

Week 2: The Importance of Church Icons 101

by Dn. Nicholas Nettleton

Worship is one thing, veneration another. The invisible things of God have been made visible through images since the creation of the world. –St. John of Damascus; *Defense Against Those Who Oppose Holy Images*, circa 730 AD

In the Orthodox Church, you see many people making the sign of the cross over themselves and kissing or praying in front of one of the many icons here in the Church. This act is understood as “veneration”, or in the Greek “proskeneisis”-literally, “kissing toward”. St. Basil of Caesarea has said that “veneration of the image is transferred to the prototype”. We do not venerate the wood or the paint; this is nonsense - we venerate the one pictured (i.e. the prototype). The idea that the veneration of an image transfers to its prototype was the common understanding of the ancient world, and is still the latent understanding of imagery today. For example, you might kiss a picture of your mother, spouse, or children when you are away from them, and miss them, in order to show your love for them. Do you give your love and veneration to the photographic film? No - The love is passed to the one imaged, within us. This is the fundamental problem with idols and “graven images”. In that case, there is no prototype; the images are false gods. The veneration therefore goes to our passions – power (ex. Zeus), physical strength (ex. Kratos), lust (ex. Aphrodite), desire for wealth (ex. Plutus), drunkenness (Ex. Dionysius, Silenus), etc.. When we venerate this image of Christ, we show and grow in our love for Christ who is the prototype.

I assure you, that if the Lord were to walk into the room, that the Orthodox present would not venerate his icon anymore. We love *HIM*. That is why we kiss His picture.

This understanding forms the basis for the requirements of the Holy Icon. Holy Icons must be:

- **Theologically correct** (proclaiming the Gospel and the Church’s teachings),
- **Aesthetically adequate for the subject** (not sloppy or abstract, but painted with skill),

- Expressed in the semantic “language” of iconography, in line with Holy Tradition (no innovations or decadent “art”).

Through these requirements, the Holy Icon truly becomes a “window to heaven”. Also, for the above reasons, and since the icon is the Gospel for the illiterate, no deviations from the prototype are allowed. This is radically different from western “religious art”, which seeks to stir the emotions, and largely reflects the artist’s opinion about the subject, sometimes with little regard for the witness of the faith, or the truth for that matter. Holy Icons are forbidden from doing this. They are not signed (usually), and more often than not are direct renderings of a chosen and approved prototype - Innovation is frowned upon. Only that which has been passed down should be depicted, and symbology is used to “point” to divine or unseen things.

We depict what God has revealed to the Saints; the Church does not “designate saints”, but rather recognizes that God has *revealed* one to be a Saint. In the same way, Icons depict the transfigured and luminous version of those things revealed to us in the scriptures, through divine revelation, or within the Church’s tradition. God became man, and therefore made Himself known to us – we believe Christ is God, we also believe He can be depicted “in His person” since He chose to make Himself visible:

..[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (Col 1:15)

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known. (John 1:18)

Next week will be an overview of the origins of Christian Iconography, found (perhaps surprisingly) in Jewish iconographic traditions and Egyptian portraiture.