

PART I

The Iconostasis

CHAPTER ONE

The Christ of Sinai

Unless you're a member of an Orthodox church, you probably haven't encountered icons in their natural setting. You may have seen them in magazines or museums and wondered at their mysterious and somewhat forbidding quality.

When I became an Orthodox Christian, icons were one of the hardest things for me to get used to. They didn't seem very friendly. They didn't even seem like good art. Gradually, though, I learned that icons are not intended to be art-book pictures. They're companions in prayer, both public worship and private devotion. I hope in this book to help you encounter icons in that larger context and understand what role they play.

We'll do this by visiting an imaginary church at various times during the year, meeting the icons "at work" there, and getting to know them better. In some churches the interior will be nearly covered with icons, and the sight can be visually overwhelming. We'll try to simplify things by turning our attention to two different areas of the church. In Part I of the book we'll be looking at the icons on the iconostasis, a wooden screen that stands before the altar area. The color panels at the center of the book represent the four major icons on the iconostasis. We'll examine these icons, and address the larger questions about icons and their place in the life of faith, in Part I of this book.

In Part II we'll turn to the black-and-white icons in the book's center. These will serve to represent the icons placed on a small stand just inside the church door, which are changed to correspond with the feasts of the Church year.

A book this small cannot, of course, be a comprehensive guide to icons, but I trust it will be a useful introduction. Through it I hope you will begin to know icons and discover ways that they can be a part of your own life of prayer. When you visit other churches or meet icons in other contexts, you will be able to recognize them as new friends.

Come in. I want you to see these icons.

We've come into this church around noon on Sunday. The service has recently ended, and the once-feathery wisps of incense are settling into a diffuse pale-gray

cloud. It smells like smoke and roses. A few bulletins and worship books are scattered about, and a child's white cardigan lies forgotten under a chair. The church is empty; the congregation has gone downstairs to coffee hour, and we can faintly hear the hubbub of their voices. Up here, though, it's quiet.

Walk up to the center of the church with me and look around. There's a lot to take in. The church looks surprisingly complicated inside, compared to how it looked when we were coming up the sidewalk. From the outside it looked like a simple cube. But in here much of the walls and even ceiling have been covered with paintings of people and scenes from the Bible and Church history. It's initially bewildering to the eye, with so many stories and scenes going on at once.

But if you imagine the room painted solid white you can see that it's still a cube, with a single large dome centered overhead. If you look toward the back wall, behind the altar, you'll see that it is topped with a half-dome, what architects call an apse. This altar area is separated from the main body of the church by a wooden screen, the iconostasis. And that's it, actually. There aren't even pews, only a few short rows of chairs against the walls. During worship, most of the congregation stands clustered on the oriental rugs in the center. (A floor plan of our imaginary church appears on page 2).

Unlike the familiar kind of pointy church that sends a steeple soaring toward the heavens, this dome covers worshipers as with a bowl. It conveys a feeling of God joining us in the Incarnation and rounding us into one Body.

When the congregation first moved into this building the walls were bare white, and the congregation has been saving up to add made-to-order icons a few at a time, as they can afford to have them painted. Some of the prime spots in the church don't yet have hand-painted icons. In those places the congregation is using reproductions of classic icons that have been laminated onto wooden panels. All the icons we will be looking at in this book fall into that category of historic reproduction.¹

Let's look at the iconostasis, that wooden screen before the altar. The Greek word means "icon-stand." On it is set a series of large, almost life-size icons. Fold out the color panel and you'll see two icons on each side. On the iconostasis these four icons are side-by-side in this order. In the middle, between the Virgin Mary and Christ, there is an elaborate double door that opens to the altar, called the Holy Doors. The key on page 2 will help you visualize the arrangement.

On these doors there is an icon of the Angel Gabriel announcing the birth of the Christ Child to the Virgin Mary. Beyond these doors is the altar, and behind the altar, on the back wall of the church, is the apse we noticed earlier. The apse is

filled with a very large icon of the Virgin Mary standing with her hands raised in prayer. On her torso there is a starry disk, and in it we see the Christ Child blessing us.

To the right of those double doors on the iconostasis is the imposing icon of Christ we see reproduced on the back of the color panel. He is holding a jeweled book in one hand and blessing us with the other. His face, and particularly his eyes, are powerfully attractive, compelling, yet also somehow disturbing. They make us feel confused or self-conscious, as if they are asking a question we don't understand.

To the left of the double doors (on the front of the color panel), we recognize the Virgin Mary, who is embracing the Christ Child. She traditionally holds this place on an iconostasis, to Christ's right, recalling the Scripture, "at your right hand stands the queen" (Ps. 45:9). In front of each of these icons is a brass stand holding clusters of beeswax candles, which are now more than half-melted and running with honey-scented streaks. The candles cast flickering light on the figures. These images of Christ and the Virgin are two of the best-known and most beloved icons in the world. We'll be looking at them in this chapter and the next, and learning more of the "what" and "why" of icons.

