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Aspects of the Human Person's Experience of the Divine as reflected in the Service and the Icon of the Feast of our Savior's Transfiguration

Abstract

After a short biblical introduction presenting the event happened on Mount Tabor as it is reflected in synoptic Evangelists narration the article is continuing with a general perspective of the evolution of the Feast of Transfiguration in both Eastern and Western liturgical traditions. Two theological aspects are following: firstly, Transfiguration of our Lord described by hymns which contained in Vespers and Matins, Antiphons and Divine Liturgy



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and secondly, Transfiguration of our Lord in the Icon of the Feast. Description and interpretation of the icon of Transfiguration could be found in the last subsection of the article. As a way of conclusion, the author underlines the profound relations between biblical texts, liturgical hymns, iconography and theology each of them supporting, revealing and explaining the others and being supported, revealed and explained by the others.

Keywords

Transfiguration, biblical approach, liturgical theology, hymns, iconography

1 The Transfiguration of our Lord according to the descriptions of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke

The event of the Transfiguration of our Savior on Mont Tabor is narrated only by the synoptic Evangelists. In the Gospel according to John, the narration of this event is missing.

Although these three narrations of the Transfiguration of our Lord are very similar, their content is far from being identical, differentiating elements having their importance and significance. In order to observe these differences, I would like to present these three descriptions, showing the particular elements of each of them¹.

¹ Kenneth Stevenson, *Rooted in the Detachment. Living the Transfiguration* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2007), pp. x-xi.

Matthew²	Mark	Luke
"Verily, I say to you, there are some of those standing here who in no wise shall taste of death until they see the Son of man coming in His Glory"(16:28)	"And He was saying to them, 'Verily I say to you, that there are some of those standing here who in no wise shall taste of death until they see the kingdom of God having come in power" (9:1).	"But of a truth, I say to you, there are some of these standing here who in no wise shall taste of death until they see the kingdom of God" (9:27).
"And after six days Jesus taking along Peter and Iakovos and John, <i>his brother</i> , and bringeth them up into a high mountain in private,"(17:1)	"And after six days Jesus taketh along with Him Peter and Iakovos and John, and bringeth them up alone into a high mountain in private; and He was transfigured before them" (9:2).	"And it came to pass, about eight days after these words, that He took along Peter and John and Iakovos, and went up into the mountain to pray" (9:28).
"and he was transfigured before them. And His face did shine as the sun, and His garments became white as the light" (17:2).	"And His garments became shining, exceedingly white as snow, such as no fuller on the earth is able to whiten" (9:3).	"And it came to pass, as He was praying, the appearance of His countenance was different, and His clothing became white, flashing as with lightning" (9:29).
"And behold, Moses and Elias appeared to them, talking together with Him" (17:3).	"And Elias appeared to them with Mosis, and they were talking together with Jesus" (9:4)	"And behold, two men were talking with Him, who were Moses and Elias, who appeared in glory and were speaking of His decease which

² Quotations are from *The Orthodox New Testament* (Buena Vista, CO: Holy Apostles Convent, 2000).

		<p>He was about to fulfill in Jerusalem. But Peter and those with him were weighed down with sleep, and after they fully awoke, they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him" (9:30-32).</p>
<p>"And Peter answered and said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if Thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles: one for Thee, one for Moses, and one for Elias'" (17:4)</p>	<p>"And Peter answering said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for Thee, one for Moses, and one for Elias.' For he knew not what he should say, for they were greatly afraid" (9:5-6).</p>	<p>"And it came to pass, as they were parting from Him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles, one for Thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias,' not knowing what he was saying" (9:33).</p>
<p>"While he yet spoke, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them. And behold, there came to be a voice out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My Son, the Beloved, in Who I am well pleased; be hearing Him.' And after the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were exceedingly afraid. And having come to them, Jesus touched them and said, 'Arise,</p>	<p>"And there came to be a cloud overshadowing them. And a voice came to be out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My Son, the Beloved, be hearing Him.' And suddenly, after they looked round about, they saw no one any more, but Jesus alone with themselves" (9:7-8).</p>	<p>"And while he was saying these things, a cloud came to be and began to overshadow them, and they were afraid as they were entering into the cloud. And there came to be a voice out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My Son,</p>

and cease being afraid.' And after they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus alone" (17:5-8).		the Beloved, be hearing Him.' And while the voice came to be, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and related to no one in those days anything of what they had seen" (9:34-36).
"And as they came down from the mountain, <i>Jesus</i> enjoined them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead" (17:9)	"And as they came down from the mountain, He gave them express orders that they should relate to no one what they saw, except whenever the Son of Man should rise from the dead" (9:9).	

