SHORT WRITINGS FROM TAIZÉ

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Brother Jean-Marc

Icons

This booklet seeks to answer some of the questions that are often asked about icons, using as examples the icons in the Church of Reconciliation at Taizé. It does not go into details about the history of icon painting or their artistic composition, since such information is easy enough to find in books or on the internet. Its focus is on the essential meaning of icons and on providing some keys to help understand them; and it suggests some ways in which they can help a life of prayer to grow.

Some of the icons in the church at Taizé are reproductions of Russian icons from the 15th or 16th centuries; one

goes right back to the seventh century; others (notably the icons of the cross and of the Virgin) are modern but inspired by the same tradition, which is still very much alive. The roots of this tradition go back to the earliest days of Christianity, but it truly began to flourish from about the fourth century. In response to waves of criticism ("iconoclasm") in the seventh to ninth centuries, the theology of icons was clarified, and its principles were defined by the second council of Nicea in 787. In the West, religious art took a different direction from the Middle Ages onward; in the East, the older tradition was maintained, and it is flourishing today in Russia and many other countries. It is also attracting renewed interest in the West, not only because of the artistic value of icons, but also because for many people they offer a means of prayer and a fresh way into the Gospel.

It has not been possible to reproduce icons in colour for this booklet; the line drawings are in the style of the outlines that icon painters use for setting out the composition on the background before adding the colours.

What Is an Icon?

The word *icon* (in Greek εἰκών) simply means "image": it is the ordinary word in Greek for a picture. But it used in a special sense to refer to pictures made, following a definite Christian tradition, in order to help people to pray.

It is important to bear this main purpose in mind if we are to understand icons and their meaning. Their aim is to be an aid to prayer: they are not primarily decorative;

they are not made above all to teach about the Bible or the doctrines of the faith (though they do also play this secondary role); and, unlike much western art, they do not aim to express the vision or the personality of the artist as an individual.

The aim of icons is prayer. And for Christians, prayer is a relationship, a friendship, with God. This means that the purpose of icons is above all personal: they are made in order to help us enter into a relationship with God, and to support this relationship and help it to grow. The characteristic features of icons are all designed with this purpose in view. If we have grasped this, we have the principal key to understanding icons. But before we go on to see what this means in practice, there is a problem that must be faced.

It is easy enough to see how keeping a photograph of a friend or member of one's family can be a reminder of them, and serve to rekindle our love for them when they are far away. But how can this be possible with God? "No-one has ever seen God", says St. John (1 John 4:12). God is not a being with a physical body; God has no shape or size or colour; there is nothing in God that it is possible, in a literal way, to make a picture of.

But the problem goes much deeper than this. It is not just that God has no visible, physical body. It is that God's very nature, his essence, is fundamentally mysterious. God can never be fully grasped or pinned down by our imagination, nor by any form of definition or thinking about him. The best our ideas can do is to point in the right direction; but they can never encompass God. When we try to get hold of him, he eludes us.

Now in fact most of us, when we think about God, create images of him in our minds. For example, we remember that God is mighty, and so we make an image of some sort of very powerful being. Or – and this can be a lot better – we believe that God is beautiful, and so we imagine someone who is radiant and lovely. Or else – much more problematic – we say to ourselves that God wants us to do what is good and will be unhappy or angry with us if we do what is wrong, and so we picture some sort of supernatural referee or policeman. Some of these images may be quite helpful, and can lead us towards God, at least up to a point. Others are hopelessly wrong, and can completely distort our idea of God and so keep us away from him. But none of these pictures is very good. None of them quite corresponds to what God really is in himself. If our faith is to grow, we need to become gradually more aware that all our images of God are totally inadequate to what he is in reality. He is always greater, or better, or more alive, or more surprising, or simply quite different from the picture we had of him. Any picture of God turns out in the long run to be a false picture.

