**Sacred Art: Icons**

*The sacred image, the liturgical icon, principally represents Christ. It cannot represent the invisible and incomprehensible God, but the incarnation of the Son of God has ushered in a new "economy" of images:*

*Previously God, who has neither a body nor a face, absolutely could not be represented by an image. But now that he has made himself visible in the flesh and has lived with men, I can make an image of what I have seen of God . . . and contemplate the glory of the Lord, his face unveiled [Saint John Damascene]*

– *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1159

**Icon** comes from the Greek work *eikon*, which means “likeness” or “image.” An icon depicts Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, or the angels or saints. As Saint John Damascene points out, the practice of iconography is rooted in the Incarnation of Christ. In Christ, God takes on our human nature, He has a face. Therefore, we are able to depict Christ. As the Catechism goes on to say: “Christian iconography expresses in images the same Gospel message that Scripture communicates by words. Image and word illuminate each other” (CCC, no. 1160).

In addition to the person of Jesus Christ, icons also depict Mary, the angels, and the saints.

All the signs in the liturgical celebrations are related to Christ: as are sacred images of the holy Mother of God and of the saints as well. They truly signify Christ, who is glorified in them. They make manifest the "cloud of witnesses" who continue to participate in the salvation of the world and to whom we are united, above all in sacramental celebrations. Through their icons, it is man "in the image of God," finally transfigured "into his likeness,"who is revealed to our faith. So too are the angels, who also are recapitulated in Christ (CCC, no. 1161).

As this passage indicates, iconic representations of the angels and saints are always related back to Christ – for the angels and saints find their holiness in Christ alone, and so testify to His glory. Icons are designed to draw us into contemplation, to lead us through the image to communion with those represented. Saint John Damascene writes: “The beauty of the images moves me to contemplation, as a meadow delights the eyes and subtly infuses the soul with the glory of God” (cited in CCC, no. 1162). Icons have a great power to draw us to prayer, to infuse us with God’s presence.

The *Catechism* goes on to say: “the contemplation of sacred icons, united with meditation on the Word of God and the singing of liturgical hymns, enters into the harmony of the signs of celebration so that the mystery celebrated is imprinted in the heart's memory and is then expressed in the new life of the faithful” (CCC, no. 1162). The presence of icons in the church, as well as in our homes and workplaces, allows the Gospel to be imprinted upon our heart. As human beings, we think about what we see, what we experience through our senses. How profitable to surround ourselves with sacred icons which draw our minds and hearts to God and His angels and saints!

We declare that we preserve intact all the written and unwritten traditions of the Church which have been entrusted to us. One of these traditions consists in the production of representational artwork, which accords with the history of the preaching of the Gospel. For it confirms that the incarnation of the Word of God was real and not imaginary, and to our benefit as well, for realities that illustrate each other undoubtedly reflect each other's meaning.28

**[1162](javascript:openWindow('cr/1162.htm');)** "."32 Similarly,.