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**Doorways to Divinity and Function in the Form:
Icons and Ecclesiastical Enforcement**

Ana Schnellmann

Medieval Art

Dr. James Hutson

December 2, 2014

It is always fascinating to explore the development of cultures and cultural art and to see how one evolves from and into the next. In classical antiquity, the veneration of the cult statue was common; the cult statue occupied a niche in the temple to which only priests and guests of the priests had direct access. The statues were not simply symbolic; they were, instead, holy objects, manifesting a direct path to the cult deity they depicted. The image itself, in other words, was the authority; the image itself had power. The forms and authority of the cult deities and of their priests merged; to anger a priest was to risk angering the deity. In the later Byzantine era, through Caesaropapism, we see the same pattern. The spiritual becomes the temporal and the temporal becomes the spiritual. Art, including iconic art, becomes a way by which viewers and worshippers experience and explore the conditional concern and care of the Church and of the temporal authorities who acted in its name. Before and after the iconoclastic dispute, icons were not simply viewed as decorations. Rather, they were holistically experienced as divine instruments and were, as Bissera V Pentcheva notes, “meant to be physically experienced” because the icon itself was “matter imbued with *charis* or divine grace.”¹ The representation and veneration of icons, particularly icons of the saints, Christ and the Christ Pantocrator, and the Virgin Hodegetria, served several ecclesiastical functions; specifically, they spread the word of the emergent faith, they reinforced ecclesiastical authority, and they provided an individualized and therefore more committed and fervent faith.

Although an icon can be in the form of many media, and although I will be considering mosaics, an icon is generally considered to be a small, portable depiction of a deity such as Christ, a demi-deity such as the Virgin Mary, or a holy person such as a saint. Because the

¹ Bissera V. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon.” *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 4 (December 2006): 631.

emergent church was made up of small communities of people who worshipped together, often icons, like small Hellenistic cult statues, were used for personal veneration. By the end of the fourth century, and because of its political power and geographic location, a newer art, “Christian by its essence and Hellenistic and oriented by its roots, an art that has come to be known as “Byzantine,” emerged in Constantinople,² lending itself to a grander and much more public icon, the mosaic. While many mosaics featured Christ himself, the more personal and personalized smaller icons generally depicted saints. The depiction in icons of saints shows us the merging of the Hellenistic and the Christian; just as classical antiquity had special patron deities for cities, temples, and even homes, so did the Christians use depictions of saints as their personal and powerful patrons.

Through their iconic images, the saints portrayed interact strongly with the viewer. Gary Vikan tells us that the style of icons led to “intense psychological dialogue,” a dialogue not to be distracted by use of real space or earthly time, thus making “Frontality and direct eye contact” essential.³ The person, even if a saint, being depicted was of marginal importance; vital to the depiction itself and to the viewer’s experience of it is the theological idea of the saint, the essence of the power of the saint. The image, like a relic, is what connects the viewer/worshipper to that being worshipped, and it is this theological idea that gives the images of the saints their power. In the words of Sendler, the saints’ “individual characters were absorbed by the theological idea which was the essential part of their existence.”⁴ It is the theological idea to which worshippers and viewers were drawn.

² Egan Sendler. *The Icon: Image of the Invisible*. (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood, 1988), 14-15

³ Gary Vikan. *Sacred Images and Sacred Style in Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 137.

⁴ Sendler, *The Icon*, 61.

Saints are often portrayed as heroic: they are soldier-saints, ready to enforce the Church's dogma and doctrine; they are martyr saints who give their lives for the Faith; they are scholarly saints, disproving any error or heresy. They are those people, those models, that their venerators strive to emulate, not only because the saints manifest the ideals of the age but because those saints have unequivocally, the attention of Christ and often too of his mother. Again, the saints are heroes in whom Christ has a personal interest and for whom Christ has a personal love. If we consider, for instance, the image of St. Philip (Figure 1), we see the full frontality and direct engagement described by Vikan; the young saint, dressed in aristocratic robes and holding a codex in his left hand, appears to be lifting his right hand to give a blessing; the codex and the benediction remind us of typical depictions of Christ. In his icon, however, the apostle Philip has not yet completed the gesture of benediction. Rather, he seems to be in the midst of so doing, similar to later Pantocrator images, leaving the viewer to wonder whether the young saint will, indeed, confer a benediction. An image of Christ hovers over the saint's left shoulder, Christ himself holding a codex in his left hand as his right hand is definitively raised in benediction and approbation over young Philip, giving Philip his clear blessing to act in Christ's name and to do what he, Philip, deems right. If Christ has a special love and regard for St. Philip, and St. Philip has a special interest in and approval for his venerator, it follows that Christ will accept the viewer/venerator under, as it were, the sponsorship of Philip. Indeed, it seems in the depiction on the icon that Christ has become the disciple of his apostle, and the apostles, after the Virgin, "were the most spiritual and the most filled with the Holy Spirit."⁵ In hoping for St. Philip's

