



My Digital Collection of Icons

HIEROMONK TIKHON (KOZUSHIN)

Abstract: In this paper father Tikhon Kozushin relates his experience of engaging with the internet. He presents his vast collection of digital icons and reflects upon uses of the digital medium for praying and performing service.

Keywords: digital icons, Orthodox iconography, Church mission

On 2 August 2014 Mikhail Suslov contacted Father Tikhon (Kozushin), sending him a questionnaire on how Orthodox priests relate to the digitalization of contemporary life. Father Tikhon responded by the following letter:

Dear Mikhail,

Before I start answering questions of the questionnaire, let me address you a private letter. I have to admit that your letter ‘hit the bull’s eye’, so to say. I have been concerned about the theme of digital icons for almost 20 years (since 1997) when an apology for the internet (dial-up) appeared in Moscow. My task was narrow and broad at the same time – to collect as comprehensive a collection of digital icons as possible [...] To reiterate: I tried to build up an all-embracing collection, not to study some particular icons, even the best ones [...] At the moment I think a lot on how to make this collection a common property of the people. By the way, I write and speak in English as almost a native language, so I could present my collection in English [...]

God save you!

Hieromonk Tikhon

After an exchange of emails, Father Tikhon submitted the following essay in English.

I was born in 1948 into a family of Moscow Jewish intelligentsia. As early as when I was 16 and still at school I began reading a lot, and I was eventually presented with a thick volume that was the Bible in Church Slavonic. In 1974 I was baptized by the then-popular Moscow priest Fr. Dimitry Dudko, and later sang and read in different Moscow churches. After 1980, I began to consider monasticism and priesthood. I could not make this come true in the Moscow Patriarchate, since they considered me a dissident, which I was, but not in the sense

they meant it. In 1988, I was able to travel to the USA, where I met with Metropolitan Vitaly, the First Hierarch of the Russian Church in Exile (outside of Russia). It was an enlightening experience and confirmed my further road into Orthodoxy. I was tonsured a monk, and very soon after ordained firstly a deacon and then a priest (in 1991). After I returned to Russia my congregation (which had roots in the religious and philosophical Seminar that I ran since 1987) formed a parish, but we could not procure a building or even a room to conduct services. So I lived in a rented apartment, the larger room of which we turned into a small church. Just one year later, a parish in the city of Alexin, Tula region, just 200 km south of Moscow, asked to join the Church Abroad (*Zarubezhnaia Tserkov'*) and they had a detached two-story building (or rather the 3 walls that remained). That became my second parish, which I cared for until my health failed a year and a half ago. This made the Moscow climate fatal to my health, and so I moved to Montenegro where I joined the Orthodox Church of Montenegro (image 1).

Image 1. Metropolitan Mikhailo (Miraš Dedeić), the First Hierarch of Montenegrin Orthodox Church and Father Tikhon (Kozushin)

