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**LIGHT – ICON/STAINED GLASS – ILLUMINATION**

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**Abstract:** God revealed to man during the history of his salvation in two ways: through word and through image. In other words, the divine message was addressed to the hearing and seeing of man. In the second case, revelation was achieved in a complete form. Man was part of a theophanic act, he was enveloped by the divine light and with the help of his spiritual eyes he was able to see, as much as it was permitted, God who is light. This light was not completely strange to man, even though he could not see it with his physical eyes. The uncreated light that God made even from the first day of creation did not disappear when the great light were put in the sky. It had the purpose to arrange creation and to be the environment within which man could meet God and talk to Him face to face. Even though the fall took man out of sight, God established that from time to time this bright environment should be revealed to man in order to call him back to the life within light. These presentations of the Lord in the light of His glory continued after His incarnation. The mystical experiences of the Fathers of the Church (Saint Symeon the New Theologian or Gregory Palamas) constitute a testimony to this respect. But seeing this divine light is not reserved exclusively to the mystics, but may be experienced, partly, by the faithful nowadays. The present study endeavours to provide contemporary man with the necessary premises to experience the sight of the deifying light by means of religious imagery. Whether we have in view (in a proper sense of the expression) icons painted on wood or walls or stained glass imagery, they all contain, hidden within, the kind of light which, once experienced, illuminates man and fills him with light.

**Key words:** Light, stained glass, icon, experience, illumination, contemplation, image, fire, St. Gregory Palamas

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## 1. Introduction

The primordial light fills that which in the beginning was empty and undefined (*tohu vabohu* – Gn 1:1), shedding light (in the proper sense of the word) on the reason/nomos revealed out of that abyss calling (Ps 42:7) and waiting for the discovery of its face (*paneh*), over which the Spirit of God was hovering, warming and giving life to the waters (Chirilă 2009, 96). Light penetrates darkness, illuminates it and cannot be swallowed by it. In fact, darkness accepts to be conquered, it does not resist the light; it cries and waits for its illumination, for its bringing forth into the light. The comforting and enlivening hovering of the Spirit over the deep waters announced the pouring of God over the darkness of non-existence. That starting light was a reflex of the uncreated energies (Chirilă 1994, 48), a sign of the presence of the One Who is Light, of the One Who is the Light of Light and of the One who, while hovering over the waters now as a hatching hen giving life to its eggs (St. Basil the Great 1984, 92), will also reveal Himself in the shape of tongues of fire, to testify to the Trinity. This is shown in the text of the exapostilarion of the Pentecost: “Light is The Father, Light is the Son and Light is the Holy Spirit, who was sent down upon the apostles in tongues of fire. Through Him the whole world is enlightened to worship the Holy Trinity.”

## 2. The uncreated light and its relation to the created world

The purpose of the primordial light is to organise, conquer and restore darkness. The presence of this light renders all things and objects visible. It embraces, clothes and envelops every object it encounters, is united to it, illumines it, reveals it and takes its shape. For these reasons, the act of shining-through of the divine reasons seeded by God into creation is a doxological manifestation by which the Image is revealed into the created images (Chirilă 1994, 49). The connection between this effect of the primordial light and physical light allows us to say that, when the latter passes through the stained glass, the countenance of the iconised/Christified countenances is revealed. Although the role of solar light is that of beautifying, it may also help us understand the manner in which creation in general and these iconised images in particular reveal our Creator. At the same time we should underline the fact that there is no contrast between solar light and the uncreated light regarding their essence; their contrast concerns only their form. While one is created, the other originates from God and is also a principle of the Trinitarian communion (Chirilă 1994, 50).

The sight of this light and man’s participation to the perpetuation of its presence into creation generates a restoring act by which man opens

himself to the sight of the divine glory in eternity. In other words, receiving the light that structured everything at the beginning of the world and that, at the same time, is above all beginning, presupposes the acceptance of a calling, which is to reach out and trace it back to its simple origin. To put it another way, the one who beholds this uncreated light with immaterial and steady eyes has to seek its origin – the *Father of lights* (Jas 1:17) (St. Dionysius the Areopagite 1996, 15).

Being the very essence of light, the primordial light is differentiated from light created on the fourth day, emitted by the astral objects: sun, moon and stars. This is the kind of light that man was to enjoy first, but his ontological calling in pursuit of the Light, of the One Who was *Father of lights*, demanded that he should become subject of the incarnation of the primordial light endlessly shining forth from God. When he sinned, man lost his clothing of glory and exchanged this bright garment for one made of skin. Because he was no longer able to embody light, Light Himself (Jn 8:12) descended from heaven and became incarnate, to render thinner the materiality of our being to the point where it achieves the transparency in which “light is present as object enveloped by light, that is to say, not as a loss of man’s countenance in the Countenance, but in the sense of a positive distinction granted to our countenance” (Chirilă 1994, 53). In other words, the incarnate Son of God lifts our fallen nature, fills it with His glory and clothes it in light, thereby destroying darkness, night and death. That is why the light of day itself represents an opportunity for us to accomplish the kind of acts that determine man’s access to the real and everlasting light that calls on us to perform the acts of the day, as children of light and children of the day (1 Thes 5:5), for as long as the Light of the world is with us (Jn 12:35).

### **3. Seeing and experiencing the uncreated light (according to St. Gregory Palamas)**

According to Saint Gregory Palamas, spiritual sight far surpasses the ability of the physical eyes, whose function is to perceive natural light. Whereas to an ordinary man sunrays appear to be only made of light, to a man who has achieved divine sight, the sun, the mighty star of the day, appears as a dark object. The pure sight of the latter exceeds his eyes’ natural ability, so what he can see is that sunlight appears to be mixed with darkness (St. Gregory Palamas 1977, 264). This divine darkness (*as overflow of light*) is immaterial light because of the abundant overflow of light. It is the place where each individual who wants to know and see God must come, rising above sight and knowledge precisely because he does not see and know, aware of the fact that he is beyond the sensitive world. Dionysius the Areopagite calls the same place in turn darkness and light, sometimes saying that it is visible, at other times that it is not, sometimes

that it is known and at other times that it is unknown. But since he says that this light is also darkness because of the overflow of light, it becomes obvious that, in fact, it is light (Stăniloae 1993, 61).

The fact of seeing the unseen that Palamas mentions is superior to the apophatic theology as well since he who sees God, sees the Unseen. In these terms, the unseen becomes visible and it no longer is simply unseen. The unseen gets seen and experienced in a form superior to those that belong to the senses and are visible. This type of vision allows spiritual men to acknowledge the deifying work they experience in their very being through this light that flows from God. This light, says Saint Gregory Palamas, opens man's spiritual eyes to infinity and "always fills him with a hidden light, revealing through it things that have never been revealed. That is why speakers for God call this light endless. Through it, when all knowledge stops, God reveals Himself to the saints, joining them by the power of the Holy Ghost, as God with gods, and being seen by them." (St. Gregory Palamas 1977, 303).

In other words, man opens himself to a perspective of eternal and continuous knowledge which provides him with the necessary environment to grow inside this light of divine love that shares itself to man. As man partakes of the uncreated light, its brightness will intensify so it will send out rays that are more and more powerful. The natural consequence of this increasing illumination is a sharpening of the sight and penetration power of the rays that originate from the being of God. Thus, the eyes will cease to be the object of sight alone, becoming instead the material that light renders more transparent, more translucent. The eyes will permanently adapt to this light and consciously participate in the continuous revelation of the divine mysteries (St. Gregory Palamas 1977, 303).

