



Priest preserves countercultural image

By Donna De Palma

Viewed solely as works of art, icons are "diametrically opposed to what the world sees as creativity," observes Father Mark Melone, pastor of St. Nicholas Melkite Church on Rochester's Leo Street.

Never straying from their traditional artistic heritage, iconographers paint their images with characteristically elongated human forms, giving the illusion that the flesh itself has fallen away. This style is used to indicate that these depictions represent concerns outside of the human realm, Father Melone says, pointing out that iconographers do not use live models for their work. Instead they depict stylized forms in order to evoke elements of divine inspiration and devotion to the representations of holy events and personalities.

Although the iconographer shares the artist's need to master technique and style, the iconographer's work is judged by spiritual rather than aesthetic criteria. The icon's primary purpose is to serve God and manifest His holiness, according to Father Melone, a trained iconographer who recently gave a two-part presentation on icons at the Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal.

The icon must also adhere to tradition and be painted without guile or illusion. But its most distinguishing characteristic is that the icon must serve as a signpost or window to another reality.

"In iconography, you really can see a purple cow," Father Melone remarks.

Partly because iconographers paint from memory, their images show signs of coming from a mystical tradition, and although many contemporary iconographers lead secular lives, monks were at one time the only artists allowed to create icons.

"The tradition of depicting saints and commemorating religious events through icons is based upon the simple idea of making images of those we love. The object is, of course, not to honor the images but the persons. In order to make the life and mystery of the church present, we have icons," explains Father Melone, who began studying iconography 15 years ago at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., under the guidance of Ade Bethune, renowned designer of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper and of church art throughout the world.

Yet the priest readily admits that when an icon is viewed without faith, it is simply an archeological puzzle or a work of art. The Holy Spirit must be present in the viewer's heart in order for the icon to be understood, he says. "Indeed, icons are judged by standards other than those of this world."

The priest explains that the icon forms a relationship among the viewer/worshipper, the iconographer and itself. Distinguishing between

