

Adult Catechism Class for November 16, 2015

Praying with Icons in the Eastern Christian Tradition

Part 1: Scripture Readings:

Philippians 4:6-7: Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Psalm 19:14: May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Mark 11:24: Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

Part 2: What are Icons? What is an icon? The word "icon" means "image," but since the early centuries of Christianity, the word "icon" is normally used to refer to images with a religious content, meaning and use. Most icons are two-dimensional; mosaics, paintings, enamels, miniatures, but ancient three dimensional icons also exist. Many people assume an icon must be in a Byzantine or Russian style. Many icons are, but many are not; other Orthodox Christian cultures have their own traditional styles of art, and many icons exist painted in a Western style. It is not style that makes a painting an icon, it is subject, meaning and use. An icon is always the representation of a religious subject, but not every representation of a religious subject is an icon. An icon is not simply the representation of a religious subject, it is a representation with a religious meaning, and if it is an Orthodox icon it must have an orthodox meaning. The icon must not only represent a religious subject in an orthodox way, it is to be an image for religious use. Icons are part of the Church's preaching and part of the Church's prayer. The true iconographer prepares for the work of icon-making with prayer, fasting and study. The Church must be able to own and worship the image the iconographer produces. The icon must be truth.

The production of icons is a mode of prayer; they come from prayer to be used in prayer and worship. Icons have an important role in the decoration of church buildings, in the church's worship and in personal devotion. They play several roles: Icons teach: they represent sacred persons, sacred events, they show us the reality of the Divine Kingdom. They teach history, doctrine, morality and theology. They remind us what we are and what we should be. They show us the importance of matter and of material things. They show us the transfiguration of matter under the power of the Holy Spirit. Icons challenge: we see the saints, transfigured by God's grace and by their own free response to Him. we are challenged to follow in their footsteps. Icons witness: the icon of Christ witnesses to the Incarnation. The Divine logos came down into our humanity; He is human as we are human. Humans can be portrayed; portraying the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ, we witness to His true humanity. The icon is a doorway to the awareness of presence and the love of Christ and His saints and angels. Christ dwells in us by His grace, and the saints and angels are already present with us, through their love and their prayers; the icon reminds us, and makes us aware of that presence.

Part 3: Spiritual Characteristics of Icons: We do not adore images; adoration [latreia] is due to God alone, but we do venerate and reverence them. The saints, as deified human beings are also venerated, and with a higher kind of veneration than are their images, but no saint, not even the Theotokos herself, is ever worshipped as we worship God. Icons allow us a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, a vision the Word of God in human form, of humanity deified in the saints, of matter transfigured by the power of the Spirit. Icons are windows onto aspects of reality we cannot normally see, and help us awake our spiritual senses so that we become more vividly aware of the Divine energies that suffuse and uphold all Creation.

Icons can be effective in recalling us to the presence of Christ - the icon can serve as a reminder that He truly is here. Each specific icon type carries its own message about Him. The Pantocrator reminds us that the Christ who is present here is the Almighty, the Creator and Sustained of the Universe, the Upholder of All. The icon of Christ the Teacher reminds us that it is He who teaches, through the Gospels, the Church's proclamation of the Good News, through prayer, if our spiritual senses are awake to hear Him, through the people we meet, the situations we face. The icon of the Panteleimon, the All-Merciful, reminds us that nothing we have done is beyond His forgiveness; the Christ Who is present to us offers forgiveness and transformation, if we will accept it. The icon of the Crucified reminds us of the unlimited love of the Son of God who assumes our human nature in order to let us share His divine nature. He has entered into our humanity in its fullness, into our joys and sufferings, even into degradation and death; there is no part of our life where Christ is not. The Anastasis reminds us that Christ has descended into death to free the whole of humanity from the entrapping power of death, from the fear of death and from the compulsion to sin.

Because icons are physical objects, they serve as invitations to keep our eyes open when we pray. While prayer may often be, in Thomas Merton's words, "like a face-to-face meeting in the dark," cutting a major link with the physical world by closing your eyes is not a precondition of prayer. Icons help solve a very simple problem: If I am to pray with open eyes, what should I be looking at? It doesn't have to be icons, but icons are a good and helpful choice. They serve as bridges to Christ, as links with the saints, as reminders of pivotal events in the history of salvation. Once you have an icon, it requires a place. There should be an "icon corner" in the place you live; an area where one or several icons are placed that serves as a regular center of prayer. Icons can be placed in other areas of your home. If there is an icon near the table where meals are served, you may want to begin and end your meals by praying and facing the icon while reciting a prayer before and after the meal. If it is good to have an icon in every bedroom and kitchen.

