

every Thanksgiving to buy presents. Since the overwhelming majority of Americans celebrate Christmas, and an even higher percentage of those flocking to the malls after Thanksgiving are doing so to buy Christmas presents, a retail employee can conclude that most of his customers would appreciate being wished a "Merry Christmas." Indeed, it seems churlish that the retailers of America, whose well-being depends in large measure on Christmas, are increasingly afraid even to mention the holiday to which they owe their good fortune.

Admittedly, some non-Christians (like the Buddhist chaplain) have decided to exchange gifts during the Christmas season. But those who adopt Christian customs can hardly complain about others who assume that they celebrate Christmas. And I do not understand why wishing a stranger "Merry Christmas" is now considered singularly offensive—so offensive that the phrase is heard less often these days in public than the profanity that has come to characterize much of our entertainment and conversation. (Indeed, television stations generally wish their viewers "Happy Hanukkah" and "Happy Kwanza" but offer only a bland "Happy Holidays" to their Christian viewers, even on December 25.) Anyone wishing a stranger "Merry Christmas" is not only acting on the statistically well-justified assumption that the other person does celebrate Christmas but is offering the greeting as an expression of good will. Most non-Christians are not multiculturalist zealots, and they understand this.

All news from the Christmas front is not bad. I have continued to receive many favorable comments on my essay. A Catholic parish in New Jersey distributed a copy of it as part of its Advent package, and several parishioners wrote to express their gratitude. Another correspondent wrote that, "even though it seems a daunting task, I don't intend to give up Christmas without a fight." And there are signs that more people are beginning to join this fight. I have noticed columnists bemoaning the assault on Christmas, and even articles carrying the bad news that The Gap discourages its employees from mentioning Christmas have questioned the reasoning behind such directives. Some Catholics have filed suit against the New York City schools, which allow the display of menorahs and the Muslim star and crescent but forbid Nativity scenes, according to the *New York Post* (December 11, 2002).

I remain confident that the great majority of Americans resent the assault on Christmas. And as long as these Americans can be coaxed out of silence to fight for our traditions, this is one assault we can repulse.

Tom Piatak writes from Cleveland, Ohio.

Heavenly Windows

by Fr. Alister Anderson

Recently, I read some words that were spoken by Saint Macarius, a fourth-century monk who expresses so powerfully what God in Jesus Christ came and continues to come to do among us:

When man falls under the power of the darkness of the devil's night, he is troubled and distressed by the dreadful wound of sin that blows in him. He is shaken and trembles through all his nature. His soul, his thoughts, his understanding are shaken. All the limbs of his body are shaken and no part of either soul or body escapes unharmed from that sin that dwells in him. But, in like manner, there is a day of light and a Divine breeze of the Holy Spirit which refreshes the souls and bodies that stand in the day of the light of God. It penetrates the soul and its thoughts and all the members of the body. It refreshes them with a Divine unbelievable rest. And as in the night of sin and error, when man is clothed with darkness, and wears the garment of blasphemy, unbelief, indifference, arrogance, greed and lust, then comes Jesus Christ who tears off the clothing of the kingdom of darkness. In Him and through Him we put on the new and heavenly man who is Jesus Christ. And in Him once again, we correspond and conform our eyes to His eyes; our ears to His ears, our hands to His hands; our heart and head to His heart and head, all pure and wearing the heavenly image in which God made us.

Saint Macarius's words illustrate how this new and heavenly man finds visual expression in the art of the icon. In the icon, the Orthodox Church sees an im-

portant expression of our Faith in its totality. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the restoration of the holy icons (the victory of our spiritual ancestors over the iconoclasts who attempted to remove the icon from all our churches) is, at the same time, the victory and restoration of the Orthodox Faith.

The icon portrays a person who has passed from death to life and who has become a new creation through faith in Christ, Who makes all things new and good. Saint Paul wrote, "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things have passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). By taking on our nature, the Son of God reveals the true identity of every man and woman as created in the image and likeness of God. The icon therefore depicts the person as a new being who is transformed, healed, and restored to God's image.

Icons portray holy people who have grown into the likeness of God. Being made in the image of God is not the same as being made in His likeness. God made us in His image, which is perfect because God is perfect. But we deliberately allow that image to be defaced through our manifold sins. For us to be like the heavenly icons in Orthodox churches, we must try to lead holy lives by submitting ourselves to the Lord's authority and His commandments. For us to be made in the likeness of God means that we must do what our Lord wants us to do and believe that He gives us the power to do it. We must understand the Orthodox doctrine of *synergeia*, which means that we must work with God's grace to grow toward His likeness. That is a lifelong spiritual pilgrimage.

