

AN ORTHODOX BIBLE STUDY



Windows to Heaven

Scripture, the Fathers, and the Holy Icons



"Whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory."

1 PETER 1:8

Prepared for those approaching the Orthodox Church,
in the tradition received from the Apostles
and confessed by the Seventh Ecumenical Council, A.D. 787

A Guide Through This Study

Peace to you as you begin. You come to this question as a Protestant would — with a Bible in hand, asking, "where is this written?" That is exactly the right question, and it deserves a real answer. This study walks through the biblical foundation for icons, the theology of the Incarnation that makes them necessary rather than optional, the history of the controversy that tested and confirmed this teaching, and then a close, patristic reading of five great icons, each of which turns out to be a small systematic theology painted in color and gold.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Every icon is, at root, an argument about who Jesus Christ is. The Church did not fight for two generations over painted wood because she loved decoration. She fought because to deny that Christ could be depicted was — the Fathers saw clearly — to deny that He had truly, fully taken flesh. Iconography is Christology you can see.

The Image of the Invisible God

Man Himself Is the First Icon

Before there is any painted image in Scripture, there is a living one. God does not merely make man; He makes man *as an image*.

"Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...' So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

GENESIS 1:26–27

The Hebrew word here, *tselem*, is the same word used elsewhere for a carved or cast image. Man is God's icon — not a portrait in the sense of a physical resemblance, but a living representation that makes the invisible God present and knowable within creation. This is the seed of everything that follows: God is not opposed in principle to being represented. He built representation into the very structure of Genesis.

God Himself Commands Images in the Tabernacle

This is the point to sit with longest, because it is decisive and it is too often skipped. The very same God who gives the commandment against idols in Exodus 20 turns, five chapters later, and commands Moses to have artisans *carve golden images of cherubim* for the Ark of the Covenant — the single holiest object in Israel's worship.

"And you shall make two cherubim of gold... The cherubim shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings... There I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim."

EXODUS 25:18, 20, 22

Notice what this passage actually says: God does not merely tolerate these images. He locates His own manifest presence — the place where He will "meet" and "speak" with Moses — *between* them. The cherubim are not decorative. They are the appointed place of divine encounter, carved in gold, gazing down upon the mercy seat. The same pattern repeats throughout the Tabernacle and later the Temple: cherubim are woven into the inner veil (Exodus 26:31), carved into the doors and walls of Solomon's Temple, and overlaid with gold (1 Kings 6:23–35). Solomon's Temple, built according to a pattern God Himself gave David "by the Spirit" (1 Chronicles 28:12, 19), is filled with sculpted images of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers.

If Exodus 20:4 were a blanket prohibition of religious imagery, then God would be commanding Moses and Solomon to sin in His own sanctuary. Clearly, that is not what is being forbidden. We will unpack exactly what *is* forbidden in Part II.

The Bronze Serpent — An Image That Heals

Numbers 21 gives us something even more striking: an image that God commands specifically as a vehicle of physical and, in the end, spiritual healing.

"So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived."

NUMBERS 21:9

Christ Himself takes this image and applies it directly to His own crucifixion — He does not treat it as a mere historical curiosity, but as a living type of what He is about to do:

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

JOHN 3:14–15

Here is an object — a crafted image — that God ordains as a means of grace, and that Christ says prefigures Himself. This is exactly the logic of an icon: matter, shaped by human hands at God's command, becomes a point of contact between the believer and divine healing, not because the bronze itself is powerful, but because it points beyond itself to God's saving action.

Matter Itself Carries Grace

Scripture repeatedly shows physical objects, touched by holiness, becoming instruments of God's power — not magically, but because God freely chooses to work through the material world He made and called good.

- **A dead man is raised by touching Elisha's bones.** "So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of raiders; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let down and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet" (2 Kings 13:21).
- **Handkerchiefs from Paul's body heal the sick and cast out demons.** "God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them" (Acts 19:11–12).
- **Peter's shadow is sought out for healing.** "...that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them" (Acts 5:15).
- **The woman with the flow of blood is healed by touching the hem of Christ's garment** (Matthew 9:20–22) — the fabric itself becomes the point of contact with divine power flowing from the Incarnate Word.

None of these texts teach that cloth or bone is intrinsically magical. They teach something more specific and more Orthodox: that God sanctifies matter and uses it as a vehicle of His uncreated grace, because matter itself is not an obstacle to holiness — it is the very stuff He created, took upon Himself, and is redeeming. This is the theological soil in which the veneration of icons and relics grows.

