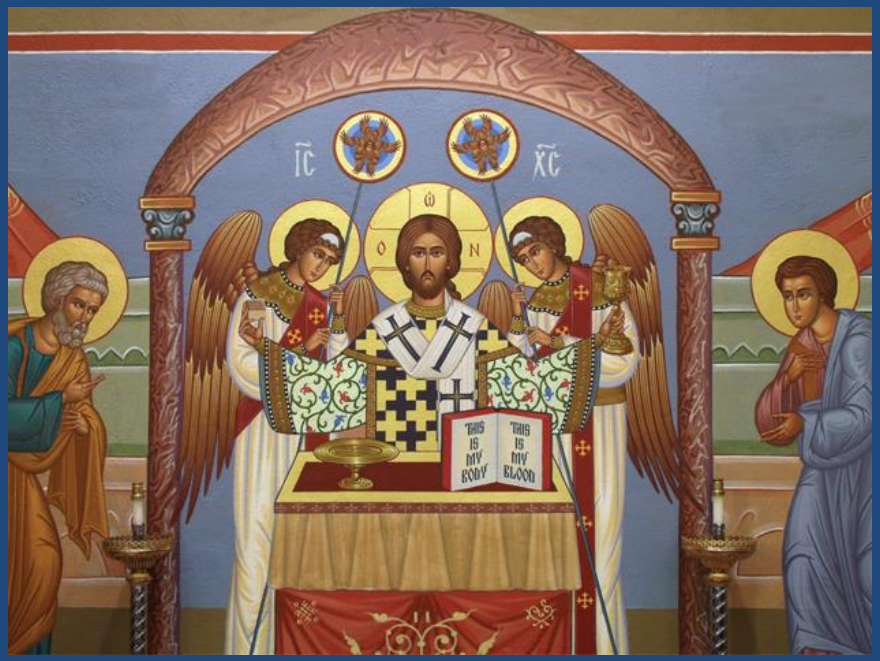
Icons and Iconography

Byzantine Iconography

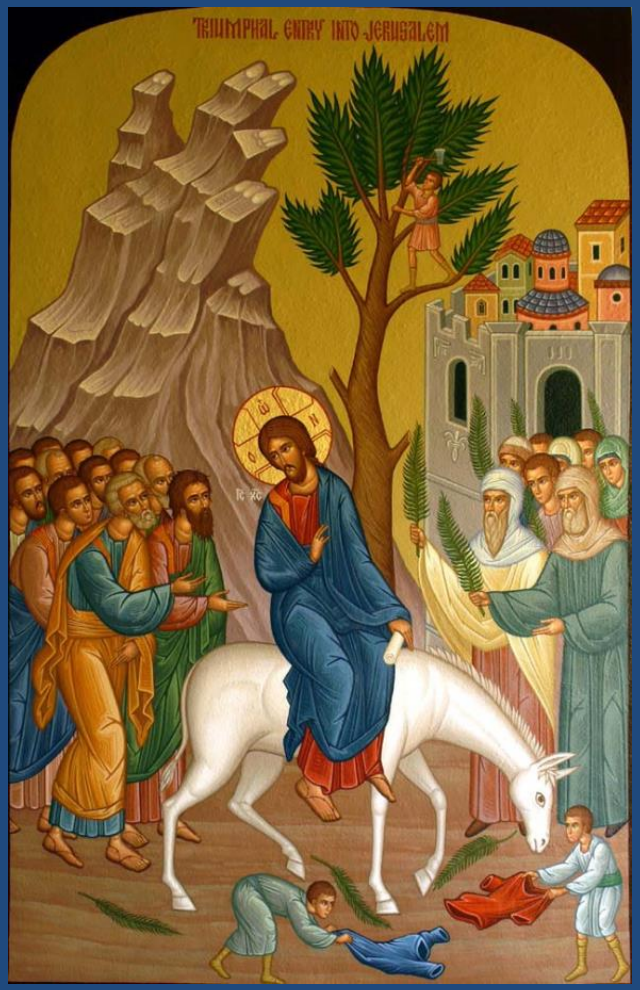


By the hand of Father Luke Dingman, www.lukedingman.com

What is an icon?

