

The Orthodox Icon, Source of the Catechesis

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Abstract:

The icon is a support that directs towards Image. The iconic Christian life is a very important aspect for the configuration of the contemporary catechetical language and discourse. Without denying the importance of the informal catechesis, we must draw the attention upon the risk of lingering on the informal aspect. The reality that reveals before the one who contemplates and who opens oneself to the iconicity of contemplation surpasses the stage of a simple word. Hesychia is the instrument that can be used successfully by all those who want to enter the universe of contemplation. The contemplated reality, icon and substance of the same reality, can be discovered in a gesture of reciprocal revelation in the mystery of silence and of the super-rational word.

Keywords: *Gregory Palamas, Sophorny, hesychasm, Triads, knowledge, icon*

In this study I do not intend to emphasize the forms through which the contemporary catechesis may use as an inspiration and may discover the informal sources within the Byzantine icon. Instead, I wish to propose a philosophical perspective of this relationship between icon and catechesis, or, more appropriately, between iconicity and the mystagogical catechesis. The modern man does not necessarily lack information, in general. And if there is a certain lack of information, it can be remediated rather efficiently, taking into account the variety of means of information. Also, modern man does not necessarily lack theological information. The large variety of means of communication and information that were adopted by the Church permits correct information, and if this information is scarce, it can be completed successfully along the way. But an important part of our contemporaries lacks the iconic view over the theological realities. The information can be assimilated, slower or faster, but the iconic view develops in time and necessitates a certain sensitivity to mystery which I would call artistic sensitivity. It is not the

brutal knowledge that opens man to mystery, but the knowledge that involves contemplation, vision, and existential assimilation of the Subject which reveals itself and proposes itself to be contemplated. This presentation does not refer to a negation of the role of the informative catechesis, which is in fact extremely necessary, but it tries to draw the attention upon the fact that the limitation to such a type of catechesis can miss definitively an opening towards the iconic perspective of knowledge. The massive focus on information does nothing else but to separate this information from the life of the Church as a whole, which also means living in the ascesis of virtues, and dogma and Liturgy.

Sight: surpassing the fragmentary

Knowledge cannot be dissociated from sight. Any act of education involves and implies the existence of a visual support that can be used when the time is right. When we speak about icon, we cannot ignore its pedagogical aspect, as a source for the understanding of the revelation of the mystery of incarnated God:

To appear means «to come into light», «to stand into light», into the visibility horizon within which anything can become visible to us. But before this thing settles into this horizon of light and reveals to us, the horizon itself must open and reveal, the visibility of the horizon must be produced. This visibility of the horizon is the act of appearance of the world. Thus, to appear no longer means simply: to come into this light which is the world's light, to become visible in it, but designates the coming of the world itself, the appearance of the light, the visibility of the horizon (Henry 2003: 70-71).

Man develops and grows within the universe of visibility that God makes available. This universe of visibility has multiple valences and offers the necessary premises for an authentic discovery, that are not shielded by various sources of interferences. Man discovers oneself, shares this self-discovery with the others, but, most importantly, he discovers his self in a universe of visibility that does not rob his image, but potentiates it. Expanding this thesis of the universe of visibility, we say that God Incarnated, Himself being this universe, reveals Himself to give man the possibility to discover himself. It is not a discovery that steals the mystery, but one which develops into the mysterious light of the discovery of the One who is light par excellence. Within this frame, the icon is a sign of the manifestation of the universe of visibility.

From the point of view of the contemporary catechesis, the self-discovery, both of the divine Subject and of the human subject, has a very important role. As the icon does not only transmit an amount of information, but it directs to attaining a universe that cannot be decoded formally in a single attempt, requiring an *askesis* of the mind, in the same way, catechesis has not only the role of transmitting information, but it must also direct towards attaining a universe which is par excellence a universe of the super-rational sight and understanding. Sight implies a unitary vision of the whole, an undivided knowledge of the reality, the iconic perspective on the Subject with which one comes into contact. The dynamics touch-vision is essential to configure any catechetical discourse which aims at overcoming fragmentation and wishes to come to this iconic undivided knowledge-touch-vision:

In the world of Orthodoxy no fragmentary, generalized and idolatrized element is tolerated. On the contrary, amongst the numerous pieces and deep fractions of the historical and natural reality, comes and returns the unifying power and force of the divine glory, of the mystery of unity, which is tied and untied in its dramatic way towards completion; what is absolutized becomes scrap, fragment, fraction and needs healing (Matsoukas 1996: 26).

