

Krzysztof Wałczyk SJ

Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow

DOI: 10.35765/pk.2019.2603.05

Biblical Inspirations in Nikifor's Paintings¹

ABSTRACT

Nikifor Krynicki (Epifaniusz Drowniak, 1895-1968) was one of the most popular non-academic Polish painters worldwide. To show the biblical inspiration in his creative output I chose two categories from various thematic aspects: self-portraits and landscapes with a church. There are plenty of Nikifor's paintings showing him as a teacher, as a celebrating priest, as a bishop, or even as Christ. A popular way to explain this idea of self-portraits is a psychological one: as a form of auto-therapy. This analysis aims to show a deeper explanation for the biblical anthropology. Nikifor's self-portraits as a priest celebrating the liturgy are a symbol of creative activity understood as a divine re-creation of the world. Such activity needs divine inspiration. Here are two paintings to recall: *Potrójny autoportret* (The triple self-portrait) and *Autoportret w trzech postaciach* (Self-portrait in three persons). The proper way to understand the self-identification with Christ needs a reference to biblical anthropology. To achieve our real-self we need to identify with Christ, whose death and resurrection bring about our whole humanity. The key impression we may have by showing Nikifor's landscapes with a church is harmony. The painter used plenty of warm colors. Many of the critics are of the opinion that Nikifor created an imaginary, ideal world in his landscapes, the world he wanted to be there and not the real world. The thesis of this article

1 The author of the text, Fr. Krzysztof Wałczyk S.J., Ph.D., was not able to submit the final version of this text containing illustrative material to the editorial board of the journal. Therefore, we publish the article in the unchanged version, subjecting it only to the necessary linguistic and technical editing.

is that Nikifor created not only the ideal world, but he also showed the source of the harmony – the divine order.

KEY WORDS: Nikifor, self-portrait, landscape, biblical anthropology, painting

STRESZCZENIE

Biblijne inspiracje w malarstwie Nikifora

Zasadnicza teza artykułu „biblijne inspiracje Nikifora” sprowadza się do pokazania, że autoportrety są przejawem szczególnej samoświadomości malarza utożsamiającego twórczość artystyczną (malarską) ze sprawowaniem liturgii, inaczej z uobecnianiem religijnego kontekstu rzeczywistości, a konkretnie z uobecnianiem dziejów Chrystusa. Z autoportretami Nikifora wiąże się także intuicja antropologiczna, realizowanie człowieczeństwa poprzez utożsamianie się z Chrystusem. Pejzaże ze świątynią nie są tylko urokliwym przedstawieniem okolic Krynicy i innych miejscowości z południa Polski. Głębsza intuicja malarza dotyczy Bożego źródła ładu i harmonii w pejzażach. Jego pejzaże to wręcz epifanie boskiego porządku. Teologia (także Biblia) używa na określenie takich intuicji pojęcia „objawienie naturalne”.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Nikifor, autoportret, pejzaż, antropologia biblijna, malarstwo

Nikifor (proper name Epifaniusz Drowniak) was a representative of the so-called naïve (or primitive) art. He lived from 1895 to 1968. Throughout his life, he was associated with the town of Krynica. He belonged to the Lemko ethnic group, and was of the Greek-Catholic confession. Nikifor's life circumstances can be considered as dramatic. He was an illiterate homeless man, with serious communication problems (his speech was very unclear). His medium of communication was painting. He is credited with authorship of tens of thousands of watercolors and drawings, out of which a large percentage has not survived. He worked mainly on the promenade at the spas in Krynica, hoping to sell his work to the patients. The first painter who discovered and appreciated the work of Nikifor was Roman Turyn, a Lviv born Ukrainian artist. Starting from 1930, Turyn acquired approx. 200 watercolors by Nikifor and presented them in Paris. The actual

discoverers and promoters of Nikifor's art, however, were Ella and Andrzej Banach from Krakow, who met him in 1947 in Krynica. Nikifor owed his first exhibitions in Poland to them as well as international ones in Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, Liege, and even Haifa, in the years 1959-1960.

