

2009

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

An Overview of the iconography of Saint Philip's from the Iconographer's Perspective

by Nicholas Papas

My hope today is to share my own personal perspective on the iconography of Saint Philip's. Since I painted most of the icons here, the idea is that it might be a perspective that brings something new or different or special. Maybe it will. Maybe it won't. We'll see.

But before I share my own personal perspectives let's take a quick look at what other perspectives people might have. What might the viewer's of Saint Philip's icons bring to the table?

Some people have an in-depth art history or art study background. These people can tell you about the origins of art. They can tell you about history and geography and technique and light and dark contrast and color balance.

On the other end of that spectrum there are those that don't know the difference between spray paint and spray deodorant.

Some people looking at icons are seeing them for the first time.

These people can tell you about first impressions. Or maybe you can remember the first time you saw an icon. Maybe you can recall your own first impressions?

Wanna know MY 1st impression? When I was a preteen I saw myself as an "art prodigy". I was a prodigy (at least in my own mind) who was already familiar with the likes of Michelangelo. I knew the lofty capabilities of the art of mankind. This is how I "knew" with certainty that whoever these folks were that did the mosaics of Saint Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania... DID NOT HAVE A CLUE! They CLEARLY didn't even know how to draw. They must have been amateurs or some fly by night characters.

Fortunately 1st and early impressions can be moderated!

Getting back to other peoples impressions and perspectives on icons...

Some people look at icons not for the 1st time but for the one thousandth time.

At one end of this spectrum of viewers are people who will tell you stories of miracles and healing. At the other end of this spectrum will be those who have LOOKED a thousand times but never SEEN...even once!

Another perspective comes from those who look at icons and see pretty or favorite colors.

These people will say, "I love blue" or "I love red" or "I love purple".

Still other people see colors that they don't like.

(I could tell you plenty of stories about these people!)

Some people are distracted by icons.

Some of the distracted ones will be OK with being distracted. They'll see their "distraction" as a kind of prayer. Others will be annoyed by the distraction.

Some people will just shut eyes.

Some will shut their eyes to pray. They will tell you that they are in the presence of holiness.

Some will shut their eyes or look away because they don't want to sin the sin of idolatry. Some of these people will quote the Old Testament Commandment prohibiting idolatry.

Some people will look at icons and be inspired to defend them against those who think that icons are a violation of the Commandment against idolatry.

Some people are moved by icons.

Maybe they will tell you why they are moved.

Some people are moved to tears by icons.

These people will not say much. They'll be speechless.

Some people could care less about icons.

They will have a lot of other things to say to keep their mind and eyes off of icons.

Some people don't like being stared at by icons.

These might tell you about the overwhelming guilt they bear.

(I heard a story years ago of a thief who stole a priceless ancient icon but returned it because the Saint in the icon "kept looking at him"!)

Some people want to destroy icons.

These people REALLY think the icons are staring at them!

(In countries where Muslims have gone through, it is very common to find icons with the eyes gouged out!)

In stark contrast, some people look at icons like a kid.

These people like to put flowers around icons or light candles in front of them.

Some people like the feeling of lighting a candle in front of an icon.

These people will tell you about answered prayers.

And, finally, getting back to me, what do I, as the iconographer, see?

What might I as the iconographer of Saint Philip's see or know or do or feel or understand that others might not? Or what might I be able to add to other peoples' perspectives that they might not have in their brain's iconography file? What might I be able to bring to the table? Maybe nothing new, we'll see.

And I don't say that I may not be able to bring something new in a flippant way. Because, all this while that I have been talking about other peoples' perspectives I have avoided acknowledging the caliber of folks that attend Saint Philip's parish. This is a special place with special people. Through the years I have noticed that Saint Philip's is blessed with lots of sensitive, insightful, well-read, wonderful people. So maybe I really have nothing new to offer.

But I'm here now! And just in case...here goes nothing...

To explain and share the iconographer's perspective, my perspective, let me start by spouting off a list of words. After I quickly run through these words I'll come back to each one and elaborate. Any of these words or all of them (or the concepts surrounding them) are what might pop into my head as I look at the icons here.

