

From the first centuries of Christianity icons have been used for prayer. Icons are usually two-dimensional images and may be of paint, mosaic, embroidery, weaving, carving, or engraving. Orthodox churches do not use statues in worship; instead, icons are hung along the walls or painted directly on them, and portray scenes from the life of Jesus Christ, events in the life of the Church, or portraits of the saints.

Icons of Christ show him not as an ordinary man but reflecting the fullness of divine glory, even at the moment of his utter dereliction. It is for this reason that Christ is never portrayed, as often in Western sacred painting, as simply a human being suffering physically and mentally. It was the end that was important – his sacrifice and offering of himself, his death and resurrection – not the pain of getting there.

Icons of the saints do not claim to be actual likenesses, but offer an image of what a holy, sober, chaste man or woman would look like. Those from the last hundred years are more likely to be recognizable representations, but they are still done in the Byzantine style.



Icons are vehicles of faith; they focus our attention and guide our prayers. Arriving at church, believers light a candle and kiss the welcoming icons. Just as in your own house you will have photographs of loved ones, why not in God's house have pictures of God's loved ones? And just as you would kiss a loved one in greeting, believers kiss icons. It is not the painted board they kiss or before which they bow, but the person depicted. Believers speak to God, to Christ's holy Mother, and to the saints in as personal a conversation as you would have in your own family. No two conversations are the same; God knows what's in our hearts and he responds according to our individual needs.

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The icon participates in the liturgy along with the Gospel and the other sacred objects. In the tradition of the Orthodox Church, as in the Western, the Gospel is not only a book for reading but a liturgically revered object. During the liturgy the Gospel is solemnly brought out for the faithful to greet with a kiss. An icon is the Gospel in colour and so to be venerated with prayer and kissed. St Gregory the Dialogist, known in the West as Gregory the Great (Pope 590-604), spoke of icons as being 'Scripture to the illiterate'.

All Christians have the right to hang an icon at home, but only in so far as their home is a continuation of the church and their life a continuation of the liturgy. An art gallery is

the wrong place for an icon. It is as much use there as a beautiful butterfly you sought to preserve in a glass case: in so doing you have killed it.

Icons do not become more powerful, important, or valuable with age. Whether an icon is a thousand years old or printed from the internet, it serves the same function: to help us speak to God and to listen; and to come closer to him through his saints by their example, through the obedience of the Mother of God, through Christ, and through the joys and victories of the earthly body of Christ, the Church.



'I do not adore
the creation
rather
than the
Creator,
but I adore
the One who
became a creature .
. . . that He might
raise our nature
in glory . . .'

St John of Damascus (c.676-749)

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