

## MAN: THE LIVING IKON

When Russian Ambassador Gromyko first met with U.S. Secretary of State Schultz, what do you think they shared? Snapshots. Pictures of their grandchildren!

## GOD'S PHOTO ALBUM

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we all like sitting around and looking through old family albums, discovering our roots. It helps us establish our identity. It's the same when we look at Christ, the Son of God, and realize that we are His brothers and sisters.

We find our identity and fulfillment in the family of God. If we don't take a good look at God our Father and Jesus our Brother, will we really know who we are? Will we know what it means to be created in His likeness?

The Scriptures tell us that Jesus is the Image of God, the divine ikon. Did you know that you are to be a living ikon? Just what is an ikon and should Christians have them? In this article we hope to touch on these questions and the importance of becoming images of Christ.

## MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

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we all see ourselves in those we love; of course, more so physically in relatives. This is even true of God. *"God looked at everything He had made, and He found it very good"* (Genesis 1:31). But most pleasing to

God of all His artistic masterpieces is mankind. That means you! Do you know why? Because: *"God created man in His image; in the divine image He created him; male and female He created them."* (Genesis 1:27)

It's as if we're God in miniature! Now, of course, we aren't the same as He is, but we are made in His likeness: *"For God formed man to be imperishable; the image of His own nature he made him."* (Wisdom 2:23)

So we're all just 'naturals' when it comes to being Godlike, even if that 'talent' seems buried. God can't help but love us; we're His kids. He looks at us and sees Himself. We make His heart skip a beat. He's proud of us, and He just loves showing us off to the rest of His creation, especially the angels. But they can't quite figure it all out: why He keeps on loving us; why He puts up with a bunch of rebellious kids. Sometimes I wonder too why He puts up with me. But He does. Not only that; He helps me change and become more like Him.

## BECOMING IMAGES OF CHRIST

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ow? Well, first of all He sent His Son, the one He joyously thundered about from heaven: *"This is my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on Him"* (Matthew 3: 17). You see, He just can't help Himself. He sent His Son to be an example for us. *"This, in fact, is what you were called to do, because Christ suffered for you and left an example for you to follow the way He took"* (1 Peter 2:21).

To be a Christian, then, is to follow in Christ's footsteps. The word for 'example' in the text from Peter is **hypogrammatos** in the Greek. Sounds fancy, doesn't it? But it's a very simple word. Do you remember your kindergarten blackboard? On the top of it was the alphabet printed in clean cut, white lettering, and you had to trace underneath the same letters, stroke for stroke. Well, that's exactly what a **hypogrammatos** is – a chalkboard with the alphabet on top for kids to practice how to write.

The Father wants us to be schooled in the wisdom of His Son. He asks us to try and try again until we can trace His Son's footsteps, walk in His shoes.

But tracing the pattern of His life, becoming like Jesus, isn't something we do on our own. No, He holds our hand and guides us as we try to copy Him: *"Any who did accept Him He empowered to become children of God."* (John 1:12)

This power comes from the Spirit. *"The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. All of us, gazing on the Lord's glory with unveiled faces, are being transformed from glory to glory into His very image by the Lord who is the Spirit"* (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). It is by spiritually contemplating the Lord that we are made like Him. The word translated by 'gazing' actually means to look into a mirror. Now this mirror, like the image, is Christ, the Wisdom of God.

The author of Hebrews picks up on this when he says, *"This Son is the reflection of the Father's glory, the exact representation of the Father's being, and He sustains all things by His powerful word."* (Hebrews 1:3). We get our English word 'character' from the Greek word used in this passage, which means 'exact representation'. Have you ever played in candle wax, dipping your fingers in it to make a mold? When you peel the wax away, an impression of your fingerprint remains in it.

This is what the Greek word 'character' means *The Jerusalem Bible* translates it as "perfect copy".

When life gets us hot under the collar, that's usually when the Lord tries to impress His image on our lives. He has His finger on us. He's giving us 'character'. He's making us into a 'perfect copy' of His Son. *"We know that by turning everything to their good God cooperates with all those who love Him, with all those that He has called according to His purpose. They are the ones He chose specially long ago and intended to become true images of His Son, so that His Son might be the eldest of many brothers"* (Romans 8:28-29).