An icon (from the Greek word eikon) is an image, which tries to express a spiritual reality or a religious truth. Icons offer a presence, and prayer and a sense of communion. Icons use many symbols to remind us of these realities. For example, the lock of hair on the forehead of most icons of Christ symbolizes wisdom. Even the colours used in iconography have specific meaning.

The Rublev Trinity Icon



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Simply, an icon is like a window that helps us look to heaven. It shows us the holy people, or saints who lived before us.
When one stands in church and sees the icons, they do not feel alone.
Each one of us is made in the image of God and therefore we too, are each an icon.
An icon is not fully an icon until it is blessed by the priest in a church.

Icons :

- ❖are always based on original or other icons and are never painted from live models
- ❖are not painted, rather they are written; this is to emphasize for us that they assist us in recalling a spiritual encounter
- ❖represent the truth of God with colour and lines instead of words
- ❖represent holy persons and holy events.
- ❖are not meant to be physically accurate; for example, generally the lips are smaller, suggesting silence and contemplation; the eyes are larger suggesting that the person depicted beholds the glory of God
- ❖are not merely a decoration for the home or building
- ❖are meant to be in places of prayer; in a home it is proper to have an icon with a candle or small votive, reminding us of the God's presence in our homes
- ❖are not worshipped. The Church has made it quite clear that the faithful do not worship the wood and paint, but deeply respect and venerate the person depicted.

Functions of Iconography

1. To enhance the beauty of a church with a beauty that has an emotion of holiness
2. To instruct us in matters related to eastern spirituality
3. To remind us of our spiritual teachings
4. To remind us of the images represented
5. To remind us of the virtues of those represented in icons
6. To help transform us, sanctify us
7. To serve as means of worshipping God and venerating the saints

Image courtesy of St. Elias Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral, Ottawa

Iconographer:

- one who writes icons
- should pray, fast, and live a religious life
(It is believed that St. Luke was the first iconographer.)
- deals with tradition, rather than with creativity
- bears the responsibility of honesty, authenticity, and faithfulness to the community of believers

Colour use in iconography

BLACK – 1. The colour symbolizes grief, sorrow, sickness and death. **2.** It is a liturgical colour used on Good Friday.

BLUE – 1. The colour signifies Heaven, wisdom and charity. **2.** Blue symbolizes the Virgin Mary. **3.** Blue is often connected with the angelic class known as the Cherubim. **4.** Blue vestments may be worn when celebrating the Feasts of the Mother of God.

BROWN – The colour symbolizes the rejection of this world.

GREEN – 1. The colour symbolizes growth, life, hope, fidelity, and immortality. **2.** Green is a liturgical colour used on Pentecost Sunday and the week following Pentecost. It is also sometimes worn by the clergy when no other colours are specifically called for.

GREY – A colour reminiscent of ashes, which symbolizes repentance and humility.

GOLD – 1. The colour symbolizes worth, wealth, kingliness, and splendour. 2. It can symbolize Jesus' kingly office. 3. A Liturgical colour used for Sundays and major holy days.

RED – **1.** The colour symbolizes love, fervour, holy zeal and youth. **2.** It is a colour closely connected with blood and martyrdom. **3.** Red is connected with the angelic class known as Seraphim. **5.** Red is a liturgical colour used for feast days of martyrs, funerals and liturgies for the deceased.

VIOLET (Purple) – **1.** The colour symbolizes penitence, referring to the purple garments put on Jesus when He was mocked (John 19:2). **2.** It is a colour used to symbolize royalty. **3.** It is symbolic of preparation, mourning, humiliation and the Passion. **4.** Purple is a liturgical colour which is used during the Great Lent (Great Fast).

Image courtesy of Steve Collins

Acceptable media for creating icons

Traditionally, icons were written using only naturally occurring media – painted on a wood that had been hand sanded and prepared with gesso and linen and then painted with paints made from powdered minerals and egg yolk (egg tempera).
Today, some iconographers will use acrylic paints, but the same effects are impossible to replicate.

