

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE *POKROV* FEAST OF THE ALL-HOLY MOTHER OF GOD AND EVER-VIRGIN MARY

Ján HUSÁR

Pravoslávna bohoslovecká fakulta, Prešovská univerzita v Prešove, Prešov,
Slovenská republika

Even though the feast of the *Pokrov* (Protection, or more generally intercession) of the Most Holy Mother of God does not belong to the twelve major ecclesial feasts, the feast enjoys great popularity in the Slavic countries, due to the special reverence to the Mother of God. This is the reason why we classify it together with the other important ecclesial feasts. [1]

The iconography of this feast stems from a concrete historical event. The Byzantines were attacked by the Saracens in the tenth century and the capital Constantinople was in danger of falling to the invaders. These Saracens were not Christians and they did not have a positive attitude towards Christianity. Usually the cities which fell to their rule ended up in destruction and ruin to the very foundation. The population was enslaved. The Byzantines were outnumbered and were full of fear and tribulation, when they saw the fierce enemy in front of the walls of the capital. However, although they were rather militarily weak they had strong faith in God. At that moment during the siege, the population of the capital city was moving into the important Blachernae church for an all-night vigil, in order to ask the King of the Heavens and Earth and his All pure Mother for help in their plight and liberate them from the hands of the enemy. [8] [11]

In the church at that time the emperor Leo the Wise was present, the empress Zoya and a great abundance of believers. There was also the blessed fool for Christ Andrew, who was from the Rus and his disciple blessed Epiphanius. Before the all-night vigil ended, at four o'clock in the morning, the blessed Andrew in a prayer enticed ecstasy looked up to the heavens and he saw: the Mother of God as she was elevated among the angels, prophets, apostles and other saints and was praying for the salvation of the entire world, while at the same time covering it with her *omofor*. The blessed Andrew in a pious surprise showed the vision to Epiphanius and asked him: "Do you see my brother the Queen of all, as she is praying for the salvation of the world?" "I see- replied

Ephiphany – I see and I am filled with wonder”. In the morning the news of this event reached all the confines of the city. All were inspired, when they realised that the very Mother of God is praying for them. Not long later the enemy was driven from the walls of the capital. [6] [18]

The very same lofty *omoforion* covers every Christian soul. The liturgical service of the *Pokrov* feast is devoted to the revelation and clarification of the worship of the Mother of God as the Intercessor, Pleader and Advocate for the world, as a strong Protectress of this world and as a spiritual centre gathering around itself the Church. All these characteristics of the worship of the Mother of God are with proper depth and fullness expressed in the hymns of this feast, that is the Kontakion and the Troparion. The Troparion of the feast exalts especially the very idea of the *Pokrov* of the Mother of God over the world and the prayerful connection with her in the earthly Church. The Kontakion speaks about her as of a Heavenly queen and expresses Her connection with the Heavenly Church. [3] [10]

In the liturgical celebration of the *Pokrov* there is one interesting special feature, which has also appeared in the iconography of the feast. In the life of saint Andrew we find out, that the Mother of God had spread a blanket over those praying, which she took from her head. But on most icons of the *Pokrov* the Mother of God is depicted with a covered head – with an *maforionom*, holding in her hands a bishops – *omoforion*. The *omoforion* symbolising the episcopal service of Christ our Saviour, which is held by the Mother of God in her hands, reminds us of her pleading and advocacy role in front of her Son. Also, at the service of the *Pokrov* she stands in front of the spiritual *eyes* of the praying people not only as a protectress of the sinful world, but also as the pleader intercessor for the world in front of the Son. [5]

The bishops *omoforion* symbolises the lost sheep, which Jesus Christ found and brought on his shoulders, as to bring it to His Heavenly Father. The Mother of God spreads her *omoforion* not only over the world, but also elevates it in a prayerful manner to Christ. That is why also in the service of the *Pokrov* it is repeatedly stated, that the Mother of God spreads her hands to her Son. The prayerfully elevated hands of the Mother of God to Christ we can see on many older icons of the *Pokrov*. On these icons the *omoforion* is not held by the Mother of God, but by the accompanying angels. These prayerful depictions, lead us to the main motive of the service, which is encapsulated by the Orthodox worship and glorification of the Mother of God. [2]

