

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT ICONS

It is impossible to visit Italy, Greece, Germany, Yugoslavia, Romania, Russia, Bulgaria, the Middle East without becoming acquainted with a form of religious art called *the icon*. Used extensively in churches and homes in these countries, it has now become quite popular in the West where such art is being used for decorative purposes. Eastern Christians consider this a blasphemous distortion of the original intent of the icon. Not a few tourists today pay expensively for what they believe to be 16th or 17th century icons but which unfortunately turn out to be antiqued lithographs beautifully decoupage.

The word *icon* comes from the Greek word *Eikon* which means *image*. A famous German camera Zeis Ikon uses this word as a trade name. St. Paul speaks of Christ as the *Icon of God*; that is what the phrase is in Greek. Christ is the Icon of God, and the whole New Testament is written on the basis that if you want to know what the Eternal God is like, you look at Jesus and see.

In the West, religious art was placed on the windows of a church or cathedral. In the East the windows were left quite plain and the walls were covered with religious art.

The purpose of icons is three-fold:

1. to create reverence in worship;
2. to instruct those who are unable to read;
3. to serve as an existential link between the worshipper and God.

WHY ICONS?

The Hebrew had as his form of icon the written word. He objected vehemently to any kind of picture, never realizing that a combination of letters conveying an idea was just as much an icon as any other form of portrayal. In dealing with other people, i.e., Greeks, Egyptians, Latins, the Church was faced with the need of expressing to them the idea of Christ embodied. He had already been embodied in the written word and song. Now He had to be embodied in picture in order to appeal to the pope of the senses: the eyes.

THE ICONOCLASTS

The Church calendar sets aside the first Sunday of Lent as the Sunday of Orthodoxy. It marks the day on which the use of icons was reinstated after a period of opposition. It commemorates the triumph of Orthodoxy against the iconoclasts whose purpose it was to remove forcibly all icons from churches and destroy them as instruments of idolatry.

Since the icon is one of the most distinctive features of Orthodoxy, we shall consider briefly what it signifies, why it is used, its practical value as well as its doctrinal significance.

First, let us consider the charge of idolatry. Orthodox Christians do not worship icons; they merely reverence or venerate them as symbols. Leontius of Neapolis wrote in the seventh century:

*We do not make obeisance to the nature of wood, but we reverence and make obeisance to Him who was crucified on the Cross.... When the two beams of the Cross are joined together, I adore the figure because of Christ who on the Cross was crucified, but if the beams are separated, I throw them away and burn them.**

GOD: INVISIBLE OR VISIBLE?

The iconoclasts (those who sought to remove all images from churches) held that God cannot be painted because He is eternal and invisible. "No man has seen God at any time" (John 1:18). But the Orthodox insisted that God can be painted because He became man. In the Old Testament any image of God would be a "graven image", an idol, because no image of God could exist. Nobody had ever seen God. But this changed the moment God became man in Christ. Because of this it is now lawful to make a picture of Him. Those who were denying the icon of Christ were denying the truth that He had become man. In other words, they were denying the very basis of our salvation: God becoming man in Christ. Thus, what we really commemorate on the first Sunday of Lent in the Orthodox Church is not a controversy about religious art, but about the Incarnation of Christ and the salvation of man.

* Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*.

St. John of Damascus expressed this well when he wrote,

Of old, God was never depicted. Now, however, when God is seen, clothed in flesh and conversing with man, I make an image of God, of the God whom I can see. I do not worship matter. I worship the God of matter who became matter for my sake...to work out my salvation through matter.

It would be theologically accurate to say that God Himself was the first icon maker by visibly reproducing Himself in the likeness of His Son. The iconoclast controversy was not simply a controversy over religious art, but over the entire meaning and implication of the incarnation. God took a material body, thereby proving that matter can be redeemed. “The Word made flesh has deified the flesh,” said John of Damascus. The materials employed in the icons are but another expression of Eastern Christianity’s appreciation of the material world. This has much to say to us today in the area of ecology: That matter is sacred and should not be abused or contaminated.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was negative to icons. For Luther they were permissible as illustrations. Calvin could accept nothing more than historical scenes with more than one person depicted, so that it would not make the faithful stumble into idolatry.

