



## When Innovation and Creativity in Iconography Court Heresy: “Icons” of the Holy Family

This article is taken from an essay written by Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, several decades ago, for the periodical *Orthodox Tradition*.

**SOME YEARS AGO**, Professor Constantine Kalokyris, the renowned expert on the history and theory of Orthodox Iconography, made the observation that, “In America they have started making Byzantine icons, mosaics, and wall-paintings, but the painters here are still lacking the theological presuppositions of Orthodox iconography.”<sup>1</sup> One might take some exception to this statement now, several decades later, when traditional Iconography and iconographers can be found in many places in America; and, indeed, it can be persuasively argued that there were very notable and clear exceptions to his claim, especially in certain Russian Orthodox circles in this country, at the very time that Kalokyris originally made his observation. Nonetheless, there was, in part, some accuracy in what he said, and there persists among Orthodox in America an iconographic “tradition” which most assuredly reflects a deficit in that correct understanding of the theological and dogmatic presuppositions which define the Church’s iconographic witness.

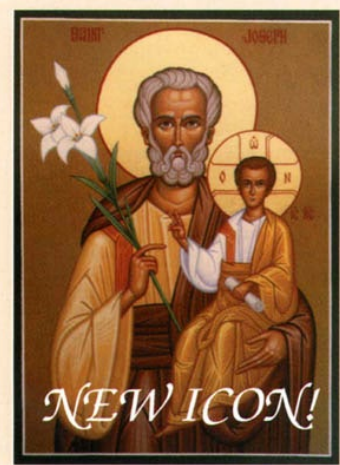
What lies at the core of the many deviations that we see from traditional Iconography is a failure to grasp one of the essential spiritual axioms that undergird the preservation of Holy Tradition itself: following the path carefully set forth and meticulously defined by those who have gone before us. As I constantly tell my own spiritual children: “Imitate; don’t innovate.” The failure to honor

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<sup>1</sup> Constantine D. Kalokyris, *The Essence of Orthodox Iconography*, trans. Peter A. Chamberas (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross School of Theology, 1971), p. 93.

this simple principle has serious negative consequences, not only for the field of sacred art, but in every other area of Orthodox theology as well. The malaise of modernism, which so deeply affects so many Orthodox jurisdictions today, can be traced precisely to a *willful rejection of the humility of imitation for the arrogance of innovation*. This fact is perfectly illustrated by two Icons recently printed by the Conciliar Press, a publishing house of the now-defunct “Antiochian Orthodox Evangelical Mission,” a short-lived “church within a Church” that was formed when a group of former Evangelical Protestants (the self-styled “Evangelical Orthodox Church”) was accepted into the innovationist Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese. These two iconographic offerings, advertised in the publishing house’s Spring 1998 catalogue, also provide compelling evidence that Professor Kalokyris’ somewhat dated misgivings about traditional Church art in America are not wholly without merit and still find application in at least some contemporary Orthodox circles here.

The first of these Icons, “by [or, more properly, ‘by the hand of’] Fr. Luke Dingman” and entitled “ST. JOSEPH—Western Version,” depicts St. Joseph the Betrothed holding the Christ Child in one hand and a lily in the other. While



**NEW! Just in time for Father’s Day!**

at face value this depiction may seem innocent enough, such an Icon displays a lack of attention to essential matters of Orthodox doctrine. It is not a traditional Orthodox portrayal of St. Joseph, as the painter admits, but rather a “Western [read: ‘Roman Catholic’] Version” of the Betrothed of the Mother of God. It evokes the Latin image of “the Holy Family,” one of the many theological and liturgical innovations of the Papacy that have adversely influenced Orthodoxy, and an especially recent innovation at that. As one Roman Catholic scholar has remarked, in contrasting the Papist feast centered on the Holy Family to the Christian Feasts of antiquity, “[The Feast of the Holy Family]...is a product of our modern age, the times to which we belong.”<sup>2</sup> This familial aspect of the Icon

<sup>2</sup> Pius Parsch, *The Church’s Year of Grace*, trans. the Rev. William G. Heidt, O.S.B., Vol. I (Collegeville, MN: St. John’s Abbey, 1962), p. 289.

is only enhanced by a caption which proclaims, “Just in time for Father’s Day!” While there is, of course, nothing objectionable *per se* about a holiday honoring fathers, to connect this secular event with an Icon of this sort is to imply wholly inappropriate things about the relationship between St. Joseph and Christ. In traditional—*i.e.*, *imitative*—Orthodox iconography, the Christ Child is properly portrayed, not alone with St. Joseph, but rather alone with His Mother, thereby stressing the dogma that He is “a Son without a father, Who was begotten of the Father without a mother before the ages.”<sup>3</sup> In the final analysis, were we to associate St. Joseph with fatherhood, it would technically be with fathers who are celibate widowers!

