



EARS TO HEAR, EYES TO SEE

The Lamb sacrificed in the midst of the elders and the four living creatures.

The Mystery of the Church

Sister Ioanna Reitlinger

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When Sister Ioanna [Reitlinger] was commissioned by the Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius in 1945 to decorate their chapel at Ladbroke Grove, London, she had come to a crossroads in her life. Father Sergii Bulgakov—her teacher, spiritual director, and friend for twenty-five years—had died the previous year. Now, with no one to consult or discourse with—at any rate, not at the theological level she was accustomed to—she was virtually on her own, a woman in a strange city, an

exile from her homeland, a nun, a lone artist with a distinctive vision that had been nurtured for many years under Father Sergii’s tutelage. He had encouraged her to think as a theologian, to pray as a theologian, and to paint as a theologian. She was to “apocalypse” her images, that is, she was to unveil their meta-historical and eschatological reality, the Source of which, though outside space and time, is apprehensible by the trained human intellect.¹ She was not only to apprehend, however, but

¹ The popular notion of apocalypse as a global catastrophe or the end of the world has no basis in the literal meaning of the Greek, which means revealing or uncovering.

also to paint. The grace of this reality had begun to possess her mightily twelve years earlier, on the day she was professed in the monastic habit in Paris. Her diary entry for that day records:

Now I feel the apocalypse of Christ approaching. . . . My soul is so suddenly lit up with clarity. . . . Believing in our time means believing in the apocalypse of Christ. And if I love Christ and love beauty and wish to give it flesh—I pray to the Lord: may he send this vision, for I believe it exists. I must see it as an art-

ist and re-render it—that means rushing in there—into the apocalypse—and somehow revealing it because there is beauty in all its strength.

Sister Ioanna knew that, to paint as a theologian, she would need a much larger “canvas” than a simple board or even a single wall. She now had three, possibly four walls at her disposal. Moreover, Father Sergii had not left her at loose ends. His final theological treatise, posthumously published in 1948, *The Apocalypse of John: An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation*—whose development she, being close at hand, had been able to observe—would be her subject. Rather than illustrate it, she would illuminate it or “re-render” it theologically in colors and paints; she would “apocalypse” the Apocalypse, and call it not the Apocalypse, but the “Mystery of the Church.” We cannot endeavor to describe all the theological subtleties contained in this remarkable work due to limited space, but we might at least attempt to address three of the most obvious examples of her symbolism.

First, near the front of the chapel, and therefore meant for all to see, is a very large vertical panel depicting a scene from Saint Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. It spans the height of two long horizontal registers that extend the length of both sides of the room. The upper register renders dynamic scenes, such as the divine action of angels holding humankind accountable, while the lower register comprises panel after panel of saints grouped from every tribe, tongue, people and nation, who, having accepted accountability with regard to the divine judgement and suffered it, now sit perfectly still in joyful, triumphant peace. The panel of Paul’s conversion spans both registers, divine

The conversion of
Saint Paul.



and human, symbolizing the combination of divine initiative and human cooperation that underpins each and every conversion. Conversion is the door to this reality.

Second, the essential continuity and unity between the Old and New Testaments is a fundamental principle of authentic Christian theology. In one section of the upper register, Sister Ioanna depicts three scenes from early Genesis. But she Christianizes them: the Spirit hovering over the chaotic waters becomes the dovelike Spirit; the Word of God, the Logos, creates the creatures; and the Trinity (“Let us make . . .,” Gen 1:26) create Adam and Eve. In a nearby panel, the same dovelike Spirit makes a Pentecostal descent on Mary and the apostles, marking the “genesis” of the Church, the beginning of a new creation. The connection is theologically inspired.

Third, eternity is introduced subtly and symbolically by scrambling time and space. The saints from each of the “national churches” are seated on semicircular pews as though posing for a wedding photo. A single frame of reference ostensibly means a single point in time and space. Here, however, something historically impossible occurs. In the panel of British Saints, for example, Saint Chad, who lived in the seventh century, is standing near Edward the Confessor, whose time is of the eleventh century. Saint Columba of the sixth century and Saint Patrick of the fifth and their respective local churches are not separated but are together in a single location as one—impossible geographically and historically, but eschatologically, pleasingly plausible and utterly believable.

