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The Erroneous Practice of Making Icons of God the Father



“But furthermore, who can make a similtude of the invisible, incorporeal (bodiless), uncircumscribed, and undepictable God? It is, then, uttermost insanity and impiety to give a form to the Godhead.”

- St. John of Damascus (Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, 4:16)

Introduction

Iconography and theology are intricately intertwined. The misbelieving Jews and Muslims who have no faith in the Divine Incarnation, likewise have no iconography, and the barren walls of their synagogues and mosques lack any depiction of God, since without the Incarnation such depiction is impossible. Iconography, therefore, is a statement and confession of faith. Our Orthodox faith in the Incarnation of God appears in our iconography, and, in fact is the basis of iconography. In the same way, incorrect iconography often shows a wrong understanding of the Faith, and therefore, it is very important to point out and correct such errors. Icons of God the Father or of the Trinity, which as we will see are of Papal origin, are

just such an important case, and unfortunately, these icons are found in many places today. Consequently, there is a need for such a webpage as this to protect the faithful from this error and set the record straight against misinformation spread by the partisans of error.

Before setting out to learn why these icons are prohibited for Orthodox Christians, let us preempt a possible misunderstanding. This webpage is not about icons labeled “Lord of Hosts” or “Lord of Sabaoth” (Gospod Sabaoth; Kyrios Sabaoth), which may be interpreted as depicting the Son of God either by Himself or depicted simultaneously in heaven and on earth in a manner similar to the icon of Christ simultaneously “Above Enthroned, Below Entombed”, since He is also “Lord of Hosts” as are the Father and the Spirit. This webpage is also not concerned with the traditional icon of the Hospitality of Abraham, with Christ (with a cross-stamped halo) and two angels being served by Abraham and Sarah.

These icons are fine. This webpage is only concerned with the erroneous attempts to depict God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, which false iconography came in among some Orthodox Christians from the West’s unorthodox painting schools.

The following webpage will demonstrate with the clear witness of the Church Councils and Fathers that (1) icons of God the Father or God the Holy Spirit (with one exception about which we will speak later) are not Orthodox and (2) that these icons are not and never were part of Orthodox tradition but are of Roman Catholic origin.

We will clearly set this forth by asking the following five decisive questions and giving first hand the replies of the Holy Fathers and Councils to them.

I. Does the Church have a tradition of depicting the Godhead, or more particularly, those persons Who did not take on a circumscribed and visible nature, i.e., God the Father or the Holy Spirit?

II. Nevertheless, could the Father or the Spirit be depicted, even as the Son is depicted?

III. Was the Father or the Holy Spirit ever seen so as to be depictable, for instance, in the vision of the Ancient of Days by Daniel [Dan. 7]? And if not, then why are the Old Testament visions of the Son, which is before He took flesh and became visible, able to be portrayed, but the Father and the Spirit are not? Were those not visions of the Son's divinity, which likewise should be invisible and undepictable?

IV. If the Divinity is invisible and therefore not depictable, why, therefore, did Christ say, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"[Matt.] or "...their angels continually behold the face of My Father" [Matt.]?

V. If the Father and the Spirit are not depictable, where then did the numerous Icons (so-called) of God the Father and the Holy Spirit found in Orthodox countries come from?

So let us see how the Church answers each of these questions.

[Author's Note: the references for all non-scripture quotations appear in the endnotes, being numbered thus (#); all Old Testament scriptural quotations are according to the Septuagint [LXX] unless otherwise noted; all Greek text has been rendered using "Symbol" font].

Questions and Answers

I. Does the Church have a tradition of depicting the Godhead, or more particularly, those persons Who did not take on a circumscribed and visible nature, i.e., God the Father or the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, and thus the whole Church, flatly deny this, stating:

"Christians have never made an icon of the invisible and incomprehensible divinity, but it is only insofar as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us that we paint the mysteries of man's redemption." (1)

If such an authority for iconography as the 7th Ecumenical Council has declared that icons of the naked divinity, or

the Persons of the Trinity Who have not become incarnate were never thitherto made, can anyone credibly contest the conclusion that such icons are not a part of Orthodox tradition?

St. Pope Gregory II of Rome, an early defender of the Church's iconographic tradition and icon-veneration likewise testifies: "We do **not** delineate and paint the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2)

Another of Her chief expositors and early champions of Her iconographic tradition, St. Patriarch Germanos of Constantinople firmly states: "**We make no icon or likeness or figure of the invisible Divinity** upon Which even the sublime orders of angels themselves cannot look or comprehend, but, because the Only-Begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, accepted to become man by the merciful will of the Father and the Holy Spirit,...we draw His human face and the icon of His human form, according to the flesh and not of his incomprehensible and invisible divinity." (3)

Therefore, the answer to this question is that the Church has not received the tradition of depicting God the Father; and this is most obviously attested to by the fact that these images have only started to appear since the thirteenth century. It is also obvious that an apostolic tradition does not commence thirteen hundred years after the apostles received "the Faith which was once for all delivered to the saints". Jude, 3

II. Nevertheless, could the Father or the Spirit be depicted, even as the Son is depicted?

St. John of Damascus, perhaps the foremost of the Church's teachers and defenders of its iconographic tradition writes: "But furthermore, who can make a similtude of the invisible, incorporeal (bodiless), uncircumscribed, and undepictable God? It is, then, uttermost insanity and impiety to give a form to the Godhead." (4)

St. Pope Gregory II of Rome explains to the Emperor Leo the Isaurian, the Iconoclast, that we do not and cannot depict the Father: "Why do we **not** delineate and paint the