Puritans in England and America took a dim view of religious art. They despised and prohibited all religious paintings. In a way they were probably right. Most “religious art” is offensive because it makes it hard to believe that the only begotten Son of God became man. The picture of the Christ as a bearded lady, sometimes with a bleeding valentine heart showing through a transparent chest, if taken seriously, denies that He was made man. Such pictures give the idea that He became a phantom, neither male nor female.

Eric Newton writes,

But from the moment when God sent his only begotten Son to dwell on earth, born of a mortal woman, to preach, to perform miracles, to suffer death at the hands of the Jews, and to be resurrected, the situation for the artist changed, for the new religion contained within itself the fact of the invisible made visible, the Deity made human, the

*supernatural made physically manifest. At last there was no reason to forbid imagery, for if God Himself became incarnate there could be no possibility of the artist's image of Him leading to idolatry.**

WHAT IS AN ICON?

The tendency among some of the early Christians was *not* to use a realistic image of Jesus. Instead they used abstract signs—letters that would stand for Jesus, such as Chi-Rho, the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ, or IHS, the first letters for the name Jesus in Greek. They also used figures such as the fish, which was a secret sign for Christ, or a sheep, representing Jesus, the Lamb of God.

The Trullan Synod, held in Constantinople in 692 A.D., stated that it was wrong for the church to depict Christ in signs and symbols any longer. The Synod specifically decreed that it would be wrong to portray Christ as a sheep (Lamb of God). If he really became man, the Synod said, then He must be portrayed as a human being—not as an animal or as a symbol.

The Church Fathers felt that the divine nature of Christ should be brought out in the images as well as His human nature. They said, in the same directive, that images of Him should not be “too carnal”. The Seventh Ecumenical Council stated that the Church, even though she may depict the Lord through art in His human form, must not separate in the representation Christ’s flesh from His divinity. Christ had to be represented in Orthodox art as God-Man. As such, it would be outright impious to represent Christ according to the natural beauty of some ordinary human model. This was not true in the West where “good-looking” and visionary young men became actual models for paintings of Christ. These humanly “beautiful” Christs of Western art were unacceptable to the Eastern Christians in view of the fact that they expressed the idea of only the human nature of our Lord. So, Orthodox art was faced with the special task of finding some iconographic type which would lead the spectator directly to the thought that in the represented person “the whole fullness of the divinity dwells bodily” (St. Paul). Moreover, Theodore Studites said, “If we say that Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God, by the same manner His representation must be said to be the power and wisdom of God.”

* 2000 Years of Christian Art. Eric Newton and Wm. Neil. Harper and Row. Used by permission.

For this reason, Orthodox art created for Christ an *idealized* type unlike any purely human model, with supranatural characteristics such as large eyes, nose and hands. Thus, the Orthodox iconographer attempts to express the supra-natural, supra-rational and supra-conceptual elements of our Lord through hyperbole, exaggeration, excess, and even deformation of natural reality.

Thus, while the West has traditionally emphasized the human nature of Christ through the use of statues and human models of Jesus, the East has placed more emphasis on the divine nature of Jesus through the icon that lends itself very effectively to the expression of the divine, transfigured state of Jesus through the use of stylization.

THREE WAYS OF PORTRAYAL

There are three possible ways of “portraying” someone: the photograph, the portrait and the icon. The *photograph* records the features as they are. A successful *portrait* reproduces a person’s features in a way that is true to life and recognizable; but at the same time it brings out his character and gives expression to his inner nature. An *icon* is not a photograph but more like a portrait. Yet it is more even than a portrait. It aims at giving a true likeness of the person, and at the same time it attempts to bring out in a person what he or she has become through the power of the Holy Spirit. An icon then is more than a photograph, more even than a portrait. Iconography portrays what happens to people after God touches them. They become new persons. By omitting everything irrelevant to the spiritual figure, the figure becomes stylized, spiritualized, not unrealistic but supra-realistic.* The icon is thus set aside from all other forms of pictorial art. It offers an external expression of the transfigured state of man, of a body so filled with the Holy Spirit, so trained in good, that it has become like the spiritual body which we shall receive at the Second Coming of Christ.

There are some who believe that abstractionism, the reduction of a figure to its purest essence, originated with the iconographers.

Icons have been called prayers, hymns, sermons in form and color. They are the visual Gospel. In reality, the Eastern Church has two Gospels: the verbal and the visual, to appeal to the whole man. As St. Basil said,

I am indebted for this comparison of photograph, portrait and icon to Rudolf Muller's article, *The Theological Significance of a Critical Attitude in Hagiography* that appeared in *The Ecumenical Review* some years ago.