Icon of the Holy Family

Icon of the Domestic Church

The home is our domestic church. The mother and father are the head of the church, with the children as their congregation. The parents have an important role to play in leading their church. Their responsibility is to bring themselves and their children closer to God. The altar is to a church what an icon corner is to a home.

What is an icon corner? The icon corner provides a place where family can come together to pray. We are children of God. Just as we have photo albums full of family members, we should also have pictures of God and the Saints to remind us who we are and who we are to become.

Festal Icons

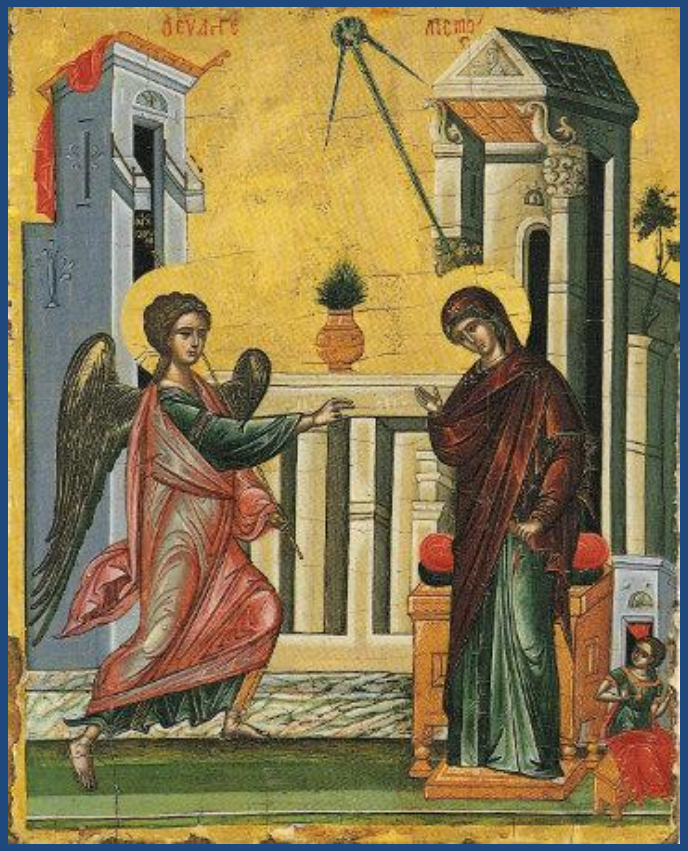
Icon courtesy of Dmitry Shkolnik

Festal icons illustrate the spiritual realities of the event they portray. Icons teach: they represent sacred persons, sacred events, they show us the reality of the Divine Kingdom. They teach history, doctrine, morality and theology. The Feast of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God is the first major feast day of the liturgical year. Anna and Joachim have a daughter whom they name Mary. Anna is the central figure because she is the agent through whom God works.

A brief look at a few icon details ...

The symbols on this icon include the Greek letters MP ΘY, which are on either side of the halo. This is the abbreviation for Mater tou Theo which is Greek for Mother of God. The IC XC are the abbreviation for the words *Isous Christos* or Jesus Christ.

Details of the Icon of the Annunciation



This is one of the oldest icons of the Church. An image of the Annunciation can be found in one of the Roman catacombs, from the beginnings of Christianity. The details of the icon have remained the same since that time. The only change is that in the image that appears in the catacombs, the angel is shown without wings.

The story of the Annunciation is found in Luke 1:26-28. The Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary and said, “Rejoice! Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women.”

Mary, obviously was frightened. She did not know what to say or do. She was troubled by the greeting. The Archangel Gabriel told her not to be afraid. He told Mary that she would have a son and she was to name Him Jesus.

Mary had more questions and the Archangel said that the Holy Spirit would descend upon her. The Archangel Gabriel also told her that her cousin Elizabeth would also have a son. Mary believed that Archangel and told him, “Behold the servant of the Lord; let it be unto me according to your word.” She accepted what the Lord offered her and the Archangel departed.

