

Principles of Hagiography that is Holy image (icon) making or Iconography and analysis of the icon of the All Holy mother of Jesus (father Konstantinos Stratigopoulos)

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The following text is the written edition of the introductory session of the Theology of Orthodox icons of the workshop on icon making, given, on Friday, November 4th, 2005, by father Konstantinos Stratigopoulos, vicar of the Church of Dormition of the Holy Metropolis of Glyfada, Attica, Greece.

Lesson 1st

Principles of *Hagiography* that is Holy image (icon) making or Iconography and analysis of the icon of the All Holy mother of Jesus.



In the beginning of our lessons and we will start with a twenty minute session that we will specify as Theology of Icons because Icon Theology is very essential for us in order to know how to create the holy images. We do not simply describe the events and impress them in a subjective manner from our own intellectual and artistic ability and experience. Every line that is made and drawn here has a Theology because the icon unfolds all the theology of the Church Fathers.

Our Church, for the possibility of studying the events that arise from the experience of the Divine Economy has the Holy Bible that tells us about the events, has the Church Fathers that interpret the events, has the Hymns that also interpret the events - the hymns are an interpretation of the texts of the Bible - and has the icons that are also an interpretation through graphic art. Therefore in order for us to interpret, as the Church Fathers do in order to interpret the Holy Bible, the iconographer must be an illuminated person, participating in the events of the Church and knowing the holy Bible.

Iconography is a teaching of a specific expression (“language”) that is the “language” of the Holy Bible. Thus the icon painter must know the hermeneutics of the Church in all the events in order from him to reflect in the painting the theology that is reflected in the Bible and the Church Fathers. Hence no one can take and describe the events with his own imagination. You will notice this in the course of our lessons that each line, each expression - many elements are indeed dogmatic - are unchangeable. You cannot change the doctrine. And here on these icons we always engrave and impress the doctrine. And in the doctrine nobody intervenes. You will see this along the way and you will understand this, and I personally consider this the most important part of these inaugural courses, because if you simply learn a technique without knowing the deeper theology, you will do nothing. You will simply reciprocate on “how to do it”, “this way or that way”, or you will become imitators and icon copiers and nothing else.

After we begin the theology today for first time, I will tell you some very basic principles of the icons, to simply remember them, in order to have them in your mind as a general structural element, and on these general principles we will build the further foundations for what is called theology of the icon.

The first basic principle of the icon, an essential basic principle is that the icon, any icon expresses events in two dimensions, never in three dimensions. In two dimensions. During the early years of the first Church there were some sculptures and bas-reliefs that were gradually abandoned and abolished. And this is a theology. On the contrary in the Roman Catholic Church as you can see, sculptures remained. In our Church they were completely suppressed for reasons deeply theological and deeply essential for the event of which the

faithful functions (experiences) in front of the icon. As you see when I say two dimensions, I have height and width, I do not have depth and perspective drawing.

Of course, in an hagiographical technique one could also make depth, by drawing what is called a vanishing and reference point anywhere on the horizon and based on that point, have the events in front of it appear larger, and events that he has behind of it appear smaller. Even if the icon has a multiple events expressed theme, and is descriptive of them - and there are many themes that could be central or background -the balance of forward-backward, small or large is overthrown. Here as you see we have the event of the Nativity of Christ, a multiple event related icon. We are not interested in having perspective in the icon. We must necessary have only height and width, never depth. Why do we adopt this irregular parameter since a rational art technique tells me to have depth so I can see the events better?

The three dimensions in the classical sense, so to speak, of the Euclidean geometrical space, not considering other dimensions like time, but height, width and depth in the three-dimensional geometry are something very real and very existent but are self sufficient meaning that something that has height, width and depth is self sufficient, it does not need something else. It is definitely an object, visible from any side. If somebody stands in front of the icon and sees only height and width and does not see depth the icon invites him to understand that the icon is incomplete. See carefully. Why is it incomplete? What is absent? The depth. This happens for the observer to understand that he himself who stands in front of the icon is the missing depth. The icon is neither a museum event nor an art event. It is an event that invites me to participate in the pictured happenings. An event of prayer.

