

DOI: 10.15290/rtk.2017.16.3.15

*Tatiana Misijuk*  
*Politechnika Białostocka*

## The multilayer composition of an iconostasis

The paper indicates a complex meaning of the iconostasis both in sacred art and the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. Selected examples illustrate a process of historical development of the iconostasis, contemporary variety of forms and its influence on worship celebrated in the Orthodox church.

**Key words:** icon, iconostasis, sacred art, symbol, canon of iconography, history of art, liturgy.

According to a majority of dictionary definitions, an iconostasis (Gr. *eikonostasion*, *eikonostasis* from Gr. *eikon* – an image, picture; and *stasis* – stand, place<sup>1</sup>; some point also to Gr. *histemi* – place; another Gr. term for iconostasis is *templo*) is “the screen which, in Byzantine churches, separates the sanctuary from the nave”<sup>2</sup> or “the high screen covered with icons, separating the nave from the sanctuary in Christian churches of the Eastern rite”<sup>3</sup>. Some studies assert also that “iconostasis represents one of the most important features of Orthodox

---

<sup>1</sup> Por. *Iconostasis* in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07626a.htm> (15.04.2016).

<sup>2</sup> *Iconostasis* in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (editors), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York/Toronto 1990, p. 688.

<sup>3</sup> *Ikonostas*, in T. Gogacz, B. Milerski (editors), *Religia. Encyklopedia PWN*, Warszawa 2002, v. 4, p. 506.

churches”<sup>4</sup> and “it may be said to differentiate the Greek church completely from the Roman in its interior arrangement”<sup>5</sup>.

In a majority of generally accessible explanations the iconostasis is perceived mainly as a screen, partition, wall, barrier separating the central part of a church, the nave, where a congregation gathers for worship, from a presbytery or sanctuary, where the sacrament of Eucharist is celebrated. Although in fact it stands between the two parts of the Orthodox church and as a wall of icons it may appear as a screen or partition, its meaning and its role in a spatial arrangement of the Orthodox church as well as its liturgical function is completely different.

In order to comprehend a multilayer meaning of the iconostasis there is a need to study history of its development and to indicate above all its unique place in the Orthodox Christian worship. It is also necessary to explain the function of icons.

## History

An initial form of the iconostasis may be seen in a low barrier placed between the nave of a temple and its sanctuary. The form and height of those screens varied. Sometimes they were solid low walls or balustrades, at other times they were higher latticed screens or a row of columns with an architrave. Soon icons began to be placed between columns under the architrave and later on over it.

Studies have shown that at first an icon of the Savior appeared initially under the architrave, and later on over it, immediately over the Royal Door in the middle of the screen. Soon it was accompanied by icons of the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist making up a triptych referred to as *Deisis* (Gk. Δέσις – prayer or supplication). The three figures could appear on one long wooden panel or on three separate icons. Prof. Leonid Ouspensky considers that this particular triptych of the sanctuary screen, brought from Byzantium to Kievan Rus, to be the initial form, from which iconostasis gradually evolved on Russian soil<sup>6</sup>. The evolution consisted in adding to the triptych more icons of Saints and increasing the number of tiers with icons. By 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox churches in Rus were fit with extended iconostases with several rows. In 15<sup>th</sup> century the iconostasis took its final

<sup>4</sup> L. Ouspensky, V. Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, Crestwood, New York 1989, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> See *Iconostasis* in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Ouspensky, Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, op. cit., p. 59.

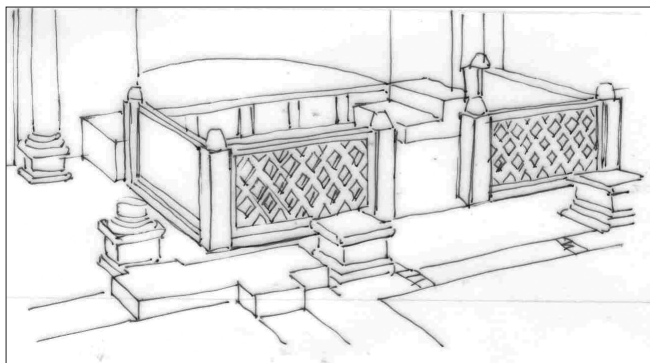


Fig. 1. 4<sup>th</sup> century basilica in Ohrid (according to the reconstruction by A. Orlandos).

