Sacred Icons

by Aidan Hart[1]

What are Sacred Icons?

For many people today, the word "icon" means those pictures we see on the computer screen. If you click on these icons, something happens: a lot of information becomes available, or some really useful programme appears. So these icons are not just pictures to look at, but are keys or doors to a whole world stored in the computer. There is an enormous number of possibilities latent there, but they do not become available to us until we click on the icon which represents them. This is a bit similar to how sacred icons work. Sacred icons are not just pictures to look at, but are a door to heaven, a way of meeting those who dwell there.

Sacred icons are depictions, painted in a particular style, of Christ, his Mother, the angels, and holy people or saints. (*Icon* is a Greek word, and simply means an image or portrait of someone.) And so these holy images are a means of us meeting and coming to know the holy people depicted on them. Icons are more than just art objects to look at, as beautiful as they can be. They are a window to Paradise.

This might sound rather radical and a big thing to claim, and needs explaining. In the Bible it says that we are "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses", and that Christians have come to "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Hebrews 12:1,22). This means that when a few people gather in a church to worship, or one person prays at home - or even while in their car driving to work! - they are in fact joining in the inexpressibly beautiful and ceaseless worship that is going on in heaven. They are in the company of God and countless angels and saints. Holy icons are paintings of this beautiful city and its citizens, and are there primarily to help us really feel that we too are, or can be, members of this city.

Icons also show us that life with God is beautiful, that God Himself is the source of beauty. In the hermitage where I live, up in the wild hills of Shropshire, there is a little chapel with all its walls covered in frescoes of saints from around the world: St Patrick of Ireland, St David of Wales, St Seraphim of Russia, St Anthony from Egypt, and many others. On the ceiling is an icon of Christ. I like to think of him as the conductor of a beautiful symphony, and the saints around as skilful players in his orchestra. When I and others who happen to be with me begin a church service, we are not in fact beginning something but are joining in this ceaseless heavenly symphony. And visitors - even the tough truck drivers who sometimes visit after they have delivered their sixteen tons of sand! - when they walk into the chapel immediately feel that they have entered another world. The sweet smell of the beeswax candles and the incense, the light reflecting off the gold haloes on the icons, the peace - all these things create an atmosphere which quietens their soul and shows that God is the God of beauty, who wants everyone to live in Paradise.

Many visitors say that they "feel at home" in this and other such churches filled with icons. And they are in fact at home, because all of us were created to live in Paradise. This feeling is made possible largely because of the icons. They declare that in Christ there is no ultimate separation caused by death, for all the people depicted on

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the walls around, although they died on earth, are alive and present in the Church, which is the Body of Christ

When did sacred icons begin?

From the very first centuries of the Church we find pictures of Christ and his saints. Although pictures of saints are not now often seen in churches in Britain, it was not always so. Until the time of Henry VIII and Cromwell, who had icons destroyed or covered up - most churches in Britain were colourful and full of paintings. (The Victorians who hacked off most of the remaining plaster along with their wall paintings didn't help either!) Even poor churches usually had something painted, if only just scroll designs with stencilled flowers, as in the thirteenth century church to which I go. And even this parish church, poor as it was, has a wall painting of Thomas Beckett's martyrdom.

One of the oldest surviving house-churches in western Europe is found in England, at Lullingstone, Kent. It is from the early fourth century, and has wall paintings of people (probably the occupants) standing with hands uplifted in prayer. There are yet earlier examples of wall paintings in the Roman catacombs. In these, Christ was initially depicted symbolically, as the Good Shepherd, or as Orpheus (the Greek god whose music tamed wild creatures and who descended into Hades to save Eurydice), or as a fish, an acrostic for "Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour". There is a depiction of the Virgin and Child probably of the second century. From the third century we find paintings of the deceased with their hands raised in prayer, often with inscriptions like "Peace be with you" and "Pray for us." And of course icons were found in the east as well as in Rome. The historian Eusebius (265-340) wrote: "I have seen a great many portraits of the Saviour, or Peter and Paul, which have been preserved up to our own times." We can even say that icons existed in Old Testament times, if we take the more general meaning of the term icon, since the temple included images of the six winged seraphim.

Why have icons?

From 720-787 AD and 815-843 AD there was a great controversy in Christendom about icons. A group called the iconoclasts (literally, "icon smashers") said that icons were idols, and went about smashing them up. The Church, however, in a council called the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 AD) defended icons and their veneration for the following reasons.

1. The fathers of the Council said that because Christ is God become truly man, and therefore has a real body, He can be depicted; to say He cannot be depicted is to say that He is not truly human. The acts of the Council said: "The pictorial image in iconography and the verbal narrative in the Gospels are in agreement with one another, and both alike emphasise that the incarnate God the Word is genuine and not illusory." It was only after God had become man that He could be depicted; to make images of Him in Old Testament times, before His incarnation, would have been idolatry, the fruit of human imagination and a false image.

2. Iconoclasts said that to venerate or kiss an icon was to worship matter. But following the words of the fourth century saint, Basil the Great, the Church said that "the honour given to the icon passes to the person it depicts." If you give me a photo of someone precious to you, you are pleased if I cherish it and frame it, and displeased if I crumple it up and throw it away; there is a connection between the

image and your friend, not of course because ink and paper is like your friend, but because it bears his or her likeness.

3. The Council differentiated between worship, which is due to God alone, and veneration and honour which it is natural to give to all those people and things through which God comes to us. And this includes even inanimate matter. The icon affirms that everything which God has made is good, including inanimate matter, and is useful in the spiritual life. "I shall not cease to venerate matter, for it is through matter that my salvation has come to pass" wrote St John of Damascus.

4. Icons are powerful teaching tools. The Seventh Council said that "what the written word proclaims through letters, iconography proclaims and presents through colours." Without images, the Christian life too easily becomes merely a set of moral codes and concepts, rather than a living relationship with Christ and his saints. Along with the smell of incense, the taste of Holy Communion and many other things, the seeing and touching of icons help all our senses to be involved in worship.

How are icons used?

Portable icons are placed on walls of churches, in homes, on city gates, in vehicles, they are worn on the body. Their very presence in these places declares that all places, all compartments of life, can be sanctified or set apart for God.

As we have seen, icons are not just looked at but are also venerated. On entering a church, an Orthodox Christian will cross himself, because the whole church is itself an icon of heaven. Then he might buy some candles, which are ideally of beeswax. First he will go to the icon of the church's patron, and cross himself twice, bowing to the ground, kiss the icon, and cross and bow once more. In doing this, he is venerating the person depicted, using his whole body to express his love. He might light one of the candles and place it beside this icon. The lighted candle does many things: its light and the fragrance helps to create an atmosphere of prayer; it is an expression of the donor's love for the person on the icon; in a mysterious way, as long as it burns it continues to offer up the prayers of the donor, a sort of echo of his first prayer. Next he will venerate the icon and Christ, and then the Mother of God , lighting candles there too.

But as we have seen, not only do churches have icons. At home, devout people will say their prayers in a place especially set apart. In this place, besides icons there will probably be an oil lamp, holy water, a hand censer, the Bible, a prayer book and a place for candles. In Russia this is called "the beautiful corner". It is the warm heart of the home, through which the fragrance of Paradise can permeate all aspects of life.

How are icons made?

Since a sacred icon is theologically defined as an image of Christ or a saint, then an icon can be made in mosaic, wall painting, relief carving or in other mediums as well as the more common one of paint on wooden panels. However, by the word icon, most people today mean holy images painted on wood - portable icons so called. How are these portable icons made?

Up to about the eighth century, most portable icons were painted with a technique called encaustic. Wax is heated and mixed with powdered pigments and when still hot, applied straight onto a wooden panel. Sometimes an emulsion was made, which allowed the wax and oil or egg mixture to be applied cold. Most encaustic icons were destroyed during the iconoclastic period. Those that remain are mostly found in the

monastery of Saint Katherine's in the Sinai desert, where the iconoclasts' destroying hand did not reach.

Since the eighth century most icons have been painted using egg tempera, which is a mixture of egg yolk and pigment. The process is as follows.

A slight hollow is made in the face of a plank of wood. Interestingly, the raised boarder so formed means "ark" in Slavonic (the church language of Slavic Orthodox). So the icon is a sort of Noah's ark, one means of saving the material world from the chaos we have introduced to it through our disorderly living. Or again, it can be likened to the Ark of the Covenant, which was a special wooden box covered in gold, which God commanded Moses to make. God's glory was revealed to the Israelites through this Ark, just as through the icon God's glory and beauty are again revealed.

If need be, battens are dovetailed into the back of the panel to prevent warping, but also to allow for expansion and contraction of the panel as the humidity changes throughout the year. A layer or two of animal glue (nowadays, this is usually rabbit skin glue) is applied, followed by linen. The linen helps bind the gesso to the board.

