

ARCHIMANDRITE ZENON (THEODOR): His Life and Work

Архимандрит Зинон (Теодор)

by Aidan Hart

I am not given to adulation: it places too heavy a burden of expectation on the unfortunate recipient, and often hinders the adorer. But I must confess I border on adulation for the works of the contemporary Russian iconographer and fresco painter, Archimandrite Zenon (Teodor).

Every once in a while an iconographer appears who is free yet traditional, a wind of freshness, a new plant in a forest of conformity. Such is Father Zenon. His works have the ring of authenticity. He is constantly learning from different icon traditions, Western as well as Eastern, exposing himself to new influences - first the Moscow school of Andrei Rubliof, then earlier Byzantine work, then Romanesque, Armenian, and more recently, from works of Ravenna and early Rome. He unearths the secrets of masterworks, makes them his own, and then he paints without apparent labour.

A spirit of tentativeness, if not fear, still dominates the icon revival of the past century. This is an understandable reaction to the many centuries' debasement of the tradition, but it is a reaction and not a healthy state in which to remain. While most contemporary iconographers reject the sentimentalism and naturalism of nineteenth century work, and copy Byzantine or medieval Russian icons as an antidote, most of us are essentially still copyists, and all too often bad copyists. And, understandably, it is the same masterpieces that are endlessly reproduced, which has the unfortunate effect of debasing the very works we love so much.

But then such people as Father Zenon arrive, who open wide the doors and windows of this stale room and show us what an authentic tradition is. They feed directly from the sources, seeking the spirit rather than the form of medieval icons. They breathe the holy light and air of the Liturgy, inner prayer, the Holy Spirit of God Himself, and unite this life to great artistic gift. To be a great iconographer requires not piety alone, nor skill alone, but the two wedded.

Such people immerse themselves in the existing body of medieval icons as a student before their master. But in the fullness of time they leave home and develop their own voice. They have not from timidity remained forever under the roof of their master, a safe but sad course. Seeds are meant to be carried away from the mother tree, to grow in fresh soil.

As interbreeding produces deformity, so isolationism stunts iconography. Isolationism can take the form of believing that one epoch of one culture is the most spiritual and therefore the only one really worth emulating, or that the iconographer's calling *per se* is always to copy the work of past great epochs. But iconographers such as Father Zenon open vistas, show us through their work that the tradition is alive. Their icons are children of a creativity fed not by the isolated self but by the Holy Liturgy.

Since very little is written in English about Archimandrite Zenon, I would like to introduce you to his life and thought and icons. If any reader can correct or add to my researches I would be most grateful.

A short biography

Father Zenon - in the world Vladimir Theodore - was born in southern Ukraine in 1953, so the first thirty-eight years of his life were spent under atheistic communism. He and his family lived in the Mykolayiv region near Odessa, in the small town of Pervomais'k. In interviews he has often pointed out that this area was once a very large Greek colony. This fact may well have influenced his later belief that Russian iconography has to go back to its Byzantine roots if it is to reach again the heights it obtained in the fifteenth century.

His father was a shepherd and his mother an accountant. As was often the case in communist times, he was taken by his grandmother to church as a child. Parents could lose their jobs doing such a thing, but the KGB thought the retired *baboushkas* were fairly harmless!

Father Zenon recalls in an interview with Mikhail Serdyukova that being in church at the age of three he was struck by the beauty and mystery of the services: "I remember very well receiving communion there, and the unusual atmosphere - I had never seen such a thing anywhere else: quiet, beautiful and inexplicably mysterious. Even the liturgical discipline that I experienced seemed to me special: it trains character but without frightening one. I still remember the wonderful smell of incense, and the priest named Father John ..." This church was later destroyed in the 1960's by the local Soviet government.

Vladimir had always drawn, so it was no surprise when in 1969 he enrolled for art studies at the Odessa Art School in the Department of Painting. Russian art training, although somewhat academic, is typically very thorough, and this equipped the future Father Zenon with great facility as a draughtsman.

