

## The Icon and the Kingdom of God

We live in times awash with man-made images, in a postmodern epoch where each person struggles to produce the most convincing image of himself and his idea, where people try to attract the most people they can through their self image in order to impress and to impose their “icon” or, better yet, their “idol,” on others (as St Andrew says : “αὐτὲ ἰδῶλον ἐγενόμην”, “I have become an idol to myself”; Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, Ode IV). It is an era that offers falsehood, delusion, and fantasy without transcending the antinomies and limitations of history.

Your Eminence, Your Graces, beloved brothers in the Holy Spirit and co-celebrant of our Modesty, and dear pious assembly of the fullness of the Church, the living icons of God.

We live in such times; yet, this moment in time – The Sunday of Orthodoxy, the feast of the Icon – proposes an alternative image: one Divinely-revealed rather than human-made, one that is convicting rather than convincing, one that is iconic rather than idolatrous – the Icon of God.

This Icon represents humanity having received the opportunity to circumscribe and depict the Transcendent God, which only became possible once God became man, expressing his Divinity in human form, bringing the Kingdom of God into the Divine Liturgy, and demonstrating the reality of the Resurrection by asking one of His disciples to verify what he saw by touching Christ’s hands, feet, and side (Jn 20:26). Similarly, the language of the Fathers about Icons, especially that of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, has to do with both seeing and beholding the vision of God. But this language introduces significant questions: What is the real image of God? What is the real image of man? What is the real image of this world? Does the Icon depict a Platonic ideal? Or does it represent Greco-Roman art? Or does the iconic image capture the corrupted world of Pieter Brueghel or Salvador Dali? Maybe, we Christians present an image that itself can

obscure the image of the Kingdom? Do we not, instead of iconizing the transfigured world of Paradise, most often represent the mere fallen world? This problem faces us in our present-day Church and it is necessary to ask ourselves: does our image of the world and the Church overshadow the true image of the Kingdom?

What is the difference between the Icon and the image, between the Divine Image and the image of this world? The two are altogether different.

The first, and significant, difference is that the Icon is not naturalistic; it does not represent something ephemeral, but rather it represents both a Person and a personal relationship. One of the most significant points to emerge from the Seventh Ecumenical Council is that one Divine Person – the Son of God – became man, demonstrating that we cannot speak about God or imagine God without the Person who revealed God to us. An image that does not refer to the Person of Christ is an image that refers to the corrupted world and thus leads to death. The Icon is not of this world; it is eschatological both in origin and in content. Not being drawn from history, we can call the Icon meta-historical.

Nevertheless, the Kingdom can only be depicted by using created means. The Icon is distinct from the truth, not because it is false, delusional, or fantastic, but because it borrows its means of expression from still-corruptible nature.

Although its means of expression derive from fallen nature, the Icon refers to inexpressible Truth by encouraging our personal relations with Truth; a proper Icon creates true personal relationships. That is why an Icon is indivisibly linked with Love: we cannot speak about Truth without Love, and we cannot speak about an Icon that does not lead us to Love.

For Orthodox Christians, this means that the Icon leads us to the Church. There we will meet the other in his or her true state. As Fr. Justin Popovich used to say, “in the Church we are taught to see (iconically) in every man our future

brother/sister [as he or she is in] Paradise.” There, in the Eucharistic synaxis, we will see and meet God through our communion with others. So, the Icon gathers (*synaxis*) the community we call the Church. The Icon, then, is not only an object that we kiss and venerate, but an eternal synaxis that exists in moments, movements, and actions during the Divine Liturgy. Outside the Church, there is not the Kingdom of God; inside the Church, all is iconic.

Here we understand the next characteristic of the Icon: it refers to another, not to itself, leading us, thereby, out of solipsism. It encourages us to go out and meet the other. The Icon is person-oriented! When we venerate an Icon of Christ or a Saint, we demonstrate our victory over individualism and show that we are not self-reliant. When the Icon traces this relationship between persons (God and man) and gathers the Church, then the Church becomes a real depiction of the Kingdom of God, leading us to the Divine Eucharist, which St Maximus the Confessor described as the image or Icon of the Kingdom. In the primitive phase of the ancient Church, the Icon was closely linked with the mystery of Eucharist. The Eucharist is the celebration that makes the earthly Church what it is, namely, an *Icon* of the Kingdom.

But, there is yet one more difference between the Icon and the image. The image « fixes » reality, as opposed to the Icon which does not fix it but liberates it from natural laws. We celebrate today the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical synod who gathered to testify that the Church could not exist without Icons, without iconizing the Person of God! When an image becomes an Icon, it no longer refers to itself anymore – to its ephemeral existence; rather, it refers beyond itself: to something beyond this corrupted world. When an image becomes an Icon, it redeems a person or landscape depicted in it and situates that person or landscape in relationship to the Kingdom. In the historical life of the Church, everything is an image of the future. The Icons which depict the Saints are not photographs of their historical faces, but the images of the future they portray.

