



THE SCHOOL OF
CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

Sitting prayerfully with an icon:

A simple guide

Many icons are strikingly beautiful. But they are not created to draw our attention to their craftsmanship.

Icons always point beyond themselves.

A portrait might try to give us an accurate picture of a human face, or depict an event in a way we might normally expect to see it. Not so with an icon.

What you see (the lines and colours) are important, but only inasmuch as they help us become more open and receptive to the light of God's presence and action in our life, in the lives of those around us and in the world.

Think of an icon as being like a doorway, but with a rather significant difference - this doorway is created to help open us.

Icons are created to help us enter into prayer.

We may begin our time with an icon looking at it, appreciating its sheer beauty. This can be a very good way to begin. But it is not where it ends.

God is not something we can look at directly, but a presence we can responded to.

If we can allow ourselves to just look - quietly, patiently, asking nothing, resting in the present moment, trusting in God's ever-present-presence - we may come to find that God has allowed us to look through the icon.

We may come to realise that God is looking at us, permeating us, transfiguring us.

Practice

Find a quiet place to sit prayerfully with your icon.

Make sure you are sitting comfortably, with your back as straight as you are able, with your body still, relaxed but alert.

Close your eyes lightly and take a few slow, deep breaths. Following the flow of our breath in and out of our body, we return our attention to the present moment.

As you follow the flow of your breathing, allow yourself to let go of any worries about the future, any regrets about the past.

Choose a prayer word or short phrase to recite in your mind. For example, “Love”, or “Peace”, or “Thy will be done.” And begin to say it silently, interiorly, with the in-breath, and with the outbreath.

Or if you prefer, simply focus on your breath and follow it flowing in and out through your nose. Whatever works for you.

Follow this simple practice for five minutes.

Then gently open your eyes and let them rest on the icon.

Let your full attention rest gently on the icon.

If you notice your attention has followed a thought and you are looking at that instead of the icon, just gently return your attention to reciting your prayer word with the flow of your breathing.

Then return your full attention to the icon.

And just look, quietly, patiently.

Rest in the present moment, trusting in God’s ever-present-presence.



