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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

May you always be consciously aware of the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love and mercy of God the Father, and communion with the Life-Giving Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart!

DEVOTION TO CHRISTIAN ICONS

The great devotion of Eastern Christians to the spirituality of religious icons is an area of piety that is not easily understood by most Western Christians. In the Christian East icons are venerated in the same manner as Sacred Scripture. This follows from the constant right teaching (Orthodoxia) about veneration of icons taught by all great Eastern theologians from the earliest centuries up to the present and universally practiced by all Eastern Christians.

To understand true devotion to icons let us begin with the reality of Christianity that Jesus Christ is the true image or icon (in Greek, *eikon*) of the unseen God (Colossians 1:15). Jesus said to Philip, "...He who sees me has seen the Father..." (John 14:9). Early Christian theologians, who were also persons of deep prayer in oneness with Jesus Christ risen, taught that the law of prayer (*lex orandi*) comes out of the revealed truths which Christians believe in and act upon (*lex credendi*). They evolved an entire Christian incarnational theology from the two basic truths revealed by God in Holy Scripture by focusing especially upon their doctrine of image and likeness.

The first truth all Christians hold is that Jesus Christ is truly God from all eternity. By taking upon himself our material humanity (John 1:14) he becomes the material form and the way we can communicate with the invisible and active presence of the unseen God (Colossians 1:15-18). Jesus is the Good News of God's great love for us human beings (John 3:16). We are immersed in matter and in our sinful brokenness in a world that is in bondage to sin and evil forces, impeding our ability to be in loving harmony with God and the created cosmos (Romans 8:21). We have no way of moving into the invisible presence of the all-transcendent Source of all being, God, Trinity, by our own powers.

But in him, Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh for love of us, we now have the way out of our darkness. He is the "radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of his nature" (Hebrews 1:3). Who sees him, sees the Father (John 14:9). Thus the second truth is that matter is very good in God's eyes (Genesis 1:31), especially when the Trinity decides to create us human beings out of matter "according to the image and likeness" (Genesis 1:26) that is Jesus Christ. We are to become progressively divinized in Christ Jesus by the workings of Jesus risen and his Holy Spirit as we become more and more made into his likeness by a progressive oneness with him and as we surrender in obedient love to his commands.

We are not the image or icon of God. Only Jesus Christ, God-Man, is the perfect reflection of the eternal God in human, material form. Yet we, alone among all other material beings, can be self-transcendently present to God's spiritual reality and become sharers in his very own divine nature by grace (2 Peter 1:4).

ICON AS PRAYER

If God-Trinity is truly present within matter, especially in the Word incarnate, Jesus Christ, then the whole material world, starting with our embodied beings, can be our point of communing with the transcendent presence of God, as uncreated energies of love. If the divine

Trinity is actively operating in and through matter to give themselves to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then, we should have reverence as we touch God's material world to find God at the heart of matter! (*Inscape*).

In Eastern Christianity art and theology go together. They cannot be separated. Both art and theology express the deepest inner feelings of the heart. Art and theology articulate God's living revelation, but art does it in a visible, plastic way. An icon is a picture of a sacred subject which is typically painted on a panel of wood. The surface beneath is prepared with a mixture of powdered alabaster and glue beneath which linen is sometimes stretched. Colors (pigments) are laid on, using the yolk of an egg as medium.

Icon paintings are possible because of the humanity of Christ (incarnation), a new humanity which is being fully restored to communion with God. Our humanity was deified in virtue of God becoming truly man, so that through his Spirit, Jesus could restore in us, his followers, the image of God unto his likeness. The icon is a concrete instance of the Divine Presence revivifying matter.

The Melkite Catholic Archbishop Joseph Raya well explains how an icon reflects in itself a microcosmic divinization of what the entire material cosmos is capable of becoming through Jesus Christ and his Spirit. "In an icon, all the elements of nature are represented and transformed into a vision of God. The material world is represented by chalk and alabaster, which is covered by paint and by the jewels and precious metals which adorn the icon. The plant world is represented by the wood on which the icon is painted. The animal world is represented by the egg with which the paint is painted. Even the human world is represented by the relics of the saints which are added to the paint. This amalgamation of all the elements of creation in the icon is an assertion of, and emphasis upon, the indwelling holiness of the entire created world which participates and shares in the redemption of Christ."

