

Icons and the Human Person

by Aidan Hart¹

May I begin with the words of an eight-year-old, named Ruth:

I had a baby budgie called Tabitha but she died before she knew what she was.

To know what we are before we die: surely this is the most exalted task of the human person. But life is busy, and it is easy to care about many things except this one thing needful. The words of another eight-year-old, Bruce, can easily apply to us:

A prime minister is so busy he doesn't have time to think.

The human person is made in God's image; this is a profound mystery. If Tabitha had been a human this is what she would have needed to know before she died.

Today we will first look at what it means to be in God's image; we shall consider what we *are*. Then we shall consider what the Orthodox Church says we can *do* about this. Finally, we shall consider the *mystery* of the human person.

1. WHO ARE WE?

The human person as communion

We are made in God's image. But God is three, triune. He is a communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is why we can say that God is love, even before He created anything outside of Himself to love. While each person of the Trinity is fully God, each goes out of themselves in love for the others. The Church Fathers have called this an ecstasy, which means literally a going out from one's place.

We also are created to be ecstatic beings, longing always to go out of ourselves in love for God and for others. Each one of us is not a part of the whole, but are the whole. At the same time, each one of us exists not in isolation but as members of one another. We cannot see our own faces, but are seen by others. To be ourselves we need to be seen and loved by another. The quickest way to madness is to be put into a totally black room and be deprived of sound, touch and all other means of communication. Such a person begins to believe that they don't exist. I am because I am loved. If I am not loved, I am not. Hell is standing back to back, being deprived of other people's faces. Heaven is to behold the face of the Lord and the face of my brothers and sisters.

But how do we commune? What are the human faculties of communion?

Means of communion

We have a body - or rather, we are a body. So we offer spiritual gifts to one another through offering material things - a flower, a kiss, a hug, a gift, a poem, a word. Each of these gifts is a bush burning without being consumed.

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It is a material offering alive with the grace of love which transforms mere matter into something made divine by grace. A gift of genuine love is a grace bearer.

But beside being bodies, we are also souls. And at the core of our being is the spiritual heart, and the “seeing” or perceiving faculty of the heart is what the Greek Fathers call the *nous*. By this *nous* we can know and be known in an unmediated way. Through the rational faculty we can know about things and people, but we cannot know them as they are in themselves. But the *nous* can do this. “Deep calls to deep” as one of the Psalms says. A loved one is suffering, and your heart tells you this, senses it. And so you pray for them at that moment as for yourself. Someone comes to you, and you feel that you know them already. Through the heart we can know people from the inside out.

Sadly this life of the spiritual heart is a rarity in a secular age which denies the existence of our spiritual nature. Too often we live in the outer regions of our being, in the body and the brain, and exile ourselves from the Paradise of the heart. We don’t want to get out of the boat and walk on the water to meet Christ. We prefer the solid feel of the wooden boat, the familiar. That revered elder of our times, Father Paissius of Athos, told me more than once that miracles are done from the heart. And so to live the miracle of being truly human requires a life of the heart. The heart is created to unite all the faculties of body and mind and emotions in the cause of love.

But to enter this inner garden wherein God walks needs calling upon the mercy of Christ, who has died to open the door to Paradise. It needs sacrifice and even death. Nothing mortal can enter this sanctuary because mortality cannot bear the light which fills this place. Sacrifice and death are merely the letting go of those mortal things which we cannot take with us into eternity.

“If you die before you die, “ say the Fathers, “then when you die you will not die.”

Divine eros

What does it mean to be an icon, an image of God? Unlike a painted icon, we are living icons. We are flesh and blood, living creatures with heart and mind. This means that we are not static icons but have implanted in us a longing to be united to our archetype, to God Himself. So to be truly human is to be more than human. To be truly human is to become nothing less than gods by grace. Every fibre of our being thirsts for this union with God.

Sin is simply, but tragically, our seeking to satisfy this thirst through created things. According to St Ephraim the Syrian the tree of knowledge of good and evil was the created world, which was to be eaten after the tree of life:

*God placed two crowns for Adam, for which he was to strive,
Two tree to provide crowns if he were victorious.
If only he could have conquered just for a moment,
Her would have eaten the one and lived, eaten the other and gained
knowledge...²*

If Adam and Eve - that is, you and I - had realised that God alone is life and beauty itself, and that created things have life and beauty only by

² “Hymns on Paradise” XII:17

participation in God, then we could have partaken of created things and received divine life through them. By receiving the world as gift we would have received the Giver. As it turned out, we foolishly thought that life existed in created things in themselves, and so by eating of them we ate of death. The tree brought knowledge of evil because we thought that it had good in and of itself; it brought death because we thought that it had life in and of itself.