To remain to the stage of informal catechesis implies precisely this risk of moving away from iconicity and spinning around the absolutized scraps, that is the risk of fragmentation. The universe of the visibility that Michel Henry mentioned has this particular role to overcome the absolutized scraps. An icon is not discovered only in its detail, even if this detail can be perfect in the message it conveys, but it must be discovered in all its details, in the Image that we venerate and which is an indicator towards the ultimate reality that gave substance to the image. The icon is revealed to the catechet and catechumen as a sum of indicators which refer to the Image that was revealed in an incomprehensible way. Sight, iconicity, super-rationality are the key elements to understand an icon, which cannot be circumscribed to an elementary, completely informal level of understanding. In fact, the absolutization of any element to the detriment of the whole and of the unitary vision is not a mistake that can affect only the area of modern catechesis:

The sacred texts themselves cannot be absolutized and transformed into idols, because in this way, they cannot have their place within this impetus of complete perfection [...]. All the pieces of creation, all the historical events are called

continuously to gathering, illumination, unification, glory and perfection (Matsoukas 1996: 26).

A catechesis which remains strictly at the informal stage and does not step into the mystery room of understanding the iconicity of the creation will do nothing else but to absolutize the fragment, the part, the scrap, resigning from its role of bond and shaper in order to achieve an iconic view over reality:

To know the ignorance that our knowledge shelters, does not mean to ignore or to fall into the void of thing and knowledge. Rather to use negation for a better knowledge – without idea. This ignorance is opposed to the idolatry of the categorical predication because in it the negative way meets «in ascension» the name that the affirmative way has just pronounced «in descent» (Marion 2007: 213).

We reaffirm the fact that the modern man needs the askesis of iconicity. This askesis determines man not to absolutize the limited knowledge and to open to the negative way of knowledge, which is a way of contemplation, of discovery by experience of certain realities which otherwise would have been known only theoretically.

Vision: essential element of the mystagogic catechesis

The icon requires an assimilated vision. The one who does not assimilate the vision of the Image is transformed in a simple spectator whose access to sight is reduced to a fragmentary information:

I have long been wishing, O true-born and dearly beloved children of the Church, to discourse to you concerning these spiritual and heavenly Mysteries; but since I well knew that seeing is far more persuasive than hearing, I waited for the present season; that finding you more open to the influence of my words from your present experience, I might lead you by the hand into the brighter and more fragrant meadow of the Paradise before us; especially as you have been made fit to receive the more sacred Mysteries, after having been found worthy of divine and life-giving Baptism (Sfântul Chiril al Ierusalimului 2003: 342).

Sight is superior to hearing because it offers an iconic perspective. And I do not refer here to the spiritual hearing, but to the hearing that fragments the object/subject of hearing. Hearing can become sight in its turn, and then the difference between them is no longer in substance, but in modality. As long as hearing remains at the level of instrument which fragments, we cannot speak of an iconic perspective in the act of hearing.

In fact, this iconic perspective is not reduced to some visual aspect, but considers experience as an essential factor in assimilating realities. Saint Cyril mentions in the cited paragraph the “brighter and more fragrant meadow of the Paradise”, thus indicating through this expression the fragile level of sight. The fragility of sight, that is the incarnation of the concept, is essential to the Christian-Orthodox experience. Vision is by all means fragile, meaning it can be experienced, subjected to visibility, in a universe which is no longer purely ideatic, but implies light and smell:

An idealistic ethic, unrelated to matter and art, is incapable of expressing the ontological ethos of ecclesial communion. We understand this when we look at the organic identification of art with worship in the context of the Eucharist. The worship of the Church is art: it is the work of a communal use of material reality, building and shaping the earth’s material so as to render it capable of serving life, that existential fullness of life which is communion and relationship (Yannaras 1984: 231-232).

The ecclesial communion is iconic par excellence. It reflects and offers the possibility to surpass the concept, the idea. The Eucharist, as an icon of the eternal life, is not a simple concept, on which one may offer certain information that can be interiorized.

To this respect, Archimandrite Sophrony is very categorical:

There are cases when intellectual perception overcomes the faith of the heart. However, most often, through a preference (or if you want, love) of the heart for God understanding comes as well. Only the intellectual faith in God’s existence is not redeeming yet: we find such a faith in demons as well. It does not lead to the real, existential knowledge of God, who asks for our whole and complete life in the Word of God, in the commandments of the Gospel, not only through abstract thinking, but also through the love of heart, the love of our entire being that will necessary become an act of life” (Sofronie 2014: 80).

The act of life, experienced among the others also in the mystery of the Holy Eucharist is the icon of the eternal life, an undeniable reality, vision of the realities that cannot be expressed and understood rationally, but superrationally. Going beyond the concept, the idea, challenges man to discover, through sight and experience the act of life, the existential knowledge of God. The Eucharist itself is vision, iconic reality of the eternal communion in eternal life. The art of the Church in its ensemble offers such an image of the Unseen, proposing contemplation as the most important gesture for the understanding of iconicity. The light and smell

that Saint Cyril of Jerusalem mentioned are the fundamental features of iconicity:

The word echoed round you from without; hearing of hope, and knowing it not; hearing mysteries, and not understanding them; hearing Scriptures, and not knowing their depth. The echo is no longer around you, but within you; for the indwelling Spirit henceforth makes your mind a house of God (Sfântul Chiril al Ierusalimului 2003: 9).