In fact, to protect the Faithful from an improper understanding of his fatherly rôle and his relationship to the *Theotokos*, traditional Orthodox Iconography downplays the figure of St. Joseph (without, of course, denigrating his person). For example, in the Icon of the Nativity of Christ, as Professor Constantine Cavarnos comments, “he is not shown at the central part of the composition, like the *Theotokos* and the Child, but away, at a corner, in order to emphasize the Scriptural account and the teaching of the Church that Christ was born of a *Virgin*.”<sup>4</sup> Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, in their pivotal work on iconographic theory, make a similar observation: “Another detail emphasis[es] that in the Nativity of Christ ‘the order of nature is vanquished’—this is Joseph. He is not part of the central group of the Child and His Mother; he is not the father and is emphatically separated from this group.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, in Icons with similar themes, such as the Meeting of the Lord or the Flight into Egypt, Orthodox iconology does not understand St. Joseph to be the head of some sort of “Holy Family”; rather, he is seen as the Providentially-ordained guardian of the *Theotokos* and her Divine Child. His humble acceptance and virtuous fulfillment of this rôle are precisely the points of focus in his veneration by the Orthodox Church.

This straightforward, Orthodox characterization of St. Joseph reflects the spirit of the Eastern Fathers, who are laconic in their references to him. And while the Western Fathers, by contrast, evidence a greater preoccupation with

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<sup>3</sup> *Dogmatikon*, Tone 3.

<sup>4</sup> Constantine Cavarnos, *Guide to Byzantine Iconography*, Vol. I (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1993), p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> 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), p. 160.

his person, their chief concern is nonetheless the same as that of their Eastern counterparts: *viz.*, the defense of the Ever-Virginity of the Mother of God. Thus, St. Augustine of Hippo, for example, while noting that, “Joseph...might be called the father of Christ, on account of his being in a certain sense the husband of the mother of Christ...”<sup>6</sup> qualifies this admission by insisting that, in their spousal relationship, “there was no bodily connection.”<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere he elaborates on this point: “And because of this conjugal fidelity [*i.e.*, their mutual celibacy] they are both deservedly called ‘parents’ of Christ (not only she as His mother, but he as His father, as being her husband), both having been such in mind and purpose, though not in the flesh. But while the one was His father in purpose only, and the other His mother in the flesh also, they were both of them, for all that, only the parents of His humility, not of His sublimity; of His weakness [see II Corinthians 13:4], not of His divinity.”<sup>8</sup> It is in this sense, then, that we must understand the Scriptural statement, “And [He] was subject unto them,”<sup>9</sup> concerning Christ’s relationship to St. Joseph and His Mother.

St. Ambrose of Milan, again safeguarding the traditional Christian teaching about St. Joseph and his rôle as the husband of the Virgin Mary, warns us that by misunderstanding this particular Biblical verse, “the snake of unbelief, released from perverse hiding places, lifts its head and vomits forth mischief from serpentine hearts.”<sup>10</sup> Herein lies, too, the danger of a “Western Version” of St. Joseph, a version which, for former Evangelicals only freshly “converted” to Orthodoxy, poses a serious temptation towards doctrinal error. Such converts often enter the Church with a *phronema* (mind-set) inimical to correct Orthodox piety. Hence, Hieromonk Gregory (himself a convert to Orthodoxy from Evangelical Protestantism), in a very insightful book about the heresies of what he calls

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<sup>6</sup> St. Augustin, “Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon,” trans. the Rev. Richard Stothert, rev. Albert H. Newman, in *The Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatists*, Vol. IV of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st Ser., ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, “On Marriage and Concupiscence,” trans. Peter Holmes and the Rev. Robert Ernest Wallis, rev. Benjamin B. Warfield, in *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, Vol. V of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st Ser., ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 268.

<sup>9</sup> St. Luke 2:51.

<sup>10</sup> Saint Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1998), p. 62.

