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# THE ICONIC REPRESENTATION OF THE TABORIC LIGHT

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## Abstract

In the present study, we aim at underlining the importance of the event of the Transfiguration of the Lord has for iconography. We shall highlight the fact that to represent a heavenly reality in icons, it is necessary to have a deep understanding of the Taboric mystery. Without experiencing this radiance, the disciples saw, without truly partaking of the uncreated light that also surrounded the coryphaei of the prophets of the Old Testament (Moses and Elijah), the icon painter will be alien to the reality of theophany. How can the icon painter represent the greatness of glory? How can he show to the people the unseen One, Who lives in the everlasting light, if he has not partaken of the vision of those that are heavenly? Due to these realities, we considered it appropriate to make a research that grounds what most iconologists have asserted, namely that the icon of the Transfiguration is the prototype and the foundation of every iconic representation, on the Scripture and patristics.

*Keywords:* icon, transfiguration, light, theophany, Mount Tabor

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## 1. Introduction

The iconic representation of the event that took place on Mount Tabor, where God was transfigured in front of His disciples, represents a real challenge for icon painters. They have the difficult mission of representing artistically the face of the holy glory, namely the divine light that shone from the Saviour's body. In the past, the iconic representation of this uncreated light was the test through which the apprentice proved to his master that he had the necessary qualities to represent heavenly realities [1]. At first sight, this exigency imposed upon the novice would have nothing special. His iconographic knowledge and mastery could easily be verified as soon as he made an iconic representation of a saint. However, the icon of the Transfiguration had a special status among all the other icons of feasts. Here, everything is surrounded by light. Even the three disciples (Peter, Jacob and John), who saw God's glory, were filled with this radiance. If it had not been the case, they could not have partaken of the theophany. As such, everything that would be represented in the icon of the

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Transfiguration had to radiate light. Due to this fact, some specialists went so far as to say that the icon of the Transfiguration was not painted with colours, but with Taboric light [2], a light with which the icon painter first had to accustom his eyes.

In one of his studies on iconography ('The Icon, the Face of a Transfigured World'), Jean-Claude Larchet refers to the transfiguration of the things portrayed in the icon and provides the example of the Byzantine representation of the event on Mount Tabor [3]. The iconic representation of the Saviour and of those who partook of His glory (the two prophets and the disciples) offers us the necessary framework for the understanding of how human nature becomes transparent and allows itself to be transformed by/ for grace. In this context, J.-C. Larchet believes it is pertinent to check the mastery of apprentices through the iconic representation of the Transfiguration, yet without giving further details [3]. Referring to the same tradition, Daniel Rousseau mentions that the reason why the apprentice icon painter had to paint the icon of the Transfiguration of the Lord was to receive the radiance of divine glory in his heart, from Christ, just like it happened with the three disciples on Mount Tabor [4]. In his work, *The Icon - the Light of Your Face*, Father S. Rousseau dedicates a chapter to the icon of the Transfiguration of the Lord where, besides Scriptural and iconographic details, he emphasises the theological significance of the event and, implicitly, of the icon of the feast. The research of Father Rousseau represents one of our main sources of inspiration. We intend to develop the Scriptural reference points that he mentions, by visibly underlining the exegesis of the biblical episode and the patristic perception of the miracle on Mount Tabor. Fotie Kontoglu, one of the Greek coryphaei who, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, militated for the revival of Byzantine iconography, links the tradition of validating the icon painter to a liturgical context. He claims that, in the past, the painter used to come to church, in front of the priest, to receive his blessing. The priest placed him in front of the icon of the Theotokos on the iconostasis and, at the end of the prayers through which he asked the grace of the Holy Spirit to overflow to the icon painter, he would utter the Troparion of the feast of the Transfiguration: "You were transfigured on the Mount, Christ God revealing Your glory to Your disciples, insofar as they could comprehend. Illuminate us, sinners, also with Your everlasting light, through the intercessions of the Theotokos. Giver of light, glory to You." F. Kontoglu justifies the presence of this Troparion in the blessing ritual with the fact that "this feast is the sum of theories related to holy painting and, together, they symbolise the spiritual transfiguration of the believers who worship the holy icons" [5]. It is this perspective, focused on the fact that all those who look at the holy icons are filled with grace and light, that shall be developed in our research.