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Because we have not seen and known Him, and **it is impossible** to delineate and paint the divine nature. And if we had beheld and known Him, as we have His Son, we would have delineated and painted Him also in order for you (Leo) to call His face also an idol!" (5)

(Author's Note: This letter of St. Pope Gregory II was endorsed by the Holy Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council and entered into the Acts of the same Council; see the Greek text, reproduced above, found in Mansi's published collection of the Acts of the Councils, volume 13. *Consequently, the Apostolic and Patristic teaching that God the Father is not portrayable in icons is again confirmed to be the teaching of the Church and must be heeded and obeyed, according to the word of the Lord [cf. Matt. 18:17]. This also shows that it was not the practice, nor was it permitted by the Church in ancient times to paint the pseudo-icons of God the Father.*)

St. Gregory II's explanation seems to be an echo of that of the Prophet Moses:

"The Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; it was a voice of words which ye heard and ye saw no form, ye only *heard* a voice... Because ye saw no form in the day in which the Lord spoke to you in Choreb in the mountain out of the midst of the fire, also take good heed to your hearts, lest ye transgress, and make to yourselves a carved image, or any kind of figure, the likeness of male or female..." [Deut 4:12, 15-16 LXX]

The very same reason St. Gregory II gives for why it is impossible and we cannot depict the Father, is also given by Moses for why alleged images of God were forbidden in the Old Testament and the making of them was counted as a transgression and idol-making. Consequently, to depict the Father now would be similar to the ancient Israelites transgression in making the calf.

The point is that, since no one holds that the Father was incarnate or was seen in the flesh, but some say he was seen according to His divinity, these people are, by saying such things or depicting the Father, asserting and

confessing that the Divine nature is like the nature of created things in that it is circumscribed, limited, visible, and even human-shaped, for how else can the Father be said to have been seen so as to be depicted thus. Truth and the Holy Church do not allow that what has not been seen can be depicted, and so to depict the Father is to say that the Father is such as He is depicted. This is like the transgression of Israel in the wilderness, for they asserted that the divinity was like a calf, and these false iconographers do little better in confessing through their false icons that the Divinity is like a man. Let the reader, remember and ponder this.

Likewise, with the same idea, St. Theodore the Studite, another of the Church's chief defenders and expositors of her iconographic tradition declares: "Insofar as He proceeded from **a Father Who cannot be represented**, Christ, not being representable, cannot have an icon made by art. In fact what icon or image could correspond to **the Divinity, the representation of which is absolutely forbidden by divinely-inspired Scriptures?** But from the moment when Christ was born of a representable Mother, he clearly has a representation which corresponds with the image of His Mother. And if He had no image or icon made by art, that would mean that He was not born of a representable Mother, that He was born only of the Father; but this contradicts His whole economy." (6)

The answer here is that since God the Father and God the Holy Spirit were not incarnate, nor took any permanent form, it is improper to depict them in any standard or typical manner.

III. Was the Father or the Holy Spirit ever seen so as to be depictable, for instance, in the vision of the Ancient of Days by Daniel [Dan. 7]? And if not, then why are the Old Testament visions of the Son, which is before He took flesh and became visible, able to be portrayed, but the Father and the Spirit are not? Were those not visions of the Son's naked divinity, which likewise should be invisible and undepictable?

St. Justin Martyr, Dialogue replies to Tryphon the Jew's question if he believed the naked Divinity appeared in

human shape to the Patriarchs and Prophets: “Even he who has only the smallest intelligence will not venture to assert that the Maker and Father of all things became visible within a little area of earth...It is the Son of God Who appears to men. He is sent by Another Who remains in the supercelestial places, invisible to all men, holding personal intercourse with none, Whom we believe to be Maker and Father of all.” (7)

St. John Chrysostom comments on the Lord’s teaching: “Not that anyone hath seen the Father, except the *One* Who is from God, that One hath seen the Father’ [Jn. 6:46]...If the Lord had only said, ‘Nobody’, and stopped there, then we might have thought that only our human nature was here excluded from having ever seen the Father...but by adding, ‘except the One Who is from God,’ He excluded even all created beings from having seen Him.” (8)

St. Ambrose teaches: “No one hath seen God at any time’ [Jn. 1:18]... **So it is necessary to agree that, although no one has ever seen God the Father, the Son was seen in the Old Testament.**” (9)

(Do you understand, O reader? The truth the divine Scriptures propound that all visions of God were and are of the Son of God, not the Father Who cannot be seen, is a fundamental Christian tenet, and, as St. Ambrose says, “it is necessary to agree” with it.)

St. John of Damascus comments: “What Daniel saw [in Dan. 7] was not the nature of God, ...but the type and the image of the future One Who was to become thus as incarnate. For the invisible Son and Word of God was about to become man in truth, in order to unite to our nature.” (10)

