

Vera Icona: Reflections on the Mystical Aesthetics of Jacques Maritain and the Byzantine Icon¹

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For centuries Christianity pondered the question of her God's image, the challenge of representing Him in forms that she found ready made in a pagan world, bound to its gods and myths. The philosophers, Plato first among them, tied the image to a transcendent origin and made verisimilitude the criterion of its virtue and vice, intimating that, like Janus, art could turn a face either toward the absolute or toward the vulgar and depraved world of desire and illusion. By contrast, then, what is Christian art? It is the "art of humanity redeemed," answers Jacques Maritain, an art that belongs to man by virtue of a nature touched by God, a creative impulse not unlike that of a bee, we are told, but with one difference, our freedom to reject it and look elsewhere for inspiration.² This suggests that art must make redemption evident objectively either in its content or in its form or in both. It must in a definitive, distinct way, be *Christian* art. But what constitutes a Christian work of art as such? For Maritain "the work will be Christian in proportion as the love is alive."³ Love is related to Christ's presence, experienced by the artist in a way that af-

1. In loving memory of Father William (Bill) J. Krupa, O.S.A.

2. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), pp. 68-69.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

fects the work's creation and its visible form. There is no doubt that this form is beautiful, characterized by virtuosity but also by an inner brilliance, attributed to an "intrinsic super-elevation," a movement in the form that distinguishes Christian from ordinary beauty.⁴ It is difficult to visualize what is described here and Maritain does not give compelling examples in *Art and Scholasticism*. It is clear though that what makes art Christian is not a "right" content defined by some correspondence to certain truths of faith e.g., in a didactic sense.

The modality of truth in Christian art is determined by contemplative communion, sacramental love that unites artist, world and work of art with Christ. For this love to arise in the artist and find expression in art, a particular relationship to Christ must be in order. Maritain quotes Fra Angelico: "... to paint the things of Christ, the artist must live with Christ."⁵ This is a vital relationship not left to abstract intellection or the imagination. Life with Christ consists of full participation in the mysteries of His cross and sacrifice. In *Art and Scholasticism* Maritain refers Christian art to *ascesis*, a discipline of life and sensibility nourished freely within the mystical body of the Church. His sources are the intense, purgative sensibility of Carmelite spirituality evident in the poetry of St. John of the Cross, and Thomist contemplation infused with love. Desire for God energizes and transfigures the artist's intellectual vision.⁶

Ascesis (spiritual exercise) and art also converge in the Byzantine icon, painted by an artist who fasts and prays, rooted in sacramental life. Maritain is opposed to the model of Christian art that has evolved out of the Byzantine tradition and to art in general that is ecclesiastically regulated. In *Art and Scholasticism* and in *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus* he provides arguments for a mystical aesthetics that is free, sacramental and rooted in the Cross. For Maritain, Christian iconography is vitally ordered to Christ's Passion. This is best expressed in a concept that appears only in passing in his essay on painter Georges Rouault, the concept of the *vera icona*, known in the tradition as the *Veronica* (*vera icona* or true icon), the image-relic of Christ's face impressed in cloth. Art is Christian to the extent that *vera icona* defines the aesthetic object. To that we must add another element, that of experience. Christian art is art that is constituted in a way that makes prayerful contemplation possible. Maritain prays and contemplates

4. Ibid., pp. 70-71.

5. Ibid., p. 71.

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948), vol. IV, pp. 180-81.

the art of Rouault in a manner analogous to *lectio divina* (prayerful reading), in *visio divina* (prayerful seeing). His mystical aesthetics is consistent with those of the Byzantine icon with the difference that Maritain reasserts the significance of an ascetic subjectivity and therefore a certain plasticity in the aesthetic range of the Christian image and art.

I

Images and statues of living things, whether worshipped as divine or not, were forbidden in the Hebrew Bible under the charge of idolatry. A God heard in human voice but not seen or encountered in the natural world and the human form cannot be "aesthetic," in the literal sense of the word. If we must speak of sensibility in this context, it is one in which the ear but not the eye is sanctified, so that of the world one seeks only the form and order of the letter, the semiotic, to which the somatic, the carnal and tangible, must conform. Here there is no "art" since there is no freedom to let the form speak for itself, out of its own being, without restriction or regulation. This is why Christ, the *theanthropos* (God-Man), emerging out of human flesh mysteriously, without the aberration implied by miracle, was so scandalous. That He was a Son rather than a Messiah speaks to a profound kinship with nature, a kinship that affirms but also transfigures the natural bonds of family, making Him everybody's son and brother. Thus He instructs Mary and St. John from the Cross: "*ecce filius tuus ... ecce mater tua*" (behold your son ... behold your mother) (John 19:26). This call to communion, spoken on the verge of death known until then to be final and irreversible, is rarely viewed aesthetically. Yet it is not difficult to see in it an invitation to "circumscription" (*perigraphe*) and a revelation of form that begins from the moment that Pilate utters "*Ecce homo*" (behold the man). For with this utterance the audience is invited to see and behold (*idou*) the one that he presents, a presence taken all the way to the Cross (John 19:5). For all that man is and can be to his fellow man is revealed on the Cross to which not only the Incarnation, itself a drafting of flesh from within, but also the Resurrection, the exposition of flesh intact and immaculate, are drawn.

The Cross marks and projects the periphery of Christ's body. It is a *topos* (place) of sin and death that *lifts* man and nature to the Resurrection. The frame made of hard wood on which flesh is stretched to its limit is not accidental to the Incarnation. It is part of its hidden substantiality and Passion. In the drama of human sin, nature too is a participant. There is here no historical accident of a crucifixion. Into this aesthetic of death and the

spectacle that constitutes it, God enters for His own sacrifice after which being is never the same—even if man, having denied the Cross, wills it to be. To this literal apotheosis of human sin, God comes as victim and savior. The sight of the Crucified inverts its own spectacle (the staged drama of His public torture and execution), for against it and around it forms the sight of the Resurrection, the conversion of death to life. Having lived within the imaginary, within an illusory world of which Christ, in death, was the end and, having also anticipated in the presence of ephemeral beauty the death of his body and senses, man is now free to rediscover in form the presence of life. Thus, in Matthew, Jesus likens those caught in loveless piety and devotion to white washed tombs that “look beautiful (*oraioi*) but are filled inside with dead bones and every kind of filth,” an image that speaks to the aesthetic of illusion and death shattered by the Cross (Matthew 23:27-35). For in the presence of the Cross, man cannot anymore be silent, as one is in front of the lifeless statue or sign of God—what happens also when the cross does not bear the Crucified—but must speak to his own abandonment of God and fellow man. Before the utterance of redemption is heard, *He is risen*, all forms must rupture first in the cry of guilt and sin, then in the joy of the new life.

