

# **CHURCH WALL PAINTINGS AND MOSAICS: Principles of their arrangement and relationship to church architecture<sup>1</sup>**

by Aidan Hart

## **INTRODUCTION**

A church building can be seen as a garment for the liturgy, in that it follows the form of the liturgy. In this respect good ecclesiastical design works from the inside out, just as a tailor begins with the size and proportions of the person for whom he is making his garment. So it is with the relationship between a church and the wall paintings and mosaics that, ideally, cover its inner surfaces. Traditional churches offer a wonderful complex of shapes and curves for these images, each of these areas having a theological role in the whole schema. If contemporary surface iconography is to be similarly successful it needs to be both faithful to these principles and to retain a certain boldness. This survey seeks to outline some of these principles and to illustrate them through a brief historical overview.

Usually it is considered the ideal for an Orthodox church to be covered inside with murals or mosaics. A good church design therefore offers, within the given budget, the richest and theologically most satisfying array of surfaces. A church architect and the people commissioning the design need to understand the principles which govern the design and making of these wall images. This essay looks at some of these principles.

The history of Orthodox church wall-painting and mosaics, East and West, is a very rich one. On the one hand it reveals tremendous creativity in the Church's response to architectural and pastoral changes. On the other hand it shows how consistently it has been faithful to unchanging spiritual principles.

We shan't be considering the style of surface iconography, but rather the scheme or arrangement of themes which are chosen, highlighting in particular the interdependent relationship between the design of the building and these schemes. As we shall see, the shapes and spaces created by a church building are an integral part of traditional regimes. It seems that to a large extent temples have been designed from the inside out, creating the maximum richness of surfaces so that the wall paintings can express the maximum richness of spirituality.

NOTE: For the sake of simplicity in this essay the word mural includes mosaics. Also the word icon in this essay signifies a particular theme (e.g. the Nativity) of a mural or mosaic.

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<sup>1</sup> A talk given at The Prince's Foundation, London, for the Orthodox Church Architecture Group on 26 Feb. 2003.

## PRINCIPLES OF MURAL AND MOSAIC DESIGN

### The function of murals and mosaics

- to *create an atmosphere* of beauty, compunction, inner silence and wonder which is conducive to attention, prayer, repentance and worship
- to *teach* spiritual truths by illustration
- to help *initiate* the faithful into these truths as they participate in the liturgical life
- to give the faithful the sense that they are *participating in the events* depicted, and are not just observers
- to show that worship on earth in time is *participation in the ceaseless worship in heaven*

### Principles of mural design

The main principle is that *the spaces and surfaces created by the building are incorporated into the mural or mosaic designs so that they and the people inhabiting the spaces are involved in the theological dynamics of the iconographic theme.* This is done in various ways.

- On the horizontal axis, *the progress of depictions from the west to east relates to the stages in the spiritual life and to the history of God's economy.* That is, our experience of the icons as we pass through the church is a recapitulation, a microcosm, of our and the world's spiritual history. For example, events from the Old Testament are usually placed in the narthex, whereas New Testament events, which fulfil these types, are placed in the nave. Or there might be depictions of martyrdom or ascetics in the narthex, showing us that courage is needed in the spiritual battle if we are to experience the glories depicted in the nave. The same applies for images seen on exiting. Often the Dormition (the repose of the Mother of God) is shown above the door in the west wall, by way of reminding the faithful of their own eventual death and of the reception of their souls by Christ.
- *On the vertical axis personages and scenes are depicted which reflect the descent of God to man and the ascent of man to God.* And so in a domed church we typically find Christ in the dome, surrounded by angels. Below him are prophets, and then, in the pendentives, the four evangelists, followed on the walls by scenes in the life of Christ, and finally, figures of saints.
- *Theological juxtaposition is reflected by juxtaposition in space.* That is, when one event is a fulfilment of another its depiction is often placed on the opposite side of the church. For example, the transfiguration (man's deification in Christ) might be placed on the southern transept apse, opposite the nativity (God's incarnation) which is painted on the northern side.
- *Movement within an icon often passes through architectural space.* Personages within a given event are so placed that they relate to each other across the actual space inhabited by the viewer. A common example is when the Archangel Gabriel is shown on the upper left portion of the apsidal arch, speaking to the Virgin who is depicted on the upper right portion.
- *Personages within a given scene are sometimes placed on different planes within a given area.* For example, the Magi might be painted around the corner from the rest of the Nativity scene so as to emphasise that they are travelling from afar.

- Where possible, *the most theologically appropriate shape or surface is chosen to carry a given image*. For example, the womb-like shape of the apse is usually adorned with an image of the Mother of God.

### Characteristics of church buildings desirable for murals

From the above we can deduce some more general architectural principles for the church commissioners, designer and builders to keep in mind, as far as providing the most satisfying array of surfaces for murals.

