

ICONS AND THE MYSTERY OF THE FACE

How image and word affirm communion and transformation¹

Introduction

First, I would like to thank those who have invited me to give this talk: St Marys College; Sterling Yates of the St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology; and Natalia Nikitin for introducing me to them in the first place.

Our subject this morning is *ICONS AND THE MYSTERY OF THE FACE: How image and word affirm communion and transformation*. Christian tradition affirms that mankind is made in the image of the Holy Trinity. The plural used in the sentence, 'Let us make man in our image,' has been understood by many Church fathers as an adumbration of the Holy Trinity. St Irenaeus, for example, writes that:

*[Man]... was formed after the likeness of God and moulded by His hands, that is, by the Son and the Holy Spirit.*²

We are therefore not made in the image of a monad but of the divine community of the Holy Trinity. Relationship, 'the communion of the saints', is therefore central to being in God's image and therefore to being fully human. In this talk I want to explore how icons assist this restoration of face-to-face relationship between human persons and between God and mankind. Not to have images in our churches is literally to de-face Christ and his Church. Without faces, the Christian faith falls from communion and degenerates into a mere system.

The soul that is perfectly illuminated by the ineffable beauty of the glory of the light of Christ, and is made one spirit with the Lord, becomes all light, all eye, all face.
(St. Macarius the Great, Homily I.2)

We will also explore this morning how icons affirm that the vocation of each person is not just to follow Christ, but to be transfigured by Him, to become a 'partaker of the divine nature' in the phrase of the Apostle Peter. In the words of St Athanasius the Great: 'God became man so that man might become god by grace.'³

The words for face in both Greek and Latin, *prosopon* and *persona*, also mean person. Our face is both the organ of relationship and the epitome of our person. Each person's existence is affirmed by being looked at, by being regarded, by knowing that they are seen. I was recently interviewed for a podcast called Sunny Banana, a quirky title you might think. Its creator, Jarrod Taylor, explained that it comes from the Zulu greeting *sani bonani*, which

¹ A talk given at St Andrews University, St Mary's College, 2 May 2025.

² Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, IV, 20, Section 1.

³ *On the Incarnation*, 54.3.

means literally 'I see you,' to which the reply is, 'I see you too'; so much said is so few words! Insanity and mental illness results from not being noticed, not being seen, from being ignored as though you did not exist. To be forgotten is to be in an eternally dark room in which people can neither see nor be seen, while heaven is where we see one another in all our glory. Heaven is the place of unveiled faces:

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Corinthians 3.18)

This afternoon I want to speak to you about three faces in icons: the face of God; the face of the individual human person; and the face of the Church.

FACES

1.The face of God

The Old Testament is full of prayers beseeching God not to turn his face from his people. As long as God looked at them, they lived. And yet, before the incarnation, man was not able to see the face of God. When Moses asked God to see his glory, the Lord replied:

'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence...But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.' (Exodus 33.19,20)

The Old Testament is therefore full of stories of partial revelations, of glimpses of the Lord. Holy men and women were able to see only 'the back parts of God', the hem of his garment, or hear his still small voice but not see his face. But in Christ we can now behold the face of God, for the person or hypostasis of Christ is not that of a man, but of the Logos, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. We can now behold the face of God because this Logos has united himself to our material humanity and thereby become visible.

The incarnation was the primary defence of icons given by Church fathers against the iconoclasm that swept the eastern Roman empire 726 to 787, and again 814 to 842. John of Damascus wrote:

Of old, God the incorporeal and formless was never depicted, but now that God has been seen in the flesh and has associated with humankind, I depict what I have seen of God.⁴

⁴ John of Damascus. 2003. *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*. Translated by Andrew Louth. Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1.16

This is one reason why Moses and Elijah were present at Christ's Transfiguration; under the Old Covenant they had only partial encounters with God, but on Mount Tabor they see him face to face. Moses was hid in the cleft of a rock before God passed by, and he saw only 'the back parts of God', and Elijah heard only God's 'still small voice' as he stood at the mouth of his cave. But now, on Mount Tabor, these prophets see God's face in the incarnate Word. This is why many icons show two caves below the prophets. Because God has become flesh and therefore visible, these prophets can now leave the cleft and the cave and behold God face to face. This is why some icons show the caves filled with light in the form of gold leaf.