Following the thought line of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, Saint Gregory Palamas emphasizes the fact that illumination and the sight of this divine light is bestowed on the man who reaches the happy state of wholeness, the one who embraces the image of Christ and allows Him to live inside his being. Only those whose countenance will reflect the image of the Proto-image "will be worth being filled with the visible image of God, in a more beautiful imitation of the spirits above the heavens" (St. Gregory Palamas 1977, 304). Thus, we are able to understand more clearly the reason why, pervaded by the image of Christ, iconographers contemplated the uncreated world in the holy icons and, touched by the One who lived inside themselves, saw with their own eyes the unutterable glory of God. The mysterious communion between iconographers and Christ provided them with the grace of a sight not only equal to that of the heavenly powers that covered their faces before the burning fire of the divinity, but also surpassing it. In keeping with the framework of St Dionysius' thought, we may say that the people in whom Christ mysteriously lives partake of the same divine light enjoyed by the

Thrones, Cherubim and Seraphim, the heavenly powers in close proximity to God. In the kingdom of heaven, man will come to know, through his deified body and in a manner similar to that of the divine angels, the plenitude of God's existence, for he will be deeply and completely impregnated with God. He will know God through the entire universe and through all the people that have become transparent in God (Stăniloae 1995, 169).

Seeing the divine light depends on the work of the Holy Spirit. Not until the Holy Spirit descends into the soul of the man who has cleansed his sight, not until he is carried away, can he see the light. The Spirit is the one who opens the eyes that are mysteriously kept from seeing. Within this revelational space of sight, there are three stages man must pass through. Besides illumination, Saint Gregory points out two additional moments: the clear sight of light and the sight of things in light. The maximum point of revelation, as far as the human mind can perceive, will be attained in the final stage, when all things will be visible in light. At that moment man is no longer separate from light. He can see that the Father is Light, the Son is Light, that Light is the Holy Spirit and that he himself is light, yet not by nature, but by grace: „He who sees... becomes light himself, similar to what he sees; that is to say he is united without blending, being light and seeing light through light. If he looks at himself, he sees light; if he looks to what he sees, it is also light; if he looks to what he sees through, that is also light...” (St. Gregory Palamas 1977, 311). In this way, a mysterious unification takes place, albeit one that is not fusion, in which all become one and the one who looks can no longer be distinguished from what he looks at and from the light through which he looks. He is light looking at light through light.

Penetrating the bright darkness represents the maximum point of revelation. In fact, this darkness is impregnated with light, because, according to the Psalmist, to God are darkness and light one and the same: “Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.” (Ps 139:12). In other words, this darkness is light for those who haven't entered it yet. In the darkness of the divine, seeing through the workings of the mind and the senses is useless. It is a place where only those will enter who, having purified their souls, can get closer to the Unseen, just like Moses did when he entered the darkness on Sinai where God had descended (Ex 20:21).

#### **4. The uncreated light in icons and stained glass**

The light of Mount Tabor is light originating from eternity, which will shine upon us in eternity, ceaselessly, with brilliant rays (St. Gregory Palamas 1977, 289). Those who let themselves be enveloped in this light mystically partake of the beauty of the Kingdom of Heaven where not only

God is Light, but the saints also shine like stars in the sky, spreading themselves the light that floods them. Even the bodies of the saints that partake of divinity become bright. Overflowing with divine glory, they become carriers of the light beautifying the time to come. Thus, icons and especially stained glass works testify to this reality. Not only do they testify to the light of divinity through the transparency of the bodies represented, but they also convey this light to those who contemplate them, illuminating them and clothing them in the bright clothing that Adam once exchanged for garments of skin. This clothing in light marks man's re-entrance into the state of grace, into the paradisiacal state that distinguishes the Kingdom of God.

Those that hide into light can no longer be seen because they already are light. And this light cannot be hidden under a bushel. It shines irradiating from the hearts of those who are pure in body just like the light of a lamp piercing the glass that surrounds it. This is the way in which we think the transparency of the bodies of saints represented in icons can be better understood. While maintaining their morphology, the saints' bodies are similar to glass cases that keep the flame of the divine light burning in order to spread it around them. Unlike the icon, stained glass is flooded with sunlight, allowing us to understand much more easily the idea of light being conveyed, and therefore the illumination of the face that contemplates it.

