

# The Good Word

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## THE ICON: A MANIFESTATION OF THEOLOGY

BY GUEST AUTHOR PAUL AZKOUL



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**Part I.** In the original Greek, the word for *image* (*imago*, Latin) is *icon* (εἰκών). Iconography began in the Old Testament. Images were indeed permitted in the Scriptures. God forbade the Hebrews to create images of God, because no one had ever seen Him:

*And the Lord spake to you out of the midst of the fire a voice of words, which he heard, and ye saw no likeness, only a voice* (Deuteronomy 4:12).

*Take good heed to your souls, for ye saw no image in the day wherein the Lord spake to you in Horeb in the mountain, out of the midst of the fire* (Deuteronomy 4:15).

But while at the same time God forbade the Hebrews to create images of God, He spoke to Moses, giving him a command:

*And thou shalt make a mercy seat, a lid of pure gold, the length of two cubits and a half, and the breadth of a cubit and a half. And thou shalt make two cherubim graven in gold, and thou shalt put them on both sides of the mercy seat. They shall be made one cherub on this side, and another cherub on the other side of the mercy seat, and thou shalt make the two cherubim on both sides. The cherubim shall stretch forth their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings; and their faces shall be toward the mercy seat. And thou shalt put into the Ark the Testimonies which I shall give thee. And I will make myself known to thee from thence, and I will speak to thee above the mercy seat between the two cherubim, which are upon the Ark of the Testimony, even in all things which I enjoin thee concerning the children of Israel* (Exodus 25:17-22).

Since God Himself allowed us to see what the cherubic angels looked like, they could now be represented in form by us. But not only the images of the two cherubim's were seen as icons, but the

Tabernacle itself, the icon or image of Heaven, the Holy of Holies, the Throne of God, from where God spoke to man. God prohibited images, representations of Himself, simply for one reason, He had never been seen, while not forbidding the image of other things visible to us.<sup>1</sup>

In the fullness of time, God put on flesh; He made himself a man. Now, not only had we seen God in the flesh, but we had seen His face. Now there was a certain obligation to make an icon of God in the flesh as a means of education and veneration. The failure to depict Him in images suggested that He had not become man. One cannot separate God from Jesus Christ; it is impossible to create an icon of Christ without, at the same time, making God present.

To paint an icon of Christ and deny the presence of God in the icon of Christ is the denial of the Divine Economy; hence, the denial of our salvation. But what is not being depicted is God's nature. Only the humanity of Christ is depicted.

*"Being indepictable in thy Divine nature, O Master, Thou didst deign to be depicted when, in these last days, Thou becamest Incarnate ..."* (Third Sticheron of the Great Vespers for the Sunday of Orthodoxy).

*"While depicting Thy Divine likeness in icons, O Christ, we openly proclaim Thy Nativity ..."* (Sessional Hymn after the 3rd Ode of the Canon for the Sunday of Orthodoxy).


*He who seeth Me, seeth Him that sent Me,*" said the Lord (St. John 12:45).

Elsewhere Christ said to Philip: *"Have I been so long with you, and yet thou hast not known Me, Philip? He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, show us the Father?"* (St. John 14:9)

The Church has taught Her people that, in the icon of Christ, we also "see" God the Father. Christ is the very Image or Icon of the Father; so where One is present so is the Other.

**Part II.** There have always been those who deny the icon: the iconoclasts. On the first Sunday of Great Lent, the Orthodox Church celebrates the restoration of the Holy Icons, which were banished in the Byzantine Empire during the time of the Emperor Leo III, in the year AD 726. He openly took the position against the

1. However, He did forbid the Israelites from making *graven images* of things in heaven, on earth, and in the water under the earth for themselves to fall down before and to worship (*cf.* Exodus 20:4).



painting and veneration of icons. During this time a terrible number of Orthodox Christians were martyred — some for painting them, some for hiding icons in their homes, some for publicly confessing them as part of the Orthodox Faith, and some for declaring that the renunciation of the icon is a renunciation of Christ Himself.

Our people have understood that there are not two different religious categories: one of things of primary importance and another of things of secondary importance. Once such a distinction is drawn, there is much trouble. In the words of St John of Damascus:

“We do not change the boundaries marked out by the Fathers; we keep the tradition as we have received it. We beseech, therefore, the People of God, the faithful flock, to hold fast to the ecclesiastical traditions. The gradual taking away of what has been handed down to us would be undermining the foundation stones, and would in short time overthrow the whole structure” (*On the Holy Icons*).

