

2010

Art for God or to God through Art?

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Recommended Citation

McCarthy, A. (2010). Art for God or to God through art? In D. J. Cohen & M. Parsons (Eds.), *In praise of worship: An exploration of text and practice*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publisher.

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Art for God or to God through Art?

*“Images open the heart and awake the intellect, and,
in a marvellous and indescribable manner,
engage us to imitate the persons they represent.”*

St John Damascenus¹

Introduction

Christian art has been an integral part of faith and worship for almost two millennia. Is that because the human need to express mystery is captured most fully through our creative processes, or is it because the presence of God within us can surface into the conscious realm most effectively through the creation of beauty? While this might be an impossible question to answer, it also could be the vehicle for examining an understanding of the importance of the connection between God and all that is beautiful. ‘Art demonstrates spiritual facts such as peace, depth, intensity, and so on. Thus art lends form, colour, tension and proportion to the invisible. It harnesses awe and leads dawning comprehension to active creativity.’² Through such creative activity Christians have made visible the reality of God incarnate.

Christians are ‘people of the book’ because of the profound degree of sacredness of the Scriptures and the depth of understanding of Christ as Logos, the Word of God. However, throughout our history the expression of these texts through visual art has led us to a greater depth of understanding of our image of God.

The richness of Christian art lies in the narratives expressed through visual images but the symbolic language of such images has largely been lost to people of the 21st century. Our ability to ‘read’ artworks of previous eras has been eroded and so the capacity of art to draw us to the sacred has been diminished. Even our ability to ‘read’ contemporary works of art is limited if

¹ St John Damascenus in M. Didron, *Christian Iconography*, (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1851), 3.

² Friedhelm Mennekes, “Interconnection: Religion and Art” in *Beyond Belief: Modern Art and the Religious Imagination*, (Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, 1998), 27.

the symbolic language is not understood. So often people will say 'I know what I like' but will be unable to access works of art because of the absence of the symbolic language that is required. Is it also apparent that to approach the sacred through visual art, to develop our connection and understanding of God through creative processes, has become limited by our almost exclusive use of the spoken and written word in our worship practices?

Our current media-focussed culture is highly visual with many images used to attract and disturb the viewer so the visual imagery always demands newness. Current forms of street and consumer art in Australia have changed the audience and perception of art in that those who now patronise art are no longer the ecclesial power figures as in the past, but rather, those who are much more closely involved with everyday living and the economic and political processes that determine present realities.

Reading religious art, particularly from different eras, requires a specific visual language which is not always utilised in modern images. Why should we bother? What will the inclusion of art works contribute to our sense of the sacred? Will we find God in art, or will our artistic expression draw us toward God? This chapter examines the importance of art in religious activities, the tradition of icons, and how our communities can be drawn into the dance of faith as we re-educate ourselves and re-enliven our capacity to respond in faith to art works that will open us to an encounter with the divine.

Christian art

We can see ‘beauty as revelation, and art as the human mediation that both enables and limits its revelatory power.’³ In Pope John Paul II’s letter to artists, he refers to the artist as the image of God the Creator.

None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. A glimmer of that feeling has shone so often in your eyes when – like the artists of every age – captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colours and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with which God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you.⁴

Artists themselves engage in the creative process of God in bringing to fruition responses that can only be evoked through the senses. In the 9th century, following the end of iconoclasm, Photios emphasised in one of his sermons that

seeing the imagery of Christ makes it easier to accept the truth of his incarnation in the flesh than merely reading the Gospel accounts: “Christ came to us in the flesh and was carried in the arms of his mother. This is seen and confirmed and proclaimed in pictures, the story is made clear by means of our personal eyewitness and viewers unhesitatingly accept this truth.”⁵

Over the centuries Christian art has developed from images adapted from the Greco-Roman culture around the Christian communities, through extraordinary eras of development in theology and technical expression where the Christian aspects were culturally dominant, to a point in Australian culture where religious art is almost a cultural sideline. Ancient civilizations such as Egypt and Mesopotamia give us rich examples of how they developed an understanding of the divine/human connection and expressed it in artistic forms making the invisible, visible. Christian art however, comes from a profound shift in the understanding of the presence of God in the world. God became present in the flesh of Jesus Christ, God was no longer invisible.

³ Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, (New York, Paulist Press, 2000), 5.

⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists*, accessed online http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists_en.html

⁵ Robin Cormack, *Icons*, (London, The British Museum Press, 2007), 47.

