Introduction

A shackled prisoner was sentenced to death but given a choice by his captors. He was taken into a silent courtyard and shown a foreboding black door. The condemned man had the choice to suffer a quick and relatively painless death by execution or to take a chance and enter through the black door. The prisoner, conjuring in his mind the potential terrors that might await him behind the dark portal, chose death by execution. After he met his fate, an eyewitness to the event inquired of the executioner: "Sir, what exactly is behind the black door?" The executioner stepped over, opened the door, and revealed the sun-drenched vastness of a glorious world outside the confining walls. "Freedom," he said.

So much of our lives as human beings, but more to the point as Christians, is spent resisting the invitation to that which brings greater freedom. Freedom from sin brings us back to union with the community (or Church). Freedom from our fears brings us back to union with the world. Freedom from that which holds us back from growth and conversion brings us back to union with ourselves. Freedom from all the above and all that is not good and life-giving brings us back to union with God.

Icons have experienced a phenomenal resurgence in Western spirituality, and what were once the ancient and sacred language of our Orthodox brothers and sisters are now an increasingly integral part of the faith journey for all Christians. Twenty years ago, the solemn, silent, and dark images of Christ, the Virgin, saints, and holy people were rarely seen outside of museums and art books, but today they are being engaged and venerated by more Western Christians. They pray with them, integrate them into their liturgies and sacred spaces, have them in their homes, and are moved to create them in workshops that are now being conducted all over the world. Why is that?

I believe that Western Christians have rediscovered icons not only for what they are but also for what they are not: museum pieces or

dusty relics from an earlier epoch of faith, staring gloomily at us with large eyes darkened by centuries of soot, tallow, and the unforgiving effects of time. Instead, icons are living and vibrant testaments of faith, sacred portals through which God's truth and beauty shine forth into our realm and, literally, stare us in the face. The mystery is that, in total peace and prayerful repose, we can stare right back. It is the "beloved and lover" gaze of the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross. It is the "I and Thou" dialogue of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. It is going through God's black door and falling in love.

If encountering icons—especially the Icon of the human face of God in the person of Jesus Christ—entails falling in love, then it stands to reason that we would want to know more about the One we love. If someone has an obsession with sailboats or speedboats, the logical impulse would be one day to attempt to drive one. If the obsession is light planes and the freedom of the open air, the impulse would be to take lessons to learn how to fly one. If someone begins to enter more prayerfully and intentionally into the mystery of icons, it is natural that the desire to create one would inevitably follow.

For nearly two decades as artist in residence at St. Gregory the Great Parish in Chicago, I have conducted more than one hundred icon workshops, retreats, lectures, and classes on the history and spirituality of icons. The most challenging (yet rewarding) have been the icon retreats, lasting from two to seven days, in which participants ranging in age from five to seventy-five journey with the Image. In the process, they encounter the Word, and ultimately they realize that the two are one. The problem that almost all participants encounter is not that of becoming proficient in iconography but that of simply beginning the journey. To return to the earlier story, fear and hesitation invariably hold them back. Only children, who are fearless, are without inhibitions and look forward to the opportunity to cover the panels and themselves with paint.

One of the first and most emphatic reasons adults give for why they can't take the icon workshop, despite their desire to do so, is "I can't even draw a stick figure!" What I don't tell them is, "Confidentially, neither can I." What I do say is that the reason for creating one's own icon is not to reproduce a luminous image that looks as if it just

tumbled off the walls of the Annunciation Cathedral in Moscow. The reason for creating an icon is to embark on a journey, in prayer and silence, in which one will come to know intimately, not so much a process, but a person. This person may be Jesus, the second person of the Trinity; his Mother; or the men and women in the drama of salvation history who, like us, lived, loved, suffered, laughed, struggled, and ultimately became so absorbed in the life of God that his light came to shine through them. It is not our individual prowess that is being celebrated in the icon, but the triumph of those great lights that continue to shine in the Communion of Saints.

This book has been written to be your guide into the act of iconography, which is an act of prayer. It has been divided up into seven chapters, which not only measure the days it will take to create your icon, but also are an approximation of the days in which God created everything from nothing. Therefore, the creation story will guide this retreat. From the first chapter, where we will begin with a void and slowly create form, through the creation of light with the application of gold, to the use of water and pigments that come from the earth, we will slowly arrive at the fullness of the divinized person. We will not be simply painting as much as we will be actually participating in God's act of creation, which ultimately is the reason why we paint icons.