My next remark reveals my bias as an Orthodox Christian priest. I say this not to discredit Western religious art, because much of it is spiritually moving. But there is a great difference between Western-Latin religious art and Eastern Orthodox religious art, which is expressed through the icon. For many years, I had been accustomed to looking at Western or Latin religious art in which the physical body, even in a saint's martyrdom and suffering, is beautiful and well proportioned, even sensuous and romantic.

Several years ago, when I looked at Orthodox icons, I thought them a kind of primitive art. Those depicted, even the Lord Jesus, looked physically out of proportion and stylized. The eyes are too large; the ears, too flaring; the nose, too

long and narrow; the mouth, too tight and small. Now, through many years of study and worship, I see our icons as profoundly more spiritually arresting than most Western religious art. They are sacramental entities. They depict a spirituality that transcends the physical form. Icons enable me to see and feel the spiritual power of the holy people of God and the events in their lives that made them holy. Icons help me to look at who I really am and what I want to be. I am no longer captivated by the romantic and the frequently sentimental and sensuous perfection of the physical body that is depicted in Western religious art. Now, it is easier for me to go beyond the physical image to the spiritual reality to apprehend the real condition of my own spiritual life. In short, through the icon, **theology becomes experiential**. That is why icons are called “windows into heaven.”

Icons reveal the mystery of new life in Christ. Their faces have looked upon eternal life, and they radiate victory over sin and death through their faith and love for Jesus Christ. Their faces show us what we should be looking for in this life before we die. Icons are mostly about faces. The remainder of the body, below the head, is relatively unimportant. Your face tells others who you really are.

The natural form of the faces of icons has been altered. They have the look of spiritual power that transforms them into wholeness, peace, and serenity. Their faces are never depicted in profile. They are turned toward us and look directly at us. The people in whom Christ dwells look us full in the face. Like Christ, they live for others. They look at us in hope and prayer that Christ will live in us. Saint Macarius says that “a spiritual man cannot be depicted as incomplete; a soul which has been illumined is all light and has no part behind it, but instead is all forward.” The person in whom Christ dwells is turned toward others. He attracts us by his gaze and opens up to us his inner life. The profile, on the other hand, suggests fragmentation; it signifies a fading away, the absence of the person. It implies dishonesty and being two-faced. No true icon is depicted in profile—except that of Judas Iscariot. The overall expression of the faces of icons is one of peace and long-suffering. This is the peace of Christ, Who was not ashamed to be born in the filth of a stable; Who was not resentful because He was poor; Who was not embarrassed to sit on the donkey. He did not become angry when He was

mocked. Even when nailed to the Cross, He preserves His serene glory. Even when resurrected, He does not become proud or haughty or arrogant.

Consider the face of the icon. The eyes, the windows of the soul, are always open and enlarged. They are that part of the face in which spiritual life is concentrated. The large eyes—especially those of Christ, the Theotokos, and the archangels—reveal wisdom, awareness, and insight. They see you just as you are. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “The light of the body is the eye; if therefore thine eye be sound, thy whole body shall be full of light. But, if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness” (Saint Matthew 6:22ff.). The eyes of icons have seen a redeemed world. They have also seen Heaven, and they want to tell us about it so that we will turn away from the way that leads to Hell.

The ears of icons are somewhat enlarged and usually flare out from the side of the head. The holy people depicted in this manner hear the voice of God. The enlarged ears remind us what Jesus said to Satan when He was tempted in the wilderness: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” If we want to live by the Word of God, we must *hear* that Word. Jesus said, “He that hath ears, let him hear.” Saint James said: “Let every man be swift to hear [and] slow to speak.” Our world is full of sounds: strange sounds; deafening sounds; terrifying sounds. The noise of this world is seductive, filthy, deceitful, chaotic. Much of it is the voice of the Devil, and that is why the saints of all ages have urged the faithful to revere silence. They urge us to hear the words of the prophet Habakkuk, who said, “The LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him” (Habakkuk 2:20).

The saints want us to hear the still, small voice of God, Who spoke to the prophet Elijah and Who speaks to our consciences every moment of every day we live. Jesus Christ calls us out of this world to hear Him and to serve Him. The Greek word for *church* is *ἐκκλησία*, which comes from *εκ* and *καλεο*—“those called out.” We are called out by the voice of Christ, Who says, “follow me.” Unless we close our ears to the world’s incessant clamor, however, we will not hear His voice. Instead, we will be pounded senseless by this world’s delusions, disappointments, and defeats. We will never hear the Lord calling us to repentance so

that we can embrace His strength, hope, mercy, forgiveness, and love.

