

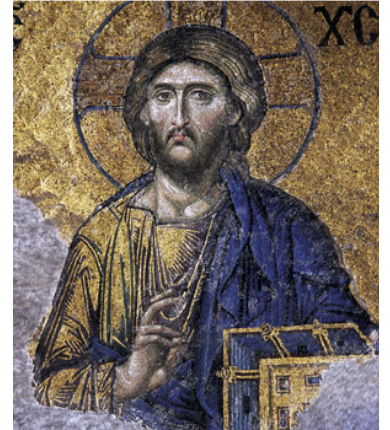
# Praying with Icons

Fr Simon Ckuj shares the following insights about icons and deepening our relationship with Christ through praying with icons. Fr Simon is Parish Priest of St Andrew's Ukrainian Catholic parish in Lidcombe, Sydney. Individuals and groups are encouraged to read this reflection and, following the guidelines at the end, spend time contemplating the face of Christ.

**He is the image [Greek: icon] of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (Col 1:15)**

When an iconographer creates an icon, they are said to "write the icon", not paint it. This is because it is a prayerful exercise in humility before God. They are highly symbolic using shapes, colours and forms to **symbolize different spiritual realities**. They are not signed by the artist on the front, if at all. The best iconographers are not famous artists, but holy saints.

Praying with icons is an ancient prayer practice that involves **keeping our eyes wide open**, taking into our heart what the image visually communicates. We focus not on what is seen in the icon, but rather on what is seen through it - the love of God expressed through God's creatures.



Religious icons are commonly referred to as "windows to heaven" or "windows to the eternal". The idea that a piece of artwork can give us **a glimpse of the invisible** comes from Christology - the study of the person of Christ - which focuses on the Incarnation. Because God took on human flesh, He allows us to see the person of Christ, who is God.

***Christianity is the revelation not only of the Word of God but also the Image of God.***

Leonid Ouspensky

Icons also **lift up our minds from earthly things to the heavenly**. St. John of Damascus wrote, "we are led by perceptible Icons to the contemplation of the divine and spiritual" (PG 94:1261a). And by keeping their memory before us through the Icons, we are also inspired to imitate the holiness of those therein depicted. St. Gregory of Nyssa (ca 330-395) spoke of how he could not pass an Icon of Abraham sacrificing Isaac "without tears" (PG 46:572). "If to such a Doctor the picture was helpful and drew forth tears, how much more in the case of the ignorant and simple will it bring compunction and benefit"

This is prayer without words, with a **focus on being in God's presence** rather than performing in God's presence. It is an experience of touching and feeling what is holy -- a divine mystery. Icons are not simply art; they are a way into contemplative prayer, and are therefore one way to let God speak to us. They are **doorways into stillness, into closeness with God**. If we sit with them long enough, we too can enter into the stillness - into communion. And if we listen to them closely enough, with our hearts, we just may discern the voice of God.

When we speak of icons as a medium for "gazing into heaven", we refer to their value as much more than religious art. Instead, **icons serve as a very real means for connecting us with God and His love**. Icons are beautiful, but without relationship behind it, beauty alone feeds only a portion of the human soul, and ultimately patronizes the deep human need for loving connection with the Transcendent. With this in mind, we seek to view icons as points of visual and spiritual intersection with eternal things, as living prompts for our prayers, and as reminders of the very real world that exists beyond the limitations of this temporal one. Christ and the saints are alive and well, and they have not forgotten us. We can draw strength from holy people who have gone before us into eternity, who are constantly present within both the form and function of the icon to help us in our prayers. **Icons teach us to contemplate life's most important matters.**

Icons can seem complicated or strange at first. **Take time 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. This is part of what is meant by icons being “theology in colour.”

### **And keep these elements in mind:**

**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 in real life. Icons are spiritual portraits**, meant to emphasize the stillness of the subjects’ souls, as well as their 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.

To begin your prayer, you may want to light a candle nearby. A flame is a metaphor for prayer, inviting us into the presence of Holy God. **Look at the icon as you pray. See it as a point of connection with Jesus and the community of saints.**

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.**