LOVE
 PEACE
 HOLY SERENDIPITY
 EDUCATION
 FUN
 OASIS
 FANTASY
 GRATITUDE
 AWESOME
 WORK
 SATISFACTION
 PRAYER
 HUMILITY
 BEAUTY
 GLORY

LOVE, the first word on the list and great word to start with I think. And an easy place to start. I have loved the people here and I have felt that they have loved me. This has made it easy for me to love doing the work at Saint Philip's. What more can I say about it? Love is a perspective that is prevalent and stark and strong to me when I look at these icons.

PEACE. The second word on the list

PEACE. I feel peace when I see this work. Some of the peace is simply crude. Especially as I wrap up an installation. This peace can be described as "whew, that's done". You can relate. It's like when you've finished cleaning your house or washing your car. It's like finishing any job. It's simply that kind of "whew."

But with Saint Philip's, for me, it is a REALLY BIG "WHEW"! It's really big to me because, to me, it is REALLY BIG.

And to me this brings to mind the next words on my list...HOLY SERENDIPITY...

These words I think best describe how I am even here. HOLY SERENDIPITY explains how I have been involved with icons in general AND "Holy Serendipity" explains how I am involved with the icons at Saint Philip's specifically.

"Holy Serendipity"; another way to put it would be...happenstance guided by the good grace of God.

This is how my career as an iconographer began and it is how my connection to Saint Philip's was formed. I began my vocation as an iconographer without much forethought and my connection to Saint Philip's began without my input or effort. But, looking back, I see that both were guided and shepherded by the Hand of God.

My experience of "Holy Serendipity" at Saint Philip's began in 1992. Saint Philip's had begun their search for an iconographer. An iconographer had tentatively been chosen. In the meantime, Helen Joseph a fellow parishioner of mine, one who I had only recently met, was visiting Souderton on a trip away from Greensburg. Somehow she caught wind of the eminently pending decision to enlist an iconographer. She found out that nothing was yet cast in stone and pleaded her case that I be contacted before a final decision was made. I was called. I made the trip across the state and showed up in my best suit (a suit that you may have never seen again.)

The rest is history.

How does a church choose their iconographer? Might it be a result of Holy Serendipity? If a Church was choosing an iconographer back in 1950 or 1960 or 1970 there weren't a lot of choices. By '92 things had already begun to change in that regard. There were a lot of possible choices back in '92 and there are even more now. And these, in '92 and now, are not choices between good and bad or theologically correct and incorrect iconographers. These are choices between one sound iconographer and another.

So how does a church decide? How did Saint Philip's decide? Sometimes, if not often, it has to do with the best price. Sometimes it has to do with tastes or styles. Sometimes it has to do with affiliations or ethnicity. There can be any number of reasons.

How did Saint Philip's decide? I half wish I had been a fly on the wall the moment the decision was made. But I wasn't and I don't know what went into the final decision.

And while I am curious, I really don't want or need to know the human dimension of the decision making process. Because I know that ultimately it has been ordained by God. It was Holy Serendipity. How do I know this?

I know this because it says so on my wife's coffee mug.

Her coffee mug has the Prayer of the Optina Elders printed on it. (Optina, for those of you that don't know, is a renowned Orthodox Monastery in Russia. Many of the Elders from there are acknowledged to be Saints.)

Anyway, it is their prayer on Patty's Coffee mug which has the memorable and perfect phrase which goes "... ALL IS SENT BY THEE"!

So, according to the wisdom of the Optina Elders on Patty's coffee mug, God has sent Saint Philip's to me. And, conversely, God has sent me to Saint Philip's.

This of course does not mean that God has sent a perfect man to Saint Philip's any more than it means that I have been sent to a perfect church. This just means that God is in control and He is using us for each other. He is using me for you and you for me. It is His plan.

And as your good Priests and Deacons and teachers are teaching you, God's plan is Love, Communion and salvation.

If I could take a small step back and return to the previous word, PEACE. There is a different peace that is part of my perspective on Saint Philip's iconography. That other "peace" is the sublime variety not the "whew it's done" kind. Hopefully, you can relate to the sublime kind of peace too. Sublime peace is something I get when looking at Saint Philip's icons. I get this from any Orthodox icon though. This peace is a gift. It is a gift and a fruit. It is the peace that is the fruit of being faithful to Orthodox Tradition. In the case of iconography it means knowing what has been painted in the past. It means knowing why it was painted that way or if the reasons are unknown the work proceeds with as much fear and trembling and respect and submission to the guidance of all that has happened before as can be mustered.

