

THIS IS MY BELOVED SON
THE TRANSFIGURATION OF CHRIST

Andreas Andreopoulos

Foreword by Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia



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TO FR. ANDREW LOUTH

...ὡς Ἀλέξανδρος ἔλεγε, τοῦ πατρός, ὡς δι' ἐκεῖνον μὲν ζῶν,
διὰ Ἀριστοτέλην δὲ καλῶς ζῶν
—PLUTARCH, *Alexander*, 8:3

*Alexander used to say that he owed to his father living,
but to [his teacher] Aristotle he owed living well.*

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FOREWORD

WHO IS CHRIST? WHO AM I? For an answer, we may turn to one of the most mysterious events in the Gospels: the Transfiguration of Christ on the mountain in the presence of his three chosen disciples—Peter, James, and John. The dazzling light that shone from the face of Jesus reveals to us his true stature as the eternal Son of God. It reveals to us also the highest potentiality of our created nature, our ultimate vocation as human beings.

Andreas Andreopoulos has already written an earlier study on the Transfiguration, entitled *Metamorphosis*.¹ This has been widely acclaimed as an original and illuminating explanation of the theology and iconography of the Transfiguration, the fullest and most authoritative treatment of the subject available in the English language. In this present book he does not repeat what he has said so well in his earlier volume, but he approaches the Transfiguration from a different point of view, explaining its significance in the continuing experience of the church and in the personal journey of each Christian. He sees the Transfiguration as “a timeless story,” as “an event that keeps on happening.” He shows us how this moment in Christ’s life has lived on through history, shedding its radiance upon all ages.

In the light of Christ’s face that was so strangely and so strikingly altered upon the mountaintop, in his garments that became dazzling white, all human faces have acquired a new brightness, all common things have been transformed. For those who believe in Christ’s Transfiguration, no one is despicable, nothing is trivial and mean. As Edwin Muir puts it in his poem “The Transfiguration”:

The source of all our seeing rinsed and cleansed
Till earth and light and water entering there
Gave back to us the clear unfallen world.²

All this, and much more, Andreas Andreopoulos explains to us in the pages that follow. He writes in a way that is vivid yet profound and often unexpected. Reading his text, I have come to look at Christ's Transfiguration, and our own, with new eyes and a fresh understanding.

INTRODUCTION

IT IS HARD FOR ME TO WRITE ON MATTERS that neither my reason, nor my understanding, nor even my convictions have any hope of truly grasping. It is hard to take any part of the story of Jesus and explain it to others, as if I fully understand it myself, or to pretend to analyze it as if it were an abstract philosophical idea. But then, none of those abilities play any role in the presence of God. Instead, we can only try to respond in a way that recognizes his presence in the world, Scripture, life, and the sacraments of the church.

There are several books that examine the Transfiguration from a strictly biblical perspective or that discuss its reception and effect within early and later Christianity. There are also accounts of saints who experienced the continuous Transfiguration of Christ—the mystical experience of the outpouring of the light of God—as it was imparted to them. Here I did not want to restrict myself to the voice of knowledge or to the voice of experience. I tried to write partly with the approach of a theologian and teacher and partly with the approach of someone who tries to tell a story. But mostly, I approached the event from the perspective of a person who takes the narrative, the tradition, and the significance of the Transfiguration seriously at all levels.

I would not like to write a book as a diary of personal thoughts and experiences without recourse to a body of knowledge. This would not be useful to anyone. On the other hand, it is not enough to merely list what we know about the sources and the tradition of the Transfiguration, and exclude faith, understanding, and even intuition. Instead I tried to write as directly as I could and combine the two voices, drawing on what I know at both levels, neither hiding behind the persona of a teacher, nor resorting to an emotional or pietistic subjectivism. At both levels,

however, my voice remains nothing more than a witness to a miracle that happened once, in a specific time and place, but still shines forth and reaches the world and the people of God.

It is hard to approach and consider the mystery of the Cross or the Resurrection, but perhaps these events are so big and so deeply embedded in history that our mind has a different way of dealing with them. The Crucifixion as the last public act of Jesus, and the Resurrection as the core of the Good News of the gospel, are events that decisively shaped Christianity. Momentous as they may be, we absorb and in some way accept them for what they are as we encounter the Christian faith and narrative for the first time. In this way they are not as surprising or unanticipated as some of the less prominent biblical narratives.

