



## Fire & Light

### St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

Church Tel. 930-9681 / 907-9447

Visit [stsymeon.com](http://stsymeon.com)

✘ March 1, 2015 ✘

### First Sunday of Great Lent The Sunday of Orthodoxy

Martyr Eudoxia of Heliopolis (152)

Martyr Antonina of Nicaea (305)

St. David, Bishop of Wales (6<sup>th</sup> C)



### The Second Week of Lent:

✘ Wed. March 4, 6:30pm Presanctified Liturgy

✘ Fri. March 6, 6:30pm Presanctified Liturgy (w/Lenten Supper)

# FASTING

taken from "The Lenten Triodion" by Kallistos Ware

Fasting is not a mere matter of diet. Its significance is moral as well as physical. True fasting is to be converted in heart and will; it is to return to God, to come home like the Prodigal son to our Father's house. In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it means "abstinence not only from food but from sins." "The fast," he insists, "should be kept not by the mouth alone but also by the eye, the ear, the feet the hands and all the members of the body": the eye must abstain from impure sights, the ear from malicious gossip, the hands from acts of injustice. It is useless to fast from food, protests St. Basil, and yet to indulge in cruel criticism and slander: "You do not eat to devour your brother."

The purpose of the fast is to bring us to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement: "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). If we always take our fill of food and drink, we easily grow over-confident in

our own abilities, acquiring a false sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Through fasting we become aware of our great dependence on God.

Fasting also brings us greater mental clarity and wakefulness. While involving genuine self-denial, fasting does not seek to do violence to our body, but rather to restore it to health and equilibrium. Fasting liberates our body from the burden of excesses and makes it a willing partner in the task of prayer, alert and responsive to the voice of the Spirit.

Many contemporary Christians have lost a true vision of man as an integral unity of the visible and invisible; they neglect the positive role played by the body in the spiritual life, forgetting St. Paul's affirmation: *Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you...glorify God with your body* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

The Church of Christ is delivered from the dark despondency of heresy:

She puts on a robe of gladness, and is clothed in the light of divine grace.

A feast of joy and gladness is revealed to us today.

For the teachings of the true Faith shine forth in all their glory!

And the Church of Christ is bright with splendor ---

adorned with the holy Icons that have now been restored!

And God has granted to the faithful unity of mind!

As there is one God and one Lord, so also true dignity is expressed by the oneness in the image of the One Principle.

And so, the one Church, which heresies make an effort to cut into many, is likened by oneness into the nature of the one God.

~ Clement of Alexandria (3<sup>rd</sup> C)

## ***This and That***

How did it happen that a republic born of a rebellion against a king and parliament we did not elect has fallen under a tyranny of judges we did not elect?  
- Patrick Buchanan

The accrediting organization for doctors in Ontario, Canada, is considering a policy that would force its members to participate in abortion and euthanasia (even indirectly, by requiring them to refer patients seeking abortion or euthanasia to a doctor who will perform it) as a condition of being a physician. If the CPSO policy is finalized as currently worded, Christian physicians are no longer welcome in the medical profession unless they are willing to compromise their religious and moral beliefs... It's a scary time to be a Christian doctor in Canada.

But how long will American Christians be free to work as lawyers and doctors (or other professionals) without having to deny their faith or participate in something they consider to be gravely immoral? I suppose the US Supreme Court will at least partly answer that question in its gay marriage ruling this summer.

If you are a North American Christian and you are not preparing, and preparing your children, to suffer for the faith, you are not reading the signs of the times.  
- Rod Dreher

The "Tolerant" ~ "Who cares, anyway?"

To accord other faiths a status comparable to Christianity's, you need not only to esteem the ideal of tolerance; you need also to assume that no religious faith makes more than ordinary sense—neither Christianity, nor Islam, nor anything else. In this moral void, take your pick of salvational instruments: the Way of the Cross, the Pillars of Islam, the Euro. Each to his own: a high-minded way of saying, "Who cares, anyway?"

