

The Consecrated Woman: Icon of the Transfigured Church

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Icons have always been most mysterious things. They at once symbolize and transmit something of the supernatural life of the most high God. In this article Fr. Regis Barwig deepens and refines our sense of what it means to be a woman consecrated to the religious life, and he does so precisely by weaving his own pastoral experience in the Church with insights gained from a full appreciation of icon art. The result is an exciting portrait of the ideal religious woman which cannot fail to challenge every Christian — male and female — to live more fully in the Lord.

The Russian Orthodox Father Alexander Schmemmann has said: “The meaning, the essence and the end of all vocation is the Mystery of Christ and the Church. It is through the Church that each one of us finds that the vocation of all vocations is to follow Christ in the fullness of His priesthood: in His love for man and the world, His love for the ultimate fulfillment in abundant life of the Kingdom.”¹ Indeed, though rooted in the remembrance of the past, Christian life is an anticipation of the Kingdom to come, and the Church is the token of this glorious consummation. From earliest times, in the *Didache*, the Church prayed for its fulfillment: “As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, and was gathered together and became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy Kingdom.”² This reflects faith in the reality of a Church characterized by the indwelling of Christ. It implies living and dying for the fact that the Church is Christ and the faithful are members of His Risen and Glorified Self. As Joan of Arc said: “It seems to me that our Lord and the Church are all one; you ought not to make a difficulty of that.”³

Against this background, the words of Pius XII can be readily appreciated: “To be living icons of that perfected integrity that forms the bond of unity between the Church and Her Divine Spouse is certainly the supreme glory of the virgins.”⁴ Hence, in themselves consecrated women can embody the Church’s bridal mystery and fruitfulness in which He who is mighty casts His transfiguring gaze upon their lowliness, expressed in faith and hope, as He overshadows them with His own creative power. Ultimately, it is clear, the role of the religious woman is to be an icon of the Church.

In iconizing the Transfigured Church, the female religious does so in a single-minded, undivided way (I Cor. 7:33), with a consciousness of her mission, an awareness of her destiny. Along with the Church, she consecrates and transforms, purifies and cleanses, sanctifies and hallows this world. Her goal with Christ and His Spouse is to consecrate the world — *consecrare mundum*.⁵ This, indeed, is the earthly anticipation of the City of God in the communion of the saints: that which St. Benedict would make as the image of his monastic family and, by extension, of every family of consecrated religious, namely, the *vita coelestis* — the life of the Family of God that speaks of Heaven.⁶ In this connection, with the great St. Gregory of Nyssa, the religious must know that “. . . the friends of the Bridegroom see the Sun of Justice by looking upon the face of the Church as though it were a pure mirror, and thus He can be seen by His reflection.”⁷

As the same Father of the Church went on to say:

All of you, following the counsel of Paul, have stripped yourselves of the old man (Col. 3:9), like a soiled garment, with all his works and desires; and by the purity of your lives you have put on the snow-white garments of the Lord which He showed us at His Transfiguration on the mount. All of you, then, who have been transformed into something divine and sinless — it is to you that I speak. . . .⁸

Here indeed is the vocation to mirror the Transfigured Lord and Redeemer. This is not something superimposed by poets or theologians: it is ordained of God. It is the heritage in which our Blessed Lady is the archetype of the Church and its relationship to its Lord. It is this Virgin Mary whom St. John depicts under the figure of the woman as the perfect and transfigured realization of the Church. It is this supreme task of the Mother of God which is being shared with the consecrated woman and perpetuated in the colossal work of the Church to regenerate all men in Christ. To be an icon of the Church is to participate in this work most fully.

Let us try to understand what an icon is. A painting is realistic if it attempts to reproduce nature as it is, even to the point that upon seeing the portrait of a person one believes one actually sees him, so much does the work resemble him. But the idealistic painting evokes a definite reaction by emphasizing certain characteristics of the subject. The icon seeks to arouse in the beholder a spirit of prayer; therefore, it is not a work of art conceived according to secular rules. Before one undertakes to paint an icon, one receives a special blessing, one fasts, one prays.

In beginning the painting the artist does not use his imagination or subjective impressions. No, first of all he uses patterns fixed by rigorous traditions of the Church. It is only on a plain background that he paints, for he seeks no third dimensional effect: he seeks the reproduction of a spiritualized being, yet a real, authentic being. Is this not what the religious is to be in, of and for the Church, for all mankind?

