

## HOLY ICONS IN TODAY'S WORLD

### A living tradition's insights into contemporary issues in modern art, ecology and community<sup>1</sup>

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We are made to be gods by grace, sons and daughters of the Living God. If we only saw what majesty and dignity is bestowed upon each of us here tonight we would bow down in reverence to one another. We are created for Paradise, and we long to return to our homeland. We are created to love our Maker and so, as St Augustine of Hippo wrote:

*You have made us for Yourself, Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.*<sup>2</sup>

All man's cultural endeavours and economic pursuits are, I believe, fuelled by this inner longing. These pursuits themselves may be and sadly too often are misdirected, for though we feel the longing we do not know what it is for. We repeat the sin of Adam by expecting created things in and of themselves to satisfy our longing for the Divine.

If we are to solve any of our problems in art, ecology and community, we need to understand better this nostalgia that drives us to search and work and make.

All the wonderful things in the universe are icons or images of divine love, an engagement ring pledging the love of God to us, awaiting our response: Yes, Lord, I will marry you. Sin is simply missing the point by taking the engagement ring of creation's beauty, turning our back on the Giver, and forgetting that it is His pledge and proposal of marriage.

St Irenaeus, a second century saint of Gaul, said that when God created us and placed us in the garden of Eden he gave us a task: to become gods. He wrote:

*We have not been made gods from the beginning, but at first merely men, then at length gods...*<sup>3</sup>

This union with God is not of course something within the power of man. It is only possible through God's descent. But nevertheless, it requires our freely offered participation to become reality. Irenaeus again:

*Through His transcendent love the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, become what we are that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.*<sup>4</sup>

When God created us and placed us in Paradise, the first stage in this task was to receive creation with thanksgiving and thereby make it sacrament. Some of the Church teachers say that this is the meaning of the tree of

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<sup>1</sup> A talk given in Austin, Texas, December 12th, 2013, at St John the Forerunner Orthodox Parish.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 1:1

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, Preface.

knowledge of good and evil. This tree stands for all the created world: if received with thanksgiving it brings good, for we receive it as a love gift and not as mere matter, as a ring gift and not mere gold. But if creation is grabbed for pleasure alone, it brings evil and death, not because matter is evil, but because we expect life from something which bears life but is not Life Himself.

Only when Adam and Eve, that is, you and I, had through thanksgiving accustomed ourselves to the veiled glory of God's light within His material creation would we have been able to partake of the Tree of Life. The fruit of this tree is the Holy Spirit, whereby man not only beholds the glory of God but he now receives this glory within himself. Here, deep calls to deep. A god by grace communes with God by nature.

Note that the Bible begins with a verdant scene and ends with a city. Let's think of the beginning as a jungle. God then plants within it a garden. This garden is an artwork, a product of God's imagination fashioning the wild jungle. Paradise is a God-made icon, an image of His plan for the world. It bears the stamp of His character in a richer way than the wilder world outside.

The divine Gardener then places man and woman within this paradise and says, "Make it your own, expand the boundary of this garden until all the world is paradise."

Paradise is a Persian word, and means a park for a king in which he enjoys the company of his friends and takes pleasure with them in its delights. So this Eden is not merely a garden but is above all a place of communion. It is an expression of love, and the setting for mutual love. It is not merely something to look at, but is a nuptial chamber in which God and man find union.

This is why the Bible ends with a city. The New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven as "a bride adorned for her husband". We begin with God and two people in a garden, and end with God and a nation in a verdant city. We begin with raw materials and end with a work of art. We start with a couple and end with a very large family. We begin with courtship, and end with marriage. We begin with God and man, and end with transfigured, deified man, man radiant with the indwelling Holy Spirit.

And so we come to our first icon, the Transfiguration. This evening we will concentrate on three icons: the Transfiguration, Pentecost and finally a frescoed church regarded as a single image of the heavenly city. We will see what insights they may offer us regarding art, ecology and community.