At the same time, stained glass reveals more clearly (that is naturally, by analogy) the fact that although they partake of the same divine light, the saints' faces may shine differently. Just as a star is different from another in terms of brightness, so do saints shine differently. In other words, although the light is one, the manner in which it is reflected upon the one who contemplates it differs depending on the saints' images. Hence, the light that shines through stained glass reveals to us various ways of receiving the light. Each man receives the light of God depending on his qualities. United with it, he shines according to his own spiritual structure. In fact, the stained glass representation of saints conveys to the observer the message that each of us is called to clothe in light according to his way of being.

The icon is an extension of light, of the Taboric brightness, into creation through man (Uspensky 2002, 496). Still, this does not refer to all men, but only to those who live in the crucified and resurrected Christ, according to the Pauline paradigm ("I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." – Gal. 2:20). This mystical reality has been a challenge for iconographers. They had to paint the icons so as to capture the uncreated inside their artistic creation. To achieve this level of exigency, these iconographers had to undergo a mystical experience that enabled them to render into colour the light that they partook of. We believe it would be more accurate to say that they did more than fill the icons with white lines (highlights); they really enveloped

them in light (Ghenescu 2010, 470). Without such an experience, iconographers would never have succeeded in capturing the uncreated light into the icon. And this mystical reality cannot be replicated, no matter how accurate the work of a painter who reproduces Rublev's *Trinity* may be. The light flooding that icon cannot be reproduced without having really experienced the mystery of divine light. Hence, it is necessary that the iconographer who wishes to carry that light over into the icon should prepare his soul for the experience of that sight (Lossky 1992, 249; Evdochimov 1993, 209).

Association with physical light can be used to enhance the value of stained glass, helping to facilitate, to some extent, the understanding of these notions of theology that cannot be easily grasped and internalised. By passing through the colours of stained glass which already portrays an eternal reality, physical light fills the eyes of those who behold or simply view this reality. By having that which is the *lamp of the body* (Mt 6:22) filled with the iconographic image, the mark of the Proto-image is planted inside the beholder/viewer's nature (even though the stained glass may represent a saint, and not Jesus Christ, Who is the Image of the Father - 2 Cor 4:4), the Image in which man was created at the beginning of time (Gn 1:26-27). Once the eye is filled by this iconographic light, the whole body and soul will certainly follow. Here it may be necessary to underline the fact that the above-mentioned metaphor is employed by Matthew the Evangelist to indicate the spiritual light shining forth out of man's soul.

Next, we may note the fact that the iconic light, filled with the Christic image, becomes part of the beholder/viewer. It is no longer taken to be a foreign object. The divine imprint of the image impressed upon human nature makes it recognise the call to likeness of the iconic image as it passes through the eyes and soul. When we say that the iconic light is internalised by the beholder/viewer, we mean that Light is already within his soul. Man heard the voice of the Word, opened his eyes - the gates of his soul - and received Jesus Christ inside. Entering his soul, the Light calls for the divine sparkle created into His Image to feast on the eternal light (cr. Apoc 3:20).

The next level of this association allows us to state that the eyes that are filled with the iconic light come to see the realities before them in a different light. Physical sight is overwhelmed by this spiritual sight which enables man to see what could never be seen had his eyes not been filled by this new, eternal and eternalising, light. In other words, it is no longer man who looks through his own eyes, but Christ living within him who does so (Gal 2:20).

After such an experience, the iconographer may illuminate the icon and prepare it for contemplation, offering the beholders a grain of the Taboric light, a gate to the undying light of eternity. In this way, the icon is an art work that gives out light of its own light, symbolised by white, or white and golden, lines (Trif 2009, 401). In other words, icons uncover the

transparent morphology of those who had, even while still here, internalised this transition from their earthly image to their likeness to the one Who is Light, and so enable us to experience in advance the light of the eternal Kingdom of God (Bizău 2005, 86).

To represent the faces and clothes of saints in Byzantine icons, iconographers employed highlights (as symbols of the eternal light), whose function is to underline the presence of the uncreated light/energy to which the saints were connected both in their earthly lives and in eternity. These are elements that underline their living in the eternal light of God. The white background and white lines in icons obey neither the laws of physical reflection nor those of optical perception. The light given off by the highlights on the clothes and faces of the represented saints is not their own; these highlights suggest the fact that the saints are enveloped in a light that penetrates them, lights them up with a divine fire that does not burn, but radiates out – a heavenly, uncreated kind of light. That is why every icon should be a source, a fountain of Taboric light (Gusev 2007, 339).

