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Homily
The Sunday of Orthodoxy Vespers
The Getty Center, Los Angeles, CA

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Holy Icons and the Ultimate State of Being

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!

It is a joy to be here with all of you this evening, united together in prayer on this special day celebrating the victory of truth and restoration of icons in this special place –The Getty Center, where the holy icons from Sinai have been piously brought, so that they may be experienced and revered by all who come and will come here to be taught and spiritually uplifted by their unique and historical beauty.

From the very beginning of Christianity, the theme of *icons* has been a fundamental component of Theology, and most especially of Christology.

As we celebrate this day in history, we know that icons have been central to the life of Christians in the 8th and 9th centuries, culminating in the thought and work of theologians such as John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite, who made them key subjects of their theological discourses. However, we also know that the theology of the icon is as old as Christianity itself, as is evident from the place it occupied in the Pauline writings.

Here it is also worth mentioning that St. John of Damascus began his great theological work, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, with the words of St John the Evangelist (1:18) “*No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father’s heart, who has made him known* (ἐξηγήσατο)”.

This evangelical truth expressed in these words concerning the mystery of God and his Incarnation, reveals to us the solution to the two-fold question historically surrounding icons and *par excellence*, the icon of Christ – on the one hand, the complexity of describing God, Who by nature is ἀπερίγραπτος or indescribable; and on the other, the theological attempt to describe τὸ ἀπερίγραπτον God, who, by the nature of His Being, is limitless and infinite.

Through the reality of the Incarnation of the Invisible God, we have been given the possibility of Christian iconography, iconology and icon-veneration, knowing very well that on the one hand, it is impossible to make any adequate picture or description of God, for He is Invisible and Incomprehensible, and because “No one has ever seen God” But on the other hand, we have come to know that “it is the only-begotten Son”, “who is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1,15), who, in His Incarnation revealed the invisible God on a human face, as Saint John of Damascus paraphrased from the words of the forefather Jacob: *I have seen the human form (face) of God, “and my soul has been saved”* (Gen 32:31, *On the Divine Images*, 1,22 PG 94, 1256).

When we speak about the relationship between God and the icons, we should always bear in mind this fact of the Incarnation of the Word – the Son of God – by Whom God in Christ actually became visible. That is the reason why the Person of the God-man, Christ, – One Hypostasis in two natures – is the basis for iconography. The Seventh Ecumenical Council (787) expressed this relationship in its dogmatic “*oros*” which states that “honor rendered to the image ascends to its prototype and he who venerates an icon adores the person of the one portrayed.” It was the decision of this Council therefore, that affirmed, once and for all, that the rejection of the holy images was the rejection of the fact of salvation by God in Christ and the Holy Spirit.

In our own time there is vast agreement that Byzantine iconography has a particular unique value. But, the difficulty arises around the question: wherein lies that value? One main perspective is that Byzantine iconography is essentially a *spiritual* painting, contrary to the secular, which underlines (merely) the bodily dimension. Still others consider that Byzantine iconography expresses the heavenly reality as well as the secular – the earthly one. We insist that the difference lies in the fact that Byzantine iconography expresses the ultimate reality of this world. It depicts the world as it will be—transformed in the Kingdom of God.

Secular art usually expresses the mere passing, the temporal, one world which does not succeed to transcend its limitations, corruption and death. One such example is when Picasso completed a portrait of a particular woman, he discovered she was greatly disappointed with the presentation. Picasso responded by saying, “Dear lady, I’ve painted you exactly as you will look in ten years!”

So, iconography depicts that which is just the opposite. It depicts a Saint as he or she will appear and become known in the Kingdom of God. Instead of the decay and corruption of modern portraits, the icon – with the help of the uncreated light of Paradise – leaves out the features of corruption that a saint possessed during his earthly life. So, we might say, that an icon is a *portrait of transfigured life in the future kingdom*.

The icon is an unusual image which presents the landscape (“*paysage*”) of this world, not corruptible as it is now, but incorruptible, as God the Father will look upon it in the Eschata or end of time, when the Son of God will introduce the resurrected people and the entire creation to the Father, by saying: “*Behold, I and the children that You have given to me*”. In this way, the icon depicts the restoration of the fragmented, corrupted space and time.

