

I
THE ICON OF THE HOLY TRINITY

Living in the House of Love



INTRODUCTION

How can we live in the midst of a world marked by fear, hatred, and violence, and not be destroyed by it? When Jesus prays to his Father for his disciples he responds to this question by saying,

"I am not asking you to remove
them from the world
but to protect them from the evil one.
They do not belong to the world
any more than I belong to the world."
(Jn 17:15-16)

To live in the world without belonging to the world summarizes the essence of the spiritual life. The spiritual life keeps us aware that our true house is not the house of fear, in which the powers of hatred and violence rule, but the house of love, where God resides.

Hardly a day passes in our lives without our experience of inner or outer fears, anxieties, apprehensions, and preoccupations. These dark powers have pervaded every part of our world to such a degree that we can never fully escape them. Still it is possible not to belong to these powers, not to build our dwelling place among them, but to choose the house of love as our home. This choice is made not just once and for all but by living a spiritual life, praying at all times and thus breathing God's breath. Through the spiritual life we gradually move from the house of fear to the house of love.

I have never seen the house of love more beautifully expressed than in the icon of the Holy Trinity, painted by Andrew Rublev in 1425 in memory of the great Russian saint, Sergius (1313-1392). For me the contemplation of this icon has increasingly become a way to enter more deeply into the mystery of divine life while remaining fully engaged in the struggles of our hate-and-fear-filled world.¹

A GENTLE INVITATION

Andrew Rublev painted this icon not only to share the fruits of his own meditation on the mystery of the Holy Trinity but also to offer his fellow monks a way to keep their hearts centered in God while living in the midst of political unrest. The more we look at this holy image with the eyes of faith, the more we come to realize that it is painted not as a lovely decoration for a convent church, nor as a helpful explanation of a difficult doctrine, but as a holy place to enter and stay within. As we place ourselves in front of the icon in prayer, we come to experience a gentle invitation to participate in the intimate conversation that is taking place among the three divine angels and to join them around the table. The movement from the Father toward the Son and the movement of both Son and Spirit toward the Father become a movement in which the one who prays is lifted up and held secure.

During a hard period of my life in which verbal prayer had become nearly impossible and during which mental and emotional fatigue had made me the easy victim of feelings of despair and fear, a long and quiet presence to this icon became the beginning of my healing. As I sat for long hours in front of Rublev's Trinity, I noticed how gradually my gaze became a prayer. This silent prayer slowly made my inner restlessness melt away and lifted me up into the circle of love, a circle that could not be broken by the powers of the world. Even as I moved away from the icon and became involved in the many tasks of everyday life, I felt as if I did not have to leave the holy place I had found and could dwell there whatever I did or wherever I went. I knew that the house of love I had entered has no boundaries and embraces everyone who wants to dwell there.

Through the contemplation of this icon we come to see with our inner eyes that all engagements in this world can bear fruit only when they take place within this divine circle. The words of the psalm, "The sparrow has found its home at last. . . . Happy those who live in your house" (Ps 84:3, 4) are given new depth and new breadth; they become words revealing the possibility of being in the world without being of it. We can be involved in struggles for justice and in actions for peace. We can be part of the ambiguities of family and community life. We can study, teach, write, and hold a regular job. We can do all of this without ever having to leave the house of love. "Fear is driven out by perfect love," says Saint John in his first letter (1 Jn 4:18). Rublev's icon gives us a glimpse of the house of perfect love. Fears will always assail us from all sides, but when we remain at home in God, these worldly fears have no final power over us. Jesus said it so unambiguously:

"In the world you will have trouble,
but be brave:

I have conquered the world."

(Jn 16:33)

WHERE HEART SPEAKS TO HEART

Living in the house of God, however, is not only a protection against the fearful world, but also a revelation of the inner beauty of God. Rublev's icon allows us a pre-view of this inexpressible beauty.

Within the circle of the Holy Trinity, all true knowledge descends into the heart. The Russian mystics describe prayer as descending with the mind into the heart and standing there in the presence of God. Prayer takes place where heart speaks to heart, that is, where the heart of God is united with the heart that prays. Thus knowing God becomes loving God, just as being known by God is being loved by God.

From within this holy circle, this house of love, the mystery of God is revealed to us. It is the mystery of the three angels who appeared at the Oak of Mamre, who ate the meal Sarah and Abraham generously offered to them and who announced the unexpected birth of Isaac (Gn 18). It is the mystery of hospitality expressed not only in Abraham's and Sarah's welcome of the three angels, but also in God's welcome of the aged couple into the joy of the covenant through an heir.

