

Benedict XVI on the Holy Images

AIDAN NICHOLS, OP

Oxford University

Oxford, England

Introduction

A POPE who is at once a theologian by *métier* and a man of wide personal culture is likely to address at some point or other the topic of holy images. For this topic exists at the intersection of two vital lines: the presentation of the economy of creation and redemption through divinely elected signs and the human practice that is visual art or—if the word “art” has acquired excessively virtuoso associations—then, at any rate, painterly craft.

As Cardinal Ratzinger, Benedict XVI has addressed these issues from two perspectives that broadly correspond to my proposal of two (intersecting) “lines.” In his Christology, he considers holy images as a continuation of the divine presentation of salvation through the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, who is the living Icon of God and his human Face—a Face the traits of which can still be captured iconographically, by a meta-empirical seeing, through visionary painting. In his study of the liturgy he takes holy images to belong with the way the Church, in her worshipping spaces, allows the divine signs issuing from Revelation to be themselves signaled and thus transmitted through human art. In the first case, the emphasis lies on the holiness of the image: It is continuous with the divine action. In the second case, the stress lies rather on the image-character of sacred art: It is a sign that is humanly constructed, though for a God-given purpose.

We can call these two perspectives, then, Christological and liturgiological, respectively. While we may employ the two perspectives alternately in quick succession—as we shall see, Benedict does not keep them hermetically sealed from each other, the distinction between them is plain. Though the material content discussed in one or the other perspective

will overlap, the formal entertainment of that content is proper to each. At the same time, as Ratzinger handles these matters, other major themes of philosophical and theological importance also make their appearance.

The Christological Perspective

The Christological perspective is well-evidenced in Ratzinger's essay on "The Face of Christ in the Holy Scriptures," which takes as its starting point the Johannine saying, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). Ratzinger underlines the Old Testament background of Jesus' conversation with St. Philip in the immediate aftermath of the Last Supper Discourse in St. John's Gospel.

The primordial human longing to see God had taken the Old Testament form of "seeking the Face of God." The disciples are men who seek the face of God. That is why they came across Jesus and followed him. Now Philip brings this seeking before the Lord and receives a surprising answer, in which the novelty of the New Testament—the new thing that is coming through Christ—seems gathered up as if in a crystal: Yes, man can see God. Whoever sees Christ sees Him.¹

But just how are we to look at Christ in such a way that we can see the Father? Ratzinger refers us back to the earlier incident in the Fourth Gospel where pagan Greeks had approached Philip—himself from a strongly Hellenized region of Palestine—asking to see Jesus, to which the reply, from Jesus himself, is a riddling reference to the fruitfulness of his Passion (Jn 12:24). The Hellenic world—indeed, the pagan world as a whole—will see Jesus (and through Jesus, the Father), but only via his Passion. The Passion is glorification, whereby he will come to them in the risen power of the Holy Spirit, and do so in such a manner that there is "a new seeing, which happens in faith."² Ratzinger emphasizes that this never leaves the Passion behind. "The seeing happens in discipleship. Discipleship is a life in that place where Jesus stands, and this place is the Passion. In it and no place other is his glorification a present reality."³ In the pregnant saying of the Johannine Passion narrative, which finds here the fulfillment of a prophetic prediction (Zec 12:10), "They shall look on him whom they have pierced" (Jn 19:37).

Ratzinger admits that the Old Testament vocabulary of "the face of the Lord" does not in fact recur in St. John. But he holds stoutly nonetheless

¹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Unterwegs zu Jesus Christus* (Augsburg: Sankt Ulrich Verlag, 2003), 12.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

to a deep underlying continuity between that motif of the Hebrew Bible and Johannine thought. If that is disputed, then at least there is one Pauline text that can support his thesis for the New Testament more generally, since in Second Corinthians St. Paul makes the connection quite explicit: "It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (4:6).

