



Hooked on Icons

Learning to understand and pray with icons

From the syndicated column “The Prayerful Heart”

By Julie McCarty

Over the past decade, I have become hooked on icons. The first time I fell in love with an Eastern Christian icon was when a seminary professor explained the symbolic meaning of Rublev’s Icon of the Trinity. In it, there are three figures with bowed heads seated around a table set for a meal. This image represents the three angels entertained by Abraham and Sarah in Old Testament times (*see* Genesis 18:1-8), and is viewed by Orthodox Christians as a prefiguring of the revelation of the Holy Trinity. The three distinct persons look a lot alike—perhaps as a way of showing that persons of Father, Son, and Spirit exist as one true God, in the perfect harmony and inter-relatedness of love. The drawing perspective is not “realistic”—as evidenced by the slope of the table—but that is by design. This is not an “earthly” banquet, but a heavenly one, and you, the viewer, are invited to that empty space at the table. That’s right: the Holy Trinity is drawing *you* into communion with God in the heavenly feast.

Everywhere I go these days, I see Eastern Christian icons making their way into Roman Catholic quarters. There are icons for sale in Catholic bookstores. Parishes are purchasing icons for their worship space. I have even heard of Catholics learning iconography, the sacred task of creating icons.

If Roman Catholics are going to embrace this ancient spiritual art, I think it is important for us to learn the deeper meaning and significance from those who have preserved the theology of the icon from ancient centuries. We must be careful not to treat icons as merely another art form. Although icons are not to be worshipped, they are to be treated with the greatest respect, much more than an American Catholic typically uses for statues or other sacramentals. Icons are very near to sacraments in terms of conveying to us a sense of divine presence. That is why one often sees Orthodox Christians bow before the icon, stand facing the icon during prayer, or lift their little children to kiss the image.

One way to expand our understanding is to read books about icons in a slow, prayerful manner. “Praying with Icons” by Jim Forest (Orbis) provides a good introduction to icons and how to pray with them, along with 25 icon meditations. Henri Nouwen’s “Behold the Beauty of the Lord” (Ave Maria Press), and Gregory Collins’ “The Glenstal Book of Icons” (Liturgical Press) also contain beautiful icon reflections. A recent book by Russian Orthodox priest Father Michael Evdokimov, “Light from the East” (Paulist) arranges icons in accordance with the liturgical calendar, along with insights on prayer and liturgy from the Eastern Christian perspective.

There is a rich theology behind the creation of icons and their use in prayer. Key to this is the Christian belief that all humans are created in the image of God. Because of sin, this image within us has become distorted or spiritually ill, but Christ came to heal us and restore that image of God. Just as Christ reveals the true, holy image of God, the holy saints in heaven also reveal this image of God. Perhaps that's why the faces in icons so often look alike: all the saints are filled with the presence of Christ. Like St. Paul, they can honestly say, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (*see Galatians 2:20*).

While icons are often called "windows of eternity" because they reveal something of the world beyond, they are also like a mirror. Gazing upon the icon, we begin to see what God desires of us: for we, too, are called to be transformed into the image and likeness of Christ.

