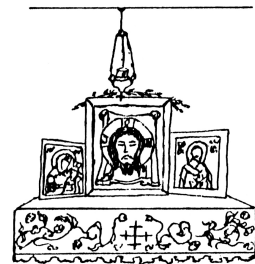


I cons: Our Spiritual Mirrors

Icons are commonly called “Windows to Heaven.” Indeed they are, but the invisible God who created all that is seen and unseen also presents us with icons as spiritual mirrors to reflect back to our *noetic* eyes the image of God that dwells within each soul. Each soul only attains full personhood through union with Jesus Christ. When we act in accordance with His commandments, we refine our soul and grow closer to Christ, Who ministers to us with gifts of grace. We are to exercise our will to follow His commandments, but beyond that we cannot force ourselves to attain virtue. Virtue flowers forth within us when we are watered by God’s grace. Our virtue is really His Virtue shining within us (“Thine Own of Thine Own we offer unto Thee”), only too briefly before our sin tarnishes the glow. Icons, however, are a more lasting reminder to us of our spiritual bodies; as such, they serve an important need in calling to mind Paradise and the spiritual raiment of man before his Fall from that blessed state.

Christ’s incarnation in our fallen mortal form, His assumption of our nature and, then, resurrection clears the way for us to ascend the Divine Ladder to return to our spiritual state before the Fall. Before Christ, this way was obstructed. It is now open, but we can only ascend by employing our will to follow the Lord’s commandments, praying and fasting so that the tarnished icon of Christ within us will be illumined, reflecting His Holy light like the shimmering of shook foil in the sun. When we so ascend, Christ can be seen in us like lampada light flickering in the gold haloes of church icons. This acquisition of grace is not for our glory, but always for the glory of God. In the fourth century, St. Basil proclaimed: “the honor paid to the icon passes on to the prototype.” So, too, does the awakening within us of our *nous*, testify to Christ’s power. “Self-renewing icons” are icons that, having darkened with age, gradually and miraculously brighten on their own as if expert iconographers were employed to restore their luster. Prayer and fasting are our means of brightening the icons within our souls. We, of course, are not “self-renewing,” but it is our selfless actions—prayer, fasting, almsgiving—that the Lord bestows with His grace, which polish and brighten God’s image within us.

Today we celebrate the restoration of icons into the life of worship of the Church. It is a triumphant celebration, for we are also celebrating the promise of the victory of our own spiritual bodies over the gravity of the world. Our patron, St. John, reminds us that when we behold an icon, we behold the image of a person in full union with the Lord: “Veneration of the holy icons is veneration of the glory of the Lord.” St. John cautions us that “Hades is not a place, no, but a state of soul. It begins already here on earth. Just so, paradise too begins in the soul of man already in earthly life.” Those who conform themselves to the world stare into glass mirrors to see who they are. We gaze upon icons to see what we may become.



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