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## The Icon between Holiness and Sanctification

### Abstract

Is the icon holy, or must it be sanctified to become holy? Does any religious representation become holy after it has been sanctified? Does the icon have holiness in itself, or does it need adjuvant ministries? These are pertinent questions that require clarification, research, and objectivity to protect us from the dangers of pietism and iconic fetishism. Many sons of the Church cannot conceive of worship before an unsanctified icon, but once the ritual of sanctification is applied to the icon, which until recently was only a "profane" image with a religious subject, it becomes an icon due to sanctification, or little, it becomes "good for worship". This study does not address the issue of the sanctification of icons based solely on their historical dimensions, but, starting from the decisions of



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the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787), brings to attention the equality of worship given to holy icons, the holy cross, the Gospel text, and holy relics. The icon and its liturgical, aesthetic, dogmatic, and commercial connotations could not escape the uncontrolled rise of the tendency to sanctify almost anything. So is the icon holy? Does it sanctify? Should it be sanctified?

## Keywords

icons, iconology, holiness, consecration, Tradition, Orthodoxy

## 1 Introduction

"Next to the «Jesus Prayer» and the Byzantine liturgy, but even more than these, the icon is undoubtedly the most well-known and widespread element of the Orthodox Tradition."<sup>1</sup> Although we can say that contemporary society is one of images, eminently iconic, because we meet *icons* everywhere, starting from street signs to mobile phone *gadgets* and other IT *devices*, the true icon or THE ICON, as a visual representation and hypostatic transcendence, is reduced to obsolete dimensions, its presence being tolerated only for its artistic character, less for the theological, dogmatic and/or missiological, and this because "our society has abolished everything that was holy. The icon bears witness a presence whose roots are anchored in non-empirical (from 'beyond') reality."<sup>2</sup> The deformation of the importance of the Orthodox icon is caused by some *extra muros* reasons, such as the iconoclasm of yesterday and today, with its various aspects of aniconic manifestation, but also by some *intra muros*, ecclesial reasons, trivializing its dogmatic, liturgical, and

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel ROUSSEAU, *Icon – the Light of Your Face*, 2nd ed., foreword by Olivier Clément, transl. from French by Măriuca Alexandrescu, Edit. Sophia/Siluana, Bucharest, 2020, p. 5 (*Preface*).

<sup>2</sup> Stéphane BIGHAM, *The Icon in the Orthodox Tradition*, transl. Diana Preda, Cornel Apostol, Oradea, Edit. Theosis, 2016, p. 85.

mystical value in favor of the exaggeration of the artistic and aesthetic side. "The more the icon moves away from its source – the Orthodox Church – and from its authentic message – the Gospel of Christ – the more it loses itself in the religiosity of holiness. Iconography is truly a holy art, but a Christian holy art, closely related to the Bible, to Christ and to the tradition of the Church."<sup>3</sup>

## 2     **Icon today**

"The icon is figuratively expressed prayer of the mind, devoid of expressiveness and sensual passion, representing events independently of their chronological consecutiveness and not in a historical aspect, but in their supratemporal fulfillment and meaning. The icon is ritual and mystery. The icon is a religious act, not symbolic, but real."<sup>4</sup>

According to the *Dictionary of Orthodox Theology* by professor Fr. Dr. Ion Bria, the icon represents a "sacred image, in two dimensions, which represents Jesus Christ, the Mother of God or a saint, which can be painted because of the body they had ...".<sup>5</sup> But today the term "icon" has become a generalizing one, a label applied to any religious image, belonging to any artistic style, any technique used, or any way of working. Thus, we can see the use of this term both to identify works of artistic theology, specific to Byzantine and post-Byzantine art, made in various techniques (encaustic, tempera on wood, mosaic, fresco, bas-reliefs, etc.), varied stylistic manners due to the artistic schools, the national-

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<sup>3</sup> St. BIGHAM, *The Icon ...*, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> Nikolai Mihailovici TARABUKIN, *The Meaning of the Icon*, transl. and afterword by Vladimir Bulat, Adrian Tănăsescu-Vlas ed., Bucharest, Edit. Sophia, 2008, p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> Ion BRIA, *Dictionary of Orthodox Theology. A - Z*, 2nd ed. rev. and compl., Edit. I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucharest, 1994, pp. 195-197. See also Ioan MIRCEA, *Dictionary of the New Testament. A - Z*, Edit. I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucharest, 1995, pp. 91-93.

religious influences and the respective time period, but also for the Western religious images<sup>6</sup>, for the naive works on glass from Habsburg / Austro-Hungarian Transylvania, for the serigraphs and lithographs sold on an industrial scale, for tapestries, for the *Made in China* kitsches present on the stalls and in the churches' shops, more comprehensively speaking, for any object depicting holy characters or biblical scenes (and not only).

