

# Nicholas Stanosheck: Meditation on the Icon of the Holy Chinese Martyrs of the Boxer Rebellion



*Icon of the Holy Chinese Martyrs of the Boxer Rebellion,*

*By Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, MA*

**The meaning and the significance of the icon of the  
Chinese Martyrs of the Boxer Rebellion**

**by Nicholas Stanosheck,  
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The Orthodox Church believes that [the icon is a window into](#)

heaven. In other words the icon makes visible the very real but invisible reality of Christ and the saints. The Orthodox Church also believes that the icon is the word of God in visual form. In other words this icon is a visual sermon that speaks to us about the heroic faith of the Chinese Martyrs, their willingness to die for Jesus Christ.

When I looked at this icon I asked myself: What are they doing? What are they looking at? What are they doing with their hands? What is their body posture like? Are there any writings in the icon?

Starting from the bottom of the icon we see a large group of people looking at us. It is a mixed group. It is made up of clergy and laity, men and women, adult and children, boys and girls. All of them are wearing haloes, the haloes signifying their having attained sainthood. (In the Orthodox Church salvation -- that is, life in Jesus Christ -- is available to both adults and children.) The golden haloes represent the and the promised to those who keep the faith and who love the appearing of Jesus Christ. Notice that everyone in the icon has a cross. This represents the cross that Christ gives us when we become his followers:

Bodily posture is also important. Their standing upright signify the fact that the Chinese martyrs are very much awake and conscious in heaven right now. It also symbolizes the Orthodox Church's belief that when we die we do not experience soul sleep but enter fully conscious into Christ's presence.

One thing I like about this icon are the little details that carry much meaning. I see little details like the Chinese style clothing, the long braided pigtail worn by St. Paul (standing to the right of Fr. Metrophanes'), the distinctive Chinese style kung fu

slippers on their feet, the Asian features on their faces.

When I looked at the front row I expected to see the priest Fr. Metrophanes Tsi-Chung in the center, instead I see the priest with his wife St. Tatiana. The fact that Metrophanes is of Chinese ancestry points to Orthodoxy's commitment to an indigenous clergy. Orthodoxy in China was not a foreign religion, but a religion with deep roots in Chinese culture. Also please note that the priest depicted in this icon is a married priest. More than that, he was a married priest with three sons. A family man with three sons! All this point to a powerful affirmation of Chinese family values. But what really impresses me is that here is a family willing to die for Christ. Imagine! A whole family who loved Jesus Christ more than anything else in the world.

A careful examination of the front row shows other signs of family affection. In the left corner we see a little boy clinging to his father's robe. In the middle we see a mother putting her hand on her son's shoulder in a gesture of love and protection. In the right corner we see two sisters holding hands together.

As I look upwards I see two buildings in the background. On the left a Russian Orthodox Church building with the distinctive onion shaped dome. And on the right a building in the distinctive Chinese architecture. This represents the dignity and wisdom of Chinese culture. The Chinese martyrs standing between the two buildings shows them standing between the two cultures.

Looking further up I see the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven extending both hands in the gesture of blessing. Christ's position at the very top of the icon points to Christ's Lordship over all creation, his transcendence over all cultures: East and West. So likewise his extending out both hands in the gesture of blessing

points to Christ's extending his grace and mercy to the whole world. This brings to mind the words in John's Gospel.

In closing I would like to bring to your attention that for the Orthodox Christian, the icon is more than just a reminder of the past. This icon is a spiritual bridge linking us Christians living today to the Chinese Martyrs who died a hundred years ago. This leads us to the ancient belief in the communion of the saints. From the beginning Christians have not only remembered the saints and the martyrs, they asked the saints to remember them in their prayers. This is the significant of the eyes. Do you notice that the eyes of the Chinese Martyrs are looking at you? This is an invitation for you to enter into fellowship with them. It is also an invitation for us to ask them to pray to Christ for our salvation and for the salvation of China to the glory of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.