The defense of the icons, is the defense of the Orthodox Faith. To defend the Faith, is to defend Christ. This is why so many fathers, and mothers, children, teachers, monks, priests, and bishops, have shed their very blood willingly, knowing that this act of martyrdom would secure the Faith and strengthen the flock of Christ.

And so, for those who gave their lives and shed their blood for the sake of the Holy Icons, for the celebration of the victory of the re-establishment of the icons for veneration and worship, the Church has set aside a special day, the Sunday of Orthodoxy. The fact that God had become incarnate is the basic theology as to why the Theotokos, the Saints, and the Angels may be depicted. Man, in his deified state, may now be depicted in the icon, since God deigned to dwell in us. We do not worship man, but the Holy Trinity Who sanctifies the object by His Grace. It is not idolatry when reverencing the Saint, because the veneration is not to the human person, but to God who dwells in him, who sanctifies him.

We honor and venerate the icon, but adoration belongs to God alone. We honor and venerate the Saints for their service to the Creator. *I will dwell in them and walk in them, as God hath said* (2 Corinthians, 6:19). As well: *If a man love Me, he will keep My words, and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him and make Our abode with him* (St. John 14:23). *Know ye not*, says the apostle Paul, *that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you?* (1 Corinthians 6:19). Also, Saint John of Damascus says:

“During their life, the Saints are full of the Holy Spirit. After their death, the Grace of the Holy Spirit continues to

dwell inseparable in their souls, in their bodies, in their sepulchres, in their images and their holy icons, and this not by essence, but by Grace and energy.”

The icon is one of the many mysteries of the Orthodox Church. It is not merely paint set upon a canvas, or a piece of wood as if it were a lifeless artifact of the human imagination. Christ, the Theotokos, the Saints, and angels are mysteriously present in their icons -- mystically, spiritually, by the Uncreated Energies of God. The forms and their surroundings are not arbitrary. The icon is not just another form of art. It is the standard for all art. It is art par excellence. Iconography is historically and theologically factual. Imagination, personal ideas, human emotion, and the self, has no place in iconography.

**Part III.** The iconographer, just as all Orthodox Christians, must be humble of heart. Contrition will purify his heart to enable him to see clearly his task. Or rather so that he may have the Holy Spirit dwelling in him fully, in order to allow God to work through Him.

Dr. Constantine Cavarnos, a friend of the late Photios Kontoglou of blessed memory, and author of the book, *Byzantine Thought And Art* says:


“With regard to the creation of works of spiritual art, Kontoglou holds that there is presupposed a certain inward state. Such works, he believes, cannot be created ‘by any carnal man, even though he be the greatest master.’ They [i.e., icons] can be produced only by an artist, even though he be unlettered, who fasts, prays, and lives ‘in a state of contrition and humility.’ For only then is the soul ‘imbued with Grace, soars upward with spiritual wings, and becomes capable of representing the deep realm of mysteries.’”

This is also true for those who gaze upon the icon. In other words, if a man is carnal, worldly, and has his cares in this world, or if he is impious, then his spiritual awareness belongs to the Devil. If a man’s heart desires the things of the world then he cannot comprehend the mystery, or the beauty of the spiritual and sanctified world. Dr. Cavarnos continues:

“Similarly, says Kontoglou, the beauty expressed by such works is not perceived by carnal, sophisticated, impious men any more than is the truth and beauty of ‘the Gospels and of everything that emits a spiritual fragrance.’ Such persons only understand the language of the senses; spiritual art, however, ‘does not address itself to the senses, but to the spirit.’”

The iconographer is merely a tool. The Holy Spirit is the conductor, the guide. The paint brush is empty and is useless, unless the painter picks up the brush and guides it along. It is the same with the iconographer. The iconographer is the brush, and the Holy Spirit is the guide.

Not just any color, but “sacred colors”, forms, “mystical forms”, and appearance can be given to the



garments or the background of the icon. The face is the central focus of the icon. There is a unique approach to it. The icon must bring to the heart and mind, to the soul and spirit, the presence of God, and His grace in a literal way.

Even the technique of applying the paint to the drawing, which will become the icon, makes the difference between a truly beautiful icon, and one that is flawed. The face, along with the subtle gestures of the body, the feet, and hands, the entire body, even the posture is significant. These features make the icon meek and humble, or intense and powerful. One may see compassion and contrition in one icon, and in another, one sees judgment, sternness. Each one of these expressions can move him or her who gazes upon the icon to attain a greater spiritual level of faith.

