

## Khourieh Randa Al Khoury Azar Decodes the Language of Icons

By Karen Sibert Haddy

As a newcomer to the Orthodox faith more than 20 years ago, I can still remember my first sight of the profusion of holy icons when I walked into an Orthodox church, and how foreign they seemed – severe yet serene, so different from the rotund Renaissance images of the infant Jesus and the Virgin Mary that fill non-Orthodox churches and decorate western Christmas cards.

After a day listening to the teaching of Kh. Randa Al Khoury Azar, a professional iconographer and a faculty member at the Antiochian House of Studies, I am very grateful for insight into the deeper meaning of Orthodox icons and the scholarship that goes into their preparation and writing. Sponsored by the women of St. Simeon Orthodox Christian Church in Santa Clarita, the October 12 seminar was attended by many of our parishioners and visitors from neighboring churches, all of whom were blessed by Kh. Randa's visit.

Kh. Randa began the day with an explanation of the purpose of icons in Orthodoxy. They are not to be worshipped, but venerated and honored. "Worship is for God, and only God," Kh. Randa said. "Icons are a means of honoring God, his saints, and the holy angels. The honor that is given to the icon passes to its prototype."

Noting that many of the saints depicted in icons have been martyrs for Christianity, Kh. Randa asked the question, "Those who defended their faith, don't they deserve to be venerated?"

Kh. Randa quoted from St. John of Damascus and his famous work, "Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images":

*"I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honoring that matter which works my salvation...The image is a memorial; just what words are to a listening ear. What a book is to the literate, that an image is to the illiterate. The image speaks to the sight as words to the ear; it brings us understanding."*

She explained that an idol is a sculpted work showing an imaginary god or animal, and thus there are no three-dimensional sculptures or statues in the Orthodox tradition. In contrast, an icon "is a window into heaven that opens your eyes into another

realm,” Kh. Randa said. “Through color and lines, an icon expresses what the gospel proclaims in words.”

“Accepting the icons and venerating them is accepting the mystery of the Incarnation of God Himself,” Kh. Randa said. “Refusing or rejecting the icons or attacking them is denying the Incarnation of God and the existence of Christianity.”

Because each icon is intended to be a narrative, iconographers speak of “writing” an icon, not painting or drawing it. Before she begins to write an icon, Kh. Randa first prays and then reads extensively to learn about the saint or the subject. “Iconography has canons and rules,” she explained. “The iconographer does not add anything new to religious icons, but strictly follows the Christian tradition and the canons of iconography.” The work must invite the Christian to enter into “contemplation, prayer, and silence.”

### **What distinguishes an icon from a painting?**

First, Kh. Randa explained, there is no sense of time in icons because they are not intended to be “of this world”. While a painting may depict events in sequence, a religious icon can depict different scenes and events as if they occur at the same time. This is because of God’s perception of time, according to Holy Scripture: “A day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”

Another difference is that holy icons are not painted in realistic perspective. Instead, they give a sense of entering the divine world where space and time are insignificant. The concern is for spiritual truth. The decision to depict a figure as big or small, placed near or far away, depends on its importance in the event. There are no shadows in iconography because there is no sense of the time of day.

There is no attempt by iconographers to show the human body in its normal proportions, Kh. Randa explained. The intent is to portray inner beauty instead of ideal physical appearance. To that end, there are no open mouths, no expression, and no actions. The mouth is small, meaning that the individual obeys the sacred commandments of God rather than speaking. The large forehead symbolizes teaching and knowledge. The large eyes are for seeing the uncreated light of God.

### **Symbolism and color in iconography**

Nothing in an icon is accidental; every detail and color has meaning, Kh. Randa said.

- **Gold** is the color of the uncreated light, the glory of God, and God's grace. The halo is gold to signify the radiating glory of the represented person, surrounded by the uncreated light.
- **White** signifies purity, cleanliness, and the heavenly realm. Icons of the resurrected Christ typically show Him clad in white and gold.
- **Silver** indicates purity of soul and holiness.
- **Green** is the color of youth, fertility, life, and the Holy Spirit. The priest wears green vestments at Pentecost to signify the renewal of life.
- **Blue** signifies the kingdom of God on earth, the humanity of the Theotokos, and human life. In our church, this is why the icon of St. Simeon shows him in a blue robe to underscore his human nature.
- **Red** signifies the blood of Christ, sacrifice, and martyrdom. It also signifies divinity. Icons of the Theotokos often show her wearing a red veil and mantle over a blue robe, showing that she was first human, and then by her complete obedience to God became divine.
- **Purple** indicates wealth, power, and authority, as in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.
- **Brown** is the color of earth and mountains.
- **Black** is the color of evil and death, used to paint caves and symbols of the grave. It can also be the color of secrecy. Black is the absence of light, and therefore it has no place in the transfigured reality. The black robes of monks can symbolize the rejection of worldly pleasures and habits.

