



Who's Who in the Trinity Icon?

When contemplating Rublev's Icon of the Holy Trinity, it is almost inevitable that some will ask: Who's Who? Though the Three Angels are similar in appearance, their clothing is distinctive, and so certain minds will naturally seek to read meaning into their colours and Who they represent.

Whether the question is even appropriate is a matter of debate, though the very human need to cross every "t" and dot every "i" means that it is certainly not a modern one: answers do exist.



5th century mosaic, St Maria Maggiore, Rome

Early icons from the first millennium did on occasion identify Christ among the Trinity at least. An example from the early 5th century is of a mosaic from the Saint Maria Maggiore in Rome. In it, Abraham greets the Three on bended knee; the central of the Three men is cloaked in a *mandorla*, with his hand raised in a blessing – identifying Him with Jesus Christ, the Son. Identifying the pre-Incarnate Christ among the Three Angels, but not identifying the other Two, crops up in isolated Icons for centuries afterwards. The most usual way of identifying Christ would be to give

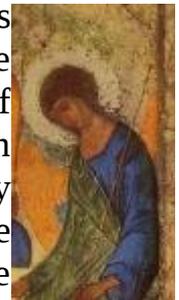
the central Angel seated around the table a special “I AM” cross-halo, which is only associated with Jesus Christ.

However, this practice was condemned by the Stoglav Council (Стоглавый Собор) of 1551. The Council also recommended that the Icon not explicitly name any of the Angels, but instead carry the inscription Svyataya Troitsa (Святая Троица), i.e.: “Holy Trinity”. This practice spread out from the Russian Church and is now generally followed by all Orthodox Iconographers.

Despite the ruling of the Council, attempts have been made to identify the Three Angels of the Holy Trinity, even those depicted on the beautifully simple Icon by Rublev. The most common explanation is so widespread that it is worth describing here:



To the left is **the Father**, Who is seated beneath Abraham’s “tent” as described in the Genesis account; yet in the Icon the tent is shown as a magnificent castle: the open-doored House of the Father, the goal of our journey. He is shown clothed in garments which seem to shimmer, reflecting the Heavenly Glory. To the right is **the Holy Spirit**, clothed in green and blue hues: the colours of the Earth. These are also the colours of the Holy Spirit, as He “...is everywhere present and fills all



things...” according to the Orthodox prayer. In addition, Orthodox churches are decorated in greenery at the feast of Pentecost (the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles), and worshipers wear green. The Holy Spirit is seated beneath a mountain, which represents the spiritual ascent all believers must experience.



And so in the centre is seated **the Son**, or **Word of God**. His clothes are the typical bright red cloaked in blue, often seen on Icons of Jesus Christ, representing the Divine (red) and human (blue) natures. Over his right shoulder there is a band of gold; as Isaiah prophesied: *the Government shall be upon his shoulder*. Towering above Him is the oak of Mamre, yet within this icon is revealed as a foreshadowing

of the Cross, or tree, from which Jesus would be hung.

With this in mind, we can see that what the Icon shows us is not the three individuals of the Holy Trinity, but the relationship between Them. Of the Three, the Father on the left of the picture is the only figure to be unbowed, displaying a fatherly authority over the other Two. The Holy Spirit and the Son together bow to the Father, so that we can clearly see the Father to be the fountainhead of the other Two: from the Father comes both the Word (the Son) and the Breath (Spirit) of God. Contrary to the formulations of heretical theologians, the Holy Spirit does not bow before the Son, nor is He depicted as the love which flows between the Father and Son, but as a person in His own right, in a relationship with the other Two. The Son of God is shown as though in conversation with the Father, which is what is revealed to us in the Gospels, where Jesus frequently prays to the Heavenly Father. Despite the authority of the Father, all Members of the Holy Trinity are shown equal in size, and the reverence of the Son and Spirit to the Father appears voluntary; it is done out of love, not fear.

Yet we must be careful to separate what is revealed to us by God, and is therefore salvific, from that which is formulated by arrogant “over-philosophizing” and can therefore lead us off in dangerous directions. We can look upon the Icon of the Holy Trinity and contemplate the relationship of the Father with the Son and the Holy Spirit, yet we must not try to concentrate too much on the Three figures as separate beings.

The canons of the Stoglav Council are therefore useful in that they encourage us to look at the Icon in the most beneficial way. We are not invited to look at “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” – three individuals – but instead the Holy Trinity: a Tri-Unity toward Whom our prayers are directed.

*All-Holy Trinity, have mercy on us.
Lord, cleanse us from our sins.
Master, pardon our iniquities.
Holy God, visit and heal us
For Thy Name's sake.*

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