Then the gesso is applied. This consists of animal glue warmed up and mixed with a fine white powder, nowadays most commonly chalk powder. Of old, alternatives included alabaster powder and an inert form of gypsum plaster called sotile. Up to fifteen layers of this warm, liquid gesso are applied. When dry, it is made very smooth either by scraping or sanding.

The design is then sketched or traced onto the panel . If gold leaf is to be applied, it is usually done now, and is generally only applied to areas where there will not be paint. One method of applying the gold, called oil gilding, simply requires the brushing on of a glue called gold size, followed, when the size is half set, by the gold leaf. A more complicated method called water gilding allows the gold to be polished by burnishing. With this technique some layers of clay, called bole, mixed with animal glue are applied and sanded very smooth. This is then flooded with water, a section at a time, and the gold leaf applied. When the bole has part dried but still a bit soft a smooth stone, usually agate, is used to polish or burnish the gold.

Then the painting begins. Egg yolk is mixed with powdered pigments. The most common pigments are earthen - ochres, umbers and siennas. Stones are also used, usually for the brighter colours. Lapis lazuli, azurite, malachite are the most common. Burnt bone (or ivory in the old days!), wood and lamp soot are common blacks. The making of artificial pigments is an ancient practice. These include verdigris (a green made from acid and copper), lead carbonate (white), vermilion (a brilliant red, mercury sulphite) and Egyptian frit (blue). Organic pigments, or those made from plants, are not permanent enough to be used.

Generally, the darker shades are laid down first. On top of these are painted increasingly lighter and smaller areas of highlighting. In this way the iconographer does not paint with shadow (as in much naturalistic painting) but with light. It is as though the iconographer begins with darkness and death, and ends with light and resurrection. The final stage is the writing of the saint's name. The icon is then blessed by a priest, and venerated. After about a year the work is ready for varnishing. Traditional varnishes are tree resins (mastic or dammar), or linseed oil mixed with a drier or siccative.

Tradition and Originality

To what extent are icons painted according to an unchanging pattern, and to what extent do they change from period to period, place to place, painter to painter?

What is common to all icons of a given subject are those things which are timeless. For example, an icon of the apostle Peter must look like him - or at least, according to what tradition says he looked like. We have already discussed how icons do not have chiaroscuro: it would be a departure from reality for an iconographer to show a saint's face with deep shadow, because the saint has himself become a sun, and shines with the light of God who dwells within him. Unlike many modern painters, the aim of the iconographer is not to express him or herself, but to reveal to the viewer of the icon the beauty and holiness of the person or event depicted.

But if three people, equally skilled, paint a portrait of the same person, their results will naturally be different. And so it is in the icon tradition. There is a legitimate and natural variation within the parameters of the icon's purpose and function. The analysis given below of two Transfiguration icons bears out how many variations there are on a given theme. The fact that old icons can be dated to within fifty years, and their provenance identified even to a particular city, clearly shows that the tradition is a living one and not merely a matter of "painting by numbers".

The style of an icon

We notice that icons do not depict things merely as they appear to the eye. The perspective of buildings is quite unlike that seen in photographs. The eyes of people are often enlarged and their nose elongated; there is no deep shading, and everything seems much flatter than "real life". And so the first impression many westerners have of icons is that they are primitive, undeveloped and naive. But is this so? Are there reasons for this stylisation?

Icons do not only depict outward appearances, but reflect something of invisible spiritual realities. In fact, all good art does this. A good portraitist simplifies or subtly emphasises certain features to bring out the character of his sitter. Below are described just some of the many techniques used in the icon tradition to express this spiritual world.

Radiance. In icons we do not find deep contrasts of light and shade (called chiaroscuro in art language). This is because the brilliant light of God shines from *within* the persons depicted. And also, icons show the saints in their present state of glory in heaven, where there is no need of a sun because God himself is their light. His glory surrounds all things and so there is no room for shadow.

Inverse perspective. There is a number of perspective systems used in icons, each teaching a spiritual truth. With inverse perspective the lines of a building do not converge on a point on the horizon, inside the painting, but instead they converge on us, the viewers. This serves to include us in the action depicted. The Orthodox hymns make it plain that a sacred event in the past is still acting on us today: "*Today* Christ is born", they will say, "*Today* Christ is risen. Let us join with the angels in praising His third day resurrection!"

