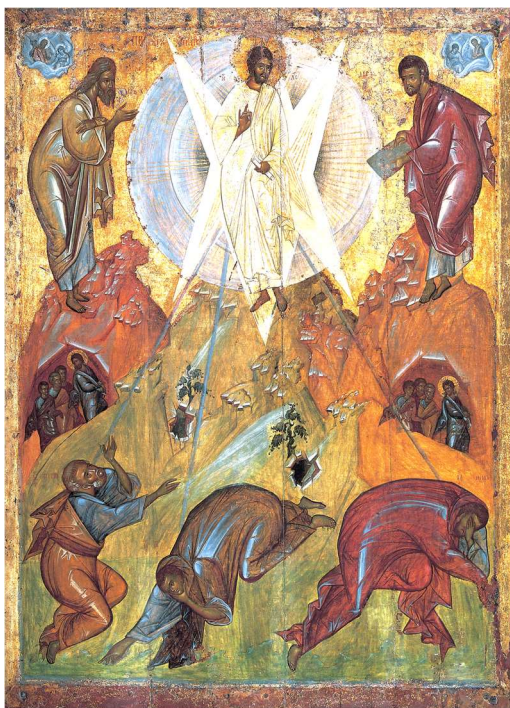


CHRISTS TRANSFIGURATION AND ITS ICONOGRAPHY

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Picture: Icon of the Transfiguration of the Christ. The author is famous iconographer Theofanes the Greek.

In the Orthodox Church the icons bear witness to the reality of God's presence with us in the mystery of faith. The icons are not just human pictures or visual aids to contemplation and prayer. They are the witnesses of the presence of the Kingdom of God to us, and so of our own presence to the Kingdom of God in the Church.

The Transfiguration is one of the Twelve Great Feasts of the Orthodox Church, celebrated on the 6th of August. Described in the first three Gospels²³², its commemoration has become uncommon in many non-Orthodox churches, which is

unfortunate as there is much to discover in this event. Being one of the Great Feasts, there is also a rich heritage of iconography surrounding the Transfiguration of Our Lord.

Biblical texts: "And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, And was

²³² Matt 17, 1-9; Mark 9, 2-10; Luke 9, 28-36.

transfigured before them: and His face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elijah talking with him. Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah. While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid. And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only. And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.”²³³

“And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James, and John, and leadeth them up into an high mountain apart by themselves: and he was transfigured before them. And His raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them. And there appeared unto them Elias with Moses: and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter answered and said to Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. For he wist not what to say; for they were sore afraid. And there was a cloud that overshadowed them: and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. And suddenly, when they had looked round about, they saw no man any more, save Jesus only with themselves. And as they came down from the mountain, he charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were risen from the dead. And they kept that saying with themselves, questioning one with another what the rising from the dead should mean.”²³⁴

“And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray. And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and

²³³ Matthew 17, 1-9, KJV.

²³⁴ Mark 9, 2-10, KJV.

glistening. And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him. And it came to pass, as they departed from him, Peter said unto Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias: not knowing what he said. While he thus spake, there came a cloud, and overshadowed them: and they feared as they entered into the cloud. And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. And when the voice was past, Jesus was found alone. And they kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen.”²³⁵

In the Gospels, the Transfiguration comes just six days after Christ's long discourse on the End of the World, the Last Judgment and the Second Coming of Christ. Christ finishes His words with the promise: “...there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.”²³⁶ The Transfiguration, then, is the realization of Jesus' promise, and so what the Apostles experience is a foretaste of the future life – “the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”, according to St Peter.

Story of Transfiguration of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was told by three evangelist Matthew, Mark and Luke. This story didn't happen in front of eyes of many people, Saviour chose just three of His disciples: Peter, James and John. Transfiguration for His disciples was confirmation of the divine nature of Jesus Christ, uncovering glory of His divinity. If they wanted to participate, they needed to take part in difficult journey with Christ on the top of the Mount Tabor. That is where He has transfigured. As witnesses of this happening and as another proof of Christ's divine origin with Saviour appeared prophets Moses and Elijah. Moses as representative of the deceased and Elijah as representative of the living because he hasn't died and during his life was taken

²³⁵ Luke 9, 28-36, KJV.

²³⁶ Matthew 16, 28, KJV.

to Heaven. That is why Apostles got another lesson – for God there are not dead, for Him everyone (living or deceased) is alive²³⁷.

The earliest surviving image of the Transfiguration is from St Catherine's monastery in Sinai, a place which, because of its seclusion, is home to many early icons. In the apse of the catholicon there is a mosaic of the Transfiguration, dating from the middle of the sixth century.

Iconography of this feast at the beginning has symbolic character. Instead of just Christ's Transfiguration, there is simple cross circled with many stars, on sides of the cross were written 2 Greek letters (alpha and omega) as demonstration of Saviour. On the sides of the cross were portrayed characters showing Prophets Moses and Elijah, above cross was shown palm – symbol of God-the Father. Under whole composition was portrayed Mount Tabor and three lambs as symbols of Apostles Peter, James and John.