“Evangelicalism,” writes: “It is ironic that Evangelicals consider the Virgin Birth to be a fundamental Christian doctrine, because they themselves do not fully embrace this doctrine. The dogma of the Virgin Birth teaches that the Mother of God was a Virgin *before* Childbirth, *during* Childbirth, and *after* Childbirth: the Nativity of Christ revealed her as *Ever-Virgin*.... Evangelicals disbelieve the wholeness of this dogma and instead mitigate it by accepting only the Virgin Conception.”<sup>11</sup> They thus risk a heretical view of the Virgin Birth.

Evangelicalism, to be sure, champions marital domesticity as the highest ideal of Christian life—in stark opposition to Scripture and the Orthodox Fathers, who hold up virginity as the loftiest state in Christian life. Accordingly, many Protestants hold to the perverse and blasphemous notion that St. Joseph and the Mother of God engaged in physical intercourse. This irreverent idea is, of course, nothing new; such notorious heretics as the Ebionites, Helvidius, and Jovinian held to the same view from the earliest times. St. John of Damascus, in commenting on this pernicious heresy in his extensive catalogue, *On Heresies*, classifies such individuals as “enemies of Mary”: “*The Antidicomarianites* say that, after having given birth to the Saviour, the blessed Mary, the ever-virgin, had marital relations with Joseph.”<sup>12</sup> A Western Icon of St. Joseph as the “prototypical Father” (“Just in time for Father’s Day”), then, when painted and distributed by former Evangelical Protestants, not only smacks of innovation and constitutes a deviation from the best standards of Iconography, but fosters wrong dogma (heresy) and leads us to enmity against the Mother of God herself. It should be self-evident that converts disposed towards a fleshly view of the *Theotokos* and St. Joseph the Betrothed—a view sometimes motivated, not just by sectarian theology, but by a compensatory elevation of the flesh that frequently signals psycho-sexual maladjustment and dysfunction—should under no circumstances expose themselves to the visual dogmatic instruction of Icons which misrepresent, distort, and defile the Church’s pure teachings.

These same critical remarks apply equally to the second Icon in question, “Sts. Joachim & Anna[,] from [‘by’] the hand of Sarah Dingman,” an embarrassingly frank expression of carnality. A recent book by another Protestant con-

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<sup>11</sup> Hierodeacon [Hieromonk] Gregory, *The Church, Tradition, Scripture, Truth, and Christian Life: Some Heresies of Evangelicalism and an Orthodox Response* (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1994), pp. 47-48.

<sup>12</sup> Saint John of Damascus, *Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase, Jr. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), p. 131.



vert to Eastern Orthodoxy, Clark (Innocent) Carlton, *The Faith*, purporting to be an Orthodox catechism, characterizes marriage—once more, rather ill-advisedly and in opposition to strict Patristic tradition—as “an end in and of itself”<sup>13</sup> (a claim which I and others, incidentally, have criticized from a traditional Orthodox perspective<sup>14</sup>). This curious and un-Orthodox notion is perfectly expressed in this Icon, where the Ancestors of Christ are pictured in a prurient embrace. An iconographic depiction of a bed forms the background for this scene. The fact that the Icon is advertised on the same page as “a guide for Orthodox couples in developing marital unity” and another Icon, “Wedding at Cana,” leaves little to the imagination—the unnatural and un-Orthodox elevation of the Mystery of Marriage to an inappropriate, pseudo-spiritual level.

While the painter of this Icon might argue that her depiction is not an innovation, and that she is simply imitating an ancient Icon, she would be quite wrong in doing so. In the first place, such passionate embraces, with the holy personages depicted looking in each other’s eyes, are clear innovations. Icons, as we shall argue subsequently, never express carnality and human passions. In the second place, the prototypes for this Icon are of non-Orthodox provenance. They have their source in Western artistic creations, such as the fresco by the Florentine painter Giotto di Bondone (*ca.* 1267–1337) found in the Arena Chapel in Padua, where the Ancestors of God are seen embracing in a passionate manner. Works drawing on this Western tradition surfaced in Orthodox iconography only after the Unia, appearing largely in Russia, especially during the reigns of the Westernizing sovereigns Peter the Great and Catherine the Great (see, for

<sup>13</sup> Clark Carlton, *The Faith: Understanding Orthodox Christianity: An Orthodox Catechism* (Salisbury, MA: Regina Press, 1997), p. 228.