When contemporary biblical, theological exegetes refer to the event that took place on Mount Tabor, they go into smallest details, asking questions and providing answers, launching hypotheses that need long and ample research. I am not going to go through all those details. However, I will limit myself to the reports that comparatively look at these three narratives of the Transfiguration of our Savior. Comparative studies, whether detailed or not, are fascinating, as a Biblicist once emphasized³. Whereas Saint Mark's description is simple in expression and not as generous in content, Saint Matthew's is considered distinct and richer theologically. Saint Luke's is more extensive than the other narratives because it introduces more words and expressions which have generated unresolved controversies

³ Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2009), p. 112.

among researchers⁴. In Saint Luke's narrative, there are two specific elements that influenced significantly the biblical interpretation:

- 1) the time when the Transfiguration took place, "as He was praying" (Luke 9: 29) and
- 2) and the discussion between Moses and Elijah "who appeared in glory and were speaking of His end which was about to be fulfilled in Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31). The later explicitly connects the Transfiguration of our Lord to His Passion⁵.

Another element introduced by Saint Luke suggests that the Transfiguration took place at night, since, according to some researchers, "Peter and those with him were weighed down with sleep; and after they fully awoke, they saw His glory and two men who stood with Him" (Luke 9:32)⁶.

It is important to mention also the fact that unlike Saints Matthew and Mark, in whose narratives is mentioned the six-day interval, Saint Luke approximates the time interval by using the words "about eight days" (Luke 9:28). According to some researchers and exegetes, the six days to which the Evangelists Matthew and Mark refer, and the eight days mentioned by Saint Luke have a symbolic value. Those six days are related to the days of the week. They are also related to the six days spent by Moses when he climbed Mount Sinai the second time, in the cloud that surrounded the mountain and on the seventh day the Lord called him from the midst of the cloud (Exodus 24:15-16)⁷. The high priest of the Old Testament would also spend six

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ E. Laing, "Die Verklärung Jesu nach dem Markus Evangelium," in *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 1922), quoted in Arthur

days for purification prior to the Yom Kippur feast day when he would bring sacrifice for the atonement of sins⁸.

According to Saint John Damascene, even though there is an apparent contradiction among the three narratives, all the accounts are correct and speak of the same thing: "Indeed and rightfully there are mentioned 'eight' as well as six 'days', by the preachers of the truth- says the Holy Father. For there is no disagreement what so ever in what is been said, but rather the accord given by the Holy Spirit is evident; for it is not them that speak but the Spirit of God, speaking within them. (...) Therefore, those who said, 'after six days' left aside extremities, which is to say the first day and the last day, reckoning only the days set in the middle; whereas the one who reckoned eight days, reckoned all of them together. For people used to count both ways"⁹. According to the understanding of Saints John Damascene, the Evangelists Matthew and Mark considered only the core, whereas Saint Luke also counted the periphery.

It is worthwhile to underline that in the view of the same Holy Father, but also of other Holy Fathers, both of the numbers six and eight are symbols of perfection. Although the number six is often associated with a lack, with deficiency, or with imperfection, Saint John Damascene asserts the opposite: "And 'six', he says, is taken as the first perfect number. Because it is

Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, p. 113.

⁸ *Dicționar enciclopedic de iudaism*, ed. Viviane Prayer, trans. Viviane Prayer, C. Litman, and Țicu Goldstein (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2000), p. 632.

⁹ Sfântul Ioan Damaschin, "Cuvânt la Schimbarea la Față a Domnului și Mântuitorului nostru Iisus Hristos," in: *Cuvântari la sărbători împărătești, la sărbători ale Maicii Domnului și la Sfinți*, trans. Gabriel Mândrilă and Laura Mândrilă (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2010), p. 84.

composed twice from its own: or, three is half of six, two is one-third, and one is one-sixth and counted all together they make a perfect whole. God also created through the power of the Word, in six days, the whole visible world. Therefore, perfection is natural for those who behold the divine glory, which is beyond all, the only fully perfect"¹⁰. When it refers to the "eight days", Saint John Damascene says: "Eight is a prefiguration of the future (of the things to come). (...) The things of the eighth age had to be revealed to the perfect ones in the eighth day"¹¹.

Another element that generated debate among researchers has to do with the mountain on which the Transfiguration of our Lord took place. According to Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, for example, this event took place on Mount Tabor¹². This tradition was confirmed over the years by the Churches built there, starting with the Church built by the Empress Helen¹³ at the beginning of the fourth century, to the churches existing today, by the monastic life, and by the multitude of the pilgrims. According to some recent researchers, the mount of the Transfiguration would have been Hermon, a 2814-meter mountain, sometimes called mount Sirion¹⁴, a high mountain of 2814 m, sometimes called the Sirion (Deuteronomy 4: 48). This mountain was considered to be sacred by the first inhabitants of Canaan. Today this is identified with Jebel es-Sheik (the

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 84-85.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 85.

¹² Sfântul Chiril al Ierusalimului, *Cateheza a XII-a*, in *Catehezele*, part I, trans. D. Fecioru (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1943), p. 288.