But God in His mercy reversed this by uniting Himself to the very tree which had been our occasion for sin. He allowed Himself, who is Life, to be swallowed by death so that in death we might eat and drink life. This is why icons of Christ have the Greek words O WN, inscribed inside a cross which is set within His halo. O WN means the Existing One, the One who truly is. Only God has existence and life in Himself. We have, whereas God is.

The pure in heart shall see God

Because we are made in God's image it is natural to do good, and unnatural to do bad. So the preparation for God-knowledge is self-knowledge - not the fallen self, but the icon made in the divine image. God cannot be known as some object out there: He can only be known as the subject of my being, as the foundation of my existence.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." And what is purity? Purity is ultimately not so much absence of foreign matter, but absolute presence. If we say that this is pure water, we mean that this is only water. So the pure in heart are those who are only heart, who are all eye, all ear, who are fully human. The pure are those who are their true selves and not a series of masks. It is surely significant that the English word holy means whole. If I am physically unwell and am in pain it is difficult to concentrate on others. If I am whole, then I can forget myself and enter the joys and sorrows of the other, become all eye, all ear for them. So to the extent that I become my true self, I can forget myself and love the other, can discover God in the other.

The end of godly self-knowledge then is to behold God, not myself. We need to heed the warning of six-year-old Susan:

If my sister keeps looking in the mirror she'll turn into a vanity.

A painter once said to me that when he painted a tree or some other object, he was not aiming to express himself but that tree. But then a miracle began to happen. To the degree that he died, got out of the way and let the tree speak through his brush, the more he discovered himself through the tree. He found that his self did not exist in isolation, like an object rattling around in the box of his body, but only existed in relationship.

If we are meant for relationship, what is the basis of our union with others?

A single human nature

There is only one human nature. Each one of us, unique as we are, participate in this one nature. If we truly realised this the world would be a different place. I would experience my neighbour's suffering and my neighbour's pain as quite literally my own, because it is our nature which is suffering, our nature which is rejoicing. St Maximus the Confessor said that

one result of the fall was to split up human nature, to make us live as though each of us possessed an independent nature.

Dostoyevsky wrote that compassion is the greatest virtue. Surely this is so, precisely because compassion is a sign that we have rediscovered our identity with others. St Anthony the Great said that his brother is his life. He also had a rule that he would not do anything that benefited himself more than his brother

When we learn to live this identity of our shared nature a miracle occurs. I share in another man's suffering nature, and I find that I am sharing in Christ's divinity. I behold and love my own flesh and blood - that is, my fellow human - and I find that I am beholding and loving the Creator of the universe. I offer alms to a poor man, and a hand with pierced palms receives them. I visit a man in prison, and I am told on the day of judgement that I have visited God. I love a creature of flesh and blood on earth, and I find myself seated with Christ in heaven.

The thirsty saint

So to be human is to love. The more we thirst for God, the more God opens our eyes to behold Him in other people. "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." The thirsting soul is granted to see profound beauty in others. She is like a bee who seeks the nectar of a lone flower in a concrete yard. The hungry soul naturally seeks out all that is good in those whom she meets. When she does encounter sin in the other, she does not treat this sin as part of their true person, but as something foreign to them.

We can learn to live in this way by meeting saints. In the presence of the saint we are changed. We are not usually aware of this change when we are with the saint, because their humility is such that they are more aware of us than of themselves.

We go away from meeting the saint and realize that they have addressed something deep in us which we never knew was there. We came to them as a pauper, and they rolled out the purple carpet of royalty for us. We came to them immersed in trivia and they spoke to us of heavenly things.

And the way the saint speaks to us of heavenly things is not foreign. They believe in us. They speak to us as a citizen of God's creation. They speak to us from that Paradise, and so their words and deeds carry the scents of that place. This fragrance reminds us of the time we were in Paradise, in the loins of Adam and Eve.

And so a meeting with a saint gives birth to longing, nostalgia. He or she awakens in us longing for our Edenic homeland. Such meetings are therefore "dangerous", they can challenge us profoundly. They require a response. Do I want to remain where I am, in the realm of the immediately known, with the swine? Or do I want to begin that long journey home, with no money, to embrace my Father? Perhaps he will turn me away?

The saint reveals paradise to us as much as we are able to bear it. But then he leaves us absolutely free, freer than we were before. Having given us a taste of God, he leaves us alone with God. Will I then repeat the tragedy of the fall and grasp hold of creation rather than my Creator? Or will I grasp hold

of Christ as my Lord and my God, my Life, my Light? A meeting with a saint can be a crisis point. As an eight-year-old boy named Mark once wrote,
Good pepul always friten bad pepul.

