

The Holy Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today the Church celebrates the memory of the Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council which met in Nicaea in 787 AD.

In the Orthodox Church, we recognize seven church councils as ecumenical. These special councils were called ecumenical for two main reasons. First because the councils were attended by bishops from all over the inhabited world – the Greek word “oikoumene” literally means “inhabited”. And second because the doctrine and practice which the councils set forth was received and accepted by the consensus of the entire Church.

In these ecumenical councils we see something quite remarkable. For we know that during the 4th through 8th centuries when these councils took place, travel was not what it is today. One could not simply hop on a plane and fly halfway across the world in a day. It took weeks and in some cases months for these aged and venerable bishops to travel by ship, horseback, and camel from all over the known world to cities such as Nicaea, Constantinople, Chalcedon, and Ephesus.

But what is perhaps more remarkable, for us who live in an age when people choose their Christian doctrines like they choose their produce at the supermarket – taking those things which they like, those things which appeal to them, and leaving the rest – is that these Fathers traveled such great distances and made such a great effort not to argue their own opinion but rather to preserve without alteration or division the truth of the faith they shared in common – the Faith which was delivered by Jesus Christ, once and for all to the saints.

The Fathers knew that truth revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ was not relative, not subject to individual interpretation or selectivity, and was not changeable. They knew that Jesus Christ is the Incarnate Son of God, “the way, the truth, and the life,” and as St. Paul writes to the Hebrews, He “is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

When on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down upon the Apostles in tongues of fire, He not only extended to them everything which Christ has accomplished but He also revealed to them in extreme clarity everything which Christ Himself had taught. On Pentecost, the Apostles were baptized in the Spirit of Truth, which united them in One Body, the Body of Christ, and gave them One Mind, the Mind of Christ.

As St. Paul writes, they were united in “one Lord, one faith, and one baptism”. They had received the Spirit of “the one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all.”

Yet with the gift of oneness of faith was also given the gift of speaking in many tongues, so that each person, whether Jew or Greek or of any other race, could hear in their own language the wonderful works of God.

It is this unity of faith and diversity of expression which is the hallmark of Orthodoxy. A unity of faith which extends not only over all the oikoumene, over the whole inhabited world, but also across the expanses of time, spanning all generations from Pentecost until Christ's Second and Awesome Coming. And a diversity of expression which allows this one true faith to reach every person independent of race or culture.

Since the establishment of the Church, this unity of faith was expressed not only in what Christians said but also in what they did. Not only through preaching the Gospel in a diversity of languages but also through living the Gospel through a diversity of customs: through liturgical worship, through the singing of hymns, through the sacraments, through the depiction of symbols such as the Cross, the fish, or the ship, and through the veneration of icons.

As we know, the first icon was made by our Lord Himself when He left the imprint of His Face on the Holy Napkin which He sent to King Abgar of Edessa. And the first hand-painted icon was written by St. Luke the Evangelist who painted the image of the Mother of God and Christ Child. And the walls of the catacombs were covered with Christian symbols and depictions of Christ as the Good Shepherd or the Lamb of God, or the Holy Apostles.

And then in later times when it was still common for large segments of society to be illiterate and therefore unable to read the Holy Scriptures, the Gospel was preached to the people through icons which covered the walls of the churches; so that even those who were illiterate could receive the Good News through the universal language of images.

And so, when the 7th Ecumenical Council was convened in Nicaea in 787, the Fathers met to uphold the long-established practice of venerating icons. A practice which came under attack in the seventh and eight centuries due to the growing influence of Islam which saw icons as idolatrous.

The Fathers explained that the veneration of icons was in fact not idolatrous since no honor was being paid to wood and paint, but to the person or persons depicted in the icons. This teaching was first expounded in the fourth century by Saint Basil the Great, but had been a part of the mind of the Church since the very beginning.

And more than this, the Fathers explained that the veneration of icons was not only a legitimate religious practice but it was also in fact a necessity to living the fullness of the Christian Faith. For the Fathers, the veneration of icons was as essential a part of the Christian life, as prayer, fasting, almsgiving, the studying of the Scriptures or the receiving of the sacraments.

Now this may be a little shocking, because as we know, outside Orthodox Christianity the veneration of icons has either fall into disuse, such as is largely the case in the Roman Catholic Church, or has been rejected altogether, such as in most Protestant churches.

And so we may ask the question: Why did the Holy Fathers see the veneration of icons as such an important part of the Christian life that they deemed it not only good but also necessary?

If the Fathers were here today – and they are in spirit, through their writings, and through their depictions on the walls – they would respond that the answer is very simple. Since God became man in the Person of Jesus Christ, since the invisible God revealed Himself in the flesh, it is fitting to remember and reverence not only His word by recording it in the Holy Scriptures but also His image by depicted it in icons.

In Christ the invisible has become visible, the immaterial has become material. St. Paul writes in Colossians that Christ is the image of the invisible Father – in the Greek this is much more striking; Christ is the icon of the invisible Father. Christ Himself confirmed this when the Apostle Philip asked to see the Father? The Lord said to Philip, “Have I been so long a time with you, Philip, and yet you have not known Me? He who has seen Me has seen the Father.”

And so, the Fathers in unity of mind ruled to continue the practice of the early Church, to continue the veneration of icons, and thereby to continue in the oneness of faith which had been handed down to them from the day of Pentecost. For they knew that to stop the veneration of icons would be to deny the Incarnation of Christ – to deny the truth that God Himself had taken on flesh and revealed Himself to us.

Similarly, the Fathers explained that to deny veneration to icons of the Mother of God and the Saints, would be to deny the fact that God is glorified in His Saints. In today’s Gospel reading, the Lord says very clearly, that He is glorified in those who have become one in Him. Christ is glorified in His Saints because He dwells in them and the Saints through their lives glorify Him. As Christ is the image of the Father, similarly do the saints become the image of Christ for they continually make manifest His holiness.

And so brothers and sisters, let us continue in the faith which has been handed down to us. Let us continue to worship the invisible God who has revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ. And let us honor and venerate the icons made of Him and His Saints, in whom He dwells.

But let us also remember that we too are called to become icons of Christ.

In the Old Testament, God revealed Himself as the Word, through the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai. In the New Testament, Christ revealed Himself as the visible Image of the invisible Father, through taking on flesh and blood and dwelling among us. Whereas the Law was written in books, the Gospel was depicted by the Life of Christ.

Let the icon always be a reminder for us that not only has God revealed Himself to us, not only have the saints conformed themselves to His image and therefore been glorified by Him, but let the icon also be a reminder that we ourselves are called to become icons of Christ in this world, revealing His glory, not simply by our words but also by the content of our lives.

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