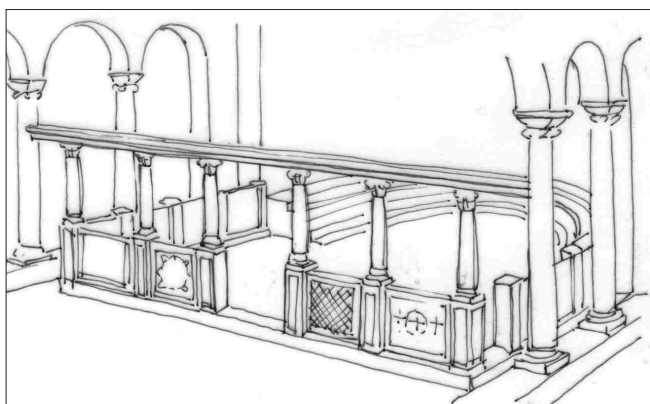


Fig. 2. Basilica „Aphentali” on Lesbos island, 4<sup>th</sup> century (according to the reconstruction by A. Orlandos).

shape as known today and in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that form spread from Russia to other Orthodox countries<sup>7</sup>. The centuries-long evolution of the iconostasis from a balustrade to a five-story icon screen is confirmed by columns, engaged columns and pilasters still present among the icons on it. Although they do not play their original role, they remain a characteristic component of its decor.

Experts assert that up until the end of 4<sup>th</sup> century the dimensions of the iconostasis did not prevent the believers from following the liturgical mystery taking place in the sanctuary. Paul Evdokimov asserts that the reason for development of the iconostasis, a gradual filling in the space between the sanctuary and the nave with icons, was didactic – it was “to teach visually by showing the faithful the economy of salvation

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.



Fig. 3. *Deisis* – Fresco from Voronet monastery, Romania, 15<sup>th</sup> century.

and its progressive advance”<sup>8</sup>. Pointing to the predominant in Russia tradition of Joseph of Volokolamsk, promoting the liturgical pomp and lavish decoration, which has won out over the more sober spirituality of St. Nil Sorsky, he asserts that through the iconostasis “the tension that exists between the Church and the world along with accompanying danger of emphasizing too much the distinction between the sanctuary and the nave”<sup>9</sup> was transposed between clerics and laymen.

### The composition of the iconostasis

The simplest spatial form of the iconostasis is a composition consisting of its two most important icons: the one of the Incarnation, the First Coming of Christ, presenting the Holy Virgin and the Child, and the icon of Parusia, the Second Coming of Christ in glory. The icons are placed on both sides of the Royal Door in the very center of the iconostasis. There are icons of the Annunciation and of four Evangelists placed usually on the leafs of the Royal Door. Images of Angels are placed usually on the smaller, one-leaf side doors of the iconostasis. In a bit more developed forms of the simple iconostasis there are also icons of the Feast and/or the Saint(s) of a particular church positioned

<sup>8</sup> P. Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: a theology of beauty*, Oakwood Publications, Rodondo Beach, CA 1996, p. 155.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem.*

in the same row of icons. The icon of the Mystical Supper is located right above the Royal Door.

In the fixed classical composition of the iconostasis<sup>10</sup> in its upper rows there appear the icon of *Deisis* – prayer, supplication of the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist before the Enthroned Christ the Savior, extended by additional figures of Saints and Angels (1). The following three rows are filled with icons of the Resurrection of Christ and the twelve major liturgical feasts (2), as well as the Old Testament Prophets (3) and the Patriarchs (4).

In the construction of the iconostasis one can see a wide range of artistic resources: a pithy composition, spatial form, material used, its features, colors, light, texture etc. While pondering upon the used means, forms or material one should not pass over the fact that the most important in the iconostasis is the icon with a broad range of its media of expression. One should keep in mind the function of the iconostasis in the Orthodox liturgical service and take into consideration what it is actually about to show the believers through the icons placed in it. All the forms and means are designed not so much to provide the iconostasis with the fullest artistic expression, its “beautification”, as to the best possible introduction of the faithful into the mystery of Sacrum.

Therefore, in making an iconostasis, while using any possible technologies: wood, stone, pottery, glass, metal work or various combinations of them, it is important to make sure that the plastic means characteristic to given technology do not dominate over the icons which are to be “framed” by them. Decorative chiaroscuro of carving, overly sharp contrast in texture and structure of the stone, artificial lighting, “excess of form” in the iconostasis may cause that the flat icon, devoid of chiaroscuro but rich in its meaningful symbolism of color, becomes “drown out/choked” and shut out. In order to allow the iconostasis to fulfill its role truthfully, it is necessary that every aspect of its form – a composition of all its elements – should affirm the icons.

