

SACRED TREASURES AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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A loss of connection between the sacred and the arts in our increasingly secular society is of concern. The artistic heritage of Western Civilization is rich and reveals where we come from and who we are. David Tacey in his concern for the development of spirituality into the new millennium refers to how Australian nationalism and secularism seek to ignore the sacred and discard it as being 'ancient'.¹ In our colonial heritage it seems that the '... old, which so often includes the concept and image of the sacred, must be discarded and overcome in order that the new can take control.'²

In this paper sacred treasures in the form of icons will be examined and then a valuable process for the RE classroom using icons and silence will be presented. Even though our secularism in the 21st Century tries to betray us into pretending that the spiritual does not count, art 'will dish up a hearty meal of symbols, myths, rituals and religious images.'³ By exploring religious art that has ancient beginnings students in RE can be opened to a new world of symbols and thereby increase their own response to their lived environment.

What is required for the RE teacher and the student is a renewing of the language of symbols. Different cultures use different colours; some cultures use white to accompany mourning whereas we in the West we have traditionally used black. Red is used for joy in Chinese culture but is used differently in Western culture. If we offer someone a red rose, particularly on 14 February, there will be no denying that its symbolism has very particular intent.

But what of the symbols in the Western tradition of religious art? Since the beginning of the first millennium Christians in particular endeavoured to image their God. This is forbidden in Judaism and in Islam, but for Christians they believed that they had seen their God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. A real man, in a real moment in time, in a particular geographical location. Initially they adapted images from the Greco-Roman culture but soon began to develop their own images.

Icons developed particularly in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition but are also present, though to a much lesser extent, in the Roman Tradition. The Eastern areas of Christianity centred around Constantinople (today called Istanbul) which was established by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th Century and with the safety provided by strong governance and political stability, the Byzantine culture developed a great understanding of beauty and its relationship to an understanding of the sacred. The term *icon* comes from the Greek word *eikon* which means *image*.⁴ This word has taken on different meanings in our contemporary world but in this article it refers to the tradition of particular sacred images. Computer icons on our screen can point to various areas beyond our desktop. They can take us to something 'beyond' what we now see, they can link to a printer or a mobile hard drive that is separate to the main machinery. Icons also indicate something that is 'beyond' what you see now. We see them and have a response with our mind and our emotions. 'That response may be belief, or disbelief, or praise, or wonder, or prayer, or encouragement, or terror about the Last Judgment of questions about Christian doctrine.'⁵ Recently I travelled to Russia with the particular intention of seeing and responding to icons. Many of my travel companions had no understanding of icons at all but with a brief explanation, while we were in a 14th Century monastery, they were opened to a whole new world. The beauty of the icons drew

them in initially and evoked a response but the unlocking of the symbols brought them a new awareness and a real joy.

Because Christians believed they could image their God they used such sacred images as a way to come into contact with the sacred. Interest in icons and their sacred beauty is increasing today and their capacity to inspire serenity and meditation has been of benefit to many. There are those who collect them as artefacts only but that is to deny their real worth to the human person. Because they present particular theological understandings in images, the iconographer is often described as 'writing' an icon. The theology of the particular subject is established by the Church and each time an iconographer re-creates an image they bring to the experience their own creative spirit. In preparation towards writing an icon, the iconographer will enter prayerfully into the process and fasting is often associated with such preparation. Michael Galovic, a contemporary iconographer who lives in New South Wales, says that he does not need to intentionally fast because the very process seems to require it. He will work in his studio and suddenly discover that he has not eaten for many hours because he has been so absorbed in the process.⁶ 'The primary role of the iconographer is one of service, offered first of all to God'⁷ and in that sense the art of painting in this particular way takes on a very serious religious role. Below is an icon written by Galovic.⁸ It is of Saints Peter and Paul. The one on the left is St Peter and he traditionally has a full head of hair and a full beard. His undergarment is blue for the truth that he carries from Jesus. Having been close to Jesus he also wears a gold stripe over his shoulder. He has a humble coloured outer robed because he denied Jesus three times before Jesus died. Paul is dressed similarly but Paul is recognised by his distinctive curly Jewish beard and balding head.



Every aspect of the icon has symbolic value: the gold background represents the splendour of God and timelessness. The uncreated light of God's presence.⁹ The gold leaf used will shine even in places which we think are in darkness. It is as if God is present even in the darkest moments. This has an immediate impact upon the person producing the icon. Red is the colour of divine love because God so loved the world that God became human, flesh and blood, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Blue is the colour of heavenly truth following a very ancient Jewish tradition of the heavens being where God resides and where all things are true and beautiful. Green is the colour of creation and the colour of hope. Every gesture and object has a particular significance in the narrative offered by the image. What some conceive to be very crudely drawn human faces turn out to be very carefully denoted because they need to be obviously human, and often obviously a particular person, but mostly they are not totally realistic so that the viewer is drawn into a deeper reality, rather than just looking at an image of a person.

Silence and stillness are sometimes difficult to find in our world and the religious education classroom has a unique place to provide moments in time that can renew the spirit through reflection. 'One of the fundamental ways that spirituality is nurtured is the process of reflection.'¹⁰ The following process has been tried in a number of settings with high school students, adult groups and university students, and has provided opportunities for silence with the completion of a religious artefact at the end as well as all the results of such introspection and concentration on a symbolic item. When teaching a year very rowdy nine RE class, I needed some vine leaves cut out for a staff prayer activity the next day and needed to give background material to the group to begin a new topic. To solve both problems at once, the students were given a pair of scissors and paper with the outline of the vine leaves and they moved into an amazing stillness and concentration on the task in hand while I simply read them stories that gave the necessary background for our new topic. A wonderful solution with excellent results. The very few who did not want to engage at first joined in shortly afterwards because of the obvious engagement of the rest of the quiet, still, class.