⁵ Robert Bartlett. *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013), 167.

approbation, the viewer will most likely model himself after the saint, thus reinforcing and continuing ecclesiastical authority.

Similarly, if we consider the image of St. Nicholas (Figure 2), we see again a figure directly confronting the viewer. This time, the saint is sponsored not only by Christ but by the Virgin Mary as well. A small Christ, extending a codex with his right hand, hovers over Nicholas's right side, seemingly transferring the word directly to the saint. On Nicholas' left side, we see an image of the Virgin, cradling, perhaps, a mandylion, emphasizing the pathos of the faith. Surrounding the entire portrait are scenes from St. Nicholas' life, giving the viewer simultaneously something to admire and something to emulate. In addition, the figure gives the viewer hope of special favor from this early fourth-century saint who was reputed to provide unexpected gifts.

St. Philip was an apostle, St. Nicholas, a pope. When we examine St. Menas, we see a warrior and popular martyr who drew enough pilgrims "that they stimulated and presumably partly funded, the building of a huge complex of hostels, bath-houses,, and churches, including the main one, the largest basilica in Egypt."⁶ When one looks at the icon *Christ and St. Menas*, Figure 3, it becomes clear immediately that it would behoove us to emulate St. Menas, for he seems to be on equal, or nearly equal, terms with Christ himself. In the icon, the figure of Christ is only very slightly larger than the saint. Christ's arm is draped familiarly over Menas' shoulder as his other arm cradles a codex; for both Menas and the codex, Christ shows approval and even affection. Both Menas and Christ wear similar facial expressions. To gesture or to confer a benediction is one thing; to touch is quite another. Christ's being shown in physical and close

⁶ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 471.

contact with St. Menas immediately gives the viewer/venerator an indisputable sign of not only Christ's approval of his martyr saint but also, again, of sheer brotherly affection. With Christ's arm around Menas and Christ's eyes on the viewer, not on the saint, Menas slowly raises his right hand in a gesture of blessing; as with St. Philip, however, the blessing does not seem to be complete. Menas, the martyr warrior-saint, may or may not signal his approval of the viewer, and the viewer will endeavor mightily to earn that saint's approval and affection, by extension, Christ's. The power of St. Menas is unequivocally referenced; it can be argued that Menas seems, by the placement of his hand, about to confer a blessing on Christ himself. He, like Christ, holds the Word, but Menas holds a scroll whereas Christ holds a bejeweled codex, thereby making Menas' "word" older and more traditional than that contained in Christ's book. Menas, therefore, can be seen as the authority over Christ.

Clearly, these saints' icons, as well other icons of saints, serve a clear ecclesiastical purpose. In the words of Warren T. Woodfin, in reference to the St. Menas icon in particular, "the introduction of the image of Christ to the saints' iconography and the variation in its rendering reveal a pattern of permeability between imperial and ecclesiastical realms--as between the earthly and heavenly--that, with accelerating intensity, marked the art of Byzantium from the eleventh century onward."⁷ This permeability marks the function of the icon as a timeless doorway to the divine, a portal to the improbable. The viewer is, to borrow from Matthew Arnold, wandering between two worlds, both of which are accessible, neither of which are absolute. The icon, in short, is a conduit between the earthly and heavenly realms, and within that conduit, the distinction of the two melts and melds, reinforcing again the power of

⁷ Warren T. Woodfin. "An Officer and a Gentleman: Transformation in the Iconography of a Warrior Saint." *Dunbarton Oaks Papers* 60 (2006): 112. JStor (12504213).

iconography to enforce adherence to the dogma, promises, and threats of the still-emerging Church.