"The decay of the iconographic tradition resulted from the weakening of the strictness of the good church order",<sup>7</sup> so it can be stated without any reluctance that the icon is a truthful barometer of the spiritual level of the Church. This mirror reflects the face of Tradition, the order, and the promoted aesthetic tastes. Unfortunately, "our society abolished everything that was holy, and the icon bears witness to a presence whose roots are anchored in the non-empirical reality (of the 'beyond')",<sup>8</sup> and "with the decadence, the icon was no longer considered as a testimony of Orthodoxy, equal to the word",<sup>9</sup> but its importance was condensed to the result of a simple aesthetic, historical and decorative character. For some, the icon no longer 'tells' them anything, but only 'shows' them something or someone; the icon is no longer worshiped<sup>10</sup> as such, prayed to<sup>11</sup>, but only regarded as an ecclesiastical relic or a

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<sup>6</sup> The realistic manner of the religious images of the West is not to be "corrected", but the naturalistic, desacralized, anthropophilic one, foreign to the theological iconic message: "The icon relates the seen to the unseen, without making concessions to realism, but also without despising matter." (Marie-José MONDZAIN, *Image, Icon, Iconomy. The Byzantine sources of the contemporary imaginary*, transl. from French by Măriuca and Adrian Alexandrescu, Edit. Sophia, Bucharest, 2009, p. 121).

<sup>7</sup> N. M. TARABUKIN, *The Meaning of the Icon*, ..., p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> St. BIGHAM, *The Icon* ..., p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Leonid USPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon in the Orthodox Church*, introd. and transl. Teodor Baconsky, Bucharest, Edit. Anastasia Foundation, 2009, p. 317: *footnote* (p. 97).

<sup>10</sup> *proskynesis*

<sup>11</sup> *molennâe* = Russian, "prayed" icons.

museum piece interesting for the olfactory sense, but not for a spiritual sight (*theoria*), understanding sight (*orasis noera*), and understanding feeling (*aistheseis noera*).

"We see God in creation, in the Liturgy and in the icon. These are mediated views, those things tell us about the presence and work of God, but do not show us Himself"<sup>12</sup>, and

"the sacred art of the Orthodox Church calls us to leave the old ways of looking, offering us the conditions to discover new states of attention, a new way of being, because only those who lose their lives will find it, given to themselves".<sup>13</sup>

Far from this contemplative side, far from the artistic and dogmatic importance, is the commercial-financial 'importance' of the icon. Regarding this aspect, the Synod of "The Hundred Heads" (*Stoglav*) from Moscow (1551), established about icons that it is not possible to trade with them, and their sale is prohibited, as it was also banned their 'serial' realization. Starting from the very end of the 17th century, a true iconographic industry flourished in all Orthodox countries, patronized by monasteries and blessed by bishops, iconography (*eikonourgia*)<sup>14</sup> becoming a liberal, 'professional' profession, diluting the sacred, theandric and dogmatic character of the icon, even if "its purpose is to be a seal not of the transitory, but of the meanings of the eternal."<sup>15</sup>

Without detours and words carefully crafted through a 'cardboard' deontology, N.M. Tarabukin issues a verdict in this case:

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<sup>12</sup> Bishop ANTONY the Confessor, *The Path of Inner Prayer. Hesychia's Manual*, Edit. Annunciation, Galați, 2003, pp. 110-111.

<sup>13</sup> Archimandrite Maximos CONSTANS, *The Art of Seeing. Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography*, transl. from English by Dragoș Dâscă, Edit. Doxology, Iassy, 2017, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> Gr. *creating or making icons*

<sup>15</sup> monk Gregoire KRUG, *Reflections of an Iconographer on the Meaning and Purpose of Icons*, transl. Carmen and Florin Caragiu, Bucharest, Edit. Sophia, 2002, p. 163.

"All those who bring destruction to church canonicity, starting with architects who depart in church architecture from the ancient Byzantine traditions and with artists who replace the icon with a painting, and ending with hierarchs who tolerate and even encourage such deviations – all these must be considered heretics, whose only justification can be their ignorance in these matters",<sup>16</sup>

because – states the Greek iconologist Constantine Cavarinos:

"These people are outside the 'wedding chamber' (see Matthew 25, 1-12). These are sentimentalists who want superficial, secular, 'aesthetic' experiences, and who do not distinguish between the holy and the worldly, between 'repentance' and the ascetic experience. For them singing and psalmody, painting and iconography, literature and hymnography, theater and church are one and the same."<sup>17</sup>