The Crucifixion is the essential iconographic moment of Christianity and as such defines its art. Hans Urs Von Balthasar has noted that *after Christ* art springs from an abundance of being; form comes to the artist not from the imagination or from culture, but “from beings themselves,” awakened to the love of the Trinity.⁷ Brought to utterance through Christ’s sacrifice, this new Adamic being is no longer the object of human “representation,” since, now sanctified, it is *free* to be itself and to be “presented” as such, its itinerary open, though not without anguish, to the post-Resurrection artist.⁸ Thus, for Von Balthasar, modern subjectivist aesthetics, where expression is appropriated by the human voice and sensibility (so that only man speaks for being and represents it), is problematic because it violates the freedom that Christ in his Passion bestowed on all things. There is another caveat. Being that is ordered to Passion cannot be apathetic. Inert, stylized form does not belong to Christian art. The art of beauty, the form within which there is no “nonform” (*Ungestalt*) and in which therefore the void or *kenosis* of the Cross is erased, either precedes or ignores the Incarnation.⁹ What undermines aestheticism for Von Balthasar is the fact that it

7. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama, Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. II, trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), pp. 26-27.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

refuses to recognize our world as a place of horror and loss—the same recognition that it denies to the Cross.¹⁰ It is only by a misconception of the Resurrection that art glorifies either God or man. Von Balthasar's warning is scriptural to the core. Paul's mystical vision of the body as a *topos* (place) of perpetual Passion invites us to de-aestheticize art. For we are called to embody not only Christ's dying (*nekrosis*) but also as *periferontes* (carrying) suggests, to bear that unique death in its promise of life—a circumscription where flesh once again contains Him, lives and breathes, dies and rises with Him (2Corinthians 4:10). The Latin translates Paul's Greek better than the English: *semper mortificationem Iesu in corpore circumferentes ut et vita Iesu in corpore nostro manifestatur* (always carrying in the flesh the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be shown in our flesh clearly). One need not doubt a Marian modality in this passage, by which, what has been called "aesthetic," is now ordered to her person and mystery. Art is to carry being as Mary did, by an act of surrender, adoration and perpetual union with her Son that culminates in her sharing the self-emptying of the Cross.¹¹

In his mystical study of Christ, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus* (delivered as a series of lectures in 1964), Maritain, like Von Balthasar, objects to a triumphalist Cross on which Christ suffers in divine isolation, apart from human suffering.¹² The example he gives is the crucified Christ *Pantocrator* (all-powerful) of the Orthodox tradition, the Christ reigning victorious over all creation, even in death. For Maritain, this conception of Christ undermines human participation in the crucifixion: "the crucifix bearing the *Pantocrator* becomes the symbol of a common consciousness in which the sense of the Cross is still very insufficiently developed."¹³ For the Cross to be complete, it must issue an invitation to communion; according to Maritain, it must become a Passion jointly suffered by God and man. Otherwise, Christ's mystical body stands apart. In His isolated divinity, Jesus suffers what man can only view from a distance—a divine spectacle to be imitated but not shared.¹⁴ The difference here is one between imitation and participation, contemplation and radical communion. The Orthodox *Pantocrator* also represents an abandonment of Jesus and

10. Ibid., pp. 29-30.

11. John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter: Redemptoris Mater (Mother of the Redeemer)*, March 25, 1987, #18.

12. Jacques Maritain, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), pp. 30-34.

13. Ibid., p. 31.

14. Ibid., p. 32.

a rejection of human complicity, Maritain argues: "Jesus *has received no aid* from others in order to suffer and in order to accomplish the work of which He alone was capable."¹⁵ In the same context we read an objection to another extreme often encountered in Spanish art: dolorism, the reduction of the Cross to an instrument of torture and that of Christ to its human victim. Thus if on the one hand, Christ is in His most human moment only a reigning God rising in glory against the backdrop of a fallen humanity, on the other hand, He is in His most divine moment only a ravaged servant. Either position, being extreme, disrupts and distorts the economy of the Cross that is centered on its *mesotes* or *mediocritas* (mean). From Maritain's standpoint, the Cross is the *locus mysticus* (mystical place) of communion, the intersection and union of God and man, in which the *theanthropic* mystery is both finalized and opened to humanity. But essential in this union is the presence of the man of history, a condition to which Christ himself on the Cross is subjected: "Each one indeed carries his own cross," Maritain writes, "but ... this cross is, *in reality*, a tiny little portion of the Cross of Jesus. There is but one Cross, that of the Savior—that Cross, *Spes unica* (sole hope), which is the primary end of the Incarnation, and in which we are called to participate."¹⁶

In emphasizing the communal nature of Christ's Passion, Maritain opens the mysteries of the Cross to human history. He calls it a place of "horror and dereliction" in the presence of which most would be tempted to close their eyes. The desire to see only Christ's love and redemption—the "gentleness of His heart which passes to the instrument of His torment"—makes it easy to forget that the Cross is also "hard, abominably hard."¹⁷ This "naked" hardness is at the center of human history and sin, where man allows or causes his fellow man and child to suffer degradation, excruciating pain, or death.¹⁸ It makes present for all to see what is most difficult to accept: that man should so suffer as his God did and that as long as man allows and causes others to suffer, so suffers his God, so suffers he, so is the Cross raised and Christ crucified. God, writes Maritain, "has sent His Son in order to make Him suffer in all plenitude—a certain day where all the times are gathered together—that which is *inadmissible to man*."¹⁹ Thus gathered in the Crucified, from the

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., pp. 30-33.

