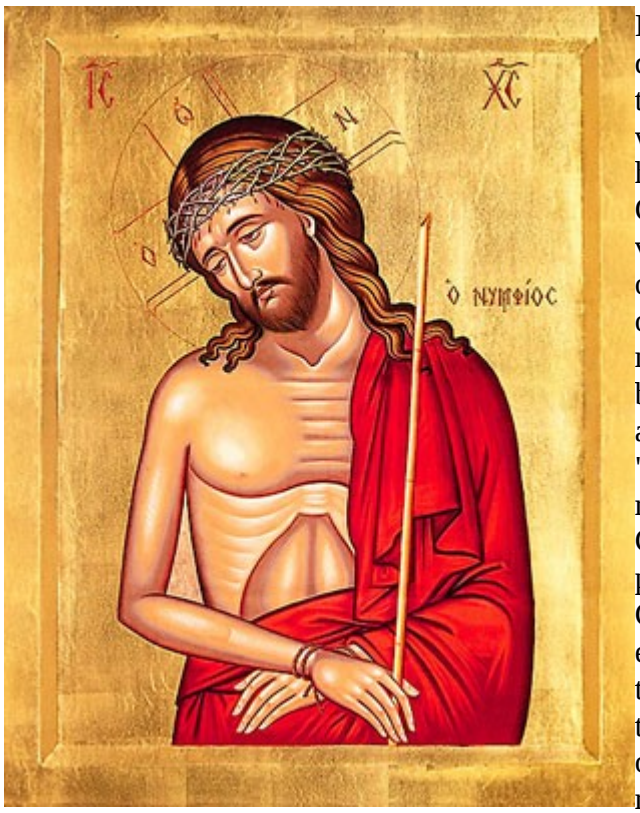
# *The Iconic and Symbolic in Orthodox Iconography*


## *by Hieromonk [now Bishop] Auxentios*


The following essay is taken from a presentation by the author to a graduate seminar in advanced iconography at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, in the spring semester 1987. Bishop Auxentios holds a Doctorate in Orthodox liturgical theology from G.T.U.

The task of the present essay is to provide the general reader with theoretical definitions of the terms "icon" and, though with lesser attention and precision, "symbol" as they are used in the Patristic defenses of Orthodox *eikonographia*. As modest and unambitious as this task may at first seem to be, the reader will promptly come to understand that an exhaustive treatment of these terms would, in fact, entail the writing of volumes of material. The expansive subject surrounding these terms rises out of a peculiar aspect of the Eastern Orthodox ethos—and Byzantine iconography can only be properly and authentically understood within the context of that ethos and of the civilization that gave it birth and its unique "identity"—, namely, that no element of Orthodoxy, even one limited to such a seemingly peripheral area as iconography, can be treated in and of itself, outside the mosaic *Gestalt* which Orthodoxy rightly is. Like the items on the "menu bar" of the iconic computer screen, with their multiple files and sub-files, any aspect of the study of iconography unavoidably presents to us endless ramifications in complex areas of Orthodox history and theology, in the vortex of which we will be led to the very axis of Christianity. The author asks of his reader, therefore, patience with and careful attention to the several ostensible digressions involved in approaching the terms under consideration—patience and attention that will, it is hoped, be rewarded with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the subject of iconography in general.




Icons and Orthodox Spiritual Life. It is not difficult to demonstrate that icons are important in the Orthodox spiritual life, if not the daily secular world of those living in Orthodox cultures. One has only to visit an Orthodox country, such as Greece, and seek out more remote and traditional villages, where life continues at a pace unchanged, often, from Byzantine times and free from the outside influences of tourism, Western materialism, and the affluence which results from both of these factors. (These untouched villages are quite prevalent among Greece's two million "traditionalist" or Old Calendar Christians, who reject the adoption of the Western calendar by the Church of Greece in 1924 and who, while severely persecuted and even scorned by the State, or New Calendar, Church of Greece, have remarkably enough preserved many ancient Orthodox traditions to this very day.) If one were to attempt to catalogue the locations and frequency of occurrence of icons in such places, he would soon realize that their presence is ubiquitous. Public buildings, cars, buses, taxis, trains, restaurants, markets, shops, squares, the roadsides, gardens, and fields—all of these things and places, and many more, too, are adorned by icons. These icons are usually mounted in a prominent place, often with an oil lamp or candle burning perpetually before them.

