

**THE ICONS**  
**at**  
**Saint John's in the Village**  
**New York, New York**

**224 Waverly Place**  
**New York, NY 10014**  
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What constitutes an icon? When do religious paintings begin to function as icons, mediating transcendent reality in addition to inspiring the viewer aesthetically? What would disqualify an icon from any longer being considered one? Can one legitimately blend the Stations of the Cross of Western Christendom with the heritage of Eastern Orthodox iconography? Seventeen magnificent paintings in the sanctuary of an Anglo-Catholic parish in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, invite such questions.

St. John's in the Village Episcopal Church (224 Waverly Place, New York, New York 10014-2405, [www.stjvny.org](http://www.stjvny.org), 212-243-6192, The Rev'd Lloyd Prator, Rector) was founded in 1853. Fire destroyed the original classical revival style church building in 1972. Edgar Tafel, a colleague of Frank Lloyd Wright, designed the current church sanctuary. In the 1800's, St. John's in the Village led the way in New York City toward "free" pews. In the 1900's, St. John's in the Village led the way in New York City toward open inclusion of Gays and Lesbians in the worshipping community. The church currently reaches out to the West Village community through excellent fine arts initiatives and special ministries to persons living with AIDS.

One obvious example of the blending of Christian spirituality with fine arts at St. John's in the Village is the sequence of seventeen icons in the church. The following paragraphs intend to describe those icons and express appreciation for them as works of art and channels of God's grace. I will first tell what is known of their creation or *writing*, (the Eastern Orthodox term), then describe them sequentially, then comment on their significance, and close with further observations.

## The Writing of the Sanctuary Icons

In tandem with the sense of wonder and mystery generated in the sanctuary by these icons is the mystery of their creation! Church archives seem lacking and even long-term members know little of the story. The Rev'd Lloyd Prator, current rector, provided the following information, in a personal interview.

The iconographer, Christopher Kosmas, had been Deacon in the Greek Orthodox Church. Apparently, some time in the sixties or seventies, the Greek Church defrocked Christopher, when his gay orientation or lifestyle became known. The Rev'd John Cannon, then rector, commissioned Kosmas to provide icons for St. John's in the Village sanctuary, which had been rebuilt in 1972. An inscription beneath the center triptych reads: "Thy servants, Robert Pfreundschuh [Kosmas' partner? Assistant?] and Christopher Kosmas render unceasing thanks unto Thee, O Lord God for the opportunity to honor Thee with these works of our hands. Winter, 1982, New York."

When Father Prator became rector in 1988, he noted that Kosmas had substituted an icon entitled "Israel Crossing the Sea on Dry Land" for "Jesus Falls a Third Time" (Station Nine). The new rector re-commissioned the writing of the ninth station, at a cost of \$3000. Kosmas contracted AIDS and died sometime in the early 1990's. Neither the Onassis Center for Hellenic Studies, nor the Gay-Lesbian Community Archives, nor any website maintains a record of Christopher Kosmas. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese would not respond to my inquiries about him. St. John's in the Village would greatly appreciate any further light that can be shed on this iconographer and this story!

Nothing has come to light about the writing of the icons themselves. One does notice immediately that they combine Eastern Orthodox iconographic *style* with Western Christian *themes*, namely the Fourteen Stations of the Cross, plus three

additional icons. According to Father Prator, Kosmas, superior artist though he was, apparently lacked precise knowledge of either world, hence, for example, the need to re-commission Station Nine. Other miscues and anomalies, none of which significantly diminishes the overall aesthetic appeal, will be mentioned under specific icons.

Fourteen "stations", two other icons, plus a center triptych comprise the collection of icons by Christopher Kosmas in the Church of St. John in the Village. All four walls display them, spaced appropriately around the church, and with center-points at about 56 inches from the floor. The fourteen stations and two additional icons all measure 18.5" tall by 16" wide, with a 1" wood frame enclosure. As will be discussed below, the icons consist of canvas mounted and varnished tightly into a wood backing. The center panel of the triptych measures 42" x 42" rising to a point at 68". The side panels measure 21" x 42" rising to the same height at their points.

