

THE WORD ICON AS IT OCCURS IN THE SCRIPTURES

The word *icon* is a transliteration of the Greek word *εἰκὼν* and is found in the New Testament, particularly in the letters of the apostle Paul. While most Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians are familiar with the biblical theme of Jesus as the Word of God made flesh (John 1:1-14), Orthodox Christians also celebrate the biblical theme of Jesus as the Icon or Image of God. The icons found in Orthodox Churches are a celebration of the fact that Jesus Christ is indeed the Word of God made flesh and that anyone who has seen Jesus has seen the Father (John 12:45 and 14:8-12). As the 7th Ecumenical Council held in the city of Nicea in 787AD proclaimed, icons are in color what the Scriptures are in words: witnesses to the incarnation, the fact that God has come among us as a person whom we can see, touch and hear. In fact, in the traditional language of the Church, icons are not simply painted but written and an iconographer is "one who writes icons."

Below are listed four of the places that the word icon is found in the original Greek text of the New Testament. Normally translated by the English words "image" or "likeness" in the New King James Version, the New Revised Standard Version and the New International Version, in the texts given below the transliterated word "icon" has been left in the text.

THE WORD ICON APPLIED TO JESUS CHRIST

"He [Jesus] is the *icon* of the invisible God" (*Colossians 1:15*).

"In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the *icon* of God" (*2 Corinthians 4:4*).

HUMAN BEINGS IN THE CHURCH

"Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the *icon* of its Creator" (*Colossians 3:10*).

"And we all, with unveiled face, reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His *icon* from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is Spirit" (*2 Corinthians 3:18*).

Concerning this last verse from St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: do you see yourself as being changed into His icon by the Spirit? That this is precisely what the Christian life is? How do you reflect the glory of the Lord in your life?

Praying with Icons: the qualities of an Icon

by Jim Forest

"It is the task of the iconographer to open our eyes to the actual presence of the Kingdom of God in this world." — Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

A good icon is a work of beauty and beauty itself bears witness to God. Perhaps for those beginning to form a deeper appreciation of icons, some general comments about the essential qualities of an icon may be helpful.

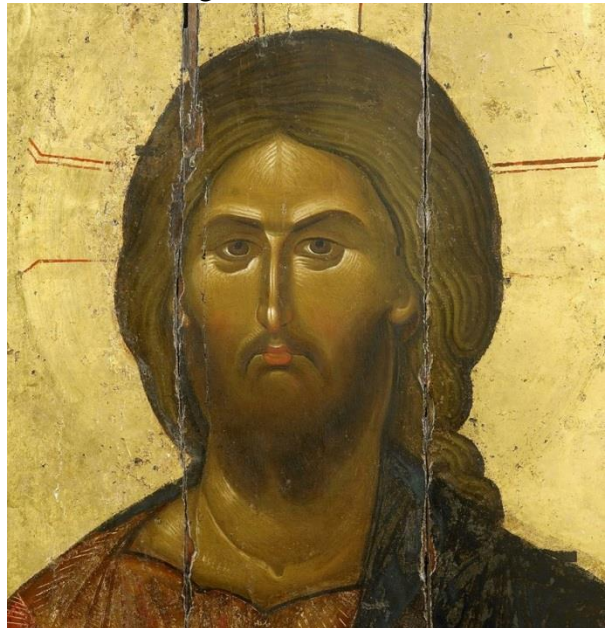
An icon is an instrument for the transmission of Christian faith, no less than the written word. Through sacred imagery, the Holy Spirit speaks to us, revealing truths beyond the reach of words.

Icons are an aid to worship. Wherever an icon is set, that place more easily becomes an area of prayer. The icon is not an end in itself but assists us in going beyond what can be seen with our physical eyes into the realm of mystical experience.

The icon is a work of tradition. Just as the hands of many thousands of bakers stand invisibly behind each loaf of homemade bread, the icon is more than the personal meditation of an individual artist, but the fruit of many generations of believers uniting us to the witnesses of the resurrection. ***Read 2 Thessalonians 2:15*** about the necessity of holding on to tradition.

