

SERMON - The Holy Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council, Sunday, October 13, 2019

The veneration of the icons, when understood and practiced according to sound Christological foundations, is a product and revelation of the Church's faith in Christ. Briefly, the meaning of icons is that they are testimonials and reminders of the Incarnation. In the words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, "No one has ever seen God, but the Man Christ reveals Him in full. An image of the Man Jesus is therefore an image of God, for Christ is the God-Man. If the material universe and its matter can be sanctified by the grace of the Holy Spirit...if the water of baptism grants us the forgiveness of sins; if the bread and wine of the Eucharist make present to us the Body and Blood of Christ, then a portrayal of Christ, the product of human art, may also be filled with the grace of His presence and power—may become not only an image but also a spiritual reality." ("Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy," SVS Press, 2003, page 202). Furthermore, the same reality exists with the depiction of the Mother of God, the apostles, the saints and the martyrs, because every saint is a witness for Christ, showing forth all the power of union with Him, and therefore reflect the power and image of Christ in themselves. They are, in effect, themselves living icons of Christ as well. Due to lack of understanding, ignorance and superstition, many practices of the church are sometimes perverted and distorted and take on improper forms. This occurred with the veneration of the icons. Iconoclasm originated in the church and appeared at the beginning of the 8th century among the bishops of the eastern borderlands of the Byzantine Empire. The sentiment was so strong that it necessitated Patriarch Germanos of Constantinople to defend the ancient practice of venerating the Holy Icons in a special epistle ("ukaz," in Russian). The controversy took on an imperial dimension when it reached the ears of the emperor, Leo the Isaurian, who chose to side with the iconoclasts. In the year 730 he published a decree against icons. The Western half of the church condemned iconoclasm and already bloodshed began in the East. Under Constantine Copronymus, Emperor Leo's son, persecution of the icon-worshippers was really set in motion, resulting in rampant bloodshed and atrocities. Constantine systematically purged the episcopate, beginning with the Patriarch, and summoned a robber council in Constantinople in 753 which condemned the veneration of icons. So began a decade of blood, and many new-martyrs were added to the church calendar who lost their lives for the sake of the veneration of the icons. Primarily it was the monks who proved to be the chief witnesses to the truth and openly opposed iconoclasm, which resulted in their persecution, torture and death. There was a widespread destruction of icons, which were replaced by worldly art: hunting scenes, decorative designs, and the like. The persecutions died down after Constantine's death and his iconoclast son Leo IV became emperor. Fifty years of iconoclasm had a strong effect on Byzantine society. When Leo the IV died in 780, his wife Irene became empress. Irene had always been a devotee of the icons and of the monks. In 787 Irene summoned a council in the city of Nicea, with Patriarch Tarasius presiding. Here the dogma of the veneration of icons was formulated and promulgated. The greatest theological defense of the veneration of the icons was laid down in the writings of St. John of Damascus, who in all probability had already died before the robber council of 753. Six Ecumenical Councils had already convened which defined and defended Orthodox Christology in the face of numerous heresies, robber councils, heretical emperors, and heretical bishops, presbyters and monks. The whole Christological dispute comes to a climax with the 7th Ecumenical Council, and the faith of the "Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Fathers" is the everlasting immutable foundation of Orthodoxy. However, iconoclasm did not end with the convening of this council. Iconoclasm continued to rear its ugly head and there were still bloody persecutions against the Orthodox. The final victory of Orthodoxy came once again through a woman. The Empress Theodora, the wife of Theophilus, halted the persecution immediately after her husband's death. On the first Sunday in Lent in 843 the reinstatement of icons was proclaimed in Agia Sophia, and this day has remained in the church's memory as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy." Each year on this Sunday the Church celebrates its victory over the heresy of iconoclasm which raged against the Church for 90 years. On the Sunday of Orthodoxy, the

true dogmas of the Orthodox Church are solemnly proclaimed, and all heresies and heretics are anathematized and excommunicated. Today the Church is still opposed by many false doctrines and teachings about Christ and about humanity. There are many modern day heresies. Some of them are re-incarnations of ancient heresies already condemned by the Church, others are new forms of ancient heresies, and some are totally new heresies peculiar to the modern age. May the Lord not abandon us in our sins, but continue to raise up great spiritual men and women and great theologians who will bring the Holy Fathers into the modern age, men and women who will dispel our confusion and clearly define the truth in the modern age. May our minds always be clear and see, understand, believe in and worship Christ as He really is. May we thus proclaim today and always, as we do on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, "this is the Faith of the apostles, this is the Faith of the Fathers, this is the Faith of the Orthodox, this Faith hath established the whole world.". Amen.