17. Ibid., p. 36.

18. Ibid., pp. 34-37.

19. Ibid., p. 37.

beginning of history, are the sins of humanity that find there their redemption. The Cross is alive. Man in his sin and need, God in His love and abundance meet there. The absence of this vitality is the reason that Maritain finds the *Pantocrator* concept and image problematic.

II

Knowing that Maritain has written repeatedly about suffering and art, particularly with reference to modernism, it is reasonable to find his meditations on the Cross aesthetically challenging. If the Christian artist is to stand with eyes open to the divinity and humanity of Christ's Passion, he or she must resist the temptation to avoid the torment of the Cross either by idealizing it or making it culturally salient – as Von Balthasar also cautions.²⁰ There is a beautiful passage that deserves to be quoted in full as its aesthetic and mystical sensibility show well how Maritain understood and experienced the relationship between redemption and art. It also makes clear why the image of the Cross raised against a heavenly rather than an earthly world (the former traditionally favored by Orthodox iconography), would be incomplete from his standpoint.

Jesus has taken on Him[self] all the *sufferings* at the same time as all the *sins*, all the *sufferings* of the past, of the present, and of the future, gathered together, concentrated in Him as in a convergent mirror, in the instant that by His sacrifice He became,—in a manner *fully consummated* and through the sovereign exercise of His liberty and of His love of man achieving in supreme obedience and supreme union the work which was entrusted to Him—the Head of humanity in the victory over sin.²¹

This “convergent mirror,” at once opaque and luminous, is the Cross and Corpus of the Crucified. Maritain discerns in this mirror the darkest of human passions and sins and the loving acts of sacrifice of all those that partake of Christ (His life and death) and stand transfigured in His mystical body. Suffering humanity is vitally present in the Cross; it is not merely imaged or simulated. This notion shapes Maritain's aesthetics, as we shall see later. In the ancient Christological hymn, recalled by Paul in his letter to the Colossians, all things of heaven and earth, living and dead, gather, rest and find their peace *per sanguinem crucis eius* that is, in and through the blood of Christ's Cross. (1Colossians:13-20). For Maritain too Christ crucified cannot be a

20. Von Balthasar, pp. 26-27.

21. Maritain, *On The Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, pp. 41-42.

man empty of other men, of the visceral and carnal modalities that constitute human agony and desolation and bring to the cruelty of the Cross the devastation of life and nature that has marked human history. He cannot be shown in the form of a type, a formulaic figure, empty of emotion. He must be fully man and fully God, as we are taught by the mystery of the Incarnation. Thus, in the midst of the light of Resurrection, we encounter the darkness of the abominable pain of the Cross in which all human suffering from the beginning of time is gathered. It is from the midst of this darkness that man is finally free to utter with Christ *Deus meus, ut quid dereliquisti me* (my God, why have you abandoned me)? We may think here of an absence, retraction and silence of being in the very midst of its plenitude and abundance, an offering of itself that leaves it empty, bearing only the form of love—a concept difficult but not impossible to visualize.

Now, if we consider these ideas in the context of his rejection of the *Pantocrator* Christ, they give additional reasons for finding that type problematic, especially from an aesthetic point of view. The dialectic of light and darkness, of *plerosis* (filling or fulfillment) and *kenosis* (emptying), is central to the Byzantine icon whose form defined Christian art in the West until the time of Giotto. For Maritain, this dialectic is important and remains a central part of his definition of Christian art. What is missing from the icon, Maritain would suggest, is a particular kind of physicality, the presence of sacrificed and sanctified flesh, flesh common (vulgar) but also set apart, transfigured. Maritain wants art that fasts and feasts, delights and devastates, judges and redeems, and belongs, as does Christ Crucified, to the fullness of hell and the fullness of heaven. Here the coordinates of the Cross are central; art must take artist and viewer to the depths and heights of the human spirit, the darkness of the tomb and the light of the Resurrection. Maritain calls these modalities “scandalous” and his description vividly recalls the rhythm and iconography of St. Bonaventure’s *Lignum Vitae* (*The Tree of Life*). The imagery is vivid and intense: “God made flesh, God in agony, God condemned, God spit upon and scourged, God crowned with thorns, God nailed to the Cross, God dead, God buried and risen?”²² The question mark at the end is appropriate since the Cross has a time in the future, it remains open; death does not seal it just as the Resurrection does not annul it. Thus for art, the form that disintegrates in matter, that is

22. Ibid., p. 38. Compare especially with two stations in *Lignum Vitae*, “Jesus Nailed to the Cross” and “Jesus Given Gall to Drink.” St. Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Classics of Western Spirituality*, trans. E. Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 148-53.

broken to its death, must also, within the same image or object, be reconfigured, saved and redeemed. It must be shown with an intimation of wholeness, to which it is open and yielding.

In his essays on Carmelite mystical theology in *The Degrees of Knowledge*, Maritain distinguishes ontological from mystical suffering. In the latter the soul, in self-surrender, dies a death that “does not obliterate sensibility, it refines and makes it more exquisite; it does not harden the fibers of being, it softens and spiritualizes them, it transforms us into love.”²³ We find a brief mention of the Dominican (Thomist) and Carmelite aesthetic in a comparison of the works of Fra Angelico and El Greco. Unity of truth defines Fra Angelico’s Thomist vision whereas a unity of love orders the Carmelite passion visible in El Greco’s elongated figures that stretch in darkness transfigured toward the invisible horizon of God’s presence.²⁴ For Maritain, the two are not mutually exclusive. Drawn out of contemplation, love mystically unites the human soul to God, a notion shared by both St. Thomas and St. John of the Cross.²⁵ Reconciliation and order belong to contemplation, but to the heart belongs disparity which only love can vanquish. Contemplation and rupture, delight and agony are joined in the mystical death of God on the Cross. Having first lost everything in a darkness or night of the senses, the poet recovers there the luminous and subtle forms of transfiguring love, as did St. John in his *Spiritual Canticle*.²⁶ Thus the artist who senses mystically does so with his or her senses dead to the world, but not in the ontological sense that impoverishes and destroys nature or that empties art of beauty. Here we see why both St. Thomas and St. John are relevant. Writes Maritain, “the perfection, not only moral, but metaphysical, of the human creature was never and will never be more fully achieved than when the most beautiful of the children of men was immolated upon the wood of the cross.”²⁷ In his short essay on the painter Georges Rouault, Maritain applies this notion to art in a most compelling way. Its language is passionate and intense, very similar to that of *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*. This is where we shall see clearly Maritain engage in *visio divina* (prayerful seeing), praying and living the art that he