The most significant impression will be made, however, by visits to Orthodox households and Churches, where icons play a very important role. In Orthodox homes, the eastern corner of a centrally located room is always dedicated to the display of icons. There are usually many such icons on display (twenty-five to thirty icons would constitute a conservative average), and this "icon corner" always features at least one vigil lamp hanging before it, religiously and perpetually kept burning by the members of the household or, in the event of their absence, by someone hired or appointed for this task. Quite often, the icons are placed around a *proskynema*, or small stand. All of the remaining rooms of a traditional Orthodox home will be similarly decorated, with the exception of the latrine (for obvious reasons), though usually with one icon on a wall (usually an Eastern wall, again). This icon is also at times adorned with a vigil lamp. At other times, the main "icon corner" of the house described above, which is used for household or family prayers and services (as well as blessings by the parish Priest—such as the Lesser Blessing of Waters, which is traditionally done each month in pious Orthodox homes), is duplicated on a smaller scale in all of the major rooms of the house, especially the bedrooms, and is used for private prayers. We should also note that it is not unusual for some very pious Orthodox believers to have a full chapel in their homes, fully adorned, in the traditional manner, with the same icons that one might find in a parish Church. A Priest will often visit the family on a significant Feast Day or on the Name Day of a family member (the day on which the Saint after whom a person is named is commemorated—celebrated by traditional Orthodox believers instead of birth days) to celebrate the Divine Liturgy and to commune the family.

On entering a village Church, one has only to open his eyes to locate the icons. If the Church has been standing for any length of time, chances are that it will be more difficult to find small patches of empty wall space than it will be to find multiple frescoes of Christ, the Theotokos, the Saints, or events from their lives. Careful examination will reveal that the arrangement of the many icons adorning the Church—including those of Christ, the Theotokos, St. John the Baptist, the Patron

Saint of the Church, and, less frequently, the twelve Apostles and the twelve Great Feasts on the *templon* [or, less accurately, the *eikonostasion]*, the altar screen that separates the naïve from the altar of the Church—is not haphazard. There is a hierarchic scheme along two axes of the Church that essentially holds in all forms of Church buildings. The first axis rises vertically from the nave, populated round about on its walls with the community of Saints, who pray for the people enclosed by the Church building, to the dome, which almost always bears the classical depiction of Christ the Pantocrator (*Pantokrator*, or "Ruler over All"), who looks down from Heaven onto His creation. The second axis runs from the narthex (traditionally occupied by the catechumens and penitents [those under Church censure]) to the sanctuary, the Eastern apse of the latter being decorated with icons of the Liturgists (e.g., Sts. Basil the Great and John Chrysostomos), the communion of the Apostles, the Virgin (who holds the leading position among the Saints of Heaven and who also personifies the Church, having contained, like the Church, Christ Himself —"Whom the world cannot contain," in the image of ancient Orthodox hymnography—in her womb, and whose figure in this location is thus called *Platytera ton Ouranon*, or "Wider than the Heavens"), and, of course, Christ.

The Icon in Orthodox Church History. Aside from the presence of iconography in traditional Orthodox societies and Churches, a presence which survives, though precariously, to this very day, as we have demonstrated, a glance at one very important period in the history of the Orthodox Church also attests to the importance of the iconographic tradition. The subject of iconography precipitated the longest-running (approximately 120 years) and most violent of the theological debates to shake the internal life of the Orthodox Church: the so-called iconoclastic controversy. This controversy produced many new martyrs and confessors (those suffering deprivation, exile, etc.) for the holy icons, especially during the brutal reigns of the iconoclastic emperors Constantine V (called "Copronymos") (741-755) and Leo V ("the Armenian) (813-820). Icons, as a consequence of the great iconoclastic upheaval, were the subject of the Seventh Œcumenical Council (or, more properly, "Synod"), the last catholic synod recognized by the Eastern Orthodox Church, held in 787 in Nicaea. The final victory of the iconodules over the iconoclasts, sealed in this synod, was marked by the restoration (re-hanging) of sacred images in the "Great Church" of Hagia Sophia on March 11, 843, an event commemorated each year on the Sunday of the "Triumph of Orthodoxy," or the first Sunday of the Great Fast (Lent), by Orthodox Churches throughout the world even in contemporary times. The Orthodox writers who came to the defense of the veneration of sacred images, along with the proceedings of the Seventh Œcumenical Synod itself, came to form the principal sources from which all subsequent generations of Orthodox theologians drew in their understanding and explication of the Church's iconographic tradition. It is, therefore, in terms of the history of this controversy, as well as the specific exchanges between the Orthodox and iconoclast parties which participated in it, that we will set the stage for our understanding of the icon and the particular theoretical definitions cited at the beginning of our discussion.