Therefore, the subject outlined in this brief presentation shall be developed in our research, with a particular emphasis on the Scriptural perspective. The interpretation of the event of the Transfiguration of the Lord from a biblical point of view and the validation of the results of the exegesis by a specialist in iconography shall represent one of the strong points of this study.

Before anything else, it is essential to make use of the first source of iconography, following a deep understanding that is not limited only to scanty information. The biblical texts that underwent the process of interpretation were taken from the *Septuagint*, Alfred Rahlfs' edition, published in Stuttgart - 1935, and from the *English Standard Version* - 2001. Concerning the second source, the Tradition of the Church, we shall particularly underline the view of Saint Gregory the Sinaite, presented in a homily uttered on the day of the feast of the Transfiguration, alongside those of Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Maximus the Confessor, Saint Simeon the New Theologian and Saint Gregory Palamas. Following the display of these perspectives, we shall analyse the icon of the Transfiguration from an iconographic perspective starting from one of the most titled iconographic sources, the Ermine of Dionysius of Furna. At the same time, we will decant the message from a theological perspective to emphasise the importance of the iconic representation of this Scriptural event for the believer's partaking of the divine light that shines forth from the transfigured face of Lord Jesus Christ.

## **2. The Transfiguration of the Lord - scriptural reference points**

The episode of the Transfiguration of the Saviour is presented by all the synoptic Evangelists. For a detailed presentation, we have opted for Saint Matthew's variant (17.1-9), but we shall also present complementary aspects from the other versions. We do not aim at having an exegetic approach of the entire pericope. We shall focus mostly on the details that help us outline the Scriptural discourse on the divine light. We shall extract from the text-only the elements that will facilitate a better understanding of theological thinking that painters impressed on the iconographic prototype of the Transfiguration of the Lord. The first term on which we shall focus is *μετεμορφώθη*, a passive aorist from the verb *μεταμορφόω* ('to change the form, to transform'). This word appears in the form only in two situations (Matthew 17.2 and Mark 9.2). In both cases, reference is made to a physical change, to a transfiguration. The two other occurrences of the verb (Romans 12.2 and 2 Corinthians 3.18) consider a spiritual transformation [6]. This makes us infer that the Transfiguration of the Lord was a real fact; His body was transfigured before the disciples. The transfiguration was marked by a strong light [7]. The Evangelist Matthew compares the radiance of the Saviour's face with the light of the Sun. The language used by the evangelist suggests that we deal with radiance from the inside and not with external illumination. Christ is the One Who makes this light shining forth from within Him [8]. In the other texts from the Scripture, the association with the Sun is always linked to the divine grace bestowed upon man (Matthew 13.43; acc. to Exodus 34.29-35, Daniel 12.3) [9]. In Matthew's text, we are told that, in the kingdom of their Father, the righteous will shine like the sun. As such, the face of the righteous will has a radiance like that seen by the apostles on Mount Tabor [10]. The same Evangelist mentions the fact the effects of this transfiguration were also extended to the Saviour's clothes, which

became white like the light on His face [11]. Referring to the Lord's clothes, the Evangelist Mark does not compare the white with light, but with snow: "And his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them" (Mark 9.3). We notice that we are faced with a white uncommonly radiant, which cannot be compared in any way with the most immaculate material white.

The Evangelist Luke also provides us with a few details that are important for our research. First, he mentions that the Saviour was transfigured while praying: "[Christ, emphasis added] went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white." (Luke 9.28-29) [12] We point to the fact that Luke speaks about an alteration of the Saviour's face [13]. Here, he points to the fact that Jesus Christ revealed to His Disciples His godly face, which was hidden from sight due to the embodiment.