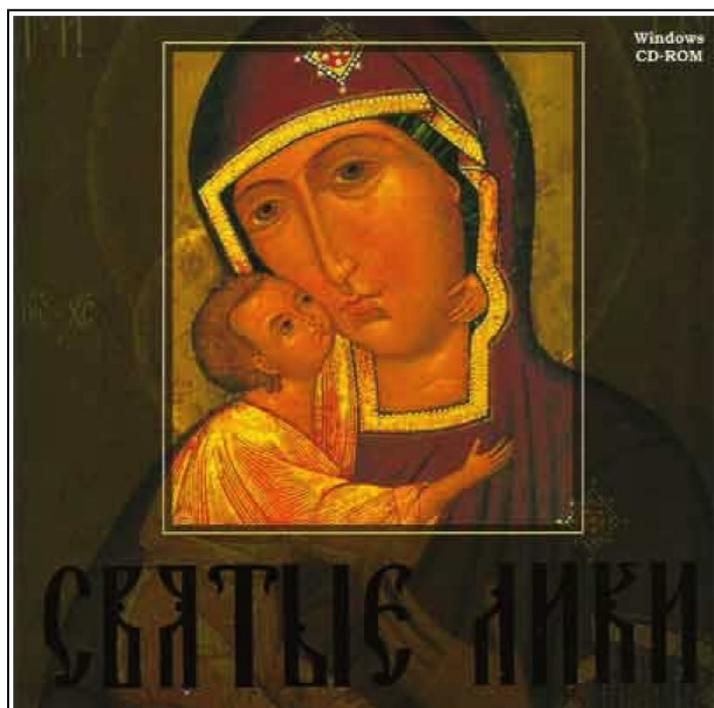


Source: Father Tikhon (Kozushin)

When in 1996 - 1997 I started to pick up any icon pictures that came my way on the internet or elsewhere, the connection speeds and computer powers were laughably ridiculous from the standpoint of a modern teenager; I say this with the purpose of showing in what impossible conditions I first undertook this work. Notwithstanding, by the year 2001 I had amassed around 16,000 images. In the year 2002 I was approached by a cd-media company who proposed to have my collection printed on 2 CDs. I agreed without transferring to them any rights for the collection, and they did print a total of 5000 copies under the title of *Svyatyie*

Liki [Holy Faces]. The edition was bought out in no time without recourse to any promotional ads (image 2).

Image 2. The cover of the first edition of my collection of icons (on 2 CDs, 2002). Inscription: ‘Holy Faces’



Source: Father Tikhon (Kozushin)

The collection contains 46,000 images as of today, also of much better quality than previously. Because I have been at work for nearly 20 years now, the advantage of my collection is that it contains quite a few specimens that made only fleeting appearances on some auction sites or painters' own sites, and then sunk away from public view into privately-owned or home collections. Also, icons from the reserve funds of museums could appear briefly on museums' pages and then disappear for years to come with the excuse of being renovated. Apart from the internet, I photographed icons wherever possible and permission was given. I also scanned icon art books. Usually, I do not indicate the source of any particular picture, as I, and happily not I alone, believe that the internet is intrinsically the public domain, and what ever appears on web pages and becomes downloaded can be used by anyone without reservation, except for expressly commercial purposes. But even then things can be negotiated.

As of today, I consider my collection to be in relatively good order and condition. I have classified icons into more than 185 rubrics. While some of this rubrication cannot pose any questions, being quite obvious and widely accepted, some rubrics are rather subjective. For example, I singled out folders containing icons, applied art and utensils from Georgia, and also icons of Coptic origin. I set up separate folders for John the Forerunner (545 images),

Holy Great Martyr George (454), and Saint Nicholas (1286), not only for their wide-spread veneration in the Russian and other Orthodox Churches, but also for the sheer amount of available icons (image 3). Special folders are allocated to the outstanding iconographers Dionysius and Andrei Rublev. When one browses the folders devoted to individual saints, one cannot but be impressed with the infinite variety of artistic approaches within what is usually regarded as a very restrictive iconographic canon. The large quantity of portraits and icons of the Russian Imperial Holy Martyrs (665), and of the Romanov Dynasty in general (722 – mostly portraits by various artists), are the pride of my collection and make up two separate folders and some subfolders inside.

Image 3. Icon of Saint George, the Great Martyr and the Trophy Bearer (Novgorod, 14th century, but it still follows the Byzantine iconographic tradition)



Source: Father Tikhon (Kozushin)

Initially I had the firm intention of concentrating on the icons per se, but who can resist the beauty of church decorations, the alter walls, and the churches themselves? I could not. So I made up the Applied Arts Rubric (8522), with many subsections depicting the beautiful views of the churches from all around the world, the most prominent inner decorations (the

frescoes) from some very special ancient monasteries, the splendid artwork of the church utensils and crosses (a special folder), some wooden sculptures (mostly in the Perm region of the Russian European north, where they were prominently represented and then spread to other regions of Russia, against the prescriptions of some 17th century Russian Church Councils [*sobory*] not to produce anything ‘thicker than semi-flesh’ (meaning haut- or bas-reliefs of course)). One should understand this as a protective move against the onslaught of the Roman Catholic culture from the West with its ‘full-flesh’ artifacts.