Not that supposedly acute European thinkers, like their American counterparts, lack preferences of their own. These preferences normally turn out to be secular, this-worldly, distrustful of notions rooted in long-past events in far-distant countries: virgin births, resurrections, and the like. Christians and Muslims, for all their theoretical antagonism toward each other, have something in common besides monotheism. Secularists don't know what to do with them.  
- William Murchison

And more from Patrick Buchanan:

The differences between a liberal secularized Europe and the Islamic world are irreconcilable. And it is their world, not ours, that is growing in numbers, militancy, converts, crusaders and confidence.

How does the presence of 20 million Muslims who come from nations where men believe their grandfathers were exploited and persecuted by Europeans advance the unity and security of Europe? How is Europe made stronger by such "diversity"?

When people are using the First Amendment to assault the somewhat older Second Commandment, "Though shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain," they should not be surprised when devout followers of Abrahamic faiths take a pass. These Islamic terrorists are sending us a message: In the post-Christian West, Christians may turn the other cheek at insults to their God and faith. We are not turn-the-other cheek people. Insult our faith, mock the Prophet, and we kill you.

An awakening and rising Islamic world — a more militant faith than Christianity or secularism — is saying to the West: We want you out of our part of the world, and we are coming to your part of the world, and you cannot stop us.

The world has turned upside down. What was criminal vice in the 1950s — homosexuality and abortion — is not only constitutionally protected, but a mark of social progress.

As Rome passed away, so, the West is passing away, from the same causes and in much the same way.

*Democracy is not enough. If the culture dies, the country dies.*

## SHOULD THE CHURCH BE IN STEP WITH THE TIMES?

By Archbishop Averky (+1976).

*Know that we must serve, not the times, but God.*

St. Athanasios the Great, "Letter to Dracontius"

† † †

In step with the times! Behold the watchword of all those who in our time so intensely strive to lead the Church of Christ away from Christ, to lead Orthodoxy away from true confession of the Orthodox Christian Faith. Perhaps this watchword does not always (nor with everyone) resound so loudly, clearly, and openly—this, after all, might push some of them away! The important thing is the practical following of this watchword in life, the striving in one way or another, in greater or lesser degree and measure, to put it into practice.

Against this fashionable, "modern" watchword, perilous to souls however it may be proclaimed or however put into practice, openly or under cover, we cannot but fight—we who are faithful sons and representatives of the Orthodox Church, the whole essence of whose ideology, in the name of which it exists in the world, is not to be "in step with the times," but to preserve an unchanging faithfulness to Christ the Saviour, to the true Orthodox Christian Faith and Church.

Let us recall how the blessed Metropolitan Anthony, founder and first head of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, in his remarkable essay, *How does the Orthodox Faith differ from the Western Confessions?* wrote concerning the profound difference between our Faith and heterodoxy. He finds this profound difference in the fact that the Orthodox Faith teaches how to construct life according to the demands of Christian perfection, whereas heterodoxy takes from Christianity only those things which are, and to the degree to which they are, compatible with the conditions of contemporary cultural life.

He tells us: "Orthodoxy looks upon Christianity as the eternal foundation of true life and demands of everyone to force himself and life until they attain this standard; whereas heterodoxy looks upon the foundations of contemporary cultural life as an unshakable fact. Orthodoxy demands moral heroism—*podvig*; heterodoxy searches for what in Christianity would be useful to us in our present conditions of life. For Orthodox man, called to eternity beyond the grave, where true life begins, the historically-formed mechanism

of contemporary life is an insubstantial phantom; whereas for the heterodox the teaching concerning the future life is a lofty, ennobling idea, an idea which helps one ever better to construct real life here."

These are golden words, indicating for us clearly and sharply the truly bottomless abyss that separates genuine Christian faith—Orthodoxy—from its mutilation—heterodoxy! In the one is to be found ascetic labor (*podvig*), a turning to eternity; in the other, a strong attachment to the earth, a faith in the progress of mankind on earth.

