

**A Light from the East of Europe:  
The Symbolism of the Icon of Blessed Janos Brenner**

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Eastern Christian icons are windows into heaven and thus depict the saints in the light of glory. Rather than shining *on* an icon, light should radiate *from* an icon. That is why there is so much gold on the background, halo, and border of the icon of Blessed Janos Brenner. The glorious light of the saints is a participation in the glory with which Christ shone at his transfiguration on Mount Tabor. The icon is meant to draw us up the mountain to see Christ revealed in the glory of his saints.

Light is also a major theme of the symbols chosen for this icon because of Cistercian's motto, *ardere et lucere*, engraved on the hand cross. Thus, the halo is filled with rays of light, which radiate from the Eucharistic host and from within the hand cross as well. All this flaming light was meant to evoke the vision from Bl. Janos's novitiate journal:

“On the stone wall of the bastion of my life stands written this sentence: Under all circumstances let your holy will be done. Take my will, my heart, my all and give me [the grace] that I may be fully transformed into Christ, for this is my vocation. To burn, to be aflame in your love for sinners...

“To burn in the fire... I saw a long corridor, which was gradually glowing hotter and hotter but where I was standing it was black and cold. At the end of the corridor there was a flaming heart upon a white-hot glowing throne. I understood from this that the Heart of Jesus is Lord above all and that I am still far away from the true love of his most holy Heart. O blessed are those who have reached the throne and have been burned away...”

This vision was surely fulfilled in Bl. Janos's martyrdom. Thus, his halo is white gold in order to evoke the same white-hot glow of the throne on which he himself was burned away, and of the flaming heart he was shown to have for sinners and for Christ, both of whom he died serving.

Bl. Janos is shown drawing the Eucharist up to his heart because of the love he showed for Christ in the Eucharist, which he died intending to administer and also protecting, as his body was found the morning after he died still clutching the Eucharist to his chest. He is shown presenting the Eucharistic Christ to us while also turning his own heart toward us. That is why his left shoulder and the stole on it are slightly larger than his right: he is turning his left side toward us in order to show us his heart, again evoking the vision from his journal.

The Eucharistic host is round, as in the West, but, as in the East, it is stamped with a cross and the letters “IC XC NIKA,” a Greek abbreviation for “Jesus Christ Conquers.” In the East, the stamped center of the *prosphoron* (offering), which is cut away from the rest of the loaf and consecrated as the Eucharist, is called the lamb: Christ conquered sin and death as the sacrificial lamb that was slain; the Eucharist is the wedding feast of the lamb of God. Bl. Janos was conformed to this same Eucharistic lamb in his martyrdom for Christ; the blood he shed cleansed the wedding garment with which he could enter the feast. He presents the Eucharist to us in order to invite us to follow him to meet the bridegroom of our hearts.

Bl. Janos is shown with a somewhat somber facial expression and his nose is narrowed and elongated, as is traditional in Eastern icons. This makes all the saints in icons look more alike, and a bit less like their earthly selves, as they are all now united and conformed to Christ, and so reveal him to us. The somber expression is one of the ways that Eastern icons are meant to reflect both the mystery of the cross and of the resurrection at the same time, which makes them especially appropriate for use in liturgical worship.

Bl. Janos is shown in a cassock, surplice, and stole, which he was wearing the night he met the Lord. That is why he has white shirt sleeves with cufflinks under black buttoned sleeves, the most formal way to wear a Roman cassock. But he is also shown with a Hungarian Cistercian collar in order to express his complex identity as first a Cistercian, forced underground by the Communist suppression of the order, and then a diocesan priest. That is also why his religious name “Anastasius” appears with his baptismal name “Janos Brenner” over his left shoulder. His Cistercian identity is also expressed by the *fleurs-des-lis* in the halo and in the four corners of the hand cross, a reference to the French origins of the order. The circle framing the hand cross also evokes the Benedictine cross, a reference again to the origins and monastic rule of the order.

The stole that Bl. Janos wears is turned to the purple side, rather than to the white and gold side, in order to symbolize his passion and give a rich, royal color to the composition. The fact that he is a martyr is indicated by the title “Blessed Martyr” over his left shoulder, by the cross he holds in his right hand (a standard Eastern symbol of martyrdom), and by the white and red lines around his halo, which evoke the blood and water that flowed from Christ’s side as the sign that his passion was complete. The large red dots throughout the border of the icon are meant to evoke the drops of blood that Bl. Janos shed when he was stabbed to death.

The floral vine pattern on the border of the icon symbolizes the new life and growth of the Church in the Spirit, whom we profess in the Creed to be the Giver of Life (Eastern clergy wear green vestments on Pentecost Sunday for this reason). The vine is sprinkled with the blood of martyrs, the seed of Christians. The alternating green, white, and red enamels in the center of the border are meant to evoke the colors of the Hungarian flag in order to honor Bl. Janos’s Hungarian nationality. The various shades of blue and green and white and red in the border, by the workings of providence, are also reminiscent of the color pattern of the lanterns found around the Cistercian preparatory school. The single white heart at the bottom center of the border evokes the glowing-white flaming heart of Bl. Janos’s vision.

As is traditional, the icon gives no indication of the artist or donor’s names. The artist’s name is Oleh Skoropadsky. He is a Byzantine Catholic working in Ukraine. His work can be found online at [Cathodox.com](http://Cathodox.com) and on Etsy. The icon is a gift from Turner and Elizabeth Nevitt in loving memory of Fr. Roch Kereszty and Fr. Denis Farkasfalvy. I think Fr. Roch would have found it beautiful. Fr. Denis would probably have considered it too much, but love can do that sometimes.