

“THE SPIRITUALITY OF ICONS”

By His Grace Bishop Daniel

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**Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, King of Kings and
Lord of lords**



**THE BEHOLDER OF GOD
MARK THE EVANGELIST
SAINT AND MARTYR**



*H.H. Pope Shenouda III, 117th Pope of
Alexandria and the See of St. Mark*



**His Grace Bishop Daniel
Bishop of Sydney and Affiliated Regions**

Icons have had a place in Christian worship as early as we can establish.

In the broader sense, icons may be found in basic wall paintings, graffiti of crosses and symbols on ancient tombs, to magnificent frescos, icons and stained glass windows in churches and cathedrals.

The Jewish tradition shunned icons in reference to the second commandment. Early Christians, however, did not feel constrained by that commandment for reasons that we will explore later.

Despite the fact that stylised wall paintings were associated with pagan worship in Ancient Egypt, Christian themes were brought to Christian worship without the fear of slipping back to idolatry.

Egypt did not experience a great debate about the validity of the use of icons. There seems to have been a quiet acceptance of their use, as well as a realisation of their importance as an essential part of worship without any fear of confusion and idolatry. The iconoclastic movement, which raged in Europe in the 8th and 9th centuries, did not even cause a ripple in Egypt, which had, by then, split from Byzantium and the west as a result of the Chalcedonian division.

In order to find apologists for the use of icons, one has to look at the Byzantine or western fathers who wrote to answer the iconoclasts.

St John of Damascus wrote:

“Some people reprove us for honouring images of the Saviour, of the Mother of God and other holy servants of Christ. But let them think for a moment.

In the beginning God created humanity in his own image. Why ever should we have such respect for one another, if not because we are made in the image of God?

In Basil’s words, ‘the honour paid to the image is in reality paid to its prototype,’ that is to say, to what the image represents. Thus the Jewish people revered the Tabernacle because that, much more than the rest of creation, was an image of God. The making and the veneration of images are not a novelty. They are based on a very ancient tradition.

God made the first human being as an image of Himself. Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and all the prophets saw God, not in His true being, but in His image.

The burning bush was an image of the Mother of God. When Moses wanted to approach, God said to him: “Put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5).

If the ground on which Moses saw the image of the Mother of God was holy, how much more holy will the image itself be!”

Ever since the miraculous healing of King Augarus, after receiving the image of the impress of Christ's face, a sense of the spiritual connection between the icon and its prototype, became an important part of Christian culture. The connection between the icon and the prototype of the icon, is a universal Orthodox Tradition. And it is from this spiritual connection that the Icon draws its true beauty.

In the Orthodox concept, icons carry the real feeling and teaching of orthodoxy. They are not to be worshipped but serve as points of connection with Christ and the community of saints. Of course Christ and the saints are close with or without icons, but icons help to serve as constant reminders that we live in the presence of God and in the midst of a **“cloud of witnesses.”**

To quote Thomas Merton from his book ‘The Meaning of Icons’ :

“It is the task of the iconographer to open our eyes to the actual presence of the Kingdom of God in the world, and to remind us that although we see nothing of its splendid liturgy, we are if we believe in Christ the redeemer, in fact living and worshipping as “fellow citizens of the angels and saints, built upon the chief cornerstone with Christ.”

Icons in the Orthodox tradition are not to be taken as art for art's sake, but rather, they are to be used as windows into the spiritual world. They play a significant role in conveying the theology and traditions of orthodoxy, and connect the believer with heaven by achieving a prayerful mindset which would lead into a life of prayer and contemplation.

No less than the written word, an icon is an instrument for the transmission of Christian tradition and faith. Through sacred imagery, the Holy Spirit speaks to the believer, revealing truths that may not be evident to those using only the tools of reason. And this is one of the most important aspects of the spirituality of icons, that they teach us that dogma, which is the revealed knowledge of God, is first and foremost beautiful. The icon gives us the sight of the saints, and reveals Christian dogma, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, as being extremely beautiful.