If the saints' icons allow viewers to gain indirectly the approbation of Christ, is the icons of Christ himself that allow the venerators to reach grace--or damnation--directly. The threat of the loss of heaven and the pains of hell certainly serve a direct ecclesiastical function in assuring the fear of and therefore the obedience to spiritual authority and the temporal authority sanctioned by the Church. If, as Sendler notes, "the icon is intended to be an image of the invisible and even the presence of the Invisible One,"⁸ it is true as well that the Invisible One is not so Invisible but is present and watching always. In Holy Tradition, again as cited by Sendler, hypostatic union is the divine nature of Christ assuming human nature, and thus the divine nature itself is the subject matter of the icon.⁹ Moreover, it is within the Christ icons that we see the mystery of Nikophorus' argument, as cited in Parry, that "Although the invisible is opposed to the visible, the intangible to the tangible, the incorruptible to the corruptible, and the impassible to the passible, they can in fact be contemplated in the person of Christ."¹⁰ When the viewer contemplates the image of Christ, the Pantocrator image in particular, he or she enters into a literally otherworldly state of mind, a state of mind that yearns for grace and that fears damnation. The image of Christ in many icons, fully frontal, invites the viewer to enter the doorway to the divine and question, at the same time, if that viewer is worthy of so doing. "When a Byzantine Christian stood before an icon of Christ," Vikan notes, "he believed himself to be standing face-to-face with his Savior; this, for him, was a sacred place and moment of

⁸Sendler, *The Icon*, 39)

⁹Ibid., 41.

¹⁰Nikephorus. *Spicilegium Solesmense*, ed. J.P. Pitra, vol 1 (Paris 1852). Quoted in Kenneth Parry, *Depicting the Word: Byzantine Iconophile Thought of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996), 79.

encounter with God.”¹¹ How the viewer responds to the eye-contact and full frontal view of Christ depends, according to scholars including Vikan, on the state of the viewer’s conscience. Of the icon *Christ* (Figure 4), a Byzantine description, as quoted in Vikan, reads “His eyes are joyful and welcoming to those who are not reproached by their conscience . . . but to those who are condemned by their own judgment, they are wrathful and hostile.”¹² To some degree, then, the viewer forms Christ after the viewer’s own image and understanding. If the viewer’s conscience is unencumbered, a state gained by adherence to the dogma and directives of the Church as learned and internalized by that viewer, Christ will become welcoming and joyous; if the viewer rejects the teachings of the Church, that viewer has rendered himself or herself as a heretic to whom Christ becomes wrathful and hostile. The Christ himself, amazingly and somewhat alarmingly, remains passive, allowing the viewer to make his or her own choice of salvation or damnation.

Salvation or damnation is, to some extent, dependent on the willingness of the viewer to accept the dogma of the Church or to be a heretic and reject it. The viewer of the Mt. Sinai *Christ* does not only view the depiction of Christ. The viewer also, though the icon, must consider and view the actual dogma of the Church. The viewer, while contemplating the image of Christ, is also confronted with the image of the codex held by Christ, a type of codex that is owned only by the elite. The codex, richly bejeweled, is a sumptuary object held by spiritual leaders and the temporal leaders sanctioned by the Church. To reject any part of this *logos*, or any part of the hierarchy promoted by the Church, is to reject what Christ himself actually holds: his Word.

¹¹ Vikan, *Sacred Images and Sacred Style in Byzantium*, 137.

¹² H. Maguire, “Truth and Convention in Byzantine Descriptions of Works of Art,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 28 (1974), 113-40. Quoted in Gary Vikan, *Sacred Images and Sacred Style in Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 137.

Again, spiritual and temporal authority merge and reinforce ecclesiastical authority; Christ is the emperor and the viewers are his subjects. To refuse or to be unable to accept wholly the dogma of the Church as signified by the codex is to risk eternal damnation.

The image of Christ as emperor is further reinforced if we examine the *Christ Pantocrator* mosaic from Cefalu Cathedral in Sicily (Figure 5); in so examining the icon, we see that the codex Christ holds in his left hand is not closed, but is open, clearly showing the writing contained therein, a reference to the infallibility of the Word. Whereas the Mt. Sinai Christ is simply dressed in the garb of one of the ordinary classes, the Christ Pantocrator of the Cefalu Cathedral is richly attired in imperial and splendid garments. He is shown frontally, and his worried-looking eyes, small, pursed lips, and flowing hair remind the viewer of his humanity and of his place among the ranks of the royal. Christ's long, bent fingers and partially closed right hand that is not yet raised in a gesture of benediction remind the viewer of Christ's power to damn as well as his power to save. Christ, as emperor, is truly "ruler of all," and that image is not necessarily comforting. Fearing the Father, perhaps, and the Son, the viewer may well flee to the Virgin, the Mother, who may, and who probably will, intercede for the viewer with her son.