Flatness. Icons do not attempt to create a great sense of depth. They do use enough highlighting and perspective to affirm that the material world is real and good and part of the spiritual life. Nevertheless, things are kept somewhat more on a plane than naturalistic painting. Why is this? It is to help us to pass through the icon to the persons and the events depicted. The aim of the icon is not to replace the subject depicted, but to bring us into living relationship with them. This explains why statues are not as a rule used.

Flatness also gives much greater freedom to arrange things according to the spiritual importance rather than their place in three dimensional space. The icon of

Christ's birth, for example, is often arranged in three bands. The angels, who come from heaven, are placed in the top band of the icon. On the bottom is the Christ child being washed and Joseph looking a bit dejected, doubting the Virgin birth. This lower realm depicts the human world. In the middle band we see a depiction of the tiny Christ child, and the Mother of God. Through Christ, who became man through the Virgin Mary, heaven and earth are reunited. This symbolic arrangement would not be possible if the event was depicted naturalistically.

Multi-view perspective. Sometimes a building is shown as though seen simultaneously from left and right, below and above. This helps us to see things as God sees them, and as they are in themselves, and not just as they appear from our view- point which is limited in time and space. The same idea often leads the tradition to depict the same person more than once in the same icon, such as with Christ in the Nativity icon, as we have seen.

Anatomy. The eyes and ears of people are often enlarged, and the nose elongated. This is to show that the saint is someone who contemplates God, who listens to Him, who smells the fragrance of Paradise. On the other hand, the lips are smaller than usual, and the gestures restrained. Being so full of God's power and love, the holy person does not have to say and do a lot for a lot of good things to happen.

There is a blend of joy and sadness in the saints' expression. Whatever state we are in - joyful or sad - we feel that the saint is there with us, like a brother or a sister, rejoicing when we rejoice, weeping when we weep.

Symbolism. Two principles guide the use of colour. One is symbolism. The Saviour for example, is often shown both with an reddish brown garment, which represents His humanity, and a blue one, which represents His divinity. Not surprisingly the robe of the Virgin Mary, from whom Christ received his human nature, is usually depicted with this same reddish brown colour. The martyrs' robes include some rich vermilion red, which symbolises their blood and the richness of eternal life into which they have entered through their self sacrifice.

The other principle guiding colour choice is harmony and luminosity. Although life on this side of death inevitably involves suffering and struggle, life with God is above all full of joy and peace. This is reflected in the colours used in icons. Warm hues are chosen, and one or two in particular might echo and resonate, like recurring themes in a symphony. Often, particularly in the Russian tradition, layers are applied quite thinly so that light passes through them, and reflects back out from the brilliant white gesso background. The light then appears to come from within the icon.

Nature. Icons show a world were the miraculous is natural, or rather, where nature has returned to its Paradisiacal state. Mountains are shown bowing to Christ, who created them, and trees have fruits and leaves and shapes that appear to be from Eden. And when plants and animals are recognisably of this earth, they are depicted in their pure essence, simplified, rather than in every detail.

Garments. We notice that drapery is not quite as we would expect. Although the folds follow the essential shape of the body underneath, liberties are taken in order to show that the body and the garment are not meant to remain a merely material, but be transfigured or "saturated" with the Holy Spirit. Garments are finished with light, or even pure white highlights, and the lines of folds are harmonious , without agitation. In the Bible it says that when Christ was transfigured "his face shone like the sun, and his garments became as white as light" (Matthew 17:2). This shows that the material and the spiritual worlds are not separated, but one can participate the other.

A study of some icons

Icons are not meant to be things which hide truth, mysterious things which only scholars can understand. They are explained by and help explain the narratives in the Scriptures and the hymns of the Orthodox Church, which are so rich in theology and spiritual insight. When the faithful go to church for the feast of Christ's transfiguration, for example, they not only see the icon but hear the hymns written specifically for that feast; one interprets the other. So let us look at a few icons and see what can be learned from them.

Fig. 1. The Transfiguration of Christ, 16th century

(Russian, Novgorod school, 16th century, 164 x123 cm. Photo: Courtesy of the Temple Gallery, London)

This icon depicts the event recorded in the Gospels where Christ took his three closest disciples, Peter, James and John up a mountain and was transfigured before them. The prophets Moses and Elijah appeared with him. The disciples were dazzled by the brilliance of the light, and so the icon shows them falling in disarray. Moses, who died, represents all those who have died, and so in this icon he is depicted being carried to the mount in a tomb. Elijah was taken straight up into heaven, and so he represents all the living. In Christ, this icon says, the living and the dead are alive together; heaven and earth are reunited. Also shown is Christ ascending and then descending the mount with his disciples.