Before we begin our actual treatment of the literature and theological ideas deriving from the iconoclastic controversy, however, we should make some introductory remarks about the nature of Orthodox theology itself. In his now classical treatment of the subject, the Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky (1) makes a Patristic distinction between two ways of theologizing, these, in turn, based on corresponding approaches to knowing and experiencing of God. This distinction is so significant, that Lossky uses it as a focal point in every subdivision of his theological inquiry (e.g., Trinitarian theology, Christology, cosmology, anthropology, etc.). The first of these ways is the cataphatic or "positive" way, and corresponds to man's normal way of relating to his world. It involves, above all, affirmation. From this perspective, we would speak of God in normal cognitive categories, attributing to him such characteristics as supreme good, truth, justice, mercy, love, beauty, compassion, and so on. This first way, this "natural" way, Lossky argues, must rest on constant qualifications and is strongly limited by comparison to a second apophatic, or "negative," way. This second way is ultimately more appropriate to the objective of knowing God or of theologizing. From this more accurate perspective, the human language can only be used to deny or

to express negation. Human cognition becomes a method of negation, rather than affirmation, and truth rises above (simply because it lies beyond) cognitive knowledge. Here, one who truly loves, experiences, and knows God (to the extent that such is humanly possible) is compelled to speak as follows: "God is *not* good, truth, justice, etc. It is not, of course, that God is the opposite of these things (evil, falsehood, injustice...); rather, these characteristics must be refuted, since they are the products of human experience of the created universe. God, being uncreated and, in His divine essence, wholly transcendent, cannot, in the depths of His being, in the internal life of the Trinity, be known in any cognitive manner whatever. Consequently, He can in no way be described or encompassed by a vocabulary springing from and appropriate to the created realm or created beings. In this sense, we cannot ultimately affirm His existence as such:

> ...In regard to the doctrine of theology, so far from inventing some kind of circumscription or comprehension (perish the idea! for this was an invention of pagan thought), we do not even know that the Godhead exists at all, or what sort of thing it is, as it alone understands about itself. (2)

We have, then, a profound division that separates the uncreated (the Divine) from the created (spiritual and material) realms. Note that the spiritual (which, along with man's higher or "noetic" faculties, includes the Angels) finds itself on the same side of this division as the material. This is but one of two such divisions (the other being that between good and evil) which Orthodox Patristic literature recognizes as enduring and genuine. This is not, however, to admit to the neo-Platonic dualism that some rather polemical Western theologians—thinking clearly neither about Orthodox theology nor neo-Platonic thought—are wont to find in Orthodox Patristic thought. The division between the uncreated and created does not deny to man a knowledge of God. Orthodox theology notes a further distinction (though *not a division*) between the Essence and Energies within the Uncreated (God) Itself, the former being, as we noted above, profoundly and eternally transcendent and beyond man's experience or comprehension. The energies of God, on the other hand, may be mysteriously imparted to the human being in the course of spiritual life, providing him, here on earth, with a certain knowledge of God that will be more fully revealed in the afterlife. These divine energies renew, transform, and sanctify humans, making them gods by Grace, "partakers of the divine nature" [*"theias koinonoi physeos"*] (II Peter 1:4). The consequences of this participation in the divine energies are radical in the extreme: men becomes gods, the created and limited taking part in the uncreated and divine, the finite and temporal participating in the infinite and eternal. Thus, in effect, the chasm between the Divine and the created is bridged, this bridge rising out of the Incarnation.


In understanding divine energies which bring man into union with God, we should note that the divine energies are *fully* God *un*created; they should not be thought of as emanations or steps down on some heavenly hierarchy. They are at once distinguishable from the divine essence *and* uncircumscript, infinite, and undefinable.They are unique solely in the sense that the created realm may participate in them. Otherwise, they remain beyond description. Also, beyond the fact that the divine energies can be communicated to creatures, human language here, too, must confine itself to negative statements about these energies. The only things that can be said about them in a positive mode relate to their *effects* upon those whom they touch. And finally, as we have suggested above, these effects must be understood in a dynamic way. Communion with the divine energies purifies (from sin and corruption),

transforms (both our physical *and* spiritual natures), and sanctifies (leading us into ever greater virtue and glory).This dynamic process has no limit or end, even in the life to come. The "perfection" of Saints in paradise, in this sense, is defined patristically as perpetual growth and progress in virtue and knowledge ("from glory to glory," in Pauline terms).

Because Orthodoxy gives precedence to apophatic theology, her doctrine as whole is characterized by a certain laconic tone, if not outright reticence in approaching certain matters. This is especially true with regard to the Mysteries (Sacraments) of the Church, wherein the individual takes part in the divine energies. (In proper Orthodox treatments of the Mysteries, incidentally, they are not limited to the seven Sacraments held in common with the Western Church, but include all spiritual acts and rituals in the spiritual life.) Contrary to fashionable modern accusations, based more on ignorance and a lack of depth in spiritual experience than anything else, the Eastern Fathers were not given to undue "curiosity" and a penchant for philosophical "speculation." Their theological expositions were inevitably formulated as a *response* to the curiosity and speculation of the heretics. It was in an effort to limit fruitless probings and presumptuous definitions of the unfathomable and inexpressible that the Fathers drew up the cautious definitions ratified by the Synods. And these definitions were more often than not apophatic and negative in character, avoiding definition by affirmation. (Thus at Chalcedon: "One Person in two natures, which are united *without* confusion, change, division, or separation.")