The mouths of icons are small and closed, which is in keeping with the teachings of the Bible about the mouth. Read what Saint James says about the mouth and the tongue inside it:

The tongue is a fire; a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell . . . the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing.

Icons remind us what Solomon said in one of his Proverbs: “He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life; but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction” (Proverbs 13:3). They remind us of what King David said in one of his Psalms: “I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle” (Psalm 39:1). Most of all, they remind us of Jesus’ words: “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man” (Matthew 15:11).

Icons want us to be quiet. Their silence is comforting and reassuring. The small, closed mouth combats the sensuous and voluptuous temptations we see in so much art and photography today. It pleads with us to stop yelling and arguing among ourselves. It encourages us to be peacemakers and reconcilers, even as Jesus came into this world to reconcile us to God. It reminds us that, when we do speak, we must speak the truth. It reminds us that we must keep our big, bragging mouths shut, so that we can learn by listening to the Truth.

The nose of the icon is elongated and very narrow, which reminds us of what we must breathe in and what we must breathe out. The icon asks us to exhale the sickening smells of this world’s foulness. We all know very well the smells of this world’s lies, greed, selfishness, perverse living, arrogance, and hate. The only hate we can breathe in is our hate of the Devil and all of his works. The saints have breathed out all the stinking sins of this world because they have breathed in

the Breath of God. They have breathed in faith, hope, and love, as well as justice, temperance, prudence, and fortitude. The Breath of God is what a living godly soul should be—what we should want to be. Moses tells us in the second chapter of Genesis: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” The icon calls you to be a living soul for God.

Every Orthodox Christian has his own way of preparing for worship. When I say my morning prayers, I stand before the icons in my study. I remind myself that the icon symbolizes the entire human person, body and soul, the sense of sight, smell, hearing, taste, touch; even the hair and garments as being unified and made harmonious. The icon at which I gaze is a visible expression of the victory of mankind over all the inner divisions and chaos in man and in the world. The whole

body of the icon is no longer what Plato called “the prison of the soul.” It becomes a “window into heaven” and a picture of the temple of the Holy Spirit, which I want my soul and body to be. Who, then, can help but kiss that spiritual representation of God? And then after the kiss, I ask myself, *Do I look for God as this holy person does?* Then, I look at the ears of the icon: *Do I listen for God’s voice?* Then, I look at the mouth: *Do I always try to speak the truth of God?* Then, I look at the nose: *Do I breathe in the Breath of God and all for which God stands?*

We need to remind ourselves that we are icons of Christ to the world around us. The world looks at us and wonders if we are Christ-like, as Christians ought to be. When we think of ourselves as members of the Church, do we remember that our own congregation serves as an icon of Christ to all the world around us? Each congregation is a Christian family that is

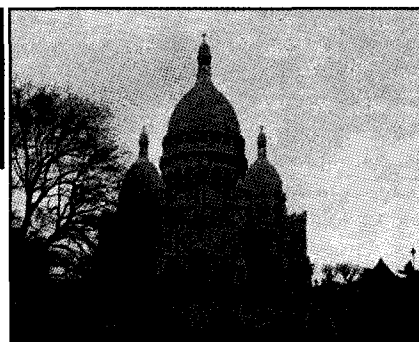
expected to believe and act as if there really is a Heaven and a Hell. We are on a spiritual pilgrimage toward Heaven and are praying that the world will follow Christ as we are trying to. We should act in such a way that others will see what the icons tell us—that the riches and pleasures of this world are not important and never to be trusted.

What do you need to pray for to be worthy to enter the Kingdom of God? If you look at the icon and pray with the saint depicted, you will know what you must do. The icon is not only a window into Heaven but a window into your own soul’s health.

The Rev. Fr. Alister Anderson is a priest of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church. He preached this sermon recently in St. Catherine Orthodox Church, Hagerstown, Maryland.

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by George McCartney

Be Afraid of Virginia Woolf

"CAUTION: Reading Virginia Woolf may be hazardous to your health."

This warning should be slapped on Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* and its film adaptation by Stephen Daldry. Cunningham's tendentious treatment of Woolf's last years and her continuing literary influence is just honest enough to raise some alarms.

And now another caution: In the analysis that follows, I have felt it necessary to deal with the narrative's conclusion, so you may want to skip the next several paragraphs until you see the film for yourself—and I think you should. It is vital to confront infections at their earliest stage, especially those that present themselves with such a glossily innocuous air.