Nikifor's thematic palette included self-portraits, portraits, landscapes, including landscapes with churches (dominated by Greek and Roman Catholic churches, but there are also synagogues and Lutheran churches), saints, railway stations, urban architecture, fantastic themes and Krynica's villas. For the purposes of the paper on Nikifor's biblical inspirations I shall only analyze his several works in two thematic blocks: self-portraits and landscapes with a church. Perhaps it will be surprising that this selection will not include drawings from his *Prayer Book*, but a detailed analysis of that bulk of work would blow the framework of this paper out of proportion.

I. Self-Portrait:

* *The band shell* (Collection of Andrzej Banach)

This image (A. Banach chose it for the cover of his book about Nikifor) is an example of the transformation Nikifor experienced through painting, a sign of the painter's self-awareness as someone endowed with a deeper view of reality (than his audience?). The world appears to him as a symbolic reality, as a theater. The symbolic unveiling of the curtain and surrender to the guidance of the "master of ceremonies," that is, the artist himself, allows the viewer to gain an in-depth insight into what the world is – through Nikifor's images.

Nikifor shows himself as a "magician." Standing with a baton (a wand?) in the middle of the stage inside the shell, he is separated from the audience with a small barrier. The place seems enigmatic (mysterious). The separated curtains of the shell suggest that we are dealing with a concert hall, a theater, or perhaps a circus(?) However, this is only a superficial impression, because the exposed curtains in the shell reveal the sky showing through. So, we are in the outdoors, and Nikifor – a magician for us – is a guide to the viewers in the experience of "the world behind the scenes." The color of the sky is intriguing. Behind Nikifor, it is dominated by delicate red corresponding with the intense red curtains of the band shell. In the upper parts of the picture, the red turns into blue, which in turn corresponds with the intense blue shade of the dome. The interplay of colors shows that the shell is not just a concert hall, but a vestibule to the reality

in the background, and Nikifor with the baton in the center of the image (in a blue suit), is our guide.

The colors of the “band shell” remind us of the meaningful dialog from the film *My Nikifor* by Krzysztof Krauze, from the scene of painting outdoors. Nikifor explains to his guardian (the painter Włosiński) that one needs to ask for color. *The band shell* seems to be an apt comment to this. Capturing the right play of light and colors in landscape painting is nothing other than sensitivity to harmony in nature and has the second dimension in which the visible world becomes symbolic.

* *Triple Self-Portrait*, 1920-1925 watercolor, Krynica

The central figure of the *Triple Self-Portrait* is probably Nikifor himself, like the other two figures standing (or sitting) at a table, which is also serving as an altar.² His hands rest on the altar and hold a cup. The two smaller figures on the sides hold a prayer book in their hands showing it the viewer. One of them raises his hand with the prayer book. We can infer from this gesture that Nikifor is emphasizing the importance of prayer, or that he indicates his familiarity with the divine reality.

On the altar you can see lighted candles, a crucifix, a paten with prosphora (bread used in the Eastern Christian rite in the Eucharistic liturgy),³ an open book (a lectionary? A missal?), and two large slices of bread. This representation clearly refers to Christian rites, to the liturgy. The last of the above-mentioned elements on the altar – slices of bread – is surprising, because the liturgy in the Eastern rite does not provide for the use of bread other than prosphora, unless in a situation of persecution, or war turmoil forcing special behavior. Given the dating of the *Triple Self-Portrait*, i.e. the years 1920-1925, it is difficult to speak of such an exceptional situation. It is necessary to identify the painter's own function with the presence of a higher order (liturgical function) and the satisfaction of important human needs by means of art (satisfying the hunger for divine reality).

Nikifor's outfit seems to be lay, but numerous decorations such as a cross on the top garment suggest liturgical attire. The decorated red flap raises associations with a stole. Kinship to liturgical vestments is primarily provided by the miter, headdress used by priest in the Eastern Rite, which Nikifor

2 According to Z. Wolanin, one cannot decide whether all three forms of the *Triple Self-Portrait* show Nikifor, or just a figure placed in the center. This is because the title does not come from Nikifor; this name has only been identified in the literature (Cf. *Nikifor*, ed. Z. Wolanin, Olsztyn 2000, pp. 16-17).

