

3-17-19 Triumph of Orthodoxy

© S. Hinde

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

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. We are only six weeks away from the great celebration of Pascha. Only six more weeks. We begin our preparation for Lent three weeks prior with the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, and then the story of the publican and the Pharisee who went up to pray and finally, the Prodigal son who returned to his father. King week ushered us into the Lenten journey. It's a time of spiritual cleansing that we are encouraged to undergo through fasting, prayer, repentance, reception of the Holy mysteries and asking forgiveness of our brother.

During this first week of Lent we have read a portion of the Canon of Saint Andrew in the first four evenings. Every journey begins with the first step and we have embarked upon the journey to Pascha. Each Sunday of Lent carries its own theme, and this is repeated every year. Today on this first Sunday, we celebrate the triumph of orthodoxy, which commemorates the restoration of the veneration of icons, after the iconoclast controversy, which is considered to be the triumph of the Church over the last of the great heresies. All heresies afterwards were just reinventions or re-clothing of old ones.

The theme of the day is the victory, the victory of the true faith over all that is contrary to it. John 5:4, "This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith." Also, the icons of the saints. The icons that we all carry with us, bear witness that man created in the image and likeness of God, may become holy and God-like through our purification as God's living image.

The first Sunday of the great Lent, originally commemorated the prophets, Moses, Aaron, and Samuel and others. This is reflected in the epistle and Gospel readings that you just heard this morning. The church has celebrated the monumental triumph of orthodoxy against the destruction of the holy icons since the year 843. That's 1,176 years. Think of that, 1,176 years that we have been celebrating this great victory, long before the protestant reformation or the thousands of groups that have sprung up since then.

We know that division begets division, begets division, but orthodoxy remains the same. We keep this feast in memory of the final defeat of iconoclasm and the subsequent return of the icons to the churches, to the homes, and to public places. As most of you already know, the word iconoclast simply means icon smasher, one who would destroy icons.

This victory, this triumph was a long and hard fought battle, which lasted almost 120 years. The controversy was officially initiated by the emperor, Leo III in the year 726. Leo was not the brain child of the heresy of iconoclasm. There were other factors which preceded Leo dating back even centuries. There was of course at the time, the influence of the Muslims who bordered the empire, who in many places would not allow icons in the Christian churches.

There was the influence of the Monophysites, the heresy that taught that Jesus had only one nature, which was divine and therefore could not be depicted in icons. There was the Nestorian heresy, and others over time, which to some degree, came together to form an underground sentiment of heresy which eventually found expression in the emperor, Leo III.

3-17-19 Triumph of Orthodoxy

© S. Hinde

In his first public declaration of his opposition to the veneration of icons, he took an icon of the Lord Jesus Christ and he destroyed it. This action provoked outrage and rioting as well as condemnation from the patriarch. And of course, taking a position against the emperor always meant persecution. And persecution of the faithful followed. Monasteries were closed, many were exiled to foreign lands. Others put in prison. Some were flogged and beaten, and even martyred for their defense of the holy icons.

It is important for us today to remember and to appreciate, to appreciate the sacrifice that the early Church made in its preservation, in its perseverance of protecting and defending the truth against the heretical practices being forced upon them. We must also understand and embrace the mind of the church concerning the veneration of icons. The controversy was more than whether or not you liked Christian art, much deeper. Theologically and christologically, much deeper is a proper understanding of who Jesus Christ is. The earlier ecumenical council has brought together the greatest minds of the Church, those men who knew about God intellectually, but knew God experientially.

The previous heresies that the Church anathematized were still trying to raise their decapitated heads and pervert the Church once again. To argue that you cannot depict Christ in an icon because he only possessed divine nature is simply an attempt to resurrect an old heresy. The argument that the veneration of icons was idolatry, we still hear that today from the West. The argument that the veneration of icons was idolatry was addressed by St. John of Damascus with such simple clarity that many of the heretics repented and returned to the faith.

Concerning idolatry, St. John said, "Icons are not idols. Icons are not idols, but symbols. Therefore, when an Orthodox venerates an icon, he is not guilty of idolatry. He is not worshipping the symbol, but merely venerating it, since veneration is not directed towards wood or paint or stone, but towards the person depicted. Therefore, relative honor is shown to material objects, but worship is to God alone. We do not make obeisance to the nature of wood, but we revere and do obeisance to Him who was crucified on the cross. When the two beams of the cross are joined together, I adore the figure because of Christ, who was crucified on the cross. But if the beams are separated, I throw them away and burn them."

Word of St. John's open defense of the veneration of icons reached the ears of the emperor. But there was little the emperor could do against him, since he lived in Damascus, which was outside the empire and ruled by the Muslims. To try to punish and silence St. John, the emperor came up with an idea. He obtained a copy of one of the saint's letters, which had his signature on it. He then forged a letter to himself as if it were from St. John. In the letter it was made to appear that the saint was offering up the city of Damascus to the emperor with a plan to overthrow the Muslim caliph. He then had the forged letter delivered to the caliph. Of course John was summoned. He was dismissed from his high-ranking position, and it was ordered that his right hand be cut off. His writing hand cut off at the wrist.