Here are selected examples of contemporary iconostases.

<sup>10</sup> See the 16<sup>th</sup> century iconostasis at the side altar of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary at St Sophia cathedral in Novgorod which is used as an example in various studies of the subject provided by Ouspensky, Lossky *The Meaning*, op. cit, p. 61 and 62; M. Quenot, *Icon. Window on the Kingdom*, SVS Press, Crestwood, NY 1997, p. 49 and O. Popova, E. Smirnova, P. Cortesi, *Ikony. Ikony różnych kręgów kulturowych od VI w po czasy współczesne*, translated by T. Łozińska, Warszawa 1998, p. 12.

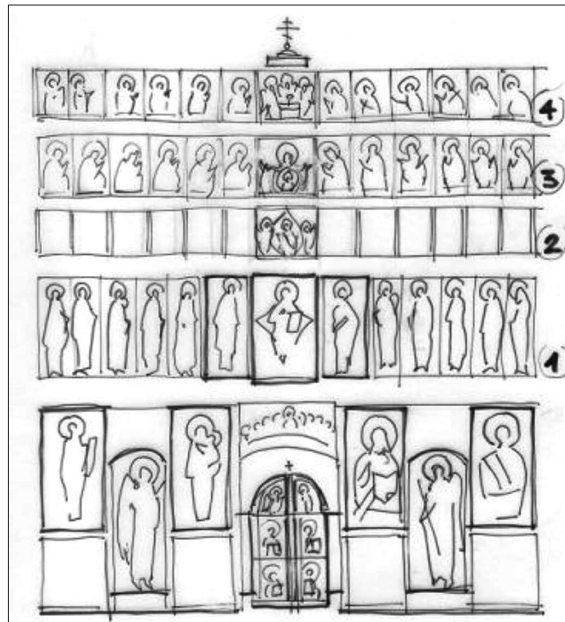


Fig. 4. Diagram of a church iconostasis.

### Hermitage of the Holy Spirit in Mesnil Saint Denis, France

The form of the iconostasis is a part of wall of a side altar of the Orthodox church at the Hermitage of the Holy Spirit in Mesnil Saint Denis near Paris. The two main icons are composed as pillars of the whole structure. Father Gregory Krug constructed the hermitage on his own and he is the author of the beautiful, distinctive iconography. Painting the icons strictly according to canonical requirements, he created his own, very particular style, which occurs very seldom.

### Orthodox church of St. Nicholas in Frankfurt am Main, Germany

The form of the iconostasis, its colors, decoration and details affirm the icons. Proportions of the iconostasis are very harmoniously arranged with proportions of the entire interior – size of arches, horizontal partition of the wall paintings. The natural color of wood of the iconostasis matches the yellow ocher of the iconography's background. Delicate relief of decoration stripes and maintained texture of wood are the elements enriching the whole. Their size and intensity of impingement have been designed in accordance with the principle of affirmation of the icons, which is clearly visible in this interior.



Fig. 5. Hermitage of the Holy Spirit in Mesnil Saint Denis, France.



Fig. 6. Royal Door of the main iconostasis – an icon of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary.

Theology  
of beauty



Fig. 7. Orthodox church of St. Nicholas in Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

## Baptistry of the Archangel Michael's Orthodox church in Bielsk Podlaski

The small space is determined by an arch of the Royal Door which enters a column of light coming from a steeple with a cupola above it. The light and the arch piling up behind the baptismal font determine the vertical and indicate a sacramental character of the place. The entire intimate interior is subordinate to that composition. The low nave kept in a dark value of red and navy blue, a homogeneous character of the wall paintings, remain in contrast to the illuminated part and bright color of the steeple. The consistently built sacred space lives in time for which it was designed – I do remember what a great experience it was to participate in a sacrament of Baptism in that space, especially on the Feast of the Resurrection of Christ.

Theology  
of beauty

## Monastery of the Transfiguration, Uusi Valamo, Finland; chapel of St. Sergius and St. Herman

The iconostasis in a form of a rectangle, confined from above by a straight line of cornice (usually crowned with a cross often accompanied by tablets of the Decalogue, a chalice and a spear). The composition of icons in the iconostasis is not symmetrical due to their size and style, nevertheless it constitutes



Fig. 8. Baptistry of the Archangel Michael's Orthodox church in Bielsk Podlaski designed and painted by Prof. Jerzy Nowosielski





Fig. 9. Monastery of the Transfiguration, Uusi Valamo, Finland; chapel of St. Sergius and St. Herman.

