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The Pedagogic Function of the Icon in the Modern World

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The icon is usually associated with the religious imagery and practice of the Orthodox Church. In fact, however, the icon is part of the legacy of the entire Church as the period when the first icons were made pre-dates the Great Schism (1054); not only was the early church not divided, but it actually focused its whole energy on calling the first councils and consolidating doctrine¹. This shared legacy gives the icon its ecumenical potential.

At present we are witnessing the renaissance of the icon and great interest in its significance. The icon is much more than a mere illustration of the Holy story. It is a kind of medium, a launching pad that projects us towards the trans-empirical, and makes it possible for us to explore and derive happiness from it.

Everyone pursues happiness. Through its transcendent beauty, the icon makes it possible for us to approach perfect happiness and in this way it realizes its preventive potential, which is so central to pedagogy. In this paper the author tries to focus on the pedagogical potential of the icon, which by means of its sheer artistic merit becomes an important tool for propagation of universal values.

The word *icon* derives from the Greek word *eikon*, which means “picture”, “image”, “portrait” in the broadest sense of the word. In the Byzantine Empire, the term icon was applied to every figurative description of Mary, Jesus, the disciples, saints and angels as well as events from the Holy story. Today, the term is used with reference to easel painting, sculpture, mosaics and other works of art which are not necessarily closely bound up with architecture. This is how today the icon is perceived by the fields of archaeology and art history².

¹ O. Popowa, E. Smirnova, P. Cortesi, *Ikony*, Warszawa 1998, p. 7.

² T. Jank, *Krótką historia niejednej ikony*, Gdańsk 1998, p. 11; L. Uspiński, *Teologia ikony*, Poznań 1993, p. 7; T. D. Łukaszuk, *Obraz święty – ikona w życiu, w wierze i w teologii Kościoła. Zarys teologii świętego obrazu*, Częstochowa 1993, p. 5.

Within the classification of the Orthodox Church the criteria specifying what can be regarded as an icon are more rigid: the icon must be painted on a wooden board and made using a specific technique in keeping with a codified and time-honoured rules which constitute the iconographic canon³.

An icon is like a window into supernatural reality. There are many things in theology which cannot be put in words and icons make it possible to transcend the boundaries of the visible and move towards a mystical experience. The icon can be seen as a fragment of metaphysical reality, which fills the vision of the world with beauty. One of the functions of the icon is to show the secrets of faith and it brings forward the image of eternal life, which is the Kingdom of Beauty⁴. There is no place for falsehood, violence or using other people in this world. If, in the future, man wants to live in this reality, he has to learn all its rules now. The Scriptures instruct us about these rules and prepare people for life in a better world, in a process that starts during our lifetime.

The icon helps to make the message of the Holy Bible more realistic and in it, the invisible becomes visible⁵. It also gives people a real experience of beauty, which has a stronger power of argument than persuasions and verbal instructions. God and man come together in the icon to remind us that there is a world, where there is no unpleasantness, old age, or diseases and nobody is in danger because of enemy, the icon is a card and the label of this world.

The artistic legacy of the monk-painter Andrej Rublov, who lived at turn of fifteenth century is an example of supreme achievement in the thousand-year old iconographic tradition. What had preceded Rublov's work, and what followed it finds its ideal in the few works by Rublov which have survived. The above-mentioned examples are an attempt at addressing the needs of our contemporaries, who, though benefiting from all the material goods the today's world with its technically advanced civilization can offer, realize that they cannot quench the thirst that they feel, whether or not they are aware of it.

The Icon of the Holy Trinity executed by Andrej Rublov has aroused keen interest of Christians, adherents of other religious traditions, and non-believers, all of whom perceive the beauty and power that radiate from it. This icon is so wonderful that even those who are hostile (to religion) are reduced to deferential silence and adoration when gazing at it. No other icon has invited so much commentary. It remains a highly original work of art, even though it is thoroughly traditional, since at its deepest level, it remains absolutely inimitable⁶.

³ Uspienski, *Teologia ikony*, p. 7.

⁴ P. Florenski, *Ikonostas i inne szkice*, Warszawa 1981, p. 126.

⁵ P. Evdokimov, *Prawosławie*, Warszawa 1964, p. 245.

⁶ G. Bunge, *Inny Paraklet. Ikona Trójcy Świętej mnicha-malarza Andreja Rublowa*, Kraków 2001, p. 9; *Katechizm Kościoła Prawosławnego*, Kraków 2001, p. 92; cf. G. V. Popov, *Adrei Rublov*, Moscow 2007.

The favourite motif which has come to be used to reveal the mystery of the Holy Trinity was the motif of God's three messengers visiting Abraham and Sarah under the oaks in Mare (Genesis 18, 1–3). One of these angels, who is three angels at the same time symbolizing the Holy Trinity, comes to man to remind him of what is most fundamentally true about him, i. e. that he is a religious creature. God becomes a guest in order to be recognized by man. By visiting man, he makes it possible for him to break free from his confinement and draws him into a love relationship described in *Song of Solomon*; thanks to this relationship it becomes possible for man to transmute his infirmity⁷.

God is revealed to everybody who is gazing at this icon. God enters his house like a guest, but in a fairly surprising way, like in the story, he becomes the host. In this way, the relationship is reversed; the one who receives is himself received and assumed, in this case into the communion of the three persons (of the Holy Trinity), as if he himself were a guest⁸.

