

## TALK FOR SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY

**In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit—One God. Amen.**

Fathers, Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

St. Simeon the New Theologian in one of his sermons to his monks used this striking literary image. He said: 'I'm like a street urchin, a beggar, who saw a man on the street corner giving out gold coins to everyone. The young beggar went up to the man and could hardly believe his good fortune when he also received a gold coin. He quickly ran off to find his friends, children who were beggars like himself, to tell them where the generous man was so they could also get gold coins from him.' Then St. Simeon explains that he is himself the street urchin, and the generous man giving out the gold coins is Christ. And his listeners (and, of course, now his readers—that is, we ourselves) are the beggars who can—and have—all received gold coins from Christ, but who don't so much as guess the value of what is in our hand.

Tonight, you might say, we have a chance to reflect on how very rich we are. In fact, what we are doing here tonight is celebrating our wealth. On the one hand, we are rightly glorying in the particular event the Church calls the Triumph of Orthodoxy, when the holy icons were once and for all restored to the churches for veneration—restored to us! who had been deprived of them—and iconoclasm was defeated, after not just decades but centuries of persecution. And—on the other hand—we are glorying in the triumph of Truth, right belief, right worship, ORTHODOXY!—because the icon is nothing less than a confession of our Orthodox Faith—our core belief—that Jesus Christ is both God and man. This is our treasure—wealth beyond imagining!

You probably all understand what I mean when I say that the icon is itself a confession of Faith, but let me explain so that all of us are clear on this. If you have followed the hymns sung this evening, then you know the basic theology explaining what the icon is.

## KONTAKION FOR THE SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY

No one could describe the Word of the Father

(that is, the Second Person of the Trinity—because God is spirit and He is invisible)

But when He took flesh from you O Theotokos, He accepted to be described

(So, once He was born of Mary as a human being, He could be seen as a human being  
with a material body like ours.)

And restored the fallen image to its former beauty

(We call Him perfect God and perfect man.)

We confess and proclaim our salvation in word and images.

(We announce His Incarnation in the Gospel in words and in the icon in images.)

And our Holy Fathers say—maybe this will surprise you—that they are equally  
important.

Just as the Gospel expresses in words the Truth that God became man in Jesus Christ, so do icons express this same Truth in images (pictures). In more prosaic terms: If someone in the early first century had had access to a camera, he could have taken a photo of Jesus, God and man. It is because of the Incarnation, because God became flesh, that He can be described, that we can have a portrait of Him. And if God did not become man, then no image of Him is possible. But Orthodox theology goes even further! The icon is not merely possible; because of the Incarnation, it is necessary. Just as the Church must have the Gospel, the Church must have the icon! The icon is not optional! The Truth requires expression not only in words but in images!—because God did not merely send mankind a book! He sent His Son into the world—in person!

So, why all the controversy? Bitter controversy—replete with persecutions—torture, grisly martyrdoms, exiles and imprisonments--not to mention political intrigues, and upheavals. The lives of saints who defended the icons—like St. Theodore of Studium, St. Stephen the New, even the Empress Irene (who with her son, the Emperor Constantine VI, called the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council)—are not easy reading!

The history of iconoclastic times is too complex, too convoluted, even to outline here this evening.

[Incidentally, it's not just a matter of church history, but includes wars, invasions, earthquakes, the rise of

Islam, political relations with Rome and the West, and on and on. . . .] The short of it all for our purposes is to note that there were strong currents among the Christians of Byzantium—Orthodox Christians—who did not understand what to do with the Old Testament, notably in this case the Second of the Ten Commandments.

Every Christian and Jew learns the Ten Commandments, and the people of Byzantium well knew what they said: “Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven images, . . . and thou shalt not bow down to them nor worship them.” The icons are graven images. So, they said, we must get rid of them, remove them from our churches and our homes, destroy them.

Well, someone is going to say, icons weren’t around from the beginning. They came along in later centuries. This issue about icons can’t be that important. Wrong! There were portraits of the Lord from the earliest Christian times, a few attributed to the hand of St. Luke (and a few of these still preserved today, by the way). The Church historian Eusebius remarks that he personally had seen quite a number of portraits of Jesus. If not much in the way of early iconography has survived, it’s because the iconoclasts did such a thorough job of destroying almost everything. (Besides the iconography in the catacombs, it is the significant treasure trove of icons from the 6<sup>th</sup> century at Mount Sinai, which because of its remote location escaped destruction by the iconoclasts, that confirms the existence of icons in early Christian times.)

Throughout the centuries, the Church has been faced with all manner of false teachings. Here we are in a church dedicated to St. Athanasius, the heroic defender of the Church against Arianism. We all know the story. But dangerous and threatening as the various heresies were that have troubled the Church, their defeat is not celebrated with anything like the emphasis given to the defeat of iconoclasm. It is the defeat of this heresy, because it attacks the very ground of our Faith, that we rightly call The Triumph of Orthodoxy.

I would like to conclude with something that has its own icon (presently right here in the middle of the church): the account of the very first celebration of the Sunday of Orthodoxy. The date was March 11<sup>th</sup>, 843, which in that year was the first Sunday of Lent.

The husband of the Empress Theodora, the Emperor Theophilus, who was a fierce iconoclast, had recently died, and the Empress was much concerned about his salvation. When Lent came around, she pleaded with all the clergy of Constantinople, especially the new Patriarch, St. Methodius—who her husband had persecuted—to pray in all the churches for the whole first week of Lent that God would forgive him. The Empress' wishes were carried out, and she herself joined in the special prayers and services. Then, at the end of the week, the clergy, the imperial court, and the lay people celebrated an all-night vigil. In the morning, a triumphal procession was arranged through the capital. A great multitude of Orthodox faithful assembled outside the Patriarchate, carrying candles. A procession followed, with the Empress and her little son Michael (the new Emperor), in which the sacred images were borne together with the holy Gospel and relics of the Cross. The procession slowly proceeded from the Church called Blachernae all the way to the Great Church of St. Sophia, continuously chanting “Lord, have mercy.” Then, reaching their destination, they celebrated the Divine Liturgy and returned the icons to their original places. This reinstatement was done by the very hands of the Patriarch, the bishops, and numerous priests and monks. The names of all deceased Orthodox confessors who had suffered for the icons were proclaimed from the ambo, the names of those who had refused to venerate the holy icons were anathematized. The decrees of the 7th Ecumenical Council, held in 787—fifty-five years earlier, mind you!—were read out and confirmed. And a new decree was announced: Henceforward a celebration was to be observed annually on the first Sunday of the Great Fast, which would be called the Sunday of Orthodoxy. As of tonight, we Orthodox have been celebrating the Triumph of Orthodoxy for 1,177 years!

And this service did not mark the end of the celebration. The relics of martyrs who had given their lives for the icons were brought back to the capital and greeted with great honor. The Empress and all her court, carrying lamps, went out to receive and venerate them. And then the Empress held an enormous, open banquet that lasted an entire day—a mercy meal for her departed husband, where her guests included confessors—saints—whom he had persecuted because of their defense of the icons. This expression of her deep Christian understanding and practice turned out to be political genius! It brought peace to her realm like nothing else in the aftermath of the controversy. For how could the persecuted nurse rancor against their iconoclast persecutors in the face of such an example of humility and forgiveness!

But this is the Lord's example and His teaching, is it not? Proclaimed in words and images. The wealth that we have inherited from our Holy Mothers and Fathers. Truly, the world has no idea what riches we Orthodox Christians have! No idea!