

The Confessor's Tongue for December 4, A. D. 2022

25th Sunday After Pentecost; Great Martyr Barbara, St. John of Damascus

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

The Commandments of Christ

"If you love Me, you will keep my commandments."

But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest.

Matthew 9:36-38

As Orthodox Christians and followers of Jesus Christ, we must always share Christ's concern for the multitudes outside of the Church who faint in their lack of spiritual nourishment and are scattered as sheep without a shepherd. Christ became man to reveal God and to die for every human being on the face of the earth. God loves each man alike, with no favoritism. Thus we cannot be indifferent to the fate of those around us who may die without Christ. We share in Christ's concern for the lost sheep by praying to the Lord of the harvest that He will send laborers into the harvest, for "the laborers are few," though "the harvest is truly plenteous."

A couple years ago, we saw the world's need for Christ and the laborers to convey Him to it as it descended into a frenzied panic driven by fear of death in the face of the Corona Virus. Without Christ, "all life is to fear for life." People become paranoid over possible dangers and pursue safety at all costs. Yet life is unavoidably unsure and dangerous. Only faith in Christ, when we commend ourselves into His providential care, lifts us out of fear for life in the face of every danger.

We need laborers here in Denton County, where many live entirely without Christ, and many others live with distorted and incomplete versions of the Christian faith. Christ commands us to pray for those laborers to be sent out. Perhaps they will be some of us; perhaps others whom God will send here.

Nonetheless, we must pray. Nearly 800,000 people live in Denton County, and there is but one Orthodox parish. We should pray and work towards the construction of a beautiful, permanent temple for our parish that we may receive them. We should work and pray for the founding of new missions in our own county and in the neighboring counties (particularly Wise and Cooke counties). The harvest is truly plenteous. There is no good reason why there should not be five or ten parishes in Denton County alone, and there is no good reason why even small towns should not have an Orthodox parish.

But whatever God gives, let us pray for laborers in Denton County: at UNT, at TWU, at NCTC, in every town, city, neighborhood, and place of employment. Our task here at very least is to be the Church and to pray for laborers. We may not be

confident about how to start more missions. We may not see where the people and money will come from. But we can pray as Christ commanded, and we are remiss if we do not.

How may we pray for this? Here are three suggestions. First, we may offer a petition in our own words as part of our daily prayers. Second, as we head out of our homes each day for work, school, or errands, we may ask God to send out laborers into the harvest, and offer ourselves to Him for this purpose. Third, we could read an Akathist to St. Innocent of Alaska, St. Nicholas of Japan, St. Nina of Georgia, or some other missionary saint, asking his prayers for our area. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

The Functions of Icons

Dr. Constantine Cavarnos

Holy icons serve a number of purposes. (1) They enhance the beauty of a church. (2) They instruct us in matters pertaining to the Christian faith. (3) They remind us of this faith. (4) They lift us up to the prototypes which they symbolize, to a higher level of thought and feeling. (5) They arouse us to imitate the virtues of the holy personages depicted on them. (6) They help to transform us, to sanctify us. (7) They serve as a means of worship and veneration. I shall discuss briefly each one of these functions.

(i) The most obvious function of icons is that they *enhance the beauty of a church*. Attention to this fact is called by the following hymn from the *Triodion* that is chanted on the eve of the Sunday of Orthodoxy, when the victory over Iconoclasm is commemorated:

The Church of Christ is now embellished like a bride, having been adorned with icons of holy form; and it calls all together spiritually; let us come and celebrate together joyfully with concord and faith, magnifying the Lord. [1]

The idea that icons are a means of enhancing the beauty of churches appears in many writings of the Fathers. To give one example, Niketas Stethatos, the most famous disciple of St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), says that upon becoming abbot of the Monastery of St. Mamas, Symeon "adorned its church with beautiful marbles on the pavement, with holy icons, and other wonderful offerings." [2]

It may be added, that the very fact that the Orthodox in general speak of the 'decoration' (*diakosmesis*) of churches with icons shows plainly that they recognize this function.

As a 'house of God' and a 'house of prayer,' the church should be rendered as beautiful as possible, especially in the interior, where the faithful gather for worship. But the beauty of the church must bear the impress of holiness; and the pleasure evoked by it

must transcend that of mere aesthetic experience: it must be spiritual.

(2) That icons serve to *instruct the faithful* is a point which is duly emphasized by the Greek Church Fathers. Thus, St. John Damascene remarks that since not every one is literate, nor has leisure for reading, the Fathers agreed that such things as the Incarnation of our Lord, His association with men, His miracles, His Crucifixion, His Resurrection, and so on, should be represented on icons. [3] And St. Photios, Patriarch of Constantinople, says: "Just as speech is transmitted by hearing, so a form through sight is imprinted upon the tablets of the soul, giving to those whose apprehension is not soiled by wicked doctrines a representation of knowledge consonant with piety." [4]

Photios adds that icons not only teach, as do written accounts, but in some instances they are *more vivid* than written accounts, and hence *superior* to the latter as a means of instruction. He cites as an example the representation of the deeds of holy martyrs.

