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THE ICON CORNER: A HOW-TO GUIDE

by Dr. Alexander Roman

Icon corners started out as a characteristically feature of an Orthodox home. The main corner of the ancient Slavic house in pre-Christian times was considered the most sacred and spiritual part of one's home. This is the corner that one faces when one immediately enters the main room. The determination of this was easier in the days when most homes had only one room!

The father of the ancient Ukrainian family before Christianity was the designated minister who conducted the services and other cultic functions in the house. From this role came the familiar term "Batiushka" (a term of endearment for "father") which later Orthodox priests took on, especially in Russia where the Tsar was also referred to in this way. This corner was where the family gathered to celebrate major "rites de passage" of the members, to pray and to honour their dead.

With the coming of Orthodox Christianity, it was natural for the people to decorate the main corner of their homes with icons as a place for family prayer and reserve it for important days in their lives. As St. Paul mentions on more than one occasion in his Epistles, and as the tradition of the Church bears out, each Christian house is a "Home Church." It is here that children are raised in a Christian spirit, where daily worship and scriptural reading and meditation is made, and where we are strengthened against the temptations and trials of life. And whenever the Church is persecuted and Christians are prevented from attending Church for the Divine Liturgy and other services and sermons, then that is when the Home Church takes on a special role. Thanks to the Home Church, and to the grandmothers, mothers and others, usually women, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine and Eastern Europe stood fast throughout the years of Soviet persecution.

The icon corner is far from a quaint way to decorate one's home with religious art. It is a necessary home shrine which is the basis of the life of worship of our Home Church. The icon corner is organized structurally facing East. Orthodox Jews have what they call a "mizrah" frame in which is placed the Ten Commandments, for example. They face the mizrah when they pray at home for inspiration and as a constant indicator of the Eastern direction. Icons of Christ are placed on the right side of the corner, while Icons of His Mother holding Him as a Child are placed on the

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left, much as in an Iconostasis.

Both types of Icon are, in fact, Icons of Christ, God Incarnate. The Icon of the Theotokos is the Icon of the First Coming of Christ, the Icon of Christ is that of His Second Coming. The corner in-between recalls to us our life that is lived in-between the two Events. The Icons also remind us of the need for repentance as in the beginning of our spiritual life, and our ongoing spiritual development that will result, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, in our becoming spiritual adults of full stature in Christ. The Icons of Christ in Orthodoxy celebrate different aspects of our Lord. There are Icons of Christ the Light-Giver, the Life-Giver, the Teacher, Extreme Humility, the Resurrection, the Lover of Humankind and the various biblical events of Christ's Life. The Icons of the Theotokos celebrate the Incarnation of the Son of God. There are also many miraculous Icons, in the Ukrainian tradition, of Pochayiv, Kyivan Caves, Kazan-Derman, the Protection-Pokrova etc.

The centre of the corner could be decorated with the Cross, the Ukrainian three-bar Cross for example. There are four Icons of the Holy Trinity in Orthodoxy: The Old Testament Trinity, the Baptism in the River Jordan, Pentecost and the Transfiguration. These are the Biblical events at which the Presence of the Holy Trinity was made known. Following through with the celestial hierarchy, Icons of angels and saints are added to the icon corner. The icons of our patron saints after whom we are named should feature prominently. The icon of the patron saint of the Church in which we were baptized would be another priority.

Icons are often given as presents to mark "rites de passage" or important events in our lives. There are the icons we received for our Baptism, graduation, marriage, birthdays and Namedays. We should also keep the icons of the patron saints of those who have died, our parents and relatives, together with their actual pictures, as a reminder to pray for them. There is no reason why we couldn't have an iconographic representation of a beloved relative written for our own private use, as this is an ancient tradition of the Church. Saints are not only those who are liturgically celebrated in public, they are also those with whom we have lived and whose lives reflected the Presence of Christ for us.

The many icons of the icon corner remind us of the great Cloud of Witnesses who make intercession before us at the Throne of Almighty God. They recall to us that we are never alone as members of the Body of Christ, that even death cannot separate us, not now, not ever.

In terms of specific decorations for the icon corner, there are some established traditions in this regard as well. Ukrainians love to place embroidered cloths or towels over their icons as a way to indicate a special honour for the Person depicted on the icon and to whose care one has entrusted oneself. Icons of the Mother of Christ God are especially decorated with such towels and these represent the Mantle of Protection. Sometimes people who celebrate their Namedays are covered with such towels during family prayer as well. Very often, newly married people will kneel for their blessing from their parents and also from the Priest in Church, on an embroidered towel, and this is then used to decorate the main Icon or Icons with which they are also blessed during the wedding ceremony.

