



JOHN OF DAMASCUS

OPENING COLLECT

Confirm our minds, O Lord, in the mysteries of the true faith, set forth with power by your servant John of Damascus; that we, with him, confessing Jesus to be true God and true Man, and singing the praises of the risen Lord, may, by the power of the resurrection, attain to eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.** (*Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, p. 93)



ENCOUNTER

Begin by asking those gathered if they have heard of or know anything about John of Damascus. Allow anyone who knows something to share, then pass out the handout and give the group time to read through the material. When everyone is done reading, open the conversation to discuss John's life and witness, using some of the questions below.

- * What are some key moments from John's life?
- * What qualities stand out to you about John?
- * Did you find anything about John's life confusing or surprising?



IMAGES

As part of the class, you may want to display some images of John of Damascus. Possibilities are included on the *Living Discipleship* website, but you can substitute others that are meaningful to your community.



ENGAGE

John of Damascus was a strong advocate for the practice of praying with icons, during a time when icons were being hotly debated. John contended that God chose to reveal God's self to humanity through the material world and most of all through Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. He believed that, like the sacraments, icons make present that which they represent. They are gateways through the visible to the invisible. Thus, when we practice prayer with icons, the icons themselves are not the focus of our prayer; they instead serve to carry us deeper into relationship with the one God, the Revealer.

Try it out. For this prayer practice, you will need at least one icon for the group to gaze upon and a space that is appropriately quiet and comfortable.

- ✿ Start with the icon covered and take some time for the group to enter into silence.
- ✿ After a few minutes, move quietly to uncover the icon and invite the group to focus their gaze upon it. Invite the group to bring their full selves into an encounter with God through this icon. Allow at least 5-10 minutes for the group to gaze silently upon the icon.
- ✿ Next, invite the group to offer intercessions and thanksgivings to God, either silently or aloud, while remaining fixed on the icon.
- ✿ Conclude with the Lord's Prayer.

After you've finished praying with the icon, discuss the following questions, either all together or in small groups.

- ✿ What did you notice when you gazed upon the icon?
- ✿ What was hard about this prayer practice?
- ✿ What was fruitful for you?

EXPLORE

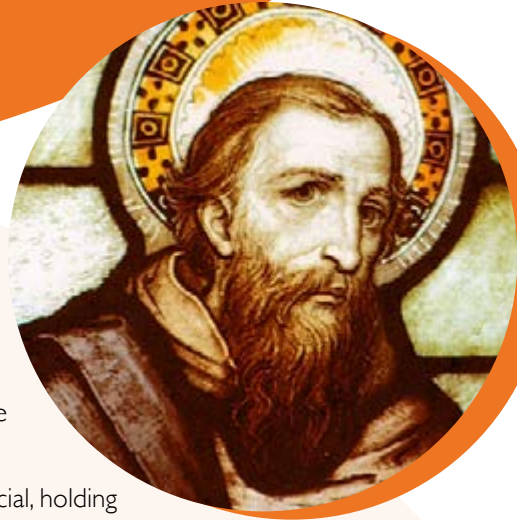
- ✿ Debates over the use of icons, relics, and images in worship have continued to arise throughout the history of Christianity. How does your church use images? What tensions are present, if any, over the use of images in your church?
- ✿ What does John of Damascus teach us about God?
- ✿ What particular gifts or strengths did this saint have?
- ✿ Does John of Damascus have anything to teach us about living in times of theological controversy?
- ✿ What does the development of John's story teach us about the Church's role in shaping the images and stories of the saints we remember?

EXPAND

- ✿ *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* by John of Damascus. Translated and Introduction by Andrew Louth
- ✿ *St. John of Damascus: Writings*. Translated by Frederic H. Chase Jr.

