

**SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY**  
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**Moscow, Church of Christ the Savior**

On the first Sunday of Great Lent we celebrate what is called the “Sunday of Orthodoxy.” This day was established in memory of the victory over the heresies of the VIII century, after the triumph over the heresy of iconoclasm. After all of the trials of the first seven centuries of the existence of Christianity, trials connected with many heresies and schisms, the Church finally decided that all destructive dissent would be stopped. With this hope a feast was established which, on the one hand, would bear witness to the acceptance of the veneration of the holy icons, and on the other hand, contained a prayer to God that no heresies and schisms would any longer disturb church unity.

However, we know that in Church history much has taken place after these events by people who sowed discord, disturbances and schism. However, in spite of these contrivances, by the mercy of God, the Church has still kept its oneness. Perhaps it diminished in size in relation to those dimensions that it had in the first millennium, covering East and West, but it preserved its unity and oneness. Today the exponents of this oneness consists of 15 autocephalous Orthodox Churches, whose names are remembered in the molieben of the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

Turning our attention to the past, yet at the same time valuing contemporary life, the question is asked: what was the driving force of such heterodoxy in the the Church which led to division and schism? Even the apostle Paul said that there would be dissent among you (see 1 Cor. 11:19), but not the kind that challenges the general faith of the Church, which disturbs the foundations of her existence and which defiles the life of the Orthodox with falsehood and false preaching.

If we attentively take a look at the personalities of those people who, in ancient times, were the founders of heresy, we will see that they were extraordinary people. They were highly intellectual, well educated and had disciples who were able to clearly and persuasively expound their point of view. Why weren't they servants of God and help build up the body of the Church, but instead became heresiarchs and fomenters of schism?

St. Gregory the Theologian writes that if someone wants to become a theologian, he must first learn to keep the commandments of God and to not rebel against the Divine order. He further says the following wonderful words: “deeds are steps that elevate us to contemplation (true understanding and knowledge of God).” St. Gregory said that special scholarship and special knowledge could certainly elevate a person to contemplation, but he also said that deeds, like steps, elevate a person to contemplation. In another place he maintains that there is great meaning, significance and value in words spoken by theologians, but nothing is more important than to cleanse one's soul, and he cites the words from the Book of Wisdom: “wisdom will not enter a deceitful soul, nor dwell in a body enslaved to sin” (Wisdom 1:4). In the words of Venerable Nikita from the Philokalia, paraphrasing the apostle Paul, no one can confess the Lord as only the Holy Spirit, which means that without the acquisition of the Holy Spirit it is not possible for someone to be a theologian.

This amazing sphere of human speculation — theology, is based not only on logic and knowledge, but above all it is founded on inner spiritual experience. If a theologian were to only be an academic scholar, having the knowledge to be able to argue his position, then he will always carries within himself the dangerous possibility of teaching falsehood. Only if this scholar lives an intensive spiritual life, if for him the Divine Liturgy is not merely a holiday protocol to go to church on the feast days, if for him prayer is a daily necessity, if for him repentance and self-analysis is a daily practice, then such an intellectual will never say a word against Divine truth, but the opposite, his knowledge, united with spiritual experience, will be a colossal warehouse of ideas and spiritual energy, just as it was with the Holy Fathers.

Never approach the Divine without preparing yourself spiritually. Theology is to approach and to touch the Divine, it is an attempt to penetrate the mystery of God. Only within the depths of a heart committed to the Lord and filled with humility and simplicity will salvific Divine truths be revealed.

Therefore, when we hear some kind of proud, perhaps even powerful words about God, which disturb and trouble our hearts, let us not easily become captivated by the fascination and charm of these words and immediately put our trust and faith in them, but first test them by verifying them with our own personal spiritual experience, and compare them and see if they correlate with the teachings of the Holy Apostles and the Holy Fathers. Therefore, let us be attentive and careful to what people say about God.

Many people today speak about God, but unfortunately, their words do not help people to become closer to God in as much as they create new obstacles which even further divide worldwide Christianity. We also know that in spite of the great attempts by many, among them holy people, to overcome the divisions which exist in the Christian world, the abyss and separation, especially with several confessions, is tragically growing even wider. No matter how much those who increase this abyss and separation try, by citing some kind of modern philosophical viewpoints, some kind of modern anthropology, some kind of new standards of ideas of thinking in a philosophical way, they can't hide their destructive activities which are aimed at further separating people from God, from His commandments and from His world.

The Sunday of Orthodoxy, on the one hand, gives us the opportunity to remember the names of everyone who labored to unify the Church, preaching about Christ. However, on the other hand, this day also gives us the opportunity to pray for the Church of today, for the contemporary Church, for a Church facing huge challenges, for her servers of today who face special demands, not only concerning the level of knowledge that is required of them, but also the depth of spiritual experience that they must have, because only through that experience, only by living a righteous life will they be able to convincingly and crushingly answer any attempts to further divide the flock of Christ.

May our Lord Himself, mercifully having called us into His Holy Church, having granted us the grace and strength for spiritual growth and having illumined our minds with the light of His Divine commandments, lead us through this life, protect us from every temptation and help us to grow spiritually, remembering that by our deeds we ascend the steps to contemplation, as St. Gregory the Theologian taught us. Amen.

***Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen***