

The Church is a mirror of Reality: Icons

The House of God is a place of ultimate Beauty, so is the human person

“For as the proportions of [churches] and their design and their whole lay-out are beautiful, it is fitting also for persons of whom the proportions of their heart and the design of their soul and their uprightness are beautiful to dwell in them.” - **St Shenoute**

When you enter a Coptic Orthodox Church, you are immediately welcomed by icons of Jesus, Virgin Mary, many of the saints and events from the life of Christ. These icons are informed by thousands of years of history and tradition and are one of the things that defines the Coptic Orthodox Church today. In every icon, lies meaning and symbolism, reflecting the beauty and richness of the church.

Icons and symbolism function by creating **patterns** within the life of the church. These patterns play out in **liturgy, scripture, hymnology** and in our **everyday lives**.

This material is not an exhaustive list of these patterns but a series of examples, in order to train your mind to see these patterns in church and in the world.

It is important to note that as Christians, we do not worship or venerate the idols themselves. They are rather used as tools to help us meditate on our Lord Jesus Christ.

St. Basil defended the use of icons and compared images to text:

“For what the words of a story make present through hearing, the same picture indicates silently through imitation”

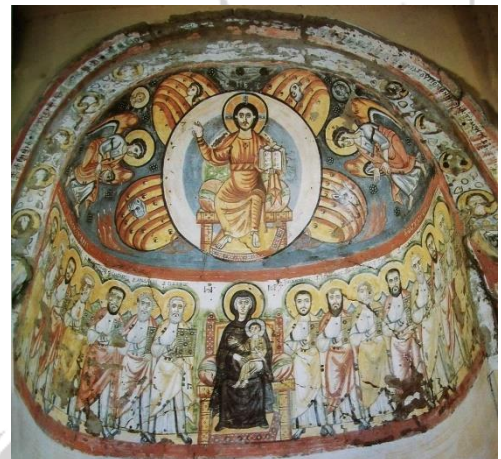
(Basil, Homily on the 40 Martyrs of Sebaste quoted in John of Damascus, Three Treatises on the Divine Images, trans. Andrew Louth)

Let's get started with one of the most ancient icons of the Church:

❖ The Icon of the Ascension/Pantocrator

The most ancient icon used in the **East of the church**, which is sometimes called **The Father's Bosom**, is the **Icon of the Ascension**.

- In this icon (6th century icon, preserved in the **Coptic Museum in Cairo**), Christ ascends and sits at the right hand of the father (in His bosom) and seats us there in Him.



- In the upper portion of this scene, Christ is on the throne surrounded by the 4 incorporeal creatures, sometimes with the fiery wheels as well. This is based on the vision of the throne of God which **Ezekiel** saw in exile (**Ezekiel 1:1-3:15**).
- St Macarius the Great gives a commentary on this scene which is useful to keep in mind when we stand before this icon in the church:

“And all of this which the prophet saw in ecstasy or in a trance was indeed true and certain, but it was only signifying and foreshadowing something no less hidden, something divine and mysterious, “a mystery hidden for generations” but that “has been revealed only in our time, the end of the ages” when Christ appeared. For the prophet was viewing the mystery of the human soul that would receive its Lord and become his throne of glory” (Homilies of St Macarius, Homily 1)

- If we take St Macarius’ commentary seriously, this means that the icon is not a window or a door into something distant, but **a mirror which reveals what we are, and what we were created to become.**

“Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” (1 John 3:2)

- St Macarius views this image of Christ enthroned as being the image of the human soul, through which the beauty and light of God shine in the whole world
- Returning to the ascension scene, we see below, the Virgin Mary, who is an image of the whole church, and the apostles, witnessing the ascension of Christ and expecting his second coming.
- The words which the church sings in liturgy give **a voice** to the virgin Mary and the apostles in this icon:

“Amen Amen Amen, your death O Lord we proclaim, your Holy resurrection and Ascension into the Heavens we confess. We praise you, bless you, thank you and we entreat you O Lord our God”

Then the priest responds:

“Therefore, as we commemorate his holy passion, his resurrection from the dead and ascension into the heavens, his sitting at your right-hand O Father and his second coming which shall be from the heavens awesome and full of glory, **we offer to you your gifts from what is yours”**

- The Priest and all the church raise their hands like **the Virgin Mary who is the symbol of the church.** The church commemorates of salvation and the expectation of Christs coming by offering him everything we are, which He turns into his true Body.