### **3 The idea of sanctifying icons and their contribution to the sanctification of man**

Although the question of the sanctification of icons has been raised since the work of the Seventh Ecumenical Synod (as we will detail in the next chapter), such an idea did not appear in the cultic practice of the Orthodox Church until much later, in the middle of the 17th century Metropolitan Petru Movilă of Kiev and all Russia, in 'Molitfelnik' (*Trebnik*) of 1649 introduced five short hierurgies / prayers for the consecration of the following types of icons: 1. Holy Trinity (more precisely theophanic and epiphanic icons: Philoxenia of Abraham, the Baptism of the Lord, the Transfiguration and the Descent of the Holy Spirit); 2. Christ and the royal holidays; 3. Mother of God; 4. Saints; 5. Several types of icons are brought together.

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<sup>16</sup> N. M. TARABUKIN, *The Meaning of the Icon*, ..., p. 130.

<sup>17</sup> Constantine CAVARNOS, *Byzantine Sacred Art*, transl. from English by Paul Bălan, Edit. Doxology, Iassy, 2017, p. 119.

So for 1649 years after the incarnation of the Son of God and the birth of the possibility of the iconic circumscription of God, icons did not require any cultic *adagio* of initiation and confirmation in the Church: "Even if it did not add icons among the great church mysteries, Orthodoxy considers them sacred by their character. They are, in the truest sense, sacraments of the Incarnation."<sup>18</sup> Even if "the veneration of icons is in the Church a lit torch whose light never goes out. It is not lit by a human hand and since it was lit, it has not tired of burning",<sup>19</sup> the question arises: What exactly determined the introduction of such innovations in the rite of the Church? We can argue for a possible answer with the unfortunate influences of deviant Western practice,<sup>20</sup> but we would rather take responsibility for the decadence of spiritual life, church art, morality and the theological-technical knowledge of iconographers, sobriety and acrimony for authentic, canonical and traditional in iconology. The decline of the holiness of the members of the Church was also reflected in the decline of iconography and the understanding of its ontic role and ecclesial purpose. "The icon is the visible and tangible testimony of the grafting of the created human principle to the eternal divine being,"<sup>21</sup> and "sanctity, I believe, is what is imprinted on the icon,"<sup>22</sup> for "the icon itself emanates a scent of asceticism."<sup>23</sup> So the injury of the life in the Holy Spirit brings an injury to the understanding of the icons, even if "with the will of God, they were established and became

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<sup>18</sup> John Anthony MCGUCKIN, *The Eastern Orthodox Church*, transl. from English by Mihai Moroiu, Bucharest, Edit. Baroque Books & Arts, 2020, p. 170.

<sup>19</sup> Gr. KRUG, *Reflections ...*, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> S. Radojcic, *Les icônes de Yougoslavie du XII à la fin du XIII siècles*, in "Icônes", Paris-Grenoble, 1966, p. LXXI: "Western influences did more harm to Byzantine painting than the Turks.", cf. L. USPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon ...*, p. 236.

<sup>21</sup> Gr. KRUG, *Reflections ...*, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> Gr. KRUG, *Reflections ...*, p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> St. BIGHAM, *The Icon ...*, p. 93.

tradition in the Church through the reason of the Holy Spirit."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, we can unequivocally state that "the icon represents the spiritual experience of holiness",<sup>25</sup> and "the icon – in full convergence with theology and the liturgy – looks especially at the fruit of the Incarnation, the deification of man",<sup>26</sup> therefore "the icon cannot be understood outside the church, of the universal cohesion in whose composition it is included."<sup>27</sup> The sanctity of the icon can also be associated with the sanctity of the life of the iconographer, that humble instrument of the Holy Spirit, who in a volitional and assumed kenosis, carefully hides in order to remain anonymous forever. To create icons in accordance with their original meaning, "an artist and a contemplative theologian must meet in the same person... For this, true icon painting is the rarest and most difficult art: it claims to combine these two gifts, rare too".<sup>28</sup> Only by having this conviction, and by abstracting from some exaggerated eidetic<sup>29</sup> artistic effervescence of the icon painters, we can understand why

"painting icons is compared to theologizing, to the clear expression of the truths of faith, which are the fruit of the illumination of the Holy Spirit. [...] the icon painter takes on the role of theologian, enlightener and holy member of the

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<sup>24</sup> Abu QURRA, *On the Veneration of Holy Icons*, transl. Lidia Rus, introd., notes, comments, indexes by Remus Rus, Bucharest, Edit. Univers Encyclopedic Gold, 2012, p. 88.

<sup>25</sup> L. USPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon ...*, p. 171.

<sup>26</sup> L. USPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon ...*, p. 193.

