

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN THE BYZANTINE RITE

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THE Eastern Church has never ceased to share in that wonder expressed by St John in his First Epistle concerning the Word of Life, 'Which we have heard, seen with our own eyes, contemplated, touched with our hands'. That man should handle the Divinity—that the Divinity should stoop and empty itself to the utter annihilation of the Cross, that a meeting between death and life, heaven and hell, creature and Creator should have been made possible within the limits of our human space and time—that the divine energies should have reached and penetrated human frailty—that all this is not a thing of the past but an ever-present reality—the only true reality of this transitory life—such is the intimate conviction expressed in all the liturgical texts of the Byzantine rite and lived by the faithful.

There is only one centre of life: the ceaselessly unfolding, ever present drama of the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which culminates in the revelation of the Blessed Trinity at Pentecost and the birth of the Church—that new creation within which the deification of man, or in other words his union with God, is made possible. If since the Incarnation the world as a whole has been hallowed by a second, even closer contact with its Creator, if man who was called into existence out of nothing is now drawn into an inexpressibly intimate fellowship with God, the whole of creation, the whole life must assume a new aspect. They have become, as it were transparent, permitting the Reality from beyond to shine through. This 'transparency', which is a consequence of the Incarnation, accounts for those frequent and genuine religious experiences outside the Church, connected chiefly with nature or great art. However, such experiences of created things as 'signs' of the divine inevitably bear the character of an unexpected and special grace and are always acknowledged as such. In fact they are only dim reflections of the reality within the Church. Here, due to the working of the Holy Spirit, everything material, without losing its own character, can be and actually often is

charged with supernatural power, thus becoming a symbol of spiritual realities.

In the consecrated church building, where mass is offered, there is a concentration of spiritual power. But this is not limited to the building and the cult. By virtue of the divine energy indwelling in her, the Church draws the whole of creation into her orbit: sacramentals, processions, the blessing of water are only so many means of bringing the fruits of the redemption to the whole world.

In the West the sense of the symbolical value of material things and actions is largely atrophied. It is true that Catholics are well acquainted with the catechism definition of the sacraments as 'outward signs of inward grace'. In the Blessed Sacrament they may be quick to discern the burning reality behind the veil of matter. But as a rule their sense of religious symbolism rests at that. Even the use of sacramentals seems to call for an apology, while the rareness with which a priest's blessing is sought only points to the same conclusion. It has been forgotten that, instead of being a pure spirit, man is made of body and soul, and that both, according to their nature, share in the means of redemption. The liturgical movement is doing much to teach the faithful the significance of religious ceremonies. But there is still a long way to go till that sense, so vivid in the Middle Ages, of the divine weight attached to each detail of the cult is reawakened in the West.

In the East it was never dormant. For the Eastern Christian the church is veritably the meeting place of heaven and earth. The burning lamp does not recall the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, but indicates the sanctity of the place where the Divine Mysteries of our redemption are celebrated. The *iconostas*, that screen which in Byzantine churches separates the sanctuary from the rest of the church, is the gate of heaven. Its doors are only opened at especially solemn moments during the Liturgy (Mass): at the Little Entrance with the Gospels before the collect of the day, at the Great Entrance which corresponds to the Latin offertory, at the communion till after the Liturgy for the distribution of blessed bread. At other times the doors of the *iconostas* remain shut, except during the week following Easter Sunday, when they are not closed at all as a sign that Christ has thrown open the gates of heaven for us. It is only when one has passed

through the severe Lenten fasts of the Byzantine rite that one can enter into the full joy of this significant act. Again and again during Easter night priests and deacon break through the 'Royal' (central) doors of the *iconostas* swinging the censer to announce the joyous news that 'Christ is risen' to the faithful, who answer in turn: 'In truth he is risen'. Here action and words coincide to convey a spiritual truth of the highest order. All the objects in the sanctuary, which in the Byzantine rite is called the altar, have a symbolic value, recalling some mystery in the life of the Saviour. The Eastern name for the altar is the throne. Here different ideas intermingle—now it is thought of as the throne of God or of Christ, now as the heavenly altar of sacrifice, or again as the Holy Sepulchre, or as Christ himself. The linen on the altar represents the napkin (*sudaria*) of Christ and the coloured altar-cloth the divine glory in heaven. The veil of the paten is the shroud of Christ, while the paten itself is regarded as representing the crib or the vessel on which the Paschal Lamb, pictured as a babe, is sacrificed. The veil which covers both paten and chalice after the preparation of the Bread and Wine on the small table to the left of the throne, called the Credence or Prothesis, signifies the stone which Joseph of Arimathea placed before the Holy Sepulchre. The Credence itself symbolises the cave at Bethlehem as well as the hidden life of Christ. The meaning of the lance which is used to separate the particles from the large host and the asterisk which is placed above the host is evident. The book of the Gospels is the Logos himself, who became man and completed the divine revelation.

