

THE WORLD MEETING OF FAMILIES 2018 ICON OF THE HOLY FAMILY

Explanation and Reflections on the Icon

What is an icon?

The word 'icon' comes to us from the Greek word for 'image'. An icon has a very different intention to the countless images with which we are bombarded day in day out. An icon is not like a photograph, nor is it a portrait. It is an image which invites us to prayer. Like the Gospels, but in a visual way, it helps communicate to us what kind of relationship God wants to have with us.

As Patriarch Bartholomew of the Greek Orthodox Church wrote: *"An icon is no mere religious painting – and it is not, by definition, a religious object. Indeed, it is a subject with which the viewer, the worshipper, enters into wordless dialogue through the sense of sight. For an Orthodox Christian, the encounter with the icon is an act of communion with the person represented in the icon."*

How is it created?

Traditionally icons use seasoned wood as their ground. Specialist Joinery Group, a company based in Co. Derry, crafted the wooden cabinet and base for our Icon of the Holy Family. This was then covered in several layers of *gesso*, which works like an undercoat, priming it to receive the paint well.

The type of paint used in icons is known as 'tempera', an ancient technique, in which the coloured pigments are bound together with egg yolk and water. This has very different qualities to oil or acrylic paint. The colours need to be applied with great patience, building from dark shades to light, often requiring many layers of tiny hatch-strokes laid closely on top of another.

Who 'wrote' it?

It is said that icons are 'written,' rather than 'painted', as they present to us a visual narrative. This Icon of the Holy Family, commissioned for the 2018 World Meeting of Families being hosted in Ireland, was written by iconographer Mihai Cucu, who comes from Romania. Mihai was assisted by the Redemptoristine Sisters of the Monastery of St Alphonsus, Iona Road, Dublin. It was truly a work of their prayer and of love.

Transfigured beings

The icon writer, when painting persons, starts their skin tone with a base greeny-brown soil colour, called *Proplasma* (reminding us that we are humans – of the dust of the earth). Then they do what God does to us – they add light to it.

Theologians of the Orthodox Churches remind us that in the Book of Genesis, chapter 1, when God speaks and says: "Let there be light" in verse 3, God does so before He creates the physical light of the sun, moon and stars (verses 14ff). This can be understood as God first communicating to us the glorious light of the radiance of love, shining from the face of Christ. As we read in St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ". [2 Cor 4:6]

So we can come to understand that the holy ones put before us in icons are in fact transfigured beings, people radiant with the light that comes from God. These holy ones are often shown to have haloes, golden to remind us of heavenly realities. Their appearance can seem strange to us. Their necks appear to bulge (as a sign of their being filled with the breath of God, the Holy Spirit.) They sometimes have big eyes and small

mouths. Their faces do not smile, but often have the expression like that of someone who is listening intently to us.

What does this icon show?

In considering what would be featured in an icon fitting for the World Meeting of Families, thoughts immediately focused on the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and also on passages in the Gospels in which we see Jesus' deep compassion and concern for marriage and for those living with the burdens of family life.

We were drawn to an image of the Holy Family at table, sharing a meal and sharing their faith, as suggested by the Gospel of Luke chapter 2. An obvious Gospel text reflecting God's concern for marriage is the Wedding at Cana in the second chapter of the Gospel of John. And finally, the other Gospel that came to mind was the Raising of Jairus' daughter as found in chapter 5 of Mark's Gospel. There we see Jesus' response to a family with a sick child and how he respected that family's privacy in the midst of emotional turmoil when it came to the moment of healing.

Thus, with these three narratives, the design of this icon takes the form of a triptych which looks, from the outside, somewhat like a house with front doors. On these outside doors, we are presented with the Archangels Michael (*left*) and Gabriel (*right*). On the base is the inscription "AMORIS LAETITIA", 'The Joy of Love', the title of Pope Francis' post-Synodal exhortation on love in the family, the source of our reflections during the World Meeting of Families 2018.

The Archangels Michael and Gabriel

"Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" [Hebrews 1:14].

Both of these Divine Servants are robed quite splendidly, as they reflect the beauty of God. As we read in the Scriptures, angels are winged creatures [cf. Exodus 25, Ezekiel chapter 1, Isaiah 6]. They are not static beings. We see them in graceful movement, bearing with them the dynamism of the love of God. They both carry a staff of God's power and an orb upon which is written abbreviations for the name of Christ in Greek (IC XC Jesus Christ) as Jesus is the Word God speaks to us. Michael, whose name means 'who is like God', has a shimmering cloak. Gabriel is dressed in green – a colour associated with the Holy Spirit, who as we hear in the Creed is "the Lord, the giver of life". It is fitting that the angels feature on the outside of the icon as they carry with them the desire of God to protect. As we read in Exodus chapter 23:20-21: "I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Be attentive to him and listen to his voice... for my name is in him." Their heads are bowed in adoration and service of God, the Holy One. Their tightly curled hair has ribbons – which are somewhat like 'antennae' receiving the promptings of God.