What the word transmits through the ear, that painting silently shows through the image, and by these two means, mutually accompanying one another... we receive knowledge of one and the same thing.

One has but to enter an Orthodox Church to see unfolded before him on the walls all the mysteries of the Christian faith. "If a pagan asks you to show him your faith," said John of Damascus, "take him into church and place him before the icons."

Through the icon the Orthodox Church appeals to the eye, is the pope of the senses. We remember much more easily what we see than what we hear. The Old Testament prophets, for example, often used the method of dramatic and symbolic action. Men might refuse to listen, but they could hardly fail to see. Jeremiah, for example, forewarned the people of the slavery that was to fall upon them by making yokes and wearing them on his neck. The practice in Communist countries of hanging pictures of their leaders everywhere was borrowed by the Russian Marxists from the use of icons in the Russian Orthodox Church. The pictures are, in effect, icons of the new gods intended to stimulate a kind of worship and absolute obedience.

EXISTENTIAL ENCOUNTER

The icon is more even than a means of instruction. It is in effect a sacrament. For, an icon is not fully an icon until it has been blessed by the priest in church. Then it becomes a link between the human and the divine. It provides an existential encounter between men and God. It becomes the place of an appearance of Christ, provided one stands before it with the right disposition of heart and mind. It becomes a place of prayer. An icon participates in the event it depicts and is almost a re-creation of that event existentially for the believer. As S. Bulgakov said, "By the blessing of the icon of Christ, a mystical meeting of the faithful and Christ is made possible." Many icons are regarded as "wonder-working". These are considered to be the icons par excellence.

Standing in an Orthodox Church whose walls and ceiling are covered with icons of Christ and the saints, the worshipper does not feel alone. He experiences the communion of saints. He experiences a fellowship with Christ and the saints. He is made to feel that he is a member of the family of God. Cecil Steward describes this well when he writes,

The pictures seem to be arranged in a way which instills a feeling of direct relationship between the viewer and the pictures...each personality is represented facing one, so that one stands, as it were, within the congregation of saints. Byzantine art, in fact, puts one in the picture.... He (the viewer) observes and is observed.

EGYPTIAN ART INFLUENCE

One of the forerunners of the icon is the Egyptian funeral portrait. It was the desire on the part of the deceased not to be forgotten that led the Egyptians to paint a picture of the deceased person's face on the mummy. The distinguishing feature of the Egyptian funeral portrait was the large eyes, wide-open and staring at the one who beholds them, as if to say, "Here I am. You may think I'm gone and forgotten, but as I look at you with these eyes, I dare you to forget me."

The early Christian icons followed the same pattern. The saints whom they represented had huge eyes that looked straight into the eyes of their beholders, as if to say, "Here I am. I may seem dead to you, but I am very much alive in the presence of God."

This is one of the principles that were incorporated into icon painting. The sensory organs (eyes, nose, ears) are not rendered according to true anatomy because each of them has been changed by divine grace and has ceased to be the usual sensory organ of biological man. The eyes are painted large and animated to express physical intensity. Having been opened to God, they have seen great things. "Mine eyes have seen Thy salvation." The ears are painted large as a symbolic projection of the ears of the soul that have heard and still hear the good news of Christ. The nose also is often larger than its natural length and thin to denote that it is not meant to smell the things of this world but the fragrance of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The mouth, on the other hand, is shaped small to express that the represented saint "takes no thought of his life, what he shall eat and what he shall drink", but seeks first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

FACIAL FEATURES

THE HALO

Western religious art has relied on the crown of light or halo to denote the "holiness" of the represented person. Usually this was so because the sacred person is so worldly in appearance that the halo is

required to signify that a saint is being represented. In the icon, however, one does not depend on the halo alone to understand that the represented person is a saint. Holiness is indicated by the entire form and style of the icon. This is why the halo is missing from some of the older icons as well as in the wall-paintings of the catacombs where Christ and the martyrs are represented without halos.

PRACTICAL USE OF ICONS

A Japanese girl in an American college was invited to spend the Christmas holidays with a classmate. Afterwards she was asked how she enjoyed the holidays. “Very well,” she replied, “but I missed God in the home. I have seen you worship God in your church. In my country we have a god-shelf so we can worship our gods in our homes. Do not Americans worship their God in their homes?”