¹³ Ene Braniște, *Liturgica generală cu noțiuni de artă bisericască, arhitectură și pictură creștină*, 3rd ed., rev. Nicolae D. Necula (Bucharest: BASILICA, 2015), p. 225.

¹⁴ Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, p. 113.

sheik's mountain), and it is located 48 km southwest of Damascus. The peak of this mountain is covered with snow all year long. This snow causes the abundant dew to which David refers when he says: "As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there, the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore" (Psalm 133:3).

The fact that it is close to the Cezareea of Philipi prompted some to believe and assert that Hermon would be the "high mountain" from the description of St. Mark (9, 2)¹⁵. The views from the peak of this mountain (in reality it is about three peaks) are spectacular and far-reaching, allowing the viewer to see the horizon of the Mediterranean Sea up to Damascus in Syria, from Lebanon to Mount Moab, from the Valley of the Jordan to the Dead Sea, and over Galilee to Jerusalem and beyond.¹⁶

It is interesting that, although historical and liturgical tradition have Mount Tabor as the place of the Transfiguration of the Lord, nevertheless the service structure of the Feast of the Transfiguration uses on several occasions a segment of verse 13 of Psalm 88, "Tabor and Hermon shall rejoice in thy name."¹⁷ Also, one of the stichera idiomela of the Aposticha of Great Vespers theologizes on the theme : "David, the ancestor of God, foreseeing in the Spirit the coming of Thine only-begotten Son in the flesh unto men, summoneth creation from afar to

¹⁵ J. D. Douglas, "Hermon," *Dicționar Biblic*, trans. Societatea Misionară Română (Oradea: Cartea Creștină, 1995), p. 526.

¹⁶ Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, p. 114.

¹⁷ The Aposticha from Small and Great Vespers, as the Prokeimenon at Matins, as the little entrance of the Divine Liturgy. *The Menaion of the Orthodox Church*, trans. Isaac Lambertsen (Liberty, Tennessee: St. John of Kronstadt Press, 1997), vol. 11, pp. 69-70, 73-74.

gladness, and crieth out prophetically: "Tabor and Hermon shall rejoice in Thy name!" For, having ascended that mountain with Thy disciples, O Savior, Thou wast transfigured, and didst cause the darkened nature of Adam to shine again, imparting to it the glory and splendor of Thy divinity. Wherefore, we cry unto Thee: O Lord, Creator of all things, glory be to Thee!"¹⁸.

2 Brief History of the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord

This feast, called in the *Menaion*, *the Transfiguration of the Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ*¹⁹ (*Ἡ μεταμόρφωσις τοῦ Κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*, *Domini Jesu Christi Transfiguratio*), or in Slavonic *Preobrajenia* or *Probojenia*, has, according to some scholars, its origins in the annual feast day of the consecration of a church dedicated to this event, built in the 4th century by Empress Helen on Mount Tabor²⁰. This premise is based on the historian Nicephorus Callistus' notes that say that in the year 326, Empress Helen built a church on Mount Tabor. It soon became a place of pilgrimage, having a path of marble stairs that would give access to the peak of the mountain. The excavations conducted in modern times by Franciscan monks have led to the discovery of the ruins of two ancient churches, one during the Crusades, and another four or five centuries later²¹. In the 6th century, Mount Tabor has become an

¹⁸ *The Menaion*, the second stichera from the Aposticha, p. 72.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁰ Ene Braniște, *Liturgica generală cu noțiuni de artă bisericască, arhitectură și pictură creștină*, p. 255; Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, p. 129.

²¹ Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, p. 129.

important ecclesiastical center with a Bishop's Chair. This Bishop was mentioned in documents of the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553). Other researchers conclude that the celebration started in the 5th century,²² without specifying a time frame, while others place its beginnings at the end of the 5th century²³. In any case, from Palestine, this feast spread quickly in the East. At the end of the fifth century or the beginning of the sixth century, it was adopted by the Nestorians, and in the seventh century by the Syrians²⁴.

In the East, there is a feast mentioned in a liturgical Jerusalem calendar in the seventh century; in the Constantinopolitan Synaxarion as well as in some Greek manuscripts this feast appears in the eighth century. It is then that the feast becomes widespread in the East. Saints John Damascene and Cosmas of Maiuma are reckoned among the first to have composed hymns for this feast day²⁵.

In the Byzantine tradition, the feast day is observed on the 6th of August. The feast day is also celebrated on the same day in the

²² Hugh Wybrew, *Orthodox Feasts of Jesus Christ and The Virgin Mary, Liturgical Texts with Commentary* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2000), p. 21.

²³ Philippe Rouillard, *Les fêtes chrétiennes en Occident* (Paris: Les Éditions du CERF, 2003), p. 127.

