



Praying with Icons

Icons are used as a focal point for this meditation.

OVERVIEW

An introduction to the history of iconography in Christianity and the practice of praying with an icon.

MATERIALS

A printed icon for each person

Scripture

JOHN 14:6-9A

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

COLOSSIANS 1:15-19

He is the image (Greek: “eikon”) of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Quotations

In former times, God, who is without form or

body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake.

— *St. John of Damascus*

Often, doubtless, when we have not the Lord's passion in mind and see the image of Christ's crucifixion, his saving passion is brought back to remembrance, and we fall down and worship not the material but that which is imaged: just as we do not worship the material of which the Gospels are made, nor the material of the Cross, but that which these typify.

— *St. John of Damascus*

Introducing the Practice

Icons play a major role in the worship and prayer life of Eastern Orthodox Christians and, to a lesser extent, some Western Christians as well. The word "icon" comes from the Greek word "eikon" which is usually translated image. An icon is a special painting or visual representation of Jesus, a biblical figure, or a saint. Though icons may look simple at first glance, they are in fact incredibly complex and detailed. Because icons are created for spiritual purposes, they are not meant to be realistic depictions of what the people actually looked like. Nevertheless, there is a reason for every little detail of the icon – the facial features, the bodily postures, the colors, the shapes, and the symbols. Each detail of the icon is meant to communicate and represent something to the person praying with it. Though icons are very complex in form, they are rather simple in use. Icons are considered to be windows into heaven with a special power to reveal spiritual truths to us. While there are many incredible writings about the power of icons, many theologians have offered a more simple description of them as similar to the pictures of family or friends that we have in our

homes. As those pictures of family and friends remind us of the love we share with those people, icons remind us of the love that we share with God and with all the saints who have come before us. Ultimately, if the icon brings us to love and communion with God, it has done its job.

Many Christians do not grow up in traditions that use icons, and they may seem foreign or unfamiliar to many of us. Any questions or uncertainties are perfectly normal. In fact, Christians have been questioning the use of icons since very early in the tradition, and the question of icons was even at the center of an early church council (Second Council of Nicaea in 787 AD). The main question was: should Christians be allowed to paint images of Jesus, biblical figures, and saints? Some Christians believed that icons were a form of idolatry and that Christians should not use images in worship because God is surely greater than any image or painting can depict. These “iconoclastic” ideas led to widespread destruction of Christian art and images. Saint John of Damascus (675-749) was a great defender of icons, and his writings played a major role in the decision of the Second Council of Nicaea to permit and promote the veneration of icons. St. John of Damascus was a Syrian monk and priest. His main argument for the use of icons was centered on the person of Jesus. Though God may be infinite and incomprehensible, said St. John, God became visible to us in the person of Jesus. In this sense, Jesus was the human image or “icon” of God. Because God showed himself to us in Jesus, it is appropriate for us to keep images of Jesus and to use them in our prayer and worship. As St. John explains, we do not worship the images; we use the images to aid in our worship of God. The term “venerate” is often used for icons to distinguish the practice from “worshipping”. While we only worship God, we can venerate icons as a spiritual practice that aids our worship of God.

Preparing for the Practice

For this practice, you will need to acquire a collection of printed icons. You may be able to find some online that you can print off for free, or you may need to go to your local Christian store to purchase a collection of icon prints. We recommend getting a variety of different prints so that there are many options for students to choose from. If your prints do not say who the icon is depicting, write the name of the saint or spiritual figure on the back of each print. Spread out the prints on a table and invite everyone to choose an icon to pray with. They should look for one that specifically speaks to them and calls out to them in that moment.

The Spiritual Practice

Find a comfortable, quiet place to pray with your icon. Settle into the present moment, slowing your breathing and centering your heart, and begin to gaze at your icon.

(1 min silence)

Gaze into the soul through the eyes of your icon, knowing that the figure represented is alive in heaven, joined in the prayer and worship of God throughout all eternity.

(3 min silence)

Allow your sense of sight to interact with whatever the icon is presenting to you in the present moment. Open your hearts to the icon in a silent dialogue where spiritual meaning is conveyed beyond words or thoughts, in the pure longings of the heart.

(5-7 min silence)

What longings arise in your heart when you gaze into the icon? What do you feel arise in you? Use the icon as a window to heaven, expressing all that is on your heart to God through the icon.

(3-5 min silence)

What response do you hear through the icon? What does it express back to you? What does the icon have to teach you?

(3-5 min silence)

Let us close our time of prayer with thankful hearts, knowing that God is intimately present to us in each moment and grateful for the many ways through which

God communicates with us.

Amen.

Duration: 15-20 minutes

Discussion Questions

1. What was this experience of praying with an icon like for you? Did you connect with your icon at all? Did you connect with God through the icon?
2. For most of our meditations we close our eyes. What was it like for you to meditate with your eyes open and intentionally focusing on an icon? Had you ever seen icons before or prayed with anything in a visual manner like this before?
3. Some Christian denominations today incorporate icons into their religious life and some denominations remain skeptical of icons. What do you think of icons after this prayer practice? What do you think of artwork being used in churches or in private prayer and worship?