It has been traditional for Orthodox homes to have such a “God-shelf” in the form of an icon with a votive light burning before it. This serves as a reminder of God’s presence in the home and as a center for family prayer. In old Russia, for example, every house—from the great winter palace of the Czar to the thatched hut of the peasant—had an icon of Christ or the Virgin Mother. At that time no Russian home was a home until it was consecrated by the icon.

Helene Iswolsky writes in her book *Christ in Russia*,

In the old days...a Russian entering his home or visiting a friend would first of all bow low before the icons and make the sign of the cross before greeting his family or host. The icons symbolized God’s presence; they were a constant reminder of the supernatural life, and appealed to morality and conscience. It is difficult to lie, to cheat, to be brutal in front of an icon. The communists in Russia did all they could to tear away the icons from men’s homes, to deprive them of the image of their God, and to stifle the conscience of the people.

In fact, if the Church in Russia has survived under Communism these past many years despite lack of any facilities for instructing children in the Christian faith either at school or at church, it is due (humanly speaking) to the Christian family. Throughout Orthodox Christendom, the family has been regarded as a “house church” with its own “altar” where prayers are offered before the icons.

The icon was never intended to hang on a wall as an aesthetic object. If it is used as an attractive piece of decoration, it ceases to function as an icon. For an icon can only exist within the particular framework of belief and worship to which it belongs. Divorced from this framework, it loses its function as an icon.

In a fragment of a *Life of St. John Chrysostom* preserved in a work by St. John of Damascus (675-749), we are told that Chrysostom had an icon of the Apostle Paul before himself as he studied Paul's epistles. When he looked up from the text, the icon seemed to come to life and speak to him.

Icons in the home consecrate the profane; they transform a neutral dwelling place into a "domestic church" and the life of the faithful into an unceasing liturgy.

Jesus said, "When you pray, go into your room" (Matt. 6:6). Archbishop Paul of Finland adds, "But even so we are not alone. The icon in the corner of the room where we pray is a window into the kingdom of God and a bond with its members."

One of the Patriarchs of the Russian Church said:

If in hospitals, which treat the diseases of the body, everything is arranged to make the surroundings conducive to the patient's return to health, what great care must be taken to order everything in a spiritual hospital, a church of God.

We can apply this also to the Christian home which should include reminders of God's strengthening and healing presence.

ICON PAINTERS

It has been said that love is the great interpreter. It is the conductor of an orchestra who is in love with the music of a composer who can best interpret and express it. A young artist once brought a picture of Jesus which he had painted to a great painter for his verdict. The artist studied it for quite some time and finally said, "You don't love Him, or you would paint Him better."

This great truth is practiced among Orthodox icon painters who are usually monks. Such iconographers are not considered to be religious artists but rather as persons who have a religious vocation. They are missionaries preaching visual theology. The icon, like the Word, is a

revelation, not a decoration or illustration. It is theology in color. More important than being a good artist is the fact that the icon painter be a sincere Christian who prepares himself for his work through fasting, prayer, Confession, Communion and has the feeling that he is but an instrument through whom the Holy Spirit expresses Himself. It is important to know Jesus better if one is to paint Him better. In the West, the theologian has instructed and even limited the artist, whereas in the East the iconographer is a charismatic who contemplates the liturgical mysteries and instructs the theologian.

GOD'S BEST ICON

Since we are talking about icons we would be remiss if we neglected to say that by far the best icon of God is man who was made in God's own image. This is the reason the Orthodox priest during the liturgy turns and censens the congregation after having censened the icons. Each person in the congregation is a living icon of God. Through censening we pay respect to the image of God in man which resides in all persons regardless of the color of skin or class. To pay respect to the icons in Church and to show disrespect to the living icons of God—our fellow humans—is hypocrisy of the worst sort. It is interesting to note here that in the Abyssinian Church Jesus and Mary are pictured as black people. All people—regardless of color—are living images or icons of God.

A Sunday school teacher once said to her first-grade class, "You know how you feel when you draw a picture. You want everybody to see it and admire it because you made it. That's how Jesus feels about you. You're the picture He draws."

A little boy asked, "Is everybody Jesus' picture?"

"That's right," said the teacher.

"Even Annie?"

"Yes."