## SHARING IN THE DIVINE NATURE

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his process is what the early Church called **theosis** or deification: becoming like God. The apostle Peter teaches, *"That divine power of His has freely bestowed on us everything necessary for a life of genuine piety, through knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and power. By virtue of of them He has bestowed on us the great and precious things He promised, so that through these you who have fled a world corrupted by lust might become sharers of the divine nature"* (2 Peter 1:3-4)

This is the good news of the Incarnation! The divine nature took on human nature, in order that we might participate in the divine life.

It is because of the mysteries of the Incarnation and Resurrection that we are sure that we too can be transfigured. When God became man, taking on flesh, He sanctified created matter. Matter, after all, is not evil. In fact, when God had finished creating everything, He said, "It is very good".

Creation is God's masterpiece of love. *"We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning He had meant us to live it"* (Ephesians 2:10). Several times Paul tells us that Christ is the image of God. The word 'image' in Greek is **ikon**. From apostolic times Christians have made images, ikons of Christ. Ikons are plaques or sacred objects bearing paintings of Christ, the Mother of God, angels or saints. They represent the real essence of a person. Jesus Christ is literally the Ikon of God, the exact physical representation of the invisible God. We are called to be living ikons of Christ. To see Jesus is to see the Father. To see us, we hope, is to see Christ.

## IKONS, INSTRUMENTS OF GRACE

**P**rayer and faith in God's grace is what allows Christ to dwell more fully in us. Holy images (ikons) can help us in our becoming representations of the divine life. Ikons aren't supposed to be portraits of saints, but something like caricatures, except that they portray the good points, not the bad. They are symbolic depictions of their holiness and way of life. By looking at an ikon and meditating on the life of the person it represents, we can be inspired to be transformed into the image of Christ.

Saints, recognized by the Church, are people who have had their lives changed by Christ. They have been born again into the heavenly family, transformed into the image of Christ. We are all called to be saints, holy ikons of Christ.

Ikons, like other holy objects, are instruments of grace and healing. God's grace works through the symbols and the object itself. Ikons of saints are somewhat like relics. The grace of God in the saint is in the ikon. Many people have been healed by touching ikons in prayerful faith. It is the Holy Spirit who has sanctified and empowered the holy objects. He heals through the physical dimension as well as the nonmaterial, because in God's becoming man the created order has been redeemed and made holy.

## HONORING THE SAINTS

**N**ow that doesn't mean we worship the ikon or the saint. Worship and adoration are reserved for God alone. But we should honor and pay respect to the saints. Who hasn't given a standing ovation to some prominent person? How much more so we should honor and pay recognition to those outstanding people of faith who have run the race well. St. Paul said, *"Take me for your model, as I take Christ"* (1 Corinthians 2:1). If we follow Christ, how can we not help but end up walking with and following others who have already followed Christ? Paul again says, *"My brothers. be united in following my rule of life. Take as your models everybody who is already doing this and study them as you used to study us"* (Philippians 3:17).

## ARE IKONS IDOLS?

**S**ome might object, though, that meditating on or praying in front of an ikon is idolatry. This objection has been raised before. Over three hundred bishops gathered together in 787 at what is now known as the Second Council of Nicaea. They discussed the matter, and this is what they concluded: it is holy and good to pay honor and reverence before an ikon of either Christ, the Mother of God, angels or saints; but to God alone belongs worship and adoration.

Here are some of their reasons. Scripture says, *"You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth"* (Exodus 20:4). But five chapters later God says, *"For the two ends of this throne of mercy you are to make two golden cherubs; you are to make them of beaten gold"* (Exodus 25:19). God also commanded Moses to fashion a bronze serpent in the image of the biting snakes. What! Has God contradicted Himself? Of course not! The difference is the next verse after the command not to make images: *"... you shall not bow down before them or worship them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God ..."* (Exodus 20:5). Images and works of art aren't evil; **worshiping them** is. If God truly became man, we can surely paint pictures of Him.

## WE ARE LIVING IKONS

**O**ur lives will be sanctified and transformed the more we contemplate Jesus, the Ikon of God in the flesh. Prayerfully meditating on the lives of the saints before their ikons will likewise inspire us to also become living images of the Divine Life, for the transforming power of God rests upon the ikon. This is our calling: to share the image of the God-Man (cf. Romans 8:29).

Let us, therefore, revere one another and see the image of God in our fellow human being. And if we think it is hard to find it in some, let us help them discover it. Imagine it! We can see God every day if we choose to. Why don't you show someone a token of appreciation for being a sign of God's love in your life?

And the next time you look in a mirror, take a good look and realize you are the image of God being changed from glory into exceeding glory!

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