It was in his second year at art school that, through art, he encountered the Gospels and found the Orthodox faith for himself. "Every artist is faced with works of the old masters whose subjects are based on the Bible, the Gospel stories. These paintings raise questions, the answers to which only the Gospels can give. The Gospel is the cornerstone, the ABC to understanding human life in general and painting in particular. Without the Gospels, old masters are incomprehensible".¹

After his conversion he soon began painting icons. This was a dangerous occupation since icons could be interpreted by the authorities as a form of anti-Soviet propaganda, a punishable offence. There were no icon teachers available in Odessa, and so Vladimir was compelled to learn by copying from reproductions and from medieval originals, though very few good examples existed where he lived.

After his studies at Odessa Art School Vladimir fulfilled his obligatory two years in the Soviet Army, albeit as a painter. Then in 1976 he became a monk at the Pskov-Caves Dormition Monastery, Kiev (also known as Pskov-Pechory or Pskov-Pechersky). Rather untraditionally for its haste, just three

¹ interview with Zenon by Mikhail Serdyukova about Father Zenon painting the cathedral of St. Nicholas in Vienna.

weeks after his arrival the abbot told Vladimir that he was to take his vows and be ordained to the diaconate. Forty days later the deacon Zenon was ordained priest. One gets the impression from later interviews that he would have preferred not to be ordained, but he left to concentrate on his ministry as an iconographer. But he felt obligated to obey his abbot, or risk being told to leave the monastery for disobedience.

Archimandrite Zenon's icon painting continued from strength to strength. After two and a half years at the monastery, in 1979, Patriarch Pimen, himself an expert and connoisseur of iconography, called this promising new iconographer to the Trinity-Sergius Lavra. This monastery is the spiritual heart of the Russian church, and at that time was also the headquarters of the Patriarchate. Father Zenon lived there for the next seven years, where he created, among other things, the iconostasis for the chapel in the crypt of the Cathedral of the Assumption.

In 1983 the Patriarch asked Father Zenon to participate in the restoration and adornment of the Danilov Monastery in Moscow, which in that year became the official residence of the Patriarch of Moscow and the headquarters of the Russian Orthodox church. He lived and worked at the Danilov for a year while painting the icons for the crypt church. It was while working at Danilov that he began to be regarded as one of the leading iconographers in Russia, and also to receive invitations from overseas.

However, he found the busy life of these two large monasteries difficult, and after a year asked for a blessing to return to the Pskov-Pechersky monastery, where he went in 1985.

For the next eight years while living at Pskov he worked primarily on commissions for various iconostases. From 1985 to 1986, for example, he painted the church of St. Paraskeva in the Vladimir region, then the iconostasis icons for the chapel of Martyr Cornelius within the church of St. Nicholas in his monastery.

In 1988 he painted the iconostasis for the lower church of St. Seraphim in the ancient Trinity Cathedral in Pskov, in 1990 for the Protecting Veil at the Pskov-Pechery Monastery, and from 1989 to 1991 for the church of the Pechersk Saints on the Hill.

From around 1988 Archimandrite Zenon began to move away from the 15th century Moscow period for his inspiration and draw from earlier models, though still at this time mainly Russian, such as 12th century Kievan and Yaroslavl icons. Indeed, as we already indicated and as we shall see in more detail below, his inclination over the years has been to draw on earlier and earlier models, most recently sixth century mosaics of Ravenna, Italy, and the Romano-Egyptian encaustic portraits of the first and second centuries. In fact, over the last few years he has begun painting panel icons using this ancient encaustic medium, that is, wax mixed with pigment, used either hot or as an emulsion with oil and resins.

In 1991 Soviet communism collapsed, bringing with it greater freedom for the church in Russia. Over the coming years many temples were to be restored to church ownership, which created huge demand for new iconostases and wall paintings. This, combined with his increasing renown, led to Father Zenon receiving larger and larger commission, and not only from within Russia but also from overseas, such as from New Valaam monastery in Finland, and later, from Italy, Belgium, Vienna and Greece.

But since atheistic communism had all but crushed iconography, it had been very difficult for budding painters to learn the art. So after the fall of communism new icon painters had to be trained to meet the burgeoning demand. With this in mind, in 1994 the Russian state returned to the Russian Orthodox Church the ancient Holy Transfiguration (Spaso-Preobrazhensky) monastery in Mirozhsky, Pskov, on the condition that the church established in it an icon painting school. Father Zenon led this school, turning it into a real fraternity of painters - a unique phenomenon then for Russia.

