

Icons: A Theology of Light

In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. (John 14:18-20)

Then Jesus cried aloud: 'Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. (John 12: 44-46)

The Bible calls us to see with eyes of faith. In contrast to worldly things, we are asked to know the spiritual. But how can modern people see the invisible? One answer lies in the Gospels. On the road to Emmaus, the disciples saw Jesus, but they did not recognize him. Immediately after Jesus broke bread with them however, their 'eyes were opened.' (Luke 24:31) In the Eucharist, the bread which we see is Christ glorified. When we eat the Eucharist, we unite ourselves to God and can more readily recognize godly things. The very act of Christ becoming man both restores the image of man to its initial glory and provides a means of seeing God.

Icons are aids to prayer in this theology of seeing. By contemplating the image of Christ, we can feel the presence of an invisible God.¹ An icon is not an idol; rather it is a celebration of the gift of incarnation. Because they are used to grow closer to God, the methods and prototypes of icons strictly follow tradition. The process of making an icon involves prayer, study, and fasting. The iconographer has to trust holy tradition and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to make an icon that comes from prayer and aides the prayerful.

The faces and proportions may seem odd compared to more realistic works. Michelangelo's pieta, for example, is a masterpiece of sensuality. Its sweeping cloth, vibrant expressions, and finely chiseled bodies draw its audience into the drama of a mother grieving for her son. This realistic approach is a wonderful way to tell a story. Icons, however, are not illustrations. They deliberately do not overwhelm



Vladimir Madonna. Russian 12th Century Icon

¹ Icons are also made of saints and angels. The reasoning is the same; by seeing the image of someone that is united with God, we can feel the presence of God.

their audience with the reality of an event because they are cultivating contemplation of things beyond reality. Both artistic ways are inspirational, but one seeks to be loud and expressive, while the other needs to be quiet and restrained.



[The Pieta, Michelangelo's 16th century Italian sculpture](#)

A Call for Icon use in Liturgy and Prayer

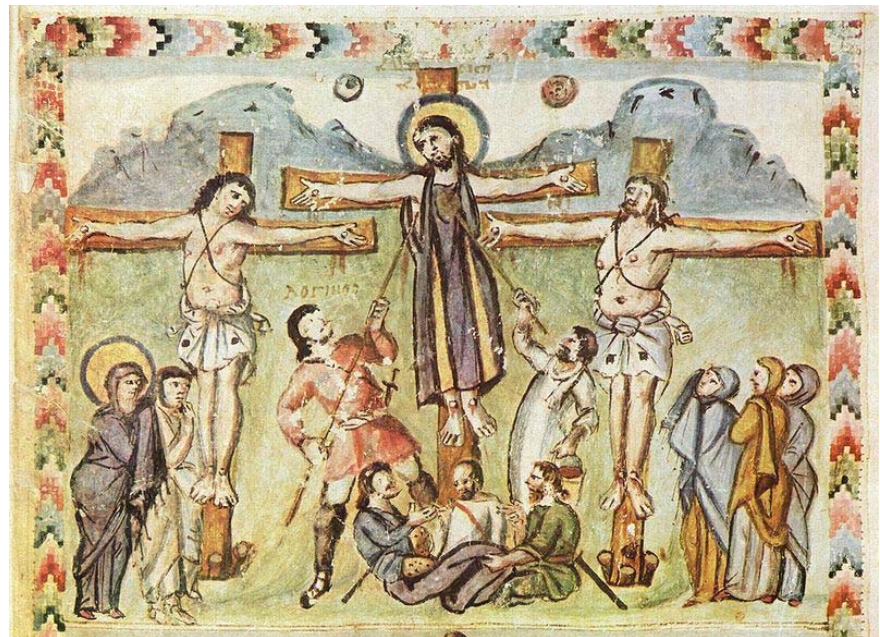
Pope Benedict considered these two traditions in his book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. He relates the changes in art that brought about the wonders of the Renaissance and later European works. Pope Benedict implores his audience to value its beautiful western tradition, but also to consider using the ancient art of icons where appropriate. Since icons are aids to prayer and reaffirmation of the Incarnation, they can be of great benefit to the liturgy, as well as private prayer in homes.

