

History of Coptic Iconography

Objectives

Study of the icons, its history and its spiritualities

References

- ❖ The Spirituality of Icons (H. G. Bishop Daniel)
- ❖ Church House of God (Fr. Tadros Malaty)

Scriptural Verse

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12: 1)

Lesson Outlines

Essential Icons on the Iconostasis

- ❖ Right: The icon of our Lord followed by St. John the Baptist and the “Patron Saint”.
- ❖ Left: St Mary “The Theotokos”, the Annunciation, Archangel Michael and St. Mark.
- ❖ Above: The last supper and icons of the twelve disciples.
- ❖ Top: A crucifix with the Virgin Mary and St. John

Icons and Church Education

- ❖ Icons are pictured sermons presented in a simple, universal language expressing the joyful life, love, kindness, Spirit of strength and prayer attitude.
- ❖ In the Old Testament; the Tabernacle, the Bronze Serpent, the Fiery Bush and the Rod of Aaron are considered as Superb Icons designed by God.
- ❖ The Holy Bible is a divine Icon portrayed by the Holy Spirit to reveal God’s love and the icons are an open Bible uncovering the mysteries of the scriptures.
- ❖ The Father is not shown as an aged man (this is the Arian heresy), for He is not incarnated (rarely symbolized by a Hand going through the clouds). He is revealed through His incarnated Son.
- ❖ The Icon is an aid to worship. It helps to focus in prayer and to feel the presence of God. A candle before an icon resembles the light of the Lord Jesus Christ who shines through His saints and the Halo shows that they are the light of the World.
- ❖ The Icons are not as normal paintings and the Christian artist is a preacher and a teacher who needs to fast and pray to get a divine grace and offer Icons with Pious Spirit.

Consecration of Icons

- ❖ Veneration may only be given to consecrated church Icons.
- ❖ Icons receive consecration by a bishop and are anointed with the Holy Myron.
- ❖ Once consecrated, they are qualified to receive incensing, become in God’s possession, and bear spiritual power to attract the hearts and contribute to the church’s life.

History of Iconography

There is always a spiritual uniformity in Icons although they may differ stylistically.
(Byzantine icons show elongated figures, while Coptic Icons show rounder ones)

- ❖ Period of Symbols: Used in the first two centuries (Good Shepherd, Fish or the Greek letters of the Lord Jesus' Name in the shape of a Cross.)
- ❖ Period of Biblical Icons: Used to teach subjects of the Holy Scriptures as a universal language. (Miracle of the loaves, Daniel among the lions, the raising of Lazarus...)
- ❖ Period of Inspiring Icons: This kind appeared as Christians were awaiting the second coming. (Icons of Martyrs and Saints crowned with glory, Angels and Prophetic Visions with the Enthroned Lord Jesus Christ)

Features of Coptic Icons

- ❖ The Icon is a mini biography of the Saint. For example, St. George (the white horse gift from the emperor, dressed in armor as a military, dragon under his feet for his spiritual victory and the woman in the back is the one he converted to Christianity in his prison...).
- ❖ Large and wide eyes that look beyond the material world.
- ❖ Large ears that listen to the word of God.
- ❖ Full gentle lips that glorify and praise the Lord.
- ❖ Small mouth that signifies the virtue of silence and humility.
- ❖ The saint always gazes straight ahead; a sign of his unbending faith and his call to us while an evil character is portrayed in profile sign of deviation and avoidance.
- ❖ No signs of sufferings as the martyrs and saints are now glorified.
- ❖ The halo is an expression of light radiating from within the saint, as a sign of the holiness he attained by his spiritual struggle.
- ❖ All icons are based on that of the Lord Jesus Christ with a round face denoting eternity.

Icons of the Lord Christ

- ❖ The legs of the Child are crossed and His arms outspread, to foreshadow the Cross.
- ❖ The Lord hanging on the Cross, with opened eyes as a sign of His immortality and Divinity.
- ❖ He bears a Coptic Cross, so that we look to Him as our Savior.
- ❖ Bare feet symbolize that He walked among us, leaving His footprints on the earth.
- ❖ Although an infant, He is usually portrayed as a man wearing adult clothes because He is the Lord of creation and the glory of God the Father.
- ❖ He wears White for His purity, Gold for His Divinity and Glory or red for His Redemption.

Icons of St. Mary

- ❖ St. Mary when holding the Lord Jesus Christ, always has one hand signal towards her Son which is the action that sums up her entire life to the present day.
- ❖ In some icons, the Child face is pressed against His mother's – which is an action of tender love and a reminder that His body was knit from her flesh affirming Incarnation.
- ❖ St. Mary appears to be looking toward the person praying before the icon, and her eyes have an inward, contemplative quality.
- ❖ St. Mary wears a garment and a shawl. Her clothes are blue for her association with the heavens, red because through her, the Savior and Redeemer was born or brown for her poverty and humility.

- ❖ Upon her shawl are 3 stars symbolizing her virginity before, during and after her son's birth. At the same time they suggest that heaven has found a place in her.
- ❖ The Icon of St Mary with the Lord Jesus is an Eucharistic icon: because in receiving the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, we too hold Him and are held by Him.

Conclusion

Icons serve as constant reminder that we live in the presence of God and in the midst of a “cloud of witnesses.” They are not to be taken as pieces of artistic device, but rather, as windows or doors into spiritual world.

Activities / Discussion Points

1. Why do we honor the Icons of saints?
2. Distribute a picture of an Icon and try to understand and contemplate its features together.