



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

74 - February 2017

A Best Practice: Icon Writing as Formative

This best practice reminds us of many realities about adult faith formation today:

- Many opportunities are initiated and planned by our parishes and (arch)dioceses; yet, that doesn't need to be the only way. The power of one person having a dream!
- The arts are exceptionally influential in our faith journey; we don't always need words.
- Multiple intelligences remind us that adults (all of us) learn in many ways, to touch people's hearts in faith formation.

Pre-reading Alert: As you read this you might say, "this is way beyond what one parish could do."

- As you read, think about the adaptations or tweaks that you might be able to make.
- As you read, don't miss the end which suggests some simpler possibilities that might be appropriate for you and your parish (and diocese).

What is an Icon?

"Religious icons are ... symbols or representations of a greater "object," ... the "object" is a person: Christ or one of the saints in heaven. Icons are like quick links in that they give us a kind of symbolic snapshot of holy persons who are in heaven.

More than that, religious icons are a form of prayer. When you look at an icon, it is meant to make you aware that you are in the presence of God. Icons, then, are not just art with a religious theme; rather, they are sacred art because they bring the viewer to the sacred.

Icons have been called windows to heaven or doorways to the sacred. When you are standing in front of an icon, it is as if you are looking through a

window into the heavenly world of the mystery. But this is a two-way window. As you look through the window, you are also being seen with the eyes of love by those in the icon. It's like you become a part of the mystery that the icon seeks to express.

... icons are more than pretty pictures. They are a visual form of prayer in line and color that seek to tell us something true about God and the saints. They follow a long tradition of truths that are communicated visually rather than through words, a theology passed on from one artist to the next. They are meant to help us open ourselves to God's love."

(<https://www.loyolapress.com/icons-as-religious-art.htm>)



What is Icon Writing?

Various people have differing opinions on how to describe the process of creating an icon. "Writing Icons" seems to be a recent term that to describe this spiritual practice which brings prayer and painting together (see the notes just below). Others feel that the term is an inaccurate description (<http://orthodoxhistory.org/2010/06/08/icons-are-not-written/>).

Some Realities about Icons

- "It is said that icons are not painted, they are written (that they are written has its origin in the similarity of icon painting process to the

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writing and copying of old manuscripts – the painter painted the ‘original’ again and again and was also considered to be more a craftsman than an artist).

- The writer ‘prepares himself’ before starting to work, with going within and staying within, fasting, prayer and with the way he lives his life.
- Icons are not naturalistic and do not represent the world we sense, imagine and usually live in.
- Icons are windows, gates and mirrors to ourselves showing us ‘something’ of who and what we are.
- Icons communicate an unseen divine reality, beyond logic and thinking.
- Icons teach the Tradition using pictures and colors. Icons are written therefore it is important to learn to read them, to tune into them without contact within, icons look like primitive representations of historic events.
- Icons are venerated for what they represent, not as objects as such.
- An icon is an embodiment of prayer; it is made with prayer and for prayer.”

<http://prayerofheart.com/icons.html>

“Icons are a window to heaven,
an aperture to the very reality that they represent.”

- *Dr. Holly Taylor Coolman,
The University of Notre Dame
Liturgy and Vocations Symposium, 2015*

The Beginning – of the gathering detailed in this newsletter

In 1997, Ilene Kelly, living on the east coast, experienced icon writing in her hometown.

Because she had a vacation home in northern Michigan, she applied for a grant and arranged for an iconography instructor to offer an opportunity during the summer in icon writing at a retreat center in the northern part of the lower peninsula of Michigan. That was the beginning; every summer since the workshop/retreat has continued.

The Summer Experience in Michigan

To return to our best practice – Since 1997 people have gathered every summer to explore the experience of icon writing. People have come from across the country; many of the people were the “originals” – coming every year since the very beginning.

