

Devotion to Christian Icons

The great devotion of Eastern Christians to religious icons is an area of piety that is not easily understood by most Western Christians. In the Christian East icons are venerated in the same manner in which the Christian West venerates Sacred Scripture.

To understand true devotion to icons it is necessary to begin with the reality of Christianity that Jesus Christ is the true image or icon (in Greek, *eikon*) of the unseen God (Col. 1:15). The Church teaches that the law of prayer (*lex orandi*) comes out of the revealed truths, which Christians believe in and act upon (*lex credendi*). The Church evolved an entire Christian incarnational theology from the two basic truths revealed by God in Holy Scripture by focusing especially upon the doctrine of image and likeness. The first truth is that Jesus Christ is truly God from all eternity. By taking upon himself our material humanity (Jn. 1:14) Christ becomes the material form and the way we can communicate with the invisible and active presence of the unseen God (Col. 1:15-18). The second truth is that matter is very good in God's eyes (Gen. 1:31), especially when God decides to create man out of matter "according to the image and likeness" (Gen. 1:26) that is Jesus Christ. Man is not the image or icon of God. Only Christ, God-Man, is the perfect reflection of the eternal God in human, material form. Yet man, alone among all other material beings, can be self-transcendently present to God's spiritual reality and become a sharer in his very own divine nature by grace (II Peter 1:4).

Icon as Prayer

If God is truly present within matter, especially in the Word incarnate, Jesus Christ, then the whole material world, starting with our embodied beings, can be our point of communing with the transcendent presence of God, as uncreated energies of love. As we touch God's material world we find God at the heart of matter.

In Eastern Christianity art and theology go together. They cannot be separated. Both art and theology express the deepest inner feelings of the heart. Art and theology articulate God's living revelation, but art does it in a visible way. An icon is a picture of a sacred subject of material construction. Icon paintings are possible because of the humanity of Christ, a new humanity, which was fully restored to communion with God. Our humanity was deified in virtue of God becoming truly man, so that through his Spirit, Jesus could restore in us the image of God unto his likeness. The icon is a concrete instance of the divine Presence revivifying matter.

An icon is more than a picture, more than a teacher of revealed truth, more than a window to another world. It is, for the believer, a leading through matter into a fuller participation, or at least experience, of the Incomprehensible God. To stand before an icon with the right humble disposition of heart and mind, is to be in touch with the presence of the subject, which the icon represents. An icon makes it possible for the suppliant to rise through the visible representation to the spiritual presence. The icon is the prayerful meeting point of contact. The iconographer seeks to represent, as far as a graphic medium can, the spirituality, the glory, of the subject depicted. The suppliant before me icon is moved by the spirituality expressed in the representation and through this rises to the real and glorious presence. St. John Damascene wrote: "What is seen sanctifies our thoughts and so they fly towards the unseen Majesty of God" (*On Holy Images*, trans. M. H. Allie, 1898, p. 22). Through the icon, we intimately come in touch with God. Icons transcend the limits of other forms of art because of their symbolical meaning for the religious community at prayer.

Transfiguration of Matter

The participation in the spiritual transfiguration of matter into an icon, or symbol of faith, brings to the Christian an experience of divinisation. The agent of such divinisation is always the Holy Spirit. The icon is an example of the transfiguration of matter by the Holy Spirit and by man. The Holy Spirit by breathing a living spirit into the first man, made him according to God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27). In praying before icons, Christians, the Holy Spirit working within them, summon Christ and the saints into their history to lead the faithful into the transfigured world of heaven. The transfigured quality of both icon and the man of faith, anticipates and indicates the ultimate transfiguration which is yet to come in its fullness when the entire cosmos will be transfigured by the power of God in his Spirit of love, who is "all in all" (I Cor. 15:28). In praying before icons, they become a medium that manifests in prayer Christ, all men in Christ, and the whole cosmos in the perspective of the transfiguration into Christ, by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit transfigures us into the icon or likeness of Jesus Christ.

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