Over a quarter of all uses of the word *panim*, "face," in the Old Testament Scriptures refer to the divine face, rather than human (or angelic) countenances. That amounts to an astonishing total of one hundred texts. Ratzinger comments on the thought-provoking fact that this plethora of references to seeking God's face issues from *an aniconic religion*. Were the divine face to be found embodied in a cult-object, this pervasive vocabulary would be understandable. But no. "The image is prohibited, yet the seeking of the face remains."⁴ That is certainly curious. The divinity ceases to be objectified yet its face endures. Precisely as the One who must never be imaged, God can, it seems, be seen. The materialization of the divine in cult is abolished and yet its innermost direction emerges clearly as never before. Relation to the divine personality: That is what the Old Testament holds out to us, and vividly so, in this paradoxical concatenation.⁵

Ratzinger finds it unsurprising that, as biblically derived discourse mutates linguistically in its passage through Greek to Latin, *panim* becomes in the first *prosopon* and then, in the second, *persona*. The *face* brings us to the mystery of the *person*. God is *ein uns zugewandtes Wesen*, an "Essence turned toward us." And Ratzinger hints strongly that the notion of sensuous perception that "face" suggests ought not to be eliminated—just as it was not so eliminated for Israel's experience of the face of the Lord in the rich *cultus* of the Jerusalem Temple (compare Ps 24:6 and the "liturgical calendars" of Ex 23, Ex 34, and Deut 16). That is so even if the prophets and the psalmists alike emphasize the moral and spiritual preconditions of such seeing in right living and purity of heart—and even if a key text for his account, the beautiful fragment that is Psalm 17:15b, the seeing in question is eschatological, lying beyond our historical existence: "[W]hen I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form." For other texts again (for example, Ps 4:7b), the "light" of God's face means life for Israelites here and now. In any or all of these senses,

⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵ Ratzinger points out there is an analogy here with Old Testament talk of the "Name" of God, referring his readers to his *Einführung in das Christentum*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Kösel, 2000), 122–24.

for God to “hide” his face is penalization. The deprivation of God is the contrary of flourishing; it is *tieftes Unheil*, “deepest woe.”⁶

The Pauline passage from Second Corinthians, in which Ratzinger found a safe anchor for his claim to New Testament relevance for this Old Testament material, invokes a more particular comparison: between Moses and Christ. In the dramatic encounter of Moses and the Lord that follows the deviant worship of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32, we are told, seemingly contradictorily, that Moses “spoke with the Lord face to face” (33:11), and yet was warned by God, “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (33:20), a statement whose opening prohibition is solemnly repeated three verses later. The New Testament writers, so Ratzinger explains, find here a significant ambiguity. Putting together various disparate passages from the proto-martyr Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin in the Book of Acts, the Letter to the Galatians (at 3:13) and the First Epistle of St. John (at 2:1), Ratzinger concludes that the Son stands always face to face before the Father. “He could see the Face of God and on his face is the glory of God visible for us.”⁷ If Moses were told only the Lord’s “back” might be seen, for St. Gregory of Nyssa in his *Life of Moses* that is because we can only encounter God when we follow “behind” in the manner of disciples. Ratzinger makes this more concrete: Gregory should have written “in the manner of disciples of *Jesus*.”⁸

What is new about the New Covenant in this regard is not new themes, but a new person: Jesus, the face of God for us. At this juncture one might say that what Ratzinger is carrying out may usefully be called, in the words of Kevin Mongrain about Balthasarian thought, an “Irenaeian retrieval.”⁹ According to a key expression of St. Irenaeus’s *Adversus haereses*, the Son is the visibility of the Father. What we have heard so far in “The Face of Christ in the Holy Scriptures” is a biblically informed defense of this claim. And Ratzinger’s summary conclusion on the difference the New Testament makes to the Old—“not new themes, but a new person”—seems a verbal reminiscence from book 4 of Irenaeus’s great treatise: “Know that he brought all novelty by bringing himself who had been announced.”¹⁰

Out of this awareness, writes Ratzinger, there arose the art of the icon, which cannot of course claim to be the end of our quest for the face of

⁶ Ratzinger, *Unterwegs zu Jesus Christus*, 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25, with reference to Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Moysis* (PG 44, 408D).

⁹ K. Mongrain, *The Systematic Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. An Irenaeian Retrieval* (New York: Crossroad, 2002).

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, IV, 34, 1.