- A design where *ceilings* as well as walls can be painted provides more scope than merely vertical wall areas.
- A *gradual transition from wall to ceiling* is preferable. This can be done by the arch (as in a barrel vault) or by a series of articulated forms (e.g. cube to pendentive to drum to dome). This architectural unity reinforces the iconographic theme of earth and heaven's union in Christ.
- On the basis of the observation that "*there exists a perfect imperfection and an imperfect perfection*" a slightly *undulating surface* is more satisfying and gentle than a perfectly flat one. This is particularly the case with gold mosaic, as it makes the light play with the reflections. There is
- A *variety of shapes* provides much more potential for theological play and nuance than monolithic forms. This is one reason why the cross in square design has proved so popular, with its transition from hexagon to triangular pendentives to drum to dome.
- A *permanently stable wall and surface is necessary*. The time and expense invested in murals requires that particular care be taken. Walls or ceilings should be as permanent, stable and inert as possible, allowing for no ingress of moisture, no salt ingress, no movement. A wooden stud wall with plaster board, for example, is not permanent enough to justify all the effort and expense expended on murals.
- The wall material itself needs to have the *correct suction* for lime plaster, and be a bit *rough*. Brick and rough stone are ideal surfaces.
- *Any render applied to the surface must be compatible with the eventual mural plasters*. Usually a lime based render is necessary. The ideal is for the architect to consult the muralist on which render they prefer. Gypsum plaster is not suitable, since it is not permanent enough and doesn't have the right suction properties. A coarse fat or semi-hydraulic 3:1 lime based plaster is usually the ideal render, perhaps reinforced with hair, hemp, linen or straw. If for some reason a particularly strong render is needed it is I think better to use an hydraulic or semi-hydraulic lime rather than cement. If any cement is to be added it should only be white cement, not Portland, and must be no less than 33% of the lime content: research shows that an addition of less cement than this considerably *weakens* the lime mix rather than strengthens it. Also, the surface should be finished with a wooden float so that it is a bit rough; the polish left by a metal float would not allow good adhesion of subsequent muralist's plaster coats. When the plastering for murals begins, this render will have to be further roughened with heavy scoring.
- *If mosaics are intended particular attention needs to be paid to the placing and size of windows*. More research is needed to discover what principles were used by past master builders.

### Factors behind historical variations in mural schemes

A survey of different Orthodox churches shows that while mural and mosaic designs reveal a consistency of purpose and overall principles there is nonetheless considerable variation in how these principles are expressed. This diversity is due to a number of factors.

- *The shape of the building both opens and precludes possible options.* A basilica, for example, offers only an apse, and flat northern, southern and western walls, whereas a cross-in-square design offers not only the apse and flat surfaces, but also domes, drums, pendentives, pillars, arches and barrel vaults.
- *The wealth of the patron* dictates the materials and medium chosen, which in turn influences the scheme. An emperor, for example, would usually prefer, and could afford, mosaic over wall painting because it made a stronger statement of his beneficence. A monastic patron, on the other hand, would probably prefer - and could only afford - murals.
- *The medium chosen in turn affects the complexity of the scheme:* mosaic favours simpler and bolder scenes than murals.
- *The theological preferences of the patron* often dictate to the designer the overall emphasis. Imperial patrons, for example, have usually favoured scenes which assert their divine appointment as ruler, whereas monastic patrons gravitate towards more ascetic subject matter.
- *Designs often respond to the doctrinal issues of the time* and reflect cultural trends. The humanism and dynamism of the Paleologian period, for example, led to greater movement and complexity in the choice of mural and mosaics scenes.
- *Liturgical changes* have always brought with them a change in subject matter and even church design. For example, from the time when the Great Entrance assumed greater importance in the Divine Liturgy we tend to find it depicted in the apse, as in Peribleptos church at Mystra, Greece, about 1360.
- *The nature and needs of the congregation* are clearly a big factor in the design of wall images. A parish church will have a slightly different emphasis from a monastic one. Or a mission church might for example chose to have saints from a great variety of ethnic backgrounds.
- *The function of the building establishes its general iconographic theme.* The baptistery at Florence, for example, has mosaics showing the creation story by way of reminding the faithful that baptism is a recreation. Catacombs, which are burial places, have depictions showing survival and deliverance in the midst of adversity (Jonah in the fish, the children in the fiery furnace etc.). Martyria show scenes in the martyr's life and death.
- *The dedication of the temple* will be incorporated into the design. Take for example the church of Chora monastery in Constantinople, which is dedicated to the Saviour and the Mother of God. The Greek word "chora" and its cognates refer to land and also to a dwelling place or suburb. The church was originally called Chora simply because it was in the suburbs of Constantinople. But with time this name was given theological significance, so that the present iconographic scheme, inspired by the learned patron Theodore Metochites, emphasises Christ as the land of the living, and the Virgin as the dwelling-place of the Lord.
- *The chief painter or mosaicist brings their own unique creativity* in finding a design suitable for their commission. The case study of Volotovo given below

bears this out. Two equally gifted masters can find different but equally successful solutions to the same problem.

## **A SURVEY OF MURAL AND MOSAIC DESIGNS**

Let us now turn to a survey of church mural and mosaic schemes throughout the centuries. We will start with a more detailed study of a Russian church painted by the time that the main elements of Orthodox mural design had been settled. Then we will pass onto a survey of the historical developments which led up to the adoption of this scheme.

### **1. THE CROSS IN SQUARE CHURCH :A Case Study: Murals in the Church of the Dormition at Volotovo Polye, Russia<sup>2</sup>**

This late fourteenth century church is appropriate to our purposes for a number of reasons. Firstly, in their general layout the murals conform to the by then traditional scheme and so illustrate very well what has now become the norm. However, and this is the second point, there are enough variations to illustrate that this same tradition is not ossified but demands a creative response. These mural designs show particularly profound theological inspiration. Thirdly, Volotovo illustrates well the various principles outlined above, particularly in its inclusion of architectural space in the scheme. Finally the murals themselves show a high degree of inspiration in their bold, painterly technique. Because of this style they were in fact once considered to be by the great Theophanes the Greek.