"You Shall Not Make For Yourself an Idol"

This is the verse every Protestant convert has memorized long before he ever meets an icon, and it deserves to be read carefully rather than reflexively.

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image — any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God..."

EXODUS 20:4–5

Read the Whole Sentence

The commandment is a single continuous thought, not two separate prohibitions. It forbids making an image *in order to* bow down to it and serve it as a god. The text itself supplies the purpose clause: "you shall not bow down to them nor serve them." This is why the very same God, five chapters later, can command cherubim to be carved for the Ark without contradiction — those images were never bowed down to as gods. They were never given *latreia*, the worship due to God alone. They marked the place of His presence; they were not mistaken for His person.

Idol (Eidolon) Versus Icon (Eikon)

The New Testament itself preserves this distinction in its vocabulary. An *eidolon* (idol) in Scripture is consistently a false god, a demonic substitute for the true God — Paul can say plainly that "an idol is nothing in the world" (1 Corinthians 8:4) precisely because it claims to represent a god that does not exist. An *eikon* (icon/image), by contrast, is used throughout the New Testament in a positive and even exalted sense:

- Christ Himself is called "the image (*eikon*) of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:4).
- Man is renewed "according to the image (*eikon*) of Him who created him" (Colossians 3:10).
- We are being conformed "to the image (*eikon*) of His Son" (Romans 8:29).

The problem in Scripture is never the making of a likeness as such. The problem is worshiping a false god, or worshiping the image instead of the reality it points to. An Orthodox icon of Christ does neither: it depicts the true God who genuinely became visible in the flesh, and the honor given to it is directed entirely to Him, not to the wood and pigment.

An Idol (Eidolon)	An Icon (Eikon)
Represents a false god, or a real creature worshiped as a god	Represents the true God who truly became man, or a saint conformed to His image
Receives <i>latreia</i> — the worship owed to God alone	Receives <i>proskynesis</i> — honor, which passes through to the Person depicted
Terminates attention on itself as divine	Directs attention through itself, toward heaven
Forbidden absolutely: Exodus 20:4–5, 1 Corinthians 10:14, 1 John 5:21	Commanded/permitted: Exodus 25:18, 1 Kings 6:23–35, confirmed at Nicaea II (787)

A Historical Turning Point: The Incarnation

There remains a real historical development to acknowledge honestly, and Orthodoxy does not hide from it. Before Christ, God had not yet taken visible, human form. To attempt an image of the unseen, formless God the Father in that era would indeed have been presumptuous — a claim to have seen what had not been shown. This is part of why Orthodox iconography, to this day, generally does not depict God the Father in His own essence, but only as He has revealed Himself: the Son incarnate, the Spirit as a dove or tongues of fire, the Ancient of Days as a christological title (Daniel 7, applied in Revelation 1 to the risen Christ).

But the Incarnation changes the entire situation, which is exactly the argument St. John of Damascus will make in Part III. Something has, in fact, now been seen.

The Incarnation as the Charter of Icons

"That Which We Have Seen With Our Eyes"

The theological center of the entire icon question is not really a dispute about art. It is a dispute about the Incarnation. St. John the Evangelist opens his first epistle by grounding the Christian message in physical, sensory contact with God:

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life... that which we have seen and heard we declare to you."

1 JOHN 1:1, 3

John is not describing a private mystical vision. He is insisting — against the earliest heresies that denied Christ had a real body (docetism) — that the eternal Word became genuinely visible, touchable, paintable matter. This is the same John who opens his Gospel: "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory" (John 1:14). And Paul: Christ "is the image (*eikon*) of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), in whom "dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9). And the author of Hebrews: Christ is "the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person" (Hebrews 1:3).

St. John of Damascus: The Argument From the Incarnation

It fell to St. John of Damascus (c. 675–749), writing from the safety of Muslim-ruled Damascus, beyond the reach of the iconoclast emperors in Constantinople, to give this instinct its most rigorous theological expression in his *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*. His argument can be laid out as a simple syllogism:

1. The invisible, uncircumscribable God cannot be depicted in His divine nature — this the iconoclasts and the Orthodox agree on completely.
2. But the Son of God has become man, taking on a real, circumscribable, visible human nature, without ceasing to be God.
3. Therefore, to depict the incarnate Christ in His humanity is not to depict the deity, but to bear witness to the reality of the Incarnation itself — and to refuse to depict Him is, in effect, to deny that He truly became flesh.

ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, ON THE DIVINE IMAGES

He explains that in ages past, God, having no body or form, could not be depicted at all — but now that God has been seen in the flesh and has lived among men, an image can be made of what has been seen of God. He insists he does not venerate matter, but the Maker of matter, who willed to work his salvation through matter and become present within it.

— *Third Treatise, on the Incarnation as grounds for images*

This is the heart of it: iconoclasm, taken to its logical end, is a Christological error before it is anything else. To say Christ cannot be painted because matter cannot bear the divine is to say, in substance, that the divine did not truly join itself to matter in the Incarnation — which is either a denial of the true humanity of Christ (a version of docetism) or a denial that His humanity and divinity are truly, personally united (touching the very Christology settled at Chalcedon in 451). St. Theodore the Studite, writing a generation later during the second wave of iconoclasm, presses the same point even further: a Christ who cannot be depicted is, by definition, a Christ without a definite, particular human body — which is no real man at all.

Icons as Books for the Unlettered — and More

Pope St. Gregory the Great's famous defense — that images are "the books of the illiterate" — is true as far as it goes, but the Eastern tradition, following St. Basil and St. John of Damascus, says something stronger still. Icons are not merely pedagogical aids or memory devices. They are sacramental in character: through the icon, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we are brought into communion with the person depicted. This is why icons are venerated, not simply looked at — a distinction Part V will unpack fully.

The Seventh Ecumenical Council

The Iconoclast Controversy

The theology in Part III was not developed in a seminar room; it was fought for, at real cost, over roughly 120 years. In 726, Emperor Leo III the Isaurian, likely influenced by pressures from the rapid spread of aniconic Islam along the empire's borders and by a rigorist reading of Exodus 20, began removing and destroying icons throughout the Byzantine Empire. His son, Constantine V, intensified the persecution — convening a council at Hieria in 754 that condemned the veneration of icons, and violently persecuting monks, who were the icons' fiercest defenders. Monasteries were closed, relics burned, and confessors like St. Stephen the New were martyred for refusing to trample an icon of Christ.

It was during this first wave that St. John of Damascus wrote his treatises from outside the Empire's reach, and it was the empress-regent Irene who, seeking to restore the ancient practice for her young son Constantine VI, convened the true Ecumenical Council that would settle the question for the whole Church.

Nicaea II, A.D. 787

Meeting first at Constantinople and then, after a mutiny by iconoclast soldiers, at Nicaea — the same city that had hosted the First Ecumenical Council in 325 — the Seventh Ecumenical Council gathered over 300 bishops. Presided over with the participation of legates from Pope Adrian I of Rome, the Council examined patristic testimony reaching back centuries and issued its formal decree (the *Horos*):

THE HOROS OF NICAEA II, A.D. 787

The council decreed that, just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross is set up, so too the venerable and holy icons — of Christ, the Theotokos, the angels, and all the saints — are to be made and displayed, whether in painting, mosaic, or any other fitting material, in churches, in homes, and along the roads. It affirmed that whoever venerates an icon venerates the person represented in it, for the honor given to the image passes over to its prototype.

— summarized from the Definition of the Seventh Ecumenical Council

The Council's central theological phrase — "the honor of the image passes to the prototype" — is drawn almost verbatim from St. Basil the Great, writing four centuries earlier about the icon of the Emperor and, more importantly, about the relationship between Christ the Son and God the Father. This shows the Fathers of Nicaea II were not innovating; they were formalizing an instinct already deeply embedded in patristic Trinitarian theology.

The Second Wave, and the Triumph of Orthodoxy

Iconoclasm was not finished. It revived under Emperor Leo V in 815 and continued under his successors, with St. Theodore the Studite emerging as its great defender through exile and suffering. The controversy finally ended on the First Sunday of Great Lent in 843, when the Empress-regent Theodora, acting for her young son Michael III, definitively restored the icons. The Church has kept that day ever since as the **Sunday of Orthodoxy** — celebrated to this day at the opening of every Lent, when the faithful process with icons held high, proclaiming the restored teaching of the whole undivided Church.

WHY THIS HISTORY MATTERS

This is precisely the kind of episode the question of apostolic continuity turns on: not a doctrine invented in the eighth century, but an ancient, lived practice — traceable to the catacombs, to Old Testament images of the cherubim, to the very logic of the Incarnation — that came under attack, was tested against Scripture and the Fathers by an Ecumenical Council in communion with Rome and the East together, and was vindicated. The Seventh Council did not create a new teaching; it recognized, defined, and defended one it had received.