A Cross for St. Regis

Since St. Regis Church did not have a crucifix, one was donated by a parishioner. The crucifix was commissioned to enhance the Eucharistic meaning of the Mass. Only traditional earth pigments, egg yolk, and holy water were used in the painting. The halo is pure gold leaf, with the cross shape polished and chiseled into its surface. Emphasis needed to be placed on Christ's free sacrifice, but also on his suffering. In general, Christian artistic traditions tend to favor one attribute over the other.

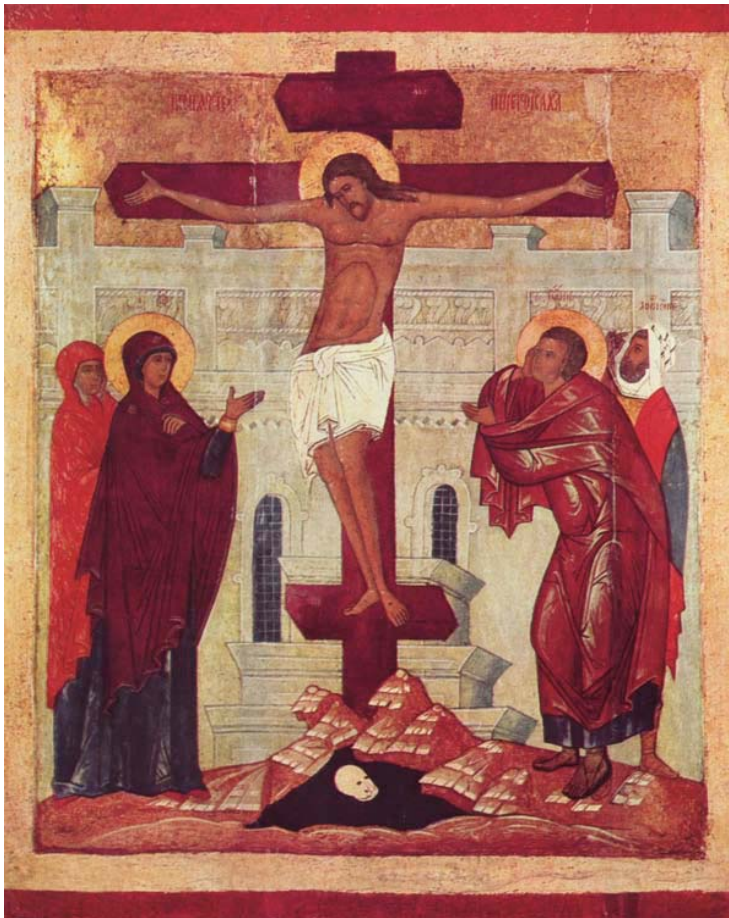
Early Christian Crucifixion Scenes

Early Christians, struggling with the nature of a God that can die, tended to portray the crucifixion symbolically. Old Testament prefigurations of Christ's death and resurrection, such as Jonah inside the whale, decorated early Christian tombs. Emperor Constantine (R. 313) popularized the Chi Rho Cross, which he claimed to have seen in a vision, as a Christian symbol. More importantly, he outlawed the death sentence by crucifixion; later generations were less likely to associate the cross with an ignoble death. Still, it was not until 5th and 6th centuries that artists dared to portray a man on a cross. Even then the first scenes are ones not of a defeated criminal, but of victory. The crucifixion in the Rabbula Gospels show a man, fully clothed in royal purple, arms extended gracefully, almost as if standing in front of the cross. Christ's eyes are open and he gazes calmly at his viewers. His hands are extended effortlessly to the side, in a gesture of prayer. This is the Christ in John's Gospel, "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down on my own." (John 10:18)



