

often saying the Jesus Prayer—“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me”—with each brush stroke. In her workshops, Sister Mary Charles would often hand out prayer cards to her students and create a prayerful atmosphere by playing CDs of Orthodox Christian chant.

The painting (sometimes icons are said to be “written” instead of “painted”) of icons is the creation of beauty, which takes raw materials—gesso, paint, and wood—and forms it into an image that causes us to slow down and reflect on the subject matter depicted in the icon. Ultimately, the focus of any icon is the gospel message: the crucified, risen, and exalted Christ. In the same way that a priest brings Christ into the midst of a



Christ Pantocrator, 1995
58" x 36"
*St. Andrew's Church
Brainerd, MN*

congregation by reading the words of the Evangelists in the Gospels, so too does an iconographer bring Christ into the present with the representation of Christ's image in an icon. In fact, St. John of Damascus, an early 8th century saint, wrote that icons preserve the theology of the Incarnation: that God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. The depiction of the saints is a testament as to how

the gospel message continues to inform the life of the Church, and iconography plays a vital role of bringing that message alive to those who stand in the presence of the icon. Each saint strove to let the light of Christ shine through his or her life, and the iconographer strives to show that aspect of the saint's life through the depiction of the image.

When iconographers are finished with an icon, they pray a prayer of completion that asks God to fill their soul with joy and gladness. They also pray that their icon may edify and inspire those who gaze upon it. When an icon moves us to prayer and inspires us to become an image of Christ's love, then that icon fulfills its role and becomes holy. St. John of Damascus writes, “This contemplation sanctifies our sight and, thereby, our soul.” In other words, what makes this work of art an icon, instead of just a work of art, is the viewer's grasp of it and response to it. This is when the eyes of the body inform the eyes of the mind so that the eyes of the heart can see (Ephesians 1:18).

For Sister Mary Charles, this concept was critical. Her icons weren't just an expression of her artistic ability, but a ministry that helped her spread God's love, and touch everyone she encountered—either in person, or through her work. She used her icons to bring Christ and the saints to life for numerous congregations, including Twelve Holy Apostles Greek Orthodox Church, St. Scholastica Monastery and many other

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