

FIGURES OF THINGS CELESTIAL  
By Dr. Alexander Kalomiros

TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTION

*"Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God,  
and Him only shalt thou adore" (Mt.4:10).*

*In all matters, the Holy Fathers of the Church sought always, insofar as it was possible, in combating the diverse heresies, to make use of the very words of the Holy Scriptures themselves. This was true also of their strategy in refuting the iconoclasts of the 8th century.*

*In their Introduction to the decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the editors of the NICENE AND POST NICENE series correctly observe:*

The Council decreed that similar veneration and honour should be paid to the representations of the Lord and of the Saints as was accustomed to be paid to the "laurata" and tablets representing the Christian emperors, to wit, that they should be bowed to, and saluted with kisses, and attended with lights and the offering of incense. But the Council was most explicit in declaring that this was merely a veneration of honour and affection, such as can be given to the creature, and that under no circumstances could the adoration of divine worship be given to them, but to God alone.

The Greek language has in this respect a great advantage over the Hebrew, the Latin and the English; it has a word which is a general word and is properly used of the affectionate regard and veneration shown to any person or thing, whether to the divine Creator or to any of His creatures. This word is *prosýnesis*; it has also another word which can properly be used to denote only the worship due to the most high God, this word is *latría*. When, then, the Council defined that the worship of "latría" was never to be given to any but God alone, it cut off all possibility of idolatry, mariolatry, iconolatry, or any "latry" except "theolatry". If, therefore, any of these other "latrías" exist or ever have existed, they exist or have existed not in accordance with, but in defiance of the decree of the Second Council of Nicea.

*Contrary to popular opinion, however, even our English term "worship" does not possess the rigid implications which some have sought to ascribe to it. The primary definition of "worship" is "to honour or revere as a supernatural being or power or as a holy thing, to regard or treat with honour or respect, to salute, bow down to" (Oxford Universal Dictionary, p. 2153). Furthermore, the term "worshipful" is commonly applied to persons "distinguished in respect of character or rank, entitled to honour or respect on this account" (ibid). To this day, it is a title ascribed to "justices of the peace, aldermen, recorders, the London city companies, and freemasons' lodges and their masters. . . to mayors, and the sheriffs" and later, to magistrates as well (ibid).*

*On the other hand, the term "adoration" is not so flexible, especially as regards things Divine. By definition, to adore is "to make an act of the mind and the will in acknowledgement of the infinite perfection of God; to make an outward reverence expressing such an act" (ibid, p 26). Indeed, even in Roman Catholic secondary schools to this day, a point is made of the fact that "adoration" is to be rendered to God alone.*

*This distinction, as the editors of the Nicene Series point out in their above mentioned Introduction, is made most clear and manifest in Matthew 4.; "Thou shalt worship (proskynéseis) the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou adore (latreúseis)." "Worship" was due indeed to God above all, but not exclusively to Him, whereas "adoration" is to be given to "Him only".*

*These, too, were the very terms which the Holy Fathers employed in their conciliar definition. And, though it may be true that, to a certain extent, the words "worship" and "adoration" do not possess that particular distinctness which their Greek counterparts possess, nonetheless they do to a very great degree possess its essence. Indeed, if the term "worship" can be used to honour the Lord Mayor of Dublin, who could refuse to apply the same term in our reverence of the sacred icons?*

*In conclusion, it would be appropriate to quote here the Seventh Council's letter to the emperor and empress. The letter points out that St Paul "says of Jacob (Hb.11:21) 'He worshipped the top of his staff', and like to this is that said by Gregory, surnamed the Theologian, 'Revere Bethlehem and worship the manger'. But who of those truly understanding the Divine Scripture would suppose that here adoration, 'latría', was intended? Such an opinion could only be entertained by a simpleton or one ignorant of Scriptural and Patristic knowledge. Would Jacob give divine worship to his staff? Or would Gregory the Theologian command us to worship the manger as though it were God?"*

*Holy Transfiguration Monastery*

### PART ONE

On the first Sunday of Great Lent, our Church celebrates the feast of the Restoration of the Veneration and Worship of the Holy Icons, after the terrible persecution against the Orthodox which was started by the heretical Iconoclasts, throughout the Byzantine Empire. During this period, a great number of Christians were martyred: some for hiding icons in their homes, others for confessing that there was no Orthodoxy without icons, and that he who renounced icons has in reality renounced Christ Himself.

