

## SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY

Vespers 3/12/06

St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church

Bethlehem PA

Today, the first Sunday of Great Lent, our church celebrates its victory against heresy and more specifically the decisive defeat of Iconoclasm on March 11 843 AD. We celebrate this event not only for the icons, but for the fact that the Orthodox Church is the only form of Christianity which has preserved the teachings of the seven Ecumenical Councils without addition or subtraction down through the centuries.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council preserved and safeguarded the truth in its successful defense of the Holy Icons. In doing so our Holy Fathers anathematized the unrepentant icon-fighters, the Iconoclasts, who contended that since Jesus Christ is God it is not permissible to depict Him in icons because the divine is invisible and therefore it should not be depicted. This theological battle lasted over 150 years, and thousands of martyrs were added to the celestial altar. Some of our pacifist Christians in their lack of understanding often judge this element of the Orthodox Church as unnecessary triumphalism. According to them it is egotistical to claim that

we the Orthodox have the entire truth.

The church being the Body and the Bride of Christ, is spotless and without wrinkle, and the pillar and the foundation of the truth. Without the absolute truth we lose the path that leads to God's likeness, which is the purpose of our creation. So why the battles, over dogma, over doctrine, over icons and biblical interpretation? The church fathers and especially the defenders of the faith were not some querulous characters. Most of them were monastics, like St. Anthony, St. Maximos the Confessor, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Gregory Palamas, and St. Nikodemos The Hagiorite. They were hesychasts – they loved solitude!!! But they defended the faith not because God was in danger or His Church was in danger. Never! They were shepherding the flock! They fought because of their pure love for God's people who were infected by the spiritual disease of Arius, or Nestorios or Apollinarios or Dioskoros. They were defending the traffic signals, the bridges, the road signs, and the guardrails of the narrow path that leads to God, to the source of love and perfect freedom. The dogmas, the commandments, the statues found in the gospel are not some juridical, legalistic inventions of priests to keep the populations under their thumb! And, Christ did not incarnate to

teach us some good manners or to give us some reward after we die!

This is the pitiable plight of the descendants of Luther, Calvin, and the early reformers who completed the derailment of their followers from the already derailed schismatic Church of Rome. Take for example some recent claims of some contemporary icons of the Protestant Mega-Churches. “Jesus had an ego. He said, ‘I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.’ Wow, what an ego trip he was on!” (Robert Schuller, “The Phil Donahue Show” 9/12/1980).  
Ego trip? Not exactly!

This statement is totally irresponsible, and contrary to Christ’s hypostatic union of the two natures, the unconfused union of divinity and humanity.

Christ said, “Learn from me because I am of a meek and humble heart and I will give you rest.” So Christ does not have a trace of egotism because egotism is demonic and in Christ there is no sin.

More recently this same pastor (before 9/11) professed on national television: “It would not bother me if my descendants became Moslems”. More new-age psycho-babble is heard from his disciple Rick Warren of Orange County California, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Warren states, “Learn to Love yourself... Be true to yourself... Forgive yourself... Believe in yourself”

(Ladies Home Journal March 2005, page 36). Doesn't this sound like the sermon of the serpent to Eve in the garden? You can reach theosis (divinization) by yourself, you don't need to involve God!

It is no wonder that 50% of the American Christian children graduate from a four-year college not only with a college degree but with a high degree of denial of faith in Jesus Christ. False doctrines of an angry God, a God so angry that He needs to sacrifice His Own Son to satisfy His justice have deleterious effects on the minds of our American youth. True doctrines or true dogmas are not some laws written up at some conferences called Ecumenical Councils. The church Fathers had empirical knowledge of the Holy Trinity, of the two natures of Christ, of the Love of God, in the uncreated light. They experienced these revealed ontologies and then they expressed them in theological terms. The dogmas or the commandments do not necessarily save man, they simply open the road. They guide the faithful to reach catharsis and illumination to experience and taste the reality of God. This, however, cannot take place outside of the Orthodox dogma. Take the dogma of the Holy Trinity, for example. We cannot be called Christians without the dogma of the Triune God. The fact that God is Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit, three persons with One Essence, is of paramount importance in our spiritual life and ultimately in our overall behavior towards our fellow human being. Dogmas influence our daily existence. In Christianity we have a personal God, not a higher power. A higher power has might and force, but not love. Salvation without love is hatred, and love that does not preserve freedom is destruction. Saint Nickolai Velimirovich observes, “For someone to conceive a God without a son translates to conceiving a God without love: without a co-eternal son, who then did God love pre-eternally before the Creation of the World? This would mean that God did not know how to love. The repercussions of this are very overt in the religion of Islam. The Quran ridicules the teaching of the Holy Trinity. At the Temple of Omar, one of the most holy sites of Mohamedanism, the following commandment is engraved on the wall: “Faithful, know that Allah has no Son”.

