ARE ICONS NECESSARY?

Iconoclasm and the Triumph of Orthodoxy

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Are icons really necessary, or are they just "pretty" decorations and "nice" to have? In Orthodox churches and homes, the presence of icons is one of the most prominent and obvious characteristics. Why? Would Orthodox Christianity exist without icons? These questions were debated, and the answers definitively given during the Iconoclastic Controversy 1100-1200 years ago, when the Orthodox loudly proclaimed **"YES!** icons **ARE** necessary:" without icons there is no Orthodox Christianity, because icons confirm and verify the truths that Orthodoxy proclaims. On the first Sunday of Great Lent each year we celebrate the Feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, which commemorates the victory in 843 of the Orthodox iconodules (those who venerate, icons), over the iconoclasts (those who destroy icons). This Triumph of Orthodoxy terminated 113 years of fighting, during which thousands were martyred in their attempt to protect their sacred images.

What does all this mean to us today? Can we imagine ourselves giving up our lives to defend our own icons or those of our parish against people who would destroy them? It is quite difficult to imagine that we would. But then, we must wonder why we probably would **not** give up our lives for our icons. Could it be because we don't really understand what icons are, and why they are necessary, and mistakenly think that they are just "pretty" decorations?

We will attempt to deal with all these questions by looking back at the Iconoclastic Controversy and trying to gain an understanding of what it was all about.

What Was the Iconoclastic Controversy?

One of the best ways of relating to something of the past is to correlate it to the present. Thus, let us try to explain what iconoclasm was by imagining it today. (Of course, our parallels are inadequate because our political-social situation is so different.) Imagine that the President and Legislature of the United States issued a law stating that possession or veneration of icons was illegal, and that all icons were to be destroyed. Anyone who violated this law would be arrested and even killed. Imagine police or military groups going around and systematically destroying all icons. Then further imagine that the Patriarch or Metropolitan and some of the other bishops **agreed** with the law, and issued letters denouncing the use of icons, and that countless others in the Church also approved and endorsed these actions. Each one of us must ask ourselves where we would stand in such a controversy, and whether we would say that icons are necessary, and risk life, limb and torture to preserve their use.

What we have just been saying is hypothetical (but not as impossible in 2020 as it was some decades ago). But this is essentially what happened 1100-1200 years ago. Why, and what was the Church's response? To answer these questions, first we'll briefly mention the historical facts of the Iconoclastic Controversy. Then we will consider what the Iconoclasts' position was. And finally, we will discuss what the Orthodox view is, as formulated during the controversy, and seek to gain an understanding of what icons can mean for us now, in a personal way.

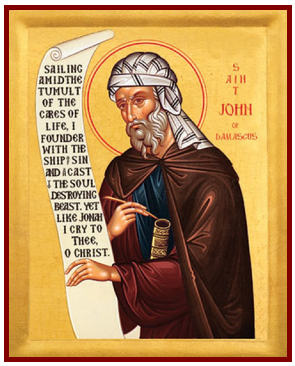
Iconoclasm, it must be remembered, did not involve persecution of Christians by pagans, as had occurred during the first three Christian centuries. It was basically a conflict within the Church itself, between two factions, each of whom believed they were acting in God's name. However, iconoclasm received the power to enforce its views as a result of the illegitimate interference of a number of Byzantine emperors in the life and beliefs of the Church. During the Iconoclastic period, virtually every sacred image that could be found was desecrated and destroyed — portable icons, mosaics and frescoes on church walls, Gospel book covers, sacred vessels and vestments, illuminated manuscripts — anything that had an icon on or in it. Also, countless thousands of Orthodox faithful, many of them monks and nuns, were savagely tortured, mutilated, and murdered. These atrocities were committed by the army and other officials of the state, with the sanction of several Patriarchs of Constantinople and hundreds of bishops.

