

Tadeusz Dionizy Łukaszuk OSPPE

The Sacred Image/Icon of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary as the Fruit of the Incarnation

The existence of sacred images, which Eastern custom calls icons, in the Church is palpable and therefore cannot be questioned. Images are present and properly venerated in the Church. According to the teaching of the Second Council of Nicaea, images should represent “*both God and our Saviour Jesus Christ as well as our Virgin Lady, Mother of Christ, worshipful angels and all saintly and honourable men*”¹. We know from history that during a certain period the future of images in the Church was threatened. The problem was whether the image represents and captures its prototype well enough for the prototype to be grasped and properly worshipped. A further issue was whether the persons are depicted in the icons in the form in which they embody the saving and theiotic power of God. These and similar questions were posed in connection mainly with the images of Christ and the BVM. The answer to them was to be found in the very roots of the salvational order of the *New Testament*, that is in the mystery of the Incarnation. Only there was it possible to find a firm justification of the sacred image, both of Christ and His Virgin Mother. Any theology of the Marian image, if it is to be a serious theology, must reach to the foundations of the renewed order of the world. The Icon from Jasna Góra cannot fail to meet this requirement.

It is a truism to state that the Church dispute over sacred images and their veneration was in its deepest sense a controversy over the significance and effects of the Incarnation. The subject of the dispute was not the aesthetic aspect of images or their didactic and catechetical function, but their relation to the reality of the Incarnated God. The question was whether the image created by the hand of man is able to express the truth of the Incarnation. The opponents of images denied them this ability, thus demanding images to be excluded from the religious order based on the fact of the Incarnation. The icon-worshippers insisted on their presence and were convinced that it was sacred images that aptly expressed and closely guarded the truth of the Incarnation.

It is understandable that here there is no possibility - and no need - to repeat the past controversies and quote the arguments used by both sides. This subject matter has been thoroughly examined² and the reader can refer to the bibliography. In this paper we shall note how the official teaching of the Church presented

the relation between the icon and the Incarnation. Was this issue sufficiently defined in the official teaching? The next question concerns our own times and should be formulated as follows: Is this relation perceived today, and is its significance felt? The purpose of posing these questions is to show to what extent images are connected with the vital core of Christianity and why, in consequence, they constitute an important element in the Christian order of salvation.

1. The Relation of Sacred Images to the Incarnation as Perceived by the Ancient Oecumenical Councils

In order to maintain thematic coherence, only the ancient oecumenical councils will be discussed here as the councils absolutely authoritative in the matters of faith in the Church. Statements of the assemblies of a lower rank such as the Trullan Synod of 692, though important and characterised by a wide scope of subject-matters, will be set aside. It is known that the problem of images was tackled by two oecumenical councils which announced their relevant decisions directed to all the Church: the Second Council of Nicaea of 787 and the Fourth Council of Constantinople of 869. The former treated the issue of images as the primary object of its attention, whereas the latter only touched upon it but, as we shall see, with shrewdness and insight. Specifically, the Second Council of Nicaea devoted its decree (called by the Greek name *Horos*) to images, and the Fourth Council of Constantinople expressed its judgement in Canon Three appended to the decree proper.

A. The Second Council of Nicaea: Images³ Testify to the Truth of the Incarnation

The final part of the *Horos* of the Second Council of Nicaea refers generally, but significantly enough, to the source of the above mentioned decisions concerning sacred images and their proper veneration discussed in the *Horos*. The reference reads as follows: “*In this way the teaching of our Holy Fathers remains in force, which is the Tradition of the Catholic Church, which accepts the Gospel from one end of the earth to the other. In this way we follow St. Paul, speaking in Christ, the entire (divine) assembly of the Apostles and the Holy Fathers, preserving the traditions which we received*”⁴.

