REPORT

The Holy Icon of the Resurrection

Basic Principles
for Overcoming an Unfruitful Dispute

September 26, 2007 (Old Style)
St. John the Theologian

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I. The Language of Iconography as Depictional Theology

1. IT HAS been very aptly written that

Every Orthodox Icon expresses a truth which is, at the same time, a common experience of the One, Catholic Church. There is no place, here, for individual inspiration.[1]

2. CONSEQUENTLY, as the "Russian Kontoglou," Leonid Ouspensky, observes:

[O]ne cannot consider every image, even one that is very old and very beautiful, as an infallible authority, especially if it originated in a time of decadence such as our own. Such an image may correspond to the teaching of the Church or it may not. It can deceive rather than teach. In other words, the teaching of the Church can be falsified by the image as much as by word [written or oral]. For this reason, the Church has always fought not for the artistic quality of its art, but for its authenticity, not for its beauty, but for its truth.[2]

3. THE ORTHODOX ICON, as depictional theology, constitutes a codified language, which—particularly with regard to events from the Old and the New Testaments—does not confine the meaning of the events to their historical place or the temporal instant at which they occurred, but transcends these factors in order to teach us a dogmatic truth, to wit, their real meaning.

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[1] Cf. Spyros Marines, "Prologue" to the work by Leonid Ouspensky, Ἡ Θεολογία τῆς Εἰκόνας στὴν Ὀρθόδοξη Ἐκκλησία [The theology of the icon in the Orthodox Church] (Athens: Ekdoseis "Harmos," 1993), Vol. I, p. 7.

[2] Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon,* trans. Anthony Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), Vol. I, pp. 16, 14-15. (In a few places we have found it necessary to modify the English version of Ouspensky's work in order to reflect the Greek translation used by the author of this Report—*Trans.*)

• Thus, with regard, for example, to the architecture in an Icon, the building (or the landscape: the cave in the Icon of the Nativity of Our Savior, and also in the Icon of the Resurrection) indicates the place in which the event occurs, but

> never encloses the scene; it only acts as a background, so that the event does not occur *in* the building, but *in front of* it.[3]

4. WE CAN OBSERVE, during the period of theological decadence in the regions of the Orthodox East (from the end of the sixteenth century through the beginning of the seventeenth century), a gradual loss of understanding of the language of iconography and, at the same time, the profound influence of Western models of thought and art.

• An immediate consequence of this loss was the prevalence of (at times unbridled) imagination and an effort to adhere to the historical place or the temporal moment of the events in question, which were henceforth presented in a completely naturalistic manner (and moreover, inside buildings or within landscapes), entirely stripped of their deeper theological essence— their iconographic meaning.

5. THE FOOTNOTES and comments of St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite in the Rudder[4] that treat of the Holy Icons represent "a typical example of this development," as Leonid Ouspensky remarks:

> 'St. Nicodemus' understanding of sacred art is permeated with western rationalism'; 'the seven reasons [sic; St. Nikodemos actually cites only six reasons—*Trans.*] for the veneration of icons he enumerates lack all theological significance, and the essential one—that of witnessing to the Incarnation—is missing'; 'the context of the general concepts of St. Nicodemus and those of his time [betrays the replacement of] the traditional Orthodox artistic language by the language proper to Roman Catholicism.'[5]

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[3] *Ibid.,* Vol. I, p. 189.

[4] Ἱερὸν Πηδάλιον [The sacred rudder], "Prolegomena" to the Seventh Œcumenical Synod, 7th ed. (Athens: "Aster," 1970), pp. 314-321.

[5] Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon,* Vol. II, p. 420.

II. *Historical Development*

    1. WITHIN the historical parameters of this development, during which, as we have said, the language of Orthodox iconography was lost, the Latin type gradually came to prevail in depictions of the Resurrection.

