Sacred Art

 ***“Before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified.” Galatians 3:1***

By Ossama R. Ekladious

1. **The Biblical Parameters**
	1. Some believers object to the use of icons in worship because of the 2nd Commandment.
		* “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them . . .” Exodus 20:4&5
	2. Do icons come under the category of graven images?
		* Let’s look back to historical, Biblical times.
	3. ***Biblical Imagery:***
		1. God commanded Moses to build a tabernacle a few chapters after giving the 10 Commandments:
			* “Moreover you shall make the tabernacle with 10 curtains woven of fine linen thread, and blue & purple & scarlet yarn; with artistic designs of the Cherubim you shall weave them.”
		2. With respect to the Ark of the Covenant, the Lord instructed Moses to have 2 Cherubim of hammered gold at the ends of the mercy seat. God said, “And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the 2 Cherubim which are on the Ark of the Testimony.” Exodus 25:22
		3. God also instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, so “that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.” Numbers 21:8
		4. When Solomon built the Temple, he made two cherubim of olive wood, each ten cubits high, inside the inner sanctuary. Their wings were stretched from one end of a wall to the other end, and he overlaid the cherubim with gold (I Kings 6:23-29).
		5. Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple reveals that its walls were carved with cherubim and palm trees all around (Ezekiel 41:18-20).
	4. A recently unearthed synagogue of the last few centuries before Christ has paintings of biblical scenes on its walls.
2. **Icons and Our Faith**
	1. What does the 2nd Commandment mean by “graven image?”
		1. A “graven image” is an idol, an image created to be worshipped as a god.
		2. We do not worship the icon itself; we venerate the image that it represents.
		3. There are *two classifications of images*:
			1. True or appropriate image: an image of the true God, His Angels, His Saints, etc.
			2. False or inappropriate image: an image created to be worshiped as a god, or an image of what’s invisible.
	2. With the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God became man; therefore, we may draw His likeness.
		1. During the times of the 10 Commandments, God had not incarnated yet, becoming man. Therefore, it wasn’t appropriate to draw His likeness because no one had seen Him.
		2. St. John of Damascus says, “When you contemplate God becoming man, then you may depict Him clothed in human form. When the invisible One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw His likeness.”
		3. His incarnation revealed Himself in and through material creation. And, material creation thus sanctified must be allowed to reveal Him.
	3. Icons illustrate sermons.
		1. “A picture is worth a 1,000 words.” (Old Chinese adage)
		2. We use icons to illustrate the Gospel of Christ itself.
		3. Icons become for us windows to heaven, revealing the glory of God. They bring a revelation, a manifestation of the unseen heavenly host of Angels, Saints, and Martyrs – even the eternal saving events – into our presence.
3. **Imagery in Early Christianity**
	1. Christians in the very early years of the Church used such symbols as the cross, the fish, the peacock, the shepherd, and the dove.
	2. Early Christian tombs and catacombs bear paintings which are representations of Biblical scenes.
	3. Eusebius, the 4th century Church historian, tells us that:
		1. Outside the house of the woman in the Gospel with a hemorrhage cured by Christ was “a bronze statue of a woman kneeling in front of Christ with His hand stretched out to the woman.
		2. Portraits of the Savior and of Peter and Paul have been preserved, and that he had examined these with his own eyes.
	4. St. Gregory of Nyssa (4th Century) tells of being deeply moved by an icon of the sacrifice of Isaac: “I have seen a painted representation of this passion and have never passed by without shedding tears, for art brings the story vividly to the eyes.”
	5. Saint Gregory Nazianzen wrote about the persecution of Christians by the cruel Emperor Julian the Apostate saying, “The images venerated in public places still bear scars of that plaque.”
		* From this, we can surmise that icons were venerated in the earliest centuries of the Church.
4. **Worshipping Versus Venerating**
	1. Worship is reserved only for God.
	2. “To venerate” means to regard with reverential respect or with admiration.
		1. For example, your feelings about the Bible as the word of God.
		2. Or, your feelings about a Saint.
	3. When we honor an icon of one of the Saints by bowing before it, kissing it, or saying a prayer before it, we are focusing upon the godly example of that Saint and upon following that example.
	4. Icons engage the human eye in the worship and adoration of God. Saint John of Damascus summarizes this as follows:
		1. “I do not adore the creation rather than the Creator, but I adore the One Who became a creature, Who was formed as I was, Who clothed Himself in creation without weakening or departing from His divinity, that He might raise our nature in glory and make us partakers of His divine nature . . .”
		2. “Therefore I boldly draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes by partaking of flesh and blood. I do not draw an image of the immortal Godhead, but I paint the image of God who became visible in the flesh, for it is impossible to make a representation of a spirit, how much more impossible is it to depict the God Who gives life to the spirit?”
	5. In A.D. 787, the 7th Ecumenical Council of the Chalcedonian Churches, after a thorough and lengthy examination of the Holy Scriptures and Tradition, condemned the heresy of forbidding the use of icons (iconoclasm) and upheld their use in Churches, homes, and waysides, on vestments and sacred vessels, etc.
5. **On Holiness**
	1. God alone is Holy; creatures are holy only in a derivative sense.
		1. Sacred in this world is never such by its own nature but always by participation in what is Sacred.
		2. “Holiness” implies being set apart, belonging to God.
		3. “Sanctification” of a thing or a person means being purified and returned to its original state, reoriented toward its authentic destiny to permit the Holy God to dwell in it and to shine forth.
		4. Examples:
			* 1. The Ark of the Covenant was holy because of God’s presence.
				2. The Scriptures are holy because they contain Christ’s presence in His word.
				3. Every Church is holy because God dwells there.
				4. Angels are holy because they live in God’s light and reflect it.
				5. Every baptized and confirmed person is holy because he’s sealed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
	2. Therefore, everything is potentially sacred when it comes in contact with what is Holy.
		* For example: water, oil, icons, bread & wine
6. **Writing the Icon**
	1. A book is an icon written with words, just as an icon tells us a story depicted in lines and colors.
	2. Who can write an icon?