- Today many Coptic churches also model the icon in the east after the book of **Revelation**, with the twenty-four priests placed below the throne in place of the Virgin Mary and the apostles. The 24 priests also represent the worship of the church.



The Icon of the Ascension, the main icon of the church, **is a mirror of the human person, and the church standing around the throne of God.**

Since the most important icon in the church functions as a mirror, we can infer that all iconography is a mirror which shows us that we are participants in the kingdom of God through liturgy.

After understanding the most ancient icon in the Church, let's uncover the in-depth meaning of one of the landmarks of any Coptic Church – The Iconostasis!

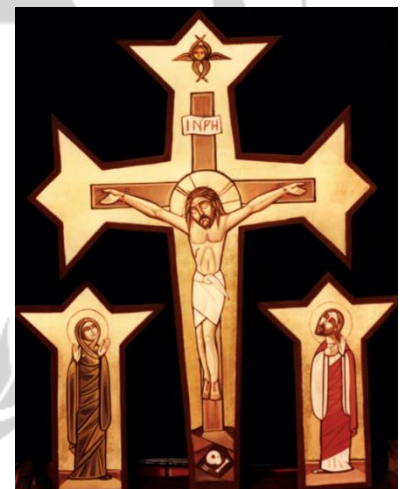
❖ The Iconostasis: Patterns and Connections

Iconographic program: The arrangement of the icons within a church space based on a theological theme or narrative.

The **Iconostasis** or **Icon screen** carries icons which stem from this pattern of worship. Since there is a door in the middle, the icons are placed in pairs on either side, and mirror each other. Starting from the center, the common pattern is to have:

1. The Cross:

- The Cross at the top sets the pattern. Christ is in the centre and the Virgin Mary is at his right just as she is below.
- **The Cherubim above the cross** indicates that it is the throne of the king of Glory. Since the cherubim are found around the throne of God, then it follows that if the cherubim are above the cross, then this too is God's throne. **This means that the cross icon and the Ascension icons mirror each other.**
- Below is **the cave with the skull of Adam**. So, we have the heavenly cherubim above, and the cave below, and Christ crucified in the middle. **This makes the crucified Lord the vertical connection between heaven and earth.**



2. The Last Supper:

Christ offers his **Body and blood**. This is a mirror of:

- **The Cross** on which Christ offers his Body and blood
- **The Altar** below with the priest and deacons, on which Christ also offers his body and blood.
- The priest mirrors the action and words of Christ **“Take eat all of you... Take Drink of it all of you...”**



3. Christ and the Virgin Mary:

The icon of Christ and the Virgin is sometimes replaced by the Icon of Theophany

4. The Theophany and the Annunciation

The theophany and annunciation both involve a **descent of the Holy Spirit**. In the annunciation on the Virgin Mary (a symbol of the church) and in the theophany on Christ, who received the Spirit **“for us in himself”** (St Cyril)

5. Michael and Gabriel

Note: The Icon of Archangel Gabriel is sometimes replaced by the annunciation

6. St Mark and other saints who are important to the church community such as the patron saint of the parish

The arrangement of the icons in the church often varies, but the important thing is to notice the patterns which the program creates. These patterns in Church allow us to see the pattern of Christ in our lives and all creation.

❖ Icons and hymnology: the icon is poetry

When chanting hymns in the Orthodox church, we do not chant about events which took place in the past but instead we chant in the present mode - **“Today the Virgin gives birth”, “Today Christ is Risen”** etc. Every event which is celebrated is made present and alive in the church through hymns, Icons, Ritual

Icons make events present just like hymns do through Anamnesis

Anamnesis: Participatory commemoration which makes events present so that Christians participate in what is being commemorated until their life is transformed into the life of Christ.