²⁴ Irénée Henri Dalmais, Pierre Jounel, Aimé Georges Martimort, *The Church at Prayer. An Introduction to the Liturgy*, IV, ed. Aimé Georges Martimort et al., trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1985), p. 97; Philippe Rouillard, *Les fêtes chrétiennes en Occident*, p. 127; Feuillen Mercenier, Francois Paris, *La prière des Eglises de rite Byzantin. Les Fêtes. Grandes fêtes fixes*, 2nd ed. (Belgium: Edition de Chevetogne, 1953), p. 380.

²⁵ Ene Braniște, *Liturgica generală cu noțiuni de artă bisericească, arhitectură și pictură creștină*, p. 255.

Chalcedonian Church of Ethiopia, while the Armenian Church celebrates it on the seventh Sunday after Pentecost²⁶.

In the West, the transition to, reception, and establishment of this holyday transpired slowly. Its significance, even up to today, has not achieved the level of importance that the feast day has within the Orthodox tradition²⁷. Some scholars are of the opinion that the Transfiguration in the West was observed as early as the fifth century when it seems to have been observed on Ash Saturday (the first Saturday of Great Lent) and the following Sunday. St. Matthew the Evangelist's narration of the event on Tabor was read as part of the Gospel reading during the service.

Pope Leo the Great's sermon on the Transfiguration of the Lord seems to have been given at the celebration of this feast day held at the beginning of Great Lent. The transition of the celebration from the beginning of Great Lent to the 6th of August is difficult to determine. Sources of August 6th as the feast day can be traced to a reference made by a Spanish Bishop in 845, and to a manuscript from the 11th century preserved in the Vatican Library. In 1152, the complaint of a priest is recorded who objects to the expansion of the number of feast days under the influence of monasticism, holding the feast day of the Transfiguration to be an innovation. During the same time frame, the feast was adopted at Cluny²⁸.

There are also opinions according to which, in the West, the feast of the Transfiguration arrived in the 9th century and spread quickly in France, Spain, and the Germanic countries. Rome is mentioned in the 12th century, but the

²⁶ Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, p. 128.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Transfiguration's definitive acceptance throughout the West was made during the reign of Pope Callistus III in the year 1457, who imposed this feast day because of his wish to mark the victory of the Hungarians led by John Hunyadi over the Turks at Belgrade in 1456. It was known as *Festum Transfigurationis Domini*²⁹.

The Roman Catholic tradition, however, does not emphasize the Transfiguration of the Savior, but rather the preparation of His disciples for coping with events that would happen in the days after Tabor, events that would center on the Lord's crucifixion. In the current Roman Catholic tradition, the Transfiguration is a celebration that anticipates the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (14 September). This link between the Transfiguration and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross is based on a tradition whereby the Transfiguration of the Savior, despite the chronology mentioned in the Gospels, would have occurred forty days before His crucifixion³⁰. Fixing the date of August 6 was done by reference to the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (14 September), so that the feast of the Transfiguration preceded the Exaltation.

It is interesting to note that the Orthodox East has not adopted this Western tradition, nor could they have, because these feast days had already been long established. Even so, on August 6th

²⁹ Ibid.; Philippe Rouillard, *Les fêtes chrétiennes en Occident*, p. 127; Feuillen Mercenier, Francois Paris, *La prière des Eglises de rite Byzantin. Les Fêtes. Grandes fêtes fixes*, p. 380; Irénée Henri Dalmais, Pierre Jounel, Aimé Georges Martimort, *The Church at Prayer. An Introduction to the Liturgy*, pp. 97-98.

³⁰ Irénée Henri Dalmais, Pierre Jounel, Aimé Georges Martimort, *The Church at Prayer. An Introduction to the Liturgy*, p. 98.

within Matins, the chanting of the Katavasias of the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross begins³¹.

3 Central Themes in the Hymns of the Service of Transfiguration

The structure of the service of the Feast of our Lord's Transfiguration is one specific to the category of Royal feast days, having small Vespers, Great Vespers, Matins, special Antiphons at the Divine Liturgy, Epistle reading, Gospel reading, the megalynarion, the communion hymn, and the dismissal. Although the feast of the Transfiguration is held during the Dormition fast, because it is a Royal feast day, it allows fish, oil, and wine, regardless of what weekday it occurs. Beginning this day, it is allowed to eat grapes but not before they are blessed in the Church at the end of Divine Liturgy. The *Menaion* records that the one who would dare to eat grapes before August 6 is not allowed eating grapes before the end of August. In monasteries from the feast of the Transfiguration, the monastics will eat grapes three times a week, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday³².

This feast day is preceded by a pre-feast day on August 5, and followed by its leave-taking on August 13.

The hymns that compose the service for this feast day were composed by different authors, as follows: four festal stichera from "Lord I have cried..." were composed by Monk Cosmas, the stichera from "Glory ... Both now and ever..." were composed by Anatolius, the first canon of Orthros was composed by Monk

³¹ *The Menaion*, vol. 11, p. 74, etc.

³² *Ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 81.