23. Maritain, Jacques, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. G. B. Phelan (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 353.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 378.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 340-44, 388.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 378-79.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 355.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 382-83.

contemplates. At work are the philosopher's intellect and the mystic's sensibility. For Maritain, Rouault's art shows the vital unity of contemplation and love lived by the artist and offered graciously and mystically by his work, exactly as they are offered by the poetry of St. John of the Cross.²⁸ Viewed in this context, his important distinction between ontological and mystical sensibility and his Thomist and Carmelite understanding of the latter, proposes a new type of Christian art that is both profane and sacred. From Maritain's perspective what he is offering as an alternative is meant to cancel two dominant views of art in Christian tradition and life that he considers problematic.

The first is suspicion of nature and carnality and therefore of art to the extent that it brings both to attention in its object and experience. Especially in the East, where this suspicion has survived eighth and ninth century iconoclasm, the Orthodox Church responded by regulating content and expression and limiting Christian art to an auxiliary, didactic and liturgical role, as a *lingua sacra* (sacred language) in images. Thus in the East, the separation of sacred and profane art is clear and not likely to be revoked any time soon. Extreme measures prescribed by both Byzantine and Reform opponents of art have been consistently rejected by the Orthodox on the basis of philosophical and theological arguments against iconoclasm based on the Incarnation, dated to St. John Damascene and St. Theodore Studite. In the West, the legacy of Reform iconoclasm, transplanted successfully in America, is benign neglect with intervention occurring only when the work of art is expressly anti-Christian or vulgar ("offensive"). The second view is related to this aesthetic of indifference but emphasizes unconditional freedom of expression essentially determined by the artist's subjectivity. Thus art that purports to be "Catholic" or "Christian" is such by the artist's will and intention and by a consensus of taste in clergy and laity that essentially concedes the irrelevance of sacred art in worship and that of theology and spiritual life in forming aesthetic experience.

Maritain believes that there is no need to either contain Christian art within a single canonical aesthetic language, as argue the advocates of the Byzantine type, or to separate it entirely from mystical theology, prayer and *ascesis*, as happens in most instances with "Christian" art today. It is clear from his reflections on Rouault and the arguments of *Art and Scholasticism* that the Byzantine canon is not entirely dismissed. Its apophatic, purgative qualities are central to his aesthetics even as what he perceives to be its formalism and lack of vitality are rejected. In Rouault especially, Maritain finds a compelling example of the transfiguration of beauty that issues

from the union of Thomist contemplation and Carmelite love.²⁹ But Rouault, it is worth noting, in his abstraction and rejection of naturalism, is in many instances closer to the Byzantine form than Maritain perhaps would admit. Maritain's problematic is that he wants to maintain artistic freedom though conditionally, arguing as we shall see, that it is possible for art to be both free and ordered mystically to the person of Christ.

In what follows, we shall look in some detail at the Byzantine icon and contrast its theological and aesthetic principles with those proposed by Maritain. His critique of modernism will be addressed in that context with reference to *visio divina* and the *vera icona*. With Rouault's art as a prototype for both, Maritain is embracing what is actually a Byzantine art but in a modality that seeks to be consistent with subjective, esoteric expression and certain modernist forms that emphasize abstraction. His idea of an ascetic sensibility, formed by the sacramental and spiritual life of the Church, reiterates the Byzantine solution to the relationship between art and Christ but, contrary to Byzantine practice, assumes a spirituality centered on the exploration of inner life. Thus, Maritain's ideal is an artist who masters the icon but who is also open to expanding its aesthetic range without compromising its ascetic discipline and apophatic character

III

For Orthodox Christianity, the very existence of a Christian art is a testament to the triumph of true faith over heresy, represented most poignantly in the final victory in 843, in Constantinople, of the *iconolatres* (defenders of images) against their detractors or *iconoclasts*. It was in that period that art acquired a theology and the Church sanctified the senses in what Jaroslav Pelikan has aptly termed "the rehabilitation of the visual."³⁰

Belief in the poverty of the senses and the reduction of art to utility, implicit in all iconoclasm, then and now, reflects the absence of *charis* (grace) for which the Greek preserves, in the sense of ingratitude (*acharistia*), the opposite of what is preserved for us in the Eucharist (*eucharistia*). Von Balthasar reads *charis* in its total sense when he reminds us that *chara* and *chairomai*, joy and enjoyment or delight are

29. Georges Rouault, *Georges Rouault*, Text by Jacques Maritain (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969), pp. 5-6.

30. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); see especially pp. 99-119, the chapter under the same title.

essential to the nature of grace.³¹ Thus, when being is subject to utility, it is not only graceless but also ungrateful, as are those who so order it. For where grace is absent so is enjoyment, as Puritanism amply shows in its sterile and morbid forms. To the iconoclast, the image is not a *corpus* (we could think of it only as a corpse); it has no inherent passion or begging frailty that Christ can transfigure. Its pagan origin and carnality condemn it. It is a semblance to be crushed. The idea that in Christ, man, nature and man's works are redeemed and can, in the freedom that He has gained for them, now bring forth their own goods, their own Eucharistic forms as sacrifice, however poor or vulgar they may be, is incomprehensible.³² This is why verisimilitude becomes so important in the iconoclastic argument. In verisimilitude, the modality of the imaging itself is determined externally, its truth given by *representation* rather than by presence. For the latter, viewed exclusively in pagan terms, as an epiphany of a deity in the object of cult, is precisely what is being feared. But that fear is possible only because for the iconoclast the mystical union of Incarnation and Resurrection on the Cross, by which being is transfigured (not transcended), replenished and redeemed (and therefore too is art), is yet invisible.

