

“In Him All Things Hold Together”

**Week 4: *Christ Pantocrator* (6<sup>th</sup> century)**

This week, as we continue our study of scripture and images of Christ, we encounter one of the oldest surviving paintings of Christ, a sixth century icon titled *Christ Pantocrator* (“Christ Almighty”). This work by an unknown artist, likely created in Constantinople, is held in St. Catherine’s Monastery in the Sinai desert, and is the most ancient example of this type of depiction of Christ. St. Catherine’s Monastery, a UNESCO World Heritage site, has been in



continuous use since late antiquity. Over half of all surviving Byzantine icons reside in the monastery’s collection. St. Catherine’s library also once held the oldest surviving complete New Testament, *Codex Sinaiticus*, which is now held by the British Library.

*Christ Pantocrator* survived mainly because it was at St. Catherine’s Monastery. From 640 onward due to Islamic control of Egypt and Sinai, St. Catherine’s was effectively cut off from the age of iconoclasm which convulsed the Byzantine world. From the iconoclasm begun by Emperor Leo III in 726 to the condemnation of iconoclasm by Patriarch Methodius I of Constantinople in 843, countless pieces of sacred art were destroyed.

The religious, theological and political reasons for iconoclasm are complex, but derive mainly from the biblical injunction against “graven images” (Ex. 20:4, Deut. 5:8). Though early Christian depictions of Christ were used during worship and prayer as images pointing toward God, an opposing movement contended that all images had been forbidden by the first commandment.

In brief, the Council of Hieria condemned all images depicting Christ in 754, with the only admissible representation of Christ being, “the bread and wine in the holy supper.” Yet Hieria had not settled the matter. In 787 the Council of Nicaea II reversed the iconoclasm of Hieria, decreeing:

“with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God...For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honorable reverence, not indeed that true worship of faith which pertains only to the divine nature...For the honor which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented.”

“*Christ Pantocrator*” (in Greek: Χριστὸς Παντοκράτωρ) means “Christ Almighty.” “Pantocrator” is a compound word meaning “*pantos*” (all) and “*kratos*” (might). It is an image of Christ in the unity of his humanity and divinity. The Greek word “*pantokratos*” appears ten times in the New Testament, notably in 2 Corinthians 6:18 and Revelation 1:8. Revelation 1:8 reads, “*I am the Alpha and the Omega,*” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” For the early church what was at issue was how to depict “the Almighty” who is the Lord God, the Word, the Christ, who emptied himself becoming fully human. The proto-creed contained in Colossians 1:15-20 reads:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Compositionally, Christ’s right hand is upheld in blessing (or as is sometimes interpreted, in teaching), while the left hand holds the scriptures, symbolized by the cross. Christ carrying the scriptures, evokes Paul’s phrase “*the law of Christ*” (Gal. 6:2 and 1 Cor. 9:21), as well as Christ as the fulfillment of the law and the one who interpreted Mosaic Law in terms of loving God and neighbor (Deut. 6:4-5 and Lev.19:18b). As the sheep were separated from the goats and put at the right hand of Christ, so too, the goats were placed at the left (Mt. 25:31-46). So Christ’s right hand is lifted in blessing, and his left hand holds the law and is reserved for judgment.

In this image, the eyes of Christ look out relentlessly from the painting onto the viewer. As we look upon the image of Christ, the image of Christ also looks out upon us, reminding us that we are constantly under the watch and protection of Christ, as well as the judgment of Christ who knows our hearts and who searches out our sin. It is a reminder of Paul’s words to the Romans, “*Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off*” (Rom. 11:22). The gaze of Christ is meant to draw us once again into the presence of the Alpha and the Omega, the Almighty – into the presence of the One who is eternal, and yet whose indwelling light enlightens, enlivens and leads us through life’s darkest valleys.

Though many icons depict biblical stories, in *Christ Pantocrator* we see the entire salvation narrative, the beginning and the end. We are encouraged to see that our brief span of human life is part of God’s greater salvation narrative. We are also encouraged to remember that though our world may seem to be spinning out of control, “in him all things hold together.”

Though we live in a time of division and anxiety, we have reconciliation and peace through his cross. Christ, the Almighty, knows our sufferings, blesses our lives, and encourages us with the law *that is himself* – a law of perfect love for God and neighbor. Under his steadfast gaze and watchful protection, we remember that Christ shares our humanity, and shares his righteousness with each of us so that we might become like him. Christ, the Almighty, helps the weak so that in him they might be strengthened to perfectly love and help others. Amen.

*(Image: located in Saint Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, Egypt)*