

# THE SPIRITUAL SENSES AND THE LITURGICAL ARTS

## *Lecture 3: The Spiritual Senses as Transformation*


*Chichester Cathedral, February 2022*

### **Synopsis**

*The focus for the final lecture will turn to the intended effects of liturgical art. We'll explore how a Church environment can stimulate the spiritual senses. We will observe how this happens through a variety of complementary means that build towards a total effect. In this context, the spiritual senses register the transformation of the whole person in a renewed cosmos.*

*Lecture Series*  
**The Spiritual Senses and the Liturgical Arts**

- 1. The Spiritual Senses in Tradition (1st February)*
- 2. The Spiritual Senses and Making (8th February)*
- 3. The Spiritual Senses as Transformation (this evening)*



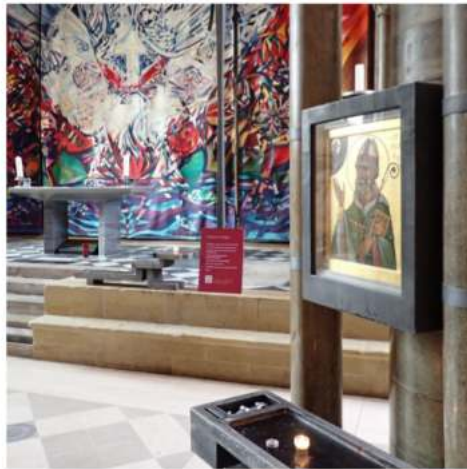
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## INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction and setting to this lecture, I want to start with a quick summary of lectures to date, in a way that I hope is hospitable to those here for the first time.

Right from the beginning I made a distinction between gallery art, threshold art and liturgical art itself, liturgical art having its specific place within Christian worship. And we looked in the first lecture at, in sum, the importance of embodiment - the Incarnation - in liturgical art.

We spent some time looking at the art of this Cathedral Church.



The shrine of Saint Richard of Chichester, Chichester Cathedral

On the point of embodiment, and further to helpful discussion since, I should emphasize an understanding that while Christ became flesh, he did not remain so: his Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension are a transformation of the flesh, and of the will, the mind, the whole human being. Flesh is a necessary start, but it is necessarily not the end. We will be looking at this transformation further today in the context of the Transfiguration. We do not remain enfleshed. We are divinised, made divine by grace; this affecting our whole being without remainder; flesh and mind, body and soul. About this spiritual body it is hard to say much that is specific, at least according to the apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. Perhaps that's something for further discussion later.

In the second lecture, we looked at specifically Christian characteristics of liturgical making.



Apse mosaic, Basilica of San Clemente, Rome, 1130s  
(Photo: James Stringer, CC BY-NC 2.0)

We looked at 20th century European and 12th century Chinese painters, and we engaged with comparative distinctions that led to an outline of the specifically Christian view in which Christ is all, in all; a world bright with Christ. I suggested, as a thought experiment, putting aside inherited understanding of Christian 'tradition' just for a short time within the lecture in order to re-envision the whole concept of tradition. For while we in the Art of Worship project vitally see ourselves as working within Tradition, we are not thereby simply copyists or restorers: rather, Tradition is the passing on of fire, of spiritual vision - hope-filled, creative, risk-filled, burning and bright; and we do our best to live upto the challenges of this Tradition, which only grace makes possible.

In what I've said to date, I've adhered closely to the one tradition of the Church that is shared by Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Orthodox. I've focussed a good deal specifically on the work of theologians Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor. While I haven't often referenced their thought explicitly, I'd be happy to give more detailed information on this if helpful.

This much for both a very short reminder of the lectures to date and an attempt respectfully and thankfully to respond to some points in the engaging discussions which followed them.

For those of us new in coming to today's lecture I hope this summary also sets, at least minimally, a context for today's final lecture. Today I want first to share a feel for what's going on in the field of spiritual senses research - particularly for any of us who might want to take this further. This leads into our main task which is to consider how art in the church's liturgy - the church's worship - can stimulate and encourage the spiritual senses.



So: current research.