In the third chapter we will turn to the icon to the left of the Virgin, which shows Christ pulling an old man out of a tomb, while other figures stand behind him in a rocky landscape. The old man is our forefather Adam, and this icon represents the events of Holy Saturday, when Christ went into the realm of Death and set the captives free. This spot on an iconostasis is usually reserved for the saint or feast for whom a church is named, so now we know that this church is called Holy Resurrection.

On the far right side of the iconostasis (on the back of the colored panel) we see a man looking toward Christ and lifting his hands in imploring prayer. We could guess from his disheveled appearance that this is St. John the Baptist, even if we didn't know that this is his usual spot on an iconostasis. We'll get to know him further in the fourth chapter.

If you turn around, you'll see something going on everywhere you look. There are brass candlestands, hanging oil lamps, and a box of sand forested with leaning candle nubs. Toward the front there is a bulky wooden bookstand for the chanters; in the back there are a dozen music stands for the choir. Near the iconostasis there is a large baptismal font shaped like a silver chalice. On the far edges of the iconostasis, beyond the Resurrection and St. John, angels stand guard on doors leading back to the altar. If we look up at the ceiling we're startled to see Christ gazing directly down on us from the dome centered over the nave. Though the

congregation has gone downstairs, the church retains a hum of bustling energy. Something vigorous has been going on here, and the high smoky room still reverberates.

The impact of so much iconography can be overwhelming, an effect compounded by the fact that icons don't seem very inviting. Their unsmiling sobriety throws us off initially, and we aren't sure how to relate to them. Let's begin by taking a closer look at the most demanding one, the icon of Christ. This is not the original, of course, but a large reproduction that this congregation has chosen for this spot on their iconostasis, which always holds an icon of Christ. This is an excellent one to study if we're trying to figure out what icons are all about in the first place.

As you compare it with the other three main ones on the iconostasis you'll notice that it differs from them in several ways. It is more realistic, less stylized, for one thing. The icon's background is not gold, but shows a blue sky and a bit of curving architecture. Christ's face is also more natural-looking, more like a portrait. If you have seen Egyptian or Roman paintings from the first centuries A.D.—the ones on mummy cases in museums, for example—you will notice that this icon resembles them in the expressiveness of the wide eyes and the subtle skin tones.

This is the oldest of our four main icons, and in fact is one of the oldest surviving examples of Christian art. It was painted in the middle of the sixth century, and the fineness of the execution suggests that it was produced in the imperial capital of Constantinople. Yet from the time of its execution it has resided far from that busy city, preserved in a distant monastery in the red granite mountains of the Sinai. This isolation is the main reason it survived.

The southern Sinai is a forbidding place. Yet from earliest times Christians have gone there to live dedicated lives of prayer, near the site of the Burning Bush and the mount where Moses received the Law. When Egeria, a Christian woman from Spain, made a pilgrimage through the Holy Land in the fourth century, the Sinai had already been established as a place of prayer. She wrote of her travels: "There were many cells of holy men there, and a church in the place where the [Burning] Bush is."

But the rocky passes were better fit for nomads, and Bedouin tribes regularly attacked the monks. In the sixth century the monks on Mt. Sinai petitioned the Emperor Justinian to build a walled monastery for their protection. Around the year 550 the walls rose forty feet high, and they still stand today. The monastery within them, now named for St. Catherine of Alexandria, has been in continuous operation ever since.

This icon of Christ probably was sent as a gift to the monks when the monastery was first completed. It is of a type called Pantocrator, which means “Ruler of All.” While many icons show Christ at various points in his earthly life, a Pantocrator icon is timeless, revealing Him as the eternal judge. It is usually a bust-length image, though sometimes He is shown sitting on a throne. His right hand is raised in blessing, and in His left hand is a massive book. Orthodox Christians would recognize this as a Gospel book, the elaborately-bound volume containing only the four Gospels, which is kept on the altar and read aloud by clergy during services. (The Epistles are kept separately in a smaller, plainer book, and their reading is accompanied by less ceremony.) In some Pantocrator icons, as here, the Gospel book is closed; in some it is shown open and inscribed with a text from the Gospels, often the “I am the way” passage (John 14:6), or “Come to Me” (Matt. 11:28).

Most ancient icons are executed in a paint made with egg yolks, called egg tempera. This one, however, uses an older technique called wax encaustic, melted wax mixed with powdered pigments. For long centuries of prayer in that Sinai monastery the smoke of incense and candles darkened it, and this icon was repeatedly overpainted to restore the image, a fate that befalls many icons. Only in 1962 were these layers removed and the original revealed once more.

