

Iconography in the Christian Tradition



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The Dominican writer, Timothy Radcliffe has observed that in building connections between people, words are everything. The word *art* comes from a Latin stem *ar*, which means to fit together. The word *religion* is probably related to *religare*, which translates as *to bind*. The word *culture* derives from *colere*, to worship. These etymologies reflect a profound truth; that, throughout human history, art, religion and culture have been inextricably linked. At its heart, the purpose of art has traditionally been to join and bind people of this world with a higher divine world. Art as culture is an act of worship. As Hart (2006,p.1) asserts, the iconographer seeks to *write* a piece of sacred art "that not only depicts a world shot through with divine power and light, but is itself an integral part of the human being's union with this divine light and love".

In the opening chapter of C.S Lewis' novel *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (from *The Chronicle of Narnia* series), Edmund finds himself looking into a painting in Lucy's room and remarking how *Narnian* the ship in the picture looked. The obnoxious Eustace Clarence Scrubb walks in and begins teasing them again about Narnia. The two brush him off and again study the picture - only now, the waves seem to be moving and the ship seems to be moving. Suddenly the three of them are all drawn into the painting and find themselves floating beside the ship.



Someone from the ship jumps into the water and brings Lucy alongside the ship to have her lifted up, followed by Edmund, then the completely miserable Eustace.

This excerpt is a good analogy for how the viewer engages with an icon. The art of the icon is essentially liturgical; it invites participation from the viewer, drawing the viewer into its world and sending the viewer out into their own world to live and act differently. Paradoxically, while we read an icon, the icon also reads us, challenging us to question the mystery and contradictions we see both in the icon and then in ourselves.

The earliest Christian icons date back to the sixth century and emerge from the eastern Orthodox traditions. Many would be familiar with the World Youth Day icon of Our Lady, Veneration of the icon has been a significant part of the world youth day pilgrimage but it is important to understand what contemporary Catholic Christians are doing when they venerate crosses, icons and other sacred objects. The purpose is not so much the veneration of the object itself but more significantly what that sacred object represents. We venerate the cross because the cross is a symbol of unconditional love and a reminder of John 15:13 that "no one shows greater love than when they lay down their life for a friend." It reminds us that displays of unconditional love emerge in the most unlikely of places; the untiring efforts of Terry Hicks to get justice for his son, David is but one example; the dedicated work of school staff in some of our more challenging Catholic schools is yet another.

Teaching about Iconography

The National AIDS Network commissioned this magnificent icon written by Fr William Hart and called Mother of God, Light in all Darkness. When the icon was completed, the iconographer was noted as saying, "I wanted to create a contemplative image of absolute unconditional love and hope amidst the varied experience of darkness people with HIV/AIDS, and all of us, encounter in this life. The Mother of God holds Christ Emmanuel who guards and is the living flame of love, warmth, promise and joy. She gently repeats his gesture of shielding the Light".

When exploring icons with students the simplest and most poignant question to ask is *What do you see?* To answer this question adequately students need time - time to contemplate, to think, to discuss, to write.

This is an icon of three candles. The Christ child holds and shields one candle flame with his small hand, the



mother shields the light with her own protective hand raised in blessing. She is wrapped in deep blood-red garments and is full of sorrow. Both child and mother are flames (human lights) against the dark of night. Notice too the contrasts of dark and light used in this icon – the darkness of the background and the illuminated faces of the mother and child in its midst. The prayer that accompanies this icon is:

*Mother of God
Light in All Darkness,
shelter him
our flame of hope
with your tender hands.
And in our times
of dread and nightmares,
let Him be our
dream of comfort.
And in our times
of physical pain
and suffering,
let Him be
our healer.
And in our times
of separation
from God and one another,
let Him be
our communion.
Amen.*

When teaching about icons it is better to allow students time to simply contemplate the image in silence for some time rather than immediately providing background information and input. Students then might, for example,

- share any reflections on the icon discussing the aspects that stand out for them
- write about the messages or feelings the icon evokes in them.

After the sharing, students could be invited to come forward to take a candle. In response to the icon the teacher could begin by lighting his/her candle from the large candle, sharing a word, then lighting the candle of the



person on either side. The teacher then invites all those gathered to close the session by praying the icon prayer:

In term two of this year fifty teachers came together to learn about the place of iconography in the Christian tradition and how sacred art might be incorporated into the classroom religion program as well as the spiritual formation of students. This workshop, led by Mark Elliott and Margaret Connors of the RE Team, provided participants with the opportunity of creating their own icon based on the charism of their school communities. Some of the icons produced are depicted below. A second workshop with a specific focus on teaching about iconography using online technologies will be offered at the Multimedia Expo on 21 August.

The true iconographer has a desire to know the beauty of God and convey this to others through their art for as the great mystic and poet of the fourth century, Saint Gregory of Nyssa reminds us,

*The person who gazes on divine beauty marvels
at what is continually being revealed and never
ceases desiring more; what he awaits is even more
magnificent and more divine than what he sees.*

