

## FAITH AND THE ARTS

## Iconography: art of prayer and reflection

By Jerry Hames

Regan O’Callaghan prefers to be called an iconographer or an icon writer rather than a painter or artist.

“Just as I would write a sermon to preach verbally on a Sunday, so I write an icon to preach visually, because an icon is basically a visual sermon,” he said. “However, icon writing is a creative process with rules you have to respect.”

Some Orthodox iconographers would not consider his work true icons, he said, because, first, he is not a member of the Orthodox Church (he was ordained a priest in the Church of England in 2001) and second, because he adds visual elements and sometimes works with contemporary themes.

O’Callaghan is in the midst of a three-month residency in the Diocese of Long Island, teaching children, youth and adults in a series of workshops about the art of prayer and reflection as they create icons.

“When I come into my studio, I start with a prayer and I finish with a prayer,” he said. “Icon writing is a process of prayer for me more than anything else, and I underline this point when I teach. When people come to my classes, I say, ‘This is not an art class, it is a class in prayer more than anything; it is a spiritual discipline. You must be focused and able to leave your troubles and worries behind and focus on the present and on what is good.’”

His relationship with icons is deeply personal. They are about your relationship to the divine, are windows into the divine, into heaven, he tells those at his workshops. “They should not just be left on a wall, but you should develop a ‘liturgical’ relationship with them. You do not see people walking around with an oil painting and hugging it, but this happens with icons.”

While an artist-in-residence at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London some years ago working on an icon of St. Paul, he was given a room reached from a winding staircase. “I really developed a relationship with the icon I was writing” -- so much so that he would greet it in the morning and say goodbye when he left later, he said. By doing so, he said he gained a greater understanding of St. Paul in the process.

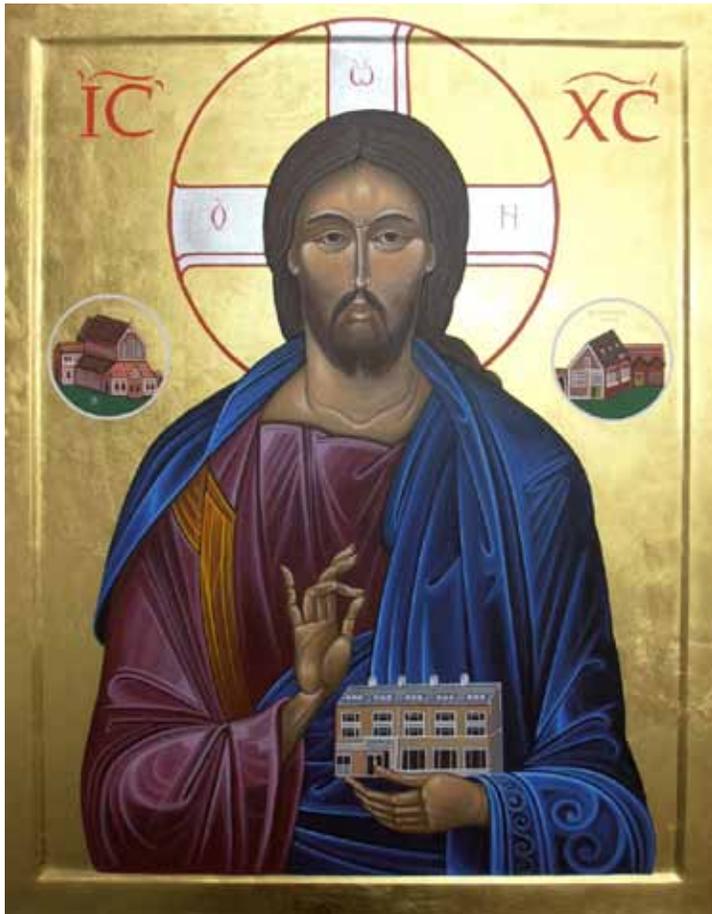
“In icon writing you learn about virtues, humility and other characteristics of the saints you are portraying,” O’Callaghan told young men at a weekend retreat at Campe DeWolfe, Long Island’s Episcopal camp and conference center, on the last weekend of April. There, he led various activities, including an icon-writing workshop and a meditation on the beach focusing on the theme “Who are you?”

That theme was incorporated into his teaching. Participants were given images of saints ranging from early church fathers and mothers to contemporary men and women like Martin Luther King Jr., said Patrick Kangrga, the diocese’s youth and young adult missionary. “With each stroke they were drawn in to contemplate the depth of God and reflect upon the image of God in their icon, as well as the way in which they themselves reflected the image of God to the world.”

O’Callaghan also led a children’s workshop at a Brooklyn church. More will follow throughout June at other parishes and at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Garden City, N.Y.

“The children’s classes are very similar to the adult classes,” he said, “although I often find children less inhibited than adults when it comes to being creative. The prayerful discipline of icon painting is also shared, and I place the same emphasis on this as I do with the adults.

“The children love using egg tempera as well as the gold leaf. I often do warm-up exercises with children like you would before you play sports. I also talk about the eggs we use and how I use organic eggs. If a chicken is happy, then we will have a happy egg, which means a better quality egg, which is good for binding the pigment.



Photos/Regan O’Callaghan

Above, “Lucy” egg tempera and gold leaf 2015

Left, “Jesus of West Hampstead” egg tempera and gold leaf 2013

Below, “3 Mothers” egg tempera and gold leaf 2007



Photo/Graham Lacado

Regan O’Callaghan at St Paul’s Cathedral London 2015.



Photo/xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Left, students learning to make egg tempera at Church of the Nativity, Brooklyn, Long Island

through their art, O’Callaghan said he, too, has had a rich experience during his residency. He thanked his parish host, Bishop Lawrence Provenzano, and the Very Rev. Canon John P. McGinty, dean of the diocese’s George Mercer Jr. Memorial School of Theology in Garden City, a co-sponsor along with the diocese.

“Faith is expressed not only, and perhaps not even best, in words,” said McGinty. “Feelings, colors, form – beauty in all its aspects; these things, too, communicate and strengthen faith.

“For Regan O’Callaghan, a writer of icons, this is a less a work of art than it is an experience of prayer, and that means it is an experience of God. Not talking about God. Talking with. And not even talking. Being with God.

“Regan is opening the door to that experience with people, younger and older. I think he is going to leave us a more prayerful, spirited, people. He’s going to leave us knowing that we can actually experience God, and become more by that experience.” ■