

10-27-19 The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

When you come into an Orthodox church for the first time perhaps one of the most striking impressions is that of the icons, the Midian royal colors, the gold halos around the head, the stories and theology revealed in the icon. It makes a strong impression on the viewer, especially the first time. This morning we commemorate the Holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council and their defense and veneration of icons and their use in the church. I have taken this homily from my catechism class, so for the catechumens, this is simply a review.

Icons have been in the church since its beginning. St Luke, the Gospel writer, painted the first icon of Mary, the Mother of the Lord. In the catacomb churches, although icons were less refined, they were still an important part of Christian worship and expression. There are to this day some well-preserved catacombs in Rome and in these catacombs are icons of the Lord, the Theotokos and events surrounding the life of the Lord.

When the church was freed by the Emperor Constantine in the Fourth century, the church was free to express itself, to build churches above ground, to come out of the catacombs and adorn the churches with holy images and crosses. The church grew and developed and refined its worship having always at its center the receiving of the holy mysteries. Whenever serious problems arose with the potential to disrupt the dogmatic continuity of the church following the example of the apostles themselves, a council was convened to resolve the issue. As most of you know there were seven great ecumenical councils throughout the centuries and history of the church. The last of the great councils, the seventh, was called the Second Council of Nicaea and it dealt with use and veneration of icons and sacred and holy images in the church.

Icons historically were placed in the church, in the homes and even in public places, but a controversy arose about the veneration of icons and this controversy lasted for 120 years, 120 years. There were two periods of iconoclasm in this 120-year period. Iconoclasm means those who destroy icons or more literally, icon smashers. The Emperor Leo III ordered the removal of an icon of Christ, which is over the gate leading to the Great Palace of Constantinople and replaced this icon of Christ with a cross. It's not clear that the Emperor Leo was an iconoclast but there's little doubt that his son and successor was. There's even historical speculation that a deep-sea volcanic eruption in the Aegean Sea caused a massive tsunami. This caused a great deal of damage to the coast land. It is said that the Emperor took this as a sign that God was judging the empire and the icons were to blame.

This superstitious position may have been the result of speculation amongst some of the clergy concerning the use of icons during that period. The tsunami, it is speculated, moved the Emperor to believe that God had spoken against use of icons in the church. The keyword, of course, is speculation. He erroneously speculated on this issue. Unfortunately, this resulted in 57 years of persecution, 57 years of persecution of the church. And all those venerating and especially those painting icons, or writing icons as we say, were imprisoned, tortured, exiled, and even murdered.

This period ended and the veneration of icons were restored in the year 787. The Seventh Ecumenical Council brought peace to the church, which unfortunately only lasted for 27 years until a second attack against the veneration of icons began. The second iconoclastic period began at 814

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and lasted through 842. Emperor Leo V, the Armenian, instituted the second period of iconoclasm. Essentially, the iconoclast for both periods insisted that the veneration and use of icons were idol worship or idolatry. Of course, they used certain scripture to make their argument. The most notable is from the commandment of the Old Testament from Exodus 20 verse four, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above, or the earth below, or the sea that is beneath the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them."

This brings into question then, what does the Lord mean in this commandment? Are we supposed to take this literally to mean that no form of art can be used in the church? This seems to be the position of the iconoclast and it is essentially the same position of the iconoclast to reformers in the 16th century, especially Calvin. If you take this position, how does one then explain the Lord's command to build the Ark of the Covenant with all the images that the Lord commanded Moses to place upon the Ark?

To understand the Lord's commandment of not having any graven image, you must understand it in the context of the Lord telling his people not to have or honor anything made or offered to false gods. Let's look at an example from Deuteronomy chapter 12 verse two, these are very strong words. "Destroy completely all the places." Destroy completely. Not just set it aside, not just don't use it in public. "Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains, on the hills, and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worshiped their gods, break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire, cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places."

Doesn't seem to be any ambiguity about how God views the worship of false gods and idols. Again, Deuteronomy 16, worshiping other gods, "Do not set up any wooden Asherah pole beside the altar you build to the Lord your God and do not erect a sacred stone for these the Lord your God hates." That's clear. There's no ambiguity. The Lord is telling his people to reject false gods and every item used in worshiping these false gods.

On the other hand, we see the Lord ordering Moses to build the Ark of the Covenant using all kinds of material, gold, bronze, fine linen of many colors and having images of the cherubim made of fine gold covering the Ark.

There are many examples, let's say John of Damascus and St. Theodore point to as examples of the Lord using images in honoring and worshiping the one true God, but rejecting images that give honor to false gods. This Holy Father writes at length proving that the veneration of icons is not just acceptable but even necessary, even necessary in the worship of the true God. Since those opposed to the use of Christian art argue that it was idolatry to venerate icons, the Church Fathers came together with one mind to resolve the issue and the Seventh Ecumenical Council was convened.