St. Irenaeus remarks: “And the Word spake to Moses, appearing before him, ‘just as any one might speak to his friend’ [Ex. 33:11 LXX] But Moses desired to see Him openly who was speaking with him, and was thus addressed: ‘Stand in the deep place of the rock, and with My hand I will cover thee. But when My splendour shall pass by, then thou shalt see the latter end of Me, but My face thou shalt not see: for no man sees My face, and shall

live.’ [Ex. 33:19-23 LXX]. Two facts are thus signified; **that it is impossible for man to see God**, and that through the wisdom of God, **man shall see Him in the last times [in times ‘posterior’ to Moses’ day]...,that is, in His coming as man...**The prophets, therefore, did not openly behold the actual face of God, but they saw the dispensations and mysteries [of the Incarnation] through which man should afterwards see God...This, too, was made still clearer by Ezekiel...For, when this man had seen the vision of God [Ezek. 1:1 LXX]...and when he set forth all the rest of the visions of the thrones, lest anyone might think that in those visions he had actually seen God, he added: ‘This was the likeness of the appearance of the glory of God.’ [Ez. 1:28 LXX]...What the prophets did see were similtudes of the splendor of the Lord and prophecies of what was afterward to come to pass; **it is manifest that the Father is indeed not able to be seen of Whom also the Lord said, ‘No one hath seen God at any time’ [Jn. 1:18]**. But His Word, as He Himself willed it, and for the benefit of those who beheld, did Himself show forth the Father’s brightness and revealed His purposes;...not in one figure only, nor in one character only, did He appear to those seeing Him, but according to the reasons and effects aimed at in His dispensations...”
(11)

Saint Irenaeus elsewhere reiterates: “All visions of His speaking with men and being with them, such as when Jacob sees Him [Gen. 28:12-15], signify the Son of God. It is not the Father of all, for He is not seen by the world....It is not He Who would stand circumscribed in space and speak with Abraham [cf. Gen. 18:2], but the Logos of God, Who was always with mankind, and foretold what was to come to pass in the future, and acquainted man with God.” (12)

Saint Kyril of Jerusalem, the great catechist, also teaches: “The prophets in those times beheld Christ as much as each was able....The forefather David knew Him,...and Moses, Esaias, and Jeremias also saw Him.” (13)

St. Hilary of Poitiers concurs, demonstrating that the God of Whom Prophet Isaiah speaks and Whom the prophet says that he saw is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God

and not God the Father. Let the reader note especially the concluding paragraph wherein it is declared that no one has ever seen the Father and no one in St. Hilary's day dares to claim that God the Father has been seen:

“God speaks through Isaiah, saying, ‘I have appeared openly to them that asked not for Me, and, I have been found of them that sought Me not. I said, Here am I, unto a nation that called not on My name. I have spread out My hands all the day to an unbelieving and gainsaying people [Is. 65:1-2 LXX]. Could...the Speaker be more distinctly revealed as true God, than here? Who, I demand, was it that appeared to them that asked not for Him, and was found of them that sought Him not? What nation is it that formerly called not on His name? Who is it that spread out His hands all the day to an unbelieving and gainsaying people? Compare with these words that holy and Divine Song of Deuteronomy, in which God, in His wrath against them that are no Gods, moves the unbelievers to jealousy against those that are no people and a foolish nation. Conclude for yourself, Who it is that makes Himself manifest to them that knew Him not; Who, though one people is His own, becomes the possession of strangers; Who it is that spreads out His hands before an unbelieving and gainsaying people, nailing to the cross the writing of the former sentence against us...[T]he prophet, whom we are considering, proceeds...:-But My servants shall be called by a new name, which shall be blessed upon earth, and they shall bless the true God, and they that swear upon the earth shall swear by the true God [Is. 65:15-16].

“If heresy, in its folly and wickedness, shall attempt to deceive the simple-minded...that these words, which were spoken in reference to God the Son,...are an utterance of God the Father concerning Himself, it shall hear sentence passed upon the lie by the Apostle and Teacher of the Gentiles. He interprets all these prophecies as allusions to the passion of the Lord and to the times of Gospel faith, when he is reproofing the unbelief of Israel, which will not recognize that the Lord is come in the flesh. His words are: ... But all do not obey the Gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report? So then faith cometh by hearing and hearing through the word. But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth,

and their words unto the ends of the world. But I say, Did not Israel know? First Moses saith, I will provoke you to jealousy against them that are no people, and against a foolish nation I will anger you. Moreover Esaias is bold, and saith, I appeared unto them that seek Me not, I was found by them that asked not after Me. But to Israel what saith He? All day long I have stretched forth My hands to a people that hearken not [Rom. 10:16-21]....[I]n the beginning of that utterance in which it is said that the servants of the true God shall bless Him and swear by Him, we read this adoration by the prophet:-From everlasting we have not heard, nor have our eyes seen God, except Thee, and Thy works which Thou wilt do for them that await Thy mercy [Is. 64:4 LXX]. Isaiah says that he has seen no God but Him. For he did actually see the glory of the God the mystery of Whose taking flesh from the Virgin he spoke of beforehand. And if you, in your heresy, do not know that it was God the Only-begotten Whom the prophet saw in that glory, listen to the Evangelist:-These things said Esaias, when he saw His glory, and spake of Him [Jn. 12:41]. The Apostle, the Evangelist, the Prophet combine to silence your objections. Isaiah did see God; even though it is written, No one hath seen God at any time, save the Only-begotten Son Who is in the bosom of the Father; He hath declared Him [Jn. 1:18], it was really God Whom the prophet saw. He gazed upon the Divine glory, and men were filled with envy at such honor vouchsafed to his prophetic greatness. For this was the reason why the Jews passed sentence of death upon him [Editor's note: Indeed, the Jewish Babylonian Talmud rules that Isaiah was rightly slain by them for this, and more so for insulting the Jewish people by saying 'I... dwell among a people of unclean lips'].

