Meditating with Icons

A healing ancient prayer form

Deepen your prayer life and discover a healing relationship with Our Lord & His Blessed Mother

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People have used sacred images and icons for thousands of years to penetrate the mysteries of creation and the universe. In fact, icons have often been said to be, “windows to heaven”. How can a sacred image reveal what we can’t see or touch?

Practice 1

Look at the icon. Take a few deep breaths to feel centered. Then glance at it for a short while – less than a minute – and answer these questions.

What do you notice about the woman’s expression? Is she smiling, frowning or what?
What is she saying to you?

What is the child looking at? What do you feel as you gaze at the woman and the child?
Look again at the icon and simply notice what your attention is drawn to; scan the icon or concentrate on any detail.

Icons are said to have been written, not painted. They are a project of months of prayer, fasting and meditation and are not signed by the maker.

They are free to all who might benefit from them. So, they are made under the auspices of divine revelation, or of the Holy Spirit, or of the Spirit of God or of the Creator, or of what can be understood as transcending our mundane world as the writer of the icon is ‘guided’ to express what wants to be expressed.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help
Think to yourself about what you have seen; what feelings arise in your heart and gut? What is, is; without judgement simply notice how you are affected by gazing at the icon. There may be rational interpretations to what you experience, but those can come later. At this point, practice 1 is coming to an end.

*Please come back to Practice 1 three times during the day and repeat the icon gazing choosing the icon that draws you the most. Do this for three days before going on to Practice 2.

This is not an instruction set in stone but a suggestion for slowly advancing in the use of a sacred image for meditation, prayer, and healing.
**Practice 2**

Look at this icon again. This one is known as Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

It has a long history. From what is known, it was an ancient icon on the island of Crete and was carried off to Italy when the invading Turkish Moslems threatened to overwhelm Crete. There are various stories about this and also about how it ended up in a church in Rome in 1499. So it is thought of as a Christian Orthodox icon of great value and revered by people of many centuries.
Some things about the icon are obvious. A strangely dressed woman is holding a child and figures like angels are suspended to either side of the woman.

The woman appears to be looking towards the viewer. The child appears to be looking away and is clasping his mother’s hand.

Gaze at the icon for a minute or two and just notice what interests or stands out for you.

There are many ‘official’ interpretations to most of the details, and they will help, “to see heaven through the icon.” For now, value your own thoughts and feelings.

End practice 2 with a desire to know and to learn more.
Practice 3

At this point it becomes obvious that icon gazing and sacred image viewing with the intention of receiving healing with prayer and meditation, one actually has to do it, not just read about it! Therefore, feel free to repeat practice 1 and 2 many times – as many times as it seems fruitful and even more – even when it seems not to help. This is what meditation is – looking at, noticing, contemplating, thinking and feeling.

For prayer, a Catholic Christian might wish to end each practice with a “Hail Mary”.

_Hail Mary, full of grace the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus._

_Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen._

If you prefer, you may wish to make up a prayer of your own – questioning, praising, pleading, doubting, angry, sorrowful, or whatever. All prayer will be effective and will bring self-knowledge and healing!

By revealing ourselves in prayer we reveal ourselves to ourselves too. What might be lying hidden is exposed to the light of day. From our being self-absorbed and, “boxed in”, we become more open, both to know and to receive what is for our own good.
This session is on “Advanced Practice on Trust”. In this step we turn over our trust or put our trust in God and His Mercy and Benevolence. We do this by looking at the icon or Sacred Image and placing our concerns into the care of God through the hands of whom the icon represents. Another way to think of this would be that we ask Mary, while gazing at her image to deliver our petition or to ask for her assistance or intersession in whatever matter concerns us. Mary’s hands point towards Jesus’s heart. We come to Jesus through his Mother Mary.

Like the story of the wine at the wedding feast at Cana, Mary will relay our concerns to Jesus and God to take care of them. We then “let go” of these concerns and matters. This doesn’t mean that we stop doing or solving a problem. What it means is that we will now handle the matter with more confidence, and with inspiration knowing that our problem now resides in the capable hands of God.

We can now choose to wait with patience until a solution or answer happens. The whole idea is that we trust in God to help us. Sometimes an actual miracle will happen. Sometimes it seems like we make a decision and the answer appears on its own. However, even if it seems like we solved the problem we can have faith that we had assistance and extra help even if the solution isn’t perfect or what we really wanted. Now with confidence and trust we are able to live our daily lives with the trusting knowledge that God is with us and we find renewal often simply by icon gazing.
Expressing thanksgiving and gratitude for answered prayer (through miracles, gifts, helps, solutions, and inspirations received) that we know happened by faith and those obvious undeniable ones are important to acknowledge and appreciate.

It is proper to give thanks and to express gratitude to God and to who is represented by the sacred icon who we trust has come to our assistance.

A thankful heart is enough; giving ourselves time to develop one is the challenge in our busy world.

To feel thankful in our heart, to express the thanks inwardly or even outwardly, to give time to cherishing our thankfulness is sometimes easy to forget but this is our calling.
Practice 6

Praying for others is needed for our own growth both spiritually and psychologically. It is helpful and healthy to get our minds off ourselves and focused on others and their needs and problems.

If one feels unduly troubled while praying with icons or it brings up troubled thoughts or feelings then consulting a counselor or clergy person - one who can view our lives a bit more objectively than we can - might be needed. It might even be that our use of sacred image and icon prayer leads us to this conclusion.
Practice 7

Some possible interpretation of the icon, Our Lady of Perpetual Help

‘MP’ is the Greek initials for ‘Archangel Michael’, who holds the lance and the sponge. ‘Michael’ means ‘who is like God’.

Under ‘MP’ are the Greek initials for ‘Mother’.

Gold background symbolizes heaven.

The color ‘blue’ was worn by mothers in Palestine.

Red tunic was the color worn by virgins at the time of Christ.

The falling sandal indicates His alarm at the thought of His passion and death.

The Christ child clings trustingly to his mother.

‘OV’ is the Greek initials for ‘Archangel Gabriel’, who holds the cross of Christ. ‘Gabriel’ means ‘God is strong’.

Mary’s mouth is small, symbolizing her few recorded words and the depth of her contemplation.

There are also Greek initials in the icon for ‘of God’ and for ‘Jesus Christ’.

The mother’s supporting hand is evident.

Notice that Jesus seems a bit big for a baby – this tells us he is both human and divine.

Notice you can see Mary’s ear which is slightly exposed – this tells us she is listening to us.

Notice the angels are reverently holding something. St. Michael on the left and St. Gabriel on the right (identified by the Greek letters above them) are holding the instruments of Jesus’ passion.
Practice 8

The Sacred Icons on this and the following pages are ones you may wish to pray with in your meditation time.

The stories about the icons are fascinating. They can be found on the web by ‘googling’ the name of the icon.

The letters in icons are usually Greek letters in the oldest ones and Slavic which is similar. This is because nearly the whole world after Jesus time spoke Greek and knew Greek and even the modern icons copy doing this as part of the rules for making icons.

The word describes who is in the picture, or the event in the life of Jesus (birth, baptism, passion, resurrection) or the very fancy titles for Mary (Mother of Our Savior, Mary Most Holy of Good Counsel, Mother of Tenderness and so on).
Our Lady of the Sign
Jesus the Pantocrator
The Good Shepherd
Our Lady of Fatima
Our Lady of Kazan