

Chapter 14: Using Sense

In our American culture, worship has often become simply an exercise of the heart or mind. Since Christ came to redeem the whole person, the Orthodox approach is to involve as many aspects of the human experience as possible—all the senses.

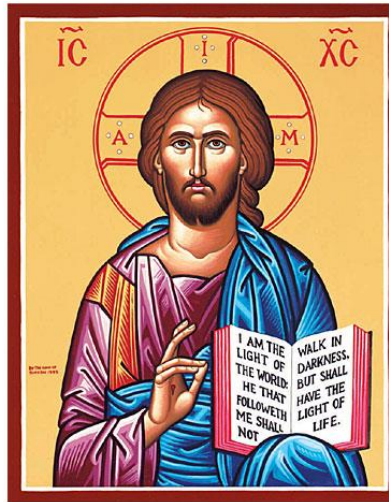


SIGHT

Candles are a tangible reminder that Christ is the Light of the World. *“In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.”* (John 1:4) *“I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness but will have the light of life.”* (John 8:12) *“I have come as a Light into the world so that everyone who believes in Me would not remain in darkness.”* (John 12:46) In the Ladoga and Bloomfield chapels, at or on Holy Redeemer’s altar were two candles, one representing the divine nature of Christ, and one representing the human nature of Christ. Now on the Agape House altar is a single candle as a focus for the one eternal nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Icons are another important visual stimulus for worship. As the Mothers expressed in their book *ICONS: THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF ORTHODOXY*: “An icon is always a part of the whole spiritual life of the Church and says what the Church knows to be true, just as the Church’s liturgies, music, candles, incense, and vestments represent what is true about the Kingdom of God. Icons do not intend to give an exact historical representation of some moment in time and space. Instead, they tell something about the inner man, about the transformation that has happened because humanity is in union with divinity. (This work of art) is the work of the iconographer expressing some Christian teaching in a simple form anyone can see and begin to understand. In fact, icons were originally used by the early Greeks especially for those who could not read.

Just any drawing recounting a Scriptural event or having a religious theme does not constitute an icon. Everything in an icon shows a realm different from the material world. The iconographer’s world is one of men and activity regenerated by the Incarnation of the Son of God. His icon shows the world of the Kingdom of God: immaterial, spaceless, timeless, and righteous....The icon is not just a story told, but our Faith communicated. To look at an icon is to have the words of our Scripture, creeds, and liturgies come to life before our eyes.”



Christ the Light-Giver

In their book the Mothers go on to describe some of the people depicted in icons: “In the many icons of Christ, the names given to those icons tell much about what the iconographer is trying to communicate: Christ the All-Ruler (Pantocrator), Christ the Merciful, Christ the Victor, Christ the Light-Giver, Christ the Life-Giver, Christ Extreme Humility, Christ the Savior, Christ Emmanuel, Christ Enthroned, Christ the Holy Redeemer.

Christ’s Mother, St. Mary, is considered the person most glorified (that is, filled with the glorious energies of God) because of the Incarnation. Because of her unique place in the salvation of man, her icon is the most widely seen after that of her Son portrayed alone. When her icon is displayed with others, hers is placed to the left of the Christ icon, the place of honor at her Son’s right hand.

If St. Mary is most often seen at the right hand of Christ, the icon most often placed on His other side is that of the greatest prophet, St. John the Baptist, the Forerunner (Luke 1:17). Alongside St. Mary and St. John the Baptist are often placed the icons of the archangels St. Michael and St. Gabriel. Depicted together the four represent the Church and the Hosts of Heaven adoring the Trinity. Usually, too, there is the icon of a patron saint, one of the saints of the Church who is particularly special to a household, person, or church.”

Saints whose icons have graced the walls of Holy Redeemer include St. John of Damascus (9th Century writer about orthodoxy and defender of icons), St. James the Apostle (after whom Mother Pilar is named because he was known as a pillar of the Church), St. Paul (after whom Mother Paula is named), St. Mary Magdalene (a favorite of the Mothers), and Fr. Louis (Thomas) Merton. Merton’s writings as a 20th Century monk were important to the Mothers in understanding monasticism, and Mother Pilar created an icon for him for the chapel. Additional icons were used for the Bloomfield outdoor meditation areas, including Christ the Good Shepherd, St. Photini, and St. Mary of Egypt.