The vision of an icon does not fulfil its purpose if it remains an exterior vision. The vision cannot echo outside the looker, it cannot fulfil its role as initiator into the mystery of iconicity, unless it is integrated and assimilated in a creator manner. From a theological point of view, catechesis is efficient when, according to the words of Saint Cyril, the Spirit dwells within the one who looks and transforms his vision into an initial, mystagogical, mysterious one, which reveals the real fundamentals necessary to enter into communion with the One imagined. But when we speak about iconicity it is very important not to confuse it with the initiatic, mystagogical, mysterious vision with the one affected by passion. The latter is a consuming act, which does not assimilate and integrate, but it destroys the object proposed for contemplation. And since the modern catechesis of the 21st century addresses to a modern man, who lives within the universe of the visual communication and image, it is very important to observe this risk: image, vision, face can be both mystagogical and lustly. To this respect, the urge of the Patericon:

It is the duty of the monk that when he is in the company of other monks, he keeps his eyes cast down and does not look to the face of the other, especially of the young one. And when he is alone, his attention must be directed towards heaven at all times (*Patericul Mare* 2016: 161).

Vision must not be lustly because the object of vision is not a reality that lets itself surprised with techniques or methods that do not involve the complete engagement of life. The epectasy of vision, the growth in vision and understanding, the clearer awareness regarding this sight are possible because the reality presented before sight is the uncreated energy of God. The icon is the door that opens the way towards seeing these works of God, but these works cannot be rationally circumscribed nor filed in informational structures. Saint Gregory Palamas often mentions these ideas:

The light of the Lord's Transfiguration does not come into being or cease to be, nor is it circumscribed or perceptible to the senses, even though for a short time on the narrow mountain top it was seen by human eyes (Saint Gregory Palamas 2004: 136).

The contemporary catechesis must take into account this aspect of the possibility of sight that is so dear to many of the hesychast fathers. Vision is not provoked, it is not a result or a reward granted automatically following a well-established route. It is a stage that can be reached within the complete liberty of the relation and which involves realistically the possibility that this relation does not develop towards the direction of seeing. No programming can force the liberty of the subjects, all the more so, it cannot force trust in its own stock of information:

People search endlessly to enrich their knowledge. But they usually lose themselves in that «endless», for lack of a better word than the inconsistent endlessness of quantity, on the so-called horizontal level. The revelation given to us comprises however a different knowledge, that is the revelation of the final dimensions of Being. And when these final dimensions reveal to us, the search for cognition on a horizontal level becomes useless. We could study for centuries the literature of the whole world, of all the cultures, of all the religions...but where will that lead us? (Sofronie 2014: 97).

Catechesis, as I have already mentioned, does not dissociate itself from information. But the temptation of the excessive rationalization of the Orthodox catechetical discourse must be observed and stopped. Seeing the divine mysteries is possible in all the periods of history and we cannot lie ourselves with the idea that in a time of information the **only** solution for an answer remains the spread of information. This can also be a solution, but it is intermediary and inferior, and it only prepares the entrance within a deeper understanding of the mystery. The Romanian parish, with all its aspects, needs a more pronounced evangelization, but in the same time it also needs a very urgent connection with the patristic sources of catechesis. Since we speak about sight, we cannot agree with the possibility that vision is obstructed and jammed by other priorities that always come second within spiritual life. Professor Mantzaridis draws attention categorically on this aspect:

In the huge torment of our age, to speak about peace – hesychia seems almost unrealistic. But this does not mean that it is inaccessible or, even worse, needless. For Orthodoxy, hesychia is not languor or non-working, but self-concentration

and a powerful activation at the level of the inner man. It is the condition of the interior restoration of man and of his communion with God and with his neighbor. In the tumble of noise and information in our era, man finds himself in danger of losing his identity and humanness. Unless he tries to focus within himself and to find his true connection with God and with his neighbor, any progress of his is naturally destined to vanish. Only in this way one can understand the priority given to the divine hesychia in order for man to achieve personal completion against any social activism and even against the evangelization of the world (Mantzaridis 2001: 185).