In 1990, a Joint dialogue between the Oriental Orthodox Churches (of which the Coptic Church is a member) and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, took place in Cairo, in which they signed the following declaration:

“In relation to the teaching of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of the Orthodox Church, which took place in 787 AD, the Oriental Orthodox agree that the theology and practice of the veneration of icons, taught by the council are in basic agreement with the teaching and practice of the Oriental Orthodox from ancient times, long before the convening of the council, and that we have no disagreement in this regard.”

This council of 787 AD stated that the Icon was equal with Scripture, since it instructs with shape and colour in the same way as Scripture with words. Thus, icons do not simply attempt to instruct us about the life of Christ or the saints depicted, but they instruct us in the Theology of the Church. And the eyes, posture, colour and gesture come together to point to Theological truths.

The icon has a revered character in that it is concerned only with the sacred. Through line and colour, the iconographer seeks to convey the glory of the invisible and divine reality and to lead the viewer to an awareness of the divine presence. Thus, the icon is theology written in images and colour.

To quote John of Damascus:

“Since the Invisible One became visible by taking on flesh, you can fashion the image of Him whom you saw. Since He who has neither body nor form nor quantity nor quality, who goes beyond all grandeur by the excellence of His nature, He, being of divine nature, took on the condition of a slave and reduced Himself to quantity and quality by clothing Himself in human features. Therefore, paint on wood and present for contemplation Him who desired to become visible.”

The icon is a work of tradition. It is more than the personal meditation of an individual artist, but the fruit of many generations of believers uniting us to the witnesses of the resurrection. And although icons may differ stylistically, for example Byzantine icons depict elongated figures, whilst Coptic icons depict still, rounder figures, there is always a spiritual uniformity. The icon reaches out beyond cultural boundaries and testifies to the unity of faith centred on the Person of Christ, and the Vision of God.



Stylistically respectful of the past, but at the same time looking forward to the future, the icon traditionally testifies to the spiritual unity of the Church on earth, with those who have come, and those yet to come. And so, the icon, together with the Church building, teaches us to live, not only in joyous anticipation, but also in a delightful pre-taste of the Parousia.

Icons are an aid to worship. Wherever an icon is set, that place more easily becomes an area of prayer. The icon is not an end in itself, but assists the believer in going beyond what can be seen with our physical eyes, into the realm of mystical experience.

Icons help to focus prayer, for example, if one becomes distracted during the liturgy, it may be helpful to gaze at the icon of the Pantocrator, which in orthodox churches is located just to the right of the royal doors of the iconostases.

The icon brings to mind that one is standing before Christ, and helps to bring one back to reality, back to the present moment, and back to the awareness that one is always in the presence of God.

The famous English poet John Donne once confessed:

“I throw myself down in my chamber and I call in and invite God and His angels to come. And when they are there, I neglect God and His angels, for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the creaking of a door”. And therefore, an icon can help to overcome distraction during worship.

The liturgical year is a procession of icons through which we keep returning to the main events of salvation history. The purpose of the church year is not only to bring to the mind of the believers the teachings of the gospel, and the main events of Christian history in a certain order, but to renew and actualise the event of which it is a symbol, taking the event out of the past and making it immediate. Through the calendar we begin to see each day, as a door toward closer union with Christ.