The Council perceives its teaching as a continuation and maintenance of the teaching of the Holy Fathers, that is the Tradition of the Catholic Church. This Tradition, according to the Council, is an extremely rich reality which contains the *Gospel*, accepted by the Church in all the world. The Tradition does not exist independently of the *Scripture*, but it is the *Scripture* that constitutes its proper core. It is in the *Gospel*, accepted by the whole Church, that the teaching of our Holy Fathers is contained. This teaching dwells in the Church and through the power of the Holy Ghost reaches human minds and souls, thus creating the mighty current of the living Tradition, which is paramount to the most vital stratum in the life of the Church. The Church lives thanks to the Tradition, because in the Tradition - as is stated in the

Horos of the Second Council of Nicaea - the Holy Ghost lives and acts. And because the Holy Ghost dwells in the Tradition, it becomes the property of the Holy Ghost⁵.

Within the framework of the Tradition (in a deep and broad sense) proceeds the whole life of the Church which is aimed at preserving the truth and putting the benefits of Salvation within reach. The truth and the benefits reach man in their own ways which can be seen as tiny rivulets of one great Tradition and which can be called traditions in the plural. This plurality of traditions, in contrast to the one, general Tradition, are uncapitalized. Because the Second Council of Nicaea used such a structured definition of the Tradition, in the eyes of historians of dogma it deserved the name of the Council of the Tradition⁶ along with the name of the Council of Sacred Images.

This digression into the subject-matter of Tradition was made consciously and purposefully in order to show that owing to the Living Tradition, in the sufficiently broad and deep sense, the Council doctrine concerning sacred images probes to the very roots of Christianity. It stems from the *Gospel* accepted by the Church dispersed throughout the world. It also means the proper following of St. Paul, speaking in Christ, the whole group of the Apostles and the Holy Fathers.

The question appears: What in essence the Fathers of the Council meant when they said that they received it from the Tradition anchored in the *Gospel* and enriched by the witness of St. Paul, the Apostles and the later Fathers. They did not search these sources for any statements about images as such because, as they knew the *Scripture* perfectly well, they realised they would not find them there. Neither the *Gospel*, nor St. Paul, nor the Apostles discuss images. What did the Council Fathers find then in the Tradition they described? They found the subject of the sacred image, namely the face of God Incarnated, and consequently theological justification for the existence and role of the icon in the Church. The Incarnation of the Son of God is mentioned in the *Gospel*, preached by St. Paul, announced by the Apostles and explained by the Fathers. One can see that the Fathers of the Council attempted to bind their teaching about sacred images very strongly to the Tradition, whose roots reach the history of the Incarnated Son of God, which is transmitted to us through the *Gospel*. The *Gospel* constitutes a part of the Tradition and as such can be incorporated in the general definition of “*all the Church traditions, with or without the sanction of the Scripture*” which the Council resolves to preserve intact.

This is almost immediately followed by the statement which is the most important in the iconological teaching of the Church. Thanks to it the icon is directly dealt with and united with the reality of the Incarnated Word, and justified by its power.

The decree further reads: “*One of those traditions is also the creation of the pictorial representation, this creation works in alliance with the history of the evangelical kerygma to testify to the certainty of the real, not apparent Incarnation (Humanisation) of the Word of God and brings us similar benefits (like the evangelical teaching). Things that are capable of testifying to the same have undoubtedly the same significance*”⁷.

The above quoted excerpt of the *Horos* points out that:

- The creation of images, as a part of the great Tradition, is equal in rights to other parts of the Tradition (i.e. traditions).
- This creation works in alliance with the evangelical kerygma to testify to the certainty of the Incarnation. This statement of the Council is of capital importance to the icon and its theology. The icon in close alliance with the *Gospel* confirms the certainty of the true Incarnation. The Greek word *συναδουσα* should not be understood solely in the sense of the confirmation of compatibility with evangelical history, but also as a statement about collaboration for a common end. In the same way as the history of evangelical teaching, the icon testifies to the true Incarnation. Images can be rejected only by those who do not believe in the true Incarnation: analogically they should reject the evangelical history.
- The *Gospel* and images bring us similar benefits.
- Since they are capable of representing the same thing, then without doubt they should be honoured in the same way.

