INTRODUCTION

Eyes to See: The Redemptive Purpose of Icons

Mortal, you are living in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see, who have ears to hear but do not hear.

—Ezekiel 12:2

Jesus said to [the disciples] . . . "Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?"

—Mark 8:17–18

Both Jesus and Ezekiel recognized the parallel between having ears to hear and eyes to see, but in the Protestant tradition of my childhood, the emphasis was always on having ears to hear (the words of the Bible) to the loss of eyes to see. My earliest spiritual formation focused on the hearing part and omitted what became apparent later as effective avenues for engaging the seeing part. Symbolic images within worship began to inform my spirituality only when I chose the Episcopal Church as a teenager. I do not know if an increasing awareness of symbolism was

due to natural maturation or to the richness of symbolic images so available in Episcopal liturgy. However, I vividly remember saying at age seventeen that my reason for converting was, in part, because my previous church was just "so plain." As with many other seekers, I had a hunger for something more tangible. There was the longing to see God and live.

The depth of seeing nurtured by icons was included as a defense against accusations of idolatry during the Iconoclastic movement of the seventh and eighth centuries. The heresy of the iconoclasts, or image-smashers, was failing to accept any representations of God, and in so doing failing "to take full account of the Incarnation."[1] Their failure resulted from the narrowness of dualism, a belief system that separates the material/physical from the spiritual. Their heresy was disregarding the full humanity of Christ as both physical and spiritual, and therefore the saving identification of Christ with humankind fallen from the Creator's image and likeness. In countering the iconoclasts, John of Damascus said, "The Word made flesh has deified the flesh."[2] Deification, or divinization, is the aim of the Christian life in Orthodox belief. "God became man that man might become god," said Athanasius (296–373 C.E.).[3] Note the distinction in where the capital "G" and lowercase "g" occur—we tend to get that confused. The biblical basis for this doctrine central in Orthodoxy is found in Paul's frequently used term in the epistles of being "in Christ," and the idea in John's gospel of union between God and humans—God dwelling in us, and we in him (14:20, 17:21). This is summarized in 2 Peter: "His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness. . . . Thus he has given us . . . his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may . . . become participants of the divine nature."[4] "God has 'deified' matter, making it 'spirit-bearing'; and if flesh became a vehicle of the Spirit, then so—though in a different way—can wood and paint (in the images of icons). The Orthodox doctrine of icons is bound up with the Orthodox belief that the whole of God's creation, material as well as spiritual,

is to be redeemed and glorified."[5] Thus, icons demonstrate that all that is represented in them has been restored to the intended Image of God. Icons also serve as "pledges" for the redemption of all creation, serving as "part of the transfigured cosmos."[6]

The point is this: for Orthodoxy, icons are "not merely paintings." Because of the Incarnation's deification of fallen humanity as seen in icon images of divine and transfigured people, icons provide a vehicle for our participation in God's redemptive work. Icons are no less than the "dynamic manifestations of man's spiritual power to redeem creation through beauty and art."[7]

If this were a book about icons simply as religious art, it would not be worth writing, let alone publishing. If Orthodox Christianity did not claim icons are essential for seeing the holy, I would not be motivated to try to inform non-Orthodox Christians about icons. God embodied, in the human and historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth—who is, for all Christians, also the Christ—the mystery and doctrine on which salvation depends. But finding Jesus incarnate in today's world is the struggle of faith for many, me included. The words and images I encounter every day need to be countered, challenged, and balanced against words and images whose purposes are edifying, redemptive, and healing. Reading scripture every day is how I attempt to provide some balance for the words I hear. But I was short on balance for the images I was seeing before starting to take icons as seriously as I do the Bible. Images of the divine are all around, but difficult for me to see except in nature. Starting down that beautiful avenue lined with icons has expanded my spiritual sight and given me the ability to more quickly recognize and apprehend the divine that surrounds me. Icons have done for me what Orthodoxy claims: given me a more "full and proper doctrine of the Incarnation."[8] I now believe the sacred images of icons are the most effective avenue for formation in spiritual seeing. The reason for this book is my belief that *seeing images of the divine* just as often as I *hear divine words* is

essential to me as a Christian trying to remain faithful in today's culture.

Having learned something of how icons are produced, and the traditions and principles that distinguish icons from all other religious art, I can go so far as to say that "authentic" icons are to spiritual seeing what Holy Scripture is to spiritual hearing. At times Western Christianity has emphasized the importance of hearing to the exclusion of seeing. In this incredibly visual culture, the Church would do well to offer the visual counterbalance of icons never lost in Eastern Christendom. We need both sight and sound. Just as surely as ears become attuned at hearing God's Word in Holy Scripture, we need eyes that truly see in order to experience the divine in Holy Icons.