3 The information appearing in *Religia. Encyklopedia* by T. Gadacz provides that the bread is baked from “fermented wheat flour and yeast, formed by two adjoining forms that denote the dual nature of Christ;” cf. also B. Banaś, *Nikifor [1895-1968]*, Warszawa 2006, p. 11.

placed over the central figure in the “self-portrait.” The two side characters also wear miters topped with crosses. Such miters are used by bishops.

Another striking element of the self-portrait is a halo with the name “Jan Nikifor.” The halo and the artist’s face are the same, pale yellow color. The nimbus is seen only around the head of the central figure. The signature “Jan Nikifor” emphasizes the relationship between the painter and saints. A halo around the head is not an invention of Christian sacred art. It comes from the inspiring influence of Hellenistic-Roman art. A nimbus served to emphasize divinity and was an attribute of emperors and heroes. In the Christian tradition it appears first in the representations of Christ, then angels, martyrs, saints, and the Virgin Mary. That listing in itself leads to the conclusion that the halo signified belonging to another, divine reality. If Nikifor uses it in presenting himself as a painter and at the same time as holding the ceremonies, the conclusion of his identification of his own work with the exercise of rites personifying divine order seems to be justified. The *Triple Self-Portrait* is not an isolated example of this. Suffice it to recall a different picture from the gallery in Krynica: *The iconostasis of Nikifor* (1925-1930), or self-portraits from the collection of A. Banach: *Nikifor the bishop* or *Nikifor with a nimbus*.

The most surprising is the painter’s identification with Christ. It is indicated by a typical representation of the Savior in folk Christian sensibility: a central figure with an exposed heart. The first impression applies to art as a gift of self, as an act of self-sacrifice. Artistic creation, or all creative activity is a gift of self, an attitude that lets one follow the example of the Savior to pursue their own humanity. This is not a new convention in European painting. Suffice it to recall A. Dürer’s 1500 *Self-Portrait at the Age of Twenty Eight* also known as *Self-portrait as Christ*. Also, this Munich painting involved an intuition about art and humanity. Dürer assimilated himself with Christ suggesting that artistic creativity is due to divine inspiration. A more in-depth interpretation focused on the vocation of each person, as the Bible’s Book of Genesis says, that is, becoming an image of the Creator (cf. Ge 1, 26). If you agree with the statement that the divine distinguishing feature is eternal life, man will realize his vocation when he lives in the hope of resurrection. According to Christian theology, Christ fulfilled human vocation through His death and Resurrection. So, anyone who lives in close relationship with the Savior fulfills his or her vocation to be the image of the Creator. Dürer, by presenting himself as Christ, suggests that not only he himself as a creator, but each person becomes another one through close relationship with Christ.

The convention in which the characters are presented in the *Triple Self-Portrait* reminiscent of an icon. All three are placed in a golden glow blue highlighting their affiliation to a different reality. Their frontal position

and intense gaze directed at the viewer are an attempt to establish contact with them and, we may guess, to deliver a message. As said above, the message of the *Triple Self-Portrait* refers to works of art and painting as an epiphany of the divine order and harmony. Identification with Christ and the perception of one's own work as the celebration of rites, as a gift of self, seems to be the key to understanding the work of Nikifor. The confirmation of intuition that Nikifor sees his own work as an epiphany of the divine order and harmony is also found in his landscapes.

* *Nikifor-bishop inside a church, behind the altar* (1930s, Nowy Sącz)

The painting depicts Nikifor as a bishop with outstretched arms during prayer liturgy. The painter dressed in a chasuble with stole and miter on his head performs rituals in a church. On the altar we see the liturgical vessels, lit candles and an open missal. The spiritual authority Nikifor in this presentation is shown by his episcopal insignia, miter and crozier, and a golden halo around his head. The priest raises his hands up in a typical prayerful gesture of supplication suggesting our human insufficiency and vulnerability. What is the request of the artist-priest? The presentation of himself as a bishop celebrating liturgy suggests that Nikifor understood his painting work as a kind of ritual. This self-presentation is about more than a therapeutic presentation of oneself in a function that is the reversal of one's real conditions. The rites performed by Nikifor-bishop is a painted document of harmony, order, in which he experienced contact with nature and which pointed to the reality of God as the source of order.