From the artistic point of view we can summarize the theology of the icon with these four simple points:

First, the icon is not a naturalistic portrait, but a *light-portrait* (photo-portrait). Icons express ontological participation in the Uncreated Light.

Secondly, this Light transcends the laws of optics. It expresses the freedom of the Uncreated.

Third, icons of Christ are not presented as an *individuum* or individually, but are revealed as the Mystery of the Church, where the many are gathered as saints (in the Pauline sense). Each saint depicted in the icon bears all the properties of the Light of Christ, which implies that he is “a Christ by grace”.

And fourth, as every icon is depicted transcendentally, the lighting “equalizes” every saint with Christ and other saints within the ontological community of persons, that is, the Church. In the iconic ontology of the Greek Fathers, an *eikon* is normally an “image of things to come.” So, there cannot be an icon of the Kingdom without the community.

The icon reveals an existential attitude and disposition. When we stand before an icon, we do not kiss a mere photograph, but rather, the eschatological (ultimate) person of a Saint depicted. And in the same manner, it is especially important for us to know and remember, that when we stand with our fellow man, we should also overlook his weaknesses and iniquities, and see in him primarily his future restored, transformed and resurrected face, free of passions.

This explains why historically, Orthodox people did *not* differentiate between ecclesial and secular painting. Their eyes were transformed by the eschatological vision of the world. Thus they looked not only at the saints, but also to the ordinary men and women, and our landscape and environment as well – all as transfigured from the temporal to the eternal, the mortal to the immortal, the corruptible to incorruptible.

To more fully understand this, let us now briefly consider what distinguishes Byzantine art from secular aesthetics. Byzantine art is not carried away by the phenomena caused by the laws of optics. It does not empirically observe and represent the appearance of what exists; rather these are appreciated on account of their partaking in *another light*, which is not determined entirely by the laws of optics. Everything in the icon is painted in such a way, with such conventional, flexible shading, that it lends *permanence* to its characteristics.

The fullness of Byzantine aesthetics is also expressed in the iconographer’s freedom to depict not only what is visible, but more so, what is invisible. Byzantine art thus gives a *view of the subject which is complete and not at all fragmented*. While western art is *often* restricted to a great extent by the natural laws of the linear transmission of light so that everything which is behind or inside something else is not seen; in contrast, *Byzantine art has absolute freedom to depict everything*. One such example among many, in the many icons of saints and feast days which we venerate, as well as those which are part of the exhibition here at the museum, we can see depicted such things as the roof of a house, even though we are looking at it from below, and according to the laws of western perspective that would not be possible.

In the restoration of icons, we celebrate this perspective and vision of life, transformed and transfigured by the person of Jesus Christ. We celebrate in them the possibility of what remains ahead for those who believe and have lived faithful to Christ. It is precisely this vision of life which Byzantine iconography communicates to us and the culture in which we live.

So, icons are our spiritual treasures because they ultimately reveal our relationship with God; that we belong, not to our self, or to our work, or to ambition in this world, but that we belong to God. They are our treasures because they reveal that we are not alone, not isolated, but part of a communion of saints, loved by God with a love which this world with all of its adversities and all of its trials and tribulations cannot take away. The Lenten season certainly calls us to joyfully rediscover this vision of life and our relationships with the world and one another. It is, in a very real way, the foundation and purpose of our fasting, prayer and almsgiving. Through our ascetic efforts, we are led to this essential understanding of our relationship to God, to the world, and to one another as citizens of His Kingdom to come.

May we all then, today, fully aware of our rich treasure of faith in the holy icons, honor the memory of those who have handed down this precious heritage to us, and by so doing, solemnly rediscover this vision of life, and once more, rededicate ourselves to our faith in Christ, our service to Him and to one another as we await the ultimate transformation of the world which has already begun through the Church. This is central to our spiritual growth and this celebration today, as summarized in the historic Synodikon which I now ask you all to rise and enthusiastically join me in proclaiming to one another and to the world.