the first to do it, because the Son of God circumscribes himself by becoming man: he “restricts” himself until he is contained in an indi-

vidual, or what’s more, until he *is* this individual in all his contingency. Here is the “scandal” of faith, the scandal that consists in saying that the divine Person of the Word can be seen in the individual humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. The icon, in making these traits individual, refers to the reality that it allows us to glimpse, thus becoming the manifestation of the archetype.

Precisely because it is founded on the divine Incarnation, the Church considers the icon to be intrinsic to the essence of Christianity, since it is the revelation not only of the Word of God, but also of his image manifested in God-Man. It is thanks to the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity that the existence of the image in the New Testament derives from its prohibition in the Old Testament. For the Church the sacred image derives precisely from this *absence of the image* in the Old Testament. The precedent of the Christian image is not the pagan idol, but the absence of the concrete and direct image before the Incarnation, in the same way that the precedent of the Church is not the pagan world but Israel, the people elected by God to welcome his Revelation. Whereas the iconoclasts, who comply with the biblical prohibition, confuse the Christian image with the idol, Saint John of Damascus, comparing the Old Testament and evangelical texts, shows that the Christian image is the fulfilment of the Old Testament, since it derives from the essence of Christianity. His argument can be summed up in this way: in the Old Testament the direct manifestation of God to his people happens solely through the Word; He doesn’t show himself, he remains invisible – when listening to his voice, Israel doesn’t see an image. When the Invisible, taking on flesh, becomes visible, then it can represent the similarity with He who has appeared. That is, the ban on representing the invisible God implicitly contains the necessity of representing God once the prophecies have been realised. And so, the words of the Lord – «You haven’t seen the image; so don’t make it» – mean «don’t make images of God *until you have seen him*». So, according to Saint John of Damascus, if in the Old Testament the direct revelation of God is manifested only

in the Word, in the New Testament is manifested both in the Word and in the image.

Since the Invisible has become visible, the Unrepresentable becomes representable. God no longer addresses men only through the Word but presents himself in the Person of the Word incarnated, and it is for this reason that the close link between the word and the image is a distinct feature of the New Testament. All the prefigurations of the Old Testament announce a future salvation, that salvation which, in the present, has been realised, and which the Fathers summarise in a particularly pregnant formula: «God has become man because man becomes God» (Ouspensky [1982]). This redemptive work is therefore centred on the Person of Christ – God become Man – and, beside Him, the first human person entirely deified, the Virgin. It is for this reason that the first icons that appear in Christianity are of Christ and the Virgin. The fundamental link between the image and Christianity is the root of the tradition in which the Church has, from the beginning, preached Christianity to the world through *both* the word and the image. The truth has to be “shown”, and as an image, it is not an idea or an abstract formula, but is concrete and living: it is a person, the Person who «suffered under Pontius Pilate». When Pilate asks Christ, «What is truth?», Christ responds by simply remaining in front of him in silence. And to his disciples Christ says, «I am the way, the truth and the life». The truth does not answer the question of *what is* but of *who is*: it is a Person, and it is for this reason that the Church does not simply “speak” the truth but “shows” it.

The Church brings the image of Christ to the world, the image of man and world renewed by the Incarnation, the image of salvation. It is Christology, then, that constitutes the basis of the dogmatic struggle between orthodox Christians and heretics between the 8th and 9th Century (Schönborn [1986], see also Evdokimov [1972]). Right at the beginning of iconoclasm, orthodox Christians understood the danger it posed for the fundamental dogma of Christianity. If the existence of the icon is founded on the Incarnation of the sec-

ond Person of the sacred Trinity, this Incarnation itself is affirmed and verified by the image. In the eyes of the Church, negating the icon of Christ is equivalent to negating his Incarnation, to negating the whole Economy of Salvation. Thus, in defending sacred images, it is not only their didactic role or aesthetic aspect that the Church defends, but the very basis of the Christian faith. This explains the firmness with which the orthodox Christians defend the icon. The term “icon” is understood in different ways by the iconoclasts and by the orthodox Christians: according to the iconoclasts, the icon is necessarily of the same nature as He whom it represents, it must be consubstantial with Him. Starting from this principle, they arrive at the inevitable conclusion that the only icon of Christ is the Eucharist: if Christ, say the iconoclasts, chose bread as an image of his Incarnation, it is precisely to avoid idolatry, seeing as bread has no human resemblance. But for the orthodox Christians, not only is bread not consubstantial or identical to its prototype, as the iconoclasts think, but, on the contrary, the notion that corresponds to the word “icon” (*eikón*) contains an essential difference between the image and its prototype. «The representation is one thing, and that which it represents is another», claims Saint John of Damascus (Ouspensky [1982]: chap. VIII).

