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The Ethos of Liturgical Art

Chapter 12 of *The Freedom of Morality*
(St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood,
NY: 1984), pp. 231-264

1. Worship, art and technology

When the eucharistic community becomes once again the axis of the Church's life, this leads to a rediscovery of the communal character and ethos of liturgical art. The ontological content of the eucharist— eucharistic communion as a mode of existence— assumes that the communal reality of life has a cosmological dimension: it presupposes matter and the use of matter, which is to say *art*, as the creative transformation of matter into a fact of relationship and communion.¹ Man's art, the way he takes up the world and uses it, is a basic element in life, whether it brings about the alienation of life, or makes it incorruptible and raises it to an existential fullness of personal distinctiveness and freedom.

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. And the Church's art is worship; it is not

¹ The Greek word *techne*, "art," is "the science of fashioning anything," "the fashioning of the work" and "concerned with making, involving a true course of reasoning," according to Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 6, 4). it comes from the word *teucho* which means to build, to be the builder of a work, to create, to give "reason" to matter. See Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire Etymologique de la langue grecque*, vol. IV, part 1 (Paris, 1877), p. 1111. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Les carrefours du labyrinthe* (Paris, 1978), pp. 222-223: "The Greek word *techne* goes back to a very ancient verb, *teucho* (attested exclusively but innumerable times by the poets...) whose central meaning in Homer is 'to make,' 'to produce,' 'to construct'; *teuchos*— 'tool,' 'implement'— is also the implement *par excellence*: arms. Already in Homer the shift was accomplished from this meaning to that of causing, of making something to be, of bringing into existence, often detached from the idea of material fabrication, but never from that of the suitable and effective act."

merely decorative, but manifests and highlights the “rational” potentialities of matter, the harmony of praise formed by the “words” or inner principles of created things when they are serving the eucharistic event of communion. The “true life” of the eucharist operates and is celebrated within the given realities of nature. The Church’s liturgical time— the daily, weekly and annual festive cycles— and her liturgical space— the way the church as a dimensional entity is articulated through architecture and painting— are elements as essential for the operation of the eucharist as the bread and wine of the mystery; they are the direct link between the salvation of life and the function of eating and drinking.

For the man of the modern technological age, however, use of the world, that is to say, life as art and the construction of the personal event of communion, has altogether lost the immediacy of a relationship. Technology now comes between man and the world, replacing the personal attainment of art with the impersonal product of the machine. Of course, the organic cord connecting man with the world, the function of eating and drinking, has not been lost. But food has ceased to sum up man’s participation in the life of the world, to sum up man’s art or skill, his direct relationship with the materials of life and the way he creatively transforms them into a potential for life. In a rural society, the craftsman and tradesman as well as the peasant would earn their living by their art or skill, by the way in which they encountered the natural or social potentialities of life, the potentialities for serving life in natural matter itself. In that society, man knew the demands, the resistances, the behavior of the material; and to say that he knew nature means that he *respected* it. His life and his art were a study of the world, an expression of respect for the world. With his body and his art he studied the life of the world, not doing it violence but taking part in it, in harmony with the natural rhythm of life— birth, growth, fruition, decay and death, the changing seasons and the whole working of creation.

Today the majority of people in “developed” societies partake only indirectly in the life of the world. In a large modern city life is organically severed from the reality of nature, completely isolated in a rhythm of its own which is unrelated, even contrary to the natural flow of life and subject to the conditions imposed on it by the rationalistic organization of corporate life. Man knows how to use machines but not how to use the world; he earns his bread by technology, not by his art. This is why it is impossible for bread and wine to represent for urban man the summing up of life, the life and work of a whole year with four seasons, a year of sowing and harvest, subject to weather and winds. The church texts bring him images from a different experience of life: “And as this bread was scattered over the mountains, and was gathered together and became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy Kingdom.” For modern man these are all beautiful poetic images, but they are not his life. His own bread is hygienically packaged and displayed in the supermarket windows be e the jams and the

packets of frozen vegetables. Bread is no longer of central importance for his life; other foods have taken first place. And the consumption of food connects man's life not with the productive *principle* in nature as it is revealed within the relationship created by an art or craft, but with the way in which the "relations of production" become a matter of purely human rival claims. Consumption makes life subject to impersonal networks of economic, trade union or political mechanisms, autonomous and unrelated to any reverence for the principle or reason in natural reality.

2. The asceticism of art and the art of ascesis

In the realm of worship, then, the crucial problem of modern life is summed up. How can life operate once again in the dynamic dimension of a communal use of the world? How can technology rediscover the ethos of art and serve the authenticity of life, the communal realization of man's personal distinctiveness and freedom through his use of the world? How can the eucharistic mode of existence even today reconcile the rationalism of technology with a reverence for the inner principle or reason in created things, and do away with the pollution and rape of nature, the debauchery of industry over the living body of the world?

There are certainly no answers to these questions which could serve as objective rules or formulae laying down how life should be organized. If there are answers, they will emerge organically once our life is worked out in the right way, and to this end eucharistic liturgy and art can guide us in a dynamic fashion. What must be made clear first and foremost is that the eucharist of the Church loses any ontological content and turns into a conventional outlet for religious feelings once the bread and wine of the mystery are turned into abstract symbols, and cease to sum up the cosmic dimensions of life as a communal event.

If we accept that man's relationship with God is not simply intellectual, nor in a legalistic sense "moral," but necessarily involves his use of the world, then the Gospel truth of salvation is being undermined by the way modern man is cut off from *ascesis*, from the practical study of natural reality and respect for it, and is isolated in the autonomous self-sufficiency of technology. Even from the earliest years, the Church has used every means to defend her truth against the danger of being turned into an abstract, intellectual system of metaphysics or a legal code of utilitarian deontology. In every heresy, she has perceived above all the primacy of an individual, intellectual understanding of her truth, and ignorance or neglect of the experiential immediacy with which the Church lives the event of salvation. The Christ of the heresies is a moral paradigm of the perfect man, or else an abstract idea of a disincarnate God. In both cases, man's life is not substantially changed in any way: his existence is condemned

either to annihilation along with his body in the earth, or else to an immortality necessary *by nature*, while individual or collective “improvements” in human life turn out to be fraudulent and senseless, or else a naked deception.

In the period of the ecumenical councils, the Church stood out against the intellectual forms of the heresies in order to preserve the cosmic universality of her eucharistic hypostasis, the salvation embodied in the bread and wine of the eucharist. She stood for the salvation of man’s body, not merely his “spirit,” from the absurdity of death; she stood for the belief that it is possible for the humble material of the world— the flesh of the earth and of man— to be united with the divine life, and, corruptible though it is, to put on incorruption. It took centuries of striving before language was able to subdue the arbitrariness of individual logic and to express the dynamics of life as revealed by the incarnation of the Word. And, side by side with the language, there was the artist’s struggle to speak the same truth with his brush, not schematically or allegorically, but imprinting in design and color the glory of man’s flesh and the flesh of the world made incorruptible. Then there was also the formative song of the architect who makes stone and clay into “word,” giving them reason and meaning; and in his building the One who is uncontainable is contained, He who is without flesh is made flesh, and the entire creation and the beauty of creation are justified. And, besides these, there was the hymn of the poet and the melody of the musician, an art which subjugates the senses instead of being subjugated by them, revealing in this subjection the secret of life which conquers death.

Thus man’s separation from the asceticism of art and the art of *ascesis*— the practical encounter with the potentialities for salvation in the flesh of man and of the world— and his isolation in the individualistic self-sufficiency provided by technology leads to a “religious” alienation of the Church’s truth, to the Christ of the heresies— a moral paradigm of perfect man, or an abstract idea of disincarnate God.

