

BYZANTINE ICONOGRAPHY

BY

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The term «iconography», as it was used in the Byzantine Empire, and as it still is understood in the Orthodox Christian East, means both the art of decorating churches with panel icons, wall paintings, and mosaics depicting sacred persons and events, and also such paintings themselves, which are usual referred to as «icons». The function of these works is a liturgical one. They are a means of worship, like the hymns that are used during the church services. As a symbol, the icon provides a means not only of honoring sacred personages, but also of lifting up the soul to them and arousing emulation. The icon raises us to a greater or lesser degree of experience of spiritual reality, depending on our inner disposition and love of higher being. Thus, St. John Damascene (c. 676—c. 754) remarks: «According to our state, we are led up by perceptible icons to the contemplation of the divine and immaterial»¹.

Since icons are concise memorials of things written in the Scriptures and of the lives of Saints—prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors, teachers, and so on—they are, of course, instructive. They effectively show by means of representations and colors what history tells us by means of words. The Patriarch Photius (c. 820 c.-891) says in this connection that «Just as speech is transmitted by hearing, so a form through sight is imprinted upon the tablets of the soul, giving to those whose apprehension is not soiled by wicked doctrines a representation of knowledge consonant with peity»². Moreover, he holds that there are instances where icons are more vivid than written accounts and hence superior to the latter as means of edification. He cites as an example the representations of the deeds of holy martyrs. As such, icons not only teach

1. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 94, col. 1261a.

2. Cyril Mango, ed. and trans. *The Homilies of Photius*, Cambridge, Mass., 1958, p. 294. Cf. St. Basil (330-379): «What the spoken account presents through the sense of hearing, the painting silently shows by representation». *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 94, col. 1401a.

these things in a vivid manner, but also remind the faithful of them. St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-395) felt the same way when he remarked: «I have often beheld a painted representation of the Passion, and have never passed by this sight without shedding tears, for art brings the story vividly to the eyes»³. The effectiveness of the icon as a means of instructing and reminding is due, not only to the power of painting as a means of expression, to the peculiar forms and colors used in an icon, but also to the fact that the icon presents simultaneously and concisely what would take an appreciable period of time to describe in words. This is especially evident in the case of icons depicting events, such as the Nativity, the Transfiguration, the Crucifixion, or the Resurrection, where several figures as well as a place and objects are depicted. But while the icon has a didactic effect, its function is primarily liturgical.

Inasmuch as the icon is essentially symbolic, the veneration of it is a veneration of the prototype or original which it represents. In the words of Basil the Great (c. 330-379), which are repeated by John of Damascus and other defenders of holy icons, «the honor which is given to the icon passes over to the prototype». The prototype honored is in the last analysis God, as God created man in His own image. Such reverence of honor, which the Greek Church Fathers call *timetike proskynesis*, is to be distinguished very sharply from worship, which they call *latreia*. Worship pertains only to God. Honorable veneration of an icon consists of such acts as crossing oneself before it, saying a prayer addressed to the sacred person or persons represented on it, and kissing it.

When the crucial distinction between honorable veneration and worship is lost sight of, iconoclasm, the condemnation of icons, is a result. This is what happened in 726, when the Byzantine Emperor Leo III issued an edict which condemned the making and veneration of icons as idolatry, and contrary to the second commandment. But the icon is an image or symbol, and is designed to lead us to that of which it is an image or symbol; an idol lacks this power of the authentic symbol.

The practice of according the reverence of honor to sacred objects is deeply rooted in the sacred tradition of Christianity. John Damascene would trace this tradition back to «The Mosaic people», who «honored on all hands the tabernacle which was an image and type of

3. *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 94, col. 1269α.

heavenly things, or rather of the whole creation»⁴. The c r o s s has always been venerated by Christians. The painting of the cross in the dome or apse of the Church was not forbidden in Byzantium even by the fanatical enemies of the icons, the Iconoclasts. Now the crucifix is itself an icon, an image of Christ's crucifixion, a symbol of Christ Himself, who is usually depicted upon it in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The crucifix serves as a symbol in a number of ways. It reminds the faithful of Christ's life, of the historic event of Christ's crucifixion, and of the means whereby salvation or participation in the Divine life might be effected, namely, through self-sacrifice, through suffering, through arduous spiritual striving. The Greek Fathers often quote in this connection the following statement of Christ: «If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me»⁵. It is for these reasons that the crucifix is placed at conspicuous points of the church: at the façade, on the top of the dome, over the «Beautiful Gate»⁶, on the Holy Table or Altar. And the holy martyrs are represented in Byzantine icons holding a cross in their right hand, a symbol that they sacrificed their physical life for the sake of their Faith and salvation.