Dr. Constantine Cavarnos says that Photios Kontoglou “emphasizes the simplicity, clarity, restraint, power, originality and great spirituality of Byzantine art,” this is to say iconography. He continues, “This art,” he observes, is “an art with most powerful character and with the greatest spirituality and originality.” Dr. Cavarnos continues:

“But there are many, Kontoglou is aware, who think very differently. They look down upon Byzantine art [iconography] ‘because it lacks naturalness.’ He does not deny that Byzantine paintings and mosaics lack what is called ‘naturalness.’ But he observes that painting is not good because it is ‘natural,’ in the sense of observing carefully the anatomical structure of the body and the principles of perspective, but for other reasons. A work may look ‘natural and precisely for that reason not be good.’ Thus the hands and feet in a Byzantine icon may appear unnatural, yet they are truer, more expressive, more artistic than the hands that have been painted, say by Raphael.

“Byzantine iconography, then, is not to be condemned for not being naturalistic, realistic, or for not reproducing faithfully the external world. For its aim is something very different. Byzantine iconography has a religious function. It seeks to express spiritual things in order thereby to help man rise to a higher level of being, to lift his soul to the blessedness of God.”

Iconography is not meant to serve the passions, but calm them, to bring the onlooker into a truer, and higher reality than secular, worldly art. When we gaze upon the icon, when we pray before the icon, we are in communion with God and His Saints. The icon’s intention is to bring about repentance and to ask God to lift our minds and hearts to a less worldly but more pious level of spirituality. The icon should soothe the passions and calm our rage. When we look at the icon, the icon will suggest to our minds to pray, if we are spiritually opened to its message. Dr. Cavarnos tells us that:

“Kontoglou emphatically places inner, spiritual beauty

above external beauty, and spiritual art above secular art. External, physical beauty, he remarks, is shallow and perishable, while spiritual beauty is deep and imperishable. Physical beauty arouses the outer senses; spiritual beauty, the inner senses – it makes us feel reverence, humility, contrition, the ‘gladdening sorrow’ of which Saint John of Climacos speaks.”

**Part IV.** When we venerate the icon, when we kiss them, when we speak to Christ, or the Theotokos, and the Saints and the angels through the icon, they receive our kiss, they hear our voice. By the power of Divine Grace these actions pass through the icon and are received by the prototype. Leonid Ouspensky the writer of the book *Theology of the Icon* says that, “The icon is venerable and holy precisely because it portrays and bears his name,” -- meaning, that the icon is holy simply because of the Saint whose name is on the icon. When the iconographer has finished painting the icon, the last thing he/she puts on the icon is the name of the Saint. At once, as soon as the name is painted on the icon, the Saint becomes present in the icon, and, at this point, is what makes the icon holy, but not only the spirit of the Saint, but the Grace and mystical energy of God enters into it. Ouspensky continues:

“This is why grace, characteristic of the prototype, is present in the icon. In other words, it is the grace that the relationship between the faithful and the Saint is brought about through the intermediary of the icon of the Saint. The icon participates in the holiness of its prototype and, through the icon, we in turn participate in this holiness in our prayers.”

Dr. Alexander Kalomiros, lay theologian, and author of *Against False Union*, and *Figures of Things Celestial*, tells us:

“Through the icon, we participate in that holiness according to the measure of the purity of our hearts; we receive the Grace which flows from the material of the icon. We are mystically sanctified by the operation of the Holy Spirit ... The ikons show us poor men the Kingdom of God coming with power, according to the measure of man’s capacity and receptivity, even as the Transfiguration of Our Lord on Tabor revealed His glory to the three disciples ‘as each one could endure.’”

The iconographer possesses an unbelievable gift from God. He or she is able to bring the Saints, the angels, the Theotokos, and even Christ God Himself to earth. They are present with us, in their icons. They are there in a very literal way; mystically, spiritually. (Dr. Kalomiros continues):

“In truth, how strange is God’s will! He has chosen humble matter, which we despise, to make it into a vehicle of His Grace. The oil of Holy Unction, the water of Baptism, the myrrh of Holy Chrism, the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist, the bodies of the Saints, and their ikons; all these material things, nevertheless, raise us to Heaven, much more than those great and sublime ideas which we men conceive with our poor minds.” ❖ ❖ ❖



## ON THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WESTERN ART AND EASTERN ICONOGRAPHY

BY PAUL AZKOUL

**Part I:** I would like to discuss, as an Orthodox iconographer, why the religious art that comes from Western secular societies seeks to simply portray images of Christ, Mary the Theotokos, and His saints as naturalistic beings, bereft of any special dignity, or divinity. In their depiction of these holy men and women western artists appear ignorant of the true theology of what Christian art really is and how it is achieved.

