

*Praying  
with  
Icons*

by Alison Asquith



# *Praying with icons*

Until recent years, most Western Christians were unfamiliar with icons. Icons seemed foreign and outside Western spirituality. For Orthodox Christians however, icons have been a critical part of their religious practice for over 1500 years. Today however, icons have captured the attention of many non-Orthodox Christians who have begun to recognise the potential importance of icons for the further development of spirituality of Western Christianity. In some Anglican Churches (particularly in Victoria), and in some Uniting and Baptist churches, icons have begun to assume a prominent position as focal points of prayer and devotion.

## *What are icons?*

Icons are sacred images of Christ and the saints as well as depictions of scenes from the Scriptures. In early Christian centuries a variety of mediums were used for icons: marble, ivory, tapestry, mosaics, gold, silver, enamel, terra cotta. Most commonly they are painted<sup>1</sup> on a timber panel which is covered with linen then applied with gesso, followed by a series of layers of glue and powdered chalk before the final polishing. It is a painstaking and time consuming process. Icons follow particular traditional styles, are unsigned and are blessed for use in prayer.

Due to the Orthodox Church according such a high status to icons, it is interesting to note that all traditional icons have a complex set of guidelines for their creation, or what could be described as a 'canon'. The Orthodox Church stipulates that all icons are to be made to give the impression of eye-to-eye contact with the person(s) depicted. Generally icons are shown full-faced, not in profile so that their faces offer the largest possible space for contemplation and communion. Other rules affect colour, and physical composition. Space is handled through the use of perspective, and time through the layout of people and events surrounding the central subject. Such a 'canon' helps keep the quality of icons within the accepted Christian bounds, and places them in Orthodox eyes on a par with Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

## *Icons and prayer*

Probably the most important book that first introduced me to the mystical language of icons was Williams, *Ponder these things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin*.<sup>3</sup> Icons are a major vehicle for viewing and understanding reality in a complete, holistic way, that is, a spirituality. The sole purpose of icons is that they offer access through the gate of the visible to the mystery of the invisible. They lead us to the contemplation of the divine:

the icon stands for something other than itself it is designed to lead us from the physical to the spiritual realm. The icon is an image of a real, sacred person or

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<sup>1</sup> While some theologians refer to 'icon writing' there are many others who speak of 'icon painting'. Dr John Yiannias, Professor at the University of Virginia, argues that the term 'icon writing' is a term that is peculiar to American (or at least English-speaking) Orthodoxy. He says that never in the Orthodox Church's history until our day, has the Church said or implied that an icon is written: <http://orthodoxhistory.org/2010/06/08/icons-are-not-written>.

<sup>2</sup> L. Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, (New York, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 51-56

<sup>3</sup> R. Williams, *Ponder these things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin*, (Norwich, The Canterbury Press, 2002)

event and is designed to lead us to it. Key words often used in the context of icons are that they 'lift up the soul to God, instruct, remind, and arouse our emulation'.<sup>4</sup>

An icon is, in effect, the equivalent to a sacrament whereby the people depicted are personally present.<sup>5</sup> An icon

provides an existential encounter between men and God. It becomes a place of an appearance of Christ provided one stands before it with the right disposition of heart and mind. It becomes a place of prayer...An icon participates in the event it depicts and is almost a recreation of that event existentially for the believer.<sup>6</sup>

This means that through an icon, Christ, his mother and the saints can become 'present' with us. The icon therefore becomes a place of divine presence and an instrument of grace because it transmits to us the sanctifying presence of Christ and lifts up our prayers to God.<sup>7</sup>

The way in which an icon does this is by providing an opportunity for encounter through the use of sign and symbols. They allow us to cross the boundary between our conscious and unconscious; they allow us to cross the boundary between the material and the spiritual. In a sense they exist on the border of these two worlds. Thus symbols are created as a powerful way by which the created can explain and approach the uncreated.<sup>8</sup>

