

PRAYING WITH ICONS

A theological definition of this form of spirituality, how it would normally be performed by a director, and its relevance to the art of Spiritual Direction.

by

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Praying With Icons

Icons have been part of Orthodox spirituality for over 1,500 years and are a central aspect of Orthodox religious practice. Icons are more than simply just another smart technique to be added to a person's spiritual direction tool kit. They are a major vehicle to be used for viewing and understanding reality in a complete, holistic way, i.e. a spirituality. As John Baggley, in his book *Doors Of Perception*, says, "In studying icons and in using them for devotional purposes we come into contact with a tradition of theology and spirituality that is very different from that familiar to most Western Christians."¹ I am, therefore, going to examine the theology and spirituality of icons before I explore some of their relevance for Spiritual Direction.

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. As Constantine Cavarnos tells us, "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 event, and is designed to lead us to it."² Key words often used in the context of icons are that they 'lift up the soul to God, instruct, remind, and arouse our emulation.'¹

An icon is, in effect, the equivalent of a sacrament whereby the people depicted are personally present.³

"It 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."⁴

This means that through an icon Christ, 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 to God our hearts and prayers.⁵

The way in which an icon does this is by providing an opportunity for encounter through the use of sign and symbols. Symbols and signs are normally known as 'border-crossers' in that they allow us to cross the boundary between our conscious and unconscious, and they allow us to cross the boundary between the material and spiritual. In a sense they exist on the border of these two worlds. Symbols are a powerful way by which the created can explain and approach the uncreated.⁶

¹ Baggley, J. *Doors of Perception*, p44.

² Philippou, A. *The Orthodox Ethos*, p182.

³ Limouris, G. *Icons-Windows on Eternity*, p110.

⁴ Coniaris, A. *Introducing the Orthodox Church*, p174.

⁵ Limouris, G. *Icons-Windows on Eternity*, p107.

⁶ Ouspensky, O. *Theology of the Icon (I&II)* p40.

Now the Orthodox approach to icons and prayer is based upon the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ for the Orthodox believe that "the moment God became man it became lawful to make a picture of Him." They believe that anyone who denies the appropriateness of icons also denies the reality of the incarnation.⁷ Effectively, they state that because God has chosen to reveal Himself through human flesh, then it is appropriate to utilise material means as a vehicle of grace when used in faith. (The Second Commandment forbidding the making of idols is, therefore, by-passed by the incarnation of Christ, and consequently art, images, symbolism, and sign are now valid ways of apprehending God).⁸

The practical power of an icon (despite it's theological significance) is primarily it's appeal to the eye.⁹ The eye is widely described as being the 'Pope' of the senses. For example, "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, the most important of the senses."¹⁰ Indeed St. Basil the Great and St. John Damascene taught that icons and the word accompany one another in a parallel appeal to the visual and aural senses.¹¹

Because the Orthodox accord such a high status to icons it is valuable to note that all traditional icons have a complex set of guidelines for their creation, or what could be described as a 'canon'. For example, 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. They are generally shown full-faced, not in profile, so that their faces offer the largest possible space for contemplation and communion. Other rules affect colour, physical composition, etc. Space is handled through the use of perspective, and time through the layout of people and events surrounding the central panel. This 'canon' helps keep the quality of icons within accepted Christian bounds, and places them in Orthodox eyes on par with Scripture.

The way in which a directee would use an icon is to "Gaze at them with complete attention and to pray with them."¹² They would mediate upon their content and allow themselves 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. The pray-er enters into a sense of seeing and being seen, and then responds to the interaction that comes out of this.

What happens as a result of gazing is that the directee focuses very deeply upon God. As Leonid Ouspensky says, "The icons never strive to stir the emotions of the faithful. Its task is not to provoke in them one or another natural human emotion, but

⁷ Philippou, A. *The Orthodox Ethos*, p172.

⁸ The debate is obviously a lot more complex than this. For a fuller explanation concerning the Iconoclast Crisis, the Triumph of Orthodoxy, and the distinction of the veneration of icons from the worship of God, refer to 'Icons: Windows on Eternity' and, in particular, 'St. John Damascene's Teaching about the Holy Icons' by George D. Dragas.

⁹ This is in contrast to the Western Church which was primarily concerned with the ear, i.e. 'listening.'

¹⁰ Ouspensky, O. *The Meaning of Icons*, p193.

¹¹ Philippou, A. *The Orthodox Ethos*, p183.

¹² Nouwen, H.J. *Behold the Beauty of the Lord (Praying with Icons)*, p12.

to guide every emotion as well as the reason and all other faculties of human nature on the way towards transfiguration."¹³ Or as Sister Olga puts it, "An icon is not touching or sentimental, nor even to magnify human feelings. It is to orientate all of our minds, feelings, oneself towards the holy." In other words it is a tool of focus and mediation which sharpens the faculties for the reception of divine grace. As St. John Damascene said, "Icons evoke our hunger for God."¹⁴

In many ways, therefore, it could be said that icons are an invitation. They invite and lead to a sacred place (or space as some writers prefer) of interaction between the pray-er and the God 'behind' the icon. This is particularly understood, for example, in the sense of time. For when pray-ers respond and worship God, they don't just remember the Christ of the icon, they live and partake in the life of Christ and heaven now. They (through the icons) dwell in the eternal present today. Everything is 'contemporised.'