The discussed decree of the dogma shows that, in the judgement of the Council, images fulfil a function identical to that of the *Gospel*, are equally honourable and enjoy the same right to be venerated. The source of the monumental significance of both realities is their direct involvement in the service of the Incarnated Word.

The above remarks, as can be easily gathered, pertain to the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is indeed the case, because the main controversy over images referred to the possibility of an adequate depiction of the Incarnated Son of God. The Council followed the teaching of the Church Fathers and accepted such a possibility, thus proclaiming legal permission, and even the necessity for the existence of images of Christ. Other than Christ images in the Church may portray His Mother, Our Lady Mary, worshipful angels, as well as saint and pious men. The Council does not identify precisely the entitlement of these figures to a place in holy pictures, but confines itself to an emphasis on the benefits in which people are a party to when they come in contact with a likeness of the represented person. The benefits are the revival of memories about those portrayed and the stimulation of a desire to follow in their footsteps. That is most likely the desire to attain their honourable state and the happiness that springs from it. The cited state leads to sanctification, *theiosis*, whose source and primary example was the humanity of Jesus Christ subjected to *theiosis*. The icon should properly stress this state. The figures of the Virgin and other saints reflect the light of the same theioteic power that first shone from the face of our Lord Jesus Christ. The faces of the Lord and His servants can be represented by images: images are then an appropriate and indeed essential means to give witness about the Incarnated God and about the world transformed through the Incarnation.

B. The Fourth Council of Constantinople: Images Deliver to Us the Salvational Benefits of the Incarnation

The Fourth Council of Constantinople of 869-870 stated its attitude towards sacred images in the form of Canon Three, which included a serious sanction of anathema against all those who object to the doctrine presented. The statement's form alone, as we shall see, has some characteristics of an authoritative judgement which satisfies the requirements concerning dogmatic decisions. The statement can be viewed, together with the decree of the Second Council of Nicaea, as the dogmatic definition of the position and role of sacred images in the Church.

As to the contents, the Canon considerably enriches the Nicene decree. By linking the mere existence of sacred icons with the Incarnation, as was in the case of the Second Council of Nicaea, it assigns to them the role not only of testifying to the reality of the Incarnation, but rather of transmitting the benefits of the consummated salvation. The text of the pronounced decision reads: "*We order that the sacred icon of our Lord Jesus Christ (the Latin version adds: "the Redeemer and Saviour of all"*)⁸ is granted the same adoration as the Holy Writ of the Gospel". In the decision two details are worth stressing. Above all, the phrase "we order" itself (in Greek *θεσπάζομεν*) conveys the meaning of hierarchic authority supported by supreme authority, indeed the authority of God. Secondly, the adoration due to images must equal that offered to the *Holy Writ of the Gospel*. A proper word to describe this veneration is the Greek *προσκανεσις*, which clearly differentiates between this form of the cultus from the latria paid to God alone.

The decisive section of the Canon obviously remains in accordance with the earlier decisions of the Second Council of Nicaea, supplementing them at the most with a repeated confirmation and some specifications concerning the type of veneration. The justification of the decision, however, introduces us to a new, deeper way of understanding the role of sacred images. It turns out that their mission is not limited to testifying about things past, but they are also to continue their service by imparting messages today. "*As we all reach salvation thanks to the syllables contained in it (the Writ), in the same way, thanks to the visual effect of colours, everybody - the wise and the humble - can easily find salvation; what the word conveys in syllables, the signs in colours announce and embody*"⁹.

Images were juxtaposed with the *Gospel* not on the level of their common testimony, but on the level of their service in bringing salvation to people. Salvation is brought to us by means of the syllables recorded in the *Writ*. The same is accomplished by the painter's line in images.