God, not even when the icons concerned are miraculous icons, the *acheiropoietai* or images “not made by hands.”¹¹ The crucial question to emerge from the iconoclast dispute for Ratzinger is, Do the icons “carry the dynamic of transcendence”? Can they “point beyond themselves”? Are they an “invitation that brings us onto the [right] road in the search for the Lord’s face”?¹² If so, they lead us further on the path of discipleship which in this life has no end. The icons are seen justly only when they are seen in terms of this *eschatological* aim. The love of neighbor and the Eucharistic cultus furnish us with anticipations of the Kingdom we hope for. But we need the holy icons to remind us that the “true healing and the true repletion” will be looking on God’s face.¹³

The Christological perspective—readily sanctioned by a work to which Ratzinger has elsewhere made laudatory reference, Christoph von Schönborn’s *L’Icône du Christ*—has the possible disadvantage of concentrating an account of the origin and meaning of the cult of icons on the central Figure of Christianity, to the detriment of the wide iconographic range of early Christian art—unless, that is, the additional themes (Mariological, hagiological, sacramental, and the like) are treated as aspects of a wider Christological constellation.¹⁴ Where, however, Ratzinger differs from his fellow cardinal lies in the way he underscores the subjective, rather than objective, significance of iconic making and perception. Whereas Schönborn emphasizes the dogmatic foundations of the icon in the Greek patristic Christology of dual nature and single hypostasis, Ratzinger stresses the transformed subjectivity that alone can allow us to grasp and profit by the new Image of God in Jesus Christ. In Balthasarian terms, within the unity of the entire perceived *Gestalt*, always both objective and subjective together, it is the “subjective evidence” (which is far from “subjective” in any pejorative, self-referential sense of that word) he prefers, in this context, to explore.

Ratzinger returned to the topic—still in what I am calling the “Christological perspective”—in an essay titled “Wounded by the Arrow of the Beautiful: the Cross and the New ‘Esthetic’ of Faith,” which, among other things, shows his debt to the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar just mentioned. He begins from the liturgical use of Psalm 45, the Epithalamion psalm for the marriage of an Israelite king, but applied in the Lenten Psalter to the nuptial relation of Christ and the Church. The

¹¹ Ratzinger, *Unterwegs zu Jesus Christus*, 26.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴ C. von Schönborn, O.P., *L’Icône du Christ. Fondements théologiques élaborés entre le Ier et le IIe Concile de Nicée (325–787)*, 2nd ed. (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1976).

acclamation “You are the fairest of men and graciousness is poured upon your lips” (v. 3) is not, so Ratzinger points out, simply an act of praise of the outer loveliness of the Redeemer. For what appears on his “lips” is “the inner beauty of his word, the splendor of his message.” What “appears” in him is, accordingly, “the splendor of truth, the splendor of God Himself, which carries us away, which so to say inflicts on us the wound of love.” This is the “holy eros” whereby in and with the Church we can respond to the love that calls us.¹⁵ But in Holy Week the same psalm, when used in the liturgy, is qualified by juxtaposition with an antiphon that radically changes its sense. The antiphon is drawn from the Servant Songs of the Book of Isaiah: “He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him . . .” (53:2). The contrast cannot but strike the attentive worshipper.¹⁶

The fact to which it draws attention certainly struck one attentive reader: Augustine of Hippo, who concluded from the marring of the Passion, itself the most admirable of events, that in the events of the Great Week the entire Hellenic aesthetic is Christologically called in question. Both Old Testament texts, applied to Christ, are breathed out by the same Spirit. Their contrasting sounds, which lack all audible harmony (so prized by the Greeks), are what place before us the true beauty. The suffering Christ tells us that “the beauty of truth includes wounding, pain, and even the dark mystery of death itself.”¹⁷

Actually, the Greeks were not without some distant surmise of this. In the *Phaedros* Plato showed his awareness that beauty has the power to draw us out of our contentment with the everyday, and by unsettling us makes us uncomfortable. Ratzinger goes so far as to say, on Plato’s behalf, that “the arrow of longing strikes man, wounds him, and in this way gives him wings and draws him upward.”¹⁸ In his treatise *Life in Christ*, the Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas baptizes this thought. People who have a longing that outstrips their nature are those “the Bridegroom has wounded; he has dispatched to their eyes a ray of his beauty.”¹⁹ That is how God awakens them to their highest destiny.

Ratzinger denies that all this is superficial aestheticism, much less irrationality. “Beauty is knowledge—yes, a higher kind of knowledge, because

¹⁵ Ratzinger, *Unterwegs zu Jesus Christus*, 31.

¹⁶ The alternation of unlovely and lovely in the *Christusbild* of the Fathers was noted in A. Grillmeier, S.J., “Die Herrlichkeit Gottes auf dem Antlitz Jesu Christi,” in idem, *Mit ihm und in ihm. Christologische Forschungen und Perspektiven* (Freiburg: Basel, Wien, 1975), 19–75, but without the use of Ps 45.