Fig. 2 The Transfiguration of Christ, 20th century

(English, 1999)

A comparison of this icon with the one above shows both the continuity and the variety within the icon tradition. In the modern one the iconographer has limited his palette to silvery greens and grey blues. In this way he emphasises the fact that the light which comes from Christ is the uncreated light of God which permeates and sustains the whole universe. In other words, the icon stresses the possible union of God and man. The Russian icon by contrast shows each person wearing a different coloured garment. This stresses the equally important fact that union with God also affirms the uniqueness of each person.

Responding to the modern over-emphasis on activity and movement, the contemporary icon uses earlier, more simple models and pares everything down to the essential six figures. And while retaining the important contrast between the calm heavenly figures above with the frightened disciples below, it nonetheless chooses to do so in a more restrained way. Both interpretations are legitimate, both remain true to the timeless elements of the sacred event.

Fig 3 Royal Doors

(Russian, Rostov-Suzdal School, 16th century, 157x 67 cm. Photo: Courtesy of the Temple Gallery, London.)

Every Orthodox Church has a partition between the sanctuary and the nave, called the icon screen or iconostasis. This screen represents both the separation of heaven and earth which we now experience, and also the fact that through Christ they have been united. The iconostasis is thus both a wall and a door. In the middle are gates called the Royal Doors, and to the right and left are icons respectively of the Saviour and the Mother of God. There are three traditions of what can be depicted on the

Royal Doors: the Annunciation (the Archangel Gabriel appearing to Mary); the liturgists St. John Chrysostom and St Basil who wrote the two Holy Liturgy services used by the Orthodox Church; the four evangelists who wrote the Gospels. The Royal Doors illustrated here combine the first two of these subjects.

In the buildings behind Gabriel and the Mother of God we can clearly see some of the methods of perspective discussed above.

Fig 4 Prophet Elijah

(Northern Russia, 16th century, 58 x 47 cm. Photo: Magda Willems-Iven)

Elijah was taken directly up to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:1-12). After he ascended, his disciple Elisha who had been with him took up his teacher's mantle and received double the prophetic and miracle working power of his master. Down below is shown an earlier event in the life of Elijah: He is lying down, fearful and ready to die because he is dejected about threats to kill him. But an angel tells him to rise and eat and drink.

Fig 5 The Resurrection

(Russian, 17th century, 45.5 x 34 cm. Photo: Courtesy of Magda Willems-Iven)

The Resurrection of Christ is a profound mystery, and so is not depicted directly (although some later decadent icons do show him jumping out of the tomb with a flag!). Instead, the "Harrowing of Hades" is depicted. When as man Christ died, as God he descended to Hades and delivered all the righteous people from its imprisonment. Our icon depicts Adam and Eve, with Moses on the left, and Kings David and Solomon on the right. The broken gates of hell are under Christ's feet.

Fig 6 The Mandylion

(Russian, *c.* 1800, 38 x 31.5. Photo: Courtesy Magda Willems-Iven)

This icon type is also called the icon "made without hands", and Veronica, which means "true icon" in Greek. The theological basis for this icon is that Christ is the perfect image of the Father, and, being God, was made man without the agent of a human father. In other words, this icon type affirms that the source of all sacred icons in the incarnation, God becoming flesh. This truth is expressed in a legend which says that Christ miraculously left an imprint of His face on a cloth and sent it to Abgar, king of Edessa. This story is the inspiration behind the icon here illustrated.

Fig 7 The Myrrh Bearers

(English, 1999)

This icon is a copy of a fifteenth century icon from Moscow. Three women disciples had come to the tomb to anoint Christ's body with myrrh . But an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled back the stone over Christ's tomb to show and declare to them that Christ had risen from the dead. The Gospel accounts tell us that the angel's appearance "was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:3,4). All this is clearly shown in the icon. The scale of the people depicted is according to their importance, the angel largest and the guards smallest. The hill sweeping up declares that Christ has risen.

Fig 8 New Martyr Elizabeth

(1999, England)

New Martyr Elizabeth was martyred in Russia in 1918. She was the German granddaughter of Queen Victoria and sister to the last Tsarina. After the assassination of her husband she became a nun and founded the Convent of Saints Martha and Mary. The challenge with painting an icon such as this, where photographs of the saint are available, is on the one hand to capture a likeness, and on the other hand to indicate something of the hidden inner life of the saint.