

From the very beginning, Christians have created pictorial representations for use during personal and public prayer. It was seen as a way to enhance a person's prayer, giving a visual medium to meditate on while conversing with God.

The word icon comes from the Greek word *eikōn*, meaning 'image'. The first ones were painted in a Byzantine style popular in the early centuries of the Church, and over the centuries, this style has been retained and formalized into an artistic language, in which every part of the icon, colours, figures, clothing, hand gestures, objects, and lettering has a specific meaning.

These images are traditionally less realistic and more symbolic in nature. They are often called 'windows into Heaven,' and are designed with that goal in mind. The artist does not want the Christian to admire the icon as a beautiful piece of artwork, but to use it to be drawn into prayer, raising the mind and heart to God. This helps explain why icons are not signed by the artist (also called the 'writer'), as modern-day paintings are. The artist does not want to be praised for his or her talents, but to help facilitate an encounter with God.

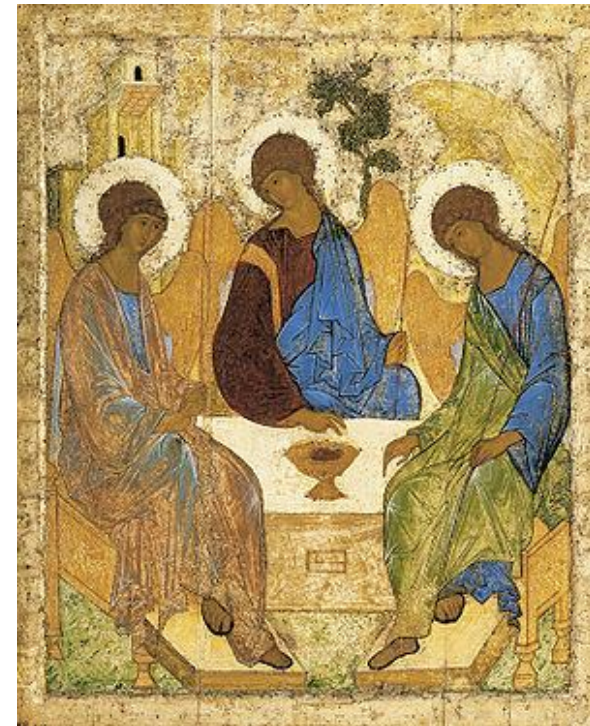
The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, "Christian iconography expresses in images the same Gospel message that Scripture communicates by words. Image and word illuminate each other."

#### Book suggestions

Nouwen, H. J.M., *Behold the Beauty of the Lord-Praying with Icons*  
Ouspensky L., and Lossky, V., *The Meaning of Icons*  
Williams, R., *The Dwelling of Light, Praying with Icons of Christ*

## Praying with Icons

### Visio Divina



**Choose**

You may choose an icon that is already familiar to you, such as Rublev's Trinity or the Friendship icon, or perhaps another icon you have newly discovered. If possible, you might like to light a candle next to the icon.

**Take time to settle yourself into stillness****Explore**

Many spiritual writers explain that praying with icons is a receptive experience, where we gaze into heaven and allow God to touch our heart. Simply gaze at the icon. Let your eyes wander over the entire image and rest on it in various places, taking in what you see. Notice the subtleties in colours, shadows and expressions; notice the eyes of the individual(s) in the icon. Let the eyes look at you. As you move your gaze slowly around the image, is there anything that is starting to draw you in - a particular detail or colour, perhaps? Allow yourself to be drawn into that part more deeply. Does it evoke any specific memories, feelings, or other images? Simply gaze at the icon.

**Reflect**

Are you sensing that God might be speaking to you, telling you something about your life? Is there anything you are longing to say to God about this?

Now simply rest in your awareness of God's presence for a few moments. You may want to close your eyes and savour the darkness and sense of surrender.

**Close**

After sufficient time has passed – perhaps 10-30 min – thank God for the opportunity to be with him.

Praying with icons can be a beautiful experience, one that can be repeated each and every day.