Theology  
of beauty

a harmonious entity. An important role in the integration of the composition belongs to the two decorative elements that compensate for differences in size of the icons. The whole is crowned by a wall painting of *Deisis*.

### Church of St. Demetrius in Thessaloniki

An example of a low iconostasis in a large interior of a church. Thanks to the light color and the lace of the bas-relief, the stone structure is light and its rhythmic composition matches with a symmetrical arrangement of the iconography program in the sanctuary.

### The meaning and symbolism of the iconostasis

The meaning and symbolism of the iconostasis needs to be examined in the context of the meaning and symbolism of the whole Christian Orthodox church. One should remember that “symbolism plays a very important role in the Church, because everything in the Church has, so to speak, a dual character: material and spiritual. The material is directly accessible to our senses; the spiritual is suggested to us through symbols. One cannot fruitfully study the symbolism of the Church apart from the Liturgy: the two develop together and the [Church] Fathers explained the symbolism in terms of the Liturgy. Cut



Fig. 10. Church of St. Demetrius in Thessaloniki.

off from the divine service, symbolism loses its meaning and becomes a series of sterile abstractions”<sup>11</sup>.

Thus the church is a place set apart on the earth, the place of *Sacrum*, dedicated to God, sanctified, so arranged and fitted as to help the believers to continue their earthly way, their move to the most important aim of Christian life which may be described as an ascent to heaven. The symbolism of the Divine Liturgy clearly points to remembrance (Gk. *anamnesis*) of Christ’s teaching and His salutary sacrifice, the Savior’s life from His Nativity in Bethlehem to the Ascension. During the Divine Liturgy the remembrance is being made present. The ascent can be also seen in a spatial arrangement of the Orthodox church which refers to a tripartite division of the Old Testament tabernacle of Moses and the Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem. In the church the believers pass through two stages of the earthly space. They enter through the vestibule (Gk. *narthikos*, Cs. *prtvor*). It is a kind of preparation, prelude or a buffer zone between the turmoil of a street, an inner disorder and a prayerful concentration. The “narrow gate”, the “eye of a needle” brings into the nave (Gk. *kyrios naos*, Cs. *khram*) where the believers stand in front of a gate of a further unearthly ascent. The gate is the iconostasis which appears on the border between the earthly nave and a heavenly presbytery with its holy altar (Gk. *hagia trapeza* – a holy table, Cs. *prestol* – a throne), on which the Sacrifice

<sup>11</sup> L. Ouspensky, *The Symbolism of the Church*, in *The Orthodox Ethos. Studies in Orthodoxy*, vol. I, edited by A.J. Philippou, Holywell Press, Oxford 1964, p. 153.

of Thanksgiving, the mystery of salvation is offered. According to St. Maximus the Confessor (7<sup>th</sup> century) and St. Sophronius of Jerusalem (7<sup>th</sup> century) “the church is the image of the immaterial and of the sensory worlds – of the spiritual and the physical man. The sanctuary is the symbol of the first, the nave – the symbol of the second. At the same time both these parts constitute an indivisible whole, in which the first enlightens and feeds the second, so that the latter becomes a sensory expression of the former. This correlation re-establishes the order of the universe violated by the transgression”<sup>12</sup>. According to St. Germanos of Constantinople, “the church is the earthly heaven where God, Who is above heaven, dwells and abides”<sup>13</sup>.

Theology  
of beauty

Thus, the most important place of the church is the sanctuary, the altar part, which corresponds with the Holy of Holies (Hebrew *Kodesh HaKadashim*) – the innermost and most sacred place of the Tabernacle and the temple of Jerusalem, sanctified by the presence of God. The Ark of Covenant with the Tablets of the Covenant (Decalogue – Ten Commandments) was kept inside there. It is the Holy of Holies that symbolizes the house of God or God’s dwelling place. St. Simeon of Thessalonica explains that “the narthex corresponds to earth, the church to heaven, and the holy Sanctuary to what is above heaven”<sup>14</sup> and St. Germanos calls it “the place where Christ, the King of all things sits enthroned with the apostles”<sup>15</sup>. Prof. Ouspensky takes also note that the sanctuary is always situated at the eastern end of a church building, so that the whole temple is oriented to the east. Explaining the symbolic meaning of such a direction he points to both to the past and to the future of the Church – the lost Paradise was located “in the east” and the coming of the future Kingdom is associated with a sunrise<sup>16</sup>. What is equally important, the Kingdom of God which is to come, very often referred to as “the eighth day of creation” or “the day without end”, is also symbolized by the rising of the sun, and hence the east<sup>17</sup>.