This reality of the Icon's relationship with the Kingdom of Heaven is why the Fathers of this Synod repeated what St Basil said in the fourth century: "*the honor paid to the Icon passes on to the prototype*"! Therefore, when we venerate an Icon, that relationship goes beyond the Icon and reaches the Original source of the image, which is a Person. That is why in the Church, the Word is an Icon and an Icon is the Word! And this is something that our Church experiences throughout the ages! In our Churches, the Kingdom of God is depicted and represented through Icons, through chanting, through harmonious architecture, through all manner of aesthetic endeavors that are part of our Liturgical expression. How did the Orthodox survive under the Ottoman rule without catechism or schools? Only through this Iconic approach to embodying Truth. The pious people spoke with God through Icons (iconographic depictions) and Hymns and not through human words or rational formulations; God, in turn, revealed Himself to His people through Icons and Hymns.

This, in the final analysis, means, dear brothers and sisters, that the Divine worship in its liturgical-iconical context has saved the Orthodox Church and not the verbal descriptions and rhetoric of the homilists...such as this present one.

There will be those who assert that an iconic image conveys the Platonic idea of a shadow empty of reality. But such a position makes it difficult to speak of the Church as an Icon without falling into the realm of the imaginative or unreal. The Iconic nature of the Orthodox Church does not imply a lack of reality, although it does imply a lack of objectified and autonomous reality. As Metropolitan John of Pergamon states, "by being iconic in her existence the Church is two things: (a) she is an image of something else that transcends her—hence, again, a *relational* entity; and (b) she is in her institutions and structure so *transparent* as to allow the eschatological realities to be reflected in them all the time. This can hardly be achieved outside the context of worship, for it is there that transcendence and transparency are experienced par excellence."

My beloved, in this society permeated with the *illusions of multimedia*, where image-pollution of all sorts has blurred our vision, we are invited to promote the true Icon of the Kingdom, we are invited to liberate our everyday life from slavery to the natural world through this iconical ethos that our Tradition bequeaths to us; an *iconological* ethos that leads to an affirmation of the other, which leads very often to “silence” and to deference before the other, who we prefer over ourselves (“Honor one another above yourselves” – Rom. 12:10).

Unfortunately, my beloved, Orthodoxy in our times tends to become an ideology, wherein slogans and accusations of betraying the faith and tradition – understood ideologically – are hurled at one another. But, significantly enough, our Orthodox Church has chosen the commemoration of the Seventh Ecumenical Council to be *the* Sunday of Orthodoxy. As is well known, this Council dealt with the issue of Icons and did not put forth any propositional definition of the faith. In declaring, “*This is the faith of the Fathers; this is the faith which has sustained the oecumene,*” the Council pointed to a form of “theology,” the Icon, which was the liturgical experience of the community and required no subscription to conceptual or ideological statements.

This declaration of the Seventh Council ended the Christological debate of words by testifying to the *reality of the Mystery* in the Icon of the Crucified and Risen Lord. This Icon removes our forgetfulness of the eschatological Coming of the Risen One, the eschatological Newness of the Living One (Apoc. 21, 5; 1, 17). Now “we call Christ’s image ‘Christ’...The Icon of Christ is nothing other than Christ, *apart, of course, from the difference in essence*” (St. Theodore the Studite).

The identification of the selfsameness of Christ with His image leads to my final point: Orthodoxy *is* the Church and *not* an ideology ! It is a gathering of the people and, particularly, a Eucharistic gathering of living icons. This is what we must emphasize today ! Not an Internet-online-virtual *illusion* of communication, but the Icon as the visible and true communication of the Kingdom; such *must* be

the future of Orthodoxy because such is the future Christ promises His Church. In the Eucharist, we are taught not only to venerate and greet icons, but also the other members of the synaxis, not passing the living icons – people – by, but greeting and embracing them. So, the Icon is indeed the right method of looking at the world...Only this iconic approach will save Orthodoxy from becoming a secular organization conforming to *the image of the world*.

May this, our commemoration of the Sunday of Orthodoxy today in Los Angeles, serve as a source of sanctification, strength, and hope for the Orthodox faithful.

Finally, from this Holy Ambon we extend our wholehearted well-wishes to the beloved Hierarchs, to the devout clergy, and to the entire flock of the Orthodox Church of America, and we pray that God may bless our efforts and good works, to the glory of our Father Who is in Heaven and the honor of our Church and all the living icons within.