In our day and age, it would be considered by many to be narrow-mindedness, fanaticism, worship of empty forms, and folly to sacrifice one's life for confessing one's belief in such insignificant "details". It is true that Christians of today are willing to betray, and that without too much remorse, not only icons, but also their Faith. We see some who applaud those who are bartering our Church's Tradition to the Pope and to other heretics.

Nevertheless, the Church of Christ has not considered the matter of icons a "detail". Pastors and flocks have understood that there cannot be things of primary and things of secondary importance in matters of Faith, for our Faith resembles a knitted object which begins to unravel when even one stitch is undone. This is why so many fathers, mothers, children, monks, teachers and bishops have shed their blood willingly, knowing that it would serve to water and strengthen the tree of Orthodoxy. And so, for the celebration of the re-establishment of the veneration of icons after this victory, the Church set aside this chosen day, the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

### CONTEMPORARY ICONOCLASTS

Is the question of icons, which many of our contemporaries consider as no more than a mere detail, really of such great importance that the Church had to attach to the icon the very idea of the *true* Way of thought, of the *right* Faith?

To understand the meaning of the icon in our Faith and in Orthodox life, we need not exhume the ancient Byzantine Iconoclasts; for, in our time, we have our own. They can be divided into three categories.

1. The Protestants, or Evangelicals, as they sometimes call themselves. These reject icons and banish them from their assemblies. Protestants consist of a multitude of heresies which fight one with another. Nonetheless, they are united on this one point: the rejection of icons.

2. The Papists, or "Catholics" as they call themselves. In theory, they recognize and accept icons, but for them the icon is not a sacred object, but simply an ornament, it is not an icon, but a religious painting. There is nothing sacred or holy in it. It is a human concoction which follows current fashion in its style, as do all other human creations.

3. The "Orthodox" whose faith is vacillating, and who are ready to follow the former or the latter. Some are even indifferent to icons. They are influenced by the Protestants who say that icons are material objects, gross, incompatible with the religion of Christ, which is completely spiritual. Yet others permit icons in their homes and in church, but these icons differ in nothing from those of the Papists, being deprived of all sacred character; they are secular works of art, and have no relation to Christ or His saints, whose names they may well carry. They are nothing but melodramatic or affected representations of Christ and His saints.

#### THE INDEPICTABLE GOD

Let us now see what the first of these iconoclasts, the Protestants, think of icons. Their arguments are the same as those of the Byzantine Iconoclasts. The Protestants maintain that the custom of painting icons has no foundation in the Old or New Testaments. Neither Christ nor His apostles have ordered us to make icons. On the contrary, in the Old Testament, God categorically forbids it:

*Thou shalt not make to thyself an idol, nor likeness of any thing, whatever things are in heaven above, and whatever things are in the earth beneath, and whatever are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor serve them, for I am the Lord thy God, a jealous God, recompensing the sins of the fathers upon the children of the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." (Ex.20:4-5)*

*Lest ye transgress and make to yourselves a carved likeness, any kind of image, the likeness of male or female... Take heed to yourselves lest ye forget the covenant of the Lord our God, which He made with you, and ye make to yourselves a graven likeness of any of the things concerning which the Lord thy God commanded thee. For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, a jealous God." (Dt.4:16, 23-24).*

The Protestants say that in the primitive Church, there were no such things as icons. Icons were introduced into the Church as an evil imitation of pagan practice.

And what do the Holy Fathers answer to the arguments of the iconoclasts? Let us see.

It is true that God forbade the Israelites to make an image of God. But what image could be made of God? Had they seen God? In the same chapter of Deuteronomy, where He forbids the Hebrews to make an image of Him, God gives this reason:

*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).*

When I spoke to you, said God, in the fire of Mount Horeb you heard only My voice. You saw no image nor figure of Me. Therefore, if you wish to make something in My image, it will certainly not be in My image; for you have seen no image of Me. It will only be an idol, something that resembles a man or a woman, or some animal that walks on the land or crawls at the bottom of the sea, or some other creature. That which has happened to the pagans who do not know God, will happen to you: some have deified men, others animals, others stars or other creatures.

And Deuteronomy repeats once again:

*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).*

Thus the Hebrews had good reason not to make any image of God. What image could they make of Him? They had heard only His voice, and a voice has no image.

