Iconography

Fr. Dustin's Summary of Three Treatises on the Divine Images by John of Damascus:

St. John starts by taking a look at the Old Testament prohibition against idols. St. John views this prohibition from two perspectives: 1) the nature of the commandment, and 2) the definition of veneration. He says that the nature of the commandment was to prevent the Israelites from falling into idolatry. He also argues that the commandment is more specifically against depicting the nature/essence/substance of God, and to prevent humanity from worshiping creation instead of the Creator.

Iconography, St. John points out, does neither of these: it's not a depiction of God's essence, nor does it lead one to worship creation. The second aspect, veneration, boils down to an articulation of definition. St. John argues that veneration has two meanings: one is worship, and the other is to pay honor to someone. While worship is due to God alone, honoring the person depicted in an icon is not worship, but it is paying honor, which ultimately glorifies God.

It is, at this point, that St. John is able to fully turn his attention to iconography. What changes the entire game is the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, that is God enfleshed, or Incarnate. St. John writes,

> *"Therefore I am emboldened to depict the invisible God, not as invisible, but as he became visible for our sake, by participating in the flesh and blood. I do not depict the invisible divinity, but I depict God made visible in the flesh."* (I.4)

Even the Incarnation has several levels of understanding. In the first aspect of the argument, St. John argues that what was invisible is now visible. Here he does a lengthy analysis of the definitions of "image." He states that it is important to note that images make manifest what was hidden or unseen. In this way, an image holds two realities together: the seen/visible and unseen/invisible. With this in mind, St. John is able to say that icons of Christ both depict the Son of God as he was in the 1st century, as well as indicate his invisible presence among us now.

At this point, that St. John delves deeper into Incarnational theology. He reminds us that after God created the visible (earth, animals, seas, etc.) and invisible (heaven, angels, etc.) worlds, God created humanity to unite the two worlds (i.e., we were created in His image to attain His likeness). Our task, in sum, was to make creation a sacrament. However, we failed in this task; but Christ, through his Incarnation, was able to succeed where we failed. This union means that humanity is now infused with divinity. Matter is recreated, and it is now glorified with God's presence. It is for this reason that we can venerate the icons.

St. John writes,

> *"I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake, and in matter made his abode, and through matter worked my salvation. 'For the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' It is clear to all that flesh is matter and is a creature. I reverence therefore matter and I hold in respect and venerate that through which*

> *my salvation has come about, I reverence it not as God, but as filed with divine energy and grace"* (II.14).

In this way, the use of icons in worship is a sacramental act.

It is also because of the Incarnation that we can glorify God through the saints; after all they able to participate in the life of God because of the divine/human union in Christ. So when we venerate the image of the saints, we are, in actuality, glorifying God. St. John takes it further by writing,

> *"The temple that Solomon built was dedicated with the blood of animals (Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement) and adorned with images of animals, of lions and bulls and phoenixes and pomegranates. Now the Church is dedicated by the blood of Christ and his saints and adorned with an image of Christ and his saints"* (II.15).

There's much more in this these amazing three treatises; however, it's really about the Incarnation, the Son of God taking on flesh, and the transfiguration of matter that takes place as a result, which allows for our deification. It's also about the meaning of image and veneration, the dignity of matter, and the importance of the unwritten tradition handed down by the Church through the apostles and now articulated by St. John.

Looking at Icons

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Monastics: They were considered "living monuments" and "pillars of virtue." Though they had emotions, in their ascetical practice they overcame their emotions through the greatness of their minds. They reached a state of *apatheia*, passionlessness. Thus, monastics were restricted in their physical movement, their emotions, as well as through physical privation, wasting themselves through fasting – becoming lifeless and bodiless. Sometimes, monks were equated with the angels: bodiless beings, *asomata*. In other words, depictions of saints is a depiction of their "real natures," not a matter of convention. The "stiffness" of monks in Byzantine portraiture, therefore, is a reflection of monastic self-denial. An alternative mode of depiction would be the types of St. John the Baptist, St. Makarios, St. Onouphrios, and St. Mary of Egypt – nude and physically deprived.

Soldiers: There are stories, in Byzantine literature, of soldier saints "coming to life" to act. Byzantines looked to this class of saints for strength and help in life – thus the saints had to "look the part": restless and vigorous, healthy red complexions; not motionless, fleshless, or pale (like monks). Their eyes of look directly at you or often "follow" you around the room. Their portraits had to inspire confidence in the beholder. This may also be why there's many carved images of solider saints but not monastic saints.

Bishops: Like monks, bishops were expected to show qualities of disembodiment and immateriality. Oftentimes the vestments show "flatness" to illustrate this quality. Though they were pale and physically weak, their strength is of an immaterial kind.

Apostles and Evangelists: Saints in this category are depicted with emotion, fluidity, and movement: emphasis on their corporality. This isn't a distinction between ascetic and non-ascetic saints. It's an indication that these saints had participated in the historical events of Christ's life: they bear witness to his Incarnation.

The Virgin: There's an emphasis on her mediation on account of her humanity. The bond between the Virgin and her Son is the guarantee of strength of her intercession on our behalf. Thus, the Virgin's portraits often have a high degree of corporality and movement.

Source: *The Icons of their Bodies* by Henry Maguire

FEAST DAYS:

As you look at feast day icons, notice how often Christ is often surrounded by a cave-like structure, mandela, or aureole. Usually the cave-like structure represents the depths of fallen humanity into which the divine Jesus comes to us. This shows us the transfiguration of nature accomplished by the Incarnation. Or, to put it another way, we are transformed and saved by the enfleshed Christ


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