Everything you will need to know is in the book. This includes not only the step-by-step instructions but also reflections on the sacredness of each step of the process and materials. Also included is a list of all materials needed for the icon retreat, from brushes and panels to pigments, compass, and cleaning supplies (see page 112). If you are reading this book, it is because the Spirit has moved your heart to do so. Now we will begin to move your hands.

Guidelines

Before you start, however, here are some general guidelines to keep in mind.

- Remember that this is a retreat and not a work project with a deadline. Your seven-day retreat will be a fluid motion of prayer centered on the rhythm that you set. It is possible to work on

your icon and complete several steps in one day or spread them out over several weeks. Our main objective here is not to be dogmatic with our "days" but to allow you the opportunity to enter prayerfully into the deeper meaning of each step along the way, becoming more intentional and aware of the work of your hands and the movement of the Spirit. Correlating each step with God's own work of creation, however long that took, is that for which we strive.

- This is your time, and your work area will become your "sacred space." Think of all the materials as the food that would be gathered when following a recipe for cooking. My mother, who was Greek and to whom cooking was as much a natural impulse as breathing, would say a prayer before putting bread into the oven and kiss the warm loaf as it was brought out. Like Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a seventeenth-century Carmelite writer, Mom gloried in the presence of God among her pots and pans in the kitchen. While I don't suggest (or even recommend) kissing your panel or jars of paint, an awareness of the sacred nature of your work will be reflected in the clear, uncluttered, almost Zen-like minimalism of your space.
- As you would if you were preparing to bake bread or a cake or make a full five-course meal for a special occasion, take the time first to read the list of materials needed for each day. Set before you only what you will need for that day's work in order to keep your space organized and "sacred" and not to be overwhelmed by the mass of materials and clutter that will inevitably crowd you. Keep the materials for the other days in a covered plastic storage box. If you are doing this retreat alone in the privacy of your room, chances are good that materials will become lost or shuffled around. If you are doing this in a school, a dorm, a parish setting, or a religious community, the chance of things getting scattered is almost inevitable.
- Carefully read the spiritual reflections and thoughts that precede the work section of each day. Understanding the sacred nature

that underpins the steps of painting the icon will give you a better spiritual road map as to what you are doing and why.

- Also be sure to carefully read and reread the instructions for each step before jumping into it. Take a few minutes to practice on a sheet of clean paper or cardboard before you begin the actual work. For example, do some sample tracing with the carbon to see if you have the right sense of fluidity and gracefulness to the lines and curves of the face and garments. When it comes to the painting portion, practice with your brush to get a sense of control over painting, both the lines and the large areas that will be required. Also practice with the compass that will double as your paintbrush for doing circles.
- Clean and organize your area after each day's work. Remove any clutter such as paper, tape, and so on, and make absolutely sure that you wash all paintbrushes in warm soap and water and dry them gently with a soft cloth. Change your water daily, and have a steady supply of clean rags since you will probably use several during the painting process. Make sure all flecks of gold leaf are brushed up and collected in a small container for future patching or thrown away. Even synthetic gold leaf is not a good thing to have floating about and possibly ingested.
- Begin each day's work with a prayer. This could be silent prayer, or the morning prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours (the day's prayer can be found online), or a short reading from the New Testament. Close each day with the same. Bidden or unbidden, God is present, but it is an awareness of God's presence that we want to continue to heighten in our retreat as much as we want to do the same in the entirety of our lives.

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Day 1

Word and Image

The earth was a formless void. . . .
Then God said, "Let there be light";
and there was light.

~Genesis 1:2a, 3

When I was a novice in the monastery, I was brimful, as are most novices, with what is known in the trade as militant ignorance. Militant ignorance, in short, is when someone claims to know absolutely everything about things that in fact they know pretty much nothing about.

My militant ignorance in the novitiate revolved around my iconography lessons, which were being conducted by another artist named Joe. My greatest desire at the time was to be left alone so I could soar to the mystical heights of iconographic greatness without Joe looking over my shoulder. However, the minute he walked away, I became the equivalent of a three-year-old child in sandals and a black cowl, filled with abandonment issues and terrified of making appalling and irreparable mistakes that would simply ruin my icon in progress.

