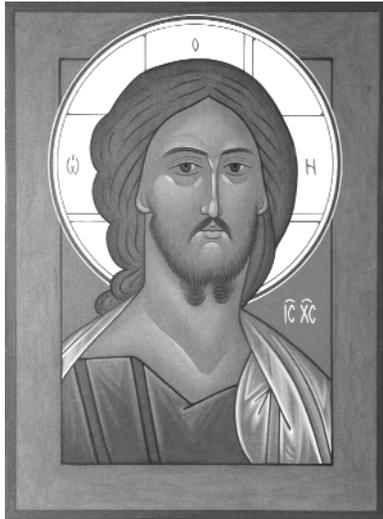


A Brush with God



A Brush
—with—
GOD

An Icon Workbook



PETER PEARSON



morehouse

HARRISBURG • LONDON

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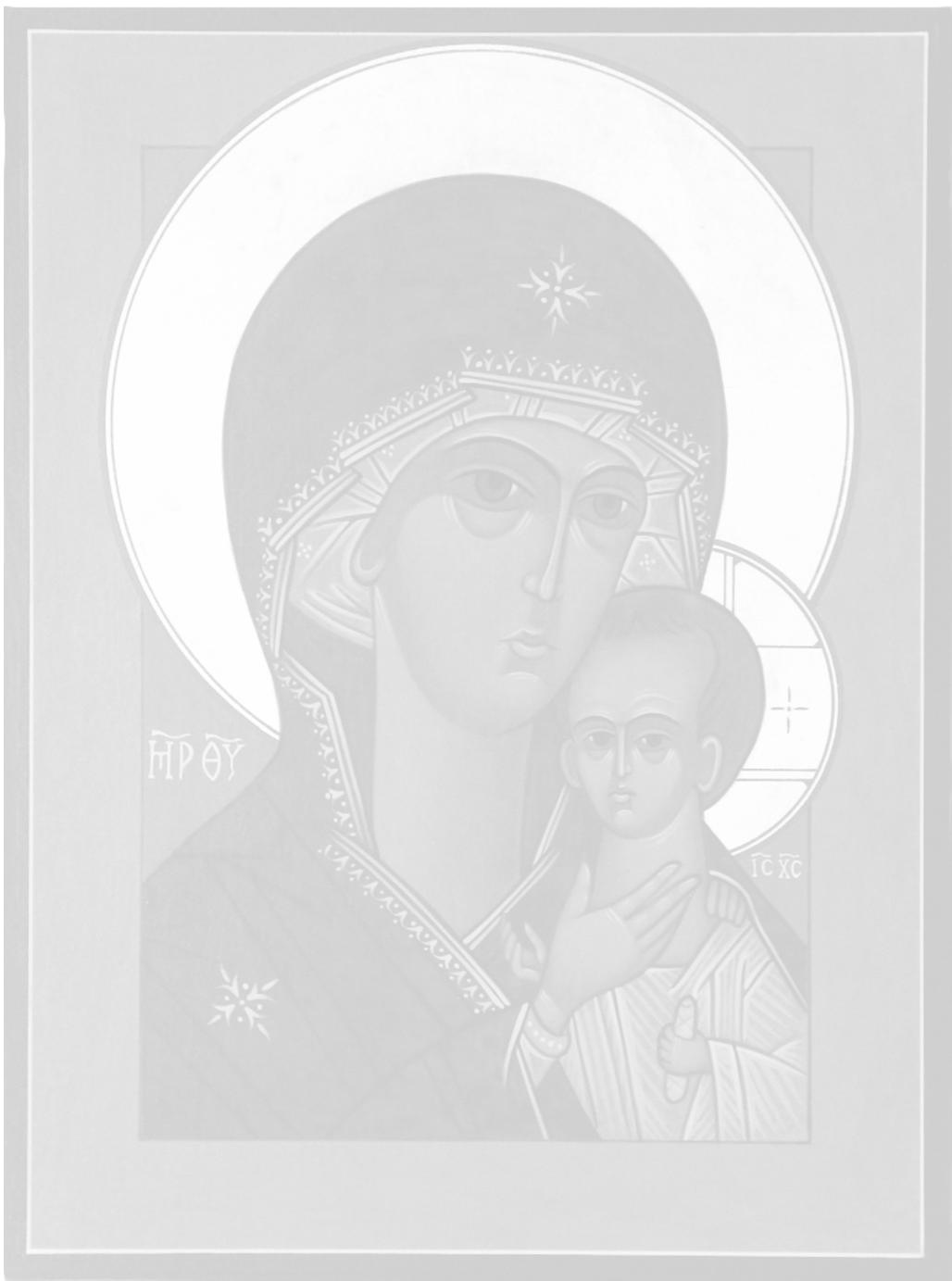
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This book is dedicated to the glory of God,
and in memory of Miss Joan Collins,
my art teacher from Lincoln Elementary School,
who first introduced me to icons,
and to all my teachers.
Thank you for everything.



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— FOREWORD —

The celebrant's introductory words for the "Order for the Blessing of an Image of our Lord Jesus Christ" in the *Book of Blessings* (the Roman Ritual)¹ state:

This image honors, above all, the truth that Christ is the visible image of the invisible God . . . the sign and sacrament of God the Father. As Christ himself said: "He who sees me sees the Father." Therefore, when we honor [his] image, let us lift up our eyes to Christ, who reigns for ever with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The ministry of the icon painter is that of the theologian: first, to know and love God; second, to praise God; third, to reflect on one's own experience of God from within a community of praise and present that reflection for the community's deeper understanding of its Faith, leading to greater praise of the Trinity that grounds all communion. Peter Pearson is a theologian who writes with paint on boards.

