

## ICONS: IMAGES OF GLORY

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**I**cons play an important role in the spiritual life of Byzantine Christians, both Catholic and Orthodox. An icon is not merely a picture of Christ or of a saint, much less a religious decoration, but an expression of the most fundamental realities of our faith and a making present of the heavenly reality they depict.

## GOD TRULY WITH US

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**T**he first reality of faith expressed in icons is that the Word of God truly and completely became one of us in Jesus Christ. He was not simply manlike: He was truly human, like us in all things except sin as the Scripture says. Our icons of Him proclaim the truth of His humanity while stressing His divinity as well. As St John of Damascus noted, “Of old God, the incorporeal and uncircumscribed, was not depicted at all. But now that God has appeared in the flesh, I make an image of the God who can be seen.” This is why icons are not symbolic designs (depicting Christ in symbol, as a lamb, for instance, is forbidden in Byzantine tradition) but realistic images of the One who is truly one of us.

## WE SHALL BE CHANGED

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**I**n the Scripture we are promised that the Lord “*will give a new form to this lowly body of ours and remake it according to the pattern of His glorified body.*” (Philippians 3:21). And so the second reality to which icons point is that of the **glorified body of the new creation.**

Icons are realistic images, but they do not seek to depict the flesh of our fallen human nature, but the glorified bodies of those who are filled with the Holy Spirit. Sanctity is possible, the icon proclaims, and will fill even our bodies with the light of the Spirit of God. This is why the iconographer does not strive for the natural realism of a photograph. This would only reproduce the physical reality of this world.

Rather his intention is to suggest spiritual beauty, transfiguration, deification. It also explains why the figures in icons are usually heavily draped with clothing. Naturalistic art exposes the flesh, glorying in physical beauty. In icons it is generally only the face and the eyes and – through them the soul – which are shown. In Byzantine icons the physical presentation is meant to be colored by the spiritual reality just as the body of Christ reflects divine glory in a physical way.

## WINDOW TO HEAVEN

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**T**he icon has nothing in common with the decorative art we have in our homes, offices, or subway stations meant to adorn our living space. Icons are meant to call us to prayer, to an encounter with the Lord whom they reveal. This is why we pray before icons and fill our churches with them. We carry them in procession, bow before them and kiss them. A Byzantine church, in which all the walls are covered with holy icons, pulls us out of the mundane world of this age and into the life of the world to come. We see the effect of the grace of the Holy Spirit which we receive in the holy mysteries when the believer lives in this light of that grace.

The most customary manner of reverencing an icon in church is as follows: make one or two metanies then kiss the icon and then make a final metany, place your candle in the stand and move away. It is the custom in many places to kiss the feet on an icon of Christ, the hands on an icon of the Theotokos, and the forehead on the icon of a saint.

## ICONS IN THE HOME

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**O**ur use of icons is not restricted to the church building. God is with us wherever we are, and so it has become customary for Eastern Christians to proclaim His presence in their homes and workplaces by setting up icons. In particular the family prayer or icon corner is the focus of a household's Christian identity and the place in the home where family prayer is conducted.

Customarily a corner is chosen which faces east and there the family's sacred objects are gathered. Most common are the icons of Christ and the Theotokos, the holy cross, and the icons of the patron saints of each member of the family. The icon corner usually includes a lectern, shelf or small table upon which are placed a cross, the holy Scriptures, and a small incense burner. Many people also keep containers of holy oil, holy water, and antidoron as well as other blessed objects (palm, flowers, etc) on the table in their icon corner.

In addition to the icon corner many people place a special icon of the Theotokos near the door of the house. People venerate this icon, known as the 'Doorkeeper', on leaving or entering the house to ask for blessing on their comings and goings. It is also common to place in the dining room the icon of the Hospitality of Abraham, which represents the

Trinity in the form of the three angels who dined with Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18). Icons of the family members' patron saints are often put in their bedrooms as well.

Since icons are considered to be sacramental, revealing the special presence of the holy ones depicted in them, candles or oil lamps are kept burning before them. The faces of true icons are painted in such a way as to reflect the light of the lamps, just as the person depicted in the icon reflects the grace of the Holy Spirit within them.

A hanging lamp suspended from the ceiling or from a bracket over the principal icon in the icon corner in the most traditional way to adorn the icons. Some people leave a candle burning in their icon corner all the time. Others light the lamp and burn incense on occasion, such as on Sundays or the Great Feasts. Still others burn the lamp when they are praying, or when in need of a special blessing or protection.

## BLESSING AN ICON

Icons are often blessed simply by being placed on the holy table during the Divine Liturgy. There are also specific prayers for the blessing of icons, appropriate to the subject of the icon (Trinity, Christ, Theotokos, saints) as well as a general prayer which may be used for any icon. The priest would say the prayer then sprinkle the icon with holy water. Everyone would then venerate the newly-blessed icon. If a bishop is blessing the icon, he anoints it with chrism rather than with holy water.



Master, infinite in Your divine nature, You condescended in these latter days to become incarnate and finite: for in assuming our body, You accepted all its properties. Wherefore we represent Your likeness and embrace it with the Model in mind. Through it we ascend to You and, following the divine tradition set by the apostles, we draw from it the grace of healing.

The grace of truth has shone forth and the predictions of old have been clearly fulfilled: for behold, the Church has put on the incarnate likeness of Christ, the new world of icons transcending adornment. As the tabernacle of the Covenant held the presence of God, so do icons show forth the presence of the One we worship and revere. By venerating them we never go astray. It is a glory for us to kneel in true worship of the incarnate Christ. Let us then embrace His icon, O believers, and cry out, "O God, save Your people and bless Your inheritance!"

(Vespers, Sunday of Orthodoxy)

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