An interesting little side note, I just thought of this this morning, so I added it to my homily, especially if those who want to know what part women played in church history. Both periods of the iconoclasm were initiated by men, the emperors at the time, and both periods of the restoration and the veneration of icons was initiated by women, the empresses of the time. In both cases of the

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restoration of the veneration of icons, the emperor had died leaving the throne to his son who is still a child and therefore his mother, the empress, acted as the regent on behalf of her child until he came of age. God used the wise discretion and the courage of these women to help restore his church.

The council addressed the deeper issues that set Christian art apart from pagan idolatry. St. John of Damascus was the greatest voice in the defense of the icons during the first period of the iconoclastic persecution of the church. St. John was living outside the influence of the Roman Empire in the lands controlled at the time by the Muslims, and as a result he was free to write rebuttals against the iconoclast. In Constantinople at the time, the heresy of iconoclasm had arisen and spread very quickly and of course was supported by the emperor. Rising up in defense of the Orthodox veneration of icons, St. John wrote three treatises entitled, *Against Those Who Revile the Holy Icons*. The wise and God-inspired, the writings of St. John enraged the emperor. But since the author was not a Byzantine subject, the emperor was unable to lock him up or imprison him or exile him or even have him executed.

The emperor then resorted through cunning deception and lies to try to get at St. John. He had a letter forged to himself as though St. John had written the letter, in which St. John supposedly had offered the emperor his help or assistance to overthrow the Assyrian capital. This letter and another hypocritically flattering note was sent to the Muslim ruler. The caliph immediately ordered that St. John to be removed from his post and that his right hand be cut off.

That same evening, they returned the severed hand to St. John. He then pressed it to his wrist and prayed to the most Holy Theotokos to heal him so he could continue to defend the Orthodox faith. At the time he fell asleep before the icon of the Mother of God. And in his sleep, he heard her voice telling him that he had been healed, and that he should go ahead and use all of his skills to defend the Holy Orthodox faith. Upon awakening, he found his hand had been attached to his arm once again. Only a small red mark around his wrist remained as a sign of the miracle. Later in thanksgiving for being healed, St. John had a silver model of his hand attached to the icon of Theotokos, which became known as the icon of the three hands.

When the caliph learned of the miracle, which demonstrated John's innocence, he asked his forgiveness and wanted him to be restored to his former office, but the saint refused. He gave away his riches to the poor and he went to Jerusalem with his stepbrother and fellow student, Cosmas. There he entered the monastery of St. Sava the Sanctified as a simple novice.

The second period of the iconoclastic controversy, in this period, St. Theodore the Studite, was the primary voice in defense of the veneration of holy icons. St. Theodore wrote anathemas to those who disrespected the holy icons, and I'd like to read a number of these anathemas this morning and in these anathemas, you will see the synopsis of their previous ecumenical councils.

In our catechism class, of course, we go through these in more detail, but time prevents us from doing this this morning. It is where he addressed essentially the statements of the first Six Ecumenical Councils. Quoting St. Theodore, the Studite, "Therefore if anyone that denies our incarnate Lord Jesus Christ is circumscribed by the flesh while remaining indescribable according to

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his divine nature is a heretic." In other words, anyone who claims that Jesus Christ is not fully God in his divinity and fully man in his humanity, both natures existing in the person of Jesus, then he is a heretic. That's why he called Jesus often the God- man, fully God and fully man.

The iconoclasts said that Jesus Christ could not be depicted in iconographic form because they did not believe that he could be depicted without either depicting his human nature alone, which was Nestorianism, or by depicting the divine, which cannot be depicted. You cannot depict the divine nature, which is why we don't have real icons of the Father and the Holy Spirit. St. Theodore corrects this approach by the simple fact of Christ's incarnation. He says, "We see him as he truly is and seeing him as he truly is, Christ the incarnate God, does not require either of the divine nature be circumscribed nor the human nature and divine nature be separate. It is the mystery of the incarnation."

He addresses this more clearly in the anathema. "If anyone should argue that because the flesh of the Logos is circumscribed, his divinity is circumscribed together with a flesh and if in this argument he fails to distinguish the two natures in the single hypothesis according to their natural properties, he's a heretic. If anyone calls the circumscription of the Logos, bodily form, neither the icon of Christ nor Christ by identity of name, but miscalls it an idol of deception, he's a heretic." In other words, if you look at an icon of the Lord and claim that venerating his icon is idol worship, you are a heretic.