‘Jesus of Nazareth provided a face that one could see, describe, picture, a voice that emerged from an identifiable face.’⁶ The Christian encounter with Jesus Christ, ‘God-with-us’, is a profoundly personal, and yet, communal experience. ‘Perhaps today, these same walls cry out to us in vain because of our “poverty,” our distancing ourselves from the colour, joy and communion. In our own time, we run the risk of losing the power of communications that can be found in and through images.’⁷

Religious art in Australia was almost non-existent until the second half of the 20th century. ‘The main reason appears to be that we inherited a vacuum from the old world where art had lost its identity when it lost its connection with the things of the spirit.’⁸ Through most of the history of Christianity, art has been closely woven with the work of the Church in combining the Word with visual artistic expression, ‘but when the limit of realism had been reached after the end of the 17th century, it seemed that all that needed to be said had already been said, and an age of repetition began.’⁹ In 19th century Europe, a period of imitation of the ‘glories of Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque’¹⁰ was prevalent and this absence of anything new also flowed into the Australian experience. The churches built in Australia were mostly in the style of English Gothic revival. The social reality of Australian congregations was that they were scattered, poor (particularly in the Irish Catholic communities) and therefore unable to commission works of art for the glory of God. Where the Protestant communities avoided visual arts other than stained glass windows and sculptured lecterns and other objects, the Catholic community was prey to ‘sentimental realism’.¹¹ Plaster statues abounded and where art had once been the work of

⁶ Francis J Moloney, *Life of Jesus in Icons*, (Strathfield NSW, St Pauls Publications, 2008), 11.

⁷ Moloney, 15.

⁸ Hilde & Hans Knorr, *Religious Art in Australia*, (Croydon Victoria, Longmans, 1967), 3.

⁹ Knorr, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

artists' hands for God, now they were untouched by human hand. Plastic images, even luminescent, and unimaginably poor, sentimental images filled the need and distracted the faithful.

The contemporary experience

Following two world wars and a depression a new language of art was needed to 'meet the needs of the spirit in a time of great disturbance. The climate was at last right for resurgence.'¹² The Blake Prize was established in Australia in 1951 to offer a platform to encourage art works that were 'capable of giving inspiration'.¹³ While the Blake Prize has not increased the number of liturgically useful paintings, it has encouraged religious art. More recent criticisms of the Prize, however, echo the development of art that is closely allied to social change. Australia is now an intensely pluralistic and secular society. The decision to recognise atheism as a religious construct suffered much criticism and the Christian tag for the Blake Prize is no longer appropriate as other religious groups are represented. 'Art works don't only operate within the setting of the gallery, museum, or private home – they also resonate in the big world of ideas and social change and the tacky, sticky worlds of the politics of perception that surrounds debates about refugees, Indigenous Australia or terrorism.'¹⁴

The latest Prize (2007) was won by Shirley Purdie, an indigenous artist from Warmun in the East Kimberley, for her *Stations of the Cross*. This ancient Christian theme was set in the landscape of the Bungle Bungle Ranges and it is 'a strong visual exploration of a story of passion and suffering that also echoes her communal history and identity...This unsettling content and form

¹² Knoor, 5.

¹³ Knoor, 5.

¹⁴ Rod Pattenden, *What's art got to do with it?* Accessed online 18 March, 2008, <http://www.artreview.com.au/art/artandabout/whats-art-got-to-do-with-it.aspx>

of expression stands in contrast to the often-cheerful reception of Indigenous art that thrives on a decorative spirituality feeding Western hunger for meaning.¹⁵ Purdie's work is local, relevant, and evocative and expresses something about the last journey of Jesus that resonates with the suffering of her people so it tells us something of who we are and something of our God in a very particular linking of time and place. The Stations of the Cross is a form of worship that dates from the Middle Ages where different aspects of the Passion and Death of Jesus are relived in prayer and meditation. Purdie's work invites worship that links the past and the present, the political and the religious. Art is capable of making these links and expressing meaning that cannot be accessed by text alone.

