

Praying with Icons



Icons have been part of the Christian tradition for centuries. Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, writes: “We call them saints when what we really often mean to say is icon, star, hero, one so possessed by an internal vision of divine goodness that they give us a glimpse of the face of God in the center of the human. They give us a taste of the possibilities of greatness in ourselves.”

Oftentimes in prayer, our imaginations can race in a distracted manner. Icons can help us to overcome distraction. They invite us to focus on an image of the holy that points the way to God. Icons take us beyond words and give us a visual reminder of God’s love for us. It is another way to ponder our faith and who God is. The icon conveys a story of faith, a work inspired by God. It is a tool of prayer, helping us to focus on the holy and suggest virtues for the spiritual journey.

Here are a few books from Priest Lynn’s library that you may find interesting/useful:

Joan Chittister, [A Passion for Life: Fragments of the Face of God](#)

Jim Forest, [Praying with Icons](#)

Linette Martin, [Sacred Doorways: A Beginner’s Guide to Icons](#)

Henri J.M. Nouwen, [Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons](#)

Alla Rodina, editor, [The Russian Icon](#)

ICONS - Prayer with eyes open



INTRODUCTION

Many of us were taught to close our eyes when we pray. 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.

This is prayer without words, with a focus on being in God's presence rather than performing in God's presence. It is a right-brain 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 the communion. And if we listen to them closely enough, with our hearts, we just may discern the voice of God.

Choose Icon

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. Try extending your hands and turning your palms upward, a gesture both of openness to God's grace and the gift of your hands to God.

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.