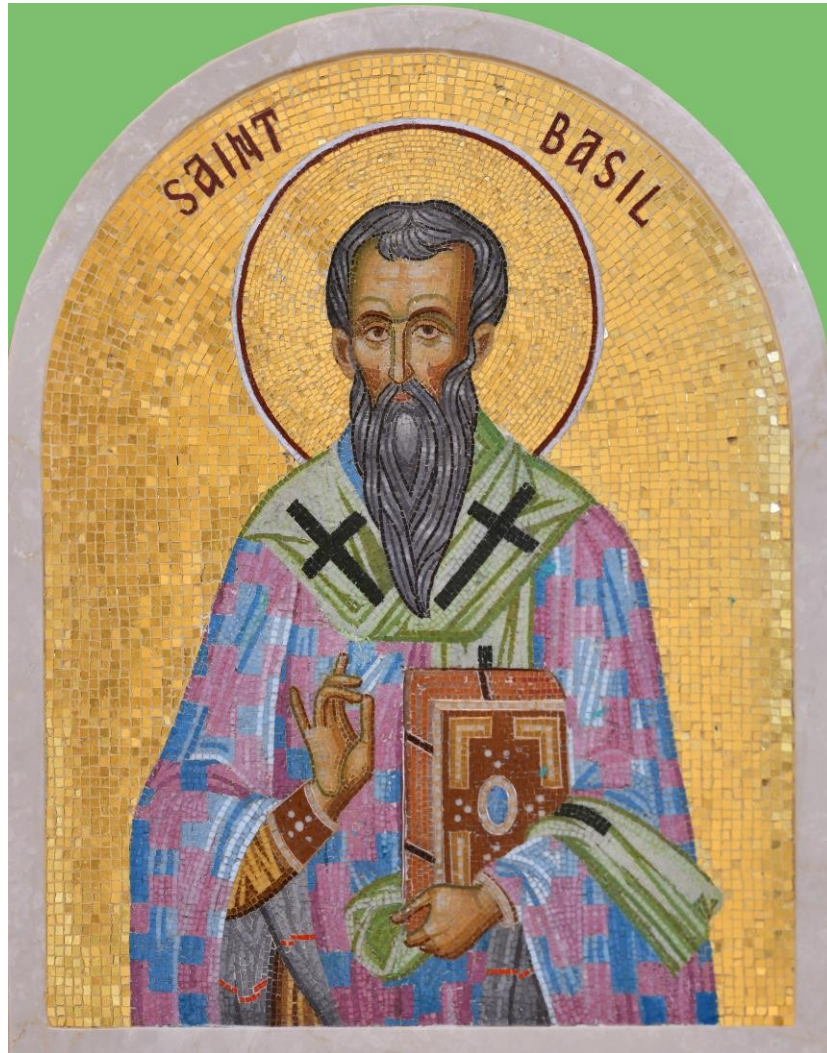


Icons in the Chapel of Saint Basil the Great *by John Johns*

Saint Basil the Great

As Saint Basil the Great wrote, “For this is the nature of the icon, to be the image of the Archetype.” In other words, as our Most Eminent Shepherd Isaiah, Metropolitan of Denver, has taught us, icons are, “reflections of the prototype.” In his book on the Holy Spirit, Saint Basil emphasizes that “the honor paid to the image passes on to the prototype.”



Saint Basil Icon, George Papastamatiou

For the believer, the icon is not simply a work of art or religious picture. As a window to heaven the icon is the point at which our soul encounters and unites itself to the depicted person. Saint Gregory of Nyssa described an icon as, “*A tongue-bearing book which when read benefits the faithful and builds him or her up in various ways. For, the silent art on the wall knows how to speak and brings benefit for greater things.*” There are specific techniques as well as particular rules by which the Byzantine icon is, “written” (iconography = Greek “icon” + “graphia” writing).

Mosaic icons raise us to another realm and speak to us with a “silent voice.” The mosaics’ clarity and brilliance give such a strong sense that a divine concord permeates everything. The small glass components with their ability to reflect light make the colors shimmer. When the faithful enter a Church with mosaic icons they enter into a homogeneous environment where the deep and brilliant gold of the mosaics give the impression of broadening and dematerializing the area. In this way the mosaics match up to Byzantine art’s purpose of expressing man’s transcendence through represented events.

The Holy Angels



Archangel Michael, George Papastamatiou

Saint Symeon of Thessaloniki explains the symbolism of the human characteristics given to the Holy Angels. He says the eye lashes and eyebrows symbolize the “guardianship of the God-revealing designs.” Their youth-like age is, “the flourishing and eternal life-giving vigor.” The wings manifest, “the elevating height and the heavenly.” Their staff is “the royal and sovereign and the divine end of all things.” In addition, Saint Symeon says the Angels are usually represented with dark hair that is tied with a ribbon whose ends hover in the halo. The ribbon represents the pure mind of the Angels; is regarded as a crown for their perfect innocence and signifies that their mind is concentrated only on the divine and essential.

