Icon of the Holy Family

Created for the Diocese of Crookston
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The Icon is written by Fr. Thomas Loya of the Tabor Life Institute in Chicago. He is a Byzantine Catholic Priest and he and his staff will also be the main presenters for Saturday of our Marriage Congress in October 2014.

Byzantine religious images painted during the Byzantine Empire began in the 5th century. This rich tradition continues to this day, over 1,500 years after the first images were created! This enduring heritage is a testament to the powerful religious experience that these images evoke.

The iconographer must prepare himself for the task of painting an icon by following a strict discipline of fasting and prayer. He must quiet his spirit and submit himself to God. The icon he creates will not be signed. He will not expect accolades or applause when the icon is completed. The icon will be created to inspire and lead others into worship. Painting the icon is not a use of imagination. Instead, the icon will be painted using the prescribed regimen and style that has been passed down through the centuries. Everything from the facial expressions to the colors used is predetermined. There is no icon of the Holy Family as such in the strict tradition of Byzantine iconography. Nonetheless, the Icon of the Holy Family created for the Diocese of Crookston, Minnesota follows as faithfully as possible the ancient canons of Byzantine iconography. The composition of this icon is careful not to present a ‘family portrait’ type of image of the Holy Family. Rather, the composition follows the prescribed patterns of Byzantine iconography that convey the theological and dogmatic significance of who and what is being represented in the icon.

Mary, Theotokos (Greek for The Mother of God) is depicted in deep, earthy red tones signifying that it is from the Theotokos that Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, received His earthly, human nature. The earthy red tones also signify her purity and her royalty as Queen of Heaven. In Byzantine iconography the Theotokos is always depicted with three stars, one on each shoulder and one on her forehead. These stars signify that the Virgin Mary remained a virgin before, during and after the birth of Jesus Christ. On this icon two stars can be seen on the Virgin Mary. The third star is hidden behind the Christ child.

The Christ child is depicted in colors of white and shimmering gold symbolizing his royal Messianic glory. The posture of the Theotokos and the Christ child is based upon the ancient Byzantine icon of The Panagia Eleousa, or “Virgin of Tenderness.” The expression of the Theotokos is meditative and even pensive. She does not gaze sweetly upon the face of her Christ child as more naturalistic portrayals of the Virgin and Child often do. Rather, the Theotokos looks away as she contemplates the vocation of her Son’s suffering, death and Resurrection. Byzantine iconography always seeks to keep our eye from lingering in the natural world. Rather, iconography attempts to usher our gaze toward the ultimate theological and dogmatic meaning of the Christ child—the purpose and destiny for which the Second Person of the Trinity took on our fallen, sinful human nature.

The left hand of the Christ child clings to his Mother and together with His right hand it seems as though the Christ child is pulling his pensive Mother toward Himself as though to comfort her and reassure her as
she contemplates so awesome a mystery. The right hand of the Christ child caresses the chin of His Mother. In addition to comforting His Mother, this gesture of the Christ child symbolizes a mystical spousal relationship between the two of them: Christ is the New Adam (1 Corinthians 15:22&45, Romans 5:12-21) and the Theotokos is the New Eve. (Galatians 3:16-19 and 4:4-7)

Saint Joseph is seen as he is always depicted in Byzantine iconography—on the outside or background. His posture is solicitous and vigilant. As he beholds the unique relationship between the Theotokos and Her Son, Joseph represents all of us, called to likewise stand in reverential awe of the Great Mystery of Our Lord’s Incarnation. The left hand of Joseph is raised in awe and reverence but with restraint, for no one may ‘touch the living tabernacle of God.’

The initials next to the Theotokos are ancient Greek abbreviations for the “Mother of God.” The initials next to the Christ child are ancient Greek abbreviations for “Jesus Christ.” Inside each of the bars of the cross in Christ’s halo is one of the Greek letters O Ω Ν.

The tradition places this Greek phrase, inside the halo for a theological reason. "Ho ὃν" is the answer that the LORD God gave Moses when he asked God’s name; the LORD answered, “I am Who Am.” (Exodus 3:12-14) This signifies that although we see the Christ child as if looking like any human child, He is at the same time the Only-Begotten Son of God existing before all ages. In our icon, only one of the Greek letters is visible.

The purpose of icons is first to create reverence in worship and second to serve as an existential link between the worshipper and God. Icons have been called prayers, hymns, sermons in form and color. They are the visual Gospel. As Saint Basil the Great († 379) said, "What the word transmits through the ear, the painting silently shows through the image, and by these two means, mutually accompanying one another...we receive knowledge of one and the same thing." "If a pagan asks you to show him your faith," said Saint John of Damascus († 749), "take him into church and place him before the icons.”

The icon was never intended to hang on a wall merely as an aesthetic object, though it may be stunningly beautiful. If it is used simply as an attractive piece of decoration, its purpose is diminished. An icon can only work its power within the particular framework of belief and worship to which it belongs. The icon is a link between the human and the divine. It provides a space for the mystical encounter between the person before it and God. It becomes a place for an appearance of Christ, the Theotokos or the Saints—provided one stands before the icon with the right disposition of heart and mind. It creates a place of prayer.

Icons are not created to force an emotional response. When portraying historical scenes the faces don’t show emotions but instead portray virtues such as purity, patience in suffering, forgiveness, compassion and love. An example of this would be the portrayal of Christ on the cross. Neither is the icon a sentimental picture. Christ is always shown as God. Even the icons of Christ seated on His mother’s lap show Him with an adult face, revealing that even though Christ lived as a child among us He was also God.

Icons depict silence. There are no actions displayed, no open mouths. The icon invites the Christian to enter into contemplation, prayer, and silence. Space is not defined as three-dimensional and time is insignificant. The story told by the icon precludes time and space. Light proceeds from the character portrayed in the icon. There are never shadows in icons. This shows us that the saint portrayed is “glorified” having completed the race and entered into heaven.

As theologian Sergei Bulgakov said, "By the blessing of the icon, a mystical meeting of the faithful and Christ is made possible.” provide courage and strength in a world marked with tragedy and suffering. They provide joy since icons remind us that we are deeply loved by God.