I first met Peter Pearson when he was playing the guitar with a folk ensemble at Blessed Sacrament Parish in Arlington, Virginia. I soon discovered that in addition to his day job (his own passport and visa service) he also painted icons. At the time, I was serving in a Melkite (Antiochian Byzantine Catholic) parish where I was being soaked in a very experiential way in the tradition and spirituality of the Eastern churches. From the first, I was deeply impressed by Peter's work and by both his intuitive and acquired knowledge and understanding of traditional iconography. I have followed his progress over the years and sat in his icon painting retreats. Eventually, I commissioned Peter to paint the icon of the Theotokos that graces our abbey church and I have come to see what a great master Peter has become. He instructs and guides. He gives encouragement. He invites the courage to take risks and be forgiving of one's mistakes. Indeed, from his own experience he teaches that mistakes can be some of our best teachers.

In this book, Peter demonstrates what he has learned at the levels of the head, the heart, and the hands. At the end of the Little Entrance in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy (Eucharist), the priest standing before the Royal Doors lifts the Gospel Book and sings aloud “Sophia, orthi!” (Wisdom, attend!). *A Brush with God* is about wisdom. It is about the wisdom of coming back to the truth that all ministry is a matter of competent skills informed by Faith. The competent skills Peter brings to his work and to his writing are a thorough knowledge of traditional iconography—years of learning through study and experience—and a deep Faith in that Incarnation that is the ground and justification for creating sacred images.

Peter’s technical knowledge, skill, and experience are clearly seen in the chapters of this book, which stand out as the writing of a painter whose work has become prayer. Chapter 4, more than just an introduction to painting techniques, could well be an introduction to self-spiritual direction.

As a pastoral liturgist, I am most excited about Peter’s insights concerning the ways sacred images might influence our understanding of theological and even scriptural texts. His clear explication of the Eastern canon of painting is a contribution to the faith life of Christians bombarded and saturated by a world of images that seduce us into conspicuous consumption rather than lead us to reflective thanksgiving. The boundaries imposed on the painter of icons come to be seen as conducive to good art and theology as the boundaries for writing a sonnet, a haiku, a hymn tune, a homily, general intercessions for public prayer, or a commentary on the Scriptures.

As a traveler, I have often found it beneficial to read as much as I can before journeying to a new land or city. When I return, I often reread some of the materials I read before setting out. *A Brush with God* serves well for that kind of reading. It is instructive reading for anyone drawn to icons. To simply absorb Peter’s sage words about “gazing” will permanently transform the way the reader looks at icons and the human face. For those who have never painted an icon but are considering doing so, this work will be good tourist reading—an encouragement, a good overview of the territory, and a source of mining what they’ve acquired in the experience of painting. For those who have been painting icons, this book will be a helpful source of suggestions and a way of understanding anew their own brush with God.

Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 2003
Rev. Andrew D. Ciferni, O.Praem., Ph.D.
Rector of the Abbey Church and Liturgy Director
Daylesford Abbey, Paoli, PA

— PREFACE —

I grew up in a fairly typical Irish Catholic home, which means I grew up with plenty of old plaster statues. You probably know the ones I mean. Mary wore the baby blue robe and her nose was usually chipped. Jesus wore the white robe with a red cloak. And of course, there were holy cards, rendered in a quasi-Victorian manner. One picture of Jesus hung in the living room and there was a crucifix over the doorway in each bedroom, which I think was a compromise between my Catholic mother and my Baptist father. But my maternal grandparents lived right next door and their home was adorned with all the typical Catholic accessories, right down to the portrait of the pope and a flower vase bearing the image of Jacqueline Kennedy. In the 1960s, you couldn't get much more Catholic than that.

I was twelve years old when I saw my first icon. My elementary school art teacher, Miss Joan Collins, had invited me to her house for lunch. Walking into her living room, I was immediately drawn to an odd picture on the wall. It was a silk-screened Christmas card, a reproduction of an old Russian icon of the Virgin with three hands by Dr. June Baskin. I was completely taken by this image.

During the late sixties, icons were not given much attention on any front, either artistic or religious. I asked as many questions as was humanly possible during the time available, but since my teacher didn't know a great deal about icons, she suggested I visit the local library and pointed me in the direction of Byzantine art. I started my search the very next day. There were very few books about icons or, for that matter, Byzantine art. But, there were enough for me to make a start. And so, I read everything the library had on hand and began to experiment by piecing together the scant information the books provided.

My mother, meanwhile, had come to the end of her ceramics venture, so there was plenty of paint and no shortage of brushes. My dad brought home felt-tipped markers from work. I began by tracing images I found in the library books, mostly of mosaics from the churches and monasteries throughout the Middle East. I fashioned panels by stretching paper over the covers of old books, the backing of paper tablets or any other cardboard I could find. When my icons were completed, I created chapels in the nooks and crannies of our old house. They looked beautiful in the light of the candles I would burn before them.

I eventually graduated to wooden panels. Over these I stretched the athletic tape discarded by our high school basketball team, and applied a flour and glue mixture over the canvas taping. I had received a set of acrylic paints that Christmas, so I was thoroughly equipped for iconography.