These secular works of such men as the German artist Mathias Grunewald (AD 1475-1528), depicted images of Jesus Christ, and the Theotokos, in such a naturalistic manner that they suffer from having no spirituality whatsoever, i.e., no sanctity and no grace. (I use “spiritual” in the Orthodox sense of the word).

In their works the bodies of Christ, the Theotokos, the Saints, and the Angels are not transfigured as they are in Orthodox iconography, but they are simply painted in purely human and aesthetically pleasing forms, often to the point of revulsion, as that by Grunewald, for example, while, as Kontoglou says,

“Liturgical art, on the other hand, has a spiritual, symbolic, and supernatural character.

“The ecclesiastical art of the Orthodox Church does not strive to delight our senses, but rather to sanctify our senses by offering us the same holy nourishment which we partake of during our holy services. This nourishment comes to us through hymnology, iconography, architecture, and even through the art of the sacred utensils, vestments and every other man-made object in the temple. All these, with their reverent and elevating character work together for the purpose of lifting the souls of the faithful to praise and thanksgiving, but not in the aesthetic manner which secular art serves. It is, rather, accomplished in an entirely different manner, a manner which is spiritual in itself.”

Yet, as in Grunewald’s *Crucifixion* (fig. 1), pleasing the senses is not always what the secular artist strives for. Often they will create art that is corruptible and vulgar for the sake of shock value. Secular art arouses the emotions, it stimulates the senses, and the passions, such as anger, or envy or lust. It can also horrify. It can be repulsive. To be repulsive does not always mean that it moves one to a state of fright. It can be repulsive in the sense that it is a lie, a lie that impersonates the truth, a lie that only the evil one can mask without authenticity in order to deceive and capture the ignorant in his shameful net and through his lie creates a false Christ, with false doctrine, which creates a false church, which threatens to seduce one into a state of damnation.

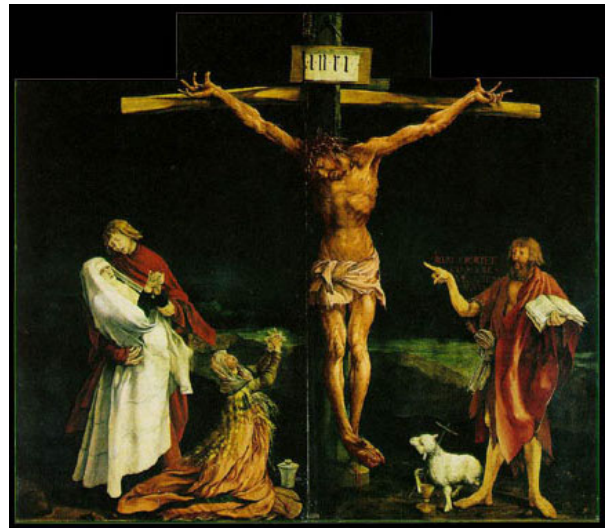


FIG. 1: *CRUCIFIXION* BY MATHIAS GRUNEWALD

It can even be physically beautiful, but this beauty is shallow. The physical beauty that Western art brings is not the deep inner beauty that penetrates the soul by God’s grace and destroys the passions. One kind of beauty edifies, strengthens and humbles one’s soul, while another type, like a seductive woman, destroys the soul and engenders sinful passions such as destructive lust. Another difference between worldly beauty and God’s inner beauty, i.e., His grace, is the difference between the arousal of emotions which comes from secular art and the calming of the emotions which comes from the ecclesiastical beauty in iconography. As secular art induces human emotion which is temporary and often misleading and misunderstood, the art of the church brings contrition. Mr. Kontoglou gives us these simple examples:

“I am emotionally moved in the theater; I am contrite in church.’ The confusion of these two feelings [that is, of the profane and the sacred, of the worldly and the religious] is the cause of the confusion of the worldly and the spectacle with the liturgical service, a confusion of reason in which there has been introduced into many of the churches Western art which depicts the saints as ordinary men, painted in a natural style, and especially four part music which is not only foreign to the character of [Greek] Orthodoxy, but is in itself worldly, theatrical, sensual, romantic, having no place in the Church especially in the Orthodox Church where everything has liturgical character.”

