

The Importance of Church Icons 101, by Dn. Nicholas Nettleton

“The defenders of the Holy images founded the possibility of Christian Iconography on the fact of the Incarnation of the Word: Icons, just as well as the Scriptures, are expressions of the inexpressible, and have become possible thanks to the revelation of God, which was accomplished in the Incarnation of the Son.” - *Vladimir Lossky, “The Meaning of Icons”*

What is an Icon?

What is a Holy Icon? It is nothing more than the illustration of Church Tradition, theology in color, and the Gospel of the illiterate and deaf. Many in the ancient world were illiterate, but even walking into an Orthodox Church today in a country where 99% can read the scriptures themselves, you are surrounded by the message of the Gospel, the Saints, the feast days of the Church, and Old Testament typology.

We are bombarded with icons without even knowing it. In watching just a few minutes of television, you are exposed to thousands of images. Why are we so attracted to the images and why are they found everywhere? The answer is because they influence us. We become like them, and they express our desires. We conform ourselves to them in time - there are Holy Icons, just Icons, and unholy icons. Unholy icons are things like explicit images, but also celebrity, riches, and other purely worldly pursuits. This is the *idolatry* that St. Paul warns of in Colossians, Chapter 3. We must do as he exhorts us, to “put to death therefore what is earthly in you, immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness which is *idolatry*.” (Col 3:5)

Holy Icons show fact as an image to “lead us into all truth”. But are they really necessary? Aren’t they just extra, fancy decorations? This is how the west views “religious art”, as something dispensable. However, the truth is that you cannot banish icons no matter how hard you try. They will always be present whether it be in the form of a simple cross, images flashing on a jumbotron, a “worship band”, a pastor on the stage, or even bare white walls. They are all a testament to a certain ideal and are understood (perhaps subconsciously) in this manner. And now, because of a “literal” modern misunderstanding of the 2nd commandment: “thou shalt not make for yourself any graven image of anything that is in heaven or on earth”..etc, Holy Icons are even looked on as idolatrous by some Christians. While well intentioned, this understanding of the 2nd commandment is too simplistic and incomplete.

It is interesting that God gives Moses this commandment, and then immediately proceeds to instruct the people to make the Ark of the Covenant with two molten Cherubim flanking the mercy seat in chapter 25 of Exodus. In addition, the furnishings of the tabernacle include cups inlaid with the images of flowers & almonds. The wood was to be carved with palms and pomegranates. The curtains were to be embroidered

with images of Cherubim. ***God desires images in his Holy Temple - and commands them.***

Secondly, of course the Hebrews could not fashion an image of God. Any image they made would have been out of their own imagination since no man had seen God. The second commandment's true purpose was to keep the Hebrew people separate in practice from their idolatrous pagan neighbors. *They were not to serve images of imaginary gods.* The Hebrews were surrounded by *unholy* icons – ones of false gods, and so would likely imagine the true God to be something like the Canaanite gods, leading them into error. For this reason - ***Icons must be guided by Holy Tradition, not the world. Therefore, they are not merely "Art".***

Finally, St. John Chrysostom when commenting on this argument against Holy icons (no – it is not new), sees the 2nd commandment as really an extension of the 1st, and therefore expressly being concerned with *false gods* – actual idols that were being worshiped by “the nations”. ***Holy Icons are not “Idols” – They express the truth of the Gospel in images as revealed to us by God.***

Next week will be an explanation of the Theological foundation of Holy Icons in the Orthodox Church.