This fact plays a very important role in the Bible. In Biblical times, almost every nation kept statues or images of their god or gods in their places of worship. The temples of the Greeks and the Romans or the ancient Egyptians are familiar examples. The Jewish people were unique in insisting on a principle that they had received as a command from God: "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them." (Exodus 20:4-5). This principle is

reiterated again and again throughout the Old Testament. So it was that the sanctuary of every other temple of those times held the image of the god, but in the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, the most holy place contained, instead of a statue, an empty space.

One way to understand the sense of this is to think of a friendship between two people. If a friendship is to grow and mature, the friends need to be themselves and not hide behind a mask or false persona that they might be tempted to put on in order to be accepted or admired. And each needs to allow the other the space to be himself or herself, without imposing conditions: "I need my friend to be such-and-such a kind of person." If there is not this essential space for authenticity, the friendship will remain stunted and can never grow or deepen as it should. When God tells his people "You must not make an image", he is saying to them: "Leave me a space to be who I really am. Do not try to fill that space with an imaginary god. Let me be who I am. Because I want a real friendship with you, not an imaginary one."

The reason for forbidding images of God was to leave space for a reality, for a mystery, that is better than any image.

This principle, in its literal form, is conserved to our own times by the Jewish faith and also by Islam, both of which do not accept the use of images in prayer.

How is it, then, that many Christian churches allow and encourage the use of such images? This fact seems, at first sight, particularly paradoxical in the case of the Orthodox Church: it is Orthodox thinking that emphasizes more than any other tradition the mystery of God,

the fact that we cannot encompass Him by our thinking or imagination.[1] And yet it is the Orthodox Church that has particularly developed the tradition of making and using icons.

The resolution of this paradox is in the person of Christ. An icon does not represent God in himself. There are, in the authentic tradition, no icons of God the Father, nor of the Holy Spirit, nor of God the Son considered apart from his incarnation in Christ, precisely because God is by nature mysterious and invisible, and any image set up to represent him is likely to become a barrier to knowing him better. But what is represented in icons is Christ Jesus the man. The reason why it is possible to make icons lies not in the Old Testament, whose revelation of God forbids the making of images, but in the New. "He who has seen me," says Jesus, "has seen the Father" (John 14:9). "Christ," says St. Paul, "is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). These mysterious words make clear that, though God cannot be represented by an image in the ordinary sense, a true image of God does really exist: not an image painted or drawn by a human being, but the person and the life of a human being, Jesus Christ. This is what theology refers to as the Incarnation: Christ was not just a teacher, come to tell us something about God, nor even a prophet, charged with a message from God. His

[1] This important aspect of Christian thought is known as *apophatic* theology. It approaches God not by asserting things about him, but by progressively negating all assertions in order to transcend them: if God is powerful, his power is so different from human strength that the word "powerful" can be very misleading. If God is loving, his love is so much deeper than human love that even the word "love" is quite inadequate. In this way, negating statements about God becomes a way of approaching him even more positively. This strand of thought is present in almost every Christian tradition, but it is particularly emphasized by the Orthodox.

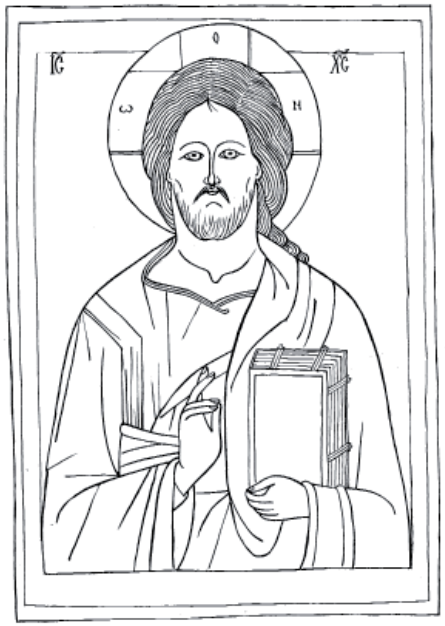
identity, his very self, which is expressed in all his acts and works, is the same as the identity of God. Who is God? Who is Jesus? The answer to these two questions is the same. The person and life of Jesus reveal the heart of the mystery that is God.

