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# TRANSFIGURATION OF VISION IN MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR'S MYSTAGOGY

„Seen by no one, nor with anyone in sight,  
I left with no sign or guide, but the light burning  
in my heart.” John of the Cross, *„Dark Night of the Soul”*

## 1. Introduction:

To see and to be seen – these are the two extremes that define human existence. Through the eyes, the very physical tool, our life-among-others has been determined. But eyes are also considered the entrance toward the metaphysical realm – the relationship with the Other, the One in mandorla or the all-seeing eye of the soul. These are the two levels in which human beings subsist – in the horizontal dimension of being with the others, seeing and being seen, and by vertical order deepening the relationship with God creator. Therefore the sign of the cross mirrors the way in which human beings exist: that is, carrying the image and striving for the likeness to the divine in physical and metaphysical realm. In this process both life with the others and the union with the Other require transfiguration of vision that unifies the gaze of the viewer and the reality observed.

The Transfiguration of Christ follows the trajectory, as attested by the writings of the Fathers and the language of the icons. Perhaps the most impressive of the mysteries of the Transfiguration is what Maximus the Confessor describes as the „**passing from flesh to spirit.**”<sup>1</sup> This ideal, understood within Christianity as divorced from and opposed to any remnants of Manichean or Platonic dualism, is one of the most fundamental tenets of the Christian ascetic struggle. And this core orthodox principle is reflected in the art of icon.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Amb. Io. (10) PG 1128 A.

<sup>2</sup> Andreopoulos, A. *Metamorphosis. The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology an Iconography.* St Vladimir's Seminary Press 2005, p. 24.

## 2. Icons and Vision of Maximus the Confessor

Icons approach us in our space we strive to define. They issue an invitation to re-establish an interactive relation between the observer and the icon, to initiate a dialogue about truth.<sup>3</sup>

St. John of Damascus writes, „God created man endowed with a visible and invisible nature by his own hands according to His image and likeness, forming the body from the earth and through His breathing upon it giving it a rational and intellectual soul, which we call the divine image. That which is ‘according to the image’ is manifest in the intellect and free will. That which is ‘according to the likeness’ is manifest in such likeness in virtue as is possible”.

We must bear in mind that after John of Damascus – who further enhanced the Confessor’s prestige in Orthodoxy’s archive – fresh interpretation of Maximus was limited principally to ascetical and spiritual theology in the Middle and Late Byzantine periods. He did not address the legitimacy of religious iconography so his name did not significantly emerge in the iconoclastic controversy, though his theological articulations of the relation of image and prototype did positively inform the defence of icons.<sup>4</sup>

The accepted image of Christ and its theological justification were formulated in the period of the iconoclastic disputes. The doctrine is expressed with utmost clarity in the kontakion for the Feast of Orthodoxy:

„No one could describe the Word of the Father; but when He took flesh from you, O Theotokos, He accepted to be described, and restored the fallen image to its former beauty. We confess and proclaim our salvation in word and images”.

This poem, composed by St. Theophanes the Metropolitan of Nicea, one of the defenders of icon-veneration in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, speaks of God the Word becoming „describable” in the light of the incarnation. Having assumed fallen human nature, Christ restored in human beings the image of God according to which we were created. When divine beauty (Slav. ‘goodness’) merged with human malevolence, it saved human nature. **It is this salvation that is depicted in icons („images”) and in sacred texts („word”).**

As a result of the fall, the image of God was darkened and distorted, but not altogether lost. The purification occurred with the incarnation of the Son of God Who, through the action of the Holy Spirit, restored the fallen image to its former beauty. But man himself needs to make an ascetic effort so that the grace of God be sent. Christian asceticism is a path to the

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<sup>3</sup> Dzalto, D. 10/30 Retrospective Art Exhibition. Belgrade, 2010, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Blowers, P. Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World. Oxford University Press 2016, p. 294.

spiritual transformation – such as revealed in an icon – of a human person. The Orthodox icon is a teacher of the ascetic life inasmuch as it teaches the doctrine of faith.

In Maximus the Confessor the transition from ascetic practice to aesthetic contemplation in its essence is a process of transformation of vision (ή αἴσθησις νοερά, aestesis noera) – a notion that unifies both sensible and intelligible realms and is one of the main contributions of Maximus in 7<sup>th</sup> century language. During the iconoclastic times his teachings became one of the main sources in arguments of defending the Orthodox truth. Maximus's holistic philosophy is based on the fact that human being is a microcosm that has a mediating role between the sensible and intelligible spheres. By virtue of their very existence and their modes of cognition, human beings also unite the extremes of heaven and earth; male and female. According to Maximus, these extremes in the fragmented universal hypostasis find their unity in the human being. Thus, the greatest tasks facing humankind involve mediating between God and creation; re-creating the world after the paradigm of Christ; and transforming humankind's fallen state of being into a supremely human mode of being in Christ.

