

# The Path Towards Salvation

## How Christ Saves

Therefore , as I said earlier , the Word , since he was not able to die — for he was immortal — took to himself a body able to die , that he might offer it as his own on behalf of all and as himself suffering for all , through coming into it “ he might destroy him who has the power of death , that is the devil , and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage ” ( Heb 2.14 – 15 ) . ....

For this reason , the Savior rightly put on a body , in order that the body , being interwoven with life , might no longer remain as mortal in death , but , as having put on immortality , henceforth it might , when arising , remain immortal . For , once it had put on corruption , it would not have risen unless it had put on life . And , moreover , death does not appear by itself , but in the body ; therefore he put on the body , that finding death in the body he might efface it . For how at all would the Lord have been shown to be Life , if not by giving life to the mortal ?

Source: *On the Incarnation* by Athanasius

Paschal Hymn: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life.

## The Passions that Enslave Us

For most ascetical authors , although these classifications vary considerably and need to be understood in context , there exist two overriding ‘ mother - passions ’ . One concerns the irrational faculties ( thumos and epithumia ) , namely gluttony in the sense of fundamental greed ; the other concerns nous , namely pride . **Pride and greed** form an alliance in a sort of metaphysical usurpation that annexes the whole being to the ego . Spiritual writers , especially Maximus the Confessor , speak here of philautia , self - love , self - centredness , that snatches the world away from God to annex it , making neighbours into things . There is no longer the Other , nor other people , only the absolute I . ‘ Whoever has philautia has all the passions ’ , according to Maximus . ...

Greed unleashes debauchery as an expression of sexuality . The two together , to satisfy themselves , breed avarice . Avarice produces depression – grief at not possessing everything – and envy – of those who possess . Thus arises anger , against anyone who threatens my goods , or who forestalls me in securing something that I covet . Pride , in its turn , begets ‘ vain glory ’ , the display of riches and temptations , followed by anger and depression when the sought - for admiration and approval is lacking . So we come back , through the deep desire to monopolize , to greed . The two circles meet and form an ellipse with two poles .

Source: *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* by Olivier Clement

## Freeing Ourselves from the Passions

The Fathers discern three main stages in the spiritual way :

**1 . Praxis [actions]**, the practice of asceticism , the purpose of which is to transform the vital energy that has gone astray and been ‘ blocked ’ in idolatrous ‘ passions ’ . Praxis gives birth to the virtues , which love will then synthesize . These virtues , let us remember , are both human and divine . They represent so many participations in the Divine Names , and in the brilliance of the godhead in whose image we are made . This is not a matter , then , of mere morality . Not only do the virtues enable us to avoid idolatry – above all self - idolatry – and to gain the inner freedom that makes love possible , but they have a mystical flavour . In this chapter and the two following , it is this praxis with which we shall be mainly concerned .

**2 . ‘ Contemplation of nature ’ [theoria]** , that is , some intimation (an indication or hint.) of God in creatures and things .

**3 . Direct personal union with God [theosis or deification].**

Source: The Roots of Christian Mysticism by Olivier Clement

# Iconography

## Fr. Dustin's Summary of Three Treatises on the Divine Images by John of Damascus:

St. John starts by taking a look at the Old Testament prohibition against idols. St. John views this prohibition from two perspectives: 1) the nature of the commandment, and 2) the definition of veneration. He says that the nature of the commandment was to prevent the Israelites from falling into idolatry. He also argues that the commandment is more specifically against depicting the nature/essence/substance of God, and to prevent humanity from worshipping creation instead of the Creator. Iconography, St. John points out, does neither of these: it's not a depiction of God's essence, nor does it lead one to worship creation. The second aspect, veneration, boils down to an articulation of definition. St. John argues that veneration has two meanings: one is worship, and the other is to pay honor to someone. While worship is due to God alone, honoring the person depicted in an icon is not worship, but it is paying honor, which ultimately glorifies God.

It is, at this point, that St. John is able to fully turn his attention to iconography. What changes the entire game is the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, that is God enfleshed, or Incarnate. St. John writes,

>“Therefore I am emboldened to depict the invisible God, not as invisible, but as he became visible for our sake, by participating in the flesh and blood. I do not depict the invisible divinity, but I depict God made visible in the flesh” (I.4).

