

The Sacred Icon

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Iconography or the “writing of an image” (*eikonographia*) is one of the most venerable and ancient forms of sacred art. The traditional method uses the egg-tempera technique on a solid wood panel;

contemporary icons can be of oil and acrylic paints on boards of composite material or masonite. The icon however, is much more than a style or form of art. An icon or “image” is an invitation into a world of prayer and spirituality, a world of the non-verbal; it is an

expression in symbolic form and color of that which cannot be seen; it is a doorway leading the believer ever further into a life of worship and adoration.



Our Lady of Perpetual Help

This symbolic language and technique of sacred art began in the 4th century in the city of Byzantium (later Constantinople), the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Following the legal recognition of Christianity by Emperor Constantine (A.D. 314), the “imaging” of the gospel message was no longer confined to the catacombs; it could be



Our Lady of Czestochowa

shared publicly without fear or favor.* By the sixth century, iconography was an authoritative and definitive art

form and a servant of the Christian faith. The iconographer or “image writer” articulated Christian truths through the symbolic language of the image. During the 8th and 9th centuries, two great waves of “image breaking” (*iconoclasm*) engulfed Christianity. At the heart of the controversy was the claim that the use of images was a return to paganism and idolatry. Amid the struggle and turmoil, many if not most of the early icons were destroyed. A few survive today at the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai.

The aftermath of the controversy resulted in the development of a prescribed regimen and style for the creation of an icon; from facial expressions to use of colors, everything was ordered. Even among the various schools of

iconography, tradition defined the icon. In the centuries that followed, churches of the Byzantine Empire and later Russia were ornamented with iconographic schemes in mosaic, fresco, or the traditional wood-panel.

Within the Basilica of the National Shrine, several well-known icons are represented in mosaic. These include Our Mother of Perpetual Help, Our Lady of Pocz, and Our Lady of Vilna. Traditional wood-panel icons are venerated in the Chapel of



Our Lady of Vilna

Our Lady of Czestochowa and the Byzantine-Ruthenian Chapel of the Eastern Rite.

The icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa (left) is in the style of the *Virgin Hodigitria* or “the guide.” In this icon, the Virgin cradles the Christ Child in her left arm while pointing towards him with her right hand. The Child raises his right hand in blessing and in his left



Theotokos

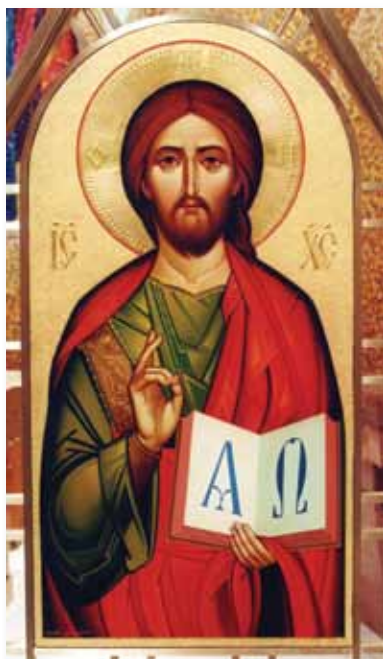
hand, he holds the New Testament. This is the focal point and the mystery of the icon: the incarnate Son of God, shown not as an infant but as Wisdom incarnate, the one who has divine authority to bless and to teach. The veneration of this icon at the Basilica is represented by the repoussé frame of silver and gold supported by two adoring angels and a gilded crown above the head of the Virgin. The icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa written for the National Shrine in 1964 is being restored and will be completed by the end of this summer. Until

then, another icon of Czestochowa is displayed in the chapel.

In the Byzantine-Ruthenian chapel, the large icon on the left is that of the *Theotokos* (MP ΘΥ), “the one who bears God.” As Mary bends her head towards the Christ Child, she looks towards the world as she presents her son. The faces of mother and child touch. Jesus focuses his attention on his mother, embracing her with his right hand while holding a scroll with his left hand. This style of icon known as *Eleousa* or “tender touch,” is a variation of the “the guide” and shows the physical motherhood of Mary and the tenderness she evokes from her son.

On the right is the icon of *Christ the Teacher*. His right hand is raised in blessing; the positions of the fingers symbolize the *chi rho* (XP), the oldest monogram for Jesus Christ. (The crossed fore and second fingers = X; the ring and little fingers touching the thumb = the top of the P) Another interpretation is that the two fingers touching the thumb represent the two natures of Christ; the slightly bent middle finger symbolizes the descent of Christ to earth or the Incarnation. Upon the open pages of the New Testament are the Alpha and the Omega, a reference to Revelation 22:13, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” The Greek letters (IC XC) are the monogram for Jesus Christ. Within the halo is a cross and within each bar of the cross is a Greek letter (O ω N), signifying the name revealed to Moses in the burning bush, “the

Existing One” or “I am.” The gold band shown on his right shoulder symbolizes royalty.



Christ the Teacher

As these examples show, the icon is a door, a way into a tradition of prayer and spirituality expressed within a symbolic language and technique of sacred art. The icon is a door, a threshold to the realm of the Spirit, where the believer can experience the transforming power of divine grace, of being “iconic,” of being made in the “image” of God. ☩

*For information on catacomb art at the Basilica see *Mary's Shrine*, Fall/Winter 2010.