The primacy of the incarnation also explains the importance that the icon tradition gives to the Mandylion image of Christ's face, also called the icon 'Not Made by Human Hands', or *Acheiropoieton* in Greek. The tradition of the Mandylion is that Christ pressed a napkin (*mandilion* in Greek) to his face and miraculously imprinted his image onto it. He then gave this napkin to the emissary of King Abgar of Edessa, along with a letter promising that he would send one of his disciples to the king after the ascension.⁵

As both 'not made' and a perfect image, the *Acheiropoieton* is a play on the Biblical text: 'the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation (*χαρακτήρ/xaraktir*) of his being' (Heb 1.3). Christ is the perfect and uncreated image of the Father. As affirmed in the Creed, the Son of God is not created, but is 'begotten, not made'; he is the 'not made' and perfect image of the Father.

The way that the icon tradition paints the face of Christ tells us much about the nature of God. One of the first things people notice about icon faces is their combination of sadness and joy. Although he is the source of all joy and hope, Christ also co-suffers or 'compassions' with us in our sorrows. Well-painted icons therefore combine the warmth of a gentle smile with sadness in the eyes.

Within Christ's halo, which symbolises his divinity, there is always a cross. God himself enters our suffering and death so that he can 'conquer death by death'. In Christ as *theanthropos* or God-man, God co-suffers with us.

In a sort of fractal image within an image, inside the cross which in turn is inside the halo we often find written the name of God, ὁ ὢν. Its literal meaning is 'the being', or 'the one who is'. This is the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew *Ehyeh* (Yahweh), which is God's name as revealed to Moses in Exodus 3.14: 'I am the one who is / I am the being', or in the Hebrew, 'I am who I am'. So this man, Jesus of Nazareth, is none other than the God who

⁵ The story of the miraculous image appears quite late, the first mention being by Evagrius Scolasticus in his *Ecclesiastical History* written 593. However, its historical veracity is of no importance; it is a graphic illustration of a theological truth.

spoke of old to the prophets and appeared in diverse and veiled ways throughout the Old Covenant.

2.The face of saints

We have icons of Christ, but we also have icons of saints. The human person is a profound mystery. Have you ever looked at people as they walk by, or watched them seated and talking, and realised that you are beholding little gods, mysteries of infinite depth and great possibilities, creatures made by the King of Glory, people with histories like no other being has ever had? Each one of these persons is an endangered species, called to become what they are before they depart this life. Though created, they are in the image of the uncreated. They are infinities within a finite. Each of these persons is of such value that God would have become incarnate and suffered, died, and rose just for them alone.

Over the centuries the icon tradition has developed ways of suggesting this mystery of the person. When an iconographer paints eyes, for example, instead of making the whites of the eyes all white, we first apply a dark base, then around the iris add a little umber and white still leaving much of the dark untouched. We then finish with a final crescent or two of pure white highlight. So why the dark when the whites of eyes should be white? Because the icon invites the viewer to look into the mysterious depths of the saint, to look into their soul through their eyes. The saint contemplates us with loving attention, but we also contemplate them. This invitation to patient contemplation and communion explains why icons lack violent gestures, sudden contrasts, distracting ornamentation. Like gentle lighting in a frescoed church, the sobriety of icons helps create an inner stillness that facilitates contemplation of mysteries.

In our secular culture we have forgotten the *nous*, that all important faculty of the heart whereby we may know things in an unmediated way, as it were, from the inside out. The fourteenth-century hesychast St Gregory of Palamas calls the *nous* 'the eye of the heart'. When purified and illuminated by the Holy Spirit, St Gregory says, the *nous* knows things as they are rather than as a conglomeration of facts, something to which the rational faculty is limited.

Icons paint people and all creation as seen with this noetic eye as well as with the eye of the body. Like any good portraitist, the iconographer attempts to do some justice to the character and inner state of their subject as well as to their outer likeness. We will of course always fall short of this mystery, but we can at least suggest the existence of this profundity.

I have spent time with some saints: Fr Sophrony of Essex monastery, Fr Porphyrios of Athens, and St Paissius of Mount Athos. Each in their own way spoke from another land, from the paradise of the heart. If I asked questions from the brain, they would answer to and from the heart. They saw and spoke from the *nous*. Their gaze penetrated behind my stumbling attempts to explain and to ask direction. They consequently spoke to the space behind my words, and therefore needed to answer with only a few apposite words.