Saints inspire; Christ judges; Mary understands. Despite the imperial robes and the red shoes of an empress in which she is often depicted, despite her status as Queen of Heaven, Mary is fully human, as are the saints. Unlike the saints, though, she is "proof-positive" of the possibility of "salvation as deification" as Pelikan notes.¹³ Icons of the Virgin seem invariably comforting. In Deesis iconography, the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist both may speak, and do speak, directly to Christ on behalf of sinners and subjects, pleading for them. In the

¹³ Jaroslavo Pelikan. *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 142.

mosaic, *The Virgin Paracletis with George of Antioch* (Figure 6), we see, in hierarchical scale, a gentle Virgin considering her supplicant, as Christ, from the upper left-hand corner of the mosaic, extends his hand in blessing toward his mother, leaving all decision up to her. The Virgin holds an open scroll in her left hand as she extends her open right hand toward the much smaller, prone, George of Antioch. The Virgin wears imperial purple robes and royal red slippers, but her face is highly sympathetic all the same. There seems little doubt that George of Antioch will be forgiven and blessed, whatever his transgressions may have been. The Virgin, however, is still in a position of judgment, although it is a judgment we may be sure will be gentle. What viewers crave, however, is not judgment, kind and gentle as that judgment may be; viewers long for, simply, full understanding, the type of understanding that is shown in and through *The Virgin of Vladimir*.

Perhaps the most powerful image, and the image to which viewers are invariably drawn, of the Virgin is the icon the *Virgin of Vladimir* (Figure 7). This image, like others of the Virgin, softens somewhat the patristic authority of the Church while in no way dissenting from or dismissing that authority. While both the saints and the Virgin may speak freely on behalf of the sinners and supplicants to Christ, the Virgin as a mother is viewed as more sympathetic and as a more powerful voice due to the very intimate and inimitable relationship to her son. As Parry notes, the title “Theotokos,” or “God-bearer,” rather than “Christotokos,” “Christ-bearer,” or “Anthropotokos,” “Man-bearer,” emphasizes “the close connection between marionology and christology in the East.”¹⁴ In the eleventh century in Constantinople, the functions of icons were

¹⁴ Kenneth Parry. *Depicting the Word: Byzantium and Iconophile Thought of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries*. (New York: E.J. Brill), 1996), 191.

changing,” according to Robin Cormack.¹⁵ “The cult of the Hodigetria (sic) was on the increase, and there is evidence of changes in monastic spirituality.”¹⁶ Emotional responses to images of the Virgin, particularly to the *Virgin of Vladimir*, were heightening.

The Hodegetria icons, including the *Virgin of Vladimir*, show us the more human and communal side of the Church. Sendler examines the use of naturalism and light in the *Virgin of Vladimir*. “On the right,” he notes, “a very strong light falls on the faces thus creating a clear reflection on the Virgin’s nose. The area where the faces touch remains in the shadow . . . the hieratic impression which we can feel in other icons here gives way to intimacy; eternity seems to become incarnate in the moment.”¹⁷ Sendler goes on to note “On the Virgin’s shining face, there radiates a hot light that bursts forth from slightly green skin tones,”¹⁸ showing us again, through the “slightly green skin tones,” Mary’s humanity and from the “hot light,” her inner radiance and the radiance of the love of the Church. There is no past, no present, no future in this icon; the viewer is drawn into a community consisting of the Virgin, of the young boy Christ, and of the viewer/venerator. Because of the theme and the nature of this icon, there is no fear of hell, no immediate hope of heaven; there is, instead, the sheer presence of the holy.

Moreover, the viewer of *The Virgin of Vladimir* is powerfully struck with the pathos of the Virgin Mary. Kurt Weitzmann writes “The close relation, cheek to cheek, between Virgin and Child is characteristic, although the Virgin’s face expresses more melancholy than maternal affection, as if she were anticipating the Passion of her Son.”¹⁹ The Virgin gazes directly at the

¹⁵ Robin Cormack. *Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks, and Shrouds*. (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1997), 157.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Egan Sendler. *The Icon, Image of the Invisible*, 177

¹⁸ Ibid., 235.