Recent attempts to approach the Orthodox icon philosophically have emphasized its "eucharistic realism."³³ By realism in this context is meant the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic mystery carried as a concept to church iconography, assigned, through human agency, the same function of presenting Christ to the faithful. Thus the icon operates analogically to the Eucharist. In two studies that examine the Byzantine icon as art, in terms of its composition and unique features in comparison to Western art, Yiannis Kordis, has attempted to present it as an aesthetic object par excellence, that is independent of nature or of any effort to simulate it.³⁴ At the same time, as aesthetic object, the icon participates in the Eucharistic mystery analogically and dynamically by assuming a key liturgical role. Its

31. Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, p. 24.

32. The separation of senses and art from the divine is a commonplace of iconoclasm as early as the third century. See the writings of Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea (265-340) and Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis (d. 403) in Mango, Cyril, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 16-18, 41-43.

33. Yiannis Kordis, *Ta Portraits tou Fayum kai e Byzantine Eikona* ["The Portraits of Fayum and the Byzantine Icon"] (Athens: Armos, 2001), p. 64, #26.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

dynamism rests in the absence of depth by which objects, instead of retreating in a space that distances itself from the viewer (as in perspective), take the opposite direction and meet him on the surface of the painting. It is clear, from Kordis' account that this dynamism is by no means related to an expressive form since the icon is essentially "clean" of emotion.³⁵ Thus on this point, we know immediately that we have a key difference with Maritain who will insist on expressiveness though not without certain conditions, as we shall see more specifically below.

It is worth spending some time on the composition of the icon in order to make clear its peculiar dynamism. Arranged according to height rather than depth, items in the icon that would otherwise be placed in the background of an image are moved to the upper part of the composition forming a vertical hierarchy. Through a frontal projection of surface, objects appear to be shown from above, in full rather than partial view. Linear and schematic, these figures move toward the viewer out of their two-dimensional frame, entering liturgical space and time, a sacred, ecclesiastical domain in which their place is not different from that of the words and sounds that constitute the Byzantine liturgy. Thus what is distinct about the Orthodox liturgical experience, if we may use that term, is that, though polymorphous, it remains ordered to Scripture, essentially to the Word, as surrogates of which sound and image preach and sanctify. The latter is especially important to stress since otherwise the Byzantine icon would assume the function given to art by Reform theology. What sanctifies the icon is that being detached from the natural world, it is also exempted from the communication of character and personality or of the carnal vitality associated with physical form. Kordis insists that were the icon geared toward nature, as in the art of the Renaissance, it would draw attention away from the mysteries taking place in church. As he sees it, if that were the direction of the aesthetic object in sacred art (i.e., beyond the image and toward the object depicted), the eye would direct the mind to seek truth in either the natural or secular realm, a move that is essentially anti-ecclesial. Another fundamental problem with this shift in the aesthetic object is the confusion of secular and soteriological function. For especially with regard to the latter, we can explain the austerity and economy of the Byzantine form. In the icon, facial features are emphasized separately (delineated as eye, nose and mouth), thus undermining the vital unity that one typically experiences

35. Ibid., pp. 71, 43. See also Yiannis Kordis, *En Rythmo, To Ethos tes Grammes ste Byzantine Zografike* ["In Rhythm: The Ethos of the Line in Byzantine Painting"] (Athens: Armos, 2000), p. 72.

in a face. As a result, the entire figure is marked by an express lack of interior life—it is by design “empty” and “cold.”³⁶ As Kordis points out, the Byzantine solution to art’s liturgical function is to establish an aesthetic dynamism based on compositional principles rather than a dynamism that is inherent in form and emphasizes expression—what Von Balthasar and Maritain would support.³⁷

St. Theodore the Studite’s insistence that “substance” (*hupostasis*) in sacred art should only be rendered in the modality of a thing’s appearance explains the expressive emptiness of the icon. Jesus, Mary and the saints may be shown as human beings but they may not be rendered in their distinct particularity, in the *fullness* of a human person.³⁸ The icon presenting Christ is only presenting a certain man and it does that through similitude or semblance—the main sense of *eikon* in Greek—refusing to present him in his inner and outer vitality since art, it is reasoned, cannot render substance. Thus we have in this view the persistence of the Neoplatonic semblance for which the image remains defined by the basic meaning of *eikon*, always a reflection, never an object in its own right. Kordis’ move to make the icon aesthetic, an *eikon par excellence*, that is independent of verisimilitude, avoids rather than answers the question. Instead of a suffering *man* we are shown a suffering *type* who *stands for* the man and in this sense *re-presents* him; it does not make him present, even though that is the very point on which Orthodox iconography is supposed to differ from its western counterparts.³⁹

36. Kordis, *Ta Portraits*, pp. 43, 67.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-73.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57. For St. Theodore Studite, art and the image specifically cannot reveal anything about the human soul. See also Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), and Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence, A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. E. Jephcott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) for original texts, commentary and discussion of Orthodox theology on this subject and on iconoclasm in general. According to Mango, iconoclastic debate was largely theological. Questions central to artistic theory and judgment were of little concern. Truth in art was relegated either to tradition or to conventions associated with the type and labeling of an image. See Mango, pp. 149-50.

39. The idea, as Kordis explains, is that the icon’s point of reference is not the objects or figures it depicts (as in Western art) but the viewer in liturgical space with whom presumably it enters in communion. The image, qua image, or object that is aesthetically constituted, belongs to the liturgy exclusively. The truth and presence of what it depicts are never of interest and their consideration is at best a distraction. See especially Kordis, *Ta Portraits*, pp. 76-71.