On the right-hand side of the rite-celebrating artist-priest you can see a portrait on an easel, and a kind of bust above the portrait. It is possible that the function of the bust is a "refinement" of facial features which cannot be seen in the portrait. Nikifor-bishop behind the altar and the work of art with a bust indicate the author's suggestion that there is a spiritual kinship between rite and artistic creation.

Another reading of the artist-priest and the portrait on easels refers to the aforementioned anthropological context. We become ourselves in the creative process, and creativity is like a particle of the divine in us. Christian anthropology suggests that we become ourselves in the image and likeness of the Creator, namely through likening ourselves to Christ. Christian theology defines the priest celebrating Holy Mass as "alter Christus." Therefore, it demands that the priest be a man.

In the image, Nikifor surprises us with the *location of the altar*. Directly behind the praying Nikifor-bishop there is a door leading to the outside of the temple. This is by no means the actual layout of any church, since the altar, as a place particularly associated with the sacred, is always

placed in the temples on the opposite side of the entrance. In most of Nikifor's paintings referring to the celebration of the liturgy, the spatial arrangement of the church corresponds to the real one. One can conclude that through the immediate vicinity of the sacred space – the altar and the church door – the artist suggests closeness, mutual permeation of the ideal world, realized in the liturgy and the real world just outside the door. Large windows on both sides of the door show the outside world with a meaningful separation of earth and sky. In Nikifor's vision, the earth is distinguished by a dark blue color, the same as the temple's door. The painter seems to indicate that the earthly reality penetrates into the interior of the temple. The sky outside the window is pale blue, and at times white. The walls of the temple are the same color. Also, the tablecloth on the altar is white. Nikifor-bishop's pleading could apply to the transformation of earthly reality, its shape as the heavenly ideal. If we narrow our deliberations down to the level of anthropology, then here too, the request will be about becoming fully what Nikifor thought he was.

The painting *Nikifor-bishop inside the church, behind the altar* is signed by the artist. The two-line signature also shows hardly readable words: "Souvenir ... Krynica ... Painter." What is surprising in this signature (and in the painting itself) is not only the combination of the painterly work with the liturgical activity of the clergyman, but also its treatment as a souvenir. This reminds us of the function of images with religious motifs in the pastoral practice of the Catholic Church, e.g. holy cards printed on the occasion of a priest's first mass, Christmas visits, anniversaries of priestly ordination, religious vows, marriage, First Communion, Confirmation, etc.

* *Nikifor-bishop* (1920s, watercolor/gouache, Andrzej Banach's collection)

Nikifor-bishop's face is turned toward the viewer. He stands in a chancel of a small church. His spiritual authority is manifested by a miter on his head and a gold nimbus. The artist-priest holds an open Bible in one hand, in such a way that the viewer can see the printed pages, while raising the other in a gesture of admonition or instruction. A careful look at Nikifor-bishop addressing the audience is also a kind of admonition to take the message preached by him seriously. One cannot see the flattery towards the viewer A. Banach writes about. On the contrary, the self-portrait of the artist is a witness to the importance of art and the unique position that it takes. Nikifor is intensifying the effect of this testimony by using a "distorted" perspective. The standing figure fills almost the entire choir directing the viewer's sight to the open Bible, to the hand gesture emphasizing the message, as well as to careful, intense look of the painter-priest

seeking contact with the audience.⁴ All these elements, as well as the fact that no other equipment is visible in the presbytery, we focus our attention on the message of the Bible and the figure of the preacher, Nikifor the Bishop. The interpretation must go beyond the self-creation in opposition to reality suggested by critics. The authority of the painter preaching the message is a derivative of the message itself. Nikifor's work must be interpreted – as suggested by the painter himself – through its connection with the liturgical function, that is to say, the epiphany of the divine order seen in his work. Perhaps it was precisely the external conditions of Nikifor's life, his homelessness, difficulties in communicating, the fact that he was despised and rejected, that made him watch out for the traces of the divine presence, the divine order, in order to cope with the difficult reality.

One may also recall the painting *Madonna in the Church* by Jan van Eyck, from 1425 (Berlin). Van Eyck's Madonna dominates the Gothic building. Her importance is further emphasized by the play of light.

