



# The Story of Our Icons

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**The Icons of our Blessed Mother and Beloved St. John the Apostle** are written in the traditional Russian-Byzantine style. They take their rightful place on either side of the Crucified Christ and are shown, in their glorified state and not in their own agony. They direct us to **HIS SUFFERING** and what HE has accomplished in it. They bear witness to us that they have seen Him in the flesh and now live with Him in Heaven ...continually **praising God and interceding for all of mankind.**

The three year project began with **traditional blessing** of the boards and blessing of Iconographer's hands. Nine months were given to prayer, study and finalizing drawings according to the rules for writing an Icon. Daily, God was petitioned for the St. Augustine community and all who would gaze on these icons and to protect, forgive sins and guide the unworthy hands of this writer.

**The names** of many priests, Archbishop Sartain, all parishioners, families/friends

and prayer requests were written on the icon boards. Over the next three years, names and petitions were added almost daily. All were held in prayer, during the writing of the icons and will continue to share in the prayers on into the future. (This includes anyone connected to these names, new members or visitors to the church.)

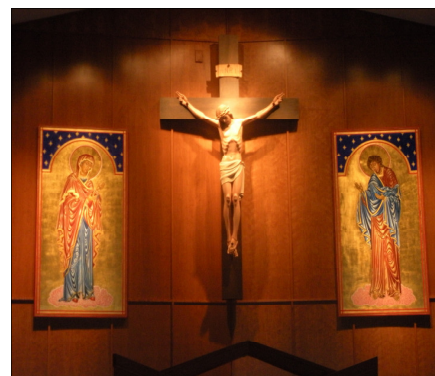
**Finding the story:** Careful attention was paid to insure that the ancient prototypes and Gospel were accurately conveyed. It became evident that our icons were not to be

taken from the Crucifixion Icons, but instead from the prototypes of the glorified figures; who were the two faithful witnesses to the Crucifixion. It is very clear that they do not want anyone distracted by their suffering, but instead, wish to guide and direct us **TO THE ONE WHO SUFFERED.**

**Their garments**, once soiled at the Crucifixion, have been Sanctified by the Blood of

the Lamb. The blood soaked edges are now trimmed in gold. The Blessed Mother wears the royal red shoes with gold cross and soles and Beloved St. John was given golden sandals.

**Hand gestures** were studied and their symbolism prayerfully chosen from the acceptable prototypes. One hand directs our



focus toward Jesus, the other intercedes for us. The palm is upturned and held near the heart. It is to be 'read' as 'compassionate holder of all your prayers'. In their glorified state, they were given the expression of "Sorrowful Joy", (a common term used by the Desert Fathers), Knowing the Joy of Salvation, but Sorrow for suffering mankind.

**The dark starlit sky**

is symbolic of the dark sky at Christ's death. The background of **23K gold** leaf symbolizes the atmosphere of *Heaven; the Uncreated Light of God*, shines through their garments in a myriad of shapes and facets. Earthen red covers **the edges** of the boards and is a mixture of Cinnabar and red clay which calls us to remembrance that the Blood of Christ, when mixed with earthly man, sanctifies.

The **green line** next to it represents the Holy Spirit, the New Covenant, the Mystical Vine. Because of this border, an icon is never framed. This **'framed' space** symbolizes the separation between the material world and the Heavenly realm.

**The many folds in the garments** represent the stages of prayer; the unfolding of Christ's message in our heart. These Holy Garments are a consoling reminder of their never-ending capacity to cover and protect.

**Iconography is our Christian Heritage.** Icons are said to be **'written' and not painted.** That's because the early Christians, through revelation of the Holy Spirit, hid within their simple icons the stories and teachings of Jesus and the apostles. By use of symbolic meaning given to hand gestures, to lines, shapes and colors, they were able to hide the Holy teachings from their enemies. These Holy events and oral teachings held within the icons and frescos, what would later be written down as the New Covenant; the New Testament of God's love and saving power of our Lord.