Another detail given by Luke, which is also related to light, is that Moses and Elijah "appeared in glory" (Luke 9.31). The words suggest that the apostles were partaking of the glory of the Lord and that these men of the Old Law also had their glory [14]. The two prophets were covered in the light shining forth from God, a light that made them partake of the Godhead. From Luke's narrative, we also find out that the disciples were heavy with sleep: "Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him" (Luke 9.32). We shall later see the meaning of this detail regarding the disciples' sleep [15]; for now, we shall keep in mind the fact that the evangelist recalls once again that what was revealed on Mount Tabor is nothing else than the radiance of God's glory. Likewise, Luke also calls to mind that the three disciples were afraid not after they heard the voice of the Father, but as soon as they entered the bright cloud that had overshadowed Mount Tabor: "As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud." (Luke 9.34). The three apostles were made to partake of the divine glory. Due to the experience of the transfiguration, they understood that their Teacher was more than they had thought until then. As a result, the disciples no longer regarded Jesus Christ the way they did before climbing on Mount Tabor [16].

The event on Mount Tabor would help Peter understand the mystery of God's embodiment and preach it to everyone, showing how God descends from transcendence and allows Himself to be touched to convince men of His presence and, through light/enlightenment, to make them partake of His glory, of His Light that shines forth from His Eternal Being (2 Peter 1.16-18) [17]. One of the details in Luke's version of the Transfiguration persuades us that the apostles were filled with this light. According to Luke, the apostle Peter told the Lord it would be good to put up three tents there, on Mount Tabor, not knowing what he was saying. This attitude is explained by Saint Gregory, who claims that, when a man sees the unspeakable light, his senses and, implicitly, his reason does not act according to his will, but are overwhelmed by godly reasoning: "For when the mind is swallowed by the unspeakable light and moves outside of that which

is, it annihilates the feeling in any relation and darkens the very senses with the light of that power; or, on the contrary, through light, the mind is separated from the senses and the senses from relations, becoming possessed by the divine Eros, while removing all the attachment the mind has, through its senses, to that which can be sensed" [18]. A confession like that of the Apostle Peter would also be made by Saint John, the evangelist, who also refers to the Transfiguration of the Lord in the prologue of his first epistle (1 John 1.1-7). We notice that, here, John refers to the theology of divine light. He saw the Son of God radiating and shining forth an unspeakable light on Mount Tabor and, as such, called Him Light (John 1.9). He who claims to have fellowship in Christ but is not light or does not walk in the light or his deeds are not performed in the light, lies, and does not live out the truth. The son of light partakes of the light and, through partaking and grace, he becomes light, resembling the One Who enlightened him, Who is Light and the source of Light.

### **3. The perception of the theophany from Mount Tabor in the tradition of the Church**

In the third section of our research, we aim at exploiting the teaching on the divine light developed by the Church Fathers, starting from the theophany on Mount Tabor. We shall focus mostly on Saint John Chrysostom's commentaries on the episode of the Transfiguration of the Lord [19] and Saint Gregory the Sinaite's homiletic discourse [20] on the aforementioned feast. We shall highlight the text fragments that will contribute to the understanding of the mystery hidden in the light of the icon of the Transfiguration. Thus, we shall also underline how the icon's second source of inspiration completes the theological discourse hidden in the realities represented in the icon.

The Church Fathers correlate the event of the Transfiguration of the Lord with two theophanic episodes from the Old Testament, whose protagonists are the two prophets present on Mount Tabor: Moses and Elijah. Both were found worthy of partaking of the godly glory. God revealed Himself to both in all His splendour and radiance. If then they could see only a part of the light radiating from God's being, now they could immediately contemplate the face of His grace which radiated from the body of the Divine Son. The association of these events was due to the similar elements present both on Mount Tabor and Mount Sinai: the mountain, the dazzling radiance, the bright cloud, and God's voice. The Israelite people and its representatives (the three disciples) are added to them.