In Nikifor's self-portrait referred to here, dark colors dominate. The chancel of the church is blue-gray. Nikifor is wearing a gray suit, and a black cape over his shoulders. Even the painter's face and his "admonishing" hand are dark. No light is coming through the windows. The world seen through the windows is also a blue-gray. The only bright spots in the image are the white pages of the open Bible and Nikifor's white shirt. The latter highlights the author's undoubted familiarity with the "invisible world" of which the Bible tells and which Nikifor praises in his paintings. The significance of the dominant dark colors in the picture should be seen as emphasizing the tension between the message of the pages of the Bible and the world in which we live, that is far from realizing divine reality.

* *Self-Portrait in three forms*, approx. 1925 (Nowy Sącz District Museum)

In his *Self-Portrait in three forms*, Nikifor provides the viewer with an insight into his understanding of creative activity. The scene depicted in the image is set in a spacious room with theatrical curtains ajar. The association with the theatrical stage is not accidental, because the scene

4 B. Banaś, commenting the watercolor *On the stroll* (in the study titled *Nikifor*), suggests Nikifor's awkwardness in using perspective. This conclusion is probably related to the "awkward" proportions of the person in the foreground and the stately building in the background. Although the author's conclusion seems convincing, it is possible (or more advisable?) to assess the "disturbed" proportions in this picture differently. A young, elegant man – the character in the foreground has a clearly developed "ego." This is indicated by the expression on the face, the costume, and the gesture of the left hand held up. It can therefore be assumed that Nikifor's watercolor is a caricature.

presented in the picture is a kind of meta-reflection on human life and the artist's vocation.

Nikifor-bishop in his liturgical attire – a chasuble with stole, miter, a crozier in his right hand – sits in a chair behind the altar (a kind of a writing desk with books). On the altar you can see an open book, and on the side wall there is a signature of the author: "Nikifor the painter." In his majestically raised left hand, the master holds not a brush, but a cross, with which he performs the rites.

Right next to Nikifor-bishop shown from profile, the viewer is facing the frontally turned Nikifor-painter. The artist's gaze makes it clear that he is looking for contact with the viewer. Is the subject of an unspoken dialog the understanding of creativity? Or humanity? The answers to this question are given by the third, miniature representation of Nikifor on the bookshelf. The genesis of this form of self-presentation should be sought in the "letters of invitation." A picture of Nikifor wearing the so-called "letters of invitation" was recorded in the memory of his posteriors. They were his written requests for support from him to passers-by. In them Nikifor talks about his physical handicap and making a living by painting pictures. The third character in the *Self-portrait...* wears a large wall clock with clearly marked numbers and hands on his body. In this symbolic way Nikifor underlines our commitment to the good use of time. The painter thinks about time and our commitment in sacred terms. The third character is a clergyman, too, who appeals to the viewer raising both hands expressively. One of them pulls the rope of a bell similar to church bells which are used to announce the liturgy. The words of Czesław Miłosz's epilogue to his poem *On angels* come to mind:

day draw near
another one
do what you can.⁵

Once again, the work of Nikifor suggests a connection with the exercise of religious rites. However, the message with which he acquaints us is beyond the understanding of his activity. The painter directs the viewer towards the good use of time, suggesting that it is related to the sacred dimension of reality. Realizing that time we have is a gift enables us to commit to use it well.

5 Cz. Miłosz, *On Angels*, in: *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, ed. C. Forché, New York 1993.

Here again we are reminded of Miłosz and his understanding of time that was given to us. In the first part of his *Either-or* poem, the poet writes: If God incarnated himself in man, died and rose from the dead,

All human endeavors deserve attention
 Only to the degree that they depend on this,
 I.e., acquire meaning thanks to this event. We should think of this by day
 and by night.
 Every day, for years, ever stronger and deeper.
 And most of all about how human history is holy
 And how every deed of ours becomes a part of it,
 Is written down forever, and nothing is ever lost. Because our kind was so
 much elevated
 Priesthood should be our calling
 Even if we do not wear liturgical garments. We should publicly testify to
 the divine glory
 With words, music, dance, and every sign.⁶

Nikifor's art undoubtedly has a therapeutic function. This function does not, however, lie in the creation of self-portraits himself as someone who in fact he was not. In this case we could talk about making up for the harshness of reality at most, but not about any therapeutic impact. The latter aspect assumes that Nikifor-painter understands his work in sacred categories and encourages the viewer to dive in with the same depth.