I find it hard to keep talking in the presence of this icon; it communicates something so profoundly beautiful—tranquil, filled with tender life—that it seems all the earth should keep silence. That’s quite a change for me, because for a long time I didn’t like icons at all. They didn’t appeal to me; they didn’t even make sense. When other people talked about how beautiful and moving icons were, I’d arrange my features into a thoughtful, serious expression, but inside I’d be thinking, “I have no idea what they’re talking about.”

Icons seemed to me the opposite of appealing. The art looked like bad art, with clumsy perspective and unrealistic faces. Worst of all, icons didn’t convey emotion. Everyone looked so stiff and unfriendly. When it came to religious art, I much preferred to stroll the halls of the National Gallery of Art and view color-saturated canvases from the Renaissance, full of plump babies and yearning eyes cast upwards. Art that showed people who looked like real people, portrayed in ways that tugged the heartstrings.

That is decidedly what icons do not do. If you’re like I was, it takes a while for this icon of Christ to “speak” to you. When it does, it communicates something subtle, very different from the clear, dramatic message you get from a Renaissance canvas.

Look at the icon of Christ again. You may find his gaze unsettling, as if He is looking back at you, or even through you. My husband, a pastor, once received a

phone call from a retired humanities professor. The caller said that he was a lifelong atheist and humanist who was mostly ignorant of religion. But then someone had given him a copy of this icon. “When I look at it, I have the sensation that He’s looking into my soul,” he said. “Before this, I didn’t even think there was such a thing as a soul.”

The Christ of Sinai has that penetrating effect. We can understand some of the ways this is achieved artistically, but like pulling the petals off a flower, analyzing details won’t fully explain the whole.

One way the iconographer has achieved this intense effect is that the perspective is intentionally distorted. Look at the Gospel book; it towers upward, as if we’re standing on the street looking up the corner of a skyscraper. But if you look at the figure of Christ, it’s as if we are facing Him squarely, with our head coming up to His chest. What’s more, the whole image of Christ gets subtly wider as it goes back into the picture. Why is that?

You’ll remember from elementary school art lessons that “perspective” means that when you look at a picture of railroad tracks, far in the distance the tracks converge. The place where everything collapses into a tiny spot is called the “vanishing point.” That’s the rule in most Western painting. A canvas shows a scene as if you’re looking into the box of a theater stage, with everything getting smaller as it goes back. That kind of perspective invites you into the frame of the picture, as if you’re entering a room and joining the characters there.

With many icons, however, perspective is reversed. Christ’s ears and hair are wider than His face. His shoulders seem to go on forever. Things are getting larger as they go back, and smaller as they come toward you. This means that the convergence point is in front of the picture, right about where you’re standing. You’re the “vanishing point.” From the perspective of heaven we are so small, and if God did not sustain us we would vanish. No wonder you feel like you’re standing on the bull’s-eye.

Sometimes several different approaches to perspective might be used in the same icon, as here with the differing angles on the Gospel book and Christ. This gives the viewer a general sensation of being off-balance, outside familiar territory. The Cubists used a similar technique to achieve their everything-at-once effect.

Christ’s halo also contributes to the sense of things getting larger. The halo was a new development in art, invented by iconographers. We now think of it as a painter’s “poetic license,” placing a flat golden disk behind a figure’s head to indicate special honor. The original intention, however, was to convey a sphere of light encompassing the person’s entire head, or in some cases entire body, like the

glow around a candle flame in a dark room. The faint red lines on the halo in the Christ of Sinai give it a slight curve, as if it were cup of gold.

Throughout Scripture and Christian history there is a consistent message that God is Light, and those who belong to Him are said to be illumined by His presence. From the earliest centuries Baptism was referred to as “illumination.” The Gospels tell us that when Christ was transfigured on Mt. Tabor His disciples saw Him glow with a light beyond earthly origin. Similar stories are told of many saints—and not only those in the distant past, by the way. This visible glow of the Uncreated Light, as the Church Fathers called it, is what a halo intends to represent.

The use of the halo and mixed perspective both make this icon imposing, but the iconographer has done something else here. Use a piece of paper or index card to cover first one half of the face and then the other. A dramatic difference appears. Let’s examine first the right side of the face, then the left.

The face on the right is looking at you in a way you’d rather not have someone look at you. The gaze is more penetrating than is comfortable. It’s a little too knowledgeable. However, we soon realize that the expression is not harsh or rejecting. The expression is lively, as if it is in motion. There is even a bit of humor in it, a lift at the corner of the mouth and cheekbone. He might be saying, “Oh, I’ve got your number.” It is a challenging yet friendly expression, and somehow energetic and purposeful. This might be the expression of a surgeon who knows that his efforts are going to be successful, and is now confident that complete healing will be achieved.

