

Icons; Role of women-church

Q *I am writing to you with the following concerns.*

1) The Catechism of the Ukrainian Catholic Church is presented with the icon on the cover and one other inside showing Jesus' hand extended to Adam only with Adam's back turned to the sad face of Eve. I find this abhorrent!

Icons have a strong symbolic meaning and for women, represented by Eve, to be excluded from salvation is unthinkable. This is deeply wounding. It stabs me in the heart and gut to walk into my church of 75 years to have to face the fact that this is how women are viewed. We may be told that this is not what is meant, however, the icon gives graphic visual endorsement to the second-class status of women around the world.

The resurrection is a central teaching of hope for all. How can women be left out of this? the icon writer comes from Lviv. This seems to be placing the value of the writer above half of the faithful. I request that this be addressed by our Patriarch and corrected.

2) Related to this issue, I request that the language used to address the people attending church services be inclusive. Some clergy are being present to the congregation by saying "Brothers and sisters". Could this not become an everyday occurrence by all the clergy to give respect to the presence of women please? I humbly submit my request to be heard.

Respectfully Calling for Respect

A Dear Respectfully calling for Respect,

I have always found that a good icon evokes and accentuates what is already in my heart. In this instance, it appears that you have been marginalized for some time because you are a women. You raise a good point about the icon because I have never noticed this version of the icon until you mentioned it. Most versions of this icon have Jesus grabbing the arms of both Adam and Eve. There is one that clearly has Jesus facing Adam and not Eve. But then again there are many icons that Jesus faces one or more people while one or more others that are present (not just Eve) are not being faced by Him. Awareness of His presence and of the Trinity is salvation and is not limited to physically grabbing an arm.

It may be of little consolation to say that icons are about eternal things so they should not be viewed with a “sense of chronology” since in eternity, there is no before or after, or distance for that matter. Everything is here and everything is now. Further, we become aware of God’s presence everywhere. The fact that we are in His presence and receive eternal life because of this presence has little to do with who He faces or doesn’t face in an icon. In an icon of the Nativity, Mary is next to the infant Jesus but is looking away. Some might perceive this as a rejection of the Christ child but it certainly is not.

Again, I don’t want to take away from your point about inclusiveness in our church or in the way we speak or make decisions. Your feelings are very valid, especially regarding your feeling about inequality. Icons evoke things that are in our hearts and experiences that are real. For instance, the stern face of the Pantocrator in Washington, DC’s Immaculate Conception Shrine is seen to be quite disturbing for some. I offered the interpretation that if I feel judged, it certainly is disturbing. However, if I don’t feel judged, Jesus seems to be a wonderful protector against unmerciful judgment. Again, what is in my heart is accentuated by the icon. To the extent that you are treated unfairly and an icon evokes this, I encourage you to discuss this with the parish council if it is in a church and the priest that serves you. Come to some agreement about what to do. Do not be afraid to address the issue. If you feel you need support from others, then seek it.

Bishop Bryan Bayda

Further comments:

As a woman I wondered the same thing about that icon. You are not alone. As Bishop Bryan has stated, however, it is not the only icon that one might have concerns about. I'll be honest, some icons speak to my heart others do not. Why that particular icon was chosen is probably because it spoke to whoever it was that was doing the choosing. When I look at that icon I always try to think about the scripture where it says the 'first shall be last' and focus on the fact that Christ came to save us all, and he came born of a woman, whose 'yes' was required for this to happen. I also take solace in the fact that slowly our church is recognizing that women have a very profound role in the life of the Church and as Pope Francis has said should be included deliberately in Church Governance roles. Also, Pope Saint John Paul was very clear that women can and should be involved as catechists and teachers of the faith. This makes very clear that there are some very significant roles that women can and should play both in domestic church and the institutional church. Are the wheels of change turning slowly? Yes, but I am encouraged that we are talking about this. Please understand I am not advocating for the ordination of women, as I believe that there are solid anthropological reasons for the male priesthood—such as a woman cannot be a father—but rather I am saying that the role of mother and spiritual motherhood is rich and deep and needs to be explored, respected and utilized in practical ways by the Church more than it is today.

Thank you for your question and let's keep the conversation going.

Deborah Larmour,
Family and Life Office.