Other details in an icon have specific meaning too, Kh. Randa said. The act of holding a cross indicates that the saint was a holy martyr, because it symbolizes the most perfect sacrifice of life for others, which is the Crucifixion. Wings are reserved for angels, the messengers of God, and the ribbons worn by angels are like "antennae" to pick up the voice of God. Mountains are a symbol of steps leading to God, helping us rise from earthly thoughts to heavenly thinking. We are always closer to God on a mountaintop, as on Mount Tabor in the Feast of the Transfiguration.

### **How an icon is prepared**

Kh. Randa explained that only the highest quality materials are used in preparing icons, because of "the respect we owe to such important eternal ideas and people."

"Why go cheap with our faith?" she asked. "We want the best of everything in our icons." The cloth used is 100% cotton linen, the gesso that primes the surface is a mix of marble or chalk, the clay is natural, and the gold is 22K to 24K to represent the atmosphere of heaven.

The colors used are powdered natural pigments, she said. An egg yolk binder is used as a symbol of creation and of Pascha. The use of a wood frame with a cradle or raised edges indicates that the icon is a window showing us the way to real life after this earthly life. The eyes are always the last part finished, as the eyes express and reflect the soul of the subject.

The iconographer doesn't expect praise for writing the icon, and therefore it is never autographed. "It's the work of the Holy Spirit through the hands," Kh. Randa said. "We thank God for accepting us, the sinners, to use our hands to write the icon. It is not my work; it is God's work through me."

In the last part of her presentation, Kh. Randa gave an excellent overview of the controversies in early Christendom and heresies that led to the destruction of icons in an attempt to attack the beliefs of the faithful. These conflicts continued from the 5th century to the year 842, when the Byzantine Empress Theodora brought back honor and veneration to icons. Later she was canonized, and we remember St. Theodora on the first Sunday of Great Lent each year when we celebrate the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

### **How Kh. Randa became an iconographer**

Born and raised in Jordan, Kh. Randa earned her bachelor's degree in the field of economics. Later, she pursued special training in conflict resolution and communication skills. When she and her husband, Fr. Mansour Azar, moved to his hometown in Lebanon, Kh. Randa made use of her training and knowledge to help him establish the St. Nicholas Marriage Preparation Center in the Diocese of Mount Lebanon. It was in Lebanon that Kh. Randa first had the opportunity to learn to write icons.

"I can't remember a time in my life when I wasn't fascinated with icons. They always captured my eyes and heart, and I always felt them alive and talking to me," she says. "I was blessed in Lebanon to meet the right people at the right time to pursue this dream and get to know how to write icons the old traditional way." Subsequently, Kh. Randa has added to her skills and techniques by training with internationally known iconographers from all over the Orthodox world.

In 2013, Kh. Randa and Fr. Mansour emigrated to the United States with their two children, and Fr. Mansour became the Pastor of Saint George Antiochian Orthodox Church in Upland, California. With the blessing of H.E. Metropolitan Joseph, Kh. Randa has continued to write icons which have found their way into many churches, homes, and private collections.

Keeping up her skills in writing icons takes a great deal of practice – sometimes eight to 12 hours a day, Kh. Randa says. “It requires lots of reading and dedication, practice and passion, patience and persistence, and so much love and prayer.”

She relates to the experience described by St. John of Damascus: “I enter into the common place of therapy of souls, the church, choked by thoughts as by thorns. The blossom of the icons attracts me to gaze at it, and as a meadow delights my sight, and imperceptibly instills into my soul the glorification of God.”

Kh. Randa hopes to continue sharing her knowledge and experience about the beauty of iconography and the important role it plays in the Orthodox Church. In her words, “Icons are windows into heaven, and were created to serve the Church in spreading the Faith.”