The story of the Transfiguration, on the other hand, communicates something more unexpected, something less embedded to our cultural acceptance of Christianity, and something that provokes a reading at a deeper, and yet more direct, level. It resonates in many ways with what we hear sometimes from elderly monks and charismatic laypeople, about a different kind of recognition of the presence of God, in a more palpable way—even when the light is so dazzling that you cannot know what it is that you are sensing. There is something immediate in this story, something that draws us inside of it, at the foot or on the top of Mount Tabor, where we can see Christ change into his real form, the form of light. Words cannot fully express the experience. I know, however, that the last thing I would need to do after such an event is to systematize it, classify it, or analyze it philosophically and theologically—at least if *theology* means what it usually means in our days. Yet, as with most experiences that lie beyond the level of the ordinary, we inevitably return to the words, to that part of thought that likes black to be black, and a table to be a table, and does not register easily that for which it does not have a word.

But then, we occasionally see a glow in the faces of some people that betrays an inner sense, a spiritual way to touch, see, and hear. This glow,

humble and rare as it may be, does not appear only in the serene faces of the saints in iconography. Recently I heard someone speak about an elderly aunt of his, a simple woman who grew up in Asia Minor and came to Athens as a refugee in 1922. That woman used to take him to church with her when he was a child. Once, after communion, he saw her face shine in an unusual way, and naturally, with the curiosity and the directness of a young boy, he asked her what that was, why was her face glowing so strangely. He still remembers her response: closing in, and smiling almost conspiratorially, she told him, "Don't say anything, my child. It is a sin to talk about such things."

"Such things" cannot be described by words, and if nothing else that man's memory shows that sanctity is not an affair only of the past. Yet here I am, assuming the responsibility to talk and write about the Transfiguration in the background of "such things." This is not easy, I'll say this again. I find many such exhortations to silence in the lives of the saints. It is even right there in the biblical Transfiguration narrative itself, when Jesus instructs the three disciples who have seen what their eyes could not believe to keep silent about it until after his Crucifixion and his Resurrection, when the full mystery would be revealed to the entire world. This is one of several connections between Tabor and Calvary, the Transfiguration and the Cross. The message here is very strong: we cannot understand the glory of the Transfiguration or the Resurrection if we have not made the Cross part of our own life. Similarly, the command of Jesus to the disciples to keep this in silence until after they had known him as the crucified and resurrected God implies that the mystery of the Transfiguration cannot be approached as an inert object of study from the outside, without reverence, without fear, and without trembling. "Such things" are not spoken of lightly.

I know that in this attempt there may be times where all my education, my knowledge, and my wits can work against me. I am afraid that some of my thoughts or my phrases may escape and may try to have a life of

their own, without a direct connection to things that resonate with my own experience. I am terrified that although I know that I have to walk on the crutches of my mind and my experiences, I'll drift instead toward the crutches of keeping fast on the way. But I cannot give up—not yet. I owe it to the few droplets of grace that I was made conscious of, or rather the few instances that made me aware of the continuous outpouring of grace.

And yet, this is not simply a personal difficulty that I acknowledge out of piety. The entire biblical message offers itself freely on this condition. I am reminded of St. Paul's self-imposed limitations, when he wrote, "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect" (1 Cor. 1:17). There is something misleading about an eloquent "wisdom of words" and "systematic" or scholarly theology, which as St. Paul testifies, stands at odds with the power of the Cross of Christ, and—I'll dare add—also at odds with his Transfiguration. Eloquent wisdom is a trap, a professional deformation into which theologians fall very often, perhaps more often than anyone else.

The reason for this is that Christianity is not a philosophical system, a set of rules and laws, or an intellectual edifice that attempts to explain the world to us. It is instead a way of life, an insight that flows out of living experience, which includes things we see, touch, and understand, and also things that we do not comprehend even if we see and touch them. Christianity is at its most essential in the mystical sound of the heartbeat of the church, the breath of its saints, and the presence of the Bridegroom Christ just on the other side of our senses

The continuous Transfiguration of Christ in the church is one of those things. And if this is difficult to visualize, we can start from the biblical message itself: if we put ourselves in the place of the three apostles who witnessed this miracle we would have no words to describe or explain it. The narratives are revealing and elusive at the same time. "His face shone like the sun" and his clothes "became shining, exceedingly white, like

snow; such as no launderer on earth can whiten them” (Mt. 17:2; Mk. 9:3). There is a lot that serious analysis can tell us about these passages, but if we pause for a moment and try to visualize the raw experience, we come at a loss. And if we did manage to visualize it to some small extent, it would be even more difficult to describe it.