In the discussion that follows, the present writer will start at the north wall and proceed in order around the entire church. I will comment on each icon descriptively as well as devotionally, including a short prayer evoked by my own veneration.

### The North Wall

#### 1. *Jesus is Condemned to Death.* [north wall, far right]

Jesus, standing to the right with his hands bound, looks over at Pilate on the left, who sits facing away on his throne, his head supported by his right hand. Jesus' halo lacks the customary Greek inscription *ho on* ("he who is"), but his torso bears the bloody marks of flagellation. Of special note, the black pavement stones, drawn in inverse proportion, deliberately match the pavement stones of the church of St. John in the Village.

To this viewer, Pilate's ghostly pale face bespeaks fear. His head in his hand suggests confusion. Does Pilate think that by not looking at this bothersome Galilean, he will simply disappear? Why does Jesus Christ sometimes frighten, confuse and bother me? *God of Justice, grant me grace never to avert my eyes from injustice!*

**2. *Jesus Takes Up His Cross.*** [north wall, right center]

Jesus, carrying an unsplit tree trunk beam, walking on the same pavement as before, sees (a vision of) Isaiah on the viewer's left, identified in writing. Isaiah holds and displays a small lamb for Jesus, who is identified as "The Lamb of God." The Savior's eyes gaze on the lamb, almost certainly an allusion to Isaiah 53:7b, "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter." The inscription ho on appears on Christ's halo.

Station two suggests a vision experienced by our Lord on the Via Dolorosa. John the Baptist had labeled Jesus the Lamb of God, who takes away the world's sins. The prophet Isaiah, in this vision, reminds Jesus and this viewer of the grim implications, namely, the slaughter of that lamb. How much does my forgiveness cost God? How can my suffering in the world, if and when it occurs, be redemptive for others? What cross do I bear today? *Lamb of God, by your Cross forgive my sins. Amen.*

**3. *Jesus Falls for the First Time*** [north wall, center]

The third station icon suggests another vision on the part of Jesus, now fallen to his knees under the weight of the cross beam. Behind him partly stands and partly sits the glorified Christ, hands outstretched in *orans*, on a globe of the earth, itself partly sunken below the horizon. The sun's flaming and relentless heat seems to bear down on Jesus, who now crawls just off the black pavement. In contrast, a rainbow behind the Pantokrator breathes serenity.

Did Jesus indeed glimpse his triumphal glory as he trudged along,

worn down by the weight of the cross and the world's sin? Did the vision of his glory mollify the pain of his suffering? "Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame..." (Hebrews 12:2a). *Suffering Servant, Glorified Savior, may we ever look to the transcendent joy beyond the horizon of the present pain. In Your Name we pray. Amen.*

**4. *Jesus Meets His Afflicted Mother.*** [north wall, left center]

Labeled Mary Theotokos, Jesus' mother on the viewer's right faces her Son to the left, carrying the rough cross beam. She holds her head in her hand, expressive of her affliction over his impending fate. Jesus' halo bears the ho on inscription. Head lowered, he looks directly at Mary, whose eyes look at her son's right hand.

The plain light brown pavement, plain olive green lower background, and customary plain gold leaf backdrop create a sense of simplicity that belies the intensity of emotion implied here. To this worshiper, only station thirteen, the *Pieta*, rivals this one for poignancy. Could Jesus' grasping of the branch knob on the cross, and Mary's perplexity as she looks at that hand, conceal a personal statement of the iconographer, who was gay, and who died of AIDS? *Mother of God, pray for us.*

