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Seasoning the Seasons™

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Saint John Damascene

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Saint John Damascene
Mid 17th Century
Greek Heritage

Icons have been called “windows into heaven.” They are a wonderful resource for prayer and spirituality. There is a lovely icon in my parish church called the “Theotokos of the Passion” by Eastern Christians, and referred to by those of us who are Western Christians as “Our Lady of Perpetual Help.” Because an icon tells a story, we say an icon is “written”, rather than drawn or painted.

But did you know we might not have icons in our churches at all today if it hadn't been for Saint John Damascene. At a time when iconoclasm, or the destruction of religious images, was rampant, it was John Damascene who defended the veneration of icons. He explained that venerating sacred images is not the same as idolatry, but rather that an icon draws us into the presence of the mystery of the sacred.

John was born in Damascus (Syria) around the year 676 and died in 749. His Feast Day (optional memorial), December 4, is kept by both Eastern and Western Christians. John was a theologian and a liturgist. He not only studied and reflected upon Christian dogma, but he preached wonderful homilies and wrote beautiful liturgical hymns. In fact, we still sing his hymns today. The text of the Easter hymn *Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain* was written by John of Damascus! This hymn is sung today in churches of many denominations at Easter time.

In this icon of Saint John Damascene, you can see that his vestments are covered in icons. In the center of his chasuble is the icon of Our Lady of the Sign of Yaroslavl, a 15th century Byzantine icon. If icons tell us a story, perhaps this icon tells us that John Damascene preached many homilies centered on the Virgin Mary, and it certainly tells us the story of his appreciation for iconography as a means of entering into prayer. May Saint John Damascene intercede for us that we, too, may always have a great appreciation for art and beauty as a means of encountering the holy.