



Praying with Icons

“An icon is not just a picture. Yes, they are pictures, but they are so much more; yes, they are works of art, but they are so much more: an icon is a window through which we see not just the physical representation of a person, but the spiritual reality of the one depicted. For the Christian, Jesus himself is the icon, par excellence for He is the image of the invisible God. As such when we gaze into the mystery of the person of Jesus, we see through and beyond him into the heart of the living God. When we gaze at Jesus, we come to know what God is truly like.”

-Brother James Koester, SSJE

The idea of praying with icons seems like a foreign concept to many Episcopalians. It harkens to alien concepts of idolatry and saintly devotions which have the power to estrange us from a relationship with God. But icons can be so much more; they can be a tool through which we can connect to a holy figure – the person of Jesus, Mary, a saint. A way by which we can deepen our own spiritual connections to God.

An icon provides a visual and physical depiction of an event from the Bible or of a biblical figure or saint. The practice of creating an icon is as much a spiritual practice as it is an artistic one. Icons are “written” not painted or drawn. Each choice the icon writer makes, holds significance. The position of the hands and what they are holding, the colors of the clothing, the letters around the head. The gold of the background represents the eternal presence of God and his uncreated light.

But look at the eyes – what do you see? The eyes that are looking back at you. The eyes that are the windows into the soul. Can you see the humanity of the figure? Can you feel their emotions, their passions, their faith? What do you see, but also what do you feel?

It is easy to start praying with icons. If you do not have an icon at home, find an image online. Search for icons of Jesus, Mary, a biblical scene, a favorite saint. Pull up the image, maybe print it out. And then try and settle yourself for a couple minutes of silent prayer and contemplation. Focus first on your first impressions – what first comes to mind when you view the image. Then consider the specific details – who is the figure? what are they holding? what are they wearing?



But then start to move into the why. Why does Jesus have his fingers raised? Why is Mary embracing Jesus this way? Why are these other figures in the image? Let your mind wander from the image itself to what the image represents. Put yourself in the place of the writer, the place of the figures. How does this make you feel? What emotions are summoned from deep down?

At the end, bring your thoughts back to the image itself. Is there a new meaning you did not notice before? What stands out now- is it different from your first impressions? Do you think or feel any different?

Conclude with a prayer and re-engage with your day.

Holy God, Holy and Mighty. Holy Immortal One. Have Mercy Upon us. Amen.