

WONDERWORKING POCHAIV MOTHER OF GOD ICON VISITS CHURCHES IN CANADA

The Orthodox icon is a special kind of self-revelation of the Church; it is a spiritual field within a physical space, a crossing point of the radiuses of the Orthodox canons, of mystics, of soteriology.

The Orthodox icon expresses the concept of beauty as something holy and sacred. Beauty is an ontological rather than an esthetic category, a guiding light in the search for the absolute truth.

The icon is evidence that the God's Son became Son of Man, that God's word became flesh and the Divine Hypostasis became a being of both Divine and human nature — unique and real. God accepted human nature in perpetuity so as to show people a path leading to His perfection, to let man, the peak of His creation, participate in the freedom and consummation of the Absolute Being. The Orthodox icon reflects the greatest truths of the faith in Jesus Christ the Savior — it is at once a sermon and a prayer, and a means for spiritual transformation. The icon is not a picture containing solely religious information, it is something more than a simple representation. After an icon has been consecrated it becomes a vehicle of the blissful presence of the invisible God, Who became visible through Jesus Christ. That is why St. Simeon of Thessaloniki said: «What is represented in paints is truth in a painting, as is what is written in a book, and God's grace lives forever in it, because that which is represented is holy»

According to the definitions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 AD) «the praise for the image is transferred to the original image»

We should distinguish between an icon and an idol. The idol is an image of false and imaginary deities, while the icon is a sacred representation of the one, true God and His holy angels and saints. The Orthodox icon is much more than a visual aid that makes up for the written word for the illiterate. Its role is not passive; the icon is an active mediator that allows the presence of the original image and conveys God's grace to the worshippers.

God reveals His power and grace in a peculiar way in some icons, places and objects that possess extraordinary powers. The most essential quality of these icons, places and objects is not inherent to them — it is to be found in God's grace and love and in His generosity to send His power through whoever and whatever He chooses and wherever He chooses. The devout Christians need to show firm and perform good and holy deeds in order to receive God's grace.

Icons of Mary holding her Son Jesus have been popular since the Council of Ephesus which in 431 solemnly declared Mary to be the Theotokos or Mother of God.

St. Luke was the first one who painted the «Theotokos», «Mother of God», while she was still alive. He is credited with three icons of the «Panagia», in one case using the wooden table where Mary and St. John ate their meals.

Throughout history, many Icons of the Most Holy Mother of God have had miracles attributed to them.

The Wonderworking Pochaiv Icon of the Mother of God is visiting OCA parishes throughout Canada until October 11, 2009. The icon began its trip to Canada on Tuesday, September 22,



The Holy Icon visits Christ the Saviour Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Toronto



Pochaiv Icon of the Mother of God at Holy Annunciation Cathedral in Ottawa



His Beatitude, Metropolitan JONAH came to bow down before the Holy Icon



Pochaiv Icon of the Mother of God at Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral in Montreal

where it was at Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral in Montreal, QC. On Saturday, September 26, the icon traveled to Toronto, where it was resting at Christ the Saviour Cathedral. On Tuesday, September 29, the Pochaiv Mother of God icon was at Holy Annunciation Cathedral for the consecration of Archimandrite Irénée (Rochon) as Bishop of Quebec City and Auxiliary to His Eminence, Archbishop Seraphim. Other cities in Canada scheduled for the tour include Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina and Winnipeg.

Before returning to Ukraine, the Pochaiv icon will again be at Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Toronto on Sunday, October 11. The Pochaiv Icon of the Mother of God is among the most venerable sacred items of the Orthodox Church. Located at the Dormition Cathedral, Pochaev, Ukraine, the icon is renowned throughout the Slavic world and is venerated by Orthodox Christians throughout the world. Christians of other confessions also come to venerate the wonderworking image of the Most Holy Theotokos, together with the Orthodox.