We can also appreciate the effectiveness of icons as a means of instructing if we note that in a *composition*, such as the Nativity, the Raising of Lazarus, or the Crucifixion, the icon presents *simultaneously and concisely* many things—a place, persons and objects—that would take an appreciable period of time to describe in words.

(3) We have a tendency to forget, to forget even things that are of vital importance to us, to fall asleep spiritually. So even though we may *know* many things about the Christian faith, such as the commandment of love, the teaching about the spiritual realm, the exemplary character and noble deeds of many holy personages, we tend to *forget* them, as we become preoccupied with everyday worldly matters and pursuits. Icons serve to *remind* us of these things, to *awaken* us with respect to them. The vivacity of icons, which St. Photios points out, renders icons very effective in this regard. John Damascene sums up this function when he calls them concise memorials (*hypomneseis*), [5] that is, concise means of remembering. He gives the following example: "Many times, doubtless, when we do not have in mind the Passion of our Lord, upon seeing the icon of Christ's Crucifixion, we recall His saving suffering." [6]

(4) Icons also serve to *lift us to the prototypes*, to a *higher level of consciousness, of thought and feeling*. This is their *anagogic* function. The prototypes of the icons, i.e. Christ, the Theotokos, the Prophets, Apostles, Martyrs, Saints in general, enjoy a higher level of being than we do in our ordinary, distracted everyday life. When we see their icons, we recall their superior character and deeds; and as we recall them, we think pure, sublime thoughts, and experience higher feelings. Thus, for a while we live on a higher plane of being. As St. John Damascene remarks, "we are led by perceptible icons to the contemplation of the divine and spiritual." [7]

In this function of the icon, its essentially symbolic nature is manifest. An icon is not an end in itself; it is not merely an aesthetic object to be enjoyed for whatever artistic merits it possesses, but is essentially a symbol, carrying us beyond itself. It is designed to lead us from the physical and psychophysical to the spiritual realm. And hence it is, as St. John Damascene says, a pattern (*typos*) of something heavenly. [8]

(5) By instructing us in the Christian religion, reminding us of its truths, aims and values, and lifting us up to the prototypes, to holy personages, icons serve another important purpose: *they stir us up to imitate the virtues of such personages*. Thus, one of decrees of the Seventh Ecumenical Synod—the Synod that was convoked specially to settle the dispute between the iconoclasts and those who defended the veneration of holy icons—says: "The more continually holy personages are seen in icons, the more are the beholders lifted up to the memory of the prototypes and to an aspiration after them." [9]

(6) An additional function served by holy icons is *to help transform our character, our whole being, to help sanctify us*. They effect this by instructing us, reminding us, uplifting us, and stirring us up morally and spiritually. The function of the icon in this regard is based on the principle that we become like that which we habitually contemplate. True icons focus the distracted, dispersed soul of man on spiritual perfection, on the divine. By dwelling steadily and lovingly on such perfection, we come to partake of it more and more.

(7) Finally, the icon has a *liturgical function, it is a means of worship and veneration*. This is one of its primary functions, more important than the first. Like sacred hymns and music, the icon is used as a means of worshipping God and venerating His saints. As such, it is *essentially symbolic*, leading the soul from the visible to the invisible, from the material to the spiritual, from the symbol to the prototype or original which it represents. As every Orthodox Christian knows, the first act of the faithful upon entering a church is to take a candle, light it and put it on a candlestand that is placed next to the *proskynetarion* or icon-stand on which is set the icon representing the sacred person, persons or event specially celebrated by the particular church and after whom or which it is named. Then he bows before the icon, making the sign of the cross, and kisses the icon, saying a brief prayer. This series of acts is called veneration or 'honorable reverence' of the icon. It is *not* an act of *worshipping* the icon. The Greek Church Fathers distinguish very sharply between 'honorable reverence' (*timetike proskynesis*), which is accorded to icons, and 'worship' (*Iatreia*). Worship is accorded only to God. Further, they emphasize that the veneration which we give to a holy icon goes to the prototype which it represents, for example, to Christ, to the Theotokos, to some martyr or other saint. In the words of Basil the Great, which have been repeated by John Damascene and other defenders of

the icons, "the honor which is given to the icon passes over to the prototype" (*he time tes eikonos eis to prototypon diabainei*). [10] The prototype honored is in the last analysis God, as God created man in His own image. [11]