Now, Jesus had a physical body like ours; you could see him and touch him. If there had been cameras in those days, it would have been possible to photograph him. There is no impossibility about making a picture of him, as there is in the idea of making a picture of God himself. And this is the starting-point for Christian icons: an icon is a picture of Jesus Christ. But it is a not a photographic portrait simply showing his physical appearance. Icons are not interested in Jesus' height or build or the colour of his hair; their focus is not on externals, but on his identity, his deep identity as a human being, which is nothing other than the identity of God.

So icons are not made in opposition to the command of the Old Testament. Rather, they are a celebration of Christ, of God incarnate in humanity, and they are a way of expressing prayer through Christ to God. St John of Damascus, writing in the eighth century, expressed it in these words:

> In the past, the incorporeal and invisible God was never represented. But now that God has been manifested in the flesh and has dwelt among men, I represent the visible in God. I do not adore matter; I adore the creator of matter, who has become matter for my sake, who chose to dwell within matter and who, through matter, has caused my salvation. (Discourse I, 16)

The Icon of Christ



Because the whole concept of icons is based on the person of Christ, on his identity, and on the relationship with God that he came to open up, the icon that shows his figure is the most important one. Particular attention is paid to his face. The face is always turned towards us, never in profile: looking towards us, it invites us to look towards him. The face is surrounded by a halo, a golden circle symbolising the presence of God, who is light.

At the top of the icon, his name is written, usually in the shortened Greek form IC XC for IHCOYC XPICTOC, Jesus Christ. The halo of Christ is often inscribed with a cross and with the Greek letters ὁ ὤν, which is the Divine Name in the Septuagint version of Exodus 3:14, where God reveals himself to Moses: "I Am Who I Am", or "I am the One Who Is".

Some icons show nothing more than the face of Christ; others show him quarter-length or full-length and seated on a throne. His right hand is raised in a gesture of blessing that is frequently to be met with in icons of the saints, too. In his left hand he holds a scroll or a book, symbolising the Word of God. Christ himself is called the Word of God: the main idea here is communication or communion. Through Christ, God wants to speak to us and to bless us. The book may be closed or open; if it is open, some words may be visible. These will usually be in the language of the country where the icon was made, and will always be from the Gospel: "I am the light of the world", for example (John 8:12), or "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will refresh you" (Matthew 11:28).

We may be surprised at first that the face can seem somewhat sad or stern-looking. In our present-day culture, if we keep a picture of someone we love, we like them to be smiling. Icons do not show this smile which is so usual for us, and so we may be inclined at first to wonder what is wrong, and to take it as a sign of sadness or severity. But this is not the real intention. If we look carefully, we find that although the faces on icons are never smiling or laughing, on the other hand they are never weeping, or angry or bitter. In fact, they do not show any particular feeling or emotion: they are most often simply neutral and still.

The reason for this neutrality is to allow room for us, if we come before the icon to pray. We can come in any state – happy, agitated, weary, overburdened, calm, excited – and the face of the icon imposes nothing. It – or rather he – is simply there for us, just as we are. We can see exactly this sort of expression on the face of anyone when they are listening carefully, when they are really trying to understand someone else: they let their own feelings sink into the background for a while, in order to be fully present for

the other person. This is just like the way in which God is totally attentive to us when we come to pray.

Mary

Icons always refer to Christ. They either represent him directly or else they show his saints, those people who by following Christ have become, each in their own individual way, like him, and so who reflect in their turn something of the light of God.

Among the saints, Mary holds a special place. She is the mother of Christ; she bore within herself him who, while fully human, is also fully God; so she is known by the densely paradoxical title of "Mother of God". It is the shortened Greek form of this title (ΜΡ ΘΥ for ΜΗΤΗΡ ΘΕΟΥ) that is written on her icon.

As with icons of Christ or any of the saints, there are usually no background details or scenery, only a single luminous background colour, symbolizing the presence of God, the light of eternity.

There are a large number of variants of the icon of Mary. In some, she is holding out her child towards us, or pointing towards him. In others (the type known as icons of "tenderness"), Christ is pressed close to her face, emphasizing the closeness and humanity of the love that unites them.