The icon is silent. No mouths are open nor are there any other physical details which imply sound. But an icon's silence is not empty. The stillness and silence of the icon, in the home no less than church, create an area that constantly invites prayer.

The icon is concerned solely with the sacred. Through line and color, the iconographer seeks to convey the awesomeness of the invisible and divine Reality and lead the viewer to a deeper awareness of the divine Presence.



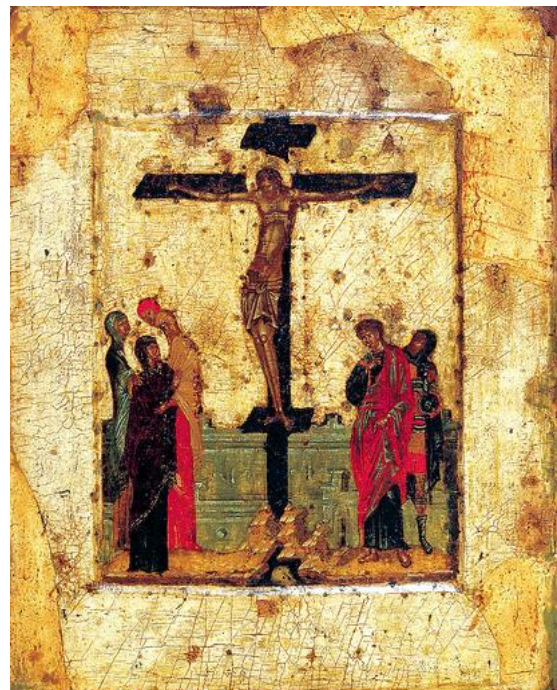
The icon is a work of theology written in line, images and color. Part of the Church's response to heresy has been articulated through iconography. For example, the bare feet of the child Jesus shown in many icons serve as a reminder that He walked the earth and left His imprint — that He was not simply a spirit who gave the appearance of being human.

The icon is not intended to force an emotional response. There is a conscious avoidance of movement or theatrical gesture in iconography. In portraying moments of biblical history, the faces of participants in the scene are rarely expressive of their feelings as we might imagine them, but rather suggest virtues — purity, patience in suffering, forgiveness, compassion and love. For example, in crucifixion icons, emphasis is not placed on the physical pain Christ endured on the cross. The icon reveals what led Him to the cross: the free act of giving His life for others.

Icons guard against over-familiarity with the divine. An icon of the Savior is not merely a sentimental painting of “our dear friend Jesus,” but portrays both the divinity as well as the humanity of Christ, His absolute demands on us as well as His infinite mercy.

Icons rely on a minimum of detail. There is either nothing at all in the background or, if a setting is required, it is rendered in the simplest, most austere manner.

Icons have no single light source. Iconographers have developed a way of painting which suggests a light source that is within rather than outside. The technique builds light on darkness rather than the other way round. The intention is to suggest the “uncreated light”: the light of the kingdom of God. The icon's light is meant to illumine whoever stands in prayer before the icon.



In icons faces are seen frontally or in a three-quarters view, the only exceptions being those, like Judas, who have abandoned the kingdom of God. Gazing at the face, we are drawn especially into the eyes, the windows of the soul. The enlightened eyes communicate wisdom, insight, and heightened perception. Meeting the Savior and the saints face-to-face, we find ourselves in a relationship of communion, while a face depicted in profile suggests disconnection and fragmentation.

Each icon reveals a person who is named. An icon of the Savior or any saint is not complete without the inscription of his or her name, except in cases where there are

numerous figures on icon. Names connote a person no less than visual representation. “The icon reveals,” notes Father Maximos of Mt. Athos, “not a world of things but a world of persons.”

The icon is not an editorial or a manifesto. The icon painter does not use iconography to promote an ideology or personal opinion. Neither do iconographers decide who ought to be regarded as a saint. The iconographer, having been blessed by the Church to carry on this form of non-verbal theological activity, willingly and humbly works under the guidance of Church canons, tradition, and councils.

The icon is unsigned. It is not a work of self-advertisement. The iconographer avoids stylistic innovations intended to take the place of a signature. This does not preclude the names of certain iconographers being known to us, but we can say that the greater the iconographer, the less he or she seeks personal recognition.