Veneration, Not Worship

Two Different Greek Words

Much of the confusion a Protestant convert feels when he first walks into an Orthodox nave and sees people bowing before icons, kissing them, and lighting candles before them, dissolves once the underlying vocabulary is made clear. The Fathers, and the Councils following them, are careful to distinguish two entirely different acts:

(λατρεία)	(προσκύνησις)
Adoration; the worship owed to God alone, as God	Reverence, honor, obeisance — a bow of respect
Given only to the Holy Trinity	Given to icons, the Cross, the Gospel book, relics, and — in a different sense — even to other people (Genesis 23:7; Genesis 33:3)
Terminates in the object itself, as divine	Passes through the object entirely to the person represented

Scripture itself uses forms of *proskynesis* for ordinary human respect — Abraham "bowed himself" (*prosekynēsen* in the Septuagint) before the sons of Heth (Genesis 23:7), and Jacob bowed before Esau (Genesis 33:3) — without anyone imagining idolatry was involved. The word simply means a physical act of reverence; its object and meaning determine whether it is appropriate or not.

St. Basil's Principle

ST. BASIL THE GREAT, ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

St. Basil teaches that the honor given to an image is not divided from its archetype but passes over entirely to the one it represents — so that whoever venerates an image, in that very act, venerates the person depicted in it, not a separate object of worship.

— *On the Holy Spirit*, XVIII.45

Basil originally makes this point about the relationship of the Son to the Father — the Son is the perfect Image of the Father, and to honor the Son is to honor the Father, without division. The Church later applied the same logical structure, by analogy, to icons: the wood and pigment are not the terminus of veneration. They are a transparent window; the eye and the heart pass through them to the Person who is honored.

An Everyday Analogy

Consider a man who carries a photograph of his late mother and kisses it before he sets out each morning. No reasonable observer thinks he believes the paper and chemicals in the photograph are his mother, or that he has divided his love between a woman and a piece of paper. The photograph is not the terminus of his affection; it is the means by which his affection, which is really and fully directed at his mother, finds physical expression. This is precisely — not loosely, but precisely — the logic St. Basil and Nicaea II apply to icons. The veneration is real, physical, and warm; and it is entirely, without remainder, directed to Christ, to the Theotokos, or to the saint depicted.

THE LINE THAT MUST NEVER BE CROSSED

Orthodoxy is emphatic that — adoration as God — belongs to the Holy Trinity alone, and to no icon, no saint, no relic, however venerable. This is why an icon of Christ may receive both *proskynesis* (as an image) *and*, because it depicts the very Person of God the Son, *latreia* directed through it to Him — while an icon of the Theotokos or a saint receives only *proskynesis*, *hyperdulia* in the highest case of Mary, but never *latreia*. The distinction is not a technicality; it is the whole defense against the charge of idolatry.

Reading the Icons

Everything so far has been the grammar. What follows is the reading itself — a close, patristic look at five great icons. Every Orthodox icon is written (the traditional word is "written," not "painted," because an icon makes a theological statement the way a sentence does) according to a canon of forms developed over centuries precisely so that the image would teach true doctrine and resist heresy. Nothing in a canonical icon is decorative. The gold background, the inverse perspective, the elongated figures, the inscriptions — all of it is doing theological work. Take these one at a time, slowly, the way you would a difficult patristic text.

HOW TO USE THIS SECTION

- Have the actual image open in front of you as you read each entry.
- Read the Scripture citations in full from your OSB before reading my commentary on them.
- Notice the inscriptions on each icon — *IC XC* (Jesus Christ), *Ο ΩΝ* (HE WHO IS) — these are not labels for the illiterate; they are the icon's own theological captions.

1. The Resurrection — the Harrowing of Hades

The icon of Holy Pascha, the Feast of Feasts



*The Resurrection of Our Lord (Anastasis)
— the traditional Eastern icon of Pascha*

The first thing a Protestant convert notices about this icon is what it does *not* show: there is no empty tomb, no stone rolled away, no women arriving at dawn — though those Gospel scenes have their own, separate icon. Instead, Christ stands astride two broken doors, laid in the form of a cross over a black pit, pulling Adam and Eve bodily up out of open graves by the wrist. This is the Church's chosen visual proclamation of the Resurrection, and it is drawn directly from Scripture, not invented.

The Descent Into Hades

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison..."

1 PETER 3:18–19

"For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit."

1 PETER 4:6

Paul confirms the same descent: "Now this, 'He ascended' — what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?" (Ephesians 4:9). And the Church has always read Psalm 24 (LXX Psalm 23) as a prophetic dialogue between Christ, descending to shatter the gates of Hades, and the demonic powers guarding them:

"Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle."