<sup>27</sup> Evgheny N. TRUBETSKOY, *3 Essays on the Icon*, transl. by Boris Buzilă, Bucharest, Edit. Anastasia, 1999, p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> Serghey BULGAKOFF, *Icon and the Veneration of Holy Icons*, transl. of Hieromonk Paulin Lecca, critical study by Fr. Nikolai Ozolin, Bucharest, Edit. Anastasia, 2000, p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> *eidetic* = (Psych.) Coming from the imagination. (Philos.) Pertaining to the essence of things, possessing the features of the essence. (Aesthetics) What defines the disposition of the artist to represent his ideas, products of the imagination, with an accentuated plasticity, at will.



Church, who expresses the truth, not through words, but through shapes and colors".<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, "in the old tradition, the iconographer (painter of icons) is not defined as a painter, but as a hagiographer, as one who, through painting, 'writes (describes) holiness'."<sup>31</sup>

#### **4 Consecration of icons in the historical and patristic context of Tradition<sup>32</sup>**

Until the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Constantinople, 787), it seems that no one wrote any work on the consecration of icons - or at least it has not reached us - and we have no mention of the existence of prayers or the necessity their sanctification. We can cite as a possible reason the fact that no one has ever doubted their sanctity, in the absence of prior hierurgies.

It was only at the Synod of 787 that the question of the consecration of icons was raised, the lack of consecration prayers being used by the iconomachs as a strong argument for their deviation from the Church's ideology and Tradition. In fact, this substantiation of their hatred against iconosophy was first mentioned at the Iconoclastic Synod of Hieria (754), where the iconoclastic bishops affirmed "that the icon cannot be called sacred, for "no sacred prayer (*hiera*) blessed her, who would make her pass from a vulgar thing to a holy being (pros to

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<sup>30</sup> Georgios KORDIS, *Hierotypos. Theology of the icon according to the Holy Fathers*, transl. from Greek by Mihai Coman, transl. from Old Greek by Cristina Costena Rogobete, Octavian Gordon ed., Byzantine Edit., Bucharest, s.a., p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Olivier CLÉMENT, *Considerations on the Spirituality of the Icon*, in "Orthodoxy", XXVII (1975), 2, p. 389.

<sup>32</sup> An imperative study that must be read is that of Father St. BIGHAM: *Consecration of Icons: a Practice in Contradiction or in Accordance with the Tradition of the Orthodox Church?*, published in Romanian version: Stéphane BIGHAM, Nikolai OZOLINE, *Theology of the Icon. 9 Iconology Studies*, transl. by Cristian Imbrea, Edit. Theosis, Oradea, 2021, chapter 9, pp. 205-229.

hagion), but she remained vulgar and without honor». (Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio XIII*, 1767, 268 B-C).<sup>33</sup> At the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, the iconoclasts reiterated the idea that "there is no prayer capable of consecrating icons to make them sacred objects. Icons remain profane objects, with no other value than the one conferred on them by the painter" (6th Session, Mansi XIII, 268 et seq.), means aesthetic, didactic, archaeological, historical, national, etc. To these theological ineptitudes, the Fathers of the Seventh Synod respond:

"Many of the objects we hold sacred are not sanctified by special prayers because they are already full of holiness and grace by their very name. That is why we consider objects of this kind worthy of veneration and embrace them. Thus the very cross of life-making is considered by us to be worthy of honor and serves us as a means of attaining holiness, even if it has not been sanctified to us by a special prayer. Therefore, the iconoclasts must admit that the cross itself is a somewhat unworthy object of veneration (because it was not sanctified by a special prayer), or consider that the icon is also holy and worthy of veneration." (Session VI, Mansi XIII, 269 D)<sup>34</sup>

And also the Orthodox Fathers and Iconodules of the Synod of 787 testify that:

"Although the Sobornic Church pictorially represents the human form (*morphē*) of Christ, it does not separate His body from the divinity with which it was united (...) When we make the icon of the Lord, we testify to His deified body and do not recognize in the icon anything other than a image that resembles the prototype. This is why the icon gets its name;

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<sup>33</sup> M.-J. MONDZAIN, *Image, Icon, Iconology...*, p. 170; see also deac. Ion I. Ică jr, *The Canon of Orthodoxy: The Seventh Ecumenical Council, vol. I: Dogmatically defining the Icons (691-810)*, Edit. Deisis, Sibiu, 2020, p. 181: The icons "...have no consecration prayer, so that it is transferred to what is holy from what is common, but remains common and dishonorable as the painter made it."

