

TEACHING ICONOGRAPHY TO OUR CHILDREN

This guide is intended as a primer for teaching our children how to read icons and their knowledge will continue to grow with the years to come.

Sometimes we take for granted that we didn't always know how to read icons as well as we do now. There is a literacy to reading icons, just as there is for books. As parents and teachers, we put forth effort to carve out time to teach our kids the letters of the alphabet, their sounds, words, and eventually how to read books. As Orthodox Christians, we should also teach our children how to read icons.

We teach our children their faith through **worship**, **teaching**, and **praxis** (living our faith, daily). In reference to learning how to read icons:

- **Worship** - Our children see and venerate icons at our church and when we visit other churches as well.
- **Teaching** - We teach our kids how to read icons in our homes and in our church schools.
- **Praxis** - Our children see and venerate icons in our homes and church classrooms.

ICONOGRAPHERS -



God is the first iconographer, who made man in His image - and we are all living icons, which is one of the reasons why we treat everyone with respect. (Saints are the Church Triumphant, who have fought the good fight, and we are the Church Militant, who are currently striving to fight the good fight.).

St. Luke the Evangelist is the second iconographer who depicted the Theotokos holding Christ.

COLORS -

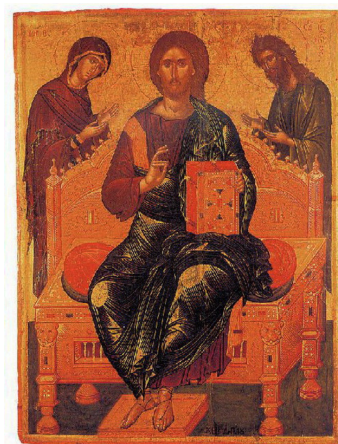
In the 1800's, scientists discovered how to make synthetic colors in the laboratory. Our box of crayons that we know and love today is only possible because of these discoveries.

Prior to the 1800's, paints were handmade by the painter and dyes were handmade by dyers. Some colors are much easier (and cheaper) to make than others. For example, brown, yellow, green, and black were relatively easy to make because they could be made from local plants, minerals, or

animals. You'll notice that regions tended to have certain colors associated with their clothing, art, and pottery. This is because these colors were readily available in their area.

There are three colors - red, purple, and blue - that were far harder to create and astronomically more expensive because the resources were either difficult and/or expensive to acquire. Certain regions were known for their particular shade of red, purple, or blue and oftentimes you could be punished by death if you shared the trade secrets for how to create these colors. Only royalty and the extremely wealthy could afford to purchase red, purple, or blue items and therefore these colors were referred to as royal colors. (We still refer to a specific shade of blue as 'royal blue' even today.)

With this in mind, we can have a better understanding of the use of colors in iconography. The colors in icons are used for specific symbolism. The iconographer never randomly chooses a color for any part of an icon. For example - red, purple, and blue will be used for the clothing of emperors and empresses, but it will also be used for the clothing of Christ and the Theotokos. Prior to the invention of synthetic color, people knew instantaneously that someone was wealthy or important simply by the color of their clothes. When they looked at an icon with Jesus clothed in blue and red and on a throne - they instantly knew He was important! He is the Son of God.



For the purposes of this guide being a primer, I'm not going to focus too heavily on colors, but I did want to explain that they do have a special significance.

CLOTHING & HANDS -

When we don't know the life of the saint depicted on an icon, we are often provided with two clues to tell us about them: their clothing and what they are holding in their hand.



For example, Saints Constantine and Helen are dressed ornately and clothed in red or purple. (Byzantine purple looked more like a reddish purple than the purple we think of today.)

They are holding a large cross indicating this is the True Cross of Christ. When you see a saint holding a small cross in their hand, oftentimes (but not always) this is because they were martyred.

Clergy will be depicted in their vestments. Monastics will be dressed in simple clothing, often brown or black. Soldiers will be dressed in their military uniform.

Oftentimes, a saint will be holding an object in their hand - a scroll, gospel, cross, and many other objects - indicating a significant aspect of their life.

FACES -

When you look at an icon, the faces of the saints do not look the same as in a photograph or if you saw the saint in-person. This is done on purpose.



Eyes: are often looking into the distance; looking only to God, not of this world

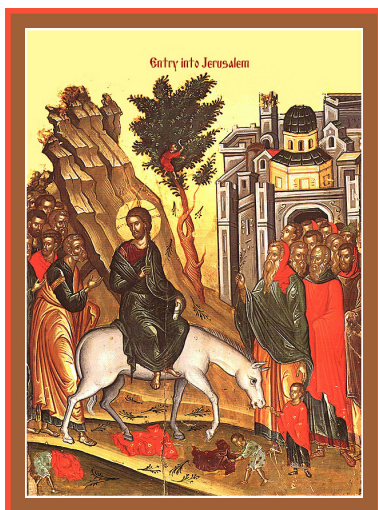
Ears: are internalized towards God

Nose: is longer than normal and quite thin; no longer detects the smells of this world

Mouth: is tiny and closed; is concentrating so hard on God that it is silent

Halos: represent the Divine Light that shines from them because they have a close relationship with God

OUTDOOR VS. INDOOR EVENT -



Oftentimes, icons depicting a wall or building in the background, without a curtain, is an outdoor event.