¹⁹ Kurt Weitzmann et al. *The Icon*. (New York: Knopf, 1982), 17.

viewer whereas the young Christ gazes directly at his mother's face as he grasps, child-like, at her robes. As with St. Menas, here the subject of the icon--in this case, the Virgin--is seemingly more powerful than Christ. The expression in the Virgin's eyes seems melancholy indeed, but perhaps that melancholy is more symptomatic of the sympathy she feels for the viewer than it is for the pain about her son's upcoming Passion. In either case, the viewer here is not being evaluated, judged, or even immediately inspired; the viewer is simply being seen and witnessed--and of all human longings and passions, the need to be understood, to be listened to, to be simply witnessed--seems to surpass all other needs.

Although it is impossible to analyze all functions of icons, it is clear that their presence enhanced the spiritual understandings of the emergent and growing church. Icons of powerful saints who had the approbation of Christ inspired the viewer to emulate the saints and respect their lives, and often their deaths. Doing so would help the viewers themselves gain similar approbation. Images of Christ and the Christ Pantocrator reminded viewers that damnation was as strong a possibility as salvation; failure to follow the Word meant they would join the ranks of those who would suffer eternal damnation, damnation from which there was no escape. Icons of the Virgin served to comfort the viewers with the promise of a sponsorship, earned or unearned, from an earthly though deified being who would witness them, understand them, and testify for them. Far from being simply aesthetic objects, icons presented their viewers with a new Biblical understanding, a reminder of the Church's authority, and a reassurance that the Mother Church would protect and guide those under her rule.

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<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25046213>