Also from Photios Kontoglou:

“The works of Western religious art are emotional and dramatic. The dramatic element is carnal, even though it is thought to be spiritual. In the Orthodox icon there exists the liturgical element. Wherever the liturgical element is present, there the dramatic and emotional [or carnal] element is neutralized. In the works of Western religious art there is no spiritual ascent. The saints, Christ, the All-holy Mother of God are simply people painted from life, ordinary people who portray Christ, the All-holy One, or the saints. With us the

iconographer is not an ordinary painter as in the West; he has a special service [liturgy] to perform through this art, a spiritual service [liturgy] and for this reason his is called *iconographer*.”

**Part II:** The forms of religious painting, such as the *Madonna Della Tenda* (fig.2), by Raphael (AD 1483-1520) or the *Madonna and Child* from the school of Alessandro Botticelli (AD c.1445-1510) (fig. 3); having only themes of being religious, can never be holy. Instead they portray a religious subject, such as



FIG. 2: *MADONNA DELLA TENDA* BY RAPHAEL



FIG. 3: *MADONNA AND CHILD* FROM THE SCHOOL OF ALESSANDRO BOTTICELLI

the saints, as they would appear naturally. They do not show that these holy men and women have become saints. They simply show them in portraiture or in statuesque form without ardor, so that their followers, the laity, will not be intimidated to achieve loftier goals, to strive for perfection, so that they may continue to live their carnal lifestyle without guilt or threat. Seeing men and women painted naturalistically, by secular artists, they see no physical change. With no inner change, no spiritual transformation, there can not be an outward conversion, and thusly, not seeing any reason to change themselves, not seeing or understanding or truly believing that men and women, although merely human, can become saints, can become something greater than their ordinary selves, and be transformed by the Holy Spirit.

What one believes about the Holy Trinity, Christ, Holy Tradition, Doctrine, His Church, the Theotokos, even the saints, and angels, is seen through Western religious art, and for that matter through Orthodox iconography.

In iconography, in order to exhibit an inner change, the corporeal being manifests an outer change. Through this transfiguration, this supernatural occurrence, we see the saintliness of these men and women in their icons as in the icon of the *Dormition* (fig. 4) and all icons.

We see incorruption, immortality, piety, sanctity, grace, virtue, in place of the passions and corruptibility.



FIG. 4: *FRESCO OF THE DORMITION (DETAIL)*, AD 1376-7, CHURCH OF ST. DEMETRIOS, MARKO MONASTERY, MARKOVA SUSICA, MACEDONIA

This is accomplished through great struggles, such as intense prayer and fasting, through struggling and overcoming temptation, through strict adherence to God’s commandments, and unwavering obedience.

Keeping in mind that Western art reflects its theology, it shows that Protestant and Roman Catholic theology teaches that man is being punished for the guilt he inherited from Adam. Christ dies in our place and suffers God’s wrath. Therefore the crucifixion of Christ is depicted as the Savior in agony.

In the Orthodox representation of Christ’s crucifixion (fig. 5) He is not punished in our place,



FIG. 5: *ICON OF THE CRUCIFIXION OF CHRIST* BY PAUL AZKOUL

rather, He is an emissary for the human race who conquers the devil from whom He recovers the creation which He returns to the Father as a “Sacrifice of Praise.” In Orthodox iconography we never see Christ or the saints in agony, but in inner peace, security and



consolation.

The Western art of today is a reflection of Western religion today. Today's Western religion is a reflection of their attitude about the importance of the world in religion today. Thus, in the West, people departed from the original purpose of the Christian faith -- the battling of the passions to overcome sin and to gain inner freedom from the Devil. But instead of placing the welfare of the soul and the acquisition of the Holy Spirit first, in the West they strive to be accepted by the world and allow the prosperity and pleasure of the body to take precedent. Thus, in the West, people hope to avoid the moral guilt of sin, if not by good works, then by faith alone. So commonly, their religious art shows the empirical man, having forgotten the piety once delivered to the saints.