What’s more, the Patriarch Nicephorus, indicating, as we have seen, the difference between the image and its prototype, claims that those who don’t accept this doctrine, who don’t understand it, can justly be called “idolatrous”. Orthodox Christians, sustaining the distinction between nature and person, claim that the icon represents not a nature but the Person that unites two natures without confusing them. The image doesn’t belong to one or the other of his natures but to his Person. The icon is not therefore an image of divine nature but is the image of a divine incarnated Person, and this means that the icon is a revelation of eternity in time. For these reasons the icon is linked to its prototype. As the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, or the Second Council of Nicaea (787), maintain: «the honour to the icon is conveyed to the prototype» (see

Di Giacomo 1998). In the icon there is both difference and identity: difference of natures and identity of Person and as a result, as the Council emphasises, our attitude towards the icon must be that of *veneration* and not of adoration (see AA.VV. [1997]).

2. The perspective used in the Russian icons of the 14th, 15th and part of the 16th Century is in strident contradiction with the rules of linear perspective. The icon often depicts details and plains that can't be visible at the same time: for example, both the sidewalls of the outside of a building are represented in the same image. As Pavel Florenskij argues, whereas icons with "more correct" drawings can appear cold and lifeless, the most creative icons are always those with "errors" of perspective: thus icons that transgress perspective are superior to those that do not. These transgressions of the rules of perspective are very frequent: it's almost as if there is a particular system of representation and perception of reality, which is that represented in the icon. And so, we have a general definition of *reverse* or *inverse* perspective, and sometimes even *deformed* or *false* perspective (see Florenskij [1967]). From the procedures of reverse perspective there follows also the policentrality of the representation, where the picture is constructed as if the eye was looking from various different points at the same time. The task of the painting is not to duplicate reality but to offer the deepest understanding of its "architecture", of its material and its meaning. That which misleads us most of all in this "reverse perspective" is a series of particularities of form that at times seem to be insoluble enigmas to people brought up in modern European cultures. Because of this such forms are often understood to be deformations, but these "deformations" are only such when seen by an eye used to linear perspective. In reality we are not looking at a deformation but a different pictorial language, that of the Orthodox Church. It is necessary to point out that in this generally accepted technical term of "reverse perspective", the expression "reversed" is not precise, because there is no pure and simple reversing of linear perspective – no

inverse reflection, or mirroring – and there is no system of reversed perspective that would correspond to the system of linear perspective. To the rigid laws of the latter, another "law" is opposed, another principle of image construction. This other principle implies a whole series of procedures that give a contrary (reverse) representation to the illusion, or one that is totally different from it.

Contemporary science itself tells us that we don't see close by objects as Raphael represents them, but we see them as Andreij Rublëv and the ancient Russian artists represent them. Raphael clearly drew in a different way to Rublëv, but he saw in the same way, since there is a law of nature that also regards visual perception. But the difference lies here: whereas Raphael submits the natural vision of the human eye to the control of his reason and in this way distances himself from that vision, the iconographs didn't distance themselves from it, because the sense of that which they were representing didn't allow them to overcome our natural perception of the foreground, to which the structure of the icon is limited. The representation of space in the icon has this particularity: although it is three dimensional (the icon is not a two-dimensional art), the third dimension is limited by the surface of the painting and the representation is orientated towards the real space that is found in front of the image. The icon doesn't show us an illusory representation of spatial depth, but its inverse. Whereas a picture constructed to conform to the laws of linear perspective represents another space, which has no relation to the real space in which it is found, in the icon we see the contrary: the represented space is included in the real space without rupture between them. The representation is limited to the foreground. The people depicted by the icon and those which find themselves in front of it are united in the same space, thus the image addresses man in the same way as the revelation addresses him.

In the icon the Unrepresentable gives itself as Other with respect to every determination: this leads to that "theology of the icon" that escapes every rational translation, but also to its paradoxical nature which makes it the place-non-place in