Further, as Metropolitan Anthony so sharply and justly sets forth, "the Orthodox Faith is an ascetic faith," and "the blessed state which the worshippers of the 'superstition of progress' (to use the felicitous expression of S. A. Rachinsky) expect on earth, was promised by the Saviour in the future

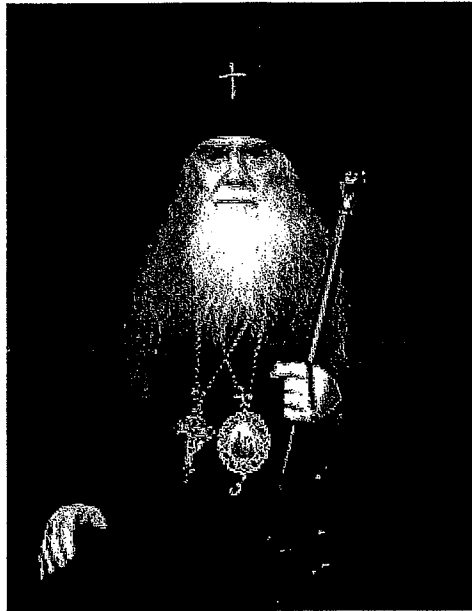
life; but neither the Latins nor the Protestants desire to reconcile themselves to this, for the simple reason—to speak frankly—that they poorly believe in the resurrection and strongly believe in happiness in the present life, which, on the contrary, the Apostles call a vapor that shall vanish away (Jas 4:14). This is why the pseudo-Christian West does not wish and is unable to understand the renunciation of this life by Christianity, which enjoins us to fight, having put off the old man with his deeds, and having put on the new man, that is renewed unto knowledge after the image of Him that created him (Col 3:9-10).

"If we investigate all the errors of the West," Vladika Anthony writes further,

"both those which have entered into its doctrinal teaching and those present in its morals, we shall see that they are all rooted in a failure to understand Christianity as ascetic labor (*podvig*) involving the gradual self-perfection of man."

"Christianity is an ascetic religion," concludes this excellent, forcefully and perspicuously-written essay. "Christianity is a teaching of constant battling with the passions, of the means and conditions for the gradual assimilation of virtues. These conditions are both internal-ascetic labors—and given from without—our dogmatic beliefs and grace-bestowing sacramental actions, which have one purpose: to heal human sinfulness and raise us to perfection."

And what do we see now in contemporary "Orthodoxy"—the "Orthodoxy" that has entered into the so-called "Ecumenical Movement"? We see the complete negation of the above-cited holy truths; in other words: renunciation of true Orthodoxy in the interest of spiritual fusion with the heterodox West. The "Orthodoxy" that has placed itself on the path of "Ecumenism" thinks not of raising contemporary



life, which is constantly declining with regard to religion and morals, to the level of the Gospel commandments and the demands of the Church, but rather of "adapting" the Church herself to the level of this declining life.

This path of actual renunciation of the very essence of holy Orthodoxy—ascetic labor, for the purpose of uprooting the passions and implanting the virtues—was taken in their time by the partisans of the so-called "Living Church" or "Renovated Church". This movement immediately spread from Russia, which had been cast down into the dust by the ferocious atheists, to other Orthodox countries as well. Still fresh in our memory is the "Pan-Orthodox Congress" convened by Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios IV of sorrowful memory in 1923, at which were devised such "reforms" as a married episcopate, remarriage of priests, the abolition of monasticism and the fasts, abbreviation of Divine services, suppression of special dress for clergy, etc.

Notwithstanding the collapse at that time of these impious designs, the dark powers were not, of course, pacified, and continued from that time their obstinate and perseverant activity, finding for themselves obedient tools in the ranks of the hierarchy of various Local Orthodox Churches. At the present time also, by the allowance of God, they have attained great success: almost all the Local Orthodox Churches have already entered into the "Ecumenical Movement," which has set as its purpose the abolition of all presently-existing churches—including, of course, the Orthodox Church—and the establishment of some kind of absolutely new "church," which will be completely "in step with the times," having cast away as useless rags, as something "obsolete" and "behind the times," all the genuine foundations of true Christianity; and first of all, of course, asceticism, this being the indispensable condition for the main purpose of Christianity: the uprooting of sinful passions and the implanting of Christian virtues.

