

Sunday of Orthodoxy 2023

Jesus said things, as did Moses and the prophets. Is it NECESSARY that our faith include a book in which they are written down, or is that just an optional add-on to our personal relationship with Jesus? After all, at no time in Jesus's earthly ministry does he tell anyone to write down anything, and the only thing he wrote – the words written in the dust while the woman caught in adultery stood before him – was not recorded. Why do all Christians insist that it is NECESSARY that our faith include a book? Where did we get that idea? Did we just make it up?

And where did we get the contents of that book? Where did the Table of Contents of your Bible come from? It's not anywhere in the Bible – it's an addition to the Bible. Why do we all believe that it is NECESSARY that that book contain certain material? Did we just make it up?

Or is there something about the way God deals with humans that makes it NECESSARY that we receive revelation and grace from him in a certain way, the way he chooses to reveal himself? Does God's self-revelation have specific content, regardless of what we want? Is our salvation from death and sin simply a matter of our own predilections, or must we submit to God to be saved?

Jesus was a real, flesh-and-blood human and also God, the second Person of the Trinity. God is love. Is it NECESSARY that we love the God who is love? Is it NECESSARY that our love extend to kissing him? If you saw with your eyes the God who personifies love, how would you express your love? Just standing – or worse, sitting – there waiting for him to leave so you can get on with your day? Or would your love move you to DO something? What does a healthy human DO in the presence of love incarnate?

If we actually saw the flesh-and-blood Jesus, the second Person of the Godhead standing in front of us – is it NECESSARY – is it part of being a healthy human – that we venerate him? How would or should we do that? Or do we just nod and go on with our day?

If we knew he was leaving – ascending in glory – or after that ascension, would or should we depict him so that we can continue to see with our eyes and show love by our actions to the one who is supremely loveable, to continue to venerate the one who is venerable? Is it sufficient to just have an idea of his humanity and his see-able and touch-able flesh-and-blood reality, or is it normative that we would depict the God who became flesh for our salvation, and lovingly venerate those depictions?

If he had been incarnate in 2022, we would have pictures of him. Cell phones would have been out and videos would be circulated. We would treasure those pictures, those images, a year later, decades and centuries later. Would that be wrong?

Would it be wrong to accord veneration to those images after he ascended to his Father? Would or should those images be treated differently from our Snapchat or Instagram posting of our cat's latest cute thing? Would we take special steps to protect and honor those images? Would we put them in a place of honor and stop to reflect on their deep meaning? Or just vaguely keep them in mind?

Icons make present to us God in Jesus and his grace – his self-revealing energies. Creating those images in faithful representation of him requires reception of his grace and in itself expresses love and honor. Respectfully and lovingly venerating those images of God who is love, and is the Creator and Master of all is the healthy response of healthy humans. Teaching the loving veneration of icons is a duty of the Body of Christ, the Church.

Icons are more than just pictures; they are doctrinal statements, expressing the created reality with regards to their subject, but also, more importantly and more fundamentally, the theological reality with regards to their subject. They make present to us God incarnate, in the person of Jesus and those who faithfully present his divine life.

Icons are not photorealistic, but they are true to the created reality – Jesus was a human male who was born and matured thru normal human developmental stages until his crucifixion at age 33, so he is depicted as (a) a male human, never a Zebra or a woman; and (b) a baby, an adolescent and as a man, but never as an old man, because he died at 33.

But icons are also and more importantly true to the theological reality – he was both fully God and fully man, for example, so he is depicted wearing both blue and red clothing, but with the blue over the red, to show that he was both God (blue is the color of the divine and ethereal) and man (red is the color of humanity, the color of blood). But while he was both divine and human, his divinity was the primary or overarching reality and his humanity a second or subsidiary reality. He was fully human, but intentionally submitted his human nature to the energies of the divine nature. The Theotokos, on the other hand, is depicted as wearing red over blue to show that her humanity was her primary reality and her participation in the divine life was a second reality as she submitted her humanity to the divine life at the Annunciation.