But of course it is not the saint who frightens us; it is the revelation, the challenge which opens up before us which awes us. The saint, the true human, does not teach. He feels that he is less than all others. But because he is full of light, and we have so much darkness, it cannot be otherwise than that his or her light enters our darkness. We feel that he speaks to us from another place - not a foreign place, but from our homeland. He does not teach, he merely describes the place where he lives. Being with him, I realize that it is I who am in a foreign land, and it is he who is at home. The saint does not threaten me. Because he is already dead to this world he has nothing mortal to lose and therefore to defend.

The saint has removed the masks, so he is what he is. He is natural, spontaneous. He can afford to be natural because he has nothing to hide.

Yet the saint's spontaneity is not an occasion for insensitivity. He is very sensitive to my weakness, and instinctively only reveals what he feels I am ready to receive. I know that he has passed through deep valleys of sorrow, and that he is more human than I. I am not therefore afraid of sharing with him my deepest self - my hurts, my aspirations, my experiences. He has known these himself, in his own way, and I know that he has understood and holds my disclosures as something precious.

And the saint does not only understand and cherish the things I share with him; he also transforms them, bringing out their deeper levels. I describe something clumsily, only half aware of what I am trying to express. But the saint perceives it and manifests its greater significance to me.

We are icons of God. But we all know that we are imperfect icons. Also, many of the Church Fathers make a distinction between being in the image and in the likeness of God. The divine image is something given, they say, whereas being in God's likeness is something we can only grow into through the right use of our freedom. The Russian word for saint, *prepodobny*, means precisely "much like"; a saint is a saint because he or she is much like God. How can we become much like God? How can we live worthily of the divine image?

2. GROWING IN HIS LIKENESS

Commandments and freedom

"He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him...If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him"

(John 14:21, 24).

We live in an individualistic society, and any talk of keeping commandments tends to make us shy away, gives us a feeling of being restricted, contracted. Why is it that the Lord emphasises the keeping of His commandments when He says that He came to set us free?

By keeping the words of Christ, we are ensuring that we will be capable of bearing God without being destroyed. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit may then and only then come and dwell in us. A pair of gloves must be the right shape and size if hands are to fit into them.

Compare the icon of the Transfiguration with the icon of Pentecost. When Peter, James and John behold the Lord transfigured, they are hardly able to bear it and are shown falling over backwards. At Pentecost they are better prepared and are not only able to behold God's glory, they are able to receive this glory into themselves.

In one sense, we ought not need the commandments. We only need them because we were born into a world distorted by sin, and so what should be natural to us is no longer natural. As seven-year-old Jim said

I went swimming but my body kept wanting to drown.

We need a schoolmaster until we return to our natural state. We are gloves that need repair. At our baptism and chrismation we were healed of our paralysis, but we need to learn how to walk, to do what is natural to a healthy person.

Prayer and our name

Prayer. Prayer is the root system of every tree in paradise. Prayer is the leafy canopy reaching out to drink the light and warmth of the Son. Without prayer we cannot be persons, because we are not in communion with Life. The very word person means face, and face is fulfilled in relationship. We have eyes to see the other, ears to hear the other, lips to commune with the other.

I know a man who while praying the Jesus Prayer suddenly was made so aware of God's presence with him that it seemed to him that he ceased to exist. Delight in God's presence took him out of himself. God was revealed as closer to him than he was to himself. Yet in the same instant he knew that to behold God in this way he must exist. Then he saw that the ultimate end of every fibre of his being was to behold God -to be all eye, all ear, all sense.

And yet we have a name. We do exist. We are unique. Since there is only one of us in the universe, each one of us is an endangered species. Since God has created us unique, we have a mission to love ourselves, to be true to our name. We can't afford to be like our little Ruth's budgie which "died before she knew what she was."

To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it. (Rev. 2:17)

This name is our essence. But it is revealed by God - it is God who gives the white stone upon which our name is written. Although our walk with God is according to the commands given to all, the details of this walk are unique because each one of us is unique. We need courage to follow the Lord, even to death. It also needs courage to avoid the temptation of aping others, of hiding behind others and not finding our own name. And one's true self is the greatest gift we can give to others. White light is made of many colours, and our task is to be one of these colours.

But there is a danger that we think of this "self" as something walled about, a castle to be defended, a contained, definable entity. In reality I do not think

that this self exists at all. Our true self exists only in relationship with God. Our name cannot be written on air; it is written on a stone and that stone is Christ. Without the stone, there is no name. In the last chapter of the Scriptures we read that in the age to come

...there shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. (Rev. 22:3-5)

We cannot read a name written on our own forehead; another must read it and tell it to us. If we do try to read it artificially, in a mirror, we shall get it back-to-front. Much modern art is a testimony to this abortive search for meaning apart from God. If we keep doing this we will end up like little Tim's budgie:

My budgie broke is neck. It served him rite because he was always kissing himself in the mirror.

