

# To know Christ and the power of His resurrection

(Phil 3.10)

As we contemplate the phrase from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, "*To know Christ and the power of His resurrection*" (Philippians 3.10), may our souls express and strengthen a desire to know Christ, to listen to His words in the Gospels, to receive in faith His precious body and blood in the Eucharist, and in our prayer grow into a deep personal relationship with the Risen Christ. As depicted throughout the earliest days of the Church, this will involve, for each of us, an experience of God's overwhelming love, a movement of conversion from our sins, and a commitment to make Christ known to the world.

+ *Archbishop Michael Mulhall*

## A Reading of the Six Icons

Icons are liturgical objects, consecrated by a priest. They are bearers of theological truths and are capable of inviting the faithful into the very mysteries they present through prayerful reflection on the images. The background of all the icons is blue. It isn't sky blue, but a deeper blue. This colour is commonly found in frescoes in churches of the Byzantine rite. It is neutral and creates an effect of depth and trust. It elevates the soul, calms, and soothes.

The circle on which the cross is positioned represents the Blessed Sacrament. Each ray starts from Our Lady's heart, who is centered in the composition. Our Lady always brings us to her son, the Bread of Life. The red lines around each icon symbolize the blood of the Lamb (Ex 12:1-13). *But for you, the blood will mark the houses where you are. Seeing the blood, I will pass over you; thereby, when I strike the land of Egypt, no destructive blow will come upon you.* The Eastern Church Christogram is written on the back: IC XC NIKA, which means "Jesus Christ Conquers."

## Descriptions of Jesus Christ and of the Virgin Mary

Jesus and His Holy Mother are wearing the same colours. Jesus's robe is red and his mantle, blue. Mary's robe is blue and her mantle, red. These two colours were, historically, very difficult to obtain. They were reserved for the representation of the emperor and the empress. This is why painters used these colours to depict Jesus and His Mother,

the King and Queen of the universe. Mary's clothes are never transparent, for the virtue of chastity. For the same reason, and in contrast to men, women, on Byzantine icons, always wear shoes, and have their hair hidden except when their lives would not allow it, e.g. living in isolation or remote places.

The red and gold cloth on Jesus' right shoulder is called a clavus, symbolizing His priesthood. It is the same for all the apostles. Jesus has a unique halo, with a Cross and letters inside. The letters in the halo, in Greek: **ωδη**, mean "*I am who I am*" (Ex 3:14). It indicates to us that Jesus is God Himself. In the background is written IC XC, the first and last letters of the Greek words **ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ**: *Isus Christos*, Jesus Christ. The little sign on the letters, named titlo, means that it is an abbreviation.

Jesus holds the Gospel on a scroll with His left hand. On three of the five icons here, He blesses with His right hand, in the Orthodox manner, joining thumb and ring finger. Those two fingers represent His divinity and humanity. The three other fingers represent the Holy Trinity.

In Greek, the Mother of God is called "Theotokos". In 431, at the Council of Ephesus (in Turkey), the council Fathers formally declared Mary, the Mother of God. This title is the highest which can be given to a woman. The Greek letters **MP ΘΥ** on both sides of her head mean "Mother of God". The little sign on the letters means that it is an abbreviation. The three stars which adorn her mantle, one above the forehead and one on each shoulder, signify her perpetual virginity. The Virgin Mary, the saints and the angels all have plain halos.

### **The Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: Acts 2:1-4**

The Holy Spirit is depicted as a dove, sent by God the Father, present with the Son in the mandorla. The glory of God is represented as a *mandorla*, oval or round, composed of several blue concentric circles. It is the symbol of the high heavens. The mandorla becomes progressively darker as it moves toward its center, the dwelling place of God.



The Virgin Mary is at the center of the composition - her heart is at the center of this icon. She is in the Orante position, facing us, with her hands raised. This gesture signifies a prayerful appeal to God (one can see a chalice in this position). She is surrounded by St Peter, holding the keys, and St. Paul.

The Apostles - some of them are carrying a book or a scroll. It reminds us that they authored some of the books of the Bible. There is no connection between the size of the book or scroll in hand and the amount of writing. From left to right: **First row:** Andrew, Jude, Peter, The Mother of God, Paul, James, son of Zebedee, and John. **Second row:** Philip, Matthew, James, son of Alphaeus, Barthelemy, Thomas, and Simon.

### **The Meeting on the Road to Emmaus: Lk 24:13-35, Mk 16:12-13**

Jerusalem's wall is behind in a golden colour, which means that we are outside Jerusalem. Reverse perspective is used here. The mountains and trees are saying to Jesus: 'Stay with us!'



### **The Risen Lord and Mary Magdalene: Jn 19:11-18**

Jesus's blessing hand is the center of the composition. He blesses with His right hand. Mountains and trees, leaning toward Jesus, are saying: 'Stay with us!' Inverse perspective is used on the sarcophagi and mountains.



### **The Revelation to St. Thomas: Jn 20:14-18**

The description of the apostles in the Pentecost description also applies here. Reverse perspective is used on the building, pedestal and tiles. The center of the icon is the Scripture held by Jesus. On Byzantine icons, when a veil is between houses or on architecture (but not at a window), it indicates that the scene takes place inside. On this icon, the scene takes place inside the house.



### **The Miraculous Catch of Fish: Jn 21: 1-8**

Mountains and trees are saying to Jesus: 'Stay with us!' The boat represents the Church. One doesn't see the full boat, because the church is not yet fully complete.



### **The Conversion of St. Paul: Act 9:1-9**

Jesus is in a blue nimbus, mandorla, which represents the glory of God. It is composed of several blue concentric circles, symbolic of the high heavens. This is the way to represent God on canonical icons because no one has seen Him, except through Jesus Christ. The town is Damascus, represented with a reverse perspective. Nature, once again, wants to keep Jesus.



### **The Apostles are represented the same way on each of the icons:**

As the pillars of the Church, Saints Peter and Paul are standing on either side of the Mother of God. Of course, Paul was not present during this event, but the reality of Pentecost transcends time and space, and in some sense, Paul was later mystically joined to this moment. He is also included to show that he was in complete harmony with the other Apostles. Paul is always depicted with short brown hair and a long beard, tapering to one or two points. He is balding with a high forehead (signifying great wisdom and learning), but with a tuft of brown hair in the center. He is, of course, depicted on the icon of the Conversion on the way to Damascus. Peter is easily recognizable by his white, short, curly hair and beard. He is always wearing blue – the colour of the choice of God – and with a gold mantle – the colour of the chief. In some icons, like this one, he may be shown with keys, a reference to the words Jesus said to him: "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." Matt. 16-19. Peter is also represented in the icons of the Revelation to St. Thomas and the Miraculous Catch of Fish.

Saints John, Thomas and Philippe are always shown as beardless youth. A singularity for John, who is represented as a youth until Pentecost, and as an old man after Pentecost (as the writer of the Book of Revelation). Here, St. John is in the first row, right, holding a scroll for his books in the Bible.

Andrew, the brother of the Apostle Peter, was formerly a disciple of St. John the Baptist. Because of this, he is depicted with unkempt hair, in the manner of the prophet he followed. On Byzantine icons, he wears the earth-green colour. According to the Tradition of the Church, after Our Lord ascended into Heaven, Saint Andrew went to Greece to preach the gospel. He was put to death on a cross. This explains why he is often represented holding a cross, as in this icon. He is also present in the Miraculous Catch of Fish and in the Revelation to St. Thomas.