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The Place of Icons in the Orthodox Tradition

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An icon is a sacred representation 'upon sacred vessels and garments on walls and panels painted with colours, made in mosaics, or out of any other material'.¹ Icons have now become widespread, especially in the Orthodox world. They are designed to lead us from the physical to the spiritual realm. They convey the truths and values of Christianity. But some other Christians deny the need for such symbolic representations. They fear that it will lead to idolatry. Is it idolatry? No. It is quite different from idol worship. Icons deepen our understanding of divine things. They are used to edify the faithful. How is it done? Now read on

Symbolic Art in Early Christianity

From the very beginning of Christianity symbolic art existed among Christians. In the New Testament we come across many symbols. They point to the reality of the mystery of God's presence in the world and in the Church. The symbol of the dove was very prominent among early Christians. The symbols of the fish and shepherd denoted Christ. The Greek word for fish (*ikthus*) which was an acrostic for 'Jesus Christ, son of God, Saviour' was very prominent. The early Christians used representation of events in Holy Scripture to decorate their tombs. Such pictorial representations have been found in catacombs at Alexandria and Rome. Christian art co-ordinated its symbols in significant schemes of thought. Anthropomorphic personifications and apocalyptic themes were involved in the pictorial decoration of the Church. Walter Lowrie makes the following comment: 'Early Christian literature was more symbolical and allegorical than we might wish to be, and the symbolical interpretation of the Old Testament was richly exploited in the New, especially by St. Paul. In view of these facts it would be strange indeed if early Christian art had soberly eschewed the use of symbols.'² The early Christians had the idea that through symbolic art one is made conscious of the presence of God.

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¹ Definition given by the Second Nicene Council of AD 787.

² Walter Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church*, p. 8.

The Gradual Growth of Iconography

The number and variety of symbolic representations increased in the succeeding centuries. The inner living faith of the believer was expressed through material media. Early Christian writers affirm the existence of sacred icons in their time and stress the value which icons have for the Christian. St. Basil said, 'Arise now before me you iconographers of the merits of the saints. Let me be overwhelmed by your icons depicting the brave acts of the martyr.'³ St. Gregory of Nyssa tells us that he was very much moved by an icon of the sacrifice of Isaac. We are told that St. John Chrysostom had an icon of the Apostle Paul before himself as he studied St. Paul's epistles. The Byzantine style evolved primarily in the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople. Until the outbreak of Iconoclasm in 726 AD, iconographic representations increased with each century.

The iconoclastic ban on icons resulted in a large-scale destruction of icons in the Byzantine Empire. During the controversy (ca. 700 AD) protest arose widely against Christian paintings and icons. The Elvira synod of 706 AD took decisions against such symbolic representation. Emperor Leo the Isaurian openly sided with the iconoclasts and in 730 AD published a decree against icons. As a result, the Eastern Church was forced to create theological interpretations of icons. Patriarch Germanos of Constantinople defended the veneration of icons very strongly. With the political and military decline of the Byzantine Empire, Orthodox art did not decline. Iconography began to develop with great vigour and system.

Is it Merely an Aesthetic Taste ?

The answer is negative. We would discuss a picture by Picasso from the aesthetic point of view. But the case of an icon is quite different. The believer finds a spiritual reality in icons. The secular painter fails to express spiritual beauty, the beauty of humility, meekness, self-mastery, purity, peace, love and other Christian virtues. For painting an icon, rigid discipline of fasting and prayer is required. '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.'⁴ In his book *The Joy of Freedom*, Bishop Paulose Gregorios writes that icons are 'theophanies, manifestations of the sacred and the transcendent in space and time.' He continues, 'The icon, like the Word, is a revelation. It is a presence, not a decoration or an illustration.'⁵ We can see that icons

³ St. Basil, Homily on the Martyrdom of Barlaam. Quoted in *The Orthodox Ethos*, p. 175.

⁴ Constantine Cavarnos, 'Iconographic Decoration in the Orthodox Church.' Article in *The Orthodox Ethos*.

⁵ T. Paul Verghese, *The Joy of Freedom*, p. 51.

are different from portraits, photographs and statues. 'The icon is a kind of hieroglyph, a stylized symbol, a sigh, an abstract scheme it is loaded with the Grace of an objective presence; it is a meeting place between the believer and the Heavenly World.'⁶ The non-believer sees in an icon a great work of art and nothing more, whereas the believer finds an icon revelatory of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Will it Lead to Idolatry ?

This is a probable question. If the reverence paid to icons were simply absorbed by themselves, it would be idolatrous. Again, if they become sacred on their own account, they are objects of superstition. But icons have a priestly character. They mediate between the world and the Kingdom of God. Take the case of an icon of St. Mary. The eyes, the nose, the vesture, the colours have all been painted not to represent a person standing upon the earth, but a person standing in the Kingdom. Thus, icons lead us to know the realities of the Kingdom of Heaven. Comparing icons and other forms of religious art, Joseph P. Frary writes : 'Icons do not represent historical events, as does most religious art in the West. They do not represent a state of being as do Buddhist statues of Bodhisatvas being enlightened. They are not personifications of certain realities as some classical and post-Renaissance art is . . . The claim is made for icons that the experience of an icon is experience of the Kingdom of Heaven, there is direct involvement with what is portrayed.'⁷ Such honourable veneration (*proskynesis*) is distinguished from the act of worship (*latreia*). Hence the fear that icons will lead to idolatry is quite irrelevant.