Therefore, Saint John Chrysostom makes a parallel between Moses' experience on Mount Sinai and that of which God's disciples partook of on Mount Tabor. First of all, the famous exegete underlines the fact that Moses and the disciples partook of God's glory; one through a dark cloud that resembled smoke and steam from the oven (Exodus 24.18) and the others using a bright cloud that overshadowed them. On the former occasion, God was perceived as frightening, whereas in the latter case God revealed Himself using the light and

the voice from the sky. Saint John explains this major difference: on Mount Tabor, God wanted to reveal to the disciples the beauty of grace and to teach them that He is light, whereas on Mount Sinai the Lord wanted to frighten the Israelites. Naturally, the fear that God wanted to instil in those sitting at the base of the mountain, not in Moses, was focused on pedagogical rationalities. Saint Gregory the Sinaite extends this comparison and emphasises the prefigurative function of the theophany that took place on Mount Sinai: "...Mount Horeb is a prefiguration of Mount Tabor, one being the mount of virtues and the other the mount of the future, Trinitarian and godly intelligible height of grace and its gust and frightening things were a presage of the godly-human lightning. [...] The same [God, emphasis added] reveals Himself to us unspeakably radiant with love for people and, in a suitable way for us, He was seen speaking in the thearchic light and in the triple hypostatic radiance with Moses and Elijah, who accompanied Him, and overwhelming His disciples, who were shrouded in the rays of goodness and the lightning of the Godhead, for because of their incomplete purification they could experience the unbearable Godhead and the greatest representatives of the Law proved to be stronger and higher than the best disciples." [18, p. 19] We notice that Saint Gregory the Sinaite makes a symbolic and mystical interpretation of the event on Mount Tabor, comparing it first with what happened with Moses and then with the prophet Elijah on the mount of the Law, on Sinai. In the former case, in which, from the base of the mountain, the people were watching in fear the manifestation of heavenly glory, the necessity of purification is underlined [21]. Without this exigency, it was impossible to see the light of glory and, implicitly, to experience it. Only Moses entered that bright darkness where God called him to understand how one can partake of the godly glory [22]. In other words, the icon provides those who are purified from passions with the possibility of seeing the radiance of godly grace in those created after the image of the Protoimage [23]. We notice a clear resemblance when comparing the Israelites and the three apostles. Neither of them was found worthy of getting deeper in the mystery of light. Unlike them, Moses partook of the godly appearance [24] both then, on Mount Sinai, and now, on Mount Tabor, when he saw the One prefigured by the bright lightning glaring in the bright cloud.

The prefigurative character of the event on Mount Sinai is highlighted by Pious Gregory the Sinaite through the symbolic and mystical identification of the elements that mysteriously link the two theophanies [18]. Due to this manner of interpreting the theophany on Mount Sinai, it is relatively easy for us to understand that the episode is a paradigm of the magnificent theophanies in which God revealed Himself to the people in all His splendour, even if that splendour was frightening. God Who, in the Old Testament, was known to be Light and cause/source of light, clearly showed Himself on Mount Tabor, surrounded by radiance. The One Who, by nature, was unseen, allowed Himself to be seen in light. According to the same Gregory, Moses was happy to see all the symbols from Mount Sinai on the face of the Son of God, Whom he first saw in the bright darkness.

Concerning the second theophany in which the prophet Elijah is a protagonist, how God is discovered is interpreted from a mystical perspective. Mysteriously anticipating the light gently overflowing to the prophet Elijah, Saint Gregory the Sinaite does not underline all the details of the theophany but emphasises the visual character of a theophany in which the auditive images were predominant. For these reasons, *the vibrant whispers* in which God revealed Himself to Elijah become *gentle breezes of light*. “And Elijah, the bearer of fire, recognising God, Whom he had seen first in the fire and the breeze, and watching Him now, on Mount Tabor, casting lightning brighter than the sun, froze at the astonishing sight and at the timeless encounter...” [18, p. 22] From the details presented, we can easily infer Pious Gregory’s preference for light, enlightenment, and deep radiance.