The representation of Christ is of special theological significance, as an affirmation of his Incarnation. Regarding the depiction of God, Damascene observes that while it was impossible for the Jews to depict God at all, it is not so for Christians. Inasmuch as the second person of the Holy Trinity, Christ, acquired a human body and lived upon the earth, it became possible to portray him. Indeed, to reject Christ's icon, says Damascene, is virtually to deny his Incarnation; to accept and venerate it is to affirm and recall his Incarnation.

In the rudimentary symbolic art that existed among the Christians of the first two centuries, Christ was represented as a shepherd. But gradually there developed in Byzantium the type of Christ known as the Pantocrator, the «Ruler of all,» the Almighty. This came to be the most official representation of Christ for the Byzantines, and it remains such for the Orthodox to this day. The Pantocrator is painted in the dome and also on a panel that is placed on the iconostasis, immediately to the south of the Beautiful Gate.

4. A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IX. New York, 1899, p. 88.

5. Luke 9:23. Cf. Luke 14:27, Matt. 10:38. Mark 8:34.

6. The opening at the middle of the iconostasis, leading into the b e m a o r sanctuary where the Holy Table is placed.

Christ the Pantocrator is represented as follows, according to a very apt description by Fotis Kontoglou (1895-1965), the foremost modern Greek icon painter, which I summarize⁷. His body is upright. His head is crowned with thick hair, which falls over his left shoulder. His forehead is majestic, expressive of wisdom and power. His eyes are attentive and quiet. To the humble they seem benevolent; but to the proud, austere. His nose is straight and thin. His mouth is modest; his mustache is turned downward in the natural, Asiatic manner, and expresses meekness. His beard is symmetrical, slightly parted at the tip. His neck is broad and firm, and part of his chest near it is exposed. He is covered by a broad garment, from which his hands emerge, the right hand making the sign of benediction and the left one holding the Book of the Gospels, the life-giving Divine Law.

About the response evoked in the beholder by the icon, this same iconographer says: «The Pantocrator engenders in the pious soul all the holy and contrary feelings, being great, powerful, creator of all things, all-seeing, meek, benevolent, humble, austere, merciful, a law-giver... For the wicked and the indifferent, he is a heavy cloud that covers them with darkness, but for the believing and the humble he is the immortal Sun, the fount of life; and this is why they cry out with exultation: 'Let us forever walk in the light of thy countenance»⁸.

The Greek Fathers, who formulated the dogmas of the Orthodox Faith, did not specify just how icons should be painted. They did convey, however, the basic idea of true iconography, which is that everything in the icon should be reminiscent of a realm different from the material world and of men who have been regenerated into eternity. Thus the idea of a transfigured world and transfigured men is the key to painting and understanding true icons⁹. The archetypes of the recurring themes of Byzantine iconography, such as those of Christ the Pantocrator, the Nativity, the Holy Virgin and the Child Christ, and St. John the Baptist, developed slowly. They are the result of centuries of spiritual life, Christian experience, genius and work. The painters who developed them regarded their work as fearful, like the dogmas of the true Faith; and they worked with humility, and piety on the models that had

7. See C. C a v a r n o s, comp. and trans. *Byzantine Sacred Art*. New York, 1957, pp. 79-80.

8. *Op. cit.* p. 80.

9. Cf. L é o n i d e O u s p e n s k y, *L'icône, vision du monde spirituel: quelques mots sur son sens dogmatique*. Paris, 1948, pp. 10-11.

been handed down to them by earlier iconographers, avoiding all inopportune and inappropriate changes. Through long elaboration, the various representations were freed from everything superfluous and inconstant, and attained the greatest, most perfect expression and power possible¹⁰.

The icon is not, like the secular painting, an end in itself, an aesthetic object to be enjoyed for whatever merits it possesses, but is essentially, a symbol, carrying us beyond itself. The icon stands for something other than itself. It is designed to lead us from the physical and psychophysical to the spiritual realm.

