ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS

CONCEPTS

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TO SEEK HIS FACE

By Charles Rohrbacher

It is a truism that our faces reveal to others our innermost selves. To see someone face-to-face is to be invited into that person's presence and into communion with the inner life that is revealed in their features. Conversely, when a person turns his face away from us, we are taken out of his presence and denied access to him. Father Gregory Kroug, in his *Notes of An Icon Painter* writes:

> "Only a picture that has a face looking at us and a human face transfigured by divine grace has the right to be a holy icon."[1]

His assertion insists on our prayerful reflection, because he is saying that the icon is not a painting about ideas, even theological ideas, but about human persons and their presence. It is the human being, specifically the face of the particular human being who looks out at us in the icon, that constitutes the subject of the Gospel proclaimed in 'line and color'.

The icon, if Father Kroug is correct, is the transfigured presence: the presence of the Lord and of His saints and creatures animated by His All Holy and Life-Giving Spirit. The icon shows us who we are, as men and women, made in God's image and likeness, by showing us our brothers and sisters who have themselves entered into the fullness of what it is to be human.

By showing us their human faces transfigured by divine grace, they invite us into their presence. In holy icons Jesus and the saints simply look at us. You might expect that they would be holding up copies of the Ten Commandments or the seven deadly sins. But they do not hector or admonish us, nor do they give us a set of rules to follow. Rather, they invite us to look at them and allow them to look at us.

St. Mary of Egypt is the verbal icon of repentance for Eastern Christians. St. Mary was a prostitute who became a desert solitary after undergoing an extraordinary and transforming conversion.

The Virgin of the Sign icon

While still caught up in the disorder of her empty life, she sought to enter the Basilica of the Resurrection in Jerusalem, but was prevented by an unseen force. However, through the doorway of the church she was able to look upon the icon of her namesake, Mary the Mother of God.

1. Michel Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom,* St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991

Looking upon the icon, she felt ashamed to be in her presence and her Son's, and began to weep over her sins. St. Mary saw not only the futility and ugliness of her life, but in the icon saw the image of the truth about herself.

She saw she was a sinner and God's beloved daughter, made in the Divine image and likeness. Her transformation came when she looked at the face of Christ and His mother and in their loving presence experienced in her own person the Good News. She was transformed when she allowed the Lord to look on her and see who she was.

In the creation account of Genesis, man and woman were created in perfect communion with God, with each other, and with creation. This communion was symbolized by their nakedness, a nakedness that was without shame. With the Fall, this communion with God and the cosmos was broken and the man and woman who in the beginning had experienced no shame in being naked covered themselves with fig leaves and hid from the Creator. Separated from God because they sought autonomy in rivalry with God instead of communion, the man and woman hid not only their physical nakedness but their inner, spiritual nakedness from God. The presence of the Lord, in the beginning a joyful encounter of intimacy, trust and love was now sadly veiled by the alienation, distrust and hatred of a humanity that both longed for and fled from the face of God.

Cain in the book of Genesis could be speaking for all of fallen humanity when he cries out to the Lord:

> "Behold, you have driven me out this day from the face of the land; and from your face shall I be hid; and I shall be a wanderer and fugitive on the earth." (Genesis 4:14)

***St. Mary of Egypt* icon**

Later in the Psalms, Israel prays with longing to see the face of God, imploring God not to hide His face but to reveal it once more. "As for me," sings the psalmist, "in justice I shall see your face and be filled when I awake with the sight of Your glory." (Psalms 83:9)

Communion with the Lord, symbolized by Israel in the anthropomorphic image of the "face of God" (the root word, *panim* was also used to mean "presence"), is in the Psalms, both a gnawing hunger and true nourishment. But the psalmist only wants to look upon the face of the Lord to bask in the radiance of the Lord's love: he seeks the assurance that the Lord sees him as well. "Turn your eyes, O God, our shield," he prays, "look on the face of your anointed." (Psalms 83:9)

A sure sign that we trust other people intimately is that we are able to let them see our face. By letting them look into our eyes and study our facial expressions, we reveal our innermost self to others. Parents and their newborn children bond this way. And lovers experience the most profound communion in the profound self-revelation and vulnerability of this face-to-face intimacy.

