

## Icons as Veils

St. Dionysios the Areopagite in his work *On the Celestial Hierarchy* says that human beings cannot be “raised up directly” to the heights of spiritual contemplation. We cannot look directly into heaven. Even the angels cannot look upon the divine without covering their eyes. The six-winged cherubim have two wings just to cover their eyes, two to cover below in modesty and two to carry out their work.

For humans St. Dionysios says that we use symbols, which he calls veils. With these veils we are able to go through different stages or levels of experience. We begin with symbols that take us across the threshold. They are inadequate because they are made so that we can start to understand. These naturalistic pictures show God and the angels as human beings or to use the words of the Prophet Ezekiel (1:6-8) “They were in human form, but each had four faces and four wings, and their legs were straight, the soles of their feet like the hooves of a bull, gleaming like polished brass. Human hands were under their wings, and the wings of one touched those of another. Their faces and their wings looked out on all their four sides; they did not turn when they moved, but

each went straight ahead.” Dionysios calls these riddles. It is only when one figures out the riddle or sees the beauty within these images they partake of the mystery and are filled with “great theological light. (115)

The problem is when these images whether in text or in icons fail to point the reader or viewer to the light inside. The Cappadocian Fathers, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Maximos the Confessor pointed out this failure and referred to it as a “stumbling block”. Origen pointed this same problem with the scriptures. While every word is divinely inspired and every word of it is useful for salvation (I Tm 3:16), the “object of the text” is God. As one can miss the point in art and be caught up in the work and not the divine light, humans can miss the deeper meaning of passages of Scripture. This is where contradictions in understanding and people finding offense lay. They are caught viewing the trees in the forest and missing the sunlight.

It is for this same misunderstanding that people look upon icons as idols. They are stumbling on the art and the objects of human creations failing to see that it is a veil hiding the light so that we are not blinded. The icon is a veil in which every

part of it can open the individual viewer to glance upon the light through a new form of vision fashioned by faith. Without faith one sees a picture, with faith one hides from the infinite mystery of God but grasps just a personal minute revelation. The viewer is transformed from one glory to another on a never-ending journey into the divine light.

Iconographers do not write the human body as it truly appears but in a timeless world either floating on golden light or surrounded by buildings whose proportions are out of proportion. Their eyes are always fixed for while humans want to take in all that is around them, the subject of icons are fixated like a person in love upon their beloved, God. As an American musical “classic” (A Portrait of My Love by Matt Monro) sings, “It would take ... a Michelangelo, and he would need the glow of dawn that paints the sky above to try and paint a portrait of my love.” Scripture and iconography only give a glimpse of the sky above when we try to get a glimpse of our God.

For more on this see Fr. Maximos Constas’ *Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography* (Introduction to the Art of Seeing), Alhambra, CA., 2014.

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## Lenten Regulations

(a guide)

Most people equate “Lenten Regulations” with the fasting rules regarding food intake. In practice, this approach is an easy way to just fulfill some basic requirements. After all, the process seems quite straightforward: set a goal; do what you can to meet the minimum; mission accomplished.

It’s easy to judge the degree of success—you either did or did not abstain from certain foods on specified days. You may have even carefully checked ingredient labels, just to be sure to comply with the “law”. Did it make you better?

If that scenario has been

played out before, and you felt somewhat less than pleased with the results after forty days of near torture, perhaps you’ve come to a realization that there has to be more to it than that.

Good for you!

Those restrictions came about for very good reasons. People felt that they had to be told exactly what to do to succeed in this very important step along the way to really living a good, Christian life.

Times change. As we age we usually become wiser.

Education may have made us more sophisticated, and easy solutions don’t seem to satisfy.

If that sums up your expectation for a truly meaningful Lent, let the food restrictions be the starting point. (You know what they are): No meat or animal products the first day of Lent [February 27] and Great and Holy Friday [April 14]; no meat on any Friday during Lent. Anyone wishing to do more than the minimum may elect to add Wednesdays (and Mondays); try to abstain from milk, eggs, cheese, butter more frequently; or even every day of the Great Lent.

Using arbitrary age ranges 14-59, as the Roman Church does, somehow detracts from following the spirit of the idea of “fasting”. Perhaps a better

guideline could be to apply some other notion. How about: “anyone who receives the Eucharist”? It’s more inclusive, and age-appropriate modification can easily allow for developing minds to get accustomed to a realistic participation in this form of discipline.

We can learn to not judge others by how they keep or don’t keep the “rules”.

Now we’re freed up to pay attention too, to two other aspects—the companions to fasting: prayer and attending to the needs of others (“almsgiving”).

See if that doesn’t give you a much more satisfying Lent than just “giving up” food or fleeting entertainment.