The church was built in 1352 in the monastery at Volotovo Polye, three miles east of Novgorod. It was frescoed first in 1363, but most of this work was overlaid with the present frescoes about 1380. A great deal of interest was shown in these murals by scholars from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and photographs and painted copies were made during this time. This was fortunate, since the church was completely destroyed by the Nazis in the Second World War.

The cultural background to life in Novgorod is important to an understanding of the Volotovo murals. At this time Novgorod was wealthy, had great libraries, enjoyed international connections including with Constantinople, retained a certain continuity because its artistic past had not been destroyed by the Mongols, and enjoyed a rich secular culture of literature, art and folklore which ran parallel to the ecclesiastical art. It also enjoyed a certain freedom of thought uncommon for the time.

Some of the inscriptions are in Greek, some in Slavonic. This reflects the close relations which Novgorod - a city of merchants and traders - had with Constantinople. The fact that this church includes the Great Entrance theme only recently introduced to Byzantine countries (as at Periblepta church at Mystra) shows how close the painter and patrons were to Greek trends.

Although Novgorod was a wealthy city, there was poverty. This must have influenced the inclusion of a depiction which encourages almsgiving, something discussed in more detail below.

Another contemporary aspect important to the design is the “strigolnik” heresy current around that time. This is probably what influenced the choice of the “Wisdom Builds its Temple” subject in the narthex.

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<sup>2</sup> See *Frescoes of the Church of the Assumption at Volotovo Polye*, by M.V. Alpatov (Moscow, 1977). Dual text, in Russian and English.

The main theme emphasised throughout is the union of man with God, expressed particularly as an ascent. The rapidly executed strokes, the choice of themes which stress upward, heavenly movement, and the paucity of ornamentation on the garments all tend towards a stress on a sort of ecstatic union with the Divine, regardless of ones place in the ecclesiastical or secular hierarchy.

If we are to understand why these murals are designed the way they are, it is essential that we reflect on them in the order that we would experience them if we were going to church and participating in the Liturgy. And so, beginning with the narthex entrance, we will pass through the different parts of the church in order to study the theology behind the mural arrangement.

### *The narthex*

The narthex scenes are on the theme of the Old Testament, the Mother of God (to whom the church is dedicated), entrance into Paradise, and the faith and ascetic struggle necessary to enter Paradise

On entering the small barrel vaulted narthex we see ahead of us two archangels standing either side of the entrance to the nave. The left one holds a sword, and the other a large orb, which represents wisdom. Above we see the angel declaring to the three myrrh-bearing women that Christ is risen, while to the left Christ appears to Mary Magdalene.

These scenes immediately give us the sense that we are on the threshold of Paradise: the angels are guarding the entrance, but Christ has risen and opened the door to Paradise; the door is through his tomb and therefore through participation in his death and resurrection.

But also suggested by these two scenes is that compassion is the means of meeting Christ - the myrrh-bearing women who come in identification with Christ's sufferings are those who first encounter the resurrection. This is a theme to be reinforced just inside the nave as we later enter.

On the wall to our right there are depictions of Jacob's Ladder (Genesis 28:10-22) and Jacob wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32:22-32). At the top of the ladder, and above the latter scene is depicted the Virgin and Child. As "Our Lady of the Sign" she is again shown in the centre of the top of the barrel vault.

Jacob's Ladder reminds us that God has come down to us through his birth from the Virgin, who is symbolised by the ladder - something reinforced by the depiction of the Mother and Child at its summit. This interpretation is further reinforced by a hymn well known to the people at the time called the Akathist to the Mother of God, which calls Mary "the heavenly ladder by which God came down." But the ladder also reminds us that we have a struggle ahead of us - we must ascend the ladder in order to enter Paradise. The ladder of struggle is an image the Russians would have been acquainted with through the writings, and probably the icon, of St John of the Ladder.

The need for this ascetic struggle is reinforced by the depiction of Jacob's determined fight with the angel; "I will not let you go until you have blessed me" he said to the angel. The angel then gave him another name, Israel. The giving of a new name introduces the idea of new birth. Now Jacob was on his way to re-enter the promised land, which is a type of Paradise. So again we have the theme of entrance to the church being entrance to Paradise.

Above Jacob's depiction is a row of six saints in medallions, and then a rare allegorical scene illustrating the verses of Proverbs 9:1,2: "Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars. She has prepared her meat and mixed her

wine; she has also set her table.” Three of the personages hold scrolls, whose writing, though I can’t decipher them from the photographs, would doubtless interpret the scene to viewers. St Paul writes that “Christ Jesus has become for us wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30). In the Akathist Mary is called the “table bearing a wealth of forgiveness”, “receptacle of the Wisdom of God”, “bowl for mixing the wine of joy” and “life of mystical festivity”. This mural tells us that Christ is both the builder of the house, the setter of the feast and the feast itself, while the Virgin, through whom he became man, is the means by which he offers himself.

The murals on the north or left wall have no record, but they presumably were also scenes from the Old Testament.

In summary, all the narthex scenes are from the Old testament, and are visual prophecies of Christ and the Virgin (to whom the church is dedicated). They also prepare the visitor for the fact the nave he or she is about to enter is an image of Paradise, and that the door has been opened by Christ but which can be entered only through faith, compassion and ascetic struggle.