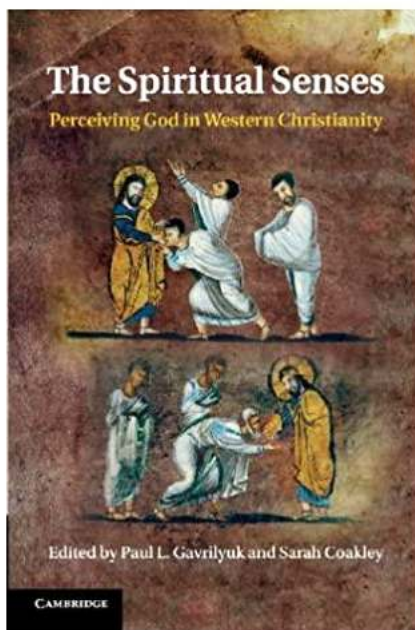
Roughly speaking, we can see two approaches to the spiritual senses within the current literature. One looks at spiritual senses chronologically, usually beginning around the second century. Another looks at the spiritual senses thematically, by sense: sight, hearing, taste, touch, etc. I want briefly to consider these approaches and the insights they each bring.

First, there's frequently a chronological approach to the spiritual senses.

This approach might start with some scriptural references, then go to Origen of Alexandria's Greek Septuagint mistranslation of the Hebrew of *Proverbs* 2.5, referencing, according to

Origen, a 'divine sense', then on into Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite especially before arriving at the systematising impulses of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries in which something like a doctrine of the spiritual senses emerges, at least in the Latin west.

An insight gained from this approach comes in seeing quite how resistant various early inquiries into the spiritual senses are to containment within a doctrinal system. For a millenium, there was no Christian doctrine of the spiritual senses.



Sarah Coakley and Paul Gavrilyuk (ed.)

*The Spiritual Perception Project* (online)  
Paul Gavrilyuk and Frederick Aquino



For a wise account of these complexities, I recommend Sarah Coakley and Paul Gavrilyuk's introduction to their book, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* [above]. I should say that I assisted in one of the chapters, but gain nothing from any sales, so I reckon I can recommend in good conscience; and I only assisted in a technical way.

Also, Paul Gavrilyuk's got a great set of YouTube interviews on the theme which you can find on his website, shared with Frederick Aquino, titled 'The Spiritual Perception Project' [above]. If you just remember 'The Spiritual Perception Project' and type those words into an internet search engine, you'll find it.

Then there's the thematic approach to the spiritual senses that I earlier mentioned, going through the senses one by one. This approach raises a number of interesting difficulties.

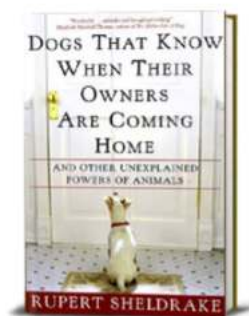
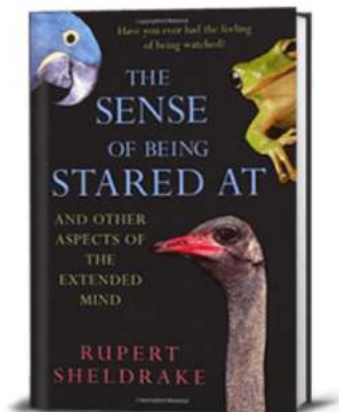
For a start, how many senses are there? Many begin with the Aristotelian five: sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell.



*Proprioception*

Further to these, a psychologist recently writing on the spiritual senses has suggested proprioception as a sixth - this being the body's ability to sense movement, action, location. Anyone who's broken a foot or ankle will likely have attended to this in the process of rehabilitation [above].

And what of telepathy as another sense? The desert fathers of the early church had it, according to their collected sayings.



*Research by  
Rupert Sheldrake*

Contemporary scientist Rupert Sheldrake has offered evidence for it in his book, "Dogs that know when their owners are coming home" [above]. Relatedly, he's also published on a 'sense of being stared at' [above, also]. It's interesting to reflect on this in Martin's and my context in the workshop here in the north transept: it seems we just have a sense sometimes of people looking at us when the people looking are fully out of sight. We're glad that the people are there: it's in part what we're there for, to be sure. But this and these other references and observations at least raise the question of extended senses beyond the

standard five.

Another interesting difficulty with the thematic approach is that senses sometimes cross over and overlap; and they do so in particular strong ways for some people who know the world synaesthetically. The word synaesthesia just comes from the Greek 'syn-' meaning together, and 'aesthesia', sensation; or 'joined sensation' / 'joined perception'. Synaesthesia appears to have very many different possible forms. For example, colours might appear with, or as, sounds.