Cosmas of Maiuma, and the second canon by St. John of Damascus, and the last stichera of the praises by Byzantius³³.

The main themes of the hymns that compose the service of the Transfiguration of the Savior revolve around biblical texts in which the holy Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe the event on Mount Tabor. Thus, the first component of the hymns of the feast day is *narrative-descriptive*.

The liturgical text transforms the biblical text in prayer, which helps the faithful who pray for a good understanding of Holy Scriptures. Referring to this liturgical pedagogy, Fr. Ene Braniste says that community prayer of the Church is "a real school, from which simple faithful learned Holy Scripture, the truths of the faith of the Church, and the moral rules of Christian life."³⁴

In the hymns of the Transfiguration, as well as in the hymns of all the divine services, the profound connection between the text of the Holy Scriptures and prayer is reflected. Here we offer two examples:

"To Peter, James and John and, Thy foremost disciples, O Lord, Thou hast shown the glory of Thy divine countenance today on Mount Tabor; for they beheld Thy garments illumined as with light, and Thy face shining more brightly than the Sun. Unable to endure the unbearable sight of Thy effulgence, they fell face down upon the ground, in no wise able to life up their heads. And they heard a voice from above, bearing witness, saying: "This is My Beloved Son, Who had come into the world to

³³ Ibid., vol. 11, p. 79. See also Petre Vintilescu, *Despre poezia imnografică din cărțile de ritual și cântare bisericească*, 2nd ed. (Cluj-Napoca: Renasterea, 2005), pp. 205 etc.

³⁴ Ene Braniste, *Liturgica generală cu noțiuni de artă bisericească, arhitectură și pictură creștină*, p. 98.

save man!" (Glory... Both now and ever..., from the Aposticha)³⁵.

"Thou wast transfigured on Mount Tabor, O Jesus, and a radiant cloud, stretching forth like a shadow, covered the apostles with glory. Wherefore, they fell face down upon the ground, unable to bear the sight of the splendor of the unapproachable glory of Thy countenance, O unoriginated Savior. O Christ our God, Who then shone forth Thy light upon them, illumine Thou our souls!" (2nd seasonal hymn of Orthros)³⁶.

Another dimension of the texts that compose the service of this feast day is the revealing one. The Divine Word has in itself the revealing power of God disclosing Himself to us through it. "Keep on searching the Scriptures, for in them ye think to have eternal life; and these are they which testify concerning Me". (John 5:39). It also reveals itself through the liturgical gesture: "And it came to pass, as He reclined at table with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and was giving it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him" (Luke 24:30-31). St. Luke recounts this when he narrates the appearance of our Savior on the day of resurrection to two of His disciples, Luke and Cleopas, who were going to Emmaus. The examples could continue. In the hymns of Transfiguration, the eternal glory of Christ, our God, is shown to the three disciples, enveloping them, overwhelming them, and astounding them.

"Thou wast transfigured on the mountain, O Christ God, Who didst show Thy glory unto Thy disciples as far as they could bear it ... (as much as they could comprehend it n.n)" (troparion of the Feast)³⁷.

³⁵ *The Menaion*, vol. 11, p. 72.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Although the Savior says that "Then the righteous shall shine forth as the Sun in the Kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:43), the expression "as much as they could bear it" makes more sense when it is placed in relation to Paul's words that say the final fulfillment of the human person is partaking in the eternal light or "ever-existing light" of God. However, this participation in the divine glory differs from person to person, which is to say that not all people "can" participate in the same. Here's what Saint Paul says: "And there are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies; but indeed, the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star"(I Corinthians 15:40-41).

The glory that Christ shows to His disciples on Mount Tabor and which He reveals to us in every Liturgy ("We have seen the true light, we have received the heavenly Spirit ..."), is the eternal and unapproachable glory of God which He reveals to us in time and partially to people. Christ reveals His glory to people through the Incarnation: "And the Logos became flesh and tabernacled among us, *and we beheld His glory*, the glory as of an only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14); *through His passion*: "And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thyself, *-says the Lord before His holy passion-* with the glory which I had with Thee before the world came to be. Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, indeed the world did not know Thee, but I knew Thee, and these knew that Thou didst send Me forth" (John 17:5, 24); on Mount Tabor miraculously *discovered*: "The mountain which before was dark and gloomy is now honorable and holy, for thereon did Thy feet stand, O Lord; for in the latter days Thou didst make manifest the hidden, preeternal mystery, Thine awesome transfiguration, to Peter, John, and James. However,

they, unable to endure the radiance of thy countenance and the brightness of Thy raiment, fell prostrate on the ground and covered themselves. Moreover, seized with terror, they marvelled, beholding Moses and Elijah conversing with Thee as they stood with Thee; and the voice of the Father bore witness, saying; "This is My beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased: Him do ye obey! He will grant the world great mercy!" (third stichera idiomela from "Lord, I have cried...")³⁸.