The believer who stands in front of the icon and feels the absence of depth, becomes himself the depth. That is to say, instead the depth being behind the pictured events, the depth is me or I become the third dimension by standing in front of the icon. It is a very important principle, a fundamental principle which cannot be explained with the means of reasonable interpretation thinking of Western icon studiers, who say that it is a nice art but it is inadequate, because it is lacking depth. But we do not make art for art, we

make art for the prayer.

It is a reductive art, interpretive of the text as I mentioned and simultaneously reductive. This means that Christ will participate in the events and will fulfill the missing depth by His presence in the front of the icon. Hence we do not like having icons in the museums, for the visitors simply to observe them. Icons are for churches where someone stands in front of and prays to the icon. And someone can become sanctified in front of the icon. We often say that there are sanctified icons and one icon gives off myrrh which scents. How did the icon sanctify? For two reasons.

The first reason is that the iconographer that made the icon could have been a Saint. And the icon itself became sanctified. The second reason is that in front of the icon many people became sanctified. Tears, sorrow, repentance and that icon became more sanctified. These are the sanctified icons. The wood itself has no such properties but people are the cause of the sanctified properties on objects. As you see we have the shadow of Peter, the cloth of Christ did healings, the mantle of prophet Elijah, the chains of St. Peter all did miracles. What were these? They were objects that receive sanctification from the sanctified person. Alone an object is not capable of anything. Therefore this was the first basic principle of the cancellation of the third-dimensional space and the engagement of the third dimension on the person that participates into these events.

A second principle which appears thunderously enough on this Nativity icon - soon after I will mention a few more words on the Nativity icon although its events are multifold, and I will get into more detail next time - has to do with the description of the events.

As you see all events are described here. We have the All Holy mother, Christ, the angels who are descending, some shepherds who observe the events, Joseph who is thinking if he should keep the all holy mother or not, the three wise men who are coming, a lot of events that happened diachronically in a icon. We do not describe things like the sequence in cartoons. All the

diachronic events gather here at once. Therefore the icon has as a second principle the principle of the cancellation of time and the surpassing of time. In the Church time is cancelled and everything becomes eternity.

What do we say during Easter Holy week: «Today is hung upon the cross, He who suspended the earth amid the waters», or during Christmas: «Today is born from the Virgin...».

How do they mean «Today»? It means elimination and surpassing of time and they assume that every event is done today, all events are together. There are a couple of icons that show this. Let me mention one so you can understand how this happens. It is the icon of Ascension of Christ, forty days after His resurrection. Here you see the All Holy mother up front and the Apostles all around. That is how the events took place. Angels descended. He ascended with the angels to the heavens. Fine up to here. However this icon could be considered absurd for the events within it. Up front here is apostle Paul, who apostle Paul at the time of the Ascension was not even a Christian. If you read the texts of the Acts of the Apostles where the story of the Ascension is described, it is in the first chapter of the Acts. Apostle Paul sees the light in Damascus and repents in the 9th chapter. Hence the icon here is un historical. Apostle Paul seems not to «have business» in the Ascension. However for us he has a purpose.

Since he repented he gains the previous time. He is present in time. He who repents gains the previous time. You see this is an elimination of time. We have more such icons that describe such events that surpass time. And this is a very important principle. We do not say «Paul wasn't there». He was, since he repented.

Another very basic principle is that the images do not have shadows. On the ground here we do not have shadows or under shade. No shade. Why aren't there any shadows? Shadows exist. Wherever there is a source of light. Light comes from the source and leaves a shadow on the ceiling, a shadow on the street, the shadow of the lamp. There is a source of light from where light

comes from. If the light is everywhere, if the light comes from all quarters, and it comes from everywhere, there can be no shadow, the shadow is deleted. All is light.