Nursing Virgin



Part 4, Friday Theotokia, Midnight Praise

“The seraphim glorify him and you held him in your arms
He who gives food to all flesh through his great
compassion, He held to your breasts and you fed him
For he is our God and Saviour of everyone
(...)

He took what is ours and gave us what is his We praise
and glorify him and exalt him”

Fraction to the Son: O You THE BEING

“And this is the wonder of your humility (...) Arms carried
you, and the knees of the Virgin lifted you up. A mouth
has kissed you and milk fed you, O you who provide for
all creation out of your bounty”

Descent into Hades



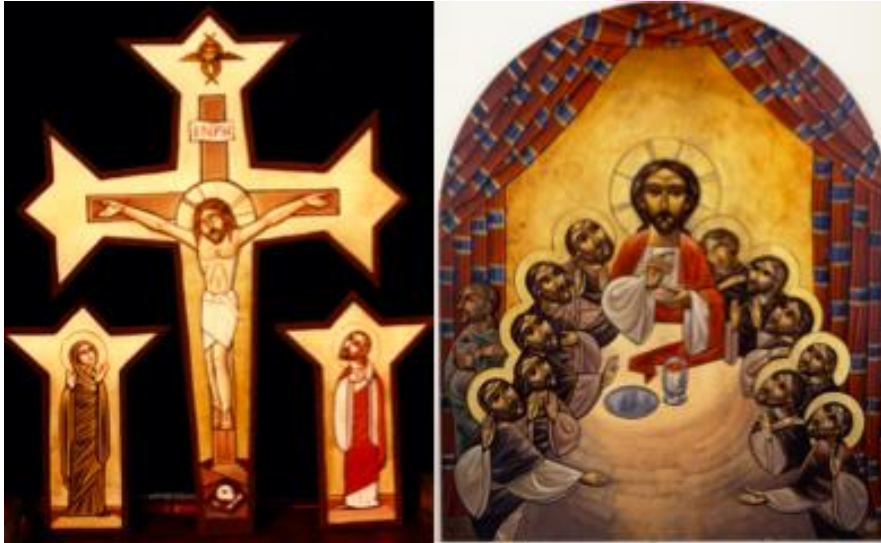
Doxology of the Resurrection

“He has crushed the gates of brass and broke
the bars of iron, and brought out his chosen
ones, with rejoicing and with joy”

The last enemy is Satan whom he chained
with shackles. When the evil guards and the
forces of darkness saw him, they ran away
from him because they knew his great power.
So, he broke the doors of brass with his
authority and he crushed the bars of iron.
Those who were in captivity cried in one voice:
“Blessed is your coming to save us.” He took
Adam by the hand and lifted him and his
descendant with him and admitted them to
paradise where there is comfort and joy

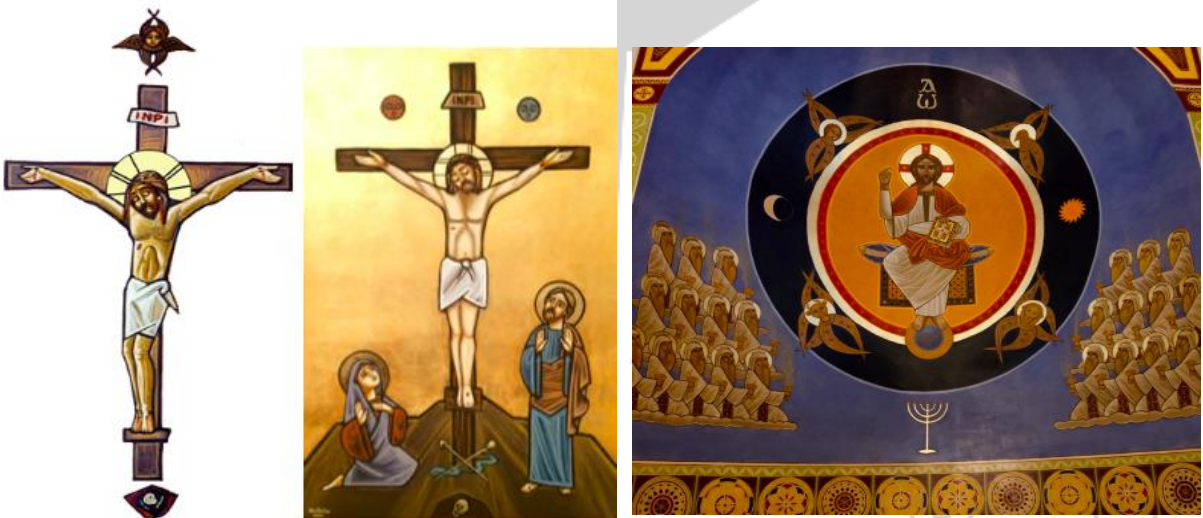
❖ Icons create meaning by mirroring each other

