

This is an extract from a talk given to our Oblates, and is in the process of being written up for publication. Iconography is ‘incarnational’. This study discusses Our Lord as the Light who came into the world visible in our flesh and so it is offered as a meditation for Christmas. You are free to quote from it but please acknowledge. There will be a second part which will cover the Passion and Resurrection.

LIGHT IN THE CLAY

PREFACE

Recently I was asked to give a presentation on the spirituality of icons and I did so ‘off the cuff’ as it were. Now I would like to write up something of my thoughts on this and develop certain aspects which time did not allow for.

I only briefly referred to the usual treatment of the spirituality of icons for it is possible to find this in many excellent books: for example, the symbolism of colour, the sacred geometry of an icon’s composition etc. But I did treat of the importance of reverse perspective when addressing the aspect of contemplation and the transforming gaze of the icon when it is directed at the viewer.

I divided the term ‘spirituality’ into two: that of the iconographer whose spirituality develops in certain ways when reacting with the work, and that of the one-who-contemplates the icon in prayer. In the case of the iconographer, I am not referring here to aspects like fasting, but the relationship between the materials used in icons and the technique as these connect with spirituality. This will become clear. As every artist chooses the materials and technique proper to the subject, what is proper to icons is exceptionally telling in spiritual terms.

The sweep of the spirituality of iconography needs to include its ancient beginnings, the sources of sacred art, in particular the Face and Person of Christ. This source includes the theology of the Incarnation and creation in John’s Gospel and in the opening chapter of Genesis, for iconography is an act of creation and essentially ‘incarnational’.

The sweep should include present scientific aspects such as the surface tension of water, the nature of light, the power of observation upon subatomic particles in Quantum Mechanics and questions relating to the Shroud of Turin and image formation.

Weaving its way through all these aspects, is the nature of contemplative prayer and the incarnational dimensions of this I-Thou relationship with the Divine.

“LIGHT IN THE CLAY”

Why this title for a talk on the spirituality of icons? Let us take a step back. “He knows the clay[dust/earth] of which we are made.” This is a quotation from Psalm 103.14 and is translated “He knows the *clay*...” in a sermon attributed to Peter Damian.¹ Adam was formed from the earth and Guerric of Igny sees the Second Adam as the Light in an earthenware lamp. “Notice the light in a lamp of earthenware, the sun in a cloud, God in man, the splendour of glory and the *brightness of eternal light in the clay vessel of your flesh*.² I find this metaphor by Guerric poignant when read alongside the identification of the Word with the Light in John’s Prologue: *In Him was life and the life was the light of men, and that light in the darkness shines and the darkness did not overwhelm it.* Translation from the Aramaic Peshitta. Also, there is the mystical theology of St John Chrysostom echoing the opening of John’s Gospel and exploring this theme: “In the beginning man was formed from the clay of virgin earth...”³ There is the great Augustine’s homily on Psalm 95: “... Adam himself was scattered over the entire earth. He was in one place, and there he fell; but he was, in a manner of speaking, shattered into tiny fragments which have been dispersed over all the earth. However, God’s mercy gathered up these pieces from every side, fired then with the flame of love, and moulded what was broken back into one piece...”⁴ Adam here is likened to clay which is fired, clay which responds to the heat and light of love.

I believe the deep psyche is home to certain ‘gifts’ from the Creator which seek expression and emerge ‘veiled’. Artists and psychologists understand this. One such intuition residing in the unconscious from antiquity is that light belongs in the stuff of earth be it clay, wood or dust. Perhaps this is a premonition of when *the Eternal Light, the Creator of Light, would shine in the clay of our flesh?* That is, when the Light of the World would become Man. Perhaps it is a prophetic instinct in the creative psyche. It is characteristic of prophecies to *return to certain themes* and metaphors at different levels and moments, and from different directions. These contemplative intuitions and prophecies are materially expressed in art, emerge in dreams and in psycho analysis.

I find it significant that a so-called modern painter, William Holman Hunt for his iconic painting, *The Light of the World* (1851-1854), mixed dust and soot from St Paul’s Cathedral with paint, allowing the natural London grime to become part of the work, as a symbol of Christ’s patient waiting at the long-unopened door, *with the light emanating from within the composition*, as well as from the lantern. [Italics mine]. Hunt felt instinctively the connection between light and clay/dust. This illustrates for me the truth of the intuition that light in the clay of our flesh and of our material world is enduring and real in the creative psyche. But in 1997 Cornelia Parker worked on this theme more explicitly. She took dust from the Whispering Gallery of St Paul’s Cathedral and placed it on glass then shone light through it. This work she

¹ As used in *Lectionnaire Monastique* for The Transitus of St Benedict.