And in the icon we express all as light. Simply there are just a few folds in clothing but in the icon all are light. We never draw shadows or under shade because it is a condition where it removes the concept of the kingdom of heaven. The light in which the images are embedded, especially the icons that are on wood is shown with gold. Gold expresses this light and of course on the walls and frescoes, because gold cannot be applied easily, other colors are used, but specifically for its application on wood it states the existence of no shadow and that light comes from everywhere. This light is the light of the kingdom of God the uncreated light. This was another essential principle that concerned the shadow and the light and how it is outpoured on the icons.

And another key principle - although I can not say why.... -I am necessarily condensing these principles in order for you to have an initial understanding of these courses of the theology of the icon - is that the saints, any of the saints described on the icon are viewed in portrait with facial characteristics visible. The facial view does not always mean as this, as Christ is here, who sees in the person.

See below the Apostles being side portraits. Here there are side portraits but in all figures both eyes appear visible. We call it side depiction. The icon never displays a side profile. It can be a slightly side depiction or front depiction and we always say that we see the icon "in person".

The face is never eliminated and because of its theological meaning that we will see God «face to face».

Face or «Prosopon» means pros-opa, that is "Towards-the eyes". To the Eyes. «Opa» are the eyes. Prosopon (Person) is the look towards prosopon, that is

to the face and eyes. And the Saints see God person to person at the limits that they are capable of doing so. We will talk about these facts in other icons, as St Paul writes about the «face to face» experience, but certainly there are some exceptions.

I would sincerely point some a few exceptions in some elements of certain pictures. I do not know why, I will always say in some pictures you will see it and say why is this person drawn profile. Theofanis, the Cretan the great iconmaker has done some icon representations where some personalities are drawn profile. I do not know why. I cannot understand it. But the theology of the icons always requires the face depiction to be with both eyes visible. «pros-opa» with eyes appearing.. We will study how this is portrayed on drawings. What we went through today were some very general principles for the theology of the icons. With these we will slowly describe all the icons in the following lessons. At least up to March when during the first twenty minutes of the lesson we will do theology of the icon you will see many details and very in depth theology that will motivate you in theological study, if you want to seriously icon paint correctly.

We had discussed that it is the study of the Scripture, the Fathers of Church and hymns that reflect the theology of the icon. When you listen to a hymn that is theology. Someone has studied the event and theologized on the event. Tomorrow's chant of the Saint. It is not simply a description of his life. It is the theology of his life. And here as we said it is a theology which is made through the word of the Scripture and of painting. Lets examine for a few only minutes the icon of the Nativity of our Christ. We will look into some elements. Notice that it is a well known icon to us. Let's look at some key events in the picture. In the center there is the cave where Christ was born, and in the background is darkness.

Let me remind that never in iconmaking we portray evil, say the devil, we never do. Even darkness here is a small exception to show what prophet Isaiah says, that Christ was born where «the region and shadow of death» existed (Isaiah 9, 2). Never portray darkness. There are a lot of icons with darkness where icon makers do not know theology. For example St. Marina with a small demon. We never portray evil. It is completely wrong because we

draw anything created by God that is enhypostasized not the unhypostasized.

The devil is unhypostasized. Be aware that unhypostasized does not mean that it does not exist. It is another thing to say that I exist, I am a being and another that I have hypostasis. It differs much. I do not say “the devil does not exist”. I said that the devil is unhypostasized. Very substantial difference if you know Greek. It is the theology of the Fathers of the Church.

Unhypostasized means that God made no such forms. The devil was an angel.

God made the hypostasis of the angel. He did not make hypostasis of the devil. Because God is author of good only. He does not make bad things. Exercising free will the devil wanted to become unhypostasized. He is existent but Unhypostasized. Be cautious and learn the meanings of the Greek language used. Hence as a creation the devil does not exist. He was an angel where within his nature and essence he remains an angel who distorted his angelic nature. This is the Unhypostasis. We therefore never paint the Unhypostasis. Nor scenes of horror etc. Never...