Neither God nor the saints, of course, need the honor which we offer them, be it by means of icons, or by means of hymns and music. But it is only proper for us to do so, as the adoration of God and the admiration of saints are expressions of a soul that sees and loves the beauty of holiness, of spiritual perfection, and feels grateful to the Deity and to holy men for their many benefactions to mankind. Such a response is not merely something proper for us, but is also conducive to our salvation. The following remark of John Damascene calls attention to this point, and at the same time has a bearing on several of the functions served by icons: "I enter the common place-of-therapy of souls, the church, choked as it were by the thorns of worldly thoughts. The bloom of painting attracts me, it delights my sight like a meadow, and secretly evokes in my soul the desire to glorify God. I behold the fortitude of the martyr, the crowns awarded, and my zeal is aroused like fire; I fall down and worship God through the martyr, and receive salvation." [12]

When the various important functions of icons are ignored and the crucial distinction between honorable reverence and worship is lost sight of, iconoclasm, the condemnation of icons, is a result. This is what happened in 726, when the Byzantine Emperor Leo the Isaurian issued an edict which condemned the making and veneration of icons as idolatry, and contrary to the second commandment. But the icon, as we have seen, is an image or symbol, and is designed to lead us *to* that *of* which it is an image or symbol, whereas an idol lacks this power of the authentic symbol; and the veneration of an icon is *not* an act of 'worshipping' it. Hence the charge of idolatry shows gross ignorance with regard to the nature and functions of icons.

In connection with the practice of according the reverence of honor to holy icons, it should be remarked that this is deeply rooted in the sacred tradition of Christianity. St. John Damascene would trace the tradition of honorable reverence of sacred objects back to the Mosaic people, who "venerated on all hands the *tabernacle* which was an image and type of heavenly things, or rather of the whole creation." [13] The cross has always been venerated by Christians. The painting of the cross in the dome or apse of the Church was not forbidden in Byzantium even by the fanatical enemies of the icons, the Iconoclasts. Now the crucifix is itself an icon, an image of Christ's crucifixion, a symbol of Christ Himself, Who is usually depicted upon it in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Endnotes:

1. *Triodion*, Venice, 1876, p. 123.
2. *The Extant Works of Saint Symeon the New Theologian*, trans. by Dionysios Zagoraios, Syros, 1886, p. 6.

3. See the excerpt from St. John Damascene in Appendix A below.

4. Cyril Mango, *The Homilies of Photius*, p. 294. Cf. St. Basil: "What the spoken account presents through the sense of hearing, the painting silently shows by representations" (*P.G.*, Vol. 94, col. 1401a).

5. Appendix A, below.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *P.G.*, Vol. 94, col. 1261a.

8. See Appendix A.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. St. Basil, *Concerning the Holy Spirit*, Ch. 18.

12. *P.G.*, Vol. 94, col. 1268 a-b.

13. See Appendix A.

What Orthodox Iconography Is

Blessed Photios Kontoglou

"Be ye not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind ... " (Rom. xii.2)

The religion of Christ is the revelation, by Him, of the truth. And this truth is the knowledge of the true God and of the spiritual world. But the spiritual world is not what men used to—and still do—call "spiritual."

Christ calls His religion "new wine," and "bread that cometh down from Heaven." The Apostle Paul says, "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

In a religion like this, one that makes the believer into a new man, "everything is "new." So, too, the art that gradually took form out of the spirit of this religion, and which it invented to express its Mystery, is a "new" art, one not like any other, just as the religion of Christ is not like any other, in spite of what some may say who have eyes only for certain meaningless externals.

The architecture of this religion, its music, its painting, its sacred poetry, insofar as they make use of material media, nourish the souls of the faithful with spirit. The works produced in these media are like steps that lead them from earth up to heaven, from this earthly and temporary state to that which is heavenly and eternal. This takes place so far as is possible with human nature.

For this reason, the arts of the Church are anagogical, that is, they elevate natural phenomena and submit them to "the beautiful transformation." They are also called "liturgical" arts, because through them man tastes the essence of the liturgy by which God is worshipped and through which man becomes like unto the Heavenly Hosts and perceives immortal life.

Ecclesiastical liturgical painting, the painting of worship, took its form above all from Byzantium, where it remained the mystical Ark of Christ's religion and was called *hagiographia* or sacred painting. As with the other arts of the Church, the purpose of

hagiographia is not to give pleasure to our carnal sense of sight, but to transform it into a spiritual sense, so that in the visible things of this world we may see what surpasses this world.

