

Monument, Museum, or Mission? – Adorning the Church with Iconography

Concerning interior church decoration among the Orthodox, one principle persists throughout the history of the Orthodox Church: to adorn the space as completely as possible with theological images called icons. Already in the Roman catacombs of the early 200's and the house-churches of Syria later in that same century, we witness multiple paintings and mosaics surrounding those gathered for worship: Christ the Good Shepherd, the Apostles as fishermen, scenes of Baptism and the Eucharist – Jonah and the whale, Noah and the ark, Christ feeding the five thousand, Daniel in the lions' den, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, the raising of Lazarus, the adoration of the Magi, David's victory over Goliath. Also present are icons of the Virgin Mary with her child Jesus, Adam and Eve, and other saints.

As subsequent centuries unfolded and the Church encountered and overcame persecution, paganism, and heresy, the theological vision of the church building only became more secure, both inside with iconography and outside with architecture itself. It is a theological vision inherited from the Old Testament prescriptions for the Temple and fulfilled in Christ and His Church as witnessed in the Book of Revelation (cf. 3 Kgm.[1 Kg.] 6-7; Rev. 4-5). "Worshippers, entering such a church, entered an image of the universe.

In the dome, symbolizing heaven, from which light streamed down, they saw Christ Pantocrator (Gk., *All-powerful*), ruling the universe He had created and redeemed. In the highest vaults around the dome they saw the heavenly hosts of angels. In the conch of the apse (i.e., the half-dome above the Altar), the next highest space, they saw the Mother of God,



symbol of the Church. From the upper parts of the walls, in their due order, the saints confronted them. They themselves, though still on earth, in the lowest part of the church, yet knew and could see that here and now they had fellowship with the saints and angels, and dared even to claim their part in the life of the glorified Christ, in whom they could hope to share in the hidden yet mysteriously revealed life of the Holy Trinity. For they had entered a church which was not only a visual proclamation of the gospel, but an icon of that salvation which it made available for their appropriation."¹

Consider well three phrases here, the rationale for adorning the Church with iconography: the church is an *image of the universe*, a *visual proclamation of the gospel*, and

¹ *The Orthodox Liturgy*, by Hugh Wybrew, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), pp. 107-8.

an icon of salvation. In other words, adorning the interior of the church as completely as possible with icons is part and parcel of the essential mission of the Church. It not only shows what we members of the Church are becoming in Christ, but what the world can become in Christ through the ministry of the Church. *“As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth. I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one...”* (John 17:17-22).

Participation in the glory of God in Christ is the very purpose of Orthodox icons. *And the Word (i.e., the Son of God) became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth* (John 1:14). *But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the*



same image (Gk., icon) *from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord* (2 Cor. 3:18). The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council stated: *“To make our confession short, we keep unchanged all the ecclesiastical traditions handed down to us, whether in writing or verbally, one of which is the making of pictorial representations, agreeable to the history of the preaching of the Gospel, a tradition useful in many respects, but especially in this, that so the incarnation of the Word of God is shown forth as real and not merely phantastic²...For the honor which is paid to the icon passes on to that which the*

icon represents, and he who reveres the icon reveres in it the subject represented” (i.e., ultimately the incarnation of Christ, that God became man for man to have communion with the divine).³

The mission of Christ, which is the same mission of His Body, the Church, is to make creation new again in re-establishing unbroken communion with God, that is, beginning with human beings, the crown of creation, to share in the divine life of the eternal Trinity, His glory, grace, and holiness. The church building is the place in which communion with God happens, specifically during the Divine Liturgy at the Table of the Lord, Holy Communion. This communion is both of the believers with God in Christ (the communion of the Holy Gifts of Christ’s Body and Blood) and between all persons who have communion with Christ including the heavenly host, the departed faithful, and those living on earth assembled in the Church (the communion of the

² That is, “imagined,” or “an illusion.”

³ Quoted from *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 14 “The Seven Ecumenical Councils,” (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991 reprint), pg. 550.

saints).⁴ Just as the mission of Christ consists in the service of the Divine Liturgy (see Heb. 8:1-6), so the mission of Christ includes the space in which this service transpires. The faithful not only assemble for Holy Communion and manifest themselves there as the Church, but they go forth from that holy place into the world bearing witness to a life transformed by God to which all who see, hear, and respond are likewise called.

Thus the church building is much more than just a place to meet. In reality it is the boundary between heaven and earth. *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel (Heb. 12:22-24). Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22).* The interior of the church naturally reveals this reality replete with icons, just as it does with an Altar, music, incense, candles and lamps, and with the faithful assembled for worship.

When it comes to churches and their adornment, we contend with a non-Orthodox utilitarian religious spirit at work in today's society. This spirit regards things only in terms of usefulness for personal need. It is reasoned, for instance, that fundamentally the church building is a convenient place in which to meet for worship, no more or less special than any other place. The real value of worship is the connection of the individual with God. So the adornment of the space is irrelevant other than to indicate in some way that it is a Christian institution (e.g., a Cross, a few Christian pictures, or banners, etc.). As a matter of fact, only those things which enhance the individual's experience are considered to be truly valuable: adequate lighting, a good sound system, comfortable seating, and a functioning heating and air conditioning system. Expensive decoration is deemed superfluous and distracting – *"Why this waste?"* (Matt. 26:8).

An equally non-Orthodox motivation comes from human pride contending in favor of church adornment, but for wrong, this-worldly reasons. One, people may be willing to provide for very expensive and extensive iconography in a church, not to bear witness to the Kingdom of God, but as a monument to themselves – look what



⁴ The phrase from the Divine Liturgy expressing both truths is: "The Holy Things for the holy ones."

they have donated. Two, people may be willing to do the same because they consider themselves caretakers of a unique and ancient artistic tradition to be preserved for itself (e.g., Russian, or Byzantine, iconography). Outsiders can come and view what is maintained on display without any prompting for inner transformation. The Church becomes a museum, not a vehicle of the Faith to the world.

We can never forget that the Church is a Mission, each church building a mission station! It is the one place in any community where *"You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man"* (John 1:51). Following Holy Communion in the Divine Liturgy, the faithful sing: "We have seen the true Light! We have received the heavenly Spirit! We have found the true Faith! Worshipping the undivided Trinity, who has saved us." And just before the Dismissal, this exchange takes place: "Let us depart in peace. / In the name of the Lord. / Let us pray to the Lord. / Lord, have mercy. / O Lord, who blessest those who bless Thee, and sanctifiest those who trust in Thee: Save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance. Preserve the fullness of Thy Church. Sanctify those who love the beauty of Thy house; glorify them in return by Thy divine power, and forsake us not who put our hope in Thee. Give peace to Thy world, to Thy churches, to Thy priests, to all those in civil authority, and to all Thy people. For every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from Thee, the Father of Lights, and unto Thee we ascribe glory, thanksgiving, and worship: to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. / Amen."⁵

As a new creation transformed in Christ Jesus by His birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and out-pouring of the Holy Spirit, the Church is the model for what all human society should look like. This is not an unattainable ideal supposed by philosophers and politicians; it is an iconographic revelation. *Brethren, join in following my example and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern...For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself* (Phil. 3:17, 20-21). **The iconography of the Orthodox Church immediately makes apparent the purpose of the Church's existence: *the universe's redemption through the saving work of Christ our Lord.*** Those who purposely gather in this Church are focused on participation in that redemption, and they joyously proclaim the glad tidings to the world.

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⁵ *The Divine Liturgy according to St. John Chrysostom with Appendices*, Second Edition, (South Canaan, Pennsylvania: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1977), pp. 82-83, 85-86.