The wonderworking icon has been kept at the Pochaev Lavra, an ancient bastion of Orthodoxy, for about 400 years. (The account of the transfer of the icon to the Pochaev monastery is found under September 8). The miracles which issued forth from the holy icon are numerous and are testified to in the monastery books with the signatures of the faithful who have been delivered from unclean spirits, liberated from captivity, and sinners brought to their senses.

In the year 1721, Pochaev was occupied by Uniates. Even in this difficult time for the Lavra, the monastery chronicle notes 539 miracles from the glorified Orthodox icon. During the time of the Uniate rule in the second half of the eighteenth century, for example, the Uniate nobleman Count Nicholas Pototski became a benefactor of the Pochaev Lavra through the following miraculous circumstance. Having accused his coachman of overturning the carriage with frenzied horses, the count took out a pistol to shoot him. The coachman, turning towards Pochaev Hill, reached his hands upwards and cried out: «Mother of God, manifest in the Pochaev Icon, save me!» Pototski several times tried to shoot the pistol, which had never let him down, but the weapon misfired. The coachman remained alive. Pototski then immediately went to the wonderworking icon and decided to devote himself and all his property to the building-up of the monastery. From his wealth the Dormition cathedral was built, as well as buildings for the brethren.

The return of Pochaev into the bosom of Orthodoxy in 1832 was marked by the miraculous healing of the blind maiden Anna Akimchukova, who had come on pilgrimage to the holy things together with her seventy-year-old grandmother from Kremenets-Podolsk, 200 versts away. In memory of this event, the Volhynia archbishop and Lavra archimandrite Innocent (1832-1840) established the reading of the Akathist on Saturdays before the wonderworking icon. During the time of Archimandrite Agathangelus, Archbishop of Volhynia (1866-1876), a separate chapel was constructed in the galleries of the Holy Trinity church in memory of the victory over the Tatars, which was dedicated on July 23, 1875.

One of the greatest defenders of icons, the Holy Father St. John of Damascus (see «Orthodox America», Vol. II, no. 1), gave an eloquent explanation of icons in three treatises called Against Those Who Attack The Divine Images. Very briefly summarized here, St. John expresses the consistent thought of the Church from the time of the Apostles to the Seventh Council.

First he reminded his readers that «no created thing can be adored in place of the Creator.» God forbade the making of idols he says, because «it is impossible to make an image of the immeasurable...invisible God.» Yet at the same time, «under the Old Covenant God commanded images to be made: first the tabernacle, and

WHY DO WE VENERATE THE ICONS?

then everything in it» — which included images of angels surmounting the Ark. These images were not idols because they were not worshipped.

Secondly, he explains how God can be portrayed now because He took upon Himself flesh and became man. «If we attempted to make an image of the invisible God, this would be sinful indeed,» he writes, and «if we made images of men and believed them to be gods...we would be truly impious. We do neither of these things. But we are not mistaken if we make the image of God incarnate, Who was seen on earth in the flesh, associated with men, and in His unspeakable goodness as-

sumed the nature, feeling, form, and color of our flesh.»

Thirdly, he shows that we do not worship icons, for worship belongs to God alone, but we venerate or show honor to them, for the image is one thing, and the thing depicted is another,» and he cites the veneration given in Scripture to the rod of Aaron, the jar of manna, and holy places like Mt. Sanai or Golgotha.

Finally, this Holy Father answers those that believe matter is in some way «bad.» He begins by quoting Scripture: «And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It is obvious to everyone that Flesh is matter, and that it is created. I salute matter and

I approach it with reverence, and I worship that through which my salvation has come. I honor it, not as God, but because it is full of divine grace and strength.»

Icons in our churches and homes are, in the words of St. John «opened books to remind us of God.» (indeed, an icon is a painted image of Christ just as Scripture is a written image of the Saviour.) This is why Timothy (Fr. Kallistos) Ware writes in The Orthodox Church: He who lacks learning or leisure to study works of theology has only to enter a church to see unfolded before him on the walls all the mysteries of the Christian religion. If a pagan asks you to show him your faith, said John of Damascus, take him into church and place before him the icons. ●