### **The transfiguration icon and modern art**

Christ takes with him His disciples Peter, James and John up a mountain, traditionally taken to be Mount Tabor. The Gospels then tell us that Christ's face and garments shine with light, brighter than the sun. Moses and Elijah also appear before the disciples, talking with Jesus about His departure. When Moses and Elijah begin to go away Peter says that it's great to be here, and asks if they can set up some tents and hang around longer. Then a voice comes from heaven saying, "This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased, listen to Him." The Lord and the disciples then descend Tabor.

So much can be said about this wonderful icon subject, but here we will limit ourselves to what insights it might offer us about art. This icon shows a world shot through with God's light and glory, a world seen with not just with the eyes of the body but with the eye of the spirit. This is surely one of the

great callings of art, to unveil and manifest in material form things that are hidden to most of us. One hymn of Transfiguration says:

*You have preserved the bush unharmed, O Master, though it was united with fire, and you have shown to Moses Your flesh shining with divine brightness.*<sup>5</sup>

In this icon, as in all, there is no shadow created by one material source of light. Icons show the world bathed in divine grace, and saints radiant with the indwelling Holy Spirit. Even the rocks flash out this light, and sometimes tree trunks are painted with gold lines. Although the garments follow the essential logic of drapery, they are not naturalistically rendered. They are rhythmical. The inanimate landscape, hills and trees, follow and emphasise the spiritual dynamic of the event.

As we shall now discuss, this abstraction and manifestation of inner reality was the stated aim of the founding abstract artists of the twentieth century, foremost among them being Constantin Brancusi (1826-1957), the founder of abstract sculpture, and Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), the founder of non-figurative abstract painting. Others could also be mentioned, such as Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), all of whose work was inspired by his belief that there was a spiritual way of understanding nature that was deeper than scientific, empirical knowledge. Like many of his time, he was much influenced by the theosophical movement, an esoteric salad of eastern philosophies and religions. Nevertheless, he was on a spiritual journey.

The majority of our art historians books have, from embarrassment it seems, omitted the central role that spiritual quest played in early abstractionism. We may or may not like what these artists came up with, but it cannot be denied that what motivated them were consciously held spiritual aims. Novelty was not their object, but the embodiment of objective truths. It was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that novelty seems to have become an end in itself, the fad for "Shock of the New" as the late critic Robert Hughes dubbed the trend.

When art loses its way, it loses it because it severs itself from its spiritual role, as a quest for God, a quest for a transfigured world, a quest for timeless truth in the midst of suffering. The word "art" means to join fitly together, and if we look throughout history the art of most cultures has aimed to join together the divine and the earthly realms, has had a religious function: Egyptian, Greek, African, Indian, Chinese, virtually all. Art without a spiritual aim is a relatively recent phenomenon.

We tend now to think of abstraction as a departure from reality. But most early abstractionists understood their venture in the literal and more original meaning of the word abstract, which is to draw out. True abstraction in art is to draw out and make hidden reality manifest in physical form. In the academic realm a short summation of a long academic paper is called an abstract. A mathematical formula is also an abstract. Albert Einstein's early work was as a patent clerk. His job was to summarize each submission in a sentence or two. It was this discipline which enabled him to arrive at the famous formula,  $E = mc^2$ . This elegant formula is an abstract or summation of a complex reality. True abstract art does something similar: it makes clear

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<sup>5</sup> The Feast of Transfiguration, Matins, Cantic Four of the canon.

something complex. As Constantin Brancusi said, "Simplicity is complexity resolved."

Transfiguration, or metamorphosis in the Greek, means a change of form. What changed on Mount Tabor was not so much Christ but the disciples. Their eyes were opened to see a little of Christ's divinity which had always been there. They saw just a little of Christ's "divine beauty hidden beneath the flesh"<sup>6</sup> as one hymn puts it.