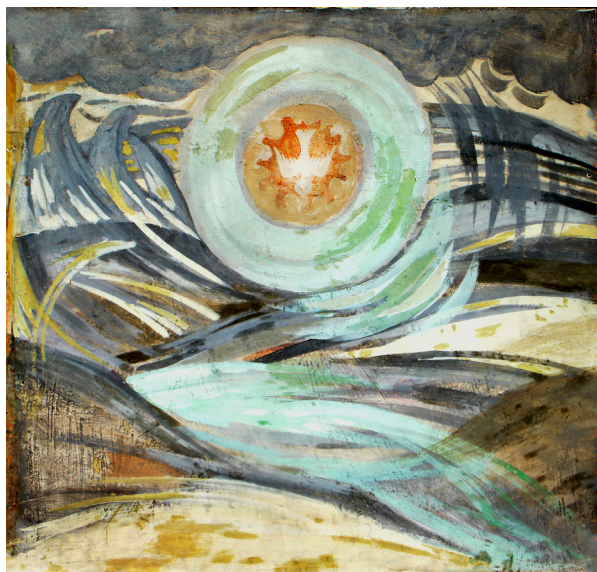


The creation of the world.



Above: The creation of Adam and Eve.

Below: The Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters.





The souls of the slain under the altar, the four horsemen, and Saint John writing.



The theologian's aim, then, is to make us marvel, to believe, and finally to pray contemplatively. Father Sergii, at an earlier point in their friendship, felt his pupil had achieved this ability even to the point that they had traded roles: he becoming her pupil and she his teacher. "Paints [in the hands of a

Left: Pentecost: The Mother of God surrounded by the Twelve Apostles.





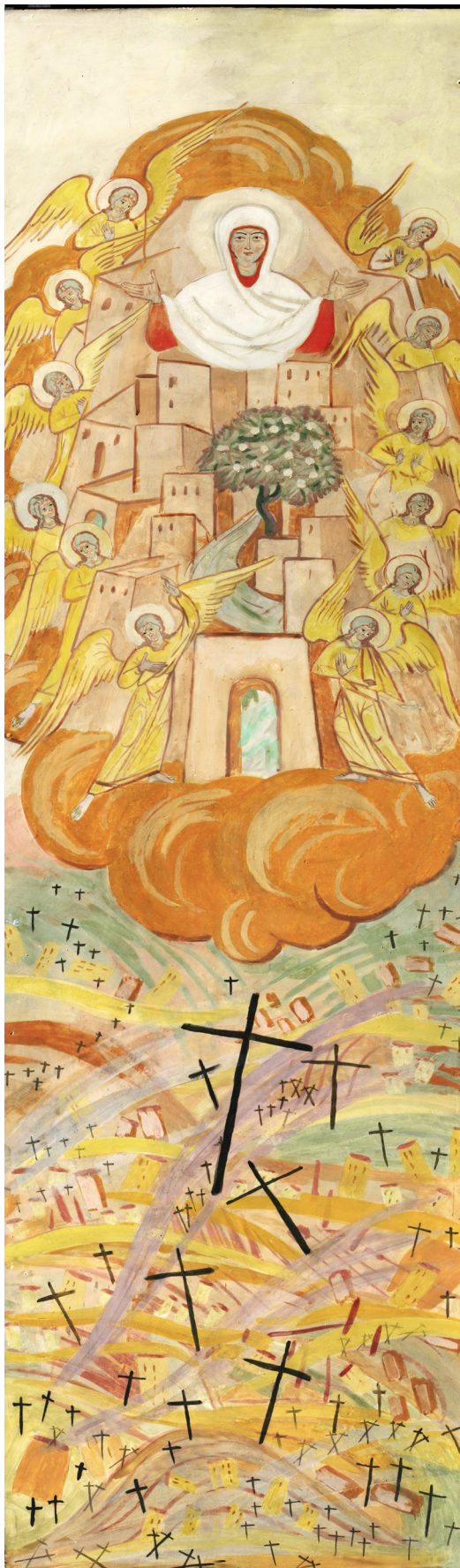
true artist],” he wrote in a letter to her on iconography, “are sophiological, and as a consequence, they are ‘ideas’ alive with revelation. I understand this abstractly, but you taught it to me. You are a real theologian, sophianic, and I rejoice in you, my friend. . . . May the Lord bless you and keep you.” ✽

Top Right: The chaining of Satan.

Right: An angel throws a millstone into the sea and another stands in the sun.

Below: Angels with the seven bowls of God’s wrath, the sickle placed for the harvest, and silence in heaven “for about half an hour.”





Left: Heavenly Jerusalem descending.





Saints of the British Isles.