

# Women with Icons

BY JOCELYN MATHEWES

In the Orthodox tradition, icons—like the saints and stories they portray—point to the power of the larger story of Scripture, and show how great a God is our God. The photographs in the *Women with Icons* project reveal how the icons of patron saints, and the women who hold them close, point to Christ.

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**M**y 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.

The world the icons point to is larger than and contains many of the stories within the Bible. Jesus' ascension, his entrance into Jerusalem, his crucifixion and resurrection all play a liturgical, scriptural, and iconographic role in the Orthodox Church. An icon enables me to tell a story



RUTH MATHEWES WITH HER ICONS.

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to my preliterate children by way of pointing and explaining. Since my children perceive icons as one of many believable visual media, having icons on the walls is another way I can make the reality of their faith more present in their lives.

An icon of the Nativity, for example, does not depend on a particular biblical text, and this simplifies matters a bit. I do not have to explain why each Gospel tells the story a little differently (yet). When my children have a question about the story, they can point to their question. It is very concrete and satisfying to be able to carry a squirming and restless child over to the Nativity icon in the middle of a church service, bringing their attention back into focus. Look! Jesus was born in a cave! And look! There are the angels in the sky that were there when he was born! And look! There are the shepherds!

As an adult convert to the Orthodox faith, I came to iconography with my adult mind and a background in visual arts. I was familiar with the historical use of art in religious settings, as well as the totemic effects that religious and art objects can achieve. Thus, the power of iconography was not terribly mysterious to me, but it was rather jarring to actually *use* it in my personal religious context. 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). Calligraphic scripture verses or illuminated Bibles were acceptable to me, but biblical stories filtered through the cartoon worlds of television or even children's Bibles seemed rather informal and incomplete.

The icons of the Orthodox Church filled this void and roused within me a desire to understand the vast history and narrative of the faith, to express its beauty in a visual way. Gradually I began to collect paper icons and to explore the church's history through books like Kallistos Ware's *The Orthodox Church* and bits of *The Way of a Pilgrim* and the *Philokalia*. At the same time, my art, design, and literature classes instructed me that *how* we choose to say or make something — the medium — often matters just as much as *what* we are saying — the content.

I found myself loving the *how* and *what* of Orthodoxy, especially icons. The time came to join the church through chrismation, and I needed to take on the name of a saint. Since my given name did not directly relate to that of any saint, it was up to me, with the guidance of those around me, to discover a saint I connected with or admired. At the time of my conversion, I was engaged to be married, so I longed for a saint's story that related to my personal path. I felt that a monastic saint's life might seem too distant and alien from my own experience, so I opened the pages of David and Mary Ford's *Marriage as a Path to Holiness: Lives of Married Saints*.

I found my inspiration while reading about Saint Sophia of Thrace, who is commemorated in the Orthodox Church on June 4th. Today I have an icon of her hanging on my wall, and to those who ask about my faith and how I live it, I can point to her and say, "She is everything I admire — selfless, humble, disciplined, and giving. She is everything I aspire to." Saint Sophia, who lived in the tenth or eleventh century, according to the *Prologue from Ochrid*, 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.

In my self-portrait I am standing in the backyard of our small second-floor apartment in Baltimore. My husband and I lived there for the first five years of our marriage alongside an eclectic set of neighbors. I was struck by how simple yet sufficient our surroundings were. Even though the row houses were a bit worn, they had their own community. I wanted to place



*JOCELYN MATHEWES WITH SAINT SOPHIA OF THRACE.*

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that modern community as a literal backdrop to the ancient faith, and turn away from the camera so that the icon's face (and therefore life) would become more prominent than my own.

My photographing other women holding the icons of their patron saints happened rather by accident. After I had chosen my saint and undergone chrismation, I wondered what saints other Orthodox women choose to associate with. Are they from the Bible or church history? How many are handed to them by parents or godparents? Exploring these chosen saints by conversing with other women opened to me stories I had not grown up with, stories that provoked and inspired. I began by asking my fellow churchgoers about their saints and their stories, and then asked to photograph them. My ongoing photography project, *Women with Icons*, blossomed from there. It is now comprised of almost fifty images of women of all ages and different walks of life, and with quite a broad spectrum of saints too.



LIANA WITH EMPRESS THEODORA.  
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A dear friend of mine, also a convert to the faith, had chosen as her saint the Empress Theodora, who lived in the mid-800s and governed the Byzantine Empire after her husband's death (while her son was a minor). Saint Theodora, commemorated on February 11th according to *Prologue from Ochrid*, is best known for restoring the use of icons after the iconoclastic controversy. In Liana's photograph, I chose to mirror the regal status of the saint in Liana's elaborate garb and the fabric background. To show a bit of Liana's unique character (especially her beautiful hair), I photographed her from above as she lay on the fabric. The perspective is rather non-traditional in portraiture; choosing such an angle serves to illustrate again how ancient stories and the lives of the faithful departed are relevant in modern life.

