



The Ladder of Divine Ascent

AMONG THE VERY IMPORTANT SCENES depicted on the walls of churches decorated in the traditional Byzantine manner is "The Soul-saving and Heavenward Ladder," usually referred to as "The Ladder of Divine Ascent." This painting or mosaic is a large synthesis that is given prominence in the narthex of some of the churches and refectories of the Holy Mountain of Athos, as well as in some old churches elsewhere.

The icon is connected with the famous spiritual classic entitled *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* of Saint John Climacos, who flourished in the seventh century. His memory is celebrated by the Orthodox on March 30 and on the Fourth Sunday of the Great Lent.

In this book, he describes *thirty stages* of spiritual development, which he likens to thirty steps upward on a ladder. The steps lead the spiritual striver to *theosis*, divinization, salvation—the ultimate goal of askesis or spiritual struggle.

In the icon which is inspired by this book, the ladder stands on the earth and reaches Heaven, symbolized by a vault from which emerges Christ. The ladder stands at an angle. Sometimes, the lower half of it is at a forty five degree angle, while the upper half stands upright. This is done in order to convey the idea that more effort is required for rising to the highest levels of spiritual development.

At the right side of the scene is shown a building, symbolizing a monastery, and outside its entrance stands Saint John Climacos. With his right hand he points at the ladder for the monks who stand behind him, while in his left hand he holds a scroll on which is written: "Ascend, ascend, Brethren."

Over the top of the ladder is Christ, emerging from Heaven. With His right hand He blesses the monk who has climbed to the top of the ladder, or holds the monk's hand. In His left hand He holds

a scroll, symbolic of His Gospel, or a crown which He is about to place on the head of the victorious monk. Below, there are other monks at various stages of ascent. Some stand on the ladder firmly, and are about to rise to the next rung. Others, however, are barely retaining their hold, as they are drawn by demons. The latter are flying at the left of the ladder. One of the monks has fallen off the ladder and is being swallowed below by a great dragon with wide open jaws. The dragon is used as a symbol of Hell.

Near the right side of the ladder are portrayed holy Angels encouraging and helping the ascending monks. This is in accord with the statement made by Saint John and other Eastern Church Fathers, that those persons who struggle for the acquisition of the virtues are helped both by God and by His Angels.

The Angels are shown with halos, clothed with light-colored garments and large, strong wings. The demons, on the other hand, are depicted without halos, without garments, with small, weak wings. Their bodies are of dark, dull colors, and have something that the bodies of the holy Angels do not have: tails. The latter symbolize the fallen state of the demons, their animalistic state. For the rational faculty, with which God endowed them when He created them—and which distinguishes both the angelic nature and human nature from that of the beasts of the field—has been corrupted by their rebellion against God.

The demons are depicted in order to remind the beholder that there exist such evil incorporeal beings, who act upon us through mental suggestion and assaults, and also to symbolize various "passions" (negative emotions and desires) in us. Saint John describes and minutely analyzes the nature of the passions, namely, pride, gluttony, lust, anger, despondency, malice, and so on. Positive qualities—the opposites of the "passions"—e.g., humility, temperance, chastity, gentleness, hope, love, etc.—are symbolized by the holy Angels, who are also to be viewed as real beings.

The statement on the open scroll held by Saint John Climacos is taken from the concluding exhortation of his book. It begins thus: "Ascend, ascend, brethren, ascend with eagerness and resolve in your hearts, listening to him who says: 'Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and to the house of our God, Who maketh our feet like those of the deer, and setteth us on high places, that we may be victorious with His song.'"

The Ladder of Saint John Climacos, which the icon depicts, is inspired by the Ladder which the righteous Jacob saw in a dream. Jacob saw a ladder which rose from earth to Heaven, on which some Angels were ascending and others were descending. His dream—or, better, his vision—is described in the book of Genesis as follows: "Jacob dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to Heaven, and the Angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord leaned upon it and said: I am the God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac; be not afraid.... And behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest" (28:12-13, 15—Septuagint).

Saint John's *Ladder* expresses the Orthodox view that spiritual perfection, *theosis*, salvation is not something attained all at once, as by a leap, but comes after a long arduous process of spiritual striving or askesis. In this process, with sustained effort one rises *gradually* from lower to higher and higher levels of spiritual development. Thus, in the ninth step, Saint John remarks: "The holy virtues are like Jacob's Ladder. For the virtues, leading from one to another, bear him who chooses them to Heaven." Later, in the discussion of the fourteenth step, he observes that "no one can climb a ladder in one stride."

Commenting on this, Saint Symeon the New Theologian says: "Those who want to climb these steps climb the first rung of the Ladder, then the second, then the third, and so on.... In this way one can rise from earth to Heaven" (*Tou Hosiou Symeon tou Neou Theologou ta Heuriskomena Panta*, p. 368). The first step of spiritual ascent, says Climacos, consists in these three virtues: guilelessness (or truthfulness), fasting, and temperance. "All babes in Christ begin with these virtues, taking as their model natural babes. For in these you will never find anything sly or

deceitful. And they have no insatiate appetite, no insatiable stomach, no body that is on fire or bestialized." These three virtues will serve, he says, as a secure foundation for the rest.

The idea of a Ladder of Spiritual Ascent appears often in Orthodox hymnography. The Kontakion chanted on March 30, feast day of Saint John Climacos, speaks of his *Ladder* thus: "By offering fresh fruits (teachings) from thy book, O wise one, thou dost delight the hearts of those who in a state of inner wakefulness heed them; for it is a Ladder that leadeth from earth to heavenly and abiding glory the souls of those who with faith honor thee."

I must add a few words about the life of Saint John Climacos and about the intent and influence of his book, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. This great and very wise ascetic was tonsured a monk at the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai. After three years he withdrew to a hermitage about five miles from the Monastery and lived there for forty years. Subsequently, he became Abbot of the Monastery and wrote his *Klimax*—the Greek word for ladder. He owes his name—Climacos—to the title he gave to his book.

Although this book is addressed to monks and to those who are thinking of embracing the monastic life, it contains a wealth of observations, counsels, and exhortations that are profitable to everyone who is interested in making progress in the spiritual life. For, as he remarks in one of his discourses (or "steps"), "Angels are the light of monastics, while the monastic state is a light for all men."

From the time it was written to the present, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* has been read assiduously by monastics as well as by pious Christians living in "the world" in the Hellenic East, in Palestine, in Russia, in Serbia, in Rumania, in Bulgaria, in Europe, and elsewhere. It has been translated, from the ninth century on, into many languages: Syriac, Arabic, Latin, Slavonic, Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Modern Greek, Rumanian, Italian, Spanish, English, and other languages. There are two translations of it in the English language, one published around 1960 in New York by Harper and Brothers and one published later by Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Boston.

The Ladder of Divine Ascent occupies an important place in the tradition of Orthodox spirituality known as Hesychasm. Among the famous Saints who were deeply influenced by it are Symeon the New Theologian, the great eleventh-century Byzantine mystic; Gregory Palamas, the great fourteenth-century exponent and defender of Hesychasm; the eighteenth-century Greek "Kollyvades" Macarios of Corinth and Nicodemos the Hagiorite; and Starets Paissy Velichkovsky, also of the eighteenth century, who translated the *Philokalia* and *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* into Slavonic.

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