## **The Nave**

### *The western end of the nave*

We now enter the nave itself. To the right on the southern wall we find a painting of a monastic meal, at which Christ, disguised as a pauper, presents himself to the abbot in order to test his generosity. Around the corner, on the western wall, we see the abbot recognising him as Christ.

The profound thing about this is that this depiction is precisely opposite the depictions of the mystical supper on the eastern side, in the apse. There we have the hierarchs celebrating the Liturgy, and above them, Christ and the Apostles in the upper room at the Mystical Supper. This juxtaposition of meal images surely is saying that meeting Christ in Communion while in church cannot be separated from meeting Christ in the hungry and poor out in the world. If we do not stop as we enter the church to look at the abbot recognising Christ in the pauper, we would most certainly do so as we left, just after celebrating the Liturgy. It would be a pertinent reminder that Christ is everywhere present and can be known, met and loved in all places and at all times in whomever we meet.

On entering perhaps instead of looking immediately around us, we first look straight ahead. The first thing we see is Pentecost, on the arch above the apse. This is a primary position within the nave. In this image the apostles are seated together as a community, to receive the Holy Spirit. Placed where it is, this image reminds us of the ultimate end of our coming together: to receive the Holy Spirit, to be deified.

The placing of Pentecost above the apse is significant for another reason. As we have said, in the apse is depicted the hierarchs liturgizing with us. At the Liturgy we call down the Holy Spirit “upon us and upon these Thy gifts” that they might become the Body and Blood of Christ. The Pentecost image is therefore perfectly placed above the apse.

We notice a woman in the Pentecost icon, surrounded by the apostles and holding a veil filled with twelve scrolls. Early icons depicted here instead peoples from various nations. Later, this was replaced by a single old man, dressed as a king and holding the veil with scrolls. Depicting cosmos as a woman probably is taken from the Hellenistic depictions of the mother goddess Gaia. And so the decision by the Volotovo painter to depict cosmos as a woman gives particular emphasis to the fact that the cosmos means not only the people of the world waiting for the Gospel (which

is represented by the twelve scrolls), but also the very material world itself, which as St. Paul writes, “waits to be liberated from its bondage to decay and be brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). This could well be an Orthodox response to the strigolnok heresy which tended to deify the earth.

#### *The nave as a whole*

We enter the nave further and stand in the centre, below the copula. We look all round and up, trying to gain an overall picture before returning to details. The Byzantines had a very particular view of aesthetic appreciation. They liked the eyes to wander over the whole, trying first to grasp the unity of everything, and only then turning to a closer inspection of the particulars. They saw that the particulars have their deepest significance in the light of the whole.

There are basically seven bands. Most of the lower two echelons of the walls and pillars are occupied by saints, mainly full length and about life scale. The next band has mainly feasts of the Virgin and the fourth and fifth feasts of Christ. In the drum is a band of prophets and then one of angels. Finally, Christ the Pantocrator is in the dome.

This scheme gives us a sense of the union of heaven and earth, God and man, angels and the corporeal world, past, present and eternity.

#### *Copula, drum and pendentives*

We now turn our attention to the details. It is natural to begin with what is most splendid - the copula above with its depiction of the Pantocrator. The hemispherical embracing shape emphasises one meaning of Pantocrator, as “the one who holds all things”. The angels are the first created beings, and mediators or messengers between God and man, and so they are depicted below. Wisdom is a big emphasis in this church, and so we again find unusually large spheres in the hands of the archangels.

Below the angels are the prophets and perhaps also some of the patriarchs, people who were the next stage in God’s revelation to man.

So we see that a passage through vertical architectural space corresponds to a passage through time, through God’s economy.

There are not many windows in the church, and the thick walls mean that the reveals are deep so that although we are aware of light entering, we do not really see outside. This gives a gentle luminosity, a sense that the light comes from within.

Next we come to a very significant shape, important both for its structural role and for the shape it creates in the mural scheme. These are the four pendentives which unite the cylindrical drum to the hexagonal nave. These are spherical concave triangles which bulge out (that is “hang”) between the arches of the nave. On these four triangles are depicted the four evangelists, the Gospel writers. The Gospel is the news that God and man, heaven and earth are united in the incarnate word. The cubic nave represents the earth, with its symbolism of four elements and the four corners of the compass, while the dome represents the heavenly world. They find their unity through the pendentives, that is, the Incarnation preached by the four evangelists.

Our eyes naturally follow from the pendentives down to the pillars.

#### *Pillars*

We notice that the saints are not just standing around the sides, as witnesses, but are among us, depicted on the pillars which stand amidst the congregation. This gives us a lively sense that we are joining in the ceaseless worship of heaven, that the angels

and saints participate with us in worship and we with them. A fundamental image for the church architect is therefore the city, the city of God. Every church building is the dwelling of God and man.

Pillars are often an dilemma for the contemporary church architect. On the one hand new materials and techniques mean that pillars can be much thinner than they had to be in the past, which has the advantage that they do not obstruct the line of vision as do the bulkier old style ones. On the other hand, this same thinness means that these pillars cannot be satisfactorily embellished with images of saints, and so they remain impersonal, purely material presences amidst the congregation. This is not a problem if the rest of the church surfaces are not covered with murals or mosaics, but if they are, these thin vertical supports remain the only non iconographical element. This is a possible argument in favour of expanding the pillars' dimensions beyond their structural necessity so that they can be painted and so "personalised". In other situations however, the community will put a higher priority on unimpeded visibility than on the mural scheme and so favour the smallest possible pillars.

