

## FOREWORD

Many years ago, on a rainy fall day in New Orleans, I found myself face to face with Henri Nouwen at a Franciscan house of hospitality in the French Quarter. I was struck immediately by the depth of his soul, and felt waves of compassion embracing me. I feel his presence even now, twenty-five years later, though I never met Henri again in this life. Henri had seen icons I had painted. He asked me that day if I would create one for him. The icon of Christ the Bridegroom, which I went home and painted, accompanied him the rest of his life. When he first wrote this book, he asked me to review the text. Our connection was through icons: he a Latin Rite Catholic, and I Byzantine. Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that I am writing a foreword to this new edition.

Byzantine icons capture the richness of the mystical life of Eastern Christianity. After many centuries of isolation, western Christians are

## BEHOLD THE BEAUTY OF THE LORD

slowly finding their way back to the wellsprings of Christianity in the East. They are drawn to Byzantine icons, even though they may find them strange. Knowing they are on unfamiliar soil, they wonder what the correct approach to an icon might be, how to interpret an icon correctly.

Correctly? How we Christians fear straying from the correct path! In our concern to do it right, we have forgotten how to respond spontaneously to an encounter with the Divine. We remain children, depending on someone else's approval, in that most important core of our life, the spiritual. We don't learn how to pray, only to say approved prayers. We sit at the dark edges of a richly laden banquet hall, hoping for a few crumbs that might fall our way.

This was not Henri's path. The compassion that overwhelmed me in our encounter in New Orleans came from years of feasting at tables in the divine banquet hall. As sensitive as he was, it probably took Henri years to overcome

his fears about not doing it “right.” That he eventually did overcome those fears, however, is evidenced by this beautiful book.

Some of the meaning that Henri found in the four icons featured in this book is not what Byzantine Christians would find. In spite of his scholarly research, he strayed from a strict Byzantine interpretation. He followed his heart. He didn’t do it “right.” In this sense, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* is not a book for academic research. On a much more profound level, however, Henri did it absolutely “right.” As a western Christian, he opened his heart in prayer as he gazed upon these four icons, and found meaning which spoke directly to his own soul.

Love is the measure of all things Christian. The mind has its place, but it is with the heart that we love. “Christ flees,” says St. Bonaventure, “when we try to embrace him with the intellect.” Henri entered these four icons with the heart of a lover. He found God in his own way, which was actually the only authentic way he

## BEHOLD THE BEAUTY OF THE LORD

could find God. He invites you to do the same. If you want to study Byzantine iconography, there are shelves of academic books waiting to be read. If you want to accompany a master of the spiritual life as he prays with Byzantine icons, this book is for you. Henri had a brilliant intellect, but as a lover he knew the wisdom of holy foolishness. In some ways, he simply stumbles into these four icons like a holy fool, challenging us also to see with eyes of love.

*Brother Robert Lentz, O.F.M.*

*Iconographer*