

## **Fathers of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council**

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today the Church commemorates the memory of the Fathers of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council. This is an annual commemoration which we keep every year in the beginning of the month of October.

On this day, we recall how in the year 787 bishops from all over the Christian world assembled together in the city of Nicaea (modern day Turkey) to declare once and for all that the holy icons of the Lord, His Mother, and the Saints, were not idols as some erroneously alleged, but were in fact just the opposite – they were witnesses to the one true God who had revealed Himself in the flesh.

The attack on icons known as iconoclasm was based primarily on two things – bad theology and politics.

First, we'll talk about the bad theology. Iconoclasm was based on the idea that God cannot be depicted in any way, shape, or form. And to support this claim the iconoclasts cited the second commandment given to Moses on Mount Sinai – the commandment not to make any graven images. Those who opposed religious icons declared, "How can you depict the invisible and uncreated God with visible and created things, especially when we were explicitly commanded not to do so!"

And of course, this seems like a good argument. After all the Old Testament continually testifies that no one has seen God at any time, and that we are not to make any graven images of Him. It seems pretty much a cut and dry issue. God is invisible, no one has seen Him, and for this reason we can't make an images of Him.

Yet, what would happen if the invisible God became visible, if the God who had never been seen in the Old Testament revealed Himself and people saw Him, spoke with Him face to face, walked with Him through the towns and cities of Palestine, felt His healing touch, beheld His miracles, and finally saw Him put to death on the Cross only to rise again on the third day?

What if, as St. John the Theologian writes in His Gospel, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory? What if, as St. Paul writes in his epistles, Jesus Christ is truly the visible image of the invisible Father?

Any reasonable person would then say that the argument against depicting God would fall apart because He has depicted Himself by taking human flesh. In fact, one might even say that since God has revealed Himself to us, He has also given us a new commandment: a commandment to record His Image just as we record His words so that all people might come to know not only what God has said, but also what He looks like, Who He is, as revealed by Jesus Christ, the Son of God in the flesh.

And so, the question becomes, “Do you believe that God has become man? Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the visible image of the invisible Father?”

If you don't believe this, if you cannot accept that God has become man, then you undoubtedly will not be able to accept the fact that we can depict His likeness in holy icons either.

This is why of the three great monotheistic religions of the world – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – only Christianity has icons and proclaims its faith in both words and images, because only Christianity accepts the fact that God has become man revealing Himself to us in the Person of Jesus Christ,

Now here is where we get to the second main reason why the Iconoclasts rejected the use of icons: politics.

If we think back and recall from our world history lessons, during the time of the 8<sup>th</sup> century when iconoclasm reared its ugly head, we see some dramatic changes in the civil and religious composition of the world. The most dramatic of these changes being rise of Islam.

Islam, as we know, emerged in the 7<sup>th</sup> century with the false prophet Mohammed.

Mohammed set out to unite the warring polytheistic tribes of the Middle East under one religion and one system of government, both as he claimed in submission to God – Islam literally meaning “submission to God”. Under this Islamic unity, the tribes instead of fighting with each other, turned their energy and effort to the struggle to bring the world into submission to Allah – this effort they called “Jihad”, the Arabic word for struggle. And in just 25 years after the death of Mohammed, Islam had conquered through the Jihad vast expanses of territory, becoming the first empire to link Western Asia with the Mediterranean.

This rapid religious and military expansion threatened the Byzantium Empire and brought fear to many within the Christian empire. And it was this fear which in part led to the controversy of iconoclasm.

Byzantine Christians, who found themselves in lands which bordered upon the rapidly expanding and militant Islamic empire, knew that Muslims did not recognize Jesus Christ as the Son of God and for this reason saw religious depictions as idolatry. And when the Muslim Caliph Yezid ordered the removal of all icons within his dominion, some Christians began to believe it politically beneficial or expedient for them to do the same. This led to the first outburst of iconoclasm as within just three years of the Caliph's ruling, even those who called themselves Christians were demanding the destruction of the holy images.

However, this capitulation to Islamic influence and power was not accepted by all. And though many of the defenders of the icons were persecuted and even put to death, the

Church was ultimately able to stave off the attacks of iconoclasm through the witness of those who were not afraid to suffer for the truth.

And so, what we celebrate today in the memory of the Holy Fathers of Nicaea is not only a theological victory, a victory over bad theology, but also a triumph of Orthodoxy over the political influences and pressures of the outside world.

From the very beginning Orthodox Christians faced these two threats: bad theology and outside pressure. In the early years of the Church it was the theology of the Judaizers and Gnostics who sought to distort the truth of Jesus Christ, and it was the Romans who sought to make Christians capitulate to the ways of the State. Then it was the Arians, the Sabellians, the Eutychians, and all the rest who confused Christ's teaching by their heresies. And as we have just seen in the 8<sup>th</sup> century it was the iconoclasts and the influence of Islam which threatened to annihilate the holy icons which witnessed to God's manifestation in the flesh.

And even today, as Orthodox Christians in America, we likewise find ourselves in a society that is influenced by both bad theology and political pressure. We find ourselves in a society where there are as many incorrect religious doctrines and opinions circulating as there are conflicting political ideas and agendas.

And in this pluralistic atmosphere we are often pressured to accept things based upon whether or not they are politically correct and expedient, rather than whether or not they are theologically sound and morally true. Take for instance, the question of what constitutes a true marriage, or the question of whether or not Islam is a religion of peace, or the question of whether or not life begins at conception. All of these questions are so hotly debated today as if their answers lie in public opinion, rather than the theological truth brought by Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, when the Fathers met in Council in Nicaea in 787, they faced the same types of religious and political pressures that we face today. Yet they saw through the smoke of political correctness and expediency and clung to the truth as revealed by Jesus Christ. Let us commit ourselves to doing the same, so that we might become like them, living icons testifying to the fact that God has come in the flesh, revealing His divine glory full of grace and truth, in order that the world might be saved.

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