The taboric glory is "*the glory of His divine countenance*" (Glory..., both now and ever..., from the Aposticha)³⁹, and *the disciples are made partakers of the unapproachable light and the nearness to the unapproachable divinity*: The foremost of the apostles, beholding thine unbearable splendor and Thine unapproachable divinity, O unoriginate Christ, were stricken with godly awe; and, covered with a radiant cloud, they heard the voice of the Father proclaiming the mystery of Thy becoming man; for Thou alone, even after Thine incarnation, art the only-begotten Son and Savior of the world." (third stichera idiomela of Aposticha)⁴⁰.

The partaking of the Lord's disciples of the unapproachable light of divinity, as well as partaking of all those who will follow His disciples through faith, is the fruit of the virtues themselves full of glory and brilliance:

"Transfigured on the high mountain the Savior, having with Him His preeminent disciples, shone forth most wondrously, showing them forth as illumined by the loftiness of the virtues and as ones vouchsafed divine glory. Moses and Elijah, who spake with Christ, showed that He hath authority over the living and the dead and that He is the God Who of old spake through the law and

³⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

the prophets. Of Him was the voice of the Father heard saying from the cloud of light:

'Him do ye obey, Who through the Cross made hell captive and granteth life everlasting to the dead!' (the fourth stichera idiomela from "Lord, I have cried")⁴¹.

The transfiguration of our Lord *is the salvific work done for us*, work comprising Adam, and together with him, the whole generation:

"By the divine transfiguration of our image, which of old was ruined by corruption hath the Creator led our forefather Adam up from the chambers of hades, and He deifieth our understanding. He remaineth both God and man, bearing the nature of each in unity, without confusion or separation. Wherefore, He shineth forth now ineffable on Tabor, and from His flesh emitteth the rays of His divinity, illumining those who cry aloud: Christ is transfigured saving us all!" (Ikos of the Matins Forefeast)⁴².

The Transfiguration is the anticipatory icon of the resurrection of our Lord from the dead. The resurrection hymns often refer to the light that issued from the tomb of Christ, the feast itself being, par excellence, the feast of light⁴³. This light was anticipated at the Transfiguration:

"To Peter, James and John, Thy foremost disciples, O Lord, Thou hast shown the glory of Thy divine countenance today on Mount Tabor; for they beheld Thy garments illumined as with light, and Thy face shining more brightly than the sun. And unable to endure the unbearable sight of Thine effulgence, they fell face down upon the ground, in nowise able to lift up their heads. And they heard a voice from above bearing witness, saying: "This is my beloved

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 70.

⁴² Ibid., p. 77.

⁴³ † Daniel, Patriarhul Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, "Sfintele Paști- icoana vieții veșnice. Tîlcuirea Slujbei Învierii" in *Făclii de Înviere-înțelesuri ale Sfintelor Paști* (București: Basilica, 2008), p. 23ff.

Son, Who hath come into the world to save man!" (Glory..., Both now and ever..., from Lord, I have cried...).⁴⁴

Referring to the relationship between the Transfiguration and the Resurrection, Michel Quenot says: "It is impossible to speak about the Resurrection without speaking about the Transfiguration, which is present in the very depths of Hades in which the resurrected Christ descends. On Mount Tabor, clothed in light, Christ anticipates the descent into the depths of Hades. (...) The same light that surrounds Christ like a mantle on Tabor comes out of the Resurrected One, the Vanquisher of death through the cross. (...) To relocate the glorification in the context of Christ's proceeding towards His Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, it is necessary to read the Scriptures carefully. The first proclamation of the Passion precedes the Transfiguration (Matthew 16:21-23), and Jesus speaks clearly to His disciples about His Resurrection when He descends from the mountain. A golden leitmotif connects the Transfiguration, Passion, and Resurrection. The Death/Resurrection corresponds to Crucifixion/Transfiguration in glory."⁴⁵

The anticipatory icon of the Second Coming represents the same glory shown on Mount Tabor: "and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead" is confessed in the Creed, based on the testimony of the Savior's words: "And then shall the sign of the Son of Man appear in the heaven, and then the tribes of the earth shall mourn, and they shall see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the Heaven with power and great glory." (Matthew 24:30).

The glory of Christ is the same glory of those who believe in Him and fulfill His commandments in love and obedience in this

⁴⁴ *The Menaion*, vol. 11, p. 70.

⁴⁵ Michel Quenot, *Învierrea și Icoana*, trans. Vasile Răducă (Bucharest: Christiana, 1999), p. 175.

earthly life: "Behold, I tell you a mystery: On the one hand we shall not all fall asleep, but on the other hand we shall all be changed- in the moment, in a wink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For a trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed"(I Corinthians 15:51-52). This change is the change into glory manifested on Mount Tabor in the Savior's human body taken from the womb of the Virgin Mary:

"Revealing the human form of Thy second and awesome coming with Thy glory, O Savior, Thou wast transfigured on Mount Tabor. Elijah and Moses conversed with Thee, and Thy three disciples were summoned to behold Thy glory, O Master, and marveled at Thy radiance. O Thou Who then shone forth Thy light upon them, illumine our souls!"⁴⁶ (first seasonal hymn for Orthros).