This book is organized around four qualities or spiritual movements that occur within a relationship with God: Discernment and Receptivity in Part I, and Fulfillment and Embodiment in Part II. These descriptors, borrowed from the vocabulary of spirituality to identify what is deeply interior, are not discrete, step-by-step processes. This framework refers to the people that inhabit either side of the icon window—those depicted in the icon, and the viewer. A connection may be created between the viewer and the icon itself when the viewer begins to perceive any of these four qualities or spiritual movements that have occurred within the people in the icons. Therein is the power of icons for gaining eyes to see. Seeing the graces revealed within the icon helps the viewer perceive qualities that might be forming or spiritual movements that are occurring within themselves. Hopefully these four spiritual movements will help you see into the very hearts of holy people, and into your own as well. Therein is the redemptive purpose of icons.

Each of the eight icons is presented in two sections—explanatory notes or historical background followed by an interpretive meditation that reflects my prayer with the icon. Each chapter concludes with scriptures that you may find useful for your own reflective process. The icons are not in chronological

order of their production, nor were the reflections always written in close proximity to the writing of the icon. In fact, the first icon I painted is presented last, indicative of the years of presence I needed to come to a deeper awareness of the icon's meaning for me. While it may be more logical to read the sections of each chapter in the order presented, I encourage you to experiment with each chapter by looking at all the icons first, starting where you are drawn, and then reading in whatever order seems most helpful to your engagement with each icon.

Part I: Discernment ~ Receptivity

The first four icons present the concepts of Discernment and Receptivity. Discernment is the lifelong seeking after the will of God. Not limited simply to understanding one's particular calling or vocation, discernment desires to know the mind of God, what God thinks and feels, who God is, what God is like. Especially seen in the *"Christus Orans"* icon, the focus of discernment is on relationship with God, seeking intimacy rather than the proverbial laundry list of petitions. *"Noli Me Tangere"* speaks particularly about discerning one's relationship with God.

Parallel with discernment is the quality of receptivity. Discernment requires listening, quietness, the willingness to receive. Receptivity is not possible without a stilled soul and surrendered ego that knows who is God and who is not. We enter into a quiet receptivity with the icon's imagery, emptying our expectations in order to discern God's agendas. We trust receptivity to give us what we need. We trust receptivity in order to be able to perceive, to discern, to see. The Blessed Mother Mary is without doubt the purest essence of receptivity we have, thus her icon "*Theotokos*, God Bearer." My experience with the icon "Mary Magdalene, the Myrrh Bearer" so shifted my understanding of the Magdalene that I now see her alongside the Blessed Mother, both as archetypes of utterly surrendered loving obedience to God.

Part II: Fulfillment ~ Embodiment

The central figure is Christ in all four icons of this section. All four icons are confrontational. They all cut uncomfortably close to the core of human anxieties. And all four are powerful witnesses of the Christian story of God's redemptive work through Jesus Christ. It was Jesus' evolution through discernment and receptivity that brought him into fulfillment and embodiment to the completion of his ministry. We know Jesus lived the embodied, incarnate presence of God throughout his earthly life, but his embodiment was most strikingly manifested, witnessed, and interpreted through his crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension. These icons provide powerful images of that sacred evolution to invite the viewer onto that broad avenue for seeing, experiencing, comprehending, and apprehending the redemptive work of God.

Episcopal priest and theologian Urban Holmes said, "No one can perceive the crucifixion of Jesus in its true light unless he or she looks at it through the awareness of his or her own death."[9] Both "The Crucifixion" and "The Descent from the Cross" icons confront the viewer with Jesus' death as well as our own. Having experienced the "*Anastasis,* Resurrection" icon as described in Chapter 7, I can confidently say Holmes' statement also applies, in reverse order, to our own resurrection. "*Anastasis,* Resurrection" helped me to see the realities possible about my own resurrection, something I could not begin to comprehend until the icon gave me a richly loaded image of Christ's resurrection to replace the vague image of absence and the empty tomb.

These four descriptors for an evolution of qualities or spiritual movements are not meant in any way to refer to linear processes. Because we live in chronological time, it is my hope this framework may be helpful for seeing the past, present, and future—the eternal *kairos* time zones of the Kingdom communicated by the icons. The post resurrection "Christ *Pantocrator,*" the last icon in the book, speaks directly to the eternal reality of Christ currently alive in another realm, the realm we can begin to glimpse through these sacred windows.

'I will be what I will be'; i.e., no words can sum up all that He will be to His people, but His everlasting faithfulness and unchanging mercy will more and more manifest themselves in the guidance of Israel. The answer Moses receives in these words is thus equivalent to, 'I shall save in the way that I shall save.' It is to assure the Israelites of the *fact* of deliverance, but does not disclose the *manner.* It must suffice the Israelites to learn that, '*Ehyeh*, I WILL BE (with you), hath sent me unto you'" [italics in the original].

4. C in the Byzantine alphabet corresponds to Σ (Sigma) in modern Greek, or S in English.
5. Betty Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain: A Course in Enhancing Creativity and Artistic Confidence* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1979).
6. Sojourner's Online, 2003.

Further Words—Four Questions

1. From David Anderson, trans., *St. John of Damascus, On the Divine Images* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 23, quoted by Brockman.
2. St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. Catherine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1981), 103, 107, quoted by Brockman.
3. Brockman, "Iconography and Incarnation."