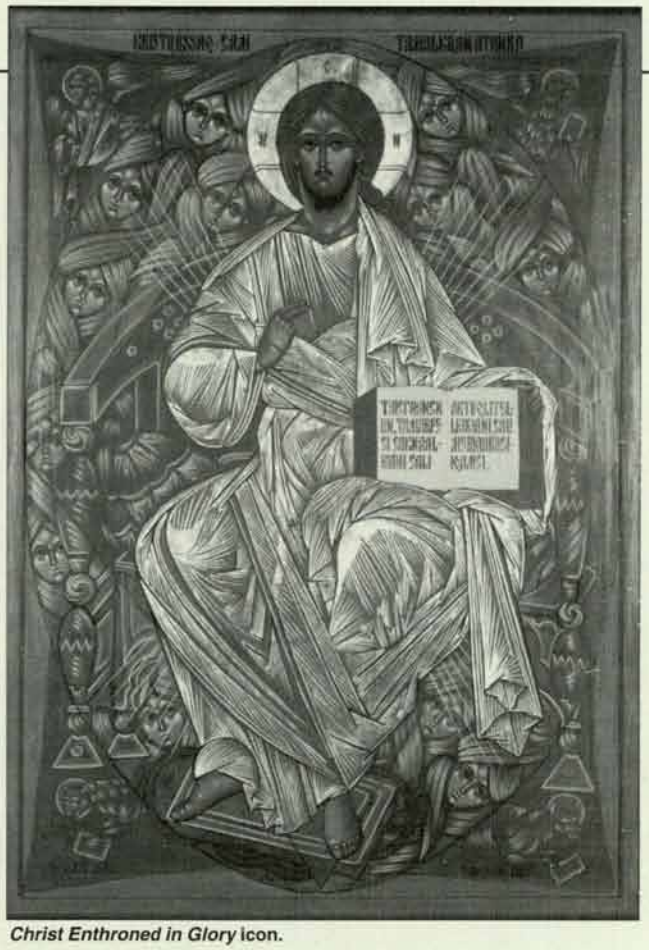
In the incarnation of Jesus, the longing of humanity for the face of God was finally realized. Human beings were able to see God; not veiled in the symbols of fire and smoke as at the Red Sea and Sinai, but in the flesh. Jesus invited his disciples to intimate fellowship with him, speaking with the Lord "face-to-face, as a man speaks to his friend."

At Sinai, the Lord cautioned Moses not to look at His face, saying: "You cannot see my Face, for no one shall see me and live". (Exodus 33:20) On the new Sinai, Mt. Tabor, Jesus, the image of God's grace transfigured and radiant with light, was seen by the disciples. Unafraid, Peter cries out with joy, "It is good for us to be here." (Matthew 17:4)

It is indeed good for us to see the incarnate God. As the first canon of Byzantine Vespers for the Transfiguration proclaims:

> "He who once spoke through symbols to Moses at Mt. Sinai saying, 'I am He who is,' was transfigured today upon Mt. Tabor before the disciples; and in His own person He showed them the nature of [humankind] arrayed in the original beauty of the Image."[2]

2. Mother Mary & Bishop Kallistos Ware, Trans. *The Festal Menaion*, Faber and Faber, London 1969, p. 476



Christ Enthroned in Glory icon.

At Mt. Tabor, to see is both revelation and salvation. By revealing His divine nature to the disciples, Jesus revealed to them the true nature of their humanity. Jesus, making the unseen God visible, invites us into intimate, transforming communion. Communion, in the words of the Byzantine liturgy for Vespers, that "has changed the darkened nature of Adam and filled it with brightness . . . making it Godlike." [3]

In the story of the rich young man in the Gospel of St. Mark, the evangelist tells us that Jesus, looking at the young man, loved him. Looking into the young man's face, Jesus saw His beloved and loved Him. Jesus invited him to become His disciple; to be His friend and not a slave.

The ancient Greeks called a slave *aprosopos*, one who has no face, because for them the personality that found expression in the face was incomprehensible in the subhuman debasement of slavery.[4] Jesus, in the words of St. Paul, became a slave, (literally 'one without a face'), so that our faces, obliterated by the slavery of sin, might be restored to us. For He was not content to merely allow us to see His face. Instead, He sought the face-to-face intimacy of parent with child, friend to friend and lover to lover.

Although materially the icon is nothing more than pigment and gold artfully painted on a wooden plank, we believe they allow us to see the true image of the faces of the Lord and His saints. Seen with eyes of faith, the icon makes visible an invisible reality, our God who is always present to us and looks on us with love. We forget, I think, that just as we are invited to contemplation of the Lord, we too, are the subjects of God's loving contemplation.

The visual language of the icon, particularly the deliberate stylization of the human figure, the flat picture plane and the use of inverse perspective are visual decides that caution us not to confuse the world of the senses, emotion and intellect and that which is beyond them. The icon, anchored in the world of matter and sensation, points beyond itself to the transfiguration of our humanity, our world and the entire cosmos in Christ Jesus.