Throughout high school, in my many art classes, I turned every sketch and painting that I was asked to do into an icon. Some teachers became frustrated, saying that I had settled on a style before honing my skills. Still, I painted icons.

One glorious year, a friend of my father's actually made me about a dozen wooden panels on which to paint—one of the best Christmas presents I ever got. Another Christmas, my father gave me a copy of the Strogonov School's Icon Painting Manual that he had found. I spent hours in my room and then in the studio I created in our attic, painting icons. In high school, I found doors from some old kitchen cabinets with inset panels. They were perfect for icons because they looked just like panels in the library books. I remember painting an icon of Christ on one of them, carefully gluing macramé cord into a pattern on the background—orange macramé cord!

When I went off to college seminary, I continued to paint whenever I had a moment. Often, I'd paint throughout the night. I experimented with composition gold leaf. And because I didn't know how to glue the leaf down, I created a technique almost like wall papering, gluing under—and over—the leaves. So what if the gold finish was a little murky, it was a start.

Today, a color photocopy of an icon I painted about thirty years ago is ever present in my studio. It's rather unskilled by my current standards, but it was the very best I could do at the time and it helps me remember not only that time of beginning, but the journey along the way.

It wasn't until I was in my mid-thirties that I took the plunge and began working full time as an iconographer—I didn't quit my day job until the time was right. When I decided to leave my monastic community, I also decided to give myself over to painting icons with undivided focus. Fortunately, I was completely free to do so since leaving the monastic enclosure meant I had nothing and therefore had nothing to lose. It was liberating and also very scary. People of faith know that there are no coincidences and I am living proof of that. Looking back, I can see how everything I've done in my professional and scholastic life has prepared me for this vocation.

As you join me in the tradition of iconography, please know that you have undertaken to do something that is genuinely challenging—and not just in the area of technique. As you paint, be prepared to learn some truly significant spiritual lessons that apply to every other aspect of your life. Entering the world of Byzantine iconography is a daunting task; there's so much to learn, it could easily take a lifetime to get only slightly past the surface. Perhaps the most essential attitude to bring to this adventure is one of humility—a spiritual virtue that's greatly misunderstood. As the root of the word suggests, humility is grounded (hummus) in reality. Humility is not self-deprecation but the ability to grasp clearly “what is” without the excess baggage of ego. The ego—that habitual self-centeredness we all struggle with—takes on many forms. It's subtle and sly and unrelenting. The

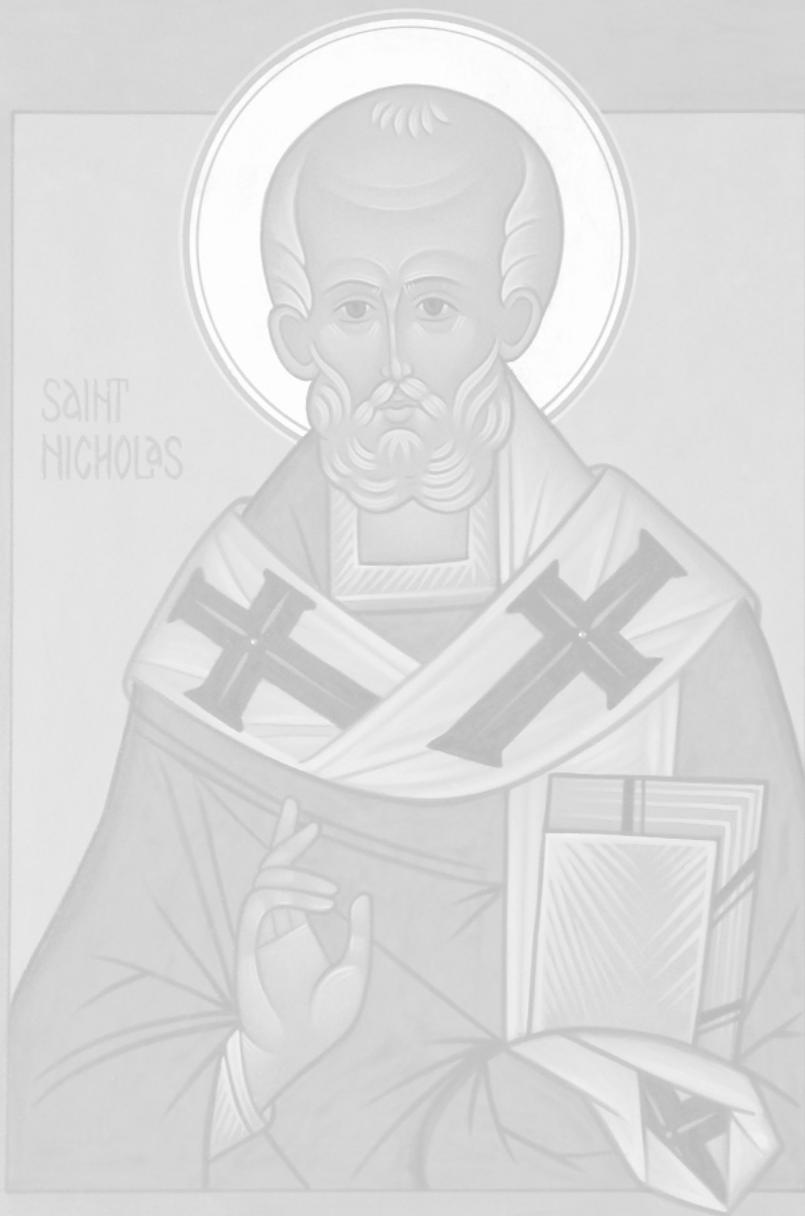
Gospels challenge iconographers, like all Christians, to abandon themselves to the journey that lies ahead. And this requires humility.