Our understanding of icons will rest on these foregoing observations regarding Orthodox theology. Indeed, before the iconoclastic controversy, almost nothing was written by the Fathers about icons, except that they existed. It was not until iconoclasm, a heresy, surfaced that the Fathers of the Church devoted any extended attention to the veneration of sacred images. And when they did speak, what they wrote was typical of the Orthodox way of theologizing: laconic and reticent. Thus, while the Fathers teach that the honor which an icon is shown is transmitted to its prototype (to the holy person or event which it represents), they do not tell us *how* this is done. And how it is that an icon conveys Grace, sanctifying those who venerate it—this also is not explained. These mysterious processes are defined in response to heretical challenges to their validity or salutary worth, but a healthy respect for the limitations of human logic and language—indeed, of the human mind—prevents any probing in great depth.

In formulating a theology of icons, the Fathers addressed two distinct periods of iconoclastic misbelief: the first extending from the outbreak of officially supported iconoclasm to the Seventh Œcumenical Synod (730-787); the second period beginning about 815 and ending with the restoration of the images under the empress St. Theodora (843). During the first period, the main spokesman for the iconodules, though by no means the only one, was St. John of Damascus (ca. 675-ca. 749). In the second period, the same can be said about St. Theodore the Studite (759-826).

The First Iconoclastic Period. St. John Damaskinos, in his apologetic discourses, concerns himself mainly with the accusation of idolatry leveled against the Orthodox by the iconoclasts, who, of course, had in mind the Old Testamental prohibitions against the making and worship of graven images. Examining the relevant passages from the Old Testament, St. John sees these Scriptural prohibitions as *providentially* anticipating their own abrogation. The prohibition in Deuteronomy against the fabrication and deification of images of creatures, be they beasts, birds, creeping things, fish, or astronomical bodies—all of which are simply creatures, or created things—, is immediately preceded by an explanatory passage which justifies the prohibition and, at the same time, intimates its undoing: "The Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.... Therefore, take good heed to yourselves. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire" (Dt. 4: 12,15). "What is mysteriously indicated in these passages of Scripture," St. John asks:

> It is clearly a prohibition of representing the invisible God. But when you see Him who has no body become man for you, then you will make representations of His human aspect. When the Invisible, having clothed Himself in the flesh, becomes visible, then

> represent the likeness of Him who has appeared.... When He who, having been the consubstantial Image of the Father, emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2: 6-7), thus becoming bound in quantity and quality, having taken on the carnal image, then paint and make visible to everyone Him who desired to become visible. Paint His birth from the Virgin, His Baptism in the Jordan, His Transfigura tion on Mt. Tabor.... Paint everything with words and colors, in books and on boards. (3)

Thus, if God is directly revealed in the Old Testament only by word ("you heard the sound of words, but saw no form" [Dt. 4: 12]), for St. John He is made manifest in the New Testament by both word and image, and so must be depicted and conveyed ("Paint everything with words and with colors, in books and on boards").

St. John of Damascus and, of course, Orthodox in general thus see a quantum distinction between the Old and New Testaments. Quoting St. John, who in turn cites the Apostle Paul, Leonid Ouspensky, the great Russian commentator on iconographic theory and theology, puts this very succinctly:

> [The Israelites had] ...a mission consisting in preparing and prefigur ing that which was to be revealed in the New Testament. This is why there could be only symbolic prefigurations, revelations of the future. 'The law was not an image,' says St. John of Damascus, 'but it was like a wall which hid the image. The Apostle Paul also says: "The law was but a shadow [*skian gar echon o nomos*] of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities" (Hebrews 10:1).' In other words, it is the New Testament which is the true image of reality.... That which David and Solomon saw and heard was only prophetic prefigurations of that which was realized in the New Testa ment. Now, in the New Testament, man receives the revelation of the Kingdom of God to come and this revelation is given to him by the word and the image of the incarnate Son of God. The apostles saw with their carnal eyes that which was, in the Old Testament, only foreshadowed by symbols. (4)

Hence there are three stages in God's post-lapsarian relations to man. The first is depicted in the Old Testament and is characterized by symbol and shadow—symbolic prefigurations of the "good things to come." The second stage is embodied in the New Testament, which is characterized by the iconic (by image). Here we have the "true form [*eikon*, or icon] of these realities." The third stage of this relationship will, of course, be the Kingdom of God to come, in which man will see reality itself, "face to face." Clearly, with regard to iconography, the "symbolic" can occupy only a secondary position, since the significant quality of an icon *par excellence* is the fact that it constitutes a *real* image of that which it depicts. The image is in some way a "true" form of the prototype, participating in it and integrally bound to it. In the second stage of the iconographic controversy, as we shall subsequently see, St. Theodore the Studite elucidated this profound relationship between image and prototype. But before examining this relationship, let us look at yet another aspect of the icon as St. John of Damascus understands it, that of iconic function.