An icon for Eastern Christians is more than a picture, more than a teacher of truths revealed by God, more than a window into another world. It is, for the believers, an *inscape*, a leading through matter into a fuller participation, or at least experience, of the Incomprehensible One. When one stands before an icon with the right humble disposition of heart and mind, one is really in touch with the presence of the subject and/or event which the icon represents. Encompassing the reality within the spirituality of Eastern Christian theology, the prayerful soul fully realizes and experiences that icons do not illustrate anything; blessed icons **manifest PRESENCE and COMMUNION**.

Saint Basil (Feast Day; January 1st) in the fourth century gave the classical formulation for true veneration of icons: "The honor paid to images passes on to the prototype." A blessed icon, "painted" (sometimes described as "writing" of icons) according to the traditional rules of the canons on icons, makes it possible for the supplicant to rise through this visible representation of Jesus Christ, the Holy Theotokos, or other saints or angels to the spiritual presence of that person. The icon is the place where Christ and the angels and saints appear to us. It is our prayerful meeting point of contact with them. Praying before an icon, we pray directly to Christ and the other heavenly citizens. Kissing and reverencing the icon, we kiss the person in glory thus represented in the icon. Bowing low before it (prostration), we bow before that person.

If such an icon portrays the spiritualized person and the hands and body do not have the proportions of earthlings (reverse or inverse prospective), it makes little difference. An icon is not a photograph or a realistic image invented by the iconographer. The artist seeks to represent, as far as a graphic medium can, the spirituality of the person in glory. The supplicant kneeling, prostrating, or standing before the icon is moved by the spirituality expressed in the represented person and through this rises to his or her real and glorious presence, and unites with them in prayer and intercession for all creation.

Icon painting (writing) is not merely an art, humanly learned. It is a prayer, accompanied by fasting and prayer on the part of the artist. The artist approaches the painting of the icon only after receiving the sacraments of Confession (Reconciliation) and Holy Communion (Eucharist). God is entreated to use this instrument of the icon and the painter as a channel of grace. The Eastern ritual gives the following prayer in the ceremony of the blessing of an icon:

Blessed is our God, always, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Let us pray to the Lord. Lord have mercy!

O Lord Almighty, God of our Fathers, glorified and worshiped in the Holy Trinity,
Whom neither reason can comprehend, nor word able to express,
Whom no one among men has ever seen, as we have learned from the Holy Scriptures.
Thus we **believe** and thus we **confess** Thee, God the Father without beginning,
and Thy Only-Begotten Son, one in essence, co-eternal with Thy Life-Giving Spirit.

Thou Who in the Old Law, did reveal Thyself unto Thy Patriarch Abraham,
in the **Image** of the three Angels, and in these latter days, after the Incarnation of the Only-Begotten Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, from the Ever-Blessed Virgin Mary,
in the Baptism by John the Forerunner in the Jordan, in the truly-bright Transfiguration on mount Tabor, in the most-glorious Ascension on Olivet, did show us the Image of the Most Holy Trinity, Thou did instruct us also to honor the wonderworking **Image**, Not-Made-By-Hands, of our Lord Jesus Christ, depicted on the towel and sent to Abgar, the Prince of Edessa, which healed him and many others, sick with the wounds of sickness;
Who did not reject, but accepted also the **Images** and **Likenesses** of Thy Holy Saints.

Do Thou Thyself look down now also on **This Icon**, which Thy servants have fashioned in honor and glory of Thee, One in Trinity, the Holy and Glorious God,
and Thine Only-Begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, His most-pure and truly-blessed Mother, our Sovereign Lady, the Most-Holy Birth-Giver of God, and Ever-Virgin Mary,
and in memory of Thy Saints (NN...), and **ble^ss it** and **sanctify it**,
and **grant it** healing power, that it may drive away every snare of the devil,
that it may cause the prayers of anyone, reverently praying in deep faith before it to be heard,
that it may draw down Thy Merciful Compassionate Love for Mankind,
and that it may receive Thy gift of Grace.