At its simplest, acts of veneration refer to the way believing people respectfully interact with and honor the subjects depicted in icons – the prototypes, not the painted boards themselves. This veneration is a kinesthetic language that involves the senses; it is the physical part of prayer. We are reminded through physical acts of veneration that not only the mind prays, but the whole person – body, mind, and spirit. Our physical selves are as much a part of His much-loved creation as our cerebral and spiritual selves.

Bowing and making prostrations before icons are common gestures many people use to express respect. Bows are still used as signs of friendship or honor toward other people in many Middle-eastern and Asian cultures. Another act of veneration, that of forming the sign of the cross on one's body before an icon, reflects several important beliefs: recognition of the holiness of the icon as a sacred object in itself, conviction regarding the subject's sanctity, and a general acknowledgement of Christian faith. God loves spontaneous acts of worship and love; we are free to kiss the icons, just as we might kiss the photo of someone we love. Candles can also be placed before icons. These candles serve as visual markers for peoples' prayers, and remind them of the warmth and light that Christ brings to human experience. But the most important component of any act of veneration is an open, trusting heart toward God, and faith in His love for us. Without the right attitude, the rest means little.

Icons can seem complicated or strange at first. Take time to come present to the icon, to simply gaze, allowing both your sense of sight as well as the longings of your heart to interact with what the icon presents to you in a particular moment. Icons have a way of teaching the heart spiritual truths the mind cannot.

Icons are painted in reverse, or Byzantine, perspective, in which the further away objects in the icon are, the larger they are drawn, diverging against the horizon, rather than converging as in linear perspective. This technique is meant to bring the subject matter in the icon perpetually into the present, into the immediate experience of the viewer. Reverse perspective serves as a reminder that since God is omnipresent and outside earthly time and place, his view converges from everywhere simultaneously. We are to put ourselves in relationship to the world within the icon, not expect that world to adapt to us. Like other features, iconic landscapes are not meant to be realistic, but symbolic. Mountains in icons are not peaked, but flat, symbolizing all creation bowing down to Christ (Luke 3:5). Even iconographic depictions of events from Christ's earthly life are meant to remind us that those events are ultimately of an eternal, transcendent nature, and not merely historical.

Unlike much of western religious art, human subjects in icons are not meant to look precisely like the people portrayed did in real life. Icons are spiritual portraits, meant to emphasize the stillness of the subjects' souls, as well as their "passionlessness" (freedom from sin and struggle) in the presence of God. Eyes tend to dominate the faces of iconic subjects, acting as reflections of the serene selves within. We are naturally attracted to a person's eyes, so this helps our focus in prayer and our heart's connection with Christ or the saint within the icon. Fr. Henri Nouwen says of the eyes in the icon of the Vladimir Mother of God: "Her eyes gaze upon the infinite spaces of the heart where joy and sorrow are no longer contrasting emotions, but are transcended in spiritual unity." Halos and gold backgrounds remind us that the people depicted there live in the presence of God's unearthly and uncreated light. The figures in some icons appear to be floating in a veritable sea of gold. We are reminded again of another world and of another reality beyond the one we know. Certain pictorial features within an icon, such as the small axe in the foreground of the icon of St. John the Baptist, remind us of pivotal events or ministries from that person's earthly life. A cross held in a saint's hand tells us that this person was martyred for his or her faith.

Part 4: How to Pray with Icons: Icons are soul windows, entrances into the presence of the Holy. Icons serve as invitations to keep eyes open while one prays. It is prayer to just look attentively at an icon and let God speak. The profound beauty of an icon is gentle. It does not force its way. It asks for time spent before it in stillness....gazing. More importantly it invites the one praying to be gazed upon by it. One is invited to enter into the icon and come closer to the Holy One portrayed. Icons are a reminder of God's unconditional love.

To pray with icons, one needs to be comfortable, quiet and attentive. The process of Lectio divina (Holy reading) can be used.

The 5 key steps are:

1. Ready – Sit comfortably and still the body. Focus on breathing.
2. Read – Take time to look closely at the icon. What do you see? See 'the more". Take time.
3. Read and Reflect – What is the icon calling you to be? What is the message for you? What do you hear?
4. Read and Respond- Read the icon once more by gazing on it. Respond in prayer. Write/draw thoughts and prayers if you journal....
5. Read and Rest- let the image of the icon rest in your heart. BE..... Give time for this to happen!!!