As we can see, God was not hostile to images. He forbade the Hebrews to represent Him only because He is Spirit, the only truly unmaterial Being. An unmaterial spirit cannot be painted unless it takes upon itself a figure and appear to men.

When God revealed Himself and spoke to the Israelites, He did not adopt a form. It was thus impossible to make an image of Him. If the Hebrews had tried to make one, it would not have been that of God, but a false image, an idol.

"THOU SHALT MAKE TWO CHERUBIM."

However, the Fathers continue their reply to the iconoclasts of all times: It is false to say that the Scriptures forbid images. As a matter of fact, while God was forbidding the Hebrews to represent Him in images, He besought of Moses the following strange things:

*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 each other, the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy-seat. And thou shalt set the mercy-seat on the Ark above, 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).*

In another book of the Old Testament, we read the following narration:

*When Moses entered the Tabernacle of Testimony to speak to God, then he heard the voice of the Lord speaking to him from above the mercy-seat, which is upon the Ark of the Testimony between the two cherubim and he spake unto him (Nm.7:89).*

Thus we see that, when Moses entered the Tabernacle of Testimony, he heard the voice of the Lord speaking to him from between the two icons of the cherubim, placed over the Ark of the Testimony.

Now, can you see how much the Protestants and all the other iconoclasts err when they pretend that the Holy Scriptures, or rather, God does not want images? And not only the images of the two cherubim, but the Tabernacle itself may be seen as an icon, an icon of Heaven, of the Holy of Holies, the Throne of God, whence God spoke to men, where stood the cherubim, celestial beings who enjoy such familiarity with God that they stand next to His Throne.

And even if God had never enjoined men to make icons, what of it? St Theodore the Studite says: Nowhere do we see Christ ordering His apostles to write even a line, no more than He Himself wrote even to give us an example. But nevertheless, His apostles have depicted His icon *in words* in the New Testament. Why should we consider it a natural thing to describe Him in books, but unnatural to describe Him with colours in icons?

#### THE WITNESS OF THE CATACOMBS

As we have already seen, the Protestants claim also that in the first days of Christianity there were no icons. But the catacombs of Rome have confounded them. They are full of mural paintings of Christ, the Virgin, and the martyrs of those days, as well as icons engraved on metal, like the one representing the apostles Peter and Paul. We also find some on the sacred vessels of the first centuries, and we are still finding more. There were crucifixes worn by the martyrs, such as the one found at Tomi (Constanta) in Romania, in the region of the gold mines, where Christians condemned "*ad metala*" were sent by the emperors for hard labour.

But suppose the Protestants were correct in maintaining that there were no icons in the primitive Church, what of it? The primitive Church did not even have the Holy Scriptures (of the New Testament) compiled as such. Only little by little was the New Testament collected. Furthermore, the books of the New Testament were manuscripts only found here and there. It is only much later that the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, selected from among a large number of similar writings and compiled those which were authentic, true and unadulterated into what She now calls the New Testament.

Must we then destroy the New Testament because it did not exist as such from the very beginning? But what was there in the very beginning? Were there any churches? The first liturgies were celebrated in upper rooms and in catacombs. Must we also continue this custom?

It is precisely because the Church of the first centuries was poor, exposed to continual persecutions, and did not as yet have artists, nor the means to create many icons, that those found in the catacombs are worthy of our admiration, in that they were painted underground, without any sunlight, but only by candlelight and under the sword of the persecutor.

#### PROFESSION OF THE INCARNATION

Perhaps many will tell us: "We admit that, in Christianity, it is permitted to make icons, and we even recognize their beauty, and admit that they are appropriate church ornaments; but don't tell us that the icon is indispensable for Christianity, nor insist that those fanatics who were martyred for the sake of icons during the iconoclast persecutions, knew what they were doing when they were defending the icons, and that icons were really worth the shedding of their blood".

But why then were so many people martyred during those iconoclast persecutions? For the same reason that the first Christian era was filled with martyrs; they sacrificed themselves lest they renounce Christ.