It is readily apparent from his writings that the depiction and veneration of icons is not, for St. John, something casual and optional. Both he and the iconodules in general envision the attack on sacred images as a veritable denial of Christ's Incarnation itself. For them, the iconoclastic controversy focuses on Christological issues, and those who reject the sacred images are but counterparts of the earlier Christian heretics who distorted or misrepresented the true nature of Christ and His Incarnation. Such a rejection is tantamount to a denial of man's salvation, for, the iconodules reasoned, in keeping with the tenets of Orthodox soteriology, salvation is possible only if man can *partake* of the Divine. If Christ was not fully God and man (*Theanthropos*), then man (a created being) can never come to partake of the Divine (of the uncreated). The fact that "the Word became flesh" is the very meaning of the icon, and to deny the use of the Church's icons, the iconodules further argued, is comparable to a denial of Sacred Scripture itself. The icon functions to reveal,

embody, and express the Incarnation of Christ and the soteriological consequences thereof. The Scriptural message of the Incarnation and the icon are analogous, as two forms of Christian revelation, both acting to convey the salvific message to mankind:

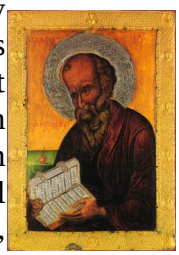
> ...We who do not see Him [Christ] directly nor hear His words nevertheless listen to these words which are written in books and *thus sanctify our hearing and, thereby, our soul.* We consider ourselves fortunate and we venerate the books through which we hear these sacred works and are sanctified. Similarly, through His image we contemplate the physical appearance of Christ, His miracles, and His passion. This contemplation *sanctifies our sight and, thereby, our soul.* We consider ourselves fortunate and we venerate this image by lifting ourselves, as far as possible, beyond the physical appearance to the contemplation of divine glory. *[Emphasis added.]* (5)

Whatever the particular faculty of perception (hearing or seeing), the net result is the same, the sanctification of the soul. Scripture and sacred images are both part of the redemptive plan. And this sanctification is precisely, again, the result of participation in the divine energies, so that "contemplation," in the passage above, might better read "participation." Thus, the iconoclastic challenge against the painting and veneration of icons does nothing other than jeopardize the Church's very teachings about the nature of Christ and, at the same time, the *sanctification* of the faithful, which are both accomplished and established through the function if the icon.

The didactic and sacramental function of the icon is further developed by St. John as he continues the foregoing argument with specific reference to Orthodox anthropology:

> Since we are fashioned of soul and body, and our souls are not naked spirits, but are covered, as it were, with a fleshly veil, it is impossible for us to think without using physical images. Just as we physically listen to perceptible words in order to understand spiritual things, so also by using bodily sight we reach spiritual contemplation. For this reason Christ assumed both soul and body, since man is fashioned from both. (6)

The visible image, then, is just as inescapable and, in fact, as necessary as the audible word in spiritual life. This is because human beings are not "naked spirits," but are comprised of both immaterial and material components. These components, we should note, are ideally reconciled in the restored human being. Indeed, Orthodox thought arduously avoids any sort of dualism or the notion of an intrinsic or enduring opposition between spirit and matter or soul and body. Both the material and the immaterial find themselves on the same side of the chasm which separated the created and uncreated, this chasm being the only line of demarcation between qualitatively different realms.The material and the spiritual ideally exist in a harmonious (and in fact eternal), albeit hierarchic, relationship. They exist in a relationship which the icon reifies. We can see the link between the spiritual and material especially in the Orthodox view of death. Death, the separation of the body from the soul, is not for the Orthodox thinker—as it is in ancient Greek thought and much modern religious philosophy—a release or escape from the imprisonment of the spirit within the body, and thus something positive. Rather, as it was for the Jews, death is a tragedy linked to a violation, a tearing apart of man's proper nature, and it is transformed only in mystical imagery, when it is envisioned as the completion of one's baptism into the death of Christ. The full restoration of man in Paradise is realized ultimately by the proper restoration of the relationship between the material and spiritual in the linking of the soul once again with the body (though now a new and spiritual body—a body of spiritualized matter, as it were).



The permanent harmonious relationship between the body and the soul, embodied in the material and spiritual bond which is the icon, accounts for the fact that man must always relate to the spiritual *through* the physical, be it the visible image or the audible word, through which each of us is led to "spiritual contemplation," or any other Mystery of the Church. These two components will always necessarily be present. Let us cite the words of St. John of Damascus: "Likewise baptism is

both of water and of Spirit. It is the same with communion, prayer, psalmody, candles, or incense; they all have a double significance, physical and spiritual." (7)