As part of the monastery's renewal Father Zenon and his team restored the church of St. Stephen Protomartyr, most notably creating and adorning a rough stone iconostasis with frescoed icons. Being his own monastery, Father Zenon had the freedom to make a screen which expressed his conviction that the screen itself must be simple enough not to distract the viewer from the icons. In fact, over the coming years his iconostasis designs were to move closer and closer to the low barriers of the early Church.

His work and visiting students increasingly brought him into close contact with non-Orthodox Christians and with early western Christian art. For example, in 1994 the Benedictine monastery of Chevetogne, Belgium, commissioned two wall paintings from him, for which he drew on Romanesque and Roman models. In 1995 he began a teaching relationship with the "Russia Cristiana" Seriate School of Iconography in Bergamo, Italy, with teachers and students of the school studying under Father Zenon at Mirozhsky.

He came to believe - controversially from the official Orthodox view - that there was no impediment for intercommunion between Catholics and Orthodox. In November 1996 Father Zenon was suspended from the priesthood by Archbishop Eusebius of Pskov and Velikiye for receiving communion from a Roman Catholic priest, Archpriest Romano Scalfi director of the Seriate icon school, in a Catholic Mass held at the Mirozhsky monastery. It was not until 2002 that he was restored to the priestly ministry, by order of Patriarch Alexy II.

During this six years of suspension from the priesthood Father Zenon withdrew somewhat from the public arena and settled in the village of Gverzdon, on the border of the Pskov region and Estonia. A small community gathered around him, and an icon studio and a joinery workshop developed. Eventually, over a five year period Father Zenon and his helpers built a small stone church in the Romanesque style.

From published photos of his work it seems that during this period, from 1996 to 2002, he mainly worked on panel icons commissioned from individuals. These works reveal a creative search in which Father Zenon continued to gain inspiration for a wide variety of icon types, including Romanesque, Armenian illuminations, and in particular the Byzantine Menologion of Basil II, a volume of illuminations painted around 1000 AD.

Since his restoration to the priesthood his icon commissions have taken him to live in various places, although I believe that his base is still his small community monastery in the village of Gverzdon, which includes two monks. On and off between 2003 and 2005 Father Zenon painted the church of St. Sergius of Radonezh at the Moscow train station "Semkhoz" in the Pushkin district, erected on the site of the death of the priest Alexander Men. Then from November 2006 to September 2008 he and a considerable team of

assistants frescoed the large Russian Orthodox Cathedral of St. Nicholas in Vienna. His team included the Russian painters Eugene Malyagin, Anton Kushans, Ilya Ivankin, Alexander Mysyk, Vasily Sokolov, and Anna Kashirina, as well as Yaroslav and Ioanna Yakimchuk from Poland and Tatiana Shilovskaya from Austria.

As someone has observed, these wall paintings use as their stylistic inspiration "classic examples of pre-Mongol Russian and Balkan icons - calm, harmonious and noble. This style is very much in tune with our times, which requires evident depth and clarity." The recently lower church of St Nicholas also has a new marble iconostasis designed by Father Zenon, with icons painted by him.

From 2009-2010 he frescoed a chapel in Simonopetra monastery on Mount Athos. The scenes in these wall paintings are stylistically inspired by the Menologian of Basil II of 1000AD.

From 2012 to 2013 Father Zenon worked on the lower church of the Feodorovsky Cathedral, Petersburg. Due to the communist revolution this lower church had never been decorated as planned by the founders, but extant documents made it plain that their intention was to base its design on early church architecture and iconography. Remaining true to this vision, Father Zenon drew inspiration for the wall paintings from 6th and 7th century mosaics in Ravenna, and from early manuscript illuminations. The encaustic panel icons are influenced in part by the famous works from Sinai and from early Roman works. He also designed a simple low barrier instead of the usual icon screen, and a ciborium over the Holy Table, an ancient tradition found for example in Emperor Constantine's time over Christ's tomb in Jerusalem.