The icon addresses the spirit. The icon, though through the outer senses, gives us a glimpse of the supra-sensible world to come, the goal of us all, making the eternal somewhat clearer, more definite. It assists us in approaching in spirit and in truth the prototype that communicates its being to the icon. That is what all religious are to do. They reveal more fully what they represent: the transfigured Church. They are not so much a picture or a sign: they are a presence. The religious life is, really, a sacramental role that raises heart and mind to God through Jesus Christ in the life-giving Spirit. One cannot discover all the richness of this icon at first sight. One must contemplate it long and often. It must be remembered, too, that all this teaches humility, for the iconographic artist never signs the painting he has produced. His identity is hidden with Christ in God.

As icons of the Church, religious are summoned to be transparent to the divine life. They become a means for men to rediscover the lost image of God in themselves. Like the icons they are intimately related to the Church in liturgical prayer. They have a genuine part in its action. They tell us all about the invisible Church beyond the icons. St. Gregory of Palamas spoke a great deal about uncreated grace, the divine light of Tabor.⁹ It is this immaterial light that emanates from the icon, transfigures the saint, edifies the faithful, tells of and inspires values that alone count and truly are.

To perfect and consummate their role as icons of the Transfigured Church, religious must empty themselves of all that is an obstacle to the image of Christ being more clearly and deeply delineated upon their hearts. This is wrought by the Cross and by obedience unto death. At the Transfiguration, obedience to the Lord was the keystone. The voice from heaven declared: "This is my Son, the Chosen, hear ye Him" (Luke 9:35). The words the Gospel writers wrote meant more than merely *listen*. They meant *hearken and obey*.

In grasping the full meaning of what it is to become an icon of the Church, it is important and valuable to consider to classic examples in the personal lives of two great Doctors of the Church, the more relevant precisely in our day when that role of doctor has suffered massive failure. I refer to St. Teresa of Avila and to St. Catherine of Siena.

What strikes us about St. Teresa most forcibly is, as P. Marie-Eugene put it, "the fact of her belonging to the Church. . . . She was seeking Jesus alone, and the Whole Christ is revealed in her."¹⁰ She loved tranquility but sacrificed herself "in order to found convents dedicated to painful prayer for the Church."¹¹ Restricted minds in our day see no value in the life of contemplation but, interestingly, one of the great transfiguring facts of St. Teresa's life is that:

in default of a method for the apostolate, St. Teresa offers us a method for the formation of an apostle. . . . The contemplatives she forms become apostles of the first rank, for she makes of them perfect instruments of the Holy Spirit.¹²

St. Teresa was conscious of the fact that in the prayer of union she crossed the threshold into union with the living Christ, and then Christ was the dwelling where life was to be hidden. This is, really, the revelation of her incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, and a consciousness of being possessed by the whole Christ. In St. Teresa's teachings, the mystery of the Church puts before our eyes the plan of God's love.

St. Teresa teaches that in the religious apostolate action and contemplation must be united. The special missions that the Holy Spirit imposes on souls are as divergent as are the functions of Christ's priesthood and the needs of His Church. There is the mission for silent prayer and obscure self-immolation, as well as a mission for teaching, or for the active life in the exercise of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. But all are divine missions through which in the Church the Holy Spirit builds up the Church at every period in history. Moreover, on these summits of transfiguration, Martha and Mary resemble each other and unite to fulfill the same office. "Believe me," wrote St. Teresa:

Martha and Mary must work together when they offer the Lord lodging, and must have Him ever with them, and they must not entertain Him badly and give Him nothing to eat. . . . His food consists in our bringing Him souls, in every possible way so that they may be saved and may praise Him forever.¹³

This is another way of reflecting the all-encompassing love of the Church and the universal salvific will of Christ. What St. Teresa believed fully she repeatedly asserted on her deathbed: "I am a Daughter of the Church."¹⁴

When we think of St. Catherine of Siena, we think of her as the reformer, especially in her letters to the Pope and to Blessed Raymond of Capua. It must not be forgotten that the concept of Church reform which so tormented her was identified with the idea of priestly holiness. The more the terrible scourge of clerical sin threatened, the more clearly she reacted out of love for the Church. She was concerned about the spiritual transfiguration of the clergy. So must the consecrated religious woman be in prayers for the Holy Father, the bishops and priests and deacons. All of the evil Catherine witnessed did not, as J.M. Perrin noted,

. . . lead Catherine to revolt or to a self-righteous withdrawal from the Church, as happened in the case of false reformers, but rather to an intensification of love, generosity, and prayer. . . . We would misjudge Catherine if we concentrated on her anguish to the exclusion of the joy that filled her heart even in the midst of her sufferings, because she never lost sight of the fact that the Church is the Bride of Christ. . . . She was always aware that God prepares the remedy at the same time men commit the fault. . . .¹⁵

St. Catherine, when she spoke of the Church, spoke in a symbolic language through which she sought to translate her personal, incommunicable relationship with God in the Church.