It is not an accident but a blessing that peace is the result of faithfully submitting to Holy Tradition. Submitting to Holy Scripture and the Holy Fathers and to the Bishops bears the fruit of peace, it's as simple as that. By planting seeds of Holy Orthodoxy the result will always be to have a tree that gives the fruit of sublime peace.

On to EDUCATION...

My Dad is a retired Electrical Engineer. Electrical Engineering is a methodical, analytical, intellectual type of vocation. This suited my Dad and this choice of career fit his gifts and personality. But as the years of his engineering career went by he was promoted into Managerial positions. Managing people seemed to be on the other end of the spectrum of what he had chosen as his career path of slide rules and logic. This was unexpected for him but he made the best of it, he forged ahead and eventually became more of a people person.

Now while I can't say that I have become a skilled people person like my Dad, I can say that like him my career path has thrown me into an unexpected level of human interaction. This is what has been an education for me. Sure there has also been the wonderful education that I have been getting from the need to do research on the lives of Saints or the details of iconographic prototypes or about WHO GOES ONTO A TREE OF JESSE. But the better (and unexpected) education has been to learn a little bit more about people. And this is an ongoing education.

There simply is a lot of learning to be had from all the interaction that is needed to accomplish the huge task of illuminating a church. I have had to talk with people! Who knew? In addition to the education gained from talking with people there has been the physical working side-by-side with people. Most of this side-by-side work has been during the installation of icons. Spending time with people at installations and learning from and about them brings to mind my next word; FUN.

There have been some FUN moments being here. Installing with Cranford or with my Dad or my own children or my brother-in-law Dale or with Peter Chellos, Jabra Tannous, Joe Gazal, John Carpenter, Drew Haas or so many others. This has been a lot of fun. And to add to the fun there has been fellowship and GOOD EATIN'! So many meals. Eating and visiting with parishioners and helpers and Priests. There has always been plenty of great food. Homemade food, Chinese food, the famous tomato pies and I have especially loved the falafels from "The Oasis" Restaurant.

Which reminds me of the next words on my list...OASIS and FANTASY.

I know, in my head, that Saint Philip's has the same struggles and human foibles and sinfulness that any Church has but it has always been a nice retreat for me to have a little "taste of heaven" even if it is that easy, chocolate-covered, sugar coated, sort-of-fantasy way by not knowing the details of the squabbles and pains and shortcomings. It's been a long Honeymoon for me. I admit it. But this little a bit of and oasis or escape for good or bad is something that I will enjoy for now. I'll accept it as a little gift from God. I'll be grateful.

Ah, "Grateful"!...my next word...

GRATITUDE

GRATITUDE comes to mind largely because of the relationship I have with Saint Philip's. This work could never be done if this parish didn't have the desire to do it. This seems like a silly thing to say but it shouldn't be dismissed or passed over lightly or easily. Not all Christian Churches want icons! Not even all Orthodox Churches want icons! Are you aware of this?! Do you know this?! Think about it!

This makes Saint Philips special and blessed!

Let me take a moment to summarize just how blessed and special Saint Philip's is in this regard!

As I mentioned earlier, it all began in 1992. It began with the front portal icon of Saint Philip and Christ. 1993 saw the installation of the iconostasis and its icons. '93 also saw the illumination of the Archway within the Altar area and the Communion of Apostles panels on the Altar itself. A thorough dialogue about the Apse iconography came to a fruitful end in 1996. This dialogue resulted in crowning the Apse with the Christ Enthroned Deisis as well as the Hierarchs and Old Testament Priests that are on the lower wall of the Eastern most area of the Apse. This was in 1997. The Crosses outside and the Hospitality of Abraham over the Narthex door were also installed in '97. 1998 saw the initial solidification of the overall theme. In 1999 there was the installation of The Crucifixion, The Resurrection and the completion of the Altar's "Clergy" Saints. 2000 added the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, the 4 Evangelists the Peacocks and the Harts. Jonah and the 3 Youths were installed in 2001. The scenes from Saint Philip Life were installed in 2002. 2003 saw the beginning of the "Cloud of Witnesses" as well as the start of the Old and New Testament upper wall scenes. Just last year, 2008, the last OT/NT Theme mural, the Transfiguration, and the 2 "Road" murals brought to completion all but the work for the westward walls and Narthex.

