



“Icons as Portals for Unlocking the Contemplative Heart:

Icons, as opposed to paintings, are considered as “writings of the heart” which open the contemplative to “Behold” the Glory of the Lord. Many paintings can aid in our “seeing”, but icons allow us to “behold”. From the Orthodox tradition, the Divine Logos, or the Word “writes” the images to which the iconographer gains access, much as a scribe, though their deep transfiguring prayer. As such, it is an act of creation, an incarnation. In our contemplative prayer, first through a silent “gazing” at the image in *Visio Divina*, another realm begins to appear which lures us to step beyond the gaze into the ineffable realm of the Divine, where “Beholding” is the work of silence”. It is a “holding ourselves open for reality to impinge upon us”— reality of the sacredness of the world, all creation and all humanity. This “Beholding” transfigures the way we see the world, how we act in it, and conveys the great hope of God’s enduring love and wisdom as promised in the Covenant of Peace. Through deep silence, a portal or thin space is created to the invisible realm where we “behold” what is beyond the gaze of the human, what is exposed through the tear in the Temple veil-- that liminal space where divine exchange, or theosis occur.

In this mini retreat, we will practice contemplative “Beholding” through *visio divina* of icons from the ancient Orthodox Akathistos Hymn, The O Antiphons, The Litany of Loretto, and the Old Testament Wisdom Books. We shall see that there are really 2 Christmas stories of Incarnation occurring during this season. One is occurring in time and space, that is, the incarnation of Christ in Jesus birth story of the New

Testament. Another is occurring in eternity, beyond time and space, in the incarnation of the Divine into all creation celebrated in the First Temple rituals of Solomon's Tradition. Icons weave together the New Testament incarnation story in time with the Old Testament story beyond time. Contemplatives today become that place of abiding love big enough to hold both stories. (Concepts for this retreat are taken from works of Anglican Solitary, "Maggie Ross" and Dr. Margaret Barker, two women who have significantly impacted the direction of my life and work. We will follow the Contemplative Outreach guidelines for Visio Divina).

About Mary

Rev. Dr. Mary Altalo is an Archpriest of the Wisdom tradition in the independent Catholic Apostolic Church of Antioch, and Associate Dean of Sophia Divinity School, the Church's distant learning Seminary founded in 1958 by Patriarch Herman Spruit. She is the rector of a newly formed church, "Our Lady of the Bridge" in Union Bridge, Maryland, a sacramental and contemplative community in the Christian mystical tradition committed to helping people know the true identity of themselves, the other, and the earth as sacred entities. She had a former 30 year career as an oceanographer and thus seeks to bridge science and religion. In 2020, she led the COMW Advent Mini-retreat and has been an advocate of the contemplative prayer practices of Father Thomas Keating and Fr. William Menninger in daily life.