We have before us, as an example, an official document of this sort, belonging to the Local Church of Serbia: the journal *Theology*, published by the Orthodox Theological Faculty in Belgrade (8<sup>th</sup> year, issues 1 and 2 for 1964). In this journal we find a lead article literally entitled: "The Necessity for the Codification and Publication of a New Collection of Canons of the Orthodox Church." The author of this article, while cunningly affirming that "the ideal principles of the Church will remain everywhere and always unchanging," nonetheless attempts to prove that the collection of canons of the Orthodox Church is only the product of a time long since passed into eternity, and therefore that it does not answer to the demands of contemporary life and must be abolished and replaced by another.

This new collection of canons, observe, "must be brought into agreement with the fundamental principles of life," with which the Church supposedly "has always reckoned." "Our time," says this cunning author, "is different in many respects from the time of the Ecumenical Councils, at which these canons were composed, and therefore these canons cannot now be applied."

Let us look now and see precisely which canons is that this modernist author considers obsolete and subject to abrogation:

—The 9<sup>th</sup> canon of the holy Apostles, which demands that the faithful, after entering church, should remain at the Divine service to the end, and should not cause disorder by walking about the church.

—The 80<sup>th</sup> canon of the Council of Trullo, which punishes clergy by deposition, and laymen with excommunication, for failure to attend church for three successive Sundays without some important reason.

*There is a truly bottomless abyss that separates genuine Christian faith—Orthodoxy—from its mutilation—heterodoxy. In the one is to be found ascetic labor, a turning to eternity; in the other, a strong attachment to the earth, a faith in the progress of mankind on earth.*  
Archbishop Averky (+1976)

—The 24<sup>th</sup> canon of the Council of Trullo, which prohibits clergy and monks from visiting race tracks and other entertainments; to this canon the author adds the entirely naive, strange remark that it was only in earlier times that such amusements were places of depravity and vice, while now they are supposedly "centers of culture and education."(!)

—The 54<sup>th</sup> canon of the holy Apostles, which prohibits clergy, without unavoidable necessity, from entering a tavern; here again it somehow seems that previously the tavern was some different kind of establishment from what it is now.

—The 77<sup>th</sup> canon of the Council of Trullo and the 30<sup>th</sup> canon of the Council of Laodicea, which prohibit Christian men from bathing together with women; why it is necessary to acknowledge these canons too as "obsolete" is completely incomprehensible!

—The 96<sup>th</sup> canon of the Council of Trullo, which condemns all adornment of oneself with various kinds of finery "for the enticement of unstable souls"—instead of "adorning oneself with virtues and with good and pure morals;" this canon in our times, it would seem, has not only not become "obsolete," it has become especially imperative, if we call to mind the indecent, shameless women's fashions of today, which are completely unsuitable for Christian women.

This is sufficient for us to see what purpose it is that the aforementioned "reform" in our Orthodox Church has in view, with what aim there is proposed the convocation of an Eighth Ecumenical Council, about which all "modernists" so dream, already having a foretaste of the "carefree life" that will then be openly permitted and legitimized for all!

But let us reflect more deeply upon what is the terrible essence of all these demands for the abrogation of supposedly "obsolete" canonical rules. It is this: these contemporary church "reformers" who now so impudently raise their heads even in the bosom of our Orthodox Church itself (and terrible to say, their number includes not merely clergy, but even eminent hierarchs!) accept contemporary life with all its monstrous, immoral manifestations as an unshakable fact (which is, as we have seen above, not at all an Orthodox, but a heterodox, Western conception!); furthermore, they wish to abrogate all those canonical rules which precisely characterize Orthodoxy as an ascetic faith that calls to ascetic labor, in the name of the uprooting of sinful passions and the implanting of Christian virtues. This is a terrible movement, perilous for our Faith and Church; it wishes to cause, in the expression of Christ the Saviour, *the salt to lose its savor*; it is a movement directed toward the overthrow and annihilation of the true Church of Christ by means of the cunning substitution for it of a false church.

The above-mentioned article in the Serbian theological journal is still discreet, refraining from complete openness. It speaks of the permissibility in principle of marriage for bishops, but in life we hear ever more frequent and persistent talk of far worse—namely, of the supposed inapplicability in our times of all those canonical rules which demand of candidates to the priesthood and of priests themselves a pure and unblemished moral life; or, to speak more simply, of the permissibility for them of that terrifying depravity into the abyss of which contemporary mankind more and more plunges itself.

