

“Icons are painted to lead us into the inner room of prayer and bring us close to the heart of God...They do not immediately speak to our senses. They do not excite, fascinate, stir our emotions, or stimulate our imagination. At first, they even seem somewhat rigid, lifeless, schematic and dull. They do not reveal themselves to us at first sight. It is only gradually, after a patient, prayerful presence that they start speaking to us. And as they speak, they speak more to our inner than our outer senses. They speak to the heart that searches for God.”

How to pray with icons.....

Everything in the picture has a significance, so you should look at it carefully, but focus mostly on the person or people in the picture. They have been prayerfully painted with the view to bringing out a response from the person who gazes at them.

Look at the icon as you pray. See it as a point of connection with Jesus and the community of saints. Take five minutes to gaze at the Icon and then mentally note anything that you may have noticed about it

Even though you may feel pressured by the demands of the day, try not to pray in a hurry. Better to pray for a short time with quiet attention to each word and each breath than to rush through many prayers. Be aware of your breathing. You are breathing in life itself, breathing in God's peace. You are breathing out praise and gratitude, breathing out your appeals for help.

As you pray, cultivate an inner attitude of listening. God is not an idea and praying is not an exercise to improve our idea of God. Prayer is the cultivation of the awareness of God's actual presence. We may speak words to God or just look attentively at the icon and let God speak to us. In the silence—What have you noticed about the image? Is God speaking to you in any way? What will you take into the rest of today/tomorrow from this experience?



Coming away from the stresses of every day life and giving our attention to our Creator and Saviour—this is the path to human flourishing.

Praying with Images

In the book *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster we discover there was so much more than we realise that Christians have done throughout the history of the church to facilitate their growing in spiritual maturity.

Many have totally committed themselves to seeking after a deeper relationship with God and they have much wisdom to share with us today. So this is what the different forms of Christian spirituality are all about, enabling Christians to grow in spiritual maturity, to grow into the likeness of Christ, in order to become the people God made us to be.

Just as the relationship between a parent and a child will change as they grow and mature, so our relationship with God can grow deeper as we take on more of the likeness of Christ. It's a journey, and in one way or another it never ends....

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." 1 Corinthians 13: 12.

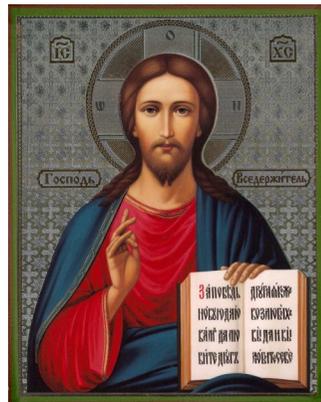
Today we look at another useful technique to assist our journey. The use of icons to help us focus, love and pray...

The word 'icon' means 'image', or 'representation', or 'portrait'.

At the seventh Ecumenical Council of the Christian church in 787 AD, a debate took place as to whether Icons were a legitimate tool for Christians to use in their spiritual journey. The problem was that the Old Testament clearly stated that no image (picture or statue) may be made of God.

So if Jesus is God, then was it not wrong to make any images of him? The conclusion was that with Jesus this rule had changed.

In fact, Jesus was seen as the icon of God, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." (Colossians 1:15).



Since it would have been ok for someone to have sketched a likeness of Jesus as he preached to the crowds, so it was ok for someone to make a picture of him based on their imagination and, if possible, convey a godly message through their picture. So the Council decided that "Icons do with colour what Scripture does with words."

"When, through the Incarnation, God took on human form as Jesus, he demonstrated that the things of this material world are not in themselves evil, and can be of use in our journey towards God. This includes the use of icons. When the church divided into the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Catholic Church, part of that division lay in the way the two churches sought to connect with God. Whereas Western Christian spirituality was focussed on developing our relationship with God through listening,

Eastern Christian spirituality focussed on the art of growing in love with God through gazing at him. (Gazing is a normal feature of loving. We can see this all around us – a couple 'in love' gazing at each other, a parent gazing lovingly at their child)This gazing was then facilitated using icons, and so this is the way to approach Icons.



As pictures, icons have a style of their own. They are supposed to look other-worldly as they serve the function of being windows on to eternity. Whereas pictures show us images of this world, icons are intended to reveal the invisible world of the Kingdom to come. In his book, Behold the Beauty of the Lord by Henri Nouwen, he looks at four icons and reflects on them. Icons are not objects of worship, they have no supernatural power. They are simply an aid to visualising God's presence in our lives more vividly. Nouwen writes,