But this event is not only about Christ's transfiguration. It is also about the transfiguration of the whole material cosmos. It is significant that not only does Christ's face shine with the uncreated light of His divinity, but also His garments. These garments are mere inanimate matter, and yet by association with Him who created them, they participate in His glory. The liturgical texts tells us that through Christ's incarnation and transfiguration He has "shone as lightning with glory upon the mountain and has filled the world with light."<sup>7</sup>

The Greek word for what we call nature is cosmos. This word's literal meaning is adornment. So we can view Christ's garments, His adornment, as the whole natural world wrapped around His divinity and thereby transfigured.

We are called to do the same, to be God-bearers ourselves and then through culture to fashion the world beautifully, integrate it into our life in the Body of Christ, and thereby transfigure it. The act of making an icon, as with any good work done in love for Christ, is akin to weaving a garment for the Body of Christ, the Church.

The garden city of the New Jerusalem that we mentioned in the beginning is the ultimate outcome of this divine-human act of cultivation. Culture comes from the word cult, which means to worship. If a culture worships itself it will wither and die. If it transcends itself by directing its worship to God, it will live and flourish. The New Jerusalem is the ultimate artwork.

So paradise is the world seen aflame with the words of God, like Moses' bush which burnt without being consumed. The Word of God speaks a word to create a cactus, and that cactus plant is thereafter sustained and directed towards its fulfilment by that indwelling word or logos.

And each thing is unique. Each person is unique. A person is holy to the degree that he or she has fulfilled their vocation, become themselves, become their unique logos. Each object and each animal has a role within the cosmic symphony.

This is what is meant in the Genesis account when Adam names the animals as they come to him. His naming was not arbitrary, but revealed each animal's inner logos. Adam was acting as a prophet, discerning the word of the Lord within whatever he encountered.

All things are in unity because they come from the one Logos, but each thing is unique because it was brought into being by a unique word spoken by the one Logos. And each of these words is a poem of love from the Creator to His creation. Each logos is a note in a symphony of love composed by the Lover for His beloved.

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<sup>6</sup> Matins, the Feast of the Transfiguration, translation from *The Festal Menaion* tr. by Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware, St Tikhon's Seminary Press, PA, USA, 1998 (p. 478).

<sup>7</sup> Small Vespers, *ibid.*, p. 469.

The dynamism of art is perhaps born of this realization that each thing, each being, is on a journey to fulfil its vocation. Reality is not static. The whole of history is a journey in which God is nudging us from the desert towards the verdant New Jerusalem, and ultimately, from being merely human to being humans united to God, deified and transfigured human beings, shining like Christ with the grace of the Holy Spirit. As one hymn of the Transfiguration feast puts it:

*You were transfigured, and have made the nature that had grown dark in Adam to shine again as lightning, transforming it into the glory and splendour of Your own divinity.*<sup>8</sup>

Even artists who have no formal religion can intuit and reveal to us these logoi, what the English poet and Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins called the inscape of things. So great art does this very thing, even if unwittingly: it unveils the word of God which created but also sustains each thing.

The Impressionists were interested in the fleeting effects of created light upon their subjects. But they inadvertently suggested a world shot through with the light of God. Their works are akin to Byzantine mosaics, all aflame with colour and shining light.

Vincent van Gogh, a fervent Christian missionary in his early years, was consciously religious in his artistic aims. He sought to suggest holiness in the intensity of strong colour rather than through symbols:

*I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolise, and which we seek to confer by the actual radiance and vibration of our colourising.*<sup>9</sup>

### ***Constantin Brancusi***

Unlike most of the Impressionists, the majority of the abstract artists of the early twentieth century were consciously religious in their aims. We shall here concentrate on the two founding fathers of the movement, Constantin Brancusi, the Rumanian founder of abstract sculpture, and Vassily Kandinsky, the Russian founder of abstract painting. Their stated aim was to discover and uncover the spiritual essence of their subject matter. Brancusi said:

*They are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realist, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things.*

*Look at things until you really see them. Those who sit close to God have already done so.*<sup>10</sup>

As we have seen, the word abstract means to draw out, and for these pioneers abstraction was a necessary language to draw out and crystallise the invisible but real essence of their chosen subjects.