A eucharistic use of the world certainly does not preclude technology, the use of technical means; on the contrary, any form of ascetic art always requires highly developed technical skill. However much technology develops it does not altogether cease to be a “rational” use of the world, a use with reason and meaning. But the problem begins as soon as this “rationality” is restricted to man’s individual intellectual capacity and ignores or violates the principle of the intrinsic beauty of the natural material; as soon as man’s use of the world serves exclusively to make him existentially autonomous, and proudly to cut him off from the rhythm of the life of the world. What we now call technocracy is technology made absolute, or, better, the ethos which accompanies a certain technological use of the world. It does not aim to serve life as communion and personal relationship, and therefore ignores also the *personal*

dimension of the world, the manifestation of God's personal energy in the world. It is geared towards man's greed as a consumer, his instinctive need to acquire possessions and to enjoy himself.²

If the autonomous operation of capital— of absolute individual or corporate interests— did not make human beings subject to the mechanized necessity for production, and if machines served the communal reality of life, the personal, responsible and creative participation of every worker in production, then their use could perhaps be as much a liturgical and eucharistic act as sowing, harvesting or gathering grapes. But anything of that kind requires a particular ethos in man, a definite attitude on man's part towards the material world and its use.

The eucharistic use of the world and its relationship with man's technical accomplishments find a complete *communal* model in the case of ecclesial or liturgical art. So perhaps the most substantial contribution that theological ethics can make to solving the problems created by modern technocracy should be to study the ethos of church art— or, more precisely, to study how the problem of technology is posed, and what ethos is expressed by the technology, the technique of liturgical art.

3. The ethos of ancient Greek and Gothic architecture

Architecture is probably the art which gives us the most opportunities to approach our theme. The reader must forgive us for inevitably confining ourselves to general observations and preliminary explanations.³

² The ethos expressed by modern technocracy does not cease to be a derivative of human nature, of the existential adventure of man's freedom. So the ascetic knowledge of man, the empirical exploration of the mysterious depths of man's rebellion by the saints and wise men of the desert, has also described the ethos of technocracy with astounding clarity, at a time when the problem of that ethos could be posed only on a very small scale. St Isaac the Syrian writes, characteristically: "When knowledge follows the desire of the flesh, it brings with it these tendencies: wealth, vanity, adornment, rest for the body, and eagerness for the wisdom of that logic which is suitable for the administration of this world; it is constantly making new discoveries both in skills and in knowledge, and abounds also in everything else that is the crown of the body in this visible world. As a result of this, it comes to oppose faith... for it is stripped of any concern for God, and makes the mind irrational and powerless, because it is dominated by the body. Its concern is wholly confined to this world... It thinks that everything is in its own care, following those who say that the visible world is not subject to any direction. Yet it is unable to escape from continuing concern and fear for the body. So faintheartedness and sorrow and despair take hold of it... and worry about illnesses, and concerns about wants and lack of necessities, and fear of death... For it does not know how to cast its care onto God, in the assurance of faith in Him. It therefore engages in contrivances and trickery in all its affairs. When its contrivances are ineffectual for some reason, it does not see the secret providence, and fights the people who are obstructing and opposing it": *Mystic Treatises* 6, pp. 256-257.

The first characteristic one might note in the architecture of the “Byzantine” church, as we now call it, is respect for the building materials; an attempt to manifest the inner principle of the material, the “rational” potentialities of matter, and to bring about a “dialogue” between the architect and his material. But what do these statements mean in terms of the actual technique of church construction? To find the answer, we shall inevitably have to resort to comparisons, setting the Byzantine building side by side with ancient Greek classical architecture and medieval Gothic.

In ancient Greek architecture, the building material is subjugated to a given “principle” or “reason” which the craftsman wishes to serve and manifest. Matter *per se* is nonrational; it is formlessness and disorder until reason forms it into being and life. Reason gives form to matter; it brings everything together and leads it to the harmony and unity of the “cosmos,” because the reason or principle of a being means that it takes its place in the universal unity of the world, and becomes subject to the laws of cosmic harmony and order which differentiate life and existence from disorder and chaos.⁴ These are given laws; they are the logical and ethical necessity of life. The architect’s task is to decode them, to reveal them through the reason or principle in his construction. It is to demonstrate the “rational” relationships which ensure harmony and unity, in other words the ethical potential of life; and ultimately to teach how the initial formlessness can be turned into a world, a “cosmos,” “beautiful indeed,” and the initial group of people living together can be turned into a city under the same laws of cosmic harmony and the ethical potentialities of life.⁵

³ There are to my knowledge no works on the theological view and interpretation of Orthodox church architecture. Perhaps unique of its kind is Gervase Mathew’s *Byzantine Aesthetics* (London, 1963). For this chapter, I have made use of the following limited bibliography: P. A. Michelis, *An Aesthetic Approach to Byzantine Art* (Athens, 1946; Eng. trans. London, 1955); Marinos Kalligas, *The Aesthetics of Space in the Medieval Greek Church* (Athens, 1946) Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (Latrobe, 1951) Olivier Clement, *Dialogues avec le Patriarche Athenagoras* (Paris, 1969), pp. 278-283. Ch. Yannaras, “Teologia apofatica e architettura byzantina,” in *Symposio Cristiano* (Milan, 1971), pp. 104-112; *idem*, “Scholasticism and Technology,” *Eastern Churches Review* 6.2 (1974), pp. 162-169.

⁴ “This ontological monism which characterizes Greek philosophy from its inception leads Greek thought to the concept of the ‘cosmos,’ that is, of the harmonious relationship of existent things among themselves ... Greek thought creates a wonderful concept of the world, that is, of unity and harmony, a world full of interior dynamism and aesthetic plenitude, a world truly ‘beautiful’ and ‘divine.’ However, in such a world it is impossible for the unforeseen to happen or for freedom to operate: whatever threatens cosmic harmony and is not explained by ‘reason’ (*logos*) which draws all things together and leads them to this harmony and unity, is rejected and condemned”: J. Zizioulas, “From Prosopeion to Prosopon,” pp. 289-290.

⁵ “Against the world of chaos and fate, Doric thought opposes order and the victory of the intellect... The Parthenon is not merely a joy to the eye, it is also ethical beauty. With the strict calculation of its

Ancient Greek architecture succeeds in imprinting the laws of cosmic harmony on a building by making its Construction technique obey the “principle” of proportion in size. The parts of the ancient Greek temple are measured mainly by the “rule of proportions.” The architect uses his material in order to form perfect proportions, and thus achieve a flawless rationalistic harmony which reveals and teaches the beautiful as symmetrical perfection. Typical of the absolute priority of the given proportions is the fact that when an ancient Greek temple is doubled in size, all its dimensions are doubled accordingly. The dimensions of its door and steps and all its parts are doubled so that the basic proportions remain the same, even though the door then becomes excessive and need only be half the size for a man to pass through it comfortably, and the steps become so large that they are almost impossible to climb. The over-riding priority is to preserve the harmony of proportions *per se*, regardless of what sizes are necessary. The point of reference is the mind of the observer; it is this that the craftsman wishes to delight and instruct by the harmony of the proportional relationships in his work.⁶

The same subjection of the material to an a priori logical conception is again expressed with remarkable technical competence by Gothic medieval architecture. In a Gothic building, the craftsman is not concerned with the inner principle of the building material; his aim is not to study this inner principle, to coordinate and reconcile it with the inner principle of his own creative will, bringing out the material's potentiality to embody, the personal activation of the principle in created things. On the contrary, he subjugates the material to given forms, squaring off the stone and doing violence to its static balance, so as to fulfil the ideological aim envisaged by the construction. This ideological aim is externally and arbitrarily set; it bears no relation to the study of the material and the struggle of construction. It is an objectified knowledge which the craftsman simply takes up in his work in order to analyse it into particular notions.⁷

architecture and the harmonious equilibrium of its masses, its inner ethical system receives tangible expression. Its meaning is that life is subject to the aims set forth by a soldier mind. It is a chart of all the values in the Greek world: a heroic symphony of athletic virtues, an ethical ascesis. The severe outward form is nothing other than the tangible expression of inner obedience”: Markos Augeris, “Mysticism in Greek art” (in Greek), in *Greek Critical Thought— A Selection*, ed. Z. Lorentzatos (Athens, 1976), pp. 120-121.