CONCLUDING COLLECT

Confirm our minds, O Lord, in the mysteries of the true faith, set forth with power by your servant John of Damascus; that we, with him, confessing Jesus to be true God and true Man, and singing the praises of the risen Lord, may, by the power of the resurrection, attain to eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.** (*Lesser Feasts and Fasts*)



JOHN OF DAMASCUS

FAST FACTS

- * John of Damascus was born an Arab Christian under the rule of the Muslim Caliph in about 676 CE.
- * John's father, Sergius ibn Mansur, was a tax collector or treasury official, holding a high position in the Muslim court.
- * Owing to his father's status and his own innate talents, John received an excellent education in theology and the sciences. Scholars believe that John succeeded his father in his office as tax collector for the caliphate.
- * John resigned his office around 725 CE and became a monk at Mar Saba, a monastery near Bethlehem.
- * During this time, a debate was raging in the Church over the use and veneration of icons, that is, images of Jesus, a saint, or a sacred event that are used as an aid to devotion. Though icons had been used by Christians for centuries in prayer and worship, a group of people called iconoclasts ("images breakers" in Greek) challenged the use of icons, contending that they were a form of the idols prohibited in the second commandment.
- * A group of powerful bishops convinced Emperor Leo III of the iconoclast argument, and he outlawed the use of icons in 726 CE. In 730 CE, Leo went even further, commanding the demolition of all icons and religious images; as a result iconoclasts went on a spree, destroying most of the icons and religious images in Europe.
- * John of Damascus was an adamant supporter of icons and wrote extensive works defending their use. He argued that icons should not be worshiped, but that they could be venerated, an important distinction. He wrote: "Often, doubtless, when we have not the Lord's passion in mind and see the image of Christ's crucifixion, his saving passion is brought back to remembrance, and we fall down and worship not the material but that which is imaged: just as we do not worship the material of which the Gospels are made, nor the material of the Cross, but that which these typify."¹
- * The use of icons and images for prayer and devotion, which John defended so valiantly, remains an important part of worship for Christians around the world today. Orthodox churches, in particular, venerate icons as a central part of their communal worship and personal piety and many Episcopal churches use icons either for decoration or for prayer. Yet John's defense of images was not applicable exclusively to icons. The practice of decorating our sanctuaries with images in stained glass and other adornments relies heavily on the arguments and writings of John of Damascus.
- * John's defense of icons was unpopular among those in power. Following his death, the Council of Hieria in 753 anathematized John and his writings, but his legacy was restored by the Second Council of Nicaea, which ruled against the iconoclasts.
- * Though he is best known for his defense of icons, John's contributions to theology were varied and far-reaching. His work *On the Orthodox Faith* was important in the consolidation of a distinctively eastern Christian theology. *The Fount of Wisdom* is one of the most important works of Greek patristic literature, and thus John is often known as the last of the Church Fathers.

¹ As quoted in *Quote, Unquote* (1977) by Lloyd Cory, p. 197.

- * John was also particularly dedicated to the Theotokos, the Greek name for the Virgin Mary, which literally means God-bearer. His sermons and writings on Mary have been an important source of theology and devotion for both eastern and western Christians.
- * John of Damascus is commemorated in The Episcopal Church's calendar on December 4.

DID YOU KNOW?

- * A statement from the Second Council of Nicaea compared John of Damascus to Saint Matthew the tax collector, because like Matthew, John considered following Christ to be of more value than all of the treasures of his position and abandoned his wealth and status as a tax collector in the court to follow his faith and live as a monk.
- * During his own time, John of Damascus was called Chrysorrhoas, which means "streaming with gold" or "the golden speaker," because his speeches in defense of icons were so beautiful and eloquent.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

- * "I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake, and who worked out my salvation through matter: ... For this reason, I honor all remaining matter, because God has filled it with his grace and power, and because salvation has come through it."
- * "Possibly a contentious unbeliever will maintain that we worshipping images in our churches are convicted of praying to lifeless idols. Far be it from us to do this. Faith makes Christians, and God, who cannot deceive, works miracles. We do not rest contented with mere coloring. With the material picture before our eyes we see the invisible God through the visible representation, and glorify Him as if present, not as a God without reality, but as a God who is the essence of being. Nor are the saints whom we glorify fictitious. They are in being, and are living with God; and their spirits being holy, the help, by the power of God, those who deserve and need their assistance."
- * "The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God."²