¹⁷ Ratzinger, *Unterwegs zu Jesus Christus*, 32–33.

¹⁸ Ibid., 33.

¹⁹ Nicholas Cabasilas, *Das Buch vom Leben in Christus*, 3rd ed. (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1991; in English *Life in Christ*), 79.

it brings home to man the full magnitude of truth.”²⁰ Contrasting knowledge through true report with knowledge through direct experience of things, Cabasilas, unsurprisingly, privileges the latter, which is a being touched by reality, and in the case of the Gospel, by the personal presence of Christ himself. In Ratzinger’s words: “[B]eing overwhelmed by the beauty of Christ is a more real and profound kind of knowledge than would be mere rational deduction.”²¹ Through the impact of such beauty, “reason is freed from its stupor, *Betäubung*, and made capable of action.”²² Ratzinger warns that this should not be taken to devalue careful theological reflection. Yet the latter is of secondary importance compared with the encounter of the heart with beauty. This Ratzinger takes to be the central claim of Hans Urs von Balthasar in the opening volume of his theological aesthetics.²³ Ratzinger regrets that so little response has been made to this central claim, not only in dogmatics but also in *pastoralia*—for the Church public, and the unevangelized too for that matter, need to meet the Lord in his beauty. People think theological reason is a wax nose; one can make of it any shape one likes. Being wounded by the Lord’s beauty gives one a measuring rod for judgments in matters of discourse about revelation, and the capacity to weigh arguments in contemporary theology and, by this criterion, find them, if need be, wanting.

In the art of the Byzantine icon, in the creations of the Romanesque and Gothic periods, one finds oneself vis-à-vis what the palpable power of the beautiful truth of God has made present in the inspiration of the artist. The artist has rendered the reality he experienced something in which we too can partake. This will make demands on us. Ratzinger seconds the proposal of the Russian Orthodox lay theologian Paul Evdokimov that the icon calls for a “fast of seeing,” a going beyond ordinary sense perception, the learning through prayer and asceticism of a “new, deeper seeing,” since what shines through the sensuous matrix is the radiance of divine glory.²⁴ What can be said so confidently of the icon can be affirmed of all “the great images of Christian art.” The beauty our faith has generated forms its chief apologia—along with the reality of the saints. These are our greatest treasures.

²⁰ Ratzinger, *Unterwegs zu Jesus Christus*, 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 37.

²³ H. U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik. I. Schau der Gestalt* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1961).

²⁴ Ratzinger, *Unterwegs zu Jesus Christus*, 36–37. Cf P. Evdokimov, *L’Art de l’icône. Théologie de la beauté* (Paris: Desclée Brouwer, 1970), 153–65.

Some will say, beauty may provide positive experiences in spots of time, but in the long run reality is more likely to be largely wretched. After Auschwitz who can write lyric poetry? For Ratzinger that objection is to “Apollo,” to the Hellenic aesthetic of beautiful harmony, not to the aesthetic embodied in the glory of the Cross, the thorn-crowned beauty of Christ for which the Shroud of Turin may stand as symbol. This is the beauty of the charity that loved us to the end. Here Ratzinger returns to the starting point of the Epithalamion psalm and its fruitful liturgical ambiguity. The icon of the Crucified liberates us from the prison-house of believing the “lie” that would make the denial of beauty’s ultimacy the last word. The splendid Passion likewise frees us from that other lie offered us by an aesthetic of hedonistic possession, whose artists would content us with the here and now, stifling rather than stimulating the movement of transcendence to go beyond. When in Dostoevsky we hear that beauty will save the world, we can too easily forget that the beauty concerned is specifically the “redemptive beauty of Christ.”²⁵

The Liturgical Perspective

When we turn from the primarily Christological to the chiefly liturgical perspective, we discover that Ratzinger’s liturgical iconology remains distinctly Christocentric, just as his Christological iconology bears significant reference to the liturgy—whether Jewish, for the cultic context of seeking God’s face, or Christian, as in the stimulus he found to such reflection in the use by the Roman Office of the theme of the marred splendor of Jesus, the suffering King.

