

The Return to Tradition

Icons in the Greek Orthodox Church

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I. Introduction

When you first walk into a Greek Orthodox church, you may be awed or even disturbed by the Iconostasis and the many icons in the nave (main worshipping area). In protestant churches icons seem a very alien, and even theologically questionable thing. I hope in this article to explain their existence, their meaning, and their function to help others know that icons are not only completely theologically legitimate, but an important and unfortunately lost part of the church to many modern congregations.

II. *Theological Defense of Iconography*

Before I tell you about the rich history and deep meaning and uses of icons, first I have to make sure we're on the same page. Firstly, I would like to point out that icons are not the same thing as idols, nor are they to be worshipped alongside God under any circumstances, the church are very clear about this. Icons are a mechanism with which we satisfy our human craving for touch and sight in worship. Of course, the best way to worship is with the mind elevated without the assistance of a visible image, but unfortunately few are capable of doing it.¹

The icons are an incarnation of the Holy Person, in the same way Jesus was the incarnate icon of the Father, whoever venerated Jesus did so the Father.² Therefore, whoever venerates an icon does not venerate the wood, or the gold, but the Holy Person depicted. If the icon is defaced and does not resemble the persons archetype (see section VI paragraph c) it is no longer an Icon, so therefore it is not the material, but the Holy Person you venerate and give honour to.³

I'm getting ahead of myself a little here, so first I'd like to talk about the difference between veneration (*doulia*) and worship (*latreia*). Veneration is the act of kissing an icon, usually on the hand, to honour the Holy Person represented. It can be done in many ways, but usually involves a short prayer to the Person depicted, and crossing oneself one or three times with bowing as well.

Veneration of icons is done in a church just after greeting the congregation by crossing oneself. Because the Orthodox church is one Holy Catholic and Apostolic church, when you attend divine liturgy as a church, it is not only a small part of the church, but the whole church; every Christian from around the world through all time, past, present and future is with you through the mystery of Catholicism given to us by Christ.

This means that when you cross yourself when entering, you greet everyone there, that is, the whole catholic church. When you venerate an Icon of Christ or Saint Mary, you are greeting them as you would if you met them in church. This means that when you kiss the icon, you kiss their hand or feet, not their face, as that would be inappropriate when greeting their human incarnation. If the Holy Person in the icon is touching their thumb

¹ Papajohn, 'Philosophical and metaphysical', 84

² Ibid., 86

³ Louth, *Tradition and Originality*, 206

to their fourth finger⁴ they are blessing, so if you kiss that hand you will receive their blessing.

So you see that venerating a Saint is merely giving them the honour and respect that they deserve as important people in the Church, and thereby all Christian's lives. If it were not for Saint Mary and her great faith, humility and self-control there would be no divine incarnation, if it were not for Paul's incredible faith and devotion to God there would be no church at all, except maybe Saint Peter's Efforts, as God hardened the hearts of the Jews, so that they rejected the Messiah. Is it not therefore right, as they are present with us in the mystery of Catholicism, to have and venerate their icons?

Worship is very different, it is not merely greeting and honouring God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as venerable persons, but acknowledging them as Creator, Messiah and Divine messenger, significantly higher than any Saint. By venerating the Saints, we are also in fact worshipping God, by honouring those he has ordained to be the creators and keystones of the church.

The act of beholding an icon does not reveal the metaphysical world, but the icon itself is a window into that world by the mystery of iconography.⁵ The icon is only counted as an actual icon when it has been consecrated by the church, then by the mystery of Iconography it becomes a window into the metaphysical world through which we may venerate and commune with the Holy Person who's archetype is depicted.⁶

a. Answering Apologists Answering Apologists

John Carpenter, in his article "Answering Eastern Orthodox Apologists regarding icons" attempts to undermine the archaeological evidence for iconography by attempting to label it as merely religious art instead of icons. It seems to me that he is misunderstanding the purpose and use of icons, quoting that icons "aid in worship"⁷ however throughout the article it is clear he has little understanding of in what way they're used to do so. The icons of Holy Events which he acknowledges are there in the early church (though he labels them as only religious images)⁸ are used in the same way then as they are used today, we do not venerate those, they are doctrinal and are used in worship in a passive

⁴ That is, the ring finger.

⁵ Papajohn, 'Philosophical and metaphysical', 88

⁶ Ibid., 89

⁷ Carpenter, 'Answering Eastern Orthodox', 419

⁸ Ibid., 420

way. In fact Carpenter doesn't address any of the nuance of worship with icons, and doesn't seem to know how it works, and yet claims he has proved they weren't used.

