

## THE TRANSFIGURATION IN THE BYZANTINE LITURGY

IRENE MARINOFF

**T**HE Feast of the Transfiguration on 6th August is one of the major feasts of the Byzantine rite. It is the feast of light and has a significant position in the cycle of the mysteries of Christ. Ontologically speaking it lies between the mystery of the Incarnation, celebrated at Christmas, and the redemptive suffering followed by the Resurrection of Easter Sunday. At Christmas the Eternal Light shone forth in human shape 'from a virginal cloud'. At Easter he breaks the chains of death and reveals his risen glory. On Tabor he empowers his disciples to recognize him through the veils of flesh.

The Transfiguration comprises all the mysteries of the divine economy, and is an inexhaustible treasure of spiritual wisdom. Already in the first vespers of the ante-feast on 5th August we find the following prayer:

Come let us mount with Jesus in his ascent to the holy mountain, and there hear the voice of the Eternal Father (lit.: who has no beginning), bearing witness by a light cloud and the Holy Ghost to the nature of his Eternal Sonship: illumined in the spirit we shall, in the light, behold the Light.

According to the mind of the Oriental Church the second self-revelation of the Most Blessed Trinity takes place on Tabor. The first was granted to St John the Baptist during the Baptism of Jesus, when the Holy Ghost descended on him in shape of a dove and the voice of the Father testified to the identity of the Son. At the Transfiguration three favoured disciples, Peter, James, and John, behold Christ transfigured. Overshadowed by the Holy Spirit in shape of a cloud of light they hear the voice of the Father. With the glorious freedom of the Bride of Christ the Church interprets the mind of God the Father:

This is my Beloved Son whom, of my own substance, incorporeally, I have begotten before the dawn. Him I have sent to save those, who are baptised in the name of the Father and of

the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and who confess by faith that the unique power of the Godhead is indivisible. Him ye shall hear.

What is this light of Thabor? Theologians may dispute on its exact nature. For the faithful it is simply the light of the divinity, that glory which the disciples failed to discover in the man, Jesus of Nazareth, but which, by a special grace, they are now enabled to see.

Immutable Light of the unbegotten Father, O Word, today we have seen in thy radiance on Thabor the Light which is the Father, and the Light which is the Spirit, that enlightens the whole of creation.

In his ineffable condescension God performed this miracle in order to fortify the Apostles against the impending agony of the Crucifixion, and to reveal to them the glory of the Resurrection.

The *Kontakion* of the feast says:

Thou wert transfigured on the mount. When they came there, thy disciples saw thy glory, O Christ, our God, so that they might remember on the day of thy crucifixion, that thou art suffering of thine own free will, and might announce to the world that thou art in truth the splendour of the Father.

Both the transfiguration and the Crucifixion are tokens of the inexhaustible love of the Father.

On Thabor there are further mysteries. He who clothes himself in the radiance of Thabor, so dazzling that his disciples are struck to the ground, is not only God, he is God *and* man-God who assumed the nature of man in order to redeem him. That is why the Transfiguration is of significance for human nature as well. First we are shown in the texts of the Vespers of the feast that by the practice of high virtue man is made worthy of divine glory. As the disciples were permitted to behold the Divinity with their mortal eyes, we, too, shall one day, by the aid of divine grace, attain to the beatific vision. This demands a transformation of human nature itself, foreshadowed by the events on Thabor.

On that day, on Thabor, Christ transformed the human nature of Adam, which was wrapped in darkness: by covering it with his radiance, he divinised it.

Here the very heart of the redemption is touched, which, according to the oriental conception, leads to the *theosis*, the penetration of human nature by the transforming power of grace. The

whole of man, not only his soul, or intellect, is affected by this process. Not as though the Eastern Church had forgotten that God is a spirit and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. She prays that our minds may be enlightened by the knowledge of God. But she is equally aware that the inner light may shine through the veil of flesh and certainly will after the resurrection of the body. But just as Christ revealed this mystery before his Resurrection, so, according to the oriental view, it may also occur that the transformation into Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit becomes so complete in a man that it is visible to others even during his lifetime. This happened, e.g. in the case of the great Russian mystic, Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833). The preoccupation with the theology of light and the events on Mount Thabor may account for the strange fact that several saints of the Eastern Church have radiated visibly, while no case of stigmatization has been recorded. The Ukrainians, placed as they are between the Latin and Byzantine rites, are a noteworthy exception.

We do not know the relationship between our Lord's transfigured and his risen body. But we do know that he who spoke to Moses in the burning bush without destroying it, and miraculously preserved his Blessed Mother's virginity, permitted his Godhead to shine through his mortal body on Thabor. This event is of unfathomable significance for the entire human race.