Suddenly a scrap of brown paper fluttered into the teacher's wastebasket. "I was going to put flypaper in Annie's milk," he said sadly, "only Jesus drew her so I better not."

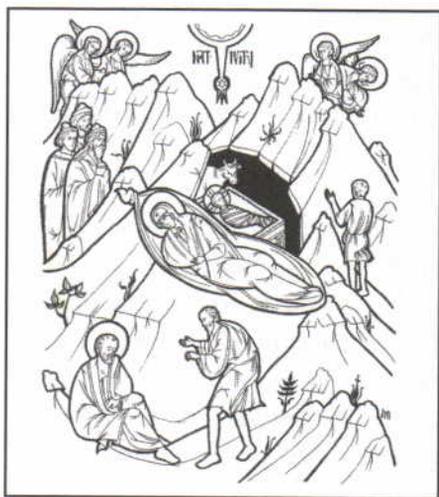
That little boy captured a great truth. The most precious icon of God is man and woman. As we treat each living icon, so we treat God.

ICONS EXPRESS OUR GOAL IN LIFE

Our goal in life according to Orthodox theology is THEOSIS. Simply put, this means that we are to become like God. This starts in Baptism when the restored image is given to us. Our purpose is to proceed from the restored image of God to the likeness of God. The likeness of God is not given to us; we have to strive for it always by God's grace. The restored image is the gift we receive from God at Baptism. But likeness to God is the task of personal holiness that we have to achieve as a fruit of our own spiritual life through God's grace. St. Seraphim of Sarov said: "The purpose of the Christian life is the acquiring of the Holy Spirit." To acquire the Holy Spirit is to acquire the likeness of God. There can be no likeness of God within us without the Holy Spirit.

This is what the icon shows us. Through the icon we represent Him, Who through His incarnation restored God's image in man. Or we represent the saints who through their constant openness to the Holy Spirit have acquired the true likeness of God and have become living icons. Our purpose as Orthodox Christians, therefore, is to develop the gift we receive in baptism: to proceed from image to likeness by God's grace and thus become living icons of Christ in the world today.

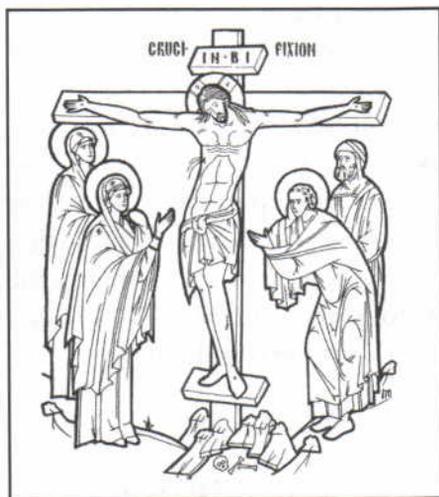
A STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL ICONS



Icon of Nativity

One of the most famous icons is that of the Nativity. Its symbolism is that of the Creator of the Universe entering history as a newborn babe. The little helpless figure in swaddling clothes represents the complete submission of Christ to the physical conditions governing the human race. Yet he remains Lord of Creation. The angels sing praises. The Magi and the shepherds bring their gifts. The sky salutes Him with a star. The earth provides Him with a cave. The animals watch Him in silent wonder, and we humans offer Him one of us, the Virgin Mother.

The lower scenes underline the scandal of the Incarnation. The right-hand scene shows the washing of the infant by the mid-wife and her assistant. It tells that Christ was born like any other child. The scene on the left portrays Joseph, who, having observed the washing of the infant, is once again assailed by doubts as to the virginity of his spouse. He is tempted by the devil, who suggests that if the infant were truly divine He would not have been born in the human way. The Mother Mary is in the center and from her reclining position looks at Joseph as if trying to overcome his doubts and temptations.*



Icon of Crucifixion (Daphni or Osios Loukas)

Crucifixion paintings of Western art present a tragic drama of a man undergoing the ultimate agony of suffering. They depict the opened mouth of the Crucified-One in its final death spasm. They encircle the head with an excessively large crown whose sharp thorns pierce the forehead, dripping clots of blood. With the picture of the horror of the human corpse, they

seek the creation of “sympathy” in the spectator.