The element of light, an iconographer introduces into an icon by means of bright colors and especially of gold. The concept of light expressed in an icon is not subject to physical laws, as in the case of Greek sculpture or Renaissance painting. On the contrary, it is a light that does not necessarily follow the law of direct illumination... This is the light which makes bodies, buildings and mountains seem weightless in Byzantine icons... In short, the light in a Byzantine icon introduces a sense of freedom, of nature's liberation from natural causality, it introduces, that is, the element of incorruptibility and eternal existence.



Archangel Gabriel, George Papastamatiou

Archangel Gabriel is depicted above as a person with priestly garments. He is depicted as a man, because as many times as Angels have revealed themselves to us, they have done so with a human form. “The ‘en face’ angle plunges the subject’s gaze into the observer’s eyes and establishes a direct bond of communication and love. The Archangels encounter the observer and impart their inward state of prayer. They are also shown at a three-quarter angle to the right to inspire the observer with the sense of communion and love. What is of value is the communication with the observer, the one praying, the unity through prayer. Orthodox iconography strives to create a loving relationship, a substantive relationship between the one depicted in the icon and those who will stand before it and be called by it.

The Pantocrator Icon



Pantocrator Icon of Christ, Bruno Salvatore

The Pantocrator Icon in the dome has the meaning of Creator, and Savior, and Impartial Judge. It is simultaneously both austere and kind. Christ wears an inner robe, *chiton*, which bares one side of His chest, and over which is wrapped a covering, *himation*, with many folds, reminiscent of Psalm 104 that says, “*You covered it with the deep as with a garment.*” From His *himation*, which enwraps Him, as does a cloud hiding the sun, pours the majesty of all creation. His right hand is raised in blessing and the left hand holds the Gospel, the divine law, tightly to His breast, giving rest to those who are heavy laden. His neck and chest are thick and strong which express mercy and compassion. Blessing and uprightness are shown by His right hand. The Pantocrator is the True Sun, the Source of Life, the Giver of Life. In the light of the glory of Your face we proceed unto the age.

The gold background symbolizes the peculiar light of the icon that shows everything as illumined and recreated in a harmonious area and time that is figuratively expressed with the uniformity of the gold. Interpreters tell us that the light of the Byzantine icon is not of this present age. It is a light, “*coming down from above*” and radiating, “*from within.*” The Byzantine icon presents not only the transfigured person, but all creation in its eternal perspective. In Byzantine iconography the people and all the world are spiritualized and illumined with the light that is not natural, but ageless and uncreated, that light which Christ radiated on Mount Tabor of the Transfiguration and that will shine on the Eighth Day in eternity.

The Platytera Icon



Platytera Icon, Bruno Salvatore

In the apse of the Chapel the icon of the Theotokos is shown as supplicant with Christ in the icon known as Platytera Ton Ouranon, “*Wider than the heavens.*” The Virgin Mary unites the dome that symbolizes heaven, with the earth, which is symbolized by the floor, the place of the faithful.

The Theotokos is therefore represented as being between heaven and earth because she intercedes for our salvation and is the one who united things above with the things below through the Christ child who is between her arms. As Saint Gregory Palamas writes, *“the Mother of God is the prelude of the Church triumphant.”*

The Nativity Icon

In the Church, all the events of divine economy are ahistorical, *“Today the Master is born as an infant... Today born from a Virgin...”* Time is not perceived as past, present and future. The Church lives the event of the divine Incarnation as a continuous present.



Nativity Icon replicated from the Monastery of Christ at Chora, George Papastamatiou

In the icon of the Nativity of Christ different times are collected into one today, into a collective presence of events which took place at quite different and distinct places and times. For instance, in the center is the dark cave with the newborn Babe in swaddling clothes. Outside the cave the Theotokos is shown on a clearing, reclining. In the left corner is a multitude of Angels chanting the *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!”* (Luke 2:14). In the right side of the icon is represented the Angel that evangelized the shepherds. In the lower part to the right the elderly Joseph, the betrothed, is represented in deep thought, while to the left is the scene of the bathing of the small Christ. The star shines from above and into the cave. The animals, the ox and ass bend over Christ’s manger warming Him with their breath (Isaiah 1:3). This copy of the famous Nativity icon from the Monastery of Christ at Chora which was in northwestern Byzantine Constantinople. The well-preserved mosaics and frescoes of the surviving Katholikon of the monastery are important examples of art of the Late Byzantine period dating to the early 14th century.

The Baptism Icon

“And immediately, coming up from the water He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. Then a voice came from heaven, “You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:10,11) The Icon of the Baptism of the Lord is an exact reproduction of this Gospel testimony.



The Baptism of Christ, George Papastamatiou

The Baptism of Christ has two fundamental aspects: on this day, the full dogmatic truth of God in three Persons was revealed to men. This mystery of the three Persons in one Godhead, which is beyond all understanding, was here made manifest not spiritually but plainly, in sensory forms. John the Baptist heard the voice of the Father and saw the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, confirming this voice – both of them testifying to the appearance among men of the Son of God in the Person Baptized.

