

## SOME NOTES ON THE ICON OF ST BEDE

Dear Fr Martin,

Here are a few notes about the design of the icon. Some things you will doubtless already know but I have included them anyway.

- Bede spent most of his life at the monastery of St Peter and St Paul, so I placed him within a building that represents his monastery.
- The church is broadly based on what archaeologists believe the Jarrow church looked like (see below).



- While the colours of everything are rich to give a festive quality to the icon, I have kept Bede's habit earth-red to indicate his monastic poverty. The complementary greens and reds around him add a joyous aspect, while the cool blues keep the work sober.
- The text he writes is adapted from his commentary on the Visitation (<https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/saints/feastofthevisitation/>)
- The chair is based on one found in an illuminated manuscript of St Dunstan, a fellow writer (below). The illumination was formerly bound at the front of a Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict, written at Christ Church, Canterbury, c.1170. The text was probably copied from a 10th-century manuscript which was corrected and annotated by St. Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury (d.988).



- The technique of painting used is traditional egg tempera. Natural pigments are bound with egg yolk. The blue is from the semi-precious stone azurite, the red curtains from cinnabar, and the other colours from earths. The panel is made of tulip wood, with dovetailed and tapered oak battens to stop the panel warping but allowing it to expand and contract with changes in humidity. The gold is two layers of extra thick 23.5 carat gold leaf, applied and burnished using the 'water gilding' technique. About 15 layers of gesso plaster, made of whiting and rabbit skin glue, are first applied to the panel, strengthened with linen cloth. A further eighth layers of red clay glue are added where the gold is to be laid. All the surfaces are then smoothed with nine grades of abrasive paper. The gilding is then done, followed by the painting.
- The barley sugar columns are inspired by the nearby Saxon crypt at Repton (below)



- The placement of the saint within an arch is a common feature of medieval manuscripts (see below), mainly because it draws the eye to the most important feature of the icon – the saint’s face.



- The knife is used both to press down the parchment while writing so it doesn’t move around, and to scrape off any errors (a medieval eraser!).
- The image type of the Virgin and Child is called ‘Our Lady of the Sign’. The name is based on Isaiah’s prophecy, quoted by Matthew, that ‘Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him “Emmanuel”, which means, “God is with us”.’ (Matthew 1:23). In this type the emphasis is on Christ’s divinity. His garments are highlighted with gold lines called *assist*. He is depicted as a small man to indicate that while He was fully human through His incarnation, He remained the eternal Logos and Wisdom of God

according to His divinity. He and the Mother of God raise their hands in intercession for the world.

- It is a common misconception that icons do not use perspective. Although they rarely use the mathematical vanishing point system invented in the Renaissance, they in fact they use up to six different perspective systems, all aimed at reflecting a divine rather than merely human way of seeing. The text of a talk I have given on the subject is below. In general, icons flatten things somewhat in order to reinforce the icon's role as a door through which we pass to meet the saint depicted. It is not primarily a work of art to replace the saint and be admired in its own right, but a means of communion with the saint. This icon of Bede uses primarily multi-view perspective (the church is viewed from both the left, right and above all at once); flatness, to help draw us through the icon to the saint himself; and inverse perspective (the writing desk). See below for fuller explanations.

I hope this helps!

## PERSPECTIVE IN ICONS

One of the first things we notice about icons is the strange perspective systems that they use. Things are not depicted as they would be if photographed. Why is this so? There are I think three main reasons, summarized in the words initiation, interpretation and experience. The icon tradition aims to *initiate* us into a deeper, more Christ-centred way of seeing the world; to *interpret* or unveil the deeper meaning behind the events depicted; and to reflect how we *experience* the world with our whole being and not just with our eyes. The various perspective systems that icons use, and the shape, scale and colour of landscapes and buildings all serve these three ends.

First let us look at what is meant by initiation, and at how liturgical texts and icons interpret events in a sacred way, and then we will consider how icon perspective fulfils these two roles.

### ***Noetic initiation***

Writing to his epistle to the Ephesians, St Paul said that he prayed for them to the Father that:

...he may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe... (Eph. 1: 17-20)

The style and not just the subject matter of an icon is designed to help open the "eyes of our heart".

