

ICONS AND THE SPIRITUAL ROLE OF MATTER¹

by Aidan Hart

"I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honouring the matter which wrought my salvation. I honour it, but not as God."

St John of Damascus, "On the Holy Icons", i.16.

These words of St John of Damascus - a saint celebrated both East and West as a Doctor and Father of the Church - were written in defence of icons against the iconoclasts. But they affirm the spiritual role not just of icons, but of the whole material world. Matter now matters not only because God created it, but also because He has united Himself to it in a personal, *hypostatic* way through becoming flesh.

In this present age as in no other, the Church needs to know and celebrate the proper and exalted use of the material world. Materialism is in fact an abuse and not a use of matter. Consumerism can be seen as a secular parody of the Holy Eucharist, a parody because we consume without thanksgiving, because we take a gift with our backs turned to the Giver. We therefore devour but are not nourished or satisfied. Only in Christ can the true and exalted role of the material world be understood and experienced.

In this article I want to outline how both the making and the use of icons is a graphic embodiment of the Orthodox Church's "theology" of matter. This is a theology centred on the Incarnation of God and the transfiguration of the human person, and through the person, of all creation. (Theology properly speaking is discourse about the nature of God as Trinity, but here we use the word in its more general sense.)

Let us first discuss the use of icons, and then how they are made.

Icon is a Greek word meaning image, and as such immediately places the religious icon as a mediator between the viewer and what is depicted. The role of any icon, but holy icons *par excellence*, is to mediate. How we treat the image is a reflection of how we view the person imaged. St John of Damascus quotes Saint Basil the Great that "the honour given to the image is

¹ An article written for the Vatican newspaper "l'Osservatore Romano", appearing December 2011.

transferred to its prototype".² We worship Christ and honour the saints when we kiss icons or light candles in front of their images.

Images of Christ, the Mother of God and saints are obvious icons. But in a more general way, all material creation in its beauty is also an icon. Creation is there not just to nourish man physically, but also to be an image of higher things, a gift of love, an expression of divine beauty and generosity.

When he receives and contemplates it with thanksgiving, man experiences the material world as a sacrament of love. When he grabs and consumes it without thanksgiving he eats death. This is not of course that matter becomes evil in itself, but that our "de-gifting" of it de-personalizes it, makes it mere matter, an idol. With great insight, St Ephraim the Syrian says that the tree of knowledge of good and evil is in fact creation. When received with thanksgiving it brings spiritual life and goodness to man. When taken without thanksgiving it becomes for him lifeless, an object, a dead thing, mere metal and not a wedding ring.

What does the way traditional icons are painted have to tell us about the material world as God intended it to be? We notice that icons are not naturalistic, that they tend to abstract things somewhat. This stylisation is an attempt to suggest the transfigured state of things, to see man and the world not just with corporal eyes but with the eyes of the spirit. While not naturalistic, icons are realistic. A hymn of the Orthodox Church for the feast of the Transfiguration declares that: "You have put Adam on entire, O Christ, and changing the nature grown dark in past times, You have filled it with glory and made it godlike by the alteration of Your form."

Icons show man in his true nature, as a created being shining with the light of the Creator. As the Apostle Peter writes, "[God] has given us ...his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and *may become participants in the divine nature*" (2 Peter 1:4).

We note too that the Gospel descriptions of the transfiguration say that Christ's garments as well as His person shone with light. Christ's material garment of linen participated in divine grace by association with His divine body. In the same way, the Church's sacramental life weaves a garment for herself out of matter and thereby transfigures that matter. Through the Church, world can become cosmos or adornment (which is the literal meaning of cosmos). It is this transfigured world that icons affirm through the way they depict people, nature and buildings. Matter is never shown as mere matter, but as matter infused with the glory of the Lord. There is no chiaroscuro, for all things are filled with light and are surrounded by light.

What about the actual process of painting icons? What can this tell us about man's broader relationship with the material world as God intended it to be?

² "On the Holy Icons" i.21, quoting St Basil from "Letters on the Holy Spirit" 18.

We can answer this through looking at the three classic roles of prophet, priest and king.

A prophet walks in the Holy Spirit and through the Spirit is inspired to hear the word of God and declare it. He or she does not speak their own words, but only the inspired and tested word of God. An icon painter is likewise called not to express his or her personal opinions, but to embody the word of God in colour and line.