He proceeds to present a shocking exegesis of 2 Kings 18:4, believing that the people "Making offerings to" the bronze snake (then called Nehushtan) was in fact using the snake in the same way icons are used in the Orthodox church.⁹ This is frankly an insultingly ignorant view on the usage of icons, and reveals that in order to have an informed opinion of their usage in the Early Church, one must understand fully their use now.

He then goes on to conflate iconography with idolatry, and dismisses orthodoxy such as the Hodigitria (See Section VI paragraph *d*) for the reason that it was only recorded in the 8th century.¹⁰ The Holy Spirit is the one who inspires traditions such as the order of scripture, the Apostles' creed and traditions like this. Whether it's strictly true or not (I personally currently believe it is literally true, but other traditions, such as Moses writing the Pentateuch, are historically probably false, but was accepted because of orthodoxy even by Jesus Himself) it should be taken as the word of the Lord through tradition, and therefore true. In the mystery of God's truth and His will for the church, human understanding is not necessary, but it is helpful. That is, after all, why we have icons in the first place.

This whole point leads into the validity of Tradition itself and its necessity in the church, which is a whole other topic that I won't go into here, but will probably be explored in a future article.

III. Why we venerate Icons

The main reason is in the name: Orthodoxy; we venerate icons because it's what the apostles, the church fathers, the early church, the martyrs and the bishops have done since the church began all those years ago. That I suppose is the best defense for icon veneration, if anyone is going to know whether icon veneration is legitimate or idolatry it would be the people who were that Holy. How do we know this? Some have argued as recently as 1992 that the Early Church community grew out of a picture free (bildlose) synagogue, but this is shockingly ignorant because there are many archeological findings

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 424

in the twentieth century that show that iconography was widely used in the church from the earliest stages.¹¹

The Theologian Eusebius talks in his books about portraits of Jesus, Peter and Paul, as portraiture was flourishing in the Roman Empire, and Jews were starting to accept images of people, and the gentiles liked them.¹² If icons were not present in the church right from the start of it, there would be no justification for the orthodox church to have them, but bishops, clergy and theologians have agreed for 2000 years that they were, and have now been proven correct.

The main reason we accept that it is an integral part of the teachings of the church is because of its legitimisation in the Seventh Ecumenical council in 787, where the Synod said:

"We salute the form of the venerable and life-giving Cross, and the holy relics of the Saints, and we receive, salute and kiss the holy and venerable icons, according to the ancient tradition of the Universal Church of God, and of our holy Fathers, who both received them and determined that they should be in all the most holy churches of God, and in every place of His Dominion. To these holy and venerable icons we give honor and salutation and honorable reverence: namely, the icon of the Incarnation of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, and of our immaculate Lady and All-holy Theotokos, of whom He was pleased to become incarnate, in order that He might save us and deliver us from every impious madness after idols; also of the incorporeal Angels- Since they appeared to the righteous in the form of men. Also the forms and icons of the divine and most famed Apostles, of the Prophets, who speak of God, of the victorious Martyrs, and of other Saints; in order that by their paintings we may be enabled to rise to the remembrance and memory of the prototypes, and may partake in some measure of sanctification. These things we have been taught to hold, and have been confirmed in holding, by our holy Fathers and their divinely delivered teachings...

To these icons should be given salutation, and honorable reverence, not indeed the true worship of faith, which pertains to the divine nature alone... To these also shall be offered incense and lights, in honor of them, according to the ancient pious custom. For the honor

¹¹ Louth, *Tradition and Originality*, 195

¹² Ouspensky et al, *The Meaning of Icons*, 25

which is paid to the icon passes on to that which the icon represents, and he who reveres the icon reveres in it the person who is represented."¹³

This is accepted as the inerrant word of God, because of the many bishops who were part of it, the unity and conviction of the church, and the prophecy and critical thought each of them brought to the council.

IV. *The Origin of Icons*

As mentioned above, the Church traces the origin of icons back to the origin of the church.¹⁴ Traditionally the first icon ever written was authored by Saint Luke,¹⁵ and blessed by the Holy Mother Herself,¹⁶ the "Hodigitria" (see section VI, paragraph d), which he then sent to Theophilus, along with his gospel. This gives more weight to the idea that the saints were fully in support of iconography and their position in churches, especially as the apostles would have told their accounts of the Gospel in churches lined with them.

