

Offering of the Holy Icons: A Unique Albanian Orthodox Tradition

CUSTOM: The "Offering or Elevation of Icons" is a stewardship practice in the Albanian Orthodox Churches. This is often a parish's principal and traditional means of public Stewardship. People often bid on icons of patron namesakes of their spouses, parents, children. Sometimes a patron saint is associated with "special affinities" for people who desire their intercessions for prayers to help them, for instance, with an illness, temptation, or a job to do.

HISTORY: The origin of this custom is not firmly known. To our knowledge, it appears in no other country with an Orthodox population. However, it appears to have arisen when Albania was subjugated under the Ottoman Empire for five centuries. In a village, the local Pasha, Effendi or potentate, seeking to enrich his treasury, would confiscate the icons & sacred articles of a church and offer them back to the parishioners, at the highest bid.

The Glorification of the Saints in the Orthodox Church

There are several categories of saints: prophets, evangelists, martyrs, ascetics, holy bishops and priests, and those who live a righteous life "in the world." What they all have in common is holiness of life. While the glorification of a saint may be initiated because of miracles, it is not an absolute necessity for canonization. What is required is a virtuous life of obvious holiness. And a saint's writings and preaching must be "fully Orthodox," in agreement with the pure faith that we have received from Christ and the Apostles and taught by the Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils.

The word *canonization* means that a Christian has been found worthy to have his name placed in the canon [list] of saints of the Church. This *canon* is read during the services of the Church. Every day in the calendar year is dedicated to a group of saints whose names are remembered by the people of God.

The people of God see God's image in His saints. For this reason our church buildings contain many ikons of saints in order to remind us that we are meant to see the image of God in ourselves and in each other. The living people of God gather together in temples in the presence of the *ikons* of men and women who have shown in an especially notable way what it means to live life fully in Christ.

Canonization does not make anybody a saint. Canonization recognizes that someone already was, in his own lifetime, a saint. Having recognized that the Church encourages its members to follow the example, the model, provided by the life of the holy person, to pray to him, to keep his memory alive. Praying to a saint does not mean that Orthodox confuse saints with God. Praying to a saint means something very easily understood: *we ask the holy person to pray for us.*

Through the prayers of all the saints, may we be encouraged to follow their example of virtue and holiness.