

Homily on the Sunday of Orthodoxy

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Sunday, March 8, 2020

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. One God.

Today, on the first Sunday of Great Lent, we celebrate the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

This is the day the Holy Orthodox Church recalls its victory over the iconoclast heresy and other heresies and remembers all who fought for the Orthodox faith.

In the year 843, the iconoclastic controversy, which had raged on and off since 726, was finally ended, and icons and their veneration were restored on the first Sunday of Great Lent.

The First Sunday of Great Lent has been commemorated as the “Triumph of Orthodoxy” ever since.

It was on this first Sunday of Lent in the year 843 that Empress Theodora and Saint Methodius, then Patriarch of Constantinople, restored the icons to the churches, overcoming the heresy of iconoclasm.

This ever-memorable Empress venerated the icon of the Mother of God in the presence of the Patriarch and other confessors and righteous men, and openly cried out these holy words: “If anyone does not offer relative worship to the holy icons, not adoring them as though they were gods, but venerating them out of love as images of the archetype, let him be anathema.”

Then with common prayer and fasting during the whole first week of the Forty-day Fast of Great Lent, she asked God’s forgiveness for her husband the late Emperor Theophilos, an iconoclast, who had died in 842.

After this, on the first Sunday of Great Lent, she and her young son, Michael the Emperor, made a procession with all the clergy and people and restored the holy icons, and again adorned the Church of Christ with them.

Refuting those who said that it was wrong to make a material image of God or of the saints, and even more wrong to venerate that object, the Church teaches us that God has made an icon of Himself in Jesus Christ.

In Colossians 1:15, St. Paul tells us that Christ is the perfect image — the icon — of the Father. And in a similar, though imperfect way, the saints have also been icons or images of Christ, and of what it means to be a Christian.

When we make and venerate an icon, we are not worshiping a piece of board or wood with a painted picture. Our worship is reserved for God alone – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When we venerate an icon, we are showing our love, our respect, our desire to follow what the icon shows us.

When we kiss an icon of Christ, in our hearts, we are kissing Christ Himself.

Today is also a reflection of the great significance which icons possess for the Orthodox Church.

They are not optional devotional extras, but an integral part of Orthodox faith and devotion.

They are held to be a necessary consequence of Christian faith in the incarnation of the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, in Jesus Christ.

They have a sacramental character, making present to the believer the person or event depicted on them.

Some Orthodox churches have their walls and domed roofs covered with painted icons, something we hope will be able to do in the future as well, and there is always an icon screen, or iconostasis, separating the sanctuary from the nave, often with several rows of icons.

No Orthodox home is complete without an icon corner (iconostasion), where the family prays.

Icons are venerated by burning lamps and candles in front of them, using incense and by kissing the icons.

But there is a clear doctrinal distinction between the veneration paid to icons and the worship due to God. The former is not only relative, it is in fact paid to the person represented by the icon. This distinction safeguards the veneration of icons from any charge of idolatry.

Gradually over the years, in addition to the return of the icons, the Sunday of Orthodoxy has also come to celebrate the whole of the Orthodox Faith.

Our Lord Jesus Christ established His Church, called it into being, gave it direction and order, for the purpose of bringing the world back to God.

We are made in the image and likeness of God, but this gift was tarnished and wounded by the disobedience of man, by man turning away from God.

Instead of living as icons of God, we sought to serve ourselves, and so death entered the world.

The theme of the victory of the icons, by its emphasis on the incarnation, points us to the basic Christian truth that the one whose death and resurrection we celebrate at Easter was none other than the Word of God who became human in Jesus Christ.

Icons of Christ, of the Saints, and of the Mother of God are a pledge of the coming victory of a redeemed cosmos over a fallen one, and show forth a restoration of the world back to its original purpose which is to glorify its Creator.

In an Icon we can see a concrete example of matter restored through Grace in the life of the Church to its original harmony and beauty, now serving as a vessel of the Grace of the All Holy Spirit.

As we commemorate the Sunday of Orthodoxy, we are not just remembering an event of the past but professing the triumph of Truth over the heresy of iconoclasm which the Icon proclaims.

Theologically, heresy is a distortion of the true and correct Vision of God, which is salvation. And what is dogma, but the Words that describe that Vision of Who God is and what He is really like?

Again, for Orthodox Christians, salvation is this Vision of God. Many Saints of our Church saw Christ in Glory and were completely altered down to the very fabric of their existence, being saved through it.

We represent in image, Christ our God and Lord, not only so that the incarnation is shown forth as real and true and not a phantasy or ghost, but even more so, to show the Face of God which reveals the pledge of this Vision of God which is salvation.

In the Canons of the Council of 867 we read: "If one does not venerate the Icon of Christ the Saviour, let him not see His Face at the Second Coming."

The veneration of the Image of Christ is our pledge to personally experience the Vision of the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, let us venerate the Icon of our Saviour, of the Saints, and of the Theotokos and thereby proclaim the inherent goodness of the entire Creation and of its redemption, restoration, and transfiguration through the incarnation of Christ.

It is now our turn to offer our own personal world as a Eucharistic sacrifice, redeeming and transfiguring the material world which we inhabit through our prayer, our fasting, and our thanksgiving to our Creator Who sustains us, enlightens us, and saves us through the incalculable Treasury of our Orthodox Faith which we have been given and which we celebrate today.

Orthodoxy triumphs in our personal lives when Christ becomes incarnate through our keeping of the commandments.

Orthodoxy triumphs when we become an Icon of Christ through our love and kindness to all those whom we encounter, being a vessel of His Presence.

Orthodoxy triumphs when the falsehood of our passions is denounced and demolished and Christ is enthroned as King and God in our hearts.

Today is the first day of the rest of Great Lent. Let us fortify ourselves by abstaining from the foodstuffs we are not allowed to consume, by abstaining from sin, and by abstaining from criticising our friends, neighbours and anybody else.

We all have only a short time in our lives, so let us glorify God by doing works of charity, alms, and prayer. Let us build up the Church and one another, placing our time and talents into those things which will benefit us eternally.

And let us give thanks to God Who has brought us here today, given us the Treasury of the Orthodox Faith, of that Gift of the Undistorted Vision of God which is salvation for the world.

The Triumph of Orthodoxy is the Triumph of the Only True and Living Way which leads the entire race of Mankind to salvation.

Let us enter more deeply into it, embrace it, confess it, and fervently live our Orthodoxy through the grace and mercy of the Lord our God to Whom belongs all glory, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

Amen.