“Thus the Only-begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father...Whom no man has seen [cf. Jn. 1:18, 1 Tim. 6:16, etc.] ,...was seen, Who appeared to them who knew Him not, and became the God of the Gentiles who called not upon Him and spread out His hands all day before a gainsaying people. And believe this also concerning Him, that they who serve Him are called by a new name, that of Christian, and that on earth men bless Him and swear by Him as true God. Prophecy tells, the Gospel confirms, the Apostle

explains, the Church confesses, *that the Son of God Who was seen is true God; but none dare to say that God the Father was seen.*” (14)

From the Church’s hymnody we understand that the Lord showed the Prophets Himself as He would be in His Incarnation. Our hymns teach us that this is the meaning of the Prophets seeing ‘the God of Israel, like a Son of Man, high and exalted upon a cherubic throne’ and other similar visions:

“In a figure Isaiah saw God upon a throne lifted up on high borne in triumph by angels...and he cried, ‘Woe is me, for **I have seen beforehand God made flesh...**’” (15)

“O merciful Lord, Thou hast unfolded visions and breathed forth prophecies, manifesting the figures of Thine ineffable Incarnation...” (16)

“Figures of Thy Theophany (God-becoming-visible) hast Thou shown in times past to thy Prophets, but now has Thou manifested...the mysteries that were hidden, making Thyself manifest to men today and dispensing a new regeneration.” (17)

“As far as was right, Thou wast seen by the Prophets. Made man in the last times, Thou hast appeared to all in Bethlehem...” (18)

“Receive, O Simeon, Him Who Moses once beheld in darkness granting the Law on Sinai...and this is He Who spoke through the Law...this is He Whose voice was heard in the Prophets, Who for our sakes has taken flesh and has saved man...” (19)

“He Who once spoke through symbols to Moses on Mount Sinai saying, ‘I am He Who is’ was transfigured today on Mount Tabor before the Disciples...” (20)

“The Ancient of Days, Who in times past gave Moses the Law on Sinai appears this day as a babe...Today Simeon takes in his arms the Lord of Glory Whom Moses saw in the darkness...This is He Who speaks through the Prophets...” (21)



Fig. 9.7. Christ as the Ancient of Days. Gospel book and (later) Apocalypse, tempera on vellum, 1297 (Gospel text), ca. 950–75 (miniatures to Gospels), ca. 1350 (Apocalypse text and miniature [fol. 139r]). Cambridge University Library, Cambridge (Ms. Dd. 9.69, fol. 139r). By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library

“Going beyond nature and its laws, thou gavest birth in a marvelous manner, as a newborn Child, to the Law-Giver of the world and the Ancient of Days....with love, we the faithful magnify you, O Theotokos.” (22)

Before we end this segment on the liturgical aspect of our discussion, we should note also note the prayer that the bishop or priest recites during every Liturgy, which affirms once again that God the Father is unseeable. After the Lord’s Prayer, the following prayer to God the Father is said secretly by every celebrant:

We give thanks unto Thee, **O unseen King**, Who by Thy measureless might hast fashioned all things, and in the multitude of Thy mercies hast brought all things from non-existence into being; do Thou Thyself, O Master, look down from heaven upon those who have bowed their heads unto Thee, for they have not bowed down unto flesh and blood, but unto Thee, the fearful God. Therefore, O Master, do Thou Thyself distribute these Things here set forth unto us all for good, according to the individual need of each. Travel with those that journey by land, sea, or air. Heal the sick, O Thou Physician of our souls and bodies.

By the grace and compassions and love for man of Thine only-begotten Son, with Whom Thou art blessed, together with Thine all-holy, and good, and life-creating Spirit, both now and ever, and unto the ages of ages.



St. Hilary likewise shows that the appearance of the three men to Abraham were the appearance of the Son of God and two angels, although some iconographers wrongly label the trio as “The Holy Trinity”, instead of the traditional title: “The Hospitality of Abraham.” Please, dear reader, firmly grasp what this holy and God-bearing Father says: that (1) only One of the three was God and only that One did Abraham worship; (2) the other two were mere angels and were not worshipped and it is an error to believe otherwise; (3) the One Who was God appeared as a man like the other two angels, and this was a vision of the Incarnate Son of God and prefigurement of the time of His Incarnation, to which Christ referred in the Gospel, saying, ‘*Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad*’ [Jn. 8;56]; (4) the God-man appearing before Abraham was called both Lord and God and did the works peculiar to God in granting life to the dead and barren womb of Sarah, in judging the sins of men, and in raining down a fiery judgment from God the Father on the ungodly. This text which follows is taken from the 4th book of St. Hilary’s treatise “*On the Holy Trinity*”, wherein He proves that Moses taught the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and that God the Son is the God Who appeared to the Patriarchs and Prophets:

“... Afterwards there appear to him three men [Gen. 18:2]. Abraham, though he sees three, worships One, and

acknowledges Him as Lord [Gen. 18:3]. **Three were standing before him, Scripture says, but he knew well Which One it was that he must worship and confess.** There was nothing in outward appearance to distinguish them, but by the eye of faith, the vision of the soul, he knew his Lord. Then the Scripture goes on, *And He said unto him, I will certainly return unto thee at this time hereafter, and Sarah thy wife shall have a son [Gen. 18:10];* and afterwards the Lord said to Him, *I will not conceal from Abraham My servant the things that I will do [Gen. 18:17];* and again, *Moreover the Lord said, The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is filled up, and their sins are exceeding great [Gen. 18:20].* Then after long discourse, which for the sake of brevity shall be omitted, Abraham, - distressed at the destruction which awaited the innocent as well as the guilty, said, *In no wise wilt Thou, Who judgest the earth, execute this judgment. And the Lord said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes [Gen. 18:25-26].* Afterwards, when the warning to Lot, Abraham's brother, was ended, the Scripture says, *And the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven [Gen. 19:24];* and, after a while, *And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and did unto Sarah as He had spoken, and Sarah conceived and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him [Gen. 21:1-2]...*

