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## Rublov's Icon of the Holy Trinity

A rejoinder to Duane Christensen's article,  
"Reading the Bible as an Icon (1985)"

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### Iconography— an ecclesial, dogmatic, and mystical art

As an Orthodox Christian, it would give me great pleasure to see that Baptists were discovering the traditions of Orthodox iconography, so I rejoiced when Duane Christensen showed me his article on "Reading the Bible as an Icon" ([bibal.net/04/proso/psalms-ii/pdf/dlc\\_essays-001-a.pdf](http://bibal.net/04/proso/psalms-ii/pdf/dlc_essays-001-a.pdf)) some 20 years ago, in which he discusses St Andrei Rublov's *Holy Trinity*. However, neither in that article nor in subsequent communications does Professor Christensen seem to have grasped the profoundly *scriptural* nature of iconography, and its difference from what we usually call "art". That's unfortunate, because this difference drives an equally profound divergence in methods of interpretation— and the failure to appreciate this has led him into actual mistakes of interpretation, which surprisingly and most unfortunately are not altogether remedied even in the works of some authoritative Orthodox commentators. This is important, because while the icon might still be grasped as a deeply aesthetic experience, to misconstrue its figures is to miss its astonishing theological profundity *altogether*. To be sure, Rublov's *Trinity* is perhaps the most subtle and profound icon in existence,<sup>1</sup> so such confusion is not altogether unexpected. Nevertheless, when the correct interpretation is understood, the meaning of the icon becomes utterly obvious and transparent, while losing none of its sublime spirituality and transcendence. So now that we are publishing Duane's article on our website ([bibal.net](http://bibal.net)), it seems that a few formal remarks might be in order.

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<sup>1</sup> At least that's what the Council of the Hundred Chapters (Moscow, 1551), to which we will refer later, seems to have thought.

An “artist”, at least as we understand the term in the post-Mediaeval West (and especially today), is an individual who ever seeks to dare what no one else has ever dared in the expression his or her own purely subjective aesthetic values and ideas. Indeed, originality and even transgression are the modern artist's highest values, and those which critics most applaud.

The iconographer, on the other hand, seeks above all to leave his subjective values behind, to acquire the mind of Christ, and to see only with the eyes of the Church. “Painters are in no way to use their imagination”, as the Council of the Hundred Chapters put it. The iconographer wishes to see only what the Church sees, neither more nor less— in other words, to grasp the Church's *dogma* in an aesthetic intuition which is as profound as the most mystical theology— and in fact a really *good* iconographer has not only artistic talent and mystical experience, but a well-developed dogmatic understanding as well.

Thus the iconographer's “frontier”— the boundary against which s/he presses— is not the merely novel, individualistic, or shocking, but is the inexhaustible depth of an *objective* tradition— inexhaustible because it is nothing other than the life of the Church as that community which has its origin in the Holy Trinity, and objective because it seeks to express dogmas which are formally defined by scripture and tradition. Those who gaze at an icon will not understand it unless they understand and try to enter into the same *ecclesial* experience. Indeed, the purpose of the icon is to engender precisely that understanding and that entry, which are transforming. And if we follow this path in gazing at Rublov's *Trinity*, then we will see the depth of his ecclesial, mystical, and theological intuition.

### **Who are the three angels?— piecing the clues together**

Let us begin our path of interpretation of Rublov's *Trinity*, then, with the tree behind the central figure: Now, in *all* Orthodox hymnography, the tree is a symbol of the Cross, which is identified with the Tree of Life in Paradise— not only because we receive life through it; but also because, in our midrashic tradition, the wood of the Cross was actually taken from the Tree of Life. In the iconographic tradition within which Rublov is painting, there simply is no other symbolism available for him to use in painting a tree nor, as an iconographer of the Church, would he have desired to use any other.

Of course, the tree is there in the first place because Rublov's basic subject— the Abraham's hospitality to the three mysterious strangers who speak as one (the story is told in Genesis 18)— requires, on a literal level, the oak of Mamre: under that oak, Abraham received his guests, washing their feet and serving them a fattened calf.

But Rublov, as all the fathers do, has understood the Oak of Mamre symbolically or “typologically” (as we say): it is a “type”— a kind of fore-image— or symbol of the Cross. In fact, he draws attention to this typology in a most striking manner, by painting the tree's leaves

somewhat in the form of a man on a cross, with arms outstretched and knees flexed (a posture found in less exaggerated form in some icons of the Crucifixion).