The inner light of the icon of the Holy trinity painted by Andrei Rublev (around 1407) draws our particular attention. The highlights technique employed by this iconographer is based on nuances that can hardly be perceived, rendering the sparkling light pellucid. The Russian painter's choice of transparent blue-green colours and tints gives one the impression that the icon is mystically illuminated by a bright cloud, a cloud enveloped in Taboric light. Specialists call this effect *smoke transparent*. Wrapped in it, the bodies of the three Angels seem translucent. This impression is more definite in the case of the Angel to the viewer's right. Rublev chooses some delicate hues of violaceous pink which, together with the brightness of the blue tunic and the highlights of the folds, convey the impression of transparency (Sendler 2005, 188).

If in the case of icons the light originating from within has nothing to do with natural light, in the case of stained glass natural light is fused with the inner light of the icon, enhancing the force of its brightness and the impact it has upon the viewers. At the same time, unlike icons or frescoes where light adds brightness to the colours rendering them more vivid, stained glass works showcase light as connected to colours, penetrating through glass and becoming one with them (Huyghe 1960, 99). Light becomes the symbol of the Holy Spirit descending and sheltering the Holy Virgin Mary. Saint Athanasius the Great often refers to the same image to explain the mystery of incarnation: the light passes through glass without damaging it, penetrates into the room and illuminates it.

The gracious light of the icon invites the viewer to contemplation. This call engages man in a spiritual dynamic by which the divine light is assimilated and passed on to others. The countenance of the one who resides inside the icon's field of vision or contemplation fills with light and his face, similar to that of Moses (Ex 34:29-30), becomes radiant.



## 5. Illumination, or on the telos of man

There was a time when the very first icon that an iconographer monk had to paint was the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. The purpose was to make the iconographer partake of the divine light radiating from the transfigured body of our Saviour. The task of iconising the Taboric light was a particular didactic act by means of which the iconographer was urged to contemplate, in an ascetic exercise, the uncreated light that revealed itself to the people on Mount Tabor. Moreover, before the iconographer began his work, he had to ask a priest to read to him the troparion of the Taboric epiphany, so that, on the one hand, he could understand that he had to be able to become a bright flame of light himself, and on the other, to realize the fact that, in order to see the Taboric light, he himself had to be transfigured. The three disciples that witnessed the Transfiguration of our Lord were also transfigured. Without this transfiguration and clothing in light they wouldn't have been able to see the body overflowing with light of our Lord Jesus Christ, and they wouldn't have partaken of the bright glory of the divinity kenotically hidden, the glory that, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, they could now see with their own earthly eyes. God cannot be seen unless the Holy Spirit alters/transfigures the eyes of man. Jesus Christ, in whom all the fullness, glory and light of the Deity live in bodily form (Col 2:9), was in His humanity a *glass lampstand* spreading the uncreated light of the Trinity (Evdochimov 1993, 245). This may also be the interpretative key to understand Motovilov's experience, to whom Saint Seraphim of Sarov reveals the uncreated light. After this mystical experience, during which the prince could hardly look at the radiant face of the saint, the latter tells Motovilov that, unless the prince were blessed with a gracious state of illumination, he wouldn't be able to see this light. Transposing this observation into the realm of iconography, we may say that, if the divine grace contained in the icon by the work of the Holy Spirit does not illuminate the beholder/viewer, he will not be able to see the light (Evdochimov 1993, 166; Quenot 2006, 177).

The sight of this light transfigures the entire being of the one enveloped in light. Man's body itself participates in this mystical experience, being filled with light (Damian 2003, 184). This divine light sometimes lifts the body to unspeakable heights, transforming and adjusting the body to its own nature. The uncreated light conveys its own brightness to man's body, rendering it transparent, rendering it luminous. Moses' radiant face (Ex 34:35) and the angelic brightness of the face of Saint Archdeacon Stephen (Acts 6:15) are only a few of the biblical testimonies of this transformation, with echoes throughout the entire history of the Church, right to the present day (St. Gregory Palamas 1977,

273). With the deification and illumination of the body, the light can also be perceived by the physical eyes.