which the Invisible is given in the visible while remaining Invisible. The essence of the icon consists in the passing of the Invisible into the visible and the visible into the Invisible: it is a “royal door” through which the Invisible is manifested and the visible is transformed. That the *Deus absconditus* manifests Himself in Christ, that the Father shows Himself in the mortal body, the crucifix of the Son: these are the theological foundations of the icon. And seeing as the Son, through the Incarnation, removed the Old Testament prohibition, it follows that – as has been said above – the icon derives precisely from the *absence* of the image in the Old Testament. It neither represents divine nature, nor the human nature of the Son but his Person, that is the paradoxical identity-difference of these two natures. And if the painter of icons doesn’t imitate or represent, but *lifts the veil* (see Cacciari [1985]), allowing this world and the other world to communicate with each other, then it means that wanting to destroy the icon is like wanting to close these “doors” through which the invisible Absolute makes itself manifest to our eyes. Thus the iconoclasm is precisely the negation of this epiphanic dimension (see Florenskij [1977]). But in the paradoxical nature of the icon, the epiphanic and apophatic dimensions become one: it shows the presence of the Invisible in the visible, remaining Invisible, and the presence of the Unsayable in the word, remaining Unsayable (see Byčkov [1977]). And, as Florenskij makes clear, it also shows the opposition, the coexistence, of Gold and colour in the icon, according to which Gold is pure light, whereas colour is the evocation of Light: between Gold and colour a *correct distance* must be maintained. An icon that was all Gold would remove the icon itself, since it would negate the sensible manifestation of Light. The same would be true of an icon that was all colour, for the sensible (the colour) would no longer be an area of manifestation, that is of Incarnation, of Light-Gold. The “just distance” between Gold and colour is therefore a paradoxical identity-difference and as such cannot be overcome.

In the icon there are no light sources, since light penetrates everywhere. The Light, symbol of

the divine, is represented in the Gold that radiates light, but it is at the same time opaque, inaccessible like the divinity that it expresses. In the icon this particularity of the background of light must be understood as a symbolic tradition of the principle of apophatic theology, which is the impossibility of knowing the divine essence that remains totally inaccessible. This unknowability and inaccessibility of the divinity is called “darkness”. The divine darkness is this “inaccessible light” where God dwells. The inaccessible light is the brightest Light of the light. It is dazzling and therefore impenetrable. And Gold, that unites both splendid brightness and opacity, symbolically expresses the divine Light as impenetrable darkness, which is essentially different from natural light that is the opposite of darkness. Unlike the idol-image, the icon presents the beyond of the visible, seeing as the “Kingdom of God” is not another world, but the other *of the* world (see Ouspensky [1982]: 472-474). And so in the icon there is always the possibility of dissonance: it contains not equilibrium but *disquiet*.

3. In the Second Council of Nicaea the theses of the iconoclastic Council of 754 are refuted. This iconoclastic thought can define itself as a non-economic conception of the icon, when by “economy” we mean the articulation of the visible and the Invisible (see Mondzain [1986]). The economy provides the basis of the iconophiles’ position regarding the organisation of the relationship between the sacred and the profane, the visible and the Invisible. They argue that to refuse the icon is to refuse the economy, that is Christ himself and the whole plan of the Incarnation in history. The doctrine of the Incarnation and the doctrine of the icon are one and the same thing. This identity subsumes the concept of “economy”, and it is thanks to economy that the Church itself is identified with the body of Christ. The difference between theology and the economy is the difference that exists between believing without seeing and believing while seeing. In the writings of Saint Paul the term “economy” appears in order to indicate God’s plan for the salvation of human-

ity. Precisely because Christ manifested the union of the Word and the flesh and made Himself an instrument of the Father in the plan of Salvation, for Christology the economy is fundamental: there is an economy because there is the organisation of visibility, of which the Incarnation is the prototype and from which the organisation of every visibility derives. The economy needs the icon image that respects the distinction between the two natures, incarnating the Word in the heart of its own silence. The icon tries to avoid the categories of representation and fiction – to say that it is meant to be a painting and not an idol or a representation, is to say that it establishes a gaze and not an object: it aims at the assimilation of seeing with being seen.

If the argument of early iconoclasm is by nature strongly Christological, we must wait for Nicephorus and the second wave of iconoclasm for the doctrine of the icon to become a philosophical doctrine founded on the relational economy regarding every image. And if the constituents of the icon call for the gaze and refuse vision, it is because the icon cannot be categorised as a scrap, but incarnates withdrawal itself. Christ is not in the icon, but it is the icon that looks towards Christ who continuously withdraws. And, through the lines that make up the picture, the incarnation works in this withdrawal, such that the *mimetics* of the picture are also this withdrawal. The icon, whose function it is to put the human form into relation with the divine Word, is the *mimesis* of the Incarnation. It is for this reason, say the Fathers, that refusing the image means refusing the Incarnation. And if it is the icon's abstraction that is in question in the debate with iconoclasm, on closer inspection there is no need to categorically oppose the oriental doctrine of the icon to the relations between images found in Western art. Indeed even the greatest works of pictorial art in the West depict a place in which they are not perceived, and have an existential relation with the presence of an emptiness. In this secret emptiness they remain indifferent to representation, meaning that every great art is *kenotica*. The anthropomorphism of Christ becomes the abandonment

of the Father and the sacrificial rupture between the image and the model: here *kenosi* means the desertion of the world by the divinity (see Marion [1986]). The outlines of the icon, which make up the picture, never constitute a perimeter, a limit for the being that they manifest: Christ is not a prisoner of the icon, the iconic sign is neither prison nor tomb, as the Platonic body was for the soul. The duality that the icon inhabits has nothing to do with the duality of the soul and the body, since the invisibility of the Word is not of the same nature as that of the soul.