Saint John insists on certain details that show the feelings experienced by those who partake of the godly overflowing of heavenly glory. The holy book mentions the fact that the eyes of the apostles “were heavy with sleep” (Luke 9.32). This detail is taken from the other evangelist, not from Matthew. The apostles’ feeling of sleep was due to the heavenly light that caused a darkening of their sight. In front of strong light, the eyes become sleepy, being unable to resist the radiance that overwhelms them. The eyelids close and men seem to delve in a deep sleep [25]. Although the Apostles had spent a lot of time beside Jesus Christ, the Saviour, they were unaware of Who was among them. Their spiritual eyes were still weak, as they did not truly understand who their Teacher was. They saw Him as a special Prophet, superior to those of old, but they did not anticipate that He was the Son of God, true God of true God, Light of Light. They would come to believe this on Mount Tabor or, better said, it was then that their eyes opened to understand who Jesus Christ was.

This enlightenment was also due to the Father’s testimony sounding from the sky. The Father’s words help us understand that this godly light cannot be dissociated from the person of the Saviour, Who called Himself the Light of the world (John 8.12). Saint Gregory the Sinaite extends and explains the testimony of the Father from the sky, developing a Trinitarian discourse on the grounds of the heavenly light: “This is my beloved Son, the only Son (John 1.14-18), Who was transfigured today on Mount Tabor according to his humanity; He is the imprint of My nature (Hebrew 1.3), the radiance of My glory, the identical, unchanged icon of My supra-beingness; This is [...] the One through Whom I have redeemed you, through Whom I have revealed Myself and in Whom I have enlightened and recreated the world [...] He has extolled Me and I have extolled Him today and I will extol Him with the unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6.16); He is in Me unblended and I am in Him unchanged, lightening in a way appropriate to God and Trinitarian; [...] He is the begotten Light, I am the unbegotten Light; [...] He is the light [John 1.4-9], I am the Father of lights (James 1.17); [...] He is the sun of righteousness (Malachi 4.2) Who shines in Me, I am known as the supra-existential three-sun Radiance Who is in Him and Who makes radiant in Him the entire fullness of the Godhead (Colossians 2.19); [...] in Him I radiate, I reveal Myself, I order, I purify, I enlighten and I bless

you in Him; in the light of His glory you will see Me, the unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6.16); [...] In the Spirit you will see the Son and in the Son you will recognise the Father; in the light of the Spirit you will see the radiance of My glory, in God's image you carry inside you will see the Archetype, the supra-beingness within you..." [18] We shall explain this fragment starting from one of the theological ideas mentioned at the end of the Trinitarian hymn. God's Spirit is the one enlightening us and offering us the possibility of seeing the Word of God (in whose image we were created) in our souls. Only thus can we partake of the Taboric glory. Without the work of grace, without the Holy Spirit, we will not be able to see the light, nor can we be filled with light. We cannot become living icons without the work of the Spirit who makes Jesus Christ, the resurrected, the extolled and risen Who sits at the right hand of the Father, present in us. The same Spirit allows us to see in the icon the image of the eternal and eternifying light that helps us understand how to succeed in partaking of the Light of the One from on high [18, p. 24].