Having a religious theme, such as Christ, or the Apostle Paul, or the Nativity does not suffice to make a painting an icon, an object suitable for liturgical use. Its mode of expression must be spiritual, that is, such as to make it anagogic, pointing to a reality beyond the physical, lifting those who see it to a higher level of thought, feeling and consciousness, denoted by the term spiritual.

This anagogic mode of expression is achieved in part by the use of a type of distortion. Thus the proportions of the figure are distorted, some parts being exaggerated and others diminished¹¹. The head, for instance, may be depicted disproportionately large, in order that the face, which is the most expressive part of the body, may be seen more distinctly. Usually the eyes are depicted larger than they normally are, in order to express more effectively certain qualities which are thought of as spiritual¹². Also, the nose is made rather thin, the mouth small, the fingers thin and elongated, in order to present an external expression of the transfigured state of the saint, whose senses have been refined, spiritualized¹³. The body is often elongated, as a further means of «dematerialization». Mountains, trees, buildings and so on are schematic, abstract. Thus, a mountain is represented by a stair-like rock; a tree, by a

10. Cf. Fotis Kontoglou, *Ta Akelidota Archetypa* («The Spotless Archetypes»), *Nea Estia*, Vol. 33, No. 385 (June, 1943), p. 780.

11. Cf. P. A. Michelis, *An Aesthetic Approach to Byzantine Art*, London, 1955, pp. 118, 197.

12. That such qualities are expressed through the body is emphatically asserted by the Byzantine theologians. Thus St. John Climacus says: «When the whole man is in a manner commingled with the love of God, then even his outward appearance in the body, as in a kind of mirror, shows the splendor of his soul» (St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. New York, p. 264).

13. Cf. Léonide Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*. Boston, 1955, p. 39.

trunk with a few branches; a city, by a few simple buildings surrounded by a fortification wall. Further dematerialization is attained by reducing space to a minimum, and by suppressing perspective and physical light¹⁴. Thus the figures depicted give the impression of being two-dimensional, like visions¹⁵. Finally, the iconographer makes no attempt to imitate faithfully the colors of nature but uses extensively non-natural, mystical colors.

The anagogic element is present in all authentic icons, even in those in which the theme would seem to preclude this—for instance, the Crucifixion. In Byzantine iconography, which is Christian iconography par excellence, the Crucifixion is not a gruesome spectacle as it often is in Western paintings of the modern period. Christ's body is not represented as the dead body of an ordinary, unregenerate man, far less as a corpse in a state of decomposition—as in the Crucifixion by Mathias Grünewald—inspiring horror and revulsion. Everything in the Byzantine depiction of the Crucifixion gives intimations of immortal life. The body depicted is that of the God-Man, and hence incorruptible. The expression of his face and body is full of heavenly calm and grandeur. There is an expression of sorrow in his face, but this sorrow is pervaded by gentleness and forgiveness. And he who contemplates the figure of Christ thus represented feels sorrow, though not the sorrow of despair, but the sorrow that contains the consoling hope in the triumph over death, in the Resurrection. If one turns one's gaze from the figure of Christ to the Virgin Mary and John the disciple, who stand on either side of the Cross, one observes an expression not of hysterical grief and horror, but of restrained, calm sorrow that is sweetened by the hope in immortality¹⁶.

The figures and objects depicted in a genuine icon may appear to some as simply unnatural; but they effectively express what photographic likenesses of nature cannot—higher states and qualities, and the essential nature of things. Renaissance paintings lack this anagogic spiritual element which true icons have; they give the illusion of materiality. The paintings of the Renaissance artists, such as da Vinci and Raphael, express physical rather than spiritual beauty. These works, which observe carefully the anatomical details of the body and use per-

14. Cf. André Grabar, *Byzantine Painting*, Geneva, 1953, p. 39.

15. Cf. P. A. Michelis, *op. cit.*, 116-117. 157.

16. See Fotis Kontoglou, *He Apelpisia tou Thanatou eis ten Threskeutiken Zographiken tes Dyseos* («The Despair of Death in Religious Paintings of the West»). Athens, 1961.

spective in a mathematical way, and colors and forms that we are accustomed to see in the world about us, in order to give the illusion of material reality, are ruled out as icons. True iconography is intended to take us beyond anatomy and the three-dimensional world of matter to a realm that is immaterial, spaceless, timeless—the realm of the spirit, of eternity. And hence the forms and colors are not those that one customarily observes around him, but have something unwordly about them. The iconographer does not endeavor to give the illusion of material reality, a photographic likeness of men, mountains, trees, animals, buildings, and so on. He gives a schematic representation of these, leaving out everything that is not essential. He retains details only if they are necessary.