It is one thing to sin and repent, knowing and acknowledging that one is sinning and is in need of repentance and correction of life. It is something else again to legitimize lawlessness, to sanction sin, lulling thus one's conscience and thus abolishing the very foundations of the Church. To this we have no right, and it is a most grievous crime before God, the holy Church, and the souls of the faithful who seek eternal salvation.

And for how long, to what limits may we permit ourselves to go on such a slippery path, abrogating the Church canons which uphold Christian morality? Right now in America and, as we hear, in places also in other countries which have accepted contemporary "culture," there is increasing propaganda for the official abrogation of marriage and the legalization in place of marriage of "free love;" the use of contraceptive pills is being sanctioned for married couples, and even for the unmarried, since marriage supposedly has as its purpose not the procreation of children, but "love;" legal recognition is being prepared for the heinous, unnatural passion of homosexuality, all the way to the establishment for homosexuals of a special church wedding rite (proposal of an Anglican bishop); etc., etc.

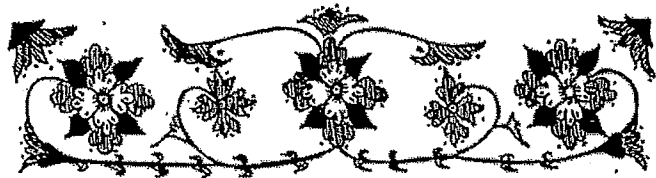
And so? Should our Church too follow this fashionable path, "in step with the times," so as not to be left behind the march of life? But what kind of "church" will this be that will allow itself all this, or even merely look at it with all-forgiving condescension? It will be no longer a church at all, but a veritable Sodom and Gomorrah, which will not escape, sooner or later, the terrible chastisement of God.

We must not allow ourselves to be deluded and deceived, for we do not need such a "church," or rather "false church." We may ourselves be weak, and feeble, and we may often sin, but we will not allow the Church canons to be abrogated, for then it will become necessary to acknowledge the very Gospel of Christ, by which contemporary men do not wish to live, as "obsolete," as "not answering to the spirit of the times," and abrogate it!

But the Gospel of Christ, together with all the canons of the Church, as well as the Church ordinances, outline for us that Christian ideal toward which we must strive if we desire for ourselves eternal salvation. We cannot allow a lowering of this ideal for the gratification of sinful passions and desires, a blasphemous abuse of these holy things.

Whatever "reforms" all these contemporary criminal "reformers" may desire, the truly-believing Orthodox Church consciousness cannot acknowledge or accept them. And whatever the apostates from true Orthodoxy, from the ascetic Faith, may do, we will not allow the modernization of our Church, and we will NOT go "in step with the times"!

Amen.



Do not have a single thing to do with schismatics and absolutely nothing with heretics ... As you know I myself have avoided them due to their Christ-hating and heterodox heresy.

St. Anthony the Great

Neither the Papist nor the Protestant church can be considered as the True church of Christ. The first was altered by a number of innovations and the accursed despotism (primacy) due to which resulted the schism from the Orthodox. The same goes for the Protestants whose innumerable innovations lead to total anarchy and chaos. Only the Orthodox church maintained the teachings of Christ flawlessly, without a single innovation. Only in the Orthodox church does unity exist. The unity which the Savior was petitioning from the Father saying, *Holy Father keep them in your Name those that you gave me so they can be one just like we were one.* (Jn 17:11)

St. Nektarios of Aigina

# THE TRIUMPHANT CHURCH

By Metropolitan Meletios of Nikopolis and Preveza (2012)

Once, in a certain Russian monastery, as Staretz Sampson tells us, a monk remembered that, during the Divine Liturgy he was told to sweep the entrance of the Monastery's Katholikon (main temple) very well. "I might as well do it now," he thought, "since this part of the Divine Liturgy is not as important." Therefore, the monk took the broom and started sweeping. He was saying the Jesus Prayer silently and in a noetic way, and from time to time, he would watch that which was being served. Not even five minutes had gone by when he turned to look up to see the domes of the Church (like the ones in Russia) suddenly opening and the Triumphant Church appearing with all its majesty before him: it was an awesome sight! In the center, there was a Holy Table as big as the sky. In front of it, three Archpriests were on their knees. Many others surrounded them and a multitude of priests and deacons surrounded the former. On the right and left sides, angelic choirs were standing in indescribable and glistening beauty. There was inexpressible glory and light... Moreover, the thousands of honey-flowing, inconceivable melodies of the Heavenly Commanders who were present filled him with divine blessedness and joy. A heavenly Divine Worship was being ministered!

