**Icons**

Icons are religious paintings of Jesus, the Virgin Mary and the Saints. They are often painted in vivid colours, with a gold background. Icons are a particular type of painting, very different from other works of art. They might appear strange or unusual to people who are unfamiliar with them.

An icon is a religious symbol and it points to another reality beyond itself. Orthodox Christians use icons to help them go beyond ordinary things and communicate with the world of the sacred. Icons have been called ‘windows into heaven’. To gaze at an icon is to catch a glimpse of the world of the sacred beyond this world.

For Orthodox Christians, looking at an icon of Jesus, Mary or one of the saints, is to see something of Heaven made visible. This is because each icon is believed to be filled with the spirit of the person whose image it represents. So, icons are regarded as sacred and are treated with great respect. Although Orthodox Christians treat icons with the greatest respect, they do not pray to them. The icons are a means of helping the person to focus their prayer and attention on to God.

**Icons in the home**

Most Orthodox families have an icon placed in a position of honour in their homes. It is usually located in the main room, in a corner or directly opposite the door. A lamp or candle burns in front of it. When family members pray before the icon, they first light a candle, make the sign of the cross and kiss the icon with respect. The icon reminds the family of the presence of God in their home.

**Praying in front of icons**

An icon is not meant to be a life-like portrait of a sacred person. It is a picture that tries to show the deep spiritual side of Jesus, Mary or one of the saints. The figure in an icon is always still and peaceful. The eyes tend to look out in a gently, timeless sort of way.

When a person prays before an icon, he / she becomes quiet and still in response to the quiet stillness of the image before them. The image slowly draws the person into its world.

An Orthodox Christian describes it like this:

“We gaze at the eyes in the face of the icon. We believe the eye of the icon is like the eye of God. God gently reaches out and draws us nearer to Him. God reaches right into our hearts. The icon brings us closer to God”.

**The Iconographer**

Artists who create icons are called iconographers. Painting icons is a spiritual activity. Iconographers believeth ta the inspiration for their work comes from God. Before painting an icon, the artist will spend time in prayer and meditation and go to confession and receive Holy Communion.

Iconographers only use natural materials in their art. Icons are painted on wood using vegetable dyes. It is a way of saying that the natural world is holy and expresses the goodness and love of God. When all the materials are ready, everything is blessed.

**Symbolic Paintings**

Icons are symbolic paintings that have layers of meaning. Iconographers are not free to paint what they like. They must follow certain rules laid down by tradition. The aim of their work is to capture the spiritual nature of the person that they are painting. All the sacred figures are painted in a distinctive style. Everything about an icon has a special meaning, including the use of certain colours.

Gold and silver – represents holiness and the power of God.

Blue – represents heaven.

Red – represents royalty.

White – represents the presence of God.

While a person can recognise the figure in an icon it is somehow not very real or life-like. The body is perfectly still. There is no suggestion of movement. The figure is simply present. The image communicates a mysterious stillness, a perfect peace. The deep border around the edge of the picture symbolises the connection between the human world, and the spiritual world of the icon.

**The Iconostasis**

Everything in an Orthodox Church has a symbolic meaning. The most distinctive feature inside the Church is the iconostasis. This is a solid screen in front of the altar. It divides the Church in two. The iconostasis separates the altar and the sanctuary from the area where the congregation gathers for worship. The screen symbolises the separation between the world of heaven and earth.

During the Divine Liturgy, the screen doors are opened after the consecration. The priest walks through from the sanctuary, symbolically bringing Heaven closer to earth as he distributes the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

The word ‘iconostasis’ means ‘the place of icons, or pictures’. The screen is usually filled with icons. The ‘royal doors’ in the centre of the screen are decorated with important icons. There is an icon of Jesus, and one of Mary the Mother of God. The icon of the church’s patron saint and some other saints cover the remainder of the screen. Icons also cover the walls and pillars, and are placed on special stands inside the entrance and in the worshipping space in the middle of the church. Ornate oil lamps often hang in front of the icons.

Orthodox Christians treat icons with great reverence. When they enter a church, they usually buy a candle and place it in front of their favourite icon. Then they make the sign of the cross, and gently kiss the icon as a mark of respect. An Orthodox Christian then prays before the icon. The image helps the person to focus their mind and heart on the presence of God.

**Answer the following questions in your jotter.**

**Remember to write in full sentences.**

1. What are icons?
2. What do Orthodox Christians do before they pray in front of an icon?
3. How do Orthodox Christians pray before icons?
4. Who paints religious icons?
5. What preparations do icon artists make before painting an icon?
6. What techniques do iconographers use to capture the spiritual nature of the person they are painting?
7. What is iconostasis?
8. How are icons used for prayer in Orthodox churches?
9. Why are icons referred to as ‘windows into Heaven’?
10. How are icons different to other types of religious art?
11. Explain what icons mean for members of the Orthodox Church.
12. Why do you think that iconographers regard their work as sacred?