**Part III.** Western artists portray the saints according to their own liking or according to their minimal and mundane imaginations, sin remains, the valiant struggle for sainthood is absent, there is nothing edifying, while Orthodox iconography depicts the saints' struggle over sin, their victory that has achieved incorruptibility, their godhood -- their winning the crown of salvation!

Only those who have adopted the "*faith once delivered to the saints*" (St. Jude 3), following an uninterrupted tradition of true doctrine, the same yesterday, today and forever, can paint icons, because icons are not just inspirational and educational, but they are a representation of true doctrine, an expression of one faith and one baptism. Faith means nothing if it is a false faith. If iconography is "Theology," or as Trubetskoi said, "Theology in Color,"<sup>2</sup> then false theology begets false iconography. The reverse also being true, and therefore he or she who espouses false doctrine can not paint icons. They may attempt it, but only a pseudo-reproduction will have been their greatest achievement. They may be technically accurate, and aesthetically beautiful, but it will not be grace filled, and so, consequently, not an icon, but a religious painting. Iconography must have two natures as did Christ, spiritual and physical. Those with false doctrine have only the physical. The logic is supremely simple.

Now, Grunewald's *Crucifixion* (fig.6), represents only a corpse nailed on a cross, a vile and grotesque monstrosity. The body and its parts are swollen, and bloated, decomposing and dripping puss. The hands and feet are twisted, there is agony. The feet are twice their normal size and misshapen. His whole body is

repugnant and a terror to observe. Or as Photios Kontoglou, better puts it:

"The whole body is one repulsive pile of flesh in final decomposition, on which appear clotted blood and puss ready to burst the dried skin and gush forth. The crown of thorns, with its long and hard spines, encircles the misshapen head, contributing to the grisly effect. But even the cross is not made, as usual, from two beams; it, too, is analogous to the gruesome specter which it holds. It is made up of the unhewn branches of some wild tree, gnarled in anguish, just like the members of the corpse it bears ..."

In the presentation of the Crucifix depicted by Grunewald he reveals to the onlooker that the death of Christ imitates ordinary human death. In this painting, there is no edification, no peace, no contrition, no hope, only despair. Representing the total opposite for that which God became man. It is painted with fear and consternation, with no sign of the presence of God. A forsaken son is painted in an image of suffering and abandonment. Not only is it not a devotional painting but a satanic one, extinguishing all emphasis of hope from the Christian soul, which is precisely a contradiction of the message of the Cross. Grunewald depicts Christ in this way, because this was his faith, his hopelessness.

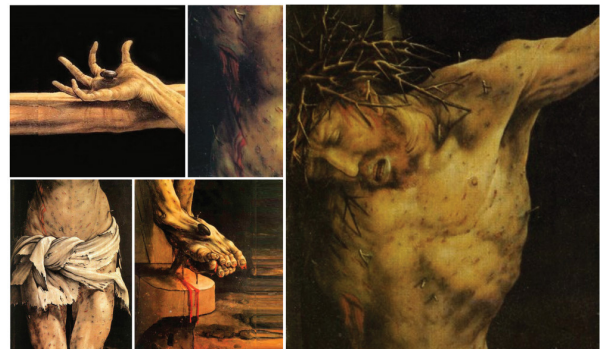


FIG. 6: DETAILS OF GRUENWALD'S CRUCIFIXION

Mr. Kontoglou remarks about Grunewald's Crucifixion:

"Grunewald apparently used a corpse from an anatomy lecture room, or from a graveyard, as a model, so that it could be portrayed in the final stage of decomposition. He did not have the consciousness that he was painting the great Mystery of the Sacrifice of the Son of God in the form of a man, as Orthodox iconographers would. For him, a corpse such as anyone's, even a criminal's is able to portray the crucified Christ. In other words, he is interested in the external appearance of the corpse, and nothing beyond this."

This portrayal of "Christ", this anti-spiritualism, is an offspring of the *campo santo*<sup>3</sup>, the skeletons, the macabre Trappist monasteries; of the depictions of the Second Coming, such as that of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel in the Vatican; and of the gargoyles, this is to say, the grotesque statues of the Church of Notre Dame,

2. Eugene N. Trubetskoi, *Icons: Theology in Color*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1973, pp. 100.

3. *cemetery* in Spanish and Italian

a confusion between saints and demons.