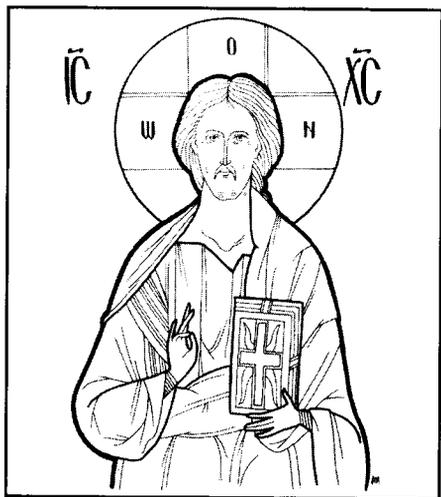
How different the icon of the crucifixion! As Photios Kontoglou writes,

Here there is nothing from the world of corruption. The forms and colors do not impart the frigid breath of death, but the sweet hope of immortality. Christ is depicted as standing on the Cross, not hanging on it. His body is of flesh, but flesh of another nature, flesh whose nature has been changed through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The expression on His face is full of heavenly tranquility; the affliction which has befallen Him is full of gentleness and forgiveness, exempt from agonized contractions on the face. It is the suffering redeemer, He Who has undone the pangs of death Who has granted the peace of the

* Nicolas Zernov. *Eastern Christendom*. G.P. Putnam & Sons. NY. The icons used here were done by Fr. J. Matusiak. Used by permission.

life to come. This crucified body is not that of just anyone, but is the very body of the God-Man Himself.. It radiates the hope of the Resurrection. The Lord does not hang on the Cross like some miserable tatter, but it is He, rather, who appears to be supporting the Cross. His hands are not cramped, being nailed to the Wood; rather He spreads them out serenely in the attitude of supplication.... I repeat: the forms and colors of the liturgical icon do not express the brute horror of death, but have the nobility and gentleness of eternal life. It is illuminated by the light of hope in Christ. It is full of the grace of the Paraclete.

In some icons of the crucifixion, the sun and the moon are placed in such a manner as to make it appear that the outstretched arms of the Savior are supporting them.



Icon of Christ Pantocrator

The typical Byzantine icon of Christ is that of the Pantocrator, the Lord Omnipotent. It is the image of the glorified Christ regnant on His heavenly throne. We are not even sure that it is not an image of the eternal God rather than that of Christ. But, as the Son is the image of the Father, so through the face of the Son we see the Father as well. Thus, the Pantocrator is really the icon of

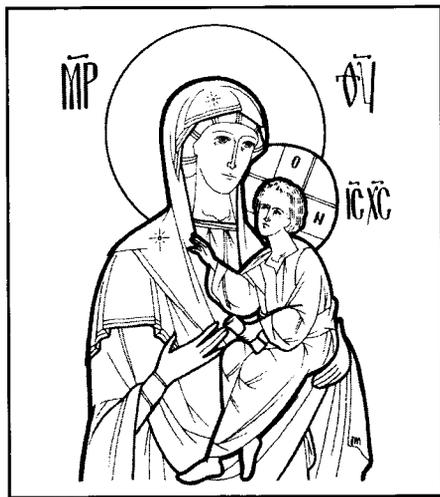
both Father and Son: the Godhead in all His glory and majesty. It is in reality an icon of the almighty and transcendent God.*

In the catacombs Christ was depicted as the Good Shepherd who tended His flock and won their allegiance. In an age where the Huns, the Vandals, and the Mohammedan infidels threatened the very fabric of the newly established Church, the Christians needed an emphasis on the Almighty God Who sat enthroned as Emperor, Monarch, Ruler, surrounded by His heavenly court of saints and angels and dominated His flock. It is somewhat of the emphasis we find in the hymn:

*This is my Father's world:
Though the wrong seems oft' so strong,
He is the ruler yet.*

It may be noted that the term "Pantocrator" and the idea behind it appear in the book of Revelation. Thus in 1:8, it is said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, saith the Lord Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come, the Pantocrator" (Almighty). The use of the multicolored band around Him is based on Rev. 4:3 where the iris or rainbow is said to surround the throne of God.

Normally, the icon of Christ Pantocrator is the most remote of all the conventional poses, Christ distant with the presence of the law. Yet in Serbia we find an icon of the Pantocrator with dancing eyes. His face is sharp, his mouth tiny with the effort of suppressing a grin, His fingers thin and dancing, too, where they hold the book. The book is closed; but He knows what is inside; the glee of goodness, the good news of God's love.