**For Thou art our Sanctification, and unto Thee do we render glory,
to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
always, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages.** Amen.

Peace be unto all. And with your Spirit.

Let us bow our heads, unto the Lord. To You, O Lord.

O Eternal, Invisible and Incomprehensible Lord, Who, in ancient times in the Old Law did command that, in the Tent of Testimony and the Temple of Solomon, there be made likenesses of the cherubim, of wood, gold and embroidery,
and Who now accepts **images not only** in remembrance of Thy **saving benefactions** and **divine manifestations** to the human race, made in honor and glory of Thy Most-Holy Name,
but also did **not** reject those fashioned in remembrance **of**, and in imitation **of** Thy Holy Saints, listen unto our humble prayer:

Do Thou **Thyself, bless** this Icon and **sanctify** it,
and grant it **grace and power**, to drive out demons **and** to heal **all** infirmities.

For Thou Art He that blesses and sanctifies **all** things, O Christ our God,
and unto Thee do we send up glory, together with Thy Father Who is without beginning, and
Thy Most-Holy, Gracious and Life-Giving Spirit,
always, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen

**This Icon is blessed and sanctified by the grace of the Most-Holy Spirit,
through this anointing with Holy Oil, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Saint John Damascene has written a beautiful treatise on icon devotion in the Eastern Churches. He sums it all up in the words: "What is seen sanctifies our thoughts and so they fly towards the unseen Majesty of God."

The sacramental presence in wood, color and lines is brought about by the prayer of the Church. The connection between the icon and what it depicts is created by the Church. Through the blessing, the icon and all the material used in the painting of the image become a link between the human and divine through which the worshiper comes into contact with "the other world." This blessing establishes the connection between the image and the prototype represented. It is a mystical encounter with the invisible.

Under the visible signs of colors and lines the eyes of true faith can unflinching discern and comprehend the transcendent reality truly present through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through this presence, we co-participate in the mystery and the Lord is then continually present in the Church, giving it life and healing. Through the icon, we intimately come in touch with God.

THE ICONOGRAPHER

Have you ever prayed in an Eastern Orthodox Church during a liturgical service that unfolded amid numerous icons, especially those of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Most Blessed Mother of God, the Ever Virgin Mary on the *iconostasis*? This is the large screen that separates the altar sanctuary, the symbol of the awesome Holy of Holies, from the people, the symbol of God's created world. Or do you possess in your home a favorite icon before which you "center" yourself in the divine presence? The icon, you will soon discover, is never merely a religious picture, a photocopy of a sense reality as perceived by the artist. Icons transcend the limits of other forms of art because of their symbolical meaning for the religious community at prayer.

The value of an icon lies, not in the art itself, but in the artist, the iconographer. The reason lies in the fact that he or she must be a holy, prayerful "theologian," in vital, living touch with the orthodox teachings for the Church, discovered through fasting, ascetical purity of the heart, and prayer that is "incessant" in the heart.

Eastern Christian iconographers seek to give to the icons they paint an abstract and hieratic or sacred character. Just as the power of the Holy Spirit shone forth from the transfigured Christ on Mount Tabor, so also the human figures radiate a divine awareness, with the gold leaf background of icons representing the grace of the Holy Spirit.

TRANSFIGURATION OF MATTER

One cannot understand the sacredness of icons and, therefore, the possibility of veneration through the materiality of the icons paid to the person represented in the icons without having

recourse to the working of the Holy Spirit. It is a gift of the Spirit that allows the painter to paint in the sacred manner of “incarnating” again the presence of Christ and his saints and angels. The same gift allows the faithful praying before such icons to be swept up into the living presence of Christ and his communion of saints and angels.

