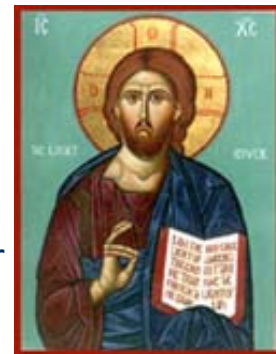


## The Icon: A Manifestation of Theology

### I.

In the original Greek, the word for "image" (imago, Latin) is "icon." Iconography began in the Old Testament. Images were indeed permitted in the Scriptures. God forbade the Hebrews to create images of God, because no one had ever seen Him: "And the Lord spake to you out of the midst of the fire a voice of words, which he heard, and ye saw no likeness, only a voice." [Dt.4:12] "Take good heed to your souls, for ye saw no image in the day wherein the Lord spake to you in Horeb in the mountain, out of the midst of the fire." [Dt.4:15] But while at the same time God forbade the Hebrews to create images of God, He spoke to Moses, giving him a command: "And thou shalt make a mercy seat, a lid of pure gold, the length of two cubits and a half, and the breadth of a cubit and a half. And thou shalt make two cherubim graven in gold, and thou shalt put them on both sides of the mercy seat. They shall be made one cherub on this side, and another cherub on the other side of the mercy seat, and thou shalt make the two cherubim on both sides. The cherubim shall stretch forth their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings; and their faces shall be toward the mercy seat. And thou shalt put into the Ark the Testimonies which I shall give thee. And I will make myself known to thee from thence, and I will speak to thee above the mercy seat between the two cherubim, which are upon the Ark of the Testimony, even in all things which I enjoin thee concerning the children of Israel." [Ex.25:17-22]

Since God Himself allowed us to see what the cherubic angels looked like, they could now be represented in form by us. But not only the images of the two cherubim's were seen as icons, but the Tabernacle itself, the icon or image of Heaven, the Holy of Holies, the Throne of God, from where God spoke to man. God prohibited images; representations of Himself simply for one reason; He had never been seen, while not forbidding the image of other things visible to us.



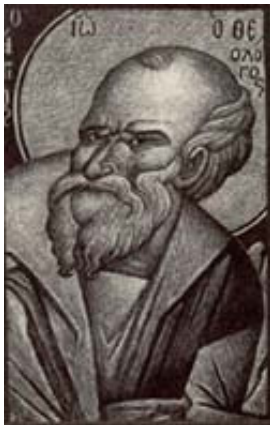
In the fullness of time, God put on flesh; He made himself a man. Now, not only had we seen God in the flesh, but we had seen His face. Now there was a certain obligation to make an icon of God in the flesh as a means of education and veneration.. The failure to depict Him in images suggested that He had not become man. One cannot separate God from Jesus Christ; it is impossible to create an icon of Christ without, at the same time, making God present.

To paint an icon of Christ, and deny the presence of God in the icon of Christ is the denial of the Divine Economy; hence, the denial of our salvation. But what is not being depicted is God's nature. Only the humanity of Christ. "Being indepictable in thy Divine nature, O Master, Thou didst deign to be depicted when, in these last days, Thou

becamest Incarnate...." [Third Sticheron of the Great Vespers for the Sunday of Orthodoxy] "While depicting Thy Divine likeness in icons, O Christ, we openly proclaim Thy Nativity..." [Kathisma of Matins, Sunday of Orthodoxy] "He who seeth Me, seeth Him that sent Me" [Jn.12:45] said the Lord. Elsewhere Christ said to Philip: "Have I been so long with you, and yet thou hast not known Me, Philip? He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, show us the Father?" [Jn.14:9]. The Church has taught Her people that, in the icon of Christ, we also "see" God the Father. Christ is the very Image or Icon of the Father; so where One is present so is the Other

## II.

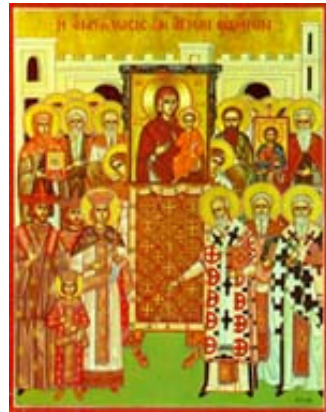
There have always been those who deny the icon: iconoclasts. On the first Sunday of Great Lent, the Orthodox Church celebrates the restoration of the Holy Icons, which were banished during the time of the Byzantine Empire, Leo III the Emperor, in the year 726. He openly took the position against the painting and veneration of icons. During this time a terrible number of Orthodox Christians were martyred --- some for painting them, for hiding icons in their homes, for publically confessing them as part of the Orthodox Faith, and declaring that the renunciation of the icon as a renunciation of Christ Himself.