According to Saint John, everyone is offered the possibility of seeing Christ in His unapproachable and unmingled light, just like the three apostles. And even more! The three leading figures saw the glory only as much as they could. Jesus Christ did not fully reveal Himself to them, as their eyes were not ready to see Him in the greatness of His radiance, The Saviour made them partake for a few moments of a supernatural vision, which can become accessible to people if they truly want it. Saint John Chrysostom also draws our attention to the fact that, during the Eschaton, every creature will see God coming with power, with the clouds, surrounded by His heavenly glory. The sight of the godly light is anticipated and can be experienced genuinely using icons. The heavenly light springing from icons or mediated through the stained glass can make man partake of the godly grace while still on Earth. Then, in eternity, man will partake of it more clearly, directly contemplating the light of God's glory [19, p. 653]. Saint Niketas Stethatos, Saint Symeon's biographer, relates one of his spiritual father's experiences, which resembles very much what happened on Mount Tabor. Once, late at night, Saint Symeon was found worthy of pretesting the communion with God and of seeing the uncreated light. At first, he had the impression is being dawned earlier, but soon he felt it was something else and he realised he was "surrounded by a light coming from above, enveloping him in a radiance resembling that of the sun. [This light] penetrates his mind, submits it and makes him feel an infinite joy. [...] Then, while lying on the ground and shedding tears, an unseen miracle happened: right at the moment when he was worshipping God, a bright cloud appeared, descending towards him and making him feel his soul full of joy, peace and godly love, as the earthly burden of thoughts related to bodily pleasures was starting to disappear." [26] This bright cloud marks the unmitigated presence of God Who, nonetheless, keeps Himself secret. We would also like to point to the fact that, during the vision of godly grace, Saint Symeon also saw other persons, just like God's Apostles.



Concerning these aspects, Saint Gregory the Sinaite mentions that the event of the Transfiguration of the Lord does not lose its importance, nor does it get wasted presaging the eschatological times. It cannot be perceived like the episode that took place on Mount Horeb with Moses, which is gone. What happened on Mount Tabor remains and is perpetuated until the end of time, “for, as it has been said, darkness was a prefiguration of the Transfiguration and both are gone, but the Transfiguration is the truth of theophany in everyone and it is again the earnest of eternal happiness in the other world and part of the unspeakable overflowing of light, when we will be transfigured forever in a single light and glory on Zalmon, the spiritual mountain of peace which transcends all understanding, as it stands written (Psalm 68.14; Philippians 4.7), from above, we will be made white like the snow by a thearchic light and we will dance, singing under the overflowing light.” [18]

#### **4. The iconic representation of godly light**

The icon of the Lord’s Transfiguration faithfully depicted the event described in the Holy Gospels. We have evidence of this since the sixth century. The monumental mosaic of the main church within the monastery of St. Catherine of Sinai presents in the centre the Saviour Christ blessing. Next to Him, on the left and the right, we see the two prophets, Moses and Elijah, holding out their hand to the Lord. At the bottom of the stage, we find the three apostles who have their names written above their heads [27]. At the same time, we find in the church of Saint Apollinaire in Classe (4<sup>th</sup> century) a symbolic representation (the apostles are depicted in the form of lambs) which has not been generalized [4, p. 181]. The tendency to faithfully reproduce the scriptural details prevailed in the Byzantine East. In some representations, painters have emphasized one of the evangelical accounts, such as the fresco in Toqale, Cappadocia (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries). Inspired by the Lucanian version, the painter represents the apostles sitting, not lying on their faces. But in general, starting with the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Peter is represented on his knees with his right hand raised towards the Lord, and the other two are painted either lying on their backs in the light (John) or lying on their backs, avoiding the light, springing from the body of the Saviour (Jacob). The generalization of this iconographic type in which the apostles are visibly overwhelmed by the experience of divine light was favoured by the controversy regarding the Tabor light of the fourteenth century [28].

In Dyonisius of Fournas’ hermeneia, the icon of the Transfiguration is not taken into sufficient account. Having in mind its importance in certifying an icon painter’s capacity to represent the uncreated light that must be captured in any icon, irrespective of the saint represented in it, it was appropriate that the hermeneutist should give special attention to this aspect. The only reference to the uncreated light is the description of Jesus Christ’s clothes. Our Lord is represented on the top of the middle mountain, *in clothes white* (as light), standing and blessing, surrounded by rays of light. Fotie notices these lacking details and mentions the following in the description of the scene: “Mount Tabor

with three peaks. On the highest of them, at the centre of the icon, Christ stands straight, facing us, inside the bright grace represented by a radiant circle, in which a radiant tetragon is painted. His clothes are white, with bright hues. His right hand, he blesses, and, with His left hand, He holds a rolled parchment, like in all the scenes with the Lord..." [5, p. 166]. Constantine Carvanos, coming from the same Greek school with Cretan influence, presents the sketch of the icon, similarly, insisting on the uncreated light overflowing from the Saviour's face [27, p. 88].