PSALM 24:7–8 (LXX PSALM 23:7–8)

Reading the Icon Detail by Detail

- **The broken gates beneath Christ's feet, crossed like an X:** these are the "everlasting doors" of Psalm 24, and the shattered locks, keys, and chains scattered in the black pit below are Hades' broken power over death — a direct visual quotation of Hosea's prophecy, "O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction!" (Hosea 13:14), which Paul applies to the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:55.
- **Adam and Eve being pulled from their tombs by the wrist** (not the hand — Christ grips them by force, because they cannot save themselves; salvation here is entirely His act) represent the whole of fallen humanity. This is the icon of 1 Corinthians 15:22: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive."
- **The figures on Christ's left** — kings with crowns — are David and Solomon, ancestors of Christ according to the flesh, representing the righteous of the Old Covenant now released.
- **John the Forerunner** (the Baptist), still gesturing as he did in life toward Christ, appears among the righteous, having "prepared the way" even into Hades itself.
- **The mandorla** — the almond-shaped burst of light surrounding Christ — signifies uncreated divine glory breaking into the darkness, echoing Matthew's account that at Christ's death "the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (Matthew 27:51–52).
- **The angel above, holding the instruments of the Passion** (the Cross), reminds the viewer that the Resurrection is inseparable from the Crucifixion — glory arrived at through the Cross, never around it.

ST. MELITO OF SARDIS, ON PASCHA (2ND CENTURY)

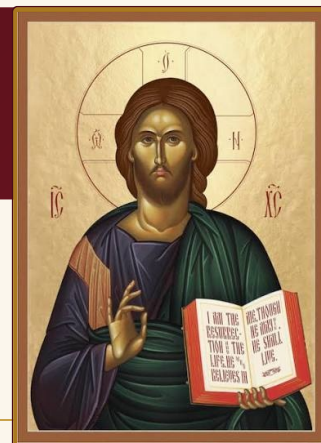
In one of the earliest surviving Paschal homilies, St. Melito has Christ declare that it is He who destroyed death and triumphed over the enemy, trampling Hades, binding the strong one, and carrying humanity up to the heights of heaven — language that this icon renders visually, centuries before it was ever painted.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

- Compare this icon's theology of "Christ Victor" over death with the Western emphasis, common in your Protestant background, on the empty tomb as the primary Resurrection image. What does each emphasis teach, and how do they complement rather than contradict one another?
- Notice that Christ pulls Adam and Eve up — He does not wait for them to climb out. How does this bear on your understanding of synergy: is the initiative here God's or man's, and what does that suggest about grace reaching for you even now, in your catechumenate?

2. Christ Pantocrator — the Ruler of All

The most common icon of Christ; typically placed in the central dome



Christ Pantocrator, holding the Gospel open to John 11:25

This is the icon a visitor sees first upon entering almost any Orthodox church, gazing down from the central dome as though from heaven itself — the dome representing the vault of heaven, with Christ as its Ruler at the summit. Every element of this composition is deliberate.

The Halo Inscription: "HE WHO IS"

Inside the cruciform halo, at the top and sides, you will find three Greek letters: **Θ Ψ Ν** — "Ho Ōn," meaning "THE ONE WHO IS," or simply "HE WHO IS." This is not decorative Greek. It is a direct visual citation of the Divine Name revealed to Moses at the burning bush:

"And God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And He said, 'Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

EXODUS 3:14

By placing the Septuagint's rendering of this Name — *ho ōn* — in the halo of Jesus of Nazareth, the icon makes an enormous christological claim with three letters: this man is the "I AM" who spoke to Moses. This is exactly John's own argument, when he records Christ saying "before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58), and Revelation's own self-description of Christ: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End... who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8) — the very word "Pantocrator," Ruler of All, that titles this icon.

The Open Book

In this icon, Christ holds the Gospel open, displaying His own words: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live" (John 11:25) — spoken to Martha before the raising of Lazarus. Other Pantocrator icons open instead to "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6), or the great "I AM" self-identifications scattered through John's Gospel (6:35, 8:12, 10:9, 10:11, 15:1). The open book, rather than a closed one, matters: this is not a distant Judge holding a sealed book of secrets, but the Word who has spoken, and continues to speak, plainly to those who will hear.

