



What Is an Icon?

"We venerate Your sacred image,
O Lord, and we beg forgiveness
of our sins."

There is a renewed interest and appreciation of iconography among Byzantine Catholics in the United States. It is an encouraging indication of a return to our centuries-old traditions. Our ancestors who accepted Christianity in the Byzantine Rite also accepted the practice of venerating holy icons. Without them, liturgical worship becomes sorely mutilated and loses a great deal of its solemnity and splendor. Let us then become acquainted with the history, the meaning, and the true spirit of the veneration of icons.

History

Strictly speaking, an icon (Gr. *eikon*: image, picture) is a portable sacred image, painted on a piece of wood according to the style and techniques of Byzantine art. But in its broader sense, as it will be considered here, an icon is any sacred image painted [written], or otherwise reproduced, for the purpose of veneration. The holy icon

should not be considered as an object of art or decoration, but rather as a sacred object, fostering devotion and piety. Through the veneration of icons we should feel closer to God and to things divine.

Icons were used in the first centuries of Christianity, first as an object of decoration or private devotion, and later exposed in Christian churches for public veneration. Apocryphal writings of the second century relate that the icon of the Blessed Mother painted by St. Luke was the first icon. According to another legend, Jesus himself gave an "image of His sacred face," called the "Icon Made Without Hands" (*Nerukotvorennyj Obraz*), to the Apostle Thaddeus, who used it for miraculous healing and the conversion of the Chaldean King Abgar of Edessa (cf. Eusebius, Hist. Eccl. I, 13). Although these are only legends, nevertheless they confirm an historical fact that in the East the veneration of icons originated in the Syro-Palestinian region, the cradle of Christianity.

It seems that the first icons were of the Holy

Martyrs and their deeds which were painted in their oratories, as indicated by the homilies of St. Basil the Great (d. 379) and St. Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394). Only later, some time during the fifth century, were the icons of Jesus Christ and of the Blessed Mother introduced. By the sixth century, Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, became a great center of sacred art. It was in Constantinople that a special style of icon painting was developed, which became known as the Byzantine style, eventually becoming the pride of Byzantine art.



The golden age of Byzantine art and iconography began in the middle of the ninth century and ended with the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204. Unfortunately, due to the iconoclasm (violent opposition against the veneration of icons and sacred objects) of the eighth and ninth centuries, almost all primitive icons were destroyed. Today, the best collection of holy icons (the sixth-fifteenth) is preserved at the Greek Orthodox Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai, which was built by Emperor Justinian I in the sixth century.

The ancestors of the Ruthenians received Christianity at the end of the ninth century when Byzantine art was in its golden age and iconography became a generally understood language in the Byzantine Church. Byzantine art, reaching various peoples and cultures, necessarily became subject to some changes according to the needs and genius of the particular countries. Thus, throughout the centuries, we can recognize vari-

ous schools of icon-painting, which constitute the national heritage of the given places.

In the Carpathian region we have holy icons dating from the sixteenth century when the Ruthenian local iconographers (educated mostly in Kiev and L'viv) started to “nationalize” their style in order to make them more “popular.” The oldest icon, painted [written] by an unknown local artist, is the icon of the Blessed Mother in the village of Izki, Volove County (end of the sixteenth century). In the opinion of contemporary art critics this icon is the “highest achievement of Carpathian painting.”

Theology

An icon does not represent the Divinity. But, by its symbolic pictorial language, it testifies to the participation of Christians in the divine life. Thus, the icon becomes a “manifestation of divine life” among men, a “transfigured vision” of divine mysteries, a “vision of the invisible” (Hebrews 11:1) –indeed, a true “theology in color.” The icons representing the saints, also, to some extent share in their sanctity and glory. Consequently, they become “vessels of grace,” present and working as in their relics. St. John Damascene offers the following explanation:

“The Saints, during their earthly life, are filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit. After their departure the same grace remains in their souls as in their bodies (relics – I Corinthians 6:19). The very same grace is present and active in their sacred image and icons.” (P.G. 94, 1249D).

Thus the holy icon becomes a means of communion with the Saints and a source of special graces and even of miracles. This explains the existence of many miraculous icons, through which Jesus Christ, the Blessed Mother, and the Saints continue to bestow favors and to work miracles.