Sometimes the theological truth dominates the physical reality so as to make the image difficult to understand without proper teaching, as in the icon of the twelve-year-old Christ in the temple teaching the high priests and scribes. In some icons, his head is enormous, not because he actually had a huge head, but because our head is the seat of our wisdom, and the feast of Mid-Pentecost, when this icon is presented for our veneration, is the feast of Christ the Wisdom of God. The size of Jesus's head is out of proportion to the size of his body to emphasize that in him is the fulness of the wisdom of God.

We must be properly instructed and catechized to know the reality of the mystery we hold. As St. Peter said, "no prophesy of scripture is of private interpretation." (II Peter 2:10) As St. Paul said, "the Church is the pillar and foundation of the truth." (II Tim. 3:15) With regard to the Holy Scriptures, as with the veneration of icons and all the truths of the Christian faith, without proper instruction, the Christian faith can be difficult to understand and can devolve into fantasy or worse – heresy. Nothing we believe is correctly held or

comprehended without proper catechism, in submission to the Body of Christ and His wisdom.

Our Mother the Church has not left us to our own devices. As a good mother, she instructs us in what is necessary for our life, and what is damaging or damnable.

So what is the truth about icons? Today we celebrate their restoration. But why did we develop them in the first place? Are they just an attempt to syncretize, to bring into the Church the idolatry of the pagans? Are icons just "Christian idols" that we worship instead of pagan idols? Or is there something else going on? Why would Christians who would die rather than engage in idolatry also be willing to die to protect the veneration of icons?

Icons have been painted or "written" since the earliest days of the Church. St. Luke painted the first icons of Jesus and his mother the Theotokos. But the very first icon was made by Jesus himself, when he pressed the image of his face onto the "holy napkin," the icon "not made by hands." He pressed a cloth against his face and an indelible image remained; this icon adorns most Orthodox Churches (but unfortunately, not ours ... not yet!).

Iconography is rooted in the Old Testament. Moses was commanded to build and adorn the tabernacle of the Jewish worship of YAHWEH according to the revelation he received while communing with God on Mount Sinai. (Heb. 8:5) Moses was commanded to create two golden cherubim to adorn the Most Holy Place, overshadowing the Ark of the Covenant. The tabernacle was also adorned with images of pomegranates and other objects, making present to the people the goodness of God in his creation. Iconography is not a new thing, but a fulfillment of God's revelation to his people.

Icons are not simply pictures. Icons convey the grace of God. They can only properly be written or painted by persons who know the God whose grace their icon conveys. And iconographers are not free to change the norms for icons. Jesus cannot be depicted in flip-flops, pink shorts and a rainbow T-shirt. The standards for iconography protect the faithful, by making sure that the making-present of the eternal truths that icons make present faithfully makes present the verity of those eternal truths.

We worship only God, but because God became incarnate as a man, we can depict his humanity and his holy actions and venerate what those depictions reveal to us. Further, icons of Jesus make present to us the glory of the eternal God. (II Cor. 4:6) We can also depict the ways that he has extended his energies to us in grace-filled manifestations through the persons of the saints and in the holy days commemorated by the Church, and we can venerate those who are and that which is worthy of veneration. We can and should – must, even – honor those He has honored and that which He has done.

The fathers of the Church always insisted that we worship God (*latreia*) but we extend to the saints veneration (*proskynisis*). The original Greek does not always make the distinction between “*latreia*” and “*proskynisis*,” which why you will hear in some hymns and prayers that we “worship” the saints or icons, but the teaching of the Church is explicit that our veneration of the saints and icons is “relative veneration” or “relative worship,” while our worship of God is “absolute.”

Our devotion offered to the icons “passes through” the icon to its prototype or archetype, the person(s) or grace-filled event depicted. It is not offered to the wood and paint, the cloth of the priest’s vestment, the Church wall or the metal of the holy vessel. And if the prototype or archetype is not Jesus himself, the veneration that passes through the icon then passes through the prototype or archetype to God – because the saints would never accept veneration of their own person, but always point the people offering them devotion to God and his grace. The Theotokos, chief of the saints, is almost always depicted presenting Christ for worship. Veneration of the icons of saints and feasts is thus “relatively relative” or “doubly relative”; our worship passes through to the icon to its prototype and through the prototype to God. We worship only God.