Balan insists that in a unique way art maintains the

image, the idea, and the real. It maintains the symbolic. In recent years it has been popular for artists to sever the relationship, rendering the language mute. But humanity needs art only so long as it preserves this relationship. In so doing, art reflects what makes us distinctly human – creations (image) with souls (idea) made in the image of God (reality). And so art continues to be a means of conveying clues in our search for meaning.¹⁶

Instead of using art to assist us in finding meaning and therefore finding God in our reality, post industrialisation has removed the artist from the production of religious artefacts to the point that 'mass produced reproductions of Christ have primarily served to devalue the objects and mute their significance'.¹⁷ Balan also attests to a further result of this reduction in the creator's touch in that it eliminates the historical progression of the artistic development of Christian imagery which has been in action for two thousand years and it also takes away the artists' action in

¹⁵ Pattenden.

¹⁶ Daniel Balan, *Pursuing the Sacred in Art*, accessed online 19 December 2006, <http://dappledthings.org/adv06/essayart01.php>

¹⁷ Balan.

service to God.¹⁸ This particular direction in Christian imagery is difficult to counteract as the Christian consumer is presented with mass produced religious, pious goods for purchase.

Contemporary directions were explored by Rosemary Crumlin in mounting the exhibition *Beyond Belief: Modern Art and the Religious Imagination* in the National Art Gallery in Melbourne in 1998. The exhibition involved 20th century religious art from various countries that explored religious works in a non-linear way.

At the beginning of the century, the iconography of religion and spirituality was usually Judaeo-Christian, narrative and figurative. By the close of the century, the interest is not so much narrative and scriptural as diffusely spiritual, questioning, and focused less on a life after death than on a spirit that swells within the body, the earthy, and – more rarely – society. Such changes can be clearly identified by looking at the shifts in the iconography of the works.¹⁹

The diversity of images within this collection showed that contemporary artists are seeking to engage with religious themes in a different way. The artists represented in the exhibition were searching for ‘faithfulness, integrity, and some sort of inner life that does not entail commitment to ritual or permanence or religion.’²⁰ In a sense the art itself became a symbol, a vessel for sharing what is sacred in a broader sense and tied to social themes and experiences. This mirrors the social aspects of religious practice in contemporary Australian culture where commitment to religious practice is lessening but the desire for spiritual sustenance is evident. Religion has been moved to the sidelines of society and has ‘become a private matter for individuals to decide whether and to what degree they should be involved.’²¹

¹⁸ Balan.

¹⁹ Rosemary Crumlin, *Beyond Belief: Modern Art and the Religious Imagination*, (Melbourne, National Gallery of Australia, 1998), 9-10.

²⁰ Crumlin, 11.

²¹ Gary Bouma, *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century*, (Port Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 129.

While our current culture struggles to express what is sacred using the visual language of times past and moves towards forming a new language that can express our deepest meanings, we are left with a need to understand the place of art in our religious practice and what it can offer our communities in worship and personal spiritual development.

Why do we need art?

The question then arises, why do we need art? If we base our decision on the hierarchy of human needs then the answer has to be ‘no’, but it is ‘precisely the unnecessary which makes us human’ because ‘the aesthetic perspective is one that is concerned with human experience at its deepest and widest.’²² Eisner declares that we, as humans, ‘give simultaneously both a personal and a cultural imprint to what we experience; the relation between the two is inextricable.’²³ Our cultural nature is not limited to those things that are new around us. Our cultural nature is truly derived from what has gone before so understanding the richness of our path to the present is critical to the understanding of current experiences of reality. The mind with which we perceive reality can be described as an ‘organ of the mind’.²⁴ We experience life, our lived reality and therefore God, with our whole embodied person which is dependent on our senses to bring what we experience to consciousness. What we perceive, using our physical senses, is filtered personally and culturally as it is processed by our intelligence to bring understanding. What we perceive with our senses is ‘just as capable of *articulation*, i.e. of complex combination, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language. The most radical difference is that *visual forms are not*

²² Gloria Durker and Joanmarie Smith, “Is Art Necessary”, *Religious Education*, 76/1, (1981), 27-32.

²³ Elliot W. Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2002), 1.

²⁴ Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, (New York, New American Library, 1951), 84.

discursive.²⁵ This brings us to the need to have our experience of God not only defined in discursive language but also in visual language. Our experience of God, and our image of God, is greatly enriched by the use of visual language as well as by the texts and spoken words that we use in such a variety of ways.