All of this work makes Saint Philip's special. It is a gem that should not to be dismissed easily.

Getting back to my gratitude toward Saint Philip's...

Saint Philips and Churches like it are the yin to an iconographer's yang.

I can WANT to paint icons all day long but if there is no home for them what good are they.

Saint Philip's, from the beginning, has had a yearning to be faithful to the historic, spiritual, correct and fulfilling usage of icons in the Church. That desire came from fundamental Orthodox beliefs. And those beliefs were fleshed out with concrete action and commitment. And that strong Orthodox faith has always, I believe, understood and embraced the spiritual, intellectual and emotional thirst that can only be satisfied with having icons fill a church's walls.

I am grateful for the people of Saint Philip's. (I'm going to list some people here so let me apologize ahead of time if I omit or offend anyone for omitting them).

Of course Father Boniface is at the top of the list. And you know Father Boniface so you know why he is at the top. He has always been a good and wise Father and encouraged and guided and taught and modeled and made this happen by God's grace. I am skeptical that ANY of this would exist if it were not for Father Boniface. And there is Khouria Joyce. She, while not directly involved with the iconography has always been a great and gracious hostess during my visits and especially during the installations of the work. Never underestimate the power of a good breakfast at the beginning of the day's work. More recently I have been introduced to Father Noah. I can tell already that his demeanor and intelligence and gifts will be something that I will be grateful to know and work along side in the coming years. I am already grateful for Father Noah.

In years past, there have parishioners that have befriended me and parishioners that have been involved in the beautification process, people like Jack Morrash, Bill Bovino, Dan Elliot, Serge Kaminsky and Cranford. And last but not least there has been Terry Kaminsky. Terry and I have spent hours and hours on the phone over the years. (Thankfully we both have the same cell phone plan so the calls are free.) Terry has been a cheerleader and fan and friend and I suspect a behind the scenes advocate. She has been a great liaison between me and the Parish. I am grateful for Terry.

I am grateful for everyone I have met here through the years. Without exception everyone has been good to me. But maybe I am most grateful to the donors. These are the financial backers of this work. I

don't know the stories behind these donations. I can only imagine the love and sacrifice and prayers that have gone into these donations. These donations have been awesome!

Ah, AWESOME...the next word...

I have been blessed with being able to illuminate many churches over the past 27 or so years. Very few have been as fully done as Saint Philip's. Even fewer have been done in symphony with what I had hoped to do in those churches. Seeing all of this work, in one place, that has been aligned with a complete vision, is awesome to me. I think of the time involved and the commitment and support (and donations) that made it happen and the end product is just "something". It is awesome!

WORK and SATISFACTION

When I look at these icons I can somewhat recall the work and time that went into them. The satisfaction comes with being able to see them completed. The blessing and curse of doing work for a place other than oneself or home parish is that I don't much get to see the completed piece. The work is in my studio, sometimes for months, but only as work-in-progress. When the last bit of paint goes on and the varnish is dry the work gets installed or delivered and I'm onto the next icon. And the next icon...I don't see that one completed for very long either. And on and on like this. So it is a treat to spend a little bit of time with work that is complete.

PRAYER

This word comes to mind, not so much as something I do or am gifted at or have to offer. It comes to mind because this is yet another way that Saint Philip's has been special to me. I remember, very early on, years ago, mentioning something in a kind of side conversation to Father Boniface. I mentioned that I had noticed that my work seemed to go better when I was being prayed for. He, being the Father Boniface that he is, took this request quite seriously and ACTUALLY PRAYED FOR ME. You may not know this but Saint Philip's and MAYBE one other place are the only two Churches I have worked for and been to where at the Great Entrance of the Divine Liturgy I am given the special honor of being prayed for and mentioned specifically as the iconographer.

