

In 2008, an article by Archimandrite Cyprian (now Bishop Cyprian, Acting President of the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Greece, Holy Synod in Resistance) entitled “The Holy Icon of All Saints: An Attempt at a New Approach” appeared on this website (see “[Theology—Iconology](#)”). We would like to supplement His Grace’s excellent article with a letter, written in 2003, by His Eminence, Archbishop Chrysostomos on the piece. Not only does His Eminence’s letter further underscore the importance of the article as such, but it also provides some interesting and profound comments on the nature of iconography, creativity, and Holy Tradition that we believe to be beneficial and enlightening.

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12 September 2003 (Old Style)

Dear Father Cyprian:

*Evlogeite.* I kiss your hand with brotherly affection and assuring you that, while my infelicitous presence will cause the brotherhood nothing but annoyance I am sure, I look forward to seeing you, our ailing mutual Father, and the brotherhood with great anticipation. I ask for your prayers for my travel, which I am undertaking contrary to doctor's orders, though confident in the Metropolitan's blessing and your prayers.

I received your letter and the superb and fascinating article on iconography. I apologize for my tardiness in responding, but apparently there was some problem, earlier, with the e-mail transmission and, once it did arrive, with our finding a monotonic font (all of our fonts are polytonic and rather useless for e-mail purposes, unfortunately).

In any event, I am somewhat embarrassed by your request for my views and my "*polytime boetheia*" [valued assistance]. I am stupid enough to be moved by your kind words, but I am fortunately not so stupid as to imagine that much of what I have to say is really at all valuable or helpful. I have commented about the interesting and insightful articles that you sent to me about Orthodoxy and psychology. But there I have at least a dilettantish knowledge of the subject, given the fact that I have studied psychology. In the field of iconography, on the other hand, I am shamefully ignorant of very basic issues. You know well my limitations in formal theology, as well.

However, since Bishop Auxentios, who has studied the pure sciences and who understands chromatic theory better than I, both discussed the article in question with me and also conveyed to me a very interesting discussion that he had last Autumn with Father Gabriel about colors in Iconography, and since I was once very interested in chromesthesia (a form of cognitive synesthesia, or so-called "color hearing," found in a number of psychological disorders) and looked at some length at the cognitive and sensory aspects of color perception, I do have at least a basic understanding of the technical issues, about which, nonetheless, I would not venture to comment. They are outside my grasp at anything but this basic level.

As for the theological issues raised in your article, within the confines of my limited understanding, I am very impressed, and especially with the association of color with various strata of Divine cosmology. I will say a bit more about this later. But at this point, I would like to comment on, and reinforce, several points that you make in your letter, with the hope that my reinforcement will be in some small way beneficial to you.

Perhaps, if you will allow me, I can begin my remarks with a few general points about the nature of Orthodox art, doing so in an anecdotal manner, since what I lack in knowledge I quite frankly gain in experience. This past Autumn, I was invited by the Ion Mincu University in Bucharest, where, as you know, I taught for a term, to participate in a graduate forum on the notion of creativity and its relationship to tradition in Church art and architecture. I am not an expert, again, in this field, but I was able to offer

some thoughts that the experts present seemed to like and which touch, I think, on the issue of using and understanding new approaches to ecclesiastical art.

Our final conclusion at this fascinating seminar, after looking at very innovative architecture (and some Iconography), was that the dogmatic boundaries of Orthodox architecture and art (which are even canonically delineated, in the case of Icons) do not disallow technological "innovation" ("progress" may be a less problematic word) and that there is a creativity to Orthodox art and architecture, though it is a creativity defined not (as in art) by personal preference or aesthetic caprice, but by these very dogmatic boundaries. You say this perfectly in your expression of efforts to avoid "ten steira mimesi" and to work "*demiourgika*" [creatively], defining such creativity as being based on "*mia zose theologike theoresis tou thematos*" [a vivid theological view of the matter] which is in essence dogmatic.

An excellent illustration of our point arose with regard to a modernistic Orthodox Church in Switzerland that, in almost all of its innovative dimensions, exceeded the dogmatic, liturgical, and ascetic boundaries of Orthodox art and architecture. (It is interesting that all of the scholars and architects present readily endorsed my idea that Church art and architecture have an ascetic quality that must also serve the practical liturgical function of the Church and its art.)