Nevertheless, it was being ministered in a strange way, which resembled the Divine Liturgy on earth. It was ministered by Holy Hierarchs, such as, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian and Saint John Chrysostom (three). Like, Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Photius the Great and Saint Gregory Palamas (three). Alternatively, like Saint Nicholas, Saint Spyridon and Saint Nectarios (three).

Yet there, in the heavenly Triumphant Church of Jerusalem Above, they received Holy Communion. He saw that they were partaking, in a never-ending way,, of the glory and the Uncreated Triune Light, of the ambrosia of divine blessedness, of the cup of God's ineffable mysteries...

The monk remained motionless, rooted to the spot until the Divine Liturgy had been completed. When the monks exited the Church, they saw him and he was still standing motionless; he was rooted to that spot and in floods of tears. Not only was he wet inside out but also his cloak was soaking from the unstoppable flood of tears.

Very carefully, they took hold of him and without saying a word; they brought him very gently to his cell where he remained for a long time in a state of total amazement; divine revelation had overwhelmed him. When he recovered, his Spiritual father also arrived. The latter brought him round from all the weeping he went through and then they went together to the Abbot of the Monastery to whom they narrated the monk's exceptional divine vision with a sense of awe and extreme humility.

# Wisdom of the Holy Fathers

✘ **The Savior began the work of our salvation with fasting.** In the same way all those, who follow in the footsteps of the Savior, build on this foundation the beginning of their endeavor, since fasting is a weapon established by God. Who will escape blame if he neglects this? **If the Lawgiver Himself fasts, how can any of those who have to obey the Law, be exempt from fasting?** This is why the human race knew no victory before fasting, and the devil was never defeated by our nature as it is; but this weapon has indeed deprived the devil of strength from the outset. . . . As soon as the devil sees someone possessed of this weapon, fear straightway falls on this adversary and tormentor of ours, who remembers and thinks of his defeat by the Savior in the wilderness; his strength is at once destroyed and the sight of the weapon, given us by the Supreme Leader, burns him up. A man armed with the weapon of fasting is always afire with zeal. He who remains therein, keeps his mind steadfast and ready to meet and repel all violent passions. ~ **St. Isaac the Syrian (5<sup>th</sup> C)**

✘ **Fasting gradually disperses and drives away spiritual darkness** and the veil of sin that lies on the soul, just as the sun dispels the mist. Fasting enables us spiritually to see that spiritual air in which Christ, the Sun who knows no setting, does not rise, but shines without ceasing. Fasting, aided by vigil, penetrates and softens hardness of heart. Where once were the vapors of drunkenness it causes fountains of compunction to spring forth. I beseech you, brethren, let each of us strive that this may happen in us! Once this happens we shall readily, with God's help, cleave through the whole sea of passions and pass through the waves of the temptations inflicted by the cruel tyrant, and so come to anchor in the port of impassibility (changelessness). ~ **St. Symeon the New Theologian (1022)**

✘ "He who shall preserve the life bestowed upon him, and give thanks to Him Who imparted it, shall receive also length of days forever and ever. But he who shall reject it, and prove himself ungrateful to his Maker, inasmuch as he has been created, and has not recognized Him Who bestowed the gift upon him, deprives himself of the privilege of continuance forever and ever. And, for this reason, the Lord declared to those who showed themselves ungrateful towards Him: 'If you have not been faithful in that which is little, who will give you that which is great?' (cf. Lk. 16:11) indicating that those who, in this brief temporal life, have shown themselves ungrateful to Him Who bestowed it, shall justly not receive from Him length of days forever and ever." ~ **St. Irenaeus of Lyons (202)**

