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# AN INTIMATION OF THE SACRED

## The Iconography of Hieromonk Silouan Justiniano

*by Tikhon Pino*

Tikhon Pino is an Orthodox Christian husband, father, and graduate student pursuing his doctorate in Patristic and Byzantine Theology. Mr. Pino studied Greek and Latin (Classics) at the Catholic University of America and received a Master's degree from Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. He has known Fr. Silouan for nearly a decade, as his catechist, priest, iconographer, and close friend.

**T**he Orthodox Church is for all intents and purposes synonymous with the Icon. This is not only on account of popular conception, but especially on account of her own self-identification. The victory over iconoclasm celebrated every first Sunday of Lent is called none other than the Sunday of Orthodoxy. Indeed, icons are not accidental to the Church's nature. Over a thousand years ago laymen, monastics, patriarchs, and queens fought ferociously to defend the idea that a Church without icons is a Church without Christ. A God who cannot be depicted in pigments and colors is not a God who has become one of us, and what is not assumed is not saved. Here we present an introduction to Hieromonk Silouan (Justiniano), an iconographer of exceptional talent and deep insight. Even after a millennium, the tradition of iconography is alive and well and relevant to our times.

Fr. Silouan was born in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico to non-Orthodox parents. Raised in the Protestant church of which his father was a minister, his family later embraced Orthodoxy here in the United States. Drawn to monastic life, in 2002 Fr. Silouan was tonsured a monk under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church. He was followed shortly thereafter by his brother, who embraced monastic life in the same monastery. In 2006 Fr. Silouan was ordained to the priesthood. He has served since that time at the

*Opposite: Golgotha, 2004. Fr. Silouan Justiniano. Egg tempera on wood, life-size.  
St. Nicholas Patriarchal Cathedral, NYC.*

Lord's altar together with his father, who was also received into holy orders and today serves a mission parish in their native Puerto Rico along with the rest of their family.<sup>1</sup>

Exceedingly gifted, and drawn to artistic expression, Fr. Silouan pursued a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, followed immediately by a Master of Fine Arts from Hunter College, of the City University of New York. He describes the training he received here as loosely based on the Bauhaus model, differing from classical forms in its devaluation of traditional drawing and painting methods, and a neglect of medieval and early Renaissance techniques. Yet this education allowed him to hone his skill and develop his artistic abilities. Beginning with foundational training in two-dimensional design (optics, architectural principles, as well as pragmatic, psychological, and emotional approaches to flat-surface expression), and appropriating the language of composition, color, line, form, and value, Fr. Silouan's schooling in fine art explored also three-dimensional design as well as art theory and history, culminating in an intensive preparation for exhibition and artistic success in his chosen medium through seminars, tutorials, presentations, analyses, and faculty scrutiny.

All of this served as a kind of propaedeutia for Fr. Silouan's later transition into the sacramental world of icons. Fr. Silouan relates that,

For years I had searched for a way of conveying an intimation of the Sacred—a way to express the spiritual in the immanent. I looked at Expressionism, then Symbolism, gradually going from representational painting towards Abstraction, or Non-objective painting. I read Concerning the Spiritual in Art by Kandinsky, and some of the ideas of Malevich and Mondrian fueled my interest in the possibility of painting being able to be transformative, to have spiritual impact. But, in the end, all this so-called spirituality, this yearning for the Absolute, just remained a romantic dream, a workshop of subjective fantasies.

This yearning was ultimately fulfilled, according to Fr. Silouan, in his encounter with the Icon.

He remembers seeing an icon for the first time in a postcard depicting the workspace of Ellsworth Kelly. As yet this encounter failed to convey the power and purpose of the icon, set as it was in the context of abstract conceptualism. He describes the inspiration Kelly received from the Gospel's pecu-

liar shape. For Kelly, says Fr. Silouan, “the icon remained in the realm of an aesthetic curiosity.” It was not until he first attended the Divine Liturgy in an Orthodox Church that Fr. Silouan began to be impressed by the “theurgic” nature of icons. Until then, he confesses, it had been difficult to understand art as anything “more than just a relativistic or individualistic statement—more than just clever aesthetics.” For this reason Fr. Silouan did not find the abandonment of secular painting, a necessary corollary of his entrance into monastic life, to be much of a disappointment. He found in the icon the fulfillment of everything he had longed for in the world of art.

It was in fact on the threshold of monasticism that Fr. Silouan first tried his hand at actual iconography. Having recently moved into the monastery with the intention of examining the life more closely, he was asked by his spiritual father, the abbot, to paint the *Plaschanitsa (Epitaphios)* for Holy Week. This he did using the more familiar oil-on-canvas technique. It was not until after his investiture as a novice that he painted his first traditional icon, egg-tempera on a gessoed board. Since then Fr. Silouan has worked on many projects. In addition to a number of standard portable icons, the Golgotha of St. Nicholas Cathedral in New York City stands out for him. This was a restoration project that essentially involved repainting the figures from scratch on pre-cut structures: a challenging but rewarding project.

