



5 Keys to Understanding the Icon of the Transfiguration

This Sunday, the Last Sunday of Epiphany, our Gospel lesson relates the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. The event described by Matthew, as well as by Mark and Luke, tells about the revealing of Christ's divine origin to the three Apostles while they were praying on Mount Tabor. The Orthodox icon of the Transfiguration is a highly revered image, the composition of which conceals many symbols. In this article, I outline 5 keys to understanding the meaning of this sacred icon.

1. Mandorla

In iconography, a “mandorla” is a circle or oval containing an image of Christ. The mandorla is something like the halo of western art. In the icon of the Transfiguration, Jesus is enclosed in a circle, signifying the presence of God who appears in His full glory. Sometimes, the mandorla is composed of many circles, or a circle with radiating beams, or often as an almond shape. This latter configuration serves the same symbolic role as the center of Ven-diagram—the place where two circles two realms, overlap—here, the union of the earthly and heavenly worlds.

2. Prophets

During the Transfiguration of Christ, two Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Moses, appeared on the mountain. In Scripture, the Prophet Elijah did not experience death and was summoned by an angel from heaven. The Prophet Moses, in his turn, suffered death, and, according to legend, his body was disputed over by the Archangel Michael and the Devil. The icon of the Transfiguration that portrays these prophets carries a secret meaning: Jesus Christ has dominion over both life and death.

3. Cliffs and trees

According to the tradition, the place of the Transfiguration was a smooth hillside. However, the Christian icon depicts steep cliffs. The mountains here are a symbol of faith and the spiritual path that every righteous person takes. As for the trees, they are a reference to the Tree of the Cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified.

4. Color palette

Each color in Orthodox icons has a meaning and is used with purpose. In icons of the Transfiguration, Jesus is often clothed in white robes. This color symbolizes eternal grace and purity of soul. The Apostles' faces and clothing also reflect white as an extension of heavenly light to mankind. Among other important colors used in painting the Transfiguration icon is brown. It indicates the temporality of the earthly world. It is interesting that this color also transforms, merging with gold (a symbol of the presence of the Lord) and yellow ocher.

5. The light of Tabor

The light of Tabor is the Uncreated Light, the divine origin of Christ. The rays of light allowed Jesus's disciples to see His glory.

I hope that in sharing these keys to understanding the icon, you may have a better appreciation of how the church has understood the meaning of the Transfiguration.