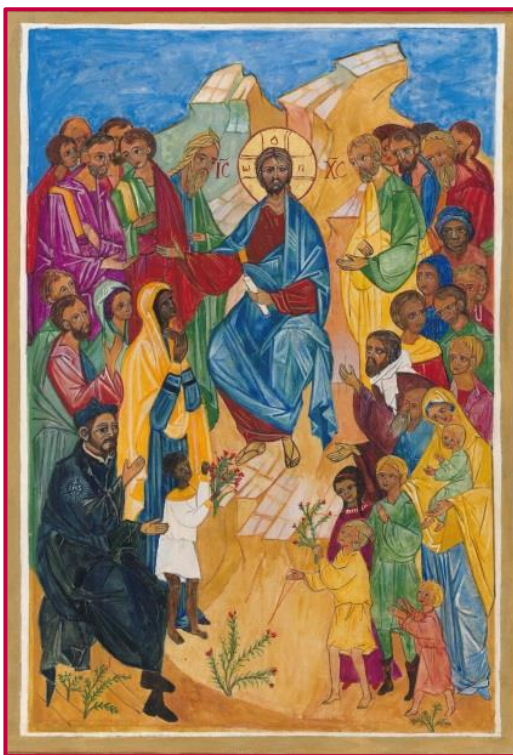


## Christ the Teacher

### An Icon for Jesuit Schools

#### What is an icon?

An icon (Greek εἰκών, eikon) is a 'window into heaven,' an image which reveals the face of God to us. Icons have been called theology in line and colour. The icon speaks the Word afresh when we gaze and meditate upon it.



Traditionally, icons are said to be 'written by God with the hands of' the artist denoting that they are regarded as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Icons are highly stylized and so the depiction of people, nature, clothing and objects is non-naturalistic (for example, there is no sense of perspective). The geometrical order of the icon (for example, the folds of the clothes or the rocks of the mountain) signifies the order of heaven with everything in its rightful place and in balance.

This stylization also appears in the faces and limbs of the people in the icon. Their faces do not resemble mere human beings, but show us the faces of human nature transformed into the divine. Hands are often delicate and expressive, commonly held in gestures of blessing.

#### A new icon for Jesuit schools

This icon of Christ the Teacher was 'written by God with the hands of Sister Mary Stella' of Hyning Monastery near Lancaster. It was commissioned on the occasion of the bicentenary of the worldwide restoration of the Society of Jesus (1814-2014). Based on the traditional Christ Pantocrator, it shows Christ the Teacher surrounded by the apostles, peoples of different races, genders and ages, and includes St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus and of Jesuit schools.



*Christ the Teacher*

## How to read the icon

Jesus is shown in the traditional pose of the *Pantocrator* (Greek: πᾶν κράτος meaning *All Powerful*). The icon of the Pantocrator is placed at the centre of the *templon* (the screen on which the icons are displayed in an Orthodox church, also known as the *iconostasis*). The Pantocrator is the first icon to be venerated.

Christ is shown **seated on a mountain with a scroll** in his left hand signifying he is the teacher. The mountain is the place of encounter with God. It is where Noah's Ark comes to rest; it is where Moses receives the ten commandments; it is where Elijah encounters God in the quiet breeze; it is where the Temple is built. It is where Jesus teaches:

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them.” (Matthew 5:1-2)

Notice that Jesus sits to teach – the traditional posture for teaching authoritatively. Bishops traditionally sit to preach and teach.

God declares Jesus to be his voice on a mountain:

“Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves . . . suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’” (cf. Matthew 17:1-13).

The scroll reminds us of the scroll of the Torah, containing the teaching given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:3ff). Christ teaches those who are gathered around to listen. We are reminded that “though the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17)

The scroll also reminds us of the eight scrolls of the prophets (the four former prophets, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; and the three latter prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the scroll of the 12 minor prophets). Jesus appears as the new prophet of the Kingdom of God with a new scroll.

The scroll also recalls the beginning of Jesus' own public ministry as he teaches in the synagogue:

“And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.’ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’” (Luke 4:17-21)

This is the good news being spoken in the icon to the people.

