

Offering of the Holy Icons: A Unique Albanian Orthodox Tradition

CUSTOM:

The "Offering or Elevation of Icons" is essentially a Stewardship practice in the Albanian Orthodox Churches. It occurs usually on the Sunday after Epiphany.

PROCEDURE:

Following liturgy, the priest will mount the pulpit and after introductory remarks, symbolically offer the Hand (and/or Sanctification) Cross, Icons and sacred articles, one by one, for the faithful's patronage. It takes the form of bidding, somewhat like an auction. The parish secretary, who has a list, records the name of the winning donor for that year. The principal item is the priest's hand cross (because it was used for the Theophany Blessing of Water) and it is considered the most prized. In many parishes, the person who "won" the Cross is highly honored and is often expected to accompany the parish priest on his seasonal Blessing of Homes. Today, that honored duty is often shared by other parish officers or is eschewed altogether.

Presently, in most U.S. churches, the priest will introduce the proceeding by describing its spiritual meaning and encouraging participation; while the parish chair, or designated lay person, actually conducts the bidding. Since there can be up to 90 or more icons offered, this duty is sometimes shared by several lay people (men or women.)

To include the children, in many churches, while the patronage is being offered, the youngsters will hold up (Elevate) the icon high for all to see and then present it to the winner. Today, some icons are only offered for youngsters to bid on, with adults refraining.

STEWARDSHIP:

This is often a parish's principal and traditional means of public Stewardship. For those who cannot attend, the "icon list" and offering envelope is mailed to parishioner's homes. In some parishes, "Icon Offerings" through the mail form a significant part of the activity's income.

VARIANCES:

- a.) In most parishes here in the U.S., each person who "wins" a favored icon, is given a small icon memento to take home for the year, which is considered a special blessing for the family. These are returned at year's end to be recycled for the next Icon Day.
- b.) Some bid on icons of patron namesakes of their spouses, parents, and children. Those who plan a marriage may seek the icon of the "Marriage at Cana," for example. Others may donate for the parish "banner." Still others, who offer the "second highest bid" still, give their donation toward that icon. There is much flexibility in this regard and the proceedings often take on the air of good-natured vying for a favored patronal family saint.
- c.) During the weeks following the activity, a list of the icons and their donors is often posted on a bulletin board.
- d.) In a related custom, in some Albanian parishes on Icon Day, the antidoron (nafora) is placed in little individual bags, one of which has a small wooden cross in it together with the cube of bread. When the cross is venerated after liturgy, the bags are distributed and one of the delighted faithful receives a special blessing for the year.

BACKGROUND: " A Blackmail Transformed"

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. They might have said: "If you want your church, here, buy it back. What is your church worth to you?" Even realizing that this was a form of blackmail, the faithful would re-obtain their church's icons and restore them to the church.

Since then, this practice was transformed by Church tradition into a featured New Year practice of its own: a sign of renewal and deeply personal form of stewardship. It became tantamount to saying: "We must reassemble and rebuild our church every year."

Since the custom is closely connected to the Feast of Holy Theophany, after the faithful obtained their icon, they would first cleanse it in a nearby river, stream or lake before returning the icon to its rightful place in the temple. (Our archive has actual photos of village faithful by a river in Dardha, Albania showing the clergymen by a stream, next to whom is a layperson holding the Sanctification Cross and hundreds of parishioners, many of whom bear icons in their hands.)

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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 Icons 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.