As we have noted, the spiritual and the physical exist in a hierarchical relationship in man's restored state, the spiritual enjoying the ascendancy. Ideally, then, the body *serves*, and does not hinder, the spirit, as the latter worships, prays, psalmodizes, and performs good works or acts of asceticism and self-denial. If matter plays an important, or even essential, role in man's salvation, and if, to the extent that it rightly fulfills its role, it is to be esteemed, at the same time matter must not be *equally* esteemed with the spiritual. Otherwise, the proper hierarchical relationship between the spiritual and the physical would be broken down, if not reversed. It is an acknowledgement of such natural hierarchical structures that underlies St. John of Damascus' classical distinction between worship (or adoration), which is appropriate to God alone, and veneration (or honor), which is proper to the Saints, the Cross, icons, relics, etc.:

> Let us understand that there are different degrees of worship. First of all, there is adoration, which we offer to God, who alone by nature is worthy to be worshipped.... But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter.... I honor it, but not as God. (8)

The veneration that is proper to everything instrumental in our salvation, other than God Himself, among which St. John also sees an hierarchical order of sorts, must be understood as a veneration rendered not to a thing (or person), in and of itself, but *through* the thing to that which sanctifies it —ultimately, of course, to God. We honor the Cross, therefore, because of the One crucified on it. We honor a Saint because of Him whose friend the Saint is. As for icons,

> We venerate images; [but] it is not veneration offered to matter, but to those who are portrayed through the matter in the images. Any honor given to an image is transferred to its prototype, as St. Basil says. (9)

The Second Iconoclastic Period. With the foregoing selection from St John Damascene, we come to the heart of the Orthodox apologetic argument in the first iconoclastic period. The words of St. Basil, as quoted by St. John, became the triumphant and much-repeated motto of the first victory over iconoclasm in 787. The matter of the relationship of the image to its prototype had been definitely treated in detail and with theological justification drawing on the most basic Christian precepts. Though the real dynamics of *how* this veneration is "transferred" are never explained by St. John, this silence is only logical, if we remember that the apophatic, pious, non-inquisitive and reticent nature of Orthodox theologizing. What is, however, open to discussion—and thus the subject of some debate in the second period of iconoclasm—is the question of *why* this transference takes place. Many of the Orthodox responses to this question simply reiterate the arguments which dominated the first iconoclastic period. What is important in the renewed debate is that a new and formidable apologist, St. Theodore the Studite, moves to the forefront, clarifying the relationship between the image and its prototype in such a way as to enhance our understanding of the symbolic and iconic with particular precision.

It was in their own synod, held in 754 under Constantine Copronymos, that the iconoclasts set the stage for the debate undertaken by St. Theodore. They accused the Orthodox of falling to two separate heresies in painting an icon of Christ. On the one hand they were accused of trying to portray both the human and the divine natures of Christ, thus running the risk of confusing these two and resulting in the heresy of Monophysitism. Only the Divine Will could so ineffably and without confusion unite the divine and human in Christ, the iconoclasts warned. If, on the other hand, the Orthodox were to agree with the view that the divine nature cannot be depicted, as the iconoclasts rightly maintained, then that would leave them only the human nature of Christ to represent. And if that were all that they depicted, they would be separating the divine and the

human, which would constitute the heresy of Nestorianism.

The Orthodox response to this seeming dilemma was formulated in the exhaustive treatment of this and all iconoclastic arguments during the sessions of the Seventh Œcumenical Synod in 787. And their response formed an integral part of the apologetics of the second iconoclastic period. The Fathers gathered in the synod evoked the ancient Patristic distinction between person (*hypostasis)* and nature (essence), a distinction first systematically put forth in the thinking of the Cappadocian Fathers. The specific focus of the Cappadocians was Trinitarian theology, and they determined that, with regard to the Holy Trinity, we must speak of three *hypostases* and one essence. This is the same terminology was then employed in the Christological definitions at a later time in the early Church. In particular, at Chalcedon the Orthodox posited a union of two natures, the human and the divine, in the one divine person of Christ. Outside the members of the Holy Trinity, it is usual to speak of any individual (or object) as being distinguished by a hypostasis (person, form) and a nature (essence). On the basis of this Patristic witness, the iconodules were able to state that the error of the iconoclasts, then, was their constant tendency to conceive of the icon as being of the same *nature* as its prototype. In fact, the only icon to which they could give their approval was the Eucharist, a view which the Fathers of the Seventh Synod flatly rejected. The Eucharist, they argued, is not an image, but is, rather, identical to its prototype, noting that "neither the Lord, nor the Apostles, nor the Fathers, ever used the term 'images' to speak of the unbloody sacrifice offered by the priest, but always called it the very Body and Blood." (10) As for a possible essential relationship between the icon and its prototype, St. Theodore the Studite comments that, "...no one could be so foolish as to think that reality and its shadow, ...the prototype and its representation, the cause and the consequence are by nature [according to essence] identical." (11) Yet this was precisely the argument of the iconoclasts with regard to the sacred image. Thus their failure to understand *why* the veneration of the image reaches up to the prototype, if simply because they failed to understand the nature of the hypostasis of the icon, which disallows the stark distinction established by the iconoclasts between the image and its prototype according to essence alone.