<sup>34</sup> L. USPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon ...*, pp. 123-124.

only by this likeness does it partake of this name, and for this reason it is the venerable and holy icon." (*Session VI, Mansi XIII, 344*)<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, the inscription on the icon of the name of the one represented on it represents the certification of its sanctity, because "through the voice of the *épigraphé*, the image is pronounced",<sup>36</sup> remembering that we "call *épigraphé* the mandatory inscription of the name of the person depicted in the icon."<sup>37</sup> We can conclude with Stephen of Bostra that "the icon is the name and the likeness of the person painted on it"<sup>38</sup>, because "the name is mystically linked to the person."<sup>39</sup>

The iconologist, iconographer and art historian Leonid Uspensky, in a *footnote* to the *Theology of the Icon in the Orthodox Church*, has a commendable remark, intended to bring light and clarification to this matter:

"Both the iconoclastic charge and the Orthodox reply prove the fact that, in the era of the Seventh Ecumenical Synod, the rite of consecration of icons did not exist. [...] unfortunately, the rite of consecration is not always properly understood by Orthodox believers. Often they bring to the Church some painting with a religious subject (which cannot in any case be considered an icon) with the idea that if the priest will consecrate it, he will make it an icon. The rite of consecration is not a magic formula able to transform an object into another object: an image that is not an icon does not become an icon by consecration."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> L. USPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon ...*, p. 162.

<sup>36</sup> M.-J. MONDZAIN, *Image, Icon, Iconology...*, p. 145.

<sup>37</sup> M.-J. MONDZAIN, *Image, Icon, Iconology...*, p. 144.

<sup>38</sup> STEPHEN OF BOSTRA, *Against the Jews*, ch. IV, P.G. LXVII, col 121 B, cf. Saint JOHN DAMASCENE, *The Three Treatises Against the Iconoclasts*, transl. and notes by Prof. Dumitru Fecioru, Edit. I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucharest, 1998, pp. 168-169.

<sup>39</sup> N. M. TARABUKIN, *The Meaning of the Icon, ...*, p. 70.

<sup>40</sup> L. USPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon ...*, p. 125: footnote (p. 335)

About the "unsanctification" of icons as a practice of the Church, St. Nicephorus the Confessor also mentions in *Antiretices*, II, 261E, claiming that "the icon of Christ deserves more honor than the Holy Cross" (429A), "...since it shows us the Christ Himself, while the Cross shows us the way of the Passion." (432A)<sup>41</sup>

Another great icon apologist, St. John Damascene, states in the *Second Treatise in Defense of Holy Icons* (ch. XIV, P.G. XCIV, I, 1300) that "the icon is sanctified in the name of God and in the name of God's friends – that is, of saints – this being the reason for which it receives the grace of the Holy Spirit."<sup>42</sup>

In the *Life of Saint Stephen the Younger*,<sup>43</sup> (Chapter 55: *Remembrance from exile. Conversation with Constantine V*), Saint [Stephen] answers [to Constantine V]:

"O Emperor, not the matter that is in icons Christians were commanded to pay homage, but they bow before the name of the person who is seen in the icon..."

And then the Saint continues:

"And who, being in all minds, pays homage to what is created when he bows before the objects that are found in churches, be they of wood, stone, gold or silver, and which have been changed into holy objects by the name written on them?"

Much later, Saint Symeon of Thessalonik (1381?-1429), the last disciple of Saint Gregory Palamas, advised as follows: "Paint in colors, according to Tradition, this is the true painting, like the Scripture in the books, and the divine grace will rest on her, for what she portrays is holy."<sup>44</sup> In the same confessional symphony applicable to iconography, the words of Saint Philaret of Moscow are also written: "True holy Tradition is not only the visual or

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<sup>41</sup> cf. M.-J. MONDZAIN, *Image, Icon, Iconology...*, pp. 313-328.

<sup>42</sup> cf. L. USPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon ...*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>43</sup> Marie-France AUZÉPY, *La Vie d'Étienne le Jeune par Étienne le Diacre*, Aldershot, Hampshire UK, Variorum Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1997, pp. 253-254, cf. St. BIGHAM; N. OZOLINE, *Theology of the Icon. 9 Studies ...*, chapter 9, p. 208.

<sup>44</sup> Saint SYMEON OF THESSALONIK, *Dialogue Against Heresies*, ch. XXIII, P.G. CLV, 113 D, cf. L. USPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon ...*, pp. 172-173.

verbal transmission of teachings, rules, rites, customs, but also the effective, but unseen, transmission of grace and holiness.”<sup>45</sup> As I mentioned before, in 1649, Saint Peter Movilă introduced for the first time in an Orthodox Molitfenic five prayers for the sanctification / blessing of icons; his theological battles against anti-iconic Calvinism being well-known, we can understand his arguments in favor of using elements foreign to Orthodoxy to strengthen the cult of icons.