Icons express this quality of listening a lot and speaking little but thereby saying a lot. They usually enlarge the organs of reception, most notably the eyes, while moderating the means of expression such as the lips and gestures.

Novices to icons often perceive the saints' faces as distant, lacking in expression and sad. This restraint actually denotes *apatheia*, a state in which the person is not violently moved by emotions and can therefore listen to others dispassionately. This silence and attentiveness creates a fragrant space into which people may enter and talk freely. Like a monastery or a flower, the saint doesn't rush outwards into the world, but just is, and people are drawn to their nectar.

The saint is one who looks outwards towards God and his fellow brothers and sisters. Such a person has become 'outside the old man' in a sort of life-giving death to self. In the words of the great sixth-century ascetic of the desert, St Barsanuphios of Gaza:

For already as many as have drunk of the Well of Wisdom have forgotten themselves, becoming all outside the old man, and from the well of wisdom they have been guided to another well, of love which never fails. And coming to this rank, they have attained the unwandering measure, becoming all mind, all eye, all living, all light, all perfect, all gods. They have toiled, they have been magnified, they have been glorified, they have been clarified, they have lived since they died.

I believe the only way of this fellowship of the saints, to become all eye, is through icons of the fellowship. We can read about them as past figures, admire them at a distance, but to know them in the present we need to see their faces. Iconography is the world of faces and therefore of communion.

3.The face of the Church

Although individual panel paintings are currently the best-known form of iconography, the fullest expression of the icon tradition is the whole church interior covered with frescos or mosaics. This multitude of figures and faces make the church building—itsself profoundly symbolic—a single icon of the Body of Christ, an image of the heavenly city.

In the case of a domed church, Christ the Pantocrator is depicted in the dome, as the head of the whole body, or like the conductor of an orchestra. Below him are depicted the first created beings, the angels, and then the Old Testament prophets. Then in the squinches we have the four Evangelists, the Gospel writers. On the upper walls and barrel vaults we see scenes of the life of Christ. Around the lower regions are standing saints, and in the very bottom to the floor we often find the inanimate world represented, as marble revetments or painted cloth or stone.

In the womb-like apse is shown the Mother of God who bore the Logos into the world. On the half cylinder below might be depicted the Last supper, called the Apostles' Communion in the Orthodox Church, and sometimes also concelebrating hierarchs. Either side of triumphal

arch we often find the Annunciation, with Gabriel and Mary conversing across the actual space of the sanctuary.

Not only are the material adornments and furnishings part of this single icon; so also are the rituals enacted within it, and the words sung or spoken. All these give the temple a face. Liturgical art transforms the building from being a mere protective shelter against the elements, into a garment for the Body of Christ. And this garment follows the form of the body that wears it.

There are essentially two main types of church design, the basilican and the 'domed cross in square'. The basilica is historically the first, being an adaptation of a pre-existing Roman civil building. It is linear and culminates in the apse and triumphal arch. The second type is the predominate church type in eastern Christendom. Though it draws on some pre-existing elements of secular architecture, the domed church design was developed specifically for Christian use. It has a richer complex of shapes and dynamism than the basilica. It shares the horizontal western/eastern axis with the basilica, but to this adds a vertical element, the descent from the dome, down through the 'womb' of the apse, and on into the sanctuary and its altar.

The domed church and its iconography is designed to lead the faithful from west towards the east through stages of initiation into the deeper mysteries of the faith.

Early churches, until around the 10th century, tended have a colonnaded courtyard at the west end. This mediated between the street and the church interior. With a fountain or phiali in the centre it was a place of preparation and cleansing. Beyond this one entered the narthex, a dark space often covered with images of ascetics since it was the place of repentance and purification.

We then enter the nave, which is paradise and a foretaste of the New Jerusalem. It is cubic, representing the earth, but it is also surmounted by a dome, which represents heaven and the divine, so this is a deified and deifying place. In the early Church only the baptised were allowed to remain here during the Liturgy proper, since only they could receive Holy Communion and only they were fully fledged citizens of the New Jerusalem. Christ is depicted in the highest place, on the dome. He is the Tree of Life, the source of the life-giving spring, the conductor of the cosmic orchestra. In the nave the faithful are surrounded by depictions of the heavenly host and by the ranks of saints from throughout the ages. The division of death has been overcome; those in heaven and those on earth are united as a single assembly. In the words of letter to the Hebrews:

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant... (Hebrews 12.22-24).