If religious works such as those of the Renaissance painters cannot be called icons, much less can sentimental, arbitrary products of the imagination, simply because they happen to have a religious subject, and still less should one give the name of «icon» to the creations of certain artists who, seeking to be «original» at any cost and thoroughly «modern», wantonly distort and dehumanize the forms of sacred personages. The departures from anatomical accuracy and naturalness in general seen in icons of the Byzantine tradition have led some to see a certain affinity between Byzantine iconography and recent schools of painting. But the two schools of painting are quite unrelated in the use which each makes of the distortion of the human figure. These recent trends, known as «cubism», «expressionism», «abstract art» and so on, when they are anything more than experiments in technique, seem to be attempts to express by means of dislocated heads, occluded eyes, monstrous breasts, and the like, the disintegrated state of contemporary man¹⁷, rather than to represent contemporary man's yearning for a reality beyond the material and an aspiration to be in relation with such a reality. What one finds in these works is a complete negation of the divine image in man; what one misses in them is not only a trace of external, physical beauty, but also any suggestion of inner, spiritual beauty. As was insisted on above, an icon is essentially a symbol, and a symbol which is designed to lead the worshipper from the physical and psychophysical realm to the spiritual realm.

True iconography is opposed to the ideas that art should copy nature, or should express the imagination or personality of the artist,

17. On the significance of such forms in Picasso's paintings, cf. Herbert Read, *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, Cleveland, 1962, p. 176.

or the spirit of his time. Its goal is to give the most effective expression to the universal truths and values of Christian religion; to lift the contemplator to the apprehension and experience of them; to transform and sanctify him. To this end the icon painter adheres faithfully to the classical Christian tradition of sacred painting, the Byzantine, employing its consecrated archetypes and techniques, avoiding arbitrariness and improvisation, as well as all that is vague, superfluous, subjective, sensual—in general, everything which tends to keep the contempler of art objects chained to a lower level of being. The art of authentic iconography is eminently deliberate, clear, precise, simple, objective, universal, spiritual.

A true icon expresses «spiritual beauty». The notion of spiritual beauty appears in philosophical and theological writings of Antiquity, the Medieval Period, and the Modern Age. Plato says much about it in discussing the Idea of the Good in the *R e p u b l i c* and Absolute Beauty in the *S y m p o s i u m*, and in treating of justice, self-mastery, and the other virtues of the soul. Plotinus speaks of it in the *E n n e a d s*, when he deals with Beauty, the Intelligence, and the virtues. St. Augustine refers to God in his *C o n f e s s i o n s* as «the most Beautiful of all»¹⁸. Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, speaks of «the incomparable beauty of the inexhaustible light»¹⁹, meaning God. Leibniz speaks of «the beauties of souls which never perish and never cause displeasure»²⁰. And A. N. Whitehead tells us that «the contemplation of the beauty of holiness» belongs to the essence of religion²¹. Such references testify to the persistent recognition that the category of the beautiful extends beyond the physical realm to the spiritual. This recognition is most marked in Byzantine theological writings, which provide the doctrinal foundations of Byzantine iconography. The notion of spiritual beauty recurs frequently in the writings of such eminent representatives of this theology as Sts. Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, John Damascene, and Symeon the New Theologian. They often view man's striving for spiritual perfection and union with God as a striving for the attainment of beauty of the soul and the vision of the beauty of God. For they view God as the supremely beautiful being, and the virtues of the soul as rendering it a likeness of God, hence beau-

18. II. 6.

19. *Meditations*, III.

20 B. Leibniz, *Philosophical Writings*, London, 1934, p. 256.

21. *Science and the Modern World*, New York, 1925, p. 165.

tiful; and likeness to God as leading to the vision of God or union with Him²². Significantly, one of the first compilations by Byzantine theologians, that made in the fourth century from the Commentaries of Origen by Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen, was called *Philokalia* which means «dove (*philia*) of the beautiful (*kalon*)». And one of the last compilations bequeathed to posterity by the Byzantines, a monumental work of 1,207 folio pages containing selections from the writings of some thirty Eastern Orthodox Fathers, is also entitled *Philokalia*²³.

