Rublev's *Trinity*

CAROLYN SCHULTZ-RATHBUN

It is not a question of thinking about the Trinity, but in it.
Olivier-Maurice Clément

Three anthropomorphic figures with golden wings, haloes of light, and tall red staves slim as lightning rods sit on simple golden thrones around a small, square table. Their world is the color of a sandstorm. Their faces are soft and beardless, with the same rosebud mouth, the same long, thin nose, the same dark eyes and nearly flat brows capped by thick auburn curls that flow down over their ears and necks. The table is bare save for a footed golden bowl holding, perhaps, a portion of roasted meat. Under them grows green grass.

The central figure draws my eye. Its tunic the color of earth or old blood, the royal blue robe cascading down from the left shoulder and across both legs, and the dark green tree scraggling up behind it stand out amidst shades of yellow and tan, pastels. A band of gold on the right shoulder suggests, perhaps, royalty. It is at the center of the icon, and both higher and wider than the other two figures, despite being further away. It faces me almost straight on. The other figures are cupped around it: their heads tilt toward it, their bodies turn toward it, their legs and feet move in toward it. Its right hand, resting on the table, appears to be giving a blessing. The head is tilted, the eyes are looking, toward the figure on our left. The two are so close that their wings overlap, and the wine-red elbow almost bumps the other figure's left wing.

This second figure has slight bags under its eyes, and the brows and lips are darker than those of the central figure. Its face is pleasant, alert. It wears a blue tunic covered by a shimmering, translucent, cloth-of-gold cloak. Its outside wing is cut off by the edge of the icon; several individual feathers are visible in the other. The right leg is raised at the knee, its sandaled foot bent at an impossible angle. The figure raises its right hand and looks across the table at the figure on our right.

This third figure wears a royal blue tunic. A cloak the green of new spring growth flows down from its right shoulder. Its wings are askew, the inner one lower and just touching the wing of the central figure. Its head is inclined, at the same angle as that of the center figure, toward the figure on the left, but the eyes look down at the chalice, the right hand reaches toward it. Its legs also are at an impossible angle, forcing the sandaled feet in, like the head, toward the center.

Directly behind the three, in the gaps between their wings and their bodies, are glimpses of cumulus-laced blue sky. Even in an arid, sunbaked wilderness, they carry with them shreds of the heavens.

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Only two or three works are attributed with any certainty to the obscure medieval monk and iconographer Andrei Rublev, but this one, *The Hospitality of Abraham*, is perhaps the most famous of all Russian icons. Created in the early fifteenth century, tempera on wood, it depicts the three angels who visited Abraham and Sarah at Mamre.

For almost 350 years, the icon resided in the Cathedral of the Assumption at the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius. About forty-five miles northeast of Moscow, this monastery was the center of Orthodox piety and Russian patriotism from the time of St. Sergius, in the fourteenth century, until the Russian Revolution. The icon, fifty-six inches high and forty-five inches wide, hung on the iconostasis just to the right of the royal doors leading from the nave into the sanctuary, where the altar stands. At almost five feet tall and just above eye level, it would have presented the three seated figures as life-size or nearly so to a worshipper in the nave.

But the icon was surrounded by giants. The image of the Theotokos immediately to the left of the royal doors is the same height but shows only her head and body. She dwarfs the figures at the table. And the seated Christ Pantocrator on the other side completely fills the panel. The long row of icons directly above these are all standing figures, seven to eight feet high. Worshippers would have experienced the life-size image of the three seated figures as one of the most intimate on the vast golden iconostasis.

I first encountered it as a cheap knockoff, barely bigger than a postcard, in a glass-fronted cabinet at a small Anglican abbey serving the homeless and recently homeless and soon-to-be homeless in Vancouver, Washington. The small, scarred room in which we worshipped was bare, the icon one of a handful of sacramentals scattered around the room. The cross on the altar I understood, and the huge images of Jesus and of Mary painted on the windows. But if you could only afford to illustrate one story in the Bible, why this one?