At this point the problems touched upon in the Canon could be analysed within the framework of present-day technological possibilities. If the Saviour lived today, he could be recorded with the help of audio-video cameras. In the aural medium we would have His words, and in the visual medium His face, His glance and gestures. Both would, on the one hand, testify to the Incarnated God and, on the other, would convey the effects of the Incarnation, that is Salvation and Redemption. Salvation and Redemption would be Jesus Christ Himself, present in His word and His figure.

In the antiquity people did not have cameras, but since they very much appreciated the importance of the word and the picture, they were able to incorporate them properly into the order of our salvation. By means of the Incarnation God entered our world, where interpersonal communication functions through the word and the picture. From the Incarnated God this communication brings salvation and redemption.

In a further section of the discussed Canon (in the Greek version) we can read a significant and weighty sentence: “*If then somebody does not venerate the image of Christ our Saviour, let him not see His personage at the Second Coming*”¹⁰. This sentence does not appear to be a mere grace note, nor a simple way of adding emphasis. It reflects and summarises the teaching of the Councils about the natural and rather essential relation between images and the Incarnation. Those who reject images do not acknowledge the Incarnation, that is the truth about the human form of our God and Lord Jesus Christ, no wonder then that the Fathers of the Council deny them the right to see the Saviour in this form. Such people seem to exclude themselves from this right because they forget about the angelic words that were directed to the Apostles at the moment of the Ascension: “*This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven*” (the Acts 1: 11). The promise of the return “*in like manner*” imposes on the Church the duty to preserve the living memory of the face of the Lord, who announced His return in the same form in which he ascended, that is the form adopted in the Incarnation.

The icon of the face of Christ manifests and maintains the living memory of the Church, and its task is not only to recollect a man from the past, but it concerns Somebody, who as a man through the mystery of Easter attained the state of glory, remains in this state and through the power of this state is present among us for ever till the end of the history of the world, when He shall come in the glory of His Father “*to be glorified in his saints*”¹¹ (cf. 2 Thessalonians 1: 10).

The icon is a means of uniting in one Incarnation the history of the earthly life of Jesus, His glorious state and the promised Parousion. Not only does it remind about the moment of Incarnation, but also makes us aware of its continuous presence and its saving influence, whose influence will be crowned with the Parousion. Taking all that into consideration, one should not wonder that the sacred image in the Church (especially the Eastern Church) is an indispensable element of experiencing and confessing the holy faith¹².

While discussing Canon Three of the Fourth Council of Constantinople, one is struck by the same phenomenon that can be observed during the analysis of the *Horos* of the Second Council of Nicaea: both documents focus their attention on the icon of Jesus Christ. The image of the Saviour was the proper centre of interest, which is unsurprising when one knows that the question involved the person of the Incarnated God and the possibility of His depiction by human works of art. Nevertheless, neither the Council of Nicaea nor that of Constantinople overlooked the fact that the Church possesses and venerates the images of the Blessed Virgin Mary, angels and other honourable and saintly men. The right to be represented in icons is

first of all granted to the Mother of Jesus, Virgin Mary. The existence of the images of angels is justified by the fact that their appearance is described in the *Scripture*.

The position of prominence of the BVM proves that, for the Council Fathers, Mary was an unquestionably great figure, closely linked to the mystery of the Incarnation and its effects. A direct conclusion emerges here that the cultus of the Mother of Christ, also the veneration paid to her sacred images, joins us to the current of the honourable Tradition of the ancient Church, the Tradition whose Lord and Animator has always been and still is one and the same Holy Ghost.

2. Fathers on the Incarnation Foundations of the Icon

The Council doctrine concerning the relation of the sacred image to the Incarnation evolved from the centuries-long tradition of the Fathers. Their teaching in this respect was considerably ahead not only of the Council documents discussed above, but also the whole iconoclastic tempest and the controversy connected with it. Their teaching was able to ripen in peaceful reflection, not pressed by immediate necessities of the moment and therefore can be viewed as the wholesome, logical fruit of the experienced truths of the Faith.