This icon is a joyous one. The bright colours of the icon show this. The Archangel has just descended from heaven and has something important to say. In his left hand is a staff, a symbol of a messenger. Also, when he is shown winged, one wing is raised, another symbol of a messenger. The Archangel’s right hand is extended toward the Theotokos and he gives her the good news from his Master.

Mary is seated and has a spindle of yarn in her hands. This detail is from Holy Tradition. In some icons she has dropped the spindle because she is so surprised by the appearance of the angel and his news. The head of the Theotokos is turned toward the Archangel and this shows she is listening to him. On her cloak there are three stars, indicating she was a virgin before, during, and after giving birth to Christ.

In the upper part of the icon is a semicircle which is a symbol of heaven. Rays are coming from the sphere and are directed to the Theotokos. The action of the Annunciation takes place in a room. The red drape hung across the structure in the background signifies this. The strange and unbelievable architecture helps the viewer understand the incomprehensible event which is taking place. As unbelievable as the architecture, so is the event.

The Annunciation is very important. The Theotokos willingly said yes to God's news that she would give birth to His Son. She could have refused, but she did not. She accepted the will of God and she did this consciously and with deliberation. Because the Theotokos said yes, all the people of the world have a chance to be saved.

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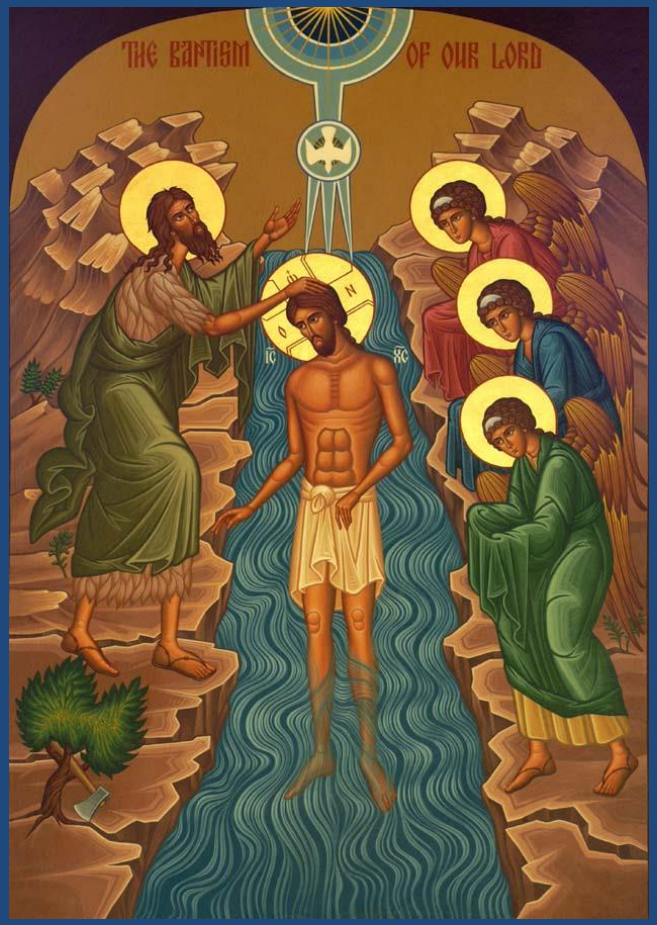
The Baptism of Christ