Brancusi and Kandinsky were undoubtedly influenced by their backgrounds in the Orthodox Church, Constantin Brancusi particularly so. According to the biography of his friend V.G. Paleolog (*Tineretea lui Brancusi* or *The Young*

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<sup>8</sup> The Orthodox Feast of the Transfiguration, Aposticha of Great Vespers.

<sup>9</sup> *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, ed. Mark Roskill (Fontana, 1983), p. 286.

<sup>10</sup> Argatu p. 24

*Brancusi*) Brancusi had ample opportunity to imbibe the spiritual tradition of the Orthodox Church since he spent many years as a church server, beginning from the age of eleven.<sup>11</sup> He had in fact also received an arts grant from the trustees of the Church of Madonna Dudu in Craiova in 1899. Later while an art student in Bucharest aged 28 he was a chanter in an Orthodox parish, well respected for his pure tenor voice, and again from 1906 to 1908 he sang and served in the Romanian chapel in Paris, the same chapel in fact where he was buried in 1957. The hymns that he sang for the services are theology and mysticism in song and had an undoubted influence on his thinking. When his friend Petre Pandrea was once talking with Brancusi about his artistic achievements, the sculptor retorted with his characteristic humour that all he had done was to set up in Paris a branch office of his homeland's Tismana Orthodox monastery.

Brancusi was quite eclectic in his reading, and read the works of Plato, Lao-Tzu and the Buddhist poet Milarepa. But the ideas he drew from these sources, from what we can tell from his aphorisms, were by and large those which accorded with the spiritual teaching of the Orthodox Church.

Viewed as isolated works of art we can easily forget the religious aim of Brancusi's work. His famous endless column in Targu Jiu is in fact properly entitled "The Column of Endless Commemoration", and was created by the sculptor to be like an eternally burning candle to commemorate those soldiers of Gorj who had fallen in war.

Although he himself was not a writer, Brancusi's friends recorded many of his words as aphorisms. These clearly reveal the spiritual nature of his aims. For example:

*The vain ego of the person ought to be dissolved. The hidden principle - that is, the truth - can only be revealed if the ego is entirely eliminated.*<sup>12</sup>

If we compare the following words of St Maximus the Confessor with those of Brancusi we see little difference:

Maximus the Confessor: *Do not stop short of the outward appearance which visible things present to the senses, but seek with your intellect to contemplate their inner essences (logoi), seeing them as images of spiritual realities...*

Brancusi: *The artist should know how to dig out the being that is within matter and be the tool that brings out its cosmic essence into an actual visible essence.*

His emphasis on the inner essence of material things in no way meant that Brancusi despised matter. He saw reality as a union of matter and spirit, and this is evident in the love and care that he expended on making his sculptures, and the appropriate ways he treated his different mediums of

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<sup>11</sup> For this and much of the following information about Brancusi see: *Peace and Rejoicing with Constantin Brancusi: Arguments for a Christian Dimension*, Calinic Ragatu, trans. Virgil Stanciu (Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Argatu p. 11

wood, stone and bronze. In this sense his work was very incarnational. This is what struck the English sculptor Barbara Hepworth when she visited his studio. She wrote that:

*In Brancusi's studio I encountered the miraculous feeling of eternity mixed with beloved stone and stone dust.*

### ***Wassily Kandinsky***

We turn now to Wassily Kandinsky, credited with being the first modern European to create entirely non-representational abstract painting, and as such is considered the founder of modern abstract painting. As well as being a practitioner, Kandinsky was also a theorist. His short book, "On the Spiritual in Art" was very influential, particularly in the English speaking world after it was translated in 1914.