Icons with a building in the background draped with a curtain depicts an indoor event.



JESUS CHRIST -

The most recognizable person in an icon for children is Christ. I've found that when I show an icon to children and ask them, "Where's Jesus?" They will quickly point to Him.

Then, when I follow up with, "How do you know that's Jesus?" They will instantly tell me, "Because it looks like Him."

From a very young age, we point to icons of Jesus and the Theotokos to our children as we hope to spend a few more minutes in the nave with an antsy toddler, when we're in the narthex with them, or in our homes. Our children recognize and have a deep reverence for Christ and His mother from a young age.

As we teach our kids how to read icons, we will go into a little more detail about how we know Christ is being depicted. When we see Jesus as an adult or in His mother's arms, we recognize Him immediately, but there are a few times when Jesus is depicted as a child with someone other than His mother. What are we looking to see from the iconographer to let us know this is Jesus or someone else? We're looking for the cross inside Jesus' halo and IC XC (Jesus Christ) written near Him.

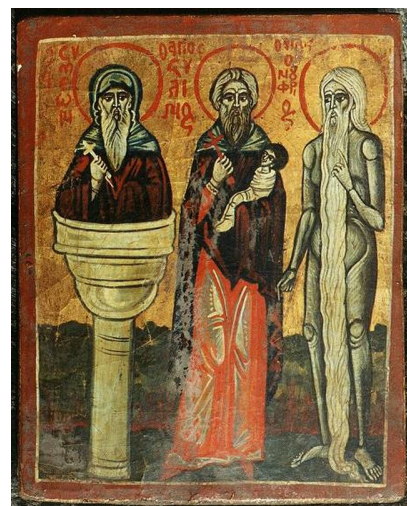
If our kids don't know about the lives of St. Christopher or Symeon the God Receiver, they may not realize that St. Christopher is carrying Christ on his back and St. Symeon is holding Jesus. They may assume that any child being held by a saint is Jesus, but St. Stylianos is not holding specifically Christ in his icon.



St. Christopher carrying Christ



Righteous Symeon
holding Christ



(Middle) St. Stylianos carrying a
child - he healed many children

THEOTOKOS -



Most of the time, the Theotokos will be depicted with her Son when the icon is not depicting an event.

She will have 3 stars on her clothing. One on each of her shoulders and one on her head symbolizing she was a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Christ.

Oftentimes, she is wearing blue and red clothing.

How can you tell if the icon is depicting the Theotokos or her mother, St. Anna? First, look to see who the woman is holding. Is she holding a boy (Jesus) or a girl (Theotokos)? St. Anna will be holding the Theotokos. The Theotokos will be holding Christ. Then look to see who is wearing the 3 stars on their clothing - this is the Theotokos.

When we understand how to read the details of the icons, this enables us to discern who is (or is not) being depicted when we see an icon that we've never seen before.

THE GOSPELS TEACH US HOW TO READ ICONS -

We spent the majority of our school year learning to read icons in relation to Jesus' life, miracles, and parables by showing our children an icon as they listened to the gospel story for that day's lesson.

For example: Miracle of Christ - Matthew 8:1-4

"When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him."

"And behold, a leper came and worshiped Him, saying, 'Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.'"

"Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, 'I am willing; be cleansed.' Immediately his leprosy was cleansed."



For example: Life of Christ - Matthew 3



“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.” (Verse 13)

“When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him.” (Verse 16)

“And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’” (Verse 17)

We see the Holy Trinity depicted in the icon of Theophany. Theophany is one of our major feast days. When do we celebrate this feast day?

“And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Verse 10)

In the icon, we see Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River, which is in the valley of the Judean wilderness where St. John the Baptist lives when he is not baptizing people in the river. We can see the Judean wilderness in the background of the icon with Jesus standing in the Jordan River.

Earlier in Matthew 3, we are given a description of St. John, “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea...John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist...”



Judean Wilderness in the distance and the Jordan River

For example: Parable of Christ - Matthew 13:24-30



“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way.”

“But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Do you want us then to go and gather them up?’ But he said, ‘No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them...”

“...but gather the wheat into my barn.” “



(Left) Wheat - (Right) Tare

A tare, or bearded darnel, is a plant that looks just like wheat, except that it is grayish black in color rather than a golden brown. Additionally, tares are bitter in taste and slightly poisonous. This is not something you want growing with your wheat, but they oftentimes grow next to each other. It is extremely difficult to tell the difference between wheat and tares until they are mature plants.

The Jews had assumed that when the Messiah came He would immediately separate the righteous from the sinners. Instead, Jesus explains that the righteous and sinners will continue living side by side until the Last Judgment.

USING AND FINDING ICONS -

If you have an icon in your home, classroom, or church that you can use for your lesson - fantastic! If you do not, you can find them online and show them to your children using a tablet, computer, or projecting it onto the wall using a Powerpoint or Keynote presentation.

I try, as much as possible, to find icons using Wikimedia Commons to share with everyone. When you're showing icons to your children using an electronic device, you can pull up icons that are easy to read for your kids. Some icons are very old or damaged and it's sometimes difficult to see individual details.

We used the following Bible commentaries to help explain the Gospel of Matthew to our children:

- [The Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Matthew](#) by Blessed Theophylact
- [The Gospel of Matthew: Torah for the Church](#) by Fr. Lawrence Farley