

give birth to a dog who would set the world aflame with the torch in its mouth. Both star and dog illustrate that the saint radiated the Light of Christ through his life and his preaching. *Christ the Teacher* represents the Source of Light and of Truth, and the promise of eternity.

That the figure of Christ is garbed in clothing vaguely reflective of the habit of the Dominicans is attributable only to the Holy Spirit. Usually Our Lord is depicted dressed in colors that represent the union of divinity and humanity (red and blue or green respectively). In spite of the non-traditional palette, the symbolism is certainly not lost here: the white and gold omophion (cloak) represents both purity and glory (as in the Transfiguration, when Our Lord appeared radiant in white), and the red chiton (tunic) remains the traditional representation of His divinity while at the same time serving as a small reminder of the blood of His Passion. Notably, the cloak and tunic are not intermingled (retaining the distinctness of the divine and human natures of Christ), yet are firmly girded about Him (to signify that Christ's humanity was not merely assumed in history and cast off after the Resurrection). The folds of his clothes, though naturalistically presented, capture the iconographic ideal: fabric is shown in geometric forms, demonstrating heavenly order.

The purpose of icons is anagogic—from a Greek word meaning “leading one upward”. In the Orthodox tradition, they are seen as works inspired by the Holy Spirit, providing windows into eternity. That is why the artist who engages in sacred art, just like the formal iconographer, must pray before and through work. While not strictly following the rules of iconography, works such as *Christ the Teacher* have the same origin and purpose: they must come from and lead to contemplation. Once again, this reflects the personality of our own parish, led by Dominicans, who are called (as St. Thomas Aquinas himself wrote) to contemplation and to share with others the fruits of their contemplation.

As St. Basil the Great noted: "With a soundless voice, the icons teach those who behold him." What then is the proper conclusion of our study of *Christ the Teacher*? Our guidance in this can come from many saints, including our patron, the incomparable theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas. At the end of his life, he received a mystical vision, after which he said that he could write no more—"all I have written seems as so much straw". Even the greatest writings and teachings of the saints pales in comparison to the Reality of God. From the edifying and instructive study of the symbolism of the icon, the reader is therefore called to turn toward the Presence of God Himself. Here in *Christ the Teacher*, the revelation and the invitation are clear. "Come," Our Lord seems to say, "Be still, be silent. Let Me look at you."

### About the Artist

Ann Chapin, a convert and a third order Carmelite, paints works of representational, naturalistic art in an iconographic style. Her work (in its composition and its use of color) primarily but not exclusively reflects post-Impressionism. Her formal iconographic training took place in the Prosopon School in New York City. She generally paints on a large scale, so that the completed image fills the field of vision and the depicted figure stands out starkly, facilitating an intimate, personal encounter. More of her work can be seen at [theholysface.wordpress.com](http://theholysface.wordpress.com). Prints and products of *Christ the Teacher* are available for purchase via [stauva.org/christ-the-teacher](http://stauva.org/christ-the-teacher). Proceeds support Ann Chapin's continuing artistic efforts.

"See, He is only waiting  
for us to look at Him"  
— St. Teresa of Avila



# Christ the Teacher

"I paint and paint until the paint seems to disappear, and all we can see is the Person revealed." These words of the artist and iconographer Ann Chapin are well applied to *Christ the Teacher*, which she created for St. Thomas Aquinas University Parish in 2017. The face of Our Lord has captured the attention of many parishioners and visitors. It is only after a moment of recognition and silent reflection that those who see His face recall that it is a work of art and inquire about the history and the method behind it. Who is the Person revealed in *Christ the Teacher*? And what does He say to us? The answer, which is deeply personal, is at the same time rooted in the history and the symbolism of this striking image.

The image presents Christ standing, shown at half-length. He is fully-bearded, with a large halo behind his head. He is dressed in a red garment, wrapped in a cloak of white and gold. His right hand is raised in blessing, and in His left He holds the open book of the Gospels, displaying the verse John 15:5: "I am the vine, you are the branches. If you dwell in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit."

Chapin's *Christ the Teacher* combines many of the elements of iconography and Western Tradition. Iconography was foundational in the history of sacred art and remained the primary mode of sacred art until the twelfth century. Icons are painted according to strict rules; in this tradition, it is more important to be faithful to the established archetypes and symbols than it is to be artistically creative. Over the centuries, Western sacred art has evolved to have more of a naturalistic, representational focus. In this tradition, a figure or event is often expressed in a life-like, personal manner.