This is very basic in icon making and we never make icons of persons that we did not see. The saints all appeared. They were revealed. In the icon of the Holy Trinity we will see that the Father is not portrayed. We have never seen the father. We have seen the son and we portray him. We have seen the Holy Spirit as a pigeon or as light and we paint it. We have not seen the Father and we do not portray him. There is not an icon of the Holy Trinity where you will see the Father with a beard. It is an incorrect icon and it is an icon theologically Unhypostasized because the Father has never been revealed. In this icon we have the darkness, «the darkness and the shadow of death» is described of which prophet Isaiah speaks about. Inside the cave there are two animals. A donkey and an ox. Two animals.

Why not choose other animals, as Christmas cards choose and in order to be charming they put bunnies and whatever else a child would like, perhaps a dinosaur. The Bible stands only on these two animals because these are the two animals that Prophet Isaiah and prophet Micah referred to, when they prophesized the event of the Nativity. Both prophets refer to two animals in between which Christ will be born.

«In the midst of two animals make known» (Habbak 3, 2) says prophet Micah and Isaiah and determining the animals they say «The ox knows his owner, and the donkey his master's crib; but Israel doesn't know, my people don't consider» (Isaiah 1, 3). Notice he says ox and donkey. What does this mean? With the perspective of the hermeneutics of our Church fathers initially they mean the irrational animals, the irrational in humans. There are two kinds of irrationality regarding humans.

There are the Christians of Judaic descent and the Christians of Gentile descent. Who knelt to Christ? The Jews who had met Christ a little earlier due to the revelation made to them and after them the Gentile Christians. They are two categories. The ones from gentiles and the ones from Jews. Both are irrational however. Both the Jews met him and crucified him and the gentiles did not know him at the time. They are always two animals in the cave that will remain two animals.

Nothing else. One who would dare to do something different alters the Bible. Some minor details may change as sparingly permitted. Some color clothing.

Nothing else. But never the key elements. For example no changes with Christ who is in this area, in the manger where he is placed. This you will portray in this certain way. Nothing else. Neither a bed nor any other clothes.

Both are theological and dogmatic elements. Christ wears these clothes because precisely he comes in order to be crucified and die for us. This feast of Christmas is not a stand-alone feast. The feast of Christmas has a meaning if what is taking place leads to an event of salvation for humanity. It is a great event when God becomes man but this isn't enough for salvation. Hades, the dominion of death, must be abolished. This is why in the orthodox world the feast of feasts is Easter. In the West it is Christmas. Easter there is a feast quite undervalued. In the orthodox church the great event of the Nativity of Christ functions to serve the Resurrection, the work of the salvation of man.

Thus this child that is born now prepares to be crucified and die for us. And he shows the taking of death upon him with the linen burial shroud that he is wrapped with in the manger. It is the linen burial shroud that Christ was wrapped with at the time of his deposition when he was taken to the tomb. It is the burial shroud that the myrrh bearing women found wrapped in the tomb. In the Nativity icon he is the child destined to die for us. For this for dogmatic reasons you cannot put on Christ any other clothes, but the clothes of him who is preparing to die and resurrect. Simultaneously the bed which he is put is a tomb. It is the tomb in which Christ entered in order to resurrect. It is not any bed. That is why when we see any other romantic picture and say what a nice picture it is theologically wrong.

This theology has moved away completely from the methodology of space depiction in existent iconography in Roman Catholicism. Protestants do not have Hagiography, they have some icons on stained glass windows. A need for them to portray something. Examining Christ's manger as his future tomb, we have entered events deeply theological. I will analyze this icon next time. Finishing only with a fact which we will also see in the next icon picture that we will analyze after the Nativity which is the Annunciation is in the icon of the All Holy mother.