The oblong shapes of the bodies may imply the persons are men, but their faces might just as well be those of twin sisters. The heads of the Angels bow down to one another in humility. None of them assume a domineering pose. The faces of the angels are full of freshness and eternal youth⁹. There is not even a trace of exhaustion (on their faces). The shape of their shoulders suggests complete relaxation. Their concentrated faces radiate with tenderness and thoughtfulness¹⁰. The three persons making up the Holy Trinity have come down not just to communicate to Abraham the good news of the birth of his son, but also to serve as an example of unity, harmony and generosity. In Rublov's Holy Trinity man and God, instead of being opposed to each other, are in fact related¹¹.

The Angels sitting at the table create a picture of love, freedom, a timeless and most intimate relationship. It is a picture of beauty, which contemporary man misses so much. Abraham's house is a place where God lives with man. The oak of Mamre is the three of life, but the mountain appears as a symbol of spiritual elevation and contemplation¹².

The icon shows the beauty of God which man cannot resist or take away. Man always wants to have greater share of this beauty – the beauty, which is the symbol of God. God invites man to experience the happiness of His presence. In fact, the table where the Angels are sitting can have continuity in time and space. There is a place for everyone who wants to share this community of love. Just as when metal is put into fire, it assumes its features; when man comes into contact with God, his heart is purified and develops a higher taste for perfection.

⁷ T. Špidlik, M. I. Rupnik, *Mowa obrazów*, Warszawa 2001, p. 23, 24, 25, 27, 28.

⁸ B. Standaert, *Ikona Trójcy Świętej Andreja Rublowa*, Bydgoszcz 1995, p. 14.

⁹ J. Forest, *Modlitwa z ikonami*, Bydgoszcz 1999, p. 149.

¹⁰ B. Standaert, *op. cit.*, p. 24–25.

¹¹ M. W. Alpatow, *Rublow*, Warszawa 1975, p. 48.

¹² Forest, *op. cit.*, p. 149; H. J. M. Noumen, *Ujrzyć piękno Pana modląc się z ikonami*, Warszawa 1998, p. 19.

The Saviour of Zvienigorod written by Andrej Rublov is another dazzling masterpiece of Russian medieval art. Despite the fact that only some fragments of this unusual picture have survived up till now, the perfection of its form, its inner clarity and force are amazing¹³.

When looking at the icon for the first time, one can find Christ's face manifesting amidst great chaos. The face which "is looking at the ruins of this world is sad yet beautiful"¹⁴. It seems that Christ wants to attract the gaze of the one who is looking at His face; He wants to get in touch with us. The face of *The Saviour* is looking at us with attention and discernment, but this look does not arouse fear or guilt. It gives the experience of a kind of perfection and tells us about a tender care of Somebody, who always and everywhere looks after a man.

The Saviour's eyes of Andrej Rublow are not sentimental, reproachful, they are mild instead. These eyes belong to God, who is the all-seeing and all-understanding Father. When standing before Him, it is impossible to hide the truth. He knows the most secret hiding-places of man's heart, but in spite of this, He does not stop loving man with His Divine mercy. There is no severity in His eyes¹⁵.

The power of this picture lies in its radiation of love, warmth and harmony. All these things arouse in the viewer the feelings of the highest love, as well as never-ending human goodness. Because of their severity, most Greek and Russian icons arouse fear. They emphasize the glory of God's majesty so much, that man feels humiliated and he realizes how unworthy of God he is. Rublov's icon gives an impression that Christ is coming down from His throne, touching man's shoulder's and inviting man to stand up and follow Him and become as beautiful as God¹⁶. Christ's face awakens in our heart not only love and confidence, but also regret, because not everybody is able to love as much as God can.

This picture shows the deepest desires of human's heart and it encourages man to go towards Absolute beauty through goodness, truth and love in his every day life. Rublov's Christ is a sophisticated combination of intelligence, firmness, thoughtfulness, power and beauty – features, which are unparalleled anywhere in the material world. All these features are very attractive to every one. Man can see the shining face of God through the ruins of our material world, when hatred, envy and enmity hold sway. God's face cannot be destroyed by violence, anger or war.

According to H. J. M. Nouwen, looking at *The Saviour* is an event occurring where contemplation and compassion have become unified with each other. This experience directs man to what is most human, but at the same time most divine, and helps him to achieve and develop desirable values¹⁷.

¹³ W. Plugin, *Wielcy malarze świata. Andrej Rublow*, Leningrad-Warszawa 1987, p. 6.

¹⁴ Noumen, *op. cit.*, p. 44–45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52; Gry, Neményi, *op. cit.*, Warszawa 1979, p. 10.

¹⁶ Noumen, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49, 50, 55.

Rublov regarded the world with love, tenderness and understanding. The colours in the icons he painted are delightful, delicate and noble and through their spiritual elevation they communicate powerfully what the person gazing at the icon could never discern themselves. The lyricism of their imagery shows great sensitivity to what is the most intimate in man. These works are artistically perfect, but at the same time they do not allow one to forget that the source of their perfection is a tenderness of the heart.

The icon manifests the transcendent world, a world that lies beyond religious rifts as regardless of differences in the doctrine we are all children of one God. The artistic and spiritual beauty of the icon, which draws people towards it by transcending denominational differences, create unity and communion; that is why it is important to disseminate its presence and message in the reality of everyday life.

Not only does the icon develop this interest in a beauty which is eternal, but also makes it possible for man to experience it and in this way arouse his higher needs. Considering various pedagogical techniques, one cannot ignore the educational potential of the icon in this context.