

The Open Door

Entering the Sanctuary of Icons and Prayer

By Frederica Mathewes-Green

Study Guide

The Open Door is composed of four long chapters followed by eight shorter chapters. Study groups may want to take this into account as meetings are planned. You will want to look at the prints of the icons as you consider each question.

Chapter 1: The Christ of Sinai

1. In your life you have seen hundreds of images of Christ, in pictures and on film. Which have affected you most strongly?
2. Is it important that an image of Christ be “realistic”? Why or why not?
3. Most people find, when looking at the Christ of Sinai, that the eyes are the most arresting feature. What catches your attention second?
4. “O Lord, you have searched me and known me!” God sees through us to our secret faults, and intends to heal us. Is this realization exhilarating or intimidating? Explain why.

Chapter 2: The Virgin of Vladimir

1. If a ruler commanded you to put your foot on an image of Christ, would you do it? Would it make a difference if this was a Christian ruler who sincerely believed such images are heretical? What would you say to him?
2. A statue is more like a living person than a painting is, because it is three dimensional. Yet this three-dimensional presence limits it, trapping it in our immediate environment, in a way an icon does not—we “look through” an icon as through a window. Which would be more useful as a background to prayer?
3. Historically, the Virgin Mary has been treated with attitudes ranging from respect to idolatry. How have you seen her in the past?
4. Can you think of her as your prayer partner? Are there other heroes of the Christian faith whom you are especially drawn to, whom you would like to call on in this way? What would you ask them to pray about?

Chapter 3: The Resurrection

1. When we think of the Resurrection we usually picture the empty tomb on Sunday morning. This icon is about what happened after the Crucifixion but before the empty tomb. What was Christ doing during this time? Look for hints in the Nicene Creed and I Peter 3.
2. “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” How can so-called “free will” lead us into slavery?
3. St. John Chrysostom’s Paschal Sermon has been well-loved for 1600 years. What part of it speaks most to you?

Chapter 4: St. John the Baptist

1. Have you seen St. John the Baptist depicted before in movies or bible illustrations? What is the first adjective you associate with his character?
2. St. John is associated with rebuking a ruler for sexual immorality. How can we tell when is it right to give such a rebuke, and when should we “Judge not”?
3. In this icon he shows a subtle emotion that combines imploring Christ for mercy and tender expectation of receiving it. Why would someone who lived such an austere life still depend on Christ’s mercy?
4. God intentionally made each of us with a distinct personality, and the closer we draw to him the more like our unique selves we will be. Was there a time in your life when you thought you should be like someone else instead? Why?

Chapter 5: The Angel with the Golden Hair

1. This question appears in this chapter: “If they made an icon of you holding a scroll, what would it say?” What one message of praise or exhortation would you want to be remembered for?
2. Angels have become characters on TV shows and in movies lately, and many books have been written about them. The emphasis is on presence of angels around us all the time, unseen or sometimes seen. Is there any story of an encounter with an angel, fictitious or real, that was especially meaningful to you?

Chapter 6: The Annunciation

1. The Virgin’s upraised hand is at the exact center of the space from the top of the canopy to her footrest, as if halting time. It is this moment, rather than the birth of Christ, that marks the Incarnation, his entry into human form. What is the special

- significance of the Incarnation? (Hint: “Hail, you through whom Creation is renewed.”)
2. St. Romanus received the Nativity kontakion in a dream. Have you ever felt that God has spoken to you through a dream? Describe.
 3. The Akathist hymn is beautiful, expressive poetry. Is there a passage in it that particularly appeals to you? Is there anything that is puzzling?

Chapter 7: The Nativity

1. How does this icon differ from familiar representations of the Christmas scene? What elements are present that we don't usually encounter, and which are absent?
2. Can you identify with Joseph feeling doubtful, given his situation? Are there particular doubts that continue to trouble you? How does having a faith community help you over such “rough spots”?

Chapter 8: The Theophany

1. St. John the Baptist was taken aback by Christ's request to be baptized; this hesitation is conveyed by his awkward posture in the icon. St. Peter was similarly uncomfortable when Christ wanted to wash his feet. Why would such requests from the Lord make us uncomfortable?
2. In the blessing of a house, the walls are sprinkled with holy water, in a sense “baptizing” it and offering it to God. Have you had your house blessed? Do you feel that all your possessions, even the most ordinary--car, clothes, groceries—belong to God, or do such things seem too trivial to bother him with? Why?
3. St. Sophronius' prayer is much longer than this excerpt, but even this selection conveys a sense of majesty and exultation. Is this a tone that you have encountered elsewhere in worship, or does it seem unique? Does it occur in Scripture?

Chapter 9: The Transfiguration

1. The Transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor is one of many transfigurations in the Scripture: a Bush that burned and was not consumed, a Virgin transformed into a mother, water turned into wine, bread and wine turned into Body and Blood. Christians should expect to be transformed too. C. S. Lewis wrote that our expectations are too low: we think that Christ wants to make us into a little rose-covered cottage but we discover He is building us into a palace, because “He intends to come and live in it Himself.” Try to put into words what you imagine when you picture your own potential transfiguration.

2. In the Transfiguration, Christ showed the disciples his glory “as far as they could bear it.” Do you think that the presence of God’s glory would be more than a human could bear? In what way—physically, emotionally, intellectually, otherwise?

Chapter 10: The Crucifixion

1. This chapter begins with a description of the Rite of Forgiveness, wherein members of the parish face each other and ask for and receive forgiveness. Does this seem like a good way to repair broken relationships? What about it would be difficult?
2. Unlike European scenes of the Crucifixion, Christ here is relatively unbloodied and serene. While a more “realistic” depiction invites our empathy, the icon seems to say that we should not presume to empathize; we cannot comprehend this mystery, but simply receive it with grateful awe. Are there other depictions of the Crucifixion, of either the Western or Eastern style, that have affected you powerfully?

Chapter 11: The Epitaphios

1. This question appears in this chapter: “If we froze time at this moment and imagine that Jesus did not rise from the dead, how would the world have been different? How would your life be different?” How would it affect you personally?
2. Have you ever kept a vigil in prayer all night long? What was the cause?

Chapter 12: The Old Testament Trinity

1. You have probably seen a color reproduction of this icon at some time, since it is one of the most popular. What about this icon makes it uniquely appealing?
2. Abraham’s story reminds us that “some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2). Was there a time when you gave or received hospitality in unexpected circumstances?
3. In Jesus’ day, as today, a professional fisherman was not expected to be highly educated. Yet the Troparion of Pentecost notes that the sending of the Holy Spirit “revealed the fishermen as all-wise.” Why does this hymn note their wisdom in particular, rather than their courage or other virtues? What would such wisdom mean in your own life?

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