V. *The Function and Meaning of Icons*

The liturgical function of icons is unifying meaning and presence, sanctifying time and places,¹⁷ the mystery of seeing through this window into paradise is very powerful doctrine. The Christian as he looks at the icon and sees his fathers and mothers in the church, the people who made them who they are, as they are present and they can participate in its mystery as an eternal church family.¹⁸

Cavarnos, who has written a lot on the subject of icons, lists seven functions of an icon:¹⁹

1. To enhance the beauty of a church with a beauty that has the impress of holiness.
2. To instruct us in matters pertaining to the orthodox Christian faith.

¹³ Cavarnos, *Guide to Byzantine Iconography*, 52 – Though it seems quite excessive to have such a large quote, I felt it necessary because of how powerful this declaration is, and as this is an article, and not an essay, I thought I'd take my liberties.

¹⁴ Ouspensky et al, *The Meaning of Icons*, 25

¹⁵ Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon*, 177

¹⁶ Ouspensky et al, *The Meaning of Icons*, 80

¹⁷ Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon*, 175

¹⁸ Ibid., 176

¹⁹ Cavarnos, *Guide to Byzantine Iconography*, 25

3. To remind us of this teaching.
4. To lift us up to the prototypes, to the holy personages to who the Icons depict.
5. To arouse us to imitate the virtues of these personages.
6. To help transform us, to sanctify us.
7. To serve as means of worshipping God and venerating His Saints.

Since the church is meant to reflect God's kingdom, it's fitting that it be very beautiful and reflect the heavenly and reverent atmosphere. The icons, unlike many other forms of religious art, are not only significant in their subject matter, but also in its mode of expression,²⁰ I'll go into more detail about the significance of its individual elements in chapter VI.

VI. *The Composition of Icons*

Icons contain within their composition liturgical, festal and doctrinal teachings in image form, through various details and traditions in the composition of iconography, I will now explain only a few of them to merely scrape the depth and breadth of the meanings of the icons.

a. *Position of the Person*

When a Holy Person is depicted alone in an icon, they are always depicted straight on, usually looking at the viewer, to increase the connection through the icon between the viewer and the Person. Since the eyes are a window to a man's inner being, they are larger than normal, and both eyes are always visible on a Holy Person. When there is a demon depicted, they are usually in portrait only showing one eye as they are two faced and deceptive.²¹

b. *The Halo of Christ, Saints and Angels*

The Halo that can be seen in depictions of Christ, Saints and Angels is used to articulate the radiance of the Holy Person, there are references to this phenomenon of people's faces shining who are Holy People in the Bible²². The halo is always made of gold leaf and is a circle around the head, unlike in pop culture where it's a circle above the head.²³

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 28

²² Exodus 34:30, Ecclesiastes 8:1, Acts 6:15

²³ Cavarnos, *Guide to Byzantine Iconography*, 30

c. *Archetypes*

In iconography, every Holy Person has an archetype, and a lot of Holy Days also have an archetype. On people, an archetype is their facial features, bone structure, facial hair and such, so that you may recognise a Saint at a glance.²⁴ For instance, one may look at an icon and notice Saint Paul always has no hair on the top of his head except a little tuft at the front, and a very wavy beard.²⁵ These are definite and so if you tried to get a church to consecrate an icon that did not adhere to the archetype of the icon it would not be consecrated.

Similarly, there are archetypes for icons of Holy Days, that dictate the composition of icons depicting that Holy Day²⁶, for instance, If the Theotokos isn't lying down across the bottom of The Dormiton with her head on the left and her feet on the right then it isn't the Dormiton.²⁷

d. *Hodigitria: A Case Study*

As I mentioned in Section II & IV, the Hodigitria is traditionally the oldest icon, being written by Saint Luke when he wrote the third Gospel, and was blessed by the Theotokos Herself. So I thought I would do a case study on it to show you the depth an icon has.

The icon features the Theotokos holding the infant Christ on her left arm, but there are many things to note about it. Firstly, the infant is no-longer sucking, He is sitting straight up in a dignified way, full of wisdom despite his youth, showing that He is the Christ-Emmanuel, both man and God, even in infancy. He is clothed in a golden himation, representing His majesty and Lordship, with His right hand he blesses, and with His left he holds a scroll. The Mother of God, standing straight upright, shows no affection to Her son, with Her right hand presenting Christ to the world. The emotional distance held is doctrine of the divine Maternity, alien to human affection.²⁸

VII. *The Iconostasis*

The Iconostasis is a large wall separating the Sanctuary and the nave of the church which has 3 doors, 1 curtain and a lot of Icons. The Sanctuary is a representation of the holy

²⁴ Ibid., 29

²⁵ Of course Saint Paul's archetype is more complex than this, but I just wanted to give an example of the types of things it could be.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Again this is an oversimplification, I would encourage you to look at them yourself online or even in person at a Greek Orthodox church near you.