In most of these icons, Christ is not shown realistically as a baby, but with the proportions of an adult. In this way, the icon avoids being a snapshot of a moment in the life of Mary and Jesus, and is able to suggest something of the relationship that spans their entire lives and continues into eternity.

People from a western background often look for a precise symbolism of colours in icons. We are used to liturgical colours linked in an exact way with the season, or in everyday life we have colour-coded charts and underground maps. There is no such systematic symbolism in icons, that could allow us to say something like "red means love" or "green means hope". The meaning of colours in icons is more subtle and less rigid, and needs to be interpreted case by case. If, however, Christ is shown wearing a gold robe, we are right to link this to his royalty and divinity. If he is wearing two colours, as is frequently the case, this is a suggestion that he is both God and human: in theological language, that he has two natures, human and divine. Mary is sometimes shown wearing the same colours but in darker tones and in reverse, to convey the idea that Christ is by nature divine yet takes on our humanity, while Mary (and everyone who, like her, trusts in Christ) is by nature human and is called by God to participate in the nature of God (see 2 Peter 1:4).

The Transfiguration

While many icons simply show the person of Christ or one of the saints, others focus on some particular, significant moment in their lives. Orthodox churches often have a set of icons of twelve important events in the life of Christ and of Mary, which are celebrated in twelve liturgical feasts.

The style of these icons is rather like the literary style of the Gospels: they do not give elaborate portrayals of the details of an event, but limit themselves to the most important features.

The best way to understand them is to compare them with the written Gospel stories.

The Transfiguration was a unique and mysterious event, which was witnessed by three of Jesus' disciples, and which left a profound impression on them. It is recorded in Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:1-10, Luke 9:28-36 and 2 Peter 1:16-18. Jesus is shown in the central place at the summit of a mountain, transfigured, his clothes "shining white". He holds the scroll of the Word of God, and his right hand is raised in blessing. Beside him, and turned towards him, are the two figures the disciples saw speaking with him, Moses and Elijah. They would have associated these figures with "the law and the prophets", the two main parts of the Bible, which point towards Jesus and from which, on a human level, Jesus acquired his understanding of his own life and mission.

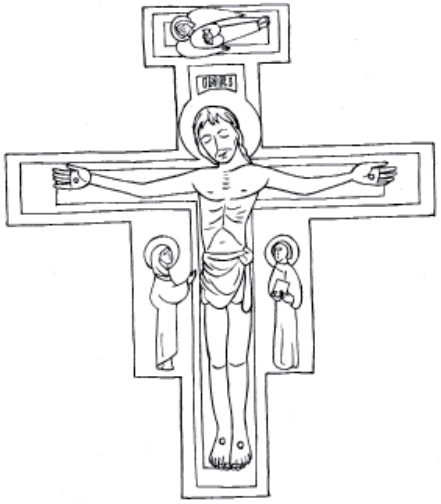
At the bottom, overcome with wonder, are the three disciples, Peter, John, and James (the order varies in different icons). They are usually shown falling to the ground or on their knees, covering their eyes from the brightness of the vision they are witnessing.

The Gospel stories speak of a "cloud" from which God's voice is heard. This cloud is a symbol of God's glory; in the icon, it is represented as a large halo or "mandorla" that surrounds Christ's whole body, and out of which Christ's light radiates.

A small portion of a similar mandorla, with three descending rays, can sometimes be seen in the upper part of other icons, such as the annunciation, that show events in which God's action is displayed.

The Transfiguration has a particularly significant place in icon painting, because it attests that by God's gift it is possible for human beings to see God's glory; and icons bear witness to the same thing. Moreover, making an icon is a kind of "transfiguration", through prayer and human art, of material elements – wood, pigments and so on – in order to invite others to a glimpse of God's radiance.