Like Brancusi, he was raised an Orthodox Christian in Russia, and we know from his book "Looks on the Past" that he was deeply moved by the shimmering colours he met when visiting churches. He felt he was moving into a painting, an idea central to his later abstract work. Also, just as Orthodox consider their icons to be hymns in colour, so Kandinsky saw his work as music, sometimes calling his more spontaneous works "improvisations" and his more developed paintings "compositions". Some of his works it seems were directly inspired by icons, such as "Sketch with Horseman", which is strongly akin to icons of St George and of Elijah taken into heaven. Although it seems he was in the end more influenced by the esoteric teachings of Theosophy than Orthodoxy, for Kandinsky painting was a spiritual exercise with spiritual aims:

*The artist must train not only his eye, but his soul.*<sup>13</sup>

*The world is full of resonances. It constitutes a cosmos of things exerting a spiritual action. Dead matter is a living spirit.*<sup>14</sup>

A central aspect of his art theory was devotional fervor of spirit, which he called inner beauty, and spiritual desire, which he called inner necessity.

Probably the American artist closest to this spiritual impetus is Mark Rothko (1903-1970). He was another Russian (Latvian), although of a devout Jewish family and not Christian. He was a complex man, whose life he felt was full of rejection and tragedy. His art naturally went through different phases, but common to all these was a search for deeper meaning in life and a preoccupation with death:

*Pictures must be miraculous: the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Kandinsky W., *On the Spiritual in Art*.

<sup>14</sup> Kandinsky W., *On the Question of Form*.

<sup>15</sup> "The Romantics Were Prompted" in *Possibilities I*, (New York) Winter 1947/48, p.84.

As we have already mentioned, the ancient role of art has been the desire to join back together heaven and earth, divine and created, spirit and matter. Surely contemporary art would benefit from reviving this inspiring aim. Heaven would become the limit to its creativity.

## **Ecology**

We turn now to our second subject of ecology. When I was learning to drive, one of the first things I was told was to keep my eyes on the road because the car would follow my gaze. It is the same with any civilisation: its actions will follow its ideas, its dominant ideology. The word idea comes from the Greek *idein*, meaning to see. Under Plato the word then came to mean the pattern or archetypal form of something, the invisible thought behind an action or object.

So if we want to address ecological problems of our time we need to identify and replace the erroneous ideology behind them. We need to direct our gaze back onto the road before we crash. We need to work to replace our false ideology with one that works and is worthy of man and the world. This is where the icon tradition and its theology offers insights.

The Orthodox Church's theology of ecology, if we can call it that, can be summarized in the three ministries of prophet, priest, and king or artist. These are illustrated in the icon of Pentecost. A prophet perceives creation as word of God, as a declaration and vision of divine wisdom and love; the priest offers thanks for creation as gift, and calls down the Holy Spirit to transfigure it; the king is like an artist, who through his skill, mastery and love of his material kingdom makes creation even more articulate in the praise of God.

In the icon of Pentecost we see the disciples arranged around a horseshoe shaped table, with rays of light descending individually upon each person. Tongues of fire are sometimes indicated upon each disciple's head as well. In the centre is a dark space with an old man wearing a crown. He holds a scroll which carries twelve scrolls. Sometimes the word cosmos is written above him. In early icons, instead of this old man cosmos, various people of different races were depicted there.

Let us now consider ecology, our relationship with the material world, in the light of the three ministries of prophet, priest, and king.

### ***Man as Prophet***

Before a prophet speaks the word of God he needs to hear it. The seer sees the Word of God in visions. According to the Orthodox Church's tradition, we all of us are called to be prophets by hearing the word of God speaking to us in the created world. We are created to be seers by seeing the world as a world burning with the presence of God without being consumed. Our ecological problems are in large part caused by the loss of this sacred view of the world. This in turn justifies our treating the world as mere matter and a means of gaining wealth and leisure.

So before we act, we need to listen, we need to see. Before preaching, the disciples at Pentecost saw and heard God in the rushing wind, the flames of fire. Revelation preceded speaking. The apostles were mystics first and missionaries second. Before St Paul begins his mission, he first experiences the Lord as light and speech while on the road to Damascus. And even then, before beginning his missionary labours, he spends many years in prayer and

preparation, first in Arabia, then in Damascus, and then Syria and Cilicia, perhaps spending some of this time in the desert.<sup>16</sup>

In our capitalist world we are taught to treat the material world as a collection of things to be turned into profit or a means of gaining us pleasure or leisure. But our first attitude should be wonder. Creation is the most splendid dowry ever given. And even this is but a small glimpse of the infinitely greater beauty, wisdom, splendour and love of the Giver. Such wonder makes a person feel the wealthiest in the world. This of itself reduces the demands we place upon the earth. Surely, dissatisfaction is what drives consumerism, the aching belly of spiritually hungry souls?