²⁸ Ouspensky et al, *The Meaning of Icons*, 81

things to come in the resurrection, and the nave represents man in the present. The two are inseparable, and are unified by the iconostasis, the Sanctuary feeds the nave and the nave acts as the sensory and motor functions of the Sanctuary.²⁹

Don't worry, it's not like the Jewish temple where God only exists behind the curtain, as Sanctuaries are in every church, and God is present in the nave (as well as in every Christian), and not only the high priest goes in there, the Sanctuary is an area set apart to consecrate and sanctify and bless things for the church. Most of the time the curtain is drawn, so you can see into the sanctuary, and it is no way symbolic of a separation between us and God, or us and the clergy. The Sanctuary is kept holy to represent it's mystery, the tension and unknowable are very central in Christianity.

Admittedly a lot of the sacred traditions can be concerning to the ignorant layman, before you fully understand them, but it's ignorance like that that caused such disastrous separations of the church as the reformation. One of the main reasons I'm writing this article is to dispel the stigma around some of Christian traditions.³⁰

The iconostasis is immediately eye-catching and awing thing, covered in gold and icons, and has a lot of tradition behind it, first I'll outline its structure:

The top row of icons on the Iconostasis is composed of icons of the patriarchs, from Adam to Moses, solidifying the doctrine that the Old Testament is very much part of Christian teaching. They are those who are justified by faith, and not by law, for when the law was created, it was a pillar of man's faithlessness, and faithlessness is the main component of the old testament.³¹

The second row is called the Prophets' storey, which has icons of old testament Prophets, with their texts prophesying the incarnation written next to them. They each have a different pose, presenting their prophecy, symbolising the lack of unity the People of God had before Christ. Their position reflects their position in the Old Testament, just before the Gospels (however in the Tanuk they're in the middle, just after the Pentateuch). In the middle of this storey is the icon "Our Lady of The Sign" who holds her hands up to

²⁹ Ibid., 59

³⁰ It's also why I waited until the end to mention the iconostasis, because the people I want to touch with this article would usually be put off by having both icons and the iconostasis because curtains are looked down upon and so are images, even though that's what the Saints and Apostles used.

³¹ In the sense that it is a main motif throughout it, the people of Israel often being idolaters throughout a lot of the historical writings.

pray, she is the fulfiller of their prophecies right up until Christ and Saint John the Baptist take that role with her.

The third row is the storey of Holy Days, which have icons of the 12 days considered Holy in doctrine, and usually some others as well. Some of the ones of note are the Crucifixion, Epiphany and Pentecost, but all of your favourites will be there. The Crucifixion is in the middle.

The bottom row, with the north and south doors and middle door with a curtain, has many Saints and Angels praying to Christ. I usually find this can be different in different churches but you'll always find the icons of Christ, the Theotokos and John the Baptist.³² As mentioned earlier, they are praying to Christ, in order, underlining the importance of hierarchy and order in the church, separating itself from the chaotic age of the Prophets. It is a representation of the fact the Church knows God's will, unlike the synagogues, who hadn't had any theological breakthroughs with regard to the messiah since the last great Prophets.

The door with the curtain in the middle of this row is called the Beautiful Gate, named after the temple door mentioned in Acts 3:2 and 10.³³ It is where the Priest comes out of during services (unless he's blessing the nave, then he comes out of the north or south door with the censer).

VIII. Conclusion

Christianity has a rich and diverse history with many sides and angles to each situation, just like any other history. In the same way God comes to meet us by His grace in whatever mindset or situation we find ourselves in, as long as we accept Jesus Christ.³⁴ This, I believe, gives us an opportunity as Christians, to choose whether to let culture affect worship or to make worship affect culture. The Saints and Apostles left us to what they thought was the best way to worship, and although I acknowledge the salvation of one who never venerates a single icon, I must also suggest that venerating an icon does much to contribute to one's faith, and faith is the key to salvation.

³² All of the Iconostasis order information is from: Ouspensky et al, *The Meaning of Icons*, 62-63

³³ Cavarnos, *Guide to Byzantine Iconography*, 55-56

³⁴ Though I am still wrestling with the salvation of protestants with regard to the notion of confession, as that is how our sins are forgiven. However one could argue confessing to Christ would mean you are forgiven, but only those who are sufficiently prophetic would be able to discern whether you have absolution, or whether Jesus wishes to give you advice. So it's more helpful in general to just do it the orthodox way and stop clinging to heterodoxy.

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