Olivier Messiaen had synesthesia, something like a bi-directional sound-colour synaesthesia.



As an aside here, our Cathedral's assistant organist, Tim Ravalde, offered an engaging insight ahead of his wonderful recital of Messiaen's *The Nativity of the Lord*. Tim suggested that the layering of musical forms in Messiaen's composition was akin to the layering of tempera paint upon the panel icon, as also the capacity to know when enough layers had been created - when the work was complete. Fascinating.

And then another question... Suppose then that there are five, or six or however many physical senses, and that these may be aligned at points, joined together; then does this total set of variables become one spiritual sense? Or, alternatively, is there a distinct spiritual sense that stands in relation to each physical sense?

But this is not a question, I think, with any straightforward or even any resolution, and for the fundamental reason that the very transformation of the senses takes us into a realm transcendent to everyday sensual functioning, and so transcendent to empirical psychology.

We'll be concerned with this transcendence, this divinisation, making divine, of the human person, for the rest of this lecture. For now, I want to state it as a key principle, as written by Hans Urs von Balthasar, being a Roman Catholic theologian of the last century(264):

“Even the most vital and profound Christian experience cannot simply be understood with the categories of psychology, and this is because Christ Himself is the primary subject, and man participates in Christ’s archetypal experience only by being raised outside of himself.”

We turn now to precisely such an ecstatic participation in Christ’s experience in the Gospels - the Transfiguration - which leads into a consideration of a role of the arts in and around the liturgy, as promised.

✠



The Transfiguration. St Catherine’s monastery, Mount Sinai. Apse mosaic. 6th century.

So: the Transfiguration.

For those unfamiliar with this event, I offer briefly a Gospel account here - this the shortest one from Mark’s gospel.

## The Transfiguration

### The Gospel according to Mark, chapter 9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

Matthew and Luke also give accounts which are largely similar. In all three accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, there is first a vision: Jesus appears to the apostles in dazzling light. Then the apostles experience the overshadowing cloud; and they hear a voice. First the vision, then the overshadowing and the voice. Then after this, according to Matthew, they fall on their faces.

There are interesting parallels in experience here with St Paul's conversion on the way to Damascus, which we hear of in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9.3-9) and which I'd like briefly to compare. Those of us unfamiliar with the account might know that Saul becomes Paul further to this event which constitutes his conversion. We hear the following: "As he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'" In this case also - like the Transfiguration - first there is a dazzling, here literally blinding light, then a voice, here the voice of Christ. First the light, then the voice; and including, too, Paul falling to the ground.

So in both the Transfiguration and St Paul's conversion there's a seeing - the light; hearing - the voice; and falling - perhaps this falling is that additional sense we looked at earlier, proprioception: the ability to locate oneself in space, to balance - or to have one's balance taken away in these cases.

What about other people around these events? What did they experience?



Well there weren't other people around at Transfiguration since Jesus took with him only Peter, James and John. But I do sometimes wonder what a sheep or a goat on that mountainside might have experienced. Would a sheep or a goat have seen anything, heard anything? Another interesting question of non-human animal experience.

There *were* others around Saul when he was near Damascus, but the accounts of what they experienced are contradictory. Acts nine tells us that the men travelling with Saul heard the voice but saw no one. But in Paul's own recorded report in Acts twenty-two, those with him saw the light but did not hear the voice. And even on this second account in Acts twenty-two when others saw the light, Paul appears to be the only one who was blinded by the vision, such that his spiritual vision was either different in form from the vision perceived by the others - or perhaps it was the same in form but different in effect.



One way of interpreting all this complexity is to suppose that the Transfiguration is not properly speaking of a change in Christ, for Christ is being seen as He always is, in His full divinity and in His full humanity: glorious, eternal, beautiful. Instead of the transfiguration being of Christ, the transfiguration is rather of the senses of those to whom Christ gives the gift of spiritual perception. Not only is it the sense of sight that is transfigured, transformed, to the spiritual state; but also hearing, proprioception and, we might think, the whole psychophysical organism, the whole experiencing person.

And note that the transformation leads to darkness and stumbling.

I invite you to hear what the seventh century Syrian saint Andrew of Crete says of this in a sermon on the Transfiguration, and as we do so to consider this mosaic of the Transfiguration from the apse of St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

The vertical line, by the way, is simply a lantern chain and nothing more; I've chosen this photo angle despite the curved, because this angle shows the curved apse nicely.