    • This type was created in the eleventh century in the West and became familiar through Giotto (Giotto di Bondone, 1266-1337), although its different forms, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, vary quite widely:

> "The Lord is represented holding a banner of victory as He is raised in the air as if by a vigorous jump from a sarcophagus tomb, whose slate covering is raised by an angel, obviously to permit Him to exit, while the guards are shown fallen upon the ground'; '[T]he Western type showing Christ jumping out of the grave was imposed upon Orthodox iconography during the Turkish domination (especially from the 17th century[6]) through the influence of the West. It became practically the prevalent Icon of the Resurrection, when in essence it is a type not only untraditional but unorthodox."[7]

    2. WESTERN GRAVURES,[8] which became a source for the borrowing of new iconographic compositions, contributed significantly to the spread of Western-style iconography and its direct influence on Orthodox painters, from the sixteenth century onwards.

> • "The Western depiction (in terms of iconography and technique) of the Resurrection was a subject especially dear to Cretan iconographers in the seventeenth century and to artists of the so-called Heptanesian School in the seventeenth and eight-

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[6]   The oldest example of such a Western-style Icon is that by Elias (Leo) Moskos (†1682, Zakynthos), painted in 1657 (now housed in the Byzantine Museum in Athens).

[7]   Constantine D. Kalokyris, *The Essence of Orthodox Iconography,* trans. Peter A. Chamberas (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross School of Theology, 1971), pp. 33, 35.

[8]   Gravure (etching): the art of engraving drawings on the surfaces of various hard and resistant materials for reproduction in mass quantities (lithography, xylography, chalcography, etc.). In the West, as far back as the Middle Ages, gravure underwent significant development, starting with images carved in wood.

eenth centuries. I believe that this preference for the Western-style rendition of the Resurrection is due, *inter alia,* to the influence of pilgrims to the Holy Places, since above the entrance to the All-Holy Sepulchre there was a similar (Western-style) Icon of the Resurrection, which was reproduced on a variety of souvenirs for pilgrims and thus became a model for many artists."[9]

3. HOWEVER, according to the Byzantine iconographic type, the Resurrection—as early as the eighth century—is portrayed primarily by the Descent of the Savior into Hades.

 • "This iconographic type represents the Lord in Hades surrounded by a radiant glory; He is trampling upon the demolished gates of Hell and bears in His left hand the Cross of the Resurrection, while with His right hand He raises from a sarcophagus Adam, who represents the human race."[10]

4. The so-called Byzantine type became very popular and was never called in question, and was in fact promoted by ecclesiastical authority, by Fathers and synods, in both practice and theory.

a. "In Byzantine art, the composition of the Descent into Hades crystallizes during the tenth and eleventh centuries, while in the Palæologan period it is enhanced with new details. In the same period, there emerges a fixed composition with many variations."[11]

b. Famous representations of the Descent into Hades, which attest to the homogeneous and uniform Tradition of Orthodoxy regarding the subject in question, include those in the Monastery at Daphni, in the Monastery of Hosios Loukas, in the mosaics and frescoes of the Palæologan era (e.g., in the Church of the Holy Apostles, in Thessaloniki, and in the Monastery of Chora [Kariye Camii], in Constantinople), those found in monasteries, and those featured in numerous portable Icons.

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[9] Yuri Piatnitsky, in *Εἰκόνες τῆς Κρητικῆς Τέχνης* [Icons by Cretan artists] (Herakleion: Bikelaia Bibliotheke-Panepistemiakes Ekdoseis Kretes,1993), p. 357.

[10] Kalokyris, *The Essence of Orthodox Iconography,* p. 33.

[11] Piatnitsky, in *Εἰκόνες τῆς Κρητικῆς Τέχνης*, p. 327.

c. It should be noted that

"all traditional depictions [of this type], whether in manu-
scripts, frescoes, or portable Icons, bear the inscription THE
RESURRECTION. Such inscriptions as 'The Resurrection of
Christ' or the 'Descent into Hades' are rare."[12]

5. IT IS very striking that St. John of Damascus (680-749) knows
only one Icon of the Resurrection, which he considers consonant in eve-
ry respect with the ecclesiastical tradition up to his time, and which he
describes:

"We have received Her [the Holy Church of God] from the
Holy Fathers thus adorned, as the Divine Scriptures also teach
us: to wit, with the Incarnate Œconomy of Christ,... the An-
nunciation of Gabriel to the Virgin, etc., the Nativity, etc....;
and likewise, the Crucifixion, etc... ; the Resurrection, which
is the joy of the world—how Christ tramples on Hades and
raises up Adam."[13]

• The Saint subsequently addresses these points in greater detail:

"Suppose an unbeliever [who comes from a pagan milieu and
says to you: 'Show me your faith, that I, too, might believe']
asks: 'Who is this that is crucified? Who is this that has risen
and is trampling on the head of that old man?' Do you not [O
man], teach him from the Icons, saying: 'This crucified man is
the Son of God, Who was crucified to take away the sins of the
world. This man that has risen is He Who raised up with Him-
self Adam, the forefather of the world, who fell through diso-
bedience. He is trampling on Hades, which held Adam for so
many years bound in unbreakable fetters and bars in the neth-
ermost regions'? In this way you gradually bring him to the
knowledge of God."[14]

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[12] Monk Ioannes-Charilaos Branos, *Θεωρία Ἁγιογραφίας* [The theory of iconography]
(Thessalonica: Ekdoseis "P. Pournaras," 1977), p. 223.

[13] St. John of Damascus, "Demonstrative Discourse Concerning the Holy and Precious
Icons," §3, *Patrologia Græca,* Vol. XCV, cols. 313D-316A.

[14] *Ibid.,* § 10, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCV, col. 325D.

6. IT SHOULD be especially emphasized that the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* mentions the Icon of the Resurrection in terms similar to those of St. John of Damascus:

> "For in the Icons we see the Suffering of the Master for our sake, the Cross, the Tomb, and Hades deadened and despoiled."[15]

• It is noteworthy that in the foregoing text the words "the Resurrection and the egress from the Tomb" are not added, because Holy Tradition has always regarded "trampling on Hades and raising Adam" as a representation of the Resurrection.[16]

7. ONE authoritative contemporary theologian, with this entire set of issues in mind, assures us that

> [T]he Church decided to regard the Descent into Hades as a true Icon of the Resurrection.... The quintessential Icon of the Resurrection of Christ is considered to be His Descent into Hades.... To be sure, there are also Icons of the Resurrection which depict Christ's appearance to the Myrrh-bearing women and the Disciples, but the Icon of the Resurrection *par excellence* is the shattering of death, which took place at the Descent of Christ into Hades, when His soul, together with His Divinity, went down into Hades and freed the souls of the Righteous ones of the Old Testament, who were awaiting Him as their Redeemer.[17]

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[15]   *Triodion,* "Sunday of Orthodoxy" (Athens: Ekdoseis "Phos," 1989), p. 156a.

[16]   St. John of Damascus, "Demonstrative Discourse Concerning the Holy and Precious Icons," §§3, 10, *Patrologia Græca,* Vol. XCV, cols. 316A, 325D.

[17]   Metropolitan Hierotheos of Naupaktos, *Οἱ Δεσποτικὲς Ἑορτές* [The feasts of the Lord] (Lebadeia, Greece: Hiera Mone Genethliou tes Theotokou [Pelagias], 1995), pp. 262, 263.

III. *Theological Analysis*

1. ORTHODOX theology regards the Latin/Western type, vis-à-vis the representation of the Resurrection,

> "as unhistorical, simply impressionistic, and essentially unorthodox,"[18]

and characterizes its adoption as

> "a compromise to the detriment of the Orthodox Tradition of worship and doctrine," which "[is] in no way permissible," since it leads "to artistic syncretism."[19]

2. THE ORTHODOX Icon of the Resurrection is a dogmatic Icon, that is, it expresses a dogmatic truth, the real meaning of the event and, as such, transcends the historical place and the temporal moment at which it occurred:

> "The quality of theological tradition is reflected in the Icon of the Resurrection, which requires a purely mystical interpretation of this event."[20]