Our people have understood that there are not two religious categories, one of things of primary importance, others of secondary importance. Once such a distinction is drawn, there is much trouble. In the words of St John of Damascus, "We do not change the boundries marked out by the Fathers; we keep the tradition as we have received it. We beseech, therefore, the People of God, the faithful flock, to hold fast to the ecclesiastical traditions. The gradual taking away of what has been handed down to us would be undermining the foundation stones, and would in short time overthrow the whole structure" (On the Holy Icons). The defense of the icons, is the defense of the Orthodox Faith. To defend the Faith, is to defend Christ. This is why so many fathers, and mothers, children, teachers, monks, priest, and bishops, have shed their very blood willingly, knowing that this act of martyrdom would secure the Faith and strengthen the flock of Christ.

And so, for those who gave their lives and shed their blood for the sake of the Holy Icons, for the celebration of the victory of the re-establishment of the icons for veneration, and worship, the Church has set aside a special day, the Sunday of Orthodoxy. The fact that God had become incarnate is the basic theology as to why the Theotokos, and the Saints, and the Angels may be depicted. Now man, in his deified state, may now be depicted in the icon, since God deigned to dwell in us. We do not worship man, but the Holy Trinity Who sanctifies the object by His Grace . It is not idolatry when reverencing the Saint, because the veneration is not to the human person, but to God who

dwells in him, who sanctifies him. We venerate and worship the icon, but adoration belongs to God. We honor and venerate the Saints for their service to the Creator. "I will dwell in them and walk in them, as God hath said" [Cor.2, 6:19]. As well: "If a man love Me, he will keep My words, and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him and make Our abode with him" [Jn.14:23] "Know ye not," says the apostle Paul, "that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you?" [Cor.1, 6:19] Also, Saint John of Damscus says: "During their life, the Saints are full of the Holy Spirit. After their death, the Grace of the Holy Spirit continues to dwell inseperable in their souls, in their bodies, in their sepulchres, in their images and their holy icons, and this not by essence, but by Grace and energy."



The icon is one of the many mysteries of the Orthodox Church. It is not merely paint set upon a canvas, or a piece of wood as if it were a lifeless artifice of the human imagination. Christ, the Theotokos, the Saints, and angels, are mysteriously present in their icons; mystically, spiritually, by the Uncreated Energies of God. The forms and their surroundings are not arbitrary. The icon is not just another form of art. It is the standard for all art. It is art par excellence. Iconography is historically and theologically factual. Imagination, personal ideas, human emotion, and the self, has no place in iconography.

### III.

The iconographer, just as all Orthodox Christians, must be humble of heart. Contrition will purify his heart to enable him to see clearly his task. Or rather so that he may have the Holy Spirit dwelling in him fully, in order to allow God to work through Him.

Dr. Constantine Cavarnos, a friend of the late Photios Kontoglou of blessed memory, and author of the book, "Byzantine Thought And Art" says, "With regard to the creation of works of spiritual art, Kontoglou holds that there is presupposed a certain inward state. Such works, he believes, cannot be created "by any carnal man, even though he be the greatest master." They can be produced [i.e., icons] only by an artist, even though he be unlettered, who fasts, prays, and lives "in a state of contrition and humility." For only then is the soul "imbued with Grace, soars upward with spiritual wings, and becomes capable of representing the deep realm of mysteries."

This is also true for those who gaze upon the icon. In other words, if a man is carnal, worldly, and has his cares in this world, or if he is impious, then his spiritual awareness belongs to the Devil. If a mans heart desires the things of the world then he cannot comprehend the mystery, or the beauty of the spiritual and sanctified world. Dr. Cavarnos continues, "Similarly, says Kontoglou, the beauty expressed by such works is not perceived by carnal, sophisticated, impious men any

more than is the truth and beauty of "the Gospels and of everything that emits a spiritual fragrance." Such persons only understand the language of the senses; spiritual art, however, "does not address itself to the senses, but to the spirit."

The iconographer is merely a tool. The Holy Spirit is the conductor, the guide. The paint brush is empty and is useless, unless the painter picks up the brush and guides it along. It is the same with the iconographer. The iconographer is like the brush, and the Holy Spirit is the conductor.

Not just any color, but "sacred colors", forms, "mystical forms", and appearance can be given to the garments or the background of the icon. The face is the central focus of the icon. There is a unique approach to it. The icon must bring to the heart and mind, to the soul and spirit, the presence of God, and His grace in a literal way.