The quoted interpretations point to an ontological meaning of the sanctuary as a symbol of the world invisible. Since the invisible is inaccessible to our sensual visual perception, it may seem correct to state that the role of the iconostasis as “the wall”, “the barrier” or “the

<sup>12</sup> Ouspensky, Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> Ouspensky, *The Symbolism*, op. cit., p. 161.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

screen” is to point that the mystery of liturgical action taking place in the sanctuary is inaccessible to human senses. This would be confirmed by a statement, that the iconostasis is “a symbol of separation of the Kingdom from the rest of the world”<sup>18</sup>.

Nevertheless, a completely different symbolic meaning of the iconostasis was brought by the fact that the screen got filled with icons placed on it in an accurately definite order. Now it is perceived rather as a border between two realities or two worlds: material and immaterial, visible and invisible, human and divine, transitory and permanent<sup>19</sup>. St. Symeon explains that “the columns of the iconostasis represent the firmament, dividing the spiritual from the sensory”. The horizontal beam of the iconostasis “denotes the union through love between the heavenly and the earthly”. The icons of the Savior and the Mother of God placed above the beam indicate that “they abide both in heaven and among men”<sup>20</sup>.

On the border between the heaven and the earth there are standing the witnesses of both spheres of the world – the Saints. It is through their mediation that the invisible becomes close and accessible. It is of them as of “the living stones” that the iconostasis is constructed, which thus becomes the wall both dividing and uniting the two realities – eternal, Divine with temporary, human. Through their intercession windows to the other reality are being opened. Their depth is not the physical space behind the iconostasis, but the spiritual depth which may be defined as “the fourth dimension” of reality. Paul Evdokimov points to the miraculous metamorphosis of the iconostasis stating that “what has initially been the wall of separation, becomes the bridge, Christ manifested in the Saints, the Passover as a passage of all of us together and everyone individually into premises of the Kingdom”<sup>21</sup>.

The division of the interior of the church is clearly visible, physical, tangible. But the two parts of the Orthodox church – the narthex and the nave where believers gather for prayer as well as the sanctuary – are simultaneously separated and united. The distinct division introduced in the physical space by the matter, becomes a source of unity in the spiritual realm. How is it possible? The answer may be found in a prophetic statement of Fyodor Dostoyevsky that “the beauty will save the world”.

<sup>18</sup> P. Evdokimov, *Prawosławie*, translated by J. Klinger, Warszawa 1986, p. 443.

<sup>19</sup> Ouspensky, Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> P. Evdokimov, *Prawosławie*, op. cit., p. 443; compare. idem, *The Art of the Icon*, op. cit., p. 156.

An explanation of the “mechanism” of the aforementioned metamorphosis of the iconostasis is provided by a deep analysis of the art of the icon. It is precisely through the art both the particular icons and the whole iconostasis appear as “the window into eternity”. One can say that in an arduous and demanding process of painting an icon everything is important: material used and its preparation, the way groundwork is prepared, a lack of naturalism in presenting persons and objects, in particular the way of painting faces, a lack of subordination to the rules of time and space, a characteristic structure of an icon, a size of the persons presented, a kind of light, a lack of chiaroscuro, lines, colors and their symbolic meaning as well as a word – the crowning of the process of creating an image by placing its name on it. All these elements comprise not only the uniqueness of the art of creating the icon, but also the way of perception of the world presented on the icon. In order to present the multilayer composition of the iconostasis it may be sufficient to refer to another technical element applied in the iconography. It is so called a reverse perspective<sup>22</sup>. Contrary to the linear perspective which rules our perception of the earthly reality, prolonged perspective lines do not become closer to each other and eventually meet somewhere behind the picture in order to provoke an impression of its depth, but they meet rather right in front of the icon. While on a picture the point of junction of the lines winds up its composition, when it appears before an icon, in a person of a man standing in front of it, the impression of openness is brought about. Thus, a man standing before the icon and/or the iconostasis is being introduced to a different reality which the icon presents through the aforementioned techniques<sup>23</sup>. In this particular way the icon reflects the Gospel teaching of Christ with its characteristic inversion of values. It may be seen clearly in Christ’s Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5,1-12), in His statement, “the last will be the first” or a recommendation: “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you“.