Similar "icon scarves" as they are known in the U.S. are also placed on secular pictures of national heroes and family portraits as a way to honour their memory. Others like to collect the flowers that are used to decorate the Tomb of Christ during Passion Week and use them to decorate their icon corner. Others place fresh flowers before them and sprinkle the icons with rose-water. This is all up to us!

Votive lamps are also a good thing to have in one's icon corner. These could hang in front of a selected icon or icons and have olive oil with a floating wick inside. Beeswax candles could also be used. These could be



lighted during our prayer. If we are in the habit of celebrating night prayer or even parts of the Vespers service, then we could follow the ancient Christian practice of lighting the lamps during the "O Gladsome Light".

An acquaintance of mine who was my employer was a very pious Carpatho-Rusyn Orthodox Christian. As a matter of fact, most of the time we talked about religion, rather than the pressing issues involved in our work! His home was so decorated by icons that one thought one was actually in a Church. Being an artistic sort of fellow, he actually made special curtains to serve as a backdrop for his icon corner in his bedroom. The overall effect was always that one wanted to kneel and pray!

The icon corner should always have a small table in front of it that could also have an embroidered cloth over it. The table is the place where we keep our Bible and prayer books. The Bible could and should itself be placed in a position of honour and veneration and decorated as the Word of God. The Orthodox Church herself places the Gospels on the Altar in this way. We reverence the Word of God and we read from it as from a Wellspring of Grace at any time of the day.

Our home liturgical collection should include the Horologion and Psalter as well as Akathists and Canons. It would be good to establish a Rule of Prayer and Scripture Reading that is shared by all members of the family. The table should also have a bottle of Holy Water. We may sip some every morning before breakfast. Others have a small container in which they keep the Antidoron from the previous Sunday Liturgy.

Early Christians used to bring some of the actual Holy Communion home with them and used to Commune the Divine Mysteries every morning. Later, they continued this practice with the Blessed Bread that is distributed in Church at the end of the Liturgy. We may also have some anointing oil from a Saint's lamp to be used when members of the family are sick. We could also have a hand censer on the table for use during our evening prayers or Vespers. We may bless our children this way before they go to bed. The smoke from the censer is a symbol of our prayers that rise to Heaven and it could help us enter into a deeply prayerful mood! Our prayer ropes and other devotionals could also rest on the table.

In addition, we may also have a chair placed beside the icon corner. This is the place of honour where the eldest of the family sits or else someone who is celebrating a Nameday. It is, symbolically, the most important spot in the home. Sometimes when there are family gatherings or social events, the table is placed pointing towards the icon corner so that the eldest woman (in Ukrainian tradition, the eldest woman in a home outranks everyone else) may sit in the icon corner.

Embroidered towels or mats may be placed in front of the icon corner for use when we make prostrations to the floor. We never place our right hand, the hand with which we Cross ourselves, on the floor, but always only on a towel. Historically, some families in Ukraine put on a "poyas" or embroidered belt before they begin their prayers as a way to show they are "girding" themselves for God's service. The embroidered Ukrainian shirt is often made from the "kryzmo" or white cloth given to us at our Baptism. This is why we should always wear our embroidered shirt to Church.

At one time, all Christians donned a uniform or a vestment in Church. Some actually have a white baptismal robe made with a red Cross on the back and put this on during prayer at home. Visitors to the River Jordan often put on such robes and go into the river in imitation of their Baptism. Ethiopian Christians maintain this practice to this day.

But this is all optional, according to one's wishes and needs. Busy people may actually like to place themselves symbolically into another world, separate from the one that offers so many distractions, through the use of such devotional items.

The icon corner consecrates the entire household and everyone living in it to the service and glory of God. Our Home Church reminds us that, as Christians, our main priority in life is to live to God's Glory. This is why there is a rite that is celebrated in both Church and Home Church equally, whenever we enter or leave them. When we come into the home of an Orthodox Christian, we try not to greet anyone before we have said a prayer before their icon corner. (I remember the first time a Priest, who came to bless our house, did this, and the surprise on everyone's face!)

Another excellent practice is to bless everything we use with the Sign of the Cross, using our hand, and saying: "This (bed, food, water, child etc.) is being blessed with the Sign of the Holy Cross, + In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The icon corner is a powerful way of making present to us the Icon or Image of God the Father Who is our Lord, God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Through our pious use of this spiritual treasure, we are ourselves, little by little, made Icons and Temples of the Holy Spirit!

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"Ours must be an Orthodoxy of the Heart,
not just of the mind."

- St. Tikhon of Zadonsk