The architectural and figurative iconography of an Orthodox church embody this city and make it manifest lest this fellowship of the saints degenerates from being a lived experience to just an idea and hope.

Further the east and beyond the chancel screen is the heavenly sanctuary from which blessings flow to us in paradise, and to which we offer the fruits of our labours. Through sacred ritual there is a continuous flow to and from the sanctuary, of offering and being offered.

All this is the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem as seen by the Apostle John and described in the book of Revelation, chapters 1, 21, and 22. For all its richness and diversity, this city is single. It is the body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills all in all:

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Ephesians 1.22, 23)

I must mention here that this city does not only include God, humans and angels, but also the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms. This cosmic dimension of the Church is reflected in iconography. Borders and carved capitals often sport beautiful vegetative designs. You might see peacocks and dragons, and perhaps the lion who dug St Mary of Egypt's grave. In more affluent churches, splendid book-matched-marble panels might adorn the lower walls, while simulated paint versions might adorn lower budget temples. Nothing is without meaning or merely decorative; all is a theophany and therefore has a face, as though each thing has a card attached with the message: 'From God with love.'

If we have ecological crisis, it is ultimately because we have not treated the world in this way, as a theophany, and not lived in it as its prophets, priests and royal artists. Instead, we have treated the world as though it were a bank with endless resources, to be drawn upon at will. We have stripped cosmos of its face and it has become for us instead an ATM machine. A richly adorned church inspired by the Church's theology is a powerful way of offering an alternative Christ-centred cosmology.

DEIFICATION

Mankind's intended state

We come now to our second theme, transformation. Throughout the Scriptures runs the image of God as light and of man mingling with God as light. Church Fathers have given this union with God various names: deification; mystical theology; union; theosis; transfiguration. It is a union in which Creator and creature retain their distinctiveness. They are united through a synergy of wills and mankind's participation in the divine-human body of Christ. A patristic analogy sometimes used is that of iron in the fire: as long as the iron remains in the fire it glows with the heat of the fire, and so the heat and iron appear as one. However, if withdrawn the iron and fire separate again and the iron returns to its cold state.

This theosis is central to the icon tradition, for the saints that icons depict are in this 'natural supernatural' condition of man. Being surrounded by icons day in day out reminds the faithful that deification is the end to which they are all called. This state of union with God through love is to be more than merely a well-ordered human; it is to become a human aflame with the Holy Spirit. It is why the church's weeks are determined from Pentecost. The descent of the Spirit is the birth of the new man, the theanthropic body of Christ. This union of uncreated light with created matter informs everything about the icon tradition: the way the paint or the mosaic tesserae are applied; how trees and mountains are portrayed; how matter is honoured in the Church's liturgy... the list goes on.

The Old Testament gives many glimpses of this deification. After communing with God on Sinai, Moses' face shone with the shekinah glory so much that he had to veil his face so as not to terrify the people.

In the New Testament we have of course Christ's transfiguration. Orthodox hymns on the transfiguration tell us that it not only affirmed Christ's divinity but also revealed that he has returned our human nature to its intended glory: He 'made Adam's darkened image to shine again', and 'in his own person he showed them the nature of man, arrayed in the original beauty of the image.' This is possible because the Second Person of the Trinity united himself eternally to our human nature.

And we have the explicit reference from the Apostle Peter in 2 Peter 1.3, 4:

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

The key phrase here is to 'participate in the divine nature'. The *koinonoi* of the original Greek here translated as participate also means commune, implying that this theosis is the fruit of a willingly chosen union, initiated by God through the incarnation and responded to by each person.

Patristic and ascetic writings frequently return to union with God as the proper end of mankind. St Irenaeus write that 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, of his boundless love, became what we are that he might make us what he himself is.' (*Against Heresies*, V) . Numerous writers have described this divine deifying grace as light, glory, and beauty. The great monk of the desert, St Macarius of Egypt (c.300-391) wrote that:

The soul that is perfectly illuminated by the ineffable beauty of the glory of the light of Christ and is made one spirit with the Lord, becomes all light, all eye, all face. (St. Macarius the Great, Homily I.2)

How the icon assists deification

It what ways does this teaching on deification affect the icon tradition? There are manifold expressions, so I would like to speak to just three aspects. These concern not just the panel icon in isolation, but the Orthodox Church's liturgical art in general. These expressions are: church architecture as symbol and pilgrimage site; aesthetics and repentance ; church lighting as an icon.

