

## **Sunday of Orthodoxy 2006 Iconography**

A sermon by the Rev. Fr. David G. Subu  
delivered on March 12, 2006

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Christ is among us!

Today the Church celebrates the triumph of Orthodoxy dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century when the terrible conflict and persecution of the Iconoclasm came to an end. The celebration and vindication of iconography in the Church is the culmination of the Church's theology, its belief that the divine person of the Son deigned to be represented in a created human form by becoming incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, to proclaim and reveal to the world the love of the God the Father. To deny the icon of Christ, according to the Holy Fathers, is to deny the fact of this incarnation and revelation of God, to succumb to the wisdom of the world and all its heresies which cannot fathom that the eternal and uncreated would even want to be united to its creation. Yet this exactly who our God is and the kind of thing that He wills—to be known by His children whom he loves. The Kontakion Hymn of this Sunday beautifully describes this reality:

No one could describe the Word of the Father;/ but when He took flesh from you, O Theotokos, He accepted to be described,/ and restored the fallen image to its former beauty.// We confess and proclaim our salvation in word and images. (*Triodion*)

Iconography therefore, properly understood, is the expression of the theological and personal reality of God's love for us. It is not another style or form of art, though it certainly utilizes the mediums and methods of art. Nor is Iconography is just a form of pedagogy, either, that teaches an intellectual or academic lesson. The icons reveal something to us for they themselves are expressions of prayer, which is true theology. As our parish is engaged in the midst of a large Iconography project, and each month we will be seeing more and more icons

being added to the our walls, we ought to understand what it is that is taking place here—what are these icons and why are they the way they are.

First of all, one must understand that iconography cannot be separated from the iconographer. Not just anybody is called to write an icon (and we use the word write to signify that the icon is more than a picture but a theological testimony, a form of visual scripture). First an iconographer must be living the Christian life, partaking of the Sacraments, fasting, and praying. They must harbor no sin in their life, no ill will or resentment, no impurity of the eye or the flesh. If these things are present they will be revealed in the icons they write, distorting the beauty which they seek to reveal by the power of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, before they even pick up a brush or unroll a canvas, they must have a blessing from their spiritual father to engage is the discipline of prayer which is iconography. In a sense, the iconographer is undertaking a sacramental ministry, a liturgical act. Just as the deacons, sub-deacons, readers, chanters, singers, altar servers, and *epitrops* or collectors should not begin their actions without a blessing from the spiritual father of the parish, and the priest does not serve without the blessing of the bishop, so too the iconographer does not begin any icon without this blessing. They are not permitted to free-lance, or go out and sell their wares like a business, though certainly today many attempt to do so. The iconographer, like the monastic, lives in spiritual obedience, and their work flourishes from the grace of God which blesses it.

Next, before the iconographer even begins a specific icon, there is a rule of prayer which they follow in doing that service. First they pray for themselves, that God should guide, protect, and strengthen them for this work. A prayer from Mt. Athos represents this tradition:

Lord God of everything that ahs being, bless and enlighten the soul, the heart and the mind of your servant (the iconographer's name), guide his/her hand, so that he/she might worthily and faithfully write your image, that of your most pure Mother, and of all the saints, for the sake of Your glory and for the glorification

and strengthening of Your Holy Church. Free (the iconographer's name) from every temptation of the devil which is against Your commandments through the prayers of Your most pure Mother, the most glorious Apostle Luke and all the saints. Amen. (Monk Dionisis [sic] of Athos, *Ermina*)

Note the final reference to St. Luke the Apostle, who according to tradition wrote the first icon of the Virgin Mary. Also, the iconographer has prepared the hymns appropriate to the subject of the icon, such as the troparion or hymn of the feast or the saint to be written. Properly strengthened and prepared by prayer, the iconographer is ready to begin the writing of the icon. This act is itself an act of prayer. Thus, when writing the icon, there should be no distractions, no worldly music or TV in the background. Even religious music or recordings of services should be avoided because listening to other people pray is never a substitute for praying ourselves.

During the writing of the icon, the name of the Lord Jesus is never far from the lips or the heart. In one tradition, it is said that as the Iconographer begins any specific line, if they should finish before they finish the Jesus prayer, then they are going too fast and need to slow down, be more attentive. And as he or she calls on the Lord's name through the Jesus prayer, they may be praying for themselves, that God have mercy on them. Or, more likely, if the icon has been commissioned by or for a specific person, family, or community, the iconographer directs that prayer for the benefit of those people. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on your servants, the parishioners of St. Mary's," or "the Codrescu family," or "the servant of God Olga," etc. Considering the number of hours it takes to make an icon, one can see why it is such a wonderful blessing for one's family to seek an iconographer, and commission a hand-written icon instead of simply purchasing a reproduction. Indeed, how many of us are willing to pray continuously for so long for someone else? How many of us can even pray so thoroughly for ourselves?

When the icon is complete, that is just the beginning of its role in prayer life. In some traditions, the icon is not considered complete until it has been brought to the church to be blessed. The manner of blessing can vary as well. For example, the sprinkling of the icon with Holy water is common, as we have seen here at St. Mary's, and often at the time of House blessing families will request to have not only the home blessed in general but also specifically the icons, old and new. Another prayerful means of asking God's blessing is to bring the icon to the church and have it lay upon the altar, especially while the liturgy is being served. The Icon may be passed over the consecrated gifts, in the same manner that the *antidoron*, or holy bread, is blessed that we each receive at the end of the service. Another pious practice is to bring an icon and have it lay upon the altar for forty days before retrieving it, and these practices may all be combined as well.

Lastly, when we do receive an icon into our homes, or offices, or even our vehicles, they are not meant to be mere adornments or decorations. The Icon is a vehicle for our prayer life, as surely as candles remind us of the light of Christ, as incense reminds us of pray rising to God, as chant lifts our minds from simply thinking about God into praying to God. Icons remind us as well that our home is also the church, for the church is not the building but the people of God, and where we are, there Christ is as well. Even the little icons we hang high up should come down and be venerated once in a while. And even the large icons in the Church out to be revered from time to time, though they are not taken down and brought to the center of the church. In this way, the prayer life begun in the context of the community in which the iconographer begins continues throughout the generations to come.

This is just the beginning. Next week, as we continue to celebrate the triumph of Orthodoxy with the commemoration of St. Gregory Palamas and his defense of the theology of

God's uncreated light, we shall consider how iconography reveals to us God's glory through its prayerful use of light and color and style. Through the prayers of the Holy Iconographers, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and save us.