Together with the liturgical service the iconography also helps us to understand the meaning of the feast. The feast of the *Pokrov* of the Mother of God was one of the most revered feasts in old Rus. This is the reason, why it is no

surprise that we find many saintly icons, which belong to the period of the flowering of Russian iconography. The iconographers from Vladimir and Suzdal, Novgorod and Moscow during the period of five centuries had created in their richness of spirit and prayer many examples of the icon of the *Pokrov*. Many of these icons represent not only a high artistic value, but also provide for a richness of material which enables us to reveal the theological content of the feast. The oldest depiction of the *Pokrov* is located in the Blachernae church (Constantinople). The icon could have influenced the iconographers in Rus and certainly displays many features of Byzantine iconography. We have stated that one of the main ideas, which had received attention in the worship of the *Pokrov*, is the idea of advocacy/intercession and the prayerful pleading of the Mother of God for the world. This idea, also congenial to Byzantine theologians and iconographers, had received its depiction in icons, frescoes and mosaics depicting the Mother of God with prayerfully elevated hands /for example the model Mother of God *Orans*/. [14] [15]

Theodor the Studite, in one of his exhortations on the feast of the Dormition, speaks about the prayerful intercession of the Mother of God for the world: "Her holy hands which carried God, are spread for us towards the Divine altar, on earth we have her substitution – the picture of the Mother of God, which resembles the Moon, which in the night illuminates the Sun." It is difficult to know, whether Theodore is speaking about a concrete icon, which he had in front of his eyes, but in any event he seems to be offering a very accurate description of the iconographic type of the *Orans*, which was very much spread in Byzantine iconography in the 9 to 10th centuries. The Mother of God *Orans* was mostly depicted on frescoes and mosaics which decorated walls and especially the altar apsidal of byzantine churches. The wall and altar depictions of the Mother of God *Orans* received various symbolical meanings in Byzantium, which then influenced further developments. The wall depictions of the praying Mother of God, were in some cases called "the undefiled wall" or the "wall of the Kingdom". These designations are usually associated with the intention to preserve the pious memory for concrete actions of intercession and protection from the Mother of God in the periods of military sufferings. The depiction of the Mother of God *Orans* on altar apsidal or on domes of churches was connected with the depiction of the Christ Pantocrator. From Byzantium, the frescoes and mosaics of the *Orans* as well as the icons of the "Undefiled wall" and of the other types related to them in one composite whole penetrated the iconographical tradition of other countries, especially the Slavic ones. [4] [8]

Especially interesting for our purposes is the mosaic depiction of the Mother of God *Orans* in the apsidal of the Kiev-Sophia church (11. century). This

depiction could have testified to the immediate influence of the iconography of the feast of the *Pokrov*. The connection of this byzantine iconography with the Mother of God in the altar of the Saint Sophia church is obvious. Suffice it to say, that in an entire row of examples of the *Pokrov* icons, especially of the Novgorod school [16], the Mother of God does not hold an *omoforion*, but is depicted with elevated hands in a prayer position, and is standing on clouds above the tsarist doors of the lower altar wall. The figure of the Mother of God with elevated hands in a prayerful position on the layer of the shining gold of the apside, dominates the church together with the depiction of Christ the Pantocrator placed in the dome, before whom She prayerfully intercedes for the forgiveness of sins. Christ who is positioned in the highest place of the church, rules over all of its area. In this particular Kiev Church, all the basic elements are expressed, which later in time joined the iconographic composition of the feast of the *Pokrov* and we can state, that the mosaics from Kiev-Sophia are very close to the first part of the vision of saint Andrew. [17]

In contrast to this Kiev depiction the icons of *Pokrov*, especially those, which were written in the fifteenth century, and which originated from the Novgorod school, are enlivened with spiritual joy, which fills the service of the *Pokrov*, and the source of which is the faith in the protection of the Mother of God and the prayerful connection between the Earthly and Heavenly Church, which is made by the protection of the Mother of God. To explain, who this idea was understood by the Novgorod iconographers, we will offer a more detailed explanation of the icon of the Novgorod school from the fifteenth century, which is now located in the Tretyakov museum. [9]