But others will say: "Were the Iconoclasts not Christians? When did they force the

Orthodox to renounce Christ?" It is true that the Iconoclasts called themselves Christians, just as our contemporary iconoclasts, the Protestants and Roman Catholics, consider themselves "Christians." But it is not enough to call oneself a Christian to be one; the Byzantine Iconoclasts, like our contemporary iconoclasts, are deniers of Christ, and here is why:

We have seen that God, while forbidding the Hebrews to make His image, commanded Moses to make icons (images) of the two cherubim and to place them in the Holy of Holies, specifying in great detail how they should be made. Why, then, did God, Who ordered the representation of the two cherubim forbid His own image to be made? Simply because He had not as yet manifested Himself in a visible form to men.

But when the "fullness of time" had come, and God had put on flesh and had made Himself man, we, having seen His form and having seen the face of God, had then not only the right to make this image, but the duty, the obligation; for not making an icon of God in the flesh He had put on, amounts to a refusal to proclaim that God was made man.

The denial of the icon is tantamount to a denial of Christ, to a denial of the Divine Economía, to a denial of our salvation. Here is how the Church sings this truth: *"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).* And: *"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"* said the Lord (Jn.12:45). And elsewhere He said to Phillip, who had asked Him to show him the Father: *"Have I been so long with you, and yet thou hast not known Me, Phillip? He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then show us the Father?" (Jn.14:9)*

And this is exactly what the Church does throughout the centuries, in that while showing to her children the icon of Christ, she shows them the icon of the Heavenly Father. She teaches and confesses that the Heavenly and Unapproachable God had taken flesh, and was made man out of love for us men. And now we see what God we worship, for we see Him face to face.

How true are the words of St John of Damascus: *"What the Gospels reveal through words, the painter shows us through his work."*

Thus, for the Church, the Gospel and the icons are of equal importance and value. Every iconoclastic disposition is an antichristian folly; since, in the Person of Christ, God has manifested His face to the world, it is an insult on our part to reject it. All those who are vexed and hindered by the icons while in prayer are, in reality, vexed by the Incarnate God. It is as if they were saying that Christ had done badly in taking human form and nature. The Jews and Moslems are, at least, consistent in their rejection of icons, for they deny the Incarnation of God. But the Protestants and other iconoclasts are not so sensible, and are without any justification.

We can attain the Father, the immaterial, formless, incomprehensible God, only through the Son, just as the Lord Himself said; for the Son has come to us in the flesh, that is in specific form. How could we reject this form (icon) without running the real risk of never reaching the Father? *"No man hath seen God at any time,"* says St John the Theologian, *"the Only Begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared Him" (Jn.1:18).* And St John of Damascus writes: *"God, Who has no body nor form could not, in the past, be represented. But now that He has come in the flesh and has dwelt among men, I can depict His visible form."*

Like the Gospel, the icon speaks of the Truth. *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,"* said Christ. Without any doubt. Truth can now be depicted. Truth is not an abstract thing; it is not one or many concepts. It is something concrete, living; it is a Person, the Person of the Incarnate Christ.

When we represent the Person of Christ in an icon, we describe neither His Divine nor His human nature, for neither can be depicted. In the icon, we portray the Person of Christ. i.e., the incarnate Hypostasis of One of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, in Whom the Divine and human nature is united without confusion or division in a manner surpassing comprehension.

In the portrait of any given man, we do not represent human nature, which is undepictable and incomprehensible; even so in the icon of Christ, we do not portray nor represent the Divine Nature, which is inaccessible and incomprehensible. Only the Person of Christ, who voluntarily made Himself man, is portrayed.

#### CONFESSION OF DEIFICATION

So much for the icons of Christ. The representation of the saints in icons is a natural consequence of the representation of Christ. The Incarnation of Christ is also the basic theological foundation for the icons of the Theotokos and the saints, for it is through the Incarnation of God that the possibility of deification was given to man.

If the saints were represented upon icons as mere men, no one would ask Christians why they represent them. No one would be scandalized at the portrait of a man. But the saints are not represented on icons as mere men, as in portraits, but as men worthy of veneration, as sanctified men, deified by Divine energy (Mt.5:9; 2Pt. 1:4).

This is a great stumbling stone to the infidel and the iconoclast. "You are idolators" say the Protestants, "You worship wooden idols and images of men."

We do not worship images of men, O blind ones! but the Grace, the power of God which dwells in those men, in their bodies, in their bodies just as it does in their souls.