Beginning in youth, there is the urge to mimic and emulate stories; this can be seen in these two young women, dressed in some of their finest and



*KATIE WITH SAINT CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA.*

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favorite clothing to have their picture taken. Young Katie's namesake, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, is known primarily through oral and non-scriptural sources. The daughter of the governor of Egypt during the reign of emperor Maximinus II in the early fourth century, she was renowned for her intellect and beauty. She was threatened with death by breaking on the wheel (which appears in her icon) if she did not renounce her faith and marry. Katie insisted on dressing as royalty herself, without my asking. She appears next to an antique spinning wheel, which makes the photograph feel almost as though it is an icon within an icon. Katie, a potential saint, cradles her namesake, a kind of recursive relationship.

Another young woman desired to make the image-making occasion special and important through dress – reflecting how she and Katie treat the stories of history and the Bible, and hopefully how they will continue to treat them. Little Hannah's demeanor is joyful, evoking the joy that the



*HANNAH WITH HOLY PROPHETESS HANNAH.*

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biblical Hannah experienced when given the gift of her son Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-21). When little Hannah hears the story about God's gift to her namesake, this icon makes the story all the more concrete and personal to her. And 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.



ANNA N. WITH SAINT ANNA.

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Much as the biblical Hannah prayed for a child, so also did the Holy, Righteous Ancestor of God Anna, who is commemorated on September 9. According to church tradition (and mentioned in the *Protoevangelion of James*), Joachim and Anna were a childless couple, much to their grief; the Virgin Mary was given to Anna in the same way Samuel was given to Hannah. In addition to the icons that feature Joachim and Anna embracing one another, there is in the Orthodox canon of icons an image of Saint Anna holding the infant Mary in her arms. In this way we can see how faith can be built up and transmitted from parent to child, and a reverence is given to parenthood, especially motherhood.

The Annas photographed for the *Women with Icons* project hail from the poles of human experience. A young Anna sheepishly holds her icon in front of her face, standing next to two strong men. She is sheltered by her father and friend on either side, and while her own identity is hidden,





*ANNE K. WITH SAINT ANNA.*  
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she will perhaps come out from behind the story of Saint Anna and use it as inspiration for her own life, whether that includes the gift of motherhood or not. She can, perhaps, come to understand Saint Anna as Jesus' grandmother (as I like to explain to my own children). 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.*

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Patron saints can become especially relevant as Christians face their ending. One of the most difficult portraits in the project was that of an acquaintance of mine, Sheila (Memory Eternal). I became connected to Sheila through a friend at my church. Approaching the end of her life, Sheila had expressed interest in being photographed with her saint, Saint Bridget of Kildare. 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.

Saint Bridget was an intensely generous monastic who devoted her life to God and was always giving to the poor. Likewise, Sheila sought to be radical in her faith, even in death in a modern hospital. She was unable to sit up and “pose” for her portrait, which made the physical connection between the icon and sitter rather problematic. Though she was in pain at the time and could not eat very much, she brought out her greatest smile—a

reflection of the vibrancy and life she had brought to others in earlier years. I left quite a bit of this portrait to chance and surroundings, but chose to have the open door of her room included (rather than facing a closed wall of the hospital) to include a greater sense of depth and space (as much as could be made, with all the bustle of hospital equipment around).

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.

Much as we are formed in early years by our biological families, through our incidental and adoptive church families we learn what is expected of us. Just as our families teach us norms of behavior and principles of life, so it is with the saints in history and Scripture. As we seek to embody the truths in Scripture, we also seek to emulate Christian saints we hear about in Church. The saints have figured out that delicate balance: how to serve Christ both *through* and *in opposition* to their cultures and expected roles. Like the saints, we must carefully negotiate our culture every day in our unique circumstances. We can draw strength from these exemplars and from each other, using our own stories and their stories to keep the fire of faith burning within.

In the Orthodox tradition the icons, like the saints and their stories, always point toward the power of the larger story of Scripture, and show how great a God is our God. In the Orthodox liturgy we read from a gilded Gospel book and kiss it out of reverence to the story (not the object). When we have a procession with an icon around the church, that icon—of feast or saint—is pointing to Christ and the power of his resurrection and victory over death.

Thus, in the *Women with Icons* project, 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. I hope that in its small way the *Women with Icons* project will point to Christ, just as the icons and the women who hold them close do.

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