

"The world is made of stories. Of course the world is made of things as well, but mostly, let's say, most significantly, it is held together by stories.

As Orthodox Christians we believe that we can encounter God anywhere and in anything, that in the language of St-Gregory of Palamas, the uncreated divine energies hide behind phenomena. We believe, within the wonderful frame given to us first by St-John the Theologian, and then expanded by St-Maximus the Confessor, that all things have a logos, have a hidden purpose, have meaning, and therefore all things are connected, united by their logos to each other and ultimately to the Divine Logos in love." (Jonathan Pageau)

St. Nicholas Owen's life is a memory united by story. There is not much information forthcoming to give account for the actual personage of St. Nicholas except for his family history and his calling to build priest holes. See his biography here: by Lawrence M. Ober, SJ

Regarding the effect that Nicholas had, the Jesuit Fr. John Gerard (1564–1637) wrote: " I verily think no man can be said to have done more good of all those that labored in the English vineyard [technical term for the ministries of Jesuits]. For first, he was the immediate occasion of saving many hundreds of persons, both ecclesiastical and secular, and of the estates also of these seculars, which had been lost and forfeited many times over if the priests had been taken in their houses."

Contemplating a commission for the icon of St. Nicholas Owen for the Jesuit Novitiate in St. Paul mostly relied on prayer and bits of information that Frs. Bill O'Brien, Larry Obermayer and Ralph Cordero were able to discover in research.

On a tangent, it was ironic that a request for this icon came into the studio at the beginning of the home shelter orders as we are all experiencing isolation in faith and hope.

First and foremost, everyone coming into commissioning an icon for the first time realizes upon entering the studio: An icon is not simply a piece of art, but rather carries a depth of spiritual meaning. The art of iconography has been referred to as 'theology in color'. The difference between an icon and a portrait is that an icon is the image of a man or a woman who is united with God. Other characteristics also define an icon. Icons are a liturgical art so there are guidelines and principles which should be adhered to. There is no rule book but traditions that have endured since the 4th Century. Icons are said to be a window not a picture. Traditionally they are not signed as this would make them a work of art rather than a sacrament or a portal through which one can meet God. They have aesthetic and didactic function.

So therefore, returning to basic principles of iconography calling for contemplating St. Nicholas Owen's life, I share the creation of his icon here:

St. Nicholas provided the access for priests to find places where God could protect their faith. After learning about the period and culture in England during the life time of St. Nicholas, I prayed for the icon to reflect the dwelling of sacrifice (priest hole) tending to salvation (silent prayers) by climbing staircases to Heaven (Tudor style homes reflecting wood interiors and stairs; prayers and salvific work raising up to the Heavens)....

I prayed from chapters of iconography manuals guiding the composition of the icon: One Hundred Gnostic Chapters, 89, Diadochus of Photice.

"Just as artists first of all draw the outline of a portrait in one single color and little by little build up one color on another thus making the likeness of the portrait conform more and more to its model...in the same way also, in baptism, the grace of God begins to operate by remaking the image what it was when man came into existence. And when that grace sees us aspiring to the beauty of the likeness with all our heart...then, building up virtue on virtue and elevating the beauty of the soul from glory to glory, grace produces in the soul the very imprint of likeness.

The image of St. Nicholas-

Bowed head- reverence and humility.

Wood cross- represents the light of his passion, his carpentry work and his martyrdom/ in his right hand. The cross made of wood represents his journey on the ladder to heaven as he perfected his carpentry trade in life.

Wood plank- represents the work of making priest holes.

The halo extending over the recessed frame grounds to his body contained in the interior of the recessed board.

23 kt. gold is placed in the halo and around the outside frame of the icon. The background behind St. Nicholas expresses elements representing Tudor style interiors.

Dimensions in the archetype:

1. Creates interior spaces personifying priest holes. This is illustrated especially in the application of gold leaf in the passageway of the arch behind St. Nicholas. The gold represents the uncreated light, the heavenly kingdom within each and every believer and in the story of the icon, Catholic priests martyred for their faith.

2. Creates movement into the geometry/poetry of the background designed with Tudor style paneling. The contrasting angle of the staircase against the simplicity of the wooden elements provides tension leading to the cross that St. Nicholas holds; the Christian Way is the way of struggle. Matthew 7:13-14," Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Color:

Plays a major role in the dimensional harmony of the aesthetics; theological and spiritual. The art of iconography has been referred to as 'theology in color' carrying a depth of spiritual meaning making icons a reflection of sacrament or a portal through which one can meet God.

When one views an icon they are drawn into the image –the eyes will most often be directed at the viewer, an eternal state which creates relationship and communion with the subject. Icons are intended to lead us closer to the heart of God.

The stylized form of icons has been handed down for many hundreds of years. There is no evident

source of external light but rather the light is meant to be glowing from within, the inner light of sacred figures and the divine light of Christ. There are no shadows as it is believed that all darkness has been driven out by the light of the Resurrection. The effect of this is that the images seem somewhat rigid and lifeless. Icons give the impression of complete flatness and the lack of perspective. It is only with deeper engagement with the image in a deeper and prayerful presence that the icon reveals itself to the viewer –it speaks to the inner self rather than the outer senses.

Composition:

There is a psychological perspective which is based on the principle that the most important figure in the composition should be the largest and centrally placed. The viewer's attention is drawn to what is central and larger rather than to what is marginal and small.

Icon painting has the ability to represent several moments of the same story on one panel. The icon depicts a reality not bound by time and space. For example, in the scene of the Nativity we see not only the birth itself, but also the arrival of the Magi, the shepherds spreading the good news, Joseph being tempted by the devil, and even the servant women washing the baby. Some scholars call this the "continuous style."

Harmonic features of icons aiding in the subconscious understanding of their meaning are simplicity, clarity, measure or restraint, grace, symmetry or balance, appropriateness, of line and symbolic colors.

And so, the encounter of the Divine in stories is something which can happen anywhere and anytime in any culture. Our eye must always be focused on Christ; Matthew 6:22, "The Lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light." Encountering Christ in stories is a balancing work of our entire being; mind, soul and body.

It was known that St. Nicholas Owen may have been a man of Little stature, as he was called "Little John". In the icon, he is depicted as a smaller man in carpentry clothes of the time. He holds a cross, a symbol of all those martyred in Christ. So in pondering the story of Christ in St. Nicholas Owen, he may be inviting us as Christians to relate to being "little in Christ" or just "ordinary in Christ". He then may be asking us to grow not in stature but in relationship for it is a known fact that history wonders if he was actually tall in stature. Could it be a mystery to the story that he was of course exhibiting great faith in the highest of virtues sacrificing himself for love of faith and for those who served God which made his presence eternally tall?

AMEN

(D. Korluka)