

## The Icon and Pastoral Care

The walls of my hermitage chapel are covered with frescoes of saints. The iconscreen has images with burnished gold and warm earth colours. Stars of light, unflickering, come from the oil lamps which hang before these icons. Incense and the smell of the beeswax candles has permeated everything, so that whichever time you enter, their fragrances envelope you. Greeted by this atmosphere, many a visitor has poured out their heart, often in tears. Some have just sat, alone with the saints who through their images comfort without a word. Others have come in time for a service, only to find that the service has not begun prayer, but is in reality a participation in the unceasing heavenly prayer and worship.

The realisation that they are not the centre of the world is a great comfort to people burdened by a human centred life. Surrounded by the icons they can just be, and by being, by looking, by receiving the fragrances, they meet something of God's beauty. In experiencing this divine beauty through icons they discover something of their own dignity, as living icons of God. And this is a dignity given rather than earned, a dignity to be received and nurtured rather than fabricated. This revelation has in itself often brought healing in a situation which presented itself as extremely complex. In short, many of these visitors to the chapel feel, and often say, that they feel profoundly at home, that they sense something of the paradise which is their true homeland.

Why can icons have such a powerful effect on people? I am not a professional pastoral counsellor, nor even much of a counsellor at all, but as a monk and iconographer I have over the years witnessed many people's lives, including my own, changed through icons. Each human person is unique and a profound mystery, and so it would be futile to try and analyse exactly why and how icons can help people. But perhaps it would be beneficial to describe some effects which I have witnessed icons have on people, and to suggest connections between these and particular aspects of the icon.

### **The icon as door**

Let me first place icons in their primary context - that is, how they are used in the Orthodox Church. Here they are treated not merely as decoration, but as a sacrament and a door through to Christ and his saints.

The word icon is Greek, and means image or portrait. But unlike, say, a viewer in the British Portrait Gallery, the devout Orthodox prays in front of an icon. He presupposes that the saint depicted is present, and sees the icon as a means of meeting him or her. He sees the icon as a sacrament facilitating the communion of heaven and earth. He sees the icon not so much as a book to be read (although much teaching can be derived from icons, particularly those of the Church feasts) but a door through which he can walk. For him the icon is relational, not ideological.

The icon is a testimony to the fact that God the Word did not only take on a specific body at his incarnation, but also filled the whole universe with his light. A hymn of Theophany says: 'Today the waters of the Jordan are transformed into healing by the coming of the Lord. Today *the whole creation* is watered by mystical streams.'<sup>1</sup>

In Orthodox countries we find icons not just in churches and homes, but also in cars, on roadsides, over gates, in public buildings, just about everywhere. They affirm that no place is essentially faceless, impersonal, but is a potential meeting ground with God and his saints, a burning bush. This in itself has enormous implications pastorally. Have not so many neuroses been created by environments which appear impersonal, enclosed, faceless, opaque and without anything transcendent?

### **Matter matters**

The Welsh monk who tonsured me once said that to know God I had also to know the earth from which I was formed. But much contemporary technology tends to distance us from the earth, or to limit our experience of it to just one or two senses. In richness of sensual experience how can viewing a tree on a television compare to climbing a real tree! Alienation from the natural world frustrates us. We sense that half our faculties are atrophied - or abused, for secular life often assails our senses with ugliness, or through advertising tries to exploit them for base ends.

By contrast, the liturgical life of which the icon is an integral part engages the whole person as a psycho-somatic unity. By way of greeting and venerating the saints depicted, Orthodox faithful kiss icons; their worship is thereby tactile. Icons are of course also seen, and so the visual and aesthetic senses are engaged. The icon affirms the goodness of matter. In the words of the seventh century St. John of Damascus: 'I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take up his abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter; never will I cease honouring the matter which wrought my salvation!'<sup>ii</sup> Liturgical worship employs also the other three senses, chiefly by psalmody, by incense, and by Holy Communion.

Through a radio programme which I was involved in, on the subject of iconography and ecology, a couple from Scotland once visited my hermitage. Jane was gifted artistically, and was a believer. However, an extreme Calvinist upbringing had taught her that matter and physical beauty had little, if any, role in her relationship with God - or even that they were obstructions to the spiritual life. Such a world view would cause enough damage to anyone, but perhaps more so to a sensitive and artistic character such as she possessed.