He sets out from where we would normally expect a theology of images to begin—from the issue of Israelite aniconicism, the anti-iconic commandments in the Hebrew Bible. He points out how, in the making of the golden cherubim to flank the Tabernacle’s mercy seat (Ex 25:22), the Book of Exodus transgresses the very command it elsewhere (Ex 20:4) asserts. I note that to speak here, as he does, of an “exception,” *Ausnahme*, assumes the prohibition of the Decalogue to strike unconditionally at *all* graven images and not simply those intended to represent the divine.²⁶ Be that as it may, by using philosophical dialectic, he coun-

²⁵ Ratzinger, *Unterwegs zu Jesus Christus*, 40.

²⁶ See the recent discussions in O. Keel and C. Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); T. N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconicism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995). There is a substantial review article prompted by the latter study: T. J. Lewis, “Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118 (1998): 36–53.

ters that to render the guardians of the divine mystery visible is precisely to underline the invisibility of the mystery itself.²⁷

The question of the original intent of the anti-iconic commandment is raised again when Ratzinger calls the thoroughgoing aniconism of rabbis contemporary with the high patristic era a “radical” interpretation of the Torah, in contrast to the more moderate understanding that permitted the rich synagogue art of Dura-Europos, our fullest surviving example of a sacral figurative art in the synagogues of the early centuries of the common era.

The frescoes of the Dura synagogue come with no handy manual of textual interpretation. Ratzinger offers a “high” theology of these paintings, accommodating them to the Jewish *haggadah* of the period as its visual equivalent. In so doing he produces a Jewish counterpart for the way the Second Council of Nicaea (the seventh ecumenical council) would treat the icons as the visual counterpart to the New Testament Scriptures—themselves, of course, a “reading” of the Scriptures of the Israel of old. The representations of Old Testament scenes on the walls of the Dura synagogue are not just “images of past events.” Rather, they participate in the liturgical re-presentation of the original happenings. That is an ontological possibility since those happenings were not merely moments in human development but “God’s action in time.”²⁸

The images in the Christian catacombs, so Ratzinger holds, take this sort of synagogue art into a “new kind of presence.” That “presence” is “new” because it depends on the Incarnation and the inauguration of the sacramental era. And it is really a “presence” because the biblical events in which, through sacred art, Christians were sharing are now inserted into the reality of the risen Lord as he masters time through his exaltation to the Father’s side. It is from there that he dispenses his life-giving sacraments—in catacomb art so often typologically indicated—via their human ministers in the Church.

This *prise de position* enables Ratzinger to establish a distinctive theology of the image, which he does by treating all Christian images as being in some way Easter-oriented, ordered to the Session when Christ receives universal Lordship. He can make good his claim that early Christian art, whatever its limitations of technique, always furnishes “images of hope,” *Hoffnungsbilder*, if the entire iconology of the Church consists in fact of *Auferstehungsbilder*, “images of the Resurrection.”²⁹

²⁷ Ratzinger, *Der Geist der Liturgie. Eine Einführung* (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2000), 99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

A more obvious Christological framework for the discussion of sacred art is surely that provided by the Incarnation itself—which would, no doubt, include a reference to the Resurrection mystery but not necessarily keep its focus there.³⁰ In fact, Ratzinger cannot do without some more pervasive appeal to the sheer entry of the Logos into the sensuous realm—prescinding, then, from the Word's eventual destiny in the return, his humanity glorified, to the Father. The early painterly or sculptural images of Christ as teacher, Christ as shepherd, speak of the wisdom of the Logos now entering the human world, and his pastoral guardianship of the human creation that he carries “home” on his shoulders, the Church of Jews and Gentiles.³¹

One reason for Ratzinger's anxiety to deflect the iconological center to the Resurrection soon becomes plain. It is those excessive claims for the continuity of the image with the Incarnation made in the context of images believed to be “not made by human hands.” The appearance of the *acheiropoeitai*—Ratzinger thinks especially of the Cappadocian image called the *Camuliana* and of the *mandylion* of Edessa whose (controversial) identification with the Shroud of Turin he seems to favor—led the faithful to ascribe to (at any rate, certain) images, a capacity to yield communion with the Savior, and indeed the gift of his real presence, thus rendering the holy images competitors and rivals of the Eucharistic mysteries themselves. After all, the affinity in causal origination between the *achieropoeitai* and the Babe of Bethlehem was, to say the least, striking. These “true” icons no more had a human artist as their author than the Word incarnate himself had a human father as his progenitor. Ratzinger thinks that images modeled on the *acheiropoeitai*—whose supernatural provenance, incidentally, he nowhere denies—became the very “midpoint of the entire canon of images,” *die Mitte der Bilderkanon*.³² He sees here a twofold danger: that icons could usurp the role of sacraments, and that they might be taken as loci of direct vision of God here and now.

