

Windows for Prayer

by Dennis J. Billy, C.S.S.R.

In a small corner of her home, a middle-aged Russian woman of simple, peasant stock lights a small votive candle before a frameless icon of the Madonna. She bows her head in silence before lifting her gaze to the mysterious presence. The moments are few, but precious.

There is little need for words in the presence of the Mother of the Word; close friends understand the meaning of life's pregnant silences. There, in the stillness of time, the woman does nothing but rest in the loving gaze of the mother of her Lord. The encounter has a gentle, calming effect on her soul.

This quiet, prayerful ritual has been going on for years. Day after day, the woman has found momentary respite from the toilsome chores of life by sharing with her close friend the simple yearnings of her heart. Her visit usually lasts only a few short minutes (sometimes less), but over the years it has increasingly become one of the defining moments of her day.

Before the icon, the woman is utterly at home. Her prayer there has slowly transformed her inner awareness of God and has gradually spilled over into everything else she does. Finally, when it is time to go, she lets out a sigh from deep within her soul, makes the Sign of the Cross in her calm Oriental manner, turns toward the kitchen area of her home, lights the fire and goes about setting the table for her family's evening meal.

The Eastern Churches' long-revered tradition of praying before icons offers a concrete way of finding the holy in the ordinary affairs of life. Simple moments such as the one just described reminds us of the close bond between sanctity and the routine activities that fill our life. They also show us how icons can mediate a contemplative experience in the midst of the most mundane circumstances. God uses them as a leaven in our life to raise our awareness of the presence of the holy in our midst. As such, they are welcome reminders of God's deep personal care for our life and of His desire to nourish us throughout our long, harrowing journey to holiness.

Icons are more than just pious pictures. The Christian East regards them as transparent mysteries, windows through which a person can glimpse the dimension of the eternal in the present moment. An icon "makes present" in a sacramental way the figures it represents. It participates in the world beyond, mediates the life of that world to the onlooker and serves as an eschatological sign of its final manifestation.

Icons are prayer and contemplation turned into art. Supported philosophically by the Neoplatonic notion of participation, rooted theologically by the doctrine of the Incarnation, they lead the beholder out of the dimensions of space and time and into the realm of spirit.

Icons accomplish this amazing feat by mixing together two fundamentally opposed means of human expression: symbol and image. While the former evokes the presence of what it represents through a kind of absence, the latter does so through visual reproduction. A wooden cross, for example, is a poignant <symbol> of Jesus' passion and death, but differs greatly from a detailed <portrayal> of His crucified, bloodied corpus.

To achieve their effect, icons juxtapose symbols and images to create a sense of the transcendent in our midst. By deliberately combining these opposing forms, they permit neither to reach its natural perfection. The result is a tense balance of countervailing forces that places the icon out of the

dimensional boundaries of time and space and brings the beholder to turn his gaze to the contemplation of the beyond.

Every person is called to become transparent to the divine life, to rediscover the lost image of God within, to become a living icon of Christ. Prayer is the ordinary means that God has given us to bring about this gradual transformation of our life. Before an icon, it can assume many shapes. One may sit or stand in front of the icon and simply ponder its meaning. A person may use the icon as a focal point for centring prayer or rhythmic breathing. One may simply gaze upon the icon-and allow oneself to be gazed upon by it in return. Of the various kinds of prayer that are related to icons, three in particular deserve special mention.

1. **The Prayer of Longing.** As a window to eternity, an icon seeks to give the beholder a glimpse into the world beyond. It does so by creating an aesthetic experience that frees it from its relationship to the artist and spectator and gives it a life of its own. An icon conveys an experience of the transcendent and reminds its beholder that his true home lies in a dimension beyond the confines of time and space. Such a reminder creates a sense of longing in the heart of the person praying.

This happens because the beholder's spirit senses its faraway home in the icon's penetrating gaze, yet still knows that it remains a long way from it. This "already but not yet" experience can be likened to what the apostle Paul writes about the inward groaning of all who wait for life to come (Rom 8:23). That inner groaning extends to all creation (8:22) and is in union with the Spirit of God, who expresses our prayer in a way that could never be put into words (8:26).

Prayer before an icon allows the spirit within us to resonate with the promptings of God's own Spirit and the yearning of all creation. It provides the human spirit with a concrete point of contact with the transcendent world beyond and enables it to breathe the rarefied air of the Lord's transforming grace.

The beholder's inner longing will intensify as he becomes more and more enamoured of God and of divine things. It will move in and out of a person's consciousness in varying degrees and with hanging intensities. At times, it may become so intense that the person praying may feel as though God is reaching through the icon and actually pulling him out of the present world and into the next. At such moments, the intervening call to Christian service (or <diakonia>) keeps the beholder's feet firmly planted on the ground. The day will surely come when each person must face, by himself alone, that final journey into the beyond. For the time being, however, the Lord usually has other tasks in mind for the faithful beholder.

2. **The Prayer of Presence.** At other moments, prayer before an icon conveys a strong sense of God's presence in one's life. This is due partly to the prayer of longing itself, which naturally implies a latent presence of the thing longed for, and partly to the heightened spiritual awareness that often accompanies the beholder's contemplative gaze.

Although he cannot see, a blind man possesses other sharpened senses that often enable him to detect the presence of another person in the same room. In a similar way, a person's heightened spiritual senses sometimes enable him to have a deeper awareness of the divine presence in his heart.

