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GLORIA

FACETO FACE WITH ORTHODOX ICONOGRAPHY

An Interview with Father Andrew Tregubov

ANTHONY FOSU

Father Andrew Tregubov is the primary clergy, commonly known as rector, of the Holy Resurrection Orthodox Church in Claremont, New Hampshire. In addition, Father Tregubov is also a professional iconographer, occasionally teaching iconography as an artistic and liturgical practice. An icon, simply put, is a sacred image that aids in Orthodox Christian worship. One who creates icons is an iconographer. Father Tregubov has also published a book on iconography that focuses on the methods and work of his mentor and master iconographer Father Gregory Kroug. Since publishing the work of Father Kroug in *The Light of Christ* in 1990, Father Tregubov has continued his work as an iconographer, receiving several accolades and recognition from both secular and ecclesiastical organizations and lecturing on his craft to institutions throughout his parish and the United States.



I had the privilege of sitting down with Father Tregubov, and over the course of an hour, he introduced me to a cornerstone of Orthodox liturgical worship. He walked me through the history of iconography, its place in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and the implications of these images in both Church tradition and in furthering an understanding of how we see ourselves as human beings made in the image of God. I am especially grateful to Father Tregubov for this discussion because I come from a Western intellectual and theological tradition that has lost touch with the use of images in worship. This interview has been edited for concision and clarity.

Anthony: Can you tell us a bit about how you came into iconography?

Father Tregubov: Very good question.

I think faith is entirely personal. It has to do with something profoundly deep, personal, and unique. It recognizes the presence of Christ in our midst and our encounter with him.

So, for example, look at the [Nicene] Creed. Although we often hear it as “we believe,” the original Creed says, “I believe.” And this emphasis on the personal aspect of our faith is invaluable. By using an objective “we” instead of a subjective “I,” we create a system in which Christ is limited to a function to bind us—the society—together rather than to be a focus of our individual relationship with him.

Why am I saying all this? Faith is entirely personal. Here is the story of my first discovery of faith, a glimpse of Heaven.

When I was about 13, something extraordinary happened to me. My brother and I went for a walk in the woods and promptly got lost. We had no water, and nobody ever thought of bringing a water bottle on a hike in my youth. We were out there for about half a day. I was getting tired and scared because it was getting dark in the woods. Then,

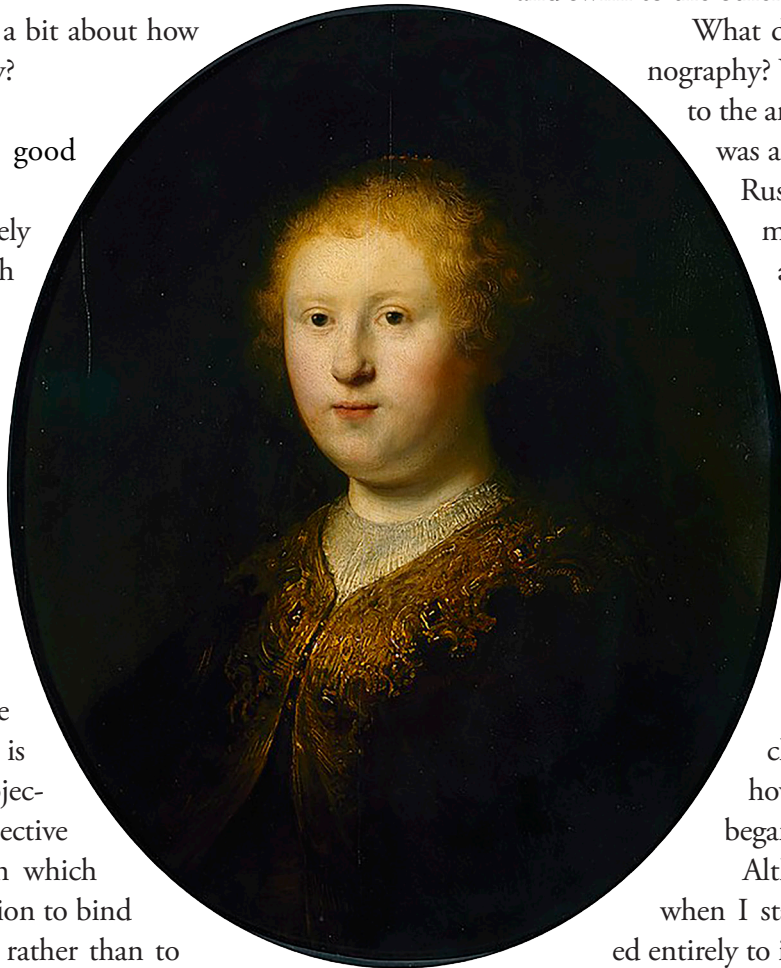
finally, we came out into the open area. I recognized the place immediately; it was not very far from our home. In front of me spread an incredible vista of the rolling fields. The sky was painted in a stunning greenish color of the late sunset. From the top of a little hillock where I stood, I was looking down at the dark ribbon of clouds over the horizon. And suddenly, I felt overwhelmed by the sense that this beautiful greenish sky was an enormous river flowing between two banks—woods at my back and the clouds on the horizon. The sky river looked vibrantly alive, inviting me to enter its flow. And all I wanted to do at the moment was to run down, plunge into that warm steaming water, and swim to the other side of the sky.

