

**HOLY FATHERS OF THE SEVENTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**  
**John 17:1-13**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**  
**St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, 12189, October 8, 2023**

The first time that I was in an Orthodox Church was when I was thirteen years old. The walls and ceiling were completely frescoed from top to bottom. Some of the icons depicted our Savior, the Mother of God, various Saints and even the angels. Some of the frescoes depicted events in the life of our Savior, such as His Holy Nativity and His Holy Baptism. The center of the ceiling was the interior of the huge circular dome which sat on top of the church. Way high up, depicted in this central area was Christ Pantokrator. Descending from the midpoint of this icon was the main chandelier of the church. There were several icon stands towards the front of the church. The worshippers were crossing themselves, making prostrations, and kissing the icons. I was struck speechless and mesmerized by this awesome scene. The idea of reverence, veneration, holiness and sanctity is all that I could feel and sense in my soul. It made a huge and tremendous impression on me. The thought that there could be anything wrong with this veneration never crossed my mind, and the idea of idolatry never occurred to me. The veneration of the icons as part of Christian worship seemed right and natural and good. Added to all of this was the sweet aroma of incense which rose in clouds upwards towards the highest points in the church. All of my senses were filled with a sense of God and holiness: my eyes with the otherworldly beauty of the icons, my sense of smell with the intoxicating and sweet aroma of the incense, and even my sense of touch by kissing the holy icons. That same day I made up my mind that this was the religion for me. I expressed my desire to the priest, and so began my journey to becoming an Orthodox Christian.

It took a while before I learned that every Orthodox Christian keeps icons in the home, prays before them and venerates them the same as in church. I was ecstatic when I learned this, because I thought that the icons were so holy that it was not even possible to take them out of the church. I purchased my first two icons and learned that the priest must bless them with holy water on the altar before I could take them home. At the end of the Divine Liturgy I was handed my newly blessed icons which I clutched in my arms as a very special treasure. The connection that I made with God through the icons when I was a boy has continued for my entire life. Over the years I have purchased many more icons, but I still have the first two icons that I ever owned, and they still evoke the same sense of wonder and reverence that stirred within my heart so many years ago.

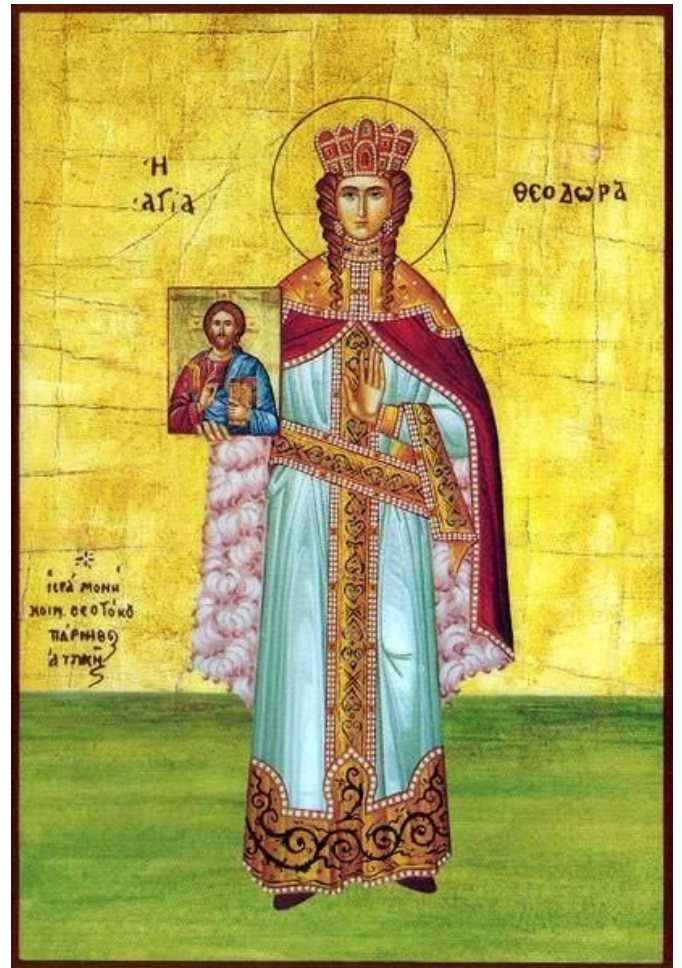
The devil, knowing how important the holy icons are as a part of Christian worship and salvation, stirred the proud hearts of false Christian leaders to consider the veneration of the icons as idolatry. This heresy became known as iconoclasm. For almost fifty years two iconoclast emperors forbade Orthodox Christians from venerating the icons of Christ and his saints. The Empress Regent Irene convoked the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, which met in Nicea, the same city where the First Ecumenical Council had also taken place. St. Tarasius, the Patriarch of Constantinople presided over 350 Orthodox bishops with the addition of seventeen others who renounced the iconoclast heresy. The heretics, under the pretext of idolatry, who had persecuted the Orthodox who venerated the holy icons, were anathematized and the veneration of the icons was restored. The Seventh Ecumenical Council is the last Ecumenical Council recognized by the Orthodox Church. Some years later, under the Emperor Leo V the Armenian (813-20), the heresy of iconoclasm once again reared its ugly head and was finally disposed of only in 843, through the zeal of the Empress Theodora and the Patriarch St. Methodius. The holy Fathers anathematized the heretical Patriarchs Anastasius, Constantine and Nicetas, demonstrated the errors of the pretended ("robber council") ecumenical council that Constantine V convened in 754 and proclaimed eternal memory of the holy defenders of Orthodoxy: Patriarch Germanus, St. John of Damascus<sup>1</sup>, George of Cyprus and all those who were exiled and tortured for defending the holy icons. This definitive

restoration of the holy icons is commemorated on the first Sunday of Great Lent, and is called the Sunday of Orthodoxy because, on this occasion, the Church celebrates the victory of the Orthodox faith over every heresy. Through the prayers of our holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us and save us. Amen.

For the classic defense of the Orthodox veneration of the icons, see “Three Treatises on the Divine Images” by St. John of Damascus, Popular Patristic Series Volume 24, SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 2003



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