Wonder does not lead to inactivity, does not stop us working the land, does not stop industry. But it does offer a new and lasting blueprint for our labours. This listening before we act provides us with a new vision towards which we labour. Behind every labour is a notion of the perfect life, however vague it is in our minds. The secular New Jerusalem behind our ecological problems is a non-existent world of satisfaction through material wealth. But this imagined Jerusalem is a utopia, it does not exist. It is a mirage. It is a world full of gadgets and every comfort, but these things prove to be but husks to the thirsting soul. It does not satisfy, and so the more one has the more one wants.

Icons help give us a true image of the New Jerusalem. They give us an inspiring, satisfying and achievable vision of life to work towards. Icons are not the fruit of fantasy, or of some unobtainable idealism. They are the fruit of vision, of knowledge through experience.

This is why iconographers work within a tradition. And by tradition I do not mean that we copy, but that we work within certain parameters, tried and tested by time. These are not arbitrary rules, set down by some authority, but are timeless principles. If some new icon style does not resonate with believers' experience of Christ, it is rejected. Inasmuch as mere paint can depict heavenly realities, iconographers try to receive and then communicate a God-given vision of things as they are, and not as they seem to the senses. This is why an iconographer needs to be a person of faith, to fast and pray, to live an active liturgical life, to be a theologian. He or she seeks not just to copy other people's vision, but to know Christ and His saints personally.

The American Evangelical philosopher and theologian Francis Schaeffer did much to revive art within the Protestant world, and I am deeply indebted to his writings for helping me to set out on life as a Christian artist. But he was mistaken in criticising the icon tradition for not depicting real people in a real world. Quoting Michael Gough, Schaeffer wrongly understood Byzantine art as "a change from 'the acceptance of an element of naturalistic realism to a preference for the fantastic and unreal.'"<sup>17</sup> Real people are deified people, and the real world is a world transfigured. A lamp is truly a lamp only when it is turned on.

Before entering Jerusalem, Christ wanted through His transfiguration to show His chief disciples the purpose of His coming suffering and death. Six days before His transfiguration He had promised that:

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<sup>16</sup> See Galatians 1:13-24.

<sup>17</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Crossway, 2005), p.30.

*there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom. (Matthew 16:28)*

Christ wanted to show them the kingdom towards which all His pending suffering was heading: the deification of the human person and the transformation of the world. The transfiguration is therefore a precursor or foretaste of Pentecost.

Perhaps the chief thing which distinguishes the icon tradition from mere religious painting is that through its style it indicates the kingdom to come. It helps us see beyond the sufferings and insanities of this present life. It shows the world as seen by prophets and not by the profane or secular. In icons, for example, we do not see shadows, the chiaroscuro created by a single light source, for all of the world is bathed in light, and light comes also from within the saints. Trees are shown in wonderful ways, as though dancing to the cosmic hymn of love. Hills rise up like ascending prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, or open like the jaws of Hades, or part like the river Jordan at Christ's baptism. We do not often see vanishing point perspective, but things are depicted as though viewed from different angles all at once. Clock time is subsumed into divine time, and so we see different events depicted simultaneously.

I run a Diploma course in icon painting, and one of the first things I try to instil in the students is a respect and affection for their raw materials. The translucent and cool pigment terre verte has a different voice than the more opaque and warm red ochre. Listen first to the materials, I tell them, and they will teach you how to use them.

### ***Priest***

We all of us are called to be priests as well as prophets in relation to the land, sky and sea. But what is a priest? This is a complex thing. A priest is one who offers, who sacrifices, who gives thanks to God for creation, and one who invokes the blessing of God upon His creation.