WHAT'S INSIDE?

When the doors are opened we see in the centre **the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph**. Flanking it are those two Gospel narratives: **the Raising of Jairus' Daughter and the Wedding Feast of Cana**. In order to better understand the icon it will be helpful to read the passages from the Gospel which inspired them. Let's begin by reading that part of the Gospel of Luke that relates to Jesus' childhood.

THE CHILDHOOD OF JESUS

Luke's Gospel 2:39-51 [New Revised Standard Version]

39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

41 Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. 43 the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 44 Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." 49 He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand what he said to them. 51 Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

We see the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, seated at table, sharing a meal. Seeing the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs and radishes and the cup of wine on the table before them we can surmise that they are celebrating the Passover meal together. "Every year" the Gospel tells us, the Holy Family went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the great Jewish feast of the Passover, celebrating how God saw his people's suffering and acted to set them free. Their faith was celebrated in their home. Their trust in God was remembered at table. It is in our home that the reality of God-with-us is communicated and passed on to future generations. Perhaps you remember saying 'grace before meals' in your homes too?

On the left, we see Mary. Look at the colours of her clothes. Her undergarment is blue, the colour of our humanity, as we inhabit this big blue marble that is the earth and look up at the blue of the sky. She is clothed by a garment of red, the colour of blood, the colour of life. In icons it stands for the colour of Divinity, of God's life. We remember how the Angel Gabriel said to Mary that she would be clothed with God's power: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" [Luke 1:35]. Often we see the adult Christ represented with these same colours but in the reverse order. We see some stylised stars on her outer clothing, symbolic of her virginity both before and after giving birth to Jesus, a reminder to us that, as the Creed tells us: Christ, born of the Holy Spirit and of Mary, is both true God and true man.

Note how her hand is wistfully held up to her face. This is a 'quotation' from the icon of 'Our Lady assuage my sorrow'. It hopes to communicate to us how Mary our Mother knows the heartache, the worries and burdens all parents experience with their children. As our Mother, she makes our trials her own concern. With her other hand, Mary is also "*Theotokos*" - directing us and showing the way to Jesus, her Son.

On the right we see Saint Joseph, her husband. In icons of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, he is shown presenting and holding up in his hands a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons, the offering of the poor as a thanksgiving to God. Here he presents us instead with *the* offering to be made in thanksgiving to God the Father: Jesus, who is the "Lamb of God" [cf. John1:36]. Hence there is no need for us to see a Passover lamb on this family table as the true Lamb is there before us [cf. 1 Corinthians 5:7]

The gesture of Joseph's hands can also be interpreted as letting Jesus go. St Joseph echoes for us the responsibility and dilemma of every parent, wanting to nurture and protect their child whilst at the same time letting them be free to become all they can be in God's eyes. Both Mary and Joseph are turned toward and bow to Jesus – who is here shown as a boy around twelve years old. They surround him with their love and care, but they do not smother him, they do not impose themselves. Both leave him space to be who he truly is.

The boy Jesus' face has a high forehead – a sign that he is full of Wisdom. His neck is somewhat bulging, filled with the Divine Breath, the Holy Spirit. It is said that, in icons, the face of Jesus can appear to have two sides – on the left his countenance is softer, almost smiling with gentleness; on the right side, he seems more stern. Jesus is both our compassionate Saviour and our Judge.

Look at Jesus' halo. It is different from that of Mary and Joseph and that of the angels. It has three bands, making it look a bit like a cross. However, this actually signifies that Jesus has the holiness of one of the Persons of the Trinity. In the halo we see the Greek letters in it: an abbreviation for "*I am who I am*" the Holy Name of God as revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14.

The boy Jesus is dressed in a traditional Jewish patterned cloth and a radiant orange, a colour associated with depictions of the Risen Christ. Down his right shoulder is a kingly sash. His right hand is raised in blessing; his fingers even make the shape of the Greek letters IC and XC, abbreviations for his own name: Jesus the Christ. Two fingers are raised to remind us that in him, two natures co-exist, in him God and humanity are one. The other three digits are nearly joined together, again reminding us of the Trinity.

