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Good Nous (Frederica Mathewes-Green)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English

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I was once asked to give a talk at Washington's National Cathedral on prayer in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. I brought with me a large icon, one familiar to many people, showing the Holy Trinity as the three visitors who came to Abraham (Gen. 19:1-8); it was painted by St. Andrei Rublev in 1410. I set up the icon on an easel, but after saying a few words about it, focused on the Jesus Prayer. This simple, repetitive prayer—"Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me"—was developed by the Desert Fathers, as a help toward learning to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17).

But when we re-gathered for a workshop later on, I found that the participants wanted to know more about the role of the icon. What is its function in prayer? What are the prayers used when looking at an icon?

It hadn't occurred to me before what an obvious question that would be. If you know nothing else about the Eastern Orthodox Church, you know about icons; they

are our most visible feature. And yet, when asked “How do Orthodox Christians pray with icons?,” I had to answer, “They don’t.” Not in a way that focuses on the icon, that is. In fact, focusing on an icon too closely would interfere with your ability to pray.

It sounds like a paradox, and, as I think it over, a number of questions arise—about the role and limits of images, the character of direct experience as opposed to thinking about experience, the human faculty of receptive comprehension as opposed to active reasoning, and the biggest question of all: what are we here for? What is the point of life?

To begin with the audience’s how-to question, the way an Orthodox Christian would pray in front of an icon is not much different from how they’d pray anywhere. An icon might well help them be more focused and attentive, of course, but it doesn’t call for a special kind of prayer.



Icons have a companionable role, and I could make an analogy to a photo of any departed loved one. If you were close to your grandmother, you might keep her

photo where you would see it every day. When your eye lands on it you would remember her, and if you paused for a moment that memory could expand into a more wholistic impression of her personality and presence. If she was a woman of prayer, you might picture her continuing even now to pray for you in God's presence. You might not just think about her, but feel a fleeting connection with her, in this relationship that transcends time.

But this sense of connection is a delicate thing, light and subtle. It may be somehow prompted by looking at the photo, but it can't be located on the surface of the paper, or distilled from the ink. And, oddly enough, the more you sensed such a connection, the more likely you would be to close your eyes, I think. You couldn't expand that feeling by scrutinizing the photo. If anything, it would get in the way.

Like that "click" you feel with your grandmother, at the heart of Orthodox Christianity is an experience of connection with God. In the Eastern view, the whole point of Christian faith—the whole point of human life—is that connection, or, to put it more precisely, communion. Communion with God is what we were made for, from the time of Adam and Eve. The ancestral fall damaged human nature and all Creation, but Christ's Incarnation, and his death and Resurrection, open the way for healing. The receptive mind is healed and restored so it can once again perceive God's presence.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity is a set of spiritual disciplines that enable that healing: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, sacraments, humble love and service of others. These disciplines help us become tuned in to this connection with God, and help us get better at staying in touch with his presence full-time. (That's what "pray constantly" means.) Of course, most people don't reach constant prayer-communion in this life, but even a little taste of it is transformative. There are so many examples of men and women, past and present, who have successfully used these disciplines and been transformed, that we know they work; real progress is possible. With many a fault and failing, we keep moving toward that goal.

Icons, like all the forms of beauty that we cultivate in worship, have a very important role. But there is a point at which all images—particularly inner pictures—will just get in the way of prayer. Pictures keep us at the surface of things. If you can experience God directly, what do you need images for?

I think we Westerners have trouble thinking through what it means to experience the presence of God because our map of human consciousness provides no faculty where that presence could register. We think we are made of head and heart, mind

and emotions. But that is not the Biblical view. There, thoughts are consistently spoken of as occurring in the heart (and they usually have a connotation of plotting and scheming, or selfish daydreams: “The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth,” Gen 8:21). There isn’t any Biblical division between reason and emotion; there is no division in reality. They are part of a single human process.

And where our bibles read “mind,” it doesn’t mean the cogitating intellect, but the receptive intellect—the understanding, or comprehension. The Greek term is *nous*, and it is a concept we don’t really have in the West. It is the perceptive mind, the mind that receives. After his Resurrection, Jesus “opened [the apostles’] *nous* to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). The *nous* is where we can sense or perceive the presence of God.

Of course, the *nous* is where we sense or perceive anything. It’s the part of your mind that is delighted when you suddenly grasp the trick ending of a movie. It is what does the resonating when you hear “the ring of truth.” The *nous* is what receives the inrush of memories of your grandmom, as if you’d just tuned it to the Grandma station. The *nous* is like a radio. It is designed to tune in to the voice of God.

But, like everything else in Creation, it is damaged. The “darkened” *nous* would much rather take in a movie, and prefers to avoid God. With time and patient practice it can be healed, though; all the spiritual disciplines of the Orthodox Church are there for that purpose. St. Paul wrote, “Be transformed by the renewal of your *nous*” (Romans 12:2). Our goal is to have “the *nous* of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16).

So the role of icons in prayer is subtle. We Orthodox would not surround ourselves with them so diligently if they did not serve a practical, even dynamic, purpose. By providing images of God’s works in history, and of people who have been fully illuminated by the light of Christ, they give us an idea of where we’re going. They help in the cleansing and healing the *nous*, so that we can get better at recognizing God’s presence. But they don’t do so as works of art, or as stimulants to the emotions, or as magical objects. Their role is companionable—they present spiritual realities that our eyes would fail to see, and, by teaching and encouraging, point us toward our destiny. Then we can close our eyes and pray.

This article was first published in The BioLogos Forum; Jan. 23, 2011. It can also be found at <http://www.frederica.com>, along with numerous other works by Frederica Mathews-Green. *This article was posted here with permission.*