The Blessing Hand and the Asymmetrical Face

Christ's right hand is raised in blessing, the fingers traditionally arranged to spell, in Greek monogram form, **ΙΧ ΧΘ** — Jesus Christ. Icon painters have long noted, and modern viewers can confirm by covering one half of the face at a time, that the two halves of Christ's face in a well-written Pantocrator are subtly asymmetrical — one side often calmer, the other more severe. This is traditionally read (a *theologoumenon*, a pious theological opinion rather than binding dogma, so hold it with appropriate looseness) as a visual meditation on the two natures: the majesty and judgment of His divinity, and the compassion and approachability of His humanity, united without confusion or separation in the one Person the Council of Chalcedon confessed in 451.

ST. ATHANASIUS THE GREAT, ON THE INCARNATION

St. Athanasius teaches that the Word of God took a body precisely so that He, incorruptible by nature, could offer that body to death for all, and thereby fill it with His own life, driving out death from all mankind as fire drives out straw — the very authority over life and death this icon proclaims in Christ's title, Ruler of All.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

- Sit with the "Ho Ōn" inscription. What does it mean for your own prayer life that the Name revealed to Moses in fire is now, without ceasing to be that same unapproachable Name, inscribed around a human face you can look upon?
- Which "I AM" saying would you want held open in your own icon of Christ, and why does that particular saying speak to where you are in your catechumenate right now?

3. Christ the Great High Priest

Often placed near the altar, or vesting a bishop's throne

This icon will feel almost startling if you are accustomed to Western depictions of Christ as a humble carpenter or a gentle shepherd only — here He is robed as a bishop of the Church, crowned, holding a jeweled Gospel book, his hand raised in blessing. Every liturgical vestment on this figure is a deliberate theological statement, drawn straight from the Epistle to the Hebrews.



Christ the High Priest, vested as a bishop, holding the words of John 14:27

The Argument of Hebrews

"Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession... let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

HEBREWS 4:14, 16

"But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."

HEBREWS 7:24–25

Hebrews spends most of its central chapters establishing that Christ's priesthood is not Levitical but "according to the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 5:6, 6:20, 7:17, citing Psalm 110:4) — the mysterious king-priest of Genesis 14 who offered bread and wine to Abraham and who has, in the text, "neither beginning of days nor end of life" (Hebrews 7:3). Christ is at once the one true High Priest who offers the sacrifice, and the sacrifice itself: "not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12).

Why He Is Vested as a Bishop

This is the detail most connected to the very heart of the matter. Orthodox liturgical vestments developed as a visible expression of an office the Church understood herself to have received, in unbroken succession, from Christ Himself — the one true High Priest, whose priesthood every bishop and presbyter serves as icon and instrument, never as replacement. When your priest vests for the Divine Liturgy in the sticharion, epitachelion, and phelonion, he is visibly conforming himself to this same icon: not because he is Christ, but because his priesthood exists only as a real participation in Christ's own, unrepeatable priesthood, exercised through apostolic succession. This is precisely the sacramental logic that the whole sacramental life of the Church rests upon: the bishop stands at the altar as icon of the One this icon depicts.

The Open Text: "Peace I Leave With You"

The Gospel book here holds Christ's words from the Upper Room discourse: "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). This is not incidental — it is spoken at the Last Supper, moments before Christ institutes the Eucharist and moments before His Passion, tying this icon's priestly, sacrificial theme directly to the peace given through the sacrament His priesthood makes present in every Liturgy: "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:7), the very peace the deacon proclaims before the Anaphora in the Divine Liturgy.

ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, COMMENTARY ON HEBREWS

St. Cyril reads the priesthood of Melchizedek as a deliberate prefiguration of Christ's own eternal priesthood — a priest without recorded genealogy, without succession, so that in him the ancient reader could glimpse, however dimly, the priest who would have no end, offering not the blood of animals but himself, once, for the life of the world.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

- How does seeing Christ Himself as the archetype of the priesthood change how you understand the priest who will one day pronounce the words of your own baptism and chrismation?
- Hebrews insists we may "come boldly to the throne of grace." Where in your catechumenate are you still approaching God

timidly, as an outsider, rather than boldly, as one being made a member of His household?

4. The Crucifixion — Golgotha and the Skull of Adam

The icon of Great and Holy Friday

Unlike much Western crucifixion art, which often focuses tightly and realistically on Christ's physical agony, this icon is composed as a theological tableau — every figure placed to make a specific doctrinal point, and Christ's own body, even in death, retaining a serenity that anticipates the Resurrection rather than lingering only on suffering.



