

Archpriest Georges Florovsky (1893-1979)

Holy Icons*

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THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT IS ORTHODOX[Y] SUNDAY. It was established as a special memorial day of the Council at Constantinople in 843. It commemorates first of all the victory of the Church over the heresy of the Iconoclasts: The use and veneration of Holy Ikons was restored. On this day we continue to sing the troparion of the Holy Image of Christ: "*We reverence Thy sacred Image O Christ...*"

At first glance, it may seem to be an unsuitable occasion to commemorate the glory of the Church and all the heroes and martyrs of the Orthodox Faith. Would it not be more reasonable to do so rather on the days dedicated to the memory of the great Ecumenical Councils or of the Fathers of the Church? Is not the veneration of Ikons rather a piece of an external ritual and ceremonial? Is not Ikon-painting rather just a decoration, very beautiful indeed, and in many ways instructive, but hardly an article of Faith? Such is the current opinion, unfortunately widely spread even among the Orthodox themselves. And it accounts for a sore decay of our religious art. We usually mistake Ikons for "religious pictures," and therefore have no difficulty in using the most unsuitable pictures as Ikons, even in our churches. Too often we simply miss the religious significance of Holy Ikons. We have forgotten the true and ultimate purpose of Ikons.

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Let us turn to the witness of St. John of Damascus— one of the first and greatest defenders of Holy Ikons in the period of struggle— the great theologian and devotional poet of our Church. In one of his sermons in the defense of Ikons he says: "I have seen the human image of God, and my soul is saved." It is a strong and moving statement. God is invisible, He lives in light unapproachable. How can a frail man see or behold Him? Now, God has been manifested in the flesh. The Son of God, Who is in the bosom

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of the Father, “came down from heaven” and “became man.” He dwelt among men. This was the great move of Love Divine. The Heavenly Father was moved by the misery of man and sent His Son because He loved the world. “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” *John 1:18*. The Ikon of Christ, God Incarnate, is a continuous witness of the Church to that mystery of the Holy Incarnation, which is the basis and the substance of our faith and hope. Christ Jesus, Our blessed Lord, is God Incarnate. It means that since the Incarnation, God is visible. One can now have a true image of God.

The Incarnation is an intimate and personal identification of God with man, with the needs and misery of man. The Son of God “was made man,” as it is stated in the Creed, “for us men and for our salvation.” He took upon Himself the sins of the world, and died for us sinners on the tree of the Cross, and thereby He made the Cross the new tree of life for believers. He became the new and Last Adam, the Head of the new and redeemed Humanity. The Incarnation means a personal intervention of God into the life of man, an intervention of Love and Mercy. The Holy Ikon of Christ is a symbol of this, but much more than a mere symbol or sign. It is also an efficient sign and token of Christ’s abiding presence in the Church, which is His Body. Even in an ordinary portrait there is always something of the person represented. A portrait not only reminds us

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of the person, but somehow conveys something of him, i.e. represents the person, i.e. “makes present again.” It is even more true of the sacred Image of Christ. As the teachers of the Church have taught us—and especially St. Theodore of Studium, another great confessor and defender of Holy Ikons— an Ikon, in a sense, belongs to Christ’s personality itself. The Lord is there, in His “Holy Images.”

Therefore not everyone is permitted to make or paint Ikons, if they are to be true Ikons. The Ikon-painter must be a faithful member of the Church, and he must prepare himself for his sacred task by fasting and prayer. It is not just a matter of art, of artistic or technical skill. It is a kind of witness, a profession of faith. For the same reason, the art itself must be wholeheartedly subordinate to the rule of faith. There are limits of the artistic imagination. There are certain established patterns to be followed. In any case, the Ikon of Christ must be so executed as to convey the true conception of His person, i.e. to witness to His Divinity, yet Incarnate. All these rules were strictly kept for centuries in the Church, and then they were forgotten. Even unbelievers were permitted to paint Christ’s ikons in the churches, and therefore certain modern ikons” are no more than pictures, showing us just a man. These pictures fail to be “Ikons” in any proper and true sense, and cease to be witnesses of the Incarnation. In such cases, we just “decorate” our churches.

The use of Holy Ikons has always been one of the most distinctive features of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Christian West, even before the Schism, had little understanding for this dogmatic and devotional substance of Ikon-painting. In the West it meant just decoration. And it was under Western influence that Ikon-painting has also deteriorated in the Orthodox East in modern times. The decay of Ikon-painting was a symptom of a weakening of faith. The art of Holy Ikons is not a neutral matter. It appertains to Faith.

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There should be no hazard, and no "improvisation," in the painting of our churches. Christ is never alone, St. John of Damascus contended. He is always with His saints, who are His friends for ever. Christ is the Head, and true believers are the Body. In the old churches the whole state of the Church Triumphant would be pictorially represented on the walls. Again, this was not just a decoration, nor was it simply a story told in lines and colors for the ignorant and illiterate. It was rather an insight into the invisible reality of the Church. The whole company of Heaven was represented on the walls because it was present there, though invisibly. We always pray at Divine Liturgy, during the Little Entrance, that "Holy Angels may enter with us to serve with us." And our prayer is, no doubt, granted. We do not see Angels, indeed. Our sight is weak. But it is told of St. Seraphim that he used to see them, for they were there indeed. The elect of the Lord do see them and the Church Triumphant. Ikons are signs of this presence. "When we stay in the temple of Thy glory, we seem to stand in the Heavens."

Thus, it is quite natural that on the Sunday of Orthodoxy we should not only celebrate the restoration of Ikon-veneration, but also commemorate that glorious body of witnesses and believers who did profess their faith, even at the cost of their worldly security, prosperity, and life itself. It is a great day of the Church. In fact, on this Sunday we do celebrate the Church of the Incarnate Word: we celebrate the redeeming Love of the Fathers, the Love Crucified of the Son, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit, made visible in the whole company of the faithful, who did already enter into Heavenly Rest, into the joy Everlasting of their Lord and Master. Holy Ikons are our witness to the glory of the Kingdom to come, and already present.