“In the passage which we have discussed...three men stand by him; he worships One and acknowledges Him as Lord. After this worship and acknowledgment by Abraham, the One promises that He will return hereafter at the same season, and that then Sarah shall have her son. **This One again is seen by Abraham in the guise of a man, and salutes him with the same promise. The change is one of name only; Abraham's acknowledgment in each case is the same. It was a Man whom he saw, yet Abraham worshipped Him as Lord; he beheld, no doubt, in a mystery the coming Incarnation.** Faith so strong has not missed its recognition; the Lord says in the Gospel, *Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad [Jn. 8:56].* To continue the history; the Man Whom he saw promised that He would return at the same season. Mark the fulfilment

of the promise, remembering meanwhile that it was a Man Who made it. What says the Scripture? *And the Lord visited Sarah [Gen. 21:1]*. So this Man is the Lord, fulfilling His own promise. What follows next? *And God did unto Sarah as He had said [Gen. 21:1]*. The narrative calls His words those of a Man, relates that Sarah was visited by the Lord, proclaims that the result was the work of God. You are sure that it was a Man who spoke, for Abraham not only heard, but saw Him. Can you be less certain that He was God, when the same Scripture, which had called Him Man, confesses Him God? For its words are, *And Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, and at the set time of which God had spoken to him [Gen. 21:2]*. But it was the Man who had promised that He would come. Believe that He was nothing more than man; unless, in fact, He Who came was God and Lord. Connect the incidents. It was, confessedly, the Man who promised that He would come that Sarah might conceive and bear a son. And now accept instruction, and confess the faith; it was the Lord God Who came that she might conceive and bear. The Man made the promise in the power of God; by the same power God fulfilled the promise. Thus God reveals Himself both in word and deed. **Next, two of the three men whom Abraham saw depart; He Who remains behind is Lord and God.** And not only Lord and God, but also Judge, for Abraham stood before the Lord and said, *In no wise shall Thou do this things, to slay the righteous with the wicked, for then the righteous shall be as the wicked. In no wise wilt Thou Who judgest the whole earth, execute this judgment [Gen. 18:25]*. Thus by all his words Abraham instructs us in that faith, for which he was justified; **he recognizes the Lord from among the three, he worships Him only, and confesses that He is Lord and Judge.**

“Lest you fall into the error of supposing that this acknowledgment of the One was a payment of honor to all the three whom Abraham saw in company [as if all three were God], mark the words of Lot when he saw the two who had departed; And when Lot saw them, he rose up to meet them, and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground; and he said, Behold, my lords, turn in to your servant’s house [Gen. 19:1-2]. Here the plural lords shows that this was nothing

more than a vision of angels; in the other case the faithful patriarch pays the honor due to One only. Thus the sacred narrative makes it clear that two of the three were mere angels; it had previously proclaimed the One as Lord and God by the words, *And the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I then bear a child? But I am grown old. Is anything from God impossible? At this season I will return to thee hereafter, and Sarah shall have a son [Gen. 18:13-14].* The Scripture is accurate and consistent; we detect no such confusion as the plural used of the One God and Lord, no Divine honors paid to the two angels. Lot, no doubt, calls them lords, while the Scripture calls them angels. The one is human reverence, the other literal truth.

“And now there falls on Sodom and Gomorrah the vengeance of a righteous judgment. What can we learn from it for the purposes of our enquiry? *The Lord rained brimstone and fire from the Lord [Gen. 19:24].* It is *The Lord from the Lord*; Scripture makes no distinction, by difference of name, between Their natures, but discriminates between Themselves. For we read in the Gospel, *The Father judgeth no man, but hath given all judgment to the Son [Jn. 5:22].* Thus what the Lord gave, the Lord had received from the Lord.”
(23)

So, we see from the above that the Church teaches that it was God the Son, and God the Son only, Who appeared in the Old and New Testaments, and that occurred, not by revealing the invisible divinity, but by revealing in prophetic visions beforehand how He would appear as incarnate.

IV. If the Divinity is invisible and therefore not depictable, why, therefore, did Christ say, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” [Mt. 5:8] or “...in the heavens their angels continually behold the face of My Father Who is in the heavens” [Mt. 18:10]?

These passages can be taken in several senses, as we will see from the Patristic explanations that follow. Yet, the Holy Fathers unanimously reject that these verses mean

that the Father or the naked Divinity was seen or will be seen by any creature:

St. Gregory of Nyssa comments: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ [Matt. 5:8]. God is promised to the vision of those whose heart has been purified. But, ‘no man hath seen God at any time,’ [Jn. 1:18] as the great John says. And the sublime mind of Paul confirms this verdict when he says, ‘...Whom no man hath seen, nor can see’ [1 Tim. 6:16]. This...the teaching of Moses, too, declared to be so inaccessible that our mind can nowhere approach Him. For all possibility of apprehension is taken away by this explicit denial, ‘No man can see God and live’ [Ex. 33:20]...Since such is He Whose nature is above every nature, the Invisible and Incomprehensible is seen and apprehended in another manner... By this we should learn that, if a man’s heart has been purified from every creature and all unruly affections, he will see the Image of the Divine Nature in his own beauty... For the Godhead is purity, freedom from passion, and separation from all evil. If therefore, these things be in you, God is in you indeed. Hence, if your thought is free of the alloy of evil, free from passion, and alien to stain, then you are blessed because you are clear of sight. You are able to perceive what is invisible to those who are not purified, because you have been cleansed, the darkness caused by material entanglements has been removed from the eyes of your soul, and so you see the blessed vision radiant in the pure heaven of your heart. But what is this vision? It is purity, sanctity, simplicity, and other such luminous reflections of the Divine nature, in which God is contemplated.” (24)