Not every person; the following are qualifications for an iconographer:

* + 1. An active member of the Church
		2. Living a spiritual life
		3. Possesses Theological knowledge
		4. A skilled artist (secondary importance)
	1. Monks have traditionally filled the role of icon-writers.
	2. Rules for writing icons:
		1. The icon must include the worshipper in its subject.
			1. The holy one must face the worshipper, looking directly at him.
			2. The parallel lines of any object in the icon must never meet at the horizon; this gives the sense that the holy one is ever with us.
		2. The halo must radiate from within the face of the saint.
			1. The light radiates from within the saint.
			2. The Saint became a temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwells within him.
			3. Compare this with the halos in Catholic pictures, which are like discs suspended above the head
		3. The holy one is depicted as victorious and joyful, never as weak or full of pain.
		4. The background must always be gilded with gold.
			1. The Saint is now in a state of glory.
			2. It encourages us to struggle in order to obtain such glory.
		5. There must never be any unnecessary lines or colors to distract the worshipper.
			+ The sole purpose of the icon is to lead the observer to a deeper understanding of the Church’s teachings.
1. **An Example: The Icon of St. Anthony, the Great**

****

* 1. The Saint’s eyes are wide.
		1. It penetrates beyond seeing the world, awaiting the kingdom of heaven.
		2. It shows his perseverance without laziness.
		3. St. Athanasius tells us that his face was full of glory.
	2. His white beard shows:
		1. The dignity of an elder
		2. The wisdom of an elder
	3. The tip of his thumb touches the tip of his ring finger.
		1. The number 10 in Coptic and Greek represents the letter “I” for I/couc (Jesus), or “J” in English for “Jesus.”
		2. St. Anthony discovered that “the name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runs to it and is safe.” Proverb 18:10
	4. The Skema is a leather girdle that forms a cross on the front and back, indicating a high monastic rank.
	5. St. Anthony holds a Tau cross; the Tau cross on which our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified is our only support to affect our salvation.
	6. The long scroll
		1. Has these words written on it: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”
		2. This Biblical verse was the motto for the Saint’s life.
		3. The scroll is long because the saint’s career was long and full of battles, starting at age 19.
	7. The icon shows the cave where the Saint battled the devils.
	8. The icon shows St. Anthony meeting St. Paul and humbly asking for each others’ blessings.
	9. The icon shows three palm trees and a water spring
		1. The number three always represents the Holy Trinity.
		2. They show that the desert turned into heaven with the Saint’s presence.
		3. God supported Saint Anthony with these; God also will support all His children.
	10. The raven, popular for stealing food, is now serving the Saint.
	11. The lions dug the grave for St. Paula’s body.
		+ **All creation returns to its original state and starts to serve and submit to man when man submits to the Lord.**
1. **References Used:**
	1. **The Holy Bible,** Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1997
	2. **Understanding the Icon of Saint Anthony the Great,** Fr. Antonious L. Henein, Holy Virgin Mary Coptic Orthodox Church, 1993
	3. **The Art of the Icon: a theology of beauty,** Paul Evdokimov, Oakwood Publications, 1990
	4. **No Graven Image,** Jack N. Sparks, Ph.D., Conciliar Press, 1987

**v v v**