For this transformation to happen a transformation of vision is needed. Thus aesthetics becomes a territory not exclusively applied to the sensory realm, but also to the intelligible, for the whole human body-soul composite.

Here Maximus introduces another term: περιχώρησις, perichoresis. Perichoresis is a complex word that has the meaning of unifying, yet preserving the difference between the qualities of God's three persons. This term is used also to signify unity between the soul and body, between ascetics and aesthetics.

The visible world and its sensory phenomena direct us to their inner meaning, to a structure that is based on the logos, which was known by human beings before the fall, but which now requires effort and ability in order to be „read.“

According to Maximus, 'αἴσθησις' signifies the instrument of sense perception and the activity of the senses. It is part of the triad of αἴσθησις, λόγος, and νοῦς, which the Confessor inherited from Aristotle and the Stoics. In Plato, the sensible (κόσμος αἴσθησις) is opposed to the intelligible (κόσμος νοητός), but it would be a mistake to see the same opposition in Maximus's thought. In the *Mystagogia*, θεωρία συμβολική corresponds to θεωρία πνευματική in such a way that the world of visible things and the realm of intelligible entities are parallel. Maximus declares:

„The whole spiritual world seems mystically imprinted on the whole sensible world in symbolic forms, for those who are capable of seeing this, and conversely the whole sensible world is spiritually explained in the

mind in the principles which it contains. In the spiritual world, it is in principles; in the sensible world, it is in figures. And their function was like a wheel within a wheel, as says the marvelous seer of extraordinary things, Ezekiel, in speaking, I think, of the two worlds.”<sup>5</sup>

The ascent from the visible (phenomenal) world toward its *logoi* represents a „return” to the same existence. However, it is no longer experienced as a phenomenal occurrence; rather, it manifests itself in its deep, spiritual essence.

According to Maximus, human beings are given the mission to mediate between the different components of their own nature and are portrayed as realizing universal co-inherence (*perichoresis*) only through life in Christ. The key to accomplishing this task is rooted in the fact that human nature is created in the image of God and involves the process of likening ourselves to God by making use of the particular inclinations inherent in the gnostic will (*γνώμη*) and the habit (*ἔξις*, *heksis*): the personal habit, or disposition, that is acquired through experience.

### 3. The Transfiguration as Paradigm

Maximus describes the conditions of divine revelation in his writings. A crucial one is his exposition of the transfiguration of Christ. For him the transfiguration is a prism through which the sublime, blinding light of revelation is refracted in manifold colors, shining on all who would dare to approach the Revealer and participate, according to their capacity, in his glory. In his incarnate mission he has opened access to the mystery of the Trinity. The transfiguration, then, is a unique mode of divine „**body language**” insofar as Christ’s luminous face, flesh, and even garments communicate God’s glory without him ever uttering a word. Without uttering a word, Christ’s transfigured face instructed the apostles on the mountain by symbolizing his ineffable, unapproachable divinity.<sup>6</sup> „In an undifferentiated, simultaneous moment (*ἐν ταυτῷ καὶ ἅμα*),”<sup>7</sup> an intensive and eschatological „present” as it were, past and future collapsed into the foreground of the Revealer.

Visual contemplation always implies an experimental element, something that has to do with the liturgical participation in the divine mysteries or the ascetic experience. Transfiguration of Christ has for long been at the core of Fathers teachings and interpretations. They base their writings mainly on the visual element of the Transfiguration and they used to think in iconographic images. Maximus the Confessor speaks about luminous

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<sup>5</sup> See *Myst.* (2) The biblical imagery mentioned here is found in Ezekiel 1:15.

<sup>6</sup> *Amb. Jo.* 10 (PG 91:1128A).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* (PG 1160C), trans. Maximos Constas I, 255.

face and the white garments of Christ, about the presence of Moses and Elijah on Thabor, about the symbolism of the three apostles. Maximus ignored the gospel narrative about the voice of the Father and draw inspiration solely from the iconography.

One of the major themes in Maximus' thoughts on Transfiguration is the passing from the material senses to the spiritual senses – and therefore to the transfiguration of vision itself. The transfiguration is the change that happens in the perception – the passing from flesh to spirit.

The icon of Transfiguration encapsulates the full range and power of prayer, from the beginning of the ascetic ascent to deification – and therefore it facilitates the transfiguration of the believer through prayer. And prayer (as it is in early church fathers, but also in Maximus) is the final stage of spiritual growth that begins by sense perception.