So which of the three persons of the Trinity would be sitting under the Tree of the Cross?

The answer might seem obvious, but in fact Christensen, following Henri Nouwen<sup>2</sup> (who seems to have gotten some of his ideas from Paul Evdokimov),<sup>3</sup> says that the central figure is God the Father. Yet by understanding the meaning of the tree, we can already see that such an interpretation would have to be, well... just plain wrong. In fact Nouwen and Christensen do not seem to have paid much attention to the three background figures; Evdokimov, who realizes that they do have meaning, resorts to a rather contorted and unconvincing symbolism involving the directions in which the angels' staffs point, in order to make sense of it, because he begins with an understanding of the angels *gained from an icon whose method of identifying the angels was explicitly found to be incorrect by the Council of One Hundred Chapters in Moscow (1551)!*

It's most unfortunate that, due to Nouwen's popularity, this mistaken view has become common. Yet icons are "theology in color", and they are meant to be used in prayer. They are guides to spirituality. So neither painting nor understanding such an image is a matter of mere taste or of subjective interpretations undertaken, for instance, in an otiose stroll through the Hermitage gallery, but of a theologically objective representation of matters of life and death which is meant to be a focus of one's actual relationship with God. So, to be sure, Nouwen changed his interpretation, after being challenged on it from a number of quarters.<sup>4</sup> And so also, as Nouwen began to do, we need to learn how to read the icons themselves, and not to make up our own interpretations of them, nor simply to accept what secondary sources say of them. We need to enter, that is, into Rublov's own profound understanding—which is that of the Church. And it's explicitly that of the Church, since this icon was canonized in 1551 as a supreme exemplar of the Orthodox iconographic tradition, by the council just mentioned.

Behind Rublov's icon is a long tradition of images of the hospitality of Abraham (Genesis 18), whose three angels can be understood as a type of the holy Trinity. This tradition has very persistently placed the Son as the middle figure of the three angels, as we know from St John of Damascus (ca. 730) and even as early as St John Chrysostom (ca. 350).<sup>5</sup> Now, for a figure representing the only-begotten Son and immortal Word of God, who became incarnate and was

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<sup>2</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Rublov's Icon of the Trinity: A Reflection on the Spiritual Life," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 14:5 (June–August 1984), pp. 8–9.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty* (Oakwood Publications, Redondo Beach, 1990), pp. 243-257. Originally published in French, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> See H. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons* (Ave Maria Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Leonid Ouspensky, "The Holy Trinity", in *The Meaning of Icons* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1989), pp. 200-205.

crucified for us, to be sitting in front of a cruciform tree would be completely natural and unremarkable. On the other hand, there would simply be no recognizable scriptural precedent or patristic resonance if, as Evdokimov, the early Nouwen, and now Christensen have suggested, Rublov had painted the Father sitting in front of a cruciform tree. The Father was not crucified for us, but the Son was. Therefore the figure who sits in front of a cruciform Tree cannot be the Father. It can only be the Son— or else the icon makes gibberish of theology. And if it were not already expected from tradition that the central figure would be the Son— or even from the simple fact that he's sitting in front of a cruciform tree— the rest of Rublov's imagery make the identity of this angel even more explicit:

For instance, he is wearing a red tunic. Red is the color of earth, of Adam, and of blood— one does not need to know the underlying biblical pun ('*edom*, 'red', '*adamah*, 'earth', '*adam*, 'man', and *dam*, 'blood'), to associate these ideas. He is also wearing a blue cloak. Blue is the color of heaven, of the transcendent spaces of the sky.

Now, in depicting a red tunic and blue cloak, Rublov is not using an idiosyncratic symbolism. This is *the usual color scheme in traditional Orthodox iconographic depictions of Christ*. Together, these colors say, Heaven and earth— the two natures, human and divine, of Christ. That is their theological and dogmatic meaning in this painting, as in every Orthodox representation of Christ. Moreover, given this significance and this context, one simply *would not* paint a representation of the Father using the colors of earth and heaven; the Father did not become incarnate and does not have two natures, and it would be just plain confusing to paint a figure representing the Father in the colors of the Son.