Early Christians were conscious of the understanding that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Son of God. Over the first two centuries of Christianity this doctrine developed and was clearly enunciated at the Council of Nicea (325CE) and further confirmed through the Council of Chalcedon (451CE).²⁶ Jesus of Nazareth was truly the Son of God so now there was the experience of a physical presence of God on earth. Christians wanted to know what he looked like and so early Christian art provides details from this period. There was no tradition of portraiture of Jesus as there was with other great figures of Antiquity such as Socrates, so the images of Jesus came from 'pure projections in the psychological sense; that is, inventions corresponding to what people needed or wanted from him. The enormous variability of images of Christ is one of the immediate consequences of this.'²⁷ An exceptionally important aspect of this development is the recognition that images are not static and they are not neutral. Texts can always be analysed in a discursive manner but visual art does not behave in the same manner. 'Images not only express convictions, they alter feelings and end up justifying convictions'.²⁸ For example, following the adoption of the Christian faith as the official faith of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century, the image of Jesus was more commonly seen as a ruler of an empire, as the Pantocrator, dressed in imperial purple in contrast to his image as the Good Shepherd

²⁵ Langer, 86.

²⁶ Alester E. McGrath, *Historical Theology*, (Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 33.

²⁷ Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of the Gods*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003), 11.

²⁸ Mathews, 11.

painted on the walls of the catacombs.²⁹ Our cultural expression of images of Jesus should link us to this history but also express something of the meaning we seek in our own time and place. The most consistent form of Christian art has been the icon which culturally was developed in the Eastern Christian communities.

Icons

The word 'icon' comes from the ancient Greek word '*eikon*' which means 'likeness, image, representation'.³⁰ This could refer to living images, mirror images and imaginary forms of images, visions. Today the term can mean a small symbol on a computer screen, or someone to be greatly admired in the public sphere of life. In the religious sense though, it refers to a religious image that is sacred, particularly in the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. Since they present profound theological understandings through symbolic language, it is usual to refer to them as having been written, rather than painted. They are either written onto wooden panels or onto church walls but can also be mosaic or carved from ivory or made with precious metals. The subject matter is usually Christ, the Virgin Mary, angels, apostles, other saints or scenes depicting the story of their lives.³¹ These details are not the most important characteristics. Their religious and spiritual function is of far greater importance.

'The pictorial representation is transformed into a holy icon by two elements that lie beyond its material existence and appearance. One is the dynamic relation to the image to the actual person it represents, its prototype. The second entails an equally dynamic relation among the actual person represented, his or her image, and the viewer; that is, among the prototype, the icon, and the faithful who venerates it.'³²

²⁹ Joseph F. Kelly, *The World of the Early Christians*, (Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 1997), 137.

³⁰ Anna Kartsonis, *The Responding Icon*, (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 58.

³¹ Kartsonis, 60.

³² *Ibid.*, 60.

The icon therefore, through the image and the deeply spiritual way in which it has been prepared, leads the viewer to enter into a dynamic relationship with the person, or persons, portrayed.

‘There is the reality of the icon, which is a picture of some bit of this world, so depicted and so constructed as to open the world to the ‘energy’ of God at work in what is being shown.’³³

For the earliest Christians, Jesus was real, was a man who walked and talked with them and who was also God: ‘as Man He dwells, taking to Himself a body like the rest; and through His actions done in that body, as it were on their own level, he teaches those who would not learn by other means to know Himself, the word of God, and through Him the Father.’³⁴ The people who pray with icons are therefore led into a dynamic relationship with the person portrayed and experience God in a very personal way.

Meaningful expression of our image of God

Over many years of teaching I have encouraged students to show their image of God through various kinds of media, music, visual art and text. Often, God is presented as an old man in the clouds which relies on the image of God the Father as the Ancient of Days. There is confusion about how Jesus fits into the picture and students, in both secondary and tertiary education, often refer to ‘Jesus and God’. There is an acute need within our highly visually-oriented, media-driven culture to call on real art to deliver differing Scriptural images of God to extend our perceptions and understanding. The mystery of the Trinity has perplexed theologians and even caused a major schism in Christian history so how can a visual expression of this mystery help us?

³³ Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things*, (Mulgrave Victoria, John Garratt Publishing, 2002, xv.

³⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, (<http://www.spurgeon.org>, accessed 18/12/2008), ch.3.

