

Sacred messages can be understood at different levels

By Felix Hoover

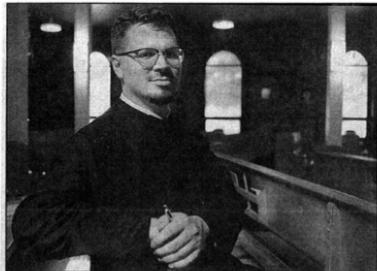
Dispatch Religion Reporter

Words that appear on icons in Orthodox churches are but part of what is "written" and "read" on such sacred artwork.

It is the entire icon that is written and meant to be read.

Icons, most of which are paintings of important church events and holy or heroic figures in church history, are said to be "written" because their theological elements make them a medium that's beyond painting, said Alexander Rentel, a deacon at St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church on the North Side.

"Reading" icons is analogous to reading the Bible or other great theological works because it takes someone who fasts, prays



Grace Beahm / Dispatch photos

Iconic art from Russia will soon adorn the bare brick walls behind Deacon Alexander Rentel at St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church.

and studies theology to comprehend their fuller meaning, he said.

"Anyone looking at an icon of Christ's Baptism should immediately understand there's a person in the water," said Rentel, who soon will resume doctoral studies in liturgical history and theology at Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome.

"At another level, they would recognize the event as the Baptism of Christ.

"At yet a higher level, someone would know that by baptism, Christ is restoring all creation to its original beauty."

As is customary at Orthodox churches, an icon of Jesus sits to the right of the doorway to the altar area (from the congregation's viewpoint) at St. Gregory.



More about icons

Several books on icons:

- *Doors of Perception: Icons and Their Spiritual Significance* by John Baggley (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, \$16.95)
- *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom* by Michael Quenot. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, \$16.95)
- *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* by Henri Nouwen (Ave Maria Press, \$9.95)

Some Web sites on icons:

- www.bridgebuilding.com
- www.ocf.org
- www.iconography.com

Source: *Wichita (Kan.) Eagle*

Traditionally, Jesus is depicted with a blue outer garment over a red garment.

Specific hues — deep teal for Jesus' outer garment and red for his undergarment — are found particularly among icons produced in northern Russia at the Yaroslavl School of Iconography, Rentel said.

The founder of the school, Russian iconographer Nikolai Muhkin, installed \$35,000 worth of icons and frescoes at St. Gregory last year and is working out details for additional ones at the church.

Unlike the Byzantine-style icons at St. Gregory with sharp, angular figures, those at St. Mary Coptic Orthodox Church in Prairie Township have softer, rounder features typical of Egyptian artwork. The Coptic Church is based in Egypt.

Despite differences in artists' styles and cultural and national distinctions, the theological underpinnings are the same for all Orthodox churches.

In Orthodox churches, three-dimensional works, such as sculptures, generally are avoided because some fear they might be idolatrous, violating the commandment that forbids worship of graven images.

The Rev. Gordon T. Walker, a circuit priest who serves the eastern half of the country for the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Diocese of North America, said he appreciates icons but doesn't think they're the only



The Rev. Sedarous A. Sedarous, pastor of St. Mary

acceptable form of church art.

"I don't feel free to condemn statues per se," he said. "It might mean that someone's faith could be damaged by judging them that way."

Among the congregations Walker serves is a fledgling one that meets each Sunday at the Signature Inn in Westerville.

The church, yet to be named, has only two icons — one of Jesus and the other of the Virgin Mary.

It could be years before the church and its icons are consecrated, but "we still view them as holy and valuable to us in our worship before that happens," Walker said.

Walker and John Sedarous, a deacon at St. Mary Coptic church, said many worshippers believe their faith adds a third dimension to the icons, even though they're painted in two dimensions.

The deacon's father, the Rev. Sedarous A. Sedarous, is pastor of St. Mary.

The elder Sedarous said, "A painting at home is just a painting; a painting in church is sacred."

Copts believe that wood's hardness makes it a sacred material. Many icons at St. Mary are wood paintings that employ ancient brush-stroke techniques, the Rev. Sedarous said.

The church also displays a few sacred wood burnings, a form of iconography that has come into use in the past 50 years.

Sewn cloth icons also are found at St. Mary.

All the icons, including the cloth ones, were blessed when the Coptic pope, Shenouda III, consecrated the church last month.

Orthodoxy is based on traditions and doctrine that date to early Christianity. There are an estimated 223 million members of Orthodox churches worldwide, including 7 million in North America.

An estimated 2,500 Orthodox live in the Columbus area.

Even though St. Gregory became an independent church in 1970, it began as Russian Orthodox and most of its artwork is in the Byzantine tradition of Russian, Bulgarian and Greek orthodox churches.

The largest Orthodox congregation in central Ohio, Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral in the Short North, features Byzantine-style icons. Many of the church's older icons come from Greece. More recent ones are mosaics created by Italian artist Bruno Salvatore, who installed them in 1997.

Byzantine icons are found at the other local Orthodox churches: St. Stevan of Dechani Serbian Orthodox Church on the Northeast Side and St. Mary Macedonian Church on the East Side.