⁶ See Michelis, *An Aesthetic Approach...*, pp. 35-36.

⁷ “Like the High Scholastic Summa, the High Gothic Cathedral... sought to embody the whole of Christian knowledge, theological, moral, natural and historical ... in structural design, it similarly sought to synthesize all major motifs handed down by separate channels. and finally achieved an unparalleled balance”: Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture...*, pp. 44-45. Cf. Auguste Choisy, *Histoire de l'architecture*, vol. 11 (Paris, 1899), pp. 260 and 265. Also Georges Duby, *L'Europe des Cathedrales* (Geneva, 1966), p. 40: “The calculation of the mathematicians secured the means of giving reality to these rational

The ideological aim of Gothic architecture is to create an impression of the authority of the visible body of the Church, an authority which exerts influence and imposes itself not only through its absolute monopoly in handling God's wishes and revelations, but also through the palpable and immense majesty of the way it is articulated as an organization. Organizational structure creates both the principle of the western Church's unity and the rationalistically secured static balance of Gothic architecture. This is not an organic unity of distinctiveness in principles, the unity which brings about communion as an achievement and a gift of personal distinctiveness and freedom. Instead, it is a uniform submission to given rules and preconditions for salvation or for static balance. It is the theanthropic nature or essence of the Church embodied in the authority of the church organization, which is treated as prior to the personal event of salvation, to the personal gifts of the life conferred by the Holy Spirit, and to the transfiguration of man, the world and history in the person of God the Word incarnate and the persons of the faithful.

In his study on Gothic architecture and scholastic thought, Erwin Panofsky⁸ has pointed to the common attitude and the attempt to explore truth intellectually which characterizes both scholastic thought and Gothic architecture,⁹ and to the exact chronological correspondence between the evolution of the two:¹⁰ "It is a connection... more concrete than a mere 'parallelism' and yet more general than those individual 'influences' which are inevitably exerted on painters, sculptors or architects by erudite advisors: it is a real relationship of cause and effect."¹¹ Gothic architecture is the first technological application of scholastic thought, following it directly both in time and in substance: it is the technique which sets out in visible form the scholastic attempt to subject truth to the individual intellect, the new structure for a logical organization of truth introduced by

constructions... The universe ceases to be an ensemble of signs where the imagination gets lost; it is the clothing of a logical form which it is the cathedral's mission to restore by putting in their place all visible creatures."

⁸ See above, n. 3.

⁹ P. 27f. See also Duby, *L'Europe des Cathedrales*, p. 106: "The new cathedral appears... more concerned about a dialectical analysis of structures. It aims at the rational clarity of scholastic demonstrations."

¹⁰ "...this astonishingly synchronous development..." p. 20; cf. p. 3ff. Also M.-D. Chenu, *Introduction a l'etude de Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris, 1974), pp. 51-60, where he concludes: "Theology is the first great technique of the Christian world... The men who built the cathedrals [also] constructed *summae*." This is affirmed also by Jacques Maritain, *Les degres du savoir* (Paris, 1932), p. 583.

¹¹ P. 20. See also Duby, *L'Europe des Cathedrales*, p. 105: "These monuments inscribed in inert matter the thought of the professors, their dialectical ramblings. They demonstrated Catholic theology."

scholastic theology. In the thirteenth century, for the first time in the history of human learning, the formulation and development of a truth is arranged systematically, with a variety of divisions. A complete work is divided into books, the books into chapters, the chapters into paragraphs and the paragraphs into articles. Each assertion is established by systematic refutation of the objections, and progressively, phrase by phrase, the reader is propelled towards a full intellectual clarification of a given truth.¹² It is “a veritable orgy of logic,” as Panofsky says of Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*.¹³

Correspondingly, the technique of Gothic architecture is based on a structure of small chiseled stones of uniform shape. The stones form columns, and the columns are divided into ribbed composite piers, with the same number of ribs as those in the vaulting which receives them.¹⁴ The arrangement of the columns and the division of the ribs create an absolutely fixed “skeleton plan” which neutralizes the weight of the material by balancing the thrusts of the walls. Here again, the thesis is reinforced by systematic refutation of the antithesis, “the supports prevail over the weights placed on them,” and the weight of the material is neutralized by the rationalistically arranged static balance.

This technique conceals “a profoundly analytic spirit, relentlessly dominating the construction. This spirit considers the forces, analyzes them into diagrams of statics and petrifies them in space,”¹⁵ forming a unity which is not organic but mechanical, a monolithic framework. “Our sense of stability is satisfied but amazed, because the parts are no longer connected organically but mechanically: they look like a human frame naked of flesh.”¹⁶ It is technology, human will and logic, which subdues matter. The structure manifests the intellectual conception and will of the craftsman rather than the

¹² “...the construction of a knowledge within the faith. From this theology is established as a science”: M.-D. Chenu, *La theologie comme science au XIIIe siecle*, p. 70. “The first preoccupation of every bishop in his cathedral... was to place the Christian faith beyond uncertainty and the obscurity of prelogical thought, to construct a spacious doctrinal edifice, varied but firmly ordered, to show to the people convincing deductions in it”: Duby, *L'Europe des Cathedrales*, p. 9.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁴ See Michelis, *An Aesthetic Approach...* pp. 89-90.

¹⁵ Michelis, p. 90.

¹⁶ Michelis, p. 90. Michelis refers also to Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik* (Munich, 1910), p. 73.

potentialities of the material— the moral obedience of matter to spirit, not the “glory” of matter, the revelation of God’s energies in the inner principle of material things.¹⁷

Finally, Gothic architecture and the structure of scholastic thought alike restrict the possibility of experiencing truth exclusively to the intellectual faculty, logical analysis and emotional suggestion. This is why both these instances of “technique” leave us with the feeling of an inability to transcend the bounds of individual existence; we remain predetermined by the capacities of our individual nature, with no *personal* room left for the unforeseen, for freedom— a feeling that there is no escape. “In the Gothic form, excess and immensity are characteristic,” says Worringer; “and this is due to the passion for seeking deliverance, a passion which finds an outlet in intoxication, vertigo and emotional ecstasy.”¹⁸ The endeavor of Gothic architecture is to elicit an emotional response by demonstrating intellectually the antithesis of natural and supernatural, human smallness and the transcendent authority, the power from on high.¹⁹

“Gothic art,” observes Choisy,²⁰ “operates with antitheses, contrasting with the plains the elevation of its perpendicular lines and enormous spires.” What we have here is not simply an aesthetic or proportional contrast, however, but an anthropocentric tendency, a demand for the earthly to be elevated to the transcendent. The union of created and uncreated is not here regarded as a *personal* event, as the transformation of man, the world and history in the person of God the Word incarnate. It is an encounter between two *natures*, with human nature clothed in the dignity and transcendent majesty of the divine nature— which is exactly what happens with papal primacy and infallibility, and with the totalitarian centralization of the Roman Catholic Church. “The vaulted construction of a Gothic church desires, and tends, to give the impression of a

¹⁷ On the particular relationship between Gothic architecture and the cosmology evolved by the theologians of the medieval West, and the relationship between this cosmology and modern technocracy, see *The Person and Eros* §§ 34, 35.

¹⁸ *Formprobleme der Gotik*, pp. 113 and 50; quoted in Michelis, p. 40.