Illustrations

Figure 1: St. Philip, 950-1000. Panel in tempera

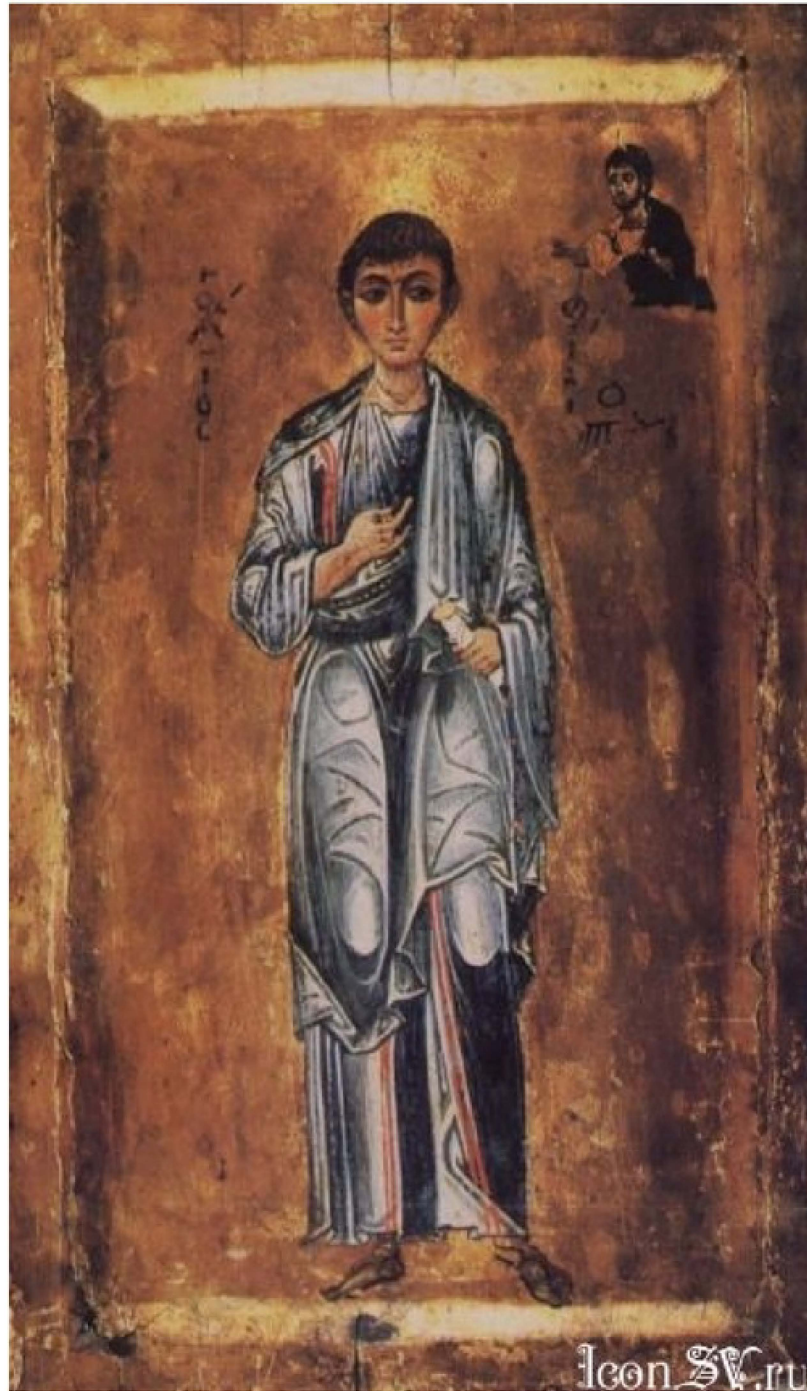




Figure 2: St. Nicholas, Monastery of St. Catherine, Mt. Sinai, 13th century



Figure 3: Icon of Christ with Abbot Menas, 6th-7th century. Tempera on wood.