### *North and south walls*

We look now at the events on the northern and southern walls of the nave. In the centre there are five modules of painting. The top three contain scenes in the life of Christ, the fourth in the life of the Virgin, while the bottom module contains a window (south wall) or door (north wall), with a medallion of a saint either side.

The feasts of Christ read chronologically from the top of the southern wall downwards and then back up the northern wall - that is, in a circle which sweeps through the congregation. In that order, the feasts chosen are: the Nativity, Baptism, the Meeting in the temple, Crucifixion and Deposition (depicted in the same module side by side), the Harrowing of Hades, and the Ascension. (As we shall discuss below, the Entrance into Jerusalem is on the west wall, and Pentecost on the east wall.) The top scenes (Nativity and Ascension) are situated in half domes.

The way these six feasts are arranged in architectural space is itself a profound commentary on their theological meaning: when we pair the feasts situated diametrically opposite one another, we find that one is the fulfilment of the other. At the top of the south wall is the Nativity, which is paired with the Ascension on the top of the north wall. The first concerns the descent of God to earth to become man; the second concerns the ascent of the incarnated God to heaven. God becomes man so that man might become God by grace, in the phrase of St Athanasius the Great.

It is also significant that these two fundamental feasts are depicted within a lunette, a frame with an arched top, and not merely in squared frames. The arch is a union of the vertical and the horizontal, and so as a shape itself symbolises a union of heaven and earth, which is the theme of the two murals.

In many churches, which is symbolically richer still, these north and south ends are apses or half domes. The apsidal form unites a north-south orientation with an east-west orientation, as well as an up-down orientation. This three dimensional shape therefore also signifies a union of the four corners of the earth, the reunion of a creation fragmented by the fall. The other important point about the apsidal dome is that it is a womb-like form, an embracing, nurturing shape. In the Incarnation and the Ascension God embraces mankind within Himself. He unites our human nature with His own, and takes gives it new birth, a birth into the divine realm.

Incidentally, we have in the Volotovo Nativity fresco a wonderfully creative and humorous use of the architectural form. The painter places the three magi not inside the lunette, but around the corner on the underside of the arch. They are riding furiously, pointing to the star, trying to get to their destination as quickly as possible. And their destination is literally around the corner. The same treatment is given Joseph on the other side. He is off the scene a bit, looking dejected since by tradition he is doubting the possibility of a virgin birth. There are a number of other examples in Volotovo of this witty use of architectural space. One is the Purification, where space is a bit cramped. So the painter has put Simeon and Anna on top of an arch, running to the scene which is further down.

The next iconographic pair in the Volotovo church is the Baptism of Christ (south wall) and His Descent into Hades (north wall). Both are events of descent and of light. In His baptism Christ descends into the waters in order to purify them - and the whole material world - and to fill them with his spiritual light. Exorcisms of evil spirits from water and the invocation of the Holy Spirit to descend and bless the waters are part of the liturgical services for both Theophany and baptisms. A similar thing is happening in Christ's descent into Hades. As the Incarnate God, Christ descends to Hades in order to bind evil forces and to deliver and bless man. He fills the place of darkness with light.

Perhaps it was with this common theme of light in mind that the painter placed both depictions immediately below a window; this is likely since the windows are incorporated into the scenes. The little nimbus which is traditionally painted above Christ in icons of his baptism in the Volotovo mural actually radiates from the window.

On the third tier is represented the Crucifixion and Deposition from the cross together on the north wall and the Presentation of Mary in the Temple (south wall). Here it might have been better to have placed the Purification (Christ's presentation in the temple) since this shares with the Crucifixion the theme of sacrifice. The Old Testament temple is above all a place of sacrifice, especially of the Passover Lamb. And of course the fulfilment of this type is the crucifixion.

We come now to the two depictions of the Mother of God on the fourth tier. Above the window on the south wall is the Virgin and Child enthroned, with the two bishop donors. Opposite, above the door, is the Dormition mural. Being above an exit, this is in fact a place of great importance; it is the last image we see as we leave. The Dormition is traditionally placed above the exit, though more usually above the west door of the nave. The faithful are reminded that they too will die, but also that they, like the Mother of God, will be taken up to be with the Lord. It is the *par excellence* an icon of passage of entry, and it is appropriately above a door.

Either side of these central festal depictions are numerous depiction of saints, mainly full length.

### *The eastern wall*

As already discussed, the Pentecost image stands on the arch leading into the apse proper. Below this is a very rare depiction - the souls of the righteous in the hand of God. The Liturgy is not just the gathering of those on earth, but the gathering of all those in heaven and earth. This small depiction, directly above the Holy Table and directly below the Pentecost, reminds the faithful that the Holy Spirit has gathered all the righteous together in Christ for the Mystical Supper.

In the womb-shaped half dome of the apse is the Mother of God; through her God has become man and entered the world. If we view the church from the side, we can see this illustrated graphically by vertical arrangement of the images. Christ (in the dome) first reveals himself in part through the angels and prophets in the Old Testament (depicted in the drum), and then “in the fullness of time” becomes man himself through the Virgin (depicted in the apsidal “womb”) and enters the world (the cubic nave). This incarnational theme of the apse is reinforced by the presence of the Annunciation image on the eastern wall immediately above the iconscreen. In other churches Mary is depicted on the left side of the apsidal arch and the archangel Gabriel on the other, speaking to her across the apse itself.

Below the Virgin is the Apostle’s Communion, and then the hierarchs celebrating the Liturgy. This pairing of the Virgin and Liturgy themes is pertinent, since the incarnation of God and the deification of man is made experience for us through our participation in the Body and Blood of Christ.