Being prayed for in this way makes me think of the Old Testament story of the Israelites defeating Amalek. In this story the battle goes well for the Israelites only as long as Moses' hands are raised. But Moses' arms got tired. To keep them raised he had helpers. I feel like this is what the prayers of you, my friends at Saint Philip's, have done at times. Your prayers have lifted me up and kept me painting.

To keep painting is a lot of what my everyday and REAL LIFE is about.

REAL LIFE; the next words on the list.

The work here began in 1992.

That's 17 years ago!

In 17 years a lot of life happens! 17 years ago my kids were little. Now, my kids are big. They're out of the house. Real life has happened. Patty and I have become empty nesters. Patty has changed jobs. She has lost her Dad. Friends have died. Friends have gotten married. Friends have been baptized. Our kids have gotten educations and jobs. Our 2 oldest kids live in distant Cities. This is real life stuff.

Why do the words "REAL LIFE" come to my mind in my perspective of Saint Philip's iconography? Because of the rubber-meets-the-road, REAL LIFE impact that Saint Philip's has had on my family in the past 17 years! In these 17 years you have been directly and literally involved with feeding us, keeping us warm in winter, putting shoes on our feet, clothes on our backs and gas in our car. Saint Philip's has provided for our "Little Church", our family. You have given us life.

I have been all over the map with this list of words that describe my “iconographer’s perspective”. This next one at first may sound like a downer but bear with me. I think it’s actually positive.

The word is SIN.

SIN. On occasion, when I look at my own work I see sin. I see my own sin, not other peoples’ sins. I see my passions and foibles or at least, at times, I recall them. On these occasions, I feel uncomfortable and restless. By God’s grace this particular restlessness is rare and personal. My guess is that it is a common feeling among iconographers. A good thing, perhaps, is that the sins of iconographers are not usually readily visible to viewers. But, any honest discussion of iconographers’ perspectives about icons will include the human side of those that painted them.

Iconographers see their own sins and by extension they see the flaws in their work. Seeing the flaws is axiomatic, I think, to Art in general not just iconography. Artists are even TAUGHT to see the flaws. At times, this can be unsettling. Happily, for Christian artists especially, there is a resolution and an answer to this difficult conundrum. The resolution can be found and taught in the charming lesson that is in a small detail of some “Nativity of Christ” icons. It is a good lesson for everyone, not just artists. It is the lesson of the shepherd musician. When he is depicted in the Nativity icon you will see him playing on his instrument somewhere off to the side. He is there to teach the same message that is in the lyrics of “The Little Drummer Boy” Christmas Carol.

Here are those lyrics...

*Come they told me, pa rum pum pum pum
A new born King to see, pa rum pum pum pum
Our finest gifts we bring, pa rum pum pum pum
To lay before the King, pa rum pum pum pum,
rum pum pum pum, rum pum pum pum,*

*So to honor Him, pa rum pum pum pum,
When we come.*

*Little Baby, pa rum pum pum pum
I am a poor boy too, pa rum pum pum pum
I have no gift to bring, pa rum pum pum pum
That's fit to give the King, pa rum pum pum pum,
rum pum pum pum, rum pum pum pum,*

*Shall I play for you, pa rum pum pum pum,
On my drum?*

*Mary nodded, pa rum pum pum pum
The ox and lamb kept time, pa rum pum pum pum
I played my drum for Him, pa rum pum pum pum
I played my best for Him, pa rum pum pum pum,
rum pum pum pum, rum pum pum pum,*

*Then He smiled at me, pa rum pum pum pum
Me and my drum.*

The little musician in the Nativity icon and the lyrics of this carol are illustrations. They illustrate the things that humans offer to God. And what do we humans offer God? We offer frugal, humble, flawed, imperfect things, like a shepherd's shrill tooting or a little boy's rustic rat tat tatting. Human offerings always seem to fall short compared to the glory of God. How can human creative effort compete with the infinite glory and awesomeness of the creative endeavors of the Creator of the Universe?

This is a worthwhile meditation.