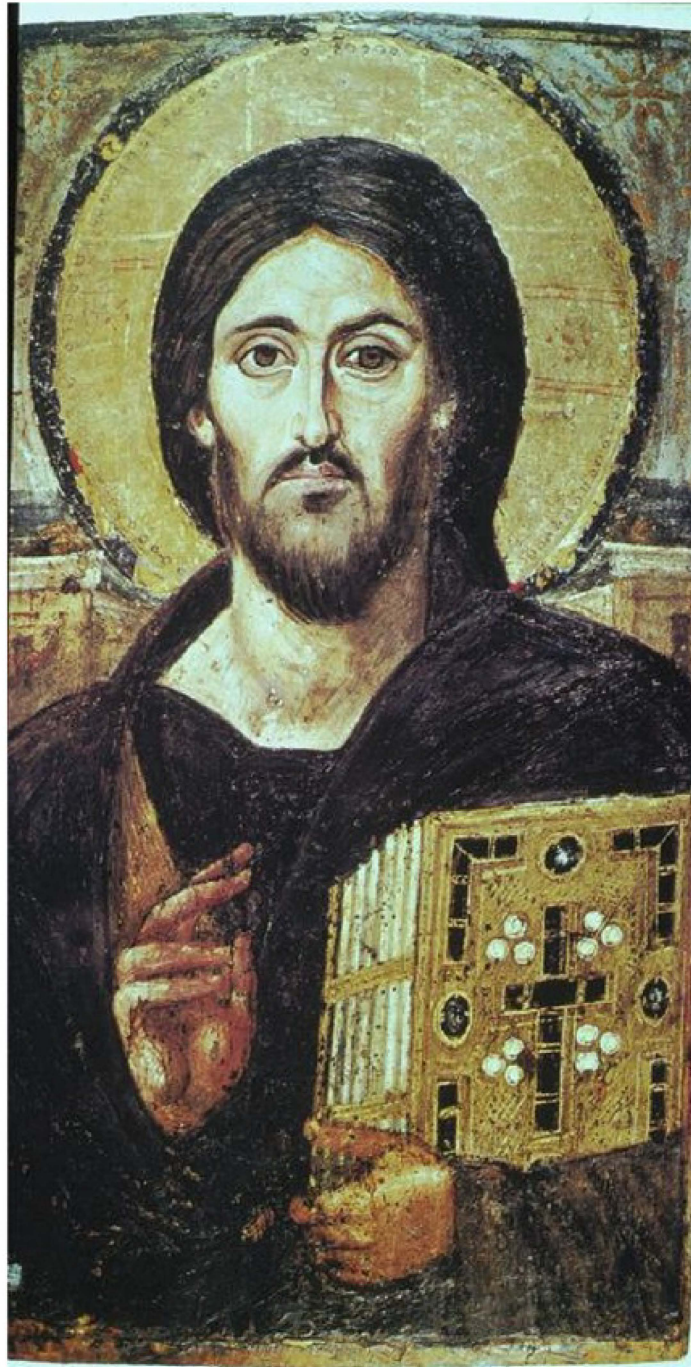


Figure 4: Icon of Christ, Mt. Sinai. 6th century, after restoration

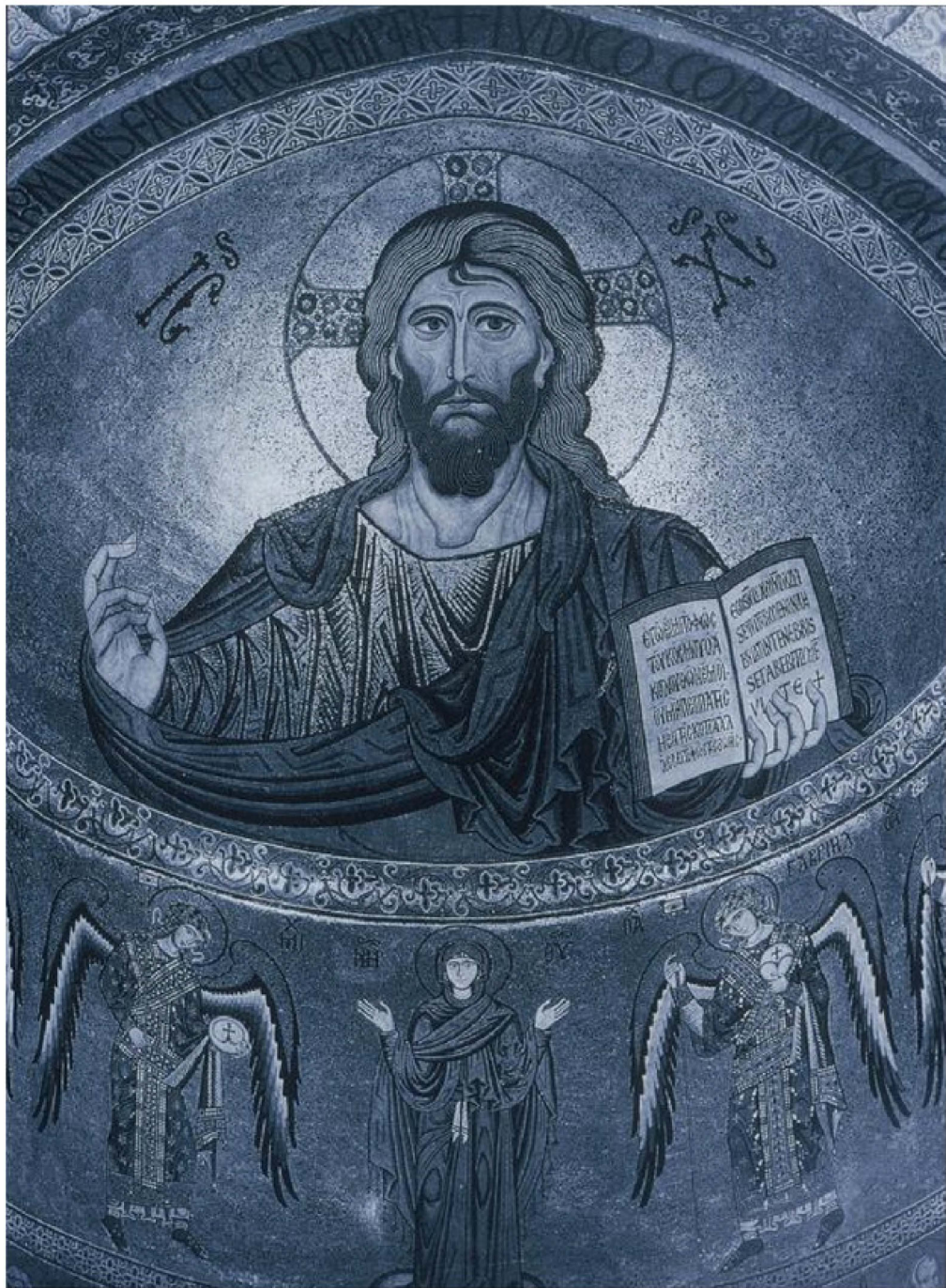


Figure 5: Christ Pantocrator Mosaic, Cefelù, Sicily, 1148.



Figure 6: Virgin Paracletes and George of Antioch, ca 1150, Sicily. Mosaic.



Figure 7: Virgin of Vladimir, tempera on panel, ca. 1125