The icon is, beyond all understanding except our most profound experience, an holy mystery. The believer who approaches the icon in faith, may, in that holy place, mystically encounter the Lord. In this sense, every icon is

The tradition of venerating images (icon in Greek) of Christ, Mary the Mother of God and the saints grew out of the incarnational theology that found its fullest expression at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. which affirmed that God so loved His material creation that His Son, completely Divine, became completely and totally human in order to transfigure, transform and divinize humanity and the entire cosmos.

In the eighth and ninth centuries, iconoclasts, led by the Byzantine emperors themselves, sought to suppress the veneration of images. After a long struggle, led by monastics and supported by the majority of the faithful, the Second Council of Nicea in 847 A.D. restored the veneration of icons and confirmed their centrality for Orthodox doctrine and worship. The first Sunday of Lent, the "Feast of Orthodoxy" is annually celebrated by the Eastern Church in honor of this event.

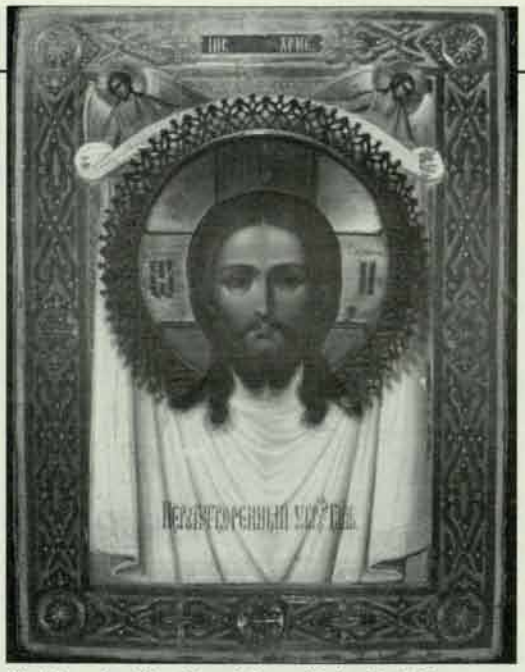
Icons are painted according to a traditional, canonical pattern, established by the Church and not according to the whim or the imagination of the iconographer. However, the iconographer seeks to represent, insofar as the limits of painting permit, a spiritual portrait of the person depicted in the icon. In this way, every icon, rooted in the believing, worshipping community and inspired by the Holy Spirit, is at once like every other icon and yet a new interpretation. However, the icon is in essence a liturgical image that must be received and venerated to truly be itself. The iconographer is the anonymous hand through whom the Spirit acts, so that the icon may be that place of holy communion where heaven and earth meet.

3. IBID, p. 469
4. Quenot, p. 93

sacramental; a mystical Theophany where we instinctively remove our sandals because we are standing on holy ground.

Although the language of icons is symbolic, the content is always incarnate. Because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the proper subject of each icon, as Fr. Kroug stated, is always the human being. The prototypical icon is that of Christ *'made-without-hands'*. Note that in this icon there is no narrative element, no language, no words, no before and after. The Holy Face is shown on a simple towel (supported in some versions by angels). In some Russian icons even the cloth is eliminated and only the face is painted on a gold or white background.

The Lord faces us directly, looking out of the icon towards us. His eyes are open and His gaze penetrating. From this image, Christ, truly divine yet entirely human beckons us, the Word beyond words made visible. In silence He becomes present to us, naming and calling us to Him.



***Christ made-without-hands* icon, Alaska State Museum, III-R-299.**

Such an icon is in the home of my friend Father Michael Oleksa, the priest at the Orthodox church in Juneau. One day he told me a story connected with it. Over twenty years ago, a young man was traveling with a group of friends in Moscow. He was completely estranged from everything Christian and he considered himself an atheist. They went to the Tretykov Gallery and were taken through the museum by one of the museum guides.

Finding the official tour not to his liking, the young man broke away at the first opportunity and wandered through the museum on his own, looking at the various paintings and art objects at his own pace. However, as he came into a gallery full of icons, he was stopped by a large icon of Christ *'made-without-hands'*. He was fascinated and found himself staring into its eyes. And from deep within him the question arose into his consciousness: "Why do I hate You?"

He credits this moment as the beginning of his conversion to Christ. A parishioner of Father Michael's when he served in Santa Rosa, the no-longer-young man, an Orthodox Christian of some twenty years, presented the priest with the icon and his story.

Charles Rohrbacher, an iconographer from Juneau, Alaska began icon painting in 1980. He received training at the Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, New York.

ADDITIONAL READING

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395 Whittier Street
Juneau, AK 99801