**The iconographic image is theology made visible.**



There are 45 icons attributed to St. Luke. Long before the Eastern and Western churches split, icons were an integral part of every Christian gathering place as well as in every home. Twice, icons were destroyed and iconographers killed. The **Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, 787, once and for all time, firmly established that**

**icons hold a visual theology and therefore are to be held as sacred tools for prayer.** The rules and canons for sacred icons were set down, not only for the use of icons, but as to how they were to be 'written' (painted) and who was allowed to write them. This was something *New*, as was the writing of the *NEW* Testament and the gift of Salvation through forgiveness of sins... **"Behold, I am making all things NEW".**

**The tradition of iconography,** prototypes and rules for the iconographers were well established by the Middle Ages. Because of their life style, only monks were allowed to write an icon. Inspiration of the Holy Spirit gave us the ancient prototypes. Many iconographers were brought from Russia to Byzantium, giving us the "Russian-Byzantine Icono-

graphy" which is still taught today along with the Iconology, which makes an icon an icon. With **the division** of the Eastern and Western Churches, this thousand year old Christian tradition was lost to most of the Western Roman Catholics and Christians. This holy tradition was kept alive for us by the Eastern Orthodox Churches until Pope John Paul II created a bridge between Eastern (Orthodox) and Western Catholics. This extended hand opened the door again to sacred iconography for the rest of the Christian world.

**The difference between Christian art and Iconography,** once understood, is never forgotten. Anyone can copy the style of an icon and call it an icon, but is it an icon? How do we know the difference? We need only ask, **"how was it made, what are its sym-**

**bols and who made it?"** Think about it like this: Looking at two Communion wafers, how can you tell which one is Consecrated and which one is not?

.....Again, we look at the symbols and liturgical steps that were faithfully followed by ones who have been called to the vocation of holy priesthood. In their ancient symbolic actions and prayers, God transforms one into the Body of Christ. But without all of these circumstances being present, the other one remains just a wafer.

**This is not to say that Christian art is without value.** It's beauty stimulates our intellect and our senses. It gives us pleasure or sorrow in the material world. Since we are also a part of this world, it has it's rightful place.

*"Let all mortal flesh keep silence and in fear and trembling stand pondering nothing earthly minded."*  
4th century chant of Eucharistic devotion. From Habakkuk 2:20



**The silent call of an icon, however, arouses the spirit in all ages alike**, with holy desires and longings for God. Just as reading Holy Scripture, gazing at an Icon of a Holy One, purifies the imagination and **draws us out of the world and into a conversation with our Lord.**

**To pray with an icon is as simple as looking.**



As we look at it, it looks back at us. It engages us .....and for awhile, we are distracted from the world. As our eyes look at the Holy Faces, follow the unusual lines and shapes of light, *we are drawn out of our senses and into our spirit*, it is in this suspended space **that God waits for us.**

How does this happen? It happens because the ones who are called to this vocation, surrender their own creativity to become the 'brush holder' of the Great Creator, and set out on a journey, unbeknownst to them. They are drawn to the unending study of the ancient rules, sym-

bols and prototypes which bend and shape them for the demanding liturgical steps that make an icon. In silence, fasting and 'prayer without ceasing', intercession is made for all who come to mind, for the Church/ the world.... entreating God to pour out His Grace on them and into the icon.....to bring healing, comfort, reconciliation, holiness, peace, and salvation for all who gaze upon it. In this undertaking, God takes pity on the unworthy beggar, Sanctifying the work and filling it to overflowing with His Divine Grace. Then something miraculous happens .....an unusual looking figure on a painted board, worked on by an unworthy hand, **becomes a Window or a Door that opens into Heaven.**

**The Symbols...to list a few:**

**The perspective:** seems off to us because the vanishing point is not on a horizon line in the 'back' of the composition. It is in the viewer who stands before it. The icon comes forward to meet you. **The elongated body:** is spiritual figure not held up by a skeletal frame. **Light on garment:** not from outside source, but from within the figure, as light shining through. **The Eyes:** large because they have seen God. They have no dot of light in the pupil. **The nose:** long and slender, no longer needed. **The mouth:** small, no need for words.

**The ears:** large on icon of the Lord: He is always listening.

**Ear lobe:** shows saint always listening for God. **Hands:** many gestures,

many meanings. Jesus hand held in blessing spells out His name: **IC XC**

**Shoulders, fore arms, knees:** unusual swirling of cloth, these are the places of service. **Neck:** dramatically bent toward the Lord, all of their being is drawn to Him.