Christ's **right hand** is held open in the gesture from Roman rhetoric calling for silence (this is how senators or orators in the Roman forum would signal to the crowd that they were about to speak). We are invited to listen to Jesus' words and to enter into a personal relationship with him.

Jesus wears a **red inner tunic** and a **blue outer cloak** (the tunic and cloak are traditional Roman dress). The red represents the earth and blood of his human nature (cf. Genesis 2:7 "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."). The blue represents the sky and heaven of his divine nature.<sup>1</sup>

The **gold sash** over Jesus' right shoulder represents his priesthood. Jesus' priesthood is of the ancient and mysterious order of Melchizedek rather than the much later Temple priesthood. (cf. the Roman Canon: "the offering of your high priest Melchizedek"). The priesthood of Melchizedek was both priestly and kingly at the same time. Thus, taken with the scroll of the prophets, Christ is represented in this icon as Priest, Prophet and King.

Around Christ's head is the **nimbus** (or halo) which signifies Jesus' divinity.

In the theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church, an icon is a 'window into heaven' through which Christ and the Saints in heaven can be seen and communicated with. The **gold background** of the icon indicates that what is depicted is in heaven. The halo is a symbol of the Uncreated Light (Greek: Ἄκτιστον Φῶς; cf. the words of the Creed: "Light from Light, true God from true God") – this is the grace of God shining forth through the icon.

The **cross** drawn in red within the *nimbus* reminds us of the manner in which Jesus died – sacrificed on a cross to take away the sins of the world.

Nine lines are used to form the cross, representing the nine orders of angels who stand in attendance on the Son of God (Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Archangels, Principalities, and Angels). Again, this is a glimpse into the order of heaven.

Within the *nimbus* are the **three Greek letters** ο (omicron), ω (omega) and ν (nu, as written in modern Greek). This is the closest equivalent in Greek of the Hebrew יהוה אֱשֶׁר אֱהִיָּה (אֱהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֱהִיָּה, 'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh, "I am who I am") – the name by which God reveals himself to Moses:

"But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you', and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am . . . this is my name for all time.'"  
(Exodus 3:13-14)

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<sup>1</sup> There are contradictory interpretations of the symbolism of the colours and the meaning attributed to them is sometimes reversed (so that red is held to symbolize the divine and blue the human). This reflects the Christological controversies of the early Church which tried to make sense of the claims that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. The controversy was settled at the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD.

Christ is the very icon, the image of the living and eternal God.

**Jesus' feet** are shown planted firmly on the mountain echoing the song of Isaiah, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Sion, 'Your God reigns.'" (Isaiah 42:7)

To either side of the nimbus are the Greek letters **IC** and **XC**. They represent the name and title 'Jesus the Christ' (Greek: ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, written IHCOYC XPICTOC in medieval Greek and abbreviated to two letters from each word). The horizontal bar above the letters indicates an abbreviated word.

The **eyes of Christ** are traditionally painted differently: one is the stern eye of the Judge; the other is the compassionate eye of the Shepherd.

Gathered around Christ on the holy mountain are **the saints** – both the canonized and the living 'saints' on earth (ie. Christians). Some are recognisable but most are anonymous. In this icon they have been painted to represent people of different races, ages and gender.

The **twelve apostles** are at the top of the icon (with Matthias replacing Judas; cf Acts 1:15-16). Peter is to the right, nearest to Christ, painted in orange and green, the colours of the rock which was the name given him by Jesus (cf. Matthew 16:18). Andrew (the first disciple to be called with his brother Peter) is to the left, facing Jesus (just next to the IC). St John is represented without a beard. Tradition has it that John and his brother James (the "Sons of thunder"; cf. Mark 3:17) were Roman citizens (James was beheaded, a privilege of Roman citizens condemned to death) – they are shown wearing coloured band of the nobility on their tunics but of the gold colour of heaven rather than the nobles' purple.

In this icon, **St Ignatius Loyola** is recognizable in the lower left corner. His hands are painted one open and one closed – representing his gradual opening up to God at Loyola and Manresa (1521-23). The open hand represents his openness to God and willingness to surrender control of his life to his Lord; the closed hand shows that this process is not yet complete as he holds some things back.