The word «spiritual» as used in this paper is based on the distinction of reality into higher and lower levels, as in the Divided Line of Plato²⁴. Spiritual reality is the highest level. To it belong God and man's highest physical activities and qualities. There are gradations within this level: God is superior to His creatures. Intuitive reason, conscience, qualities such as meekness, humility, inner unity, and love of God and neighbor belong to the level of spiritual reality. Discursive reason and its objects represent a lower level, while the senses, the imagination and their objects, as well as the ordinary, mundane feelings and desires, such as anger, malice, jealousy, bodily pleasure and pain, and the like, represent a still lower level.

In terms of beauty, a true icon is one that expresses spiritual beauty, rather than physical beauty. By spiritual beauty is meant the beauty of holiness. God is holy²⁵; and man becomes holy by attaining likeness to God through the acquisition of all the virtues. A full treatment of this subject would require a book. I shall limit myself, therefore, to a brief explanation of those virtues which the Greek Church Fathers of Byzantium especially stress, basing myself on their teaching. Specifically, I shall say something about the virtues of faith, meekness, humility, passionlessness, and love.

22. Thus, Gregory of Nyssa says: «This union of the soul with the incorruptible Deity can be accomplished in no other way but by herself attaining by her virgin state to the utmost purity possible — a state which, being like God, will enable her to grasp that to which it is like, while she places herself like a mirror beneath the purity of God, and moulds her own beauty at the touch and the sight of the Archetype of all beauty» (*A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. V, p. 356).

23. This work was probably compiled on Mount Athos towards the middle of the 15th century, but was first published in 1782 at Venice, after being edited by Macarios Notaras (1731-1805) and Nicodemos the Aghiorite (1749-1809).

24. *Republic*, VI, 509d-511e.

25. Lev. 11:44, 19:2, 20:7, 1 Peter 1:15-16, etc.

Faith is of two kinds: that which is based on hearing, and that which is based on inner perception. The first kind of faith consists in the free acceptance of the true dogmas concerning God and His creatures, both intelligible and sensible. It is possessed by all the orthodox. The second kind of faith is possessed only by those who have been illumined by Divine grace. It is called «substantial» (h y p o s t a t i k e) faith²⁶. When the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews defines faith as «the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen»²⁷, he is speaking of the second, higher order of faith. So is St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662), when he says: «Faith is knowledge that has undemonstrable principles, being the substance of things above reason and above speech»²⁸. The second kind of faith grows out of the first; it does not contradict, but confirms the first. Both orders of faith lift their possessors above the knowledge given by the physical senses and discursive reason; but the second is knowledge and not, like the first, mere belief. He who has risen to the second faith k n o w s, in part, the transcendent realm of mysteries; for he has s e e n, even though darkly, as through a glass²⁹. The circular, golden or ochre, halo around the head is the most striking means which the iconographer uses in order to symbolize the second type of faith. The halo is symbolic of the state of illumination, of higher knowledge, as well as of victory over death and of sanctity in general. Those who have only risen to the first order of faith are represented without the halo, but are distinguished from unbelievers by the trust and reverence which they show towards Christ and other sacred persons, expressed by their gaze, posture and gestures.

Out of faith grow meekness and the other virtues. Meekness is a habit of the soul that is characterized by freedom from anger and other forms of inner agitation, and is manifested in relation to all other men as steadfast gentleness. It remains unaffected by both insults and praises. The theologians of Byzantium extol this virtue, reminding us that the great Moses was meek above all other men; and that Jesus enjoins us to become imitators of His meekness. St. Mark the Ascetic (fl. 430) remarks: «He who is meek according to God is wiser than the wise;» and: «One's knowledge (of higher reality) is true to the extent that it is confirmed by meekness, humility, and love»³⁰. And St. Nilus (fl. 442)

26. See e. g. *Philokalia*, Athens, 1893, Vol. 2, pp. 435-436.

27. Heb. 11:1.

28. *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 268.

29. 1 Cor. 13:9-12, *Philokalia*, Vol. 2, p. 435.

30. *Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 67.

says that prayer—which is the highest form of inner activity, being a converse and union of man with God—«grows out of meekness and freedom from anger»³¹. Iconography expresses this virtue by depicting the faces and gestures of the sacred personages free from all agitation, calm. Even when they are represented in situations that we associate with inevitable anger and excitement, the saints have an expression of angerlessness and serenity. One notes this, for instance, in the depiction of St. George killing the dragon, St. Demetrius piercing Lyaius, and the holy martyrs in the midst of all the tortures to which they are subjected.