In order to understand how the icon works we must first have an accurate picture of our own nature as humans. We know that we are body, soul and spirit. But just as the body has various faculties, such as the five senses, a heart, lungs etc., so the soul and spirit of the human person also have various faculties.

Part of the soul is the rational faculty or reason, called *dianoia* in Greek and *rationale* in Latin. Its role is to formulate concepts derived either from information gathered by the

bodily senses, or revealed to the spirit. It cannot of itself receive the things of the spirit. By its nature it is restricted to the realm of mental structures, things that can be measured and contained in concepts. It cannot directly apprehend spiritual things. If it does try to do this it invariably creates mental idols, caricatures of reality. The rational faculty helps us to order things and to live in this world.

Spiritual things can only be directly apprehended by the “eye of the heart” as Paul describes it. In patristic and ascetic writing this is often called the *nous* in Greek and *intellectus* in Latin. It is this noetic faculty of the spirit or heart which needs to be opened in order for us to experience what God has already done in Christ. Paul writes that

The unspiritual [*psikikos* in Greek, i.e. “soulish”] man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand [*gnomai* in Greek i.e. know] them because they are spiritually discerned  
(1 Cor. 2:14)

It is important that Paul speaks here not of the carnal or fleshly man but of the person who remains in the realm of the soul, that is, limited to the rational, emotional and physical faculties. These faculties are good and God-given, but they can only assimilate things pertaining to the material world and our survival within it, and create mental pictures or concepts about spiritual realities but not experience these directly. This direct experience of divine things is by the *nous* and human spirit enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

The way an icon is painted results from this noetic way of seeing, and in turn introduces the viewer to this noetic way of seeing. Paul wrote just before the above text that he imparted the things revealed by the Spirit

...in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit [or unfolding spiritual things spiritually]

That is to say, spiritual things need explaining or manifesting in a spiritual way. As we shall see, what makes icons so powerful is not just their sacred subject matter, but the way this subject matter is expressed – they interpret spiritual truths in a spiritual manner. This is what differentiates an icon from a mere holy picture, a picture of a holy subject painted according to the latest secular styles or sentimentally.

### ***Image and word***

The icon tradition, especially festal icons, is inextricably linked with the liturgical texts. These offer profound commentary on the events, bringing out their deeper meaning. The flatness of the icon’s picture plane and the perspective systems that it uses to depict landscape and buildings enables the icon to emphasize and hint at the spiritual import of the event depicted.

- Festal icons can help us experience God in the event depicted, making subjectively real for us what has already happened in the past.
- They call us to beyond created time – *chronos* – and into divine time, *kairos*: “Today Christ is baptised”.

### ***A realistic non-naturalism***

We need to differentiate between naturalism and realism. Naturalism seeks to depict things as seen merely with the eyes, merely in their physical depth and colour. But this is not the

totality of how we experience the world. Different people who see the same scene will notice different things. What they assimilate and what they make of the information provided by their eyes will depend on many factors: their past, their character and personality, their spiritual disposition etc. The icon, like any good art, will reflect how we *know* something, not just how it appears to sensory perception. A good portraitist, for example, will exaggerate certain features of their subject in order to manifest their character.

So the icon tradition shows the world as experienced the saints. It shows the world experienced Christo-centrally, not egocentrically.

### **PERSPECTIVE: Ways in which icon perspective can help initiate us**

The non-representational style and perspective systems of icons have two main functions: they help highlight the spiritual import of the event, and they invite us to go beyond a rationalistic, cerebral view of the world and enter a more noetic, spiritual view.

There are about six perspective systems used, each having their role to play:

#### **1. Flatness**

Icons do not attempt to create a great sense of depth. They do use enough highlighting and perspective to affirm that the material world is real and good and part of the spiritual life. Nevertheless, things are kept somewhat more on a plane than in naturalistic painting. In a group icon, like that of Pentecost for example, people in the rear will be shown the same size, or sometimes even larger, than those closer. Every person is thus kept on an intimate level with the viewer. The mystery of the person overcomes the limits of physical space and distance.

Why else do icons retain this flatness? It helps us to pass through the icon to the persons and the events depicted. The aim of the icon is not to replace the subject depicted, but to bring us into living relationship with them. This explains why statues are not as a rule used in the icon tradition. Their three-dimensionality makes them too self-contained. Where sculpture is utilized it is kept to base relief.