<sup>14</sup> See the book review by Hieromonk Patapios, Hieromonk Gregory, and Archbishop Chrysostomos, *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XV, No. 1 (1998), pp. 57–60, and Archimandrite Luke, “New Age Philosophy, Orthodox Thought, and Marriage,” *Orthodox Life*, Vol. XLVII, No. 3 (May-June 1997), pp. 21–37.

example, Simon Ushakov, “the father of secular Russian painting”<sup>15</sup>). The passionate kiss, inspired by the ideal of courtly love, and the bed as a symbol of marital fidelity are, moreover, popular motifs in late Renaissance painting. When found in Orthodox Iconography, they are grave impediments to the theological function and spiritual tradition of sacred images, which, as Photios Kontoglou points out, “are the result of centuries of spiritual life, Christian experience, genius and work. The iconographers who developed them regarded their work as awesome, like the dogmas of the true Faith, and they worked with humility and piety on the models that had been handed down to them by earlier iconographers, avoiding all inopportune and inappropriate changes.”<sup>16</sup> This can hardly be said of Giotto’s work.

Furthermore, as Constantine Cavarnos points out, “The principle of *appropriateness* is apropos of all Byzantine Icons. They utilize whatever is appropriate for the depiction of a certain event or person, and avoid everything inappropriate.”<sup>17</sup> If Icons are “windows into Heaven,” and if in Heaven “they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the Angels of God,”<sup>18</sup> it becomes rhetorical to ask, “Is a marriage bed appropriate in an Icon?” One would expect to see the hedonistic paradise of Moslems and Mormons furnished in this way, but not the “many mansions”<sup>19</sup> of the Father of Christians, spiritual abodes which the Faithful anticipate, not as places of earthly pleasures, but as the Divine workshops of spiritually-elevating endeavors that render such trappings unsuitable.

As Ouspensky has rightly commented, “We never find in Orthodox iconography this ‘savoring’ of the flesh that we find in secular art on religious subjects...”;<sup>20</sup> rather, true to the ascetic standards of our Faith, an Icon “...teaches us ‘to fast with our eyes,’ in the words of St. Dorotheus,”<sup>21</sup> and, we would hope, for Orthodox spouses, to “fast from the flesh” at those times appointed by the Church. Such ascetic instruction is a result of what Cavarnos calls the “liturgical element” in an Icon: “Wherever the liturgical element is present, there the dra-

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<sup>15</sup> Léonide Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), p. 217, n. 62.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Cavarnos, *Guide to Iconography*, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> St. Matthew 22:30.

<sup>19</sup> St. John 14:2.

<sup>20</sup> Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, p. 212.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

matic and the sensuous are absent.”<sup>22</sup> “Icons lift our soul from the material to the spiritual realm, from a lower level of being, thought, and feeling, to a higher level.”<sup>23</sup> This is only possible, however, when innovative approaches are set aside in favor of traditional iconographic styles. The Holy Canons, in fact, explicitly forbid carnal representations of iconographic themes: “Those paintings, therefore, be they on panels or any other place, which fascinate the vision and corrupt the mind and incite the fires of shameful pleasures, we command that in no wise from now on and in no manner whatsoever be they engraved” (One-hundredth Canon of the Sixth (Ecumenical) Synod).<sup>24</sup>

An iconographer well-trained in this sacred tradition, therefore, would have exercised greater care than we see here, in selecting a proper prototype for depicting Sts. Joachim and Anna—especially so, given what we have said about the Evangelical circles from which the painter of this second Icon comes. For example, Hieromonk Dionysios of Fourná (ca. 1670–ca. 1745) prescribes the following treatment of the Saints: “The conception of the Mother of God. Houses, and a garden with various trees; St. Anna kneels in the midst of it, while an angel in front of her blesses her. Outside the garden is a mountain on which Joachim is praying, and is likewise being blessed by an angel.”<sup>25</sup> Such an Icon, in which the principle figures are engaged in prayer, strengthened by Angels, occasions a greater incentive to spiritual reflection and moves us away from the sensual to the sublime. It is also obvious that the spatial separation of Sts. Joachim and Anna effectively indicates the primacy of their spiritual union over and against their physical union. Every traditional prototype for Icons depicting these Ancestors of God,<sup>26</sup> as a matter of fact, emphasizes the spiritual quality of the relationship between Sts. Joachim and Anna (see, for example, Kontoglou’s prototypes of the following Icons: the “Prayer of St. Anna,” “The Birthing of the

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<sup>22</sup> Constantine Cavarinos, *Byzantine Sacred Art* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1985), p. 92.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem*, *Guide to Iconography*, p. 243.