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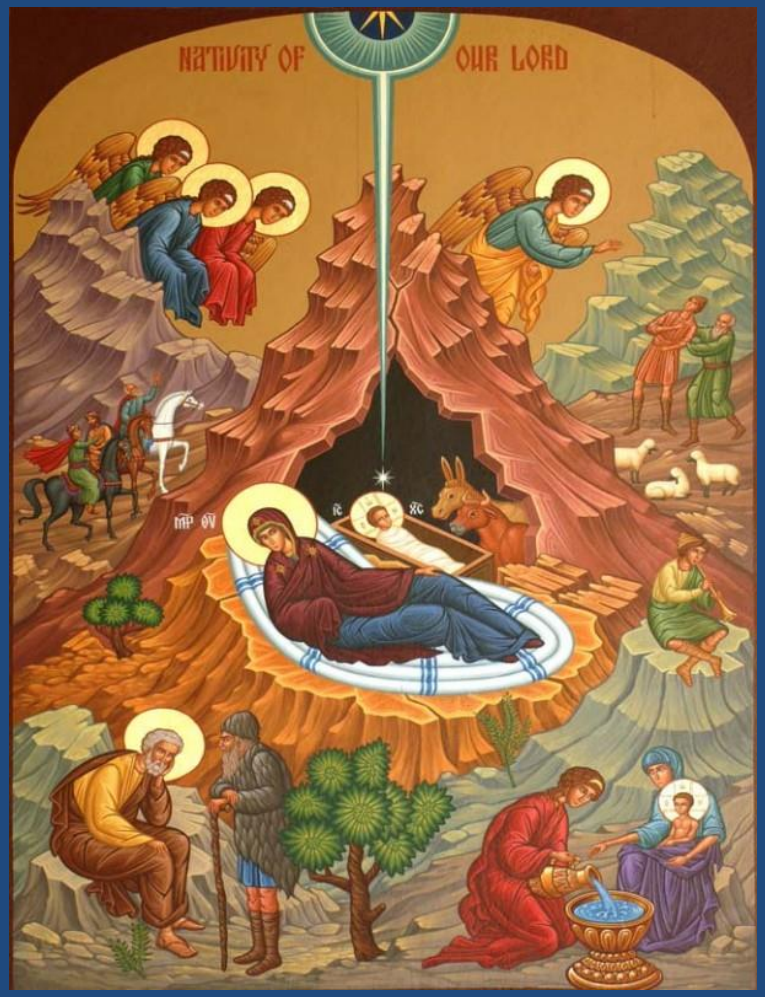
- Semi-circle at the top represents the heavens opening.
- Dove in the center is a reminder of the Holy Spirit.
- St. John's beard is long and straggly, indicating that he lived a very simple life in the wilderness.
- The harsh background and bold mountains with little vegetation indicate that it is a hard place for humans to live.
- The angels in the icon are ready to assist Jesus when he comes out of the water.

The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ

- This icon retells the story of the birth of Christ; Mary is placed in the center as she played an important role.
- In the lower corners of the icon we find two scenes; one with two women bathing Jesus, Joseph brought them along care for the Christ Child. The other corner shows a concerned Joseph with an old man. The old man is Satan and is tempting and disturbing Joseph. Satan is telling Joseph that virgin birth is impossible.
- This icon reminds us to praise and glorify the birth of Christ.



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•Three stars on her cloak remind us of Mary's virginity before, during, and after the birth of Christ.
• The long ray of light from the star is pointed directly at the cave – it announces the birth of Christ to the world.
•We see an angel proclaiming the news to a shepherd, indicating that the good news was for all.

Icon courtesy of Dmitry Shkolnik

Iconostasis

The iconostasis is an altar screen or wall which, separates the Sanctuary (where the altar is located), from the nave, (where the people worship).
The Sanctuary is where the Eucharist is celebrated, which symbolizes the Divine world. It is separated from the nave which is the part reserved for the believers and symbolizes the human world.
The iconostasis is the most distinctive feature of an Eastern Church. It is richly decorated with icons.

The first level of the icon screen has six icons, three on either side of the royal door. The large middle opening is called the Royal Door because the Body and Blood of Christ is carried through that door when the priest brings the Eucharist to the people.

The iconostasis or icon screen
St. George's Cathedral in Saskatoon

"Today he who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the Cross. He who is king of the angels is arrayed with a crown of thorns. He who wraps the heavens in clouds is wrapped in the purple of mockery . . . We venerate your passion, O Christ. Show us your glorious resurrection. "
(*Good Friday Matins)*

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Icons call us to a response . They teach history, doctrine, morality and theology. They challenge us to follow in the footsteps of the holy ones portrayed. They witness to the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Icons unite us to Christ, the angels and saints; they remind us, and make us aware of their presence. Icons allow us a glimpse of the Kingdom of God!