In these different interpretations one can trace the gradual penetration of material things by spiritual realities. Thus the throne represents the Holy Sepulchre—a first transposition, one material object replaced in our thoughts by another, but this second already hallowed by the body of him who was God and man. Yet immediately the full force of the divinity makes itself felt—this sepulchre is a throne—the throne of Christ who is God, who will re-enact the mysteries of his life and death and resurrection on this very throne: Again the Prothesis symbolises the cave at Bethlehem, the house of bread. Here the divine Babe was born, revealed only to a few chosen souls. The priest knows as Mary and Joseph knew. The shepherds knew, maybe, as the deacon and acolytes do—the hour of the faithful is yet to come.

During the long hidden years the world did not recognise him who was already in their midst. The mystery of the divine *kenosis* repeats itself at every liturgy.

Most significant, perhaps, of all is the great veil. Bread and wine are prepared, but they are still dead matter without spiritual life. What is more fitting than that they should be covered, sealed like the tomb of him who died? On Good Friday the Holy Sepulchre lay in silence; breathlessly the whole of creation awaited the dawn of Easter morning. Only a little while and Christ will rise again. Bread and wine will be changed into his most precious Body and Blood. He will come to us and we shall take possession of the source of life.

Here in the divine liturgy past and present mingle in one supra-temporal act. Not only time is made to nought; even the limits of space are shattered by the influx of divine power. Here, truly, each object, each action is surcharged with meaning—as the deacon prays on incensing the altar immediately before the actual Liturgy begins: ‘With thy body thou wert in the tomb, with thy soul in hell, as God in paradise with the thief, and on the throne with the Father and the Spirit, O Christ, who dost fill the universe, thou who art without limits’.

The whole of God’s redemptive plan is pressed into the short hour of each Mass, which symbolises on earth the celestial liturgy described by St John in the Apocalypse. Those who on earth celebrate the ‘Divine Mysteries’, as the mass is called in the Byzantine rite, have definite parts allotted to them. As in the West, the priest represents the Christ. The deacon, in his function as mediator between priest and the people, symbolises either the angels, messengers between heaven and earth, Gabriel, the supreme messenger, or St John the Baptist, whose place is between the Old and New Testaments. The faithful are the blessed in heaven, and it is not without significance that at the offertory, before and after the Great Entrance, the choir should intone the Cherubic Hymn: ‘We mystically represent the cherubim, hymning the thrice-sacred chant to the life-giving Trinity. We lay aside all cares for our temporal life to receive the King of the Universe, invisibly surrounded by the hosts of spear-bearing angels. Alleluia!’

The action of the Liturgy embraces the whole of time. The preparation of the bread and wine represents the Old Testament

preparation for the coming of the Messiah, which is revealed only to the chosen few in the sanctuary. In the Liturgy of the Catechumens the life on earth of our Saviour is symbolised. In addition to the parts familiar from the Latin rite, this comprises the singing of various prayers, psalms and litanies, on Sundays also of the Beatitudes, and culminates in the Little Entrance with the Gospels, signifying the teaching activity of Christ. The Liturgy of the Faithful recalls the death, burial, resurrection, ascension and eternal reign of Christ. While the main parts of the Liturgy are celebrated behind the closed doors of the *iconostas*, the secret action is interrupted at the Great Entrance with the offerings—Christ enters his kingdom calling men before his judgment seat. The end of time approaches—men are united by the kiss of peace; in the *Sanctus* they join the angelic choirs; the *Pater noster* shows their adoption in Christ as children of the Father, and the solemn affirmation before the Communion that 'Only Jesus Christ is holy and the Lord to the glory of God the Father' reveals their magnificent destiny—their oneness with the Deity. In the Communion, administered in both kinds, they receive the pledge of their deification.

While the great drama of the Liturgy unfolds, the faithful are not merely spectators. By virtue of the Holy Spirit within them they are witnesses; even more than that, they are irresistibly drawn into the very heart of the vivifying mystery. Everything in the church contributes to achieve this end: the representations of the great mysteries of the faith, of angels, saints, patriarchs and prophets on the *iconostas*, the images in fresco or mosaic on the walls of the church, the icons in the body of the church, the *Theotokos* with the divine Child in the half dome over the apse of the sanctuary, and the image of Christ on his throne surrounded by angels high up in the great dome.

As in the Liturgy the dealings of God with men are represented in action, in the building itself the same theme is treated in a static manner. These are no impotent images. By virtue of the blessing of the Church the icons are charged with spiritual power and enable the faithful who venerate them to enter into contact with the world of the spirit. As the Book of the Gospels and the Cross, they belong to those material things which have been hallowed by the divine touch, and now serve to draw men closer to the source of life itself.