Idolatry is the worship of a false god; for God Himself is in no wise material and, when you form a material image of the unmaterial God, you have formed an idol in your mind. It is not idolatry to worship a sacred object, such as an icon, the Gospel, or the Cross, since the veneration is not toward the object itself, nor to a false god, but to the True God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Who sanctifies the object. It is not idolatry to venerate a creature, when the veneration and the worship redound to the Creator Who sanctifies it. Christianity is not an abstract philosophy. It is the worship of a specific Person, the worship of Christ, of God Who took flesh and bones upon Himself to sanctify the matter of the universe. In Christ, all creation has been sanctified, and matter has become a channel by which God's Grace comes to men.

We venerate and worship the icon but we do not render it the adoration and service due to God alone.

It is God alone Whom we adore and serve. It is because we adore God that we venerate and worship His icon, and the icons of those in whom He has taken up His dwelling. Adoration is one thing, veneration and worship another. The same applies to the honour and veneration which we render the saints. We honour and venerate the saints because they are vessels of God's Grace. When we honour the saints and venerate their icons, we adore God Who sanctified them.

The body of a saint, in life and after death, is a dwelling place of the Holy Trinity: *"I will dwell in them and walk in them, as God hath said" (2 Cor.6:16). "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?" (1 Cor.6:19).*

The bodies of the saints are vessels of God's Grace both during their life and after their death, and each one of us should come and avail ourselves of the Grace given them. This is why we Orthodox Christians venerate the relics of the saints, their "tabernacles" as we call them. This is why the icons of the saints, just like their "tabernacles", i.e., their bodies, work miracles; for within these material objects there dwells the Grace of God.

St John of Damascus says: "During their life, the saints are full of the Holy Spirit. After their death, the Grace of the Holy Spirit continues to dwell inseparable in their souls, in their bodies, in their sepulchres, in their images and their holy icons, and this not by essence, but by God's Grace and energy."\*

#### LADDER TO THE HEAVENS

This is why we, the Orthodox, venerate the icons. By the Grace of God, the icon participates in the holiness of its prototype. Through the icon, we participate in that holiness according to the measure of the purity of our hearts; we receive the Grace which flows forth from the material of the icon. We are mystically sanctified by the operation of the Holy Spirit.

The icon is thus one of the paths which lead us to God; it is a ladder which allows us to climb from earth to Heaven. In the same manner, the temple, the church where we assemble for various services and the Divine Liturgy, is a "Heaven on earth," as the Fathers say. Christ is present there through His Body and Blood, and His icon. His all-holy Mother is also present through her icon. All the saints and the Heavenly powers are also present through their icons, placed upon the iconostas and on the walls. During the Liturgy, the faithful who are assembled in the church commune with Heaven, because the liturgical prayers and the icons which are there lift them up. Let us not consider this to be merely psychological phenomena, a purely intellectual elevation attained by the words of the prayers and the icons which remind us of Heaven. Not at all: The lifting up of the faithful is a mystery. It is possible that they feel nothing at the moment; nevertheless, mystically, interiorly, when they commune of the Immaculate Mysteries, they are lifted up, regardless of the thoughts and feelings which at the moment rule within them. It is the action of Divine Grace which raises them up and sanctifies them.

In truth, how strange is God's will: He has chosen humble matter, which we despise, to

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\*Note: The Holy Scriptures provide us with some insights regarding the working of Divine Grace in the Saints of God. In these passages from Scripture, we see that God chooses to work in the Saints not only spiritually — for example, in their souls — but also materially, through physical things associated with them. A few examples from the Holy Scriptures will serve to demonstrate the Church's belief:

a) "Wondrous is God in His Saints, even the God of Israel" [Ps. 67:35 Septuag.]

b) "In the Saints that are in His earth hath the Lord been wondrous; He hath wrought all His desires in them" [Ps. 15:3 Septuag.]

c) "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me..."[Gal. 2:20].

d) "And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: so that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them" [Acts 19:12].

e) "...They brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them.....and they were healed every one [Acts 5:15, 16].

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 icons; 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.

## PART TWO

### THE FALSIFICATION

Let everything we have said so far be considered as an answer to all the modern day iconoclasts, i.e., the Protestants, Evangelicalists and Reformed, say against us.

But as we have said at the beginning, there is also a second kind of iconoclast, those who accept icons, but who distort them and alter their true meaning, considering them as nothing more than religious and ornamental objects, decorations brimming with the spirit of the world and of the flesh. These iconoclasts are actually Papists, followers of the Pope, but they wish to call themselves "Catholics". They are much worse than the former; for it is better to cast out the icons of Christ and of His saints from our homes and churches rather than to introduce paintings which distort and thereby ridicule sacred persons, debase our religion in the eyes of the people of this world, and dim the brightness of the spiritual flame which must be born in them through God's Grace.