DEBUNKING

The Life of St. John Damascene by John of Jerusalem tells a story of the severing and miraculous restoration of John of Damascus' hand. The story says that iconoclast Emperor Leo III, enraged by John's articulate defense of icons, convinced the Caliph that John was plotting against him. The Caliph ordered that John's writing hand be cut off and hung up in the monastery as a warning to the other monks. A few days later, John asked for the restoration of his hand and prayed before an icon of *Theotokos* (the Virgin Mary), reminding her of the beautiful homilies he had written to honor her. It was said that Mary heard John's prayer and miraculously restored his hand to his arm. Though the story is likely legend and not fact, it does highlight the intensity of feeling on both sides of the debate over icons: defending them was enough to have the emperor plot to cut John's hand off, and prayer to the Virgin, before her icon, was powerful enough to have John's hand restored.

2 All three of these quotations come from John of Damascus' *Treatises on Divine Images*.



HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

OPENING COLLECT

God of all times and seasons: Give us grace that we, after the example of your servant Hildegard, may both know and make known the joy and jubilation of being part of your creation, and show forth your glory not only with our lips but in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** (*Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, p. 383)



ENCOUNTER

Begin by asking those gathered if they have heard of or know anything about Hildegard of Bingen. Allow anyone who knows something to share, then pass out the handout and give the group time to read through the material. When everyone is done reading, open the conversation to discuss Hildegard's life and witness, using some of the questions below.

- * What are some key moments from Hildegard's life?
- * What qualities stand out to you about Hildegard?
- * Do you hear any connections between Hildegard's story and those of other saints we've met thus far?



IMAGES

As part of the class, you may want to display some images of Hildegard of Bingen. Possibilities are included on the *Living Discipleship* website, but you can substitute others that are meaningful to your community.



ENGAGE

Option 1: Explore Monasticism

Monasticism (the religious life of monks and nuns) has held an incredibly important place in the development of Christianity, providing a place where men and women could dedicate themselves fully to the worship and pursuit of God. Monasticism has also held an important place in civilization, existing for hundreds of years as the repository of knowledge, where books were copied, collected, and preserved, and the center of education and learning in much of the world. Care for the poor and a dedication to service to the community have long been hallmarks of monastic communities. But many Episcopalians do not know that monastic communities still exist today—and that The Episcopal Church has monastic orders.

Invite a member of a local monastic community to come and speak to your group. Ask them to share about their Rule of Life—a framework for their spiritual and physical practices—and to speak about the gifts and challenges of living as a member of a religious community.

Option 2: Gifts and Challenges

If you are unable to find a member of a monastic community nearby to speak, show this video from the Society of Saint John the Evangelist:

- * <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/religious-orders-and-faith-communities>

After you have watched the video, divide into small groups of four to six people and discuss the following questions:

- * What was striking or intriguing to you about Brother Geoffrey's description of the monastic life?
- * Have you had personal experience with a monastic community? If so, what was it like?
- * What do you think some of the gifts of the monastic life might be?
- * What do you think some of the challenges of the monastic life might be?

EXPLORE

All together or in small groups, discuss one or more of the following questions:

- * What does Hildegard have to teach us about our lives as people of faith?
- * How did Hildegard use her unique gifts to God's glory?
- * What might Hildegard have to teach us about the relationship between science and religion or intellect and faith?
- * What about Hildegard's story comforts you? What about her story challenges you?

EXPAND

- * Selected Writings: *Hildegard of Bingen* by Hildegard of Bingen. Audio: *Hildegard von Bingen Canticles of Ecstasy* and *A Feather on the Breath of God*
- * *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias (Classics of Western Spirituality)* by Hildegard of Bingen

CONCLUDING COLLECT

God of all times and seasons: Give us grace that we, after the example of your servant Hildegard, may both know and make known the joy and jubilation of being part of your creation, and show forth your glory not only with our lips but in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** (*Lesser Feasts and Fasts*)



