

Praying with Icons

Praying with an Icon¹

1. Choose an Icon which is meaningful to you. Unless you are familiar with some of the ancient Eastern Saints, it is probably best to start with an icon of the Glorified Christ (*Pantocrator*, “Ruler of All”) or of Mary with Jesus (*Theotokos*, “God-Bearer”).
2. If possible, place the icon in a stand or attach it to an accessible wall. You may want to light a small candle and place it before the icon. Alternatively, if your icon is in a book, you can simply hold the icon in your hands upon your lap.
3. Move near the icon in a posture of prayer and close your eyes. Begin your time in silence, perhaps offering an inner prayer that expresses your desire to touch God through the icon. You may want to make use of chant. For example, if you are before an icon depicting the Annunciation, you might want to chant the first line of the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Or, if before in icon of Christ, you might want to chant the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”
4. Now, open your eyes and look at the eyes of the icon. Spend a moment reaching for God with your will through the eyes. Resist the normal impulse to grasp for some kind of knowledge. Instead, keep your eyes very still and let *yourself* be *known* by God through the icon’s eyes. Gently release any sense of judgment, distance, hardness, curiosity, or distrust as these may occur.
5. Let yourself be “hollowed-out” so that you might become aware of God’s gaze through the eyes of the icons seeing through all that you are with severe love. Let nothing remain hidden or outside this receptive exposure. Open space for the One who loves you through and through, and let yourself be open for whatever secret cleansing, healing, or illuminating might come.
6. Seek to let this “being known” by God so fill your knowing that you are left with a mutual knowing that is beyond a hard subject-object relationship. Move close to that mind of innocent seeing, of coinherent presence. There is nothing to think about, just a quality of still, open being, a descent to the single eye of your heart.
7. At the end of your prayer, close your eyes again, trying to retain a sense of the icon in your mind. Then, let it fade to a formless presence. Finally, try to sense the eyes of the icon reappearing as *your* eyes, God seeing the world through you. Thus you may find yourself *becoming* an icon, realizing yourself to be an image of God, through whom the world is loved into the fullness of being.

Reflection Questions

1. What was it like to try and let yourself be “known” by God through the icon?
2. What was the effect of the eyes of the icon becoming your eyes—if this happened for you?
3. Was there any seemingly graced moment that revealed something crucial for your way of seeing and being?
4. Can you think of any painting or other object that has been a special icon of God for you in the past?

¹Taken from Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 50–52.