The primary role of the iconographer is one of service, offered first of all to God. Technical skill alone is not enough; prayer is an essential element in the process. Icons—real icons—emerge as the fruit of a life of prayer and invite others into an encounter with God through prayer. Our service, then, extends to all who come to pray before the image that we’ve created. Like the ancient monks who copied the Gospels, we render the Good News in color and line. And, just as the monks of old were not authorized to alter the text according to their own imaginations, we are not licensed to create images of Christ the Theotokos, the angels, or the saints according to our private imaginations. Plan, therefore, to leave your ego at the door of your studio. At every step, do the very best you can. Let go of the need to control things.

My best advice? Allow yourself to be present. Let all thoughts, ideas, and even feelings go with each moment. Never mind what lies ahead or what has gone before. As you paint, allow God to hold the concerns you carry in your heart.

Remember, too, that an icon is not—and cannot—be created by the sheer force of will. Seek to become an instrument through which God can create something wonderful. For this to happen, you may have to suspend the judgments, letting go of your need to create the best icon this world has ever seen. While you’re at it, let go the fear of creating something ghastly. Keep in mind that an icon is a prayer and only God can judge the quality of a prayer. Therefore, be gentle with yourself and what you are about to create. Let this time of painting and prayer be eternity, the ongoing now in which God exists. All of us who share a passion for icons are entrusted with an ancient tradition that we can explore but never exhaust. What I offer here is iconography as seen through the filter of my own life and practice. I invite you to consider what I’ve learned in the hope that it will serve you in your own journey and ultimately serve the Gospel that Byzantine iconography strives to proclaim.

SAINTE
NICHOLAS



— CHAPTER ONE —

The Spiritual Practice of Iconography

Icons challenge our perception of what is real. They help us understand that our perceptions are often elusive and illusory. They provide a dramatically different view of things than what we can learn through our senses. Proclaiming a reality and beauty far greater than any we have ever experienced, they challenge us to reconsider what we believe based on our senses.

Icons offer us a glimpse into things through God's eyes and invite us to enter into the mystery of a world made new by the light of God's presence. With their glowing colors and graceful lines, icons insist that God is greater than any human fear and that we, too, are meant for glory.



In spirituality of almost every kind, you'll find a discussion of "ego," the self-consciousness with which we live out most of our life. Contrary to popular opinion, ego does not always tell us that we're more important or perfect than we really are. Sometimes it abuses us with unrealistic ideas about our unworthiness and the depths of our faults. In either case, ego tells us that our ideas about self worth reflect some kind of ultimate reality. I recently came across a refrigerator magnet that boldly declares: "Don't believe everything you think!"

In reality, most of us are rather ordinary—a mix of goodness and evil, beauty and ugliness, talent and lack thereof. If we can accept this, getting on with the business of life, things will be much more serene. In spiritual life, which encompasses iconography, ego is something that only gets in the way. Now, the challenge we face is how to minimize ego in our lives. As for in our painting, it's probably best to remember that we are servants to the story as it has been told for two thousand years . . . pick up a brush and get on with it.

ICONS AND IMAGES

Translated literally, "icon" means "image." In the context of Byzantine art, an icon is an image of a person or event taken directly from Christian Scripture or tradition, rendered in a specific manner, according to specific rules.

For almost two thousand years, Christians have created images that record the faith of those gathered around—and in the name of—Jesus of Nazareth and his followers. At times, there have been passionate, even violent controversies as to whether anyone can rightfully make images of Christ, his mother, the angels, or the saints. This discussion continues today. But, what is an image?

An image points to reality but never exhausts the reality to which it points. Even if we invoke our own mother's image, our mental picture will never truly capture her totality. Rather, our mental picture is colored by our experience and subsequent interpretation of that experience. Ultimately, our mental images are more about us than the realities to which they point. How much more difficult, then, it is to address the challenge of imaging God.

Scriptures tell us God is a rock, a shepherd, a fortress, a father, and so on. Does that mean that God is literally a rock, a shepherd, a fortress, a father? Or, are we saying that God is *like* these things for us? And, do these words about God exhaust the reality of who and what God is, in and of God's self? Certainly not. An image points to a reality, yet can never totally capture it.

Since the earliest days, Christians have struggled with the validity and propriety of rendering images of the Divine. The Eastern church has a more developed theology of images than the Western church as a result of the Iconoclastic ("Image Breakers") Controversies of the sixth through eighth centuries. During this period, due to some unfortunate political decisions, almost all the icons created by the early Christians were destroyed and iconographers were regularly maimed or imprisoned. The leaders of the Church finally had to step in to decide the role of images in the life of the Church.

Saint John of Damascus addressed those who opposed the making and use of images in Christian devotional practices. His opponents were influenced by Jewish and emerging Muslim adherents who abhorred the idea of creating images of God. John understood their concerns, since for them God had no physical manifestation. But, he argued, this was not the case for those who believe Jesus Christ is the incarnation and revelation of the Unseen God. For us Christians, God has a face. We can therefore represent God in and through God's first image or icon: Jesus. What we revere is not wood and pigment, but the reality to which that image points. These images can assist us in our spiritual journey. This position was adopted by the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 843 A.D.