Hesychia as a form of vision is not a marginal state, a philokalic whim, but it is the state par excellence which predisposes man to contemplation, to the vision of the divine mysteries in their unchanged reality. The thought of professor Mantzaridis are closely connected to several statements of Saint Isaac the Syrian, that we give below and which are, once again, defining for the configuration of a mystagogical catechetical philosophy:

Do not compare those who perform signs and miracles, and who are powerful, with those who live a true life of solitary silence. Love the idleness of stillness above providing for the world's starving and the conversion of a multitude of heathen to the worship of God. It is better for you to free yourself from the shackles of sin than to free slaves from their slavery. It is better for you to make peace with your soul through the union in one thought of the trinity inside you, of the body, of the spirit and of the soul, than by your teaching to bring peace among men at variance. For, as Gregory the Theologian says, «It is a good thing to speak concerning the things of God for God's sake, but it is better for a man to make himself pure for God». It is better to be incapable of speaking yet possessing inward knowledge of God than to gush forth rivers of instruction from the keenness of your intellect and from a deposit of hearsay and writings of ink. It is more profitable for you to attend to raising up unto the activity of intuitions concerning God the deadness of your soul due to the passions, than it is to resurrect the dead (Sfântul Isaac Sirul 2008: 114).

It is not the theoretical content that transforms the life of the catechumen, but the ontological content, maintained at maximum capacity. Sight is not reduced to fulfilling certain acts, however necessary they are. Of course, the quotations above cannot be read in a key which denies the role of acting and involving. These texts and the patristic catechetical philosophy in general, deny the absolutization of the practical, visible aspect. And thus we come to a paradox: exteriorization, a big emphasis on visibility actually obstructs sight. God does not reveal

Himself to the one who persist in self-stating, in the ostentatious-declarative outburst of his own achievements. Nevertheless, the texts are fundamental for the understanding of the reversal brought by the patristic philosophy to conceptual normality. It is in fact a crucifixion of the mind, an effective repositioning of the entire universe. To this respect, we find to be very interesting the affirmation of Archimandrite Sophrony regarding the imbalance that the exterior visibility can produce in the interior universe of vision:

A real Christian spiritual life is not characterized by the aggression of proselytism or by propaganda in the specific meaning of the word. The real Christian life, by its nature, is a hidden one, all-thinking humble, hidden, deepening within itself. In this self-hiding within, this search of the secret room where it is possible to «pray to the Father who is in the secret place» (Matthew 6, 6), will manifest in the case of most of the novices in spiritual life, one way or another, outside, in their whole demeanour. Demeanour, when it comes from a sincere piety, will always have a humble manifestation, and it will enkindle the admiration of many, which they will express to the humble worker. And when he will see himself praised for his humbleness before defeating the passions within, he will be exposed to a great temptation and he will start to behave “humble” but now out of vain glory. In time, when grace, for his vain glory, will leave him, he will continue to act as if he were truly humble, and then a certain spiritual wickedness will occur, which is called Jesuitism – that is so thwarting to the people because of its ugliness, that it drives many away from faith (Sofronie 2014: 199-200).

Hence, contemplation involves spiritual realism and avoiding the traps of confusing the real sight with the false light. Iconic realism determines the spiritual man to pay attention to the details that might alter the iconicity of his image, thus transforming him into a caricature lacking deepness and substance.

Hesychia – icon of eternity

Conceptual language can only partially cover an experience. There is a limit beyond which the word-concept admits the impossibility to be able to define. This aspect is valid not only for the theological realities, but it can also be applied to the scientific phenomena as a whole.

The mystic experiences neither his ecstasies nor his disgusts within the limits of a definition: his claim is not to satisfy the demands of his thought, but those of his sensations. And he tends much more toward sensation than the poet, for it is by sensation that he verges upon God (Cioran 1968: 152).

The words belonging to Cioran, who wasn't a theoretician of the religious experiences, are suitable for our theme. In order to experience an ecstasy or a drama, the word is not enough. And we come back to the observation from the beginning of our study: we do not deny the importance of the word, but we try to show that beyond the word which is so necessary there is a reality which is much more complex, called by the Fathers *superrational*, which does not circumscribe to the coordinates of a minimalistic catechetical discourse. The entrance into this reality is made through the entrance in our own reality and through the connection between these two areas. *Hesychia* facilitates this connection and implicitly helps to eliminate the conceptual surplus that might obstruct a clear view of both the self and of the reality of the divine life.

It is useless to signalize the importance of the social, ecological and biological problems for our era, as well as the special acuity that occurred and continues to occur within the contemporary society, which evolves impetuously. However, this does not mean that we are allowed to direct ourselves to exclusivist positions which prejudice things a great deal and sometimes prove to be fatal. The interest for the social, ecological and biological problems is understandable and imperative. But they cannot justify disinterest, or even worse, the abandonment of the interior man and of his life as a person. On the contrary, the interest for the person and for the interior man must constitute the basis of any approach of the exterior problems (Mantzaridis 2001: 133).