Crucifixion in the Rabbula Gospels, Germany 586 AD

Orthodox Crucifixion Icons ~8th century to today



Icon of the Crucifixion. Russian Orthodox approximately 1350 AD

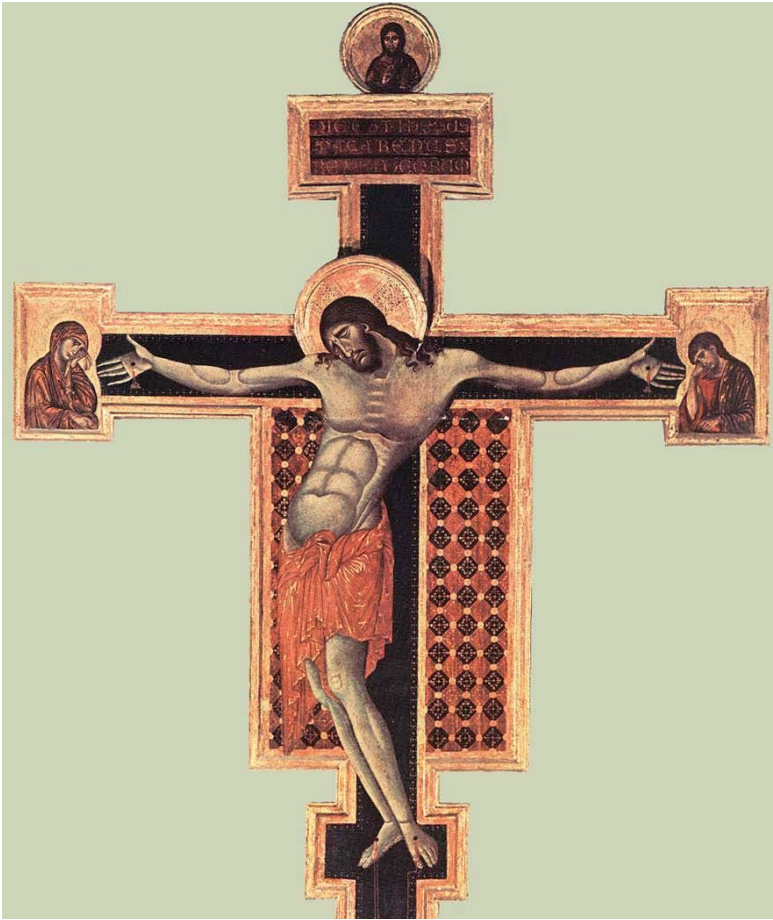
This calm composed Savior evolved into the model generally used in Orthodox icons today. Christ is dead, but his body is elegantly curved, almost as if he still stands. His hands are nailed, but in the gesture of prayer and supplication. A suppedaneum, the little stand for Jesus' feet, is usually slanted to indicate the divergent ultimate destinations of the thieves on the left and the right. Christ's eyes are closed, but the head rests peacefully to the side. His body is wounded, but there is no crown of thorns or gory details. Mary, John and other spectators react near the foot of the cross. Christ's glory and victory over death are hinted by the skull on the base the cross. Though Adam died, Christ will rise, restoring eternal life to humanity.

Christ's Crucifixion in Western Art

Eastern and Western Christian art were very similar in the first millennium. Prototypes derived from the culturally sophisticated Constantinople workshops can be seen adapted all over the Christian world. Political turmoil, doctrinal disputes, and language gradually fractured Christianity into eastern and western blocks. Western Europe pursued its own directions, resulting in theology and art that emphasized different aspects. Middle Age theology was very concerned with the death of Christ as a sacrifice. Like the Jews at Passover, Christians were saved by the blood of the Lamb. Crucifixion scenes became increasingly detailed and bloody. The body is strongly curved slumped, and exhausted. The eyes are closed in death or wincing in pain. The instruments of His torture: gambling dice, nails, pillar, whip, spear, crown of thorns are sometimes added.

Adaptation for St. Regis

For St. Regis the goal of the crucifix was to show Christ as the perfect sacrifice. He was a man who gave himself freely to suffering in body and spirit. It is meant to show the last moments of His life, when, exhausted He gave himself to His Father. You can see a heavy reliance on Cimabue's crucifix as well as earlier iconography.