The absence of God in the heart of the icon is comprised in the double mimetic articulation of Christ: the icon tells of pain and resurrection. It is empty of the carnal and real presence of Christ, but is full of his absence. This absence, through the trace that it leaves and the lack that it incarnates, produces the essence of the visible: for the divine, to incarnate oneself is to withdraw. The sign produces a division of space, as the coming of Christ produced the division in time between the Ancient and the New Alliance. The figuration of the Messiah in the form of a Lamb can be abandoned, since Christians now have a right to see his Face, which is a sign of the New Law. Christ has been resurrected, his Face and his Person (*prosôpon*) have triumphed over the cross, and the transfiguration of his body continues in the icon. Transfiguration, metamorphosis, such are the words that designate both the glory of the resurrected body and the operation of the gaze on the icon. If iconoclasm demands that the body of Christ be only represented before the Resurrection, when it found the immaterial luminosity of its divine nature, for the iconophile the face in the icon is the outline of an essence that repeats the Incarnation and the Resurrection, *without ever representing them*. The law of the icon is that the visible is not sensible: it appears before our eyes as flesh to manifest a body from which it receives light without ever appropriating it. Iconic anthropomorphism can never be understood as representative realism, since the figure is there to manifest emptiness and the absence of that horizon which it gives to the gaze. To open ourselves to

his “relative” visibility, God chose to give the Word form in flesh, to take on the destiny of the figure, and of the instrument that serves for the redemption of the figure, which is nothing other than the womb of the Virgin in which the Word became flesh. This body must already be in the image of that which fertilises it: the Virgin is already part of the economy of the natural image.

The dawn of the first icon is manifested in the announcement in which the Voice says to a woman that she will be the abode of the infinite. If the economy and the Incarnation are indissociable from *kenosi*, it is because the voice expresses itself in an empty place that only the icon has the right to enter, without ever filling it. «I am a voice crying out in the desert», and this is the same voice as that which says «I am Who I am». Or rather the voice that remains after the destruction of the flesh, which addresses men saying, «Here I am», always accompanied by, preceded by, dominated by, voices that say «*Ecce homo*». If the icon is doubled in the unity of a name, it is because this same dual unity is the essence of the model: Christ is indeed two in one. And if this mysterious unity of two natures is at the heart of the conception of the figure which is the presence of the absent, this duality has nothing to do with that which opposes the body to the soul or the material to the spiritual: it is the union of the Word with humanity. Thus the icon is endowed with a power that is both centripetal and centrifugal. Centripetal because through its forms it captures the sanctity of its model, centrifugal because through contact and contamination it spreads the sacredness that it incarnates. This is one of the main functions of the economy. To the gaze, Christ offers an icon showing a face, that is, a gaze which is itself invisible. This is therefore, firstly, an exchange of gazes, which conforms to an amorous scheme. With my invisible gaze, I look at an invisible gaze that looks at me. In the icon, it is not so much I who see the spectacle, but another gaze that holds mine. But Christ doesn't simply propose that I look at him through my gaze and I be looked at by his gaze. If he asks love of me, it is not love for him but for his Father. If He needs me to lift up my eyes

to Him, it is because I see not only Him, but I see also and above all the Father. Christ comes to Earth to glorify the Father and not to let his own glory be seen. So Christ doesn't simply offer a visible image of the Father who remains invisible but a (visible) face of the Invisible itself (the Father), a visible image of the Invisible *as invisible*. This paradox is intelligible only if we can tear the icon from the logic of the image, and therefore tear ourselves from the tyranny of the image.

Such reflections are crucial in relation to the contemporary situation of the image, in which iconoclasm seems to have been imposed. If the image wants to impose itself as its own original, the invisible must definitively lay claim to invisibility: no face, and above all no face of God, can demand to be seen. The question is whether there is a possibility that the modern model of the image (which is televisual) exhausts the essence of the visible, or if, rather, a model which is radically different from the image can be opposed to it. Historically at least, one model of the image has opposed itself to iconoclasm, and, particularly in the Church, has triumphed: the icon, which designates not a particular pictorial genre, but a doctrine of the visibility of the image (see Di Giacomo [1999]). The duality of the spectator's gaze and the visible objective is substituted with a triad: spectators' gaze, visible objective and prototype. The prototype doesn't simply take the role of an original, a referent, but intervenes as a second gaze that looks at the first face, that of the spectator. When faced with the profane image, I remain the unseen seer of an image that is reduced to an object, constituted, at least in part, but my gaze. In front of the icon I feel seen: the image is no longer a screen, since through it another invisible gaze looks at me. The original intervenes as a pure gaze meeting my gaze. Thus the icon concerns the crossed paths of these two gazes.