So it's easy to imagine the terror I felt when Joe told me that he was leaving for a two-week trip to Italy with his wife and that it was time for me to continue work on my icon alone—and without his constant assistance and calming presence. To me, that was the same as being adrift in the North Atlantic in a leaky lifeboat, with nothing but

my terror, my icon panel, and my brushes. Joe, however, said something to me that I have carried with me for the past twenty-some years of painting icons and that I would now like to impart to you.

Joe told me, in effect, that if I calm down, engage my image, and enter quietly and prayerfully into the process, then, he promised, "the icon will tell you what to do next." Now, I had heard of weeping icons, bleeding icons, and icons that turned back armies and won battles for the soldiers who marched behind them, but I had never heard of a talking icon. Frankly, it unnerved me. It slowly dawned on me, though, that what Joe had been trying to instill in me was the mystery that I have endeavored to go into deeper ever since.

It is the leitmotif to which we will return again and again down the length of our retreat. What we are about to undertake is not a sort of spiritual Olympics; it is not a race we are running that is fueled by our own talents and that ends with a triumph based upon our own individual exertions. Instead, we are embarking on a journey into a relationship with the Other, a journey that entails an inner dynamic in which one speaks and the other listens and then vice versa. This is called conversation and, as a very wise priest friend of mine used to say, "wisdom is in the conversation." The conversation is part of the journey, and the journey is nothing more than a step-by-step process by which we arrive at a destination. In the end, what Joe was trying to tell a frightened novice shaking in his sandals was that while we do have maps and signposts pointing us in a particular direction, once we get into our rhythm, the act of going from step to step will become as natural and organic as putting one foot in front of the other.

Theological Reflection

"In the beginning . . . God created the heavens and the earth" (Gn 1:1). Not by coincidence, the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis, begins with the same words as the last of four canonical gospels, that of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1).

If we are setting out to learn the "how" of iconography, it is imperative that first and foremost we learn the "why." Why, of all three Abrahamic religions, do Christians dare to create images of the divine and

pictures of the One who cannot be rendered in any visual form? Isn't that not only impossible but also an idolatrous and blasphemous violation of Mosaic Law?

We create icons and venerate them (but we do not worship them, which is widely and substantially different from veneration) because of one word: *Incarnation*. Of the three fragrant shoots of the Tree of Abraham and his One God, only Christians believe that God took flesh in the person of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, and, as St. John said, "lived among us" (see Jn 1:14). We believe that Jesus is truly God but also truly human, and that—like Shakespeare had Shylock say of himself in *The Merchant of Venice*—he was a Jewish man of the Law who had eyes, hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, and passions. In these ways, he was just like us. If killed, he would die, just as we would. Indeed, he suffered and died, but then he rose from the dead and broke forever the bondage of death. He ascended, still fully human and fully divine, to sit at the right hand of his Father. That is the Jesus we portray in iconography.

What has been clearly taught and understood in Eastern as well as Western Christianity is that images can be created of Jesus. This is because Jesus had a human body, and so creating and venerating images of him is a way of giving praise and honor to the Incarnation, the Word. We don't know how the Christians of the apostolic age and the subapostolic age, directly afterward, used imagery in worship, because the hard and fast data simply is not extant or conclusive. As the early Christians saw themselves as people of the Temple and continued to worship there, no images were used or even necessary, except perhaps the sign of the fish or the Chi-Rho (the monogram of Jesus' initials).

Later, as a fledgling sect spreading throughout the far-flung Roman Empire that embraced the known world, Christians began to assert their individuality and develop an iconographic language that by the second and third centuries was startlingly bold and pedagogically powerful. Though a bit rough-hewn, the catacombs of St. Callixtus in Rome (late second century) show how the Christians in the rapidly expanding Church were neither timid nor hesitant to portray Jesus, the Virgin, apostles, and scenes from scripture in the gathering spaces

and burial *cubicula* (chamber or small room) of the dank, candlelit catacombs. The artisans employed a highly refined theology in their frescoes, showing Jesus as the Good Shepherd, Jesus with the woman at the well, Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and Jesus with his apostles at the Last Supper. Just as St. Matthew portrayed Jesus to his audience as the New Moses, the New Lawgiver, so also well-thought-out visual correlations in the catacombs show the finding of Moses in the water as similar to Christ's Nativity, the Crossing of the Red Sea as pointing to Baptism, and Moses striking water from the rock in the desert as compared to baptismal waters of life. Even at the dawn of Christianity, images were used not to decorate but to evangelize and to draw people deeper, through the surface reality, to infinite truths and riches beyond.