HILDEGARD OF BINGEN



FAST FACTS

- ✿ Hildegard was born in 1098 in central Germany to a noble, wealthy family. As the tenth child born into her family, she was “tithed” to the church.
- ✿ At eight years old, Hildegard was sent to live with an anchoress (a nun who lives secluded from the world) named Jutta in a cottage near a Benedictine monastery. There she lived a life of silence and prayer, learning the Latin Bible and chanting the Daily Office.
- ✿ Other women were drawn to Jutta and Hildegard, and soon a Benedictine convent was formed, with Jutta as the abbess. When Jutta died, Hildegard was unanimously elected as abbess to replace her.
- ✿ Throughout her life, Hildegard experienced dazzling spiritual visions. She had her first visionary experiences at the age of five—when she saw the color of an unborn calf and envisioned places she had never been.
- ✿ At forty-two years old, Hildegard had a vision of what she called “the shadow of the living light,” in which she understood the true meaning of the Bible. She heard a voice repeat three times, “O fragile one, ash of ash and corruption of corruption, say and write what you see.” So she started writing down her visions and illustrating them with intricate illuminations.
- ✿ She recorded hundreds of visions and compiled her first book, *Scivias*. Tales of Hildegard's visions and writings spread to Bernard of Clairvaux, a highly influential monk, and then all the way to Pope Eugenius III.
- ✿ The pope was so impressed that he read Hildegard's book aloud to other clergy. He commanded Hildegard to continue writing, which she did, writing more than 600 pages that both recorded her visions and wrestled with theological questions about the Incarnation, the Trinity, and other weighty matters.
- ✿ Hildegard became famous, sought after for counsel, and she corresponded with both secular and religious leaders from kings to popes.
- ✿ She left her first community and followed another vision from God that instructed her to establish two new convents.
- ✿ Unlike many other nuns and mystics, Hildegard did not remove herself from the world or spend all of her time with visions. She studied illnesses, including both medical and holistic forms of treatment, and wrote medical books with over 2,000 herbal remedies. She wrote

more than seventy pieces of liturgical music, as well as a liturgical drama, treatises, religious works on virtues and vices, and the biographies of two saints.

- ✿ In a male-dominated world, Hildegard was an important female mystic, poet, composer, dramatist, doctor, and scientist.
- ✿ In addition to founding convents, at the age of sixty-five, Hildegard went on four preaching missions, traveling through Germany to speak at monasteries and preach in churches. It was nearly unheard of for a woman of her time to have authority to speak publically, let alone preach.
- ✿ Hildegard died peacefully at the age of eighty-one. She is commemorated in The Episcopal Church's calendar on September 17.

DID YOU KNOW?

- ✿ Hildegard was so prolific in her writing that she is sometimes called the "Sybil of the Rhine."
- ✿ In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI recognized Hildegard as a "Doctor in the Church," making her the fourth woman and the thirty-fifth saint to be given that title by the Roman Catholic Church.
- ✿ In recognition of her many contributions and accomplishments, Hildegard has a planet named after her (the minor planet 898) as well as a genus of plant species *hildegardia*.

DEBUNKING

- ✿ In recent years, Hildegard has been touted by those in the New Age movement, both because her ethereal musical compositions bear some resemblance to those cherished by New Agers and because of her many references to natural theology in her reflections on God.
- ✿ It is impossible to extricate Hildegard's music and writings from her unshakable commitment to God in Jesus Christ. It is imperative to interpret all of Hildegard's work within the context of her faith, rather than separate from it. Her references to nature are references to God the Creator and Redeemer of the world. Her music, ethereal and advanced for her time, is exclusively religious in focus and inspired by faith.

IN HER OWN WORDS

- ✿ "Eternal God, now may it please you to burn in love so that we become the limbs, fashioned in the love you felt when you begot your Son at the first dawn before all creation. And consider this need which falls upon us, take it from us for the sake of your Son, and lead us to the joy of your salvation." (*O eterne dues*)
- ✿ "Listen: there was once a King sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the King with great honor. Then it pleased the King to raise a small feather from the ground and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I a feather on the breath of God." (*Scivias*)