When early Christian symbolism was over time erased from iconography and iconographers began portrait directly Jesus Christ, canon of icon of the Transfiguration to these days wasn't much modified. In the centre of the icon is figure of Jesus Christ. His clothes are depicted "white as light" as the Gospel writers describe. Around Him is portrayed mandorla which is circle of God's Glory (Mandorla – an ancient symbol, the mandorla is the most concise way to express Christ's majesty, glory and divinity in holy icons. It is found surrounding Jesus Christ in icons of His Resurrection, Transfiguration, Ascension, the Dormition, and of Christ in Glory. As with much of the symbolism in Icons, it reveals a straight-forward truth, whilst at the same time containing layers of hidden meaning.), has several shades of blue from dark inside to lighter on the edges. Mandorla can have circle shape, or ellipse with sharp angles up and down. This colorful shades of mandorla symbolizes orthodox theological conception that we recognize God per His nature, we can recognize Him by his care about created world. Darkest colour is symbol of unrecognized secret and because of that it is nearest to the figure of Christ and brightest colours are furthest. In Christ nimbus is written cross and sides of the

²³⁷ Luke 20, 38.

nimbus iconographic acronym of His name – IC XC. On the right side of Christ, stands Prophet Elijah, on the left, stands Prophet Moses, who frequently holds table with Gods commandments or book (codex) as a symbol of Gods law. All three persons (Christ, Moses and Elijah) stands on the hills.

From Christ's body, more precisely from mandorla, shafts of light are shown striking each of the five others present: to Christ's right, the Prophet Elijah; to His left Moses; scattered about His feet, the Apostles John, Peter, and James. Through three beams of light, he draws the three Apostles, and us, into the dazzling light that surrounds Jesus. By doing so, iconographer is presenting us with the already ancient teaching that the Transfiguration was not only an event for us to witness, but a process that we should ourselves partake in. The icon captures the drama of the event: the three Apostles on their faces in confusion, whilst Christ stands serenely in the centre above them, flanked by Moses and Elijah, who appear to be blessing Him. All subsequent icons of the Transfiguration vary little from this basic composition. Therefore, even Troparion feast says that the Apostles saw Christs glory as they could, so as the poor people do. The Apostle Peter is usually shown with hands lifted up towards Christ and points to Christ as the Son of God.

The mountain on which the Transfiguration took place is identified by St Jerome as Mount Tabor. The mountain plays an important part in divine revelation, as described by Scriptures, and links Moses and Elijah who are miraculously present by Christ's side. Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments and converse with God in a great cloud of divine glory²³⁸. Elijah was told to ascend Mount Horeb (probably an alternative name for Sinai) where he heard the voice of God in the "gentle breeze". In the Biblical account as well as in icons, these two conversers with God are now shown in conversation with Christ Himself, a clear indication to Jesus' divinity. Icons further interpret their presence, following the words of the Church Fathers, by showing Moses holding a book: representing the Torah. Elijah, in animal skins reminiscent of John the Baptist represents the prophets, while Moses represents

²³⁸ Ex. 24, 12-18; Ex. 33, 11-23; 34, 4-6,8.

the Law. Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of both. On some icons, can be placed two more compositions: Christos with the disciples walking on the mountain and then coming down (the first time in Theophanes the Greek' icon). This is an important part of the event: Christ did not suddenly transfigure Himself amid His disciples while preaching in Galilee. Instead, Christ chose three of His disciples, He led them up the mountain "to pray", and there they beheld the future glory of God in the present.

Troparion — Tone 7

You were transfigured on the mountain, O Christ God, / revealing Your glory to Your disciples as far as they could bear it. / Let Your everlasting Light also shine upon us sinners, / through the prayers of the Theotokos. / O Giver of Light, glory to You!

Kontakion — Tone 7

On the Mountain You were transfigured, O Christ God, / And Your disciples beheld Your glory as far as they could see it; / So that when they would behold You crucified, / They would understand that Your suffering was voluntary, / And would proclaim to the world, / That You are truly the Radiance of the Father!

SUMMARY

The Transfiguration is one of the Twelve Great Feasts of the Orthodox Church, celebrated on the 6th of August. Being one of the Great Feasts, there is also a rich heritage of iconography surrounding the Transfiguration of Our Lord. The Transfiguration comes just six days after Christ's long discourse on the End of the World, the Last Judgment and the Second Coming of Christ. Two prophets Moses and Elijah representative of the deceased and the living. The apostles got another lesson – for God there are not dead, for Him everyone (living or deceased) is alive. The earliest surviving image of the Transfiguration is from St Catherine's monastery in Sinai. Iconography of this feast at the beginning has symbolic character. Later, Christian symbolism was over time erased from iconography. All symbols on the icon were replaced by person of Jesus Christ

as the central figure. The first time in history in Theophanes the Greek's icon Christos with the disciples walking on the mountain and then coming down.

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Abstract

Feast of Transfiguration of Jesus Christ on Mount Tabor belongs to the cycle of twelve great feasts in Church yearly calendar. Events connected to transfiguration are captured in gospels. The very transfiguration has an symbolic character and it is a confirmation of prophetic words of Christ about last events of this era. Iconography approach us these symbols through the colours and composition of persons which are present on icon of the feast.

Key words

Jesus Christ, Transfiguration, Iconography, symbolism