Later, as a result of the Reformation, there was a resurgence in iconoclastic thought and practice. With little knowledge of or regard for earlier struggles, the value of Christian faith images once again came under violent attack. Until recently, followers of the Reformation tradition rejected any representations of the Divine in worship—while paradoxically immersing themselves in "The Word." After all, even the words of Scripture are but images.

Do icons of Jesus, Mary, the angels, or the saints actually reflect how they look? Perhaps, but this question completely misses the point. We live in a world filled with photographic images of reality—our reality, not necessarily God's. Often, our criteria for judging whether art is good or bad are based on how successfully it portrays how things actually look. As a result, we've become literal and somewhat narrow-minded about images, unable to let them speak to us of anything beyond immediate experience. But in the world of icons, our standard judgments do not apply.

Every attempt to define or express who and what God is will ultimately fail because we don't possess the capacity to capture the infinite with our limited human abilities. But we need to have

something to work with, and so we continue creating images. Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, we began thinking that the images *are* the realities to which they point. This, one of the greatest failings of fundamentalism in any of its forms, is idolatry.

Icons aren't meant to reflect our perceived reality. Indeed, they are purposefully rendered in a structured way that communicates that things are very different from God's perspective. Iconography, good iconography, strives to convey invisible reality in a visible form (see p. 20). The two areas where this is most evident is in the dematerialization of the figures and the use of inverse perspective.

The term "dematerialization" means rendering figures so that they're "transparent," almost lyrical. Think about how in a good piece of music, the excellence of the composition, instead of drawing attention to itself, takes us beyond musical notes and phrases to something greater than the sum of its parts. Similarly, good icons will not only present figures or scenes, but actually encourage us to transcend all our images and ultimately to find God.

Think, for a moment, about the stories of encounters with Jesus after the resurrection. In almost every instance, the people to whom he revealed himself didn't recognize the risen Christ. He was changed somehow, different than before his death on the cross. Jesus was already in the transfigured, glorified state, quite different than his friends had known him in life. Like Jesus in his glorified body, people portrayed in an icon are supposed to be—and look—different than they might have looked in real life. They are still human, but they are also transformed by the glory of God. That's what sets an icon apart from a photograph or a portrait. In icons, people are rendered in such a way as to emphasize their spiritual, rather than physical beauty.

In Russian icons, especially those of the Novgorod school in the fifteenth century, figures are elongated, their lines given an added, almost melodic quality. You will often notice a distortion of figures beyond what might be physically possible to communicate this sense of visual harmony. Consider, for example, the image of the Virgin of Vladimir. In this icon, the child's arm, which wraps around the Virgin's neck, is much longer than it would be in reality. Yet it does not seem awkward to the uncritical viewer. The distortion of reality, then, is a tool that points to something more important.

The way colors are built up can also add to the dematerialized quality of a figure within an icon. Translucent colors seem to melt away as light passes through the pigments, and is reflected off the white gesso ground of the panel, bouncing back toward the viewer.

So too, perspective is altered in the art of iconography. In our everyday lives, the further an object is from us, the smaller it appears to be. But in an icon, this perspective is reversed; things appear to get bigger as they move away from us. Instead of a vanishing point out there, somewhere on the horizon, we become the vanishing point. If you study icons that include architectural features, you will see that perspective has been altered to make the viewer the point at which everything vanishes. The spiritual implications of this are amazing.

In our limited understanding of the universe, we are the big thing, the center of reality. Everything that is not a part of us is smaller, less important somehow. But in God's reality, we are but a small speck, a vanishing point that is less than all that we take in. We are no longer the center of the universe—God and God's reality are. Our way of perceiving the universe can lull us into the illusion of self-importance. Icons contradict this view, challenging us to reconsider things we had previously taken for granted. It might well be that when the ancient icon painters began to render reality this way, it was due to their ignorance and naiveté. Nonetheless, they have provided us with an eloquent tool by which to challenge the generally accepted understanding of the universe with us at its center.

By employing classical concepts of idealized beauty and changes in perspective, icons speak to us of reality transformed and transfigured, both in and through God's presence. They speak of transcendence and mystery. As iconographers, we point to a reality we have never seen with our own eyes. In fact, all our images of God, heaven, the angels, and the saints, whether in poetry, prose, ritual, music, or icons, represent our limited attempts to speak of the unspeakable. It takes a great deal of trust and humility to embrace this fact, to move forward knowing that the task ahead is impossible. Nevertheless, we do move forward, using a common visual language so others will recognize and relate to the faith we are trying to communicate. Ultimately, then, icons are about prayer. They emanate from prayer and invite us to enter more deeply into prayer.

LITURGY AND DEVOTION

Throughout history, people have worshipped God in countless ways—there are even different styles of worship within individual churches. For the Christian, there's a distinction between liturgical practice and devotional (or popular) piety. Liturgy is the corporate action of and by the church—this type of worship is essential. Devotion, on the other hand, is more individual and optional. In liturgy, we act together as the Body of Christ (the Church) to offer praise and thanks to God in a variety of ways. Liturgy is not something that is done to us, or a spectacle that unfolds before us like theater. It is our action, done by all, on behalf of all, and for all. Each person has a specific role in that action. In liturgy, our prayer tends to be general and universal rather than specific. And, it is not just we who offer thanks and praise; we merely enter into the greater liturgy of heaven in which the entire universe worships God.