¹⁹ “It was nevertheless the art of the Gothic cathedrals which, in the whole of Christendom, then became the instrument— perhaps the most effective one— of Catholic repression”: Duby, *L’Europe des Cathedrales*, p. 72. Direct experience alone can justify and verify these conclusions. In the cathedrals of Cologne, Milan or Ulm, and other European cities, anyone with experience of the theology and art of the Eastern Church can see the justification for the “rebellion” of the Reformation and for the various ways in which man revolts against this transcendent authority which is expressed with such genius in architecture: it is an authority which humiliates and degrades human personhood and even ultimately destroys it. Revolt is inevitable against such a God, who consents to encounter man on a scale of such crushing difference in size.

²⁰ *Histoire de l’architecture*, vol. II, p. 414.

monolithic framework”²¹— it is the image that the Roman Catholic West has of the Church. Approaching the divine presupposes in this context a comparison between human smallness and the grandeur of divine authority an authority tangibly expressed by its monolithic, unified and majestic organization and its administrative structure. The Church is not the world in the dimension of the Kingdom, the harmonization of the inner principles of created things with the affirmation of human freedom in Christ’s assumption of worldly flesh; but it is the visible, concrete potentiality for the individual to submit to divine authority. This is why in a Gothic church the material is not “saved,” it is not “made word” and it is not “transfigured”: it is subdued by a superior force. To use specialized terminology once again: “The supports prevail over the weight placed on them... the vaulting with its supple formation clearly shows that it concentrates there all the action in the forces, and compels matter to rise up to the heights.”²² This *compulsion* of matter in Gothic architecture represents a technology which leads straight to contemporary technocracy.²³

4. The ethos of technology in Byzantine building

We have referred at such length to Gothic architecture in order to elucidate by comparison a prime characteristic of “Byzantine” architecture which we mentioned at the start: its respect for the construction material and its endeavor to bring out the “inner principle” [*logos*] in the material, “rational” potentialities of matter— to effect a “dialogue” between the architect and his material.

Contrary to what we have said about Gothic art, the Byzantine architect seems free and untrammelled by any *a priori* ideological aim. This does not mean that he is unclear in his purpose: he too is trying to build the “Church,” to manifest her truth, the space in which she lives, and not merely to house the gathering of the faithful. For the Byzantine, however, the point is precisely this: the truth of the Church is neither a set ideological system whereby we ascend by analogy to the transcendent— the excessive or the immense— nor a majestic organization with an authoritatively established administrative structure which mediates between man and God. The Church for the Byzantine is the event of the eucharist, the participation of what is created in the true life— the trinitarian mode of communion and relationship. And this mode is the body of the Church, the flesh

²¹ Michelis, pp. 52-53.

²² Michelis, P. 50.

²³ See Ch. Yannaras, “Pollution of the Earth,” *Christian*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1976), pp. 317-321. *Idem*, “Scholasticism and Technology,” pp. 166-169.

of the world which has been assumed by Christ: it is the whole of creation in the dimensions of the Kingdom.

Byzantine architecture studies and reveals this reality of the worldly flesh of the Word, the fact of God's *kenosis* [i.e., his 'self-emptying' in the incarnation], and the 'deification' of created things, the way in which by taking on our material nature, God hypostasizes our existence in the divine life of incorruption and immortality. Like the ascetic in his direct encounter with his body, the architect encounters his material with the same freedom of humility and self-abnegation; and he studies the points of resistance and also the potentialities of nature. He looks for the inner principle, the "reason" [*logos*] in matter which was in abeyance before the incarnation but is now dynamic; that reason which connects the baseness and resistances of the natural material with the amazing potential in that same matter to contain the Uncontainable and give flesh to Him who is without flesh, to be exalted into the flesh of God the Word— into the Church.

Each Byzantine building is a eucharistic event; it is a dynamic act whereby each individual entity joins in the universal reality of ecclesial communion. This is a realization of personal distinctiveness, but a realization within the framework of communion, which means the rejection of [merely] individual emotions, [merely] individual intellectual certainty and [merely] individual aesthetics. Every Byzantine building embodies this ascetic rejection and self-abnegation on the part of the architect, and consequently manifests both his personal distinctiveness and at the same time the universal truth of the Church. As a technical construction, each work has a revelatory personal distinctiveness, and in this personal distinctiveness the universal truth of the Church is manifested. As Michelis writes in a technical description which unconsciously discerns the theological truth, Byzantine churches "are the dynamic compositions of a subjective sense, rather than the static arrangements of an objective theory... No work of Byzantine architecture is a pure type, a model which can be repeated... Each Byzantine church is an individuality, an act of emancipation from the model... It is not really important how precisely it fits together or how regularly it is laid out. The walls are not always at right angles, the roofs often have different inclines... the ground plans are not rectangular, the domes are not always absolutely circular at their base, the facades are irregular and the bricks fit together haphazardly. From the point of view of our very strict requirements, a Byzantine plan is always a mistake, but an acceptable mistake— one that works. The whole structure is a piece of music which the virtuoso craftsman has sung in a different way each time, and always so successfully that repetition is out of the question."²⁴

²⁴ Pp. 45-46.

The character of objective asymmetry and dissimilarity in each Byzantine building is the element which above all manifests the craftsman's respect for the peculiar "reason" [*logos*] in the natural material. It reveals his *ascesis* and his endeavor to fit the "rational qualities" of matter into an organic unity and a harmony of reasons— to "church" matter, which means leading it to the "end" [*telos*] or goal of its existence, which is to constitute the flesh of God the Word.²⁵ The objective asymmetry and dissimilarity of each Byzantine building is simply the visible manifestation of the architect's *love* for his natural material; that love which respects and studies creation and reveals it as a means to salvation,²⁶ an organic factor in the communion of created and uncreated, the recapitulation of all in the loving relationship between the Father and the incarnate Word.²⁷

The ancient Greek temple expresses the Greek view of the world as a given harmony and order, and consequently it gives reason and meaning to the actual natural environment by reducing it to relationships of proportional harmony.²⁸ By the same token, the Byzantine church expresses the Church's view of the world, of the world's participation in the dimensions of the life of the Kingdom. It therefore recapitulates the personal distinctiveness of both the site and the building material, summing up the mode of created order and beauty as the *locus* for the relationship between created and

²⁵ St Maximus the Confessor sees all creation, from the angels down to inanimate matter, as a unified and continuing event of eros, a dynamically structured "erotic" relationship, and a universal "erotic" movement which forms creation— personal and impersonal, animate and inanimate— into a "communal" sequence with an impulse turned back towards God. Inanimate matter partakes in this universal "erotic" event "according to its customary role, which is its quality." See *Scholia on the Divine Names*, PG 4, 268C-269A.

²⁶ Cf. John Damascene, *First Homily in Defense of the Holy Icons*, PG 94, 1245AB; critical edition by B. Kotter, vol. III, p. 89: "I shall never cease to venerate matter, through which my salvation was brought about."

²⁷ "The mystery of the person as an ontological 'principle' and 'cause' consists in the fact that love is able to make something unique, to give it an absolute identity and name. This is precisely what is meant by the term 'eternal life,' which, for precisely this reason, means that the person is able to raise even inanimate objects to a personal dignity and life; it requires only that they be an organic part of a relationship of love. Thus, for example, the whole of creation can be saved through being 'recapitulated' in the loving relationship between the Father and the Son": J. Zizioulas, "From Prosopion to Prosopon," p. 307, n. 35.

²⁸ Purely by way of parenthesis, we may note here that our admiration for the monuments of ancient Greek architecture is extremely superficial if we ignore the cosmic truth they embody and isolate them from the natural environment which they seek to interpret. The beauty of the buildings on the Acropolis, for instance, is essentially impossible to understand now that modern development has destroyed its natural surroundings and changed the lines and appearance of the Attic landscape.

uncreated— as the Church. Material creation is given form: it takes the form of the flesh of the Word. The building of a Byzantine church is the body of the incarnate Word, the earthward movement of the “bowed heavens”; it shapes the incarnation into the form of a cross.