According to the story in Genesis 18, YHWH appears to Abraham while Abraham, Sarah, and their household are camped by the oaks of Mamre. Three men show up as Abraham sits at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day: playing dice, perhaps, or napping, chin on chest. Sarah and a servant quickly put together a meal—freshly baked bread, roasted veal—and Abraham serves the three men.

Abraham's visitors have been depicted visually since at least the third century, with the three first portrayed as identical angels. As the tradition developed, however, iconographers and muralists began to focus on the central angel as a type, or symbol, of Christ, with two angelic companions. The central figure became larger, its face alone turned toward the viewer. It might have a cross nimbus, or carry a scroll, or wear clothes of a different color. Then, although the form remained the

same—three angels, the central one identified with Christ and given priority in a variety of ways—muralists began adding trinitarian titles to the image. Eventually the three came to be depicted identically again, but seen now not simply as angels but also as a symbol of the Holy Trinity.

Orthodox teaching prohibits the depiction of the eternal essence of God. But St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans that God's attributes "are understood through what has been made." So created things—bread, doors, fire and water and wind, kings and farmers and nursing mothers, both shepherds and their sheep, vintners and their grapevines—can be symbols of God. And this story in Genesis can be used to think about the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the itinerant God who might show up on your doorstep some sweltering afternoon.

The earlier icons could be visually quite busy. Sarah and Abraham serve the three visitors; the servant slaughters or butchers the calf; and assorted plants, animals, and miscellaneous accoutrements may fill the landscape. At least one early image has a large birdcage hanging in the tree. Sometimes even Isaac appears: although the angels had come to announce his imminent conception, the images portray a world in which time often stretches like Dalí's clock.

Rublev has removed all the activity—no Abraham washing the angels' feet, no Sarah kneading dough, no servant slaughtering or butchering a calf. And without context or movement, the icon I noticed my first Sunday at Arnada Abbey slips out of that hot afternoon at Mamre into a moment outside time, a place beyond place.

No, that's not quite right. The three have golden wings, but they also have walking sticks and sandals. Able to fly, presumably, or even to traverse time and space in the blink of a thought, they have chosen to walk, to share Abraham and Sarah's slow journey across the sunbaked earth.

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While the faithful around the world worship, as an old hymn has it, *God in three Persons, blessed Trinity*, most Christians speak most of the time as if God were a single Person. And *one God in three Persons*: what does that mean? And what difference does it make on a hot summer's afternoon as you doze by the door of your tent?

Their robes are loose, their features delicate, their faces beardless. Are they

masculine? Feminine? And that's what the Church teaches: God is spirit, neither male nor female. But what the Church does has been quite different. She has portrayed not just Jesus but the Father and, when depicted anthropomorphically, the Spirit as well, as male. She has used exclusively masculine pronouns for all three Persons. Feminine imagery for God in the Hebrew Scriptures has been, on her watch, largely lost in translation.

But in the beginning, the Aramaic-speaking church spoke and thought of the Spirit as feminine. As Jesus, Himself an Aramaic speaker, must undoubtedly have done. Because *rukha—spirit* in Aramaic—is a feminine noun, just as *ruakh* is in Hebrew. And for hundreds of years, the portion of the Church that was the direct linguistic descendant of the 120 disciples gathered on Pentecost referred to the Spirit exclusively as feminine: *she, her.*

But then, as her bishop became ascendant, the church in Rome began to pressure her sister churches to speak of the Spirit as masculine: *spiritus* is masculine in Latin. The Syriac Orthodox Church—the church which began in Jerusalem and moved to Antioch after Stephen was martyred—eventually conformed in her everyday speech, as did the others. But still today in her oldest hymns and prayers, she refers to the Spirit as feminine. The words Jesus spoke require it.

The Three could be identical triplets. They have the same faces and hair, the same haloes and wings and staves. The blue cloak and dark red tunic, the gold stripe on the right shoulder, mark the central figure, in the traditional symbolism of iconography, as Christ. Behind Him a scrawny tree recalls the oaks of Mamre, and hints as well at both the cross—often referred to in medieval times as a tree—and the tree of life.