It is brilliant, and quite deliberate, that the tradition chose not to make the Father the central figure. "No one has seen God at any time: the only-begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father—he has declared him", writes St John (John 1.18). Indeed, that's why the tradition must resort to the Hospitality of Abraham when it wishes to depict the Trinity, in the first place: it is impossible, indeed forbidden, to attempt to depict the persons of the Trinity directly. And to place the Father as the central figure would be to pretend a direct knowledge of him that we simply do not have. "No one knows the Father except the Son, and those to whom he has revealed him" (Matthew 11.25). It is Jesus Christ who is the origin of the Church's experience of God, and he remains central to it.

Reading further, we now see that it is the Son— not the Father— who extends his hand over the chalice in the gesture of blessing. You have to know something about the Liturgy for which Rublov painted this icon to recognize the gesture, but if you are familiar with this context, its meaning is obvious: This is the gesture of a priest when he consecrates the eucharistic bread and wine as the Body and Blood of Christ during the Divine Liturgy. When he does so, he holds his fingers in the form of the letters, ICXC— an abbreviation for "IHCOYC XPICTOC", "Jesus Christ".

In Nouwen's account, the viewer is drawn by the square opening drawn in the foreside of the table, into the icon itself, in an upward direction— into the picture, through the chalice, the hand, upward to God the Father, and then up into a tree. We can see how this makes gibberish of the imagery: If the tree *is* the Cross, then the icon seems to suggest that we are drawn to the Cross through the Father, perhaps even “crucified with the Father” (which would suggest the heresy of Patripassianism, something to which Rublov would never subscribe). If it is *not* the Cross (for why would the Cross be behind the Father?), then once we get up into this tree, where are we? What do we do there? What is this tree for? And how exactly do we get to it, through the Father whom “no one has ever seen”? Moreover, whatever we end up doing in the tree, in this interpretation, the Son in any case is off to one side of our movement and unrelated to our goal!

It's not hard to realize that reading the icon wrong mutilates our understanding and closes the icon's profoundest theological depths to us. But icons are a school of spirituality, and there is no “spirituality” in the Church, unrelated to the strict typology of scripture. There is no mere “art” here, no private symbolism, nothing haphazard, purely decorative, speculative, or imaginative, or even simply aesthetic. An icon is an image painted for dogmatic contemplation, and it must be very careful about what it says.

With that in mind, though, Nouwen's intuition about being drawn into the image is not altogether a bad one. If the central figure is the Son, we might find our eyes drawn from the square figure in the altar upward to the cup of the Covenant, to Son's hand extended in blessing over the Covenant, to the Son himself who exists in two natures, to the Cross which is also the Tree of Life— that Cross which I must take up and deny myself (Matthew 16.24), on which “I am crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2.19), on which I have to be “crucified to the world, and the world to me” (Galatians 6.14), on which the Son of God has torn up and nailed the handwriting that was against us (Colossians 2.14), which is the necessary path to the knowledge of the all-holy Trinity, which the Son reveals.

Once we have established which figure represents the Son, we might ask, at whose right hand does the Son sit (Psalm 110.1, Matthew 26.64, Mark 16.19, etc)?

Christensen and the earlier Nouwen tell us that the central figure is God the Father, and his two fingers point to the chalice and to God the Son— that is, to the angel on our right. But in this view, the Son would be sitting at the Father's *left* hand! Impossible: the holy icons would never contradict Scripture like this. They take its imagery very seriously and not as haphazard, arbitrary, and optional. So if, as the Scriptures say, the Son sits at the Father's right hand, and the Son (as we have established) is the figure in the middle, then the figure on the right side has to be, and only he can be, the Father, since he is the only angel at whose right hand the central angel sits.

But again the cruciform tree behind the central angel has taught us to look at the background imagery for a further elucidation of the meaning of the angel in front of it. Not surprisingly, the

angel on our right sits before a mountain, the figure of elevation, of exaltation, of spaciousness, of light and of air, of vision. He is, in other words, El Shaddai, “God the Most High”. He is clothed in a tunic of blue, signifying heaven, transcendence, and divinity, and a cloak of green, signifying life— since he is the Source of the life of the divine Trinity, and hence of all life and existence everywhere— and also signifying “youth, fullness of powers”, as St Dionysius the Areopagite says. Consistent with Scripture, his is the right hand at which the Son sits. And finally, in contrast with the building behind the angel on our left, the mountain is a more primordial figure, and the Father is the *primordium* of the Trinity.

That leaves the figure on the left, clothed in garments of off-white and blue—of light and heaven (this is more apparent in the original; reproductions vary widely in their faithfulness)—who sits in front of a building, no longer quite Abraham’s tent. The Spirit is often called “Light”, and He brings the Church into being, and continues to guide and inspire it. The Church can appear in icons as a building.