This is not to say that the iconographer should mindlessly copy, any more than a prophet merely reads out a text. An icon painter must of course be faithful to the accepted characteristics of the saint to be depicted (the Apostle Peter, for example, is always shown with white curly hair and beard), and include in a festal icon all the essential features. But he also strives to live the same holy life as the saints so that he can paint them as people whom he knows personally through the Holy Spirit. The icon painter is called to perceive the essence or *logos* of the person or sacred event that he paints - what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called the instress of a thing. And then he must try to make this *logos* manifest in paint, to become the equivalent of the prophet prophesying.

Ascetical texts, East and West, affirm three stages in the spiritual life. After purification comes illumination, which is the perception of the *logoi* or inner essences of created things. These are the words of God which bring each thing into existence and which also remain in them and lead them toward their fulfilment in the age to come. The Logos not only creates by His word, but also "bears along and sustains all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3). God is the conductor as well as the composer. The icon painter, aided by the wisdom of centuries of tradition and the inspiration of the Spirit, tries to unearth and make visible the spiritual qualities of the persons, material things and historical events that he depicts.

When lived with on a daily basis, icons help us to perceive the world as a burning bush, burning but not consumed by God's glory. We begin to see the world not just as nature, but as a symphony of love composed by our Lover. Indeed, on Mount Tabor it was not so much Christ who changed, but the disciples. The Lord opened their eyes to see him as he always was.

It is significant that the icon painter begins his painting with a white surface, the brilliant white of gesso. This represents the Holy Spirit. A prophet waits in silence before the Spirit of God, and wishes only to speak Spirit-bearing words. I have been a full-time icon painter for over twenty-five years, and still I sit before this luminous white with fear. I fear lest I cover it with thick paint, rather than let it transfigure the paint and illuminate it from within.

What of the priestly role of the icon painter - and by implication, of all Christians - with regard to matter? A priest is one who offers. More specifically, he offers to God not just the single talent already given, unchanged and without interest, but he offers things transformed by his labour. In the Eucharist we offer not grapes and wheat but bread and wine. We offer God-given "raw material" transformed by human culture. God in His

turn transforms this offering by His "divine culture" and it becomes, in the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ.

Now icons are not in fact a sacrament because they do not become holy by virtue of a priestly blessing (there is a pious tradition that icons are blessed, but this is not what makes them holy icons). Icons remain wood and pigment, but are holy by virtue of bearing the likeness and name of the holy prototype. But there is nonetheless a parallel with the process of priestly offering and the iconographer painting. A priest represents the people before God, and what he offers he offers on behalf of all. Likewise an icon represents all aspects of material creation. The painter takes pigments from the mineral kingdom (earths, semi-precious stones), wood for the panel from the vegetable kingdom, and egg for binding the pigment from the animal kingdom. The icon thus becomes a microcosm of the cosmos, an offering of all creation by the iconographer whose work represents the priestly calling of every person.

In this way icons are not only manifestations of heaven to earth - a window or door by which saints may reveal themselves to us - but are also an offering of man to God, a priestly prayer in paint rather than word. Just as prayers are sounds transformed into words by the spirit and intelligence of man, so icons are material stuff transformed into form and rhythm in an expression of love and adoration.

This leads us to the third ministry, the royal ministry. The role of leadership properly understood is akin to that of a conductor of an orchestra. It is to bring the best out of each individual and ensure that they are choreographed into an harmonious unity. The divine command given to man in the first creation account to "have dominion" (Gen.1:28) is explained in the second creation account: "The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it" (Gen. 2:15). Dominion is given to nurture and raise up, not to crush.

On the one hand the conductor needs to affirm the uniqueness of each instrument - the flute can express things that a drum cannot, and *vice versa*. On the other hand, the conductor also needs to ensure that the individual instrument plays its part in creating an harmonious symphony.

The iconographer likewise, as a conductor of an orchestra of colour and form, must know the special characteristics of each pigment. *Terre verte*, for example, is a naturally translucent pigment and should be treated differently from a naturally opaque pigment, like red ochre. Some pigments such as cinnabar become deeper the finer they are ground, while others like azurite lose their depth if ground too finely.

In conclusion, we may say that all levels of creation, from seraphim and human down to atoms, are fulfilled in relationship, in communion. God Himself is an ineffable communion of Three, with no division and no confusion of Persons. The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Spirit, and yet they are not separate. Relationship is at the heart of everything that the Holy Trinity has created. The very word *eco* from which we get ecology, ecosystem etc. means house, a place of dwelling, a synergy of person and matter. The making, the use, and the vision of an icon remains a graphic embodiment of

this sacred ecology. The holy icon reminds us that all creation can be transfigured, can become a garment or cosmos for the divine-human Church. Radiant with light and clothed with the transfigured cosmos, the Church will then stand like "a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Rev. 12:1).