

CHAPTER 3

The Human Face of Providence

Are we icons?

We have it from the Book of Genesis that we are created according to the image of God. We are not carved images; we are alive with the creative breath of God. Image is “icon” in Greek. In the original sense used by the early Fathers of the Church, an icon is a special image, one that draws the beholder beyond the visible representation toward the spiritual message. Many of us think of icons strictly in terms of religious images adorning churches of the Eastern Rite. However, Catherine de Hueck, Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa and Émilie Gamelin, to name a few, have been called icons. The burden of this chapter is to explore how the concepts of “icon” and “image of God” come together to shed light on what it means to be “the human face of Providence”.

A person who no longer experiences any meaning to life is desperately looking for a point of contact with a person who does believe and trust in the goodness and presence of God. When people encounter such a person an invitation is issued to them. God is working through a person, extending an offer to another person to hope and believe. Our challenge is to offer such a visible witness and become vessels for God’s goodness and love. God trusts us as instruments of Providence. This is why we can say that our human actions can become symbolic, even sacramental and that our body language can have significant spiritual and moral overtones.

True representation is a matter not only of words but also of images. That which the word cannot communicate by sound, the image (be it painting, icon, person) shows by representation. Created by God, human beings are the Creator’s work of art, and every work of art reflects some facet of the artist. Psalm 8 celebrates the masterpiece that is the human person in whom the divinity takes on human face so that through us, something of God can be made visible. That the Hebrew Scriptures should express this

is especially significant when we consider how deep-rooted was the rejection by Judaism of any kind of representation, in fear of relapsing into idolatry.

When the God of the Old Testament, so invisible yet so revered, who had spoken through the prophets, took on a human body, Christ became one whose actions spoke as eloquently as his words. He made it possible for his contemporaries to see, hear and touch his Provident God in a manner never accessible before nor since. Try as they might, Jesus' fellow Israelites could not find any contradiction between what he said and what he did. On the contrary, for many, an immediate experience of his humanness served as a means of opening their minds and hearts to his message. He was the icon par excellence, the human face of Providence. "He who sees me sees the Father" (John 14:9), "He is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). George Maloney, SJ ponders these texts and sees in our own humanness a capacity to respond to God's invitation to share in God's own life, as noted in 2 Peter 1:14. Accordingly, he too speaks of the human person as an icon.

The icon aims at a reality beyond anything physical, and seeks to engender a much higher level of reflection, sensitivity, and awareness. It makes the non-representable become representable. Persons who are called icons in the religious sense (the word is sometimes secularized) are those who by their very presence in our midst, even in silence and hiddenness, manifest the kingdom of God. They are gifted with charisms which arouse in others a transcendent or at least latent faith, as icons are wont to do.

Lucien Coutu, CSC in *Pélerinages aux pays d'Orient* tells of his encounters with many iconographers who explained to him how a human being, made to the image of God, has much in common with icons venerated in the Eastern Church. Because we are accustomed to look for realism in paintings, we find their lines and contours rigid with an austerity that can blind us to what they can teach us. They deliberately cut across a certain naturalness to emphasize the spiritual. Their golden background is a symbol of the divinity. To pray in front of an icon is to let the painting speak to us of God thereby helping us commune with the divine. A careful distinction is necessary between an icon

and a portrait: the latter representing an ordinary human being and the former a person united to God. A merely material image either confuses or separates the two natures in Christ because it lacks the golden glow seen on every icon, announcing the light of God. Iconographers are people of prayer; they produce more than a painting; they draw their inspiration from their union with God.

If we are looking for the most convincing human experience of what is meant by the human face of Providence, we can recall again and again the biblical account given us by those who witnessed the Transfiguration.

The apostles knew that “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18) except the Son who is in the bosom of the Father. In the Transfiguration, the idea of body is perfected. It is now seen as an outward manifestation of a capacity for transcendence. When I offer to God the darkness, the limitations of my own body, the Creator can transform them, for God lives in me and can become manifest in me. If our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, and if Christ, being God, did not hesitate to take on our flesh, then we owe reverent attention to the impact of our own physical presence as we go about our various ministries. It is the imprint of our Creator in us that is our truest self-image, and makes us the human face of Providence.

Our way of being icons will always be imperfect, because our immediate, visible egos get in the way. But with our gaze focused on Christ, and nurtured by the Word, we can manifest in an authentic manner. Sacraments do not exclude the role of the human body, and our humanly symbolic actions can have a sacramental dimension when they reveal something of the reality of God, becoming a mediation of divine action.

Sometimes when we minister to others in their time of need we are seen as being providence, albeit with a small “p”. St. Thomas Aquinas offers this further insight: Providence in God is really prudence in us. It is a strength, a habit, a virtue which we cultivate through frequent practice. Each morning as we plan our day, we need to know what we might do for God and for God’s people, and how much love should go into it.

This is but a pale reflection of an all-knowing and all-loving Providence but nonetheless we are gifted with this way of imaging the action of the Divine. The virtue of prudence has also been called the virtue of governance, which calls for knowledge and love in persons called to the service of others.

Christ came in order to be seen, touched, and heard. He wants us to be physically seen, touched, heard as the human face of Providence. We cannot do this unaided, nor by our talents and personalities alone. We know that we must let the light of God shine through, the kind of light that casts a glow that reveals to others that it is indeed the love of Christ that impels us.



*GRACE in cooperation with human freedom constitutes that mysterious
PRESENCE OF GOD in history which is PROVIDENCE.*

- S^t. Pope John Paul II