4 The Transfiguration of the Savior in the Icon of the Feast

By discussing the icon of the Transfiguration of Christ, we ought to say that this is one of the most representative icons in Byzantine iconography, and one of the most profound theological expressions in color.

As far as the historical evolution of this icon, it followed a natural course of iconographic development generally in the East, being influenced by the monastic life, by official theological formulations determined by heresies, and by subsequent studies of these formulations, by local cultural elements, by architectural evolution of the liturgical space, and, last but not least, by the refinement of the Divine Liturgy and of church services in general, and by liturgical exegesis.

⁴⁶ *The Menaion*, vol. 11, p. 73.

From simple depictions of the icon of the Transfiguration to the most elaborate forms, both from an artistic and a theological point of view, scholars speak of five stages of development of this iconographic representation.

The first phase is the so-called *early phase* or pre-Sinaitic, concerning the famous mosaic representing the Transfiguration at Saint Catherine's monastery at Mt. Sinai. Simplicity characterizes this particular phase in comparison to subsequent depictions. These representations contain three characters,⁴⁷ as opposed to later ones, which contain six characters: our Savior Jesus Christ flanked by Moses and Elijah at the top of the icon, and the three Apostles, Peter, James, and John, at the bottom.

Sometimes, two groups of four Apostles are depicted, all at the bottom of the icon, but in the distance, as can be seen in a Russian icon of the seventeenth century in the Russian Museum of Pereyaslavl-Zalesky.⁴⁸ The twelfth Apostle, Judas, is missing. He was the one by hanging himself separated himself for eternity from the glory of God's kingdom. In simple pre-Sinaitic icons, the two images on each side of the central figure Christ are symbols of the two Testaments.⁴⁹ Their unity is depicted by Christ, announced by the prophets in the first Testament, revealed through the Incarnation in the second Testament, and preached to the world by the Apostles and their successors. The significance of this unity between the Testaments is also preserved by later depictions of the two prophets and the three Apostles, who represent the Testaments.

⁴⁷ Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), pp. 75-76.

⁴⁸ Michel Quenot, *Învierea și Icoana*, p. 173.

⁴⁹ Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, p. 76

The second phase begins in the 6th century under Emperor Justinian, whose name is linked to the very spectacular depictions of the Transfiguration in the mosaic in the apse of the altar at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai. This mosaic, although it contains no details, has a few elements that will become mandatory for all later iconography related to the event on Tabor. These elements are: Christ in the upper plane is surrounded by light; from His body radiates the glory of the Godhead in the refulgent light rays, flanked by Moses and Elijah. In the lower third the three Apostles, Peter, James, and John, prostrate in awe with their faces turned towards the ground because they could not bear His glory. Such representation is considered to be an expression of the full maturity of the iconography of the Transfiguration. The same period in which this Sinaitic icon was executed is considered to be the time when the theology of the Transfiguration matured. The beginnings of this theology are to be found in the works of Origen, and it reaches its apogee in the time of St. Maximus the Confessor.⁵⁰

The third phase is related to the iconoclastic period. At this point, the accent fell more on the theological interpretation of the icon and its defense, rather than on its representation. The battle between the iconoclasts and the defenders of icons resulted in the development of a theology of icons. St. John Damascene, St. Theodore the Studite, and Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople were the principal literary defenders of icons. Unfortunately, due to the damage done by some iconoclasts, there are few icons of the Transfiguration and other saints and salvific events that have survived⁵¹.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

The fourth stage is marked by the emergence of two types of light to depict the radiant nimbus around Christ the Savior: one round, which usually includes the two prophets Moses and Elijah, or at least touches them; the other oval, which surrounds only Christ. It is hard to say which appeared first and which came second. Some are of the opinion that the round shape was earlier and that gradually around the 16th century it was replaced by the oval shape. Also, in this phase, we identify the positions in which the three Apostles are depicted: standing, kneeling, or lying on the ground with their faces turned toward Christ. Regardless of the position in which they are represented, a common element in each of these icons is revealed: the overwhelming, heavenly joy felt by the Apostles, and the inability to express this joy⁵². The heart of man can no longer perceive this inexpressible joy, which was experienced by St. Paul when he was caught up to the third Heaven (II Corinthians 12:2).

The fifth stage in the development of iconographic representation began in the 14th century and has a close relationship to the hesychastic movement. The nimbus begins brightly from the outside and becomes darker the closer it is to the body of Christ; this element suggests the unfathomable depth or the supra effulgence of the uncreated energies of God⁵³.