But in 1730, we find for the first time in a Greek *Euchologion*<sup>46</sup> a prayer for the consecration of the icon, which, however, is read only by the bishop, anointing it with Holy Myrrh in the four corners,<sup>47</sup> and then saying the following prayer:

“Master, Almighty King, Father of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Who commanded Your servant, Moses, to put the image of the Cherubim in the holy tabernacle, and from him taking the habit of making icons as a memorial of what they represent. So we ask you, Lord and King, send the grace of your Holy Spirit, together with an angel, on this holy icon, so that any prayer that is brought to you before this icon will be received by the grace, mercy and mercies of your Only

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<sup>45</sup> quoted after G. FLOROVSKY, *Paths of Russian Theology* (in Russian), Paris, 1937, p. 178, cf. L. USPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon ...*, 2009, p. 132.

<sup>46</sup> \*\*\* *Euchologe selon le rituel des Grecs*, J. Goar, 2 éd., Venice, 1730, p. 672

<sup>47</sup> Interesting is a note included in this *Euchologion* by the editors: “Regarding the prayer that the bishop says over the newly painted icon, please note that the *Sacramentaria Latina* contains a similar blessing, but without anointing with Myrrh, and it is also found in the *Ordo Praedicatorum*, as well as in the *Pontificale Romanum*. Although in the past, through too much carelessness, a blessing like this was not received for use, now, this fundamental book we hold in our hands, preserves and maintains it.” The same practice of consecrating icons with St. Mir is also found in a codex (Roman Catholic, of course) with rituals for blessing and consecrating icons in the 11th century in England, preserved in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 044: Pontifical, dated between 1025-1075 (pp. 138-141). See also Jean Marie SANSTERRE, *Les images sacrées en Occident au Moyen Âge. History, attitudes, beliefs. Recherches sur le témoignage des texts*, Akai, 2021.

Begotten Son, Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ, the lover of all people. Because to You belongs all the glory, honor and worship, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and always and to the ages of ages. Amen.”<sup>48</sup>

An attitude of opposition to the sanctification of icons and the need for prayers for their consecration can also be found in Patriarch Dosithei of Jerusalem (1669-1706), Saint Athanasius of Paros<sup>49</sup> and Saint Nicodemus the Aghiorite,<sup>50</sup> who catalogs this practice as a papist affair and an innovation.

## 5 Consecration of icons today. The opinions of Romanian theologians regarding this practice

Contemporary Romanian theologians, through their studies and opinions, seem to be followers of the theory of the need for a blessing and sanctification hierurgies, following the innovation of Saint Peter Movilă, whose *Trebnik* became the source (at least in this case) of the Romanian *Molitfelnic*. There are also some exceptions to this symphony of opinion, among which I only mention the opinion of father Ion Bria, who reiterates the Church Tradition at least until 1649:

“Icons are not venerated on a material, substantial basis (icons are not worshiped in an idolatrous way, as ‘gods’, as the iconomachi believed), but on the basis of the similarity of

<sup>48</sup> St. BIGHAM, N. OZOLINE, *Theology of the Icon. 9 Studies ...*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>49</sup> Saint ATHANASIOS OF PAROS, *Ekthesis, eitouv homologia tés aléthous kai orthodoxou pisteôs genomené hypo tôn adikôs diablêthentôn hōs kainotomôn*, (editor: Ierom. Theodôrét) pp. 122-123, quoted in Dionysios TSENTIKOPOULOS, *Basikes kateuthynseis tés didaskalias tou hagiou Athanasiou tou Pariou*, Agios Athanasios ho Parios, Paros, Greece, 2000, pp. 134-135, cf. St. BIGHAM, N. OZOLINE, *Theology of the Icon. 9 Studies ...*, pp. 214-216.

<sup>50</sup> Saint NICODEMUS THE AGHIORITE, *Prologomena. About the Holy and Ecumenical Seventh Synod*, cf. NEOPHITE, Patriarch of Constantinople, *Pidalion or the helm of the Orthodox Church*, 2nd ed., Edit. Credința strămoșească, s.l., 2007, footnote 257. 2, pp. 324-325.

the face represented with the person whose name must be indicated on the icon. By the very indication of the name of Jesus Christ or of the saint, the icon is sanctified. If the outline or the names of sacred persons are erased, the icon loses its symbolic and 'analogous' value and therefore burns. Likewise the cross, which receives holiness through its very form. If this form or its wood decays, it burns."<sup>51</sup>

But let's return to those who are for the consecration of icons. The worthy father Ene Braniște – the liturgist *par excellence* of autochthonous theology, supported the idea that "the ritual of blessing the icon establishes a connection between the image and its prototype, between the one depicted and the appearance itself"<sup>52</sup>, recalling also the statement of the Belgian researcher Dom Clément Lialine:

"icons are sanctified expressly, through a special service of blessing and sanctification, a service which has the very effect of removing icons from the ranks of common, common objects, and placing them in the category of sacred things."<sup>53</sup>

Is there not a connection established between the image and its prototype before the 'consecration', or the icon was only an image, and following the prayers, the *non-icon* became the icon. But isn't this exactly what the iconoclasts argued at the Synod of Hieria: an ordinary image is not holy, or is it not called, rather, an icon, because there are no prayers of blessing to turn it into a *holy* icon? However, Father Braniște reminds that "the icons can be considered, to some extent (sic!), as holy in themselves, in their entirety, of matter and form (image), as the faithful actually

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<sup>51</sup> I. BRIA, *Dictionary of Theology* ..., p. 195.

<sup>52</sup> Fr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Theology of Icons*, in "Theological Studies", IV (1952), 3-4, pp. 175-200, cf. \*\*\* *The Teaching about the Holy Icons reflected in Romanian Orthodox Theology. I Studies and Articles*, Edit. Basilica, Bucharest, 2017, p. 49.

<sup>53</sup> Clément LIALINE, *Un idéal de l'icône*, in "Irenikon", XI (1934), 4, Editions de Chevetogne, pp. 283-284.

conceive and venerate them simple.”<sup>54</sup> Another statement of himself deserves special attention:

“any sanctified icon is basically a miracle worker. [...] The virtues and thaumaturgical effects of the icons are therefore based both on the power of the prototypes painted on them, and on the service of their sanctification, which lends them a sacred character”.<sup>55</sup>

In these statements, the influence of the words of the theologian, the philosopher and the priest Sergey N. Bulgakoff: “any sanctified icon is basically miraculous.”<sup>56</sup> So following the same logic, we are justified in doubting the sanctity and thaumaturgy of the icons painted before 1649 (and they are by no means few and unknown), and we can claim that – excuse my non-academic euphemism – the donkey of Valaam (cf. Numbers 22: 28-30) could never have spoken by God’s will, because she was not ‘sanctified’ beforehand.

Father archdeacon Ioasaf Ganea showed in an article the reason for honoring the icon: “that is why we honor icons, because they, after consecration, are ‘signs of the overflow and presence of grace’<sup>57</sup>” and only after consecration “Holy Icons acquire divine grace and the authentication of the image represented”, for “there is a great correlation between the consecrated icon and its Sanctifier.”<sup>58</sup> And father Ioasaf also explains to us about icons that the Holy Spirit “dwells in them after sanctification”.<sup>59</sup> Maybe the ‘grace’ of the Holy Spirit... Really only after sanctification?

In a very important article for the subject of this study, Father Ioan Mircea, recalling the Old Testament consecrations, states

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<sup>54</sup> Fr. E. BRANIȘTE, *Theology of Icons* ..., p. 48.

<sup>55</sup> Fr. E. BRANIȘTE, *Theology of Icons* ..., p. 50.

<sup>56</sup> Sergey BULGAKOFF, *Orthodoxy*, 2nd ed., transl. by Nicolae Grosu, Edit Paideia, Bucharest, 1997, p. 157.

<sup>57</sup> Fr. Ilie BRĂȚAN, *Holy Icons*, in “Mitropolia Oltenia”, XXIX (1977), 7-9, p. 578.

<sup>58</sup> Archdeacon Ioasaf GANEA, *About the Holy Icons (Orthodox Icon)*, in “Orthodoxy”, XXXIV (1982), 1, p. 93.

<sup>59</sup> I. GANEA, *About the Holy Icons* ..., p. 97.



that "holy icons receive something from the grace and power of those they depict, becoming, after consecration, workers." So until 'sanctification', those representations are simple images without the perfection of their sacredness, without any spiritual 'work'. Charismatic perfection (*teleiosis*) is achieved when

"along with the gift of the saints, the power of the holy prayers uttered by the priest is added to the icons when they are sanctified and when they are sprinkled with the Great Holy Water."<sup>60</sup>

The most famous theologian of Romanian Orthodoxy – father Dumitru Stăniloae – agrees to the opinion that the consecration of the icon has an important role in its consecration as a gracious, liturgical, dogmatic and catechetical object:

"The consecration of the icon is only the first and most intensive calling of the name of Christ or of His Spirit over His face painted in the icon; it is the call of Christ as a special Person or of Christ who is in the saints on behalf of the Church, or by the Church as His collective body, full of Him. And as such, sanctification brings Christ or His Spirit into permanent connection with the icon. By consecration the icon is made a place where Christ or the saint is accustomed to be called and to renew his coming, presence or work."<sup>61</sup>

However, it is not clear whether Father Stăniloae is referring to the hierurgical act of sanctification (sprinkling with holy water) or to the sanctity of the icon *per se*.