Obviously, within the framework of this paper it is possible only to hint at the patristic thinking in this aspect and merely to mention a few pivotal statements of the Fathers which seem to signpost the path of their thoughts. It is beyond the scope and possibilities of this paper to examine the whole path and the argumentation accompanying it¹³.

The starting point for the reflection of the Fathers was the Bible, where St. Paul says about Christ: "*he is the image of the invisible God*", and when Christ speaks to Philip: "*He that hath seen me hath seen the Father*" (John 14: 9). The Father becomes accessible to us through the Son, because the *Scripture* says: "*No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him*" (John 1: 18).

The biblical message shows that the Son is the image of the Father. But one could ask how this refers to the pictorial representation of Christ. At a first glance it may seem that these are two different matters, but actually they are very closely intertwined. That was the conviction of the patristic era, and it became most conspicuous in the period of the iconoclastic controversy both in the camp of the opponents and that of the worshippers of sacred images. The opponents' argument proceeded in the following manner: there is no possibility to make a portrayal of Christ because that would imply the desire to embrace and describe the Divine. The image-worshippers answered that if the eternal Word really became flesh and lived among us, then He became describable and tangible, and thus capable of being portrayed in the image. The whole problem, therefore, amounted to one question: whether Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God, can yield to the pictorial art while serving His function of a palpable image. The main issue was whether the Son of God is also the perfect image of the Father in the incarnated state, i.e. whether His human face can be regarded the image of God. It is the answers supplied (in the positive) to the

posed questions that constitute the foundation of the sacred icon and its theology. The icon finds its sense only when it reaches the mystery of God and is capable of presenting some part of it. And there is no access to this mystery except through Jesus Christ.

The Fathers of the pre-iconoclastic era met the challenge of these questions and answered them. In the great controversy with Arianism the defenders of the Nicene consubstantiality, especially Athanasius of Alexandria, succeeded in winning approval for the belief that the Son, being equal to the Father, is His perfect image. Only in His position as the perfect image the Son can be the full revelation of the Father. Here we come to the bedrock of iconic theology, that is to the fact that God possesses His own image¹⁴. Symptomatically, the effect of the defeat of Arianism was the appearance of the first huge representations of the Pantokrator¹⁵: art dared to express in its own ways the Divinity of Christ, effectively defended for the faith of the Church. Arianism would have been the death of iconic art.

In the second half of the fourth century the Cappadocian Fathers undertook the task of working out the conceptual instruments for the revealed truth of the only God in Three Persons. From what they ascertained, of special significance in relation to the problem of icons was the closer union, almost co-identification, of the concept of *prosopon* with that of *hypostasis*. The former was understood as *face* expressing the *hypostasis* on which it is based. The image-worshippers did not fail to employ this conclusion with good effect.

The controversy with Arianism had as its principal aim the justification of the coequality between Divine Persons in the Holy Trinity. The question here was to what extent the Son (and the Holy Ghost) is capable of revealing the Father in His Person, or to what extent He is His Father's image.

The above mentioned question had to be supplemented with another one: whether Christ as the Incarnated Word still remains the perfect image of the Father, and whether the adopted condition of *kenosis* did not disturb His standing as the image of the invisible God. By posing these questions, patristic theological thinking entered the realms of the foundations of the icon and its theology in the area of the Incarnation and Christology. The main representative of this period in the evolution of iconological thinking is St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444).

St. Cyril's principal conviction was that through the Incarnation the humanity of the *Logos* did not become an instrument, vestment or external place of abode for the *Logos*, but it simply became the Flesh of God. So if the flesh is the property of the Word, and the Word is consubstantial with the Father, it must be assumed that the Word preserves its similarity to God the Father also in the incarnated state. Through the Incarnation the Word became Man (Flesh). The result of this unification is that the human face of Jesus shone with the glory of God. In St. Cyril we find the following sentence: "*As a matter of fact we cannot see God in human form, but only as the Incarnated Word which is consubstantial with us and which, having become flesh, remains verily the Son by Its own nature*"¹⁶.