The repercussions of this false teaching permeate and pervert man’s entire life. If God does not love someone else before creation, then who does He love, Himself? Such an emotion is not love but selfishness and egotism. Since God according to Islam, does not have a Son, it is not surprising that there is no mention of God’s love within the Quran. Moreover, if it is not

mentioned in the Quran it will not be developed by chance or flourish among its faithful. Mohammed never mentions love with regard to Allah at all. He only emphasizes might, power, justice, submission and mercy - mercy if you are obedient and if you are a good child of Allah! If you offend Mohammad or Allah, or if you choose to doubt your submission to this faith, then according to Mohammed you don't deserve to live.

Let's not go too far. The God of the West presents similar idiosyncrasies mainly because the Western theologians after the schism followed Plato and Aristotle to defend their faith against the rising threat of Islam. They confused the energies of God with the essence of God as a result of the Anselmian Theology and thus distorted the Orthodox revelation. Adam's fall, they teach, offended the justice of God. This made God angry, so angry that He needed to sacrifice His Own Son to satisfy His "need" for justice and righteousness! If we are obedient to this God of "needs" He is happy with us, but if we cross Him His divine wrath is aroused!!! The Popes of the West needed an army to defend this ideology. Holy Inquisition and the fear of being burned at the stake defended these false religious doctrines for a number of years. After the Age of Enlightenment however, Europe fell into

Deism and Agnosticism mainly because of these flaws of the Western Christian theological system. We are not immune from this issue in our Orthodox world today, especially when we reduce the gospel to morality and ethics by ignoring the main purpose of our life, the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. Doing this drives our children into the embrace of existentialism and agnosticism. According to the Fathers, true faith (Orthodoxia) will lead to true practice (Orthopraxia). True faith and true life are indispensably connected.

Returning to the subject of Icons, allow me to ask the same question I posed to some of our teenagers after Liturgy this morning: Who would you think was the first iconographer or iconmaker of our church? Most people would venture to say St. Luke. In reality, the first iconmaker, the first iconographer was God Himself. Of Course! He made us, he created us “Kat’ Eikova,” according to his Icon. So the first iconographer is the Holy Trinity, our God. In Genesis 1:36 we read, “Let *us* make man...” (the “us” revealing the multiplicity of persons in God)– “according to *our image*” or “kat’eikona imeteran.” Therefore, according to Scripture, Christ is the Icon of God the Father and Adam was created in the image, in the “Eikona”, of Jesus Christ.

The basis of this theological feud over icons was the dogma of the Incarnation. The Orthodox maintained that we came to know God because He became flesh. Our God is no longer imageless. The iconoclasts were heavily influenced by the rise of Islam which began to conquer the outer parts of the Byzantine Empire during the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Leo the Isavrian managed to have the right arm of St. John of Damascus cut off because of his brilliant theology in the defense of the icons. Syria at the time was under Moslem occupation. The iconoclasts essentially undermined God's incarnation and more specifically, they undermined the humanity of God the Logos. It is known that Islam is highly iconoclastic. No images of any kind are permitted in the Mosque. But this is the other side of the same coin of Monophysitism. The 1<sup>st</sup> Ecumenical Council safeguarded the dogma of Christ's Divinity against Arius who taught that Christ was created in time. The 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council defended the teaching of Christ's Humanity – that is, that Christ is the God-man. The central teaching of St. Athanasios' Homily on the Incarnation revered world wide even by Protestants like C.S. Lewis was:

“God became man so man can become God by grace!” The Logos became Flesh – so man can become Logos by grace. To this day biblical fundamentalists will tell you, “I only accept the Holy Scripture.

But you wouldn't have a New Testament without the Church. The Church came first! St. Athanasios the Great filtered out for us the pseudo-gospels and the pseudo-epistles and canonized the 27 Books of the New Testament. So how can you trust these 27 books as authentic and not trust the theology or the church of the Saint who compiled them? If the Holy Spirit was with him, and it certainly was, when he was fighting Arius and selecting the authentic books of the New Testament, it was also with him when he used the term Theotokos or Birthgiver of God for the Ever Virgin Mary. The very term Theotokos is the jetty that crushes all Christological heresies. When we name the Virgin Mary "Theotokos" we leave no doubt about the identity of Her Child. He is God or "Theos" in Greek. He is the God-man. Salvation is attainable only through the God-human person of Jesus Christ. According to the scriptural interpretation of the Church Fathers, salvation is a journey from the image to the likeness. We are created according to God's image and we are given the potential at our baptism to enter the stadium of virtues to acquire the likeness. Christ gives us the grace, the spiritual weapons, but we must exercise our free will. We do not believe in predestination because we cannot have a God of predestination and a God of freewill at the same time. One of these two Gods does not exist.