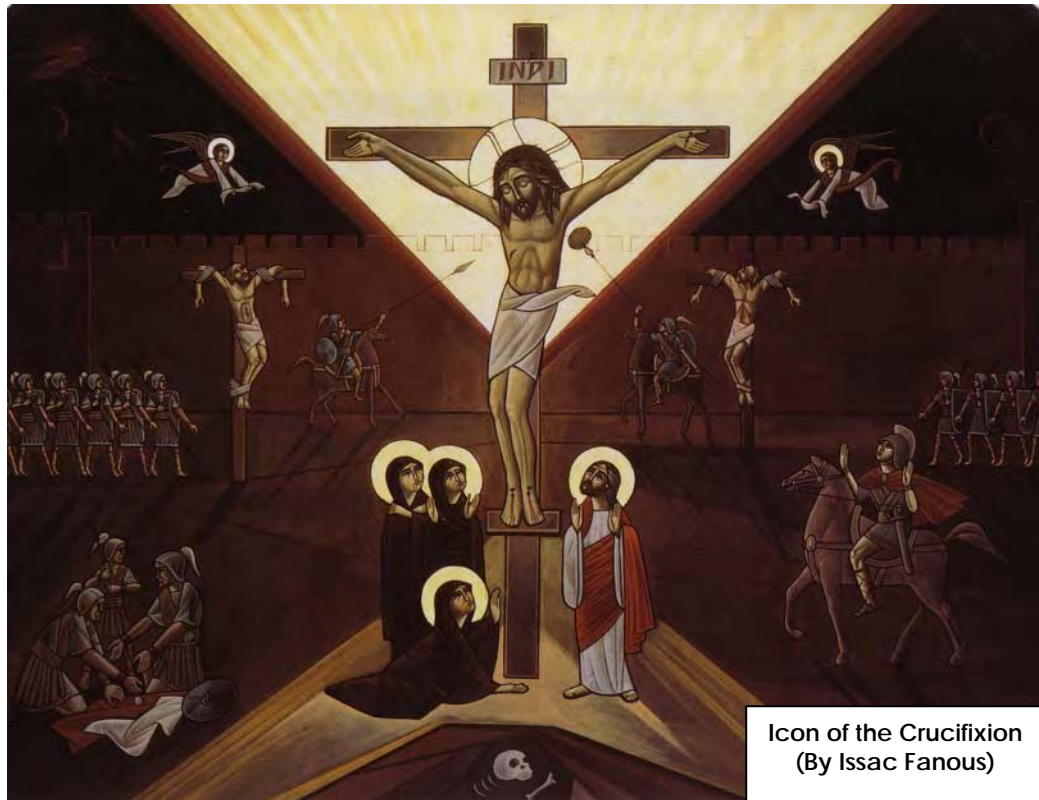
Icons are not intended to force an emotional response, and therefore there is a conscious avoidance of movement, and no superficial or exaggerated drama. In portraying moments of biblical history, the faces of participants in the scene are rarely expressive of their feelings at the time, as we might imagine them, but their expressions suggest virtues such as purity, patience in suffering, repentance, forgiveness, compassion, and love. In crucifixion icons, the physical pain Christ endured on the cross is not shown; but rather, the icon reveals what led Him to the cross, which was the free action of giving His life for others.



Icon of the Crucifixion
Church of St Keriakos,
Tahta, Egypt

Let us consider the symbolism behind the crucifixion icon, for in this single icon is portrayed the whole gospel...

In this icon we see clearly Christ's freedom and the gift he makes of himself. We see his non-resistance in his open hands and the lightness of his body on the cross. This is the heart of the icon.



Icon of the Crucifixion
(By Issac Fanous)

The suffering of those standing near the cross is under-stated. The icon includes only a few of those who were present. His mother stands on the left of the cross, and is sometimes shown supported by other women around her, such as in this icon. No less than the verbal accounts in the New Testament, the icon stresses the faithfulness of the women who joined Christ's community. The apostle John is also portrayed on the right, for he was the only disciple who followed Jesus to the cross. The usual figure behind John is the centurion, included because he was moved to confess ***"Truly this was the Son of God"*** (Matthew 27:54).

At the base of the cross is a small cave-like area containing a skull. Golgotha, which was the place of crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem, means 'the place of the skull'. The tradition is that Adam was buried where Christ was later crucified. The theological meaning however, is that Christ is the new Adam who through his death on the cross, has rescued us from the sin that Adam and eve committed in the Garden of Eden.

In some icons, the planks on to which Christ's feet were nailed are sometimes angled so that one end is slightly higher. And the raised side points towards the repentant thief, who having confessed Christ, received the assurance that ***"Today you will be with me in paradise"*** (Luke 23:43).

The icon has a Trinitarian structure. The three figures of Mary, Christ and John give the icon a triangular inner composition, reinforced by the portrayal of the broken ground on which the cross is mounted, and the black space beneath. Bisecting the triangle is the vertical line of the cross, linking earth and heaven. Thus, in this way, the cross is revealed as the ladder to eternal life.

The icon shows Jerusalem's outer wall, not only because Christ was crucified outside the city, but as a reminder that those who follow Christ are foreigners in this world. They can never be at home in the walled city of deceit and self-seeking. For as the Apostle Paul says: ***“For there is no lasting city for us in this life”*** (Hebrews 13:11-14).