When a parishioner and goddaughter of mine took up the necessary training to become full-time goldthread embroiderer (it also incorporated so-called *litsevoie* - embroidery of body parts with subtly colored silk threads), I admit I got fairly infatuated with this kind of artistry. It takes enormous amounts of time and attention to produce these superb works of religious art, and it never pays, but the admiration they invoke is rewarding. See them (under the rubric Marina Sidorenko) and the works of other embroiderers (unexpectedly, some men too) in the Embroidery Section (image 4). In the section devoted to Angels I set aside a rubric for Archangel Michael because of the role he was destined to play in Biblical History, and because he appears on icons more often than any other Archangel or angel (image 5).

Image 4. The Shroud – the cloth depicting the bemoaning of the entombed Christ by the Theotokos, the Apostles and the Angels, that is brought out for veneration during the Passion Friday service. Every part and parcel of it is hand-made - even the fabric base is hand-knit



Source: Father Tikhon (Kozushin)

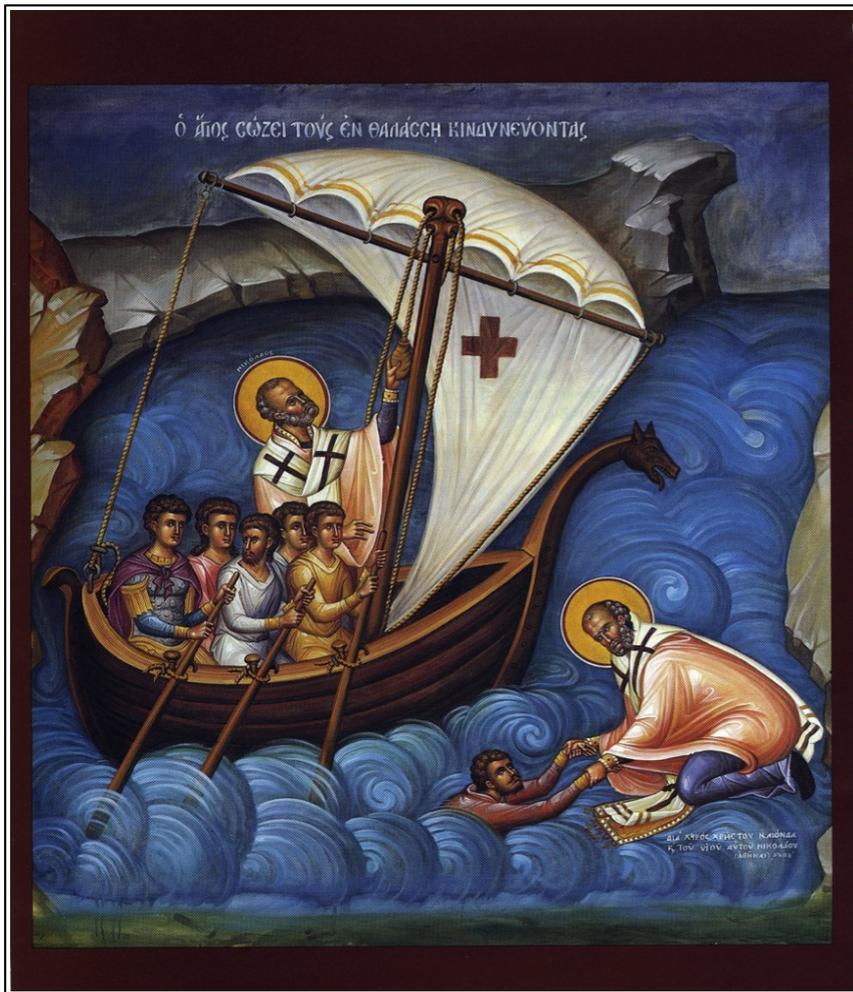
Image 5. Andrey Rublev's icon of the Archangel Gabriel



Source: Father Tikhon (Kozushin)