Icons introduce us into the other reality, another world inaccessible to human eyes, also through their content. Every one of them both separately and collectively are “windows into eternity” not only because they depict the visible world in the reverse perspective and using the clearly defined, canonical technique. The set of icons in the iconostasis described above is accessible to all the believers visual recapitulation of the entire economy of salvation<sup>24</sup>. Therefore a didactic

<sup>22</sup> Known also as inverse, inverted, divergent or Byzantine perspective.

<sup>23</sup> See M. Quenot, *The Icona*, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 48.



Fig. 11. Baptistry of the Holy Spirit Orthodox church in Białystok. Interior design, iconostasis, iconography program, furnishing and accessories designed by Tatiana Misijuk. Icons in the iconostasis by Dariusz Fiedoreczuk.



Fig. 12. Fragment of the iconostasis

layer of the meaning of the icon and iconostasis might be mentioned here. It was emphasized in particular in the medieval art of the Christian West, where religious images were perceived as a kind of *Biblia pauperum*. Nevertheless, one should remember that the iconostasis

is “the maximal expression of all that the icon reveal to us visually. Behind it there is nothing to be seen. Why? Because the wondrous mystery that is celebrated there could never be situated on our human, visual level, so to speak; such a wondrous mystery is perceived not by human eyes, but only by our soul in communion”<sup>25</sup>.

A particular significance of the iconostasis in the interior of the church and its function in the liturgical prayer is indicated by the fact that it is before the Royal Door, between the icons of the Mother of God and the Savior, that the members of the community partake in the Holy Communion – the mystery of Eucharist. In this way in front of the iconostasis and through the iconostasis the presence of Christ in the Church is being manifested in the time between His Incarnation and the Parusia. The liturgical movement is an internal movement bringing us into the depth of another dimension – the spiritual one.

Theology  
of beauty

### Baptistry of the Holy Spirit Orthodox church in Białystok

Fundamental for the idea of the whole interior is the composition of *Deisis* placed on the cross-shaped arch form designed on the opposite walls of the interior. It defines the central, centripetal pattern of the space. The same purpose is served by the way the interior is



Fig. 13. The iconostasis in a school chapel of St. Cyrill and St. Methodios in Białystok. Design – Tatiana Misijuk, icons – Dariusz Fiedorczuk.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

illuminated. The form of the iconostasis exhibits two main icons – the Virgin Mary with the Child and the Savior. The expansion of the iconostasis turns into a form of a “candlestick” which leads into the altar part by the fire of candles and the “cloud of saints” of frosted glass.

## WIELOPŁASZCZYZNOWOŚĆ KOMPOZYCJI IKONOSTASU

Przedstawiony tekst wskazuje na wielopłaszczyznowe znaczenie ikonostasu w sztuce sakralnej i w liturgice Kościoła prawosławnego. Prezentacja historycznego rozwoju, miejsca, złożonej funkcji i symboliki ikonostasu następuje przez to na tle wyjaśnienia roli, znaczenia i symboliki prawosławnej świątyni jako całości. Wybrane przykłady ikonostasów ilustrują proces historycznego rozwoju ikonostasu, współczesne zróżnicowanie jego form i nierozzerwalny związek z cerkiewnym nabożeństwem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ikonostas, ikona, sztuka sakralna, symbol, kanon ikonografii, historia sztuki, liturgia.

### Bibliography:

1. Evdokimov P, *Prawosławie*, translated by J. Klinger, Warszawa 1986.
2. Evdokimov P, *The Art of the Icon: a theology of beauty*, Oakwood Publications, Rodondo Beach, CA 1996.
3. *Iconostasis* in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07626a.htm> (15.04.2016).
4. *Iconostasis* in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (editors), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York/Toronto 1990.
5. *Ikonostas*, in T. Gogacz, B. Milerski (editors), *Religia. Encyklopedia PWN*, Warszawa 2002, v. 4.
6. Ouspensky L., Lossky V., *The Meaning of Icons*, Crestwood, New York 1989.
7. Ouspensky L., *The Symbolism of the Church*, in *The Orthodox Ethos. Studies in Orthodoxy*, vol. I, edited by A.J. Philippou, Holywell Press, Oxford 1964.
8. Popova O., Smirnova E., Cortesi P., *Ikony. Ikony różnych kręgów kulturowych od VI w po czasy współczesne*, translated by T. Łozińska, Warszawa 1998.
9. Quenot M., *Icon. Window on the Kingdom*, SVS Press, Crestwood, NY 1997.