St. Ambrose similarly explains: “Then when it adds, ‘The Only Begotten Son,..., that One declareth Him’ [Jn. 1:18], seeing by minds rather than by eyes is manifested; for the appearance is seen, but the virtue is declared; the former is comprehended by the eyes, the latter by the mind...’Blessed are the Pure in heart for they shall see God’...And God is not seen in a place, but in a pure heart [cf. Matt. 5:8]; nor is He circumscribed by sight, nor grasped by touch, nor heard by address [cf. Jn. 5:37], nor felt by approach. And when He is thought to be absent, then he is seen; and when He is present, He is not seen.” (25)

St. John Chrysostom explains metaphorically: “But when He saith, “their angels do always behold the face of My Father,” [Mt. 18:10] He means nothing except their fuller confidence and their great honor.” (26)

St. Gregory also offers the following explanation: “It is said, ‘The angels continually behold the face of My Father Who is in the heavens [cf. Mt. 18:10],’ and it is not possible to behold the hypostasis (person) of the Father otherwise than by fixing the sight upon it through His image; and the image of the person of the Father is the Only-Begotten, and to Him again no man can draw near whose mind has not been illumined by the Holy Spirit.”(27)

What St. Gregory says here is confirmed from the Lord Himself:

“Philip saith to Him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us.’ Jesus saith to him, ‘Am I so long a time with you, and thou hast not known Me, Philip? The *one* who hath seen Me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou, ‘Show us the Father’? Believest thou not that I *am* in the Father, and the Father is in Me?’ [Jn. 14:8-10].

The Lord Himself teaches us to understand that to see the Son is to see the Father.

Similarly, St. Irenaeus of Lyons speaks of God generally and the Father in particular being able to be seen by us seeing the incarnate Son of God:

“In former times it was said that man was made according to the image of God, but God was not yet seen, for the Logos was as yet invisible, after Whose image man was made. For this reason, when the Logos of God became flesh, He confirmed both; for He both showed forth the image truly, since He became Himself what was His image, and He reestablished the likeness in a sure manner by conforming man like unto the Father Who is not able to be seen” “And through the Word Himself Who had been made visible and palpable the Father able to be seen, although all did not equally believe in Him but all saw the Father in the Son, for the Father is the invisible of the Son, and the Son is the visible of the Father.” (28)

V. If the Father and the Spirit are not depictable, where then did the numerous Icons (so-called) of God the Father and the Holy Spirit found in Orthodox countries come from?

The Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1776 issued the following short, but explanatory declaration: “It has been decreed by the Synod that the icon allegedly of the Trinity is an innovation. It is alien to the Apostolic, Orthodox, Catholic Church and is not accepted by it. **It infiltrated the Orthodox Church through the Latins.**” (29)

The Holy Synod of the Church of Russia in 1722 adds a few more details in its decree: “It is strictly prohibited to have or make... icons invented by inept or ill-intentioned iconographers...contrary to nature, to history, and to truth itself (such as)...the image of the Theotokos in labor during the Nativity of the Son, with a midwife next to her;...the image of the Wisdom of God in the form of a young girl; the image of the creation of the world in six days by God in which God is represented as reclining on cushions...; **the image of the Lord Sabaoth in the form of an elderly man with His only Son on His lap and between them the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove...; the Annunciation with the Father blowing from His mouth;** a crucified cherubim...etc...(Such things exist because) we do not have artists chosen by God. Only ignorant and ill-mannered people dare to make such things. **This custom has entered Russia through the agency of infidels, especially Romans and our neighbors, the Poles, who follow them.**” (30)

The well-known writer on iconography, Leonid Ouspensky, relates: “From the moment that distortions began to appear in Church art... the Church was forced to make official pronouncements concerning iconography,...[and] protected the canonical forms of liturgic art, both through Councils...and in the persons of its higher dignitaries. Thus at the Triumph of Orthodoxy, the Patriarch Nikon (1652-1658) used to destroy icons painted under Western influence and anathematized all those who would in future paint them or keep them in their homes. The Patriarch Joachim (1679-1690) writes in

his testament: 'I ordain in the name of the Lord that icons of the God-Man and of the most Holy Mother of God and of all the saints should be painted according to old versions...; and above all that they should not be painted from Latin and German images, which are uncanonical, invented in accordance with personal whims, and which corrupt the Tradition of our Church. Such irregular icons as exist in our churches must be removed.'”(31)

Finally, in agreement with the aforesaid Synods and Patriarchs, the Great Council of Moscow, with most of the local churches represented issued the following explanation and decree concerning the aforementioned icons:

**EXCERPT FROM THE TOME OF THE GREAT COUNCIL
OF MOSCOW (1666-1667 A.D.)**

The Tome of Conciliar Acts

Concerning Diverse Affairs and Questions and Answers

Concerning Necessary Ecclesiastical Subjects

Which Council was held under the authority of the most pious great Sovereign and Tsar and Great Prince Alexei Mikhailovich, the Autocrat of all Great, Little and White Russia, in his regal presence, and was composed of the most holy Orthodox Patriarchs Paisios, Pope of Alexandria and Ecumenical Judge, Makarios of Antioch and the entire East, and Ioasaph of Moscow and all Russia, together with many Greek hierarchs [including the delegates of the Ecumenical Patriarch], and all the Russian Metropolitans, archbishops and bishops, and also the archimandrites, abbots and the entire sacred Sobor being present.