The schedule for this week is filled with icon writing and prayer. The day begins – after breakfast – with prayer and learning. In past years the iconography instructor who joined them provided background and reflections on the origin, the theology and ways and techniques of icon writing. In recent years, the participants themselves have shared their new learnings and experiences.

- Remainder of the morning: icon writing
- Lunch
- Return to icon writing
- Daily liturgy and evening meal
- After dinner: some continue working; some socialize; some return to the quiet of their room



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The participants describe their time as both a workshop and a retreat:

- A “workshop” in that the participants learn a great deal about the writing of icons during the week.
- A “retreat” in that the participants have stepped away from their schedules and usual places to spend uncluttered time in God's presence.

They work in silence with music playing in the background. They transfigure wood, clay, gold and minerals into an icon. Example: the clay (earthly matter) and gold (heavenly matter) used for the halo reminds the participants of the saint's connection to God and our relationship with God. The participants write the icon from what lies within them, spending much time in reflection.

One step at the beginning of applying pigments during the writing of an icon is referred to as chaos. Icon-writers might find themselves stopping to consider how they might create unwanted chaos in their life or in the lives of others. When reflection is part of the writing of an icon, it is the self that is also transfigured.



- Another “retreat-type” experience – during this week - is taking time to reflect on themselves as living icons. This provides a new view of the call to holiness and vocation. For instance - think about the ways in which Christ is writing you as an icon, and then, through you, the lives of others.



The Experience for One Participant

Jackie Wells, director of faith formation, Sacred Heart parish, Oscoda, MI, one of the long-time participants in the group, shares with us what this experience means for her: “I have found that I am the most joyful and most at peace when I take time for the writing of an icon. It is a prayerful art form that allows me to rest in God's presence and for those hours to be most connected to the person God created me to be.”

GEMS Suggestions

If this seems as though it's too much for one parish to do, consider some of these possibilities:

- Does everyone in your parish know the history and meaning of icons? Explore – through a workshop through your website, through your bulletin - icons within our tradition as well as modern icons. Learn

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more about the artistic work of Brother Mickey McGrath (<http://bromickeymcgrath.com/>) and John August Swanson (<http://johnaugustswanson.com/>).

- Many people today are becoming familiar with Lectio Divina. Are they also familiar with – and use Visio Divina?
 - <http://godspace-msa.com/2011/09/06/visio-divina-praying-with-art/>
 - <http://www.seeingtheword.org/>
 - <http://www.jeffreyallen.org/Pages/VisioDivina.aspx>
 - <http://www.ttlcommunity.com/visio-divina>
- Adult coloring books have become extremely popular.
 - Explore coloring prayer:
 - <http://prayingincolor.com/>
 - [https://www.paracletepress.com/Products/CategoryCenter/CSS/Color and Sound Collection.aspx](https://www.paracletepress.com/Products/CategoryCenter/CSS/Color%20and%20Sound%20Collection.aspx)
 - <http://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/prayer/arts-and-faith/visual-arts/praying-with-color-finding-the-sacred-in-coloring-mandalas>
 - Are there people in the parish that would want to gather for reflective coloring, meditation and prayer?

GEMS Wonderings

- This best practice began with one person's dream. Do you have any spirituality dreams you'd like to share with your parish?
- This workshop/retreat is one possibility of utilizing the arts in our faith journey. What might be others that could be explored and/or

incorporated into various adult faith formation opportunities, eg. music, poetry, drama, dance, etc.?

- For ideas about song in our faith journey, visit: <http://sjeciowa.org/blogs/sounds-of-the-spirit>
- See these past issues of GEMS which explore art and movies (another artistic form):
 - [GEMS #49](#)
 - [GEMS #38](#)



Janet Schaeffler, OP
www.janetschaeffler.com
jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org

Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found in:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*
[http://www.lifelongfaith.com/store/p25/The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation.html](http://www.lifelongfaith.com/store/p25/The_Seasons_of_Adult_Faith_Formation.html)
- *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation website*
<http://www.lifelongfaith.com/2015-adult-faith-formation-symposium.html>