After fervent prayer before an icon of the Theotokos, his hand was miraculously restored and healed. The caliph, seeing the miracle, then believed John's innocence and offered to restore him to his former position of dignity. However, John left Damascus and went to live out his life in a monastery near Jerusalem. He continued to write in the defense of orthodoxy and

3-17-19 Triumph of Orthodoxy

© S. Hinde

composed an exact exposition of the Orthodox faith, a summary of the dogmatic writings of the early church fathers.

Another saint I want to mention of this time, who was martyred because of his defense of the veneration of icons, was St. Stephen the New. He was a monk who sought solitude, but by God's providence, others sought him out and monasteries were established. When the iconoclastic persecution broke out, he openly and boldly defended the veneration of icons. Emperor Leo's son, Constantine, had ascended to the throne and continued his father's persecution of the Church.

St. Stephen was arrested and imprisoned for his refusal to submit to the emperor's heresy. In his trial, he stated to the iconoclast, who were his judges, that in blaspheming the holy icons, they were blaspheming the Lord Jesus Christ and his saints and the Holy Mother. As proof, the saint pointed to a coin with the emperor's image on it. And he asked them, "What would happen if we took to a man who took this coin and threw it on the ground and stamped on the image of the emperor with his feet?" And they replied, "Surely he would be punished for dishonoring the image of the emperor."

The saint replied, "Then a much greater punishment awaits anyone who would dishonor the King of Heaven and his saints." He was sent back to prison where there were already 342 elders in prison because of their defense of the veneration of icons. With St. Stephen's presence, the prison became like a monastery. The daily prayer roll was read and the hymns were chanted according to the Typikon. The local people from the community began to visit the prison in crowds asking for the prayers and blessing of the Holy Elder.

He led many to faith during this time and strengthened the faithful by his wisdom and example. Eventually the emperor had him seized and dragged through the streets where they beat him to death with clubs. His relics were rescued by the Christian faithful and put into the Church.

By the end of Constantine's reign, the iconoclast had gone so far as to brand all relics and all prayers to the saints as heretical and the faithful who opposed this position were imprisoned. After the passing of several more iconoclastic emperors, the throne eventually passed to a nine year boy, the son of Leo IV. Because of the young age of the new emperor, and his name was Constantine VI, his mother Irene assumed the reign as Regent for her son.

Irene supported the veneration of icons, and under her reign, the first period of iconoclasm ended. In the first reign of her regency, she restored the holy images to the churches, and she restored the monks to their monasteries. She appointed a new patriarch, Tarasios, the prior patriarch having abdicated his position, who wrote to the other patriarchs and convened the seventh ecumenical council. Using the writings of St. John of Damascus in defending the veneration of icons, the council anathematized iconoclasm.

One of the most important clarifications coming from this council was that the veneration of icons does not involve idolatry. The honor given to the image, that honor passes on to the original, the one depicted, in the icon. And for the next 30 years, there was peace in the Church over the issue of icons.

3-17-19 Triumph of Orthodoxy

© S. Hinde

Then in 813, a new emperor came to power, Leo V. He instigated the second wave of persecution against the Church. And over the next 28 years, the battle waged on as it had in the first period. Patriarchs were replaced, emperors were murdered, the faithful suffered persecution, and so it went. Finally, under the reign of another child emperor, Michael III, who's mother Theodora, acting as Regent for her son, put an end to iconoclasm, upholding the seventh ecumenical council.

On the first Sunday of great Lent in the year 843, the restoration of Orthodoxy was celebrated with a great procession, which took place in Constantinople. They carried icons of the Lord Jesus Christ and his Holy Mother and the saints. They made a procession through the city to the great church of Hagia Sophia. This has become a tradition which is passed down through the centuries. Orthodox churches all over the world still make a procession carrying their icons on this very day.

It is a great tragedy of the reformation that many in the west have no idea of the struggles and suffering that Church endured to preserve this most holy practice, the veneration of icons. There are so many who simply don't know what they don't know. And many of us came from that background. We are blessed to inherit the mind of the Church, the wisdom of the Church, the holiness of the Church. We are the beneficiaries of their struggles, their faithfulness, their perseverance.

And now, brothers and sisters, it is our turn. It is our turn. It is our responsibility, our obligation, even our privilege to maintain, to practice, to protect, and to hand on to the next generation, the great truths of orthodoxy. In our diligence to carry on these Godly and honorable traditions, we honor the person depicted in the icon, whether it is the Lord Jesus Christ, his most holy mother, or any of the saints. They are honored by our veneration of their holy image, may it be blessed.