I cannot help but say a few words about St Nicholas of Myra in Lycia – the Miracle Worker. His folder in my gallery contains a little under 1300 files; does that alone not speak of him as the most venerated, and I would say adored, saint of the Russian Church? At least every second believer of the Russian Church (myself included) can tell heaps of stories about how he worked miracles in their own lives. The gallery includes a portrait of him reconstructed from his relics, and from whatever scraps of reminiscences of him that were extant. What is really striking is that his later icons, painted by artists who did not have any portraits to copy from, were unbelievably close to this original and the earliest images. Browse the folder and see for yourself (image 6).

Image 6. A scene from the Life of Saint Nicholas, the Miracle-Worker, where he saves the drowning sailors



Source: Father Tikhon (Kozushin)

I admire the tablets of the Novgorod icon-art school (15th century) very much. Tablets were relatively small double-sided icons painted in the characteristically colorful, joyful and victorious Novgorodian style. I printed all the Feast icons of this gallery as best I could and used them in the Feasts Tire of the iconostasis in my small church in Moscow. Nobody said they needed anything better (image 7). Next go the Feasts. Here I included only the 12 Greater Feasts (*Dvunadesiatyie* in Slavonic), plus the Pokrov (Intercession or Protection of the Mother of God) Rubric (2322). Of the Apostles, I have 1300 images in their separate Rubric. I wonder, if there had been just as many apostles of Christ, would their preaching of Christianity have been more triumphant and outwardly successful? But no, there were only 12 in the ‘inner circle’ and 70 in the ‘outer circle’ who worked day and night to bring the light of Christ to the entire world. But not the ‘entire world’ responded, far from it!

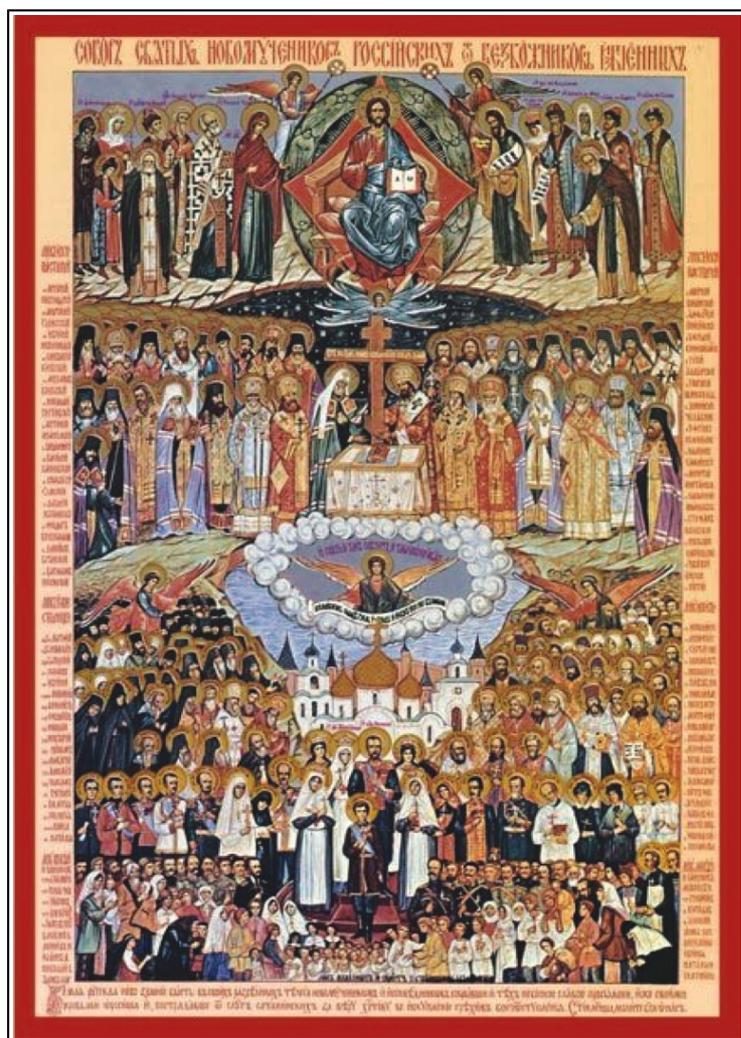
Image 7. A Novgorodian tablet depicting the three young Jewish men in the furnace