St. Theodore summarized the arguments of the iconodules during the second iconoclastic period in a particularly brilliant passage which establishes the similarity or commonality of image and prototype *qua* hypostasis. In this summation, we find a clear and compelling understanding of the natural relationship between image and prototype which also accounts for the natural process by which veneration of the image lifts up to its prototype—why the veneration accrues to the prototype:

> [In an icon] the prototype is in the image by similarity of hypostasis, which does not have a different principle of definition for the prototype and for the image. Therefore, we do not understand that the image lacks equality with the prototype and has an inferior glory in respect to similarity, but in respect to its different essence. The essence of the image is not of a nature to be venerated, although the one who is portrayed appears in it for veneration. Therefore, there is no introduction of a different kind of veneration, but the image has one and the same veneration with the prototype, in accordance with the identity of likeness. (12)

Some Summary Remarks. As we have seen in our overview of the icon in Orthodox society and worship and in its historical context, the terms "symbol" and "icon" have very specific applications in Orthodox thought. During the first period of the iconoclastic era, we saw the first systematic attempt to distinguish between the symbolic and iconic. St. John of Damascus, seeing this distinction in the Old Testamental understanding of God in symbolic terms and the New Testamental encounter with God in image, in iconic form, centers his defense of the veneration of icons on a very vivid distinction between symbol and icon. In keeping with the apophatic principles of Orthodox theology, his argument is that symbolic representations of God in the Old Testament (for example, as a voice or as the burning bush) are not God as such, the symbol expressing a negative statement about the reality of God in symbols which He cannot be (God cannot, of course,

be a burning bush or a voice, since He is absolutely transcendent and ineffable, constantly expressing this unknowable nature in Old Testamental affirmations of man's inability to "see" God —"no man has seen God and lived," or, that is, no man can maintain personal existence within the vision of the essence of Being itself). It is essential that we understand this point, for it brings us to a more precise definition of what symbol means in iconographic nomenclature. We should not imagine, here, that apophatic language expresses mere negative analogical theological concepts. Not at all. It is not as though God were "like" some symbol, in apophatic thinking, yet beyond it, but simply that God is not that symbol. Our negative statement about what God cannot be embodies within itself a statement about the existence of God, affirmation of that existence lying within our apophatic statements about God themselves. Thus symbol, as understood by St. John of Damascus, for example, was a device by which God's affirmation might be approached through negation, the symbol having no integral relationship with any aspect of God. Negation, used as affirmation, remains negation, separated absolutely from affirmative acknowledgement of that which it negates.

In the New Testamental encounter with God, St. John and the iconodules argued, God appears in icon, in a human image which is knowable, joined, at the same time, with a divine nature that is unknowable. And herein lies the initial key to an exact and precise grasp of what the iconic is in Orthodox theology. Whereas symbol, in an apophatic way, speaks of God referentially (albeit negatively and without affirmative intent in the negative symbol itself), the icon touches on the reality of God. St. John characterizes this iconic reality by the Incarnation, in which the uncontainable God was brought to dwell in flesh, being thereby contained, combining in the God-Man the true materiality of man and the true divinity of God. Indeed, the veneration of an icon, like the veneration of Christ, somehow, for St. John, brings man into contact with what is genuinely divine through that which is also genuinely physical. (This contact, of course, obviates the accusation of idolatry put forth by the iconoclasts.) Unlike a symbol, an icon brings one to participation in the reality which the icon "represents." The image and its prototype, "symbol" and "reality," as it were, are brought together.

During the second iconclastic period, we have observed, the relationship between the icon and its

prototype, between God and image, is further clarified. While there is no attempt in this period to penetrate the mystery of *how* the mundane and holy are joined together in iconic veneration (such *hows* are left to the mysterious in classical Orthodox studies), the theology of this period pinpoints precisely *why* this fusion must be. St. Theodore the Studite, arguing from the precepts set forth in the Christological synods, posits that Christ, in his hypostatic participation in the Trinity, remains perfectly divine, while, at the same time, being perfectly human. He can be seen and known as a man, whereas he remains also wholly within the unknowability and transcendence of the Godhead. In a comparable way, an icon, while material and while a mere image in some sense, nonetheless also exists in objective hypostasis, the image being joined to its prototype, participating in the holiness of that which it depicts (again in answer to the iconoclastic charge of

idolatry and the worship of wood and paint). Again here, one must not be presumptuous and find neo-Platonic parallels in this iconic theory. It stems from pure Christological theology. St. Theodore clearly argues that an icon cannot participate in the very essence of its prototype. There is thus no emanationism to be found in this argument. He simply points out that the hypostatic nature of an object allows for the material icon to participate in the holiness of its prototype, since this is the natural intention of an icon (intentionality, as we have pointed out, being foreign to the symbol), part of its very identity (an objective analog of "person" in the human being). In essence, we can address the question of *why* the veneration of an icon reaches up to its prototype by responding that it is in the intrinsic character, in the hypostatic identity of an icon, that veneration of the image reaches up to the prototype.