By the year 313, Christianity had been decriminalized in the reign of Emperor Constantine, and it was ultimately embraced by Theodosius I as the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380. The ancient center of power on the Tiber had fallen to the Goths and then shifted to Constantinople in the eastern fringes of the empire. Thus, under the emperors of Byzantium, who were the successors of Constantine and the old Roman Empire, icons were fully embraced as an integral part of the liturgy and spirituality of Eastern Christianity. They were seen to be as central to worship as the Cross and scripture, and the language and style became increasingly refined and more dazzling. Since Christianity was now officially married to the ruling dynasties and expressed the soul of an empire as well as a people, icons were now accorded the honor of being covered with gold, silver, and precious stones. Instead of being roughly rendered on cavern walls, icons were now proclaimed on more massive surfaces such as on the walls and domes of basilicas and in palaces, government buildings, and monasteries, as well as in the lowly homes of the lower classes. Despite their magnificence, the icons' simple message that the Word is also Image always remained firmly intact. It was the questioning of this truth, though, that soon led to the greatest challenge to the use of images in Christian worship.

Beginning in the eighth century and concluding in the middle of the ninth, Byzantium was sundered by the heresy known as

iconoclasm. Influenced by certain bishops from Asia Minor, the Emperor Leo III (717–741) decreed that icons were idolatrous and blasphemous violations of God's law and ordered all to be destroyed. To the iconoclasts, only the Cross and the Chi-Rho were acceptable in public liturgy or private prayer. Suddenly, bishops, theologians, clergy, religious, and laity, men and women who for centuries saw icons as accepted and integral parts of their faith, now had to step forward and speak up in defense of the sacred images. Hundreds suffered imprisonment, torture, exile, and even death for the right to create and venerate their icons.

Out of this iconographic tumult, however, came forth some of the most powerful and profound theological defenses of the right use and understanding of images. The foremost theologian who defended icons during the heresy was St. John of Damascus (679–741), a fiery, uncompromising champion of the Catholic faith whose words still ring today with the courage of his convictions. Using the strength of orthodoxy coupled with good old-fashioned logic, St. John of Damascus neatly destroyed the iconoclastic arguments and clarified for all time the clear and distinct boundary between worship and veneration. When the iconoclasts charged that the Church faithful in the East were worshiping matter in the form of two-dimensional images of the Savior, St. John fired back. These Christians are not, John said, worshiping matter; they are worshiping the Creator of matter who became matter for their sake and their salvation. Never hesitant to kick a heretic when he was down, John further demolished the iconoclast's shaky logic by famously stating that, in the end, if one denies the image of Christ (which proclaims the Incarnation), one is actually denying the Incarnation. By the middle of the ninth century, the iconoclasts were completely crushed, and the use of icons was once, and forever, restored to their rightful place in Church worship in the East (the Church in the West had continued to support the use of images).

As we begin the journey of our icon retreat, let us look at both the previously mentioned scriptural passages from Genesis 1 and John 1 and the subject for our retreat: Christ Pantocrator—or Christ the All-Powerful, the Teacher. It is an image of the Lord of all that is, seen and unseen, who has conquered, not by the sword or great armies,

but by the fulfillment of the Law in love and the contradiction of the Cross and empty tomb. Icons are windows, doorways, portals out of our temporal realm and into eternal ones. They are objective truth and, unlike secular art, not ends unto themselves. Icons guide and teach. As visual manifestations of God's truth and beauty, they have to be not only visually arresting but also theologically correct. Like good liturgy, good ballet, and good art, the forms, gestures, colors, and objects shown in icons all have a resonance and meaning that take the viewer beyond the surface reality.

There is no description in scripture of how Jesus actually looked, because physical details were not as important as his life and message. The earliest depictions of Jesus from the catacombs show him as he would have been known to the Romans of the second and third centuries: a clean-shaven young philosopher in a long toga, or a shepherd boy in a short tunic. By the fourth century, with Christianity the official religion of a Roman Empire now centered in the East, the first images of Jesus as a wisdom teacher with long hair and a beard began to appear and then dominate in Christian iconography. This is the template of the Lord that serves as our image of Christ Pantocrator.