Chapter Two

§43: Concerning iconographers and the Lord Savaoth (Sabaoth). We enjoin that there be a skilled artist, a good man, placed over iconographers as an overseer, that is, as a leader and inspector, so that ignorant persons should not defame the holy icons of Christ, of the Theotokos and of His servants by employing a bad and improper style of

painting. And we command to cease all false and sophistical reasoning, according to which every man has grown accustomed to paint icons by himself which are without attestation: that is, the icon of the Lord Savaoth in diverse forms, certain compositions of the fingers of the hand, and other improper and similar things. We therefore ordain that from henceforth the icon of the Lord Savaoth not in future be painted in absurd and improper aspects, because no one has at any time seen Lord Savaoth in the flesh. Only because Christ was seen in the flesh is He painted, that is, depicted according to the flesh, not according to His Divinity; one may say likewise concerning the most holy Theotokos and the rest of God's saints....

§44: It is most absurd and improper to depict in icons the Lord Savaoth (that is, the Father) with a grey beard and the Only-Begotten Son in His bosom with a dove between them, because no-one has seen the Father according to His Divinity, and the Father has no flesh, nor was the Son born in the flesh from the Father before the ages. And though David the prophet says, "From the womb before the morning star have I begotten Thee" (Ps.109:3), that birth was not fleshly, but unspeakable and incomprehensible. For Christ Himself says in the holy Gospel, "No man hath seen the Father, save the Son" (cf. Jn.6:46). And Isaiah the prophet says in his fortieth chapter: "To whom have ye likened the Lord? and with what likeness have ye made a similitude of Him? Has not the artificier of wood made an image, or the goldsmiths, having melted gold, gilt it over, and made it a similitude?"(40:18, 19). In like manner the Apostle Paul says in the Acts, chapter 17, section 40, "Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold or silver or stone, graven by art of man's imagination" (17:29). And John the Damascene says: "But furthermore, who can make a similitude of the invisible, incorporeal, uncircumscribed and undepictable God? It is, then, uttermost insanity and impiety to give a form to the Godhead" (Orthodox Faith, 4:16). In like manner St Gregory the Dialogist prohibits this. For this reason we should only form an understanding in the mind of Savaoth, which is the Godhead, and of that birth before the ages of the

Only-Begotten-Son from the Father, but we should never, in any wise depict these in icons, for this, indeed, is impossible. And the Holy Spirit is not in essence a dove, but in essence He is God, and “No man hath seen God,” as John the Theologian and Evangelist bears witness (1:18) and this is so even though, at the Jordan at Christ’s holy Baptism the Holy Spirit appeared in the likeness of a dove. For this reason, it is fitting on this occasion only to depict the Holy Spirit in the likeness of a dove. But in any other place those who have intelligence will not depict the Holy Spirit in the likeness of a dove. For on Mount Tabor, He appeared as a cloud and, at another time, in other ways. Furthermore, Savaoth is the name not only of the Father, but of the Holy Trinity. According to Dionysios the Areopagite, Lord Savaoth, translated from the Jewish tongue, means “Lord of Hosts”. This Lord of Hosts is the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And although Daniel the prophet says that he beheld the Ancient of Days sitting on a throne, this should not be understood to refer to the Father, but to the Son, Who at His second coming will judge every nation at the dreadful Judgment.

§45: Furthermore in some icons the holy Annunciation, Lord Savaoth is depicted as breathing from His mouth, and that breath goes into the womb of the most holy Theotokos. But who has seen this, or what Holy Scripture bears witness to this, and from whence is this taken? It is obvious that such a practice and other similar ones come from certain sophistical, or rather foolish and mindless men. Therefore we ordain that from henceforth, this senseless and improper iconography must stop. But in the Apocalypse of St John, the Son is to be depicted with white hair on account of those venerable visions which were manifested to the saint in his Apocalypse. The Alpha and Omega the First and the Last is to be understood as the Son Who is the Alpha because of His birth on high, Omega because of His birth below. Therefore, Saint Maximos in his tenth chapter of his commentary on the Areopagite says that the Lord is both white-haired and youthful: “The Lord is described sometimes as white-haired, sometimes as youthful, even as it is written: ‘Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and unto the ages’ (Heb. 13:8), for today is younger than yesterday.” (32)

Therefore, the answer to the above question is that these erroneous representations came not from Orthodox sources, but from the heretical West, as it is stated in the above documents. Indeed, when these depictions became wide spread in Orthodox countries, the clergy had to take action to stop their dissemination.

Conclusion

Thus, from the above precise inquiry and the answers given by the Holy Fathers and Synods of the whole Church the reader now knows where the truth lies. Let us sum up what we have learned above: No one has ever seen the Father, nor can the naked Divinity be seen, but only insofar as One of the Trinity took flesh can God be seen in that flesh; the visions of God seen by the saints whether in the Old Testament or the New Testament are visions of the Son of God as He would in the future appear incarnate or had already appeared incarnate, the precise details being tailored to the message the Lord wished to convey by His appearance; the so-called icons of the Trinity or of God the Father or other similar attempts at depicting the undepictible and invisible Divinity are not Orthodox, but are alien to the Apostolic, Patristic, and Conciliar tradition of the Universal Church of Christ; and such false icons as exist scattered among Orthodox peoples have been received from the heterodox Latins or Germans via incompetent, ignorant iconographers who copied them, contrary to the Church's expressed prohibition of this.