There is a special quality to the iconic in Orthodox theology that further distinguishes it from the symbolic. In the classical use of symbols, as the apologists for the Holy Images understood them, the transcendence of God is forever protected. In iconic knowledge of God, however, there is a sense in which one genuinely touches the transcendent without violating its unknowability and transcendent essence. We have noted that St. Theodore the Studite turned to the hypostatic nature of Christ within the Trinity to explain how, in the same way that hypostatically Christ was human, He also participated beyond hypostasis consubstantially in the transcendence of the Godhead, thus showing that icons can hypostatically remain images and yet participate in the holiness of their prototypes. Especially in later writers, such as St. Gregory Palamas, the fourteenth-century Archbishop of Thessalonica, we see this distinction in more elaborate and complex apophatic terms. He posits that, though the essence of God is wholly inviolable, yet His divine energies are knowable, to some extent, in the spiritual or noetic mind and (contrary to gross distortions of this Father's writings by some scholars), by integration into that spiritual mind, to the discursive intellect. (We will but note parenthetically that Palamas' thought, equally misrepresented by some contemporary scholars as "innovative" and novel, is actually wholly Patristic and reflective of an essence-energies distinction that is as old as St. Gregory Nyssa, if not older. It can, indeed, be derived by Christological theology itself.) Since, as we explained in our discussion of apophatic theology, the divine energies are not separate from and inferior to the divine essence, in some sense—and we must be cautious in what we say, according to the Church Fathers—we approach the transcendent itself. Couched in Palamite terms, we can say that the iconic has a true (though limited) relationship to the essence of the prototype, if simply because the hypostatic union of image and prototype also participates in the reality or essence of the prototype, just as divine energies derive from and contain within them characteristics of the divine essence. Again, this must be approached with great caution, as St. Theodore the Studite himself warns in his proscription against mistaking shadow for reality, but the concept is one implicit and present in every use of the iconic in Orthodox theological thought.

We must make a final rejoinder, here, related to language as it is used in contemporary Orthodox theology. We have presented a distinction between symbol and icon in classical Orthodox terminology deriving from the iconclastic period. Some modern writers, such as L. Ouspenky, have spoken of a notion of "symbolic realism" (13) or, to use the words of the famous Greek iconographer, Fotis (Photios) Kontoglou, "anagogic" symbol, or symbol leading upward and away from itself. (14) A careful reading of these experts in iconographic history and philosophy clearly shows that they are using these special definitions of symbol in the way that it might be understood in contemporary art history, liturgics, or phenomenological circles. They are simply attempting to address the unique Orthodox concept of the iconic in less specific historical terms than we have used. At any rate, their use of language certainly points to the iconic, not to symbol as the iconodules understood it, and focuses itself on the iconic as it is inextricably tied to the Incarnation. Their references, then, should all be understood in terms of the theoretical definitions that we have set forth in these summary comments.

## *Endnotes*

*1. Lossky, Vladimir, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church. London, 1973.*

*2. St. Theodore the Studite, On the Holy Icons. Crestwood, N.Y., 1981. P. 21.*

*3. Ibid., cap. 8, PG, 94: 1237D-1240A and cap. 8, PG, 94: 1328 D. See the English translation of L. Ouspensky, The Theology of the Icon. Crestwood, N.Y., 1978.*

*4. Ouspensky, op. cit., pp. 52, 55.*

*5. Ibid., p. 56. We have used here Ouspensky's translation of St. John's text because it vividly emphasizes our point.*

*6. St. John of Damascus, On The Divine Images. Trans. David Anderson. Crestwood, N.Y., 1980. P. 72.*

*7. St. John of Damascus, op. cit., pp. 72-73.*

*8. Ibid., pp. 21, 23.*

*9. Ibid., p. 89.*

*10. Mansi, 13:264.*

*11. Cited in Ouspensky, op. cit., p. 150.*

*12. St. Theodore the Studite, op. cit., p. 103.*

*13. Op. cit., p. 121.*

*14. Cavarnos, Constantine, Byzantine Sacred Art, Belmont, MA, 1983. P. 89.*

## *Selected Bibliography for Further Reading*

*Cavarnos, Constantine, Byzantine Sacred Art, Belmont, MA, 1983.*

*Idem, Orthodox Iconography, Belmont, MA, 1977.*

*Kalokyris, Constantine D., The Essence of Orthodox Iconography, Brookline, MA, 1971.*

*Ladner, Gebhart B., "The Concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy." In Dumbarton Oaks Papers, No. 7 (1953).*

*Lossky, Vladimir, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church, London, 1973.*

*Ouspensky, Leonid, The Theology of Icons, Crestwood, N.Y., 1978.*

*From Orthodox Tradition, Vol. IV, No. 3, pp. 49-64.*