St. Gregory Palamas teaches in his homily on free will that we are not automatically children of God by our mere baptism. "He came to his own but his own received Him not, but to those who received Him He gave the power (the potential) to become children of God!" So we are becoming children of God by the grace of Christ. Our Church Fathers teach about three states of Christian development: purification, illumination, and theosis (deification). Although repenting Christians can certainly be saved in anyone of these three states of development, only those at the level of theosis reach their full potential in this life and become gods by grace. They become christs by grace and we depict their transfigured bodies on icons, we include them in our liturgical services, and we venerate their icons in our churches. The icon is a visual dogmatic method expressing the truth of our faith in the same light as the Holy Scripture. Are icons graven images or idols?

Certainly Not. We stated that the first iconmaker was God and He continued to use iconography in the Old Testament. God Himself commanded Moses to make a bronze snake to heal the dying Israelites. Was that snake an idol? God Himself commanded Moses to create cherubim using pure gold with specific dimensions and place them over the Arc of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. Were these gold cherubim idols? An idol or a graven image is a depiction of an inexistent being or an inexistent god. The bronze snake was not an idol because it pre-figured Christ on the cross, and the golden cherubim above the golden altar are existing realities of heaven. The golden calf, on the other hand, was indeed an idol because it was depicting an inexistent god. So icons are not idols but precious in the eyes of the Lord! So precious that the Most Holy Theotokos permitted St. Luke to write her personal icon. St. Luke wrote four icons of her when God's mother was still alive and he painted 70 more after her dormition.

In Russia alone we have 200 feast days of miraculous icons for the Mother of God. God is well pleased to glorify His saints and to dispense His grace through created matter. The staff of Moses worked countless miracles, the staff of Aaron budded, and the bones of Elisha resurrected a dead person in

the Old Testament. The same God of the Old Testament who is Jesus Christ grants the same experiences to all those who purify themselves like Moses, Prophet Elijah, Aaron, and Elisha. So why are some icons more miraculous than others? One, and perhaps the main reason is the holiness of the iconographer. Each iconographer at the state of theosis is living the reality of Christ's Transfiguration. As Christ's Light became manifest it sanctified everything around a certain radius of Mount Tabor. Everything changed into the Kingdom of God. Not only John, James and Peter (who wanted to change his address at that very moment), but even the rocks, the soil, the shrubbery, the clothing of the apostles changed. Everything became brighter than the sun. Likewise a saint is someone who has become a pure vessel of the Holy Spirit – one dead to the world – one who no longer lives but invites Christ to live in him. According to St. Paul, the co-essential Trinity come and make their abode in this person, and in the environment of this saintly Christ-bearing person. So not only the icons, but the shoes, the clothing, the utensils of Saint Spiridon and St. Nektarios, and the chains and the shadow of Peter, and the work rags of St. Paul were full of healing power. So icons painted by saints are especially miraculous. And let's not think that someone

needs to be 80 years old like Moses to have this grace. A young child can be at the state of theosis. This was not uncommon before the age of radio, television, cds, and gameboy. Young children at the age of ten or twelve like Father Iakovos Tsalikis, Elder Paisios, and many others had visions of God. One young man of the same caliber lived in Smyrna less than one-hundred years ago. His family was renting an apartment. This young boy was very pure, very spiritual and had an ardent love for the Theotokos, the Virgin Mary. He expressed this love by painting the icon of the Mother of God on the wall of his bedroom and by praying under this icon daily and extensively. After a number of years his family had to move and the landlady was surprised to find an icon on the bedroom wall of the apartment. The new non-Christian tenants were ready to move in and the new lease called for a fresh paint job. Strangely enough, no paint would stick to this fresco. They tried repeatedly to paint over this icon but the new paint was miraculously not only peeling, but falling off of the icon. The landlady was in despair. If the new tenants were Orthodox they would understand, but this was not the case. So she went and purchased a tall new dresser big enough to hide the icon, she pushed it up against the wall and left. The following morning she

was walking through the apartment with the new tenants showing them every room. When they opened the door with the icon they found the new dresser face down on the floor of the room and the icon of the Virgin Mother staring them in the face. The icon did not wish to be hidden! God was glorifying his young servant who reached holiness from a very young age, and the Holy Spirit sanctified not only him but the works of his hands. This is central to our Orthodox Faith. The Holy Spirit does not abandon the material nature of man who reaches theosis. This is the theology behind the relics of the Saints. The relics of the Saints, the material belongings of the Saints (i.e. chairs, beds, clothing, crosses, icons) are forever energized by the presence of the Holy Spirit! They are distribution outlets of grace! It is worth mentioning here one of the great surprises relayed to me by Dr. Dimitrios Tsellegidis, Professor of Dogmatics of the theological department of the University of Thessaloniki. His doctoral dissertation was on the theology of icons. At some point Dr. Tsellegides visited an elder who was the spiritual father of a convent in Northern Greece. This elder who is still living today happens to be blind by birth. Although he was 100% blind, his spiritual vision is 20/20. After visiting with him and discussing various ecclesiastical

topics, our Doctor Tsellegidis expressed some curiosity about the elder's cell. Their dialogue was this.