The prayer of presence entails a refined sensitivity to the divine accompaniment. It assures the beholder that he is never alone and that God will never abandon one of His children in time of need. The sacramental nature of an icon enables it to mediate this profound awareness of God's presence. It draws the person more deeply into the divine mysteries and transforms moments of intense longing into a momentary glimpse of Emmanuel (i.e., "God with us"). It is here where the incarnational foundation of Christian iconography comes to the fore.

Prayer should not be thought of as a long-distance conversation with an unseen God, who rarely intervenes in the daily activities of our life. Rather, it is an intimate, living relationship with Someone who understands our human limitations, who cares for us dearly and who promises to be with us on every step of our journey.

This sense of God's presence in our life often affects the way we view other people. The deeper our awareness becomes, the more clearly we are able to discern the movement of the Spirit in the lives of others.

At this point, other people become icons of Christ for us-that is, they become mediating images for us of God's presence in the world. Sensing the movement of the Spirit in others gives us a profound reverence and respect for human life and, by virtue of God's vestigial presence in the world, for all of creation. The prayer of presence helps us to relish the wonder of existence that comes to us, moment by moment, from the hand of God and to stand with awe and a deep sense of gratitude before the ineffable ground of our existence.

3. The Prayer of Union. We are called not just to life but to life in all its fullness. Our longing for God and even our deeper awareness of His presence in our life tend naturally toward union. Intimacy with God is the work of God. It can be effected only through our cooperation with the gentle promptings that come through the work of the Spirit.

When praying before an icon, the beholder sometimes receives a brief, ever so fleeting, experience of what this union might be like. Imperfect though it may be, it silences our deep inner yearnings and gives us an intense awareness of the divine presence that makes us feel, at least for the moment, completely and utterly at one with it.

The transparency of the icon to the divine mysteries has so entered into the contours of our spiritual, mental and bodily makeup that we experience a close harmony with the Spirit throughout our entire being. Such an experience enables us to respond more readily to the promptings of the Spirit in our life. It gives us a greater appreciation of its gifts and urges us to be ever more receptive to their use in the daily circumstances of our life.

The prayer of union is an intense but passing foretaste of the heavenly banquet. It gives us an experience of the celestial dance that has gone on from all eternity and to which we are invited even now to partake.

Here on this earth we are still learning what it means to share in this divine extravaganza. Our first feeble attempts often end in awkward falls and embarrassing missteps. Still, every so often, perhaps once in a blue moon, we seem to get it right. Rather than going off on our own private tangents, we sense momentarily precisely what it means to be completely "in step" with the Lord. We experience the Spirit in our life so intensely that we seem to know instinctively how to discern and then follow its internal movement in our life.

The following observations now come to the fore:

1. As windows to eternity, icons offer us the opportunity to peer beneath the transitory veneer of life and to behold, if only for the shortest part of a moment, the underlying ground of being, toward which all things tend. Praying with them and through them helps us to become transparent to the activity of God's Spirit in our life. They enable us to participate more deeply in the process of our own divinization and propel our gaze forward to that time when all things will be renewed in Christ.

2. No one prays before an icon in exactly the same way. Since everyone's relationship with God is "unique in all the world," it follows that the actual manner in which he prays will contain subtle shades of difference. For this reason, it would be a mistake to view the kinds of prayer referred to above as a static framework that must be reflected in exactly the same way in every beholder. On the contrary, a person should look for the particular combination of prayer forms that gives his relationship with God its peculiar identifying trait. Although some people may be more prone to one type of prayer than another, the goal here is to find the right blend that suits the personality and individual needs of each believer.

3. Ultimately, it is God who determines that pattern of prayer in our life and who provides us with the correct balance to meet our spiritual needs.

The Annunciation

God uses icons to mediate those experiences of prayer in our life. Because of their sacramental nature, they should not be considered as ends in themselves, nor thought of solely in terms of their aesthetic value. Icons are only a means to an end. They move us to participate more deeply in the sacramental life of the Church, especially in the Eucharist, which is the icon of Christ par excellence in the world.

"God became man so that man might become divine." This fundamental soteriological principle states well the underlying transformational premise of all iconographic prayer. The icon's juxtaposition of image and symbol points to the union of the human and divine in Christ; our suspended, contemplative gaze symbolizes our ongoing journey into the mystery of Christ, the resulting spiritual experience and the presence of God in our midst. God comes to us so that we might be drawn closer to Him and eventually become more and more "godlike."

Such was the intention of the woman, whose brief moments of prayer before the icon began this short reflection. Although she might not have been able to express her experience in quite the same way, her constant and persistent prayer before the icon of the Madonna reveals a deep desire to ponder the mystery of Christ in her heart and to respond to the Lord's call in her life in much the same words of her silent, pondering friend: "Let it be done unto me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

Mary's response to the angel highlights for us the attitudes of transparency, openness and cooperation that all are called to foster and make their own during their long and protracted sojourn through life. Like the angel of Luke's Gospel, icons are heavenly messengers who come bearing good news for every pondering heart that takes the time to be still, to listen to the pregnant voices of life's inner silence and to rest under the healing and elevating warmth of God's penetrating gaze. Through them, the Spirit shapes us and leads us with the Madonna to the side of Christ and to the People of God He came to serve.

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This article first appeared as 'Windows for Prayer' in The Priest 52 (no. 12, 1996): 12-15.