**Hair:** follows the styles of the early prototypes.

**How is an Icon made?**

**There are 22 Liturgical steps** for writing an Icon, each layer expanding on God's creation and man's journey from Godly inspiration, to clay, to sanctification and return to God. They begin with **the board**; the vertical symbol of the Tree of Life and the horizontal, the Tree of Knowledge. The boards are hand-made of Baltic Birch, first sealed with warm rabbit skin glue. A linen cloth soaked in the glue is laid on the board. Linen symbolizes the shroud of Jesus, it also protects the painted surface from cracking apart. Linen is covered with 12 layers of natural gesso (ground marble and chalk, hide glue) Between layers, gesso is sanded and burnished with an agate stone. **The white gesso represents the Uncreated Light of God, the silent time just before creation.**

The iconographer touches the board with the sign of the cross and pauses to feel the Holy peace that will not be felt again until the icon is finished and in its home.

Many drawings are made waiting until the 'Holy One' emerges. A rough

drawing is made and then enlarged to fit the icon board. Every line that doesn't belong is removed. A de-

*Make a pause before the world of the spirit, slow down your race and look through an icon as if looking through a window. See the world which lies hidden in the heart of every one of us."*

*Vladimir Blagonadezhdin, iconographer, teacher.*

tailed drawing is transferred to the board; symbolizing God's inspiration of each of us. (An iconographer would never presume to know this by starting his own drawing directly on the board). The drawing is then etched with a sharp tool into the board, representing ones **definitive place** in creation. **There are no accidental conceptions.**



**Gilding the Halo...** The halo is covered with a mixture of red clay and hide glue, sanded and burnished with an agate stone. Unlike our Lord, gilding is an unforgiving process (on an icon). One hopes to make it through with a minimal number of mistakes. This experience with the clay represents our struggle in the physical body, to walk in the way of our calling, to practice a virtuous life, to accept that sin is a part of being human and to believe that **it is God's delight to forgive.**



**Gold is attached to the clay by the iconographer's breath.** Many layers of 23K gold leaf are cut in small pieces. For a few seconds the glue in the clay is enlivened by the moisture of the breath, it rises to the surface and draws the gold down into the clay. (it is now impossible to separate gold from clay). The gold is then burnished until reflection is seen. A bright red line is drawn around the halo as a reminder of the clay below that is being transformed by the gold. This symbolizes our spiritual nature, as God breathed into Adam. As a clay pot is made useful by it's firing in the kiln, "the Breath of Life" then begins our journey,....which is the firing of the clay.

Only pure earth and mineral pigments mixed with egg yolk and vinegar, are used for an icon. Natural pigments are not light sensitive, they can't fade. Egg yolk petrifies quickly and locks in the colors, lasting thousands of years. The acid of vinegar helps balance the fats in the yolk and kindly masks the smell of rotting eggs. Some of the pigments used for your Icons are: Cinabar, Titanium white, red clay, brown, red, yellow, and gold ochres (earths), Chrome (green), Ultramarine blue (mineral combination found on ocean floor) and Viridian blue/green (from Chromium oxide and copper)

The first layer of colors are dark and dense. Not the darkness of evil, but darkness filled with the presence of God. It represents the chaos of creation not yet conscious of God. The icon takes it's form by adding more 'light' (white) to these first colors. Each step or color is a lighter shade until last lines of pure white. Between each light is a 'float' of pure color, called the 'mercy float' because it covers a multitude of mistakes and makes smooth transition. Lines redrawn, establish boundaries and represent the laws of nature. First Light defines shapes as the first light at dawn. And symbolizes the physical world. Second Light represents inner life of man, development of his/her

consciousness. Third Light symbolizes the Heavenly Hierarchy. High-



lights are shown as facets and unusual forms of light, as though seen through the 'clothing' of Heaven's citizenry in their iconic images. The first Adam became a living soul, but the last Adam has become a life-giving spirit. The name of Image is written on Icon. A white line is drawn around halo. For the iconographer it symbolizes the white gesso of our next board, where we will begin again. After the icon is cured, it is 'anointed' with an oil sealer, and blessed.

It has been a great joy and privilege to write these icons for St. Augustine Church, and to pray for all who will gaze upon them. Thank you. jill vulcano reed, ocds....2011



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