

**Address on the occasion of the Blessing and Anointing of the  
Icon of the Cross**

**at Integritas, Ennisnag, Co. Kilkenny.**

**11<sup>th</sup> February, 2005**

It is my pleasure and privilege to introduce this utterly beautiful icon of the Crucifixion crafted by Fr. John Reynolds.

I use the word crafted deliberately because the icon painter does not paint or write an icon out of his own imagination as Western artists tend to do. The National Gallery of Art in Dublin is replete with many beautiful religious paintings, Renaissance, pre and post Renaissance. Most of them are compellingly beautiful, but they lack the depth and the drawing power of the icon. The word icon comes from the Greek work *eikon* meaning image. To distinguish the icon from other forms of pictorial art, the Greeks use the word *agiografices* which means holy images when they speak about their special form of art. The making of an icon is not the process of making an exact copy of a subject. It is more a process of recreation in which the artist moves into creative dialogue with the model. It is obvious that this icon painter has immersed himself in

the tradition and has come up with an icon which is faithful to the tradition and yet has a new expression.

The icon serves the same purpose as the Scriptures to lead people into the mystery of the divine by the Word. Word and Icon complement each other. *'What is communicated through the Word is shown silently through the image.'*[7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council 787]

The image is held in high esteem in the Eastern Churches where the image is equal to the Word and both are integrated into the Liturgy. In the Liturgy of the Orthodox Churches, the Church is in communion with the New Jerusalem, the Heavenly Church, giving the gathering a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy in which everything that is created will participate in the fullness of time. As Dostoevsky put it: 'Heaven descends to earth when the liturgy is celebrated.'

What is it that attracts us to this icon of the Crucifixion? Calm, serenity and quiet dignity drawing us inwards, inviting to contemplation, inviting us to gaze upon the image and to receive its impress into ourselves. There is a slight curvature on the panel. It serves to heighten the sense of the figure on the Cross moving out towards us. Christ's Crucifixion breaks out of the time and space in

which it happened, an event of cosmic and eternal significance that reaches out into the future and embraces all time and space.

In the Easter tradition the depiction of Jesus on the Cross is strongly influenced by the presentation of the Passion in the Gospel of John. In John it is more the glory of the Crucified that is depicted: Jesus reigning from the tree of the Cross drawing all to himself. Two great texts read as follows: *'And I when I am lifted from the earth will draw all to myself.'* [Jn. 12:32] *'Know that when you have lifted up the Son of man that I am.'* [Jn. 8:28] The lifting up of Jesus on the Cross reveals the mystery surrounding his person during his lifetime. Emotion when it is expressed is restrained and dignified. This is especially true of Mary who stands near the Cross as John emphasises. Obviously the sword foretold of the old man Simeon is piercing her heart but her grief is contained in what is a tenderly beautiful expression. The face of John is painted so simply and so naturally leaning as he does towards the Cross overcome with silent grief. Both Mary and John become symbolic figures. Their personal names are not given in John's account. They are simply called the Mother of Jesus and the disciple. When Jesus addresses his mother: *'Woman this is your son,'* the son stands for all of us, for the entire Church. And he said to the disciple: *'This is your Mother'.*

She becomes Mother of the whole Church. In recent times, Mother of the Church has become one of Mary's leading titles.

There is much more one could say about John's scene on Calvary. What he presents can be described almost as 'a Gospel within a Gospel.', but I do not want to divert you from the simple beauty of the icon itself.

The figure of the Crucified Christ demonstrates that he is victorious over death. Jesus does not hang from the Cross. He stands and shows no sign of suffering. His arms are stretched straight out and his feet are extended just a little. His head is inclined slightly to one side. The inscription in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, which Pilot insists on fastening to the Cross is represented in Latin. The title king indicates triumph, but Christ's triumph is a paradox and a mystery because it was won through suffering and death.

Closely related to the icon of the Crucifixion of Christ in the Eastern Churches is an icon called the harrowing of Hell which is the descent of Christ into the unseen world of nothingness, into Hades, to proclaim salvation to those who waited for the Good News. The icon of the descent into the deepest darkness of the grave and the

underworld is at the same time the icon of Ascent, the Resurrection of Christ into a world without end.

## **Conclusion**

The supreme glory of God made man is the beauty of the Cross. To see the Cross as the highest revelation of the glory and beauty is not to romanticise it or to cover over its horror. We 'see through' the horror of death by crucifixion which was ultimately death by asphyxiation when the condemned persons could no longer push themselves up to breathe. A terrible reality. Yet we stand with Mary and 'see through' the event. We see God's anger being appeased by the crucifixion of all human sin on the cross. We 'see through' the agony of the Son to the beauty of his love for the Father. We see the astonishing love of the Father for degraded humanity. Here we have a glory of such infinite proportions that its glory can only overwhelm us. To leave the final word to Dostoevsky in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*: "There is in the world only one figure of absolute beauty: Christ. That infinitely lovely figure is, as a matter of course, an infinite marvel.'

Eltin Griffin, O.Carm.

## **POSTSCRIPT (BY REQUEST)**

### **The Colours Shown on the Icon.**

The gold leaf in particular gives the impression that the icon is luminous, completely surrounded and permeated with light. The body of the Crucifix is a reddish brown colour depicting his humanity as does the blue background. In the entire work there is a combination of symbolism and harmony. Red is the colour signifying the divine. The figures of both Mary and John are portrayed in red outer garments to signify their being filled into the divine life of grace. The blue and green of the inner garments indicate the human person. Mary is pointing to the open side of Christ shown in red by the exuding drops of blood. The open wound is a manifestation of Christ's living presence in the Eucharist. The Church, the Bride of Christ, has its origin in Christ's open wound as emphasised by some early Christian writers.