The Cross



Icons of the cross do not emphasize the pain of Christ's sufferings or portray much of the physical horror of the crucifixion. They show Christ very simply, recalling his divinity and the immovable faithfulness of his love in the midst of extreme suffering, allowing the event to speak for itself. Some of the other people who were there may be shown on either side, sometimes on a reduced scale. Most important among these are his mother Mary and John, closest of his disciples (cf. John 19:26). At the top of the cross, letters can sometimes be seen that stand for the inscription "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (John 19:19). There may also be one or more angels. Mary and John are inhabitants of the earth; angels are inhabitants of heaven; the love of Christ, expressed most deeply by the gift of his life on the cross, is what unites heaven and earth.

The Resurrection

No-one was present, according to the Gospel accounts, to witness the moment when Christ rose from the dead. The disciples laid Jesus dead in the tomb, and they met him alive with a new life on the third day, but the moment of the Resurrection itself is a mystery known only to God. So the icon of the Resurrection does not attempt to show what might have been seen by someone standing by the tomb on Easter Morning. Instead, using a rich symbolism, it points to the meaning of what happened.

Christ is shown in the centre, in radiant garments, descending swiftly to the darkness at the bottom beneath the earth. This darkness is pain, fear, loneliness, desolation, and death itself – all the terrible, dark side of human experience, into the depths of which Christ enters on the cross. His robes stream out behind him with the speed of his descent as he brings his light into the darkness.

He comes down into darkness and death not to remain there, but to lift out everyone who was trapped there. The

figures to the left and right of Jesus include various people from the Old Testament or who died before Christ and who were waiting for him to come to liberate them (cf. 1 Peter 3:18-22). The kings David and Solomon are often visible (wearing crowns), as also is John the Baptist. At the very front are Adam and Eve, ancestors, according to the story in Genesis, of the whole human race; their presence is to show that Christ came for all humanity, not just for one race or religion or nation (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:22). Below are the doors of death and hell, which Christ has thrown to the ground in order to let their prisoners out. Sometimes the doors have fallen in such a way as to form a diagonal cross. Various locks and chains that Christ has broken can sometimes be seen on the ground.

Christ takes Adam, representative of humanity, by the wrist, and is lifting him up out of his tomb. Christ's descent becomes a movement upwards as he leads all humanity into the freedom of true life.

The Icon of Friendship

This unique icon, dating from the seventh century, is not from the Byzantine tradition like the icons of Greece and Russia, but from the Coptic Church of Egypt.[2] It is painted in the clear and naïve-seeming Coptic style.

It shows Christ and an early Egyptian saint called Menas – the names are written in Coptic letters near the top of the icon. But Menas can be seen as standing for every believer: the icon tells something about the friendship that Christ offers to everyone who will accept it. This is why Brother Roger particularly liked this icon, and why it holds a special place at Taizé.

Christ has his arm on his friend's shoulder, as a sign of his love[3]. The initiative in this gesture is with Christ: "This is love," says St. John, "not that we loved God, but that he loved us" (1 John 4:10). Receiving this love of Christ, his friend is able with his right hand to bless others. (Compare Christ's gesture of blessing in the icons described above.) This is one of the essential movements of the Gos-

[2] The original was discovered in 1902 after lying hidden in the ruins of the monastery of Bawit for many centuries. It is now preserved in the Musée du Louvre, Paris.

[3] Cf. Revelation 1 :17 "He placed his right hand on me, saying, Do not be afraid."

pel: letting ourselves be loved by God leads naturally and simply to transmitting a blessing to other people. The love between Christ and the believer is not a closed circle: it opens out more and more widely. This is also reflected in the position of the two figures: they are not sitting looking at each other, but they are walking forward in the same direction.

Christ, as we have seen before, carries the book of the Word of God. The believer carries a small scroll – a suggestion, perhaps, that Christ alone understands the fullness of God's wisdom, but that the very little we understand is enough to enable us to go forward with him.