Now cover the right side of the face and look at the left. What tranquility is here! The brow is eloquent as the bow of a violin, subtly lifted in tender compassion. This is a listening eye, patient, waiting to receive all we could pour out of our confused and aching hearts. The shadows have fled away, and the face is full of soft light. You could rest a long time here.

When you look at the whole icon again, you understand better why it is unsettling. The iconographer has sought to express a complex truth here, two concepts that are simultaneous but which we, in our limited way, must go over and over in sequence. The truth is that we need both sides of Christ. We need His challenging “surgical” aspect to reveal our sins and bring them to the surface, so that we can wrestle with and overcome them. This is especially true of the sins we dismiss as insignificant and fail to take seriously, like pride, envy, and self-righteousness.

“I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” the repentant King David said (Ps. 51). In all honesty, we may not be able to say that yet; we may not

know what murky motivations and fears circulate in our depths. But as we look at this right side of the icon we know that He sees everything. Until we acknowledge and reject our sins, they will go on poisoning us and poisoning our relationships with others. We pray to be given real repentance, so that we can gain the clear-eyed vision of ourselves that Christ already has. He knows us from the deepest inside out, and as we stand on this side of the icon we welcome His searching gaze.

Not that this process of revelation and cleansing is comfortable. It's scary to be known so thoroughly, but it's also a relief. We have never experienced anyone who knows us this well, and yet He loves us completely. As we look at this icon we see how ancient His love is. He was loving us before we ever turned to look into these eyes. He has been loving us a long time, from a Cross two thousand years before we were born. We don't have to improve, or cover up our faults, to earn this love. It has been surrounding us all our lives, waiting for us to receive it. Perhaps that is the meaning of the faint smile. He loves us too much to let us remain as we are, confused and mired in sin, hurting others and ourselves. He will heal us, and His healing is sure.

Our response to such complete and unexpected love feels like surrender—nearly like collapse, after a lifetime of trying to be good enough, clever enough, handsome enough. After such fruitless and exhausting efforts we come to stillness, like the stillness after sobbing for a long time. And now we see the other side of His face in this icon, the quiet side, the listening side. There is great patience here. That's a good thing, since it may take a very long time, a lifetime, to heal all that needs to heal. He is waiting; He is not in any hurry. He will be right here, even when you forget Him and get tangled in your life again, and have to turn around and come back to Him—not once, but over and over again.

I don't know of another icon that is as complex and searching as the Christ of Sinai. It is a universal favorite, and Orthodox Christians keep copies on their desks, at their bedsides, and on the dashboard of their cars. As we stand here in this church we see it on an iconostasis, where worshipers stand during every service and look toward, then away from, those searching eyes. When a person comes to confession, he or she and the priest will stand side-by-side facing this icon. The person will then speak out everything he needs to say, cleansing his soul in the presence of Christ. The priest is there as a witness, and doesn't deliver absolution so much as recognize it, reminding the person that Christ has forgiven him.

Perhaps you see why I say that this is a different kind of message than you receive from a Renaissance painting. People who get acclimated to icons begin to see classic Western religious paintings as accomplished and beautiful, but noisy. In

their busy drama those paintings remain earthbound, superficial. Not that the content of such art is superficial; it may provoke deep thoughts or strong empathy. Yet, in a way that's hard to define, icons touch a completely different interior level, something below the hectic arena of thought and emotion. Deeper down there is a place where we first confront life, before we decide what we think or feel about it. That is the intimate place where icons speak. They are companions in prayer and won't make sense outside the context of a surrendered and seeking life. Icons have their fullest impact on those who are saturated in prayer and Scripture, and who participate in the full life of the Church, with all her mysteries, hymns, and worship.

Look at Him again, and let Him look at you. Take your time. You may have things you want to say, and then you might run out of things to say and need just to be silent before Him. This is a quiet, but very deep, icon.

From Psalm 139

O Lord, You have searched me and known me!
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You discern my thoughts from afar.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue
O Lord, You know it altogether.
You beset me behind and before,
and lay Your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high, and I cannot attain it.

Whither shall I go from Your Spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, You are there.
If I make my bed in Sheol, You are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there Your hand shall lead me,
and Your right hand shall hold me.
If I say, "Let only darkness cover me,
and let the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to You,
the night is bright as day;
for darkness is as light with You.

For You formed my inward parts,

You knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise You, for You are fearful and wonderful.
Wonderful are Your works!
You know me right well;
my frame was not hidden from You
when I was being made in secret,
intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance;
in Your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

How precious to me are Your thoughts,
O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I would count them,
they are more than the sand.
When I awake, I am still with You.

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me, and know my thoughts!
See if there be any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!