What does it have to do with iconography? Well, that same year, I went to the art gallery in Moscow—there was a whole collection of ancient Russian art. Completely mesmerized, I stopped before a large board, where only one part of the painting remained intact. And that was the face of Christ! It was the famous masterpiece of St. Andrei Rublev’s *Christ Pantokrator*. And there, looking at him, I felt the same tug—same invitation—that I had at the sky river. It was the invitation to come closer, to come home. That’s how my iconographic journey began.

Although sometime later, when I started studying art, I painted entirely to impress my future wife. The pictures I was producing were weird and wrong, but I managed to impress her. I got the girl, so that was my success.

In 1980, I had an opportunity to go to France and meet some famous icons face-to-face. It made a tectonic change in my art perception, and from that moment, I immersed myself in Christian iconography—like in that sky river—seriously and professionally.

After four decades of working with icons, I can now tell you that the icon is not an original work of art by one artist. It is, in fact, a fruit of the liturgical, collective creative ac-



tion of the whole Church—past and present. When I begin to work on a specific icon, I try to find as many reproductions as possible of the previous, existing icons on the same subject and study them. After that, I will try to reconstruct the space, colors, meaning, and, most importantly, the living presence of all persons depicted in this icon.

In the next section, I ask Father Andrew for an introduction to iconography both as a discipline and a liturgical act of worship. He offers an explanation of iconography as through an understanding of the art behind the icon. He claims that our common experiences of art (through visual media like movies, paintings, and other decorative practices) prepare us to encounter a person in the medium of an icon. He further claims that an icon uniquely preserves the essence of a person—their personhood, identity, and humanity—through these visual depictions.

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Anthony: Obviously, you have so much experience with iconography and this beautiful expression of worship, but can you give us a bit of introduction? What is iconography for those who are unfamiliar?