It is the Byzantine technique of constructing domes, apses and arches which provides the supreme possibility for personal and free study of the “reason” in matter. On the levels of appearance and symbolism alike, the first impression is that the domes, apses and arches enable the Byzantine architect to express tangibly the movement of the incarnation, of God’s descent into the world, the movement of the “bowed heavens” (“He bowed the heavens and came down,” Ps. 17:9). It is a movement which expresses the apophatic principle in the theory of theological knowledge, the principle that God’s energy is the prime factor in man’s knowledge of God: “...having known God, or rather being known of God” (Gal 4:9).²⁹ As Michelis writes, “In the Byzantine building, we could say that the composition begins from the top and works downwards, rather than *vice versa*.”³⁰

Apart from the appearance of the building and its symbolic interpretation, the technology of the domes, apses and arches is a striking study in the potentialities of the natural material, the potentialities for transforming static balance into a dynamic composition. The weight of matter is not counterpoised statically, with rationalistically calculated mechanical supports; it is transferred dynamically in the form of thrusts, which are shared out, combined and annihilated reciprocally, as the apses succeed the domes and continue organically to the curved triangular tympana, the arches and the cross. vaults, to end in the decorated capitals, in a manner that is entirely imperceptible because the feeling of weight has flowed away, and the whole construction simply presents an image of a living body.

All this construction is done freely, without a mould. The Byzantines built their domes without using a form, building freely, in the void.³¹ Thus the natural material loses all weight, all artificial support; the weight of matter is transformed into relationship, into a connection and communion of “reasons.” The material is no longer a neutral object: it is *the product of an action*, a personal operation. We may recall here the words of St Gregory of Nyssa: “None of the things we consider attributes of the body is in itself the body; neither shape, nor color, nor weight, nor height, nor size, nor anything else that we

²⁹ See N. Nisiotis, *Preface to the Theory of Theological Knowledge* (Athens, 1965).

³⁰ P.50.

³¹ Michelis, p. 50.

consider as a quality; but each of these is a 'reason,' and it is the combination and union of these which becomes a body."³²

So the body of the faithful which comes together in the church building to constitute and manifest the Church, the Kingdom of God and the new creation of grace, is not simply housed in this architectural construction, but forms with it a unified space of life and an event of life. The building joins the people in "celebrating" the eucharist of creation, the *anaphora* of the gifts of life to the Giver of life, forming an image of the new heavens and new earth through a dynamic "passage to the archetype." The building and the people together, the "reason" of matter harmonized with the hymn of glory which affirms human freedom, compose the universal liturgy of the Church, the manifestation of Christ's body. By His incarnation Christ enthroned the whole of material creation on the throne of God: creation became the flesh of the Word, and all the world became the Church.

This reality of God who has become man, and of the world which has become the Church, is expressed in Byzantine architecture by yet another technical concept of striking genius: the introduction of the human scale into the dimensions of the building. All parts of the church are measured according to man's dimensions. The doors, windows, railings and columns are to the measure of man, and retain the same measurements regardless of the size of the building. The measurements are multiplied but not increased. Thus in Hagia Sophia, for example, the lines of arches have five openings at ground level and seven on the upper level, and the windows in the tympana of the arches multiply in successive rows so that the smallest openings correspond with largest; the space increases the higher we look, broadening out and finally breaking into infinity amidst the forty windows in the crown of the dome.³³

In this way, the Byzantine architect succeeds in preserving as the measure of his building the "great world in miniature" of the human body, creating the living unity of a body with organic members, the reality of a whole which does not do away with the part but makes it stand out, and the reality of the part which is not lost in the whole but defines it. This organic relationship between the part and the whole, the elevation of the human measure to the dimensions of the building as a whole, is the most thrilling tangible formulation of the truth of the Church, of the relationship between the person and the totality of nature. Nature is defined by the person; it does not define the person. The Church, as a new nature of grace, is not a monolithic organization which imposes itself in an authoritative manner upon the separate individuals; it is an organic unity of persons who go to make up life as communion, and communion as a unified, living body,

³² Michelis, p. 50.

³³ Michelis, P. 37.

without vanishing in the totality of that body. The image of the Church incarnate in the Byzantine building is an image of the body of the incarnate Word; it is also the space within which we see manifested the personal gifts and energies of the Comforter, and the personal, free submission of the Son to the Father's will, His participation in it, in the free "dialectic" of death and resurrection.

Byzantine architecture succeeded in conveying the image of Pentecost, the creative work of the Holy Spirit who builds the Church as flesh of the Word, which is also the flesh of the Virgin, an incarnate affirmation by man's personal freedom of the Father's pre-eternal will for the "deification" of the world. The Father "foreknows," the Word "effects," and the Spirit "perfects" the body of the Church— the created universe is "filled with the light" of the divine energy of the Trinity. In the Byzantine church building the light plays an organic role in forming the liturgical space. The brilliant natural light of the East is tamed by the position of the windows, their relatively small size and their large number. It enters the space at a slant, indirectly; it falls on the domes and apses, and "turns back on itself" to be diffused everywhere. It penetrates the marble slabs of the walls and becomes one with the colors in the icons, and folds back within the space to become "inner" light, "light of the heart," the light of the transfiguration of the created world.

It would be an immense subject to study the use of light in Byzantine architecture, the way it is totally transformed into a real "architecture of light,"³⁴ a tangible expression of the space in which the Holy Spirit is personally present and personally received. Gothic architecture expresses an absolute Christological interpretation of the Church as a strictly constructed body, centralized in its organization; it makes use of a unified and concrete space which leads us progressively through the aisles to the high altar. By contrast Byzantine architecture, with its interpretation of the Church as the trinitarian mode of existence, marks out a space which is concrete and yet without bounds, a space continually divided up which yet has its center everywhere. The eucharist is accomplished everywhere, in the place where each Christian is present, bearing in himself Christ and the Spirit.

We have attempted briefly to demonstrate the ethos expressed in both the Gothic and the Byzantine edifice— the ontological, cosmological and theological premises for the human attitude to natural material expressed in the art of these two cultures. Because of its brevity, this account inevitably presents the subject schematically, in a way that may be arbitrary and is certainly incomplete. Any attempt to draw theoretical conclusions from a work of art runs some risk of being arbitrary, since art expresses experiences and not

³⁴ Olivier Clement, *Dialogues avec le Patriarche Athenagoras*, pp. 278-283.

theorems, and “understanding” it requires participation in the same experiences, not the intellectual interpretation of them.

It is certain that neither in Byzantine nor in Gothic architecture did the craftsmen set out with the intention of expressing ontological, cosmological or theological dogmas and “principles” and imprinting them on the building. But inevitably— and this is where their artistic skill lies— they do express the living experience of those “principles” and dogmas, which in their time were not abstract ideas but the life and practical spirituality of their Church, the *ethos* of their culture. If we insist here on the spiritual and cultural differences expressed by art, this is to give a few hints as to the differentiation in the ethos of technology between East and West. Today the consequences of this differentiation can no longer be exploited for sterile theological polemic or for the sake of confessional self-satisfaction, for technology has created a problem common to East and West, an insoluble crisis for our entire civilization.

The techniques of Gothic architecture on the one hand and Byzantine on the other reveal two different attitudes towards the world, two different ways of using the world. Not only do both have specific starting-points in theology and living experience, but both find specific historical realization outside the realm of art— they express an entire ethos and influence the whole life of a society. As we have said above, we discern an organic link between Gothic architecture and the progressive development of technology, its growth into an absolute, and the alienation of man in industrial societies. And we discover the technique of Byzantine architecture behind the historical realization of the social and cultural ethos of Byzantium and the Greek people under Turkish domination— a realization which never had time properly to confront technocratic ethos of the West, but was rapidly assimilated by it.