The figure on our left, in its glorious golden robe, has traditionally been identified as the Father. Behind Him we can make out part of a house—sandstone, surely, and the rest lost in the swirling sand—that suggests Jesus's words, *In my Father's house are many mansions*. The second-story window stands open, as does the door. It is a window from which a father or mother could see for miles, by which they might sit, watch, wait. It is a door through which they could run to welcome a daughter or a son long gone.

On our right, the Spirit is clothed in sky blue and electric green. The nave of an Orthodox church is decorated at Pentecost with a riot of grass, branches,

and even young trees, the priests and deacons traditionally vested in spring-bud green and gold. The Spirit's cloak, then, is the color of Pentecost: the green of photosynthesis, of the hidden transformation of light into life. It is the green of the One the Creed calls the Lord and Giver of Life.

Behind Her stands a sunbaked hill, bare rock curved like a Japanese wave. It curves toward the tree, which curves toward the house. Moses met God on a mountain, Peter, James, and John saw Jesus transfigured on a mountain: the mountain is a familiar Orthodox motif for encounter with God, for a steep and dangerous ascent with the life-giving Spirit as guide. But mountains in the Hebrew Scriptures are multivalent. Mount Sinai is the ultimate expression of encounter with God, but "high places" are the epicenter of Israel's idolatrous heart. And, because they are militarily defensible, mountains are also places of refuge and safety. So when David, or the prophet Habakkuk, speaks of God making him walk on his high places, it becomes a prophetic pun: he must tread underfoot his idols if he is to encounter God as refuge and fortress.

Early copies of the icon show that the rock was originally cracked, like the rock at Meribah, from which God twice gave the Israelites water during their desert wanderings. St. Paul says that rock was Christ. And on the last day of Sukkot, a feast commemorating those miraculous provisions of water, Jesus taught that the water that flows from Him is the Spirit soon to be given.

Drawn to the icon, I would search for an image online, and set my laptop on a nearby table as I prayed. Then my husband and daughter gave me a copy for Christmas, eight-by-ten and gloriously colored. It sits now on a small table beside my grandfather's century-old easy chair. In the mornings I dress in the cold and the dark, slip downstairs, fill my ancient brass kettle with water, and check my phone. After the teapot has steeped I pour a mug, come to my study, light three squat pillar candles in front of the icon, and slide back into my worn green chair.

Three figures seated around a table. It's Abraham and Sarah's table, of course, the place where Abraham spread Sarah's still-warm bread and the flesh of the calf the servant had slaughtered and roasted. But it's squat and legless, a near-cube, like an Orthodox altar table. *Behold, I stand at the door and knock,* the ascended Christ told the church at Laodicea. *If anyone hears My voice and opens*

the door, I will come into him and will dine with him—the angels at Abraham and Sarah's table. But there's more: *and he will dine with Me*. When He comes, the table turns. That's the danger, of course: any place I allow God into becomes His place, not mine.

Sometimes that's also the comfort.

I can see a small niche in the side of the table—for relics, or the reserved Host. Worshippers never see that niche in an altar table: it's on the far side. Both priest and people are on the side of the table that faces the nave. But unlike post-Vatican II Catholic priests, the Orthodox priest continues to stand with the people, facing the altar and the sanctuary behind it. The Son, then, is in the priest's position, but sitting down, His work finished. And as I sit looking at the image, that places me behind the altar, with the Father and the Spirit, in the Holy of Holies.

The table is empty save for the footed golden bowl, which in the murky pre-dawn is crawling with flies. The Spirit shoos them with Her right hand. But the same specks, I see now, cluster around the dinner-plate haloes, and the edges of the house, the tree, the mountain. The Three inhabit eternity; the icon is six hundred years old.

I can't tell, looking at the copy on my table, what is in the bowl. But for a thousand years before Rublev, icons had shown Abraham serving a calf—sometimes whole, sometimes just the head—to his visitors. And most commentators identify the food in the bowl as a calf's head. Others see roasted lamb, looking forward to Pesach, and through it to the upper room and the eucharistic meal. Whatever you see in the bowl, though, it's clear that the three figures are at table. The meal together has undergirded our intimacy, our community, our celebration for millennia. And *this* meal—the intimacy and community of the Trinity together at table—provides a basis for our relationships. If there is nothing except the material, or if what is at the center of the universe is impersonal—or solitary—then all sorts of things may be ultimate reality, but relationship isn't one of them. Love requires an object both grammatically and experientially. Not even God, if God is only One, can just sit in a void and love. I love something, someone, whether my angry child or my blind black cat or my triple-scoop Smurf-blue Blue Moon ice cream cone.