Therefore, the hermeneutist first presents the Saviour in the middle of bright glory just like he is presented in the theophanies of the Old Testament. Any of God's revelations are accompanied by light, springing from the One Who is Light Himself. God's presence in the middle of godly glory indicates the fact that He is the source spreading the light. Then, he mentions that the bright grace of the Godhead is represented in the icon using a bright circle, in which a tetragon full of light is represented. After this technical detail, Fotie notes that God's clothes are white like the light, with bright hues. We notice that, besides the description of the sketch of the icon of the Transfiguration, he has made many painters insist on the godly light and specify how it can be captured from a technical point of view: "Icon painters use different methods to represent symbolically the uncreated light of the Godhead. The most common way to describe it is the halo surrounding the body of Christ, with three concentric circles pierced by sharp golden or white rays. What was seen by the three witnesses cannot be represented in the icon. Any artistic attempt to represent the event in a real, photographic way, would only conceal it even more." [29] In the icon of the Transfiguration, the halo surrounding the Saviour refers to the bright cloud that, according to the Church Fathers, marks the presence of the Holy Spirit descending on the mountain and covering Jesus Christ

We notice that L. Ouspenski and V. Lossky draws attention to the fact that the uncreated cannot be captured photographically in the created [28, p. 221]. No one can faithfully render the light that sprang from Christ's face and overflowed the apostles. However, the icon is a means by which the Holy Spirit can enlighten the eyes of the one contemplating it and make that person partake of the godly vision. Only then can an icon painter try to represent the heavenly light that he/she saw. In this context, we recall one of Saint Simeon the New Theologian's assertion, according to which a person claiming to have seen God, without having partaken of the godly light, is a liar or is living in deceit. Likewise, in this case, a painter who has not experienced the Taboric light cannot represent it as he/she has not seen it with his/her spiritual eyes.

Next to Christ, the prophets Moses and Elijah are represented on His right hand and His left hand, respectively, on the two other peaks, humbly bowing their heads towards God. The three apostles are placed at the foot of the mountains, with their faces covered and lying on the ground as if they had suddenly fallen because of the dazzling light that the Saviour allowed to be seen on His face. Where the surface permits it, the disciples and the Lord are presented laterally, climbing and descending Mount Tabor. The element on

which we shall insist now is related to the halos worn not only by the two prophets but also by the apostles. The overflowing of godly light has also made God's disciples partake of the godly grace. If they had not been embraced by the grace of the Holy Spirit, signalled by the presence of the bright cloud, they could not have seen Christ's light. Nonetheless, as they had not yet reached the necessary holiness to fully partake of the light, the apostles are represented facing the ground. On the other hand, the two prophets who had already partaken of theophanic events during their earthly life (on Mount Sinai), "they had reached holiness because they could look at the godly Grace without being blinded and falling to the ground" [27, p. 89]. The bright cloud in which God revealed Himself to Moses in the desert was also present on Mount Tabor. According to Cavarnos, the cloud "is not represented realistically, like a physical cloud, but rather like a roseate geometrical figure, with a varying number of angles: four, six or eight" [27, p. 89].