Even the Incarnation has several levels of understanding. In the first aspect of the argument, St. John argues that what was invisible is now visible. Here he does a lengthy analysis of the definitions of “image.” He states that it is important to note that images make manifest what was hidden or unseen. In this way, an image holds two realities together: the seen/visible and unseen/invisible. With this in mind, St. John is able to say that icons of Christ both depict the Son of God as he was in the 1st century, as well as indicate his invisible presence among us now.

At this point, that St. John delves deeper into Incarnational theology. He reminds us that after God created the visible (earth, animals, seas, etc.) and invisible (heaven, angels, etc.) worlds, God created humanity to unite the two worlds (i.e., we were created in His image to attain His likeness). Our task, in sum, was to make creation a sacrament. However, we failed in this task; but Christ, through his Incarnation, was able to succeed where we failed. This union means that humanity is now infused with divinity. Matter is recreated, and it is now glorified with God's presence. It is for this reason that we can venerate the icons.

St. John writes,

>“I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake, and in matter made his abode, and through matter worked my salvation. ‘For the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’ It is clear to all that flesh is matter and is a creature. I reverence therefore matter and I hold in respect and venerate that through which my salvation has come about, I reverence it not as God, but as filled with divine energy and grace” (II.14).

In this way, the use of icons in worship is a sacramental act.

It is also because of the Incarnation that we can glorify God through the saints; after all they are able to participate in the life of God because of the divine/human union in Christ. So when we venerate the image of the saints, we are, in actuality, glorifying God. St. John takes it further by writing,

>“The temple that Solomon built was dedicated with the blood of animals (Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement) and adorned with images of animals, of lions and bulls and phoenixes and pomegranates. Now the Church is dedicated by the blood of Christ and his saints and adorned with an image of Christ and his saints” (II.15).

There’s much more in these three amazing treatises; however, it’s really about the Incarnation, the Son of God taking on flesh, and the transfiguration of matter that takes place as a result, which allows for our deification. It’s also about the meaning of image and veneration, the dignity of matter, and the importance of the unwritten tradition handed down by the Church through the apostles and now articulated by St. John.

## Looking at Icons

### SAINTS

**\*\*Monastics:\*\*** They were considered “living monuments” and “pillars of virtue.” Though they had emotions, in their ascetical practice they overcame their emotions through the greatness of their minds. They reached a state of *\_apatheia\_*, passionlessness. Thus, monastics were restricted in their physical movement, their emotions, as well as through physical privation, wasting themselves through fasting – becoming lifeless and bodiless. Sometimes, monks were equated with the angels: bodiless beings, *\_asomata\_*. In other words, depictions of saints is a depiction of their “real natures,” not a matter of convention. The “stiffness” of monks in Byzantine portraiture, therefore, is a reflection of monastic self-denial. An alternative mode of depiction would be the types of St. John the Baptist, St. Makarios, St. Onouphrios, and St. Mary of Egypt – nude and physically deprived.

**\*\*Soldiers:\*\*** There are stories, in Byzantine literature, of soldier saints “coming to life” to act. Byzantines looked to this class of saints for strength and help in life – thus the saints had to “look the part”: restless and vigorous, healthy red complexions; not motionless, fleshless, or pale (like monks). Their eyes of look directly at you or often “follow” you around the room. Their portraits had to inspire confidence in the beholder. This may also be why there’s many carved images of soldier saints but not monastic saints.

**\*\*Bishops:\*\*** Like monks, bishops were expected to show qualities of disembodiment and immateriality. Oftentimes the vestments show “flatness” to illustrate this quality. Though they were pale and physically weak, their strength is of an immaterial kind.

**\*\*Apostles and Evangelists:\*\*** Saints in this category are depicted with emotion, fluidity, and movement: emphasis on their corporality. This isn’t a distinction between ascetic and non-ascetic saints. It’s an indication that these saints had participated in the historical events of Christ’s life: they bear witness to his Incarnation.

**\*\*The Virgin:\*\*** There’s an emphasis on her mediation on account of her humanity. The bond between the Virgin and her Son is the guarantee of strength of her intercession on our behalf. Thus, the Virgin’s portraits often have a high degree of corporality and movement.

Source: *The Icons of their Bodies* by Henry Maguire

**FEAST DAYS:**

As you look at feast day icons, notice how often Christ is often surrounded by a cave-like structure, mandela, or aureole. Usually the cave-like structure represents the depths of fallen humanity into which the divine Jesus comes to us. This shows us the transfiguration of nature accomplished by the Incarnation. Or, to put it another way, we are transformed and saved by the enfleshed Christ