The Cross Mirrors The Last Supper



They are placed next to each other so that we understand that we participate in the cross through the Eucharist

The Cross Mirrors The Pantocrator Icon



Placing a cherubim above the cross indicates that it is God's throne. On the 12th hour on Good Friday, as we commemorate Christ's death we sing Psalm 45 (Pek Ethronos) "Your Throne O God is forever..."

Also, the cross icon often has the sun and moon next to Christ, as Lord reigns over all creation, another common pattern in the Pantocrator icon.

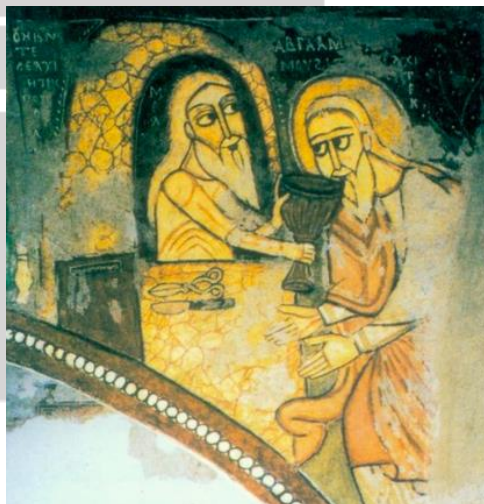
The Anastasis and the Theophany



Both the Anastasis and the Theophany have Christ trampling the dragon. Christ defeats death in the deep waters, both in the Jordan and in Hades.

❖ Icons create meaning by mirroring places in the church

The Sacrifice of Isaac and Melchizedek and Abraham



- These two Old Testament scenes are placed **above the altar** in **St Anthony's monastery in Egypt**
- The bread and wine which Melchizedek gives Abraham mirrors the bread and wine of the Eucharist
- The Sacrifice of Isaac on the altar mirrors the sacrifice of Christ on the altar of the church. As a Church, we commemorate this scene on Holy Thursday:

“Thus, the slaying of Isaac was a type of the shedding of the Blood of Christ, the Son of God, on the Cross for the salvation of the world. And as Isaac carried the firewood for the burnt offering, likewise Christ carried the wood of the Cross. And as Isaac returned alive, likewise Christ rose alive, from the dead and appeared to His Holy disciples.

O God, who received the sacrifice of our father Abraham, receive this sacrifice from our hands in this hour. Bless these gifts. ...” **Fraction of Covenant Thursday**

The Nativity



The Nativity: placed above the place for preparing the gifts (Holy bread) in the **Hanging Church in Old Cairo**. Similar to the way the room in which the Korban is made is called Bethlehem today

❖ **Icons create meaning by mirroring the life of the church**

St Mark's Icon



In this example from the **monastery of St Anthony**, St Mark is dressed in the traditional vestments of the bishop. Of course, this is not historically accurate since these vestments had not developed in St Mark's time. He is vested this way in order to show viewers that St Mark is the model for the bishop in the church, and that we are participants *today* in what St Mark brought to Egypt 2000 years ago.

The Communion of The Apostles



Christ stands at an altar as a priest and offers communion to the apostles as though in church. Once again, this is not historical, but functions as a mirror to the liturgy. In other words, Christ and the apostles are depicted this way in order to show us that we participate in the heavenly liturgy.

The Arts in the church—Music, Visual Arts, Choreography, Architecture—all contribute to a single unity in which we experience the beauty of the house of God with all our senses, in order to be conformed to this divine beauty.