Jesus, bearded and with long hair parted down the middle, stares out toward us with large eyes that convey a sense of intimacy and peace. He is clothed in garments that do not so much make an ancient fashion statement as declare bold theological truths. Jesus' tunic is red, while his cloak is a dark or purplish blue.

Remember that when icons came to mature use and widespread veneration, the great number of faithful who encountered them could not read. As Pope St. Gregory the Great said, images are books for the unlettered. Therefore, the icons' symbols, gestures, and even colors were intended to be read as though they were parchment scrolls in order to be understood. When our Byzantine brothers and sisters encountered the icon of Christ Pantocrator, in the dome of a basilica or on a small panel hanging in their home, they could "read" the icon in order to determine the person in the icon and establish a relationship and connection with the person whom the icon represents.

Red first connotes the idea of blood, that which gives our bodies life and forms the physiological matrix of our humanity. In short, it

symbolizes humanity. The particular shade of blue in the cloak that Jesus wears drew immediate correlations with royalty, kingship, and divinity. Without dry cleaners and over-the-counter dyes in abundance throughout the ancient world, this shade of blue was achieved through the expensive, time-consuming, and no doubt unpleasant task of squeezing ink from shellfish. Thus, this color was reserved only for the most exalted ranks of those who could afford it—namely, royalty. Therefore, the combination of red and blue on Jesus' garments in the icon was to its first viewers, and still is to us, a declaration of Jesus' humanity and his divinity—the hypostatic union of true God and true man in one person. While to us this seems like an overstatement of the obvious, during the first several centuries of the Christian era, the Church was being rent asunder by the various heresies (like Arianism) that questioned the two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ.

Next the icon draws the reader to the hands of Christ. While his left holds the book of gospels (the Word of Life), his right hand is raised in a curious way that conveys both message and blessing. The fingers, crisscrossed over each other in what appears to be a confused jumble, are actually spelling out an abbreviation of the Greek initials for the holy name of Jesus (**I**HCOY**C**) Christ (**X**PICTO**C**). This is not a sign language but a sacred language that will speak to us, pointing to the Word who is, as God said of himself to Moses on Sinai, simply "I AM."

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1). The immensity of St. John's poetic prologue is no less daunting to get one's arms around than the opening verses of the first chapter of Genesis: "The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Gn 1:2). Even in the beginning, before time started ticking away in the vastness of space, the Word was.

We start with the preparation of our gessoed panel that is sanded on all six sides to the smoothest possible touch. A gessoed panel is basically a wood panel expressly prepared for the purpose of painting in a particular style or media—generally for egg tempera but also for oils and acrylics. Traditional gesso is made from a mixture of marble dust and watery glue from animal hides that, when applied in nearly

a dozen layers, makes for a solid and sturdy "ground" upon which the image can be rendered. Unlike a canvas, with which an artist uses an underdrawing as his or her guide and visual road map, a gessoed panel can be etched with lines that allow the artist to see the placement of facial and garment lines when the opaque paint is applied in several layers.

By using a gessoed panel, we honor the preexisting Word, and the reason is twofold. First, as a gift of God's creation, which was spoken into existence by God's Word, wood is a sturdy and dependable material of great durability that is found aplenty in most parts of the world. Second, in using wood we honor the Cross, the means through which our salvation was achieved. The wood of the panel, even at this supposed state of "nothingness" and "void," shares by both its physical and its spiritual DNA a memory of Christ and his Paschal Mystery, and because of this we approach the material with reverence.

Painting the Icon

Materials for Day 1

- 8" x 10" white gessoed panel
- An 8"x 10" color copy and black-and-white copy of the Christ Pantocrator icon. You can obtain these images in two ways: (1) download and print both copies from the Ave Maria Press website at www.avemariapress.com/product/1-59471-757-5/Drawing-Closer-to-Christ/#more_tab, or (2) photocopy Plate V of the color insert of this book in color and in black and white at 150 percent of the original. You will not trace the border so be sure to trim it from your black-and-white image.
- Carbon paper
- Adhesive tape
- Steel wool
- Ballpoint pen with fine point or fine-tip drafting pencil
- Compass with interchangeable pencil and painting nib (available at an art supply store)

Steps for Day 1

Step 1. First, take your steel wool and rub it over the white gessoed panel to give it a smooth shine. (See fig. 1.1.)

figure 1.1