3. THIS DOGMATIC Icon of the Resurrection highlights, with truly exceptional emphasis, not an individual historical event (the bodily Resurrection of the Savior), nor an historical moment (the Savior's egress from the Tomb), but, rather, the dogma of the abolition of Hades and death as well as the Resurrection of humanity.

a. "The Resurrection of Christ is simultaneously also the Resurrection of humanity"; "the Resurrection is not only the Resurrection of Christ," but a majestic universal event, a "cosmic event";[21] "Christ does not come out of the tomb but out from 'among the dead,' *ek nekron,* 'coming up out of devastated Hades as from a nuptial palace.'"[22]

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[18]   Kalokyris, *The Essence of Orthodox Iconography,* p. 36.

[19]   Ibid., pp. 36-37.

[20]   Michel Quenot, Ἡ Ἀνάσταση καὶ ἡ Εἰκόνα [The Resurrection and the Icon] (Katerine: Ekdoseis "Tertios," 1998), p. 94.

[21]   Branos, Θεωρία Ἁγιογραφίας, pp. 216, 217.

[22]   Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty,* trans. Fr. Steven Bigham (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1990), p. 325.

- One way or another, "Christ could not have come out of the tomb, since, in descending into Hades, He ascends again to the Father, followed by liberated slaves";[23] Christ was not raised alone, but together with humanity.

b. The Resurrection, according to the Western type, "portrays a historical moment," that is, it essentially "starts from Christ's egress from the tomb,"[24] whereas according to the Orthodox type,

> "it reveals, that is, makes manifest the victory of the Cross"; "the Descent into Hades is already a Resurrection"; "the great *triduum mortis* constitutes the mystical days in which the Resurrection is accomplished."[25]

c. "Hades does not exist as a particular place; it is a symbol,"[26] which hints at the dominion of death and the Devil, and, consequently, a lack of communion with God.

- "In the Orthodox Tradition, Hades is not simply a particular place, but the dominion of death and the Devil. We say that the souls of people who are in the power of the Devil and death exist in Hades."[27]

- "It is in this sense that we should regard the teaching of the Church about the Descent of Christ into Hades, that is, that Christ entered the realm of death and consented to die, whereupon by the power of His Divinity He conquered death, rendering it completely impotent and feeble, and gave every person the possibility, by His own power and authority, to es-

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[23] Quenot, *Ἡ Ἀνάσταση καὶ ἡ Εἰκόνα,* p. 147.

[24] Branos, *Θεωρία Ἁγιογραφίας,* p. 225.

[25] Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky, "Ὁ Σταυρικὸς Θάνατος" [Of the death on the Cross], in *Ἀνατομία Προβλημάτων τῆς Πίστεως* [An analysis of matters of faith], trans. Archimandrite Meletios Kalamaras (Thessalonica: Ekdoseis Bas. Regopoulou, 1977), pp. 79, 80, 81.

[26] Nikos A. Matsoukas, *Δογματικὴ καὶ Συμβολικὴ Θεολογία* [Dogmatic and symbolic theology] (Thessalonica: Ekdoseis "P. Pournaras," 1985), Vol. II, p. 552.

[27] Metropolitan Hierotheos, *Οἱ Δεσποτικὲς Ἑορτές,* p. 265.

cape the dominion, the sway, and the power of death and the Devil."[28]

4. THE HOLY RESURRECTION of Our Savior, as a mystery, was invisible and outside the laws and processes of other resurrections, since through the Resurrection and in the Resurrection we do not have a simple resuscitation of the Master's Body and its egress from the sepulchre, as, for example, in the case of St. Lazarus (a miracle perceptible to all and the [eventual] return of his body to corruption), but its transition, as being henceforth "one with God" [ὁμόθεος] and, in an ineffable mystery, to uncreated reality; that is, we have an ontological transformation:

> "O Lord, while the grave was sealed by the lawless ones, Thou camest forth from the sepulchre even as Thou wast born of the Theotokos. Thy bodiless Angels knew not how Thou becamest incarnate; the soldiers who guarded Thee did not perceive when Thou didst arise. For both these things were kept sealed for those who inquired, but the wonders were made manifest unto those who worship the mystery with faith. Do Thou grant unto us who praise it exultation and great mercy."[29]