First Wave of Iconoclasm

It all formally started probably in 730 (or possibly earlier) after the Byzantine Emperor Leo III, the Isaurian, managed to depose and deport the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, St. Germanus, and replaced him with an iconoclast patriarch. Leo then issued a decree, signed both by himself and by the new patriarch, that ordered all sacred images to be destroyed, and ordered the exile, torture or death of anyone who possessed, venerated, or made an icon of any type. Consequently, there were many popular uprisings and rebellions. Persecutions of the Orthodox were continued by Leo's son, Constantine V, and were as severe as those under the last pagan Roman emperor, Diocletian (ruled 284-305).

In 754, twenty-four years after the initial iconoclastic decree, a council was called by the iconoclasts in which 338 bishops participated. This council proposed and endorsed the iconoclastic views as **the** dogmas of the Church. Anyone who disagreed was to be excommunicated, and deposed, if clergy.

First Restoration of Icons and Orthodoxy



After half a century of iconoclasm, when the third iconoclastic emperor died, his wife, Empress Irene, came to the throne as regent for her under-age son. Empress Irene was Orthodox, and she immediately restored icons and Orthodoxy, and prepared for an Orthodox council (the Seventh Ecumenical Council), which was convened in Nicea in 787, to formally and officially refute iconoclasm and declare the Orthodox position. The council's decisions were significantly shaped and influenced by the great exponent of the theology of the icon — St. John of Damascus.

Second Wave of Iconoclasm and its Second End

Peace lasted for twenty-seven years, until Leo V, the Armenian, re-instituted iconoclasm in 813, because he decided that the iconoclastic emperors had had more political and military success than had the Orthodox emperors. Once again there was the destruction and the persecution, with its tortures and murders, exiles and imprisonments. This time it lasted forty years, during the reign of three emperors. And once again, it was a woman who ended this second wave of iconoclasm — the Empress Theodora — who took the throne as regent for her under-age son, when her emperor husband died in 843. Immediately a council was called, which restored the veneration of icons and confirmed the dogmatic position of the Orthodox, as had been established by the Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787 (Nicea II). Then they proclaimed the first Sunday of Great Lent (Great Fast) as the feast of the Triumph of

Orthodoxy, with the procession and exaltation of icons in all churches. On that first Orthodoxy Sunday, the Empress Theodora put back the icon of Christ in its traditional position over the famous bronze gate entrance (*chalkē*) to the imperial palace. Just as it had been the destruction of that icon of Christ that had signaled the beginning of iconoclasm 113 years earlier, so its ultimate restoration symbolized the official Triumph of Orthodoxy, after the most severe challenge to Orthodox Christianity ever experienced.

This is what the feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy is all about from an historical perspective. I think that it is difficult for us today in the United States to really imagine that such destruction and torture could have continued for over one-hundred years concerning icons, for I imagine that most Orthodox today wouldn't consider icons as really that much of a fundamental necessity.

Therefore, having briefly looked at some of the major historical details of the Iconoclastic Controversy, let us now consider the views of the iconoclasts.

The Iconoclastic View of Icons

The major argument against the use of icons by the iconoclasts was that icons were idols and their veneration was idolatry, and they referred to the second Commandment's injunction against graven images. They maintained that the very substance or essence (*ousía*) of an icon was identical to the prototype. They contended that it was impossible to have an icon of Christ other than that of the consecrated Eucharistic Body and Blood of Christ. In addition to actually hating icons, the extreme iconoclasts also rejected the veneration of the Theotokos (Birth-Giver-of-God) and the saints, and the veneration of relics. (These views were obviously resurrected by Protestants in the 16th century and later.) Some felt it to be an insult to Christ and the Theotokos to form icons of them, constructed out of such dead and gross material as paint and wood.

Where did iconoclasm come from? The tendency had been around for centuries. There seem to be a number of influences contributing to iconoclasm. The strongest iconoclasm came from the Near East, where Islamic iconoclasm had a significant effect, along with Judaism, which had in large part abolished most of its figurative sacred art (but by no means entirely), largely as a reaction against Christianity. Also, in some areas of the Near East strong dualist beliefs had long been prevalent, even from pre-Christian times. Extreme dualists basically contend that the material world is evil, even going to the extent of saying that God did not create the material world, because God could not create something evil. (Of course, then, there could be no Incarnation, for God could not possibly assume the degraded and degrading materiality of the human body.)

