

The Necessity of Adorning the Temple with Icons

Many church building communities begin in rented spaces. These “storefront” settings can be compared to the tent church of the Hebrews in the wilderness: they are nomadic and provisional. The people must carry all the iconic instruments of worship with them: the aural icons of reading the scriptures, singing liturgical poetry, preaching, and ringing bells; olfactory icons of incense; tactile icons of vestments, processions, prostrations and lighting candles; and the visual icons of sacred persons (typically photographed copies of icons mounted on a portable iconostasis).

When, at last, the certain temple is built, the people are naturally moved, as with the erection of its prototype by Solomon in Jerusalem, to fit the new temple with all manner of adornment in gold, silver, precious stones and choice woods. But there is also the temptation for the people to rest from their labors before attempting to adorn the empty vault.

Orthodox temple architecture, however, is not simply a matter of defining space. The structural arrangement of stone and wood is incomplete without infusing it with the message of salvation, written in the language of sacred imagery. The execution of the apse, dome and walls are preparatory to receiving the iconic description of the New Jerusalem, which confirms the temple as a habitation of praise to the All Holy Trinity!

Of all the iconic forms employed in Orthodox worship, the visual icons hold a special place. Married with the temple structure itself, they are the most static. That is, unlike the icons of sound, smell and touch (such as the burning of incense and reading the psalter), they are not subject to our practice in time. Even if we enter the temple alone in darkness, the sacred persons depicted in the icons greet us. And we respond — “I am here.”

Necessity on the basis of the Liturgy

The Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 and the final victory over the iconoclasts in 843 are commemorated on the first Sunday of Great Lent, known as the Triumph of Orthodoxy. This celebration is a declaration that the holy icons are dogmatically essential to Orthodox worship and not just decorative additions to fill the architectural void; they are part of the divine services of the Church.

Just as “we mystically represent the Cherubim and Seraphim” in the Divine Liturgy, the icons mystically represent the presence of the Church Militant. The icons inter-populate our congregation with the Triumphant members of Heaven: Christ, the Theotokos, martyrs, saints and the angelic powers, all of whom we artfully describe in line and color. The mystical sign of this heavenly population in the icons makes Orthodox worship amphibious: the earthly dwelling with the heavenly and the heavenly dwelling with man.

This intersection of heaven and earth is realized in the context of Orthodox worship. In the visual icons of glorified persons that make immediate to us the presence of the “great cloud of witnesses,” we behold all of sacred history as “Today!” — our vouchsafe of eternity with God!

Neglecting this essential element of Orthodox theology impoverishes the very experience of Liturgy itself. Do not all our services begin with the censuring of the icons? How barren this rubric is in their absence!

Necessity on the basis of pedagogy

Icons are primarily integral to the temple structure in their mission to express God's presence with us and to enjoin us to enter into His presence in the perpetual Liturgy of the eschaton. But icons are also necessary for imparting dogmatic information. As such, the icons are a text, a scroll of God's dwelling among men that must be read and taught as catechesis. The icons function as a handmaiden to Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition to reinforce what is read, sung and enacted in our services.

The didactic power resident in the icon is deeply rooted in our capacity for communicating non-empirical realities through images and symbols. This communicative power of images is also employed for the dark purposes of capturing and profaning the soul through one-dimensional expressions of creaturely despair and raw vulgarity that exist in popular culture to corrupt the minds of young and old. In complete contrast, the divine images of iconography exist to preach redemption to the world. They are our family portraits, which not only describe the material memory of venerable persons, but also the deified reality of their labor to unite us with Christ by instructing us to despise the flesh, "for it passes away!"

Thus, the Church has the responsibility to put before the people of God, and most especially our psychologically tender children, an antidote for what is relentlessly cast before them on television, movies, billboards, magazines and the Internet. The Holy icons instruct us in piety and virtue; they assist us in heroic struggle against fallen angels and personal vice. They describe the purposes of Creation, hidden from the angels. In the icons of the 12 major feasts, we are led from the nativity of the Theotokos to the Cross, from the empty tomb to the glorious Ascension of Our Lord and the birth of the Church. They show us the reception of our Holy Mother in the arms of Her Divine Son, the inheritance prepared for the people of God before the foundation of the world. The icons return our wandering minds to the whole history of salvation, as the Body and Blood of God are prepared for us in the very Cup of Salvation. No Orthodox temple is complete without these shepherds of our souls that witness to us the triumphant mystery of the Kingdom of God!

Necessity on the basis of evangelism

We have from Holy Tradition the story of Prince Vladimir's emissaries who reported, "We did not know if we were in heaven or on earth, so divine were the services of the Greeks!" So it is with emissaries of the world who enter our midst — whether casually as spiritual tourists, art connoisseurs and seekers of exotic cultures — or earnestly as refugees from shipwrecked denominationalism, weary of living in soulless society with God-haters. While it is true that many are converted to Orthodoxy by the sheer hope of sanity extended by our storefront outposts, we have the responsibility to uphold the Faith in all its fullness and beauty to the best of our strength.

The icon is arguably the most distinctive feature of Orthodoxy to the non-initiate. A visitor to an Orthodox temple is often puzzled by the very look of icons. The icon confronts the observer with something profoundly intentional that demands an explanation! The opportunity for preaching the beauty and fullness of Orthodox Theology through iconography is at once the most challenging and convenient. Challenging because of uninformed indoctrination against "making graven images;" convenient because the icons are sermons in themselves.

Perhaps, the most outwardly critical of icons are those from Protestant backgrounds who espouse the verity, even sovereignty, of Biblical texts. Here, we can remind them that the Bible did not even exist as a single book until the 4th century and even then it was impossible for the average person to own a copy because of the time, expense and skill of hand writing the

scriptures on vellum. Until very recently, the literacy level in most countries was not high enough for the broad masses to read the Scriptures.

The Church met this problem early on, within the lifetime of the Apostles, by visually writing scenes from the Gospels on the walls of underground tombs where Christian martyrs were buried and where the services of the Church were held.

After Christianity became a legal religion in 313 A.D., almost the entire Bible was painted on the walls of churches in a manner that accurately portrayed the scriptural texts. Orthodox iconography, if properly rendered and read, is the organic conduit of apostolic preaching the Good News to mankind.

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