



Archbishop Joseph Jules Zerey of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church blesses foreign students of the Bethlehem Icon Center as they present the works executed during their course, in the biblical West Bank city of Bethlehem.

Ancient sacred art resurrected in city of Jesus birth



Foreign students of the Bethlehem Icon Center work on their painting during their course, in the biblical West Bank city of Bethlehem. — AFP photos



A painting depicting Jesus as "Christ Pantocrator" is seen in the ceiling of the chapel of the Bethlehem Icon Center in the biblical West Bank city of Bethlehem.

Down a Bethlehem alleyway, sunlight illuminates a golden icon of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, signaling the revival of an ancient art being practiced in the workshop inside. The building near the Church of the Nativity—the site where Christians believe Jesus was born—houses a group of enthusiasts specializing in the sacred art of iconography. They are doing so some 2,000 years after Christian iconography began in nearby Jerusalem—also where Christians believe Jesus was resurrected after his crucifixion, to be commemorated tomorrow for Easter. They work in both silence and in prayer, with their art a far cry from the cheap mass-produced icons sold in souvenir shops to tourists and pilgrims.

"Icons are not commercial objects for us, but holy images that we honor," said Nicola Juha, who heads the Bethlehem Icon Centre. He explains that icons like theirs are used by worshippers who, for example, light candles before them and pray. According to tradition, Luke the Evangelist painted the first Christian icon in 60 AD. Ian Knowles, far from his native Britain, now teaches the same art to not only Palestinian Christians, but also those from countries including Canada and Poland. Watching the meticulous brushstrokes of his students, he said he left home to spend two weeks in the region and was still there nine years later.

One of his pieces, "Our Lady of Palestine", depicts Mary shedding a tear over symbols of the Holy Land—Jerusalem, Mount Carmel and Mount Nebo. In a nearby chapel with a blue ceiling and a Nativity scene, around a dozen students

recite prayers, their nearly finished icons in hand. Archbishop Joseph Jules Zerey of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, which sponsors the iconography center, blesses each one, holding an olive branch with holy oil.

'A beautiful synthesis'

Each icon is unique and produced to order. Animal-hair brushes are selected in Jerusalem or even London, and the pigments come directly from the Holy Land. Hand-ground stones for yellow are from Jericho and roses used to paint faces are from Jerusalem, Juha said in the small woodworking shop where panels for the icons are carved. Rose Codneler, who has used a holiday from her work at a women's shelter in Britain to spend Easter week in Bethlehem, said the uniqueness of the icons appeals to her.

For the 33-year-old Christian, spending days painstakingly painting Christ's face is "a way of getting deeper into the characters of the Bible and the story of the Bible". "Icons have always fascinated me, and more and more so in the last few years, because they are a kind of beautiful synthesis of God, prayer and also ecology in the way that the pigments are all taken from nature," she said. Knowles's class is provided periodically to visiting pilgrims for around \$265 (250 euros) and all year round to some 30 Palestinian Christians. Juha says the center has succeeded in "reviving an old, long-forgotten Palestinian tradition in Bethlehem, which is so important both in religious and geographic terms".