**5. *The Cross is Laid on Simon of Cyrene.*** [north wall, far left]

Jesus on the right and Simon on the left both walk toward the right. Jesus points ahead with his right arm and almost but not quite gazes out at the viewer. More likely the facial turn suggests his saying something to Simon, as he (Jesus) points the way toward Golgotha. Simon, labeled "Simon of Cyrene" carries the cross beam, which has now been split, so the branch knob does not show. Simon's dark skin and furrowed expression contrast vividly with the paler skin and more serene countenance of the Savior. "Who or what has angered Simon?" this icon seems to ask. "As they led Jesus away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was

coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus” (Luke 23:26). Was it the soldiers? Or was he mad at Jesus? Or does Simon show the determination of faith? *Gracious God, transform my anger at anything or anyone into the serene bearing of my cross, for the sake of your Son my Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

### The West Wall

#### 6. *A Woman Wipes the Face of Jesus.* [west wall, far right]

Veronica, her inscribed name divided by her face, holds up a garment with Christ’s image on it. Uniquely, in this icon, it does appear that Jesus looks directly at the viewer. Yet also in this icon alone does Christ appear only indirectly, that is, as the visage on Veronica’s piece of cloth. She holds out her hands in supplication. The inscription “Lord, heal our infirmities” aptly expresses the posture and body language of the woman.

The scenery of this icon, namely, mountain, sea and shore reminiscent of the Sea of Galilee--rather than Jerusalem--lends timelessness to the icon’s worshipful impact. *Christ Jesus, in your glory, heal our infirmities, we humbly pray.*

#### 7. *Jesus Falls a Second Time.* [west wall, right center]

Three unidentified men tower over the Savior, who crawls on hands and knees toward the viewer’s left. On the left a first man, apparently in peasant’s garb, stabs or at least presses down Jesus with a pike. Another man, in white tunic and possibly crowned, extends both hands to the first (in dismay or approbation?). The third, looking off to the right, holds a scroll bearing this inscription: “He sprinkled many nations. Kings shall wonder and shut their mouth at him.” Two men bear halos, though that of the second seems partially erased!

This seventh icon lacks coherence, it seems to this viewer. Jesus and

the man holding the scroll direct viewers’ eyes *off* rather than into the icon. “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold” (W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” line 3) captures the feeling of this icon. Why the (apparently) partially erased halo? Does this iconic malaise intentionally depict the cosmic disarray linked to Christ’s passion?

#### 8. *Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem.* [west wall, center]

This eighth station traditionally bears that title. Yet once again here the action takes place beside the sea. His right hand forming *I.S.Ch.S.* (Iesous Christos), his left hand holding a rolled up paper, Jesus looks over with compassion (?) at three women. One hides behind the other two. The second holds a baby with an adult-like face. The third wipes away a tear. Artistically, the painting seems perfectly balanced, drawing the eyes directly to Christ.

Fear, supplication and sorrow seem represented by the women, respectively. With respect to Jesus, those sentiments reflect those of this viewer. I fear Christ’s disapproval. I beg him for help. I feel ashamed and tearful over the violence done him. *Lord Christ, in your grace and by your Passion, allay our fears, grant us help, and subdue our violence, we pray. Amen.*

#### 9. *Jesus Falls a Third Time* [west wall, center left]

Vivid contrasts of color highlight the visual impact of this icon. A soldier in red, blue and brown armor holds Jesus down with a pike. Some dignitary (priest? King?), arrayed in a purple and gem-studded robe whips Jesus. An older monk-like man, hands crossed, frowns down upon the Savior. Jesus, in bright blue and pink, crawls on a black oval spot, which may represent his shadow but which resembles the jaws of hell. Green mountains, gold sky, and blue sea complete the rich hues, which make this icon the most colorful.

Three new male characters, none appearing elsewhere in these stations, assault the Savior. Is it I, Lord, who flagellates you with my actions, notwithstanding my official service as one of your priests?

Is it I, Lord, who as I age feel too fatigued to come to your defense, and just fold my arms? Is it I, Lord, who, follows you outwardly as a “soldier” of the Cross, but who inwardly hold you down away from me?