Why are his works so highly regarded?

Archimandrite Zenon's icons and wall paintings display artistic mastery and convey the holiness and gravitas of the saints and events that they depict. As a recent exhibition catalogue puts it: "Father Zenon is distinguished by his brilliant draughtsmanship, his courageous creative search, and the openness of his theological position".² One feels that his works are old yet original. This comes, I believe, from a union of highly developed artistic gift, courage to explore new avenues, and life within the Holy Liturgy and prayer. He is always wanting to get to the source, to the essence of things.

Below a few of the elements which I think make him such an influential and great icon painter.

Form

Father Zenon has a consummate understanding of form. His drapery is clear and logical, and his figures display a good understanding of anatomy. Although icons are not naturalistic, they are based on the God-created forms of the human body. Icons do not distort these forms, but transfigure them, and this requires knowledge of what they are before we abstract them. As the sculptor Constantin Brancusi said, "Simplicity is complexity resolved".

² 2012 exhibition of his work in the 'Yalkala' museum, Ilichevo, near Petersburg.

Father Zenon has helped restore to Russian painting a deeper understanding of form. In a search for a heightened spirituality, Russian iconography from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries had a tendency to flatten and, some might say, dematerialize the subject, a tendency reaching its climax in the elongated figures of the Moscow school epitomised by Andrei Rubliof and Dionysius. Father Zenon highly regards works of this Moscow school, but thinks that we cannot recreate such master works out of a vacuum. He believes that a contemporary iconographer needs to pass through the Byzantine stage first, to obtain their deep understanding of form as inherited from the Hellenistic and Roman periods. He writes:

Since the living spiritual tradition has been completely severed, the level of our spiritual development is very low. It is therefore unrealistic to begin with the highest achievements of 15th century [Russian] icon painting. They are undoubtedly beyond the comprehension of modern man. We should go further back to our spiritual origins by mastering the Byzantine tradition.

*Each icon painter will have to tread the path covered by the first Russian icon painters following the adoption of Christianity in Russia. And they imitated Greek models."*³

Perhaps it is because he saw the need to renew a sense of structure in Russian iconography that Father Zenon revived the "membrane" technique of painting, in which the artist first establishes form using monochrome underpainting. This is followed by a semi-translucent glaze of the middle tone (the membrane layer), which is then followed by further modelling and colouring using both lighter and darker hues.

The underpainting technique contrasts with the proplasmos method, which has been the dominant procedure used by iconographers the world over for the last six centuries or so. In this, the first stage is to apply a flat layer of the darkest tone, and thereafter build up increasingly lighter tones.

Thanks largely to Father Zenon, the membrane technique is now increasingly used around the world.

Interestingly, the most detailed early description of the membrane method is found in a work written, or perhaps compiled, by a German artist. "On Divers Arts" was written between 1100 and 1120 by someone using the pseudonym Theophilus Presbyter, whom many scholars believe to be the German Benedictine monk and metalworker Roger of Helmarshausen. It was this book which Archimandrite Zenon studied in order to learn and revive the membrane technique, for Theophilus asserted that he was describing methods used by Byzantine painters of his time. It is typical of Father Zenon's open and enquiring mind that he used a Western source to revive an Eastern Byzantine tradition!

Back to the essentials

Father Zenon knows how to adapt detail to the medium - a fresco can be bolder than an panel painting, for example. He also adapts the style of his

³ *Russian Church Art Today*, by S.V. Timchenko, 1993, Moscow, Publ. New Book Klyuch. No page numbers given.

icons to their cultural setting, using for example Romanesque and Roman models for churches in Western Europe. Although he is skilful with the brush and can add detail if the icon demands it, he knows when to par down to the essentials and when to add embellishments that enhance the subject. This requires both artistic sensitivity and theological knowledge.

A good visual memory also helps keep to the essentials, since this saves the painter from constantly referring back to a picture and thereby being tempted to include every detail contained therein. Memory tends to store the essentials and lay aside details.

