

Holy Icons

One of the first things that strikes a non-Orthodox visitor to an Orthodox church is the prominent place assigned to the Holy Icons. The Iconostasis (Icon-screen) dividing the Altar from the rest of the church is covered with them, while others are placed in prominent places throughout the church building. Sometimes even the walls and ceiling are covered with them in fresco or mosaic form. The Orthodox faithful prostrate themselves before them, kiss them, and burn candles before them. They are censed by the Priest and carried in processions. Considering the obvious importance of the Holy Icons, then, questions may certainly be raised concerning them: What do these gestures and actions mean? What is the significance of these Icons? Are they not idols or the like, prohibited by the Old Testament?

Some of the answers to these questions can be found in the writings of St. John of Damascus (776), who wrote in the Mid-Eighth Century at the height of the iconoclast (anti-icon) controversies in the Church, controversies which were resolved only by the 7th Ecumenical Council (787), which borrowed heavily from these writings.

As St. John points out, in ancient times God, being incorporeal and unincircumscribed, was never depicted, since it is impossible to represent that which is immaterial, has no shape, is indescribable and is unencompassable. Holy Scripture states categorically: No one has ever seen God (John 1:18) and You cannot see My [God's] face, for man shall not see Me and live (Ex. 33:20). The Lord forbade the Hebrews to fashion any likeness of the Godhead, saying: You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (Ex. 20:4). Consequently, the Holy Apostle Paul also asserts: Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man (Acts 17:29).

Nonetheless, we know that Icons have been used for prayer from the first centuries of Christianity. Church Tradition tells us, for example, of the existence of an Icon of the Savior during His lifetime (the Icon-Made-Without-Hands) and of Icons of the Most-Holy Theotokos immediately after Him. Tradition witnesses that the Orthodox Church had a clear understanding of the importance of Icons right from the beginning; and this understanding never changed, for it is derived from the teachings concerning the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The use of Icons is grounded in the very essence of Christianity, since Christianity is the revelation by the God-Man not only of the Word of God, but also of the Image of God; for, as St. John the Evangelist tells us, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).

No one has ever seen God; the only Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known (John 1:18), the Evangelist proclaims. That is, He has revealed the Image or Icon of God. For being the brightness of [God's] glory, and the express image of [God's] person (Heb. 1:3), the Word of God in the Incarnation revealed to the world, in His own Divinity, the Image of the Father. When St. Philip asks Jesus, Lord, show us the Father, He answered him: Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father (John 14:8, 9). Thus as the Son is in the bosom of the Father, likewise after the Incarnation He is consubstantial with the Father, according to His divinity being the Father's Image, equal in honor to Him.

The truth expressed above, which is revealed in Christianity, thus forms the foundations of Christian pictorial art. The Image (or Icon) not only does not contradict the essence of Christianity, but is unfaithfully connected with it; and this is the foundation of the tradition that from the very beginning the Good News was brought to the world by the Church both in word and in image. This truth was so self-evident, that Icons found their natural place in the Church, despite the Old Testament prohibition against them and a certain amount of contemporary opposition.

St. John Damascene further tells us that because the Word became flesh (John 1:14), we are no longer in our infancy; we have grown up, we have been given by God the power of discrimination and we know what can be depicted and what is indescribable. Since He Who was incorporeal, without form, quantity and magnitude, Who was incomparable owing to the superiority of His nature, Who existed in the image of God assumed the form of a servant and appeared to us in the flesh, we can portray Him and reproduce for contemplation Him Who has condescended to be seen.

We can portray His ineffable descent, His Nativity from the Blessed Virgin, His Baptism in the Jordan, His Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, His sufferings, death and miracles. We can depict the Cross of Salvation, the Sepulcher, the Resurrection and the Ascension, both in words and in colors. We can confidently represent God the Invisible not as an invisible being, but as one Who has made Himself visible for our sake by sharing in our flesh and blood.

As the Holy Apostle Paul says: Ever since the creation of the world [God's] invisible nature, namely, His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made (Rom. 1:20). Thus, in all creatures we see images that give us a dim insight into Divine Revelation when, for instance, we say that the Holy Trinity Without Beginning can be represented by the sun, light and the ray, or by the mind, the word and the spirit that is within us, or by the plant, the flower and the scent of the rose.