II. Nikifor's temples (landscapes with a temple)

* *Synagogue in Tarnów* 1963-65; (Romanówka Krynica); *Synagogue* 1963-65 (signed: *LWOWAW KRHNICA ...*, Nowy Sącz District Museum)

In order to refer to Nikifor's intuition related to the view of the synagogue, it is worth to take into account two well-known paintings devoted to this topic, which were created between 1963 and 1965. In each of them there is a place of Jewish prayer in the center, although its location in urban space is different. And so, the *Synagogue in Tarnów* is surrounded by two-story residential buildings. In the picture, signed by the artist as *LWOWAW KRHNICA ...*, the synagogue was built uncharacteristically atop one of the hills of Lviv, and it towers over the city. This location had probably its origin in the imagination of the artist, but a clear religious intuition is hidden behind this.

6 Cz. Miłosz, *Either-Or*, in: Cz. Miłosz, R. Hass, *Provinces. Poems 1987-1991*, New York 1991.

The *Synagogue in Tarnów* strikes us with its unitary character of the buildings in the foreground. The buildings adjacent to each other. All are two-story houses with numerous windows located at the same height, with colored roofs, each with two dark brown chimneys. The plurality of windows is surprising and may indicate a relationship between two dimensions, internal – private residential space and the outside world. In the row of buildings in the foreground there is a wide clearance that gives an insight into a city square, where the magnificent synagogue dominates. The temple in the picture was probably the so-called New Synagogue in Tarnów, opened in 1908 and completely destroyed by the Nazis at the beginning of the war in 1939. It is known that the synagogue towered over the town with a semicircular dome. It remains an open question what the origin of the image was. Nikifor, of course, could have been in Tarnów before WWII and remembered what the synagogue looked like. However, the fact that the painter immortalized the *Tarnów Synagogue* between 1963 and 1965, i.e. 25 years after the temple was demolished, makes it feasible to believe that he could have used old photographs or postcards. Comparing the original appearance of the temple with Nikifor's vision, we find that the artist modified the appearance of the synagogue a little. In his image, the synagogue's tower is higher than the original. The body of the original building seems more massive than in Nikifor's work. The three-nave layout of the New Synagogue, visible from the outside, is preserved in his painting, thanks to the separation of naves as adjoining architectural parts. In the version of Nikifor the said narrow sections are similar to the surrounding synagogue buildings.

Another difference between Nikifor's synagogue and the original structure is striking. The windows of the latter were two-part and consisted of a round upper part (smaller) and an arched lower part. In Nikifor's vision, the two parts form a single entity, strikingly similar to figures of saints in eastern Christian iconostases (cf. *The Iconostasis with Nikifor*, 1925-30 Krynica Romanówka).

When we contemplate the synagogue in the center of the painting, are stunned by its central location, the bright colors corresponding to the color of the sky, the gentle dome rising above the whole townscape, and the coil of the Torah crowning the dome. Zbigniew Wolanin notes that "some of the buildings were marked by Nikifor with special symbols that indicated their purpose, e.g. ... He topped synagogues with a burning candle."⁷ As an example, the author recalls the *Synagogue in Tarnów*. It seems more accurate to note that in the vision of the Tarnów synagogue the dome is crowned not with candles but with the Torah scroll, and its

7 Z. Wolanin, *Muzeum Nikifora w Krynicy/Zdroju. Przewodnik*, Nowy Sącz 2014, p. 35.

meaning does not boil down (exclusively) to informing about the purpose of the synagogue. The Torah is different from the Five Books of Moses, or the first five books of the Old Testament. They are a record of God-Yahweh's creative action (Genesis), his providential, saving interference in the order of creation (Exodus) and finally God's law (other books of the Bible). When considering the meaning of the Torah scroll as the culmination of the synagogue's dome, one has to conclude that it is an additional element suggesting the religious genesis of order and harmony in Nikifor's painting, as well as, more broadly, in the whole reality.

