

Screen test

“... as they were looking on, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him from their sight.”
(Acts 1: 9)

This quote from the Acts of the Apostles comes to me as I reflect upon the paradoxical realities which exist within our Catholic Communion of Churches. On the one side there is the West, dominated as it is by the Roman mentality with its emphasis on “law” and “order” – both of which are outgrowths of the cerebral approach to faith and life: “inquiring minds want to know!” On the other hand, there is the East to which we Byzantines belong: instead of trying to analyze and organize everything, we open ourselves to a rich sensory experience, which in turn opens our minds and hearts to the mystical reality of the unfathomable God hidden within yet accessible through the lavish beauty.

Some would deem these two worlds contradictory and incompatible: “East is East and West is West and ne’er the twain shall meet.” Being both a Ukrainian Catholic and a Dominican, I find that the clash of these two contradictory and incompatible realities is the stuff of my daily life. In *Ut unum sint* (“That all may be one”), Pope John Paul II said that the Church of Christ, which subsists within Catholicism, needs to learn to breathe with both “lungs” - one Eastern and the other Western. Can these two “lungs” learn to work together, or even to get along?

A case in point: most Roman Catholics whom I know neither understand nor like the icon screen which belongs in our churches. One friend recently asked me, “Why do you hide behind that screen?” Another once commented that we “keep going in and out of doors like the figures on a German cuckoo clock!” Sometimes behaviors speak even more eloquently than words: in the chapel of St. Dominic Priory in St. Louis, there are four pillars which partially block the view of some members of the congregation; some friars physically move so that they can “see everything that happens on the altar” – as if a blocked view would change the reality! No, they just could never cope with an icon screen! Can they cope with a hidden God? Can we?

During the earthly life of Jesus, human eyes could look upon the Messiah and recognize the eternal God come to live with us; human ears could hear the voice of God-with-us, and our own voices could echo the Divine Presence with choruses of “*z nami Boh!*” Then came the Ascension, and He was taken from our sight. In our Churches, the Holy Shroud has been a reassuring presence within the sanctuary, reminding us of the 40 days which Christ spent with His disciples after His Resurrection; when the *plachanytsya* is removed on Ascension, won’t we be as bereft as the apostles at the perceived loss and emptiness?

While they were looking intently at the sky as He was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus Who has been taken from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen Him going into heaven.
(Acts 1: 10-11).

They needed consolation, and so do we!

The Gospel according to Matthew ends with the promise that the now-ascended Christ would nonetheless be present to us always (Mt. 28: 20). In his first letter, St. John

writes, "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 Jn. 4:12). This presence is not scientifically provable, but it is nonetheless real – as real to us as it was to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who remembered that their hearts burned within as Jesus walked with them (Lk. 24: 13-35). As the Word of the Risen Lord came to them from beyond the grave, so does His Gospel emerge from the sanctuary to set our hearts ablaze! They recognized Him “in the breaking of the bread”, and so do we: the Christ Who came down from heaven also comes to us through the Royal Doors, making Himself accessible by becoming our food. It’s all, as the Creed reminds us, “For us and for our salvation”.

The icon screen might be seen as a symbol for God’s life in the Church. Though hidden, His presence is real; we proclaim this inscrutable truth in the dialogue which we once again take up on Ascension Thursday: “Christ is among us! He is and always will be!” We recognize Him with eyes of faith – eyes which no screen can block. Can you pass the screen test?

-Fr. Jim Karepin, op