**10. *Jesus is Stripped of His Garments.*** [west wall, far left]

In this icon and station alone, Jesus does not appear. Rather, King David, identified by inscription, and dominating the scene, frowns down upon three men, who hold the purple cloak of Jesus. David waves a banner: “They divided my garments among themselves and for my vesture did they cast lots.” Only one of the three men appears to be a soldier. Strangely, this scene, too, takes place beside the sea!

The present viewer receives from this icon a powerful sense of the inexorable and divine unfolding of events, culminating in the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord. The cruel and petty deed of the three men takes place directly under the banner and inscription, held aloft by King David, suggesting that the entire sequence of events in the Passion had been prophesied centuries earlier. *God on High, you control all things!*

**The South Wall**

**11. *Jesus is Nailed to the Cross.*** [south wall, right]

One notices immediately here the strange lack of color, or at least a pale, whitish tint that covers and controls the icon. When questioned by Father Prator about the alleged aesthetic deficiency, Kosmas explained, “Jesus’ death on the cross jolted all creation. The blurring and paleness intentionally express that skewing of the cosmos.” The scene depicts one man’s nailing Jesus’ feet to the cross, another extending on a pole the wine on a sponge, plus the two thieves on their own crosses. Black hell appears in the rocks below.

Indeed, all seems disjointed here, out of focus and color. Even a sea, half dried up, appears in the background! Limbs of all characters seem so thin. Jesus’ hair appears matted and unnatural. Is he

looking at the viewer or up at God? Though Holy Scripture says that darkness covered the land, not pale whiteness, does this icon not convey the aridity and spiritual darkness of Good Friday? *When I survey....*

**12. *Jesus Dies on the Cross.*** [south wall, center right]

Here, a soldier pierces Jesus’ side, out of which flows blood and water into a chalice. Jesus himself appears ghostly white and hangs from a split bright green crossbeam attached to which is the inscription “Jesus of Nazareth.” A third man points to Jesus, bears a halo, and holds both a long thin cross and a banner which reads, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” The Virgin turns her face from the scene and is comforted by another woman. Hell’s hole is larger. Two streams or lake appear in the background.

Green cross? Has the Cross not become for us the Tree of Life? Chalice? Is it not new wine, the New Covenant in his blood? Steam? Does Christ not quench us with living waters? *Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.*

**13. *The Body of Jesus is Placed in the Arms of His Mother.***

[south wall, center left].

The *Pieta* probably ranks for most worshipers at St. John’s in the Village as the most popular and poignant of the icons. This close-up of Jesus’ body in the arms of his mother uses few colors, the most dominant of which is the deep blue of Mary’s tunic. Jesus’ and Mary’s haloes appear beige in color. A cup with four nails sits beside the body, which bears one small wound on the side. The brownish gray hue of Jesus’ body almost matches that of the background mountain.

Mary’s grief may exceed that of the viewer, yet most viewers will be touched deeply by this powerful icon and station. Worshipers’ eyes will feel drawn first to Mary’s face then follow her troubled gaze to

Jesus' closed eyes. *Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the time of our death. Amen.*

**14. *Jesus is Laid in the Tomb.*** [south wall, left]

This highly symbolic icon actually depicts Jesus' body already lying in the tomb. A neat three-tiered universe highlights this icon: gold background, an arched and starry celestial area, and the tomb in an underground bordered by another arch. Flowers and candles make the tomb resemble an altar table, almost. Isaiah & Jacob, identified by inscriptions and superimposed over the background and sky, hold banners with lengthy prophetic citations (Isaiah 53:5b & Genesis 49:9b). Jesus' body bears a whitish halo.