• Since the Resurrection of Christ was a victory that abolished death,

> "[i]t...constituted an ontological change and henceforth the spiritual body of glory could reappear in this world without being restrained by its laws."[30]

5. ST. NIKODEMOS the Hagiorite, in his commentary on the "prefiguration" and "foreshadowing" of the saving Passion and "supramundane Resurrection" of Our Lord, makes the following very pertinent observations:

> "Why does [St. Cosmas] the Melodist call the Resurrection of the Lord 'supramundane'? Because it is above all comprehension and knowledge of the people of this world, to say noth-

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[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Παρακλητική,* Plagal of the First Tone, Sunday Orthros, First Sticheron at the Praises (Athens: Ekdoseis "Phos," 1987), p. 246b.

[30] Evdokimov, The Art of the Icon, p. 319.

ing of the Angels; for it transcends all of the bounds and laws of nature, and is a work and accomplishment of God's omnipotence."[31]

• A lucid commentary on this Patristic viewpoint is provided by Leonid Ouspensky, who writes, *inter alia,* as follows:

"The unfathomable character of this event for the human mind, and the consequent impossibility of depicting it, is the reason for the absence, in traditional Orthodox iconography, [of any depiction] of the actual moment of the Resurrection."[32]

6. SINCE, therefore, the Resurrection of Our Lord is unquestionably "supramundane," as being "above all comprehension and knowledge," we may likewise characterize as "supramundane" the "co-resurrection" [συν-ανάστασις], that is, the "universal redemption" of the human race, which was accomplished through the Resurrection of Our Savior, the God-Man. However, as a universal, cosmic, and supramundane event, it cannot be circumscribed and captured photographically in a definite, temporal instant.

• As Professor Constantine Kalokyris so very aptly writes, since "the Orthodox [Iconographic] type" of the Resurrection expresses simultaneously these two "supramundane" events,

"[it] is not merely, as in the Latin type (exit from the grave), a visible declaration of that very instant in time only, when the event of rising from the grave took place"; "for the manifestation of the event of the Resurrection in the visible world, that is, for its more empirical representation, Orthodox iconogra-

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[31] St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, Ἑορτοδρόμιον [Commentary on the Great Feasts] (Venice: 1836), p. 32 (see also pp. 427 and 430): "Jonah stretched forth his hands in the form of a Cross within the belly of the sea monster, plainly prefiguring the redeeming Passion. Cast out thence after three days, he foreshadowed the supramundane Resurrection of Christ our God, Who was crucified in the flesh and enlightened the world by His Rising on the third day" (Canon of the Exaltation of the Cross, Ode 6, *Heirmos*).

[32] Leonid Ouspensky, in Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons,* trans. G.E.H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), pp. 187, 185.

phy has the type of the Myrrh-bearers by the tomb, where the ἐξαστράπτων ἄγγελος (shining angel) sits (ὁ λίθος)."[33]

7. **LET US** reiterate that the so-called Byzantine type, as the authentically Orthodox dogmatic Icon of the Resurrection, has always borne the inscription, "The Resurrection," and not, "The Descent into Hades," in order to represent symbolically the twofold "supramundane" event and to render perceptible the Resurrectional *Apolytikion:*

> Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.

• In this case, we have an identity of Icon, hymnography, and theology.

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[33] Kalokyris, *The Essence of Orthodox Iconography,* p. 34. See also Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons,* pp. 189-192, regarding this Icon of the Resurrection as having already taken place, in accordance with the Gospel narratives.