The upper part of Christ's body is placed above the wall, suggesting the cosmic significance of His death, which He mentions in the gospel of John: ***“And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to Myself”*** (John 12:32).

Like the gospel authors, all the icons linked to Christ's suffering and death stresses his love and freedom. He was not an unwilling victim, but a free man, who willingly gave up his life for no motive but love. For as St John tells us: ***“Greater love has no man than to lay down his life for his friends”*** (John 15:13).

The spirituality of icons also results from the fact that the icon is silent. No mouths are open, nor are there any other physical details which suggest sound. But the silence is not empty.

St Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, made the comment:

“He who possesses in truth the word of Jesus, can hear even its silence.”

The stillness and silence of the icon creates an area that constantly invites prayer. And it is this deep and living silence which marks a good icon. It is like the silence of the Virgin Mary's contemplative heart, and the silence of the transfiguration, and the silence of the resurrection, and the silence of the Incarnate Word.

Prayers can be without words – for there is the prayer of simply standing in silence, waiting before the Lord. Icons can easily draw you into a silence that overwhelms all surrounding noise and distractions. It is prayer just to focus on an icon and let God speak to you.



Fresco of Christ embracing Abba Menas
Bawit, Egypt

To appreciate the spirituality of silence portrayed in icons, let us consider the icon of the Lord's ascension.

This icon has 2 tiers, representing heaven and earth. In the upper tier the glorified Christ, at the centre of a mandorla of cosmic power, is lifted into heaven by angels. He extends His hands out to bless those whom he has gathered. He extends His hands out to bless those whom he has gathered.



In the lower tier stand the apostles and the mother of God. Her central role is made clear by her being placed in the middle. In this arrangement, we see her not only as the mother of the saviour but as the mother of the church. She who was God's bridge to the human race, is humanity's bridge to her son, and in her we come closer to him. While in some icons the attention of the apostles is divided, suggesting confusion – for some watch the ascending Christ, and others watch the Virgin Mary, we find that she alone is shown looking toward us. Her hands are raised in prayer, and she alone among the disciples is calm, still and silent.

The icon is an act of witness. What one “sees” in prayer before an icon is not an external representation of a historical person, but an interior presence in light, which is the glory of the transfigured Christ, the experience of which is transmitted in faith from generation to generation by those who have believed, from the time of the apostles ...so when I say that my Christ is the Christ of the icons, I mean that He is not reached through scientific study, but through direct faith and the mediation of the liturgy, art, worship, prayer, and theology.

But perhaps one of the most important spiritual roles played by icons in Christian history, is to proclaim the physical reality of Jesus Christ, who is the Incarnate God. And hence the icon is a revelation of the transfiguration of humankind according to the image of Christ.

We were made in the image and likeness of God, but the image has been damaged and the likeness lost. Since Adam and Eve, only in Jesus Christ were these attributes fully intact.

Christianity is the revelation not only of the Word of God, but also of the image of God, in which His likeness is revealed. The icon shows the recovery of wholeness. Thus, icons serve as a witness and constant reminder of the Orthodox Theology of Deification, or 'theosis'.

As St Athanasius of Alexandria wrote:

"God became human so that the human being could become God."



Icon of Sts Apollo and Abib

Accordingly, all icons are based on that of Christ. Figure and proportions do not obey anatomical rules, since the saint no longer exists conformed to the world, but rather to the Image of the Son of God, who transforms our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body.

Let us consider the icon of the transfiguration...

What actually occurred in this event could never be captured in an image, for how can one portray the splendour of the divine light, which illuminated the apostles? This divine light which the apostles saw, was neither material or spiritual, but transcends the order of the created.

St Gregory Palamas said:

“By a transformation of their senses, the Lord’s disciples passed from the flesh to the spirit... for whoever participates in the divine energies, in a sense himself becomes light. He is united to the light and with the light, he sees what remains hidden to those who do not have grace. He goes beyond the physical senses and everything that is known by the human mind.”

The transfiguration, like Christ’s baptism, is a revelation of who Christ is. It is also a revelation of the Holy Trinity. We hear the voice of the Father and see the light of the Holy Spirit, and the glorious face of the Son.

