

Sunday of Orthodoxy

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today, this first Sunday of the Great Fast the Church celebrates what is known as the Triumph of Orthodoxy.

This historic commemoration dates back to the first Sunday of Great Lent in the year 843. On this day the Church celebrated Her final triumph over the iconoclast heresy – a heresy which sought to destroy not only the holy images but also all those who defended their veneration.

In this Triumph of Orthodoxy we see two things.

First, we see the final restoration of the holy icons to the churches and homes of the faithful. And second, we see the vindication and honoring of the countless martyrs and confessors who suffered to preserve the fullness of the Orthodox Faith by witnessing to the vital importance of the icon in the life and tradition of the Church.

While each year on the first Sunday of the Great Fast we make this historic commemoration, the Triumph of Orthodoxy is for us Christians today much more than a mere recollection of the past.

To be sure, we give glory to God, Who guided His Church through the dark times of iconoclasm, and likewise we honor His Saints who were imprisoned, tortured, exiled, and even put to death to uphold the true Faith.

But the Triumph of Orthodoxy for us today is first and foremost is a celebration. A celebration, not so much of distant historic events which happened many centuries ago, but a celebration of an ancient Faith which is very much present in the Church even to this very day.

We know the significance of the icon in the tradition of the Church.

We know how the icon witnesses to the Incarnation of Christ – revealing in a most perfect way that great event of the invisible God taking flesh and dwelling among us.

Saint John the Theologian puts this so beautifully when he writes, “No one has seen God at any time; yet the Only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, ... we declare to you ...

for the Life was revealed, and we have seen it and bear witness, and show to you the everlasting Life, who was with the Father and was revealed to us.”

It is this everlasting Life to which the icon witnesses, acknowledging the great mystery of the invisible God taking on visible form in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Yet as we know the icon does more than witness to the Incarnation of Christ, for it also bears witness to the work which He came to accomplish, that is the sanctification of the human race.

In the icons of the Saints we see a visible testimony to the saving and redemptive work of Christ. In the icon we see man refashioned, reshaped, recreated according to, as St. Paul says, “the image of Him who created him” – that is according to the image of Jesus Christ, the God-man, the only One who authentically reveals what it means to be truly human.

Just last week we recalled how of old Adam was created in the pristine image and likeness of God. And how through disobedience he and his descendents fell from this innocence and union with their Creator, becoming disfigured by sin, corruption, and death.

And all throughout this past week, in the beautiful yet spiritually piercing Canon of Saint Andrew, we saw ourselves likened to all those who struggled throughout the Old and New Testaments to once again regain that beautiful image of what it means to be a person created in the image and likeness of God.

We made the words of the Canon our own, acknowledging that “though God formed our flesh and bones as a potter, by molding it into a body and infusing in it the breath of life”, “through love of pleasure has our form become deformed and the beauty of our inward being ruined.” And we cried with all those seeking salvation, “O Savior, I have defiled the garment of my flesh and polluted that which you fashioned within me according to your own image and likeness – accept me now as I return to you.”

In this context, we can see very clearly that our falling away from God, is a falling away from not only from our Creator, but also a falling away from the persons that we were created to be – a falling away from the image and likeness of God, which we were gifted with in the beginning.

Likewise, our return to God is a refashioning, reshaping, and recreation of the image and likeness of God within us – a return to what it means to be an authentic human being.

The Fathers give us two wonderful illustrations of how man is refashioned by Christ.

The first is that of the Potter and clay:

When through sin Adam and Eve fell from Paradise their spiritual vessels were broken,

and having lost the Holy Spirit, they could no longer retain the breath of life and therefore returned to the dust from which they were taken. Yet through baptism, man is created once again. God, as the divine Potter, wanting to reshape man's vessel which was crushed in the Fall, takes fire and water – fire from Himself for as God He is a consuming fire, and water from the Jordan river – and with these two elements He recreates man according to His divine image and likeness.

And the second illustration, which the Fathers give us to help us understand our recreation in Christ, is that of an Artist and his painting.

The Fathers say that in Paradise, God created man as a masterpiece, as a work of art, if you will, a beautiful painting in His image and likeness. But when man transgressed God's command this image was covered over, distorted, and sullied by the filthiness of sin and disobedience. Yet, through baptism the canvas of God's masterpiece is washed, through the anointing of Holy Chrism the canvas is prepared, and through the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ, man once again comes to resemble the Divine Artist who formed him as His Own Self-portrait.

What does all this mean for us, brothers and sisters?

It means that today, on this Sunday of Orthodoxy, we should do two things.

First, we should thank and glorify God for not only taking flesh, revealing Himself to us, and accomplishing everything necessary for our salvation 2,000 years ago, but also for preserving the fullness of His salvific truth in His Church throughout all times, so that generation after generation of men and women, desirous of be changed and conformed to His image and likeness might in fact be recreated, refashioned, and restored.

And secondly, it means that we should more earnestly reapply ourselves to recovering within us the image of what it means to be an authentic human being, a genuine person created in the likeness of God. This image, most perfectly revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ, is the image which the saints have recovered by conforming themselves to the ways of Christ, by acquiring His mind, and by sharing in His life. This is the image they died for, not only through suffering unjust persecution at the hands of the iconoclasts, but also, and perhaps more importantly, through the death of self denial necessary before one can take up one's cross and follow Christ.

May the Lord Jesus Christ restore us to that image from which we fell of old, to that image which He Himself recreated and manifested through His Incarnation, to that image which was recovered by His Saints, and to that image to which we ourselves struggle to return during this season of repentance, recreation, and restoration.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!