1.Church architecture as icon

A church building is not a mere shell. It participates in the transfiguration process and supports the worshippers in their journey towards it. It participates in the transformation process because, like a panel icon, it is the result of humans transforming raw materials like stone and wood into a more articulate hymn of praise to the Creator. It is a prayer from man to God offered not in words but in transformed matter. It is a Psalm written in solid matter rather than in words.

A church temple is not only an offering from mankind to God; it is also a revelation in matter from God to mankind. Like the Old Testament tent of meeting, its lineaments are not a matter for human invention, but of revelation. This is why God gave very specific instructions to Moses about the tent of meeting; it needed to reflect heavenly realities, realities which only God knew.

A temple is not just a static symbol. It is also a place of action. It is where the people of God liturgize, where they work, for the Greek word **λειτουργία (leitourgia)** means the public work of citizens. It is a holy space which both reflects and supports mankind's journey towards union with God. It is a holy mountain that is the ground for an ongoing ascent of ascetic struggle to reach the summit, where transfiguration occurs. It is also a mountain of descent, where the faithful are sent back out into the world to give the grace they received at the summit. This is of course the meaning of the word mass: *Ite, missa est*; 'Go forth, the dismissal is made'. Mission is derived from the same root, *mittere*.

A typical temple of the Orthodox Church is centrally domed. In it we can determine a number of liturgical rhythms which have theological significance, and which aid the faithful in their journey forwards.

First, there is the journey from west towards east, from separation towards union with God. The narthex is the first space. This is the place of purification. Here are found depictions of ascetics, people who have struggled against sin and won the battle.

Next is the nave. This is essentially a cube that represents the earth, surmounted by a dome that represents heaven. So the nave is the promised land, it is paradise, where God and man commune. In paradise there was also the Tree of Life, and so still further east is the sanctuary and the altar. The altar is the Tree of Life, the potential for man's deification. Man

is not able to climb up to God to gain this deification; God must come down, and so he becomes for us the Body and Blood of God incarnate.

At this point we need to introduce the vertical axis of the domed church. In the dome, above the centre of the nave, is an image of the Pantocrator, a word which means both 'The All Powerful' and 'He who holds all things'. But God does not remain a mere spectator seated in heaven, looking down upon his wandering people. Throughout the Old Testament he reveals himself to all people inasmuch as they can bear it. To the Jewish people he comes through angels and the prophets, who are depicted in the drum under the dome.

And then at the right time, wishing to unite man to himself, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity becomes flesh. St. Maximus the Confessor in fact taught that the Incarnation was the ultimate goal of creation, saying that 'the Word of God, who is God, wills always and in all things to accomplish the mystery of His embodiment.' He and some other Church Fathers, such as St Irenaeus of Lyons, had the *theologoumen* or informed theological opinion that there would have been an incarnation even if there had not been a fall.

At any rate, the hypostasis or person of the Logos unites his divine nature to our human nature. God becomes man through the Virgin Mary. The Mother of God is therefore usually depicted in the apse, which is like the womb of the church.

Christ then lives upon earth, teaching, healing, revealing his divinity through his miracles and signs. He is crucified. He rises, ascends to heaven, and sends the Holy Spirit. All these events are depicted in fresco or mosaic in the rest of the church, in the barrel vaults and walls.

All this work by Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit produces saints, so along the bottom tier of the church walls are depicted holy people. They are deified human beings who dwell together in the city of God and with whom the faithful join in worship at every service. We can say that the movement is upwards as well as downwards. Paul the Silentiary describes Hagia Sophia in such a way, as a series of arches upon arches: *'As you direct your gaze towards the eastern arches, you behold a never-ceasing wonder. And upon all of them, above this covering of many curves, there rises, as it were, another arch borne on air'*. It is a sort of eros for the divine that culminates in the central dome, which he describes as *'the divine head-piece of the centre of the church.'*

Plants, animals and the inanimate creation are part of this verdant New Jerusalem, and so they also are depicted in the church's iconography, such as in window reveals, decorative borders, carved capitals and icon screens.