The "Catholic" Church has commissioned great painters to decorate her churches, but were these painters true Christians? Surely not. These painters took from the streets beautiful youths, with traits more feminine than masculine, had them pose as models, and, with a bit of imagination, produced as a result a "Christ" full of carnal beauty, with melodramatic features, with affected expressions and gestures alien to the Christian spirit. Further, we know from history that some of their most beautiful paintings of the Virgin were modeled by the renowned prostitutes of those times. Others were the mistresses of the painters themselves. This was also true in regard to the representations of different saints.

With the tolerance and often even the approbation and admiration of the Papal Church, these painters presented to mankind the sanctified personages of our Faith in a manner far removed from reality. Their primary aim was to show their talents and nothing else. They cared very little for raising to Heaven the souls of the faithful who admired their work, for they sought only to fill their eyes and souls with vain, carnal beauty, alien to the spirit of the Gospel. This is why this type of iconoclast is far more dangerous than the first. It is, in fact, more honourable to deny icons, than to accept icons which, instead of expounding Christ's religion, teach an altered and adulterated religion, a religion made unrecognizable by the distorted persons one depicts. It is preferable to have no icons than to have icons which enervate the souls of the faithful, pervert their spirits and grossly misrepresent Christianity.

### AN EXPRESSION OF THE TRUTH

The Westerners say that it is normal for various schools of religious painting to exist, because every painter attempts to paint Christ to the best of his ability and as beautiful as he may conceive Him to be. But Christ and His saints were real people; we do not have the right to paint them as we imagine, even with a pious imagination.

In Christianity, like the written or spoken word, the icon speaks of Truth. It is impossible to paint Christ just as anyone might picture Him, for it is no longer Him we paint but an imaginary character which is arbitrarily called Christ. By referring to such a portrait as "Jesus Christ," we tell an enormous lie and thereby deceive men. Christ must be represented as He is and not as we think He is.

Orthodox iconography is a realism art *par excellence*. Imagination has no place in it. The

icon, like the Holy Scriptures, is based on historical fact. It describes the historical facts of our Faith with colours and form, whereas Holy Scriptures do the same with the written word. Therefore, an Orthodox icon can express nothing but what the Holy Scriptures say. In an icon, Christ must appear as He appears in the Holy Scriptures and in the conscience of the Church. A saint must also appear on an icon as he appeared in history and in the collected Lives of the Saints. It is impious and inadmissible for one to make use of fantasy to describe facts from the life of our Lord by the written or oral word. It is equally impious and inadmissible to use one's fancy to paint the same events with a brush.

The truth which the Church proclaims can be adulterated not only by the word but also through the icon; and it is not only by writing or speaking that we are in danger of becoming heretics but also by painting.

#### PURIFICATION OF THE SENSES

How, then, can an iconographer remain Orthodox? How will he avoid the easy fall of falsifying the Truth with his brush? How will he accomplish the difficult task of portraying the Truth in the countenances of Christ and of His saints whom he paints? The path the iconographer must follow in his work is not different from that of the preacher, or of the writer of religious books. It is no different than the road of every Christian who wishes to believe rightly.

What must a Christian do to be Orthodox? First he must be humble and have a feeling of his own nothingness and sinfulness. Humility and contrition will purify his heart that he may see clearly. "Pride compels a man to contrive innovations, since it cannot suffer what is ancient," writes St Ephraim the Syrian. The Christian must fast and pray with compunction. He must humbly follow the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, try to imitate their lives, that he might become worthy of the light from on high. These same things apply also to the iconographer who wishes to paint Orthodox icons. He must be humble. He must look at how the pious iconographers of the Church have been painting icons throughout the centuries even to our own day, and he must paint like them, without innovating or abandoning "what is ancient." He must pray very much and fast so that God may open the eyes of his soul that he may see what is true and what is false, what is spiritual and what is carnal. He must have heroic strength not to submit to the tastes of those who commission him to paint, be they priests, the parish council or foolish persons who, unfortunately, do not know what an Orthodox icon is, and cannot discern what is aesthetic and what is not.