Spiritual senses belong to already transformed tropos of human existence. In the postlapsarian mode of being, humans have lost the ability to read the divine presence in the created world. Contemplating the images (and most of all, the Transfiguration icon) becomes a healing process of learning how to see or learning how to love in the words of Maximus. This activity includes ascetic practice as well as contemplation of the mind (praxis and theoria) and according to Maximus the Confessor this is regarded as the real mystical experience. Therefore, growing „from flesh to spirit“<sup>8</sup> along with escalating from „word to spirit“ in its essence are part of the whole transformation of human tropos and are considered transfiguration of vision – when true knowledge surpasses ignorance, when darkness gives way to light.

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<sup>8</sup> Amb. Io. (10) PG 1128 A.

## Summary

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### **Transfiguration of Vision in Maximus the Confessor's Mystagogy**

According to Maximus the Confessor, the extremes of intelligible and sensible; heaven and earth in the dichotomized universal hypostasis find their unity in the human being. Thus, the greatest task facing human beings involves mediating between God and creation; re-creating the world after the paradigm of Christ; and transforming humankind's fallen state of being into a supremely human mode of being-in- Christ.

The economy of salvation suggests that the connection between heaven and earth, or between God and man, be an uninterrupted ladder – descend of God and ascent of human being. Icons naturally imitate this cosmological ladder. Thus the role of image/icon will be explored as a way of overcoming the divided hypostasis of existence.

„The passing from flesh to spirit“ is the passing from the material senses to the spiritual senses – i.e. a transfiguration of vision itself.

**Keywords:** icon, image, sense perception, intelligible/sensible realm, creation, transfiguration, Maximus the Confessor.

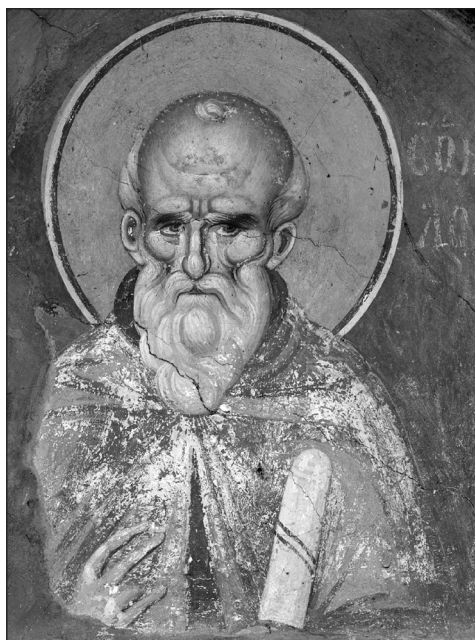
## Transfiguration of Vision in Maximus the Confessor's Mystagogy: Visual Supplement



*The oldest surviving image of St Maximus is from the 9th-c. illuminated Sacra Parallela (Parisinus graecus 923)*



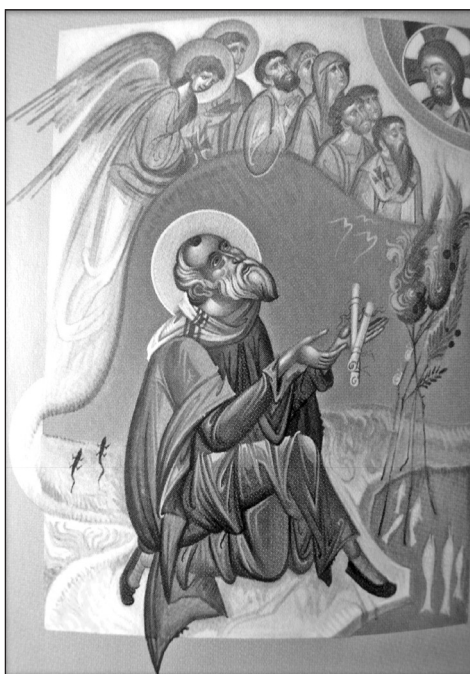
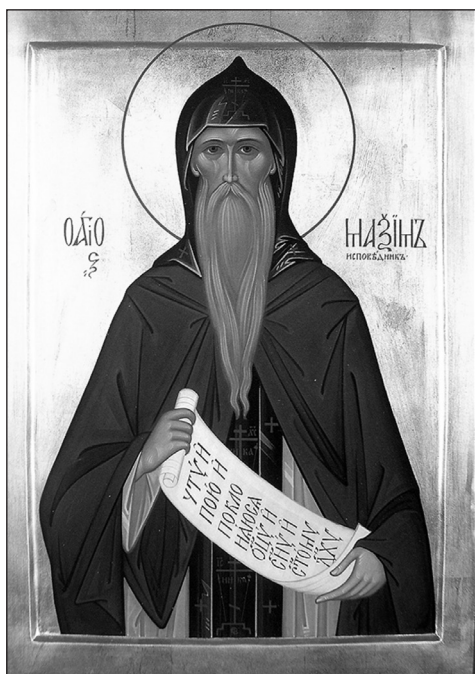
*11th c. mosaic from the church of Hosios Loukas (Boeotia, Greece)*