Hesychia does not mean sinking into an impersonal area in which the everyday reality is denied. The social, ecological or biological problems can concern or present an interest to the one who dedicates himself to *hesychia*, but he will never absolutize the plan of these realities because the dimension of the experience that *hesychia* involves and the connection to the life beyond nature is entirely superior to any orientation that might target the aspects mentioned above.

The malady of the contemporary man is a quest for efficiency, which is translated with a loss of the iconic spirit. The belief that the intrinsic solutions will be able to solve always and at a rather high level all the existential problems that environ and assault him daily is in fact a cruel delusion based on the chimera of efficiency:

Man today is preoccupied with many social, political or religious problems. But, no matter how many solutions he finds, he will continue to be dominated by inquietude, unless he finds a way to solve his existential problems. In essence, people today want to find a way to cure themselves, to catch the big «fish» that

swarm deep within their mind and soul and which wear them down, make them crazy. The tyranny of the thoughts, the penetration into the sea of our lives of the demonic thoughts gives birth to feelings of guilt, depression and to a great spiritual pain. The way to heal of all these can be found within our niptic Tradition (Ierotheos 2016: 297).

Hesychia calms down the troubled sea of the soul, making it an icon and a mirror of the uncreated divine light. In the waters of a calm sea the dangers can be easily identified and removed. Calming down the troubled sea of the life of the contemporary man cannot be achieved unless the meaning of iconicity is rediscovered. The excessive psychologization of the catechetical discourse is not the solution to the torments of the contemporary man. Such a tendency will do nothing more but to rake up the surface of the troubled sea and to offer momentary solutions, which can be applied to an extremely reduced segment from the multitude of the painful manifestations present within the soul. The obsession of efficiency, competition, of the theories of successful selling, of creating an image – which unfortunately tempt the contemporary catechetical discourse – is a one way road that will poach even more the one who is in spiritual pain and unsettlement. The obsession of efficiency and selling the brand alienates man from the state in which he might concentrate and might find a solution for the mind to become united completely with itself, image and icon of the divine unity:

Such men, in effect, practice a spiritual Sabbath, and, as far as is possible, cease from all personal activity. They strip the cognitive powers of the soul of every changing, mobile and diversified operation, of all sense perceptions and, in general, of all corporal activity that is under our control; as to acts which are not entirely under our control, like breathing, these they restrain as far as possible. In the case of those who have made progress in hesychasm, all this comes to pass without painful effort and without their worrying about it, for the perfect entry of the soul within itself spontaneously produces such inner detachment (Sfântul Grigorie Palama : I.2.7).

Hence, iconicity does not stop to the discursive and descriptive aspect. Vision which originates from hesychia is not swallowed up by the sensitive image, which can be subjected to the transitory and wonder. Coming outside the mind risks the loss of an essential intrinsic. Saint Gregory Palamas was one of the most fervent defenders of hesychia as an essential element of interiorization and penetration into the plan of the true objective reality:

Releasing his soul as much as possible from the material bonds, he unites his mind with the uninterrupted prayer to God, and with this, focusing within himself, he finds a new and mysterious ascent to heaven: this might be called the untouched darkness of the secret mystery; joining his mind carefully with this darkness, with an unspoken pleasure, in a simple, complete and sweet state of calm and in a true a peaceful hesychia, he flies over all the creatures. Thus, stepping out of himself and dedicating himself completely to God, he sees the glory of God and contemplates a divine light, inaccessible to the senses but which is a dear and holy sight of the pure souls and minds (Sfântul Grigorie Palama: 1.3.46).

Joining the apparent security that might be suggested by the apparent stability of the material world keeps the contemporary man apart from the contemplation which becomes possible following the uninterrupted prayer to God. This uninterrupted prayer is the true icon of the Kingdom which represents in anticipation the reality of the eternal life. Man rises through vision to the superrational understanding of the mystery, surpassing creation, with a zeal that does not deny the role and the problems of the creation, but which no longer gives absolute value to the criteria of efficiency or visibility proposed by the values of the created world. Man enters, iconically, into darkness, in a darkness which paradoxically, is the way to the enlightened knowledge that is not subjected to any limitations:

The apophatic attitude leads Christian theology to use the language of poetry and images for the interpretation of dogmas much more than the language of conventional logic and schematic concepts. The conventional logic of everyday understanding can very easily give man a false sense of a sure knowledge which, being won by the intellect, is already exhausted by it, completely possessed by it. While poetry, with the symbolisms and images which it uses, always exhibits a sense from within the words and beyond the words, a concept which corresponds more to common experiences of life and less to cerebral conceptions (Yannaras 1991: 17).