I think there is much I learned by approaching the Transfiguration, as well as the theological and biblical tradition in general, in the language of symbols and images. There is much in the Bible that can be understood in a lateral, iconological way. We can consider the image of Jesus in John 8:6, writing on the ground with his finger, when the adulterous woman is brought in front of him. This is the only instance where the Bible says that he ever wrote anything—and nobody was even interested in what he wrote. This is not an image of indifference, though, quite the opposite. Here we have a dispute about the Mosaic Law, and Jesus is invited by the scribes and Pharisees to offer his interpretation. What follows goes against the moralistic and legalistic understanding of sacred tradition, as it was held by the scribes and Pharisees. Does Jesus have the authority to do this? This is precisely what the image of him writing on the ground suggests. There is only one other instance in Scripture where God has written something with his finger: the two tablets of the law that was given to Moses were written “with the finger of God” (Exod. 31:18; Deut. 9:10). We can make the connection with Jesus in John 8 in an iconological way only. Here we have the image of Jesus the Teacher, whom the scribes and the Pharisees wanted to consult about a matter of the law. The Johannine narrative portrays him in this way precisely to show him as the origin of the Mosaic Law—and therefore what follows is given with the authority of God the Lawgiver. The image of Jesus stooping down and writing on the ground with his finger reveals much more than a historical or philological analysis of the passage would. Yet this is something we would understand only if we can start thinking in images. Perhaps in this way we respond to the mystery of God, at the same time we can try to preserve it.

This book may be described as my response to the mystery of the Transfiguration. A few years ago I wrote a book on the theology and iconography of the Transfiguration, for which I conducted a considerable amount of research in the writings of the Fathers as well as in hymnography and in visual sources. After its publication, however, I was left with a feeling of incompleteness, as if something inside me was trying to tell me that I needed to revisit the story of the Transfiguration with a wider perspective. Although the choice of the themes I develop here suggests an approach that is usual to textual and theological analysis and systematic theology, I think it serves the mystery of the Transfiguration better if it is recognized that its full reality hovers somewhere beyond the systematic approach. Like many other things in the church and the Christian tradition, what is important lies on just the other side of conscious perception—although not very far from it. The Transfiguration is a story of divine glory. There is no right or wrong way to approach it, because no approach can ever be enough. But at least by telling and retelling the story, exploring it with our minds and our hearts, we open ourselves to it and let the story take root inside us. Perhaps this is the best I could hope with my own theological explorations.

One final note: For biblical quotations I chose to use the *New King James Version* of the Bible, as perhaps the translation that flows more naturally in the English language. Nevertheless, I have modified the text of the NKJV in one way: the pronouns that refer to the person of Christ have been changed to the lowercase. This does not reflect a preference for a low Christology, but where biblical and liturgical texts are discussed I found it easier, and perhaps more correct theologically, to follow the grammar and the spirit of the original Greek, where no such differentiation between pronouns or grammatical types that refer to Christ and other persons exist.

1

IN YOUR LIGHT WE SHALL SEE LIGHT

Transfiguration Themes throughout the Bible



WHEN WE PREPARE TO TRAVEL TO A NEW PLACE, we try to collect as much information as we can about the journey. While in the past such endeavours were extremely difficult and people had to prepare meticulously for a trip to a distant land, it is much easier nowadays to find information about a destination, other travellers' detailed itineraries, reviews of services, and to make journey plans with a travel agent or through the Internet. Nevertheless, the basic plan remains the same.

We first try to find a map of the journey, something to give us an idea of the landscape, the rivers, lakes, seas, or mountains that we may have to cross, and especially if we travel by car, the highways and roads we need to take and the cities and towns we need to go through. It takes me much longer to learn a new city if I do not have a map reference for where everything is. In fact, I feel lost if I cannot actually position myself in a map—so that I know where I stand in reference to where I am going.

Christianity was understood from its beginning as a journey whose destination is the kingdom of heaven. The teachings, the traditions, the liturgy, and the doctrines are nothing more than travel directions in this journey, some of which come from people who have made part of the journey. The destination, however, is known only through God, and while it is necessary for us to have the will and desire to walk in the way

of God, it is not our own strength that can carry us to the end, but the strength of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, in this metaphor of salvation as a journey, perhaps the closest thing we have to a map is the gospel.

The Transfiguration of Jesus Christ is an important landmark in this journey. It is a timeless story, a wonderful and miraculous episode from the life of Jesus Christ that reveals a lot about our own journey toward salvation. While this story starts with the incident witnessed by Peter, John, and James on the top of a mountain in Palestine sometime around the year 33 AD, the significance and the message of the Transfiguration extend much further than that.

The Transfiguration in Mark, Matthew, and Luke

While much of what makes Christianity what it is took place before and after the New Testament was written, most Christians would agree that what the Bible contains is a sufficient basis for our salvation. Although the word of God—or the “memoirs of the apostles,” as an ancient writer refers to the Gospels—has a strong historical element, it is misleading to reduce the importance of the Gospels to the status of a historical source. They are more than that.