This is what the Second Council of Nicaea expresses when it argues that veneration is not to be confused with adoration: the latter regards a (real) nature, the former an (unreal) gaze. When faced with the icon one should not adore, but should venerate through the visible image and

show oneself to the invisible gaze of the prototype. The icon demands to be seen through its prototype, which means the icon is an image to be traversed. It is this that the Second Council of Nicaea describes through the formula of Saint Basil: «The honour paid to the icon passes to the prototype». Thus the doctrine of the icon breaks radically with the definition of the image, seeing as the visible object is substituted with a visible exchange in which both gazes – one seen, the other watching – cross one another and reciprocally show themselves. Since the icon is defined by a second gaze that watches the first, the visible image no longer puts up a screen, but on the contrary lets itself be traversed, giving place to the crossing of the two gazes. In this way the visible surface must paradoxically cancel itself out, or at least cancel every opacity in itself that obfuscates the crossing of the two gazes. Thus the icon inverts the modern logic of the image: it doesn't demand that you see it, but offers itself to be seen through. From its interior the icon lets spring another gaze, a gaze which is there to be seen: the disfigured figure of Christ offers itself as a transparency because one sees the gaze of God. The “defeat” of the image, realised with the disfiguration of Christ, frees the first icon and allows the appearance of the trace of the invisible that watches us.

Thus one can maintain that the idol and the icon are two ways of being entities, not two classes of entity: they are different kinds of signs and they each use their visibility in their own way (see Marion [1982]). And if the divine enters into play only through the support of visibility, then we are talking of two ways of apprehending the divine in visibility itself. The idol, by definition, is seen: *eidôlon* means that which is seen (*eidon*, *video*). What's more, it consists precisely in the fact that it can be seen and that it can only be seen. In the idol the gaze ceases to surpass itself, it ceases therefore to transform sensible-visible things and doesn't see them any more as transparent: with the idol the gaze rests on the spectacle without going beyond it. The icon is not the result of a vision but that which brings about vision: it is not seen but appears. While the idol depends on the gaze that

is aimed at it, the icon calls for vision, letting the visible gradually saturate the Invisible. However, even if presented by the icon, the Invisible always remains invisible, the icon tries to make the Invisible as such visible, tries therefore to ensure that the visible continues to refer beyond itself, although the Invisible can never reproduce itself in the visible. So the gaze is never at rest in the icon. This disquiet of the icon means any claim to an absolute knowledge ends up as idolatry.

Whilst the idol is self-referential, the icon is the contrary, giving all the glory to the Invisible. Iconoclasm criticises the supposed idolatrous derivation of icons, because it persists in interpreting them according to the logic of similarity, without understanding that they have broken with the imitation of an original. The icon doesn't represent, but presents, not in the sense of producing a new presence (as Western pictures do), but in the sense of making present all of the sanctity of the Saint. The icon allows and demands veneration, but remains outside of every idolatry. With regards to the person and the face of Christ, it is the sign and not the nature of the Invisible – a figure at a distance from the Invisible, precisely because the Invisible traverses it. Furthermore the icon, refusing adoration in favour of a simple veneration, transmits this veneration to the invisibility of Absolute Sanctity. The icon isn't the idol of Christ, precisely because it refers to Him and in this way opens to the person of the Other as such. The visible therefore doesn't open up to another visible, but to the other *of the* visible – the invisible Saint. The icon is separated from the mimetic logic of the image by the fact that it realises itself entirely through its reference to a prototype that, by definition, is invisible.

The decision taken by the Second Council of Nicaea now finds conceptual currency in the contemporary debate. Initially the icon refuses every reduction to visibility that would transform it into a simple spectacle, becoming a mere object for a spectator. This is because before being seen and making itself seen the icon silently demands from its visitor that the visitor be seen by it and demands that the invisible gaze of the visi-

tor know that it is seeing another invisible gaze appear in it. The icon wants interlocutors that can look at each other face to face, whilst the idol identifies itself with its own spectacle. The icon merits veneration only in as much as it shows an other of itself and becomes in this way the pure type of the prototype towards which it always refers. This image breaks with idolatry, totally destroying the screen of visibility and opening the visible itself: far from generating a new spectacle, as the idol does, the icon lets another gaze emerge, soliciting a veneration that it transmits to its prototype. The icon, therefore, has only one aim, the crossing of gazes, and it is in this way that it saves the image from the category of illusion, aiming at an invisible and intelligible original. The distance between the idol and the icon is defined in this way: the idol remains, in one way or another, based on desirous waiting. The icon definitively overcomes this waiting, annulling the prevision. So the icon is a testimony to the Incarnation of the Word of God, while the idol is a “diabolical” invention.