The Crucifixion, with the Theotokos, St. John, and the skull of Adam beneath the Cross

Those Standing at the Cross

"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home."

JOHN 19:25–27

This is exactly what this icon shows on the left: the Theotokos, supported by the myrrh-bearing women, her hand raised to her face in restrained grief; and on the right, the "disciple whom He loved" — John — his own hand raised to his cheek in the classical Byzantine gesture of mourning. This is not merely narrative illustration; it is the Church's visual commentary on the fact that at the Cross, Christ constitutes a new spiritual family, entrusting His mother to the beloved disciple and, through him, to the whole Church.

The Titulus and the Two Angels

Above Christ's head, the inscription reads, in this icon, "INRI" (the Latin abbreviation, *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*) alongside Greek lettering, echoing Pilate's placard: "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS," written, John tells us, "in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin" (John 19:19–20) — an unwitting proclamation to the whole known world, in its three great languages, that the crucified man is a king. The two small figures hovering above the crossbar with veiled hands are angels, present in reverent grief and awe, their hands covered as a gesture of not daring to touch the mystery directly — the same gesture used before the altar in the Divine Liturgy.

The Skull Beneath the Cross

This is the detail that most surprises new converts, and it is one of the richest in the entire icon. Golgotha itself means "Place of the Skull" (Matthew 27:33, Mark 15:22, John 19:17) — and ancient Christian tradition, reaching back at least to Origen in the third century and repeated by St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. John Chrysostom, held that Adam, the first man, was buried at or near this very spot, so that the Second Adam's blood would fall, quite literally, upon the skull of the first.

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, HOMILIES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Chrysostom notes the ancient report that Adam himself died and was buried on the very spot of the crucifixion, so that where death first entered the human race through the first Adam, there the Second Adam would triumph over death, planting the Cross precisely where the roots of mortality had first been laid.

This visual detail is Paul's theology, painted: "For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:21–22); "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). In many icons, including the composition of this image, Christ's blood is shown falling directly onto the skull — the blood of the New Adam falling upon, and redeeming, the very death introduced by the old.

Blood and Water

John records one further detail behind this scene: "one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out" (John 19:34) — read by the Fathers, from Chrysostom onward, as a sacramental sign: water for Baptism, blood for the Eucharist, both flowing from the side of the New Adam just as Eve was formed from the side of the first Adam (Genesis 2:21–22)

— the Church herself, the Bride of Christ, brought forth from His wounded side.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

- The icon insists on placing Adam's skull directly beneath the Cross rather than leaving Golgotha a bare hill. How does this detail reshape your sense of what your own baptism will accomplish — not merely a personal decision, but a real incorporation into the death of the New Adam that undoes the death of the old?
- Notice how restrained the grief is in this icon compared to more graphic Western art. What is the theological effect of depicting even the Crucifixion with an undertone of victory rather than despair?

5. Saint Constantine the Great

Commemorated with St. Helen, May 21

This icon is a different kind from the previous four — it depicts not Christ, but a saint, and so it is the clearest test case for everything established in Part V about veneration. No Orthodox Christian offers Constantine *latreia*; he receives *proskynesis*, honor for a life conformed to Christ, exactly as the icon of a beloved grandfather's photograph receives a kiss without confusion about who is God.



Saint Constantine the Great, holding the Cross and a model of the city

Why the Church Calls Him "Equal to the Apostles"

Constantine (r. 306–337) is one of only a handful of saints, alongside St. Mary Magdalene, St. Nina of Georgia, and St. Helen his own mother, to bear the title *Isapostolos* — "Equal to the Apostles." This is not a claim that he held apostolic office in the way the Twelve did, but that his labor for the spread and public establishment of the Gospel was, in its historical consequence, apostolic in scale.

- **The Edict of Milan, A.D. 313** — issued jointly with Licinius — ended the era of imperial persecution and granted Christianity, for the first time, full legal toleration throughout the Roman world, a direct historical answer to centuries of martyrdom under emperors from Nero to Diocletian.
- **The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325** — Constantine convened and personally presided over the opening of this council, called to answer the Arian heresy that denied the full divinity of Christ. It was this council that gave the Church the original Nicene Creed, confessing the Son as "of one essence (*homoousios*) with the Father" — words that stand to this day as evidence of the Church's conciliar continuity with apostolic teaching.
- **The founding of Constantinople** as a new, explicitly Christian capital — the city he holds in miniature in this very icon — reoriented the political and spiritual center of the Empire toward a city built, from its foundation, around churches rather than pagan temples.

