



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 Women with Icons
(*Women in the Bible*,
pp. 70-80)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Women with Icons

In the Orthodox tradition, icons – like the saints and stories they portray – point to the power of the larger story of Scripture. In the *Women with Icons* project we see how the icons of patron saints, and the women who hold them close, point to Christ.

Responsive Prayer (from Colossians 1:9-14)

May we be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that we may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as we bear fruit in every good work and as we grow in the knowledge of God.

May we be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may we be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. **Amen.**

Reflection

Icons (from Greek *eikōn*, for image) are important in personal and corporate worship in the Orthodox Church. Paul calls Christ “the image (*eikōn*) of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4) because he makes God known to us. With this in mind, the original artists ‘wrote’ icons in symbols in order to articulate spiritual truths they had seen, not to be realistic or decorative. Usually painted in tempera on wood panels, icons may depict Christ or another biblical figure, a saint from the life of the Church, or a biblical event celebrated in the church year.

The photographer Jocelyn Mathewes recalls, “For years the iconoclastic bent of my evangelical Protestant background had kept the walls of my home free from explicitly religious imagery (though, as a visual artist, they were covered with all kinds of other beauty).” She began using icons in worship when she joined the Orthodox Church as an adult through chrismation. Part of the process is taking the name of a saint. (Orthodox children are given one by their parents or godparents.) She chose a married saint, Sophia of Thrace, who lived in the tenth or eleventh century. Mathewes explains, “She was a virtuous woman who lost her husband and six children in middle age, and then in turn became a mother to orphans, giving freely and generously to the poor out of her own resources until her death. I want my life to be like hers – one whose loss, sacrifice, love, and way of life points to the healing and redeeming power of Christ.”

Mathewes photographs fellow church women with the icons of their patron saints as a way of getting to know these women better and to explore how their lives are becoming interwoven with their chosen saints. Each photograph tells a personal story.

- ▶ *Ruth Mathewes with Her Icons* shows how Mathewes's daughter is reminded at once of the biblical woman for whom she's named and a great-grandmother who bears her name. She loves to point to the images and ask, “Who's that?” which provides moments to explore Scripture, saints, and history.



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- ▶ *Liana with Empress Theodora* shows a dear friend with the icon of the saint who restored the use of icons after the iconoclastic controversy in the ninth century. Mathewes chose a non-traditional angle “to illustrate again how ancient stories and the lives of the faithful departed are relevant in modern life.”
- ▶ In *Katie with Saint Catherine of Alexandria* and *Hannah with Holy Prophetess Hannah*, two young women dress in favorite clothing to make the image-making occasion special. Katie emulates the royalty and martyrdom of her saint from history. Hannah evokes the joy of her biblical model. “When the church commemorates the Holy Prophetess Hannah on December 9, its members sing and celebrate along with little Hannah. Through the saints’ lives, icons, and the calendar, Hannah learns a personal rhythm of practicing her faith.”
- ▶ According to a church tradition the childless couple Joachim and Anna were blessed to give birth to the Virgin Mary. Thus, Anna is described as Jesus’ grandmother. The women who embrace her in *Anna N. with Saint Anna* and *Anne K. with Saint Anna* “hail from the poles of human experience.” Young Anna “will perhaps come out from behind the story of St. Anna and use it as inspiration for her own life, whether that includes the gift of motherhood or not,” Mathewes writes. “An older Anne (a grandmother) holds the icon on the boardwalk of the place of her retirement, serenely looking out (or back) as she literally holds onto the story and moves forward in the autumn of her life.”
- ▶ *Sheila with Saint Bridget of Kildare* shows saints are “relevant as Christians face their ending,” Mathewes says. “We long to be surrounded by those we love, especially at the end of our life; keeping the icons of beloved saints nearby is much the same as spending time with our nearest and dearest friends, for they are our inspiration and our encouragement.”

Study Questions

1. For Jocelyn Mathewes and her fellow church members, how have icons proved valuable in personal devotion at each stage of discipleship, from childhood to old age?
2. Discuss Mathewes’s observation: “Each woman’s patron saint points to Christ through a story that reveals the power and beauty of God. Each woman’s personal story has the same opportunity – to be a Christian inspiration, encouragement, and example to others.”

Departing Hymn: “O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright”

O Splendor of God’s glory bright,
from light eternal bringing light,
into our inward hearts convey
the Holy Spirit’s cloudless ray.

O Christ, with each returning morn
your image to our hearts is borne;
O may we ever see anew
our Savior and our God in you!

Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-397), translation composite
Suggested Tunes: PUER NOBIS or WINCHESTER NEW

Women with Icons

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Responsive Prayer	Responsive Prayer
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss the roles that icons can play in personal devotion through each stage of discipleship, from childhood to old age.
2. To consider how our lives become images reflecting the love of God in the world.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11. Distribute copies of *Women in the Bible (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright” locate one of the familiar tunes PUER NOBIS or WINCHESTER NEW in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Jocelyn Mathewes writes, “My daughter’s name is Ruth. She is five years old. Ruth is a biblical name, of course, and while I named her for that connection, I only named her for that in part. Ruth is also the name of my grandmother – a beautiful God-fearing woman whom I admire greatly. When Ruth hears stories about her great-grandmother, her ears perk up naturally. The novelty of hearing her own name and the knowledge of blood connection give these stories a greater power to her and to me. Likewise, hearing about her namesake in the stories of Scripture gives Ruth a greater connection to the book and its meanings.

“Ruth is lucky to have the great-grandmother that she does, and even more fortunate to have a connection to a living, breathing woman of the Bible. The book of Ruth is only one of two in the Bible titled with a female name, and it is easily read in one sitting. Yet, I find myself using icons to tell my children the stories of our faith far more than I read them Bible stories. Having the icon of Ruth and Naomi present in my house means my daughter points to it and says, ‘Who’s that?’ and a moment of natural curiosity opens a whole world of Scripture, saints, and history.”

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The *Women with Icons* project by photographer Jocelyn Mathewes introduces us to another way that women in the Bible continue to inspire the discipleship of women today. She gives examples of the biblical women Ruth and Hannah. Icons can also depict saints identified in church tradition; the examples here are Anna, Sophia of Thrace, the Empress Theodora, and Bridget of Kildare. These women also point to the overarching story of Scripture as it is read and interpreted in church on their feast days.

Icons always have had nested meaning. The original icons (which may be centuries old) were ‘written’ in symbols to articulate the spiritual insights that their artists had gained from observing the life of a biblical or historical saint; today the artists who prayerfully copy the icons today re-appropriate those spiritual insights. Something like pattern is evident in Mathewes’s photographs. In them we see further images of God’s love reflected through the lives of these contemporary Orthodox women as they hold close the icons of their patron saints.

The Orthodox Church in America has a searchable database of the icons of saints (and their stories and feast days) and icons of biblical events commemorated through the church year at “Feasts & Saints,” www.oca.org/fs (accessed April 22, 2013). Mathewes refers to *The Prologue from Ochrid*, a twentieth-century compilation of the lives of the saints arranged by their feast days. It can be searched online at www.westserbdio.org/prolog/my.html (accessed April 22, 2013).

Study Questions

1. Assign individuals or small groups to study one of Jocelyn Mathewes’s photographs and descriptions for a few minutes, and then come back together to share their findings. Members may notice recurring themes such as these.
 - The icons are points of inquiry about *biblical* stories concerning biblical saints, of course, but also related to historical saints and church festivals. This makes icons useful in teaching biblical stories to children and sharing them with one another.
 - The icons share spiritual insight through imagery. This allows them to encourage children who cannot yet read, and the elderly or infirmed who can no longer read.
 - The icons seem to enhance the relevance of the discipleship of the saints, biblical and historical, to modern life. Mathewes mentions this in her discussion of the photographs of herself and of her friend Lianna, and it is exemplified in several of the others.
 - The life of a saint has multiple points of contact with modern life. The same facet may take on different meaning as we progress through our discipleship; this is clear in the images of young Anna and of Anne holding the icon of Saint Anna.
 - The embrace of these saints is not only personal, but also communal. As a patron saint is honored on her feast day, individuals who share her name are inspired and encouraged by the gathered congregation.
2. Mathewes suggests each disciple’s life can become an image of God’s love that inspires and encourages others. Within the Orthodox tradition, a woman’s life might well become intertwined with the story of her patron saint – either because she chose that saint (as Jocelyn Mathewes did), or was given that saint’s name by her parents and godparents who admired the saint.

However, Mathewes emphasizes that this is not a process of mimicry, but of inspiration and emulation. She writes, “Just as we look to one another for encouragement, prayer, and support in our discipleship, Orthodox Christians look to the saints. Watching my contemporary Christian friends struggle to live a Christlike life is not that different from reading about the struggles of the saints in the Bible and Christian history; it is all a matter of deepening *theosis*, or union with God. Through union with God, we become who we were meant to be – not just ourselves, but our *true* selves. The saints are unique selves that have been united with God in their distinctive circumstances, just as members of a family, though related to each other, still maintain their personality quirks.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.