In the devotional icon, everything is elevated from the world in its depiction -- the figure itself, the grass, the rocks, buildings, trees, etc. Nothing in an icon is shown in a corruptible state, but in a supramundane manner. Christ, in His icon of the Crucifixion is shown standing on the cross. One cannot tell if the cross is holding Him up or if He is holding up the Cross. Any afflictions that had befallen Him are expressed in the icon as gentleness and forgiveness towards those who inflicted harm upon His body. His face is tranquil, humble, a saddening joy, a sample of the nature we will have once we have gained our salvation.

Photios Kontoglou:

“The crucified body is not just anyone, but is the very Body of the God-Man Himself; therefore it is not a corpse, but rather incorruptible unto eternity, and the source of life. It radiates the hope of resurrection. The Lord does not hang on the Cross like some miserable tatter, but it is He, rather, who appears to be supporting the Cross. His hands are not cramped, being nailed to the Wood, rather, He spreads them out serenely in supplication, according to the Troparion which says ‘Thou hast spread thy palms, and united what before had been divided, that is, God and man.’”

Iconography is not “special” as if it is one among many other “special” talents. It is not a brick in a wall of many other bricks which can not be singled out, being assimilated into some obscurity. Talents such as, ordinary art, or the ability to compose music, or poetry, beautiful as they may be, or even a genius for science come from an inner natural aptitude, but iconography is a noetic gift, a calling, if you will, from God to a select few of His people. One can not simply decide that he or she “feels” moved emotionally to paint icons, they can not just choose it because they have artistic ability or aspirations to paint them, and therefore, merely pick up a brush, practice for a few years and then call themselves, iconographer. It is not an academic subject. The iconographer works in direct contact with the Holy Spirit, the saints, and the angels. What an awesome task, a fearful and humbling task! The unity between God and the iconographer is rare, and extraordinary. The idea that one may open up a “workshop” to show people how to paint icons for themselves is presumptuous.

The paintings of Hans Holbein the Younger (AD 1497-1543) *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (fig. 7) and Grunewald’s *Crucifixion* bear nothing but fear and annihilation. The death of a body without a soul. In Orthodoxy, we prefer to use the term “falling asleep”, because death is eternal, a sleep from which we would never awaken, but Christ conquered death on the cross, which means that our “falling asleep” is

temporary. Just as it is temporary when we go to bed at night and fall asleep. We awaken again not only to a new day, but to a new life, where there is no more corruption or death, as iconography exhibits.



FIG. 7: *THE BODY OF THE DEAD CHRIST IN THE TOMB*, AD 1520-1522, BY HANS HOLBEIN THE YOUNGER

In the Orthodox icon of the Crucifixion and His bringing down from the cross (fig.8), all the figures, Christ Himself, the Theotokos, and all those portrayed, show minimal expression. One of the icon’s primary function is not to display the passions but dispassion. It is not suppose to be theatrical and worldly, but humble and dignified. Dispassion is the route to salvation.



FIG. 8: Ἐπιτάφιος Ὁρθῶνος  
ICON [EPITAPHIOS] OF THE FUNERAL LAMENTATIONS

In both icons of the Crucifixion and the bringing down from the cross, Christ looks as if He could rise up at any moment. Seeing Him on the cross is a sorrow to the faithful, of course, but not the sorrow of despair, which comes from death, but as Photios Kontoglou puts it:

“...a sorrow in Christ, which is tribulation mixed with hope and which the Fathers call *gladdening sorrow* or *joyous grief* a spiritual joy that springs from mourning.”

Also as Saint Paul tells us, saying, “*For sorrow according to God worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of; but the sorrow of the world worketh death*” (1 Corinthians 7:10).

The representation in an Orthodox icon of the



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Crucifixion, is hope bearing, it imparts redemption to the Christian soul, compunction, forgiveness from God towards us and our sins.

There are those who have taken traditional iconography and mixed it with portraiture. This corruption comes from Western influence. This, a perversion of iconography, is called, "New Style Iconography". There is also the marriage between traditional iconography and the art of the renaissance, also an occidental influence, a vulgarism known as, "soft style" (fig 9). Both these styles of "iconography" are done to make them more pleasing to the Western eye, which does not want a judgmental Christ, nor saints that show that we must actually struggle to gain the heavens.

Paul Azkoul's Iconography may be seen at his website  
<http://www.traditionalbyzantineiconography.com>



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FIG. 9: RESURRECTION OF CHRIST BY MATTHIAS GRUNEWALD FROM THE ISENHEIM ALTARPIECE IN COLMAR, FRANCE