

# a theological meditation on the mystery of transfiguration



Originally published in *Diakonia*. A quarterly devoted to advancing the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue, 8(1973), pp.306-331. Reprinted here with permission.

# A THEOLOGICAL MEDITATION ON THE MYSTERY OF TRANSFIGURATION

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The pericope containing the narrative of the Transfiguration of our Lord is found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, namely in Mk. 9,1-12; Mt. 17,1-13 and Lk. 9,28-36. The most primitive, and by the same token closest to the original oral catechesis, seems to be the account of Mark.

Unfortunately that beautiful account of the New Testament containing the very vivid and profound description of a theophany has not received sufficient theological attention in Western Christianity. However, it is true that there are some excellent exegetical works explaining either the historical and typological significance of this account or the examination and comparison of the parallel texts in the three Synoptics or the literary and stylistic composition, etc.<sup>1</sup> There are also some beautiful works dealing with the mystery of Transfiguration in art.<sup>2</sup> However, little or no strictly theological analysis of the mystery of the Transfiguration itself can be found in Western Christianity, e.g. in most of the Christological, ecclesiological, eschatological, etc. treatises there is no mention of the Transfiguration at all, and those works which contain some references to it offer usually less than the exegetical treatments.<sup>3</sup> The Second Vatican Council did not make any mention of the Transfiguration at all and there seem to be a few direct allusions to this mystery. And yet, we could have expected some modest reference to this mystery from an Ecumenical Council dealing with the renewal of the Church.

Also, during the Congress and Institute on the Theology of the Renewal of the Church marking the Centenary of Canada,

which was held in Toronto August 20 to 25, 1967,<sup>4</sup> nobody seemed to mention the mystery of Transfiguration, even if the theology of the renewal of the Church would suggest a very intimate link between the two. My reaction was to take a direct stand during one of the panel discussions at the above mentioned Congress where among other things I stated:<sup>5</sup>

My second remark . . . concerns the Transfiguration of our Lord recorded in Mark 9,1-7, Matt. 17,1-8, Luke 9,28-36. There is no adequate theology of the Transfiguration in the West. It is usually reduced to a proof of Christ's Divinity and to a didactic element in the preparation of the Apostles for Christ's Passion. According to Oriental theology, however, it was a revelation of a hidden supernatural reality, which is constantly present and constantly progressing in the Church and the cosmos. It is the supernatural 'dynamis' of God the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, which mystically and invisibly transforms, transfigures, sanctifies and fulfills the Church and the world, in preparation for the final fulfillment in the Kingdom of God.

It is the doctrine of the spiritual optimism of the early Fathers of the Church who see the cosmos transfigured in God. Any real theology of renewal must take this aspect into account otherwise it will view the renewal as coming from below and not as the work of God or from above.

This quotation reflects the substance of my paper and will serve us as a guideline in our theological meditation.

While it is true that Eastern Christianity cannot match the quantity of literature on Transfiguration produced by Western Christianity, nevertheless Eastern Christianity developed and preserved a much greater awareness of this mystery in the concrete ecclesial life, in art, in theology and especially in liturgy.<sup>6</sup> During our meditation it will be our duty to quote the relevant passages of the Byzantine Liturgy dealing with the mystery of Transfiguration and to show their relevance to the theological interpretation of the same mystery.<sup>7</sup>

### **Extension of Transfiguration**

First of all it seems that the mystery of Transfiguration has a much wider extension than is usually suspected. It affects in different degrees of intensity all parts of both the natural and the supernatural reality of which we are an integral part. As a matter