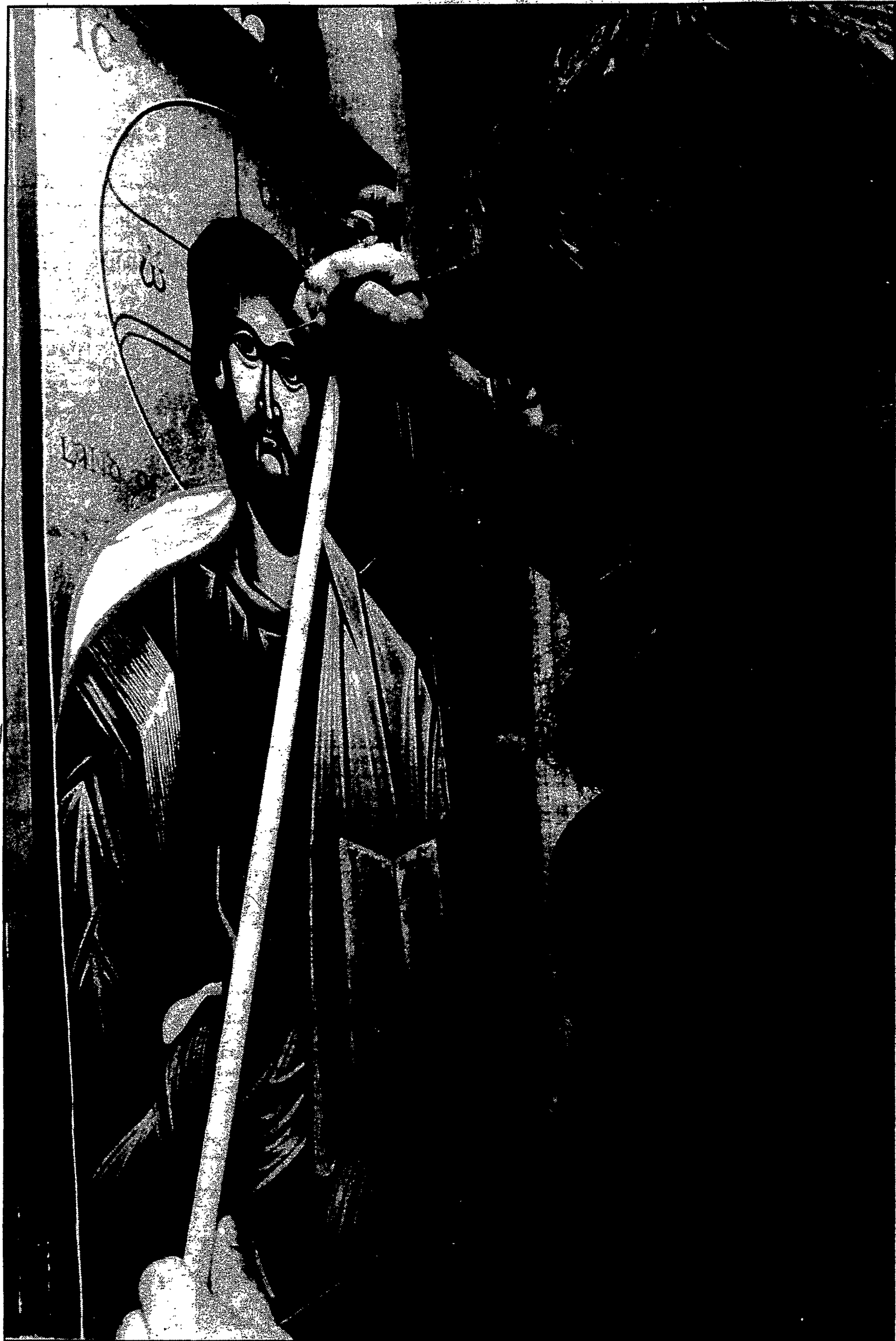


A detail of one of Father Melone's icons shows an interesting juxtaposition between the hand of the painter and of the figure being painted.

carnal sight and hearing and a spiritual perception, he notes that icons can lead viewers to participate in the mystical reality of divine life.

"Icons can serve many purposes. They can be symbolic, commemorative and/or dogmatic," Father Melone observes, pointing out that one of the primary purposes of icons is to dramatize the life of Jesus, while serving as a means of learning about God and the established traditions of the church.

Frequently iconographers, like other artists, have turned their talents toward depicting the nativity of Christ. Although icons of the nativity contain the well-known characters of the Virgin, Joseph, the Wise Men and shepherds, iconographers always set their tableaux in a cave, which represents the womb. The manger is seen as an altar or holy table, according to Father Melone, who also noted that the ox in the nativity icon is shown as very old, as an animal of sacrifice and beast of burden, representing Christ's fulfillment of the prophecies.



Father Mark Melone, pastor of St. Nicholas Melkite Church, uses a rod to steady his hand as he adds some finishing touches to one of the Byzantine-style icons he is painting as a gift.

Iconography contains four basic components: 1) objects and forms that depict everyday life and nature, 2) the royal symbolism of the Roman courts, 3) mythology and 4) the personification of nature and such concepts as piety. Symbols of nature — such as caves, mountains, water, fish, gardens, meadows, fruits, wheat, the pomegranate, vines, the sun and birds — carry many layers of symbolism. Water, for example, in the form of a fountain or the sea itself is a sign of fertility and also represents the source of life.

The Orthodox churches use such icons as part of rituals aimed at reaching the subconscious mind, and nativity icons are particularly useful now during the Greek Orthodox Church's Christmas preparations, which began Sept. 1 and will continue until Feb. 2.

One of the Orthodox Church's most important Christmas rituals — the Feb. 2 celebration of Candlemas, the blessing of the candles, commemorating the Presentation of Christ in the Temple — is in direct contradiction to con-

temporary society's abandonment of tradition, Father Melone says.

"We live in an age that is woefully incapable of celebration. Maybe we have isolated ourselves from the rhythm of the world around us, by removing ourselves from the natural rhythms like the planting and harvesting seasons," the priest speculates. Noting that in the early Church, different aspects of the mystery of Christ began to be celebrated as feast days, he explains that the early feasts fell into the order of the rhythm of the year. Christmas, he notes, is celebrated on December 25 to coincide with the Roman Feast of the Unconquered Sun, which marked the time of year when the days began to get longer.

"Iconography is a life-long pursuit," says Father Melone, who says he is still learning the art even after 15 years of study. After his apprenticeship with Bethune at CUA, Father Melone continued the study of iconography at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary in Brookline, Mass., and at St. Gregory's Melkite Seminary,

yet he notes that the United States has no formal school of iconography in the United States. Thus the priest has taken up his solitary study of iconography as part of his pursuit of an ascetic life.

Only recently has the contemporary world rediscovered the icon, and only in the last 20 years has a renewed interest arisen in the Byzantine icon. In fact, all but one of the United States' most respected iconographers are under the age of 40, Father Melone notes.

The first icons date back to 338 A.D. and were found in Constantinople, which had previously been known as Byzantium. These ancient images appeared in fresco and mosaic.

Constantinople had been the artistic center for the Greek and Roman empires for 1,000 years. In the 7th century, however, when Constantinople was besieged by the Persian fleet, bitter battles broke out within the Church, during which time the Iconoclasts burned, mutilated and whitewashed many of the existing icons.

Linda Dow Hayes, Courier-Journal