But poetry, as well as the icon is not a creation efficient enough. A poet or a painter of icons does not contribute to the progress of the business plan or to the improvement of the task target. They need peace in order to create. Their creation cannot be subjected to terms and conditions because it is not efficient by its very definition. A poem can originate only from inspiration, just as an icon always originates from the solitude of the inspiration and prayer. The contemporary catechesis does not have the

right to ignore such essential aspects. We are called to paint eternity into the souls, and this painting involves rhythm, tempo and characteristic beauty, but which cannot be programmed or determined with means that are characteristic to the fields which involve efficiency:

It is not accidental that the undivided Church of the first eight centuries and its historical continuity in Orthodoxy in the East based its *catechesis* of the faithful, that is the announcement and transmission of her truth, chiefly on the liturgy. From the liturgical cycle of the Church's services (vespers, matins, the Liturgy, the hours) theology became a poem and a song – experienced more than thought out by syllogistic inferences. Initiation into the truth of the Church is participation in her way of life, in a festive gathering of the faithful, in the visible actualization and revelation of the new humanity which has conquered death (Yannaras 1991: 18).

The cult of the Church is completed in its iconicity by the entire Scripture which sends to a higher level of understanding, in a brilliant darkness which reveals meanings that aren't noticed at a first vision, shackled by the temptation of the intellectual assimilation. But both the cult of the Church and the Scripture claim a state of peace and contemplation. The Scripture is not a didactic object, and the Liturgy is not a moment in which one may calculate efficiency. What can be efficient in a Liturgy in which there is a "waste" of requests, in which things gravitate around the mystery that cannot be quantified, nor analyzed from a corporatist point of view? What can be efficient in the Scripture that does not open to the mind that is clogged with sins?

With the parables of Jesus we are, also, on the territory of the narration that substitutes to argumentation. Their truth does not reveal systematically, it does not constitute a school dogma, a didactic «handbook». They always say more than they say and, most of the time, they say something else than they seem to be saying. This is the very essence of the story, by contrast with its strictly intellectual predication (Pleșu 2012: 13).

The mind approaches the mystery of the Scripture in a hesychast move. The story is not told nor listened in a corporatist ambiance, instead it needs a space for reflection and, why not, reflexion. The biblical meditation, as a form of assimilating the mystery of the Scripture, shows that hesychia leads to knowledge, in an iconic movement that cannot be detached from the beauty of the "untold" passages in the Scripture. Thus the opening toward within, the promotion of intrinsic visibility is a sign of

the greatness of the human soul but also of the abjectness in which it may struggle. It is a sign of greatness because the openness toward within suggests the beauty and the capacity of the interior space to host realities that are inaccessible to the exterior man:

Under a sky that doesn't allow the thought without dream, stretch waters that have never lived. Not even the storm can give you the impression of life. Still waters, whose silence is guarded by the trees and which hide within a dark crystal all the waves of the beams and all the answers of the skies (Cioran 2006: 107).

But from an iconic point of view, openness is also a sign of abjectness, because from the moment man enters with all his responsibility into this intrinsic universe, from the moment when he disavows his own imaginary universe (hence consistent, because man no longer assumes his own reality as a major existential given fact, but prefers to replace it with imaginary constructions), he discovers the abjectness of the human condition subjected to the determinisms of the imaginary. In other words, man discovers that he is not what he thinks he is or what he imagines he might be. This responsabilization is, in fact, an act of calming the troubled waters, of hesychia, of understanding in peace that only your own courage to break the darkness is saving:

In general, every man lives by delegation: socially, you delegate a president to take care of your collective being. Or you delegate Heisenberg to take care of your collective being. But in the same time, each man maintains the right that one day of his life he does not live by delegation. For instance, you do not relate to your child by delegation. You do not live your absolute deprived by delegation (Liiceanu 2013: 115).

Modern man needs this type of peace and modern catechesis has to offer the guiding marks for this peace. The comfort zone cannot be identified and attacked with instruments that are created to secure even more this comfort zone. The iconic perspective offers the chance of lingering, of peaceful introspection, of the non-convulsive care for your own destiny in eternity.

**Repentance: the painful way toward the joy founded on experience.
The pain of repentance: icon of the eternal joy**

In the past years the concept of joy is more and more present within the contemporary catechetical space. Joy as a state of communion, of communicating the ecclesial events, of trust in the creating power of the Christian, in his mission to reconfigure the world. This presence is beneficial so long as it doesn't become a call and an urge to superficiality. Christian life is not only a life of joy and ignorance toward sufferance, toward the pain generated by the cry for sins, which would be a proof of lack of pastoral realism. Contemporary catechesis has the duty to speak about joy as a state that cannot originate only from the level of feeling. Christians are and must be joyful, but this joy cannot be reduced to affectivity. One must not forget the fact that the entire philosophical tradition speaks about the paradoxical role of the tears in achieving joy, as well as of the pain that the awareness of the sinful state brings while achieving the joy generated by experience:

Let no one deceive you with vain words, and let us not deceive ourselves: before we have experienced inward grief and tears there is no true repentance or change of mind in us, nor is there any fear of God in our hearts, nor have we passed sentence on ourselves, nor has our soul become conscious of the coming judgement and eternal torments (Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog 1997: 63).