In his work on iconography, the patrologist Jean-Claude Larchet offers details regarding how the heavenly light is represented through colours. The world represented by the painter in the icon does not follow the rigours of materiality, for everything that he/she represents artistically bears the imprint of eternity, where bodies are not perishable and subject to the laws of nature, but spiritual and full of the light that God continuously pours unto them. The uncreated light, springing from the Being of the Trinity "which floods [the saints, emphasis added] is represented symbolically on the gold-plated background, gold being a shiny material that does not deteriorate. The light that embraces them and that radiates from them - represented through delicate, white lines (the so-called *lights*) harmoniously traced on their face - overflows to their garment and all the beings around them. This light springs from within them and shines the same everywhere; that is why we will never find in icons shades or *chiaroscuro* techniques or any external source of light." [3, p. 12] Even if the description made by J.-C. Larchet concerns the saints, we must not forget who their proto image is. All saints are represented in icons following the model of Christ and the details regarding how light radiates from them on garments and around them, on all the beings, are inspired from no other place than the icon of the Transfiguration. There, Jesus Christ, being at the centre of the image, shines forth and overflows His light around Him, also filling His apostles who, had they not become light themselves, could not have seen their Teacher shining brighter than the sun. To confirm this reality, we refer to the episode in which prince Motovilov experiences the heavenly light. If he had not become light, he could not have seen Saint Seraphim radiating and having a face of fire [30].

We would like to close this section by commenting on the assertion of S. Bighan, who warned painters that the icon of the Transfiguration is not painted with colours, but with Taboric light. We notice two aspects: the former has to do with the fact that the icon is painted with Taboric light and the latter with the fact that the icon painter must experience the uncreated light himself. Although the icon painter uses colours in the process of representation, he/she must know he/she portrays the deified bodies of the saints, which are now full of godly

light. If the icon cannot capture this heavenly reality, it fails to fulfil its purpose. The lines of light, the white and the gold are the main elements through which the icon painter can artistically capture the overflowing of light that the Saviour and His saints intermedate and offer to people using the icon. Even if the assertions related to the painting of light belong to a metaphorical way of expression, they do draw attention to the fact that, besides the icon painter's mastery, he/she must also have a very special heavenly gift: to partake of the uncreated light. We shall now focus on the latter aspect that refers to the act of seeing the godly light. The tradition recorded by Steven Bighan suggests that the icon painter was asked to experience the Taboric light to represent it. The one who has not seen God radiating in His glory cannot represent Him in His beauty or seize in an artistic manner His face from which light flows. For these reasons, the icon painters endeavoured to make such mystical exercises to partake of the godly glory. If we look closely at Saint Andrei Rublev's life, we will easily notice that he strictly abides by Palamite exigency that opens for men, in our case for the icon painter, the possibility of seeing the Taboric light. The testimonies of his contemporaries also indicate one of how he partook of the godly light [31]. On feast days, when he was not painting, he would stand for hours in a row in front of the icons on the iconostasis so that he may be embraced by the light radiating from the faces of those who were dwelling in eternity and who communicated through their face the light they were partaking of unspeakably, or better yet, in a way outside the scope of material sight [32].

## **5. Conclusions**

The event of the Transfiguration has a central position in Theology. The theophany of the Trinity, the transfiguration of the human body and its filling with godly light, the mysterious revelation of eternal life are only some of the subjects that confirm our assertions. The epiphany on Mount Tabor discovered to people the real icon of the Heavenly Kingdom. The Trinity from Whose Being the uncreated light springs makes people partake of the godly glory. Those who are perfect can look at this mysterious light without hindrance, whereas those who are not yet saints are overwhelmed by the vision and cover their faces.

The overflowing of light, the transfiguration and the filling with godly glory are perpetual actions to which anyone can reach. No one can achieve this glory through his/her strength but partakes of it through God's grace that illuminates him/her, making him/her capable of receiving the light from above. The event of the Transfiguration of the Lord reveals to us the mystery that those who partake of the light will experience during the Eschaton, when the transfiguration or, better said when the becoming into the light will be eternal. Therefore, the theophany on Mount Tabor is a basis and paradigm of any iconic representation, be it on wood, on a wall, on stained glass, on glass or on any other material on which eternal realities are iconized.

Possible further development of this research can be made by consulting the hymnographies' dedicated to the feast of the Transfiguration. The hymns encourage believers to participate in this Scriptural event that anticipates Christ's glory during His Second Coming and to ask the Lord to make them partake of His heavenly light that the disciples saw on Mount Tabor, "as far as they could bear it" (the Troparion of the feast).

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