The practical power of an icon (despite its theological significance) is primarily its appeal to the eye.<sup>9</sup> "If the word and song of the Church sanctify our soul by means of hearing, the image sanctifies by means of sight, which is, according to the Fathers [of the early Church], the most important of the senses."<sup>10</sup>

Icons are not worshipped, they are venerated. God alone is worshipped. The way in which we (as Western Christians) would use an icon is to "gaze at them with complete attention and to pray with them."<sup>11</sup> We meditate upon the icon's content and allow ourselves to move from one idea to another in prayer. This requires a sense of being completely present to the icon, and intentionally gazing upon it in silence and stillness. This is an ascetic discipline that requires presence and attentiveness. We enter into a sense of seeing and being seen, and then respond to the interaction that comes out of this.

## *Icons evoke hunger for God*

What happens as a result of gazing is that we focus very deeply on God:

the icon never strives to stir the emotions of the faithful. Its task is not to provoke in them one or another human emotion, but to guide every emotion as well as the reason and all other faculties of human nature on the way towards transfiguration.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> C. Cavarnos, in A. Philippou, *The Orthodox Ethos*, (Oxford, Holywell Press, 1964) 182

<sup>5</sup> G. Limouris, *Icons: Windows on Eternity*, (Geneva, WCC Publications, 1990) 110

<sup>6</sup> A. Coniaris, *Introducing the Orthodox Church*, (Minneapolis, Light and Life Publishing Co., 1982) 174

<sup>7</sup> Limouris, *Icons: Windows on Eternity*, 107

<sup>8</sup> L. Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon (I and II)*, (New York, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992) 40

<sup>9</sup> This is in contrast to the Western Church which is primarily concerned with the ear, that is, in listening.

<sup>10</sup> Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 192

<sup>11</sup> H. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, (Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press 1987) 21

<sup>12</sup> Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 39

In other words an icon is a tool of focus and meditation which sharpens the faculties for the reception of divine grace. As St John Damascene writing in the seventh century said, “icons evoke our hunger for God”.<sup>13</sup>

In many ways it could be said that icons are an invitation. They invite and lead us to a sacred place of interaction between us and the God ‘behind’ the icon. This can be particularly understood, for example, in the sense of time. For when we respond and worship we do not just remember the Christ of the icon, we live and partake in the life of Christ now.

The result of such an encounter is personal transformation. By gazing upon icons a person can gain a true perspective of themselves and of life; transformation is a place where our innermost values are sifted. However, such an ideal may at times, be thwarted by the continuous bombardment of daily images that are often beyond our control. “Posters, billboards, TV, videos and movies continually assault our eyes and inscribe their images upon our memories”.<sup>14</sup> To provide some relief from this unwanted interference on our minds, Nouwen suggests that we need to focus on “the beauty of the Lord and icons enable us to do this”.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the apparent unusualness of icons in the West, the skills needed to forge a spiritual life are not so different wherever we go. For Western Christians we do not have to jettison our traditions in order to appropriate what is valuable in others. Rather, we can use icons as a gift of Christ through the Spirit for all Christian churches. In other words whether of Orthodox Christian origin or Western Christian origin, gazing at icons and praying with icons, can enable us *all* to “see a door open in heaven” (Rev 4:1).

A final thought:

... if our contemplation of icons helps us to become more truly human in the image of Christ and therefore more compassionate towards others... then icons have become, for us, a means of grace.<sup>16</sup>

(This is an abbreviated version of the essay Alison Asquith wrote for assessment in *Serving Christ Today*, the final unit in the Trinity Certificate in Theology and Ministry. We are grateful to Alison for her willingness to make her reflections available to the parish.)

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<sup>13</sup> Philippou, *The Orthodox Ethos*, 184

<sup>14</sup> Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, 121

<sup>15</sup> Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, 121

<sup>16</sup> J. W. de Gruchy, *Icons as a means of grace*, (Wellington, South Africa, LUX VERBI.BM (Pty.) Ltd., 2008), 141