The same differentiation in attitude towards the world, ways of using the world and natural material, which is pressed in architectural constructions can also be studied the technique of icon-painting— but with a much greater risk of becoming theoretical and schematic.

5. Religious “naturalism”

In recent decades, Russian theology in the European diaspora has produced some interesting examples of how the symbolism of Eastern Orthodox icons can be interpreted, indicating also how they differ from western religious painting.³⁵ Here we

³⁵ See L. Ouspensky and V.I. Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, tr. G.E.H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Boston, 1969; rev. ed. Crestwood, N.Y., 1982). L. Ouspensky, *Essai sur la Théologie de l'icône dans l'église Orthodoxe* (Paris, 1960; Eng. trans. Crestwood, N.Y., 1980). Paul Evdokimov, *L'art de l'icône—*

need only underline the fact that these differences are not confined to style, choice of theme or allegorical symbolism; they mark a radical distinction and contrast between two views of truth and knowledge, of existence and the world, of the incarnation of God and the salvation of man— in short, they sum up two incompatible ontologies.

Even from the thirteenth century— a key point for our understanding of all subsequent religious and cultural developments in the West— we can no longer speak of ecclesial iconography in Europe, but only of religious painting. And this means that in the western Church artistic expression ceases to be a study and a manifestation of the Church's theology— at least on the preconditions for theology in visual art formulated by the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

Religious art in Europe is dominated by the “naturalistic” or, better, “photographic” representation of “sacred” persons, places or objects. The “sacredness” of what is depicted lies exclusively in the theme, the given meaning of the subject matter, and the allegorical or analogical way the viewer will interpret it. The persons, objects or places depicted are themselves those of everyday experience in dimensional space and measurable time; they have nothing to do with the space and time of the Kingdom, the change in mode of existence which constitutes true life and salvation. Western religious painting does not aspire to transcend the time-bound and ephemeral character of the individual entity as a phenomenon, its subjection to the laws of corruption. and death. In consequence, any young woman can serve as a model for a painting of the Mother of God, any young man can represent Christ or a saint, and any landscape can take the place of the scene of biblical revelation.

theologie de la beaute (Paris, 1970). *Idem, L'Orthodoxie* (Neuchatel, 1965), pp. 216-238. G.P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946). N.P. Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, trans. G.H. Minns (Oxford, 1927). P.P. Muratov, *Les icones russes* (Paris, 1927). One may observe that these examples represent a peculiar and probably typically Russian mentality in interpreting icons, as impressionistic as Russian iconography itself. The themes of the icon are analyzed into detailed aesthetic impressions, usually by means of reduction to geometric patterns; the aesthetic impressions are translated into ideas, and the ideas are used to express in concrete form the symbolism of the thematics, the design and the coloring. A typical example of this way of interpreting icons is the analysis of Rublev's Trinity in Paul Evdokimov's book *L'Orthodoxie*, pp. 233-238. This is a method which certainly expresses its wealth of poetic sensitivity, but often leads to schematic interpretations which fail to do justice to the immediacy and universality of the “semantics” of iconography. It is certainly characteristic that the examples used for these interpretative analyses are taken almost exclusively from the Russian iconographic tradition. The Greek icon (or “Byzantine,” as we say today) displays a strenuous resistance to any intellectual approach. This is probably why the particular interest recently shown by Westerners in Orthodox iconography is confined almost entirely to Russian icons, ignoring the Greek prototypes.

In western religious art, from the thirteenth century it seems that the fundamentals of the ecclesial truth and hope of the faithful were already definitively lost. Visual art no longer seeks out the truth about personal existence beyond dimensional individuality, the possibility of transforming space and time into the immediacy of a relationship or the realization of incorruption and immortality in the communion of saints. The function of painting is purely decorative and didactic— it does not serve as a revelation. It represents the fallen world and tries to give it “religious” meaning, which is to say emotive content, without concerning itself about the possibilities of existence and life beyond entitative individuality. The style— the use of colors, positions, figures and background— is subject to the requirements of “naturalism” and “objectivity.” It seeks to convince us of the “reality” of what is depicted, and reality is understood simply as obedience to the laws of dimensional space and measurable time. And it seeks to evoke emotion “objectively”; hence the perspective, the suppleness, the background and the optical illusion become the artist’s means to arouse emotion, to shock our nervous system and “uplift the soul.”³⁶

The purely artistic reaction to the “photographic” naturalism of the emotional religious style which began in the West with the Renaissance certainly has greater “theological” interest. It is incomparably more consistent with the existential bewilderment of western man, with the tragic impasse created when the truth of the person is lost. In modern western painting, there are heights of creativity which express with striking clarity the hopeless search for possibilities of form beyond “entity,” the revolt against idols which refuses to make the ephemeral identification of “forms” with “essences.” Ultimately they express the dissolution of forms in abstraction, the artist’s attempt to spell out the truth of the world from the beginning, through completely primitive color and shape experiences.

6. The “passage” to the hypostasis of the person through iconography

The problem which Byzantine iconography had to face was the same as that confronting church architecture: How is it possible for natural material to manifest its “rational” potentialities, to be transfigured into flesh of the Word, of the word of life beyond space, time, corruption and death? And more specifically: How can design and color be used to

³⁶ Characteristic is the line of argument used by Calvin in rejecting images and symbols and precluding their presence in churches— even the sign of the cross. Given the premises of the western religious painting he had in mind, a painted church is nothing but “a banner erected to draw men to idolatry.” Oblivious of the iconographic tradition of the undivided Church, he ridiculed the Seventh Ecumenical Council and its decrees: see *Institution de la Religion chretienne*, Book One, X1, §§ 12, 13, 14, 15.

depict not *nature*, the corruptible and mortal individual entities, but the *hypostasis* of persons and things,³⁷ that mode of existence which makes being into hypostasis in true life?

Certainly, the Byzantine icon is not a creation *ex nihilo*. As in the formulation of theological truth, so also in the manifestations of her art the Church has assumed the actual historical flesh of her time, transfiguring what she has assumed into a revelation of the event of salvation, a revelation ever present and immediate “yesterday and today and forever.”

The historical flesh of the Byzantine icon is the Roman art of the first centuries of the Church, or strictly speaking its Greek roots. This ancient Greek art had evolved a technique which permitted the *abstraction* of the individual and circumstantial characteristics of the person or object depicted, so as to reduce the concrete object to a direct vision of its “reason,” inner principle or *essence*. The ancient Greek artist did not aim at a faithful representation of the natural prototype an artificial reproduction of it—but at that form of depiction which makes possible a dynamic and personal view, a *conscious vision* of things.³⁸ Thus “the artifact, the statue, serves as a measure for the beauty of the natural prototype, and not *vice versa*.”³⁹ The artifact is called *agalma*, a statue, because it offers the gladness and rejoicing (*agalliase*) of the true way of looking at the world; it sets out the way to look at the object *with reason*, and relates physical objects to their *rational* reality which, for the Greek, is more real than the incidental impression they create; art offers a way of seeing which interprets the world.

Ancient Greek art thus prepares the way for Byzantine iconography. The Roman painting which comes between them historically is a forerunner of Byzantine icons to the extent that it preserves, albeit in decadent form, elements of continuity from ancient Greek artistic expression, while at the same time making progress in technical skill, especially in fresco painting. But although Byzantine iconography is an organic continuation of the Greek vision and interpretation of the world through artistic representation, it also represents a radical transcendence and transmutation of the

³⁷ Cf. the definition given by St Theodore the Studite: “When anything is depicted, it is not the nature but the hypostasis which is depicted”: *Antirrheticus* 3, 34, PG 99, 405A.