Writing to Blessed Raymond of Capua she remarked that:

The first requisite for working on behalf of the Church is that we be inspired by love, without which we can understand nothing about the Church. She is founded on love, and is herself love. The second condition for working in behalf of the Church is that our love for her must feed on death to self, for what could the Church do with soldiers who were fearful and concerned only with sparing themselves in the service of the Redemption. Fidelity to the Church is also marked by obedience.¹⁶

Finally, loving the Church, according to St. Catherine of Siena, means loving its unity:

. . . it also means understanding the riches and breadth of this unity. Our viewpoint must be as all-encompassing as God's and we should have that sense of the Church which enables us to love and understand vocations other than our own. On the one hand, the gift that each one of us receives puts him at the service of others, and binds him to them.¹⁷

Like St. Teresa of Avila who followed her in history, St. Catherine of Siena saw love for the Church as transforming and transfiguring, bringing with it an unusually burning desire for the renewal of the Church and of her own life. Perrin stated that “Her zeal for reform was no opposition to superiors or egocentric aggressiveness; it was not born of any abstract theories nor did it lead to any strange course of action.”¹⁸ She was never motivated by a desire to censure, but to serve. She tells us what God told her:

I permit this time of persecution in order to free my spouse from the thorns that surround her on all sides; but I do not permit men’s evil intentions. Do you know what I am doing? What I did before when, with a whip of cords, I drove the buyers and sellers from the Temple because I was angered at their turning the house of God into a den of thieves. So today I am making a whip of cords out of creatures and, with this whip I am driving out unclean, greedy, avaricious and proud merchants that are trafficking in the gifts of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

When one looks at the sublime fullness of Catherine’s spirituality one sees that she had no interest, desire, taste or time to be a conductor of in-depth studies and surveys: she did not try to examine the idea of the Church, the diocese, the parish. She was not a theologian writing a thesis on the Church, the Pope, and the bishops. She was not even a reformer who had a plan of action. She was above all a mystic soul contemplating the mystery of the Transfigured Church in the divine light, and reflecting it in her own person. Like every Christian woman by Baptism, Catherine became a Bride by nature, signifying the mystery of the mystical marriage of Christ and His Church. She saw her holiness in the offering of her self for the Church in an act of the interior will.

Catherine was indeed a mystic who was an icon of the Transfigured Church, which is to say an icon of Christ Himself. This was the consummation of her identity. It ought also to be the achievement of each religious woman today — to undergo a transfiguration by which God the Father recognizes His Divine Son in her.

NOTES

*Fr. Barwig’s new book, *Waiting for Rain*, written for all Christians about the contemplative life, is available for \$5.00 from Benziger Sisters Publishers (466 East Mariposa St., Altadena, Cal. 91001).

¹Alexander Schmemmann, *Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, Herder and Herder, New York, 1965, p. 117.

²*Didache*, ix, 4, as cited in *The Festal Menaion*, p. 36-7.

³Pierre Rousselot, S.J.; L. de Grandmaison, S.J.; V. Juby, S.J.; Alexandre Brough; M. C. D’Arcy, S.J., *The Life of the Church*, Lincoln Mac Veagh, The Dial Press, New York, 1932, p. 337.

⁴Jane Klimisch, *The One Bride*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1965, p. 4.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁶*Benedictus, Regula*, Cap. 73.

⁷*From Glory to Glory* (texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writings) (Selected and with introduction by Jean Danielou, S.J., trans. and ed. by Herbert Musurillo, S.J.), Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1961, p. 219.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁹See V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, James Clarke & Co., Ltd., London, 1957, p. 76.

¹⁰P. Marie-Eugene, O.C.D., *I Am a Daughter of the Church*, Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality, Vol. II, Trans. S.M. Verda Clare, C.S.C., Fides, Chicago, 1955, p. vii.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. viii.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹³Cf. *VII Mansions*, iv. Peers, II, p. 348.

¹⁴Cf. *VII Mansions*, iv. Peers, II, p. 348. As cited in P. Marie-Eugene, O.C.D., p. 660.

¹⁵*Autob.* XI, p. 85, as cited in P. Marie-Eugene, O.C.D., p. 666. J.M. Perrin, O.P., *Catherine of Siena* (trans. Paul Barret, O.F.M., Cap.) Newman Press, Westminster, Md., 1956, p. 42.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 195-6.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁹Perrin, *op. cit.*, p. 200.