Saint Symeon draws attention upon the iconicity of pain. It is not a masochist approach of the manner in which we relate to the content of the Christian life, but a replacement within the limits of the natural. Pain expresses the manner in which the Christian relates to eternity. The ephemeral joy cannot be authentic so long as it does not reflect into the mirror of the eternal joy, and the role of mirror is attributed to pain. Feeling the possibility to miss eternity must be a constant presence in the life of every faithful but, of course, without leading to morbid deviations. If a catechesis fails to connect to the patristic philosophy which supports maximally this vision, it fails in fact the whole background of understanding the role of pain and joy in a Christian's life. A joy originated from the sadness of being aware of sin is an ephemeral joy, detached from the whole dynamics and from the whole dramatism of the reality of spiritual life. Vision, which we have mentioned at the beginning of the study, is itself judged, and just as before any other judgement there

is no complete serenity until the final sentence is given. This determines a mixture in the Christian's life between joy and the fear for the sentence of the judgement. Joy comes from trust, and also from the redeeming fire of repentance which leaves open the possibility of a joyful eternity:

One of the features of the theology of Saint Symeon the New Theologian is that it's a theology of «conscience». Conscience is in close connection with the sensitive acknowledgement of the self-state of sin. Without coming to this state of conscience, man cannot feel the presence of God, he cannot have a sensitive perception of it. In this way one may understand the «feeling» of the grace that saint Symeon mentions as a condition for salvation. It is, on the one hand, a «feeling» of the sin, and on the other hand a feeling of the presence of God who helps us acknowledge our sin and to escape from it, thus growing in the feeling of His presence. It is a simultaneous sensitivity for our sin and for the presence of God. One cannot exist without the other. A more intense «feeling» of the presence of God equals the «light» of God, which is a clear knowledge of His presence and of the self's state before Him (Stăniloae 1997: 153).

Saint Gregory Palamas is equally categorical regarding the role of painful crying in the process of purification and finding out the real existential level:

To become «insensible» is an effect to do away with prayer; the Fathers call this «petrification». Was not this man Barlaam the first to criticize those who have real knowledge because they feel physical pain? Indeed, certain of the fathers have declared that fasting is of the essence of prayer. «Hunger is the stuff of prayer», they say. Others say it is its «quality», for they know that prayer without compunction has no quality. And what will you reply when you are told, «Thirst and vigils oppressed the heart; and when the heart was oppressed, tears flowed»? And again: «Prayer is the mother of tears, and also their daughter». Do you see that this physical distress not only causes no obstacle to prayer, but contributes largely to it? And what are those tears whose mother and daughter is prayer? Are they not by nature wretched, bitter and wounding for those who have scarcely tasted «the blessed affliction», but become sweet and inoffensive for those who have the fullness of joy? How is it that prayer does not dispel the bodily motions which produce a sensible joy and pain, or rather, how do these motions engender prayer and are engendered by it? Why does God bestow them as a grace, according to him who says: «If in your prayer, you have obtained tears, then God has touched the eyes of your heart, and you have recovered intellectual sight»? (Sfântul Grigorie Palama : II.2.7).

Contemporary catechesis has the magisterial role to offer this perspective on the tension between *the pain of repentance* and *the joy of feeling the grace*. However, the conversion of the state of pain into a state

of joy is not achieved instantaneously, but requires a process of revealing and self-revealing. Man must see his own icon and he must begin to understand what are the lines or the shadows that alienate him from the likeness to the eternal Image. At first repentance is painful and even demoralizing, and in the hedonistic zeal of modern man, this stage could be vital, and it could decide the future of that man's spiritual life. Catechesis must specify and initiate him into the stages of the self-decryption, as the neptic tradition presents it. A true healing cannot be achieved with inadequate means and that is why I insist upon the fact that a minimization of the ascetical life may have serious consequences. A joy that will manifest only on a psychological level, without the experience of an authentic fight deep within the nature, will be a joy that contributes to the obstruction of this Image:

Hence light is judgement, it is also the Parousia already present for those who live in communion with God, because the experience of the uncreated light transcends the limits of the created being, it is an exit from time and space toward «the mystery of the eighth day» (Lossky 1995: 135).