Hence God ordained that witnesses, representative of all mankind, should be present: Peter, James and John, Moses and Elias, 'the princes of the law and the princes of grace'. Here on Thabor the Old and the New Testaments meet to praise the mighty works of God in unison. The law and the prophets in their most distinguished members have come to hear of the redemption of man by the passion and death of the Saviour and his subsequent Resurrection.

He who once spoke in symbols to Moses on Mount Sinai and said 'I am, who am', has now been transfigured before his Apostles on Thabor in order to show unto them human nature clothed in the original beauty of the archetype. He called Moses and Elias unto himself to be witnesses of so great a grace. He granted them a share in his joy and allowed them to foretell his death on the cross and his redemptive Resurrection.

However, those who are present on Mount Thabor are important from another point of view as well. They are not only

representatives of the Old and New Testaments, they equally represent the living and the dead.

O Word of God, existing before time, thou didst clothe thyself with light as with a garment, O Word, when thou wast transfigured before thy disciples and didst shine more brightly than the sun. Moses and Elias stood at thy side, showing thee to be Master of life and death. They glorify thine ineffable economy of salvation, thy compassion, thy perfect humility by which thou didst redeem the world and cleanse it from sin. (Matins.)

Here again the choice of Moses and Elias is significant. Moses represents all the just who are awaiting the advent of the Redeemer in limbo. Elias was the only human being to be carried away to heaven by a whirlwind in a chariot of fire. The whole of creation—heaven, earth, and limbo—share in the sublime spectacle of human nature invaded and transfigured by the divine.

The mysteries of the redemption are most closely linked. One presupposes the other and sheds its light on it. We have seen that the Transfiguration is closely connected with three mysteries: the Blessed Trinity, the transfiguration of human nature by the divine light, and the redemptive death of the Christ. Yet there is still another mystery unfolded on Thabor: The Second Coming.

It is in order to give us an intimation of thine ineffable Second Coming when thou wilt appear in the midst of the gods (i.e. the angels), that thou wert unutterably transfigured on Thabor before thy Apostles, Moses and Elias: therefore, O Christ, we praise thee. (Matins.)

The revelation granted us by God in Holy Scripture is complete, yet not fully realized in time. The life of the Lord is consummated. There is nothing to be added to the history of the Early Church. Today the life of the Church is in full development. Yet great things are still to come. Even during his lifetime Christ foretold his Second Coming, and the sublime vision of St John conveys an idea of the mighty upheavals which herald it. These mysteries are also foreshadowed in the Transfiguration.

As long as men pursue their earthly pilgrimage, they must answer the challenge voiced at Matins:

Wake up, ye heavily laden; cease dragging yourselves along on the ground; rise up, ye thoughts, that weigh our souls to earth; turn towards the mount of the divine ascending! Let us hasten with Peter and the sons of Zebedee and reach Mount Thabor

with them, there to contemplate the glory of our God and listen to the voice from above which they heard, that they might proclaim the glory of the Father. (*Ikos.*)

In a Pauline turn of thought the great mysteries of the Transfiguration are brought to a close. The Son who descended from his heavenly throne to compassionate men leads redeemed mankind to proclaim the glory of the Father, the author of all light.



## OF THE STUDY AND USE OF CREATED THINGS

Translated and abridged from ST AMBROSE'S *Homiletic Commentary on the Hexaëmeron* by

J. F. T. PRINCE

**H**OW then shall our thoughts be ordered in this matter of the Creation, and in what manner may we search as to the things which nature can accomplish? Let this be answered: that it is by the nature of Christ who, abounding in the fullness of his Godhead, hath all things done according to his Will, even the Will of his Father; by this standard alone and in no wise by the mere nature of the Universe, must we conduct ourselves. As in the sacred record, when he was seen to heal the leper and to pour new light upon the sightless, the people glorified not some course of medical cure, but, in astonishment at the power of the Lord, gave unto him only (as it is written) the glory, so even must we. Nor was it from calculations and computations, from estimates and assessments of the Egyptians, nor from the concurrence of the heavenly bodies, from astronomic observation, from enquiry into the balance of the elements and the proportion of matter, from none of these things did Moses hold the knowledge and the power when he stretched his hand forth to divide the Red Sea, and, so doing, obeyed the command of God. Whence also, possessing by simplicity and obedience, this holy power and godly cunning, he crieth of himself:

'Thy right hand, O Lord, hath waxed glorious in power:

'Thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed into pieces the enemy!'