Also memorable for Fr. Silouan were two commissioned western saints: St. Martin of Tours and the Venerable Bede. The challenge of depicting Orthodox saints from non-Byzantine and non-Russian prototypes was particularly enjoyable, as it afforded him the opportunity to mine Romanesque, Gothic, and medieval manuscript illuminations, attempting to synthesize various elements of the tradition in a contemporary composition.

Currently, Fr. Silouan is painting an iconostas for a church in upstate New York dedicated to St. Innocent of Alaska. His largest project to date, it will include three tiers, following the traditional Russian hierarchy: the four main icons below, the twelve feasts above, and the Old Testament Trinity at the top. He has so far enjoyed the challenge of harmonizing the disparate prototypes chosen by his client into a consistent whole, something which, as with the western saints just mentioned, he feels brings out the most original and creative contribution of the iconographer.

This latter element of iconography is bound up for Fr. Silouan with the fact that iconography is a synergistic cooperation between the painter and the Holy Spirit. The iconographer does not merely replicate precedents, but

<sup>1</sup> *La Mision Ortodoxa San Juan Climaco* is located in the town of San German. It is named after St. John Climacus, whose *Ladder of Divine Ascent* was the first book printed in the Americas.

interprets and re-presents the tradition as the preacher interprets the Gospel and proclaims the Good News from his personal encounter with the Word it contains. The true countenance of the Lord is ever present in the icon, but no two icons are the same. Just as there is one Gospel, but four Evangelists. It all presupposes the activity of the Spirit in the creative act—an act which is synergistic and unfolds in ‘a sacred and mystical manner’ without us even knowing how the Spirit works in us, for He blows where He wills.

Iconography is thus not merely a mechanical handiwork, but a great craft exercised in service to the Church, wrapped up in the sacramental life and ascetic effort. He holds up the example of St. Andrei Rublev and St. Dionysii as reminders that icons are objects of prayer. The reverence with which these saintly iconographers approached the holy icons serves as an admonition to engage these venerable objects with profound love and prayerful communion. Such an attitude, says Fr. Silouan, prevents the overfamiliarity and carelessness to which an iconographer is susceptible.

Ironically, he tells us, the complex and concentrated task which is iconography cannot be simplistically reduced to a meditative reverie in which the soul of the painter meets God. “It is a podvig to maintain attentiveness.” The mind’s distraction from the task at hand provides an occasion to combat thoughts, images, and daydreams.

Yet this is all part of the dynamic of synergy. The iconographer is performing an ascetic task, wherein he struggles to cooperate with the Spirit and not merely function as a deaf and dumb instrument. Indeed, Fr. Silouan admits that this element of iconography has become more apparent to him over the years. An art form that appears so constrained and so limited at once admits of an enormous amount of freedom. Whereas archetypes, structures, and dogmatic parameters are given by the tradition, the work will inevitably reflect the iconographer’s peculiar theological vision, temperament, and ability. Such details as color, line, composition, and rhythm all come together to give voice to “a visual sermon” bearing the unique stamp of the artist. Even strictures such as architectural space and design serve to channel the iconographer’s unique relationship with and response to his setting into a personalized product. For this reason Fr. Silouan regrets the common, if often necessary, shortcut of installing icons which have been produced in studios according to measurements.

Such dynamic cooperation between God and man is only fitting for a craft which forms part of the sacramental life of the Church. As mentioned above, icons have a theurgic function. For this reason Fr. Silouan found it possible to move away from secular painting so absolutely in his thirst to express the transcendent. Even while iconography allows man to participate in the creativity of the terrestrial-celestial nexus we call icons, it does so in a way which surpasses the individualism of the secular art world. Whereas the world of abstract art provided an outlet for expressing the supernatural and the suprasensual, it often landed flatly in the occult, and in the world of dualism. Such subjectivism and “intellectual games” could not but disappoint in the end. Yet in iconography Fr. Silouan discovered an art that expressed the natural precisely as transcendent, the sensual precisely as spiritual. The concrete images of icons become containers of things above. In this sacramental view of icons, Fr. Silouan is expressing nothing other than the classic dogma of the icon: the icon is Incarnational.

Comparing the icon to the Mother of God herself, Fr. Silouan grounds the theology of the icon in the Oeconomy of the Logos. Hypostatic truth is conveyed in colors and wood; “the authentic countenance of Christ” reveals the invisible God. Such a profound experience of the timeless teaching of the Church in the twentieth century is only another witness to the veracity and power of the doctrine that she so zealously labored to defend. God can be painted, not in His nature, but in the likeness of the Son’s hypostasis. And in this way the transcendent God, who once became flesh, reaches out again and again to make contact with our physical, sensible selves. One can only wonder how beautifully the teaching of St. John Damascene and St. Theodore the Studite would resound in the heart of countless other students of art longing to encounter and express the ineffable through their work. This potency is not lost on Fr. Silouan. It is the real presence of the prototype, in living relation with its image, just as the Church taught, that gives the icon such vitality and force. For this reason he encourages the correct attitude toward icons: prayerful connection with the person depicted. If the veneration given to the image truly passes on to the prototype, then sloppy, thoughtless behavior becomes most inappropriate.