Christ reveals His Father to us not only in His human face, but also in His work of salvation. His deeds of love towards people reveal the love of the Father. His *kenosis* reveals the profundity of God's love.

It must be said about St. Cyril's standpoint that it qualifies him as the father of the properly and deeply understood cult of images. The strong emphasis on the identity of the flesh (humanity) of Jesus with the Son of God increases the possibility of representing Christ in images, where His humanity becomes the human face of the eternal Son of God. St. Cyril saw an opportunity to reveal the glory of God not only in the humanity of Christ. The humanity of Christ, which underwent sanctification through its unification with the Divinity, leaves its hallmark on all those who in love and faith open themselves to the saving power of the Son of God. In this manner the study of the sanctification of man under the influence of Christ is for St. Cyril a supplement to his Christology and at the same time it increases the number of persons who merit to be represented in icons.

To end this fragmentary review of the Fathers' opinions concerning iconology, it must be concluded that the patristic thinking in its slow evolution put forward premises on which the later decisions of the Councils could be founded. The authors of these decisions were thus entitled to claim that in making them they remained in concord with the Tradition of the Church, to which the teaching of the Fathers belonged¹⁷.

3. The Incarnation Foundation of the Icon in the Teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

In this last, third section it is proper to have a look at how the *Catechism* of our times formulates the position of the Church in relation to images. At the very beginning it must be noted that the *Catechism* is rooted in the Council documents from many centuries ago and declares the present-day faith in accordance with their decrees, even in the use of their phrasing. This proves the concern of the Church to preach "*quod semper, quod ubique et quod ab omnibus creditum est*"¹⁸ (what has always been believed by everyone everywhere).

The *Catechism* follows the lines of the previous decrees and justifies the existence of images by the fact of the Incarnation. In the act of the Incarnation, the Word accepted true humanity, which implies that the flesh of the Word was appropriately framed in the dimensions *délimité*¹⁹. Therefore the human face of Jesus can be "*depicted*". We read in the *Catechism* that "*During the seventh oecumenical council*²⁰ *the Church declared it rightful to represent this face in sacred images. At the same time the Church acknowledges that in the flesh of Jesus God, invisible by nature, became visible to our eyes, while the individual features of the body of Christ express the individuality of the Divine Person of the Son of God. This Son made the features of the human body His own to such an extent that when they are represented in a sacred image they can be venerated, because the faithful, by worshipping these features represented in the image, worship the Person to which they belong*".

The above cited teaching of the *Catechism* was meant to stress the reality and the individuality of the human body which in the act of the Incarnation became the body of the Son of God. The body of the Son of God, real and separate in its individuality, personally united with the eternal *Logos*, expresses in a human way the Divine Person. Thanks to the actuality of the Incarnation it became possible to create images which are both the fruit and the testimony of the true Incarnation. In this teaching we can find a faithful and sonorous reverberation of the doctrine of the Church from over twelve hundred years ago. It turns out that the Tradition, in which the Holy Ghost resides and rules, has lost nothing of its power through the centuries. It is a living Tradition!

From the discussion of the act of the Incarnation and its effects, including the effects on the existence and theology of the icon, the *Catechism* (in another location) proceeds to identify the position and role of images in the celebration of the Christian cultus. It starts with a statement about the existence of the sacred image, which without hesitation is given the name of the *liturgical icon*²¹. The icon predominantly represents Christ. It cannot represent the invisible and unlimited God. It was only with the Incarnation of the Son of God that the new *economy* of images commenced. The *Catechism* finds a confirmation of its conviction about the change effected by the Incarnation in the writings of St. John of Damascus. There is no need to quote them here. The *Catechism* charges icons with similar tasks as the *Gospel*. We read that “*The Christian iconography prefers the evangelical message to images, whose message is delivered by the Scripture through the word. The image and the word shed light on each other*”. With this last simple sentence the *Catechism* attempts to familiarise the contemporary awareness of faith with the profound teaching of the Second Council of Nicaea about the collaboration of the icon and the *Gospel* in the service of the mystery of the Incarnation²². The *Catechism* does not go into details of this teaching, neither does it attempt to elaborate on them. Yet the *Catechism* is not intended to go deeply or to develop the teaching of the faith, but only to impart it.