### *The western wall*

We turn now to depart, and face the western wall. In the top, again in a lunette, is Christ’s Entrance into Jerusalem - Palm Sunday. This is juxtaposed with Pentecost on the opposite east wall. Palm Sunday is the entrance of the King to his city, Jerusalem, where his people will reject him and crucify him. Pentecost is the entrance of the “heavenly king, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth” (as an Orthodox prayer names the Holy Spirit) to the disciples in Jerusalem, in order to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. This time, in contrast to Palm Sunday, the people receive the gift and many convert.

Below Palm Sunday is depicted Mary’s presentation in the temple. Opposite, in the eastern apse proper, is Mary enthroned with the Saviour, flanked by angels. In the Presentation she is taken to dwell temporarily in the earthly temple, where in many icons she is shown seated on a throne, and in the apsidal image she is shown forever enthroned in the eternal temple of heaven.

The images of Palm Sunday and the Presentation are both images of passage, of transition. This makes them particularly appropriate for a western wall, to be seen as the faithful depart. We are reminded that life in the world is both an “entrance into the temple” where, like Mary, we are being prepared to be Christ bearers, and also, with Christ, a journey towards spiritual crucifixion and resurrection.

Below, to the left of the western door is shown the Archangel Michael, brandishing a sword, and to the right a Stylite. The archangel reminds us as we leave and enter daily life in the world that we have a mighty protector in our guardian angel. But the Stylite reminds us also that we must do our part, and fight the ascetic fight. Above the door is our Lady of the Sign. Her hands are raised in intercession for us and the whole world, and in her womb is the Saviour, who has become man for us, and who blesses us.

As we enter the narthex and approach the final exit we see four ascetics either side of the door - two female on the right and, I think, two male on the left. As with the Stylite in the nave exit, these ascetics encourage us in our own ascetic struggle in the world. Above is the Mother of God greeting Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Both these women are literally pregnant with holiness. This reminds us that the kingdom of God is ultimately to be born within us, that we are called to be Christ bearers, “Christophoroi”.

*Exit*

We may decide to leave via the north door instead of the west door. Above it the images of the Dormition, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension give us a succinct and graphic summary of our whole life's purpose and the means to attain it: our end is to be with Christ bodily and in spirit, just as is the Mother of God, and for this we must participate in Christ's crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

**2. SCHEMES USED IN OTHER CHURCHES**

In order to show the variety of schemes used in different parts of the church, below is given a survey of themes grouped according to the sections of the church.

*Narthex*

- (Hosios Lukas, c. 1020) Descent to Hades, Crucifixion, Washing of feet, Doubting Thomas, and martyrs and bishops.
- (Agia Sophia, 10th) Virgin enthroned between Emperors Constantine and Justinian.
- (Daphni, early 12th) Presentation of Virgin in the temple
- (San Marco, Venice, c. 1280) Scenes in life of Moses
- (Chora, Constantinople, 1310-1320) Nativity, Taxation in Bethlehem; over door to nave the donor (Theodorus Metochites) offers the church to Christ.
- (Nea Moni, Chios, c. 1042) Washing of feet
- (Nicholas Orphanos, Thessaloniki, 1310-20) Scenes in the life of St. Nicholas
- (St. Sophia, Ochrid, 11th) Seven sleepers of Ephesus, Ecumenical Council, David's repentance
- (Decani, Serbia) Above entrance to nave, Emmanuel, and above this the two donors praying to the Pantocrator depicted above.

*West wall*

Most churches have the Dormition above the door

- (Torcello, Venice, mid 12th) Last judgement
- (Axiemaston, Ioannina, 16th) 3 tiers, continues the themes on the north and south walls. Top: continues wall themes of life of Christ and the Virgin; 2nd tier continues Christ's passion; bottom tier, Constantine and Helen, Peter and Paul either side of door, the unmercenary healers Cosmos and Damian.

*Transepts*

- (Daphni, c. 100) Resurrection on south wall
- (Palermo, Sicily 1143-51) Standing apostles
- (Peribleptos, Mystra) In anti-clockwise order: Nativity, Baptism, Transfiguration, Mystical Supper, Betrayal, Pentecost, Ascension.
- (San Vitale, Ravenna, 6th) Old Testament themes on theme of the Eucharist:

*Piers*

- Usually standing figures e.g. in St. Dimitrius, Thessaloniki there is a private votive mosaic of donors with St Dimitrius.

### *Pendatives*

- Most churches have the four evangelists
- (Hosios Lukas, c.1020) N.E. Annunciation; N.W. Baptism; S.W. Presentation; S.E. lost. In the second smaller dome above the altar there are the people of the nations in the pendatives, with Pentecost in the dome itself.
- (Daphni, late 11th) on N.E. the Annunciation; S.E. Nativity; N.W. Transfiguration; S.W. Nativity
- (Moni Chora, Constantinople) In the side chapel there are the four main hymnographers: St John Damascene, St Cosmas and two others.