The historical considerations implicit in Fr. Silouan’s thoughts cannot then but raise the issue of iconoclasm. Whereas many Christians are deprived of icons, that rich element of ecclesiastical life, it is important to consider whether there exists today any actual iconomachy aside from obvi-

ous misinterpretations of the Mosaic prohibition of images. For Fr. Silouan iconoclasm begins with the image par excellence: the *imago Dei*. If the purpose of an icon is to point to the transfiguration of the sensible, then there is no greater iconomachy than the neglect of one's own deification. The image of God present in us must be restored to its primal brilliance, and likeness to God must be achieved through growth in virtue. Any activity that rejects or opposes this process is nothing other than iconoclasm. In this sense the true iconoclasm of Protestantism is not seen as an exegetical problem, but an anthropological one. Luther, reducing man in himself to dung, and teaching the complete corruption of man, did away with the divine image. Nothing can be more iconoclastic than this.

Furthermore, nothing can be more hypocritical or foolish than smashing the internal divine image while simultaneously chasing after superstition. Fr. Silouan sees the fetishizing of icons as a grave manifestation of this problem. The icon, a channel of divine grace subordinate to the Holy Eucharist, is sometimes given priority in the lives of some Christians. Seen as magical quick-fixes, wonderworking icons become for some more important than the Sunday Liturgy, and the emotional, sensational experience of miracles is sought above the supreme miracle of Holy Communion.

Yet this is not to say that literal iconoclasm is a thing of the past. Even prior to the Soviet terror which destroyed and desecrated churches, Russian authorities whitewashed Georgian frescoes in an attempt to obliterate the national and ethnic identity expressed so poignantly in their unique iconography. Fr. Silouan points to an anti-incarnational theology which obliterates the necessary tension between the human (i.e., the local) and the universal, attempting to enforce an artificial uniformity by misunderstanding the synergistic dynamic of iconography. This tension, he points out, exists also between historicizing and allegorizing iconography. A balance must be struck between the symbolic and mystical (as, for example, in the visions of the prophets) and the simply erroneous (e.g., the depiction of immaterial realities such as the Father).

The remedy for problematic understandings of icons today lies in catechesis. Not merely theological training, but aesthetic education is necessary for Orthodox Christians. Dogmatic and historical questions must be dealt with alongside visual exposure to the masters of iconography, especially as these have been canonized in the tradition. In this regard Fr. Silouan has much hope, for both the present and the future. Together with the "renaissance" in Orthodox iconography, which has afforded Christians a renewed exposure to traditional forms and archetypes, the contemporary world has brought

greater access not only to the world's greatest icons and to an increasing number of styles, examples, and traditions, but even to education. Christians today are not only more aware of the most popular icons of Greece, Russia, and anywhere else, but they are able to learn the art of iconography through a plethora of textbooks, courses, and manuals.

This is not to say that the rapid changes of modernity are without hazards. Iconography as described above is increasingly threatened by the multiplication and proliferation of reproductions (prints, etc.) as opposed to hand-painted icons. Whereas the icon in itself suffers no ontological diminution, the place of the icon in the sacramental life of the Church is affected. Gone is the synergistic labor in prayer and asceticism; gone also is the natural quality of the work which contributes so much to its dynamism and its place in the Church's life, filled as it is with living things. There is "a degree of falsity—deadness" in icons produced by machines.

The itinerant workshops on iconography, too, are not without their own pitfalls. Often reducing the art to a hobby, these tutorials often lack the sobriety and *podvig* involved in the craft, and a noble contribution to ecclesiastical life can easily be reduced to something beneath its dignity. For this reason Fr. Silouan believes that there is need of genuine schools of iconography in this country, with a full curriculum for training iconographers, incorporated, if possible, into seminaries as a branch of theology. Such a school can only serve to perpetuate the living tradition we have seen active in Fr. Silouan.

In the words of this hieromonk, then, we have heard the tradition speaking to us from across the centuries. Indeed, it is the same Spirit active in the great iconographers which paints today through the hand of artists like Fr. Silouan. Inspiring inner stirrings in the human spirit, God is incarnate again and again in every generation through His Icon. Rooted theologically in the dogma of the Divine Oeconomy, the image of the Lord and His saints cannot fail to speak its own language and reflect the human together with the divine, and the divine with the human. Rightly did the Church fight to preserve her tradition as regards images. It remains only for us to appropriate her mindset as regards these treasures. In the words of Fr. Silouan, "Let us not only venerate icons, but let us also pursue what they represent." ✠