Despite the existence of works in which typology and expression are intertwined (most successfully in the Cretan and Macedonian schools), the Byzantine icon continues to be regulated in both content and manner of composition by a strict typology. Outside the context of liturgy and Scripture—to which this typology is ordered—figures and objects cannot stand on their own, freely. Their being is derivative and their connection to subjectivity (either the artist's or the viewer's) is at best subtle with stylistic differences centering mostly on line and illumination.⁴⁰ Within the form itself, the absence of expressive movement in most instances complements the existence of this sacred vocabulary that any pious Orthodox iconographer (the name appropriately is “haghiographer,” painter of holy things) must master.⁴¹ Thus, the icon can be viewed as a staged narrative of Christ's life, ordered to distinct episodes or scenes. Icons are illustrative of the sacred text (and its liturgical extension), but seem to share little of its inherent passion, the hidden Paschal event that permeates the life of Christ—and of which Mary is the first station. Only forms that function mnemonically or semiotically, by insertion in scriptural and liturgical language, can participate in the economy of redemption. Thus the faces of the saints, of Christ and His Mother, appear empty and purged of passion, as if the Paschal mystery is already over and the viewer looks at the icon as a window to the world of Resurrection and Christ's glory.

With their schematic figures forming against an illuminated screen, icons are symbolically infused with divine light but remain immobile and silent, insinuating but not presenting their passion. Ascetically formed, in certain cases emaciated, they seem to have transcended all carnal modalities, death included. They show no expressive urge, no extension and rupture of flesh toward the Word, away from its own finality and sin, with that anguish that Maritain found in Rouault or that Von Balthasar insists that art can and should realize. Thus, what is called “eucharistic” does not contain the full humanity of Christ's Passion; rather, what the icon is trying to convey is that what Christ offers of himself, he offers from the direction of the Father namely, his divine nature in which the

40. It was not until the sixteenth century and even later that icons were inscribed with the name of the painter and donor. For a brief history of Byzantine haghiography, see Athanasios A. Karakatsanis, *Treasures of Mount Athos* (Thessaloniki: Museum of Byzantine Culture, 1997), p. 49.

41. The classic example of a haghiographer's manual is Dionysos of Fournia, *Ermeneia tes Zografikes Technes* [“Interpretation of the art of painting”]. See Greek translation by K.C. Spanos, (Athens 1997) of Russian edition; *Manuel D'Iconographie Chretienne*, ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus (St. Petersburg: Imprimerie B. Kirschbaum, 1909).

mystery of Communion is contained. The *charisma* (given and gift) that places the Cross as body and blood within the center of the Eucharist, are not directly, literally depicted. This is a sensibility that approaches radical asceticism in which man can be saved only if he loses his physical vitality and if nature follows him in that loss.

Maritain's objection to this view is that love and the rupture that brings form to utterance (confession) cannot be present without that vitality. The contrast therefore between the Byzantine icon and what he is proposing is that the icon insists on strict regulation of form and expression and resists rupture on an individual basis, even if that individual is Christ Himself. For Maritain, as one who has the benefit of an aesthetic vision formed by Thomistic and Carmelite mysticism as well as by his own profound love for art, this restriction is unnecessary. Still, to make the contrast sharper, we must point out that what characterizes the best of Byzantine painting is inner tension and restraint. Tension rather than expression, introverted rather than extroverted dynamism is clearly visible in its forms. One of the best examples is the *Man of Sorrows* type, associated thematically with the deposition of Christ and historically with end-of-eleventh century Byzantine Hymns on the Lamentations of the Virgin on her son's Passion. In an icon titled *Deposition of Christ* (c. 1400), we have an excellent case of Byzantine introversion and interiority.⁴² The silent communication between the dead Christ and His sorrowful mother is at once mystical and intimate suggesting that his death is only physically present, as the rendering of his body makes plain. In fact this is the silent dynamism of form that Maritain will admire in Rouault but in the context of a different aesthetics and theology.

IV

Maritain, as we have seen, finds the idea of a "confessional" or "clerical" Christian art deeply problematic⁴³. From his perspective, the grace and mercy of the Cross make any external restriction of art's form redundant, a regression to a time before Christ's advent. Grace "heals the wounds of nature," making art's redemption and liberation possible.⁴⁴ Art is "freed by

42. Anastasia Drandaki, *Greek Icons: 14th-18th Centuries, The Rena Andreadis Collection*, trans. J. Avgherinos (Milan: Skira 2002), pp. 20-21. See also, a variety of examples from the best of Cretan, Macedonian and Athonite icons in Karakatsanis, *Treasures of Mount Athos*, pp. 64-70, 104-105, 164.

43. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, pp. 68-69, 137.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

grace” to create beyond illusion, to be genuinely “inspired.”⁴⁵ This means that its ontology is mystically formed and awaits recognition. Maritain seems to suggest that art’s freedom precedes that of the artist and that the artist enters art not unlike we enter the Church through the sacraments. Already, he notes, the Church has more than one liturgy, and that because she has as “her sole object . . . worship and union with her Savior, and from this loving worship an excess of beauty overflows.”⁴⁶ For Maritain, this activity of love in which the Church is mystically formed is the same activity that, by analogy, forms art. It is not by design but by gift that art escapes the monotony of norm or the uniformity of principle. Just as in liturgy there is no one exclusive rite, no need for regulation and uniformity, so too in art there is no one canonical sacred language or “religious technique.”⁴⁷ Where the qualities of sacred art are prescribed, notes Maritain, it becomes isolated from the human community, losing not only its relevance to its age but also its expressive vitality. “Confine it,” he cautions, “and it becomes corrupted, its expression a dead letter.”⁴⁸ Given totally to Christ, art, like being, finds its own inherent measure to which the artist freely and vitally responds. This vitality is profoundly ecclesial and mystical. A Christian art, Maritain explains, will “emerge and impose itself only if it springs spontaneously from a common renewal of art and sanctity in the world”—as happened in the Middle Ages.⁴⁹