Speaking of the liturgical celebration, the *Catechism* remarks that all its elements refer to Christ and depend on Him. This also pertains to sacred images of St. Mary and other saints. Actually, they allow acquaintance with Christ, who is glorified in His saints. Images overtly represent “*so great a cloud of witnesses*” (Hebrews 12: 1) who perpetually participate in the salvation of the world, and with whom we are specially united in the sacramental celebration. Through the icons of our faith man is revealed, created in God’s *image* and finally transformed *after His likeness*. Likewise angels are revealed, who are embraced by Christ as the Godhead.²³ The attentive contemplation of sacred images, accompanied by the meditation on the word of God and enlivened by the singing of liturgical hymns contributes to the harmony of the whole celebration and impresses the celebrated mystery on our internal memory, which is then expressed in the renewed life of the faithful.

Sacred art, according to the teaching of the *Catechism*, is true and beautiful when its form corresponds to its vocation. And its vocation is to summon and glorify in faith and adoration the transcendent mystery of God, which is the ultimate beauty

of truth and love. This beauty was revealed in Christ, in the “*brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person*” (Hebrews 1: 3), in which “*dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily*” (Colossians 2: 9), and it was reflected in the Blessed Virgin Mary, angels and saints. A truly sacred art leads man to adoration, prayer and the love of God, our Creator and Saviour, the Holy and Sanctifying²⁴.

Juxtaposing the veneration of images in the Church with the prohibitions of the *Old Testament*, the *Catechism* once again invokes the mystery of the Incarnation as the event which marked the beginning of the new *economy* of images. The Christian cultus of images does not violate the First Commandment, which is directed against idols. Yet the adoration paid to the image aims at honouring the represented person. The quoted statement of St. Thomas Aquinas explains these matters with the precision typical of Thomism: “*Images are not objects of religious cult when they are treated as objects in themselves, but when they are treated as images leading us to the Incarnated God. Turning to the image as the image itself is not satisfied with it alone, but proceeds towards the thing that is represented in the image*”²⁵.

Images not only contribute to the liturgical celebration, but they also serve as suitable furnishings of the place of family and even individual prayer. The *Catechism* envisages such a place to be furnished with the *Scripture* and sacred images. It turns out that these two realities, which are rooted in the Incarnation, interplay with each other in religious experience where contact between man and God is established.

It must be generally said about the iconography of the latest *Catechism* that it is characterised by the faithful recreation of the most vital currents of the Tradition of the Church in respect to images. The sacred image finds its ultimate justification in the mystery of the Incarnation, thanks to which the transdescent and intangible God stood close to us and let us grasp Him. Images are just one of these methods of *grasping* Him, and they do not compete with other methods preached by our faith, e.g. with the Sacraments, the evangelical word, or the hierarchy. They rather cooperate with them to save and redeem man.

Since images (not only images of Christ but all images) reflect God’s glory and God’s beauty, then:

- they deserve religious veneration,
- they can serve purely religious purposes,
- some can be venerated in a special way as miraculous images, that is those images which possess such a feature in accordance to God’s will, which is recognised in the experience of the faithful and humbly acknowledged by the shepherds of the Church.
- miraculous images can be - and actually are - the central point of many sanctuaries, and are capable of attracting multitudes of Christian pilgrims. Any employment of images outside the cultus, even if for unblameworthy purposes (propaganda, advertising), is an assault on their sacred status, and is tantamount to their profanation.