Arguments Put Forward by John of Damascus

During the iconoclastic controversy, John of Damascus strongly defended icons. His arguments can be summarized as follows: The icon stands for something other than itself. An icon is a representation of a real sacred person or event, and is designed to lead us to it. An idol lacks this authentic symbolic character. Icons are based on the same principle as the theophanies of the Old Testament and the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. All spiritual revelations have to use material media. We honour the icons just as we honour the Gospel or the Cross. Things made by our own hands can be holy if they are set apart for the use of God. Through matter, they can lead us to the invisible God. We do not venerate the icons as God but only as filled with the energy and grace of God. The veneration of icons belongs to the tradition and many miracles are wrought through them. Hence, to depart from them is a sin. John of Damascus also quotes St. Basil the Great who said, 'The

⁶ *Orthodox Spirituality*, by a monk, p. 35.

⁷ 'The logic of icons,' *Sobornost*, Winter 1972, p. 398.

honour which is given to the icon passes over to the prototype.' The prototype honoured is, in the last analysis, God, as God created man in His own image.

The Doctrinal Basis

The doctrinal basis is found in the fact of the Incarnation. Icons are testimonies to the Incarnation and reminders of it. The appearance of icons 'is inextricably connected with the unveiling in the Church's consciousness of the meaning of Incarnation: the fullness of Godhead that dwells corporeally in Christ.'⁸ God cannot be represented in His eternal being. But God became man and took a body of material flesh. Because of this, a picture may lawfully be made of Him. Further, 'in assuming a human body He used matter as the vehicle of spirit, rescued it from corruption and consecrated it to a share in His redemptive purpose.'⁹ God is the author and artist of the universe. Icons in general tell us of Beauty as a most mysterious and moving revelation of God. Beauty is 'the transfiguration of matter through the incarnation in it of another, a supernatural principle.' Thus in the reality of icons beauty has its own value. Also the icons reveal something about the process of transfiguration. To put it in the words of Nicolas Zernov, 'Icons manifest the reality of that process of transfiguration of the cosmos which began on the day of Pentecost and which is gradually extending to all sides of earthly life.'¹⁰ Thus the fact of Incarnation constitutes the real doctrinal basis of icons.

The Sacramental Function

Zernov views the veneration of icons as another example of the sacramental principle accepted by all Christians. He considers icons as 'part of the transfigured cosmos'. The Church itself is an icon of the universe. The Holy Eucharist is the means through which God's redemptive and transfigurative activity continues through time. In one sense the Eucharist is a divine image because it has the power to confer an inner sanctity on the partaker. In other words, the Eucharist 'imitates and repeats' the Christian scheme of salvation. An icon is constituted by the Kingdom of Heaven and the world. In the words of Joseph P. Frary, 'The revelation can manifest the reality of the Incarnation because the hypostatic union is a parallel reality: the Person of Jesus Christ is constituted by the two natures. Similarly icons are sacramental because the great sacrament of the Eucharist is constituted by Bread, Wine and the Person who is Jesus Christ.'¹¹ Philip Sherrard gives the following interpretation: 'The framework of belief and worship to which the icon belongs is the Christian liturgy.

⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*, p. 202.

⁹ R. M. French, *The Eastern Orthodox Church*, p. 135.

¹⁰ N. Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century*.

¹¹ *Sobornost*, Winter 1972, p. 400.

The art of the icon is a liturgical art. It is a visual system conveying and giving support to the spiritual facts which underlie the whole liturgical drama.¹² In this sacramental function we are made aware of the object which an icon reveals. It leads to the transfiguration of the believer.

Conclusion

We have seen that icons elevate believers from the physical to the spiritual realm. By perceptible icons we are led to the contemplation of the divine and immaterial. They instruct, edify and transform the faithful. They act as catalytic agents for our sanctification. We can rightly consider icons as 'a kind of window between the earthly and the celestial worlds.'¹³ The effect of icons in spiritual nurture is tremendous. As remarked by Bulgakov, 'By the blessing of the icon of Christ, a mystical meeting of faithful and Christ is made possible.'¹⁴ The present writer is of the opinion that the Church in India must take necessary steps to encourage iconography. For that, a group of devoted artists with prayer, fasting, purity, and humility must come forward under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In ancient days, monasteries were great workshops in which icons were produced. I wish we had such effective workshops.

¹² *The Art of the Icon in Sacrament and Image*, ed. A. M. Allchin, p. 58.

¹³ Ernst Benz., *The Eastern Orthodox Church*, p. 6.

¹⁴ S. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 162.