

St. Mary of Egypt and St. Zosimas: An Icon of Divine Art Notes on Form and Symbolism

By Hieromonk Silouan

Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you.

John 6: 53

The liturgy itself can be thought of as a work of art comprising several degrees of inspiration. Its center, the Eucharistic sacrifice, belongs to the order of Divine Art; through it is accomplished the most perfect and most mysterious of transformations.

Titus Burckhardt¹

The Divine Art referred to by Titus Burckhardt is nothing other than the Art of Deification. It is God Work, a theurgic transformation that is actualized through the sacraments. Hence, it presupposes human and divine cooperation, created and Uncreated Energy, man as co-worker with God. Without this synergy there is no liberation from the bondage of passions, ignorance and the veil of illusions. This revealed doctrine is of such crucial importance in Orthodox Tradition that even the most holy of solitary ascetics always sought to avail themselves of the Holy Eucharist—the Bread of Life. They knew that without it, all of their monumental effort was for naught, they could not perfect themselves. And when partaking of the Eucharist

¹ T. Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West: Principles and Methods*, Middlesex, Perennial Books LTD, 1986, pp. 59-60.

was physically impossible, “Christ gave them this sanctification in an invisible manner,” or, as St. Nicholas Cabasilas says, “God sent angels to these... with the sacrament... If, however, a man could come to the altar but does not, it is impossible for him to receive the sanctification which the sacrament brings; this is not because he does not come, but because he could come and will not; for this shows that his soul is void of the good dispositions required by the sacrament.”² But not all the angels (messengers) sent were heavenly intellects. Earthly angels, that is, priests bearing the Flesh and Blood of the incarnate *Logos*, were also sent to ascetics living in the desert, in caves, or mountain-side grottoes.

The icon which we will be commenting on (*see color insert at p. 63*) briefly depicts one of the foremost examples among these solitaries: St. Mary of Egypt (ca. 344 - ca. 421), who spent her ascetic labors in the Transjordan desert, repenting from a life of prostitution. Besides the usual feast day of her repose on April 1, the Orthodox Church also commemorates her the 5th Sunday of Great Lent as a prototype of asceticism and repentance. The icon conflates two episodes of her life: St. Zosimas, who discovered St. Mary through divine intervention, imparting to her the Holy Mysteries, and her walking across the waters of the Jordan. Let us now turn to some aspects of the icon’s form and symbolism worthy of consideration.

Through the use of subtle tonalities of light ochre and pink the desert appears to be more a habitation of sweetness and solace than a place of harshness and desolation, reminding us that, “They that sow in tears shall reap in rejoicing” (Ps. 126:5). The moment of the encounter can be said to be taking place in the morning, the golden horizon being symbolic of the arising of the Sun of Righteousness within the heart—the “city” of the Lord—a time of renewal from the darkness of iniquity. As the Psalmist says, “In the morning I slew all the sinners of the land, utterly to destroy out of the city of the Lord all them that work iniquity” (Ps. 100:8). The sky is a gentle blue, evoking clarity, for “When the intellect [*nous*] has shed its fallen state and acquired the state of grace, then during prayer it will see its own nature like a

² St. Nicholas Cabasilas, *A Commentary On the Divine Liturgy*, London, S.P.C.K, 1966, p. 97.

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