During the Holy Liturgy the priest and all the congregation call down the Holy Spirit upon themselves and upon the gifts of bread and wine. This prayer is called the epiclesis. By this descent of the Spirit the bread and the wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, and the people who partake of the Gifts become little Christs, become Christians, become God bearers. The epiclesis is a renewal of Pentecost.

So the icon of Pentecost shows the Holy Spirit coming down upon the whole world through the apostles. The old man in the dark space at the bottom and centre of the icon is not just the people of the world who have not heard the Gospel; He is also the whole material world. This is why St Paul writes:

*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God... the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now.. (Romans 8:19-22)*

When the priest offers the bread and wine he offers the world. A Russian poet once wrote:

*Every time the priest celebrates the Eucharist, he holds in his hands the whole world, like an apple.*<sup>18</sup>

We offer to God what is already His, to remind us that He is the source of all life and existence. "Your own, of your own, we offer to you, in behalf of all and for all." This offering is doing the opposite of what happened in the Garden of Eden: we acknowledge the world as God's and not just a source of pleasure.

Offering, but why sacrifice? God doesn't require the blood of sheep and goats. God asks us to sacrifice in order to keep us free, to keep us from clinging to things as though we would die without them. We surrender things and, lo, we are still alive! We had lived as though our life depended on having those things, and now they gone and I am still alive I see that I was enslaved to them.

To give praise and thanks in all circumstances is a form of sacrifice open to everybody. In doing this we see Him in all things and in all circumstances. This is one vital role of the icon. Icons stand as a permanent offering of praise in colour, and not only in churches but also in buses, cars, homes, above city gates, by the road. Those of you who have visited or lived in traditionally Orthodox countries like Greece will see icons in action in this way.

Thanksgiving is at the heart of the Holy Liturgy, the Eucharist, which is itself at the heart of the Christian life. Thanksgiving is the undoing of the Fall, the most sure path to God, an act of high wisdom. As G.K. Chesterton wrote:

*I would maintain that thanks [is] the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.*

Traditionally, an icon painter does not sign his or her work. Once completed, the icon does not stand as an artistic achievement by an individual, but is an offering on behalf of all believers, a thanksgiving and acknowledgement that the saint depicted is alive in Christ. This is one reason why people commission icons, in gratitude to the Lord for some blessing they have received.

### ***Kings and artists***

So our relationship with the earth can be as prophets and priests. We are also created to be as kings and queens. As the USA is a Republic perhaps we can liken this role to that of an artist and his materials as well as of a king to his kingdom.

Secularists tell us that the God of Genesis is to blame for our ecological crisis. His fault, they say, was to let man "have dominion"<sup>19</sup> and to tell him to "fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."<sup>20</sup> But do we blame an artist for mastering his materials? Do we blame a gardener for subduing the verdant wildness of nature's weeds to make a

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Alexander Schmemmann in *Church, World, Mission* (New York, 1979), page 222

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 1:26

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 1:28

splendid garden? And anyway, to live without exercising some dominion is impossible, for without farming or hunting we could not eat.

And so the question is not whether we should exercise dominion or not, but what domain we create by our dominion. This is why God started the ball rolling by planting a garden. He set Eden as a guideline for us. He planted Paradise and then put us in it not only "to till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15), but to expand its borders and make the whole world Paradise. This surely is the meaning of the command to "fill the earth and subdue it." The subjugation is to be understood as the craft of the artist, a craft that raises his material to a higher plane rather crushing it to a lower. We recall that the Bible ends with the image of a city, the New Jerusalem. This city is the result of culture, of labour, of creativity, of wise rule, of God and man working in synergy.

Perhaps we now think of cities as polluted and polluting things. But this New Jerusalem is a garden city. It is a life-giving city. The angel showed the Apostle John

*the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. (Rev. 22:1,2)*

The artistic act of making an icon is a microcosm of how we should relate to the world. Icon making is a dominion that raises and not crushes, sanctifies and not pollutes. The icon painter takes representatives of all three kingdoms of the world: pigment from the mineral kingdom, wood for the panel from the vegetable kingdom, and egg as the paint binder from the animal kingdom. These good things he or she then fashions into something even better, something very good, a holy icon.