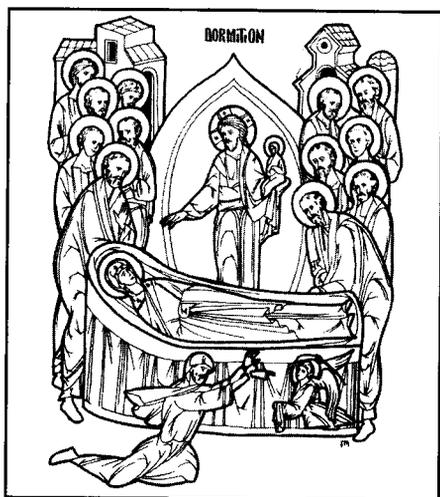
Icon of the Theotokos

In Orthodox hymnology the Theotokos is reverently said to be "surrounded with divine grace, shining with holiness, beautiful among women, who amazed the archangel with the brilliance of purity." As such, no human model could possibly be found for her. Thus, as for Christ, an idealized type was created for her to express the above-mentioned qualities. This is in contrast to many

Western painters who used sensuously beautiful women as models for Mary.

As one studies an icon of the Theotokos, one sees how the expression of the soul is concentrated on the face. The interest of the onlooker is withdrawn from the body and focused on the face and especially the eyes. Here are expressed the virtues of meekness, humility, purity, spiritual love and wisdom.

The icon of the Virgin with Child is an image of the Incarnation. If one looks attentively at the icon, one will see that the Mother of God, holding the Child, never looks at the child. She looks neither at the viewer nor into the distance but her open eyes look deep inside her. She is contemplating the mystery of the God who became man in her. Her tenderness is expressed with the shyness of her hands. She holds the Child without hugging him. She holds the Child as one would hold something sacred. All the tenderness, all the human love is expressed by the Child, not the Mother. She remains the Mother of God, and she treats the Child, not as the baby Jesus, but as the Incarnate Son of God. He in turn expresses to her all the love and tenderness of man and God to a person who is both His mother and His creature.



The Icon of the Dormition

Another famous icon is that of the Dormition or the Falling Asleep of the Blessed Virgin. Here is represented the Virgin's body asleep in the Lord. Behind her stands Jesus holding in His arms, right up against His breast, a tiny infant which is the Blessed Virgin's soul—newly born to eternal life. In front of the Virgin's body, in some icons, there is a strange little pagan character who tries to upset our

Lady's bier, and an angel comes to smite him. The point involved here is the argument, decided at the Council of Ephesus, about the Theotokos, and the attempt at that time to upset the Church's faith that she was indeed the mother of God (Theotokos) and not just the mother of the man Jesus (Christotokos). All this is shown by this one little, silly figure trying to upset the bier on which the Virgin's body rests.

SUMMARY

1. The icon is theology in color. It acknowledges the Incarnation: God become man in Jesus. To deny the icon is to deny this very basis of our salvation.
2. The icon attempts to portray the two natures of Jesus: human and divine—not just the human. Icons of the saints portray also the transfigured state of the saint who has been sanctified by the Trinity.
3. An icon is more like a portrait than a photograph in that it portrays what happens to people after God touches them. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the physical body is transformed and becomes like the spiritual body which we shall receive at the Second Coming of Jesus.
4. The icon, blessed by the priest, becomes like a sacrament. It participates in the event it depicts and becomes, as it were, a making present again of that event existentially for the believer.
5. The icon is the distinguishing feature of every true Orthodox home. It transforms each home into a “church” where God abides and where prayers are offered daily.
6. Icon painters (iconographers) have traditionally been monks who prepared themselves for the painting of each icon through fasting, prayer and Holy Communion. It was believed that to paint Jesus better, one must truly know Him better.
7. The best icon of God is men and women who are made in God’s own image. This is why the Orthodox priest during the liturgy turns and censes the living icons of God in the congregation (the worshippers) after having censed the icons on the icon screen and walls.
8. The whole Bible is about this image (icon) of God in man: how the image was marred by sin and how Jesus came to restore God’s image in each one of us. Through the icon, we represent Him who through His incarnation restored God’s image in us. Or, we represent the saints who through their constant openness to the Holy Spirit have acquired the true likeness of God and have become living icons. Our purpose as Orthodox Christians is to develop the gift we received in Baptism: to proceed from image of God to likeness of God and thus become living icons of Christ in the world today.