The first thing which draws our attention, is the architectural character of the entire composition of the icon. As if it was written into the picture of the church. The area of the church is divided by arches into three parts, ended by halfcircled vaults. The ecclesial area in the horizontal plane is divided by a long and wide ribbon of the *omoforion*, which is held by two angels, on to two unequal parts. There is the wider central part, bordered with columns and ceiling of the central arch, in which we see only two figures encapsulating the composite and spiritual basis of the icon. These are the figures of the All Holy Mother of God and Jesus Christ. The Mother of God is placed into the middle of the icon. She is standing on the cloud positioned above the Tsarist doors of the lower altar wall. It appears as if the Mother of God had come out of the apside and in a prayerfull manner she offers her hand to Christ, who is depicted above the spread *omoforion*. The unusual artistic harmony of these two figures especially culminates in their elevated hands. The hands of the Mother of God are elevated in a prayerful way to the Saviour, and her palms are directed above, as if receiving blessing and

blahodat from her Son. On the other hand slightly turned thumbs of her hands point to the *omoforion*, which is spread over the praying people, but at the same time is elevated by the Mother of God in the direction of Christ. The hands of Jesus Christ are turned, he is blessing his Church with them and with this blessing he responds to the prayer of his All pure Mother. [12] [13]

We can mention another detail of the middle part of the icon. The earthly church is located here not only under the *Pokrov-omoforion*, which is spread out above the Most Pure Virgin, but also beneath the *Pokrov* – the cloud, on which the Mother of God is standing. The spiritual meaning of this part of the icon can only be expressed by one word – *blahodat*. We see the Mother of God here not only as a graceful intercessor for the world, but also Christ himself not only as a powerful judge- Pantocrator, as he was usually depicted by Byzantine iconographers, but also as full of grace, who responds to the prayers of His Mother. The composition of the *Pokrov* icon is clearly different from the mosaics of the Sophia church. In the depiction of the Heavenly Church also-angels and saints, which are located in the side arches of the church. All these as if are directed towards the Mother of God. To her from both sides is directed the symmetrical expansion of the wings of two angels, who are holding the *omoforion*. The Mother of God here is not seen only as an Intercessor and Protector of the sinful world, but also as the joy of all creation. This idea of all-encompassing happiness, is the basis of the Orthodox worship of the Mother of God. [7]

Troparion — Tone 4

On this day we, the Orthodox people, joyously keep festival, / illumined by your coming, O Mother of God; / and, beholding your most pure image, we cry out with compunction: / "Cover us with your Protecting Veil and deliver us from all evil, / entreating your Son, Christ our God, to save our souls."

Kontakion — Tone 3

Today the Virgin stands in the church, / and with hosts of Saints, and invisibly prays to God for us. / Angels worship with Hierarchs, / and Apostles rejoice with Prophets, / for the Theotokos prays to the Pre-eternal God for us.

SUMMARY

In orthodox iconography we quite often encounter scenes that characterize a particular event or situation in the history of Christianity. One of these examples is the icon of the *Pokrov* ("Protection") feast. Like virtually every icon, this one has undergone its own historical enrichment. From the simple basic feature that depicts the protection of the Mother of God over the Emperor's city to the added

scenes that relate to the event, or symbols that characterize the main motive of the scene of the event. The icon of this feast gradually spread as quickly as the feast itself and became an essential part of the liturgical life of the Church, which is also reflected in the permanent part of the icon in the iconostasis.

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Jan HUSAR, docent, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Presov, Masarykova 15, 080 01 Presov, Slovakia, jan.husar@unipo.sk, 00421517724729. ORCID: 0000-0003-3781-1440

Abstract

The present article focuses on the theological and iconographic interpretation of the feast of the *Pokrov* (Protection, or more generally intercession) Theotokos. Although it is not one of the twelve major feasts of the Church, it enjoys great popularity in Slavic countries due to its special veneration. The iconographic representation of this feast is itself based on a specific historical event. The style of the icon depends on the depiction of the historical events of the feast and also on the development of the various iconographic schools in Byzantium and in the individual Slavic countries.

Keywords

Pantocrator, Mother of God, Saint Sophia, Christianity