At this point it is important to mention that the Coptic Church, in accordance with the canons of the apostolic councils, forbid representing God the Father in a fleshly image. And therefore, the image of an elderly man with a white beard, which is found in some religious imagery, violates the canons of iconography.

In this icon, we see Moses carrying the tablets of the law standing on the right and Elijah standing on the left. Together they bear witness that Jesus is the promised Messiah and the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. Below them are the stricken disciples Peter, James and John.



The icon concerns human destiny, our resurrection and eventual participation in the wholeness of Christ. We will be able to see each other as being made in the image and likeness of God, and so we too will be transfigured. Through Christ we become one with God. The divine likeness that we are called to attain, is the likeness of Christ, for we are, as St Peter said: **“To become sharers in the divine nature”** (2 Pet 1:4).

The Apostle Paul also explains the mystery of transfiguration by saying: **“Behold I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet...and the dead shall be raised incorruptible...and this mortal must put on immortality”** (1 Corinthians 15:51-53)

And so, whether it be in the stillness of the Saint in Coptic Orthodox Iconography, or the elongated figures of Byzantine Icons, all traditions testify to the transformation of the human person.

Even the insistence on 2 dimensional representations, automatically places the existence of the icon prototype beyond our 3 dimensional world.

To understand God then, is to understand beauty, and since an icon is proof of the Incarnate God, then icons are a way of saying that beauty itself bears witness to God. However, because nothing in our world can express that beauty of the Kingdom of God, the spiritual reality conveyed through icons, can only be represented through symbols.

As an example, angels who are insubstantial beings, can only be portrayed in a symbolic way. Their qualities are represented with material forms. We see them as beautiful beings, because in their love of God, they reflect the beauty of God. Though more ancient than the stars, we see them as young because *“God makes all things new”* (Revelation 21:5).

They are given long, eagle-like wings to show that instantly they will go wherever they are needed by God. Their intelligence and absolute attention are reflected in the facial expressions assigned to them. The decorative ribbons in their hair, the ends of which flow from either side of their heads, symbolise obedient listening to God’s voice. Their feet hardly touch the ground, reminding us that they are not material beings.



Occasionally an archangel is given one or more objects that symbolise its special function. Thus Michael is often shown wearing armour and carrying a sword, for in the book of revelation we find him leading the angelic host in the celestial battle against the dragon, who is Satan.

Also, when an evil character is portrayed on an icon, such as Satan in this example, it is always in profile because it is not desirable to make eye contact with such a person, and thus to dwell or meditate upon them. This also signifies that such a character has not fixed his gaze on the infinite and sublime, but has instead been distracted by other thoughts.

Figures in Coptic icons often have large heads, to symbolise their devotion to contemplation and prayer.

The roundness of the face also signifies, that the image of the infinite God has been imprinted on the features of the saint or the angel.

Regarding the use of symbols in iconography, one of the church fathers explains:

“There are no words, nor lines which could represent the Kingdom of God, as we represent and describe our world. Both theology and iconography are faced with a problem, which is absolutely insoluble –to express by means belonging to the created world, that which is infinitely above the creature. On this plane, there are no successes, for the subject itself is beyond comprehension, and no matter how lofty in content and beautiful an icon may be, it cannot be perfect, just as no word or image can be perfect. In this sense both theology and iconography are failures. Precisely in this failure lies the value of both alike; for this value results from the fact that both theology and iconography reach the limit of human possibilities and prove insufficient. Therefore the methods used by iconography for pointing to the Kingdom of God, can only be figurative and symbolical, like the language of the parables in the Holy Scriptures.”

In the Coptic Church, icons follow certain symbolism that carries a theological message.

And some of these characteristics are:



Fresco of St Sergios
Syrian Monastery, Wadi Natroun, Egypt

First: large and wide eyes to symbolise the spiritual eye that looks beyond the material world, as is written in Matthew 6:22, ***"The light of the body is the eye: if therefore your eye is pure, your whole body shall be full of light"***.

Second: large ears in order to listen to the word of God, as written in Mark 4:23: ***"He who has ears to hear, let him hear"***.

Third: Full gentle lips to glorify and praise the Lord, as David said in Psalm 63:5, ***"My mouth shall praise You with joyful lips"***.