In the circumstances the Iconoclast controversy might be called a cruel necessity. Ratzinger recognizes the role of non-theological factors in the official adoption by the Isaurian dynasty of Iconoclasm (though where a theological position is concerned every other consideration necessarily takes on a theological coloring). Essentially, however, the crisis enabled the Byzantine church to grasp the nature of the icon as a vehicle for evangelical faith by teasing out the notion of a *new kind of looking*,

³⁰ See for instance, A. Nichols, O.P., *The Art of God Incarnate: Theology and Image in Christian Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1980).

³¹ Ratzinger, *Der Geist der Liturgie*, 102.

³² *Ibid.*, 103.

a looking that penetrates through the sensuous to the Christological center of the supersensuous realm beyond. In Ratzingerian terms, the Iconoclast dispute enabled the Church to grasp the *Resurrection character* of all Christian images. "The icon wants to draw us onto an inner path, the path 'to the East,' toward the Christ who will return."³³

As my use of the neologism "Ratzingerian" suggests, this account reproduces neither the language of the dogmatic definition of Nicaea II, nor that of the Iconophile fathers who worked for the vindication of the icons.³⁴ It is a contemporary theological re-presentation, a kind of Roman Catholic equivalent to the Eastern Orthodox theology of the icon that flourished in Russian Orthodoxy in the late nineteenth century (for Russia itself) and the early twentieth century (for the Russian diaspora in the West). In particular, echoing the iconological essays founded on a Christological perspective described earlier, Ratzinger does not hide his admiration for Evdokimov's theology of the icon, which is cited liberally in *Der Geist der Liturgie*. Whereas in the neo-Orthodox appropriation of the patristic sources (not least for Evdokimov), the icon is dependent—ontologically and epistemologically—on the paradigmatic moment of Christ's Transfiguration as reiterated references to the "Light of Thabor" make plain, for Ratzinger the key mystery in which to see the icon is the Resurrection. And yet the *manner* of his appeal to the Easter event is entirely Evdokimovian in feel. In both cases the crucial consideration is the "unity of creation, Christology and eschatology,"³⁵ the coincidence of the light of the "first" day and the light of the "eighth" day in the illuminated countenances of Christ and his saints. Both Evdokimov and Ratzinger are suspicious of an excessively or unilaterally apophatic theology. The radiance of God streaming forth from the glorified form of the Easter Jesus is—in a phrase of Evdokimov's adopted by Ratzinger—the "apophatic 'Yes,' " *ein apophatisches Ja*.³⁶

The reason Ratzinger prefers, in the liturgical perspective, a Resurrection-centered iconology to an Incarnation-centered one, is not only that it fits better his wider emphasis on the eschatological orientation of

³³ Ibid., 105.

³⁴ A. Nichols, O.P., "The *Horos* of Nicaea II: A Theological Evaluation," *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum* 20 (1988): 171–81.

³⁵ Ratzinger, *Der Geist der Liturgie*, 107.

³⁶ Ibid., 106. On Evdokimov, see P. C. Dinh Phan, *Culture and Eschatology: The Iconographical Vision of Paul Evdokimov* (Berne: Peter Lang Pub Inc, 1985). I have provided a brief *entrée* in my essay, "Paul Evdokimov and Eschatology," in A. Nichols, O.P., *Light from the East: Authors and Themes in Eastern Orthodoxy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 194–204.

the liturgy itself. It is also because through that very congruence we are able to discern the peculiar pertinence of a Paschal iconology to the ultimate goal of the Incarnation, which is not to draw the Logos down here to where we are but to take us up with him to his home. It is at “human ascent” that “divine descent” aims. Of course, to maintain continuity with the theological doctrine of the image offered in the Christological perspective, we shall have to remind the reader that the Resurrection is precisely the Resurrection of the Crucified. Ratzinger makes the same point the other way round when he says of even the most anguished Late Gothic images of the Passion that, by finding and communicating consolation even in such horror, they “carry within them the message of the Resurrection.”³⁷