Flatness can also be seen as an intentional weakness, a deliberate imperfection that constantly reminds us that this image is not the reality but a door to its prototype.

There is also an honesty in this flatness. There no attempt to make the picture plane what it can never be, a three-dimensional object, let alone the real thing itself. This honesty to the picture plane is what inspired the American art movement of the colour field painters in the 1940's and 1950's.

Planarity also gives much greater freedom to arrange things according to their spiritual importance rather than being limited to their position in three-dimensional space. The figures within the icon of Christ's birth, for example, are often arranged in three bands to represent the heavenly, earthly and unitary realms, but also in a circle around the Christ Child. This symbolic arrangement would not be possible if the event were depicted naturalistically, with figures receding toward the distance.

#### **2. Inverse perspective.**

With inverse perspective the lines of a building do not converge at a point on the horizon, inside the painting, but instead they converge on us, the viewers outside the painting. This serves to include us in the action depicted. The Orthodox hymns make it plain that a sacred

event in the past is still acting on us today: “*Today Christ is born*”, they say, “*Today Christ is risen. Let us join with the angels in praising His third day resurrection!*”

Inverse perspective also gives us the sense that the persons depicted are looking out at us. It is as though the image is drawn not from our own point of view but theirs, and ultimately, God’s. We have already discussed the meaning of repentance as being a change of seeing. We could also explain it as a change of perspective, where we realize that we are not the centre of the universe, but God.

Inverse perspective also draws to our attention to the real space between the image and ourselves. The emphasis is on the grace coming to us through real space, as it were, rather than us being drawn into an imaginary world or reconstructed scene within the picture. Iconography is above all a liturgical art, designed to be part of a larger sacred dance that involves the church building, the space within the building, the hymns sung within it, the liturgical movements during services, and of course, the worshippers themselves. As Gervase Mathews puts it:

In the Renaissance system of perspective the picture is conceived as a window opening on to a space beyond...The Byzantine mosaic or picture opens onto the space before it. The ‘picture space’ of Byzantine art was primarily that of the church or palace room in which it was placed, since art was considered a function of architecture.<sup>1</sup>

### **3. Multi-view perspective**

Sometimes a building is shown as though seen simultaneously from left and right, below and above. This helps us to see things as God sees them, and as they are in themselves and not merely as they appear from our single viewpoint, limited as that is in space.

The same multi-view perspective is sometimes applied to time, where the same person is depicted more than once in the same image, such as with Christ in the Nativity icon. The icon tradition can also place an important person in an event at which they were not historically present, but in which came to participate spiritually. Things are shown from the view of divine time (*kairos* in Greek) and not merely chronological time (*kronos*). One example is Saint Paul in the Pentecost icon. He was not even a believer at the time, but later came to be great among the apostles and a pillar of the church together with Peter, who is shown opposite him.

### **4. Isometry**

In this approach the sides and edges of an object are depicted parallel, neither converging nor diverging. This affirms how a thing is in itself, rather than how it appears to us. All things have been called into unity in Christ, and this unity preserves and strengthens the integrity of each thing, rather than reducing it to a numerical one. Unity presupposes relationship which in turn presupposes otherness, though not separateness.

### **5. Hierarchical perspective**

Often a personage who is more important than others will be enlarged. A typical example of this is the Virgin in the Nativity icon. Conversely, someone might be made particularly small to make a spiritual point. The Christ Child is often depicted thus in Nativity icons, to emphasize God the Word’s humility in becoming man for our sakes.

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<sup>1</sup> Gervase Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics*, (London: John Murray, 1963), page 30.

## **6. Mathematical vanishing point perspective**

Although inverse perspective is more commonly used, we do also find instances where lines converge toward a point in the icon's distance. This is not pursued in the systematic, mathematical way devised first by the Renaissance painter, architect and sculptor Alberti Brunelleschi. In fact, when this system is used you are likely to find as many convergence points as there are objects. This in itself transports the viewer out of the static vantage point assumed by mathematical perspective, and presupposes instead a much more dynamic experience – surely something closer to our actual experience of life.