² From the Sermons of Guerric of Igny as used in *Lectionnaire Monastique*

³ St John Chrysostom *Homilies on St John’s Gospel* as used in *Lectionnaire Monastique*.

⁴ Homily from *St Augustine’s Commentary on Psalm 95* as used in *Lectionnaire Monastique*

entitled *Bated Breath: Fluff and Dust Collected from the Whispering Gallery, St. Paul's Cathedral, London*. The quantity of dust, from thousands of visitors, was compressed between glass. She then used this as a negative to produce a photograph, which is a camera-less photographic process. The same intuition is being expressed, that light is or once was, originally, interior to matter, our clay, our dust. In the Hebrew of Genesis we are created from dust, in 3.19, and/or clay/earth **הָאָדָם עַמְּרָךְ** from which comes the name given the first man, Adam אָדָם.



Icon of Virgin and Child by Sister Anne Eason OSB. Mixture of oil gilding and water gilding burnished to a high sheen. Gold leaf as well as platinum leaf on clay bole and gesso ground. Traditional pigments with egg tempera.

To illustrate this from iconography, I use the oldest traditional method of water gilding whose roots can be traced to the 14th Century. It achieves a brilliant reflection of light off gold leaf when it is placed on clay bole and agate burnished.⁵ This is light *placed upon* clay bole but expresses the ancient instinct that light 'belongs' *within* created matter and *shines out of it*. Consider the fields of light created by burnished gold on clay bole as haloes around the heads of saints, or the technique we painters use to express light issuing from *within the body* of the saint, flooding the clothing. This iconographic principle of light within does not entirely exclude the shadows formed from external light sources but creates a statement as a light source of primary significance. Proof of how ancient this artistic skill and intuition is can be evidenced in the use of gold foil in Northern Africa to ornament wood which dates from 2,000 years before Christ. In Peru work dates to 3,000 BC.

⁵ In this process the clay is flooded with water. Gold is grasped from the tip by the water's surface tension. As it is absorbed it draws the floating gold down onto the clay. I find this process numinous, spiritually symbolic.

To illustrate this from another perspective: The choice of the Hebrew word for Adam's clothing is deliberate, and expresses the Rabbinic legend that God clothed Adam and Eve in **שְׂוִיר** ('ō-wr) *skin* in exchange for their *garments of light*, the garments in which they had been clothed in Paradise. The pun is formed by the Hebrew word for both skin **שְׂוִיר** ('ō-wr) and for light **אֹור** ('ō-wr).⁶ "And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin ('OR), and clothed them (Gen 3. 21). In R. Meir's Torah it was found written, 'Garments of light ('OR): this refers to Adam's garments, which were like a torch [shedding radiance], broad at the bottom and narrow at the top. Isaac the Elder said: They were as smooth as a fingernail and as beautiful as a jewel ..." ⁷ The reference to 'jewel' in the Midrash is echoed in the vision of Julian of Norwich, for the light would be returned to Adam through the radiance of the wounds of Christ which she sees as jewels. The German mystic Anna Katerina Emmerich speaks fully of Adam's radiance before the Fall: "From Adam's mouth I saw issuing a broad stream of glittering light. And upon his forehead was an expression of great majesty. Around his mouth played a sunbeam, ... I saw Adam's heart very much the same as in men of the present day, but his breast was surrounded by rays of light. In the middle of his heart, I saw a sparkling halo of glory. In it was a tiny figure as if holding something in its hand. I think it symbolized the Third Person of the Godhead. From the hands and feet of Adam and Eve, shot rays of light. Their hair fell in five glittering tresses ... The glittering beams on Adam's head denoted his abundant fruitfulness, his glory, his connection with other radiations."⁸ This German visionary was not the only mystic to speak of this Mystery. Bernard of Clairvaux and others have done so likewise, even if they have concentrated on different aspects of it. Monastic chant has the Marian antiphon 'Ave Regina Caelorum' which includes the line: "...she is the door through which the Light has poured..." We cannot discuss the Word becoming Flesh without reference to His Mother through whom the Light streamed.

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⁶ I explore this more deeply in *The Passion of the Word*, chapters 1, 4, & 7.

⁷ From the **Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XX:12**:

⁸ Anne Catherine Emmerich, Anne Catherine Emmerich, *The Life of Jesus Christ and Biblical revelations*, Tan Books, Vol I, page 8: 'I have always thought that by the Wounds of Jesus there were opened anew in the human body portals closed by Adam's sin.'