✘ "When the door of the steam baths is continually left open, the heat inside rapidly escapes through it; likewise the soul, in its desire to say many things, dissipates its remembrance of God through the doors of speech, even though everything it says may be good. Thereafter the intellect, though lacking appropriate ideas, pours out a welter of confused thoughts to anyone it meets, as it no longer has the Holy Spirit to keep its understanding free from fantasy. Ideas of value shun verbosity, being foreign to confusion and fantasy. Timely silence, then, is precious, for it is nothing less than the mother of the wisest thoughts." ~ **St. Diadochos of Photiki**

✘ Sometimes a person seeks the will of God or to be delivered from some passion, and God allows some predicament to befall us which will bring the desired result. But at first sight the thing seems arduous, and he thinks that it is a temptation due to his carelessness. Yet when the benefit ensuing from the predicament or the temptation is revealed, it is seen clearly that hidden within it was God's will or the deliverance from the passion for which he had begged God. Thus we learn that in each temptation we need patience and forbearance in order to ascertain what is hidden within it once it passes. Many times a temptation happens which, at first glance, does not seem to contain anything salvific within it. Yet afterwards, we see that within it is eternal life!

~ **Elder Ephraim**

## **The Iconoclast Controversy**

In the eighth century the Isaurian rulers Leo III (717-741) and Constantine V (741-775) in the East attempted to subject the Church to their rule. The latter even dared to call himself "emperor and priest." In order to gain control of the Church these two emperors viciously attacked the zealous Christians, especially the monks, who defended the integrity of the Church. The attack took the form of a fierce persecution against those who venerated the icons. The subject of the attack was well placed because there really existed an exaggerated veneration of icons among the pious people which truly bordered on idolatry and paganism.

A Council held in 753 formally condemned the veneration of icons by Christians. It called for the removal of all images from the churches, public buildings' and homes of the people. This Council was not only a political move by the rulers to gain authority over the Church, but it showed a reasoned and well skilled argumentation against icon veneration. The basis of the position of the Council was taken primarily from the biblical teaching that God is invisible, therefore visible, graven images are not to be made and adored by true believers. It is probable that this argumentation was inspired by close contact with the Moslems who were fanatically strict on these very points.

The bishops of the Church were under strong imperial pressure to condemn officially the veneration of icons. When they did, a vicious persecution of those who continued to keep and to venerate the holy images immediately followed. The time between 762 and 775 is known as the "decade of blood" since hundreds of Christians, mostly monks, were imprisoned, tortured, and even killed for harboring and honoring icons.  
The Seventh Ecumenical Council

In 787, during the reign of the Empress Irene (780-802), who favored icon veneration, a Council was held in Nicaea which defined the legitimate and proper use of icons in the

Church. This Council, now known as the Seventh Ecumenical Council, followed the theology of Saint John of Damascus (d.749). The decision of the Council affirmed that icons may be made and honored but not worshipped.

The bishops of the Council reasoned that the very essence of the Christian faith is the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God in human flesh. God indeed is invisible. But in Jesus Christ the invisible God has become visible. The one who sees Jesus sees the invisible Father. (John 14:8) When icon painting and icon-veneration in the Church are denied, the true humanity of Jesus is denied. As well, it is denied that in and through Christ, the Holy Spirit has been given to men so that they may become holy, truly fulfilling themselves as created "in the image and likeness of God." (Genesis 1:26) Thus, it was the Council's decision that the rejection of the holy images is the rejection of the fact of salvation by God in Christ and the Holy Spirit.

God the Father and the Holy Spirit cannot and must not be depicted. Christ, the Theotokos, and the Saints can be depicted in iconographic form because they show the reality of man's salvation by God. They show the true transfiguration and sanctification of man - and the whole of creation - by Christ and the Holy Spirit. The images may be venerated in the Church since "honor rendered to the image ascends to its prototype, and he who venerates an icon adores the person (hypostasis) of the one portrayed." (Seventh Ecumenical Council)

After the Council of 787 the attack against the icons continued. It finally ended in 843 when the icons were returned to the Churches where they remain today.

~ **Fr. Thomas Hopko, *The Bible and Church History – Orthodox Faith series***