



## PRAYING WITH ICONS

“A picture paints a thousand words.”

Most of us agree that pictures and images can have a way of “saying” more to us than words can express; engaging more of our mind and our humanity than words on a page.

The word “icon” comes from the Greek “eikon” which is translated in the New Testament and the Septuagint (the original Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) as the word “image”. One example is in Genesis when Scripture tells us that humans are made in the “image (*eikon*)” of God.

Unfortunately, like many spiritual practices, Protestants tend to be suspicious of the use of Icons in prayer. Although praying with Icons can be improperly twisted to be a form of idolatry (worshiping or praying to the image or the person the image represents instead of God), this can be said of any spiritual practice if misunderstood. When properly used however Icons can be a wonderful way to allow God to speak to us. In the same way that when we meditate on Scripture the Holy Spirit draws us into the words and opens a window into a deeper reality than the physical ink printed on paper, so Icons act as a window to a deeper reality through which we can be drawn by the Holy Spirit. Using Icons to meditate is not about studying what the artist was trying to say when they created it, but allowing the Spirit to speak to you and point you to something deeper than the picture itself.

Many say the use of Icons in prayer comes out of the first few centuries when many people who became Christians were pagans who were illiterate. Because many believers were not able to read, the image portrayed in the Icon was able to draw believers into the narrative (story) of Scripture without the need for words. Traditionally Icons are images of Saints from the Scriptures. Through contemplation and meditation the Icon is a window into the story of Scripture and the character of the Saint.

The simplest way to pray with icons is to first quiet yourself before God, centering yourself on Christ and asking the Holy Spirit to speak and to draw open your eyes to see through the window of the icon. Contemplate the different details of the icon, lingering on each one. If you are more of a “thinker” than a “feeler,” ask questions like, “what is that? Why is that there? What do I see of this person’s character? How does this person reflect God and God’s saving mission of grace?”