4. In the 14th Century, Moscow became the religious centre of Russia before becoming the capital. At that time of incessant internal wars between princes and of devastation wrought by the Tatar invasion, it was the Church that guaranteed the unity of Russia. It created a spiritual unity around Moscow, which was a sign of its political unity to come. At this time Russia experienced a period of intense artistic activity. Although there were developments in architecture, literature and liturgical creations at this time, it was painting that provided the fundamental expression of the spiritual and cultural life of the Russian people. There was no theory of art as we understand it – the aesthetic appreciation of a work completely corresponded to its theological appreciation, since art was a theology that was expressed through aesthetic categories. If it was Byzantium that had been largely responsible for giving theology its verbal expression, Russia gave it its visible form: it was Russia that, through the artistic language of the Church, had the task of revealing

the profundity of the content of the icon and its supreme spirituality. In orthodox Russian thought, the question of knowing if one could represent the divinity was never posed, as if it didn't make any sense. However, in the 16th century icons had to be painted according to ancient models: the orthodox icon had to correspond to the traditions, that is to the iconographic canon established by the Church. These requirements – which require the painter to follow ancient iconographs and not to paint from their imagination or represent the divinity according to their own ideas – are often considered in art history as expressing a tendency to limit the creative initiative of the painter, as if obliging them to literally copy the models. The obligation to conform to antique models is very common and has always existed in the Church, for it is in accord with the fundamentals of sacred art. However to paint according to ancient models doesn't mean literally reproducing them, as this would limit the creativity of the painter. These rules don't limit artistic creation, but prevent deviations from the traditions of the Fathers, and so the orthodox doctrine.

With the appearance of Rublëv a new and very important chapter began in the history of Muscovite iconography. Although an autonomous school had already begun to form before Rublëv, it only acquired its own individual and clearly identifiable characteristics after the first quarter of the 15th Century. Whereas before there was no stylistic standardisation in Muscovite icons, Rublëv founded local traditions based on what had been gleaned from the works of the Byzantine masters. Although owing much to Theophanes the Greek, with whom he worked when he was a young man, during his adulthood he positioned himself as the antipode of his master, leaving behind Theophanes' severe and dramatic images (on this and, more broadly, on the *Trinity*, see Lazarev [1983]). The ideals of Rublëv were different, more contemplative and serene, and they purposefully renounced both the Byzantine thinning of forms and the local archaic traditions, which were tenaciously rooted and difficult to eliminate. Rublëv developed an artistic language that was so perfect that

his style dictated that of the whole 15th Century. And he was so glorified that for many years he was considered to be the insuperable ideal of iconography. Rublëv's greatest work, the icon of the *Trinity*, was painted in memory of Saint Sergius of Radonezh, his spiritual master. In it he incarnates the teachings of his master. It is true that the theme of the trinity was particularly important at the time due to the struggles with heresy, but, as with every great work of art, the *Trinity* has multiple meanings, and its complicated philosophical content cannot be explained simply in relation to the struggle against heretic movements. The figures of the three angels are interpreted as a symbol of the divinity that is one and three, and as a prefiguration of the Eucharist. In Rublëv's icon there is no movement, no action. The three angels are sat in deep silence on three low chairs. Their heads are slightly tilted, their gaze aimed towards the infinite. Each one is immersed in their own thoughts. The compositional centre of the icon is the chalice. Together with the head of the sacrificed calf – the Old Testament's prefiguration of the lamb in the New Testament – the chalice must be considered as a symbol of the Eucharist. The hands of the angels in the centre and on the left bless the chalice and these two gestures supply the key for interpreting the complex symbology of the composition.

The central angel is Christ: absorbed and deep in thought, his head tilted to the left, he blesses the chalice, expressing his desire to offer himself in sacrifice for the atonement of human sins. This act is inspired in him by God the Father (the angel on the left), whose face expresses a deep sadness. The Holy Spirit (the angel on the right) is present as the eternally youthful and inspirational principle, as the "consoler". What the Church teaches to be the act of the supreme sacrifice of love is also represented (the Father offering his Son as a sacrifice of atonement for the world). The artist does not stop there, but also represents the act of supreme obedience, the free choice of the Son to suffer and give himself as a sacrifice for the world. In this work Rublëv transforms the traditional iconographic type into an extremely profound