Thus, what had only been a shadow in the Old Testament is now clearly seen. The Council in Trullo (691-2), in its 82nd Rule, stated:

Certain holy icons have the image of a lamb, at which is pointing the finger of the Forerunner. This lamb is taken as the image of grace, representing the True Lamb, Christ our God, Whom the law foreshadowed. Thus accepting with love the ancient images and shadows as prefigurations and symbols of truth transmitted to the Church, we prefer grace and truth, receiving it as the fulfillment of the law. Thus, in order to make plain this fulfillment for all eyes to see, if only by means of pictures, we ordain that from henceforth icons should represent, instead of the lamb of old, the human image of the Lamb, Who has taken upon Himself the sins of the world, Christ our God, so that through this we may perceive the height of the abasement of God the Word and be led to remember His life in the flesh, His Passion and death for our salvation and the ensuing redemption of the world.

The Orthodox Church, then, created a new art, new in form and content, which uses images and forms drawn from the material world to transmit the revelation of the divine world, making the divine accessible to human understanding and contemplation. This art developed side by side with the Divine Services and, like the Services, expresses the teaching of the Church in conformity with the word of Holy Scripture. Following the teachings of the 7th Ecumenical Council, the Icon is seen not as simple art, but that there is a complete correspondence of the Icon to Holy Scripture, for if the [Icon] is shown

by [Holy Scripture], [Holy Scripture] is made incontestably clear by the [Icon] [Acts of the 7th Ecumenical Council, 6].

As the word of Holy Scripture is an image, so the image is also a word, for, according to St. Basil the Great (†379), what the word transmits through the ear, that painting silently shows through the image [Discourse 19, On the 40 Martyrs]. In other words, the Icon contains and professes the same truth as the Gospels and therefore, like the Gospels, is based on exact data, and is not a human invention, for if it were otherwise, Icons could not explain the Gospels nor correspond to them.

By depicting the divine, we are not making ourselves similar to idolaters; for it is not the material symbol that we are worshipping, but the Creator, Who became corporeal for our sake and assumed our body in order that through it He might save mankind. We also venerate the material objects through which our salvation is effected the blessed wood of the Cross, the Holy Gospel, and, above all, the Most-Pure Body and Precious Blood of Christ, which have grace-bestowing properties and Divine Power.

As St. John Damascene asserts: I do not worship matter but I worship the Creator of matter, Who for my sake became material and deigned to dwell in matter, Who through matter effected my salvation. I will not cease from worshipping the matter through which my salvation has been effected [On Icons, 1,16]. Following his teachings, we, as Orthodox Christians, do not venerate an Icon of Christ because of the nature of the wood or the paint, but rather we venerate the inanimate image of Christ with the intention of worshipping Christ Himself as God Incarnate through it.

We kiss an Icon of the Blessed Virgin as the Mother of the Son of God, just as we kiss the Icons of the Saints as God's friends who fought against sin, imitated Christ by shedding their blood for Him and followed in His footsteps. Saints are venerated as those who were glorified by God and who became, with God's help, terrible to the Enemy, and benefactors to those advancing in the faith but not as gods and benefactors themselves; rather they were the slaves and servants of God who were given boldness of spirit in return for their love of Him. We gaze on the depiction of their exploits and sufferings so as to sanctify ourselves through them and to spur ourselves on to zealous emulation.

The Icons of the Saints act as a meeting point between the living members of the Church [Militant] on earth and the Saints who have passed on to the Church [Triumphant] in Heaven. The Saints depicted on the Icons are not remote, legendary figures from the past, but contemporary, personal friends. As meeting points between Heaven and earth, the Icons of Christ, His Mother, the Angels and Saints constantly remind the faithful of the invisible presence of the whole company of Heaven; they visibly express the idea of Heaven on earth.

In venerating the Icons, then, the Orthodox are championing the basis of Christian faith the Incarnation of God and, consequently, salvation and the very meaning of the Church's existence on earth, since the creation of the Holy Icons goes back to the very origins of Christianity and is an inalienable part of the truth revealed by God, founded as it is on the person of the God-Man Jesus Christ Himself. Holy Images are part of the nature of Christianity and without the Icon Christianity would cease to be Christianity. The Holy Gospel summons us to live in Christ, but it is the Icon that shows us this life.

If God became man in order that man might be like God, the Icon, in full accord with divine worship and theology, bears witness to the fruits of the Incarnation and to the sanctity and deification of man.

It shows him in the fullness of his earthly nature, purified of sin and partaking of the life of God, testifies to the sanctification of the human body and displays to the world the image of man who is similar to God by grace. The Icon outwardly expresses the sanctity of the depicted Saint, and this sanctity is apparent to bodily vision.

Thus, according to St. John Damascene, those who refuse to venerate an Icon also refuse to worship God's Son, Who is the living image and unchanging reflection of God the Invisible. Be it known, he says, that anyone who seeks to destroy the Icons of Christ or His Mother, the Blessed Theotokos, or any of the Saints, is the enemy of Christ, the Holy Mother of God, and the Saints, and is the defender of the Devil and his demons.