2. Aesthetics and repentance

We have seen how the church architecture and its iconography do not merely depict or symbolise past events, but support people in their personal road to union with God. So it is

with each image. The form or style of icons as well as their subject matter is designed to awaken the viewer to a new way of seeing. They demand something. The icon tradition is not so much interested in imitating beauty, as in making the praying viewer beautiful. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means literally a change of *nous*. *Nous* is often translated as mind or intellect, but this is too easily misunderstood as the brain. The Makarian homilies refer to the *nous* as the 'eye of the heart', and the masterly glossary to the English translation of the *Philokalia* describes it thus:

[The nous is the] highest faculty of man, through which—provided it is purified—he knows God or the inner essences or principles [logoi] of created things by means of direct apprehension or spiritual perception...The intellect dwells in the 'depths of the soul'; it constitutes the innermost aspect of the heart...The intellect is the organ of contemplation. (The Philokalia, Vol. 4, Faber, 1995, p. 432)

We act as we see. The way we see God, people, and all creation will determine how we act towards them. A change of how we act is instigated by a change of how we see. Here is where prolonged exposure to sacred imagery can have a profound effect; it can even have an immediate effect on first encounter.

Let us consider a few of the icon's stylistic elements that aid this transformation of vision.

Bright sadness

The visage of saints in icons is usually a union of sadness and joy. This state is called *harmolipi* in Greek, a joyful sorrow, a bright sadness. Why this touch of sadness in those dwelling in the joy of heaven? Though joyful, the saints in heaven continue to be with those on earth as they struggle and suffer. They co-suffer, com-passion with us. The interiority that this demeanour reflects is also a mark of sobriety, of a permanent state of joy and knowledge rather than a fleeting feeling of happiness.

The unattractive in the service of the beautiful

Icons sometimes draw the unattractive into the service of the beautiful. The limbs of John the Baptist are emaciated, or the body of St Mary of Egypt is withered. In this way the icon shows that asceticism, training, and effort are required to become beautiful. The cross comes before the resurrection.

Perspective

Most art history writing has presumed that linear vanishing point perspective is the most advanced form of artistic perspective; all others are primitive. By contrast, the icon tradition considers limited and crude this mathematical system in which all lines converge on a single point on the horizon. Both psychologically and spiritually it does not accord with reality. First, we don't experience things in this fixed way. We move, changing our view point. Also, the raw retinal information that our brains receive is modified by what we already know about the object of our vision.

Spiritually, the icon tradition views and projects the world not just with the physical eye but with the nous, the eye of the heart. To do this it uses up to six different forms of perspective.

1. Flatness

Icons do not attempt to create a great sense of depth. While they use enough highlighting and perspective to affirm that the material world is real and good and part of the spiritual life, things are kept somewhat more on a plane than in naturalistic painting. In a group icon, like that of Pentecost for example, people in the rear will be shown the same size, or sometimes even larger, than those closer. Every person is thus kept on an intimate level with the viewer. The mystery of the person overcomes the limits of physical space and distance. Depth perspective becomes almost redundant.

Flatness also helps the viewer to pass through the icon to the persons and the events depicted. The aim of the icon is not to replace the subject depicted, but to bring us into living relationship with them. In the words of St Basil the Great, and quoted in the Seventh Ecumenical Council: 'the honour given to the image passes to the prototype.' This explains why statues are not as a rule used in the icon tradition; their three-dimensionality can make them too self-contained and 'opaque'. Where sculpture is utilized, it is kept to base relief.

Flatness can also be seen as an intentional weakness, a deliberate imperfection that constantly reminds us that this image is not the reality but a door to its prototype. It is perhaps the visual equivalent of apophatic theology, saying that this image is unlike its prototype as well as like it. There is also an honesty in this flatness. There is no attempt to make the picture plane what it can never be, a three-dimensional object, let alone the real thing itself. This honesty to the picture plane is what inspired the American art movement of the Colour Field painting in the 1940's and 1950's.

Planarity also gives much greater freedom to arrange things according to their spiritual importance rather than being limited to their position on the axis of depth. The figures within the icon of Christ's birth, for example, are often arranged in three bands to represent the heavenly, earthly and unitary realms, but also in a circle around the Christ child. This symbolic arrangement would not be possible if the event were depicted naturalistically, with figures receding toward the distance.