symbol, pushing us to reconsider this ancient theme in a completely new way. In Rublëv's *Trinity*, symbolism of a purely ecclesiastic type gives rise to something more touching – a symbol of human love and its ideal content – which is much more profound and incisive than a simple juxtaposition of ecclesiastical symbols. In its perfect artistic forms it incarnates the ideal of peace and social concord to which the best Russian souls were aspiring at the time, and which they sought in vain in their contemporary reality. As in every great work of art, in the *Trinity* everything is subordinated to a fundamental idea: the composition – the linear rhythm and the colour. There is something pacifying in this icon, that encourages absorbed contemplation. The angels of the *Trinity* are the most poetic image of all ancient Russian art: their bodies are slender, light, as if weightless. The figures of the angels, which slightly widen in the middle and narrow towards the top and bottom, are constructed according to the rhomboidal scheme dear to Rublëv, giving them a surprising lightness. There is no trace of severe asceticism in these angels: the corporal principle is not sacrificed to the spiritual, but is fused with it.

In the icon of the *Trinity* the motif of the circle continually recurs as the dominant motif of the whole composition: it is visible in the angel leaning forward on the right, in the slope of the mountain, in the tree, in the head of the central angel, and the curved line of the angel on the left, and in the pedestals next to one another. The artist isn't afraid to disturb this circular rhythm with the vertical positioning of the house, knowing that it makes his composition even more graceful and free, and he is also not worried by the tilted head of the central angel, that breaks the symmetry of the upper part of the icon, since it effectively restabilises the equilibrium, moving the pedestal a bit to the right. The chalice of the Eucharist is also moved towards the right, thus also becoming a counterweight to the head of the central angel inclined towards the left. Thanks to the extensive use of these asymmetrical arrangements, the composition acquires a rare elasticity, conserving its centripetal character and the equilibrium of

masses. By putting the circle, a geometrical figure, at the base of his composition, Rublëv subordinates the composition to the surface of the picture. Although the angels at the sides sit in front of the table and the central angel behind it, all three of the figures seem to be arranged within the limits of a single spatial zone that has minimal depth and strictly corresponds to the height and width of the picture. The total harmony that makes Rublëv's icon such a work of perfection arises from this proportionality between the three dimensions: if the figures were larger or the space was deeper, the harmony would immediately be broken. It is precisely through interpreting his figures as pure outline and making the lines and spots of colour his principal means of artistic expression that Rublëv is able to conserve that surface rhythm that has always fascinated the Russian iconographs, and which gives the composition its extraordinary lightness.

What is most noteworthy in Rublëv's icon is its chromatism. It firstly affects us with its marvellous colours, their unrivalled harmony. In Rublëv there is almost no shade, and so his palette is distinguished not only for its extreme brightness but also for its rare transparency. The figure of the central angel is brought into relief through the intensity of the blue. Although leaning on the table, it has no heaviness: it seems weightless like the figures of the angels at the sides. But as much as the quiet between the three in their wordless meeting appears superhuman, we also perceive the tumult below – the earthly lacerations and sufferings from which the work is born. It is a eulogy that is born from a foundation of anguish – something that the director Andrej Tarkovskij shows clearly in his film dedicated to Andreij Rublëv. All of the figures reflect that identity-difference that is the paradoxical nature of the icon: they are similar while being distinct. In this icon there is also a harmony between *Chronos* e *Aiòn* (between time and eternity) that, as we have seen, is essential for understanding the theological foundations of the art of the icon (see Cacciari [2007]). In the icon it isn't the dimension of *logos* that dominates, but that of *pathos* – meaning that participation domi-

nates over mere contemplation – both the continuous line of time and the Euclidean spatial composition are overcome. The spatial composition of the *Trinity* is as follows: the first angel, on the left of the viewer, is the Father; in the middle of the symbol of the Trinity sits the Son; on our right the Holy Spirit. That the Son, therefore, sits on the left of the Father, shows an "inversion" with respect to the liturgical conventions, an inversion that makes visible how spatial coordinates have no value and how the icon is called upon to continually unveil their mere conventionality. The scene is free of all abstract symmetry as if to demonstrate the extraneousness of the icon to every aesthetic canon, and in the same way it is free from every illusion of perspective. In Rublëv's *Trinity* everything is symbol, but nothing is abstracted from the most intense aesthetic emotion. Everything is idea, but in the sense of the *ideîn*, of the fullness of seeing.