Closely related to meekness is humility. St. John Climacus asserts that meekness is a precondition of humility: «The morning light precedes the sun, and the precursor of all humility is meekness»³². Humility should not be confused with servility, which has nothing beautiful about it, being a form of cowardice. True humility is self-knowledge. A man is humble if he sees himself as he actually is and in relation to what he can and ought to become. One is humble if he is keenly aware of his shortcomings, of how far he falls short of Divine perfection. Humility in man is precisely this awareness become habitual and occasioning, on the one hand, a strong dissatisfaction with oneself, and on the other, a longing to rise towards the infinite perfection of God, according to Christ's precept: «Be ye perfect, as your Father who is in heaven is perfect»³³. Thus humility is a mode of self-transcendence, like faith and meekness; it is a rising above the natural to the Divine realm. Contained in true humility is a feeling of one's insufficiency, of one's unworthiness, of the need of Divine help and mercy in order to effect the ascent. Like the virtues of faith and meekness, humility is indicated in the icon by the facial expression, posture and gestures of the sacred person depicted. It is especially symbolized by the bowed head and body. Occasionally it is symbolized more strikingly by depicting the saint kneeling, as in the well-known mosaic in the Church of Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) at Constantinople that shows the Byzantine Emperor Leo VI the Philosopher kneeling at the feet of Christ, receiving from Him the investiture of holy wisdom.

Humility prepares one for the development and manifestation of passionlessness (apatheia). This virtue consists in freedom from all the passions. The term «passions» (pathe) in the Greek Patristic writings means not only such feelings as anger, greed, lust, and the like,

31. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

32. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, p. 186.

33. *Matt.* 5:48.

but also all vice, overt sin, and all bad or negative thoughts. Passionlessness is a result of a long and sustained process of purification effected by a life in accordance with the Divine commandments. Thus it is identical with purity (*katharotes*); and the Byzantines use the two terms interchangeably. In the order of acquisition, it comes after the virtues that we have mentioned—faith, meekness, humility—and others. In his *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, which embraces 30 steps leading to spiritual perfection, this virtue constitutes the 29th step; after it comes spiritual love, the highest of the virtues. It is because passionlessness is the net result of a multitude of virtues that John Climacus remarks: «The firmament has the stars for its beauty, and passionlessness has the virtues for its adornment»³⁴. The iconographer succeeds in expressing this virtue by avoiding everything in his sacred figures that suggests pettiness or moral weakness, and by endowing them with an air of solemnity, hieraticalness, and spiritual grandeur. The sacred personages usually look directly at the beholder with serene faces and wide open eyes that seek to hide nothing, but express great inner strength and complete self-mastery.

An accompaniment of passionlessness is the manifestation of spiritual love, which is «the last of the virtues in the order of acquisition, but the first in the order of value»³⁵, being «the fullness of the law of perfection according to Christ»³⁶. Love manifests itself at different levels: there is sensuous love—love of physical beauty and bodily pleasure, and of material things in general; psychical love—love of honor, fame, power; and spiritual love—love of God, in the first place, and of man as an image of God, in the second. More than any other virtue, spiritual love renders man a likeness of God and unites him with the Deity. The Greek Fathers often quote the statement of John the Theologian and Gospel-writer that «God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God»³⁷. Love of God is love of Him as the supreme, all-beautiful, all-good, all-perfect personal Being and the aspiration for union with Him by grace. This union is called *theosis*, «deification»; and is the final end for which man was created. The expression of this virtue in an icon is not effected by giving the figures a sugary facial expression or theatrical gestures. In an icon everything, including the expression of love, is characterized

34. P. 258.

35. *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 65.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

37. 1 John 4:16.

by solemnity, which arises from the feeling of awe towards God or reverence for God's image, man. One notes this even when two saints, such as the Apostles Paul and Peter, embrace each other. When the object of love is Christ, the saint who gazes at the God-man has the expression and gestures appropriate to worship.

