

Sunday of Palamas 2006 Icons and Light

A sermon by the Rev. Fr. David G. Subu
delivered on March 19, 2006

¹⁰And: “You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. ¹¹ They will perish, but You remain; And they will all grow old like a garment; ¹² Like a cloak You will fold them up, And they will be changed. But You are the same, And Your years will not fail.” (Hebrews 1:10-12)

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

Today the Church continues to celebrate the triumph of Orthodoxy in remembering St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonika. St. Gregory never sought this honor himself, preferring to live an ascetic life of prayer and fasting in the monastery, but he was called unavoidably to be the pillar of the Orthodox faith in his day and age. At the heart of what some scholars call the “Palamite controversy,” was nothing less than the same old issue that was at stake hundreds of years before in the ecumenical councils, the age of iconoclasm, and so on. What was at stake was the question of how God can be known, if at all? After all, if the creation is fallen, and changeable, and perishable, how can any part of it receive, know, or participate in the unchangeable, eternal God?

Yet St. Gregory’s theology was not so very different in then end than the theology of the iconographers who for centuries had born witness to God’s revelation to the Creation. Like the icons, St. Gregory testified that the unknowable God out of His love for mankind does indeed reveal himself to us, and the way in which we know him is through His grace, His glory, His light, His power, His energy, which is no less a *divine* part of Him than our *human* life is an inherent *human* part of us. And by His grace He unites all of humankind to Himself and through saving humanity, redeems the fallen creation to its former beauty. The icons testify to us this

same theology by the way in which the iconographer uses light and color, as well as how the subjects of the icons and their environments are stylized. Today we will once again consider the icon in its theological aspects, having last week explored its liturgical and ascetical dimensions.

First, let us consider the use of light. Traditional icons are very distinct in the way in which they use light. First we will notice that the icon does not try to depict light and shadow in a naturalistic way. There does not appear to be a source of lighting from within the image itself—no sun, no lamp. Rather the light is ubiquitous and ambient. There are no shadows cast, though the surface elements of each figure appear lighter than the deeper folds of robes. Above all, the face shines forth the brightest. This is very different than Renaissance and later art forms such as Baroque in which heavy shadows are applied as well as the technique of “forced lighting” to accomplish dramatic effects. The icon may involve some dramatic elements, yet it always remains serene, calm, at peace. We also notice that the backgrounds of icons do not yield broad expanses and uses of perspective like the Renaissance masters did. Often the distant background is little more than a light color, but most often it is simply gold, which even furthers the effect of ambient light. The use of light in this manner is most climactic then in the depiction of the halo around the head of the saints. All of these elements have a theological meaning.

First we must understand that the icon does not seek to depict nature through the eyes of the fallen world. Rather, the icons sees creation through a spiritual lens, one in which the light of Christ illumines all. No visible light source is made apparent because the ever-present light of the glory of God is the source of illumination. The faces shine with light because the face above all represents the image and likeness of God, being illuminated and transfigured by God’s glory. The simplicity of the backgrounds indicate that we are not looking at something as it is in the world but as it is in the Kingdom of Heaven which has come through Christ. The gold-leaf is the

image of the bright light of the Transfiguration which was not a one-time event but an ever-present reality which every one of us can see if our senses are cleansed and our hearts pure. This reality and possibility has been accomplished in the saints already. Therefore, the halo indicates that having seen the glory of the Lord and been restored to the original likeness God created us to have, they themselves radiate that same light by the grace of God. Even the simple technique of the painting process itself reveals this truth as dark base colors are laid first and layer by layer light is added. So too the redeemed human nature begins in darkness but is brought step by step back to the light of its Creator. The icon, properly understood, reveals to us light and human nature not as the sinful world can reveal it, but through the eyes of the saints illumined by the Holy Spirit.

This brings us to the second aspect of the icon—its style. It is easy for us to look at the icon and think that the figures and forms look the way they do because of a desire to look antiquated or traditional. It is tempting to imagine the only reason the people and things look the way they do in icons is because those people back in the real old days weren't very good at doing art realistically and since then the church has been too stuck in its ways to bother updating the style. But we know that's not true because well before iconography was established the ancient Romans and Greeks had created some of the most amazing naturalistic artworks in history. No, there is something intentional in the way in which people and places are depicted in the icons.

If we notice the faces of the saints we see several features, all of which indicate something spiritual and theological. First the nose and the mouth tend to be sharper and smaller than expected. This is to indicate the guarding of the senses against temptation and the keeping of the mouth against idle talk or wicked words. The eyes of saints are wide, peaceful, humble, expressing compassion and love, not anger nor jealousy. The heads are held not high or haughty,

but with humility and the fear of God, even when raised toward the heavens. The bodies are modestly covered, often posed in reverential attitude. Their hands are gentle, raised only in prayer. All of these things are models for our own behavior and demeanor. If we look closely, we can see that even the natural elements of the icon such as hills and trees have this same spirit of reverence. And wherever Christ is in the icon, the figures, both human and natural, all seem to bend and move towards Him naturally, smoothly in worship and love. He is the center of the icon, even when he is not directly depicted therein.

This is the mystery for us in our lives. Does our way of life, the things with which we surround and pre-occupy ourselves, as well as our demeanor, our attitude, our expression reflect the person of Christ at the center of our life? Is our life filled with the light of Christ, or do we seem to walk around in a darkness of the soul and an obscuring of our heart's true love? Do we try to pray and find that our mind is filled with fog? Do our eyes wander on the wicked things of this world or can we perceive beauty as God intended in every thing? According to the world, we should abandoned these old-fashioned icons and fill our places of worship with more contemporary, more "realistic" portrayals of Jesus. But according to the icons, it is we who need to be transformed, becoming more like them than like the world. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that when we see a truly pious and faithful Christian that they do stand out by their simplicity, their humility, their reverence. They have become icons painted in flesh and blood by the power of the Spirit.

May the same heavenly Spirit together with the Father whose years will not fail, and His only-begotten Son by whom the world was fashioned, cleanse, bless, and transfigure all of us, that we may become true icons of the light and of the day His Kingdom, always, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.