In this respect one calls to mind the great iconographer Theophan the Greek (c.1340-1410). His friend, the Russian chronicler Epiphanius the Wise, wrote of Theophan that "he did not paint as Russian painters do, looking more at their copy books than what they are painting", but painted directly onto the wall without recourse to these books, while he discoursed wisely with the crowds who gathered to watch him. When the work demanded it, Theophan would paint with great vigour and speed, frescoing vast areas in a short time (Epiphanius credits him with frescoing forty churches in his lifetime). Father Zenon in this spirit painted in one week the six frescoed icons for the stone icon screen of the church of St. Sergius of Radonezh at the Semkhoz train station.

The painter as theologian and thinker

Archimandrite Zenon is a thinker as well as a painter. Modern technology makes available online and in books a vast array of icons. Intelligence and a refined sense of aesthetic and liturgical appropriateness is needed if the modern iconographer is to discern what to ignore and what to use from this plethora. When an icon is requested for a particular church and of a particular subject, intelligence is required to fit the icon for that place and theme. Skill without thought is the work of machines, but skill wedded to thought and prayer reflects glory, brings freedom, inspires.

Courageous humility

Father Zenon is fearless. He said in an interview that he does not care what people think of him:

One needs to be honest with oneself and with the members of the Church. The Church authorities are trying to please everyone: both the right and the left, the secular world and the world of the Church. But it is impossible to please everyone. Christ was without sin, yet even He did not please everyone.⁴

This of course can be taken two ways, diametrically opposed to each. Either it means one is self centred, or it means one is God centred. If it is the first, we may receive novelty from the artist, but this novelty will not nourish our spirit, which thirsts for the Holy Spirit. But if it is the latter, we will receive fruits of paradise from the artist. But what people like may be what they are

⁴ From an interview Aleksandr Shchipkov in Keston News
Service: <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.religion.christian.east-orthodox/FDMXnDWYXcw>

used to rather than what would best inspire them. An iconographer fixed on higher things and not current fashions will bring us fresh fruits rather than dried fruits.

Father Zenon has acquired a reputation within Russian Orthodox circles as a quite radical thinker. At one point, according to the Russian Wikipedia entry, he promoted the replacement of the ancient Slavonic language used in the Russian services with modern Russian, signing to this end an appeal issued in April 10th 1994 by the St Philaret Orthodox Christian Institute. He later changed his views on this. We have already noted his views on intercommunion with Roman Catholics, and in the iconographic realm we have already noted his growing reference for low walls in place of the multi-tiered medieval screens.

Eclecticism

Father Zenon is eclectic. As we have already seen, he has over the years has drawn from a wide range of influences apart from the classic period of St Andrei Rubliof: mosaics from Sicily; Armenian illuminations; Byzantine illuminations; Romanesque frescoes and panel icons; Ravenna mosaics from the sixth to seventh centuries; early Roman icons.

In medieval times iconographers unless they travelled widely were normally exposed to a very limited range of icon styles. But today, thanks to cheap travel, books, the internet, and exhibitions we are exposed to a great variety of work. One cannot ignore this. On the other hand there is a danger that we pick randomly, get lost in the plethora of influences, make dissonant patchworks, do not find our own voice. But Father Zenon manages to absorb these schools, take the essence and strengths of each tradition and make them his own, adopting them with good reason as appropriate for the place they are painted. So he uses a Roman style in an Italian church, or a Romanesque fresco for the eastern rite church of Chevetogne Abbey, Belgium.

Proportion and harmony

In a discussion held at the educational centre of Feodorovsky Cathedral, Petersburg in 2012, Father Zenon emphasised the need to use good proportion in structuring any church art. He spoke particularly of the golden mean, saying that since this proportion is found throughout God's creation, then the liturgical artist should also use it. Looking at his works, one is immediately struck by their pleasing proportions. It can be difficult to find a balance between movement and stillness, but good proportion will preserve quietness in the midst of dynamism.

The colours of Father Zenon's icons are also harmonious. Sometimes he will paint with just four pigments, as did the early Romans and Greeks who often used just the "tetrachromata" of black, white, red and yellow.