The most important argument in favor of the religious message of *Synagogue in Tarnów* is the color composition of the image. Bright, warm colors of the residential buildings and the synagogue correspond with the colors of the sky: they are identical with them. The impression of order and harmony in the painting is rendered by warm colors, and the harmonious urban landscape finding its extension in nature. It is noteworthy that the gentle line of the horizon is defined by mountain peaks of the same height. Their rounded shapes in turn correspond to the semicircular dome of the synagogue.

It seems that the painter's interest does not boil down solely to presenting a charming landscape, but to indicating the divine source of order. Theology defines perceiving the divine presence in nature as "natural revelation."

In the painting *Synagogue* signed by the author as *LWOWAW KRHNICA...* (so it is probably in Lviv), the Jewish house of prayer dominates the whole cityscape not only in terms of size, but additionally because it is built on a central hill of the secondary plane. The location and especially the size of the temple are surprising. The latter is not an example, as some of Nikifor's critics seem to suggest, of the painter's problems with perspective.⁸ The author of this reflection is convinced that the painter deliberately uses exaggeration ("distorted perspective") as a means of expression that enhances the theological message.

The image surprises with the harmony of its composition. The buildings in the foreground are arranged symmetrically, four on either side of the central lumen. Looking at their roofs we also perceive the architectural harmony and appropriateness of the colors. The harmonious arrangement of buildings in the foreground is complemented by the buildings on the right and left located along the streets. The symmetrical arrangement is also the first impression that can be made even from a cursory observation of the hills in the background. In the center, a hill with a towering synagogue with a spire dominates. In the forest covering the hill there is

8 Cf. B. Banaś, *Nikifor*, op. cit., p. 35.

a clearance in the very center, through which the road to the synagogue leads. Also, other hills are arranged symmetrically on both sides of the center of the synagogue.

Nikifor used a specific linear perspective in his painting – cones narrowing upwards and focusing on the synagogue. The hillside synagogue is the point of intersection of the lines leading along the roofs of the outer buildings crowning the row of houses in the foreground and further along the central hillside. The lines leading along the outer edges of the hills parallel to the temple and those in the background also intersect at the synagogue building. The applied perspective allows to emphasize the central place of the synagogue. The candle lit in the tower of the temple is yet another element that allows one to conclude about the theological message of the image, i.e., the divine source of harmony. The colors of the Lviv landscape are more subdued compared to the *Synagogue in Tarnów*. But here we can see a clear correspondence between colors of the sky, the nature and the urban landscape.

It is worth noting one more element. As viewers, we find ourselves looking at the painting, exactly at the opposite pole related to the synagogue. Just as in the portraits with the frontal arrangement of the depicted figure making eye contact with the viewer and drawing him/her into the world of his experiences, here too we are drawn into the scene, or more precisely, the painter seems to be asking us about the source of order in reality.

* *Wooden church* (My title – KW)

The untitled work depicts mountain landscape with a church, and wooden houses adjacent to it. The work was shown at the *Nikifory* exhibition at the MOCAM Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow (13.2-12.4. 2015). In the exhibition catalog, the work is signed only as “1960s, watercolor,” and the dimensions are given “paper, 21.9 x 16.1 cm.”⁹ Nikifor’s own inscriptions on the painting seem to suggest that the landscape with the temple comes from the area around Krynica, and its price was 200 zlotys. The work probably comes from the collection of Andrzej Banach.

The church is for a wooden building, a surprisingly soaring temple with regular shapes. Right next to the temple you can see wooden residential buildings. Houses in this vision of Nikifor give the impression of a “miniature temple.” The whole group emanates the characteristic warmth of this architecture, awakening trust and a feeling of being settled. Wooden sacral architecture is something typical for the Nowy Sącz area in Malopolska.

9 Cf. *Nikifory*, eds. D. Piechaczek, M. Sobczyński, Kraków 2015, p. 67.

The architectural order finds its extension in nature, in the harmonious arrangement of trees in front of the temple, in the regular arrangement of fields on the hill in the background, and in the arrangement of forests growing on the upper parts of the hills dominating the landscape.