So, to St Andrew of Crete, who said:

“[The apostles] could not endure the radiance coming forth from that spotless flesh—brilliance that welled up from the divinity of the Word [...] —but [they] fell on their faces. [...] In a complete departure from their natural functioning, they were overcome by heavy sleep and by fear, and shut off their senses; they ceased from all intellectual movement, and completely lost all awareness of themselves. So, in that divine and invisible darkness, above all light, they mingled with God. By not seeing

at all, they received the true gift of vision, and made progress in experiencing, without knowledge, an excess of knowledge; so they were led to share in a wakefulness higher than all intellectual attention.”

Now I want to show how this account by St Andrew of Crete is evident in the Transfiguration image here before us, from Sinai. The apostles are clearly in disarray. But they continue to look upon Christ: and see how the light changes the closer their gaze gets to Him. It darkens. The rings of this aureola darken as they near Christ. This inner ring is surely something like St Andrew’s divine and invisible darkness, above all light, in which the apostles are gifted with union with God. In this experience, not seeing at all, they received the true vision; a wakefulness above intellectual attention. We might recall here what we heard from von Balthasar: this an ecstatic experience outside the bounds of psychology; it’s outside the bounds of psychology because divine, because more than human.

And the Sinai monastery example we see here is just the beginning of such a depiction of light that continues through the centuries.

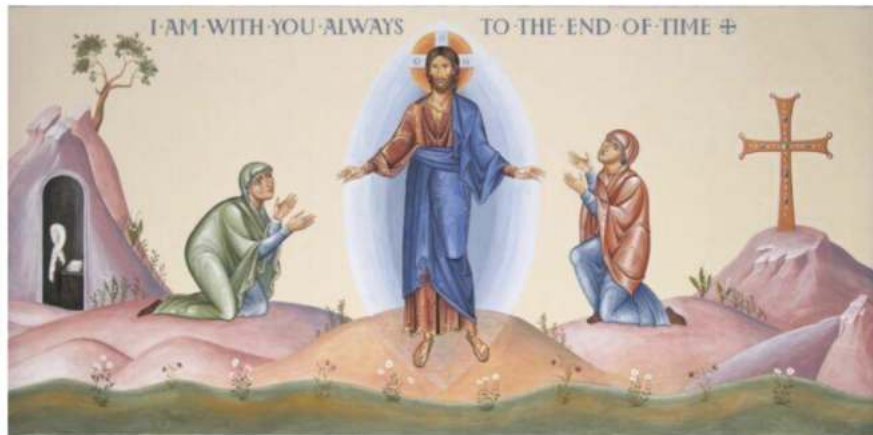
Here’s one [below] at Daphni monastery which is a few miles outside Athens and made about half a millennium later, somewhere around the turn of the 11th and 12th century.



The Transfiguration. Daphni Monastery, nr Athens. Mosaic in squinch. 11th/12th century.

Likewise a mosaic, it too shows the light of Christ as bright and yet also transcendent to all brightness - dazzlingly dark.

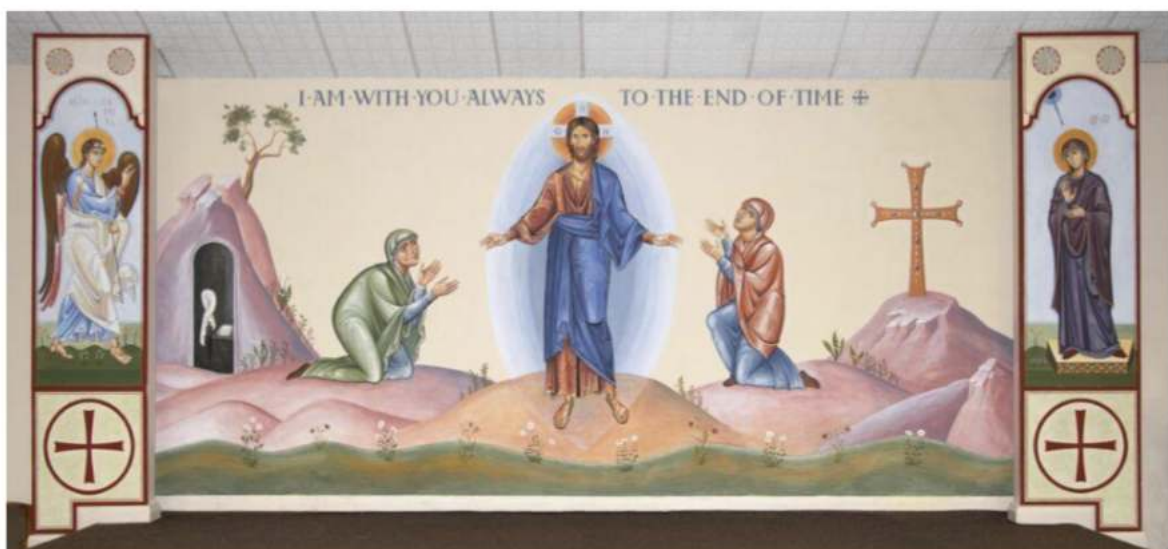
Some nine hundred later still, here's this same visual principle in the context of a depiction of the risen Christ [below].