2. Inverse perspective.

With inverse perspective the lines of a building do not converge at a point on the horizon, inside the painting, but instead they converge on the viewer. This invites the viewer into the event or into the presence of the one depicted.

Inverse perspective also gives us the sense that the persons depicted are looking out at us. It is as though the image is drawn not from our own point of view but from theirs, and ultimately, from God's vantage. We have already discussed the meaning of repentance as a

change of seeing. We could also explain it as a change of perspective, where we realize that we are not the centre of the universe, but God.

Inverse perspective also draws to our attention to the real space between the image and ourselves, especially the liturgical space which is the icon's proper home. Iconography is above all a liturgical art, designed to be part of a larger sacred dance that involves the church building, the space within the building, the hymns sung within it, the liturgical movements during services, and so on. As Gervase Mathews puts it:

In the Renaissance system of perspective the picture is conceived as a window opening on to a space beyond...The Byzantine mosaic or picture opens onto the space before it. The 'picture space' of Byzantine art was primarily that of the church or palace room in which it was placed, since art was considered a function of architecture.⁶

The emphasis is on the grace coming to us through real space, as it were, rather than us being drawn into an imaginary or reconstructed scene within the picture.

3. Multi-view perspective

Sometimes a building is shown as though viewed simultaneously from left and right, below and above. This multi-view perspective helps the viewer to see things as God sees them. It also acknowledges how things are in themselves and not merely as they appear from our single viewpoint, limited as that is in space.

The same multi-view perspective is sometimes applied to time, where the same person is depicted more than once in the same image, such as with Christ in the Nativity icon. The icon tradition can also place an important person in an event at which they were not historically present, but in which they later came to participate spiritually. Events are shown from the view of divine time (*kairos* in Greek) and not merely chronological time (*kronos*). One example is Saint Paul in the Pentecost icon. He was not even a believer at the time but later came to be great among the apostles and a pillar of the Church together with Peter, who is shown opposite him.

4. Isometry

In isometry the sides and edges of an object are depicted parallel, neither converging nor diverging. This affirms how a thing is in itself, rather than how it appears to us. All things have been called into unity in Christ, and this unity preserves and strengthens the integrity of each thing, rather than reducing everything to a bland sameness. Unity presupposes relationship which in turn presupposes otherness and difference, though not separateness.

5. Hierarchical perspective

⁶ Gervase Mathew, "Byzantine Aesthetics", (John Murray, London, 1963), page 30.

Often a personage who is more important than others is enlarged. A typical example of this is the Virgin in the Nativity icon. Conversely someone might be made particularly small to make a spiritual point. The Christ Child is often depicted thus in Nativity icons, to emphasize God's humility in becoming man for our sakes.

6. Mathematical vanishing point perspective

Although inverse perspective is more commonly used, we do also find instances where lines converge toward a point in the icon's distance. However, this is not pursued in the systematic, mathematical way devised first by the Renaissance painter, architect and sculptor Alberti Brunelleschi. In fact, when this system is used you are likely to find as many convergence points as there are objects. This in itself transports the viewer out of the static vantage point assumed by mathematical perspective, and presupposes instead a much more dynamic experience

3. Lighting as an icon

I was a novice monk for twelve years, two of which were spent in training at Iviron Monastery on Mount Athos, followed by six as a hermit on the hills of Shropshire. The many hundreds of hours spent in church services and night vigils proved to me the importance to liturgy of lighting, how its proper use supports inner prayer and the rhythms of the liturgy. Conversely, my observation of many over-lit parish churches has shown how insensitive and excessive lighting can distract from prayer.

Liturgical lighting is more than just the need to see where we are going. The fact that Orthodox worship does not require everyone in the congregation to have a service book frees us to use light liturgically.

Firstly, light is profoundly iconic. As we have seen, Scriptures, hymns and patristic writings often associate the Holy with light.

Second, lighting can create (or destroy) a prayerful atmosphere. A well-designed church controls the degree of natural lighting that it allows into the interior. A wise placement, size and material of windows creates an atmosphere conducive to compunction and attention. Traditional Orthodox churches, for example, tend to have most of the light come from high up windows, in the drum that supports the dome, for example. This gives the sense of uncreated light coming from heaven and diffusing everywhere, rather than sourced from only one direction and from the created sun. This lack of low windows also this means that the congregation is not distracted by what is happening outside.