The eyes and ears are large, to symbolise that a spiritual person spends more time in vigil watching for the Lord, and listening to God's word. On the other hand, the mouth is depicted small to signify the virtue of silence and humility.

The saint always gazes straight ahead to signify heavenly intent and unbending faith. As the faithful makes eye contact with the saint, an instant communion takes place between the church militant and the church triumphant.

When depicting a martyr, for example, it is important that the icon does not show signs of their suffering, because they are now in a glorified state. However, the icon includes aspects to indicate the identity of the prototype.

Thus, for example, St George, who suffered terrible persecution for 7 years, is not shown suffering, but victorious, and his icon depicts aspects of his life to identify him, such as the white horse the emperor gave him as a gift, or him being dressed in armour to show his military status, and the dragon at his feet to symbolise his strength in faith and spiritual victory over persecution, and the woman in the background, to bring to mind the incident of how St George converted her to Christianity, whilst he was imprisoned. In effect, the icon is like a mini biography.

In Coptic iconography, the halo is an expression of light radiating from within the saint, as a sign of the holiness they attained by their spiritual striving, supported by the grace of God. Each saint in a unique way reveals something about who Christ is, and so in some way, each saint draws us closer to Christ.

In addition, colours used in icons must be suitable to the theological meaning of the icon.



Icon of St George
Church of St Keriakos
Tahta, Egypt

Let us take as an example, the symbols and colours used in the icon of St Mary with Christ her Son.

The Orthodox Church speaks of her in the liturgy as being, *“more honourable than the cherubim and beyond compare, more glorious than the seraphim.”* From an early time, Christians began to refer to her as the mother of the church, finding in her a person who in every way provides a model of discipleship.

St Ambrose writes of her:

“The life of Mary shines forth as from a mirror, all the beauty and chastity and the pattern of every virtue.”

Thus, it is not surprising that St Jacob of Sarug expressed:

“How could I paint the picture of this marvellous, beautiful one with ordinary colour? Too exalted and too glorious is the image of her beauty!”

Mary is found in many icons, most frequently holding Christ. And although the icons have numerous variations, she always has one hand which motions towards her son - the action that sums up her entire life to the present day.



In some icons, such as this one his face is pressed against his mother’s – which is an action of tender love and a reminder that his body was knit from her flesh.

But most importantly, the icon of the Virgin Mary with Christ her Son, carries a deep theological message – as it is a means for Orthodox Christianity affirming the incarnation.

As St Cyril of Alexandria declares:

“Hail Mary, the mother of God, the sceptre of orthodoxy, who contained in your holy virginal womb, He who cannot be contained!”

In orthodox iconography, Mary appears to be looking toward the person praying before the icon, and her eyes have an inward, contemplative quality.

Christ is usually bare foot, which is a vivid symbol of his physical reality that he walked among us, leaving his footprints on the earth.

Although Christ is an infant, He is usually portrayed as a man, and this is intentional, because the noble face we see is the Lord of creation and the glory of God.

In the icon, the Lord is portrayed wearing adult clothing, which is either a white tunic to symbolise His purity, or gold to symbolise His divinity and glory, or red to symbolise that His blood was shed to redeem humankind. In these details, the icon reveals the real identity of the Son of Mary.

Over her dress Mary wears a shawl which encircles her head. This shawl is either blue to symbolise her association with the heavens, or red, to symbolise that through her, the saviour and redeemer of the world was born. It could also be brown, to symbolise her humanity, poverty and humility.

Upon her shawl are 3 stars symbolising her virginity before, during and after her son's birth. At the same time they suggest that heaven has found a place in her.



Her undergarment is either white, again to represent her purity, or red - the colour to signify redemption.

In any version of the icon of St Mary with Christ, we see her perfect devotion. Because the icon portrays the profound oneness uniting Mary and Jesus, it is a Eucharistic icon: because in receiving the body of Christ, we too hold Christ and are held by Christ.

Thus, in conclusion, icons in the Orthodox tradition are not to be taken as pieces of artistic device, but rather, as windows or doors into spiritual world. They are designed to enhance the spiritual life of the believer through emulating the virtues of the icon's prototype. And therefore, icons can be a blessing in our lives if we use them in a spiritual way.