On the other hand, Christ established the New Testament sacrament of Baptism. As a sign of the fact that here the initiative belongs to Christ, that He, the Master, came to the servant and asked to be baptized, the Saviour is represented as walking or making a movement towards John the Baptist, at the same time His head is beneath John's arm. With His right hand He blesses the waters of the Jordan, which cover Him, sanctifying them by His immersion. From then on water becomes an image not of death but of birth into a new life.

The Crucifixion Icon

One cannot glorify the triumph of God incarnate, His victory over death, without at the same time exalting the Cross of Christ. Christ Himself declares that He came, “for this cause... unto this hour” (John 12:27) The real victory of Christ was His apparent defeat, for it is by death that He overthrew the power of death. The Cross is then the concrete expression of the Christian mystery of victory by defeat, of glory by humiliation, of life by death.



The Crucifixion of Christ, George Papastamatiou

The architectural background behind the Cross represents the wall of Jerusalem. This detail not only corresponds to historical truth but expresses at the same time a spiritual precept: just as Christ suffered outside the confines of Jerusalem, Christians must follow Him and go without walls.

Christ is represented naked, having only a white cloth which covers His loins. The flexion of the body towards the right, the bowed head, and the closed eyes indicate the death of the Crucified. His face, however turned towards the Virgin Mary, preserves a grave expression of majesty in suffering, an expression which makes one think of sleep.

The gestures of the persons present at our Lord's death are restrained and grave. The Theotokos, accompanied by holy women is on the right of Christ. She holds herself upright, drawing closer the mantle on Her shoulder with a gesture of the left hand, while Her right hand is raised towards Christ. Her face expresses a grief contained, dominated by intrepid faith. It seems that in addressing herself to St. John, the Mother of God calls him to contemplate with Her the mystery of salvation, which is accomplished in the death of Her son.

The Resurrection Icon

As Paul Evdokimov has written, “*All is joy since the Resurrection exists.*” The Orthodox icon of the Resurrection of Christ also known as, “*the Descent into Hades,*” combines two events. The one event is the historical one and the other is the eschatological one: The Resurrection of Christ “*in time*” and our own resurrection, the general resurrection of us all on the last day.



The Resurrection of Christ, George Papastamatiou

In the center of the Resurrection icon reigns the Victor of death, Jesus Christ. He wears brilliant and glowing garments and is surrounded by bright blue glory of the mandorla, the almond shaped bright cloud. Simultaneously this represents His transfigured body and the never-setting light of the future age. His radiant garb and the triumphant expression of His all-holy face are harmonious with the significance of the feast of the Resurrection as it is expressed in the victorious Paschal Apolytikion: *Christ is risen from the dead, by death trampling upon death! And to those in tombs bestowing life!* The destruction of the power of death is symbolized by the broken chains and locks beneath the doors of Hades, which are being victoriously trampled upon by our Lord and lay in

the form of a cross. Adam and Eve depict the entire human race. The Lord delivers from the bonds of death all the righteous who await His coming as Redeemer and Messiah.

The Philanthropy of Saint Basil the Great

In remembrance of the miracle wrought by God as a result of Saint Basil's love and defense of his people, Orthodox Christians have observed the tradition of the Vasilopita each year on January 1st – the date on which Saint Basil reposed in the Lord in the year 379.



The Philanthropy of Saint Basil the Great Icon, George Papastamatiou

One year, during a time of terrible famine, the emperor levied a sinfully excessive tax upon the people of Caesarea. The tax was such a heavy burden upon the already impoverished people that to avoid debtors' prison each family had to relinquish its few remaining coins as well as pieces of jewelry, including precious family heirlooms. Learning of this injustice against his flock, St. Basil the Great, the Archbishop of Caesarea, took up his bishop's staff and the book of the Holy Gospels and came to his people's defense by fearlessly calling the emperor to repentance. By God's grace, the emperor did repent! He cancelled the tax and instructed his tax collectors to turn over to Saint Basil all of the chests containing the coins and jewelry which had been paid as taxes by the people of Caesarea.

But now Saint Basil was faced with the daunting and impossible task of returning these coins and pieces of jewelry to their rightful owners. After praying for a long time before the icons of our Master Christ and His All-holy Mother, Saint Basil had all the treasures baked into one huge "pita." He then called all the townspeople to prayer at the cathedral, and, after Divine Liturgy, he blessed and cut the "pita," giving a piece to each person. Wondrously each owner received in his

piece of Vasilopita his own valuables. They all joyfully returned home, giving thanks to God who had delivered them from abject poverty and to their good and holy bishop, St. Basil the Great.

The Four Evangelists

The Pendentives are the curved triangles of vaulting formed by the intersection of the dome with its supporting arches. Here we find the four Evangelists, Sts. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Their Gospels hold up the Orthodox Church as their locations hold up the dome.



Evangelist Luke, George Papastamatiou

Evangelist Mark, George Papastamatiou



Evangelist John, George Papastamatiou

Evangelist Matthew, George Papastamatiou

The role of the Evangelists in the Church is similar to that of the icon. “The icon,” says Iakovos Mainas, “is not merely a practical aesthetic method for approaching the mystery of faith. Icons are not simply books for the uneducated, as if the educated have no need of them. They teach us all not because they inform us, but because they lead us to Heaven.”

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