The question posed by the icon, its *presentation* of the relationship between visible and invisible as a paradoxical relationship which, as such, is always in movement, and never representable statically once and for all, throws light on contemporary artistic productions. It is no surprise that, both from the artistic and spiritual points of view, the icon is one of the greatest discoveries of the 20th century. This is shown by painters such as Henri Matisse and Kazimir Malevich. This discovery occurred at the eve of great historical turmoil, and it is in this period that the icon appears as a supreme treasure of human art. Indeed, if spiritual decadence is manifested in the oblivion of the icon, the spiritual reawakening provoked by catastrophes and turmoil returns us to the icon, pushing us to understand its language and meaning and to become conscious of it. The icon is no longer revealed as a past, but born again as our present, characterised by a slow penetration of the spiritual sense of the icon. The fact is that the orthodox icon is the only art in the world that, at the artistic level, reveals the meaning of life – a meaning that is much needed in contemporary European culture. Lost is the paradoxical nature of the icon, that is the insurmountable antinomicity of visible and invisible; in contemporary art we

either find only the visible dimension or only the invisible dimension, leading towards iconoclasm. Contemporary figuration oscillates between the triumph of a simply sensible-visible conception and the desire to return to the Old Testament prohibition. It is as if the terms of the icon's dominant polarity were confused into being only one dimension while simultaneously totally separating themselves. Putting the two poles of the icon into a paradoxical tension, this art puts the antinomial structure to the test, as if from the inside.

However, where there is "great art" we always find iconic antinomicity. As in the icon, in "great art", the Invisible, from the immobile Absolute, is that same force that liberates us from immediate sensible being: from absolute immanence emerges transcendence. This manifests the Truth of the icon, which is at one with his Incarnation and his cross and that, as such, manifests itself as a Truth that is not static (given once and for all), but always in movement, *unquiet*. This is the truth as *alétheia*, a truth that re-veals, that unveils in its veiling. This is an antinomial Truth: *coincidentia oppositorum*. In this way the icon is the presentation of the Truth in as much as it contains in itself its own negation. It bears witness to this insuperable *coincidentia* of visible and invisible through its *docta ignorantia* (see Cacciari [1985]: 173-211). There is no final truth-reality, therefore, as there is no initial truth-reality. And not only does Euclidean space not have sense in the icon, but neither does "Pauline" time. There is a fundamental anachronism in the icon: the principle is the end and the end is the principle. It is the refusal of mechanistic, unidirectional time, as the "eternal return" of Nietzsche teaches us. Every moment, every given is already full of a multiplicity of meanings and of numerous possibilities, and that excludes us from waiting for a definitive Sense.

REFERENCES

- Russo, L. (ed.), 1997: *Vedere l'invisibile. Nicea e lo statuto dell'immagine*, Aesthetica, Palermo.
- Byčkov, V.V., 1977: *Vizantijskaja estetika. Teoretičeskie problemy*, Isskustvo, Moskva; it. transl. by F.S. Perillo, *L'estetica bizantina. Problemi teorici*, Congedo, Lecce, 1983.
- Cacciari, M., 2007: *Tre icone*, Adelphi, Milano.
- Di Giacomo, G., 1999: *Icona e arte astratta*, Aesthetica Preprint, Palermo.
- Di Giacomo, G., 1998: *Il Secondo Concilio di Nicea e il problema dell'immagine*, in Russo, L. (ed.), *Nicea e la civiltà dell'immagine*, Aesthetica Preprint, Palermo.
- Evdokimov, P., 1972: *L'art de l'icône. Théologie de la beauté*, Desclée De Brouwer, Paris.
- Florenskij, P., 1977: *Ikonostas*, it. transl. by E. Zolla, *Le porte regali. Saggio sull'icona*, Adelphi, Milano.
- Florenskij, P., 1967: *Obratnaia perspectiva*, in *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, III 198, Tartu, pp. 381-416; it. transl. by N. Mislser, *La prospettiva rovesciata e altri scritti*, Gangemi, Roma, 1990.
- Lazarev, V.N., 1983: *Russkaia ikonopis' ot istokov do nachala XVI veka*, Iskusstvo; Moskva, it. transl. by D. Rescaldani, *L'arte russa delle icone. Dalle origini all'inizio del XVI secolo*, Jaca Book, Milano, 1996.
- Marion, J.-L., 1982: *Dieu sans l'être*, Librairie Arthème, Fayard, Paris; it. transl. by A. Dell'Asta, *Dio senza essere*, Jaca Book, Milano, 1987.
- Marion, J.-L.: 1986: *La croisée du visible*, P.U.F., Paris.
- Mondzain, M.-J., 1986: *Image, icône, économie. Les sources byzantines de l'imaginaire contemporain*, Seuil, Paris.
- Ouspensky, L., 1982: *Théologie de l'icône dans l'Eglise orthodoxe*, Cerf, Paris.
- Schönborn, C., 1986: *L'icône du Christ. Fondements théologiques*, Cerf, Paris.