The face, along with the subtle gestures of the body; the feet, and hands, the entire body, even the posture is significant. Even the technique of applying the paint to the drawing, which will become the icon, makes the difference between a truly beautiful icon, and one that is flawed. These features make the icon meek, and humble, or intense and powerful. One may see Compassion and contrition in one icon, and in another, one sees judgment, sternness. Each one of these expressions can move him or her who gazes upon the icon to a greater spiritual level of faith.

Dr. Constantine Cavarnos says that Photios Kontoglou "emphasizes the simplicity, clarity, restraint, power, originality and great spirituality of Byzantine art", this is to say iconography. He continues, "This art, he [Kontoglou] observes, is "an art with most powerful character and with the greatest spirituality and originality." Dr. Cavarnos continues, "But there are many, Kontoglou is aware, who think very differently. They look down upon Byzantine art" [icons] "because it lacks naturalness. He does not deny that Byzantine paintings and mosaics lack what is called "naturalness." But he observes that painting is not good because it is "natural," in the sense of observing carefully the anatomical structure of the body and the principles of perspective, but for other reasons. A work may look "natural and precisely for that reason not be good." Thus the hands and feet in a Byzantine icon may appear unnatural, yet they are truer, more expressive, more artistic than the hands that have been painted, say by Raphael."

"Byzantine iconography, then, is not to be condemned for not being naturalistic, realistic, or for not reproducing faithfully the external world. For its aim is something very different. Byzantine iconography has a religious function. It seeks to express spiritual things in order thereby to help man rise to a higher level of being, to lift his soul to the blessedness of God." Iconography is not meant to serve the passions, but calm them, to bring the onlooker into a truer, and higher reality than

secular, worldly art. When we gaze upon the icon, when we pray before the icon, we are in communion with God and His Saints. The icons intention is to bring about repentance, and to ask God to lift our minds and hearts, to a less worldly, but more pious level of spirituality. The icon should soothe the passions and calm our rage. When we look at the icon, the icon will suggest to our minds to pray, if we are spiritually opened to its message. Mr. Cavarnos tells us that, "Kontoglou emphatically places inner, spiritual beauty above external beauty, and spiritual art above secular art. External, Physical beauty, he remarks, is shallow and perishable, while spiritual beauty is deep and imperishable. Physical beauty arouses the outer senses; spiritual beauty, the inner senses-- it makes us feel reverence, humility, contrition, the "gladdening sorrow" of which Saint John of Climacos speaks."

#### IV.

When we venerate the icon, when we kiss them, when we speak to Christ, or the Theotokos, and the Saints and the angels through the icon, they receive our kiss, they hear our voice. By the power of divine Grace these actions pass through the icon and are received by the prototype. Leonid Ouspensky the writer of the book "Theology Of The Icon" says that, "The icon is venerable and holy precisely because it portrays and bears his name". Meaning, that the icon is holy simply because of the Saint who's name is on the icon. When the iconographer has finished painting the icon, the last thing he/she puts on the icon is the name of the Saint. At once, as soon as the name is painted on the icon, the Saint becomes present in the icon, and at this point is what makes the icon holy, but not only the spirit of the Saint, but the Grace and mystical energy of God enters into it. Ouspensky continues: "This is why grace, characteristic of the prototype, is present in the icon. In other words, it is the grace that the relationship between the faithful and the Saint is brought about through the intermediary of the icon of the Saint. The icon participates in the holiness of its prototype and, through the icon, we in turn participate in this holiness in our prayers." Dr. Alexander Kalomiros, lay theologian, and author of "Against False Union", and "Figures Of Things Celestial", tells us "Through the icon, we participate in that holiness according to the measure of the purity of our hearts; we receive the Grace which flows from the material of the ikon. We are mystically sanctified by the operation of the Holy Spirit." Dr. Kalomiros continues, "The ikons show us poor men the Kingdom of God coming with power, according to the measure of man's capacity and receptivity, even as the Transfiguration of Our Lord on Tabor revealed His glory to the three disciples "as each one could endure." The iconographer possesses an unbelievable gift from God. He/She is able to bring the Saints, the angels, the Theotokos, and even Christ God Himself to earth. They are present with us, in their icons. They are there in a very literal way; mystically, spiritually. "In truth, how strange is God's will! He has chosen humble matter, which we despise, to make it into a vehicle of His Grace. The oil of Holy Unction, the water of Baptism, the myrrh of Holy Chrism, the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist the bodies of the Saints, and their ikons; all these material

things, nevertheless, raise us to Heaven, much more than those great and sublime ideas which we men conceive with our poor minds."  
[Alexandar Kalomiros]