

A COMMENTARY ON THE ICONS OF ST. AGNES CHURCH

by Basil Lefchick, artist



Principal Theme

The inscription on the icon of Christ states the theme for our set of five icons: "Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God." Let's take a look at how this theme weaves itself through the individual icons.

The Icon of St. John the Evangelist...

We see the icon of St. John the Evangelist to our left as we look at the altar. He holds his Gospel book in his right hand, as he bows and gestures toward the icon of Christ in the center of the group. Why was John's icon selected for the group altar icons? What connection does the evangelist have with the Lamb of God Theme?

One answer is found in John's account of Good Friday. In his Gospel, unlike those of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus undergoes his death on Golgatha at the same time that the lambs are being slaughtered in the temple in preparation of Passover: "...since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want bodies left on the cross..." (John 19:31). John makes the point that through his death on the cross, Jesus fulfills the role of the paschal lamb - by shedding his blood he saves the world from sin and death.

The figure of John stands right behind that of Mary. The believer will see as natural John's closeness to Mary, remembering Jesus' words from the cross, "Behold, your mother." as he entrusted Mary to John's care.

The Mother of God Icon...

The inscription on the icon of Mary reads: "The Mother of God." Of all her titles, this is the one that exalts her above all other Saints, angelic hosts and all creation. It is the inscription most frequently found on icons of Mary. The title is the English translation of the Greek term, "Theotokos" which means "God Bearer." This title was proclaimed by the Church at the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus, in 431 A.D. One of the Saints called her the "Ewe" who bore the "Lamb of God."

She stands with a bowed head and hands outstretched toward her son. She stands immediately to the right of Christ - a position of honor. The blue of her garments call to mind the sky above us. A way of presenting her as the Queen of Heaven, who stands before her glorified Son.

She stretches out her hands in the ancient Jewish gesture of prayer. We see simple sketches on the walls of Christian catacombs that depict Mary exactly with this gesture. The image of Mary praying reminds us that she stands for - is an "icon" for - the whole Church at prayer.

St. John the Forerunner Icon...

In the Gospels, John the Forerunner (or "Baptizer") describes himself as the one who runs ahead to prepare the way for "the one who is coming after me" - "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29)

In our Icon of John, he holds an open scroll in his left hand which quotes from this text. His right hand points to the central image of Christ, affirming that Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God.

John's unruly hair, untrimmed beard, and camel's hair cloak illustrate the New Testament's description of him as a desert ascetic and prophet. From the Christian perspective, he represents the last in the line of Old Testament prophets who looked forward to and foretold the coming of the Messiah. The icons of Mary and John the Forerunner combined represent the People of God - past and present - gathered in prayer before the glorified Christ.

The Icon of Christ...

The Central icon of Christ shows us the Lamb of God in glory. "Glory" is represented by the radiant blue elliptical aura surrounding him. Glory is also suggested by the pearl and gem-studded throne on which he is seated. The open Gospel book on his knee displays the text "I am the way, the truth and the life." (John 14:6) This text appears in the farewell discourse of Jesus in the Gospel of John. In that discourse, Jesus tells Thomas "If you know me, you will know my Father." (John 14:7) So this text helps us understand that Jesus, the Lamb of God, is the "icon" or image of the Father, who cannot be seen directly.

Final Comments...

You'll notice that all the backgrounds of the icons are gold. This gold is not paint that just looks like gold, instead, thin sheets of real gold (23k gold leaf) approximately 3' square, are carefully adhered to the areas surrounding the painted figures. This traditional treatment of backgrounds and haloes serves purposes.

First, it has symbolic meaning. Gold does not rust or tarnish, because it is pure. So it serves to symbolize the never-ending realm of heaven. Its purity makes it an apt symbol for the sacred, which is free of all imperfection. The gold background of icons also signals that we are not looking at a picture of the world we ordinarily see, which reflects the human condition of sin and suffering. Icons attempt to suggest a vision of the world that is free of the human condition and "transfigured" or healed by God's loving-kindness.

Icons help us "Call to Mind" History, Salvation and the Saints. Gilbert K. Chesterton once made a comment to the effect that we shouldn't disenfranchise those who have suffered the accident of death. They have a right to be heard today, too. That's one of the justifications for church tradition, which can be understood as the "calling to mind" of the collected wisdom of all who have lived before us.

And that's where the icons help. They help us call to mind the ancestors of Christ, the prophets of Israel, Christ in his earthly ministry with his disciples, the apostles and saints down through the centuries.

St. Agnes Icon...

St. Agnes is the patron saint of the faith community, so we should expect her icon to be among those selected for the altar wall. She appears as a young Roman woman. Her family's wealth is reflected in her richly decorated garment. Her long outer garment is red, the traditional color for designating martyrs.

She points with her right hand toward the icon of Christ. In her left hand she holds a young lamb. The lamb is a Christian symbol for virginal innocence. Her name derives from the Latin word for lamb - "agnus." The lamb she holds therefore echoes the "Lamb of God" theme that runs through all five icons.

How Icons "Speak"...

We notice the right hand of Christ is held in a formal gesture common in icons of Christ. This hand gesture is a standard way in icons to indicate that Christ is "speaking" to us. What he is speaking is the text shown in the open book: "I am the way, the truth and the life."

This detail helps us understand that icons are intended not simply to add color or decoration to our worship space. They are meant to actually help us focus our attention on the liturgy; they help us connect in a physical way with the past events or realities not visible to our everyday eyes. And, they help us present in graphic form the written words of sacred scripture and the actions of the Eucharistic Liturgy. In an age which communicates increasingly through graphics rather than written words, the icon is a powerful communication tool as effective today as ever in the past.