IV. Conclusions

1. AN UNDERSTANDING of the foregoing fundamental theological truths, which are codified in the so-called Byzantine type of the Resurrection, provides us with a direct response to the false dilemma:

> How is Christ to be depicted in the Icon of the Resurrection? With His resurrected body or without it?[34]

• Since in this sacred Icon it is not simply and solely the Descent into Hades of the deified soul of the Savior that is represented (an event which cannot, in fact, be depicted), but the dogma of the abolition of death and Hades and of the Resurrection of humanity, then we reply as follows:

> ➜ *Christ is to be depicted with His resurrected body, holding the Cross, of course, and bearing the symbols of the victory won through His Passion, that is, the prints of the nails in His hands and feet, but without being encompassed by the realm of Hades and death, which (as background) is placed beneath or behind Him, in order to show that He has overcome, defeated, and abolished it.*

2. BEFORE US we have the mystery of the death and Resurrection of Our Savior, of the victory over death, and of the harrowing of Hades:

> "Although His holy soul was parted from His body during his three-day death and descended into Hades, while His body lay in the tomb, nevertheless, the substance of His Divinity was inseparable from both His soul and His body. Hence, present in the tomb through His body, It rent death asunder; present in Hades through His soul, it freed the souls in Hades."[35]

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[34] Branos, *Θεωρία Ἁγιογραφίας,* pp. 222.

[35] St. Nikodemos, *Ἑορτοδρόμιον,* p. 397 (see also p. 388):

> • "Thou wast slain, but not separated, O Word, from the flesh that Thou didst share with us; for though Thy temple was destroyed at the time of Thy Passion, yet the Hypostasis of Thy Divinity and of Thy flesh but one; in both Thou art one Son, the Word of God, both God and man" (Canon of Great Saturday, Ode 6, Troparion 1).

■ The Orthodox type of the Resurrection, in a most profoundly theological way, succeeds in initiating us into this "other-worldly" twofold mystery, whereas the Western type is incapable of initiating us into this mystery, bereft as it is of historical exactitude or theology.

3. IT IS NOW possible for us, through this prism, to evaluate the views of St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite,[36] who put forth his opinion on this subject, but not in a dogmatic spirit. Rather, he submitted it to the judgment of the Church, since—as he himself writes—"the final arbiter in the Church" is an Œcumenical Synod, which is the "personification" of the Church.[37]

> "What matters to us is not what some Fathers have said or thought, but what Scripture says, what the Œcumenical Synods say, and what the common mind of the Fathers says. For the opinion of certain individuals in the Church does not constitute a dogma"; "the opinion of a multitudinous and Œcumenical Synod is preferable by far to the opinion of a single individual."[38]
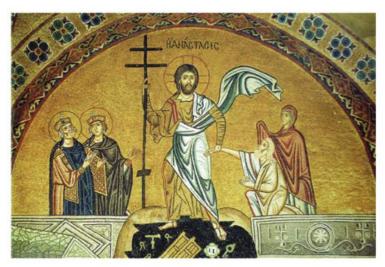
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**Unto God
be glory and thanksgiving!**

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[36] *Πηδάλιον,* p. 321 (footnote).

[37] *Ibid.,* p. 120 (footnote).

[38] *Ibid.,* p. 7, n. 2, p. 320 (footnote).

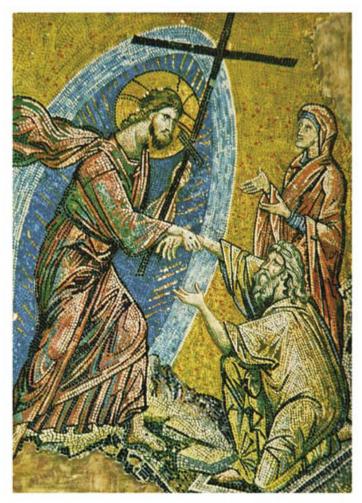## V. Samples of the Byzantine Depiction of the Resurrection

Holy Monastery of Saint Luke, Lebadeia, eleventh century

Holy Monastery of the Pantocrator—Chora (Kariye Camii), Constantinople, fourteenth century

Holy Monastery of Daphni, Athens, eleventh century

Holy Monastery of the Holy Apostles,
Thessalonica, fourteenth century

VI. Samples of the Western Depiction of the Resurrection

Elias Moskos, seventeenth century

Victor, seventeenth century

Domenikos Theotokopoulos ("El Greco"),
Madrid, seventeenth century

Matthias Grünewald, sixteenth century