In his left hand he holds a scroll. He himself is the Word God the Father speaks to us. Jesus speaks to us the words that call us to life. On the scroll is a quotation from the Gospel of Luke: the message to the angel to the poor shepherds telling us who Jesus is: the bearer of a great joy for all of humanity – the joy of Love. [Luke 2:10] The tablecloth design is again that of a Jewish design. Their gathering around the table is reminiscent of the Three Angels in the famous 15th century Icon of the Holy Trinity by Andrei Rublev. Christian Marriage is sometimes compared with the Holy Trinity, as a communion of the giving and receiving of love that is life-giving.

Similarly to this icon, the Holy Family have a place at their table for us. They invite us to join them. They are no strangers to the trials of family life. They themselves have been refugees, fleeing the violence of Herod. They have known great anxiety. Hence the radishes and bitter herbs of the Passover meal represent the sorrows and trials of the people of Israel in their slavery also represent for us the trials and sacrifices of patience and love experienced in every family. The presence of the unleavened bread and cup of wine on their table call to mind the Eucharist for us.

Let's now read the Gospel relating to the scene on the left:

MARK 5: 21-24, 35-43. THE HEALING OF JAIRUS' DAUGHTER

21 When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. **22** Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet **23** and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." **24** So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. **35** Some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" **36** But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." **37** He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. **38** When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. **39** When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." **40** And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. **41** He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" **42** And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. **43** He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

In this Gospel passage we see something of Jesus' profound compassion for a family with a sick child. Jairus begs him to come and lay his hands on his daughter who is at the point of death. In the upper part of the icon we can see adults in gestures of distress and commotion. None of them seem to be even looking at each other, they are caught up in their own upset. Jesus has put them all outside of the house. The interior space is defined and marked for us by the draped red cloth. The only still person in the middle of this disturbed crowd is a little child, dressed in white, with hands raised in an ancient gesture of prayer known as the 'orans'. The child seems to be trying to reassure the grown-ups as if to say: "Everything is going to be alright, Jesus is here." Sometimes our children can teach us powerfully of the things of God.

In the lower half of the icon we see how Christ has a great sensitivity and respect for the privacy and intimacy of our family lives. He takes with him just the girl's parents and his closest companions Peter (left, with the curly hair and beard), James and the youthful Beloved disciple John (right) to the room where the child was.

With the scroll of the Word of God in his hand, Jesus takes the girl by the hand. Notice how he holds her by the wrist, a grip similar to how a lifeguard would rescue you or a trapeze artist would hold someone safe. It is the same way the Risen Christ takes the hand of Adam and Eve to lift them from the Underworld to restore them to the fullness of life.

Jairus has his hands outstretched to Jesus as if he is placing his daughter completely in his hands. His wife holds one hand up, as if she is lost for words, the other holding onto her husband for support. In this Gospel we also see the practical concern of Jesus as he tells the girl's parents - 'give her something to eat'. The Lord recognises and truly values the everyday sacrifices and providing that goes on in our families.

And now we turn our attention to the narrative presented on the interior of the door on the right: JOHN 2:1-11 THE WEDDING AT CANA

1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." 4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." 6 Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. 8 He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. 9 When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." 11 Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

We hear in this passage how the Mother of Jesus had been invited to this wedding and that Jesus and his friends had also been invited – as if it was a later act of generosity by the couple to include the Son of Mary and his friends. We see the bride and groom seated at the table, with their wedding crowns. In the Orthodox Churches, spouses are ‘crowned’ as part of the wedding ritual. They look to each other with concern and worry on their faces. They have run out of wine. In the Old Testament we hear how wine is a symbol of joy. God brings forth wine from the earth “to gladden the human heart” [Psalm 104:15]. This couple have run out of the joy of love. An elderly couple in the background, perhaps the couple’s extended family members, bring bread and wine to the table, but will their help be enough?

Mary sees their dire need and the risk of embarrassment to them. Sometimes mothers have the keenest eyes for the burdens of others. She herself can do nothing but she goes to Jesus. We see her standing right beside him, pointing with her hand towards the husband and wife. Jesus has not yet worked any signs. He feels it’s not yet the appropriate time, and the face of Jesus in this icon captures something of his reticence. But Mary sees the couples need as most important. She trusts that Jesus can do something and tells the servants: “Do whatever he tells you.”

With one hand holding a scroll of the dynamic Word of God, Jesus, with his right hand, blesses the water being poured into the jars by the servants in response to his command. Something insipid and tasteless is filled with flavour and joy. And God gives with superabundance, beyond all expectations.

The seated wedding steward holds a cup of wine up with a gesture of approval. “You have kept the good wine till now,” he says. You have saved the best till last, perhaps an allusion to Hebrews 1:2: God spoke to us through the prophets “but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son”. Christ Jesus is revealed too as the Bridegroom of the marriage between God and Humanity. The bread and wine on the table again remind us of the Eucharist. Indeed blessed are those called to the supper, the wedding feast of the Lamb.