Another simple way to pray with an icon would be the use of the Y Chart. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel? Icons can lead us into the inner room of prayer. In busy times it can be just a glance at the icon or a ritual where one touches the icon gently either before a challenging task or at the end of a day.

A prayer rule is the outline of our daily prayer routine. It is important to have a thought out rule. Casually going to your place for prayer and simply talking with God is not the best way to begin to develop your prayer life. We will find that we end up babbling in front of our God. We can take advantage of the centuries of wisdom and being by using proven prayers that will lift us up in our way of communicating with God. A prayer rule should first specify the place and time of prayer. Then it should outline the sequence of your prayers and the specific prayers you will say. Below is an example of a beginners prayer rule:

Morning and Evening Prayer: *Place:* In the icon corner at your home, *Time:* Morning and Evening for 20 minutes each time. Begin by lighting a candle, and making three prostrations and then stand quietly to collect yourself in your heart

Examples of Prayers to use: Trisagion Prayer (Beginning with Holy God), One of six Morning or Evening Psalms, Intercessions for the living and the dead, Psalm 51 and confession of our sinfulness, Doxology and the morning or evening prayer, Personal dialogue with God, Jesus prayer - repeat 100 times. Reflect quietly on the tasks of the day and prepare yourself for the difficulties you might face asking God to help you, Dismissal prayer.

Part 5: Other Facts about Icons:

What do colors represent in iconography? In iconography there are two distinct categories of colors. First there is white, red, green and blue, used to express life, purity, peace and goodness. The second category of colors is black, brown, grey and yellow, and they are used to express danger and impurity. **White:** is the color that represents eternal life and purity. **Blue:** represents celestial beings, God's dwelling place, the sky. **Red:** symbolizes activity. In Hebrew thought, red represents life. We find it mentioned in several books of the Old Testament: in the Second Book of Samuel, Saul dressed the daughters of Israel in red garments: "O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet,

with luxury..." (2 Samuel 1:24). In Proverbs we find that the perfect wife wears red, in the book of Jeremiah, Jerusalem beautifies herself in a red garment. The martyr's clothes are red, the clothing of the seraphims are red also. Red is also the color that depicts health, fire and the Last Judgment. **Purple:** purple is the symbol of royalty, wealth, power, and priestly dignity. In the book of Daniel we learn that the king dressed himself in purple, and in the Psalms it is mentioned that the king and the queen are robed in purple. **Green:** in the Holy Scriptures, green represents nature and vegetation, and it is thus representative of growth and fertility. It is mentioned in the Song of Songs and the Book of Jeremiah. In iconography it is used for the robes of martyrs and prophets. **Brown:** represents density and lack of radiance. Brown is composed of red, blue, green and black, and it is used to depict soil, rocks and buildings. It is also used as a symbol of poverty and renunciation for the dark garments of monks and ascetics. **Black:** represents absence of life; it symbolizes a void. It is the opposite of white. While white represents the fullness of life, black represents the lack of it. Monks and Great Schema monks wear black garments, as a symbol of their renunciation of all that is material. **Yellow:** representing sadness, it is used in the icon of the Savior being placed in the tomb. In Deuteronomy it is mentioned as a sign of misfortune, bad harvest and blight.

The First Icon: The first icon, the MANDYLION or The Holy Napkin, sometimes called "Made without hands" is said not only to have been an authentic likeness of Christ, but one which Christ Himself willingly produced. It was thus often cited both as proof of the reality of His Incarnation — as it had been in contact with His body — and as justification for the iconophile position that Christ Himself has endorsed the making of His image. The features of Christ's face on the Holy Napkin are those of the Pantocrator. It is not a bust because it only shows the head and part of the neck; no shoulders are seen. The face is painted as though it is imprinted on a horizontal fringed strip of white cloth, hence the name "napkin." The earliest surviving example is said to date from the 10th Century and it is at St. Catherine Monastery in Sinai. This icon has no fixed place in the decoration of a church. The image of the Holy Napkin was also known in the West under the name of The Veil of Veronica. The Veronica story is similar to that of King Abgar: Veronica was a woman who comforted Jesus as He was bearing the cross on the way to Golgotha. She offered Him a piece of cloth to wipe the blood and sweat off His face; later she found that she received a 'miraculous image. A building along Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem associated with Veronica is today the home of a community of sisters called "The Little Sisters of Jesus."

The icon and the one who enters the reality depicted in the icon witness to the eradication of evil which has infected man's achievements. To the ascetic who prays the icon communicates the meaning of life. Matter and Spirit, heaven and earth, are both united in the icon and in the one who has entered the reality it communicates. Already in the present they begin to manifest the future of creation when God will be all in all.