Sanctuary wall painting, St Edward's RC Church, Lees, Oldham. Painted by Aidan Hart, 2001.

The gradation of light in this aureola may be gentler, but the vision from light to dark in increasing nearness to the person of Christ is very clear. This is a wall painting completed by Aidan Hart at the end of last year for the Roman Catholic Church of St Edward, Lees, near Oldham. It measures some eight metres wide by three metres high.

Now I want to draw us out from the particular visual content of these images to their spatial context in the liturgical setting. For Aidan's painting, which is on the east wall of the Church's sanctuary, and so behind the altar, is in fact flanked by Annunciation images [below].



Sanctuary wall painting, St Edward's RC Church, Lees, Oldham. Painted by Aidan Hart, 2001.

For it is in the Annunciation that humanity is united with divinity in the person of Mary, and through her son the God-man Christ, risen and with us to the end of time - as written on the wall here: every human being is called to union with the divinity. See here how the Annunciation speaks across the sanctuary space, Gabriel's hand raised in a gesture of speaking and blessing.

So the Annunciation shapes the sanctuary space, making it a dynamically active space, in which our 'yes', too, like Mary's, is invited, so as to be present to the risen Christ.



Sanctuary, St Edward's RC Church, Lees, Oldham.

And see how the risen Christ, now the sanctuary furnishings are in place [above], stands at the altar. Here is the One whom we meet at the altar in the bread and the wine, on which more shortly.

The main point I want to make at this point is that these images in the liturgy are not simply separable units depicting persons and events: they activate the space in which they stand.

Take another example from the Daphni monastery, whose image of the Transfiguration we have already seen. Here's a mosaic image of the Annunciation from Daphni [below].



The Annunciation. Daphni Monastery, nr Athens. Mosaic in squinch. 11th/12th century.

Note how the image of the Annunciation works across the space of the squinch here (a squinch being a weight bearing arch across the internal angle of the square structure). The angel Gabriel is not approaching Mary across a flat image but through the actual internal space of the building. The space itself becomes alive.

In these positions, the figures are facing one another and facing us, or at least open to us, at the same time, so that *we* are invited into the space constituted by their interaction.

Also, see how the gold tesserae reflect light in such a way as to form a radiant beam between the two figures, bringing further to shimmering life the angelic encounter for those looking up within the space of the church.



Daphni Monastery, nr Athens. Squinch mosaics. 11th/12th century.

In the Daphni image of the Transfiguration, which is made in that same squinch shape, that

light is where Christ is: Christ is the light of the world, made bright before us, and dazzlingly bright.

In each case of the Annunciation and the Transfiguration [above], transcendent light, the dazzling darkness, leads into what the scriptures call an 'overshadowing'.

In Luke's gospel, we hear the angel Gabriel saying to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." And we hear this same word 'overshadow' in the Transfiguration account, in which we hear that, "a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'" In both there is a divine creative action, a birth and a rebirth; renewal of humanity in likeness to God. This overshadowing is like a spiritual impressioning, imprinting, remaking.

So the believer, standing in the church before these images of the Transfiguration and Annunciation, is enfolded in their spiritually charged space: the believer enters into the space of the active divine light - illuminative, dazzling and disorienting, creative and recreative, all of these. She or he enters into a piece of installation art, we could say, that works in the spaces in which they move - a thought that Liz James has developed.



Before continuing, I do want to say a little more about the gold. This is real gold within the tesserae. Furthermore, Mosaicists directed the tesserae with care. They would angle each gold tessera so as to reflect the prevailing light variously. And in the upper parts of a church, this could, depending upon the wall angle, involve angling the tesserae as much as forty-five degrees in order to direct the golden light to those looking up.