Early 14th-c. fresco,  
Church of the Protaton, Mt. Athos



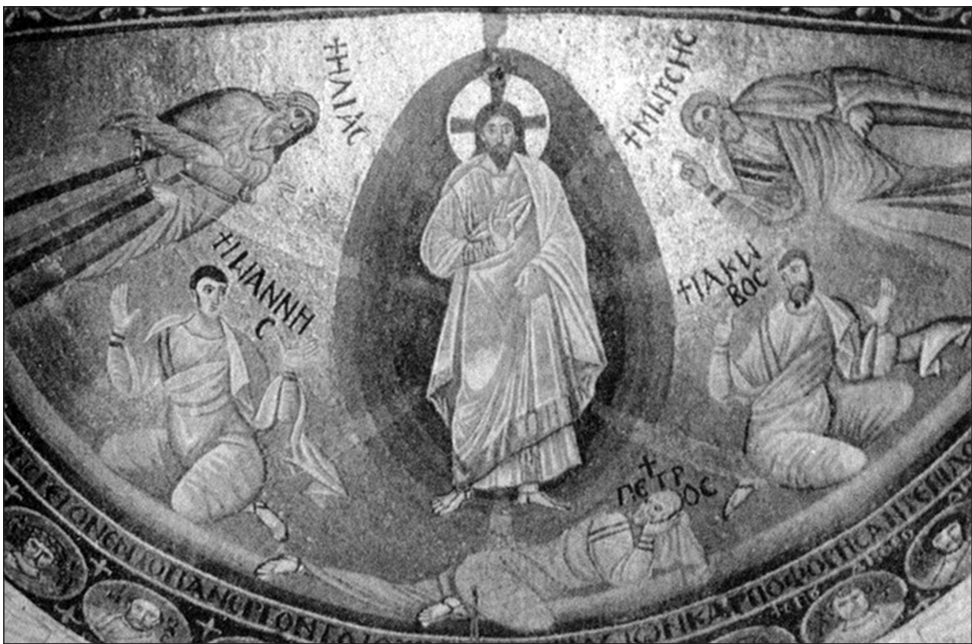
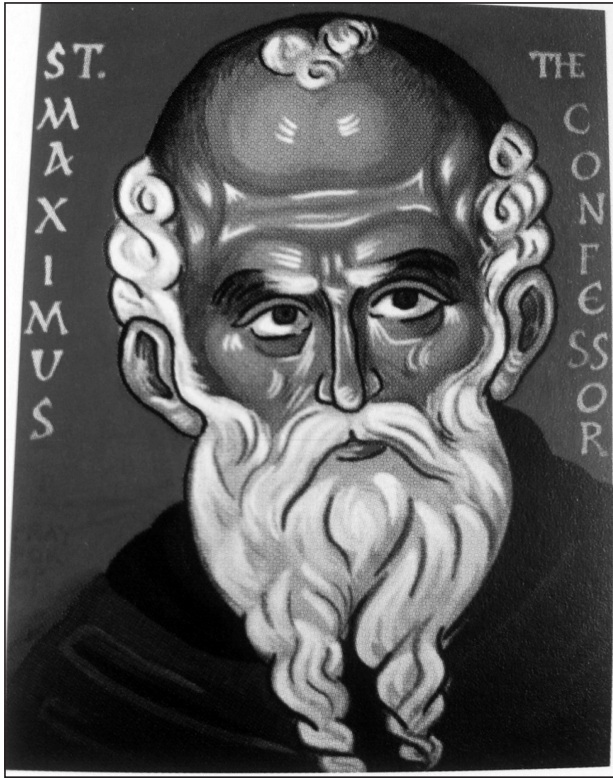
The severing of St. Maximus's hand(s)  
and tongue (Chronicle of Constantine  
Manasses, 14th c. Bulgarian manuscript)





16th-century fresco from  
the Monastery of the Great  
Laura, Mt. Athos





*Transfiguration, St Catherine Monastery, Sinai, 565*



*Transfiguration, lithography, Ivana Noble, 2011*