Thirdly, most Byzantine churches have low ambient light. This assists various things.

1. Gentle lighting helps create a sense of interiority, an inner quietness and concentration. On entering a church with low ambient light one is immediately reminded that one is entering a different space, a temenos, a holy space, and. One feels a descent from the brain into the heart. Just as silent awe is the language of the

soul, so is low light the language of the *nous*. This low lighting, with no or minimum electric lighting, sets the scene in particular for the liturgical drama of night vigils. One Greek word perfectly describes the experience one has in such vigils: ‘κατανυκτικό’ (kataniktiko). It describes something that deeply affects the emotions or inspires a sense of awe, wonder and prayer, and this is usually experienced in night or early morning services.

2. Low ambient light allows emphasis on the icons of the saints and angels. Without competition from surrounding light, the pinpricks of oil lamp flame illuminate just the faces of the saints. If the environment around these icons was flood lit with electric lighting, we would have no contrast.
3. Dim lighting sets the stage for employment of rhythm in the lighting and extinguishing of the larger chandeliers throughout the course of vigils. Traditionally, for example, votive candles are not lit in a vespers service until the beginning of the ancient hymn, ‘O gladsome light’ in which we praise the immortal and everlasting light of the Father’s glory.

Even more dramatically, many monasteries will light and then swing the great chandeliers at high points of festal services. On Mount Athos the *typika*, or the book of rules on how services are to be run, determines how many candles on the large chandeliers are to be lit for each feast, and when they are to be swung. It is a wonderful spectacle to see the central single-chained chandelier swinging in a circle, while around it the massive twelve-sided choros with its twelve vertical chains rotates backwards and forwards in a different orbit. The Psalm is being fulfilled: ‘Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars’ (Psalm 148.3).

4. Reflective surfaces, such as polished brass and silver, marble floors, mosaics, and the gilded icons, gain much more dramatic effect when set in a low-lit environment. These reflections change as the light moves during processions, the swinging of chandeliers, or the changing direction of the sun. All this helps create a sense of living and moving light. It is pertinent that contemporary Byzantine *ekphrases*, or descriptions of beautiful churches, praise awe and movement rather than static balance. In his poem on Hagia Sophia, Paul the Silentiary writes:

The hills of Proconnesus have gladly offered their back to the life-giving Queen to cover the entire floor, while the polish of Bosphorus stone shimmers gently, black with an admixture of white. (664)

The roof is compacted of gilded tesserae from which a glittering stream of golden rays pours abundantly and strikes men's eyes with irresistible force. It is as if one were gazing at the midday sun in spring, when he gilds each mountain top. (668)⁷

⁷ https://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/medieval-architecture/htm/or/ma_or_gloss_essay_paul.htm

5. The interplay of light and shadow within a church interior is consistent with the principles of kataphatic and apophatic theology. The contrast creates mystery. Every image of God, every type, every true theological statement, while shedding genuine light on God's nature is also surpassed by divine infinitude and ineffability. Whatever we say about God needs then to be unsaid—not to contradict, but to acknowledge the limitations of any description about God. This is why the Church considers apophatic statements—saying what God is not—to be superior to kataphatic statements, which say what he is. This play of saying and unsaying is reflected in the nooks and crannies and mysterious shadowed spaces that one encounters in domed cross-in-square churches, and to a much lesser extent in aisled basilica. All is not immediately revealed when one enters; the 'many rooms' in the heavenly mansion are revealed only over time. Thick walls create deep reveals that catch the sunlight and therefore offer contrast with the adjoining walls that are shrouded in shadow. Behind the columns are corners, chapels, niches. Pierced capitals reflect light off the tips of their acanthus leaves but also trap shadow in the deep piercings.

Conclusion

I hope you have found our little journey helpful. I believe passionately in the necessity and power of rich worship, of maximalising the material expressions of our love for God and of God's revelation to us . If Christians fail to give the fullest expression of their relationship with God and the material world within the protected Eden of liturgy, then they will not be able to do this in the world beyond. Beauty in worship is not an optional extra. Orthodoxy means not only right dogma, but also right worship and right glory. The beauty of liturgy is the small spring that Ezekiel saw in his vision of the temple, a spring that 'came out from under the threshold of the temple' (Ez 47.1) and then spread into the world so that 'where the river flows everything will live' (Ez 47.9).