The Icon of the Trinity

The basis of this icon is the story in Genesis 18:1-14, in which Abraham welcomes three visitors and finds that he has welcomed God. So it is sometimes known as the icon of the hospitality of Abraham. In some versions, Abraham and his wife Sarah are also shown; in others, such as the beautiful and famous icon painted by St Andrei Rublev in about 1400, the only figures visible are those of the three visitors. They are shown as angels, seated around a table with a chalice-like cup symbolizing the meal Abraham and Sarah have prepared for them. In the background is a mountain, a tree that is mentioned in the story, and a highly stylized building representing Abraham's tent.

In this story, God appears as three men – or is it one man? Or three angels? The text leaves it unclear. Christians have since seen in this a faint suggestion of the nature of God as Trinity: the fact that it is best not to conceive of God as someone alone in isolated splendour, but as a fellowship or communion of love between three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who are yet perfectly

One. The icon is a meditation on this mystery, so it is also known as the icon of the Trinity.

The figures have very similar faces; they hold identical pilgrims' staffs; they are all making similar gestures of blessing around the chalice; their robes all contain a part of the same blue colour. These elements suggest the oneness of God, which is emphasized by the fact that the outer edges of the figures form a circle, sign of unity and eternity. But the differences in movement, in colour, and position of the three figures evoke the "otherness" of the persons and the harmony of relationship.

The three figures are not an attempt to represent directly the three persons of the Trinity – that would contradict the basic principles of icon-painting. They simply stand for the angels welcomed by Abraham, and do no more than suggest aspects of God's nature.[4] One of the most significant suggestions is in the fact that the angels occupy three sides of the table, leaving in front an empty space for the person who is praying before the icon. Whoever welcomes God finds himself or herself welcomed by God, though they may hardly realise it: welcomed into a communion of love and joy "that has neither beginning nor end".

[4] Meditation on the symbolism of the various objects in the icon, on the colours, and on the attitudes of the figures can uncover a wealth of Biblical and theological echoes, some of which are drawn out in the numerous books and articles that have been written on this icon.

Using Icons

Since icons are intended to help us to pray, the most natural place for an icon is a place where people come to pray – a church. Most Orthodox churches house a large number of icons; some of them may be painted directly or inlaid as mosaics on the walls and ceiling; others may be fixed to the walls or placed on special stands; there is usually a particular concentration of them on a kind of wall or screen with one or three doors in it, which is called the *iconostasis*. This separates the nave from the sanctuary (or altar), and symbolizes communication between God and us. The iconostasis hides the altar, because God is a mystery and always partly hidden for us, yet it has doors and icons, because the mystery of God does not remain hidden but is communicated to us. In the middle, above the central door, is Christ; beside him, Mary and John the Baptist; nearby are the apostles and prophets, and the principal scenes of Jesus' life. On the door itself are usually the four Evangelists, with the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary the good news that she will be mother of Christ. (The common theme of the icons on the door is the coming of God's word to us.)

Icons can also find their place in the home. The homes of Orthodox believers usually have a corner in one of the rooms where there are several icons and maybe a vigil lamp. This idea can easily be adopted by Christians of other traditions. It serves as a reminder that God is with us always, as we go about our everyday tasks, and the corner with the icons can become a place of prayer.

To pray with an icon requires no particular method. It

is possible to stand, sit, or kneel before the icon, and maybe to make a gesture of prayer – Orthodox Christians may bow, perhaps right down to touch the ground with the forehead, or they may kiss the icon, or place a lighted candle before it. Such gestures do not express worship of the image itself, but veneration and love for Christ who is represented there. Sometimes such a "prayer of the body" can help us to express to God what is in the heart, especially if we have difficulty in putting it into words.

Remaining before an icon for a while can be a way of saying to Christ: "Here I am." Simply to be there and to let him look at us can be a means of letting a communion with God grow.

There can be a temptation to treat an icon as a kind of spiritual puzzle, with symbols that have to be decoded. We may even find the knack of such "decoding" quite quickly, but it will be a fairly superficial undertaking. In order for an icon to say something to the heart, it is better to allow it plenty of time. Maybe to keep coming back to the same icon again and again. This can make it possible, in the rhythm of the heart rather than the head, for the icon to help a friendship with God, which is inner life, to grow within us.

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