In the article cited above, Leonid Ouspensky, perhaps the foremost Orthodox iconographic interpreter known in the west, states that the angels appear in the order they are named in the Nicene Creed (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, left to right), without explaining why. Thus he takes the figure on our left to be the Father. But just as in Nouwen and Evdokimov’s interpretation, this again would have the Son sitting on the Father’s left. Moreover, it’s not clear what the Father’s connection to a building would be, for he is not the builder of the Church, in the sense that the Spirit is.

### **Reading the relations between the Three Persons**

If the Father is in the middle, then because the Trinitarian life (and therefore the gaze) begins with the Father, he would seem to incline to the Spirit first (on his right hand) while ignoring the Son (on his left). That can’t be true, but if the eye starts from the center, it hardly know which way to go. Aesthetically, the Father would inclines to the Spirit, but theologically, the Son is always mentioned first, and the life of God comes to from the Father through the Son by the Spirit. Agitation is introduced, the circle is broken, and peace is lost.

If on the other hand, as Ouspensky speculates, we read the figure on the left as the Father— then again, the Father gazes across at the Spirit, while ignoring the Son at his left, and again the circular movement is broken.

All of these authors correctly remark that the underlying form of the icon is a circle, but they see it abstractly— it is a Greek circle, and not a Hebrew one, the product of a geometer’s compass and not an eternal movement incarnate in the actual gesture of the Persons themselves.

It is astonishing that none of these writers ever seems to have even considered the only solution that resolves the contradictions: the Father is the figure on the left. Neither the imagery of the background, nor the colors of the vesture, nor the circularity of the intra-Trinitarian life make any

sense unless the Son is sitting in front of the Tree, at the right hand of the Father. Simply to state it in those terms is to make perfect sense, and once you see that, everything else falls into place.

When we read the figure on our right correctly as the Father, then the mutual inclination of the heads shows, just as the Church fathers teach, that the life and love of the Trinity originates with the Father, proceeds to and through the Son, and rests in the Holy Spirit, who returns to the Father. Our eyes follow their gaze from one to the other in a wonderstruck movement which is perfectly circular, restful, complete, and eternal.

As we follow their gaze in silent awe, further depths open up. We note that Rublov has painted the Father slightly *lower* than the other two, even though he is their Source and the Origin of their life and movement. What an astonishing expression of the mystery of divine humility, which is the source of our salvation and peace! What a profound integration of origin, movement, and silence! Up till now, Rublev has given us only what the tradition requires. But this detail, almost imperceptible because St Andrei has himself well understood its meaning, is his own brilliant intuition, corresponding most deeply to Orthodox theology.

Rublov has painted what theologians call the “economic” Trinity— the Trinity as we experience it. The “ontological” or “absolute” Trinity— the three Persons in the absolute mystery of their own divine eternity— is not accessible even to the highest angels. But the Son has revealed that the Spirit proceeds ineffably (and unpaintably) together with him from the Father alone (John 15.26); and we have received and we know the Father’s Spirit through the Son, and the Spirit brings us to the Father.

Christensen has suggested that the three angels are feminine. However, angels are never feminine in the iconographic tradition to which Rublov strictly adhered, but always beardless youths. Rublov’s icon does not exist in a vacuum, and we have to read it in the context of the entire patristic theological, literary, and iconographic tradition to which he was absolutely faithful. Beardless young men do have a kind of feminine or androgynous appearance, especially among peoples (like Greeks and other Middle Easterners) whose full-grown men tend to be quite hairy. Angels are incorporeal, and therefore sexless; and they are full of vigor, and do not age. Thus they cannot be portrayed as “grown men”— *or* as women! But the iconographer needs to depict them somehow, and the androgyny of male youth, which seems “both” male and female, means effectively that they are neither. Yet though incorporeal and sexless, angels always appear in the Scriptures and in the icons as male, because they are powerful and active— and in fact they are usually portrayed in military or liturgical dress. This non-gendered maleness is particularly important in the icon of the Trinity, because the Persons of the Godhead are neither masculine nor feminine. Only the incarnate Son is male, and that only because of his incarnation.