That doctrinal suture forms part of an interesting analytic survey of the chief periods of Western Christian art—issuing in some prescriptions for the future. Ratzinger regards the Romanesque as, despite its emphasis on sculpture, Latin Byzantinism. He considers that Early and High Gothic art, owing to its admirable fidelity to the unity of the Testaments, reproduces much in the ethos of Eastern Christian iconography even if, with the relativization of Christian Platonism in the high medieval West, salvation history now strikes people rather as “Historie” than as “Sakrament.”³⁸ We have seen how he deals with the often agonized Passion paintings of the Late Gothic period, maintaining by a bold inversion of more conventional interpretations, that these are covertly Paschal images, since only by tacit reference to the Resurrection can ghastliness console. It is curious that he does not mention the well-documented fact that the practice of depicting the dead Christ on the Cross is a tenth-century Byzantine innovation subsequently received in the West through early Franciscanism. (The making in Byzantium of images of the *Christus patiens*—showing the Crucified with eyes closed, head sagging to one side—figured among the charges against the church of Constantinople brought there in 1054 by the papal legate Humbert of Silva Candida.) Ratzinger offers a glowing testimonial to medieval glass, the “iconostasis of the West,” where the church walls, in interplay with the sun, become an image sequence in their own right. As a Bavarian Catholic, he naturally defends the Baroque at least in its “best” forms, which he describes as a visual equivalent to the jubilation of a melismatic alleluia from the Latin chant. His coldest comments are reserved for the Renaissance, in which he joins hands not only with modern Eastern Orthodox critics but with also internal dissenters in the

³⁷ Ratzinger, *Der Geist der Liturgie*, 110.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

Western tradition. Not for nothing did the nearest English Victorian equivalent to the Nazarene school call itself the “Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.” Ratzinger excoriates the Church art of the Renaissance. It made no proper distinction between the world of meaning of the Gospels and that of ancient myths. It excluded fear of sin and the pain of the Cross. It pronounced an apotheosis of beauty for its own sake.

It is curious, then, that at the first synod of bishops at which he presided as pope, namely the Synod on the Holy Eucharist, which met at Rome in October 2005, Ratzinger arranged for an image from the art of Raphael, the *Disputation on the Sacrament*, to be projected on a large screen above the presider’s table in the synod aula. He likewise commissioned the American-born, Florence-based art historian Father Timothy Verdon to provide an authoritative commentary on the painting in *L’Osservatore Romano* for October 12, 2005. Though the painting *appears* to confirm Ratzinger’s strictures on Renaissance art (notably, it presents its Eucharistic subject in parallel with a companion painting on a patently pagan theme, *The School of Athens*), Verdon’s commentary rescues it from the theological dumping ground to which, prematurely, it might have been consigned. Verdon argues that the principal message of *Disputation on the Sacrament* concerns eschatology anticipated by the liturgy—absolutely in line, then, with Ratzinger’s own theology of the image. The center of this fresco, after all, is the glorified Christ displaying his wounds—a reminder of the general judgment (compare Apocalypse 1:7), with, below him, the dove of the Holy Spirit fluttering above the Eucharistic altar and the Host to whose conversion from bread to the Body of the Lord the Spirit’s work is crucial. (Verdon thinks Raphael intended here an irenic reference to the Greek theology of the Mass, not long previously adumbrated at the abortive reunion Council of Florence.) Even the pagan companion piece contributes to the full effect of this image of the Church gathered in the presence of the Trinity in Eucharistic adoration. Raphael, so Verdon argues, wished to emphasize the intellectual fascination the Eucharistic mystery has aroused. The Christian doctors shown in the one painting are no less animated in their search for truth than are the pagan philosophers portrayed in the other, while the latter have laid some vital conceptual foundations for the work of the former. When the two paintings are seen together, as was intended, they show how even the pagans share in the Church as unwitting co-travelers in her pilgrimage to God.

