ICONS

The Essential Collection

SR. FAITH RICCIO, CJ

FOREWORD BY
FREDERICA MATHEWES-GREEN



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Icons: The Essential Collection

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Foreword

THE FIRST THING WE EVER SEE IS A FACE.

The first thing a newborn's eyes seek out is another pair of eyes. When an infant finds its mother's or father's eyes, it locks into them, and that mutual gaze forges a connection to last a lifetime. Researchers have found that, when a newborn is shown a series of simple line drawings, it will always prefer to look at a simple oval with two dots near the top—the simplest depiction of a human face. A newborn will do this, even though it has never seen a face before.

God created us with a desire to seek out faces, to look *into* faces, for that is where we read the complex mystery of human life: the mystery of personhood. This is a genuine need, and those who are deprived of other's faces, as in solitary confinement, suffer profoundly. Without one another's faces, we don't know who we are.

Our Lord chose to put on a face, to become visible in a form we find familiar, because we already know how to love another person. When we look at the faces in these icons, whether of our Lord or of his friends, we meet with something we already know, for by now we have seen many, many faces. We know how the image of a loved one connects us to her, in some inexpressible way. We understand that we can look at and handle such a photo tenderly, with love, without thinking that the photo *is* the person. We honor, but do not worship, icons.

The Greek word "icon" (eikon) appears throughout the Scriptures, beginning with Genesis 1:26—God made us in his "eikon and likeness." Christ, too, is the "the eikon of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). When God designed the human form at the beginning of Creation, it was with the future Incarnation in mind; it was with the foreknowledge that Christ would one day put on a form and a face like ours.

The images in this book will present to us, over and over, that mystery of personhood, as we encounter the face of Christ and of those who loved him. In looking at the icons in this book, we can remember who we are, and what we are called to be, as we are continuously being "conformed to the *eikon* of his Son" (Rom. 8:29).

—Frederica Mathewes-Green

Introduction

ICONS ARE AN INVITATION TO GO BEYOND OUR WORLD and to take a moment to look as through a window into heaven. But they are more than just a place for observation. The space they create gives us a wonderful, loving, and open access to reach out toward God and know him deeply in a new way. They are meant to enrich our spiritual lives and generate a conversation with God. They were created to touch and form us; they have a tangible ability to soothe and confront where necessary. Icons ask us to spend time with them, to get to know the saint, the scene, the illumined moment in the spiritual dimension that we can eventually draw strength from and live with.

I have been asked many times how to "read" an icon, how to interpret its symbolism, how to understand it. Over the years my answer has increasingly been that each icon is expressing a person or moment that we need to live with to know. Icons require only that we spend time conversing with them. They are in the truest sense a place to gather our wandering attention and direct it toward God. I think God knows an icon can keep our attention and focus our desire.

In our church we have a small prayer chapel that contains a shelf on which rest icons portraying twelve saints who stand and watch with us, granting us graceful moments in a heavenly space. They create a friendly quiet place of acceptance, and the feeling of support and encouragement from the saints permeates the atmosphere as we allow the silence to slowly envelop us. Whether we are in turmoil, saddened by a loss, or hopeful for the day ahead, many of us come to light a candle in front of one of the icons and spend time praying with the saints the icons portray. They are always ready to hear, to love, to capture our attention, and to direct us toward God. They join with us and comfort us and point us toward the place where our heart finds Christ and rests in him.

Icons reveal the essence of the subject's relationship with God; they touch that space where God meets earth in a needy human being. So they come to us as they may look in heaven, offering a helping hand and showing us how to just sit with Jesus and pour out all our concerns, fears, and anxieties until we can stand again, hopeful and resolved to move forward. The time spent just praying with them forms us, changes us. There are times I have felt carried by them and times I have felt confronted by the saints' courage, by their "yes" to God, and above by all their individual relationship with Jesus.

Icons express spiritual reality. Though they are stylized we can feel the form and life force beneath the painting.

They are a part of a spiritual legacy that has the strength of the ages behind it. Opening oneself to this legacy joins one to the movement of God's world. It is like participating in the powerful flow of God's love all about us as he endeavors to draw us to himself much as a river will pick up and carry a floating branch.

Icons challenge our busyness and give us a place to simply unwind. Often we do not want to calm down; we like the hype of living, or we are in a situation where we are in constant movement and worry. The icon gently gives us an opportunity to rest and begin to heal.

The most difficult thing is to continue to quiet ourselves and allow the Holy Spirit to touch us. There is a feeling of vulnerability and helplessness that we must embrace as the relationship grows. This is difficult. And yet the icon in its straightforward simplicity and strength reminds us that God carries us more than we struggle to remain in his presence. The icon states that he is there for us; we need just lean in and stay with him. That alone is enough. We may feel bewildered and helpless; we may not have the appropriate feelings of prayer; but there we can focus and give our time and thoughtfulness to God. The right feelings are not required—just attention and care given to finding him.

The Icons

THE PANTOCRATOR



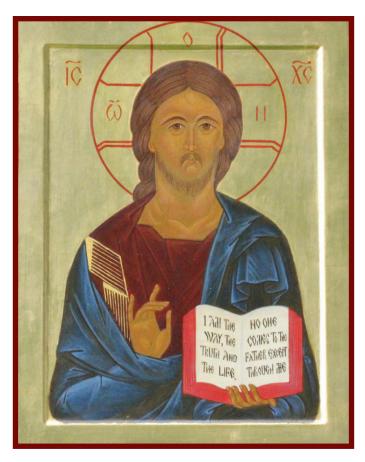
[Jesus] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of deatheven death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name

—PHILIPPIANS 2:7–11 NRSV

V....





THE PANTOCRATOR

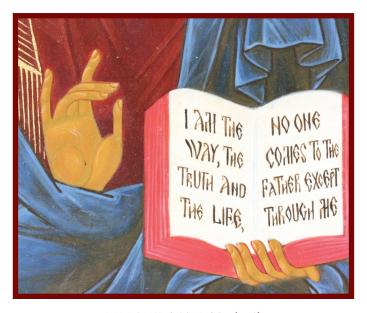
Remember, you are held safe. You are loved. You are protected.

You are in communion with God and with those whom God has sent you. What is of God will last. It belongs to the eternal life. Choose it, and it will be yours.

—HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

PANTOCRATOR

The word *Pantocrator* is of Greek origin and means "ruler of all." The full-faced icon holds the book of the Gospels in his left hand and blesses us with his right hand. The icon portrays Christ as the Righteous Judge and the Lover of Mankind. The Gospel is the book by which we are judged, and the blessing proclaims God's loving kindness toward us, showing us that he is granting us his forgiveness.



THE PANTOCRATOR, detail



Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you.

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

—1 Corinthians 15:58 NIV





ANTHONY

One day in church Anthony heard Matthew 19:21:

If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.

Eventually he went outside the village to live a life of praying, fasting, and manual labor. He always told those who came to visit him that the key to the ascetic life is perseverance. Many people came to seek Anthony. Gradually a number of disciples established themselves in caves and in huts around him. Thus was formed a colony of ascetics who begged him to come and be their guide in the spiritual life—which he did.



ANTHONY 251-356

Though there were other hermits in his time, Anthony of Egypt is sometimes called the "father of monasticism" because of his early dedication to a balanced life of solitude, asceticism, and prayer. Reading an account of his life is part of what inspired Augustine's conversion to Christianity a generation later.



ANTHONY, detail



Never lose hope in the mercy of God.

—BENEDICT





BENEDICT