

## THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT: THE SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY

The Sunday of Orthodoxy is the first Sunday of Great Lent. The dominant theme of this Sunday since 843 has been that of the victory of the icons. In that year the iconoclastic controversy, which had raged on and off since 726, was finally laid to rest, and icons and their veneration were restored on the first Sunday in Lent. Ever since, this Sunday has been commemorated as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy."

The Seventh Ecumenical Council dealt predominantly with the controversy regarding icons and their place in Orthodox worship. Empress Irene convened it in Nicaea in 787 at the request of Tarasios, Patriarch of Constantinople. 367 bishops attended the Council.

Almost a century before this, the iconoclastic controversy had once more shaken the foundations of both Church and State in the Byzantine Empire. Excessive religious respect and the ascribed miracles to icons by some members of society approached the point of worship (due only to God) and idolatry. This instigated excesses at the other extreme by which icons were completely taken out of the liturgical life of the Church by the Iconoclasts. The Iconophiles, on the other-hand, believed that icons served to preserve the doctrinal teachings of the Church; they considered icons to be man's dynamic way of expressing the divine through art and beauty.

The Council decided on a doctrine by which icons should be venerated but not worshipped. In answering the Empress' invitation to the Council, Pope Hadrian replied with a letter in which he also held the position of extending veneration to icons but not worship, the last befitting only God.

The decree of the Council for restoring icons to churches added an important clause which still stands at the foundation of the rationale for using and venerating icons in the Orthodox Church to this very day: "We define that the holy icons, whether in color, mosaic, or some other material, should be exhibited in the holy churches of God, on the sacred vessels and liturgical vestments, on the walls, furnishings, and in houses and along the roads, namely the icons of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, that of our Lady the Theotokos, those of the venerable angels and those of all saintly people. Whenever these representations are contemplated, they will cause those who look at them to commemorate and love their prototype. We define also that they should be kissed and that they are an object of veneration and honor, but not of real worship, which is reserved for Him

Who is the subject of our faith and is proper for the divine nature. The veneration accorded to an icon is in effect transmitted to the prototype; he who venerates the icon, venerated in it the reality for which it stands".

A Regional Synod was called in Constantinople in 843. Under Empress Theodora. The veneration of icons was solemnly proclaimed at the Hagia Sophia Cathedral. The Empress, her son Michael III, Patriarch Methodios, and monks and clergy came in procession and restored the icons in their rightful place. The day was called "Triumph of Orthodoxy." Since that time, this event is commemorated yearly with a special service on the first Sunday of Lent, the "Sunday of Orthodoxy".



## FINAL THOUGHT

According to Tradition, the origin of icons is a gracious story. Avgar, king of a province in Mesopotamia, entered into correspondence with our Lord, Jesus Christ. Avgar begged our Lord to come and heal him from a severe sickness. Christ refused the invitation, telling Avgar that His mission on earth was nearing completion. Avgar then sent his royal artist to paint the likeness of Christ, but the artist was unable to fulfill his task because he was dazzled by the brilliance of Christ's Divinity. In His mercy, the Lord took a handkerchief, placed it against His face; miraculously, the outline of Him was traced onto the cloth: this is believed to be the first icon, "Not Made By Hands." It is this likeness, however derived, we find in all authentic icons of Christ. Thus, icons were not only blessed by our Lord, but the first one was, according to tradition, made by Him, and of Him.

- Adapted from *IKONS* by John Tavener and Mother Thekla

## A CLOSING PRAYER

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; both now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.*

O ye who have passed from evil doctrine to true worship, who art illumined with the light of knowledge, let us clap our hands, as in the Psalms, offering God grateful praise. Let us bow in adoration to the Icon of Christ, the Icon of the most Pure, the pictures of all the saints drawn on the walls, tablets and holy vessels, refuting the lie of the evil-opinioned; for the adoration of the picture, Basil saith, is transmitted to its prototype, imploring Thee, O Christ God, by the intercessions of Thy pure Mother and all the saints, to grant us the Great Mercy.

✠ From *Vespers For First Sunday Of Great Lent*



## DID YOU KNOW?

*We do an Akathist Service each of the Fridays during Lent. Did you know about this beautiful service?*

Akathist to the Theotokos is made up of twenty-four stanzas in the form of an alphabetic acrostic, alpha through omega, offered within a Compline service. In the . . . tradition, the stanzas are divided into four parts, with one part being read each of the first four Fridays of Great Lent. On the fifth Friday the entire twenty-four stanzas are recited. The stanzas tell us of the Annunciation, Mary's visit to Elizabeth, Joseph's doubt and his dream, the Nativity of our Lord, the flight into Egypt, the blessing of St. Simeon, the new life centering on Heaven, God's presence on earth and in heaven, the angels' amazement, and more about the Virgin Mary's role. The beautiful stanzas remind us the Theotokos intercedes for us.

✠ Excerpted and adapted from the Archdiocese Webpage

✠ Reprinted from *A Way of Life: Introducing Your Child to the Orthodox Faith, a Religious Education Pre-School Program for Parents*, by Ann Marie Gidus-Mercera.