The Christian’s participation in the spiritual transfiguration of matter into an icon or symbol of faith, be it active (on the part of the painter) or passive (that of the believer), brings to the Christian an experience of divinization (theosis). The agent of such divinization is always the Holy Spirit.

The icon is an example of the transfiguration of matter by the divine Spirit **and** by human beings, most truly a mystical synergy. The divine Spirit by breathing a living spirit into the first man, made him and the first woman according to God’s image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). Now Christian artists and believers, praying before such icons, take matter and, through their spiritual powers in collaboration with God’s Spirit, make icons of Christ or of God-like images of saints and, in prayer, summon Christ and the saints into their history to lead the faithful into the transfigured world of heaven, the very presence of the Trinitarian Community of Love.

The transfigured quality of both the icon and the person of faith anticipates and indicates the ultimate transfiguration which is yet to come in its fullness when the entire cosmos will be transformed and restored in the power and unity of God in his Spirit of Love, who is “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28). As you pray before such Eastern icons, they become a medium that manifests in prayer Christ, all human beings in Christ, and the whole cosmos in the perspective of the transfiguration into Christ, by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit transfigures us into the icon or likeness of Jesus Christ.

If Christ, the transfigured, risen Lord, can be so close to us and, in matter, can be constantly experienced as more intimate to us than we are to ourselves, then why should we ever fear? “He who does not love does not know God; for God is love” (1 John 4:8). “No man has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12). My children, let us not love one another in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 4:18). “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out all fear.” Love never fails! Love never ends!

From the Pilgrimage of the Heart (A Treasury of Eastern Christian Spirituality)
Reverend Father George A. Maloney

We do not make obeisance to the nature of wood, but we revere and do obeisance to Him who was crucified on the Cross...When the two beams of the Cross are joined together I adore the figure because of Christ who on the Cross was crucified, but if the beams are separated, I throw them away and burn them. (Leontius of Neapolis)

Of old; God the incorporeal and uncircumscribed was not depicted at all. But now that God has appeared in the flesh and lived among men, I make an image of the God who can be seen. I do not worship matter but I worship the Creator of matter, who for my sake became material and deigned to dwell in matter, who through matter effected my salvation. I will not cease from worshipping the matter through which my salvation has been effected. (Saint John Damascene)

PRAYER OF BLESSING OF AN ICON OF THE HOLY TRINITY

O!, Lord God, who are glorified in the blessed Trinity, You who cannot be reached by the mind nor expressed by word, who were not seen by any man in any place, only as we have learned from the Holy Scriptures and the God-revealing teachings of the Apostles, so do we

believe and so do we confess You, God the Father without beginning, and Your consubstantial Son and Your coessential Spirit enthroned with You; and as the ancient Scriptures inform us of Your appearance in the image of the three Angels, which occurred to that most renowned patriarch Abraham, so in the new grace the Father manifested Himself in the voice, the Son in flesh in the Jordan, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove....therefore in order to always remember You, the One Adorable God, we not only confess You with our lips, but also paint Your image, not in order to make this a divinity, but that by looking at it with our corporeal eyes, we may see You, our God, with our intellectual eyes, and that by venerating it we glorify and praise You, our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, and recall Your innumerable good works: because the honor paid to an image passes on to the prototype.

Presenting therefore this icon today before Your majesty with the pious motivation which we have intended, we ask and pray and make ourselves pleasing to Your bounteous generosity, look mercifully upon it and send down Your heavenly blessing, and in Your Thrice-Holy Name, bless (+) and sanctify (+) it, so that those who do piously venerate it and do in front of it humbly bow and faithfully pray to You may find mercy, and receive grace, and be free from all misery and tribulations, and obtain pardon of sins, and become worthy of the heavenly kingdom, by Your grace and generosity and love-of-mankind, the One God glorified in the Trinity, the Father and the Son and the holy Spirit, to whom be glory, now and always for ages of ages.

(Eukholohion ily Trebnyk [Book of Blessings and Rituals])

May the Sacred Image (Icon) of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ always be in your memory. May his presence bless and make you holy,

Father John Michael Zboyovski