But the programme had given Jane a glimmer of hope - her keenness to follow up this glimmer was evidenced by the lengths to which she and her friend went to track down the hermitage phone number! They were attracted by the belief that icons are both bearers of God's grace to man and prayer in colour offered by man to God. The programme had explained that the iconographer takes pigments from the mineral kingdom, wood from the vegetable kingdom, and egg to bind the pigment from the animal kingdom. Together, the iconographer and these raw materials therefore represent the whole world. In a priestly way, the painter makes these good materials very good by fashioning them into a likeness of Christ the incarnate God and of his saints.

In one sense all this was new to Jane, but in another and deeper sense it was familiar - it confirmed what she had inwardly always felt to be true, and this brought healing. The making and veneration of an icon affirmed for her that while soul and body are distinct, they are also facets of the human person, that matter and spirit are meant to be complementary.

### **The beauty of divine image in man**

The example of Jane and of many other such meetings convinces me that it does not in fact matter a lot what a person's background is when they encounter icons. Icons can resonate with something deep inside people, in many cases despite their consciously held beliefs. It is as though the person remembers what life in paradise was like, and what they see in the icon corresponds with this memory. An iconoclastic conditioning, scepticism, or a host of other accretions can certainly shout down this 'deep calling to deep', to use the words of the psalmist. But the child of paradise, the image of God within, still kicks in the womb when it meets God.

The healing power of this resonance cannot be underestimated. Whether it is consciously recognised or not, this attraction to the icon's beauty affirms that the viewer is made in the image of God; they are drawn to this spiritual beauty because they in essence are themselves beautiful. Church Fathers often make a distinction between the divine image and likeness in

the human person, a distinction rooted in Genesis 1:26: ‘Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”’ They say that the divine image in man is inalienable - so even an atheist is in God’s image, whether or not he likes it!. By contrast, they say that *likeness* to God is something which must be acquired through synergy, or co-operation between God and man. In fact the Slavonic word for saint, *prepodobny*, means precisely ‘much like’.

Recently this icon-likeness distinction aided me to help someone emerge from a very black period. David had entered a pit of self hatred. His childhood had not provided much love and affection, and the effects of this had been exacerbated by sexual promiscuity. A recent affair, although repented of, was straining his marriage to breaking point. When he compared his wife’s faithfulness and continued love with his own past, he not only loathed his actions, but felt that he was completely bad, through and through. He believed he was unlovable because he believed that there was nothing in him anyone could possibly love. This being the case, he accused God of not creating him good. He therefore felt that he had to perform his way through life, to hide the real, bad David inside and, through his work, to distract himself from this horrible creature within; suicide was not far from his mind either.

Fortunately, David had recently encountered icons and the beauty of Orthodox worship, and was very moved by them. When I felt that the time was right, I explained that the real David was in fact a profoundly beautiful icon, created by God himself, infinitely richer than the icons of mere wood and pigment which had so attracted him. By his foolish actions he had concealed this icon in a box, and even painted graffiti on the outside. He had forgotten the icon inside and believed that this graffiti was his real self. By his acting he was painting his own icon on the outside, to cover the mess he had made. But in all this, there was still the icon within, waiting to be revealed by the grace of God together with his own effort and the help of others. His wife and I assured him that the person we loved was this real person, who in fact shone out a lot more than he realized. We, like him, disdained the box, the graffiti, the false icon, but precisely because these concealed the God-given image within. We encouraged him to remember the peace, love and beauty which he had felt during the services in the chapel. Seeing hope in these things, he gradually emerged from his darkness. Doubtless some other means could have been found to help David find hope, but the icon and the beauty of the church services seemed tailor-made for the task.

### **From existence towards life**

The icon can give glimpses of divine beauty to those exhausted by the mere struggle for survival, or by the emptiness of riches without God. The golden haloes and background and the limpid colours testify to the fact that the saints depicted are not just well ordered humans, but are people radiant with God; they have suffered, and have been deified, made ‘partakers of the divine nature.’<sup>iii</sup> I think that most social, mental and relational fragmentation has its roots ultimately in forgetting this, that the purpose of man lies outside of himself, in God, that to be truly human we must also be gods by grace, transfigured with Christ on the mountain. In the words of the fourth century saint Athanasius the Great, ‘God became man so that man, by grace, can become god.’ Even when icons do not lead people to this reality, they can at least refresh them by sharing some of its fruits. Icons are like the grapes brought back from the promised land to show the Israelites in the wilderness.