The result of this encounter is personal transformation. By gazing upon the icons a person gains a true perspective of themselves and of life. As Henri Nouwen puts it, "The 'powers and principalities' control many of our daily images. Posters, billboards, TV, video-cassettes, movies and store windows continually assault our eyes and inscribe their images upon our memories", therefore we must keep our eyes fixed on the beauty of the Lord and icons enable us to do this.¹⁵

Now I believe that from my study there are at least three important ways in which icons are relevant to the task of spiritual direction:

1. Firstly, icons are a significant part of the Christian kataphatic tradition, and as such should be familiar to every spiritual director.

For a start an experiential knowledge of icons would be beneficial for a spiritual director's own spiritual growth¹⁶ by enhancing their sense of the sacramental aspect of all life. It would put them more in touch with another aspect of God's dealings with humanity, as well as adding to their own personal practice and skills.

It would also increase a directors appreciation of the role of symbols and sign play in direction. There are logical connections between working with images, drawing therapy, dreams, visions, and other symbolic, incarnational aspects of life. Many directees encounter God in metaphor, and need a sympathetic director who has the confidence and openness to help them deepen and explore this experience.

2. Secondly, a knowledge of how icons function provides us with some criteria for the evaluation of 'new' spiritual direction techniques. For example, during the recent second year gathering at Waikanae we were briefly introduced to the use of drawing in psychotherapy, and also Interactive Drawing Therapy. An understanding of icons enables us to question and refine the use of such

¹³ Ouspensky, O. *The Meaning of Icons*, p39.

¹⁴ Philippou, A. *The Orthodox Ethos*, p184.

¹⁵ Nouwen, H.J. *Behold the Beauty of the Lord (Praying with Icons)*, p12.

¹⁶ Particularly Protestants I would think

techniques in spiritual development work. For example, icons lead us to encounter Christ in the 'now.' So how do we guide artistic techniques so that people actually encounter Christ? And how do we use drawing so that they encounter God in the 'now,' and not just in the past?

Icons also have a 'tight' canon defining what are spiritual symbols and what are not. This could lead us to ask in direction, 'What are the God signs or symbols found in what we are doing now?'

Icons are also a communal tool in the Orthodox church. They are either in the iconostasis of a church building or in the shrine of a household. They are primarily liturgical, and are specifically for the service of the whole Church.¹⁷ To what extent, then, are modern practices (and even experiences) self-gratifying, individualistic, or linked to a living community of faith?

These are just sample questions but they illustrate how a knowledge of Christian tradition in this area can be beneficial for exploring and enhancing the use of visual tools.

3. Thirdly, icons provide us with another way of looking at the spiritual direction relationship itself.

For a start spiritual direction can be seen as an icon of the divine. An icon is an object which embodies and points to a reality beyond itself with which the pray-er interacts and meets. Without wanting to be too egotistical, it seems that this definition could well apply to a spiritual director and the spiritual direction relationship. For example, Thomas Merton said that the spiritual 'father' was "a kind of 'sacrament' of the Lord's presence in the ecclesiastical community,"¹⁸ and St. Simeon the Theologian said, "A man who has acquired active faith in his father in God when seeing him thinks he sees Christ Himself."¹⁹ Kenneth Leech, quoting Tolstoy's comments on his visit to the *startsy* Amvrosy, says "When one talks with such a man, one feels the nearness of God."²⁰ So the ministry of spiritual direction is in itself an icon.

But beyond that the spiritual direction relationship has many similarities to icon work. For example, in the relationship there often develops a sense of sacred space. As the director and directee mutually gaze upon the workings of God in the human spirit there is an awareness of the Holy Spirit and of sacredness. There is a sense of existential encounter happening 'now'²¹, and the recognition that a third party is involved. There is revelation and mystery.

There is also an element of concentration and focus. There is a need for the director and the directee, in their own way, both to be present and to be still as one is present and attentive with an icon. Joseph Allen defines the quality of this

¹⁷ Kalokyris, C. *Orthodox Iconography* p13, 83.

¹⁸ Foster, R. *Celebration of Discipline*, p161.

¹⁹ Leech, K. *Soul Friend*, p44.

²⁰ *ibid* p48.

²¹ Hieb, M. *Icon Space and Spiritual Direction*.

presence for the director as comprising four parts. There is the 'intention' to enter the directees experience. There is the 'focus' upon the inner meaning of what is being said. There is the need for 'interpretation' (discernment), and eventually 'articulation' (feedback) which leads to dialogue.²² All these could also typify what happens when we interact with an icon. Possibly the same qualities could also be listed for the directee, but overall a quality and clarity of engagement similar to that found in icon work is necessary when working with a directee.

There are also other parallels as well. For example, one learns to value the material, and even mundane, as the place of incarnation. All of life is of significance, even turkeys!²³ Spiritual direction takes up the concrete daily experiences of our lives and gives them sacramental significance, just as the icon picks up a mixture of paint and wood, and becomes a window on the divine.

Spiritual direction like icon work is also a place of transformation, where our innermost values are sifted. So there are many similarities, but essentially the attributes needed for good icon work are also those which are valuable for the role of a spiritual director. Despite the apparent unusualness of icons in the West, maybe the skills needed to forge a spiritual life are not so different wherever we go!?

A favourite icon quotation:

'I saw a door open in heaven' Revelation 4:1

²² Allen, J. *Inner Way*, p112.

²³ Foster, R. *Celebration of Discipline*, p160. Thomas Merton tells the story of a Russian spiritual director who was criticised for spending so much time advising an elderly woman on the care of her turkeys. The director replied, "But her whole life is in those turkeys!"

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