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## **An Icon of the Synaxis of the Archangels**

Sermon, First Sunday of Advent, November 28, 2010

Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, NY

Deacon Daisy Kirkpatrick

*Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44*

This is the first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of the liturgical year, and the beginning of Advent, the time of preparation for the celebration of the Incarnation of Christ, the Christ Mass or Christmas. The angels announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds; and I have brought an icon of angels to share with you. It is unfinished; there is a lot more to do, but I think there is enough done that you can see and understand it.

Week before last I attended a six-day workshop at the Prosopon School in Endicott, NY. We “wrote” this icon, the Synaxis of the Archangels. Synaxis is a gathering, a council, a coming together. Vladislav Andrejev, a master iconographer, mystic, visionary is our teacher. His mission is to create a clearer comprehension of the uncreated Image of God, in whose image we are created. He uses the language of color, image and symbol to help us understand the various layers of created life. Icons speak on many levels and the symbols can be interpreted in more than one way.

The icon is painted with egg tempera, which involves mixing ground pigments with an egg yolk emulsion and building up many transparent layers. I have finished only the first layer of color and begun some of the highlights. There will be more layers of color, each one getting brighter, alternated with more layers of highlights. The final effect is to produce almost a translucent shimmer. You can see this very well in Vladislav’s icons; in mine, it is a goal yet to be achieved.



Synaxis of the Archangels  
by Vladislav Andrejev  
(unfinished)

The class combined lessons in technique with lectures on theology. Vladislav lectured for a couple of hours every day. He doesn’t have enough command of English for teaching these complicated philosophical topics in our language; so he teaches in Russian and someone, usually his wife, Olga, translates. He uses no notes and cites no sources, but he is obviously intimately familiar with the theology of the Russian Orthodox Church. I will share with you some of what I have gathered from Vladislav’s teaching.

There are three types of creative energies: Love, Wisdom and Will. All other energies are combinations of these three. These energies exist on many levels; for instance, wisdom is a continuum stretching all the way from simple information to the wisdom of God. The angels are energetic beings without bodies. They also are composed of these three creative energies in the form of heavenly power, mind, and light. They differ from each other and other angels in the way these energies are combined and in the application of those energies. Power reveals the Will of God, Mind conveys the Wisdom of God, and Light conveys Love. So Vladislav tells us, “If Light works, Love comes; if Mind works, Wisdom comes; if Will works, Power comes.

Let's look at the icon. At the top is the Lord of Hosts, the Lord Sabaoth,<sup>1</sup> surrounded by angels. His hands are lifted in blessing. Below him are a cherub and seraph. Christ is in the center because he is the personification of uncreated light and represents the central place of the mystical experience. He gives light to all creation, which could not exist without him. He is seated at an altar holding a chalice and the paten is represented on the cloth covering the altar. The sphere behind Christ represents uncreated energy, the source of all creation. At the bottom is an angel called a throne. You may recall the hymn "Ye watchers and ye holy ones, bright seraphs, cherubim and thrones..."<sup>2</sup> This is a throne; it has eight wings, not six like the cherub and seraph, and his face is gold. He is green because this is the color of food, the color of plants and also the center of the rainbow. He is at the bottom because he unites heaven and earth and supports the altar of Christ. He is stable and ever-existing light.

Surrounding Christ are the eight archangels. Only four archangels are Biblical. Michael and Gabriel are in both the Old and New Testaments, Raphael and Uriel appear only in the Apocrypha. Vladislav says that the others come from mystical experiences of certain people; they are part of the tradition of the Eastern Church. The archangels are teachers who reveal the mysteries of our faith; they help us open all levels of our consciousness to God.

- First is Michael or Mikiel. He is the best known of the archangels and is their leader. He defends us against the powers of darkness and also helps focus our discursive mind toward God.
- Gabriel is the messenger, the bringer of revelation. He calls us to service.
- Raphael has healing power; he helps us in our distress.<sup>3</sup>
- Uriel is the enlightener, he helps to open our spiritual heart.<sup>4</sup>
- Selaphiel leads us to true prayer, unceasing prayer.
- Jehudiel (or Jegudiel) teaches us to glorify God.
- Barachiel brings the light of the Will of God and delivers God's Grace to us.
- Jeremiel organizes everything taught to us by the others. He is the guide to the Kingdom of Heaven and opens the Gate to Heaven for us.

We can imagine each of these archangels as being parts of an inward spiral leading us toward the center, Christ, the Logos. It is with the help of these archangels that we are able to "cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light."<sup>5</sup> Each of the angels has a specific task, to teach us some aspect of the spiritual journey. By meditating on the angels and their purposes, they can help us approach Christ, the central place of the mystical experience.

The floor the angels stand on is the foundation, the floor of the heavenly church. It is the task of the earthly church to realize the presence of the heavenly church. The church is the gathering place, where we find opportunities to put into practice our skills in spiritual living, that we learned from the angels. It is also the place where we receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Just as solid food is not enough to sustain life, we need water; so believing is not enough to sustain us spiritually, we need communion, the living water.

And now to Him whose Power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Samuel 6:1-2, Psalm 24:7-10, Psalm 89:7-8

<sup>2</sup> Hymn 618

<sup>3</sup> Tobit 3:16 and 12:6-20

<sup>4</sup> 2 Esdras 5:20

<sup>5</sup> Collect of the Day and Romans 13:12

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 3:20-21