The serenity and surrealness of this icon sweep the viewer up into the Paschal Mystery. Jesus really died. Yet the two arches in this icon, coupled with the presence of the Old Testament figures, testify that his death is subsumed under the divine, cosmic plan of God. *Christ, we dare not arouse you from your sleep (Gen.49). Christ, in the divine plan, by your stripes we are healed (Isa.53). Amen.*

### The East Wall

**15. *Moses Leads the People of God Through the Sea on Dry Land.***  
[east wall, right]

Originally, iconwriter and artist Kosmas included this Old Testament redemption scene as one of the Stations of the Cross, in place of Station Nine, *Jesus Falls a Third Time*. In deference to tradition, Father Lloyd Prator moved this icon to its current place and commissioned the present ninth station from Kosmas.

The haloed Moses leading the people of Israel through the walled waters of the Red Sea endows this sanctuary and its worshippers with appropriate linkage to the entire biblical drama of salvation. Just as God used leader Moses to bring redemption to the people of Israel, so in Christ God leads us through the seas of chaos and sin into

salvation. *Thanks be to God who came to this earth. Thanks be to God forever!*

**16. *Jesus is Raised from the Dead.*** [east wall, left]

“He has led captivity captive,” on a banner held by St. Paul (?), expresses the triumphal tone of this final regular icon in the sanctuary of St. John's in the Village Episcopal Church. King David and St. John, in addition to the unnamed man holding the inscription, also look upon this glorious scene. The risen Christ, holding a tall thin cross, emerges from the gaping hole of hell. Simultaneously, Christ clutches Adam by the hand, Eve beside him, pulling them off a balcony. Hell has become an immense gaping hole, only this time all locks are opened, all chains broken. We call it the harrowing of hell! If the viewer accepts St. John in this icon as the author of the Apocalypse, then the entire unfolding drama of biblical revelation appears, Genesis to Revelation. The Risen Lord Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, of course, dominates the drama. *Gracious Lord, Jesus Christ, by the power of your resurrection, free us from hell! Amen.*

**17. *Triptych: Mother of God, Christos Pantokrator, Saint John***  
[east wall, center]

Measuring about 82” wide by 68” tall when opened, this triptych forms the reredos for the sanctuary. Light blues and greens dominate the triptych, lending lightness to an otherwise somewhat austere, red brick sanctuary. Across the bottom of the wood frame one finds the artist's signature, noted above (p. 2).

Right and left panels of the triptych feature the Mother of God and Saint John, patron saint of the church, respectively. The Theotokos, brilliantly colored in the blues and greens, stands tall and thin. Yet her bowed head and hands extend inward toward the Pantokrator. “Holy Saint John the Theologian,” as the inscription in Greek identifies him, and wearing a teal-hued tunic, holds a closed book. Saint John likewise leans inward with their heads toward the center, giving a unified appeal to the triptych.

*Christ Pantokrator* half-sits, within an oval enclosure, on a rainbow arch, which suggests the cosmos. Holding out his right hand in traditional blessing form, and holding in his left hand an open book with the letters Alpha & Omega prominently displayed, he looks left toward his Mother. Situated along the oval enclosure are the four Evangelists, symbolically portrayed in angelic form as the tax collector (Matthew), lion (Mark), eagle (John) and ox (Luke). Light green as foreground and gold leaf as background complete this truly majestic awesome, and aesthetically pleasing central panel. Worshipers' eyes, in the church of St. John in the Village, feel drawn to Christ the ruler of all, *who is worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!* (Revelation 5:12b).

## The Contribution of the Icons

The icons by Christopher Kosmas enhance the worshipping life of the St. John's in the Village in three main ways. First, they mediate the Paschal Mystery in public worship in lent as the Stations of the Cross. Numbers one to fourteen serve as the fourteen stations for the lenten Way of the Cross service. Typically, the worshipers gather sequentially at each station, hear a Scripture selection appropriate to the station, pray a collect and chant the *Trisagion*. Secondly, community members offer private veneration at these stations, in keeping with personal needs, throughout the year.

