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#### Topic #4

*Discuss how “the arts” (music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and others) can inspire a greater connection between God and an individual or community.*

I once heard a story of a man who said he liked visiting the Orthodox Church because, “It’s the best show in town for a dollar”. At first I was taken aback, but then I thought about it and realized that this is a high complement.

Try to imagine it’s your first time in an Orthodox Church. You don’t know what to expect... You open the door and are hit with a sweet smelling aroma. You look around and are surrounded by different *paintings* that seem to tell a story. You listen and hear beautiful music with melodies not typically found on iTunes. Our church is full of art and beauty. Why is this such a priority for us? Our relationship with God is the most important in our life. If we have a strong connection with Him, everything else will follow. When we enter an Orthodox Church we are overcome with wonderful, sensory gifts that help strengthen this relationship. To someone who’s not Orthodox, these things may feel like cultural art, however each element is meant to enhance our relationship with Christ, our Lord. The church speaks to our senses. If you can’t hear the hymns, you can still smell the incense. If you can’t smell the incense, you can still venerate the icons. If you can’t venerate the icons, you can still receive the communion.

Icons are a special part of our Orthodox Christian faith. His Eminence Metropolitan Isiah calls them “our family album”. They are beautiful pieces of artwork where every feature, color and brush stroke carries a deeper message of faith, hope, and love.

A couple of years ago I had the wonderful opportunity to visit the Assumption Cathedral in Denver. It has a huge dome whose walls are covered with beautiful icons. There is literally not a single blank spot. When we walked in, I glanced up and on the very top of the dome, looking down at us, was the icon Christ the Merciful Judge. And at that moment I truly understood what the priest means when he calls us to communion, “With the *fear* of God, with faith and love, draw near.” I felt exposed, like God was looking directly at me, with His powerful and loving eyes. That was a little intimidating, but at the same time, I felt safe and loved. It was awesome, in the truest sense of the word.

Greek Orthodox churches have been filled with Byzantine hymns for thousands of years. They bridge gaps between generations of Orthodox Christians and provide yet another art form for us to explore our faith with. But, like the icons, they represent more than just notes on a page. Think of the Lamentations we sing on Good Friday. They tell the story of the incomparable love Mary has for her son, Jesus. One of the Lamentations we chant says, “Your pure Mother, weeping bitter tears over You... O my Son, how can I lay You in the grave?” This verse is full of devastation and the most intense love a mother can feel. It reflects a great heavenly passion, but it is not too much for our finite minds to comprehend. In fact, it’s quite the contrary. The Lamentations provide us with a means to express our most passionate emotions through spiritual song. They are a reminder that God loves us, understands us, and will carry our burdens.

The first time the Lamentations really hit home for me was last year, just a few months after we lost my Yiayia to Alzheimer’s. When I was little she used to sing to me and my sister, everything from children’s songs to church hymns. Listening to her sing was an act full of nothing but pure love and the memory of it has been a gift to me over the years. But as her disease got progressively worse *we* started singing to *her*. I remember one visit about three years ago, we drove down to Houston for the weekend to see her and she was pretty unresponsive the whole time. Before we headed back home, our whole family stopped by the facility where she was staying. We began to sing hymns to her and, to our amazement, after a weekend of unresponsiveness, she started singing the hymns with us. It was an incredible and joyous moment for our family and I will never forget it. Now, whenever we’re in church and I hear those hymns, I think of my Yiayia and how, through the art of music, she help me grow a stronger relationship with God. What a great gift our church has given us... to connect with God and better understand our faith through such holy art forms.

So, imagine again: You’ve walked into the Orthodox Church for the first time. You notice the smell of the incense, the congregation venerating the icons and the beautiful hymns. At first glance it may seem like an elaborate show, but take a closer look and you can see that everything in this church is meant to strengthen our relationship with the Lord. Our church is full of spiritual art that serves each of our senses. So, if you can’t hear the hymns, you can still smell the incense. If you can’t smell the incense, you can still venerate the icons. If you can’t venerate the icons, you can still taste the communion. And that is the moment of our most

profound connection with God... when we receive the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior  
Jesus Christ.