Writing about the art that we now classify as “modernism,” Maritain uses language that suggests his Carmelite view of the Cross. Like modern man, art is called from Golgotha to bear witness to its own predicament, to suffer its own testimony to its age. Here the Greek *marturion* (*martur*: suffering witness) is appropriate; not used by Maritain, it is nevertheless implicit in what he expects of art. The artist that is called to see and testify will live through her art; the artist will be part of it, impressed by it, called to communion, even against his or her will. Artists, we are told, are called to God in “an age far removed from Christ,” and, in that unwanted vocation, face “excruciating” difficulty.⁵⁰ Ironically (but providentially) those who come to art in a “simple-minded idolatry” that worships the self and its works, are bound to suffer even more.⁵¹ For Maritain, the disposition of

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

art, any art, is toward the recesses of being so that the artist, even when unaware and unprepared—perhaps especially then—is touched and broken by its mystery and hidden realities. From this silent communion, sanctified by Christ, art leads man to *ascesis* and redemption. This is why the artist that seeks to possess and order form to his subjectivity stands exposed in that very act, for the work, like the wood of the Cross, openly bears his (and our) failure. In being preoccupied with the Self, the artist violates a plenitude that is offered to him freely and therefore risks in that rejection of love for the sake of one's Self and will, the unbearable truth of Christ's judgment shown in the artist's work. In one of his essays on St. John of the Cross, Maritain reminds us that the liberty availed by Christ is not ordered to the flesh but to the "Holy Spirit who sanctifies and sacrifices."⁵² Thus the artist, seeking her liberty in the opposite direction finds, through an exercise of divine mercy, the path to the Cross. Here, in this turn or conversion—something that Maritain sought and nourished in his artist friends but also experienced in his own life—lies the redemptive nature of art, its *charismatic* being.

Drawing on our "essential creative weakness," art reveals human sin: "the work of art always ends by betraying, with infallible cunning, the vices of the workman," as the Cross betrays our vices, then and now.⁵³ Thus, we may speak of a transparency that the work of art has, not just to the moral disposition of the artist, but also to the artist's sensibility, to the way that is, that her senses approach and constitute the world. Writes Maritain: "All that is most real in the world escapes the notice of the darkened soul."⁵⁴ What in being is transcendental, its goodness, beauty and truth, withdraws in the presence of sin from the artist's sensibility so that in the *kenosis* that follows, the artist encounters only a haunting absence that the work makes unbearably bare. Maritain's insight is profound, considering that in modernism the artist was to be finally emancipated from rules and norms, and emerge as a master of her own creative destiny. The agony that he calls "excruciating," comes from the failure of that hope, from a loss of self against all expectations; a loss of the artist to art—the work "is made by art alone."⁵⁵ Like a disoriented and abandoned child, "simple-minded" man stands deceived, unloved by his own creation. In

52. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 387.

53. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, pp. 117-18.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

response, art comes to speak the strange truth, a truth so relevant to today's art: having denied the gift of grace, we stand wounded, absent from our own creations—the idol now rising and effacing man. This conclusion is interesting because it assumes an initial rejection of Christ and the Church typical of art in the recent centuries. It thus situates the artist with an illusion of freedom for which he ultimately has to confront a meaningless and impersonal art and thus the failure of expression. From the Orthodox perspective, this may be a predictable outcome, accepted on faith by those who submit in obedience to the *lingua sacra* of the Byzantine icon and its sensibility. At the same time, the implicit distinction of a sacred and profane art, with which the Orthodox seem quite comfortable, is problematic for Maritain who seems to want a convergence of all art, even if in an ideal time, to Christ.

“Christ crucified draws to Himself everything there is in man.” Modern art “must be converted to find God again,” Maritain writes. In modernism and what follows it, there is, even for those that cannot see it, a dark night of the soul, an aridity of spirit and absence of love at the end of which art will finally recognize its true mission.⁵⁶ Converted, art is an “ascetic discipline,” a spiritual exercise intent on transfiguring matter by making it “resplendent with a dominating intelligibility.”⁵⁷ Here *claritas* (radiance) exists not formally—on the surface of the design—but vitally since as Maritain notes in a different context, the work brings to life a “a new creature, an original being capable in its turn of moving a human soul.”⁵⁸ This is possible only because the artist, having found in things a sacred plenitude, a generosity that cannot be possessed and to which she is called not only to respond but to reciprocate by an open commitment to Christ—ultimately by love—brings form to utterance. Maritain writes movingly of Rouault's painting that it “clings, . . . to the secret substance of visible reality” and therefore its “realism” does not refer to matter but to the “spiritual significance of what exists (and moves, and suffers, and loves and kills).” Describing a profound communion between being and subjectivity, he calls Rouault's art “transfigurative, . . . obstinately attached to the soil while living on faith and spirituality.”⁵⁹ The connection to Carmelite spirituality is direct and explicit. In all great artists, Maritain notes, we find a “unity of creative emotion and working reason.” But that in itself is not sufficient to result in great or

56. Ibid., pp. 118, 116, 139.

57. Ibid., p. 130.

58. Ibid., p. 63.

59. Rouault, *Georges Rouault*, pp. 21-22.

properly Christian art. What is “native privilege” must be perfected and that requires purgation, the model of which is the luminous darkness of the Cross. The work of art is the culmination or “final victory of a steady struggle inside the artist’s soul, which has to pass through trials and “dark nights” comparable, in the line of the creativity of the spirit, to those suffered by the mystics in their striving toward union with God.” “Such,” Maritain concludes, “was the case with Rouault.”⁶⁰

These observations are not forced. Studying Rouault’s work, we may easily see that texture, line and color have a fluid and graphic solidity, a sort of spiritual *gravitas* that defies the flatness of the canvas on the one side and the superficiality of an arbitrary subjectivity on the other. It is indicative of this *gravitas* that light has been thoroughly internalized and integrated with color and texture so that it is not external or accidental to the figures and objects present but an inimical part of their vitality and being. It is light rendered silent, pensive, solitary, desolate, contemplative and penitential, exactly as we suggested for the icon titled *The Deposition of Christ*. In lithographs like Rouault’s *Veronica’s Veil* (1930), this subtle illumination of flesh and matter that turns into utterance even as nothing and no one speaks, is even more pronounced; it recalls again the Byzantine icon and its often dramatic linearity. The same with *The Funeral* (1930) in which light, set deeply within the outlines and textures of things, brings the dark procession into an other day and time, the end of death and the beginning of new life. Especially in *Veronica’s Veil* the degree of abstraction and intense illumination within the forms themselves that eliminates detail, recalls the emotional and expressive emptiness of faces and figures in the Byzantine icon. Kordis refers to it as the *neptic* path (vigilance, watchfulness), by which artist and public, being faithful Christians, engage in a *catharsis* of mind and heart.⁶¹ What is different though in Rouault, that a Byzantine icon would never show, is the expansion of the line itself into an expressive object. In the icon the delineation of objects, figures and their constitutive parts is imperative. The boundaries that separate them are clear and distinct. As a result, the inner tension of forms is subject to internal and external restraint and the line serves that purpose.