An icon that profoundly expresses the Trinity is by Andrei Rublev,³⁵ painted around 1410.³⁶ The Trinity is represented by the three angels who ‘appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day’ (Gen 18:1). The three figures fit perfectly into a circle, a symbol of perfection and eternity. All figures have the same face being of the same essence, and are dressed in blue, the symbol for heavenly truth.³⁷ The interior perspective of the icon is not what we would expect where the vanishing point is somewhere in the distance. In icons the vanishing point is the position of the viewer and so it has a disturbing and yet riveting aspect. We are drawn into the presence of God through the reverse perspective of the image. This echoes Gospel values that insist if one is to be first, one must be last. To receive, one must give. The very centre of the icon is the chalice, on a table/altar in which there is roasted lamb. The symbolism of Eucharist is inescapable.

The right hand figure represents the Holy Spirit and while clothed in heavenly blue, also wears green which is the symbol of hope, of spring, of new life and particularly immortal life. Behind the Holy Spirit is a mountain, the place where one encounters God. This brings to mind the transfiguration (Matt 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-13, Luke 9:28-36, 2 Peter 1:16-18) where the glory of God was revealed in three figures and the voice of God was heard. For Elijah when he went to Horeb, he heard God speak in the sheer silence (1 Kings 19:12) as the Spirit speaks in the silence of the heart. The Spirit touches the table, the altar, bringing the reality of God’s action into the sacrifice as in the epiclesis preceding the consecration of bread and wine in a Eucharistic celebration.

³⁵ Robin Cormack, *Icons*, (London, The British Museum Press, 2007), 93.

³⁶ A clear and accessible understanding of this icon is available on:
<http://www.stjohnscamberwell.org.au/Sermons/ExplanationofTheTrinityIcon.htm>

³⁷ An early and informative study of symbols from iconography is from Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, (Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1895), 35.

The central figure is Jesus Christ. Behind Jesus is a tree. While on the narrative level it belongs to the story of Abraham sitting under the oaks of Mamre where he is visited by three angels, in iconography it also represents the tree of life and the tree on which Christ died to bring about the redemption of all humankind. He wears the unifying blue of the heavenly trio, but also a rich, earthy, red-brown garment that anchors him as a real person on earth, while the stripe of gold over his shoulder indicates that the splendour of God's presence is totally within him. The use of gold in icons indicates the splendour of God's presence in all of creation. A nimbus of gold is shown around the heads of those who are of God to show God's presence, and around the head of images of God. Jesus' right hand lies on the table with two fingers extended indicating his dual nature of God and man.

The figure on the left is the Father who has a translucent robe over the blue which indicates that he cannot be seen. He can only be known through the Son who he focuses on while the Son focuses on the Father, and the Spirit focuses on them both. 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matt 11.27). The Father holds a staff showing authority over all of Creation and behind him there is a house which refers to John 14.2: 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?' Every gesture, direction of gaze and aspect of the icon holds meaning and the most open aspect of the icon is that facing the prayerful viewer. The invitation is to join in the sacred meal, to become part of this divine group, to become part of God's life here on earth.

As the icon invites the community to enter into the life of the divine, so too do other symbols, ritual actions and the use of Scriptural text in proclamation and homiletics. 'However crucial the

verbal dimensions of celebration, including catechesis, instruction, and reflection, there is also need for a rich symbolic communication to bring people emotionally and intellectually into a mystery in which words are inadequate.³⁸ The use of art and music provide such symbolic communication. The human response is enriched as song engages us in different levels of sensory experience that can help us access the nature of God, to enter into the mystery. ‘Many religious experiences are inextricably aesthetic – few, indeed, could be called purely spiritual or intellectually theological.’³⁹ Where the concentration of effort is limited to intellectual responses it is very easy for barrenness to creep in and overwhelm the spirit.

A pastoral action in community

So what can an interest and budding understanding of icons offer a community in a pastoral sense? Without access to real icons and their liturgical function, I looked for a way in which those in my classes and interested members of our community and could be drawn into prayerful recognition and spiritual action. I have now used the following process in post-graduate theology and religious education classes as well as for our parish community and the wider community. In the tertiary education classes the students were required to write their own icon in silence for one hour each day during the intensive units which lasted for a week. A brief understanding of icons was explored, the icon to be copied was explained and the materials made available. Sacred music accompanied the action which was begun in prayer, but otherwise there was silence and stillness. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition one cannot write a ‘new’ icon. ‘Likenesses are sanctioned and authenticated by tradition and passed down in unbroken chains from teacher to pupil.’⁴⁰ Each is carefully prescribed by the theology of the Church and where a new one is

³⁸ Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, (New York, Paulist Press, 2000), 3.