A retired missionary recently visited the hermitage. Although she had been very active in helping people, first as a missionary nurse and then as counsellor to nursing staff, she always felt a void; she wanted to know and love God for himself, and not just as a means to helping others. But her activist Christian background denied the value of this. She had recently encountered icons however, and felt intuitively that they stood precisely for what she was seeking. As we sat in the chapel, looking at the icons and talking about them, she realized that the saints are above all contemplators of God’s beauty. In this way icons assured her that own longing to love God and to pray more deeply was good and natural. This in itself brought great healing, and tears.

Today however, in many situations the counsellor is not at liberty to speak openly about Christian things; the task is more just to help the other gain some sort of mental or emotional equilibrium. In such cases can the icon be of any help? Each person is unique, and so we cannot say beforehand how a person will respond to the icon. Who knows how near the surface is the image of God within them, ready to recognise and reach out to the archetypal beauty, to God himself? But in the counsellor-counselee relationship might not the icon be helpful via the carer as well as the cared for?

### **The icon and the counsellor**

The icon can in fact abolish the dichotomy of helper and helped, or at least make the “gap” tiny in comparison to the gap between them both and the beauty of holiness. One of the hymns for the Orthodox Church’s Feast of the Transfiguration says, ‘Thou, O Christ, wast transfigured, and *hast made the nature that had grown dark in Adam to shine again as lightning*, transforming it into the glory and splendour of thine own divinity.’<sup>iv</sup> Both cared for and the carer fall far short of such splendour and glory. Realisation of this infuses a humility in the counsellor which can only rebound to the good of the counselee. They are on a journey together, and the icon stands as a little jewel reflecting something of the light of transfiguration which, if they want it, awaits them; it is a glow before the rising of the sun.

Also, certainly for an Orthodox spiritual guide, and potentially for other counsellors, the icon shares the onus of caring. At its fullest, this means that the icons remind the carer that the saints are working with them to meet whatever needs there are. But for those who do not believe this, simply as a visual aid the icon still remains effective as a third party, expanding the diadic relationship into a healthier triadic one.

Icons are able to evoke the life of some saint whose struggles the counselee can identify with. For many months I had an icon of the New Martyr Elizabeth hanging on the refectory wall. So often conversation with guests would turn to this icon, and to her life which was depicted on its boarders. Many visitors found comfort in knowing that she had suffered as they had, even more so, and yet had emerged with love. They saw for example that from the icon’s tender visage the murder of her husband had not left her bitter, but had filled her with compassion. (He had been blown to bits by a bomb, but Elizabeth had pleaded, albeit unsuccessfully, that the assassin’s sentence be revoked.) The healthy thing was that, thanks largely to such icons, the visitor in need did not become so dependant on me, who have limited resources, but on God and on his servants Elizabeth and other saints. I often encouraged this independence by giving them a copy of the icon.

I have also found that icons can renew faith in human nature and, conversely, guard vulnerable people from misdirection by unsuitable guides. A lady who recently visited the hermitage had had her personal and family life thrown into confusion when her spiritual father, David, had gone awry and misguided them. It seems that David had been a warm, caring personality, who by his natural charisma attracted many people. At least in the beginning, he seems to have genuinely wanted to help others. However, over the years he came to reject traditional guidelines, and, perhaps unwittingly, to control people by his charisma. Eventually Mary and her family saw what was happening and moved away - but not before a lot of damage had been done. Above all, she felt devastated that someone whom she had trusted so much as a spiritual guide had let her and her husband down.

In the midst of tears she shared all this as we sat in the chapel. Together, without the need for many words from myself, and those mainly with reference to the various saints depicted in the frescoes around us, we began to see two things. Firstly, had they had a greater sense and knowledge of the saints, David would not have gone off on a tangent, and she would have seen warning signals earlier, before damage was done. Secondly, that though there are misguided pastors, there are also those who humbly operate within tried and tested parameters. The alternative to disillusionment with others was not therefore solipsism or

despair, but guidance from trustworthy people, and ultimately a living relationship with the saints themselves.

A priest friend once said that as a spiritual father his aim was to give people hope, for if people had hope then faith and love would follow. Perhaps therein lies the icon's power for pastoral carers.

## **Endnotes**

- <sup>i</sup> Mother Mary, K. Ware (translators), *The Festal Menaion*. Faber 1969, p354.
- <sup>ii</sup> St John of Damascus, *On Divine Images*, ii,16. St Vladimir's Seminary Press, N.Y. 1980, p23
- <sup>iii</sup> 2 Peter 1:4
- <sup>iv</sup> Mother Mary, *The Festal Menaion*, p477.

[3,002 words]