Recently I was traveling throughout Italy, Greece, and Turkey on a study tour of Byzantine art, which was quite a wonderful experience in itself. On the last night before returning home, I stayed in a hotel in the heart of Athens near the Acropolis. The balcony of the hotel overlooked a courtyard and faced a block of apartment buildings that also housed a ballet studio. As I stood there that evening, ballet students were rehearsing—stretching, moving to the music, and working on technique. Some, from my perspective, were flawless. Some seemed to struggle with the positions in a

clumsy sort of way. Quite a few spent a great deal of time trying to imitate others without much success. They seemed to be working on a dance to perform at some time in the future and by the looks of it, that would be quite a while. As the music began, the dancers ceased their individual regimen of exercises and preparations and focused solely on the dance. What a beautiful metaphor for the prayer of the Church and each of its members.

Each one of us has a routine for perfecting our skills in the spiritual life, and each one of us is at a different level of expertise. This is our personal piety, the devotional life in which we stretch our souls and seek to embrace God's will in our lives through prayer. Naturally, each individual must determine the practice routine best for specific circumstances, needs, and skill level. The goal is to bring our best to the great dance of God in the liturgy. In this dance, we continue to be individuals, but we are also part of something much greater than ourselves. We are part of the Church acting corporately as the Body of Christ. In this magnificent ballet of worship, there are no spectators among us because we all participate in the performance in some way, swept up into the action of the whole body. Thus, the dance of liturgy is the essential climax of all our practice, enhanced by our individual disciplines of prayer.

Iconography, like the Scriptures, can play a vital role in both the liturgical action and the devotions of individual believers by reminding us of God's ongoing presence and action in our world through Christ, the Theotokos, the angels, and the saints.

The icons that fill every nook and cranny of the walls of Eastern churches make the assembly keenly aware that they are surrounded by and embraced within the unseen cloud of witnesses of every place and time. They proclaim the truth that it is not just we who offer thanks and praise; but that we have entered into the greater liturgy of heaven, in which the entire universe worships God. Heaven is united to earth and the boundaries between the two seem to dissolve for a time.

Icons proclaim God's reality in a visible way, which is why they're often referred to as windows into heaven. In our individual devotions, they help us to remember our connection with the divine by providing a focus for our wandering minds. We can relate to them in much the same way as we do a trusted friend or beloved companion, with an intimacy that mere words cannot communicate.



The West, for many centuries, has been dominated by a highly rationalistic mindset that presumes to express and explain the nature of God through words. The East has only recently begun to express its understanding of God in those ways. For the most part, Eastern Christianity has always recognized that it can only say so much about God in finite, human ways before it must go silent before the mystery of the Infinite and Unspeakable. Instead of defining ultimate reality in theological concepts, the East has relied upon its artists, musicians, and poets to proclaim what can only be understood in the heart. My entire being resonates with their wisdom.



They comfort us in our struggles and challenge us when we fall into complacency. In our prayer with an icon, just as with the Scriptures, we can experience tangible reminders of the ways in which God is constantly telling us “I love you.”

The icons in our churches and homes help us to remember that we are not alone as we enter into prayer, and that our action has implications far beyond what we see around us. Icons proclaim a reality that we cannot see but still believe exists. Whether we are aware of it or not, we dance with God.

ICONS AND GRACE

Over the centuries, icons have been described in many ways. They’ve been called hymns, sermons, prayers clothed with color, images of faith, pictorial theology, windows into heaven, and the gospels proclaimed in visual form. I invite you to consider that icons are tangible affirmations of the incarnation that offer us moments of sacramental encounter with the Source of all holiness.



Incarnational faith proclaims that God has entered into our reality by becoming a human person in Jesus of Nazareth. Because of this, all created things are hallowed by God’s presence and possess the potential to speak to us of their Creator.



6

Christian faith hinges on a belief in the Incarnation—for us God has a human face. The Eternal God and Creator of the Universe became one of us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to restore all things to their intended beauty. This event is a pivotal moment in salvation history, set within the process of God’s ongoing incarnation in the hearts of women and men of every age who labor to bring God’s Word to birth in their lives. Because of this, we believe that all of creation has a role in God’s plan.

In *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches of a Theology of Art*,² Alejandro R. Garcia-Rivera discusses “the story of the Incarnation not only as God-with-us but also as heaven-with-us,” confirming “the possibility of seeing the spiritually invisible through the materially visible.” Thus, not only were humans blessed by Jesus as he walked our dusty roads, looked up at the stars, and drank deeply of the beauty that life offers. Everything in existence was sanctified by the miracle of his presence among us. Christians see the fingerprints of their Maker in all of creation. This is why we use the things of the earth to represent, express, and deepen our faith: water, oil, bread, wine, fire, incense, and even icons. We call these things sacraments.



A sacramental encounter happens when we experience God in or through something tangible, like a person or a thing. Christians use many things in this respect, things like bread, wine, water, fire, oil, and so on, to express and experience God’s presence.

Our tradition proclaims that God uses the stuff of the universe to reach out to us, bridging the gap between our reality and the Divine. But the seven sacraments, the official grace-filled rituals of the Church, aren't the only outward signs through which we can encounter God. In fact, there have been a variety of "sacraments" recognized by Christians over the centuries—the official number of seven sacraments hasn't always been so firmly fixed. Perhaps Saint Augustine, who died in the fifth century, said it best. He wrote that a sacrament is "a visible sign of invisible grace." These signs, these sacraments, address "the whole person, body and soul," and not just our intellects or emotions or spirits.