Of the effects of gold, Liz James who I've just mentioned, a contemporary scholar at the University of Sussex who has done and is doing an enormous amount to further understanding of Byzantine mosaics, Liz James cites in her work a visitor to the great Cathedral Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, present Istanbul, in the sixth century:

"The roof is compacted of gilded tesserae from which a stream of golden rays pours abundantly and strikes men's eyes with irresistible force. It is as if one were gazing at the midday sun in spring when it gilds each mountain top."

This is the divine light, heavenly light united with humanity, with the church, with the cosmos.

So we have here in the Annunciation and Transfiguration images an activation of the space of the church by encounter with divine, angelic and human beings facing each other and us all - face to face - surrounded by a dynamic light reflected from the warm gold of myriad tesserae. It's an active space of transformation...



And in the church, this transformation of person and place is above all centred upon the Eucharist, Holy Communion.

At this point, we go to Kiev.

I present what follows from the work of Alexei Lidov, a Russian Byzantinist who has recently written about liturgical art in the context of the church of Hagia Sophia in central Kiev in Ukraine. Here is the image in the cupola at Hagia Sophia [below], the cupola being the great inverted cup atop the building at the building's centre.



Church of Hagia Sophia, Kiev. Mosaics in and around central cupola. 11th century.

Looking up, you can see here Christ Pantokrator, or Christ all-powerful, or almighty, surrounded by the angelic host with the gospel writers, though less visible in this image, in the pendentives.

Here's a closer look [below].



Church of Hagia Sophia, Kiev. Central cupola, showing detailed view. 11th century.

Now I ask you to hold this image of Christ Pantokrator briefly in mind as we follow Lidov's argument.

Below this image, again, at the centre of the church, the believer takes Holy Communion, that is to say, she or he enters into union with Christ through His body and His blood. The image of Christ Pantokrator above shapes the space in which she does so.

Imagine that as the communicant takes the cup of wine, the blood of Christ: the cup from which they drink mirrors the shape of the cupola above.

Lidov then takes us to a cup roughly contemporary to the Kievan mosaics, originally from Constantinople and now in the treasury of San Marco, Venice. Here it is, the so-called 'Chalice of the Patriarchs' [below].



From:  
**Alexei Lidov**,  
'Iconicity as  
Spatial Notion  
A New Vision  
of Icons in  
Contemporary  
Art Theory'



2. Byzantine chalice from Constantinople (the so-called "Chalice of patriarchs"), Treasury of San Marco, Venice, late 10<sup>th</sup> to early 11<sup>th</sup> c.

Look inside, and what do you see? And what would you see in the wine as you come to drink from it?

Even if you cannot see all the detail, I hope you might be able to recognise in outline form the figure of Christ Pantokrator. Made of cloisonné enamel it forms part of the cup itself.

So the believer sees that same image of Christ Pantokrator in the cup from which they drink as they see above in the cupola. **Christ above, Christ below, Christ within.**



Christ Almighty in the  
cupola above



Christ Almighty in the  
cup below

Indeed, 'taste and see that the Lord is good!' as the Psalmist (34.8) says. Sight and taste and brought into union with Christ.

As an aside, there's an interesting parallel here with mosaic imagery in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna. As a person to be baptised approaches the water in the font, they see reflected in the water below them the mosaic above, this being an image of Christ Himself being baptised before them.

So here we are at the central sacraments of the Church in which Christ fills the space, above and below, and within.

In the context of Hagia Sophia in Kiev at the least, the touch of the cup, the taste of the wine, the sound of the sung voices, the smell of the incense, the sight of the icon of Christ, engage and invite. The senses are heightened, intensified, extended, transformed in total fashion toward an experience, we are told, of dazzling darkness confounding of all human sense: transcendent, blessed.



The Transfiguration,  
Theophanes the Greek,  
14th century

[Recall the words of St Andrew of Crete on the Transfiguration:] "Without knowledge, an excess of knowledge. Above all intellectual attention, a wakefulness."

It perhaps remains surprising that it is through the flesh, through the body, through the senses, that the very body, flesh and senses are transcended.

But from the perspective that the Word became flesh - became, that is, our flesh, with our

human body, our senses - and from the perspective that we can be transformed through Him and become divine... from this perspective, it might ring true.

It seems fitting to end here, in the midst of this infinite process of transformation.