Apart from the communion of the Three around the table, love is just a quaint folk-term for one of my adaptive biochemical processes. Three Persons around the table, however, give me a way of understanding my love as biochemical in its mechanism, but transcendent in its origin and meaning.

The figure of the Son first drew my eye that morning at Arnada Abbey. He sits on the far side of the altar table, the farthest away of the Three and yet bigger than the other two, both taller and wider. Traditional artistic perspective flows from me. The closer objects are to me, the bigger they are; the farther away, the smaller. But before the Three I am no longer the center from which everything flows. That center point now seems to be somewhere deep in the picture. My perspective is no longer defining. It is not my perception of reality that is paramount; it is Reality's perception of me.

Larger, darker, and at the center, the Son is portrayed, surely, as the first among equals. But both Son and Spirit bow their heads to the Father, indicating, perhaps, that He is the dominant Person within the community.

Or perhaps not. In the icon as we now have it, the first two fingers of the Son's right hand are extended in the Orthodox posture of priestly blessing. But early twentieth-century restoration revealed that the index finger is an addition by a later hand. What is now the middle finger was originally the index finger, and the only finger extended. The Son's eyes are on the Father, but with His finger He points toward the dish, and beyond to the green-robed Spirit.

The right hand of each of the Three is extended into the space created by their togetherness. The Son points toward the Spirit. The Father reaches toward the Spirit, looks at Her, inclines His head toward Her. And the Spirit closes the circle of deference, inclining Her head to the Father, and both looking at and reaching toward the bowl holding the slaughtered animal, the bowl which speaks of the sacrifice of the Son. And the bodies of Father and Spirit form—their legs would have to be broken for them to sit this way in the material world—the shape of a chalice in which the wine-dark Son is offered to the viewer, making Him the Sacrifice at the center of all things.

The Orthodox Church uses the term *perichoresis* (Greek *peri-*, around, and *chorein*, to give way, make room, go around, contain) to name the mutual intersection and interpenetration, the intimacy and reciprocity, of the Holy

Trinity. The Spirit glorifies the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, and the Father glorifies the Son. In Homer, the *choreia* is a circle dance accompanied by a chorus, a dance in which each person advances in turn, yields in turn, makes room in turn for another.

In the candlelight, the sand-colored house and rock disappear into the whirling sandstorm. All that remains are the dark tree, and the Three eternally together, wings touching, a deep pool of tranquility in the stinging, choking sand.

My windowpane turns from black to dark gray. The candles hiss and gutter. What I see most clearly in their wavering light is that bright cloak of new-growth green. Of Pentecost green. The Spirit reaching out toward the chalice—to offer it, surely, to the viewer. For there is a space left at the table, and it's on our side.

What I see is the Three in the moment just before the eternal Spirit falls in storm and fire: the moment when the eternal Son turns to the Father to ask, when the eternal Father bids the Spirit go, and the eternal mystery of the Holy Trinity is at last revealed.

And behind the Three, glimpses of infinite sky. Not, I think now, shreds of heaven brought to earth across vast distances. The Three at table are a portal, connecting, uniting, that realm and this. And the house and rock aren't disappearing into the storm but appearing out of it, summoned by the Three who are One, who sit in the desert on a carpet of new grass.

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Shortly after the Revolution, the icon was seized by the new government, taken from the monastery, and placed first in the nearby Sergiev Posad State History and Art Museum-Reserve, and then, in 1929, in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, where it hangs today.

For 350 years the icon hung in the sumptuous golden splendor of the Cathedral, inviting the faithful to join the Three at table. For the last arid century, it has hung in bare state museums, inviting us all—the faithful and the unfaithful, the connoisseurs, the curious, the footsore and the bored—to enter Their bright community, Their perichoresis. To come to the table.