The Gospel narratives in the ancient church were written in order to be read aloud, heard, and prayed in the Eucharistic gatherings of the Christians. The Gospels are first of all liturgical texts, and they were compiled primarily for this reason. These texts took their shape in early Christian communities and eventually were chosen by the early church as authoritative writings because they helped the people of God prepare for their participation in the sacramental sharing of the body and the blood of Christ that followed, and the kingdom of heaven to which it led. For this reason, every reading from the Gospels reveals something about the kingdom of heaven.

When we read texts of Aeschylus, Shakespeare, or Ionesco, we are fully aware that their natural setting is the theater stage, and we try

to imagine how they serve dramatic principles that are fulfilled in the theatre. Outside this framework there is much in the texts that does not make sense. Likewise, when we examine passages from the New Testament, it is good to keep in mind the reason for which they were written and the Eucharistic context in which they were received. The text reveals only part of the journey, but it is not the journey itself.

In that light, there is no better place to begin this journey than to turn our attention to the Gospel narratives that describe the Transfiguration of Jesus. The main narratives are Mark 9:2–10, Matthew 17:1–9, and Luke 9:28–36. In all of them it is also important to note how they are placed in the wider context of the Bible, and what other stories come before and after them.³

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them. His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them. And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—because he did not know what to say, for they were greatly afraid. And a cloud came and overshadowed them; and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my beloved Son. Hear him!” Suddenly, when they had looked around, they saw no one anymore, but only Jesus with themselves. Now as they came down the mountain, he commanded them that they should tell no one the things they had seen, till the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept this word to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant. (Mk. 9:2–10)



Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up a high mountain by themselves; and he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear him!" And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead." (MATTH. 17:1-9)



Now it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that he took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. As he prayed, the appearance of his face was altered, and his robe became white and glistening. And behold, two men talked with him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his decease, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Then it happened, as they were parting from him, that Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; and

let us make three tabernacles: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were fearful as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my beloved Son. Hear him!” When the voice had ceased, Jesus was found alone. But they kept quiet, and told no one in those days any of the things they had seen. (Lk. 9:28–36)



The story in these narratives is very direct and powerful. Mark and Matthew get right to the point. The first sentence connects the main Transfiguration story with the biblical text that precedes it: here we hear that Jesus took Peter, John, and James separately from the other disciples and led them to a mountain whose name is not given. Then both evangelists say simply that Jesus “was transfigured in front of them.” They add that his clothes became resplendent white. Matthew also writes that his face shone like the sun. Other than that, there is no attempt to explain what exactly the word *transfigured* means, as if the meaning and the special way in which this Transfiguration happened is already known to the people who hear the story. Luke’s Gospel, on the other hand, takes a slightly softer tone: it does not simply announce the Transfiguration, but it describes the change of the face of Jesus and his clothes.

If we place ourselves in the gathering of the faithful, where these texts would have been read aloud and prayed in the Eucharistic gathering, we immediately realize that they guide us into something unusual, something that has little to do with what Jesus says, and more with what he does or what happens to him. There is much that is not given in words here. There is a lot that is not explained.

The whole story has something elusive about it, making it sound like a shared secret. The separate ascent to the mountain, the white cloud,

the mysterious light, the voice from heaven, and any of the other parts of the story are not described in detail. The texts have an incomplete feel to them: the events are related almost in hurry, as if the evangelists have given up hope to do justice to the description of the event with their words.

In the context of the Eucharistic gathering, the Transfiguration narrative reveals to a community of believers an additional aspect of the kingdom of God. Those who hear these Gospel texts are hearing them already present together as the community of God in Christ. They are there for the sacraments of the church, for the grace that comes from God through the *ecclesia*, and hearing these readings they understand that an important event took place long ago. Taken by themselves (without St. Paul—as we will soon see), the Transfiguration as an event can be confusing. It is important to remember, then, that this teaching is intended to prepare the way for the partaking of the sacramental body and blood of Christ. When the Gospel of the Transfiguration is read in the Eucharistic gathering, the whole day is a feast and a celebration of the Transfiguration, including especially composed services of Vespers and Matins, with many hymns dedicated to it. After the reading of the Gospel and the sermon, very few other things will remind us of the Transfiguration. The focus shifts to the experience of the sacramental resurrected body of Christ.