So let us come now to practical conclusions: here is the crux of the matter – one should choose between following the tradition of the Universal Church which never accepted and always rejected such falsely-called 'icons' as impious and unorthodox, or to follow the personal tradition of certain individuals who transgressed that tradition out of ignorance or misunderstanding or willfulness. Certainly, the tradition may be that of generations in one's family, but it is a choice between one's grandmother's tradition and the Apostles' tradition. The tradition of these falsely-called icons, we have shown, dates back no more than a few centuries and that only among certain persons who acted thus in ignorance, indifference or defiance of the explicit decrees of the

Church authorities and saints. We should not assume that if a saint venerated or had an erroneously depicted icon, that the saint approved of it, and that therefore, it is appropriate to accept this depiction as correct. The prohibition against such icons dates back to the beginning, to Moses and the other Prophets and the Holy Spirit Who spoke through them, to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and His Apostles.

Endnotes

(1) 7th Ecumenical Council; quoted in: Grumel, V., “Images (Cult des)”, *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*, 7,1, Letouzy et Ane, Paris, 1927, p.839; as reproduced in: Bigham, Fr. Stephen, *The Image of God the Father in Orthodox Theology and Iconography and Other Studies*, Torrence, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1995, p. 34.

(2) see Endnote #5.

(3) St. Germanos of Constantinople, quoted in: Grumel, V., “Images (Cult des)”, *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*, 7,1, Letouzy et Ane, Paris, 1927, p.838, as reproduced in: Bigham, Fr. Stephen, *The Image of God the Father in Orthodox Theology and Iconography and Other Studies*, Torrence, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1995, pp.27-28.

(4) St. John of Damascus, *Fountain of Knowledge*, Vol. III: *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, IV:16.

(5) St. Pope Gregory II of Rome, 1st Epistle on the Holy Icons to Emperor Leo the Isaurian, the Iconoclast, in reply to the demand of the same Emperor that the Pope endorse Iconoclasm and condemn Icon-veneration as idolatry. Here is the Greek text found in Mansi, Acta Concilia, vol. 13:

(Dia ti ton Patera tou Kuriou Ihsou Cristou ouc istoroumen kai zwgrafoumen; epeidh ouk oidamen, tis estin, tou Qeou fusin adunaton istorhsai kai zwgrafhsai. kai ei eqeasameqa kai egnorisamen, kaqws ton uion autou, kakeinon an istorhsai kai zwgrafhsai, kai ina kakeinou ton carakthra eidwlon apokalhs.)”

(Author's Note: This letter of St. Pope Gregory II was endorsed by the Holy Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council and entered into the Acts of the same Council, where it is to be found; see the Greek text, reproduced above, found in Mansi's published collection of the Acts of the Councils, volume 13. *Consequently, the Apostolic and Patristic teaching that God the Father is not portrayable in icons is again confirmed to be the teaching of the Church and must be heeded and obeyed, according to the word of the Lord [cf. Matt. 18:17]. This also shows that it was not the practice, nor was it permitted by the Church in ancient times to paint the pseudo-icons of God the Father.*)

(6) St. Theodore the Studite, Refutation 3, Ch. 2, Sec. 3 P.G. 99, col. 417C; cited in Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, pp. 33-34.

(7) St. Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Tryphon the Jew, Ch. LX (60) -- LXI (61).

(8) St. John Chrysostom, *Discourses Against the Anomeans*, Homily V:5.

(9) St. Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to St. Luke*, Bk. I:25.

(10) St. John of Damascus, "Concerning Icons", 3rd Sermon, P.G. 85:1380A.

(11) St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies, or A Refutation of Knowledge-Falsely-Called*, IV:XX:9-10.

(12) St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, § 45, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, 16:77.

(13) St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, Lecture XII, P.G. 33:669A, 681A.

(14) St. Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Holy Trinity*, Bk. V:31-34.

(15) Matins of the Feast of the Meeting of Our Lord, "Fifth Canticle".

(16) Compline of the Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ, "Third Canticle".

- (17) Forefeast of the Theophany of Our Lord, “Third Canticle”.
- (18) Compline of the Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ, “Ninth Canticle”.
- (19) Great Vespers of the Feast of the Meeting of Our Lord, “Stichera”.
- (20) Great Vespers of the Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, “Aposticha”.
- (21) Lity of the Feast of the Meeting of Our Lord.
- (22) Matins of the Fifth Sunday of the Great Fast (Great Lent), “Ninth Ode”.
- (23) St. Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Holy Trinity*, Bk. IV:25-29.
- (24) St. Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Beatitudes, Homily 6, “Blessed Are the Pure in Heart.”
- (25) St. Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to St. Luke*, Bk. I:25-26.
- (26) St. John Chrysostom, Homily 59 on St. Matthew.
- (27) St. Gregory of Nyssa, “*On the Holy Trinity*”, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers set, Series 2, vol.V, p.329.
- (28) St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies, or a Refutation of Knowledge-Falsely-Called*, V:XVI:2 and IV:VI:6; cf. St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 22.
- (29) Decree of the Holy Synod of Constantinople, 1776; as reproduced in: Bigham, Fr. Stephen, *The Image of God the Father in Orthodox Theology and Iconography and Other Studies*, Torrence, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1995, p.146.
- (30) Special Decree of the Holy Synod of the Russian Church, May 21, 1722; as reproduced in: Bigham, Fr. Stephen, *The Image of God the Father in Orthodox Theology and Iconography and Other Studies*, Torrence, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1995, p.144.

(31) Boshakov Manual, published by A.I. Ouspensky, Moscow, 1903, (in Russian) – quoted in L. Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, pp. 48-49, n.1.

(32) The Tome of the Great Council of Moscow (1666-1667 A.D.), Ch. 2, 43-45; tr. Dcn. Lev Puhalo, Canadian Orthodox Missionary Journal.

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