Hence, the joy of the Christian is not one that refers only to the things comprised between the limits of the created world. It is a foretasting of the Kingdom and not a psychological impulse suscitated by an external factor. An attentive reading of the texts of archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov offers us precisely this perspective: of the joy that originates only from the vision of the unspoken Mystery in an effort of purification. As archimandrite Sophrony himself says, at a first sight the descriptions of his experiences could have nuances of psychiatric pathology and they could hardly be accepted as a norm for a usual Christian life. We offer below a fragment of these writings for clarification and to calibrate the contemporary catechetical conscience, which is obliged to present as realistic as possible the experiences of the Fathers, not as exotic ones, but as fundamental states that rise man ascetically to the concrete tasting of the Kingdom:

The pain of my soul was ceaseless – day and night. The torment poured into a prayer so persistent that it continued while I was sleeping or when I found myself among other people. [...] Sometimes the pain of my soul because I was parted from God threw me on the ground, and in the quietness of the night, for hours I did not stop crying my unspeakable great loss. My whole being – my mind, heart and even my body – all gathered into one, strong, clenched existence similar to a

tight knot. And when crying passed over a certain barrier, then the Earth, the whole world collapsed from my conscience and I found myself alone before God. A Light that I could not catch, that was coming from the Eternal One, granted me to see myself not in my exterior aspect, not in my daily circumstances, but in a strange manner that I cannot describe: I was standing before my Creator, completely naked in my very own being; and there was nothing hidden inside me that He could not see (Sofronie 2015: 105).

The confessions of father Sophrony do not stop here. The insistent manner in which he speaks about pain, sufferance, bitterness, nothingness, the tensed feeling of worthlessness, the self-awareness is not a morbid insistence, applied freely to pain. The importance of this period of sufferance is always taken into account, for it is seen as a major step toward the discovery of the joy originating from experience. To remain to an *untried* joy means to remain to the surface of existence, to a limited level of understanding the role of God within the difficult ascension of man toward the state of independence from the apparitions of the super-evaluated self. The true joy comes from sufferance and it is a joy of the existential communion. Man feels the presence of God in the evolution of creation, he understands the drama that engulfs the creation which runs away from God, and in this understanding marked by joy the certainty of a relationship occurs, a relationship that can only be deteriorated by the gesture of alienation from the source of joy. Any attempt of a psychological analysis of this state will fail because the coordinates that determine it are not subjected to natural laws. In the context of these experiences, one can understand why catechesis must always take into account mystagogy. A fixation in information can only bring a lack of a vivid reaction to the ceaseless call of God addressed to man. This lack of reaction is in fact the cause which produces the harming sorrow, that father Sophrony rejects and which he considers responsible for an existential failure. It is in fact a sorrow close to depression, which has no relation to the sorrow generated by self-awareness and cry for sins. To this respect, father Sophrony says:

At the beginning of repentance bitterness prevails, but soon we start to see that we are instinct with the energy of a new life which works a wonderful instauration of the mind. The movement of repentance in itself proves to be a finding of the God of love. Before our spirit starts to appear clearer and clearer the image of the unspeakable greatness of the first-created Man. [...] We stunt, we shrink to the end before the self-awareness and in the same time God comes

and hugs us similar to the Father from the Gospel. The fear and torment disappear from us, making room for the wonder of God. He clothes us with expensive clothes, gives us significant gifts, the best of them being the love that comprises everything. The sufferance from the beginning of our repentance turns into joy and in the sweetness of love. Now love has another image: suffering-together with all the creation that is lacking the Light of God (Sofronie 2015: 43).

The resemblance with the description offered by Saint Gregory Palamas is striking. The vision of light comes at the end of an experience of resignation, not as a coronation of this experience, but as a gift granted for free, on the background of a redesigning of the interior space now worthy of receiving the gift:

One recognizes this light when the soul ceases to give way to the evil pleasures and passions, when it acquires inner peace and the stilling of thoughts, spiritual repose and joy, contempt of human glory, humility allied with a hidden rejoicing, hatred of the world, love of heavenly things, or rather the love of the sole God of Heaven. Moreover, if one covers the eyes of him who sees, even if one gouges them out, he will still see the light no less clearly than before (Sfântul Grigorie Palama III.1.36).

Conclusions

Modern man needs landmarks to help him come back to the iconic perspective over life. Iconicity may replace him into the sphere of significations that the immediate utilitarianism tries to eliminate from the ordinary. Hesychia, vision, the pain generating joy, moving forward from the idea of a sufficient self, life as an icon of eternity, ceasing the quest for efficiency, statistics and rating are only a few of the aspects of the endeavour to regain iconicity that modern catechesis has the duty to valorize to their full potential. The iconic perspective can be recuperated not only through the appeal to assimilate theological information – which is absolutely necessary –, but requires a major existential effort, a crucifixion of the understanding, a real mystagogy, an evolution from the surface of things. The patristic perspective is more than enough for this endeavour of recuperation, and the contents of this perspective are completely necessary for the configuration of a mystagogical catechesis that is truly iconic.

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