

Praying with Icons

I. Icons as Tradition:

- ❖ Eastern: The Holy Visage; Western: Veronica, St. Luke
- ❖ Icon-writing/painting: “an act of prayer, fasting and meditation.”¹
 - Techniques that pre-date Christianity...not artistic license.
 - See attachment on colors in iconography.
- ❖ The Iconoclasm of the 8th Century: East and West (also in Islam and Judaism) destroying icons, relics, crucifixes, and other holy objects.
- ❖ Nicaea II: the Seventh Ecumenical Council approved the use of icons and images in churches as part of the unbroken tradition of the church. (See attachment)
- ❖ Reformation Era: More focused on anti-papism. Icons and other images, organs, vestments, statuary were all destroyed as ‘Popish idols.’

II. About Icons:

- ❖ The iconostasis, found in Eastern Orthodox Churches, is an unbroken screen of images “which reflects a state of the universe where all separation is overcome, where there is achieved reconciliation between God and the creature, even within the creature itself.”² The reredos in Western churches is a descendant of this.
 - Icons of Christ, of Mary, the Mother of God, of saints, of events in salvation history.
- ❖ Doors to the Holy: “The icon is part of an act of worship...the art of the icon is a liturgical act. We do more than just look at icons...we pray with them...the icon brings before us not isolated figures but persons in relationship...We are not just spectators, but we become actors in the scene that we see before us. The icon enfolds us; contemplation becomes participation.”³
- ❖ An aid to worship: “No less than the written word, an icon is an instrument for the transmission of Christian tradition and faith. Through sacred imagery, the Holy Spirit speaks to us, revealing truths that may not be evident to those using only the tools of reason.”⁴
 - “Attention to an icon can sometimes help overcome distraction.”⁵ Icons are, therefore, well used as part of corporate and private prayer/worship.
 - Icons “proclaim the physical reality of Jesus Christ, God Incarnate.”⁶

¹ Jim Forest, *Praying with Icons* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1997), 21.

² Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, NY, 1999), 60.

³ Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things, Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2002), from the Introduction by Bp. Kallistos Ware, x-xi.

⁴ Forest, 13.

⁵ Forest, 33.

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- ❖ An aid to prayer: Icons serve as bridges to Christ, as links with the saints, as reminders of pivotal events in the history of salvation.”⁷
 - Icons integrate ”the physical aspect of prayer... [by helping us remember that we are] breathing in life itself; breathing in God’s peace [and] breathing out praise and gratitude.”⁸
 - “It is prayer just to look attentively at an icon and let God speak to you...It is essential to nurture a capacity for inner stillness...deep-down listening.”⁹

 - ❖ Addressing the fear of idolatry: “Icons themselves [are] not being worshipped, but serve as points of connection with Christ and the community of saints...icons help to overcome all that normally impedes our awareness that we live in the presence of God and in the midst of a ‘cloud of witnesses.’”¹⁰
- III. The Anglican Approach to Understanding and Using Icons:
- ❖ “There is the reality of the icon, which is a picture of some bit of this world, so depicted and so constructed as to open the world to the ‘energy’ of God at work in what is being shown.” (Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury)¹¹

 - ❖ The Communion of Saints (BCP, 862)
- IV. Conclusion: “These meditations are really about how we are led by faith both to live in the world, fully flesh and blood in it, and at the same time to be aware of the utter strangeness of God that waits in the heart of what is familiar – as if the world were always on the edge of some total revolution, pregnant with a different kind of life, and we were always trying to catch the blinding momentary light of its changing. That is what any icon sets out to embody and transmit.” (Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury)¹²
- V. Time to reflect and pray with an icon...practicing the presence of God.
- VI. Time for discussion and/or questions.

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⁶ Forest, 41.

⁷ Forest, 41.

⁸ Forest, 41, 45.

⁹ Forest, 47, 38.

¹⁰ Forest, , xvi-xvii.

¹¹ Williams, xv.

¹² Williams, xvii.

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Attachment 1

The Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea

The [Second Council of Nicaea](#), which first met in Constantinople in 786 was disrupted by military units faithful to the iconoclast legacy; it convened again at Nicaea in [787](#) and reversed the decrees of the previous iconoclast council held at Constantinople and Hieria, and appropriated its title as [Seventh Ecumenical Council](#). So there were two councils called the "Seventh Ecumenical Council," the first supporting iconoclasm, the second supporting icon veneration and negating the first. The decrees of this council, unlike those of the iconoclast council, were approved by the papacy. Eastern Orthodoxy today considers it the last genuine ecumenical council.¹³

The following is excerpted from the documents of the Council:

{Council formulates for the first time what the Church has always believed regarding icons}

One of these is the production of representational art; this is quite in harmony with the history of the spread of the gospel, as it provides confirmation that the becoming man of the Word of God was real and not just imaginary, and as it brings us a similar benefit. For, things that mutually illustrate one another undoubtedly possess one another's message.