### *Dome*

- (Saint Prassede, Capella di S. Zenone, Rome, 817-824) Pantocrator “held” by four angels
- (Panagia tou Aracou, Cyprus, 1192) Pantocrator with half-length angels set in circles
- (Daphni) Pantocrator mosaic in sea of gold, with a rainbow coloured circle around, and prophets between windows of drum
- (Agia Sophia, Thessaloniki end 9th) Ascension, with trees (from the Mount of Olives) with the Mother of God and apostles in between trees looking up to the Saviour.
- (Palermo, Sicily, 1143-51) Christ enthroned, four angels around, with prophets in drum.
- (San Marco, Venice) There are five number of domes, arranged in a cross shape. Middle- the Ascension, with evangelists in pendatives; west - Pentecost, with angels in pendatives; south - sea of gold with cross in centre and four Venetian state saints, bishops Nicholas, Clement, Leonard and Blaise, with the four female saints Dorothea, Erasma, Euphemia and Thecla; north - theme of the life of Apostle John, with the four evangelists between the windows, and four church fathers in the pendatives (Augustine, Gregory the Dialogist, Jerome, Ambrose)
- (Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, c. 425) Gold stars on blue (mosaic) with four creatures in the corners.

### *Apsidal vault*

Most have the Mother of God with the Saviour. Below are some exceptions.

- (St Pudenziana, Rome, end 4th) Christ teaching the apostles.
- (St. Costanza, Rome, 4th) Christ standing on rock with four streams of paradise, with Ss. Peter and Paul to whom Christ gives the law. Sheep on either side.
- (St Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, 6th) St. Apollinare in paradise with hands raised in prayer, with transfiguration above, with Christ symbolised by a cross, and Peter, James and John by sheep.
- (Moni Chora, Constantinople) Side chapel, the harrowing of Hell
- (St. Katherine’s, Sinai, c. 540) The Transfiguration (the original dedication of the church), with Moses and the burning bush on the arch to the left, and Moses receiving the law to the right.
- (San Vitale, Ravenna, 6th) Christ enthroned on a sphere, flanked by two angels and martyr Vitalis and the donor Bishop Ecclesio, with paradise below.
- (Oratory at Germigny des Pres, Gaul, 799-818) The Ark of the Covenant.

- (Torcello, Venice, 12th) Mosaic, standing Virgin, with apostles below. Around the arch, facing west, is a poem about the Virgin
- (Elmale Kilisse, Cappadocia, 10th) Christ enthroned and deisis, with a bust of an archangel in the dome
- (Monreale, Sicily, 12th) Bust of Christ blessing.
- (SS. Cosmos and Damian, Rome, 526-30) Christ stands clothed in white with scroll, and blessing amidst clouds.
- (Osios David, Thessaloniki, 5th to 6th) Ezekiel's vision of Christ with the four beasts.
- (Ruesta Jaca, 12th; Esterri de Cardos 12th) Christ enthroned with angels or four creatures.
- (Panagia Angeloktistos, Cyprus, 6th) The Virgin standing, holding the Saviour, flanked by two standing angels with peacock wings.

### 3. THE BASILICA

Below is given an outline of the image themes used in a variety of basilica churches.

#### *North and south walls*

- (Saint Apollinare Nuovo, 6th cent.) Procession of martyrs on south wall, and virgins on the north, presenting crowns to the Saviour and to the Virgin respectively. Above are scenes in the life of Christ.
- (Monreale, Sicily, 12th cent.) OT scenes, and of life of Christ.
- (Synagogue of Dura, 3rd cent.) OT scenes
- (Axie Maston, Ioannina, Greece, 16th, Barrel vaulted). 3 tiers on south side: top row, scenes in life of Virgin; 2nd row, 9 scenes in Christ's life from betrayal through to the myrrh-bearers; bottom tier standing martyrs, with bishops to the east. On north side. Top row, 9 scenes in life of Christ from Cana to healing the possessed man.; 2nd tier, Christ before Pilate to entombment; bottom row, martyrs.
- Monastery of St Nicholas ton Philanthropinon, Epirus, Greece, 1560). Three bands, the top two with scenes in the life of the Mother of God and the Saviour, the bottom band being standing saints, mainly soldier martyrs, with hierarchs on the east end of the walls.
- (Taxiarches of the metropolis, Kastoria, Greece, some 10th, mainly 1359/60). Barrel vaulted: four bands (including one on the ceiling), the top two with scenes in the life of Christ, the bottom two with saints.
- (Saint Athanasius of Mouzaki, Kastoria, 1384/5). Small, single-aisled, timber roof. Three tiers, the top with scenes in the life of Christ, the second with busts of saints send in medallions, the lower with standing saints.

### 4. A CONTEMPORARY FRESCO SCHEME: A preliminary proposal for the Church of the Holy Wisdom, the Monastery of Saints Antony and Cuthbert, Shropshire

What follows is an outline of a possible arrangement for the carvings and frescoes in the proposed Church of Holy Wisdom at the Monastery of Saints Antony and Cuthbert in Shropshire.

### *Tympanum at the entrance to the cloister*

The tympanum is a microcosm of the whole, since it combines a rectangular shape (which represents the created world) with a semicircular shape (which represents the heavens). Also, as an entrance it symbolises the means of passage into union with God. The four columns (two either side) could represent the four elements - earth, fire, water, air - which in turn represent the four means of union with God. Fire symbolises the purification of repentance, water is baptism, earth is death and burial with Christ, air is resurrection and or the Holy Spirit. On the respective cylindrical columns could be carved simple geometric designs, such as those on the Durham Cathedral pillars, which represent these elements.

The symbols of the four evangelists could be carved on the four capitals, since it is through the Good News that we enter paradise. These can incorporate Celtic or Anglo-Saxon elements of design.