Whenever the All Holy Mother is portrayed she must always have, always on her head and two shoulders three small stars. These stars have eight rays each. This is a dogmatic element and no one can change it. Dogmatic are the 8 rays and the quantity three. The three determines the dogmatic perpetual virginity of the All Holy. Perpetual virginity means that she was virgin before she gave birth, during birth and after birth. Before, during and afterwards.

This expresses perpetual virginity [aeiparthenia]. How is "perpetual"? It is pre, at and after. Perpetuality of virginity is expressed via the three stars and it is essential that it is declared to indicate that this is not any woman, it is the woman who is always perpetual virgin. And simultaneously the stars are with eight beams. This is not by chance because you cannot draw an asterisk with five or six rays or with three rays because the All Holy inaugurates the work of the mystery of the eighth day of creation. God created the world in six days. There he ended his work. If you take the first chapter of the book of Genesis, «And the evening and the morning were the first day»... «And the evening and the morning were the second day»...«And the evening and the morning were the third day»...and the days close. Finally He creates man and

says «And the evening and the morning were the sixth day». And creation ends. The seventh day as you all very well know is described in the second chapter of Genesis which says «And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made».

He ended on the seventh day. If you search the entire Bible there is no verse mentioning that the seventh day ends somewhere like saying «And the evening and the morning were the seventh day». The seventh day is still present. It is the day we live today. We live in the seventh day of Creation. This is why this day remain open. But during the seventh day man failed to become what God prepared him to become.

And God forgiving man's failure inaugurates the eighth day, where the eighth day is the work of the divine economy and in this work participates the All Holy mother. Living in this world today we are living in the seventh day of creation as a failed world and simultaneously if we live in the Church we experience also the 8th day of creation.

After the second coming we will have only the 8th day of creation. Whoever has courage he can do in the future reading on these elements. Saint Maximos the Confessor very early in the 6th - 7th century describes very deeply the mystery of 8th day. As you see here we have depiction of theology. But we do not say a lot of things. Here exist unimaginable secrets as you see. It is much more difficult to «read» this than to read Maximos the Confessor. Maximos states the theology clearly. Here you should you know Maximos in order to understand this fact.

I brought you to some keys and secrets of the mystery of the theology of the icon. We will do this for all years' lessons in order for you to enter this deep expression of orthodoxy for hagiographers. Without the theology you cannot make anything.

The Orthodox should be theologians and this is not a matter of an academic diploma. It is a matter of personal involvement in the events and of course personal cleansing and illumination. It is not a matter of technique. In the distant past icon makers in order to make icons they fasted many days, did a lot of prayers, made an appealing and began the work. If you want to learn something here in this tradition, or anything you are preparing to draw you will do it with fasting and prayer. You will do prayer for the events in order for you to participate in an interbeing manner with the events (αλληλοπεριχώρηση). When icon portray the Saint, you meet and know the Saint the Saint, and this becomes a spiritual interbeing experience. Read the life of the Saint. Learn the chants of the Saint. This is not a technique. It is Church life expressed in a work or process of art making. For this reason iconography has the possibility of evolving and increasing. «Increase» does not mean I make new methods for hagiography. It means the ability to express this theology in a deeper sense. In Church nothing remains static and dormant. «Increase» is achieved by people that are illuminated and the grace of the Holy Spirit gives the ability to «Increase». It is not my own idea of making a modern school of iconographical methods. If you study the diachronic course of hagiography you will see an increase without noticing difference in the key theological elements. You will understand though a later from a previous work. Notice for example the Serbian school of Hagiography that comes after the two basic Schools of Panselinos and Theophanes. They remain with the tradition but they introduce another deeper variety without changing the theology, the icon, the balances, and it is a very deep “increase” of the icon which is of a later period because the Holy Spirit always gives «increase» to people.

Question: Who are the gentiles and who are the Jews? With which animal is each group portrayed?

Answer: With the ox the Christian Jews and the Church Fathers say that the Gentile Christians are depicted with a donkey...The more irrational of the two. It does not have much importance.