<sup>24</sup> *Pedalion* (Thessaloniki: Regopoulos, 1982), p. 310.

<sup>25</sup> *The “Painter’s Manual” of Dionysius of Fourná*, trans. Paul Hetherington (London: Sagittarius Press, 1981), p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> The earliest Icons of Sts. Joachim and Anna (ca. 9th century), we should note, appeared not alone, but within a narrative cycle of scenes, expressing a unified dogmatic statement about the Conception of the Theotokos that is lost in their independent presentation. See a discussion of this in André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).



*Theotokos*,” “The Adulation of the *Theotokos*,” etc.<sup>27</sup>). And even Icons bearing the words, “The Conception of the *Theotokos*,” present, not something carnal, but the joyous reserved spiritual embrace of these two Saints after the revelation to each that the “barren” St. Anna would conceive and give birth.

In the final analysis, both the “Western Version” Icon of St. Joseph and the indecorous portrayal of the Ancestors of God reflect the unformed sensitivities of those who have made bedfellows of Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism. In so doing, as we have pointed out, they have introduced into Orthodoxy an innovation which draws one away from the sobriety of the Fathers and their teachings about the earthly family of Christ and, indeed, the nature of human relations. These innovators would do well to reflect carefully on the Patristic teaching on such matters, and especially on what the Church and Icons tell us about marital relations and the meaning of the family, both themes directly related, again, to the Icons in question: “[B]elievers in Christ are taught not to think carnal connection the chief thing in marriage, as if without this they could not be man and wife, but to imitate in Christian wedlock as closely as possible the parents of Christ [*viz.*, their chastity], that so they may have the more intimate union with the members of Christ.”<sup>28</sup> This is not to say, of course, that, within the Mystery of marriage, there is something improper about sexual relations, or that such relations are evil or inappropriate. Not at all. It is to say, however, that, despite the lofty nature of marital love, it pales before, and must ultimately draw upon, if it is to endure and prosper, that Divine *eros* that leads us to God and which is rooted in purity and virginity—and it is for this reason, if none other, that Orthodox couples “fast from the flesh,” as well as certain foods, for the significant number of days of the year (almost every Wednesday and Friday included) that constitute fast days. There must be a balance here that places the marital bed in a positive light, but without infringing on the absolute ascendancy of the bodily purity that we find in Christ, in his earthly Ancestors, and in the Eucharistic and Hesychastic traditions of the Orthodox Church. The purity contained in the Gospel must never succumb to a kind of Christian *Kamasutra*, whether “baptized” by overt sectarians or by those coming from a sectarian background.

Ours is a strange time: one in which the sacred obligation of imitation has been swept away by the diabolical prerogative of innovation. Before they have

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<sup>27</sup> Photios Kontoglou, *Ekphrasis tes Orthodoxou Eikonographias* (Athens: Astir, 1960), pp. 256-257.

<sup>28</sup> St. Augustin, “Reply to Faustus,” p. 315.

been Orthodox for more than a few years, we find Protestant converts writing catechisms, painting Icons (many of these painters, undeniably enough, very skilled artists), and “adjusting” Orthodoxy to their notions of traditionalism. Where and under what accomplished spiritual teacher, one wonders, have they learned the art of prayer, the disciplines of fasting, and the secret teachings of Orthodoxy—those traditional things of the Faith that demand many years in obedience and that are the prerequisites for preaching the Faith in word and in Icons. Unfamiliar with anything but the contrived Orthodoxy of “canonicity” and “officialdom” (innovative ideas borrowed from the West and from the administrative definitions of ecumenical bodies hostile to the spiritual primacy of Orthodoxy), these half-converted innovators readily adopt Latin thinking and piety (ideas of a “Holy Family,” crude “bedroom scenes” in Icons, and so on) and bolster their position with the neo-Papal claims of “Patriarchalism,” conspicuously citing, in the case of converts to one particular Orthodox jurisdiction, what has become a catchphrase for them: “The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch— Acts 11:26.” They thus forget that the catholicity of the Church is not based on a city and its Bishop (whatever his simple title of honor) but on what Christ taught, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers and Holy Tradition have preserved, to paraphrase a well-known Patristic adage. Behold, then, the fruits of innovationism: Christians who are Orthodox in name, Papist in outlook, and Evangelical in their rendering of Holy Tradition! If serving two masters is disastrous, what can be said of serving three?