

July 2, 2010

Venerable Andrew Rublev

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the ministries of this parish, All Saints Icon Academy is particularly precious to me. Our congregation began this ministry some five or six years ago, after several parishioners were trained in other programs, and, for the past couple of years, our own program has expanded into two sessions, one in early summer and the other in the fall. The setting of our program is Bishop Lane Retreat Center, near Rockford.

Our master iconographer is Phil Zimmerman from Pennsylvania, who studied under other experienced masters. These included the late and much lamented Bishop Job of Chicago.

The earlier of our two sessions---the one designed for beginners---was conducted during this past week. This session was unique, in that it included only one member of our parish. The rest, three Roman Catholics among them, came from other parishes.

I try to be present at the beginning of each session, as I was this past week, in order to set a proper tone to the enterprise. This effort is necessary, especially because of a common misunderstanding of the ministry itself: the Church's iconography is often regarded as just a particular art style. Indeed, it is sometimes the case that trained artists are disposed to study sacred iconography as simply an extension of their artistic education.

In our contemporary setting, where art is regarded as a medium of self-expression, this misunderstanding of iconography is especially baneful. (Among the most distressing experiences of my time in this city was a visit, a few years back, to a regular exposition of the Chicago Institute of Art. I rushed home afterwards and took a very soapy shower, wondering, all the while, if an exorcism would not be more appropriate. I had never seen so much self-expression of sick minds in my whole life.) In fact, self-expression is pretty nearly the antithesis of the Church's iconography.

Anyway, when we begin our own sessions in iconographic training, I try to be on hand to "set a tone." I remind the iconographers---the beginners in particular---that their efforts are not only aesthetic but also ascetical. Taking my theme from the Cherubic Hymn, I instruct them to "lay aside all earthly cares." Speaking of the importance of an atmosphere of prayer, I caution them against worldly distractions, especially gossip and political commentary. (I notice that our hosts at Bishop Lane refer to our sessions as "iconography

retreats." They have the right idea.) If there is to be background music--- sometimes helpful to the enterprise---pride of place should be given to the sacred chants of the Church. I especially warn again stage music. Whereas some sections of Mozart's *Requiem* may be appropriate, we should all agree that his *Vogelfanger* is not.

In choosing new iconographers from the membership of the parish, I look for spiritual maturity. The standards I have in mind are analogous to some of those required for entrance into seminary: regular participation in the Church's services of worship, the daily discipline of prayer, the assiduous study of Holy Scripture, peace and harmony with the rest of the congregation, and uncompromised purity of life.

>From iconographers outside our parish, I require letters of recommendation from either their pastors or father confessors.

I especially stress that the iconographer is charged with transmitting "the mind of Christ," the faith once given to the saints. The iconographer is an active participant in the *paradosis*, the tradition inherited from the Apostles and Fathers of the Church. This is the reason why each iconographer has, in front of him, a model icon. In copying this icon, however, he will interpret it by its passage through his own soul. The new icon, then, is not a slavish imitation; it will normally carry a perspective from the iconographer's own soul. I have watched twenty people copy the same model icon simultaneously; each one was different from the others.

Indeed, this last consideration is the reason for exacting high spiritual standards of an iconographer. It is his vocation to convey, in the icon, some personal measure of "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The iconographer can hardly accomplish this, if that "correct glory"---*orthodoxa*---has not found its way through his soul. The authentic Tradition of the Church, of which her iconography is an important aspect, requires a transformation of heart in the person charged to hand it on.

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