The color of the sky is symbolic. In the upper part, different shades of blue and gray appear, while in the lower part, a mild red is turning into a mild violet. The colors of the sky are not just warm and optimistic. Grey dominates among the different shades of blue. We can feel drama in this constellation of different colors, which is undoubtedly a reflection of our human (life) dramas. In the painting from the Banach collection it is striking that the smoke from the chimneys of houses is exactly the same as the mild red of the lower part of the sky. It seems that Nikifor thus signals the warmth of the home fireplace (something he missed more often than he experienced, or rather experienced in churches), order and harmony are of "divine origin."

* Stróże (townscape with a church)

Nikifor himself signed the painting as *Stróże villagetown*. The charming village of Stróże in the painterly vision is open to theological interpretation. You can even say that it demands such an interpretation. The center of the image is dominated by a neo-Gothic church with a soaring tower. A road leads to it from the main square of the village. On both sides of the road there are dense rows of low houses, all in warm, bright colors. Even the roofs and chimneys of the buildings are rendered in bright colors. Buildings on the same side of the street are the same, the only difference is the color. The painter placed small colorful trees in front of the houses. The trees, like the buildings, are harmoniously arranged on both sides of the street. Architecture and nature interact in this painterly vision of Stróże emphasizing the order and harmony.

The buildings are shown in a linear perspective in such a way that their crowning is the afore mentioned stately church. It seems that this typical form of urban landscape with a road leading to the church, the bright, cheerful colors of the temple and the houses, serve the painter to convey his thoughts (intuitions) of a theological nature. The multicolor, cheerful (warm) colors of the houses correspond to the colors of the church. The tower of the temple is yellow with a purple top. The tiles over the nave and the aisle are red, the side walls are light brown and lime, and the window frames are yellow. A fragment of the spire of the church is light blue. All these colors come back on the front walls of the houses. The color scheme and architectural plan emphasize the hierarchical character of urban development. Nikifor suggests that the warmth that emanates from the houses,

the order and harmony of the place, have their source in the temple, and more precisely in the sacred reality to which the temple refers and to which its soaring tower points out.

A complement of the gentle and hierarchical vision of Stróże is the sky. In Nikifor's works the sky takes up, like in the landscapes of Ootmarsum and Haarlem in Jacob van Ruisdael's, half of the canvas. Two colors predominate, a mild blue in the upper parts and a mild pink in the lower parts. Both colors harmonize perfectly with the colors of the temple and the houses of the village and allow the conclusion that order and harmony are of divine origin.

One more element is striking about the view of Stróże. On the spacious market square or street leading to the temple, we do not see any persons, and yet the town does not seem to be extinct. The reverse is true. The answers have to be found in the "warm" colors of buildings and the church corresponding to the view of the sky and nature. The smoke from the chimneys of the houses on the right shows that the buildings are inhabited. However, it seems that the painter intended yet another suggestion. The light smoke is dispersed in the pale pink glow of the sky and is an additional element for the theological justification of the order and harmony of Stróże.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Banach A., *Nikifor*, Warszawa 1983.

Banaś B., *Nikifor*, Warszawa 2006.

Miłosz Cz., *Either-Or*, in: Cz. Miłosz, R. Hass, *Provinces. Poems 1987-1991*, New York 1991.

Miłosz Cz., *On Angels*, in: *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, ed. C. Forché, New York 1993.

Nikifor, ed. Z. Wolanin, Olszanica 2000.

Nikifory, ed. M.A. Potocka, Kraków 2015.

Religia. Encyklopedia (Entry "Prosfora," ed. T. Gadacz), PWN, Warszawa.

Wolanin Z., *Muzeum Nikifora w Krynicy/Zdroju. Przewodnik*, Nowy Sącz 2014.



Fr. Krzysztof Walczyk SJ – Ph.D., cultural anthropologist, cultural scientist, theater expert and academic teacher. Lecturer at the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow and at the Faculty of Acting of the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Krakow. Longtime chaplain of the Daughters of Divine Love Congregation, and chaplain of the German-speaking Community in Krakow. He was interested in intercultural issues. He was active in many areas, including organizing concerts,

meetings, group prayers and meditations. He did not live long enough to complete his Associate Professor dissertation. He passed away after a long illness on March 25, 2018 at the age of 56, 37 years after joining the religious order and 27 years of his priesthood.