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<sup>60</sup> Fr. Ion MIRCEA, *Idols or Holy Icons?*, in "Orthodoxy", XXIV, (1982), 1, pp. 41-54, cf. \*\*\* *The Teaching about Holy Icons reflected in Romanian Orthodox Theology. I Studies and Articles*, Edit. Basilica, Bucharest, 2017, p. 397.

<sup>61</sup> Fr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Idol as the Face of the Deified Nature and the Icon as a Window to Divine Transcendence*, in "Orthodoxy", XXXIV (1982), 1, pp. 12-27, cf. \*\*\* *The Teaching about the Holy Icons reflected in the Romanian Orthodox Theology. I Studies and Articles*, Edit. Basilica, Bucharest, 2017, p. 415.

Closer to our days, father Ștefan Buchiu also mentioned the importance of consecrating icons, even defining the ritual act of consecrating the icon as

"the moment of its 'clothing' in the uncreated divine grace of the Holy Spirit, which empowers the image painted on it to become transparent environment of the mysterious presence of the Savior, the Mother of God or the saints."<sup>62</sup>

His Holiness also mentions somewhat approvingly the practice of Coptic Christians regarding the consecration of icons:

"In the tradition of the Coptic Church, the holy icons are also anointed with the Holy and Great Myrrh, a fact that illustrates even more eloquently the special, mysterious, but effective 'charge' of grace, which establishes the miracle-working icon quality of the Holy Icon."<sup>63</sup>

So, the more jobs are applied to them, the more "miracle-working" the icons become...

These are some of the more sonorous voices of Romanian Orthodoxy in which, unfortunately, almost nothing is reflected from the Church Tradition before 1649 – the Apostolic Tradition, but only tries to substantiate and explain these cultic innovations from *Molitfenic*.

## Conclusions

If we talk about the authentic icon, painted in the Byzantine style, which preserves the mystical thrill of Christian art from its flowering period, remembering the writings of the apologist Fathers of the icon, we can conclude that the icons do not need

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<sup>62</sup> Fr. Ștefan BUCHIU, *The Apophatic Dimension of the Orthodox Icon*, in volume "Theology of the icon and its upheavals in the contemporary world", Edit. "Aurel Vlaicu" University, Arad, 2008, pp. 7-20, cf. \*\*\* *Teaching about Holy Icons reflected in Romanian Orthodox Theology. I Studies and Articles*, Edit. Basilica, Bucharest, 2017, p. 462

<sup>63</sup> Șt. BUCHIU, *The Apophatic Dimension ...*, p. 464.

any extra-prayer of sanctification, of no hierarchic confirmation, but only to preserve the dogmatic, artistic, historical and hermeneutic canons, their painter to be orthodox, with a chosen spiritual life as a theologian of the holy image, and the beneficiaries of the icons to be themselves supplicants and benefactors of the holy 'images', following the example of the lives of those represented on them.

If we consider icons and industrial copies of authentic icons, then we can find premises of the need for prayers for their consecration, as a prologue to the cultic use.

But the reasons for the sanctification of icons must be found in the agraphic<sup>64</sup> (customary) tendency to animate the cult, in the desire for emphatic church theatricality, to impress the donors and even the iconographers, to be similar to other Christian denominations that "believe that in their much chatter they will be listened to " (Mt. 6: 7), hence the pietistic and unjustifiable practice of keeping the icons in the sanctuary, after consecration, for 40 days (for what?).

Thus, it seems to me imperative to remember that the honor of the icon is similar and equal to the honor brought to the holy cross, the Holy Gospel and the holy relics of those who are pleasing to God, as stated by the Signatory Fathers of the *Horos* of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, "which formulates the dogma of icon veneration. Here is the text:

'[...] Therefore, we decide that those who, following the example of the heretics, dare to think or teach differently, to despise church traditions, to invent new things or to reject something of what has been sanctified by the Church – whether the Gospel, either the appearance of the cross, or the painting of icons, or the holy relics of the martyrs; or those who harbor bad, hostile and losing thoughts towards the traditions of the universal Church, those, finally, who dare to use the holy vessels or the honest monasteries in a profane

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<sup>64</sup> *agaphos* = unwritten law, tradition, custom.

manner – we decide that all these, if they will be bishops or clerics, will be catherized, and if they are monks or laymen, let them be excommunicated.’ (Mansi XIII, 377-380).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> L. USPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon* ..., pp. 129-131. See also I. I. ICĂ jr, *The Canon of Orthodoxy* ..., vol. I, p. 596

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