“Now elder I know that you are totally blind – why then do you have dozens of icons on the walls of your cell?”

“Demitri, because of their grace!”

“Elder I understand that, I do know that icons are windows of grace, and that they somehow bring us closer to the saint they depict when we venerate them, but in your case, you cannot see. Wouldn't one or two icons be enough for you to venerate since you really don't know which icon you are venerating?”

“Demitri, of course I know which icon I venerate. Each icon has its own distinct grace! St. Irene has one grace, St. Barbara has her own grace, and St. Nicholas has an altogether different grace.”

The professor and his companions were in disbelief. “Elder I'm sorry but I have a difficult time believing this. Do you mind if we do a little test? Would you please tie your hands behind your back so I can bring you an icon to venerate?” Dr. Tsellegidis takes an icon off the wall from the back of the elder and places it on the elder's lips to venerate.

“Oh Demitri this is Saint Catherine the Great.”

“I’m sorry Elder but I think you made a mistake in this case. I hate to tell you but I think I took St. Barbara off the wall. I think you made a mistake!”

“My dear Demitri, the grace of St. Catherine is totally different. Trust me I know St. Barbara very well! Go ahead and read the name of the icon!”

The Professor was flabbergasted when he saw that the blind man could “see” much better than the PhD of dogmatics with perfect natural vision. The icon was that of Saint Catherine indeed! This had Professor Tselleggidis and his company in tears, and quite humbled. The purity and ascetical struggle of this blind elder transformed his inner vision and transfigured his cell to Mount Tabor!

Did you ever consider this? How did the eye witnesses of the Transfigured Lord recognize Moses and Elijah on either side of the Lord on Mount Tabor since they were totally blinded by the Uncreated Light – a light that turned the sunlight into candle light by comparison? Their natural eyes were useless but the eyes of their soul were wide opened! Only with the eyes of their soul did they recognize Moses and Elijah in the Holy Spirit. Does this answer how the blind monk was able to differentiate between the icons of different

saints? He was a saint himself – he was at the state of theosis.

In closing I need to say that I'm not Orthodox simply because I was born to Orthodox parents. I am Orthodox because all the experiences of Moses, Aaron, Elijah, Elisha, and all the prophets are lived and experienced only in the Orthodox Church today! The Light of Mount Tabor comes out of the Holy Tomb of Christ every year on Holy Saturday only in Orthodoxy! Our Metropolitan Maximos was an eyewitness of the healing power of this holy fire. The flow of the waters of Jordan still turns backwards when our Orthodox Patriarch blesses and sanctifies the water of the Jordan every Epiphany! We have saintly elders in Orthodoxy with apostolic gifts not lesser than those of St. Paul and Saint Peter. The woman with the issue of blood in the gospel of Saint Mark was healed not by the Word of the Lord, not by His hands, but by the fringes of His cloak.

Here then is the theology of the icon, and of the relics of the Saints if you will: the icons are the FRINGES OF THE LORD'S CLOAK and by extension the fringes of all those who kept their baptismal garment pure and became christs by grace! My friends, we are surrounded by fellow citizens, very good people of many Christian denominations accentuating and

emphasizing some doctrine of the gospel. Unbeknownst to them, their leaders have divided the garment of the Lord in thousands of pieces. In Orthodoxy we have not only the Lord with his garment intact but all the fringes of the Lord's Cloak, and His fringes are still miraculous today. In Orthodoxy we preserve all the trimmings of the Lord's banquet and every year during Great Lent our Holy Church invites us to come and enter the stadium of virtues, to search, touch, and taste the sweetness of its life-giving springs, to discover and see "that the Lord of Orthodoxy is good." Once we practice and apply our Orthodox faith, and we begin to explode with the love of Christ. It is then that we successfully begin to share this unfathomable treasure with the sixty million unchurched Americans, including the unchurched Orthodox who are waiting for you, the Good Samaritan, to lead them to the hospital called the Orthodox Church.

AMEN!

Constantine Zalalas

Sunday of Orthodoxy 2006

## Sources

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