Ouspensky notes that we cannot make too much of the distinguishing characteristics of the three figures. “The almost identical faces of the Angels emphasize the single nature of the three Divine Persons and also show that this icon in no way pretends to represent concretely each Person of the Holy Trinity....it is not a representation of the Trinity itself, that is, of the three Persons of the Godhead, since in its essence the Godhead cannot be represented.” Thus, although the angels are distinguished by their vesture and background, it would be going too far— “a misplaced precision, amounting to downright distortion”— to inscribe the names “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” next to the angels, to write the Greek words “O WN” (“I AM” or “HE WHO IS”) in the halo of the central figure as is always done in icons of Christ, or to place a gospel scroll in his hand rather than a staff, as we actually see in some icons painted both before and after Rublov— even though the tradition has been very consistent in distinguishing the central figure as the Son. It is impermissible to apply the name of the God-Man to an image which is not a direct and concrete representation of his incarnate personhood. So while the vesture and background and the icon as a whole are explicitly concerned with dogmatic truth— expressly portraying the uniqueness and relations of the three Persons as understood in the Church— the subject is a typological story, not the actual incarnate Son of God. For this reason, the Tsar brought the matter of labels to the Council of the Hundred Chapters (Moscow, 1551), and the council ordained that images of the Trinity should indeed be painted, as Rublov did, without a cross in the nimbus of any of the angels, and that only the general title, “Holy Trinity” should be given, without labeling each figure separately.

Christensen, however, presses this lack of distinct labeling too far. At [groups.yahoo.com/group/bibal](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bibal), communication no. 168, on January 27, 2004, he wrote that “we are dealing with the trinity here— and the members of the trinity cannot be differentiated from each in the final analysis”. Therefore, he feels free to interpret the angels however one wishes. Such a view is profoundly mistaken, however, and indeed even rather Sabellian (Sabellius taught that the three Persons were simply manifestations of one another; and their distinct personhood was just illusory).

The three Persons are not logical abstractions, nor are they interchangeable. The Son did not send himself into the world, but he was sent by the Father. He did not pray to himself in the garden, but to his Father. He is not his own Origin, but he is begotten of the Father. The Father is not begotten of the Son, nor did he become incarnate for us, nor was he crucified, but only the Son did this. The Spirit who descended on Pentecost was neither the Father nor the Son, is not the Origin of the other two or of himself, but proceeds from the Father and is sent by the Son from the Father. The Father alone is the Origin of the Trinity and is the Source and Principle of its Unity. So, while it is true that the three Persons have a single nature, and we address them together as one God, still, they are Three absolutely distinct persons, and they have different roles in our salvation, so we also sometimes address each of them distinctly in prayer. Hence, Rublov painted depicted the Three with a very specific imagery that refers to their

distinctiveness and relationships. As Ouspensky puts it, “despite the similarity of the Angels, they are not deprived of individuality, *the character of each being definitely expressed as regards His action in the world*” (emphasis added) by their gesture, vesture, position, and background.

Indeed, Rublov provides these details precisely in order to portray the distinction between persons and to clarify their separate intra-trinitarian relationships, and their distinct roles in our salvation. In painting the economic Trinity, he is painting the divine *economy*: that we are saved by the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. This is why the question about which of the angels represents which Person is a most important one, for only if we correctly grasp this, do we correctly grasp the scriptural vision, which the icon teaches. The iconographer wants us to see how salvation “worked”. Thus it has to be as dogmatically precise as the canonical creed which it reflects and which is recited while contemplating it. Haphazard or arbitrary painting, or confused interpretations, are tantamount to saying, “I believe in Jesus Christ, the Father Almighty, and in one Lord the Holy Spirit, who was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and in the Father who proceeds from the Son”. None of this is true, and it doesn’t even work logically.

Rather, the historical scene of the appearance to Abraham “symbolically reveals the unity and trinity of the Godhead by showing its triune action in the world, the Divine Economy” (Ouspensky). This is further emphasized by the fact that the lines that construct the outer perimeter of the three figures— across the angels’ heads, shoulders, backs, and the sides and front edge of their footrest— is octagonal. In Orthodox art and architecture, the octagon stands for the mystery of the Resurrection. For the Son of God, as God incarnate, finished his work on the sixth day, on the Cross. On the seventh, he rested, in the tomb, and on the Eighth Day, which is also the first day of the New Creation, the Day Without Evening, he rose from the tomb.