Notes:

¹ The decree (απόϛ) of the Second Council of Nicaea in *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta*, G. Alberigo, ed., Freiburg in Br., 1962, p. 112.

² The iconoclastic controversy has an immense bibliography, where one can find the argumentation of both sides: the iconoclasts and the iconodules. The available sources in Polish are: Uspieński, L., *Teologia ikony*, Poznań 1983, especially pp. 88-119; Łukaszuk, T. D., *Obraz święty-ikona w życiu, w wierze i w teologii Kościoła*, Kraków 1993.

³ I use the terms “image” and “icon” interchangeably, following the old texts, where the Latin translation “*imago*” refers to the Greek term “εἰκὼν”.

⁴ I use the original Greek version, translating it impromptu according to its sense, without so much care paid to the elegance of form. What matters is the arrival at the proper sense, which is sometimes impoverished in comprehensive translations.

⁵ “Ταυ γερ αν αατα (παραδασει) οακασαντοζ αγαου πνεαματοζ εαναι ταατην γννασκομεν”: “We recognise then that it (the Tradition - Ł. T. D.) is the property of the Holy Ghost, who dwells in it”. G. Alberigo, (a cura di...) *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum decreta*, Florence 1962, p. 111.

⁶ Cf. J. Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions*, vol. 1, 1960.

⁷ The text is not an easy one. I feel that I have elicited its essential meaning. I did not hesitate to correct my own translation from the book *Obraz święty-ikona...*, p. 185.

⁸ The Canon is recorded in two versions: a Greek and Latin one. The Greek one is somewhat less loquacious, but in contents comparable with the lengthier Latin version. See DS 653-656.

⁹ DS 654. In the analysed text an important role belongs to the Greek word παραστησιν, which embraces the notion of embodying, representing, familiarising. See Franciscus Zorell, *Lexicon graecum Novi Testamenti*, Rome 1978, col. 1,008 ff.

¹⁰ DS 655.

¹¹ Cf. DS 655 (Latin version).

¹² Cf. Ch. Schönborn, *L'icona di Cristo*, Edizioni paoline, 1988, p. 129.

¹³ A fuller, though also far from exhaustive work is by Ch. Schönborn, *L'icona di Cristo*, Fondamenti teologici, Edizioni Paoline 1988, pp. 11-126, to which I referred.

¹⁴ Ch. Schönborn, *op. cit.*, p. 20 ff.

¹⁵ Cf. A. Stange, *Das frühchristliche Kirchegebäude als Bild des Himmels*, Cologne 1950, pp. 80-87.

¹⁶ PG 75, 1329 C.

¹⁷ The author has much to say about Christology in the iconological aspect is St. Maximus ‘Confessor’ (d. 662). This would be a tasty addition, but hardly digestible and extremely resistant to summarising. See Ch. Schönborn, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-126.

¹⁸ R. de Journel, *Enchiridion patristicum*, no 2168. The sentence quoted in the text comes from St. Vincent of Lérins, specifically from his booklet. *Commonitorium*.

¹⁹ *Catéchisme de l'Église Catholique*, Paris 1992, no 476. These formulations of the *Catechism* are based on Canon Four of the Lateran Synod of 649: DS 504.

²⁰ *Ibid.* The text erroneously speaks of the sixth oecumenical council, while mentioning in the footnotes the Second Council of Nicaea. Undoubtedly the Second Council of Nicaea was the seventh oecumenical council.

²¹ *Catéchisme*, no 1159. The word *icon* itself was very rarely used in the language of the Western Church. The *Catechism* uses it.

²² *Catéchisme*, no 1160. I tried to explain the difficult sentences of the Nicene decree in the first section of the paper. The *Catechism* does not attempt to fathom them.

²³ *Ibid.*, no 1161.

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²⁴ *Ibid.*, no 2502.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no 2131, St. Thomas II-II, 81, 3, ad 3.