³⁸ This observation arises out of the study by Christos Karouzos, “The Principles of Aesthetic Vision in the Fifth Century B.C.,” in his book *Ancient Art* (in Greek— Athens, 1972), p. 43ff., where he defines the *conscious vision* which characterizes fifth century art, as opposed to the *subconscious vision* which has left its mark on archaic art.

³⁹ Karouzos, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

fundamental characteristics of Greek art. This is because the Byzantine icon represents a cosmology and an ontology totally different from that of the ancient Greeks.

It is certainly through Greek tradition and technique that the Byzantine iconographer reaches the point of transcending the individual and incidental characteristics of the person or object depicted. This transcendence, however, does not aim to manifest the *idea* of the entity, to reduce the actual existent object to an ideal “universal.” For the Byzantine iconographer, the only existential reality beyond corruption and death is the person, the dynamic transcendence of individuality which constitutes a transformation in the mode of existence. It is no longer a matter of reducing the concrete to the abstract universality of an idea which is a “metaphysical” datum, accessible to the intellect alone. At issue is the potential existing in concrete reality, in man’s individual flesh and the flesh of the world, to participate in the true life of personal distinctiveness, of freedom from any natural predetermination. In the icon, the iconographer sets out the personal mode of existence which is love, communion and relationship, the only mode which forms existential distinctiveness and freedom into a fact of life and a hypostasis of life.

How is it possible, then, to use the material means of artistic expression to represent a mode of existence which does not do away with material individuality, but merely removes its existential autonomy, that is to say, the dimensional space of individual contrasts and distances, and measurable time with its progression from earlier to later? This achievement is not unrelated to the artistic talent of the great Byzantine masters. The technique of the icon— the restriction to two dimensions, the rejection of dimensional “depth” and of temporal sequence in events depicted, the use of colors, attitudes, figures and background— leads Greek “abstraction” to a remarkable level of expressiveness, in which the concrete reality operates as a *symbol* of the universal dimension of life. It is a *symbol* in the sense that it *puts together* (*symballei*) or coordinates and reconnects the particular experiences of personal participation in the one, universal mode of existence which is the distinctiveness of the person as dynamically fulfilled in the framework of communion and relationship.

The Byzantine icon, however, is not merely an artistic proposition, an individual achievement by the artist which is put forward as his personal participation and “symbolic” elevation to the universal. It is, properly speaking, the expression of a common attitude of life, an operation of life which the artist undertakes to depict by abstracting as far as possible the elements of his individual intervention. The Byzantines were conscious of the fact that it is the Church which paints the icon “by the hand” of the painter. Thus the technique of abstraction is not an exercise in individual skill aimed at going beyond what is concrete and contingent; it is an exercise in subjecting arbitrary

individual judgment to a set iconographic type, formed from the ascetic experience of earlier teachers of the art, in harmony with the universal experience of the Church.

The subjection of the individual view to a set iconographic type applies not only to the artist, but also to the person looking at the icon. The icon does not put forward a “logically” perfected and ideal view of an entity, but *summons* us to a direct communion and relationship with what is depicted, a dynamic passage to the archetype,⁴⁰ to the hypostasis of what is depicted. And this passage requires the subjugation of individual resistances— of the sentiments, aesthetic emotions and intellectual elevation of the individual— so as to liberate the potential for personal relationship and participation. The set form of iconography works precisely as a starting point, helping us to go beyond individual ways of looking at things and to accomplish a personal passage to the hypostasis of the things depicted, as opposed to the way they appear. This is why we say that Byzantine iconography does not “decorate” the church but has an organic, liturgical function in the polyphony of the eucharistic event, existentially elevating us to the hypostatic realization of life.

The technique of icons is incomprehensible apart from the liturgical experience of icons, the practical acceptance of their *calling* or *beauty*⁴¹— apart from a personal affirmation of their visual witness to the immediate presence of the whole body of the Church, living and departed, militant and triumphant, in the oneness of eucharistic life. In other words, the technique of “abstraction” in Byzantine iconography is much more than a style: it expresses and puts into practice the *ascesis* of the Church. The artist and the person looking at the icon alike are restricted by the canons of asceticism, And totally liberated by the possibilities for abstraction which this same form provides. Through these possibilities we are enabled to attain a dynamic renunciation of the individual way of seeing things and an elevation into harmony with the universal view of persons and things, that of the whole Church.

There are objective rules as to how the iconographer is to make the “background” for the icon, how he is to add the “flesh,” how to achieve the highlights while keeping the background color for the “shadows,” how to do the mouth and eyes and how to add the “lights” at the end. These rules are unwritten and yet absolutely precise, and are not taught theoretically but handed on from master to pupil as an experience of life and *ascesis*. As he studies his art, the pupil is guided by the teacher in the life of the Church

⁴⁰ “For the honor paid to the icon passes to the prototype”: St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 18, 45, PG 32, 149C.

⁴¹ “...as it *calls* all things to itself; hence it is also called kallos (‘beauty’)...” Dionysius the Areopagite, *On Divine Names* IV, 7, PG 3, 701C.

and her truth; he fasts and practices self-abnegation, in order for his icon to be the work of the Church, not his individual contrivance for the Church to recognize in his work the archetype of her truth, The objective rules and the established form of the icon subject the painter's individual view of iconographic truth, his individual idea or conception, to a view which is an event of communion. He represents reality, not as he sees it with his natural eyes, but with the aid of symbols which are models common to the Church's consciousness. "For the making of icons is not an invention of painters," says the decree of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, "but an ordinance and tradition approved by the universal Church... It therefore expresses the conception of the holy fathers and their tradition, not that of the painter. Only the art belongs to the painter. The regulations clearly are those of the venerable holy fathers."⁴²

The paradox, from the viewpoint of anyone without experience of the Church, is that subjecting the artist to set forms of iconography does not restrict his creative inspiration and initiative; it is not a kind of "censorship" or intellectual emasculation imposed on the artist's talent and ability. On the contrary, the more he is freed from his individual aesthetic impulses, the more clearly is revealed the personal distinctiveness of his work, and the whole Church recognizes her own universal truth in what he personally has made. It is extraordinary what artistic progress there has been in Byzantine iconography, what boldness of innovation purely in terms of painting, and what a level of artistic sensitivity has distinguished the various schools and trends in iconography.

Here we should perhaps add that it is essential for the artist to have at the outset a full and detailed knowledge of and competence in "worldly" painting. It is well known that those who were trained in iconography went through long and arduous "studies" in landscape compositions and portraits before coming on to the icon. They knew very well the secrets of the art of painting, and had practiced this art with exceptional assiduity before submitting themselves to the rule of iconography. Here, as in every aspect of the Church's life, the transcendence of nature takes place not in the abstract and intellectually, but with complete faithfulness to what is natural, with real knowledge and study of the resistances and possibilities of nature. The transfigured creation of the Church does not represent an ontological transformation, dematerializing or spiritualizing nature, but an existential transformation. Nature remains the same, but its mode of existence changes. The dematerializing and spiritualizing of nature is simply an intellectual concept, existentially realized as the "moral" imitation of an ideal prototype, and represented in art as a schematic allegory which works by analogy. The existential

⁴² Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, Mansi XIII, 252C; in the edition of J. Karmiris, *The Dogmatic and Symbolic Monuments of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, vol. I (Athens, 1960), p. 238f.

transformation of nature, however, can only be approached in life and art through the exercise of freedom, through the way of repentance. The achievement of Byzantine iconography is that it avoids the danger of “conceptual idols” and remains faithful to the “identity” of nature and the “distinctiveness” of its existential transformation: “It represents distinctiveness, but distinctiveness as likeness.”⁴³

The ascetic study of nature and faithfulness to it, designed to lead us up to its existential transfiguration, appears more clearly in the comparison between Greek (or “Byzantine”) iconography and Russian iconography— a delicate and sensitive issue.⁴⁴

We have mentioned the existence of a rule in Orthodox iconography. The use of this rule defines the scope of the artist’s obedience, the distinction between his personal approach and the experience of the Church; and while it subjugates the individual view, it brings out personal universality without ending in impersonal formalism.

