

The Gospel through Beauty: Icons and Liturgical Art as a Key to Secular Europe¹

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My subject this afternoon is liturgical beauty and the role it can play in drawing people closer to Christ, both in worship and in mission. My own specialty is the creation of visual liturgical art – icons, frescoes, mosaics, and carvings – but the principles I discuss in relation to these apply also to church architecture and music.

I would like to discuss three areas. First, I hope to shed some light on how and why good liturgical art, although created for church worship, has, throughout history, proven so important for mission. Second, I aim to outline some principles of liturgical art as understood by the Orthodox Church. The liturgical art of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches has taken different directions over the last six hundred years, and both groups need to look at the reasons behind this divergence and learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses. Third, I will conclude with a discussion of some ways in which liturgical art can be improved in the future.

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***Part One:
Their Voice has Gone Out into All the World:
Liturgical Art and Mission***

As a full-time iconographer of the Orthodox Church for more than thirty years, I have had ample opportunity to observe the powerful effect that icons can have on people, non-Christians as well as believers. Icons somehow bypass many of the misconceptions and caricatures that people harbor about Christ and the Church. These holy images challenge and inspire the heart directly. They present us with faces rather than concepts or systems. For example, three years ago I painted a 9.5 meter (31 foot) high fresco of the Transfiguration on the east wall of a Catholic church in Leeds. This had been a plain white wall with a small cross. I returned to visit the parish a month after completing the work and was told by some parishioners that it had not only transformed their worship but had begun to draw many non-Christians to visit and attend services.

I have also noticed that being an icon painter has opened doors to speak about spiritual subjects in secular institutions. Through the common ground of art, I receive invitations from television and radio stations, art galleries, art clubs, ecology groups, and even the British Library. It is impossible to explain in these talks why icons are painted the way they are and how they are used without speaking about union with God, about the cross and resurrection, about transfiguration, about paradise lost and rediscovered. The iconographic tradition has much to say not just about art and theology, but also about ecology and the nature of the human person. Just last week, I was filmed for a documentary for BBC television on the history of the portrait, in which I spoke about the relationship between the human face and the person, and how people are fulfilled in relationship, not in isolation. The same producer had filmed me a few years before for a program on the history of colour and its spiritual symbolism.

The important point to make here is that the meeting ground for these invitations has been the material stuff of icons – not words or ideas in isolation, but material objects fa-

shioned to reflect divine realities. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual” (1 Cor. 15:46). And St. John of Damascus echoes this: “Just as we physically listen to perceptible words in order to understand spiritual things, so also by using bodily sight we reach spiritual contemplation.”² What led to these invitations to speak was a recognition of the special quality of icons and a desire to know what lies behind them. Even people who do not find icons attractive recognize that they reflect a different vision of the world, and this provokes their curiosity.

From Art to Faces

Another characteristic of icons that makes it possible to speak openly about Christianity within secular institutions is that, besides being beautiful objects, icons also present the viewers with faces and therefore with people. Icons express how Christian faith is *personal*, leading believers into a living relationship with Christ, the saints, and the angels. The other liturgical arts are equally relational. They exist not primarily to give aesthetic pleasure, but within the context of relationship; they are a gift of love from man to God and a revelation of God to man. Liturgical art is adornment, a garment, but it is a garment worn by the Church, the Body of Christ. When we look at the beauty of this raiment, we find that we are looking at Christ, since the adornment points us to the person.

The presence of icons in a church, especially as wall paintings, helps to communicate Christianity as a community of relationships and not merely a moral system or philosophy. The mystery of the human person’s destiny is too great to be contained within systems. I recall from my two year sojourn at Iviron Monastery on Mount Athos that Archimandrite Vasileios, then abbot, used to say that he was Orthodox because Orthodoxy took him beyond Orthodoxy; he asserted that the human soul cannot be satisfied by any system, any “ism” or “oxy” or ideology, but only with the Spirit of God. Life in

² St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), 72.