In the lunette above could be carved Christ as Wisdom, possibly with Saints Anthony and Cuthbert either side of Him to form a deisis. There could be a short poem carved around this lunette, written (by Father Silouan!) to summarise the theme of Wisdom.

### *Cloister/Atrium*

This cloister is an integral part of the church. It functions liturgically as the atrium or exo-narthex of early churches. Such an enclosed garden was sometimes also called the Paradise. It has numerous symbolic and liturgical functions, each depending on the interpretation given to the other spaces in the church

As an exo-narthex it was in the early Church the place where non-believers and excommunicates stayed during services. It would thus represent the fallen state of the world, waiting to be redeemed. It also represented the Old Testament times, when God prepared the world to receive the Incarnation.

As a paradise, it represents a middle place between the world outside and heaven which is within the church, full of sensual adumbrations of the spiritual delights to be found therein.

Putting all these roles together, a possible arrangement for the cloister is as follows. For the frescoes, the south wall could have depictions of the creation of the world through to the fall and casting out from paradise (as those in the mosaics in the baptistery of Florence or in Sicily). These reflect the wisdom with which God made the universe.

On the eastern side of the atrium, either side of the entrance to the church could be Moses on Mount Sinai receiving the law and the revelation of God's name I AM, and the Hospitality of Abraham, where God is revealed as Trinity. These two revelations are fundamental and appropriate for the atrium and entrance to the nave: they are to do with the name, and union with God concerns the right glorification of God's name; a foundation of union with God is the keeping of the commandments; revelation of God is through eating with Him i.e. Holy Communion and giving hospitality to strangers;

I am not sure if there would be space above the alcoves on this wall for more depictions.

As a paradise, the plants should be chosen not only for their looks but also for their fragrances. Also the central area could have either a step in front which doubles as a fountain, or a sculptured cross which suggests the tree of life.

### *The doors to the nave*

I thought that these could be illustrations done in gold on dark patinated copper, comprising of six panels, three on each of the two door leaves.

These could be depictions on the theme of wisdom. Being on a door these images should have a special emphasis on events or people to do with transition from earth to heaven, or a state of non-union to union with Christ. Possible subjects are:

- the Annunciation;
- Moses and the burning bush, which suggests the teaching that we progress from practical theology (repentance) to natural theology (perception of God's logoi within the created world);
- Ruth saying to Naomi "Your shall be my God, and your people my people" (if it is to be a monastery for nuns as well as monks, we want plenty of images with female examples as well as male);
- Jacob's ladder, with the Mother of God at the top of the ladder.

### *Frescoes in the nave*

I haven't yet come up with anything special for the nave frescoes, so what is described below is more or less based on the standard arrangement. This can be used as the basis for further discussion so that we can customise things to the monastery themes. One possible theological scheme could be based on the theology of St Maximus the Confessor, who speaks of five unions effected by Christ: between male and female; between paradise and the inhabited earth; between earth and the heavens; between the sensible and the angelic worlds; between the created world and the Creator.

- Above the door, facing west: Our Lady of the Sign
- Either side of the door: Archangel Michael and a dendrite.
- The barrel vault of the entrance (the narthex): on the north side the Baptism (our means of entry into the Kingdom) and on the south side, the Transfiguration (the purpose of our entry).
  - The small rooms on the north and south sides (presuming these have a low flat ceiling, say eight foot high), standing saints, male and female. Ceilings - any ideas?
  - Space above western arch: Dormition
  - Apsidal half-domes north and south walls (i.e. the choirs): Crucifixion and the Resurrection.
  - On the walls of the choirs: standing saints
  - The dome: Christ the Pantocrator, perhaps with angels around the edge.
  - The "drum"(i.e. the ring directly below the clerestory windows): angels, if they are not included in the dome, with the Mandilion over the apse
  - The pendentives: the four Evangelists.
  - On western face of the arch over the altar: Archangel Gabriel to the left and Mother of God to the right (i.e. the Annunciation)
  - The apse: the half-dome, Our Lady of the Sign, perhaps flanked by two angels; around the walls, either the Apostles' Communion or the Hierarchs liturgizing.
  - On underside of arch over altar: Pentecost in the centre, Ascension on one side, Nativity on the other

- Proskomeidia: in front of the proskomeidia table, the Bridegroom icon; on the walls various hierarchs and deacons; on the barrel vault,
- In the southern vestry: deacons.

#### *Decorative boarders*

There will probably be areas too small for figurative frescoes. These could be filled with designs inspired by Celtic and Anglo-Saxon motifs, as much as possible drawn from local sources.

#### *The iconscreen*

In order to keep the apsidal dome visible I think the screen should be kept low, say seven feet. Wood would be a warm material to use. There is no need for a row of feast icons, as these are already included in the frescoes, so there need be only the main bottom row of icons. Also, since there are already doors leading directly into the proskomeidia and the vestry, the screen itself need have only one door, the Royal Gates. Reading from left to right the four icons and the doors could be: the dedication icon, Wisdom (what exactly this icon is yet to be agreed); the Mother of God; on the Royal Doors the Annunciation, or the two liturgists Basil and John Chrysostom, or the four evangelists; the Saviour; John the Baptist. If there were enough space, then Saints Antony and Cuthbert could be included.

#### *The altar*

I suggest that the altar be of carved stone, somewhat like the altar in the Shrewsbury parish church, with four columns and a central cube. Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Romanesque designs would be the chief inspiration.

#### *The floor*

The floor could have a geometrical design of inlaid stone or wood. It would be symbolic, like that in the existing chapel.