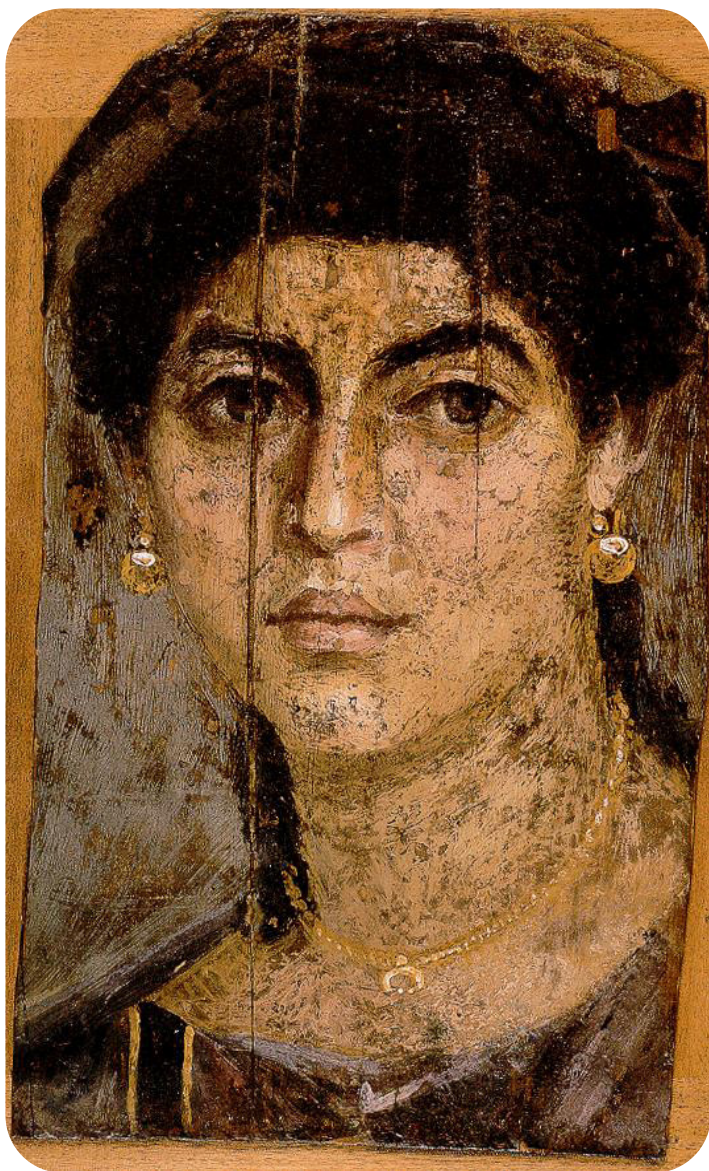
Father Tregubov: As Holy Scripture represents the highest masterpieces of inspired literature, so do iconographic masterpieces reveal the creative unity of human and divine spirit.

The entire history of art shows us two radically different notions. One views art as a means to a goal. Such a utilitarian approach uses art to influence and manipulate. It is designed to impact the freedom of the viewer in different ways. We can see it in prehistoric, ancient, renaissance, and especially modern art. The opposite understanding focuses on a living encounter, giving viewers total freedom. It doesn't sell you anything or force any ideas and emotions on you but instead invites you into a more profound and loving relationship with a person or persons depicted.

One of my favorite examples of such art is a funerary portrait of a woman found in Fayum Oasis in Egypt dating from the first century AD, about the time of Christ's coming. This masterpiece in encaustic technique reminds us of the hand of the much later famous artist—Rembrandt. We know nothing about this woman except that she might have been from a wealthy family—hence her gold earrings. But just looking at her face—brought to us by an incredible power of art—we encounter her inner living person; we come to know her.

This phenomenon is the foundation of the Christian art of iconography, keeping in mind that the icon brings us into the presence not just a mere human person but the God-Man, the only-begotten son of God, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Anthony: What is iconography used for? What does the use of icons in worship reveal? And what does it reveal about humans being made in the image of God?



Father Tregubov: With this question, we again fall into the context of our culture. In the West, everything must have utility. Everything is used for something else, and, as I have already pointed out, art also is a means to a goal. How do we “use” iconography? We don’t use it. And when we try to do it, we’re going in the wrong direction.

Similarly, how would someone answer the question, “How do you use holy communion?” Many people will say communion is a means to become closer to God, be enlightened, and change one’s life perspective. Or it is a beautiful medicine to become a better human being. It might be accurate; however, I should insist that from the point of view of the Christian Church, these benefits are secondary by-products. They are not our primary focus. The focus is not on me in this relationship but on the other—on Christ himself.

In summary, I would like to say that a person should not be used in any way. Limiting the value of a person to use is abuse. The icon, therefore, is not created for any specific use, like a magic potion for healing our social and physical ills. It simply reveals the very person of Christ, so those who love him can bond with him.

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Father Tregubov’s helpful introduction to iconography has also granted us a glimpse into the Orthodox liturgical tradition. From this introduction to an artistic expression of worship, I hope you may begin to see how Orthodoxy unites a more fully realized view of the human person with a developed view of the personhood of God.¹ ✠

1. If you would like to learn more about Orthodox iconography, see Fr Andrew Tregubov, *The Light of Christ: Iconography of Gregory Kroug* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990). If you would like to learn more about the Orthodox Church’s history and doctrines, see Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity* (London: Penguin, 1963).