Suffering: baptism or death?

Suffering. Suffering is a great fact of life on this earth. What place does it have in knowing God and in becoming a real human person? M. Scott Peck, the American psychotherapist, wrote in his best seller book "The Road less Travelled":

Life is difficult.

This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult - once we truly understand and accept it - then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.

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Suffering may have many effects, depending largely on how we respond to it. Personally I have found that one of its effects is to drive my head into my heart. It is all too easy to have theories and ideas, but these are dry and unsatisfying of themselves. Hardship patiently endured softens the heart, makes a person less prone to judge others. Suffering is an earthquake that tests and shakes everything. There is something tentative and ethereal about an idea, whereas suffering is a real, undeniable experience, albeit unpleasant at the least. In the words of C.S. Lewis in his book "The Problem of Pain":

God speaks to us in our pleasures, whispers to us in our silence, and shouts to us in our pain.

What I was going to lose anyway on my death bed is lost in the midst of suffering. Trials are a little death, a miniature day of judgement.. Suffering is mortality claiming back its own. If I relinquish the dying thing then I have peace. If I hold onto it, then I am dragged with it into death. If I relinquish that thing, that person, that circumstance, then perhaps I will find that it is God who is taking it so that He can baptise it into life. If this is the case, then by holding onto this thing I am depriving it of new life. I am being like a parent who will not let his daughter leave home and marry and have children. If I offer back my children they will return to me, with grandchildren.

3. THE MYSTERY

The human person as mystery

We have said that each of us is a profound mystery. What does this mean?

Even those we are closest to retain this element of mystery. If in the midst of our intimacy we lose this sense of beloved's otherness then we have lost them. In coming to know someone we are exploring a garden park planted both by God and that person. We enter one section of this garden park and are astounded by its beauty. But then we catch a glimpse of yet another area within this park. And so we carry on, from glory to glory, finding that this person's inner park, though bounded by a body, actually contains a universe so large that an eternity will not suffice to explore it.

Why is there this mystery to the human person? The Church Fathers teach us that while God is truly knowable through His uncreated energies which flow out to us, He is also utterly unknowable in His essence. I remember the day when it was revealed to me that each person too is unknowable in their essence. From that day, with varying degrees of clarity, I have felt a tremendous awe of people. Each person is a created god, a being with hidden depths before which even angels tremble.

I find it helpful to liken this essence of each person to that awesome cosmic phenomenon, black holes. What are black holes? As you might expect, they are mysterious, but physicists are developing theories which are helping us to understand them. They appear to be a presence so concentrated that forces come into play which we cannot begin to imagine. A black hole is actually an incredible presence.³ We have an "is" which appears as an "is not".

So what is our own black hole, our inner essence and presence? Perhaps it is the breath of life granted to us by God. Compared to the presence of God, this incredible existence granted us is but a breath. But compared to us, this breath has, allegorically speaking, more mass and presence than the sun, albeit concentrated into a pinhead.

By their nature we cannot see black holes, we can only guess their existence from the effects which they have on other bodies. Can you imagine a sparrow flying past Mount Everest and causing that mighty mountain to collapse under its gravitational pull? Such, in cosmic dimensions, can be the effect of a black hole. The lives of the saints show us what profound effect repentance has on others, and continues to have after their departure from this life. To be human is awesome, if only we knew it.

³ A black hole is formed by a material body so dense that it keeps collapsing under its own enormous gravitational forces. Eventually it passes the point of no return, called by scientists the "absolute event horizon". From this gravitational field no matter, light or signal of any kind can escape - hence the fact that this presence paradoxically appears to us as an absence.

But deep within this absolute event horizon the material body continues to collapse into itself. It ends up reaching such incredible densities that it actually crushes itself out of existence. It has then reached what scientists call a "space-time singularity"; it is something which has no dimensions. There, physical laws as we know them cease to apply. Its light, for example, pulled by gravity travels in towards the centre rather than outward, as is the case normally. And time stops.

Standing in your midst, I am standing amidst little gods. Each one of us is a new holy place, holy because God has revealed Himself there. Each one of us is new holy mountain - a mount John, a mount Columba, a mount Margaret.

The blessing of St Barsanuphrios

I would like to end by reading a blessing from, I think, St. Barsanuphrios:

May we be found as a fruit-laden olive-tree in the midst of the saints, and as a fruitful vine of the divine place, all true. And may the Lord count us worthy of the Well of Wisdom. For already as many as have drunk thereof have forgotten themselves, becoming all outside the old man, and from the well of wisdom they have been guided to another well, of love which never fails. And coming to this rank, they have attained the unwandering measure, becoming all mind, all eye, all living, all light, all perfect, all gods. They have toiled, they have been magnified, they have been glorified, they have been clarified, they have lived since they died.