Some quotes, taken from interviews

From an interview with Aleksandr Shchipkov in Keston News Service: <https://groups.google.com/forum/!topic/alt.religion.christian.east-orthodox/FDMXnDWYXcw>

"An icon painter is not an artist in the worldly sense of the word. He must not express himself in the icon. He must paint the icon in a way so that it will be an aid to prayer. Icon painting is an integral part of divine service. A badly-painted icon grates in the same way as bad church singing, or poor, illiterate reading of the texts of the liturgy. The Lord gave me the ability to paint icons. My talents belong to Him and I have nothing to be proud of about this."

"Latins have always been different from Byzantines, even before the schism [of 1054 AD]. Forms and traditions have differed. The Gospel truth has been absorbed into national cultures in their own way."

"One needs to be honest with oneself and with the members of the Church. The church authorities are trying to please everyone: both the right and the left, the secular world and the world of the Church. But it is impossible to please everyone. Christ was without sin, yet even He did not please everyone."

From http://weischeitgmeilcom2011.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/blog-post_3.html

"Icon is embodied prayer. It is created in prayer and for prayer, which is the driving force of the love of God, the desire for Him as perfect beauty. Therefore, the icon in the true sense cannot exist without the Church. As a form of preaching the Gospel, as a testimony of the Church to the Incarnation, the icon is an integral part of the service, along with church singing, architecture, ritual....

"The roots of the icon are in the Eucharistic experience of the Church. The icon is inextricably linked with it, and with all levels of Church life. When the Church's spiritual level is high then ecclesiastical art is at its best. When Church life is weakened and in decline, then of course church art also falls into decay. The icon then so often becomes a picture on a religious theme, and it ceases to be a thing of reverence and therefore Orthodox in the true sense."

Quoted by Dimitri Kuntsevich , the head of the mosaic workshop at the St Elisabeth Convent:

"Sometimes what you are painting does not work, but try again and again until you succeed."

From http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/stat_masterom/post156523320/

"The word has lost its strength and its power is seriously impaired by the media of mass culture, and this has seriously affected people's consciousness and penetrated their souls... The only way we are able to convince people is through spiritual unity. "

"Beauty is one of the names of God. Remember the Psalm: 'Thou art fairer than the children of men; grace is poured into thy lips '. This is a prophecy about the Messiah. Grace primarily represents beauty, elegance and attractiveness, and in the second place, inner kindness and goodness."

"When the time of persecution ended, and the Christians were able to build and decorate their temples. Enthusiasm for the beauty that Christ brought into the world 'spilled' onto church walls and other liturgical items. When the sense of beauty was high, so was the quality of church art. Take, for example, the churches of sixth century Ravenna. There the freshness of the Gospel still shines through. If there is no delight and wonder at beauty, nothing good will come."

Online images and videos of Father Zenon's work

Note, when searching online, put in his name in Russian: " Архимандрит Зинов (Теодор)". You can get a rough translation of any Russian text by copying and pasting the text into <https://translate.google.com/>
https://www.google.co.uk/?gws_rd=ssl - q=google+translate

- High quality photos of a variety of panel icons and wall paintings by Fr Zenon

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/feosobor1/sets/>

- Icons from the crypt church of the Feodorovsky Cathedral in Petersburg

<http://bizantium.livejournal.com/124841.html>

- Over 22 pages of collated icons with their dates, and texts of many interviews and articles. The pictures are not high resolution, but the site is an excellent compendium spreading across the whole range of Fr Zenon's career.

<http://www.cirota.ru/forum/view.php?subj=32581&order=asc&pg=0>

- A video showing Father Zenon painting the crypt church of the Feodorovsky Cathedral in Petersburg, 2010-2012 (36 minutes).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7fv915JQuU>

- Father Zenon answers questions about the creation and meaning of the frescoes of the lower church of the Feodorovsky Cathedral, Petersburg during the presentation of the book-album " Anastasis " September 1, 2013 (42 minutes, showing only the speakers, not the PowerPoint presentation images).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szPSfoHuq9M>

- A PowerPoint presentation on the lower church of the Feodorovsky Cathedral, Petersburg in the summer of 2011 (church painted 2010-2012). Includes images on the golden mean proportional system used by Father Zenon to design the altar barrier (40 minutes).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5dBMHE9vjc>

- A two minute walk through the completed crypt of the Feodorovsky Cathedral wall paintings