Hence this art is not theatrically illusionistic. Illusionistic art came into being in Italy during the so-called Renaissance, because this art was the expression of a Christianity which, deformed by philosophy, had become a materialistic, worldly form of knowledge, and of the Western Church, which had become a worldly system. And just as theology followed along behind the philosophy of the ancients—so, too, the painting which expressed this theology followed along behind the art of the ancient idolators. The period is well named Renaissance, since, to tell the truth, it was no more than a re-birth of the ancient carnal mode of thought that had been the pagan world's.

But just as those theologians were wading around in the slimy swampwaters of philosophy, and were in no position to taste and understand the clear fresh water of the Gospel, "drawn up to life eternal," so, too, the painters who brought about the Renaissance were in no position to understand the mystical profundity of Eastern liturgical iconography, the sacred art of Byzantium. And just as the theologians thought that they could perfect Christ's religion with philosophy, since for them it seemed too simple, they being in no position to penetrate into the depths of that divine simplicity; just so, the painters thought that they were perfecting liturgical art, more simply called Byzantine, by making it "more natural."

So they set to work, copying what was natural—faces, clothes, buildings, landscapes, all as they appear naturally—making an iconography with the same rationalism that the theologians wanted to make theology with. But the kind of theology you can get out of rationalism is exactly the kind of religious iconography you can get out of copying nature.

This is why their works have no Mystery, nor any real spiritual character. You understand that you have before you some men masquerading as saints—not real saints. Look at the various pictures of the Mother of God, "Madonnas" who pose hypocritically, and those in tears, weeping, which are even falsier yet! Corpses and idols for shallow men! Our people, who for centuries have received a great and profound nurture from Christ's religion, even though outwardly they seem uneducated, call a woman who pretends to be respectable but who is really not, a *Frankopanaybia*, a "Frankish Virgin," thus making a clear distinction between the "Frankish Virgin" and the true Virgin, the Mother of Christ our God, the austere *Odogitria*, Her "more precious than the Cherubim, and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim." In other words, in the simplest way possible they make a neat, sharp distinction between the art of the world and the art belonging to worship.

Western religious painters who wanted to depict the supernatural visions of religion took as models certain natural phenomena—clouds, sunsets, the

moon, the sun with its beams. With these they tried to portray the heavenly glory and the world of immortality, calling certain things "spiritual" which are merely sentimental, emotional, not spiritual at all.

In vain, however. Because the blessedness of the other life is not a continuation of the emotional happiness of this world, neither does it have any relation to the satisfaction the senses enjoy in this life. The Apostle Paul, talking about the good things of the blessedness to come, says that they are such that "eye hath not seen, and ear hath not heard, neither have entered into the heart of man."

How, then, can that world, which lies beyond everything a man can grasp with his senses—how can that world be portrayed by an art that is "natural" and that appeals to the senses? How can you paint "what surpasses nature and surpasses sense"?

Certainly, man will take elements from the perceptible world, "for the senses' sake," but to be able to express what surpasses sense" he must dematerialize these elements, he must lift them to a higher plane, he must transmute them from what is carnal into what is spiritual, just as faith transmutes man's feelings, making them, from carnal, into spiritual. "I saw," says St. John of the Ladder, some men given over with passion to carnal love, and when they received the Light, and took the way of Christ, this fierce carnal passion was changed inside them, with divine grace, into a great love for the Lord."

Thus, even the material elements which Byzantine iconography took from the world of sense were supernaturally transmuted into spiritualities, and since they had passed through the pure soul of a man who lived according to Christ, like gold through a refiner's fire, they express, as far as is possible for a man who wears a material body, that which the Apostle Paul spoke of, "which eye hath not seen, neither hath entered into the heart of man."

The beauty of liturgical art is not a carnal beauty, but a spiritual beauty. That is why whoever judges this art by worldly standards says that the figures in Byzantine sacred painting are ugly and repellent, while for one of the faithful they possess the beauty of the spirit, which is called "the beautiful transformation."

The Apostle Paul says, "We (who preach the Gospel and live according to Christ) are ... a sweet savour of Christ unto them that are saved and unto them that perish. Unto them that have within them the smell of death (of flesh), we smell of death; and unto them that have within them the smell of life, we smell of life."

And the blessed and hallowed St. John of the Ladder says, "There was an ascetic who, whenever he happened to see a beautiful person, whether man or woman, would glorify the Creator of that person with all his heart, and from a mere glance his love for God would spring afresh and he would pour out on his account a fountain of tears. And one marvelled, seeing this happen, that for this man what would cause the soul of another to stink had become a reason for crowns and an ascent above nature. Whoever perceives beauty in this fashion is already incorruptible, even before the dead shall rise in the common Resurrection."

Upcoming Events 2022

15 November – 24 December Nativity Fast
6 December St. Nicholas
10 December 8:00 a.m. Workday
15 December, Thursday, 6:30 p.m. Holy Unction (*changed*)

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!