Let us consider this passage from later in the canon of the New Testament, as well. The Transfiguration is also mentioned in the second epistle of Peter:

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to him from the Excellent Glory: "This is my beloved

Son, in whom I am well pleased." And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. (2 PET. 1:16–19)

The style of the passage from 2 Peter is more straightforward than the story as told in the Gospels, because it was composed as a letter rather than as a somewhat cryptic liturgical reading. While the author mentions the Transfiguration as an example of the glory of God experienced directly by the apostles, his narrative culminates in the phrase we “were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16), which corresponds very closely with the phrase “we beheld his glory” that we find in John 1:14.⁴ The text does not go into historical or narrative details, but it assumes that what it alludes to is already widely known to its readers. This suggests that although the Gospels as we know them were most likely written after this letter, Christian communities were already familiar with the Transfiguration, and that it was known as a revelation of the glory and the majesty of Christ. This letter is not trying to convince us that the Transfiguration took place; on the contrary, the author refers to the Transfiguration, which Peter experienced firsthand, as an undisputed fact, which he then proceeds to use as a source of hope and inspiration for his readers.

What about John?

Given all of this discussion in the Scriptures about the Transfiguration, why is it that John the Evangelist, the only person among the three eyewitnesses whose name is connected with a Gospel, did not write a Transfiguration narrative? The Gospel according to John—the last of the Gospels to be written—only briefly mentions that “we beheld his glory” (Jn. 1:14), which is usually understood as an allusion to the

Transfiguration, because the word *glory* (δόξα)⁵ is immediately recognizable as an almost tangible manifestation of the divinity of Christ (such as we see in the Transfiguration), and not simply as an abstract and generic reference to the power and majesty of God. This becomes more obvious in Greek iconography, where the luminous aureole drawn around the body of Christ in icons of special metaphysical and unusual events that accentuate his divinity (such as the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, and the Ascension) is also known as “glory” (δόξα). Not only in a biblical context, but in a wider cultural context, the glory of God in the Greek tradition is understood as something visible.

But why does John’s Gospel not specifically mention the Transfiguration? One theory has it that this Gospel was not actually written by John, the brother of James and son of Zebedee. If this is true, the author of the fourth Gospel was not present at the Transfiguration. But even if this were so, it is unlikely that he would not have heard of it. In addition, the entire fourth Gospel is concerned with many of the themes we find in the Transfiguration story: this Gospel, after all, is the Gospel of glory and divinity! The Passion in John, for instance, is not a moment of defeat or suffering, but a manifestation of Christ as the *King of Glory*, the title that we see written above the head of Christ in the Orthodox icon of the Crucifixion. The words *glory*, *glorification*, and *glorify* in John’s Gospel have a specific meaning that is so evident it is clearly understood by all who hear the relevant Gospel reading. When in John’s Gospel we read that Jesus says, “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son also may glorify you” (Jn. 17:1) or, “This he spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God” (Jn. 21:19), there is very little doubt in our mind that the Crucifixion is seen as an act of glory.

We come across the theme of divine light in the very first paragraph of John’s Gospel, and in others as well. This interest in the theology of light is evident, more directly than anywhere else, in Christ’s own words in John

8:12: “I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in the darkness, but have the light of life.” This emphasis on light became the basis for a good part of the early discussion of the relationship between the Father and the Son and is something we find developed in a different way in John’s Gospel than in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The particular themes that characterize John—light, glory—suggest that the entire book echoes the event of the Transfiguration. In other words, John’s Gospel does not retell the Transfiguration story because the theme of the glory of God and the divine light permeate everything in it. The Transfiguration in the other three Gospels demonstrates the divinity of Christ and explains something of its nature to us in a dramatic, visual way. But John’s Gospel begins differently, taking the divinity of Christ as something that needs no demonstration or proof, and is stated clearly right from the beginning.

If we were compelled to find an appropriate place to interject the narrative of the Transfiguration into John’s Gospel, we could think of two possibilities. First, we may be inclined to place it at the end of chapter 6, right after Peter’s confession of faith. This would be consistent with the very similar confession of faith that Peter gives just before the Transfiguration story in Mark, Matthew, and Luke and would make the Transfiguration narrative correspond with the reference to the Jewish Feast of the Tabernacles in John 7, where Jesus taught in the temple at the middle of the feast. Interestingly, several scholars have noticed a certain connection between the Feast of the Tabernacles and the Transfiguration of Jesus.⁶ Yet this addition would not offer anything to the message of John’s Gospel there. While in the following three chapters Jesus speaks publicly about the law and the prophets—and in an indirect sense he “dialogues” with Moses and Elijah, who encapsulate the Hebrew tradition—there is no attempt to demonstrate his divinity to the bystanders, as he teaches with the authority of the Father (Jn. 10:38), and yet they do not accept him.