When we think about a few toots on a horn or some drum rolls or a few splashes of paint, compared to the glory of the Universe it almost seems funny. Can something as frail as a drumbeat or as insignificant as a brushstroke be a worthy offering to GOD? But, quickly, any tinge of comedy is overshadowed by the possibility...THE POSSIBILITY...AND THEN THE REALITY that these humble offerings are ACTUALLY ACCEPTED! God accepts our shrill notes and splashed colors!

What we offer will always seem lame. BUT! BUT! The offering CAN be sincere and heartfelt. Human offerings to God have the potential to be bourn of love and gratitude. These offerings are human, they are imperfect, and they are all that we have to offer.

There is more to "The Little Drummer Boy" message. There is a big ending to this story. It is only implied but it is something we experience when we are open to it. The story ends with God perfecting our humble offerings. This of course makes us ask the question how? How does God perfect our flawed offerings? Good question. You'll have to ask Him. I think it has to do with His love and grace and forgiveness and healing.

To only see the sins, flaws and foibles in my work would be imbalanced, incorrect and in fact a lie. The work here is beautiful. Beautiful is my next descriptive word. To say that the work here is beautiful is a difficult thing but to NOT say it would be a lie.

So the contemplation of the perspective of SIN in the iconography of Saint Philip's can be a positive thing when it leads to a realization that God is so loving as to accept and transfigure and perfect use our frail offerings and to somehow, mysteriously effectuate salvation.

HUMILITY and BEAUTY

Years ago a friend of mine, Marydee, told me about someone she met while sharing a room in a study abroad art class in Italy. Her roommate would look in the mirror and comment about herself, "I'm beautiful." Marydee, being a good girl with a devout, Catholic upbringing, was at first taken aback at a comment that on the surface appeared to be so vain and full of pride. But Marydee being an artist as well as a sensitive and accurate assessor of character could see with her own eyes and feel with her heart that this girl truly was beautiful. Marydee was intuitive enough to also know that there was no pride in this girl's pronouncement. This girl saw her own beauty and said so. It was merely a statement of fact.

This was a lesson to Marydee and through Marydee to me. It is a lesson that I repeatedly revisit in my mind. I am still learning from it. What I have taken from it so far is a lesson about truth, beauty, humility and FALSE HUMILITY. If this girl had said she was ugly, which is interestingly what many girls and women do, she would have been lying. And who would have been the main benefactor of the injustice of such a lie? God! He is the one who created her. The lie would be about this girl God had created. He made this girl and ALL of us, beautifully. He didn't mess up. So when God uses us and shapes and grows us and teaches us and gives us DNA and muscles and brains and eyes and ears and feet and hands to carve wood or empty a garbage can or perform a surgery or sing a song or dress a wound or stitch a sleeve or balance a spreadsheet or pave a driveway then these are things of beauty that HE EFFECTUATES! His creative power is so amazing that it is emulated and worked through His created creatures!

If there had been pride anywhere in Marydee's story it would have been in NOT acknowledging THE SOURCE of the beauty. Pride does not come from FALSELY proclaiming beauty not to exist. So, God willing, when I say "the icons in Saint Philip's are beautiful" I am giving credit where credit is due. Orthodox artists are helped in this regard by a specific traditional way that iconographers refer to their work. It is traditional to say "by THE HAND of". My business card and letterhead follows this tradition. They say "Iconography by the hand of Nicholas P. Papas". This phrase helps Orthodox artists give the GLORY to God. It reminds them that they are a tool or instrument for the work that is made possible only because of everything that God has put into place to make it happen.

And I think that is where I will end for now, with the idea of giving GLORY to God. These have been a few of the perspectives of me, your iconographer, on the icons of Saint Philip's Antiochian Orthodox Church in Souderton, Pennsylvania. The list of perspectives included LOVE, PEACE, HOLY SERENDIPITY, EDUCATION, FUN, OASIS, FANTASY, GRATITUDE, AWESOME, WORK, SATISFACTION, PRAYER, HUMILITY, BEAUTY and finally GLORY.

Glory! Glory to GOD!

Hopefully we can lift our minds and eyes together when we look at these icons and with one voice give GLORY TO GOD. Amen.

*For more information about Nick Papas, visit his Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Nick.Papas.Studio>
Or <http://comeandseeicons.com/papas.htm>*

To purchase reproductions of his work, visit: <http://www.comeandseeicons.com/index.html>