5 Some Elements of Iconographic Exegesis

The first aspect is related to the presence of the two prophets from the Transfiguration icon. Both of them wanted to see God,

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 78-80.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

but they were not permitted to do so. The event on the peak of Mount Tabor partially fulfills the theophany of the Old Testament. The presence of the two prophets who wanted to see God is testimony to this fulfillment⁵⁴.

Second, the astonishment of the three disciples who were not able to express what they saw and felt had nothing to do with their physical ability to see, but, instead, with the inability to move from the bodily to the spiritual, a transition that can be made only by purification of the passions, as says St. Maximus the Confessor⁵⁵.

Third, the icon of the Transfiguration and its hymnography are based on the reports of the three Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, who express the fact that the revelation of God in His glory is visible is accessible to us in the form of light. This light shows not only what God is and what God has, namely, uncreated energies, but also what man is not but may become by partaking in the incomprehensible light of God⁵⁶.

Fourth, according to the claims of St. Ephraim the Syrian, during the Transfiguration, the Apostles saw the Old Testament prophets, and the prophets saw the Apostles of the New Testament. This “mutual recognition of the old and the new leaders” underlines the harmony and unity of the Church and those who are part of it⁵⁷. Furthermore, the inclusion in the icon

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 72-73.

⁵⁵ St. Maximus the Great, *Ambiguorum Liber*, quoted in John McGurekin, *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition* (Lewiston: E. Mellen, 1986), p. 105. See also Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, p. 73.

⁵⁶ Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, p. 73.

⁵⁷ Ephraim the Syrian, *Sermon on Transfiguration*, in G.S. Assemani (ed.), *Opera Omnia*, vol. 2, 1743, p. 425 quoted in Andreas

of those who recognize each other gives dynamism to the icon. The icon becomes an instrument of encounter, recognition and knowledge, among different generations, different people, all united in time and space by the same faith.

Fifth, the icon of the Transfiguration reveals God becoming man and deified man as far as it is possible for us to embrace and understand⁵⁸. St. Dionysius the Areopagite says that the Divine Liturgy is the visible and accessible icon of what is unseen, unfathomable, and inaccessible in the Kingdom of God. So, it is with the icon of the Transfiguration: it reveals to us what is not visible and helps us to see the unseen. The rest is silence, or, as the Gospel says, not able to express or say anything ("not knowing what he was saying" - Luke 9:33).

6 Conclusions

By taking into account the above drawing we can underline the following conclusions:

- a. the hymnography and the icon of the feast of the Transfiguration testify together and are expressions of the profound bond between the biblical text, the hymnological poetry, and the iconographic representation.
- b. at the same time, due to the presentation above we can summarize that theological reflection, prayer in its hymnological expression, and icon build an unity and are firmly rooted in the revealed Word.

Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, p. 73.

⁵⁸ Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, pp. 74-75.

c. the hymnography and the icon of the feast of the Transfiguration reveal the connection between baptism as the beginning of the process of deification of man in Christ, i.e. of man's spiritual ascension, and the Tabor event as a fulfillment of this process. At baptism we sing: "Give me a shining robe, O Thou Who clothes Thyself with light as with a garment, O greatly-merciful Christ our God"⁵⁹. On Tabor we see the humanity assumed by Christ, but now overwhelmed and infused with the light of the glory of the Godhead. Furthermore, in some iconographic representations, as noted above, the two prophets are integrated within the nimbus of light radiating from the person of Christ.

d. Another conclusion that emerges from those presented above is that the icon in its elaborate and detailed forms is the result of a process that was influenced by the process of theological maturation, as well by the formation and maturation of the divine and theological, ecclesiastical life.

e. If the Transfiguration had occurred by day or night, on Tabor or elsewhere, with 6, 8, or 40 days before the Passion of Christ, that would be less important, as long as the eternal glory of God revealed to His disciples 'as much as they could bear' (as much as they could comprehend and understand) overwhelms time, space, and humanity by making them partakers of the divine life, in which case time is called eternity; space becomes the unapproachable. This place is the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and humanity sits on the throne "with the Father and the Spirit ("and He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father" – as we say in the Creed).

⁵⁹ *The Great Book of Needs*, trans. St. Tikhon's Monastery (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1998), p. 40.

f. Finally, the image of Christ on Tabor became a prototype and a rule for iconography representing our Savior and all persons who have multiplied the gifts of baptism until they can reach the spiritual heights of Tabor. The image of the transfigured Christ shows what human persons can become, not what they are. This distinction shows the fundamental difference between portraits/paintings/photographs. The icon shows what a human being might become in and through Christ.

In a speech given at an event dedicated to icons and iconographers, organized in May 2017, in Bucharest, his Beatitude Patriarch Daniel pointed out that there is nowhere in the New Testament a given description of the physical image of Christ; only His spiritual image is described. This means that our resemblance to Christ is thoroughly experienced in the light of Tabor only after our ascendance of the mountain through spiritual exercise and purification of passions.