Source: Father Tikhon (Kozushin)

The blood of Christian martyrs is known to be the nutritive soil for the flourishing of the Church. The Russian Church can boast more martyrs who suffered during the reign of the godless regime than perhaps the number of martyrs (or confessors, as translated from the Greek) who were tortured and killed during the pre-Constantine era of the Roman Empire. The Holy New Martyrs of the Russian Church are our milestones, by which we may know whether we are heading in the right direction or have become mired in compromise and corruption. I sought out the icons or portraits (where there are no icons yet) of the New Martyrs with great reverence (image 8).

Image 8. The icon of the Holy New Martyrs of Russia painted in the Russian Church Abroad in 1980 in 1980



Source: Father Tikhon (Kozushin)

At last, we have reached our destination: the gallery of the icons of Jesus Christ, the Pantocrator (the All-Powerful). Understandably, the number of Christ's icons is immense, since the God-Man Himself blessed portraying himself by presenting his not-made-with-hands (*nerukotvornyi*, Ἀχειροποίητος) image¹ that miraculously impressed itself on a napkin to Abgar, the King of Edessa. Christ became Man: He walked, talked and ate his food amidst us, humans. Lots of people, crowds of men and women, saw Him, listened to him, touched him. He never hid himself from the multitudes, as He Himself admitted. So how dare the iconoclasts of old and of today deny us the precious privilege of depicting Him in icons, and revere the Prototype, i.e. Christ Himself, via these images. We do not venerate wood and paints, however even these material means become sanctified when used for this holy purpose, since

¹ On the concept of 'acheiropoietos' see Fabian Heffermehl's article in this issue of *Digital Icons*, pp. 27-47.

we do venerate the Christ, the Theotokos and the saints depicted on icons using these means (image 9).

Image 9. One of the earliest ‘Not-Made-With-Hands’ images, Novgorod 12th century



Source: Father Tikhon (Kozushin)

By revelation it has been made known to us that God is not ‘alone’. He is One, but not ‘alone’. We believe and know that our God is the Trinity, the Three Persons and One God-head. Russian saint *Prepodobnyi* (saintly monk) Sergius of Radonezh (14th century) was one among the saints anywhere in the Christian world who felt the mystery of the Holy Trinity most keenly. He used to say, ‘when we contemplate the Mystery of the Oneness of the Holy

Trinity, we overcome the miserable divisions of this world'. He built the most beautiful church dedicated to the Holy Trinity, the iconostasis for which was masterworked by the greatest iconographer of all time, St. Andrei Rublev. Thereby, he initiated a special degree of reverence for the Holy Trinity in Russia, and soon many more churches dedicated to Trinity sprang up on Russian land than elsewhere. There are two iconographic canons used to depict the Holy Trinity: one is based on the Genesis story of three Angels visiting Abraham and Sarah at the oak of Mamre, and the saintly exegetists pretty unanimously interpreted this scene as a representation of the Holy Trinity in the form comprehensible to Old Testament humans. The icons depicting the revelation of the Holy Trinity in the form of Three Angels are called the Old Testament Trinity icons.

Since rather early, however, approximately from 15th century, a new way of representing the Holy Trinity emerged at the same time as the Renaissance was in full swing in the West. The latter was marked, among other things, by introduction of a rather new form of representation of objects in art, that of metaphorical allegory. To be sure, the artists had known it long before this period, but inherent prudence had prevented them from using it freely in application to sacred objects. Renaissance, with its inherent audacity, opened up new horizons in the freedom of artistic expression. The so-called New Testament Trinity icons began to spread throughout the Christian world, which depicted the Trinity as God, the Father, ALLEGORICALLY represented as the 'Ancient of Days', being essentially the ALLEGORY of fatherhood; God the Son PORTRAYED in much the same way as He is on other icons of Christ; and the Holy Spirit SYMBOLIZED by a white dove, as He appeared to witnesses during Christ's baptism. Thus, all the three major artistic devices were put together to depict such a profound and incomprehensible mystery as the Mystery of the Tri-Unity of God (image 10).