To be like God or, with a phrase from our Creed, to be light of the Light (Chirilă 1994, 52), one must follow the one Who is the Light of the world (Jn 8:12), stop wandering in darkness, and achieve the light of life (Chirilă 2002, 137). The light of Christ, which shines on man right from his coming into the world, always guides him towards light and prevents him from losing himself, revealing itself through contemplation and prayer of the heart. By ceaselessly calling His name into one's heart, saying *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, the sinner!*, man reaches deeper and deeper into light, into the profoundness that is bright and full of God's light (Pașca-Tușa 2011, 67). The prayer of the heart is, according to the words of Saint Symeon the New Theologian, "Spirit-giving, bearing the divine gifts and purifying the heart, casting the demons aside and saving from sins, healing body and soul and offering the divine illumination, for Christ is the true light, sharing His grace and brightness with those who call Him. *And the light of our Lord, he says, will be upon us, and whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*" (St. Symeon the New Theologian PG 155, 541-549).

These words are the fruit of a mystical experience. Saint Symeon would never have known this unless he had experienced it. Thus, one of his disciples, Saint Niketas Stethatos, testifies seeing with his own eyes, one night, the light bestowed on his teacher from heaven (Gouillard 2008, 120). This kind of experience of a man being enveloped in the uncreated light has a powerful impact on the lives of both those who undergo it, and those who, by divine permission, are able to see it. Participating in such an episode, even though only as a witness, may generate, in the soul of the onlooker, the wish to experience the heavenly light himself. It goes without saying that the person witnessing such a mystical event may himself be touched by the work of the Spirit. As in the case of prince Motovilov (the one who saw the radiance of the face of Saint Seraphim of Sarov), Saint Niketas had too, to a certain extent, partaken of the uncreated light.

## 6. In place of conclusions

Not only does the light of God shine upon man, it also fills him with light, stamping his countenance, marking it with the light of His face, according to the words of the psalm (Ps 4:6) (Pașca-Tușa 2016, 12-3). Besides indicating the presence of God, this imprint of the divine light on a man's face is meant to propagate the glow of the uncreated light to those who are not worthy of seeing the light directly. Frightened by the light, lightning, fire, thunders and trumpets signalling God's presence on Sinai, the Israelites asked Moses to speak to the Lord first and they would obey

him, and also to ask God not to speak directly to them, as they were afraid they were going to die (Ex 20:18-19). Frightened by God's voice, they were all the more terrified by the thought of beholding His glory. In fact, they could not even bear to look at the shining face of Moses (Ex 34:35). How could they have withstood seeing God face to face? Hence, those who are marked by the light of God's countenance share something of the glow of the uncreated light with their fellow men.

These persons, on whom God shines the light of His face, assume the role of the Cherubim assigned by God to guard the entrance to the Garden of Eden with flaming swords ablaze. The role of these angelic beings with fiery faces was to permanently illuminate the darkness in which man lived after leaving heaven, filling his eyes with the divine light they radiated. The fallen man, the sinner, can no longer behold the One who is light alone. That is why God places before him an icon of His shining glory, to spark within him the wish to see again the Image in which he was created (Pașca-Tușa 2017). Adopting the comparison made by the hymnographer who composed the text of the Cherubic hymn, we may say that those who become worthy of seeing the glory of God mysteriously represent the Cherubim, urging those who wish to follow them to set aside the cares of this world. By association, we may understand the revealing role that light plays in art. In saying this, we also refer to the light shining out from icons. The saints in the icons illuminate the beholder, enveloping him in the rays of the true Light that they partake of through the purification of their souls. Having disciplined their souls and saved them from the darkness of ignorance (St. Basil the Great 1986, 133-4), they have become our luminaries.

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