Through the acquisition of all the virtues man becomes, as far as possible, a likeness of God, reflecting in his character and life the Archetypal beauty of the Deity. The acquisition of the virtues, of spiritual beauty, is not a matter of putting into the soul something totally absent from it, but of developing and manifesting the beauty already present in it, though in a potential and hidden state. According to the Book of Genesis, God created man «in His own image and likeness»³⁸. For the Byzantines this is not an empty formula, but a truth full of important implications for man. Thus, Gregory of Nyssa says: «God's perfect goodness is seen by His both bringing man into being from nothing, and fully supplying him with all gifts. But since the list of individual good gifts is a long one, it is out of the question to apprehend it numerically. The language of Scripture therefore expresses it concisely by a comprehensive phrase, in saying that man was made 'in the image of God'. For this is the same as to say that He made human nature participant in all good; for if the Deity is the fulness of good, and this is His image, then the image finds its resemblance to the Archetype in being filled with all good. Thus there is in us the principle of all excellence, all virtue and wisdom and every higher thing that we conceive»³⁹. Similarly, Abba Dorotheos (end of the 6th and beginning of the 7th centuries) remarks: «When God created man, he sowed in him the virtues; for he says: 'Let us make man in our own image and likeness»⁴⁰. Original sin, the Fall, did not result in the destruction of the divine image in man, of the reflection of the Archetypal beauty in the soul, but only in its suppression, its concealment in subconsciousness. Dorotheos stresses that «the seeds of virtue are never destroyed»⁴¹. When the suppressing factors—the passions, sin—are removed, the latent virtues are manifested again. Touching on this point, Athanasius the Great say: «When the soul gets rid of all the filth of sin which covers it and retains only the likeness of the

38. 1:26.

39. A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. V, p. 405.

40. *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 88, col. 1757.

41. *Ibid.*, col. 1745.

image in its purity, then surely this latter being thoroughly brightened, the soul beholds as in a mirror the Image of the Father, even the Word (L o g o s), and by His means reaches the idea of the Father, Whose Image the Savior is»⁴². Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa writes: When sin entered, «that godly beauty of the soul which was an imitation of the Archetypal Beauty, like fine steel blackened with the vicious rust, preserved no longer the glory of its familiar essence, but was disfigured with the ugliness of sin»⁴³. But «the earthly envelopment (of sin) once removed, the soul's beauty will again appear»⁴⁴. Hence we should exert ourselves «to clear away the filth of sin, and so cause the buried beauty of the soul to shine forth again»⁴⁵.

Now inasmuch as icons teach, remind, and arouse us to emulation of the sacred persons and deeds depicted, they help us «brighten» the divine image within us; they aid us in uncovering and manifesting the beauty of holiness. In other words, icons help man attain likeness to God.

Moreover, inasmuch as likeness to God is the final stage of spiritual development preceding t h e o s i s, icons aid man in achieving t h e o s i s, deification. T h e o s i s is union with God through grace, a participation in the perfection of God, in the Divine Life. That «likeness» to God is a necessary condition for union with Him is frequently asserted by the Eastern Church Fathers through the centuries. Thus, Antony the Great says: «Through likeness to God we become united with God; through unlikeness we are separated from God»⁴⁶. And Callistus Kataphygiotis (probably 12th century) remarks: «The supreme object of our aspiration is the supra-rational union of the soul with God; for this Divine union, likeness to God is necessary»⁴⁷. The everlasting abiding in t h e o s i s is called salvation (s o t e r i a). In the words of St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), the greatest of the Byzantine mystics and a strong believer in the value of icons for man's spiritual ascent, «salvation is deliverance from all evils and the eternal finding in God of all blessings»⁴⁸.

42. A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. IV, p. 22.

43. O p . c i t ., p. 357.

44. I b i d ., p. 358.

45. I b i d .

46. Philokalia, Vol. 1, p. 15.

47. I b i d ., Vol. 2, p. 467.

48. Dionysios Zagoraios, ed., Tou Hosiou Symeon tou Neou Theologou ta Heuriskomena («The Extant Works of Saint Symeon the New Theologian»), Syros, 1886, Part II, p. 24.

The function of the icon in this regard is based on the principle that «we become like that which we habitually contemplate». True icons focus the distracted, dispersed soul of man on the Divine and arouse in him the desire to emulate those who have achieved spiritual beauty. Byzantine iconography, which seeks to give symbolic expression to this beauty, is based on the proper respect for the supreme power of the impact of a man who is what he ought to be, for the moral transformation of those who have not advanced to this stage. It seeks to solve the problem of human regeneration by inciting the beholder to see more clearly Him whom to see is to love, and loving whom one become what He originally intended us to be.