We may also be tempted to place the Transfiguration story in the first opening paragraphs of John's Gospel. In John 1:14, the Evangelist writes about how "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." This phrase connects glory with divinity, and it says something similar to the demonstration of the divinity of Christ precisely as we see it in the Transfiguration. This also could explain why there is no specific mention of the Transfiguration in John's Gospel later on. Since this Gospel starts with the writer's confession of faith and the testimony to the divinity and the glory of Christ, everything that follows is based on this testimony. In a certain sense, all of John is offered within the light of the Transfiguration.

Nevertheless, it is not usually prudent to compare John's Gospel with the other three Gospels. As a liturgical text it is read in the same way as the other three Gospels, and yet its content is more overtly Eucharistic. What I mean is, although there is no specific mention of the Last Supper and the historical institution of the Eucharistic meal here, it is possible to read the entire Gospel as a description and commentary of the Eucharistic rite—right from the beginning, where instead of a genealogy the Gospel begins with a hymn to Christ the Logos. In other words, the whole Gospel takes place in the transfigured space that is beyond the ascent to Mount Thabor.

The Transfiguration in St. Paul

There are two more, albeit indirect, references to the Transfiguration given in the New Testament. Rather, these are two instances where the theme of the Transfiguration exists in the background without direct reference to the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Thabor. In both we find the verb *transfigure* (μεταμορφώ) used in a way that implies this connection.

Both are found in the epistles of St. Paul, in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18. In order to understand these references, we have to read each of them in their broader contexts:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transfigured by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. (ROM. 12:1–8)



And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.

Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech—unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transfigured into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 COR. 3:4–18)



In both of these passages we find something different about the use of the word *transfigured*.⁷ For the first time in the New Testament, both the word and the concept are not associated with Jesus. Instead, they point to the members of the church, the ones who receive the word of instruction. Yet the context that connects the usage of these words to the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ is unmistakable.

In the passage from the Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul develops the theme of the transfiguration of the individual members of the church into the body of Christ. It is the same theme we find in one of his most famous passages, in 1 Corinthians 12, where he reflects on the different roles of the members of the body, and the different gifts of the Holy Spirit. What makes the unity of this ecclesial body possible, Paul insists, is baptism and the operation of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). In the Romans passage he describes the effect of baptism: it makes Christians “not conform to the world,” but “be transfigured” from individuals to members of the body of Christ.

St. Paul shows us what the meaning of the Transfiguration is beyond its historical context. Although the historical Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor is present in the background of his words, Paul chooses to talk about another kind of Transfiguration of the body of Jesus Christ, where the body of Christ is understood in a different way. Here he is talking about the church as the body of Christ, and the Transfiguration of the church into his body. Paul is emphatic: the Transfiguration is not an event that belongs to the distant past, irrelevant to the life of the faithful. Instead, he helps us see the Transfiguration event from a different perspective: what happens to Christ also happens to us, to the church. This passage builds on the connection between Christ and the church and it guides us to understand and apply the biblical message beyond the confines of historical time.

In the passage from St. Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians we see a stronger connection with the Transfiguration story. Here he refers to Moses as a “type” or precursor of Jesus and the revelation he was given as a preparation for the full revelation of God in Christ. Paul talks about the transfiguration of the face of Moses in Exodus 34:29–35, after Moses’ encounter with God on Sinai, a story that is directly related to the Transfiguration of Christ. Paul mentions the “glory” of the face of Moses, which was a reflection of the glory or divine promise of the

Old Testament. He reminds us that the face of Moses had to be covered. According to the Exodus narrative, the Israelites could not bear to look at his resplendent face directly, and for this reason it was covered by a veil. In the story of the Transfiguration, the glory of the face of Christ is the fulfillment of the radiance of the face of Moses. The veil is removed and the glory of God is revealed completely and directly. If in the Transfiguration there is a limitation to what can be seen, it is not imposed to us by God, but by our limited nature.

St. Paul touches here on some of the main themes that have been developed through the last two thousand years regarding the spiritual importance of the Transfiguration for the lives of Christians. One of them has to do with the nature of the change that occurred on the top of that “high mountain.” Jesus did not change who he was; he was God before, during, and after his Transfiguration, as he was during his entire ministry, fully divine and fully human. What changed was the perceptive capability of the apostles. Each of them was given the grace to see and hear differently, and because of that they were able to see Jesus in a different way. To the extent that Transfiguration means a change of something into something that it was not before the change, the actual transfiguration happened in Peter, John, and James, and not in Jesus.

This is something that St. Paul understands clearly. He considers the Transfiguration of Jesus a prefiguration, a “mirror” of the human condition, and he places us against the mirror (another of his recurring themes, reminding us of how we see God “in a mirror, dimly” in 1 Corinthians 13) as a way to begin our own transfiguration into the image and the glory of God. The phrase “we are being transfigured into the same image from glory to glory” with which he concludes this passage is one that encapsulates in a few words the mystery and the nature of our salvation and our way into the light of God.

