

OUR ICON



Introduction

The place of icons in worship has always been a central feature in Eastern Christianity, but the appreciation of their function has not been one that we Western Christians have adopted. That is unfortunate. Still, as more icons appear in our places of worship, an understanding of their capacity to evoke prayer is an art which we can come to appreciate more fully.

An icon is not meant to be a painting which is admired simply as a piece of art. A casual first glance might well lead one to think of it merely in terms of a primitive form of art, one devoid of any understanding of perspective, one without the capacity to render the human face or body with modern accuracy.

On the other hand, once the person who is gazing on the icon learns to actually “read” it, the reason for all of the seeming “defects” become themselves windows into the sacred.

This small booklet will attempt to present some of the artistic details of the icon of St. John Neumann Church so that you will come to a greater appreciation of it as a work of religious art and a vehicle for prayer.

Becoming: We become what we gaze upon. Images guide us, accompany us, change us. Gazing upon an image can be a movement towards transformation, for as our intimacy grows, the qualities and spirit of the image are shared with the one who gazes. Pay attention to yourself as you gaze and listen. What thoughts, feelings, attitudes do you adopt as you gaze? Imagine that the image asks - “Who are you?” Are you willing to be transformed into what the image has in mind for you? A growing friendship with an image urges one into that change. How can you keep that friendship alive?

The invitation of the eyes of love: Spend some time just looking into the eyes of the icon. Do this without judgement. Let yourself become aware of the loving eyes of Jesus which are always upon you. They are glances of loving concern. Slowly close your eyes but remain with an awareness of the presence of Jesus. Remain in that presence as long as you wish. When you slowly open your eyes again, try to see the world around you using the eyes of Jesus. What do you see? What is he asking of you? Return to this presence as often as you like in order to refresh yourself and to renew the friendship which is being formed here.

Extending the Practice: The practice of praying with icons can be extended to many things. You might try the same method in viewing our stained glass windows, the statues which grace our worship space or even a holy card which has been a favorite. The footprints of God are everywhere for those who care to see.

Praying with an Icon

Now that we have a basic understanding of the symbols of our icon, we can begin to respond to its invitation to prayer. Praying with an icon can take several forms.

Gazing: What attracts your attention? Explore and develop what draws you to the image. Tell the image something about yourself, your story. Become aware of the feelings which are being conveyed by the image. What message, what viewpoint does it hold? What is its meaning to you? What do the various symbols mean to you and to your life today?

Look at the background. What do you see? Gaze “beyond the image,” using your imagination. Look for other times, other places and persons. As you are gazing, be aware of the presence of the one who also is gazing at you. All else follows from the awareness of that presence.

Listening: In the stillness, there is a dialogue waiting to happen. Imagine that listening allows you to enter into the time and the place of the image. Pay attention to what you hear. Imagine that the figure can speak. What does he want to say to you? Ask him “Who are you?” Listen for the answer. What is he saying to you from the time and place in which he lived? What is he saying regarding this time and place? Ask what it means that he is “the Way, the Truth and the Life.” As you listen, pay attention to your body, your feelings and your thoughts. Let them speak about what they have heard in the presence of the image.

The Theology of Icon Painting

In the eighth century, the validity of icon painting was questioned, and in fact many were destroyed. The contention arose from the Old Testament tradition that the incomprehensible God could never be adequately represented in any visual form.

The controversy was settled through recalling that in the New Testament, the “hidden” God had become revealed in Jesus Christ. Through his Incarnation, the face of God had become perfectly disclosed to humankind. In addition, it had always been an accepted Christian practice to use symbols to express spiritual realities. (We might recall the symbol of water as an expression of rebirth, cleansing and healing.) Couldn't icons symbolize spiritual realities as well, they asked? In reply, the Council of Constantinople (843) declared that the icon was a suitable medium for expressing the spiritual reality of Christ, the saints and the mysteries of our faith.

The Artist

The task of the iconographer is that of representing the sacred tradition in such a way that the beholder will be aroused to seek the unseen presence of the Spirit, the Presence which supports the world and all its inhabitants. The iconographer is more than an artist then. S/he approaches the work after a preparatory period of prayer and fasting so that the work rises not only from artistic talent, but from a personal commitment to the spread of the Gospel and the tenants of the Christian faith.

The Icon of St. John Neumann Church Jesus Christ, Pantocrater

“ He rules over everything he embraces and no one takes anything out of his hand. Therefore, if he possesses everything and governs what he possesses, who else can he be but the Pantocrator, he who rules all things?” St. Gregory of Nyssa

To learn to use our icon as a source of meditation, it helps to first understand some of the symbolism of the painting. To do so, we will look at both the figure and the environment.

The figure: As Christianity became the religion of the empire, the role of Christ as the ruler and judge of all things became of favorite theme for iconography. Christ the Pantocrater is an expression of that theme.

The golden background, a light which emanates from no external source, is an indication of the divine nature of Christ, that which is perfectly joined to the human form which we can see. The nose and the mouth are slender and small. The external senses have been de-emphasized in favor of the contemplative gaze, which is full and direct. No one is excluded from his wisdom.

The hand which is raised in blessing is also positioned in such a way that it identifies Jesus. The upright index finger is an “i”, the curved middle finger a “c”, the fourth finger touched by the thumb “x” and the bent little finger “c”, forming ICXC the Greek shorthand for the name “Jesus Christ.”

In his other hand, Christ holds the book of judgement. It recalls that Jesus is the Way, the

Truth and the Life. It is by this standard that each Christian will be judged.

The environment: As ruler of all creation, Jesus sits on royal cushions, resting on a Byzantine throne. The throne has structural characteristics which make it appear as a city. The doors which are depicted are dark, for the city, the abode of humans, is filled with sin and brokenness. Yet, Jesus the ruler has power over the darkness as well as over the light. There is another area of darkness near his feet. What does that mean to you? Could it be the darkness of the rest of the world, or the darkness of those who are outside of the community? It will mean a different thing to each of us according to our life situation.

It takes a bit of a poetic mind to read the symbols of this icon. Look at the corners of Jesus’ throne. There are four jets of flame. Four - the symbol of totality, like the four directions (North, South, East and West), or the four basic elements (earth, water, fire, and air). In what way have you felt Jesus’ totality? What does fire mean to you? It recalls the power of the Spirit, the incredible force of heat and light - and what else?

The feet of Jesus rest on a pedestal which seems to float above the ground. This is a symbol of the humanity and the divinity of Jesus, for his humanity is somehow not attached to the earth, but rises above it.

Has the irregularity of the throne drawn your eye to it? The misalignments are meant to draw your attention, just as a crooked picture at home attracts your gaze. It is an invitation to stay with the figure so that you might ultimately be drawn into prayer.