The artist here has followed the steps for creation of icons with a few modifications. First, the iconographer studies the established archetypes. Next, he uses pencil and paper to create a preliminary sketch (known as the skelion; here accomplished with the help of technology, permitting the artist to experiment with lines and color). The iconographer transfers the skelion to a prepared, gessoed board, sketching the lines with a styylus (a thick, needle embedded in a wooden dowel). Icons are usually painted in egg tempera; today most iconographers use special paint prepared to imitate the effect of that original medium. The order of painting is strictly observed: beginning with the background (usually golden), then painting the halo (to illuminate the face of the figure and represent sanctity), then continuing on to paint in layers, beginning always with the darker, underlying colors. The result is a gradual revelation of the person or event depicted.

In the design of the piece, the artist follows the prototype of one of the oldest established icons: the *Pantocrator*. The *Pantocrator*, a title taken from the Greek word for "Almighty", is usually depicted powerfully and sternly. Frequently, the Gospel in His hand is closed, signifying the end of time, when all will have been revealed. In such images, He Who is Lord of the universe comes to judge the heavens and the earth. This image of Our Lord follows a particular subgenre of *Pantocrator*, discernable in one important detail: the book held in His hands is open. This is one of the characteristics of *Christ the Teacher*. While the *Pantocrator* stands in the position of Divine Judge of the Universe, *Christ the Teacher* proclaims the

Good News of the Gospel. Early icons drew from the ancient custom of depicting the Roman Emperor holding the scroll of the law. Here Our Lord, holding His Gospel, reveals Himself as the fulfillment and the embodiment of the Law (represented in the Old Testament) and of Grace (revealed in the New Testament and given to us by Christ through His Church). The Western influence is shown particularly in the face, hair, and hands—all elements revealing Jesus Christ in a very personal way. The mouth is gentle, the eyebrows questioning—resulting in a face that is inviting, rather than frightening (as is frequently the impact of the *Pantocrator*), and yet full of mystery—a challenge to the viewer. His gaze is one of complete and loving attention, seeming to call us to silent, intimate union with Him.

All icons display the title of the person or event depicted. Here the left-hand side presents the first and last letters of the name of "Jesus" in Greek, while the right-hand side presents the first and last letters of "Christ". This is known as the Christogram (ICXC), the traditional iconographic abbreviation of the name of Our Lord. The cruciform halo, seen only in icons of Jesus Christ, bears the letters O Ω N, signifying the Greek for "He Who Is". This title alludes to God's revelation of His Name to Moses in Exodus 3:14: "I am He Who Is" and to the text of the Revelation of St. John, which repeatedly uses the phrase "Who is, Who was, and Who is coming" in reference to Jesus Christ. Through this we hear repeatedly affirmed the identity of Jesus Christ: Jesus Christ, Himself "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Col 1:15), took flesh and became visible. Jesus Christ is no mere allegory or myth; He is a person, fully human and fully divine, Who entered into History and seeks intimate friendship with each of us.

The arrangement of the fingers of the right hand, separated into groups of two and three, confesses the mysteries of the hypostatic union (Christ's fully human and fully divine natures) and of the Trinity (three Persons in One God) respectively. Notably, the wounds of the Passion are not represented here. This is traditional in iconography. Only scenes that confirm Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead display the wounds of Christ. Such scenes include the Resurrection itself, the revelation of Our Lord to St. Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb ("Noli me tangere"), and Our Lord's appearance to St. Thomas (John 20:26-28). In choosing not to display the wounds of the Passion, the image corresponds to the iconographic ideal of presenting the person of Christ outside and beyond time.

The colors of the image are striking and not according to orthodox rules. Iconographic figures are usually displayed against a gold background—the gold symbolic of the heavenly realm. Here, Our Lord is a luminous figure standing out against the dark background—the Light of Christ shining forth in the midst of the darkness. The words of Revelation seem to be reflected here: "And there will be no more night; they need no lights of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 22:5). This affirms the preaching mission of the Dominican Friars who serve at this University Parish: since its foundation, the Order of Preachers has been committed to prayer, study, and the proclamation of Truth (Veritas). St. Dominic himself is traditionally represented in art with a star blazing upon his forehead and, beside him, a dog with a flaming torch in its mouth. The dog is derived from a legend that says that Bl. Jane of Aza, St. Dominic's mother, dreamed while pregnant that she would

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation"  
— Colossians 1:15

"What the Book of the Gospels explains by means of words, the iconographer shows by means of his works"  
— St. Basil the Great