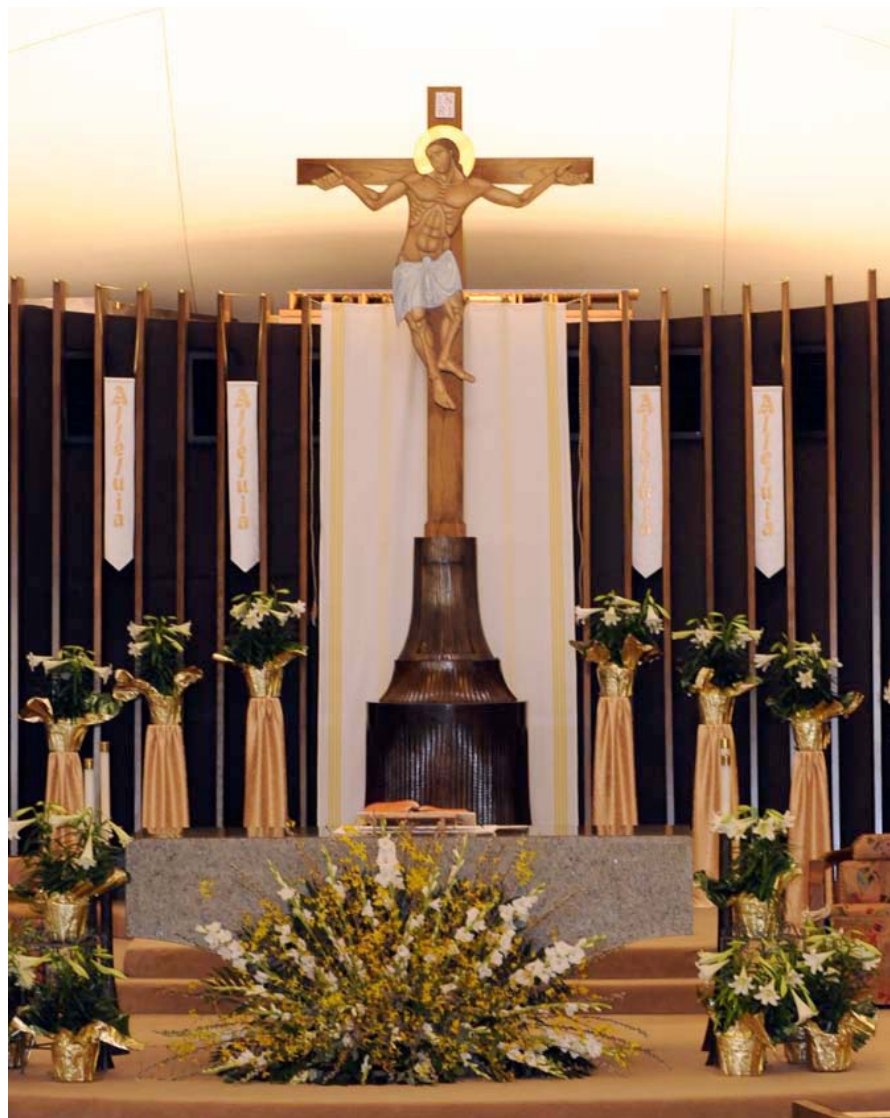


Crucifixion of Christ by 14th century Italian artist Cimabue. This one of the last great western masters to work in the icon style. After the Renaissance, art became more realistic and crucifixion scenes more bloody.

A few differences from tradition are intended to reemphasize the priestly function of the Crucifixion. The body is fuller in proportion, closer to a real man's. The crucifix is made to imitate the altar at St. Regis and specifically fit behind the tabernacle. It was important that the crucifix be integrated into the Mass, which it is meant to reenact. This did not ascetically allow for a suppedaneum. But the left hand is open more than the right as a gesture to the

good thief. The eyes are open, looking at the parishioners for whom he is about to die. His face exposes his agony. The nails are in the wrists allowing the hands to make the motion of prayer and supplication freely.² The nails in the feet were modeled after evidence of 1st century crucifixions. It is possible that Christ's feet were nailed through the heel bone. The sway of the body is one of a man painfully lifting and balancing himself on his nailed feet, so that he can stand in his final moments.

² The Greek word for hand used in the Bible can also refer to the entire forearm.



Icon of the Crucifixion. St. Regis Church, blessed Good Friday, 2009

It is the hope of the artist that these alterations make the image more accessible and useful to everyone who celebrates Mass at St. Regis. For more information, or to commission an icon, the artist can be contacted by email: Susan.Fath@gmail.com. For more on the nature of sacrifice in art, music, and liturgical reform please read *The Spirit of the Liturgy* by Cardinal Ratzinger. For more information about icon use in prayer see *Praying with Icons* by Jim Forest. *The Mystical Language of Icons* by Solrunn Nes has a beautifully illustrated introduction to icons. An intense, complete, and serious discussion of icon theology can be found in *The Icon: A Theology of Beauty* by Paul Evdokimov.