Given this state of affairs and stepping out as though on the royal highway, following as we are

- the God-spoken teaching of our holy fathers and
- the tradition of the catholic church –
- *for we recognize that this tradition comes from the holy Spirit who dwells in her--*

we decree with full precision and care that,

- like the figure of the honoured and life-giving cross,
- the revered and holy images,
 - whether painted or
 - made of mosaic
 - or of other suitable material,

are to be exposed

- in the holy churches of God,
- on sacred instruments and vestments,
- on walls and panels,
- in houses and by public ways,

these are the images of

- our Lord, God and saviour, Jesus Christ, and of
- our Lady without blemish, the holy God-bearer, and of
- the revered angels and of
- any of the saintly holy men.

The more frequently they are seen in representational art, the more are those who see them drawn to remember and long for those who serve as models, and to pay these images the tribute of salutation and respectful veneration. Certainly this is not the full adoration {latria} in accordance with our faith, which is properly paid only to the divine nature, but it resembles that given to the figure of the honoured and life-

¹³ Source: Wikipedia website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iconoclasm#The_first_iconoclastic_period:_730-787

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giving cross, and also to the holy books of the gospels and to other sacred cult objects. Further, people are drawn to honour these images with the offering of incense and lights, as was piously established by ancient custom. Indeed, *the honour paid to an image traverses it, reaching the model*, and he who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in that image.

- So it is that the teaching of our holy fathers is strengthened, namely, the tradition of the catholic church which has received the gospel from one end of the earth to the other.
- So it is that we really follow Paul, who spoke in Christ, and the entire divine apostolic group and the holiness of the fathers, clinging fast to the traditions which we have received.
- So it is that we sing out with the prophets the hymns of victory to the church: Rejoice exceedingly O daughter of Zion, proclaim O daughter of Jerusalem; enjoy your happiness and gladness with a full heart. The Lord has removed away from you the injustices of your enemies, you have been redeemed from the hand of your foes. The Lord the king is in your midst, you will never more see evil, and peace will be upon you for time eternal.

Therefore all those who dare to think or teach anything different, or who follow the accursed heretics in rejecting ecclesiastical traditions, or who devise innovations, or who spurn anything entrusted to the church (whether it be the gospel or the figure of the cross or any example of representational art or any martyr's holy relic), or who fabricate perverted and evil prejudices against cherishing any of the lawful traditions of the catholic church, or who secularize the sacred objects and saintly monasteries, we order that they be suspended if they are bishops or clerics, and excommunicated if they are monks or lay people.

Anathemas concerning holy images

1. If anyone does not *confess* that Christ our God can be represented in his humanity, let him be anathema.
2. If anyone does not *accept* representation in art of evangelical scenes, let him be anathema.
3. If anyone does not *salute* such representations as standing for the Lord and his saints, let him be anathema.
4. If anyone *rejects* any *written or unwritten* tradition of the church, let him be anathema.¹⁴

¹⁴ Source: Councils of the Church, Nicaea II Website:
<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Valley/8920/churchcouncils/Ecum07.htm#Anathemas%20concerning%20holy%20images>

Colors in Iconography

- **Blues** are associated with heaven, mystery, and the mystical life. Dark blue is often used in the cloak Christ wears in the Pantocrator icon as well as the clothing of Mary, the Mother of God.
- **Green** signifies the earth's vegetation, fertility in a general sense, youth, and freshness. It often is used in the clothing of martyrs, whose blood nurtures the Church.
- **Brown** is linked with earth and inert matter. In clothing it may be a sign of a life of holy poverty.
- **Red**, the color of blood, suggests life, vitality, and beauty...The inner robe Christ wears in the Pantocrator icon is red. Orange-red, associated with fire, suggests fervor and spiritual purification.
- **Purple** is associated with wealth and power.
- **White** is associated with the divine world, purity, innocence, and is sometimes used with what Orthodoxy calls 'the uncreated light' the light that Jesus revealed in the Transfiguration to Peter, James, and John.
- **Gold** is linked with sanctity, splendor, the imperishable, the divine energy, the glory of God, and life in the kingdom of God.