Woolf was undeniably a brilliant writer whose narrative experiments with stream of consciousness opened new possibilities for the novelists who followed her. At the same time, her works served as carriers of a virulent subjectivism that continues to infect susceptible readers. For Woolf and her Bloomsbury circle, the individual was the only arbiter of meaning and morality in a world they were convinced was metaphysically pointless. In his memoirs, John Maynard Keynes recalled the Bloomsburians' arrogant sensibility, dramatized in Woolf's novels. Looking back on his youth, he writes with bemused detachment that, for them,

nothing mattered except states of mind, our own and other people's of course, but chiefly our own. These states of mind were not associated with action or achievement or with consequences. They consisted in timeless passionate states of contemplation and communion, largely unattached to "before" and "after"... How did we know what states of mind were good? This was a matter... direct unanalysable intuition about which it was useless and impossible to argue. We were living the specious present, nor had begun to play the game of consequences... We repudiated entirely customary morals, conventions and traditional wisdom. We were

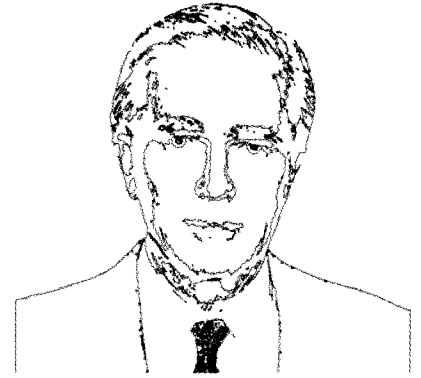
... in the strict sense of the term immoralists.

If Keynes were writing today, he might express himself more succinctly: *If it feels good, do it; consequences be damned!*

Cunningham, however unintentionally, uncovers some of these damnable consequences, and Daldry's film makes them indelibly graphic. Following the novel closely, the film weaves three narratives together, each centered on a woman confronting a moral crisis. There is Woolf in 1928, toying with the suicide she will ultimately commit in 1941. Woolf is played by Nicole Kidman, who wears a ridiculous prosthetic nose that is supposed to resemble Woolf's but only succeeds in making her look like a cross-eyed loon. (This, of course, will guarantee her an Oscar nomination.)

The second narrative concerns Laura (Julianne Moore), a California mother carrying her second child, who feels stifled by the standardization of American life in 1949. She lives in tract housing with her beefy husband, Dan (John C. Reilly), who somehow manages to be both doting and insensitive. We meet him coming back from the florist on his own birthday with a bouquet to give to his dearest before he goes to work. Then, he makes breakfast for her and their three-year-old son as Laura lingers in bed reading, portentously enough, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clearly, the man is a clod. No wonder Laura dreads getting into bed with him at day's end. Of course, there's also the little matter of her daytime smooching with a neighboring housewife.

The third narrative deals with Clarissa (Meryl Streep, who should have played Woolf, having, so to speak, a nose for the part). A 1990's Manhattan publisher, Clarissa shares her improbably spacious Greenwich Village apartment with Julia, her 19-year-old daughter, the product—if that is not too strong a word for it—of artificial insemination, courtesy of an anonymous "donor." Rounding out this modern ménage is Clarissa's lesbian lover. Clarissa's professional claim to distinction is that she has published the work of Richard (Ed Harris), a homosexual poet who is dying of AIDS. When she was 18,



The Hours

Produced by Scott Rudin
and Miramax Films
Directed by Stephen Daldry
Screenplay by David Hare
from Michael Cunningham's novel
Distributed by Paramount Pictures

Confessions of a Dangerous Mind

Produced by Andrew Lazar
and Miramax Films
Directed by George Clooney
Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman
from the book by Chuck Barris
Distributed by Artisan Entertainment

she had a summertime affair with him and has remained devoted ever since, constantly obsessing about what would have happened had they stayed together instead of following their same-sex inclinations.

The film crosscuts back and forth among the women, each narrative circumscribed by the events of 24 hours, following Woolf's attempt to render the essence of Mrs. Dalloway's life in a single day. As their stories unfold, we discover that these three women are related by parallel experiences. Each has been balked by moral and social conventions. Woolf feels guilty about not being sufficiently grateful to her husband, Leonard, and not having borne children, as her sister Vanessa has; Laura feels guilty because she does not want the husband and children she has; Clarissa faults herself for not having transcended the trammels of the female sex and forged a permanent relationship with Richard, however conjugally irregular it might have proved. Furthermore, each faces the question of suicide: Woolf commits it; Laura considers it; and Clarissa witnesses it when she fails to prevent Rich-