#### REALISM PAR EXCELLENCE

Perhaps someone will think: If Orthodox iconography is a realistic art *par excellence*, which admits no exercise of our imagination, then the best icon would be a photograph, or what, at any rate, most resembles a photograph; for a person can be represented only by this with perfect objectivity.

There is no greater error than to believe that a photograph can represent a man. No photograph has ever represented him, and the millions of pictures taken to date have not been able to achieve this. A photograph brings out the appearance, the external characteristics of man, but it cannot represent the interior reality: man in his fullness. Photography pictures man as he appears, but not as he is in reality. A great and admirable painter is he who, while painting a portrait of a man, at the same time is able to express the underlying qualities of the man's soul, heart and spirit, as also is he who, while painting nature and created things, can by forms express the causes and the mystery of things that be. Such an art, true art, can come only from the Truth, and only the Church of Christ can give birth to it. This art is Orthodox

iconography, or, as secular people call it, "Byzantine painting." Only the icon can depict a being and, at the same time, express the truth of his countenance; only it has the strength to represent the holiness, the Divine light, the radiance of Divine love, the charity, the humility, the contrition and the purity that is hidden mysteriously in the facial expressions of the saints. Only it can show to those who have spiritual eyes the new creation inaugurated by the Incarnation of God: the deification of man.

The icons 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 spiritual things, which this sacred art reveals to our eyes cannot be perceived by all, but only by those who are capable of understanding the depth of the spiritual beauty of Orthodox liturgical icons. Others see only their aesthetic beauty, if that.

The icon does not represent the perishable body of a saint, but the eternal reality of his person. This is why we say that Orthodox iconography is *par excellence* realistic, for it does not limit itself to a faithful representation of but one of the aspects of a material and sentimental reality, but, with the poor means at man's disposal, it renders all the reality of the human being, the reality of the deified man. Through the visible, the Church beholds the invisible; through what is temporal, She sees the eternal. In the liturgical icon, strange and incomprehensible encounters occur: eternity is revealed in time. Heaven comes down to earth and encompasses mortals. This is why the Fathers say that that building where the faithful assemble, the temple or the church, with its icons painted on the walls and on wood, with all that is said there, and all that is celebrated there is an icon, an image of Heaven, a realization of Heaven, though made with perishable means on this perishable earth.

To paint the icon of a saint, one must have tasted of sanctity; one must have lived the experience of the Grace of God. One must have received the Divine light, as far as this is possible to the soul. The painter who does not possess all this must be very careful, for every brush stroke can lead him to heresy. There is only one path left to him: He must walk faithfully in the footsteps of the ancient iconographers, and paint strictly as they did. This is how he can keep himself from all error, and thus give his works the seal of eternity. And spiritually he will be profited, for by adhering to the types left by our fathers, he also will taste of eternity and participate in the experience of the holy iconographers of the past, that is, the life of the Church.

#### THE GOOD TRANSFORMATION

Many Christians are offended by the ascetic aspect of Orthodox icons; they are even frightened by the austere expression of Christ and His saints in our iconography. They desire a very human Christ. Most of them want to see only a man in the icon of Christ. They fear to find themselves before God. But Christ is God-Man! Woe to those who wish to represent Him only as a man to the eyes of the world: All those who represent Christ as an ordinary man in saccharine icons, and those who introduce these cheap reproductions into their homes and churches in no wise differ from the heretic who teaches that Christ is not God, but a simple man, even if in their inexcusable indifference, they do not understand their error and sin.

As we said before, a man does not become a heretic by word of pen only, but also by the icons he accepts in his home or church. This is why Saint John of Damascus said these fearful words: "*Show me the icons you venerate, and I will tell you what you believe.*" If St John came into our homes and saw our icons, who knows how many of us he would find

Orthodox? On the other hand, if we examine those who alter the iconographic tradition, we shall find that they trample also other matters of the Faith, and that, in general, they have a "natural" faith, as the Apostle Paul would have said, that is to say, sentimental, shallow, false, not at all spiritual.