The passages from the epistles of St. Paul, as well as the passage from 2 Peter, reflect a practical and direct exhortation toward the Christian life.

This is where the historical event meets the life of every Christian. These passages help us relate the mystery of the Transfiguration of Christ directly to our lives.

There is a practical explanation for why we discover the spiritual meaning in the theology of the Transfiguration in this way—as St. Paul and St. Peter reflect on the event in the Gospels. These letters were written in order to address certain problems that the Christian communities were facing. For this reason they are less concerned with the story of Jesus and the revelation of the kingdom of God, and more with our spiritual struggle in this world. The church, recognizing this distinction, has always placed the liturgical reading of the epistles before the reading of the Gospel. St. Paul and St. Peter help to explain the broader, everyday, spiritual meaning of the event depicted for history in the Gospel texts. Liturgically, then, we are prepared to offer ourselves to be transfigured into the body of Christ at the same time we prepare to receive his own transfigured and resurrected body. The kingdom of God may lie just ahead, and it may be offered to us as freely and unconditionally as the light of God and the grace of the Holy Spirit was given to Peter, John, and James, but our entire life on earth can be spent trying to hold on to a morsel of this free gift of love.

The Transfiguration Offers a Key to Understanding the Whole Bible

Examining the Transfiguration story in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and the letters of Paul, as well as the resonance between the Transfiguration story and John's Gospel, we gain a certain appreciation for the revelation of Jesus Christ in Scripture. St. Maximos the Confessor, one of the most important theologians of the medieval church, wrote that the garments of Christ, which became resplendent at his Transfiguration, were symbolic of the pages of the Gospel as they will become clear to us at the end of time. For St. Maximos this

deep connection between the Gospel and Christ became apparent in the divine light of the Transfiguration.

Christians of all denominations look to the Bible as an indispensable base of their faith. Yet this is a living faith. The Bible is not received as a stagnant document, but as one of the most important guides that reveal to us Jesus Christ as the living God and witness his continuous presence in the church. The Transfiguration story explores in a few lines the limits of his presence and revelation through Scripture, and the way this revelation affects all Christians whose life is transfigured in prayer. It is a story with many levels, and it can show us how deep the revelation of Christ is.

The story of the Transfiguration, as most of the miracles, teachings, and other events from the life of Christ, is revealed at different levels. We start with Christ as he is revealed to us through the New Testament, in the testimony of the Gospels. But after we enter the story at this point, we may also read the Old Testament as a prophetic book that paves the way for the revelation of Christ. The early church saw a prefiguration of the Transfiguration of Christ in the shining face of Moses, when he came down from Mount Sinai—and thus was able to discern a deeper meaning in this event from Exodus. Moses and Elijah, who appeared with Jesus in the mountain of the Transfiguration, represent the partial revelation of God that was given to them and to the people of the Old Testament, which could only be given fully in Christ. Therefore, when we consider the plight of the Israelites in the desert, or the prophets who spurned kings and rulers for their lack of faith and talked to them about God, we can reflect on the fullness of the presence of God, which we knew after he was born as a human being.

Of course the biblical stories are never simply pieces of information. Even to read them with an open mind and heart is not enough. We can remember here a short story from the eighth chapter of the book of Acts, which mentions an Ethiopian dignitary who was reading

the prophecy of Isaiah while he was in his chariot. Philip the deacon heard him and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian's response was, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" He was right, and the acknowledgment of his weakness was the first step in his journey from the words to the Word. Following this, Philip told the Ethiopian dignitary things that the book could not tell him, and led him to a faith that he could not reach on his own. He explained to him how the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah was Jesus Christ, and how Christ was the deeper meaning of the book.

We are in the same position as the Ethiopian dignitary. For this reason the theology and the tradition of the church and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit are indispensable tools in our attempt to penetrate Scripture. It is not reason, knowledge, or information that can lead us to the end, only the operation of the Holy Spirit; and in the tradition of the church, its ascetics and Fathers, we do not recognize a chain of wise people who put their heads together; we only recognize the manifestation of the Holy Spirit that shone despite the limitations of the men in whom it was manifested.