One feature of this Church, however, caught everyone's attention. The Icons on one wall, while not very traditional in style, employed a new and very innovative technique. Huge granite blocks had been cut into thin slices that were almost transparent. The Icons painted on these granite panels seemed to emanate light (not in a theatrical way, but very subtly from natural sunlight, during the day, and very low-intensity artificial light during the night, as one architect who had seen these Icons observed). The question before us was whether such new technology and such a subtle lighting technique exceeded the dogmatic limits of iconographic theory.

In essence, it was almost impossible to make a case for these Icons exceeding the parameters of traditional iconographic theory, since the very striking use of light emanating through the physical "density" of marble (granite) is a wonderful and powerful theological image. Nonetheless, a few of the graduate students, rather rigid in their thinking, condemned this technique simply on the grounds that it did not employ the traditional techniques of iconography. I pointed out that tradition can develop organically (and iconographic tradition did so, as well) and that we should not be immediately resistant to the idea of new ways of expressing tradition, though with the caveat that this must be undertaken from within the Church by individuals rooted in Her Mysteriological and spiritual life in a firm and healthy way.

Needless to say, there are those who would call me a heretic, today, for suggesting that progress and change within the boundaries and context of dogmatic traditions is possible, since they understand progress and creativity to be contrary to the Orthodox notion of Holy Tradition. Thus, even the phrase that serves as a subtitle of your brilliant and provocative paper, "an attempt at a new approach," will without doubt bring criticism. Undoubtedly, "*...mia nea prosengesis*" [a new approach] is a taboo phrase to fundamentalists, who fail to understand the spiritual loftiness of "newness" or "new creation" ("creativity," if you will) from within the spiritual lexicon, and constantly misunderstand such language by naively associating it with the vocabulary of worldly innovation and egocentric expressions of creativity. In so doing, they emasculate the language of Scripture and of the Fathers, in my humble opinion.

Nonetheless, let me say that I believe that there is always a risk in preaching and disseminating our Faith in times like this, when we must both adhere to Holy Tradition and, feeling deeply our pastoral responsibilities, confront the world around us in a spiritually creative way, using technology and new knowledge in a positive manner. There is, naturally, the risk, on the one hand, of our depending on our own opinions and our own thoughts and of becoming independent in our thinking; on the other hand, there arises the problem of provoking the ire of the fundamentalists.

Here, I do not know what to say. However, I believe that the truth sets us free and that, if we humbly work with the blessing of our Superiors, constantly aware of our inadequacies (an easy thing for me), we will benefit the Faith by courageously confronting the Orthodox fundamentalist view, which itself, by virtue of losing the spirit and ethos of the Fathers, violates the dogmatic boundaries of Orthodoxy

(and with misplaced zeal that frequently breeds arrogance and even violence). I would thus very much hope that your article, "He Hiera Eikon ton Hagion Panton -- Apopeira gia mia nea prosengesi" [The Holy Icon of All Saints: An Attempt at a New Approach] will appear and that we can translate it into English and publish it. The theological thrust of the Icon, which is purely dogmatic and could not possibly provoke controversy, speaks for itself and will, I believe, inspire many people.

Finally, let me say, having strayed off into what is a matter that is only partly related to the Icon of All Saints and your excellent article, that the Icon itself is an exquisite spiritual piece. I do not say this with flattery or from the standpoint of an aesthetic evaluation (which I am not qualified to make), but because of the very dogmatic message of the Icon. Unfortunately, of course, the precision in color is lost in the computer reproduction. I look forward to seeing the original. As for your theological interpretation, here there is no question whatever about the exact expression of the Orthodox Faith. The Christocentric nature of the Icon, your careful explanation of the position of the Mother of God, and your emphasis on the Eucharistic essence of Orthodox soteriology in human transformation all make the Icon a true dogmatic text in painted image.

More importantly, the theme of the eschatological oneness of the past, present, and future gives substance, not only to history itself, but to Holy Tradition, which is not sterile, stagnant, fixed, or uni-dimensional. Tradition is that enigmatic element which holds the past and present together with the "eschatological now," providing touch-points (points of mysteriological experience), that express, convey, and vivify the wholeness of restored creation in Christ, Who brought past, present, and future into a structured oneness by His Resurrection. Though I am not a theologian, I cannot imagine a more striking and balanced presentation of the Divine Economy, Orthodox cosmology, soteriology, and anthropology than this magnificent Icon and the accompanying explanation: the *res gestae* of Orthodoxy in image and word.

Again, I apologize for my tardiness. I ask for your prayers and remain, with the blessing of our mutual Father,

The Least Among Your Brothers,

† Archbishop Chrysostomos