

## Extract from ***“LIGHT IN THE CLAY”*** **Part Two for Eastertide**

By Sr Anne Eason OSB

I will begin with what I would call *‘The Transformative Look’*. This arises in the mutual encounter between the contemplative and the subject of the icon. I am referring here primarily to the gaze of the icon on the viewer. This recognition by the saint or by God, the look of His Face, has a transforming effect on us. It is no passing illumination like that on the face of Moses, but the *lux Sancta*, the holy light of salvation and life.



*Line drawing of Rublev's Trinity showing reverse perspective.*

Traditional iconography utilizes reverse perspective, or inverse perspective, where parallel lines are drawn to diverge to a vanishing point outside the picture plane, placing the focal point in front of the painting, where the viewer is. This is not the technique which portrait painters use to focus the view of the painting somewhere near the one contemplating it. It is rather a technique which creates a sense of the icon "looking at" the viewer, drawing them into the sacred space of the icon. In relation to this I would like to refer briefly to a phenomenon in Quantum Mechanics which I have believed to

be relevant to spiritual experience since reading of it as a novice. It has implications for the *I-Thou* relationship of which Martin Buber has written so magnificently. The double-slit experiment in Quantum Mechanics has shown that the *act of observing* can change how particles behave. This has given rise to further research as to the power of observation, attention, and its effects on what is observed. The implications for contemplative prayer are immense. And the Gospels talk at times of *‘the look’* of Christ. The power of His gaze is acknowledged there: *‘He looked upon him and He loved him’...* *‘the Lord turned and looked at Peter...’*. I have written of this ‘look’ when discussing the power of the Face of Christ on the Shroud of Turin, even though His eyes are closed in the sleep of death. And that is why I and so many artists have striven to paint this Face of Christ with His eyes open as I showed earlier in this article where I superimposed the eyes of the Manoppello Cloth upon those of the Shroud. We are, when contemplating the Image on the Shroud, in the presence of the numinous, yet contemplation as used here is prayer as relationship, it is the *I-Thou*. This relationship is

initiated by the 'Other', the Truth and Love, the author of life. God's omnipresence is here concentrated in the Image but He looks out at us from within it. The contemplation is mutual but with unimaginable differences and has transformative power.

I am dwelling upon this here because when people normally write about contemplating icons, it is from the perspective of the person praying and I am comparing the power of the Shroud Image with that of the icon bearing an image of the Divine. What is actually happening is that both God and the person are contemplating each other. The Shroud has the Image, and we are compelled, invited, fascinated by this Image. I have described it as creating an interior pathway in the soul, in the spiritual self, through contemplation. The Shroud is a *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*<sup>1</sup> creating this mutual contemplation, in prayer, between the Divine and the creature. But the Divine subject of an icon has a like power.

"...Inner perception must free itself from the impression of the merely sensible, and in prayer and ascetical effort *acquire a new and deeper capacity to see*, to perform the passage from what is merely external to the profundity of reality..."<sup>2</sup> There is a *travelling towards* on this pathway between the Divine and the creature, and an encounter happens. The praying self *knows* the encounter happens, but contemplatives find it difficult to articulate this and so it should be. A skilled spiritual director may with questions and allusion help the person to bring some aspects into the light. But the transformation happens out of sight, felt, known, but in essence 'beyond' articulation. This is characteristic of Divine action upon a soul and is unique to each person. By praying with the Shroud Image we are the recipients of the gaze of God, we are observed by God, and thus subject to change and transformation. Quantum Mechanics shows that this is true even for matter. We are more than matter. We are in the realm of spiritual realities.

Addressing the necessity for contemplation, Cardinal Ratzinger writes, quoting Cabasilas: "...When men have a longing so great that it surpasses human nature and eagerly desire ... it is the Bridegroom who has smitten them with this longing. It is he who has sent a ray of his beauty into their eyes. The greatness of the wound already shows the arrow which has struck home, the longing indicates who has inflicted the wound" (cf. "*The Life in Christ*," the Second Book, 15)" The focus has shifted to the one who gazes, his interiority, his soul, and the essence is relational. Cardinal Ratzinger goes on to say "... the experience described by Cabasilas, *starting with interiority*, is visibly portrayed and can be shared. In a rich way Pavel Evdokimov has brought to light the *interior pathway that an icon establishes*. ... [to see what] the senses as such do not see, and what actually appears in what can be perceived: the splendour of the glory of God, the "*glory of God shining on the face of Christ*" (2 Corinthians 4:6). [This] leads us on an inner way, a way of overcoming ourselves; thus in this purification of vision that is a purification of the heart, it reveals the beautiful to us... In this way we are brought into contact

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<sup>1</sup> See Rudof Otto: *The Idea of the Holy* for this concept.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. Cit.* Cardinal Ratzinger



We are discussing the spirituality of iconography under the title of 'Light in the Clay' and I would like to conclude this by taking the focus back to 'light'. I am interested that Newman believed that when we are in heaven our bodies will be lit with light from within. This is, as I have shown, how iconographers paint. Newman's idea that our bodies in heaven (after the resurrection) would be "lit with light from within" stems from traditional Catholic theology regarding the four gifts of the glorified body, specifically the gift of clarity (or Claritas). This teaching is rooted in Scripture, most notably in Matthew 13:43, where Jesus says, "*Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father*". Newman understood the mystery of the human body to depend on the Eucharist as a means of sustaining body and soul for future resurrection and transformation into a "glorified body". We have discussed already some of the connections between the Eucharist and iconography above in terms of water, but here is related to light. The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas systematized the understanding of the resurrected body's qualities, which were widely accepted in Catholic tradition: Impassibility: Inability to suffer or be harmed. Agility: Ability to move instantly by an act of will. Subtlety: Freedom from the limitations of gross matter, allowing penetration of physical objects. *Clarity: The body will be beautiful and radiant, shining with an internal light, free from any deformity or opacity.*

We have mentioned the relationship between the Shroud and iconography from various perspectives and the importance of light in both. I would like to tentatively share an intuition which I as an iconographer and contemplative, have arrived at. The Resurrection was an experience involving 'light' and 'The Light', and that is evident in the properties of the Shroud. In that sense, 'light' is associated with suffering and the emergence from it and from death. But there are many instances in which saints are suffused with light during periods of intense suffering. Light is not only associated with ecstasy as with St. Seraphim of Sarov, but also with the purification which suffering gives rise to. When Goethe arrived at his experiment with light and colour, he intuited (and I use that verb deliberately because he has been criticised for not being scientific enough) that suffering was involved in the creation of colour by the action of light. I deeply respect this intuition of Goethe. I believe that he, obviously imperfectly, but still to some degree, understood the spiritual and physical interface between light and suffering. I believe there to be some mysterious connection between the spiritual reality and light, between suffering, love and light. 'God is Light', says St John, and the Light came into the world which 'God loved so much...' , suffered and died, and rose again from death.

With these thoughts, I conclude this article on the spirituality of iconography as 'Light in the Clay'. I have discussed the title in the context of iconography and have focussed on the spirituality of the iconographer and then on that of the one who prays with icons. I have also tentatively discussed the mystery of contemplative prayer.