Some of the problems of the iconoclast position are very obvious. Most crucial is their fundamental error confusing the Christian icon with the pagan idol. The pagan attitude was that their idol **was** their god — that the essence/substance of their idol was identical to their god. The Orthodox, on the other hand, very clearly explained that the icon portrayed the person (*hypostasis*) of the holy person, but **not** the essence/substance (*ousía*) of the prototype. The icon represents and *corresponds* to the prototype, but it is not identical to it. An icon of Christ represents Christ, but it is not Christ Himself. On the other hand, the consecrated Eucharistic Bread is not an icon or image that *represents* Christ, as the iconoclasts insisted, it **is** Christ.

We see that a variety of ideas accompany the hatred of icons, such as the rejection

of the veneration of the Theotokos/Birth-Giver-of-God, of the saints and of their relics, among other things. But even much more basic and fundamental to iconoclasm is the rejection of Christ's Incarnation itself, as well as of the Orthodox belief that the material world participates in sanctification or deification *(theōsis)*, and that the Kingdom of God involves a transfiguration or spiritualization of the entire cosmos.

The Orthodox View of Icons

Let us now focus on what the Orthodox view of icons is, as formulated primarily by three sainted writer-theologians: in the first period, St. John of Damascus and St. Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople; and in the second period, St. Theodore the Studite. In answer to our title question — "Are Icons Necessary?" — as we mentioned before, the Orthodox Church's response is a resounding, unequivocal "Yes!" The most fundamental reason is that authentic icons affirm and confirm Christ's Incarnation — that indeed, the invisible God assumed flesh and became visible in the God-Man, Jesus the Christ. (This is called the Christological basis of icons.) Through the Incarnation, the original image or *eikon* (the Greek word for 'image'), of God, in which mankind was created, is restored by Christ. Because Christ combines His Two Natures – divine and human — in One Person, the material and human is fully restored to the original goodness of God's creation of man. Therefore, to portray the material and human Jesus the Christ, Who appeared in an historical time and place, affirms the fact of Who and What Christ is.

Who is Jesus the Christ?

The era of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, from the early fourth to the late eighth centuries, was a time of constant Christological controversies, that is, issues concerning various questions and debates about just Who Christ is, and what His Nature is — Is He just God? Just man? How are the divine and human components related to each other, and related to the Father and the Holy Spirit? The Iconoclastic Controversy, in a way, combined all the various heresies of the prior centuries, and undermined the whole essence of the Church's teaching of the Gospels' Good News. To put it absolutely bluntly — without icons there is no Church, no Christ, no Incarnation, no Transfiguration, no Resurrection, no salvation. Thus, the restoration of icons by the Empress Irene on the First Sunday in Great Lent in the year 843 was far more than a vindication of figurative sacred Christian art. It was indeed an actual and literal Triumph of Orthodoxy, a triumph of the most fundamental truths of Who and What Christ was and is, and why the Eternal God humbled Himself to come among us as a man.

The Meaning of the Feast Proclaimed in Its Hymns

The meaning of icons and why their victory is the Triumph of Orthodoxy is clearly taught in the liturgical texts for the feast, where there are numerous references to Christ's Incarnation and the redemption of mankind. The *Kontakion* hymn is especially to the point:

No one could describe the Word of the Father;
But when He took flesh from you, O Theotokos,
He accepted to be described,
and restored the fallen image to it former state
by uniting it to divine beauty.
We confess and proclaim our salvation
in word and images.

"We confess and proclaim our salvation in *word* and *images*." This is a fundamental aspect of the meaning of icons and why icons are necessary: the *word*, that is, the Gospels, and *icons* do the same thing — they both proclaim the message of salvation. This was officially declared by the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which asserted that the cross, the Gospels, and icons ought to receive equal veneration.