That these Stations of the Cross are *icons* helps one grasp the more specifically aesthetic, ongoing, immeasurable and third way these panels enhance worship at St. John's in the Village. That is, they generate in an otherwise somewhat bland, Protestant-style, red brick interior a compelling worshipful atmosphere, a blend as it were of western and eastern spirituality. Worshipers at St. John's look *out* at the world through clear, non-stained glass. Yet inside, these scenes from the fourteen stations compensate, magically creating the "feel" if not appearance of a western cathedral. Finally, the beautiful golds, blues and greens of the icon-style panels, particularly the central triptych on the east wall, create a sensation of eastern orthodox mystery!

Not at all passing judgment on the capacity of the St. John's icons to mediate divine reality and enhance worship (they do both, in my experience), I offer now some personal, evaluative comments, from artistic and iconographic perspectives. The last two paragraphs above expressed what I consider the principle strengths of these icons, namely, their enhancement of worship through their aesthetic magnificence and religious value as icons.

Above all, for me personally, the *Christos Pantokrator* (east wall, center) and Station Thirteen, the *Pieta* (south wall, center left) display this power to transform the worshiper. Due to its position, its

subject, its size and its blend of blues and greens, the former dominates one's eyes throughout worship. For the duration of Lent, when the triptych is closed, the sanctuary of St. John's in the Village truly feels starkly bereft of the glory and mystery of the risen Christ. The latter icon, the *Pieta*, on the other hand, captivates by the *paucity* of colors, the poignancy of its subject and the closeness of Jesus' and Mary's face to the viewer. Veneration happens easily!

On the less positive side, these icon of St. John's in the Village, beg the question of their value or *authenticity as icons*, irrespective of their undisputed power as works of art. The Greek Orthodox Church, for its part, would probably at best affirm Kosmas' creations as religious paintings in a hybrid iconographic style. As noted above, they are painted on canvas which has been carefully affixed onto a wood backing. Moreover, to my knowledge, the western Stations of the Cross have never received Eastern Orthodox authorization as subjects for iconography. Kosmas' signature appears in full, frontal view on over half of the icons.

From an aesthetic and religious perspective, some details of Kosmas' icons seem problematic. Why, for example, does Christ never gaze out into the eyes of the worshipers? Why the geographical absurdity of the seas and rivers as background to the Via Dolorosa? In some stations, Christ's halo bears the traditional Greek inscription ho on but in other stations, it is absent. These and other minor details do suggest that Kosmas lacked full knowledge of both Eastern Orthodox iconography and the Roman Catholic Stations of the Cross. In effect, these miscues may disqualify these paintings as *pure* icons. The few miscues do not, however, diminish the aesthetic power of Kosmas' icons as works of art nor, in my judgment, as enhancers of worship for this church.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to provide an overview of the seventeen icons in the sanctuary of St. John's in the Village Episcopal Church, New York City. My veneration of these icons prompted the personal prayers included in my discussion of most. My *study* of these icons prompted the unanswered questions which appear below.

Does not the story of iconographer Christopher Kosmas—what little is known of him—endow these St. John's in the Village icons with special poignancy, given that this church is so self-consciously Gay affirming? Did Kosmas know when he wrote these icons that he would die of AIDS? Had he already been deposed from the Greek Orthodox Diaconate? How did that exclusion from the church impact Kosmas' relationship with God? One must, as it were, peer through the icons into the world of transcendence to begin to know, until further light shines on this icon writer and artist. With respect to the genuineness of icons, specifically those at St. John's in the Village, what ultimately and permanently transforms a religious painting into an icon? The intention of the painter or writer? The blessing of a priest? The compliance with Orthodox norms? The attitude of the beholder? The tradition of its effectiveness? Surely the answer to those questions varies from person to person. In the eyes of this beholder the issue was settled by virtue of the transcendent world that peered back at me, through these magnificent windows of faith in this little church in the Village.

3:08 – Current use: Way of the Cross (what about the other two icons & tryptch?)

3:09 – We start at the North Wall, going counterclockwise, in each case reading the icons right to left.