We thought of Scripture in general as the map of the journey toward salvation. Well, the story of the Transfiguration is more than one of the areas on the surface of that map. It is also part of the map legend, the apparatus we need to read the map correctly. As such, in the Transfiguration we can see several ways to approach Christ, but we can also discern the inner connection of these approaches. All of those ways reveal something true about Christ, but we are better prepared for the journey toward salvation when we consider all of them. When we prepare for a journey, we take note of the map, but we also consult a travel guide. And if we get conflicting information from our sources, we start wondering whether we read the map correctly or whether we consulted the travel guide for London, Ontario, instead of the guide for London, England. It is the same with the several ways of approaching Christ. There should not be a difference in the way our sources and the pillars of our faith guide us, and

for this reason, by considering them next to each other, we learn to read them correctly. Jesus Christ, who reveals himself in the Transfiguration, is the historical Jesus who was born under Pontius Pilate, but he is also the Word of God. He is the one who will come at the end of time in clouds of glory, and also the Christ whose sacramental body is the church. Considering all of these aspects at the same time reveals to us something about how the Bible should be read.

Looking toward the Transfigured Christ

The Gospels and the Transfiguration narratives were not written as if they were chronicles or historical documents, even though they have value as witnesses to real events. Today we do not have the benefit of meeting people who witnessed the Transfiguration firsthand, or people who met the eyewitnesses, but we accept the testimony of the Bible in trust and faith. Simply put, by believing the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration story, we believe that he revealed his divinity to his disciples in a miraculous event. We believe that this event was real and not symbolic, abstract, allegorical, or metaphorical. However, this is about as far as our historical aspiration can take us. The Gospels omit details that may be important for the historian. But they also describe events in such a way that allows us to understand them beyond the plain narrative.

The Transfiguration story is told in a slightly different way in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, which emphasize different aspects of the same event. The three narratives start with a mention of a certain time that passed after Peter's confession of faith—six days in Mark and Matthew, and eight in Luke. The early church tradition observed that while Mark and Matthew referred to the days that intervened between the two events, not counting the first and the last day, Luke, whose cultural background was different, calculated this time adding the first and the last day, as it was usual to him. Both accounts, according to this interpretation,

correspond to what we would today think of “after a week.” This may indeed be the case. Yet there is something more important here. All three evangelists felt that it was important to preface the Transfiguration story with a number that refers to the days of Creation, or to the Eighth Day—the day that Christian tradition identifies with the end of time, and with liturgical time. This detail, which does not need historical corroboration because its meaning is not historical, directs our attention to treat what we will read or hear about the Transfiguration as an event whose significance escapes the confines of time and space.

While we accept that the Word of God entered human history with his Incarnation and everything he did for us, we can keep in mind that the Bible itself gives us the incentive to read the Jesus story at a deeper level. A theology of the Transfiguration allows us to do just that.

We will return again to each of these themes in the chapters to come:

REVELATION OF THE LOGOS

In the Transfiguration story Christ lifted the curtain of his humanity and revealed his divinity. The Word of God, who accepted to unite with human nature, showed to Peter, John, and James that he was not only the son of Mary, born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, but also that he was the pre-eternal God. This is the tone that permeates the beginning of John’s Gospel and the reference to “the glory as of the only begotten of the Father” in John 1:14.

This revelation of the divinity of Christ reminds us that the Gospel is not the story of a man, but the story of God who became human while never ceasing to be God. Christ did not do anything out of necessity or need, but by choice. This realization becomes more important when we consider the significance of the Passion of Christ. Christ prepared his disciples to understand it by his Transfiguration. In this way, even at the moment of suffering and death, the Christ of the Crucifixion was not a

powerless and defeated human, but the same glorious Christ that Peter, John, and James had already seen at the Transfiguration.

In other parts of the Gospel we see, likewise, images of Christ that emphasize his human nature and remind us that he embraced completely the human condition. Jesus asks for water; he weeps at the news of Lazarus' death; he complains that there is no place for him to rest his head; he sweats blood the night before his Crucifixion. These examples show that he was as fully human as any of us. Yet the Transfiguration reminds us that Christ, the Logos of God before the ages, united with human nature by his own choice. The glorious Word of God was humbled, but not humiliated by becoming human.

THE SECOND COMING

From a Christian perspective, all of Hebrew Scripture until the time of Jesus had one purpose only: to communicate the preparation for Christ's First Coming. Likewise, then, the single purpose of the New Testament and the tradition of the Christian church in this age is to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ.

Although the Second Coming is described in the book of Revelation and in Matthew 25, it is the Transfiguration that provides a more direct visual model for the glorious Christ of the Second Coming. The light that shone from his face bridged the gap between the present age and the end of time.

We know Christ as Savior because he unites the eternal nature of God with our mortal nature. This union allows us to participate in the eternity and in the inexhaustible source of life in God, and this is how we ultimately understand salvation. The Transfiguration of Christ is a historical event that points toward the time outside time, the end of days, the Second Coming, and the kingdom of heaven. Following the luminous Christ, we hope to fulfill our future in the transfiguring light of God.