

Icons

This is the first in our promised series on Icons and their role in our spiritual life. As such we begin with an excerpt from “Christ Our Pascha,” The Catechism of the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

The word Catechism comes from the Greek meaning to instruct by word of mouth. A Catechism is a manual of religious instruction. It is a summary or explanation of doctrine.

In 1992 the “Catechism of the Catholic Church” was published. After its publication St. John Paul II wrote: “In the study of revelation, East and West have followed different methods ... these various theological formulations are often to be considered mutually complementary rather than conflicting.”

Faith in Christ is the same for all Catholics regardless of which Rite or Particular Church they belong to. However, the theological understanding of Divinely Revealed Truths can be different in various cultures, just as Liturgical Rites are different.

The Catechism, Christ Our Pascha, calls Eastern Catholics to embody in their daily lives the one inheritance of the faith, as transmitted in the light of their theological tradition. Christ Our Pascha is intended as a foundation for catechetical ministry.

Christ Our Pascha was published in 2011 under the direction of Sviatoslav, in his role as The Metropolitan Archbishop (Patriarch) of Kiev. It was translated into English in 2016. The Ukrainian Catholic Church is the largest of the Eastern Catholic Churches.

Prayer Before Icons

Let your face shine on your servant. (Ps 30[31]:16)

Icons serve prayer so that as the Christian grows spiritually, he or she might gradually pass from faith in the Mystery of God to the contemplation of him “face to face.” The Seventh Ecumenical Council teaches that we come to know God through God’s Son—the Word and Image of God. Each of the ways of divine knowledge is equally valid and important. In prayer before icons the main organ of our communication with God is not our lips, which pronounce the words, but our eyes. With our eyes we look at the image in order to contemplate the imaged Person. Like vocal prayer, prayer before icons is a gradual process, in which we progress as if climbing the rungs of a ladder.

The Veneration of Holy Icons

In the Incarnation of the Son of God, people “saw the one inaccessible as God become a man accessible to all.” (Akathist Hymn to the Mother of God, Kontakion 9) The Old Covenant forbade the making of an idol or even the representation of God, in order to protect the people from idolatry: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Ex 20:4). In the New Covenant, the incarnate God, Jesus Christ, became accessible to our sight, hearing, and touch. Therefore it became possible to depict him.

According to Christian tradition, the oldest icons are the Saviour NotMade-by-Hands—the face of Christ miraculously copied to a cloth — and the icon of the Mother of God, which, according to tradition, was written by the apostle and evangelist Luke. Such a tradition witnesses to the conviction that icons and icon veneration accord with the apostolic faith.

One of the first Fathers who elaborated a theological foundation for icon veneration was Saint John of Damascus. He teaches: “I venerate the icon of Christ the incarnate God ... because the honor that we render unto the image belongs to the Prototype.” (John of Damascus, First Homily for the Defense of the Holy Icons, 21: PG 94, 1252) In the icon, we venerate not the image but the imaged person, whom we prayerfully contemplate. This is because the icon raises our mind from the image to the Prototype. The Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787 condemned Iconoclasm and confirmed the veneration of icons of the Lord Jesus Christ, the most holy Mother of God, and the angels and saints. Along with this, the Council distinguished between adoration, which is due exclusively to God (in Greek, *latreia*), and veneration (in Greek, *proskynesis*), which we render unto icons, the Gospel Book, the cross, and the relics of saints. (Council of Nicaea II, Definition: DS 302. 198) We venerate icons by kissing and censing them, and lighting candles and lamps before them. The icon is also the Church’s teaching expressed in images. Therefore it should be written not arbitrarily but only according to iconographic canons which ensure that the faces of Christ, the Mother of God, and of the saints are recognizable in all instances.

The Role of Icons in Prayer

An icon is written (painted) in prayer and for prayer. To recognize and understand an icon one needs to contemplate it prayerfully. Someone who only views an icon will understand it only as a work of art. The process of contemplating an icon needs to be learned. The word “contemplation” here means “to look to the depth.” The first step toward contemplation is to concentrate the gaze on the icon. Thus, we place a lamp before the icon—a sign of divine light. Concentration leads to interior silence. When we raise our gaze to the icon, we see a figure or group of figures. The inscription on the icon informs us as to whom or what event we are gazing. The person of Christ is depicted on the icon with certain recognizable signs. One of these signs is the cross-in-halo around the head of Christ. Within this halo is the Greek inscription $\theta\ \acute{\omicron}\ \nu\ \nu$ (ho On), which means The-One-Who-Is (see Ex 3:14). [When Moses encountered God in the burning bush he heard the voice of God. Moses asked, “Who are you?” The voice responded, “I Am Who Am.” This is why the Old Testament called God Yahweh – I Am Who AM.] Christ is usually depicted in a red tunic, covered with a blue mantle. The royal red of the tunic signifies the divine nature of Christ, which in His Incarnation was clad in His human nature, represented by the blue mantle. In icons of the Transfiguration, Resurrection, Ascension, and Fearful Judgment, as well as icons of the Christ-Child with the Mother of God, the vestments of Christ are depicted in gold or white, signifying the divine nature and the glorified human nature of Christ.

The Mother of God is depicted on icons in a red veil that covers her head and shoulders, a symbol of the divine grace with which God fully gifted her. The veil covers a blue tunic, a symbol of her humanity. On her forehead and shoulders are three gold stars that symbolize her perpetual virginity. She is a “virgin before childbirth, a virgin in childbirth, and remains a virgin after childbirth.”

On icons of the saints, the light of God’s presence is represented by the icon’s gold background and the gold in their garments. Thus is symbolized the grace of God that permeates and fills the entire person. In this way we ascend from contemplation of symbols and signs to contemplation of the persons manifested on the icon. Prayer before an icon is communication with the person depicted on the icon. This is expressed when we make the sign of the Cross in front of an icon, or kiss and cense it.

Through the icon, God addresses us, reveals our vocation, and calls us to life with Him. To see God Who lovingly gazes at us from the icon is a great gift of God, a manifestation of “heaven on earth.” Having seen God in an icon, we become capable of seeing Him in other people.

According to Church tradition, a newly written (painted) icon is blessed. The Church rite bestows upon the icon “divine blessing, the grace of the Holy Spirit, healing power against all the wiles of the devil.” (Trebnik, Rite of Blessing of an Icon of Christ) The blessing makes it “a place of healing and a source of healing for all who will turn to it in illness.” (Trebnik, Rite of Blessing of an Icon of the Mother of God) Contemplating the icon gives us strength to imitate “the lives and deeds of the saints and thus become pleasing to God and heirs of the kingdom.” (Trebnik, Rite of Blessing of an Icon of Saints) Once the icon is blessed, it is included in the Church’s liturgical services and prayerful veneration in homes.

Due to this blessing, the icon becomes, as an image, a place of presence of the person depicted therein. Inasmuch as the icon manifests the presence of the living person of Christ, the Mother of God, or a saint, every icon is graced.