For Maritain, Rouault’s art is itself a sign of grace and redemption, a response to the artist’s confession: “I was not made to be so terrible.”⁶² Studied without theological assumptions, Rouault’s paintings do present a

60. Ibid., p. 16.

61. Kordis, *En Rythmo*, p. 80.

62. Rouault, *Georges Rouault*, p. 28.

unity of spiritual, moral and natural life that resonates with what we may call an aesthetic communion. This is how we can best describe it. What is ugly, tormented and desolate but also redeeming in man is shared by everything around him. There is no marked domain of ugliness and beauty, vice and virtue. In *Christ Mocked by Soldiers* (1932), Christ's body is outlined in the same harsh lines and colors that make up the vulgar faces of His tormentors. Conversely, his isolation and solitude keeps them vitally close but also apart as if in their mockery they too are alone and abandoned, just like He is, a transcending humanity present in their communion of hatred and love. Thus the painting enters the Cross; it belongs to the mystical body that gathers those that sin—even against Christ Himself—and delivers them renewed in mercy. The irony of the soldiers' mockery is that they have been gathered, humanized and redeemed by the very One that they torment and reject. In the presence of Jesus, they cease to suffer their hatred. It is works like this that lead Maritain to approach Rouault's art as an invitation to prayer. Here it is not aesthetic empathy that moves him but encounter with art's mystical participation in the Cross. Elsewhere in that essay he notes Rouault's fascination with Veronica's veil, marked by Christ's face, as if "to imprint the divine mercy on human art."⁶³ In this phrase Maritain describes in almost epigrammatic form the mystery that unites art and Cross, a mystery that Rouault witnessed in his art as he himself confesses in the short poem that prefaces his *Miserere* (1922) etchings.⁶⁴

Conclusion

From the standpoint of this brief remark, the impact of the *Mandyllion* or *Veronica* on the Christian imagination can be understood in a way that radically departs from anthropological and art historical interpretation—especially of the kind that is theologically void.⁶⁵ Intimacy with Christ—in an impression that is not a semblance but rather, as that tradition has consistently perceived, a relic, a gratuitous extension of His living body—reiterates the mysteries of His person in which the ancient and contemporary Church find their uninterrupted vocation. More than the *acheiropoietos*, the image painted without human hands, the *Mandyllion* perpetuates the moment where Incarnation and Cross transfigured the

63. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

65. On the Veronica and Mandyllion, see Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 1994, chapters 4 and 11.

senses having first, at the abominable sight of the Crucifixion, stripped them of meaning and relevance. In art that is ordered to the *vera icona* and is therefore, according to Maritain, Christian in the fullest sense of the word, truth is not that of a form or type matched to the object or person that it depicts—as in a similitude. It is rather, the truth of a *stigma*, a mark of blood and sweat directly deposited and impressed, in which, by analogy to the Passion, cloth, wound and agony are indistinguishable. This is not a mere mark. Like the stigmata of the saints, it is a *living wound* in which, in paradox, the redemptive and salvific mystery of the Cross is offered to the senses, as Christ first showed to Thomas. The wounds are Christ's but also the artist's who, nailed with Christ on the Cross, struggles, as Maritain wrote of El Greco, to convert and transfigure a world that, seduced by sin and drawn to illusion or to unredeemed sensuality, resists transfiguration.

In the work of art, the artist's communion with Christ's Passion is transferred to canvas, wood or any part of nature on which he or she works. The notion of *ascesis* to which Maritain refers the practice of art and the life of the artist finds fulfillment in the *vera icona*. For Maritain, Rouault's art bears the stigmata of redemption not in what it shows—its subject matter—but in the manner that it delivers form, in its lines, light, colors and texture, the artist's intimate spiritual and carnal language, true to Christ because it has been purified in His love. This is why in *Christ Mocked by Soldiers*, we do not see mockery or opposition but three figures united in a shared Passion, not in an intentional, designed manner but in a spontaneous translation of the artist's subtle vision and sensibility. This is art that is aesthetically, theologically and mystically significant, an example of what Maritain saw in some modern artists which led him to believe that their work should not be rejected by the Church as irreverent or put aside as irrelevant.

For Maritain, Christian art is art that is inextricably ecclesial and mystical and in so being has realized its ontological and theological vocation. In his view, it is possible for the artist to discover her vocation and also the unique path to Christ without conforming to any singular *lingua sacra*. This is a fundamental difference with the Orthodox view but not necessarily one that is irreconcilable. Ultimately, for Maritain, art that is vital to the human spirit and profound in the questions it poses about human existence and purpose in life and the order of things, leads to Christ. For the Orthodox too, the icon's inner tension and luminosity, cannot be achieved by a mere adherence to a typology or an iconographic manual. The best evidence for that, in an age where the commercial icon has proliferated, is the

striking difference between that work of skill and the work that is properly *hagiographic*, i.e., where the artist's hand is guided by God and trained in an *ascesis* of spirit and sense. In the end, the languages of Christian art may converge in the tense, restrained and luminous silence of the Byzantine icon, infused perhaps with the expressive dynamism that Maritain admired in many of Rouault's works. For the reader who is eager to see icons that presage this convergence, the fourteenth century icon *John the Baptist* in Vatopedi Monastery, Mount Athos, is a good example.⁶⁶

66. Karakatsanis, *Treasures of Mount Athos*, p. 84.