Like the early Christians, Eastern believers often refer to the sacraments as "mysteries." Indeed that is what they are. It's a mystery that God continually reaches out to us, and in so many ways. Reflect for just a few moments, and you'll realize that it's simply not possible to create an exhaustive list of how, where, and when we may encounter God. Our God is full of surprises and everything in God's creation has the potential to be sacramental in some way.

For the Christian, Jesus Christ is the primary sacrament of God. He is the fullest sign of God's invisible grace in our midst. In Jesus, we see and experience the God we cannot see or experience without some sort of material mediation. All other sacraments exist as a result of the Incarnation of Christ. The number of ways to encounter grace is limitless, but we experience God most clearly in one another. Our brothers and sisters from the Eastern churches, like all of us in the Judeo-Christian tradition, believe that human beings are created in the image of God. For the Eastern Christian, this image remains within each of us, its brightness clouded by layers of tarnish caused by sin. We are all icons of God to some extent. If we could only see through whatever obscures that image, we would encounter our God in every person we meet.

Every now and then we meet human beings so transparent that we experience God when we encounter them. We call these people saints, living sacraments, and we remember them specifically because they have invited us to remember God in concrete and consistent ways. It's rare to meet such people in person, and those of us who have can consider ourselves blessed. The saints are people in whom the layers of grime have been cleared away enough to allow us to actually see God in their lives.

Eastern Christians also believe that when we look upon the icons of the saints we are somehow in the saints' presence in an intimate way. We can experience God shining brightly in and through them. These images are not simply pictures of what these people looked like or portraits that communicate something about their personalities, although icons incorporate aspects of both of these. Much more, icons present the saints as people transfigured and transformed by grace. They show us what people look like when God gets through with them.

Although icons aren't included among the official sacraments, they offer believers the possibility of sacramental encounter. Like all sacraments, icons proclaim and celebrate the incarnation ("God-with-us" and "heaven-with-us"), finding their origin in Jesus Christ. They are pictures of grace, inviting us to experience God's abiding presence in our prayer before them.

ICONS AND PRAYER

To speak about the use of icons in prayer—as well as icon painting as prayer—we need to begin by noting that there's a very real difference between saying prayers and praying. Obviously, these two things can, and often do, overlap. Still, we've all had the experience of saying prayers, then recognizing afterward that we haven't actually prayed. On the other hand, haven't we all had prayerful experiences that haven't involved consciously verbalized prayers?

Prayer opens us to the presence and action of God in our lives. Some spiritual leaders teach that whatever takes us beyond the self places us in the presence of God. One profound contribution of Eastern Christianity is the recognition that we can pray, or at least be moved to prayer, through our senses. Things that engage our senses can be sacramental—often without our being aware of it.

There are many ways to look at icons and a wide variety of motivations for painting them. If yours is a desire to pray, the following practices may help you to touch the silence that can be found in the presence of the sacred.

PRAYING WITH ICONS

Icons aren't just found in churches. Throughout the Eastern Christian world you can commonly see these images of faith in believers' homes, at roadside shrines, in the workplace, and wherever life happens. Their presence is a sign of blessing and a plea for heavenly protection. In the home, family prayers are offered before the icons enshrined on the home altar, also called the Beautiful Corner.

The Beautiful Corner is often placed prominently in an eastern corner, the direction of the rising sun—from which Christ will one day return in glory. Traditionally, icons were lit by the candles



You won't be surprised to learn that my own home is filled with icons—not enough to make it look like a church, but they have a definite presence in my living space. A large icon of the Holy Face hangs in the living room and before it burns the flame of a hanging lamp. The Holy Trinity watches over the kitchen, a wall of Christ icons graces the hallway, and another is in the guest room. The icon corner is in my bedroom and isn't actually in a corner but is the place where I go to pray. It has a small, low table covered with a beautiful cloth and on it sits a small wooden box containing slips of paper with the names of people I want to remember before God. There's also a book of the Psalms, a votive candle, and a bowl for incense. On the wall above the table hang icons of my heroes in faith: Saint Benedict, Saint Andrei Rublev the Iconographer, and Thomas Merton. The icons are adorned with my great grandfather's rosary, some sprigs of olive from Taize and Assisi, and a Jesus prayer rope from Greece. Late at night it is not uncommon to find me sitting before them with my dog, Tristan, snoozing in my lap. He gets a bit of sleep while I seek guidance and the silence of God in the midst of my hectic life. It's the heart of my home.

or oil lamps that burned before them at all times, so that even during the darkest night, their gentle presence was known.

Icons can be a powerful link and reminder of the ongoing presence of God and the holy ones in our homes. Consider your favorite prayer spot and how it would be blessed by the addition of an icon. As far as I know, there aren't any rules for creating a prayer corner, so you can experiment a bit and find what works best for you. The point is prayer, so create a place that is free of distraction, one where your attention will not be drawn away to the telephone, the television, the computer, the dog, or the kids. Then, go there and offer your prayers. When you have finished with what you have to say, take some time to listen with your heart and with your eyes. You will be amazed at the many ways the icons will speak to you of the abiding goodness of God.