Preparation for this icon activity will take time both within and outside of the classroom prior to the process beginning. It is advised that some background into the existence and nature of icons be first established for the students. There is substantial information available on internet sites as well as the books referenced in this article and many more that are available. The physical preparations require care and time but the end result is most worthwhile. Students can be engaged in the preparation of the boards should an approachable woodwork teacher be open to the suggestion! Particle boards 19cm x 13.5cm x 1.5cm need to be cut and sanded. Icons usually have a recessed area in the middle for the image, but that is not necessary in this activity. Whereas an iconographer would then gesso and sand the board, usually *not* particle board, and add a layer of linen, the classroom process does not have the intention of a professionally finished product, but rather the experience of the process with varying results of success in terms of beauty. While iconographers are more likely to use egg tempera, some use acrylic paint and that is what I have used in every group so far. There needs to be gold and silver paint as either can be used for the background as well as a range of appropriate colours. It can be useful to have a flesh tint as well so that the students do not become consumed with trying to mix such a colour. Paintbrushes need to have a variety of strengths and thickness with some being very fine for final lines. The usual protection for desks and clothes are advisable. A plate to mix the colours and water containers are also necessary and for these the usual plastic picnic equipment is adequate. A supply of paper towel is useful with each

student having some to wipe their brushes. Gladwrap proved useful for covering the paint plates so that they could be used again.

The choice of image needs to be one that does not have too many fine details as they can get lost and become too discouraging. Peter Pearson has provided some excellent black line masters in his book *Another Brush with God: Further Conversations about Icons*.¹¹ They can also be generated from a copyright free chosen image that is photocopied and changed to a black line master through a word processor. For some classes the image on paper was glued using PVC glue onto the board and carefully trimmed around the edges before the class. Other classes did that stage themselves as the first stage. It depends on how many sessions you have to complete the activity.

Depending on the students and the situations, the time taken ranged between three to five sessions of an hour and a half each. Each session began with an explanation of some aspect of icons using a digital presentation and concluding with an iconographer's prayer to lead into the activity. At a program for gifted and talented year 12 students that I ran at our University in the January holidays, we did not begin in prayer as there were diverse backgrounds among the student cohort. The prayer was on screen for those who wished to begin in that manner. Bringing this particular group to silence was a real challenge as they revelled in the chance to interact with other students of like minds – agile, intelligent, inquisitive and excitable. A vastly different group, Masters of RE students in their school holidays, found the conclusion to the day to be in silence working on their icons a most beneficial experience and relished it. Contemplative music, my choice usually being Gregorian chant, is an excellent background that softens the atmosphere in the room.

The background is painted first using either silver or gold. That includes the 1.5cm thick edges around the sides. The gold or silver paint is usually thicker than the other colours so needs to be applied smoothly and evenly. Icons do not show any brushstrokes as the painting process is not as important as the end product and the spiritual component. Next the paint is applied to the fabric draped over the figure in the icon. Thin washes are best applied so that the lines of the drapery are still somewhat visible for later accentuation. The way in which the fabric drapes the figure is important in the icon. Still figures have very vertical drape lines while some images, for example, the meeting of Saints Peter and Paul as seen above, have the drapery lines showing their movement as they meet. Jesus and Mary usually have their drapery accentuated with gold lines to show their importance in the Christian tradition.

The final sections to be done are the faces and hands. These can be challenging and some might simply choose to colour the shape in and not try to define it any further. The choice of colours is determined by the students but with the symbolism of the colour always in mind. While the choice of colour belonged to the student, it became apparent that the choice of colour was deeply related to the student's own spiritual expression.

Red	Divine love
Blue	Heavenly truth
Green	Hope
Gold or silver	God's splendour
Purple	Royalty or penitence
Brown	Humility
White	Resurrection

Some of my students chose to use a black felt tipped fine point pen to do lines. This is not in classical icon style but it is the process and the learning and the spiritual engagement that are much more important. The final stage is to apply a clear spray to the whole surface, including the sides. Clear acrylic is certainly preferable in terms of clean up and drying time, but oil based clear sprays work very well. An outdoor location for the spraying table, with the surrounding walls well protected by plastic, is the best for safe use.

This process has many benefits: it brings the invisible into the visible realm and can lead to a deep and rich spiritual encounter. Visual art and other creative arts can draw us together, like a dance, so that we move toward a deeper and richer understanding of the sacred. While the process requires careful planning and preparation, it is indeed worthwhile.

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¹ David Tacey, *ReEnchantment* (Sydney: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2000), 79.

² Ibid., 78.

³ Ibid., 88.

⁴ Solrunn Nes, *The Mystical Language of Icons* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 7.

⁵ Linette Martin, *Sacred Doorways: A Beginner's Guide to Icons* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2002), 2.

⁶ Michael and I have had enriching conversations about the process and the quality of his work is exceptional.

⁷ Peter Pearson, *A Brush With God: An Icon Workbook* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2005), xiii.

⁸ Michael Galovic, *Saints Peter and Paul*, 2014. egg tempera on board with gold leaf.

⁹ Angela McCarthy, "Art for God or to God Through Art," in *In Praise of Worship*, ed. David J Cohen and Michael Parsons (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 174.

¹⁰ Sally Liddy and Louise Welbourne, *Strategies for Teaching Religious Education* (Katoomba, NSW: Social Science Press, 1999), 133.

¹¹ Peter Pearson, *Another Brush with God: Further conversations about Icons* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009).