Let not the ascetic aspect of the icons of Christ and His saints frighten us; this austere and sorrowful aspect conceals the whole mystery of piety in Christ. We must not forget that the majority of saints, as we chant in church have "by the streams of their tears cultivated the barrenness of the desert; and by their sighings from the depths they bare fruit a hundred-fold in labours." Let us not think that this sorrow in Christ, this life of tears and sighs, is wearisome and full of misfortune. On the contrary, affliction in Christ is the only way to Heavenly bliss, of which the saints taste while still in this world: it is the gladdening sorrow of which the Fathers speak, a mingling of joy and sadness, full of serenity, humility and love. St Isaac the Syrian writes, *"No one knows the joy which comes from tears, save he who has given his soul over to this labour."* It is thus through affliction in Christ that gladness and joy are born. He who can feel these things will feel the greatness, the incomparable beauty of Orthodox icons, though presently he may find them repulsive, pervaded as he is by the spirit of the world.

Here is how Saint Symeon the New Theologian describes the changes which occur on the countenance of those who progress in sanctity:

*"I know some among you,"* said he to his disciples, *"who partake of the common table with a contrite and humble heart, yet do not even eat of the simple meals before them, but remain hidden in silence, whose souls are filled with compunction and tears, prayers and supplications, spiritual labours and prostrations, which cause them to be transformed with that good transformation, and who have acquired a most ascetical and beautiful countenance."*

Do you see how this great Father of the Church considers ascetical beauty, which he calls the good transformation?

Truly beautiful is the ascetical countenance of icons: carnal men, whose spirit is of the world, cannot perceive this beauty, and this is a great loss to their soul.

#### I AM FILLED WHEN I GAZE UPON YOU

He who has not learned to look at icons loses much! For simply to gaze upon them gives the Christian great profit, whereas to gaze upon the worldly and affected religious paintings of the West causes great harm. A little story borrowed from the *Paterikon* will explain better what I am saying:

*Three fathers had the custom of visiting the blessed Anthony each year. Two of them questioned the saint concerning thoughts and the salvation of one's soul. The third asked nothing and kept quiet. After a long time, Abba Anthony said to the third: 'Behold, you have been coming here for a long time now, why do you never ask me anything?' and he answered him: 'Father, I am filled when I gaze upon you.'*

Do you see the great spiritual benefit which even the sight of the saints can procure, especially that of austere ascetics of the desert, like Anthony the Great? The same benefit is also produced by looking upon the icons. Blessed are those who possess such icons in their homes and in their parish churches.

Icons are not ornamental, but sacred objects. They are not paintings, mural decorations, but vehicles of Divine Grace, ladders which lead to Heaven, figures of things celestial. They

represent the Kingdom of Heaven, Paradise, with Christ in His glory, surrounded by His saints, like celestial bodies which receive their light from another, being illumined by the might of His Divinity. Icons are images of the new creation, of the imperishable and eternal world. They are images of man's deification, accomplished by the session of the worshipful, resurrected body of the Saviour at the right of God in the Heavens.

Beneath the humble material of the icons there is concealed the power of God, which has sanctified the saints, and through them, has worked miracles. It is this power which we adore when we kiss an icon with our lips; when we worship it, we are adoring the one God in Trinity.

These sacred objects cannot be fashioned as we please, according to our carnal tastes; neither can we place them where we want, like paintings in a living-room or elsewhere, among the profane objects of the world.

In every home there should be a corner reserved for holy objects: holy water, the Gospel, the wedding crowns, and holy books, with an oil lamp always burning (Ex.27:20-21), where also there arises that incense which is both perceptible and spiritual: our prayer.

#### EPILOGUE OF THE TWO GREGORIES

*"Brethren," says Saint Gregory the Theologian, "let us not do in an impure manner what is holy, or what is sublime in an uncomely manner, or in an unworthy manner what is worthy. To be brief, let us not do in an earthly manner what is Heavenly. In our religion, all is spiritual: actions, movements, desires, conversations, manner of walking, clothes, gestures; for the mind permeates all these things and makes one a man of God."*

And St Gregory Palamas writes: *"With love shall you make the icon of Him Who became man for us. Through it you will raise your mind to the worshipful Body of the Saviour, Who sits at the right hand of God in the Heavens. Like Moses, who made the icons of the Cherubim in the Holy of Holies, you also depict the figures of the saints, and venerate them, not as gods, for this is forbidden), but because of the relationship, disposition and surpassing honour you have for them when your mind is carried up to them through the icons. This Holy of Holies was a type of things super-celestial, and this holy adornment bore the image of the whole world. Moses called these things holy, not glorifying things created, but through them he glorified God, the Creator of the world."*