Evidently, here is one Renaissance image that could be taken to embody, rather than traduce, the prescriptions for sacred art that Ratzinger offers. How in his own conclusion does he sum them up? Briskly. First, iconoclasm is not a Christian option: It is tacit denial of the Incarnation

of God. Second, the principal topic of sacred art (that is, a doctrinally informed art capable of serving as a monument of Tradition) is the salvation history of the two Testaments, seen as ordered to “the day of the Resurrection and the Second Coming” of Christ. That by no means excludes as a secondary topic the saints, since they are corporately or individually an “unfolding of the history of Jesus Christ.”³⁹ Third, the images *qua* sacred art are essentially connected to the sacramental liturgy, which is the enduring visibility of the mystery of Christ on earth. That in turn means the center of iconography is Jesus Christ in the unity of his Passion and Resurrection—since this is the center of the liturgy itself. Ratzinger reiterates his claim that all images must be in some way images of Easter—hinting at the Christ who suffered, rose, will come again, and now reigns hiddenly in and over time. Fourth, the holy images are born of contemplation and issue in contemplation. The eyes of faith they require—and inspire—are the eyes of the Church herself, the primary subject of Christian vision. Fifth and finally, the Church of the West must make her own the common dogmatic formulation owed in practice, at the seventh ecumenical council, to the Church of the East. The theology of the icon proposed at the council is absolutely normative—even if stylistically a variety of iconographic manners may be compatible with its affirmations.

Conclusion

Pope Benedict is to be lauded for the rapid way in which, on assuming the office of bishop of Rome, he sought to put into effect his high view of the place of holy images in Christian catechesis and mystagogy. The fourteen sacred images included in the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, presented by Benedict XVI on June 28, 2005, were, the pope insisted, not merely illustrations but an integral part of the new text. Each image receives a detailed commentary in the *Compendium* with generous citations from the Bible and the Fathers of the Church. The new pope had learned from the fate of the 1992 *Catechism* issued by his predecessor, John Paul II, whose far more modest total of illustrations (here probably the word was apt) suffered the indignity of mutilation, replacement, or elimination in some translations. For the *Compendium*, all translations must reproduce the holy images exactly, and in the position indicated.

As patriarch of the West, Benedict XVI has the right and duty to act as overseer of the iconographic patrimony of the Latin Church. Writing as Cardinal Ratzinger, he was correct to draw attention to the continuing importance of the Second Council of Nicaea for Catholics of the West as

³⁹ Ibid., 113.

well as of the East. His statement that its theology of the image is normative sits rather oddly, however, with a certain lack of zeal in investigating that theology in its historical context. The dogmatic definition of Nicaea II and the theological doctrine of the iconophile Fathers are not the same, after all, as the neo-Orthodox theology produced by Russian devotees of the art of the icon, however gifted, in the modern period.

Actually, I think Ratzinger might have gone further and declared Byzantine practice (and not simply Greek conciliar thinking) to enjoy a normative significance likewise.⁴⁰ The Byzantine church is the only ritual church in Christendom to have worked out with full liturgical and dogmatic coherence an iconographic scheme for the decoration of church interiors, the setting of the Eucharistic action. That alone grants it a special status that could usefully act as a criterion for the re-conceiving of iconographic schemes in a Latin Catholicism too often haphazard or, more recently, minimalistic in this respect. The Byzantine is, furthermore, the only church whose art shows so consistently (albeit not *entirely* consistently) a “Paschal aesthetic” in the stylistic manner iconographers employ, combining austere Good Friday and lavish Easter Sunday qualities in a unity of asceticism and salvific fullness. Latins, and other Easterners, would do well to note.

Meanwhile, we can take courage and consolation from the magnificent words Benedict used at the ceremonial presentation of that compendium of the Church’s faith, when he declared:

Image and word illuminate one another in turn. Art always “speaks,” at least implicitly, of the divine, of the infinite beauty of God, which finds its reflection in the icon *par excellence*: Christ the Lord, the image of the invisible God. Sacred images, with their beauty, are also heralds of the Gospel and express the splendor of Catholic truth, showing the supreme harmony between the good and the beautiful, between the *via veritatis* [way of truth] and the *via pulchritudinis* [way of beauty]. While they give witness to the age-old and prolific tradition of Christian art, they encourage all, both believers and non-believers, to discover and contemplate the inexhaustible wonder of the mystery of redemption, continually providing a new impulse for the lively process of its inculturation in time.⁴¹

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⁴⁰ A. Nichols, O.P., “On Baptising the Visual Arts: A Friar’s Meditation on Art,” in idem, *Scribe of the Kingdom. Essays on Theology and Culture*, vol. 2 (London: Sheed and Ward, 1994), 183–96.

⁴¹ Pope Benedict, speech upon presentation of the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (June 28, 2005), n. 5. “Occasione publicae exhibitionis Compendii Catechismi Catholicae,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* XCVII, 6–7 (2005), 829.