The Vision and the Cross

Ecclesiastical historians (chiefly Eusebius of Caesarea, who reports it as told to him directly by Constantine himself) record that before the decisive Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine saw a sign of the Cross in the sky, together with the words *In this sign, conquer*, and was instructed in a dream to place the Chi-Rho monogram — the first two Greek letters of "Christ," *XP* — on his soldiers' shields. This is why nearly every icon of Constantine, including this one, shows him holding a cross prominently: it is not a generic attribute of sainthood but a reference to this specific, historically reported vision that the Church has always treated as the hinge of his conversion.

EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, LIFE OF CONSTANTINE

Eusebius records that Constantine, marching against a tyrant and uncertain what divine aid he could summon, called on his father's God to reveal Himself, and was shown, above the sun, a cross of light with an inscription attached, promising victory by that sign — an account Eusebius says he received from the emperor's own testimony under oath.

A Sober, Orthodox Caveat

It is worth naming honestly, as you would for any saint, that Constantine's sainthood does not canonize every decision of his reign — he was baptized only near death, delayed for reasons debated by historians, and his family life included serious moral failures. The Church does not venerate him as a flawless ruler but as one whom God used, in the manner of an Old Testament king like David, to accomplish a decisive good for His people, and whose life, taken as a whole and especially in its final commitment to Christ and the Nicene faith, is honored as a model of imperial service placed in submission to the Gospel rather than the other way around. This, too, is characteristically Orthodox: sainthood is about a trajectory of grace working through a real, complicated human life, not moral perfection.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

- Constantine's conversion was public and consequential for an entire empire; yours is quieter, but no less real. What does his icon suggest to you about the relationship between personal conversion and its wider effects on the people God has placed

around you — those closest to you first?

- How does honoring a flawed but grace-marked saint like Constantine, rather than requiring moral perfection before veneration, shape your own sense of readiness for baptism?

For Your Own Study

A few larger questions, meant to be worked through slowly — in your journal, in conversation with your spiritual father, and in prayer before the icons themselves, not merely at a desk.

On Scripture

- Read Exodus 25 and Exodus 20 back to back, in one sitting, in your OSB. Write out, in your own words, the single principle that lets both stand together without contradiction.
- Trace the word *eikon* through Colossians, Romans 8:29, and 2 Corinthians 3:18 ("we are being transformed into the same image"). How does the doctrine of theosis — union with God — depend on this vocabulary of image?

On History

- Research the Rylands Papyrus fragments and the Dura-Europos house-church (c. 235) — among the earliest known Christian worship spaces, decorated with biblical images well over a century before Constantine. What does the material archaeological record suggest about whether icon veneration is a late innovation or an ancient, continuous practice — bearing directly on any argument from historical continuity?
- Compare the Seventh Ecumenical Council's process — examining patristic testimony, hearing both sides, ratified by the whole Church including Rome — against the unilateral imperial decrees of the iconoclast emperors. What does this contrast teach you about how the Orthodox Church understands doctrinal authority as conciliar rather than merely hierarchical or political?

On Personal Practice

- The next time you venerate an icon, try to notice — honestly, without performing a feeling for yourself — whether your heart is passing through the image to the Person, or resting on the object itself. What helps you keep that movement alive?
- Ask your spiritual father directly: which icon should anchor your personal prayer corner as you approach baptism, and why that one for you specifically, at this point in your formation?

A FINAL WORD FROM ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS

He writes, near the close of his treatises, that he will not cease to venerate matter, through which his salvation was worked, but will honor it with reverence, not as God, but as filled with divine energy and grace — just as no one says the wood of the Cross, thrice-precious and thrice-blessed, is merely wood, but rather that it is honored as the instrument through which God accomplished our salvation.



A Prayer Before the Icons

O Lord Jesus Christ, our God, who for our salvation didst take flesh of the Virgin and become truly man, that what was unseen might be seen, and what was formless might be given form —

grant that as I look upon Thy holy image, and the images of Thy saints, my heart may pass beyond the wood and the gold to Thee alone, the true and living God;

and as I stand a catechumen at the threshold of Thy Church, number me among those who, though they have not seen, yet believe, and grant me a good confession and an unashamed entrance into the mysteries which Thou hast prepared for those who love Thee.

Through the prayers of the Theotokos, of St. John of Damascus, and of all the Saints, have mercy on me and save me. Amen.

WINDOWS TO HEAVEN — A STUDY OF THE HOLY ICONS
PREPARED IN THE TRADITION OF THE HOLY ORTHODOX CHURCH