Image 10. One of the earliest New-Testament Trinity icons



Source: Father Tikhon (Kozushin)

Ever since the advent of the internet, it has proved an excellent venue for allowing interested people from all around the world become acquainted with what Father Seraphim Rose of blessed memory called ‘the best kept secret’, and by that he meant the Eastern Orthodox Faith. I consider my collection of icons of the Byzantine-Russian tradition as a means of allowing people in the West to bear witness to the greatness of Byzantine-Russian culture and art. Frankly, this has been my incentive from the very conception of the project, right to this day.

Another purpose I had in mind when I undertook this endeavor was more practical, but by no means less lofty. The icons of the collection could be printed on a standard home jet-ink printer (6-color ones would be the best) on readily available photographic-quality paper to produce icons that could be sanctified and used in church for prayers. The print quality was often better than those coming from the commercial printing press. That is exactly what we did in our Moscow parish. We had a practice, every Thursday, of singing *akathistos* to the saint of the day. All along, and parallel with collecting icons, I did conversions of *akathista*, available only in civil type, into church Slavonic, which we used in our prayers together with the printed icons from the collection.

I have printed digital icons at home on good quality paper and, after sanctifying them by a standard ritual, used the printed and laminated images for prayers in church. Could I use an on-screen digital image as a valid icon? Well, it depends on the circumstances. Yes I could, if the conditions were really out of the ordinary and a prayer was needed in a place where no icons or church books were at hand. One example from my own experience was when I was asked to baptize several prematurely born babies who were maintained in infant incubators in the intensive care unit of the famous Morozov Children’s Hospital. I had come there to visit a member of our congregation who had given birth to a child with a diagnosed cerebral palsy. Actually, when on the move I frequently use my laptop to read the liturgical texts, of which I have a very near-complete collection. I, for instance, had to resort to my computer when I was asked to perform the Sacrament of Marriage on my friends when I was in Montenegro on a visit and did not have the necessary books on hand.

Here I must put in a disclaimer. Using computer for church prayers can only be justified by ‘dire’ circumstances. Icons on the computer screen cannot be sanctified, since any sacrament involves substantially a physical, material action on the object sanctified, else who could tell if the sacrament had taken place at all? Is using a digital image, which if viewed formally is little more than a set of digits, in some way a desacralization of the sacred image? It would be if the computer were left to exist on its own. The good news, however, is that a computer is a nonentity if it is not in communication with a human being through the so-called human-machine interface. It is our humaneness that kind of re-sacralizes the holy images through our faith in and love for the holy persons depicted. Amen.

I have often been asked what my attitude is towards the role that digital technologies can play, the internet in particular, in the Orthodox witness. Even though I have maintained a rather fundamentalist approach to matters of religion, I have cheered the appearance of the internet from the first moment on. I immediately saw in it a means and venue for reaching out to people with the Orthodox mission. The internet is truly worldwide, and so contacts with interested people can extend all around our mother earth. And it is fast, so it could be useful as a kind of ‘spiritual ambulance’. I said to myself, it is a means like any other means

and could be used for good or bad, ‘what is not against us is with us’, yet the difference is its sheer power – it is more powerful than any number of atomic bombs, only then it requires more responsibility and prudence. It was a pleasing experience from the start to see how much good, talented material has been filling the Runet – religious material was present in an unexpectedly high proportion too. Happy Journey, WWW!

FATHER TIKHON (KOZUSHIN) is a monk of the Orthodox Church of Montenegro. In the 1970-80s he actively participated in the dissident movement in Moscow and stood at the roots of the ‘religious revival’ in Russia. [frtikhon@mail.ru]