Before becoming pigment the yellow ochre was earth to be trodden on. Now it is kissed. The gold leaf that was once hidden in rocks now represents the glory of God. And the gold is happy not to be worshipped or made into an idol, and rejoices that it now points to its Creator. The icon painter is like the Magi who offered gold to the infant Christ, like the priest who at the Liturgy proclaims: "Your own, of Your own, we offer to You".

## **Community**

We come now to our final subject of community. What insight does the icon tradition offer us about life in community?

To be fully human is to love. To be fully human is to be in community, for we are made in the image of the Trinitarian God. God Himself is a community, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so the Body of Christ, the Church, is not merely a means to the end of an individual's personal salvation, but is itself the end of that salvation. The very word person means face, and a face is fulfilled in relationship, with eyes to see the other, ears to hear them, lips to speak with them.

It is in the Body of Christ that Janet can cease being an isolated individual and become a person. There her uniqueness and preciousness shines among the other saints. Hell is people standing with their backs to each other, heaven is people facing one another.

And so a church covered in frescoes or mosaics of the saints, angels, the Mother of God and the Lord Himself, is a single icon of life as it is meant to

be: men, women and children in the family of Christ together with all the angels and the transfigured cosmos.

This church might be a tiny chapel, with but a few icons, but these few icons affirm that when we gather together on earth to pray and praise, we are but joining in the world-wide and heaven-wide community of the brethren and angels. Icons help make the communion of the saints reality.

The icon of the hospitality of Abraham, the so called Trinity icon, shows the three angels whom Abraham addressed in the singular as Lord. The painter of this illustrated icon, St Andrei Rubliof, has arranged the three angels within a circle, but with their heads forming a triangle. All three angels have blue in their raiment, and each also wears a uniquely coloured second item of clothing. These things indicate that God is one in nature, yet three in Persons.

The fulfilment of this icon is that of Pentecost, for it shows man in the image of the communal God. The Pentecost icon shows the disciples gathered around a horseshoe shaped table. They are all one as humans, and also all gods by the descent of the Holy Spirit. This is what they are in common. A monastic elder once said:

*I have spent twenty years fighting to see all human beings as only one.*

But each disciple is also different, with different faces, gestures and garments. Each has a unique personality, a unique calling and role in life. We have a unique name. And we don't have all the time in the world to find this name. Children can be very wise. An eight year old girl called Ruth said:

*I had a baby budgie called Tabatha but she died before she knew what she was.<sup>21</sup>*

This uniqueness has a mission. A person's distinctiveness unfolds through courage and service and not mirror gazing. Pentecost gave the disciples a mission, to bring paradise, the Good News, into all the world, to the cosmos who awaits in their midst. The disciples were granted seeds from the Tree of Life and were commanded to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

A frescoed church is a foretaste of that paradise. Paradise, life with Christ, is not a white cloud. It is rich and colourful, material and spiritual at the same time. The New Jerusalem is not white marble. The Apostle John tells us its foundations are of jasper, sapphire, agate and a host of other outrageously coloured stones. Perhaps God likes bling! At the same time John tells again and again that things are clear. Even the gold is "clear as glass". This means that light, the light of God, penetrates and animates everything.

And so it is plain that Christian communalism is not the grey of communism but the colour of a carnival. An icon starts with white gesso, but ends in bright colour. Man-made religions stop at the black and white sketch, but the Cross paints a living icon of startling brilliance and variety. The gate to the kingdom of God can be very narrow, for we cannot carry through it the baggage of our idols. But the gate can also be very wide, wide enough to greet the whole universe received with thanksgiving, a world worn as the garment of the transfigured Christ.

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<sup>21</sup> Nanette Newman, *Vote for Love* (Collins, London, 1976).