Worship/Adoration of God Contrasted to Veneration of Icons

What is the veneration appropriate to icons? The Church Fathers deal with this issue very clearly by careful use of two Greek words, *proskynēsis* and *látreia*. *Látreia* refers to the **worship** and **adoration** due only to God, whereas *proskynēsis* means the **veneration** appropriate to icons, the cross, the Gospels, and relics. Sometimes it is a little confusing for us trying to distinguish between these two words, because translators frequently make the error of translating both these words as "worship" or "adoration." Veneration of icons is different from the worship of God. Icons are not worshiped. Furthermore, the Fathers clearly explain that the material of the icon (wood, paint, mosaic, etc.) is not what is venerated, but that all veneration is passed on to the prototype.

Icons, Prototype, Correspondence and Style

This relationship between the icon and the prototype is of crucial importance. As we said above, the iconoclasts asserted that an icon is identical to its prototype. On the contrary, the Orthodox maintain that this is impossible: an icon of Christ is **not** Christ. But the icon must *correspond* to its prototype in two ways:

(1) it must correspond with the person or event; and
(2) it must correspond to the spiritual and theological *meaning* of the person or event.

Thus, icons are not drawn according to the imagination of the artist, as developed in the sacred art of Western Christianity. On the contrary, Christ and the saints must look like the person depicted, and are always labeled by name. Style is the primary vehicle for expressing the spiritual and theological meaning of icons. The Church Fathers are also clear and explicit about iconographic style and condemn the use of pagan and secular, worldly style in its images (as well as in its liturgy, music and architecture). Icons, like Christians, are **in** the world, but not **of** the world. The Fathers caution about compromising the Church's teaching in icons by watering it down through a worldly style, on the pretext that the people can understand it better.

Authentic and Inauthentic Artistic Style

The Church Fathers wrote and cautioned us in precisely these words many centuries ago. But perhaps this is precisely our problem today. Possibly one of the reasons that we find it so difficult to truly understand why icons are so vitally essential to Orthodox Christianity that thousands were tortured, murdered and imprisoned to protect icons, is that in recent centuries we have forgotten the language of authentic iconography and the other sacred arts. We have become accustomed to seeing mere illustrations of the Bible and the saint's lives being "passed off" as icons, whereas in truth, they are counterfeits. Countless so-called Orthodox icons of recent centuries have incorporated a worldly style — in general, corresponding only to history, or what we might see with our outer eyes. This has been supposedly so that we can "better understand." But what is it that we are to understand? What is being taught by these inauthentic "icons"? Do we learn the universal, spiritual meaning of the Bible, and of Christ's Incarnation, Transfiguration and Resurrection, or are we taught only some historical facts? It is right and good to accept, in more or less the way we accept historical facts, that God and Christ exist: this is an initial first step in subsequent spiritual growth. But who are they? What are they? And what does it mean for us today? The answers to these questions are what the language of authentic icons proclaim, and that mere illustrations cannot teach. (Similar things can be said about the other Orthodox sacred arts: music, Liturgy and architecture.)

I suggest that there is something far more insidious and destructive than the outright iconoclasm of the eighth and ninth centuries, and that is the gradual undermining of our authentic icons (and thereby undermining our whole theological and spiritual perspective), by making them illustrations from artists' imaginations in a worldly style, rather than revelations of the glory of God — of the Kingdom of God — of Ultimate Reality and Truth. I suggest that this is largely why we have difficultly recognizing why icons are necessary and essential.

Thankfully, there exists now a growing attempt to rediscover the authentic language of iconography, that has been expanding over the past few decades and hopefully, thereby to rediscover our authentic Orthodoxy. In turn, hopefully this will lead to the rediscovery of our true selves and our relationship with True Reality — the Kingdom of God — which are revealed in the language of authentic iconography.

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N.B. For further discussion of the meaning of authentic iconographic style, see the author's companion essay, *"Icons: Glimpses of Beauty and Truth."* https://stinnocentmonastery.org/essays/icons-glimpsesofbeautyandtruth