This angelic appearance is the prefiguration of the divine mission by which God sends us his only Son to sacrifice himself for our sins, and gives us new life through the Spirit. The tree of Mamre becomes the tree of life, the house of Abraham becomes the dwelling place of God-with-us and the mountain becomes the spiritual heights of prayer and contemplation. The lamb that Abraham offered to the angels becomes the sacrificial lamb, chosen by God before the creation of the world, led to be slaughtered on Calvary and declared worthy to break the seven seals of the scroll. This sacrificial lamb forms the center of the icon. The hands of the Father, Son, and Spirit reveal in different ways its significance. The Son, in the center, points to it with two fingers, thus indicating his mission to become the sacrificial lamb, human as well as divine, through the Incarnation. The Father, on the left, encourages the Son with a blessing gesture. And the Spirit, who holds the same staff of authority as the Father and the Son, signifies by pointing to the rectangular opening in the front of the altar that this divine sacrifice is a sacrifice for the salvation of the world.

Thus, praying with this icon leads us into the mystery of God's self-revelation. It is a mystery beyond history, yet made visible through it. It is a divine mystery, yet human too. It is a joyful, sorrowful and glorious mystery transcending all human emotions, yet not leaving any human emotion untouched.

THE CIRCLE, THE CROSS, AND LIBERATION

But what does the icon reveal to us about our vocation? Do we truly belong to this icon, or does it leave us in a distant awe of the immense glory of God? As the mysteries of the intimate life of the Holy Trinity are unfolded to us, our eyes become more and more aware of that small rectangular opening in front beneath the chalice. We must

give all our attention to that open space because it is the place to which the Spirit points and where we become included in the divine circle. As I reflect upon it, with all the iconographic knowledge I have been able to gather, I come to the realization that this rectangular space speaks about the narrow road leading to the house of God. It is the road of suffering. While its four corners remind us that it represents the created order, including all people from north, south, east, and west, its position in the altar signifies that there is room around the divine table only for those who are willing to become participants in the divine sacrifice by offering their lives as a witness to the love of God. It is the place where the relics of the martyrs are placed, the place for the remains of those who have offered all they had to enter into the house of love.

Thus gradually a cross is becoming visible, formed by the vertical beam of the tree, the Son, the Lamb and the world, and by the horizontal beam, including the heads of the Father and the Spirit. There is indeed no circle without a cross, no life eternal without death, no gaining life without losing it, no heavenly kingdom without Calvary. Circle and cross can never be separated. The severe beauty of the three divine angels is not a beauty without suffering. On the contrary, their seemingly melancholic beauty—the Russians speak about their joyful sorrow—evokes the words of Jesus: "Can you drink the cup?" The way of Jesus is not different from the way of his disciples:

"A servant is not greater than his
master. If they persecuted me,
they will persecute you too."
(Jn 15:20)

Here we come to the hard realization that the movement from the house of fear to the house of love does not necessarily evoke love.

"If you belonged to the world,
the world would love you as its
own; but because you do not belong
to the world, . . .
therefore the world hates you."
(Jn 15:19)

Still, this is the only way because it is God's way, the way we can go with confidence since it leads to the joy and the peace which the world does not know. It is the way many have chosen to walk: not only Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ita Ford, Jean Donovan and Oscar Romero, but also countless anonymous women, men, and children who during the last decades have died as witnesses to the God of love but who remain present as a source of hope to the new communities emerging in the midst of the agonizing struggle for liberation.

CONCLUSION

Saint Sergius, in whose honor and memory Rublev painted the Trinity icon, wanted

to bring all of Russia together around the Name of God so that its people would conquer "the devouring hatred of the world by the contemplation of the Holy Trinity."

Fear and hatred have become no less destructive since the fourteenth century, and Rublev's icon has become no less creative in calling us to the place of love, where fear and hatred no longer can destroy us. The longer we pray with the icon and the deeper our heart is drawn toward that mysterious place where circle and cross are both present, the more fully we come to understand how to be committed to the struggle for justice and peace in the world while remaining at home in God's love.

While Jesus predicts that people will die of fear "as they await what menaces the world" (Lk 21:26), he says to his followers: "Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man" (Lk 21:36). After I gazed for a long time at Rublev's Trinity these words spoke to me with new power. "Praying at all times" has come to mean "dwelling in the house of God all the days of our lives." "Surviving all that is going to happen" now tells me that I no longer need to be a victim of the fear, hatred, and violence that rule the world. "Standing with confidence before the Son of Man" no longer just refers to the end of time, but opens for me the possibility of living confidently, that is, with trust (the literal meaning of con-fide) in the midst of hostility and violence.

I pray that Rublev's icon will teach many how to live in the midst of a fearful, hateful, and violent world while moving always deeper into the house of love.