Ignatius is clothed in the simple black robes of the first Jesuits and wears the **IHS monogram** on his sleeve. The IHS monogram, which has become a badge for Jesuits all over the world, owes its origin to St Bernadine of Siena (1380-1444) who used it as a visual aid in his public preaching. The IHS monogram is traditionally used in Jesuit schools, churches and institutions. These are the first three letters in Greek (ΙΗΣ, Latinized as IHS) of the name 'Jesus', after whom the Society of Jesus is named. The IHS is surmounted by a cross, with the three nails used in the crucifixion below. The sun's rays are taken from the Roman sun-deity symbol of *sol invictus* (Latin: the unconquered sun). Christ is the new sun revealing God's glory: "the light shed by the good news of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Ignatius has **one foot raised** in the air reminding us of his desire for his Jesuit companions to be ready, like the apostles, to be sent at a moment's notice.<sup>2</sup> His **eyes** are large and pronounced in the traditional style of the icon and gaze into the distance – he sees the divine and invites us to see what he sees.

At the bottom of the icon is a gap in the **people circled around Jesus**. This is the space for us – the people (or 'saints' on earth) contemplating the icon. The icon invites us into the circle of saints (in heaven), to be part of what is going on.

The **earth and mountain** are painted in bright fresh colours signifying “a new heavens and a new earth.” (Isaiah 65:17) God is transforming creation: “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” (Isaiah 43:19)

In this new creation, God will dwell with his people as the Christ of the icon does: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them.’” (Revelation 21:1,3)

Fresh **green plants** spring up out of the rock and desert. The freshness of the mountain rock, soil and plants represents the freshness with which the Word comes to us anew each time we pray with the icon. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.” (Isaiah 35:1-5)

The **sides of an icon** are traditionally painted red signifying the blood that Christ shed in order to achieve what you see in the image. The sides are anointed with Chrism (the oil used in the sacraments and which bears the name of 'Christ') in a ceremony to 'christen' the icon.

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<sup>2</sup> Ignatius writes of “. . . a Society that needs to have, so to speak, one foot in the air ready to hasten from place to place, according to our vocation and the Institute which we follow in our Lord” Letter to Mateo Sebastián de Morrano, Rome, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1549

## Texts for Prayer and Reflection

### Colossians 1:15-20

He is the image (**icon**) of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

### Hebrews 1:1-4

Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

### Prayer at the Icon of Christ

We reverence your spotless icon,  
O gracious Lord,  
and ask forgiveness of our transgressions,  
O Christ our God,  
because of your own good will you ascended the cross in the flesh,  
that you might deliver those whom you had created  
from the bondage of the enemy.  
We cry aloud unto you.  
You have filled all things with joy,  
O our Saviour,  
for you came to save the world.  
Amen.

## A Teacher's Prayer

Lord,  
you have called me to teach  
and you give me your son, Jesus the Teacher,  
as my guide.  
You send me to be your face and word  
in school today,  
to bring your message of faith, hope and love.

With my pupils  
may I be always patient and understanding  
and never resentful or despairing.

With my colleagues  
may I be always generous and supportive  
and never dismissive or hurtful.

With those entrusted to lead the school  
may I be always considerate and constructive  
and never obstructive or difficult.

With myself  
may I be always grateful for daily blessings  
and never take things for granted.

With everyone I encounter today  
may I be just in my actions  
and forgiving with my words.  
May I praise, not criticise;  
encourage, not deter;

help, not hinder;  
accompany, not direct;  
and bring light and joy to those I meet.

May my lessons be truthful and inspiring  
as they reveal the wonderful traces  
of your presence in creation  
and in the best of human kind.

May my classroom be a place of peace  
and respect, discovery and learning,  
where each person is given space  
and encouragement to flourish,  
growing to be the person you call them to be.

Give me energy, and faith and commitment,  
especially when I am tired or despondent,  
let down,  
or wondering if my efforts are worthwhile.

Give me the wisdom  
and strength of your Spirit,  
today and each day,  
that I may help  
the souls committed to my care  
for the common good  
and for your greater glory.

Amen.



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Biblical texts NRSV

Electronic and printed copies of the icon  
and these notes are available from the Jesuit Institute.

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