Russian iconography does not always escape the temptation to theoretical formalism, to schematic “style.” Looking at a Russian Orthodox icon, what one finds very often is not proof of the existential transfiguration of nature but rather the *idea* of transfiguration, presented in a schematic and ornamental way. Formalization replaces faithfulness to nature, and tends to aid the *impression* that nature is spiritualized and dematerialized. The folds of the clothing do not correspond to a real body underneath, and the positions and movements of the bodies are not natural but geometrically formal;⁴⁵ the lighting is diffused, almost blending in with the color, so as to give the impression once again that matter has its own light. It is hard to describe these real differences in words, but they become apparent when we compare a Russian and a Greek icon.

This distinction makes Russian iconography more easily accessible to modern western man; it corresponds to the way the European, through his own tradition, understands abstraction as a way of making things spiritual and non-material. Nor is this attitude unrelated to other peculiar features of Russian church life and theology, such as the baroque style which prevailed in Russian church architecture, the way liturgical music was taken over wholesale by the anthropocentric sentimentality of western “harmony,” or the “sophiological” tendencies Russian theology, so akin to western mysticism.

⁴³ See Epiphanius, *Against Heresies* 72, 10, PG 42, 396C.

⁴⁴ This distinction was first drawn to my attention by the artist Andreas Fokas. I am also indebted to him for other valuable observations which have improved my attempts at interpretation.

⁴⁵ See Paul Evdokimov, *L'art de l'icone— theologie de la beaute*, pp. 188-189, 210. *Idem*, *L'Orthodoxie*, pp. 227-228.

7. The last hope

We started with the question: How does the problem of technical skill, of technology, present itself, and what ethos is expressed by technique or technology in the field of liturgical art? And we have tried to seek in church architecture and iconography the particular attitude of life or ethos which is capable of transforming the application of technology into a liturgical and eucharistic action, of making our relationship with matter once again a communion and a personal fulfilment. We cannot go further than a semantic description of the conditions of this attitude, this specific ethos, without a danger of producing a formal deontology.

There is no one theory to specify how the application of technology is to be transfigured into a communal event and a potential for man's existential fulfilment. There is, however a dynamic starting-point for this transformation of life and use of the world. This is the eucharistic synaxis, the communal realization of life and art in the parish and the diocese. No political program, however "efficient," no social ethic however radical, and no method of organizing the populace into "nuclei" for revolutionary change, would ever be able to bring about that transformation of life which is dynamically accomplished by the eucharistic community, or to lead us to a solution of the extreme existential problems which technocracy today has created.

The danger of nuclear annihilation, the lunacy of armaments, the international growth of systems and mechanisms for oppressing and alienating man, the exhaustion of the planet's natural resources, pollution of the sea and the atmosphere, the attempt to repress or forget the thought of death in a hysteria of consumer greed and trade in pleasure— all these, and a host of other nightmarish syndromes, form the world which today greets every infant who becomes a godchild of the Church through holy baptism. And in the face of this world, all we Christians seem like complete infants, feeble and powerless to exert the slightest influence over the course of human history and the fate of our planet. This is perhaps because, through the historical vicissitudes of heretical distortions of our truth— distortions which lie at the root of the present cultural impasse— we seem to have lost our understanding of the manner in which our weakness and powerlessness "perfects" the transfiguring power of the Church. Our power is "hidden" in the grain of wheat and the tiny mustard seed, in the mysterious dynamism of the leaven lost in the dead lump of the world— in the eucharistic hypostasis of our communal body.

The eucharistic community, the resuscitation of our eucharistic self-awareness and identity, the nucleus of the parish and the diocese— these are our "revolutionary" organization, our radical "policy," our ethic of "overthrowing the establishment": these are our hope, the message of good tidings which we bring. And this hope will "overcome the

world”: it will move the mountains of technocracy which stifle us. The fact that the world is being stifled by technocracy today is the fated outcome of the great historical adventure of western Christianity, of the divisions, the heresies and the distortions of the Church’s truth. So equally the way out of the impasse of technocracy is not unconnected with a return to the dynamic truth of the one and only Church. Men’s thirst for life has its concrete historical answer in the incarnation of Christ, in the one catholic eucharist. And the one catholic eucharist means giving absolute priority to the ontological truth of the person, freeing life from the centralized totalitarianism of objective authority, and spelling out the truth of the world through the language and art of the icon. Even just these three triumphs over heresy are enough to move the stifling mountains of technocracy. The field in which this triumph takes place is the local eucharistic community, the parish or diocese; only there can we do battle with the impasse of technocracy. And the more sincere our search for life while the idols of life collapse around us, the more certain it is that we shall meet the incarnate answer to man’s thirst— the eucharistic fulfilment of true life.

It has taken about nine centuries to move from the *filioque*, “primacy,” “infallibility,” and loss of the truth of the person to the present unconcealed and general impasse created by the western way of life. Time is very relative, and no one can say when and through what kinds of historical and cultural development people will perhaps realize that escape from this impasse is a possibility. When the words of these pages are wiped from human memory and all of us have disappeared under the earth, the succession of generations, “all the generations” who make up the Church, will still be continuing to bring about the coming of the Kingdom of God within the eucharistic “leaven.” However far off in time, the escape from heresy is a contemporary event— not because the historical scope of western civilization in its impasse is even now limited, but because such is the present, eschatological truth of the Church, hidden within the eucharistic “leaven.”

In a new age yet to come, the eucharistic realization of the Kingdom will be embodied once again in dynamic forms of social and cultural life, without doing away with the adventure of freedom and sin, because this communal dynamism is the nature of the Church, the organic consequence of her life. This new age will spell out once again, in humility, the truth of the world, the reason in things and the meaning of history: it will once again fashion in the icon the transfigured face of man.

Additional note: Given the limited possibilities of conceptual distinctions, it is difficult to give a clear explanation of the difference between the “transfiguration” of natural material and its “dematerialization.” By the word “transfiguration” we are attempting to express the result of asceticism, of man’s struggle to reveal the truth of matter, the potentiality in the

created world for participation in true life— the possibility for the human body, and man’s construction material and tools, to form a communion; to serve and manifest the “common reason” in ascetic experience, the experience of personal distinctiveness and freedom. On the other hand, by the term “dematerialization” we mean the impression matter gives us when it is tamed by the power of the mind and will; when the hypostatic reality of matter goes almost unnoticed, since the natural matter has been absolutely subjugated to the inspiration of the craftsman, to the meaning he wants the work to serve, and the impression it is meant to make on the spectator. Gothic architecture definitely gives a sense of dematerialized space, an impression of earth raised up to heaven. It is precisely the overpowering violence of the craftsman’s frequently outstanding genius which takes the natural material and subjects it to the demands of the given aim and meaning. In a way that parallels this precisely, the whole of scholastic theology is a brilliant intellectual “dematerialization” of the truth of the Church; it subjugates the “common speech” of the experience of salvation to the interests of individual intellectual certainty and objective support for the truths of the Church. None of this is meant to belittle either the “scientific” genius of the scholastics or the artistic genius embodied in Gothic buildings. No one denies that creations such as Notre Dame in Paris and the Chartres Cathedral are supreme achievements of human art. But as we recognize the aesthetic feat, so we ought also to make a distinction between the ethos and attitude to the natural material expressed by this art on the one hand, and that expressed by other forms of art, which embody man’s struggle for the truth of matter and the world, a struggle with the natural material in order to reveal its personal dimension a struggle and an ascetic effort to bring about the communal event of personal freedom and distinctiveness.

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