We reverence the Old Testament Saints primarily because they resisted idolatry, polytheism and syncretism, and insisted on the worship of the One True God and him alone. We reverence the New Testament Saints because they lived the divine life, either in their life or at their death, as in the martyr saints, and thus showed us the way to the divine life. When we reverence the icon of a saint, we reverence the reality

of the eternal God that they make present to us in a multitude of ways: refusing to bow to idols, defending the just and rising up against injustice, proclaiming the truth of God, faithfully shepherding their flock in the face of apparently insuperable odds, and most often, being willing to die rather than to compromise with the spirit of the age.

Icons make God present to us. God is love. God is supremely worthy of honor. When we see that which is lovable, that which is honorable, how should we respond?

Healthy humans love that which is lovable. We return love when we receive it. “This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us.” (I Jn 4:10) When we stand before Jesus, who is God, who is Love, we find ourselves being loved, and we love him back like healthy humans return love. We kiss him.

Healthy humans honor that which is honorable. When we see God in Jesus, or reflected in his saints, we honor them because that’s what healthy humans do, and what God commands (Rom 13:7) – and if we love Jesus, we keep his commandments (Jn. 14:15).

Veneration of icons is distinct from idolatry in its essence – they are actually opposites. While the icon itself is nothing without its prototype or archetype, the idol is an independent reality. Icons project the grace of God into our world; idols project human will into the supernatural. An icon makes present the grace of God shown in persons or holy feasts or salvific events for our salvation, and thus its veneration is a means whereby we humble ourselves before the grace of God and allow him to use us for the accomplishment of his will in our world; idol-worship is an attempt to subject supernatural beings (demons) to human will and by them to project human will into the human world. When we venerate an icon, our faith meets with the grace of God in a synergistic salvific symphony; when an idol is worshipped the veneration passes to a demon to enslave it – and while demons might feign submission to human will, they will always and inevitably subject the worshipper to themselves, while the God we worship humbly and patiently waits for our freely-given love and service.

Kissing and venerating icons is a natural, necessary and integral part of our faith, “a necessary consequence of

the Christian faith in the incarnation of the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity,” Jesus Christ. They have a sacramental character, conveying grace to us. They teach the faithful by showing us the Jesus that we worship, and his saints and his grace-filled acts in our world. By their theological content, they provide us (as does Holy Scripture) with an objective and unvarying presentation of the content of our faith. They are one of the guarantors of our personal little-O orthodoxy, our personal congruence with the true teaching and true worship that is big-O Orthodoxy. They protect our faith.

Because Christianity is the worship of the incarnate God in Jesus Christ, veneration of icons is inseparable from Christianity. Orthodoxy is not “Christianity plus” ... icons, and vestments, and Liturgy, and ancient hymnody, and hierarchy, and everything we Orthodox find normative. In all its fulness, Orthodoxy is simply normative Christianity.

Christianity is not just “my personal relationship with Jesus, plus the Bible” and whatever we think is right and makes us feel special or fulfilled – believing in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, like my wife’s parents, or denying that real presence, like my parents; liturgy, like my immediate family, or spontaneous worship, like my parents and the rest of my family; championing homosexual marriage, like my cousin the auxiliary bishop, or decrying it as sin, like my parents. What a mess! Thankfully, we can find the truth. True worship and the true teaching of Christianity are correctly expressed in Orthodoxy.

We don’t judge our brothers and sisters whose faith is apparently (and probably very much really, but we don’t judge) apparently living and active without the fulness of Orthodoxy, but neither do we water down our faith or apologize for it to make others comfortable. In all its fulness, Orthodoxy is normative Christianity.

This is why we celebrate the restoration of the icons. Without them, as without the Scriptures, the Liturgy, the Ecumenical Councils, and all the guarantees of the indefectibility of our Faith, we would be floundering in a sea of subjectivity, buffeted by every wind of doctrine and the spirit of the age. Icons are precious, and necessary to true worship and true faith. This is why countless martyrs died rather than surrender their icons. This is why we publicly proclaim to the world the

restoration of the icons as the re-establishment of the true faith of Christians. And that’s why we process, because the Christian faith is not just something we treasure and keep safe, but something we proclaim and share.

Glory to Jesus Christ.