Crosses are another symbol continually used by Holy Redeemer, not as decoration but as a constant reminder of what it cost Christ to be the Savior of the world. The Orthodox tradition is the use of an empty cross, because it was Christ’s resurrection from the dead that secured eternal life for us. In addition, Holy Redeemer has always used a cross with Christ’s figure upon it during the Lenten weeks of preparation before Easter to focus on His suffering and sacrifice for us.

SMELL

Through all their years in Ladoga and Bloomfield the Mothers used incense during their communal worship. The reason is explained well in the EOC catechism: “Incense is what the Church uses to get our noses involved in worship to God. Icons get our eyes involved, singing and speaking get our ears involved, bowing...and making the sign of the Cross all get our whole bodies involved, and incense gets our sense of smell involved. Smell is a powerful human sense. Smells immediately bring back memories, and one of the things we do in worship is remember God and His great love and compassion for us. When we smell incense, we are helped by our memory to enter again into what is most real in our lives: our membership in Christ’s good Kingdom.

Incense symbolizes the presence of God’s Holy Spirit. God led the children of Israel through the wilderness in the pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. Incense was also used in the Old Testament tabernacle and temple worship. A description of heaven in Revelation 8:6 says: *‘The smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up in the presence of God from the angel’s hand.’* (Smoke from the incense) symbolizes God’s Spirit anointing and blessing us, as well as our prayers and offerings rising back to God in thankful worship.”

POSTURE

A bow from the waist, a bow of the head, a prostration on the ground, and raised hands are all ways our bodies can be used to worship.

A bow or a kiss can also be used to show our reverence for things that we honor, not because they are worthy of worship (only the Lord is worthy of that) but because we hold them in high regard for their connection to Him. Here Mother Pilar is kissing the Christ icon before prayer in the chapel at Bloomfield.

(Note: the two icons above her are the icons of Holy Redeemer’s patron saints, Fr. Louis Merton and St. John of Damascus.)

Making the sign of the Cross is often used at Holy Redeemer. This is not a magic talisman. The sign of the Cross is a reminder of the presence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the mention of the Trinity in prayers, at the reading of Scripture, at the time of blessing someone or something, at times of regular thanksgiving (such as meals), and at times of intense thanksgiving or petition (such as a need for rescue from danger). It is not that the Lord is far away and we must call Him to us by using this gesture. He is always there, and by using this symbol we are proclaiming we are His to Him, ourselves, and others.



HEARING

It is a very old tradition in the Church that the faithful are called to worship by the ringing of bells. A lovely brass bell was given by a group of friends of Holy Redeemer when the Mothers moved to

Bloomfield. This hanging bell called visitors in from outside. Both there and in Ladoga the Mothers used a small hand bell within the house to announce the beginning of chapel prayers.

It is obvious that the sounds of both instrumental and vocal music engage our hearing for worship. Chant has already been mentioned. Perhaps not so obvious is the impact of Scripture read aloud. In different seasons of the year, portions of Scripture are selected by the Mothers to be read during communal prayers. Some portion from the Psalms is always included, usually in a chronological cycle from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150. At times Old Testament, Gospel, and Epistle readings are added according to seasonal parish readings. These readings are a blessing for both the one who reads and those who listen. Hearing the Scriptures over and over, year after year, gives a broad understanding of the whole story of salvation, reminding us from many points in history of God's desire for us to belong to Him and of what He has done to make that possible.

This reading of Scripture is now carried beyond Agape House. Mother Pilar, Mother Paula, and Carol are all on the parish schedule for reading during the parish worship services.

Another regular feature of Agape House common prayer is the reading about the life of the saint whose feast day falls on the day of the reading. Just as icons of the faithful who have gone before us are reminders of their lives in God, the stories of their lives give the particulars of their struggles and victories. The saints mentor those who hear about them.