When approaching an icon for prayer, it may be helpful to begin by placing your concerns and problems in God's hands during your prayer time, allowing God to hold whatever might distract you. Ask God to speak to your heart, perhaps not with words, but speak nonetheless to the depths of your being.

Gazing

One way to pray with an icon is simply to look at it. Here, I'm referring to a particular kind of "looking."

In our culture, we frequently look but don't actually see. We give things the "once over," scanning to obtain information. We view what we're looking at as an object, something to download, sort, define, use and, eventually, delete from our files. Icons require—and deserve—a different kind of "looking."

When you come to look at an icon, give yourself entirely to the experience. Let your gaze rest on the icon until you see not just what you think you see (or want to see). Instead, look deep into the image. Gaze until you can see it, not just with eyes or intellect, but with your soul and heart as well. Let yourself become completely absorbed in this sacred encounter.

You can develop this skill by spending a few moments each day, for several days or even weeks, gazing at a specific icon. Simply be willing to show up, spend the time, and sit.



For me, the act of painting can itself be an act of prayer if I give myself over to that experience so completely that I forget myself, losing myself in the act of creating. Often, while painting, I'll ask for God's help and presence as I work. That doesn't mean that God was absent before I made my request, but that I might not have been very present to God.

Give yourself to the experience as fully as you are able, letting go of everything else as much as you can. Don't let expectations sabotage your experience. Simply be with the image. Look and look

until you truly see. Listen with your eyes. There are no rules for doing this. Be gentle with yourself and your prayer. One of the most notable aspects of Eastern iconography is the profound stillness of the figures and scenes. This stillness can draw us in, transmitting its sense of calm and serenity to our hearts.

Breathing

Adding an awareness of breath can be a powerful addition to this practice. Notice the inward and outward movement of air in your body. Try linking this to the Jesus Prayer:

*Breathing in: Lord Jesus Christ,
Breathing out: Son of God,
Breathing in: have mercy on me
Breathing out: a sinner.*

You can simplify this prayer even further:

*Breathing in: Jesus,
Breathing out: mercy.*



In either case, the point is not the words, but the rhythm that clears away the internal noise. Allow the prayer to become as natural as your breathing and as deep as your own heartbeat. The Jesus Prayer is a wonderful aid to the act of remembering how we are always and everywhere in God's presence. Saint Paul tells us to "pray at all times." This means we must strive to *be prayer*, not just to say prayers.



Icons speak in silence and they speak of silence, the great silence of God. To those of us from the West, this may seem strange and paradoxical. Eastern Christians have an entire spirituality of silence that has played a significant role in their approach to iconography. Known as "Hesychasm," this refers to a state of spiritual repose or quiet attained through the grace of God, solitude, and contemplative prayer. We from the West may insist that our God is not mute and never silent, but the Hesychast understands that the silence of God reveals more than all human knowledge combined. The Hesychast insists there's a huge difference between knowing *about* God and knowing God. To know God, we must quiet the endless newsreel of thoughts, perceptions, opinions, and reactions that fills our minds and hearts, and then abide in the silence. This is done with the aid of the Jesus Prayer, an ancient mantra that can still the mind and open the heart to the silence of God. Although not all iconographers were Hesychasts, the best iconographers usually were, because they painted what they knew most intimately.

PAINTING AND PRAYER

You can use the same prayer process as you paint an icon: Give your concerns to God, still yourself by breathing consciously and/or using the Jesus Prayer, and then begin. You can expect many thoughts to pass through your consciousness as you work; just allow them to become part of your prayer.

Remember, too, that there are many rules and regulations, skills and techniques to learn as you begin to explore iconography. Until you become comfortable with these, your attention will be divided. Keep working at it and try not to expect too much too soon. As your abilities develop, your self-consciousness will diminish and your experience of prayer will increase. All you really need to do is to learn how to work in a way that carries you toward God.



I have made thousands of people and situations part of the icons I've painted by imagining them as individual brush strokes, painting them into the icon. At other times, I've been so involved in the process of painting that I've not been aware of anything else and been surprised to discover that hours had passed.

These are experiences of timelessness, of the eternal now. I've come to understand these as experiences of the Kingdom of God. Obviously, this experience of the sacred is not limited to iconographers, but iconography can be one avenue to the experience.

Fasting

You may have heard about the tradition of fasting while painting an icon. Indeed, my first teacher recommended abstinence from meat and alcohol while working. Over the years, I've developed an approach that might be useful for anyone wishing to paint in a way that reflects an older, scriptural understanding of prayer and fasting.

Fasting can take on many meanings; some are more helpful than others. Often, fasting involves depriving ourselves of something, an act of sacrifice pleasing to God. The problem with this approach is that it can turn into a form of bargaining with God.

Scripture is filled with references to fasting, but one of the clearest and most challenging passages comes from the Prophet Isaiah:

Is this the manner of fasting I wish . . . that a person bow their head like a reed, and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to [your God]? This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the

homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn. . . Then you shall call, and [your God] will answer, you shall cry for help, and [God] will say: Here I am!

Isaiah 58: 5–9 NAB

Fasting from self-centered and self-serving ideas and actions is a far greater and more difficult sacrifice than simply depriving ourselves of small luxuries. If you fast, do so to become more just, more loving, more of what God envisions for us. Become your prayer and open yourself to compassion. There is no better way to make you ready to render the silence of God and the compassion of God as these things radiate through the faces of God's holy ones.