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In the Old Testament, due to the danger of idolatry, God forbade the Jews to worship the “carved im-

age or likeness” of any creature (Exodus 20:4-5; expl. Deuteronomy 4:15-20). In the first centuries the Christians, too, in the face of paganism and idolatry, adhered to these Mosaic ordinances. The frescoes from the second and third centuries found in the catacombs served only as decoration. But after the victory of Christianity over paganism (313 A.D.), when Christian theology was sufficiently developed, the Fathers of the Church gradually admitted the public veneration of icons.

The iconoclastic fury of Emperor Leo the Isaurian (717-741), during which the leading defenders of the icons were St.

Germanus of Constantinople (d. 733) and St. John Damascene (d. 749), made the Church define her teachings. In reply, at the Seventh Ecumenical



Council at Nicea (787), the Church’s teaching concerning the veneration of icons was solemnly proclaimed.

The Fathers explained that the veneration of icons, theologically, was based on the mystery of incarnation, since in the person of Jesus Christ we received revelation not only of the “Word of God” (John. 1:1–14), but also of the “Image of God,” as attested by St. Paul saying that Jesus is the “image (*eikon*) of the unseen God.” (Colossians 1:15) Jesus Himself testified: “To have seen Me is to have seen the Father!” (John 14:9)

The following is the teaching of the Church on holy icons:

- The Mosaic Law (Genesis 20:4–5) was a temporary provision against idolatry which, in time, lost its relevance.
- Jesus, by taking human flesh (by His incarnation) revoked the prohibition of the Old Testament, since He became the “visible image (*eikon*) of God,” manifesting “God’s glory” on His face. (II Corinthians 4:4-6)
- Jesus Christ, by His glorious resurrection, also glorified His human nature, which reflected His divinity. (comp. Transfiguration, Matthew 17:2)
- God created man to His own “image (*eikon*) and likeness” (Genesis 1:26) and, after the fall of Adam, our Saviour Jesus Christ restored our human nature to its pristine glory. (II Corinthians 3:18)
- The honor given to an icon is only veneration (*proskynesis*) and not adoration (*douleia*), which is given to God only.
- The honor extended to an icon by a bow, a prayer, a kiss, incense or the burning of a candle is relative, i.e. it “passes on to him who is represented on it (to its prototype)” (cf. St. Basil, On the Holy Spirit, 18).

Our ancestors venerated holy icons not in their churches, but also in their homes. These were called devotional icons, believed to protect their homes and to secure for them the continuous flow of God's blessings. These icons usually occupied a prominent place in every home and were decorated with an embroidered cloth and flowers. A hanging vigil lamp or votive candle added to the spiritual atmosphere of the room. Any visitor entering the home was expected to take off his hat and to pay homage to the icon before he would greet the host. The ancient rules of Christian housekeeping from the sixteenth century, titled *Domostroj* ("Housekeeping"), reminded our ancestors:

"The Christian should have, in every room of his house, a holy and venerable icon or image, decorated with a veil (embroidery), and provided with a votive lamp (candle). The lamp should be burning as prayers are said as a sign of veneration and proper respect."

This traditional and praiseworthy devotion to the home icon is being recommended in our religious education classes throughout the Metropolitan Province of Pittsburgh in the form of an "icon corner." Hopefully, it will win the support of parents and become a prayer shrine for the entire family.

***"We venerate
Your sacred image, O gracious
Lord, and we beg forgiveness of our
sins, O Christ our
God; for in Your
body You voluntarily deigned to
ascend the cross,
to deliver from the
bondage of enemy
those whom You
have created. We,
therefore, gratefully cry out to You: "O Savior,
by your coming to save the world, You have
filled all of us with joy!"***

Troparion for the Sunday of Orthodoxy/
Commemoration of the Holy Images

***"The indescribable Word of Father, through
His incarnation in You, O Mother of God, be-
came describable and, having restored our de-
filed image to its pristine form, raised us to the
participation of God's goodness. This we, pro-
fessing our salvation, prove with our words and
deeds."***

Kontakion for the Sunday of Orthodoxy/
Commemoration of the Holy Images



*"No matter how perfect one is, he always needs a page of Scripture (Bible).
In the same manner one also needs the holy images,
painted in accordance with the Scriptures.
Therefore, we venerate and honor them both in the same way!"*

St. Theodore Studite, d. 826