³⁹ Viladesau, 2.

⁴⁰ Guy Freeland, “Foreword” in Michael Galovic’s *Icons and Art*, (Leichhardt, NSW, Honeysett Press, 2006), 5.

required for a recent saint, then ‘prayer and spiritual enlightenment are necessary in order to create a likeness.’⁴¹

In the community and parish settings, the process was centred on Lent (four weekly sessions) and Advent (3 weekly sessions) with each session focussing for the first half hour on the Gospel of the week and an understanding of icons. Digital presentations of various icons made it a visual feast since there are many images available on the World Wide Web. The materials were made available (acrylic paints, a board with the black outline glued onto it, brushes) and the final hour was devoted to the action of writing, preceded by prayer. Participants later spoke of deeply moving experiences as they interacted with the image and allowed their own response to become visible. The technique required that the gold paint be applied first (for traditional icon writing gold leaf is often used). Gold represents the splendour of God, the presence of God in time, the uncreated light of God’s presence,⁴² so immediately there was a sensory interaction between the gold and the participant. Colour has a strong capacity to alter our state of mind through its sensory impact and when working in a protected environment without any communication with other people, the colour is given space and time to work. Different symbolic attributes of colours were introduced to the participants in the explanation of the particular icon chosen for the sessions. However, the participants were given the opportunity to change the colours (except for the gold). Upon reflection at the completion of the sessions, it became obvious that any change of colour was deeply related to the spiritual expression of the particular person and they were amazed at how their choice strongly resonated with the traditional symbolism of the colour chosen.

⁴¹ Guy Freeland, “Foreword” in Michael Galovic’s *Icons and Art*, (Leichhardt, NSW, Honeysett Press, 2006), 5.

⁴² Peter Pearson, *A Brush With God: An Icon Workbook*, (Harrisburg, PA, Morehouse Publishing, 2005), 28.

Traditional icons require a great deal of preparation with the careful selection of wood that is not damaged and that will not warp. If they are large they have strengthening sections placed on the back to prevent warping. A linen piece is fixed to the painting surface (if required) and many layers of gesso are applied and sanded before paint can be applied. The gold leaf background is applied first and then many layers of paint are applied thinly over time accompanied by prayer. The paint is usually mixed using egg tempera but ancient icons also used encaustic where thin layers of heated wax was mixed with the pigments for application to the panel. Prayer and fasting are necessary in the tradition of writing icons. Fasting need not be the denial of what we enjoy but can be in the manner of Isaiah 58:5-9 where fasting is strongly connected to just actions. 'Fasting from self-centred and self-serving ideas and actions is a far greater and more difficult sacrifice than simply depriving ourselves of small luxuries.'⁴³

The traditional methods were greatly adapted for the community and class sessions that I directed but the spiritual effect was not in doubt. At the conclusion of each session we sat in silence and viewed our work for a few minutes and then participants left quietly. The response was always one of wonder and awe at the presence of God in this action. Even the students who were surprised at being asked to work in this way were amazed at how centred and prayerful they became and how the interaction with the subject of the icon became powerful in relationship. The quality of painting and representation was not important and there was, of course, a large diversity among each group, but it was not an issue. The result was an image that will always provoke personal prayer among the participants even if they choose not to have it on display. 'Insofar as "pastoral" theology enters into the study of the communication of the

⁴³ Pearson, 12.

message'⁴⁴, this proved to be an effective way of pastorally extending the Gospel of the season and the capacity to engage in a prayerful action that required different and imaginative skills in the participants. As in St Anselm's classic statement that theology is 'faith seeking understanding', a level of engagement in faith was present, time was spent seeking the heart of the Gospel, and then reaching an understanding that is different to previous ideas, making what was previously invisible to the participant, visible.

Conclusion

What if we increased our use of visual arts through re-education of ourselves and our worshipping community? What if we re-engaged in the use of our Godly, creative selves in praise, worship and development of our faith? By extending our capacity to make visible that which is invisible we come to a deep and rich encounter with God. Visual art, as well as other creative arts, can assist us personally and communally so that we move together, as in a dance, towards a deeper understanding of faith. The experience of religious activities that only encompasses the written and spoken word can become arid and unwelcoming but with the inclusion of the creative, Godly, part of ourselves we can enliven and re-educate ourselves to once more be in awe of the sacredness of our existence in relationship with God.

⁴⁴ Viladesau, 4.

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