He also objects to the iconoclasts who associated Christian icons with pagan idols. If anyone should rashly confuse the relative veneration of Christ and the icon with the veneration of idols and should deny that it is a veneration of Christ himself, he's a heretic. Christians pay homage to the person signified in the icon, not the wood, the gold or the paint, whereas idols and their worship is a worship of both matter and demons, false gods as we saw in Deuteronomy. Traditionally, in some places and in more lenient periods of time and unlike the more radical reformers, iconoclasts permitted images of Christ, the saints and the Theotokos and the great feast or events in the scriptures. However, they refused to venerate them, refusing to venerate them to Theodore would be like seeing Christ face to face then turning away disrespectfully.

Because of their symbolic nature, icons make present the people or events they depict, which is why we treat them with respect and honor just as we should treat each other. St. Theodore goes on to say, "If anyone should transfer the scriptural prohibition of idols and misapply them to the holy icon of Christ so as to inappropriately call the church of Christ a temple of idols, he's a heretic." Again, associating icons with pagan idols does not only disrespect our fathers in the faith, but also the church, the very body of Christ and the pillar and foundation of the truth.

"If anyone should say that when he venerates the icon of Christ is venerating Christ divinity present naturally in the icon rather than and only in so far as the icon is the shadow of the flesh, which is united to the divinity, he's a heretic." This is an important distinction, maybe a little hard to understand.

Often absent from our discussion on iconography and idolatry, icons are holy because of the holy persons or events depicted, but the wood, the gold and the paint are not imbued with a special sort of divinity greater than that of the rest of creation for God is everywhere present and in all things.

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Here, Theodore rejects the idea that merely hearing about Christ and the apostles is sufficient. Our eyes, even our whole bodies, all of our senses are involved in spiritual contemplation, in the worship of the Divine. Through icons, our sense of sight is involved in both our understanding and reverence for Christ and his saints.

"Without icons," he says, "people would naturally devise their own image in their own mind, their own fantasy of what it would look like and often doing so in error. As a result," he says, "icons preserve Orthodox tradition apart from any individual imagination." Continuing, "If anyone should forbid the icon of Christ equally with the symbol of the cross to be both drawn in every place and displayed for the salvation of God's people, he is a heretic." In other words, if you prevent iconographers from doing their work so that Christ and his cross are venerated, you're a heretic.

And like most of reformers, Luther excepted, the iconoclasts of the eighth and ninth century venerated the symbol of the cross as well as relics and the Eucharist. So, Theodore explains at length the inconsistency in this argument. It makes it clear that both icons and the cross unnecessarily displayed and venerated for our salvation. "If anyone should not offer to the icon of the Theotokos as the icons of all the other saints, the veneration due to the Theotokos as the Theotokos and the other saints as saints, but you claim that the salvific ornament of the church is an idolatrous invention, he is a heretic."

Theodore again denies that icons are idols while also asserting the greater veneration of the Theotokos as compared to the rest of the saints. He then connects the veneration of icons with salvation. If anyone should not number with the other heresies, the heresy which attacks the holy icons, but you say that the fellowship for these people is a matter of indifference, he's a heretic. Theodore's argument for the veneration of icons lies in the connection between the icons and the incarnation.

Now I realize this is not your typical homily. It may seem a bit academic, but this theology is so important to preserving correct Christian dogma. And since today we commemorate all those Fathers of the Seventh Council, it's worth the time to revisit, to refresh our understanding of this most important theology.

Since the spirit of the antichrist in the Apostle John's letters denies Christ came in the flesh, Theodore connects iconoclasm with the spirit when he writes to the iconoclasts saying, "Obviously, your opposition is from the antichrist. If anyone should overextend the honor of Christ icon and say that he will not approach it for it will not benefit him unless he has first purified from all sin," he doesn't call him a heretic. He says he's a very foolish person. We don't venerate the icons because we have reached some level of spiritual perfection. It would be more appropriate to say, we venerate in our journey towards our goal of spiritual perfection.

Not one to mince words that Theodore makes a point that also applies, I think, even to the Eucharist and to all the mysteries. We should not reject salvation offered to us by God in his holy church, whether on icons, Eucharist or the other mysteries, but we should approach with a fear of God with faith and with love. The church is a hospital for sinners and icons were given to us precisely because we are sinners. Everyone should approach and venerate with respect and honor for the one depicted

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as well as with a sense of appreciation and respect for those courageous defenders of the icons, the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

Theodore's anathemas and greater arguments were received as the dogma, dogma by the Senate of Constantinople and the Empress Theodora, bringing an end once and for all to the state-sanctioned iconoclasm. May God bless us with a greater appreciation and respect for these holy images.

Amen.