### **What the angels’ staffs call to mind**

Each of the angels carries a staff in his left hand. Not actually mentioned in the Genesis account, Church tradition midrashes them as having been made of three different woods— the cypress, the plane, and the cedar— as we learn from Isaiah 60.13, a passage read and referred to on feasts of the Cross). As the story goes, the angels left these staffs with Abraham as a blessing. After the destruction of Sodom, as we read in Genesis 19.30-38, Lot’s daughters got him drunk and lay with him so that they could have children. Lot confessed this sin to Abraham, and Abraham told him to take the three staffs and plant them in a certain place near Mount Moriah and to water them with water from the Jordan. “If they grow, we know that we shall obtain forgiveness from God”, he said. Lot took them, and planted all three together. Despite great efforts by the devil to prevent him, he managed to bring water from the Jordan, and they grew up as one tree. This tree was later hewn down by Solomon for the roof of his Temple, but despite three attempts to measure it, in which it always turned out to be exactly the right length,

it always turned out to be too short. Rejected as a tree cursed by God, it was cast over the edge of the Temple Mount, only to be used a thousand years later for the Cross of our Savior.

I mention this midrash because Rublov would have been thinking of it as he drew the staffs, and because what the angels are doing with their other hands is related. Ouspensky writes that the chalice “draws together the gestures of the Angels, indicating the unity of will and action of the Holy Trinity, Who entered into a covenant with Abraham.” In the chalice we find, not the fatted calf of Genesis 18, but the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”, on a Cross that grew near Mount Moriah.

### **The Eucharist as a Trinitarian event**

Nouwen’s reading of the square opening in the front side of the altar, mentioned above, is largely fanciful, but this square does bring out the squareness of the table— and in the Russian Orthodox tradition the altar on which the sacramental Chalice is set forth, is almost always cubic. This connection should not be missed, because Rublov painted his icon for installation above the Beautiful Gate of the iconostasis, which opens to the altar of the church, and of course the chalice in the icon suggests the chalice on the altar (there is no chalice per se in Genesis 18).

Moreover, as Evdokimov points out, in the cosmology of Rublov’s day, and indeed, archetypally, the earth was thought to be rectangular— since it does, after all, have four principal directions. This rectangle can thus be read as “the hieroglyph of the earth”. Paradoxically, it is in the earth— in creation— that we encounter God.

Fourness is also a symbol of the four gospels, or rather of the *complete* Gospel, a copy of which is always kept on the altar in an Orthodox church. Four is also the number of rivers which proceeded from the Garden of Eden, and if this seems a little forced, we should at least remember that “there is a river whose streams gladden the City of God” (Psalm 46.4, Revelation 22.1).

Despite this square hieroglyph, however, the altar appears somewhat circular, since its back edge, if not its front, seem slightly curved. In fact the paradox of a square circle is not unrelated to the paradoxical shape of the building behind the figure of the Spirit— note the odd placement of the columns— for, as in all icons where buildings are represented, architectural paradox (à la MC Escher) suggests the paradoxes and circular antinomies of theology, which speak of a divine Life that cannot be grasped by the mind of man. Moreover, the normal shape of an Orthodox temple is that of a circle inscribed in a square, or rather of a cube surmounted by a sphere. The temple, the altar, the eucharistic chalice, and the incarnate person of the God-man are where heaven and earth meet.

## The final key

Nouwen notes that the figures compose a circle with the chalice at the center. In fact more precisely the chalice is somewhat a little forward of center. The real center is the hand extended in blessing over the chalice. The icon portrays the life of the Trinity— especially insofar as we encounter it in the eucharistic chalice— as a dynamic and sanctifying *event*, rather than a static idea or even a thing.

Evdokimov says that this chalice which rests towards the front of the altar, as if offered by the Trinity to the viewer who is, consequently, invited to partake of their own Communion is “the key to the mystery of the icon” as a whole. That’s true on several levels, and it shows how profoundly *ecclesial* Rublov’s vision is.

The shape of the chalice is repeated very strikingly in the visible part of the altar itself— the white area and below it— as framed by the legs of the angels, from foot to waist. This suggests that our communion with the Holy Trinity takes place in the sacrament (or “mystery”, as it is called in Greek) of the eucharistic table which, as an altar, is the place of the sacrifice of Christ.

But these lines actually continue from the angels’ feet all the way up to their shoulders, so that the entire space between them becomes chalice-like, with the central figure sitting in the cup. Thus the icon as a whole repeats the figure of the lamb’s head in the chalice on the table. It is in fact the Son himself who is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, offered to us and encountered in the chalice of the Holy Trinity. Christ himself is our Covenant and our Communion with God.

Like the humility of the Father and the circularity of the angels’ glances, this subtle and nearly imperceptible figure of the chalice is Rublov’s most profound and moving contribution to the tradition.

By removing Abraham and Sarah from his depiction of the event in Genesis 18, Rublov concentrated and heightened the typology of the Old Testament story so that it reveals the inner life of the Trinity itself, insofar as we are able to understand and even to participate in it, through our communion with the Son. *That is to say: he has shown us not the story of Abraham and Sarah, but what Abraham and Sarah themselves saw.*

This, moreover, is not a product of imagination— of Abraham and Sarah’s, or Rublov’s, or ours— but the very revelation of Scripture, and its meaning.

Moreover, by eliminating the historical context, Rublov has forcefully reminded us that the Cross itself is not merely a historical event of 2000 years ago, but the very Tree of Life in the Paradise of eternity. And by transforming Abraham’s tent into the temple of the Church, he has directed us to the altar where we have communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The figure in the chalice is difficult to determine because it has been overpainted and has had to be restored, but it appears that by substituting the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, Rublov has again directed us to the meaning of the Covenant which Abraham longed and even rejoiced to see (Matthew 13.17, John 8.56, Hebrews 11.39). In every respect, Christ is He through whom we have communion with the Father and the Spirit. We approach the Mystery of the Trinity by being united with Christ's Body and Blood, broken and shed for us on the Cross, and now set forth on the eucharistic Table.

It would be astonishing, and probably heretical, if Rublov's Trinity were *not* profoundly eucharistic, and did not strictly follow the imagery of Scripture, since it is only through the incarnate Word that we know the Father and the Spirit.

But what is most remarkable is Rublov's insight into the Trinity as a life of Communion, into the eucharistic life of the Church as the very Communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit themselves, shared with us through the only-begotten Son and immortal Word, and into the *humility of the Father* as the origin of that life.

Rublov has communicated the Church's deepest experience as a mystery of simplicity, humility, communion, and peace.

Rublov's Trinity is therefore not simply "one of the most perfect achievements in the history of art", as Christensen calls it— a piece of art open to purely aesthetic interpretation based on the critic's own subjective judgments. Indeed, as mentioned above, it is one of the most sacred and important icons of the Orthodox Church, with an *explicitly canonical* status: the Council of the Hundred Chapters in Moscow (1551) affirmed that we should take it as a model for all iconography generally, and specifically for future depictions of the Trinity, because it so faithfully expresses the fullness of the Orthodox tradition. Icons are creedal and scriptural, to the point where some even argue that we must speak of "writing", rather than "painting" them. Be that as it may (I don't agree), it simply is not within our power to invent readings and interpretations of the iconography of the Trinity which depart from the Scripture and from the canonical tradition (and still less to imagine new images, such as the so-called "Celtic Trinity" painted by Robert Lentz). For we would only obscure and deform the profound theology and spirituality which Rublov has shown us.

The rest of Christensen's article, in which he discusses the concentric structure of the Scriptures, I think is quite valuable. That's why I'm particularly exercised by his failure to grasp and to accept the profoundly structural dimension of biblical typology which pervades the iconography of the holy Trinity. We have a great need to rediscover the compositional techniques that the writers of the Scripture used in order to structure their texts, and to draw

attention to their central messages— especially as these serve as useful mnemonic devices as well. But by the same token, we need to rediscover the canonical images of Christian iconography, which are profoundly rooted in Scripture, and which have their own compositional conventions and principles.

Professor Christensen asks, “Is this a proper way in which to read the Old Testament? Are we permitted to use a single episode in a narrative complex in the book of Genesis as a window through which to view the whole of the Scriptures, as Rublov has done?” His question can receive a positive answer only if Rublov’s “window” actually arises from and leads to a true insight into Scripture.

If we can see the Image depicted in the Word (2 Corinthians 4.4, Colossians 1.15; John 1.1), and the Word depicted in the Image, then looking at the colors and forms of the Church’s icons becomes another way of encountering the living God, who has revealed himself to us through Christ, his ownmost Word and Image, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Icons do indeed show us that each of the Scripture’s narrative complexes opens out to the whole of revelation. In fact, when the work of historical, critical, and structural exegesis is done, the profound typological sensitivity of the Fathers gives us about as good as any Scripture reading is going to get— short of those mystical insights to which Rublov was obviously no stranger.

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