

Homily

Orthodoxy Sunday & the Charitable Anathema

First Sunday of Great Lent

St. Andrew Orthodox Church, Riverside, California

Fr. Josiah Trenham, Pastor

Introduction: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen. The Sunday of Orthodoxy is the occasion of exuberant celebration in the entire Orthodox world. On this Sunday we celebrate the victory of the Church and the Christian and Apostolic teaching regarding iconography over the icon smashers, the iconoclast heretics, who inspired by evil spirits sought to rob the church of her iconographic tradition under the guise of piety and respect for God's commandments.

The Significance of Icons: Icons have always been central to the Orthodox faith. The first and ultimate iconographer is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, who fashioned man in the image of God originally, and Who Himself pressed an indelible image of His Sacred and Holy Face onto a napkin for Prince Abgar of Edessa (as recorded for us among other places in Eusebius' *Church History*). Our Lord Jesus is also the ultimate icon-restorer, restoring, by His grace- by His saving acts and sacred teachings, the pristine image of God in man. It was our Lord Who inspired St. Luke to paint the first icons of the Savior and of our Lady Theotokos, some of which remain in the possession of the Church. This same iconography, has flowered throughout the history of the Church, erupting from its beginnings into full bloom to fill the world with the beauty of heaven and to declare the saving Incarnation of our Savior throughout the universe.

And be certain of this! There is no Christianity without iconography. Icons are not an addendum to the Orthodox faith. Icons are an integral and necessary expression of true belief in God and in the Gospel. Icons are the visible Word of God. The Holy Gospel has been proclaimed to man in God's will by two means: in word (Holy Scripture) and in images (Holy Icons). We can no more dispense with Holy Icons and believe we have Christianity than we can dispense with the Bible.

Icons proclaim and preserve the fundamental truth of the Gospel that God has become man. The presence of the Holy Icons in the churches is the pre-eminent sign of God's new covenant with mankind, that the desire of Israel and of the nations has come to earth. It is no wonder that the Jews and the Muslims, incessant deniers of the Saving Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, have always attacked our icons, and it is no wonder that iconoclasts in the church have been branded as Judaizers. To live without icons is to live in the Old Covenant, to live under the shadows of the law as though God has not permanently and irrevocably yoked Himself to creation and made Himself visible! This is why the hymnody for this Sunday of Orthodoxy says that iconoclasm is the "worst of all heresies...subverting the incarnation of our Savior".

The Triumph of Orthodoxy: Like all of the precious aspects of the faith the Evil One despises the sacred icons. He despises them because they are the means by which his overthrow is proclaimed. He despises them because they lead men to the knowledge of the true God and proclaim in a loud and material voice the Gospel that God has become man, reconciling the world to Him. How he laments the day when the envoys of Prince Vladimir gazed upon the Sacred Iconography of Hagia Sophia, and found themselves unable to discern whether they were in heaven and on earth which led to the conversion of the Russian nation to Orthodoxy. Truly in this the words of St. John of Damascus, that great champion of icons, were fulfilled when he said, "If a pagan asks you to show him your faith, take him into church and place him before the icons" (*On the Divine Images*). The Evil One despises icons because they instruct the illiterate, and make the mysteries of Orthodoxy clear to all of the faithful. The Evil One despises icons because they assist the faithful so greatly in their quest for salvation, serving as a point of contact with the

heavenly world, beckoning and calling all to strive for the divine life and the next world, giving birth to all sorts of devout emotions and inspiration, and actually sanctifying the faithful and healing the sick! For these reasons and more the Evil One stirred up a great tumult in the church for some 150 years, as he encouraged phony bishops, priests, monks and emperors to attack iconography and charge the venerators of icons with idolatry! Can you imagine?! The Church, which wiped idolatry from the face of the earth, is being charged with idolatry! It is this pernicious and soul-destroying heresy which was definitively overthrown when on the First Sunday of Lent in AD 843 the Empress Theodora and her pious son Michael re-established the icons for the last time in Hagia Sophia. Today we join that celebration and proclaim the victory of the Holy Icons!

The Charitable Anathema: At the end of the Divine Liturgy we will join together in a victorious procession bearing our icons, and we will conclude the procession with the reading of the proclamation of victory written by the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council! This proclamation includes both the positive declaration of the true faith, and the anathematizing of the heretics. In fact, heresy itself and our disdain for it are major themes of this Sunday's celebration. The words "heresy" and "heretic" occur some 10 times in this morning's matins hymnody as well as additional times in last night's great vespers. These are not popular terms today, and anathematizing heretics is definitely "out". In fact, the only thing heretical to modern westerners is the concept of heresy

The anathema, however, has always been a part of the church's loving response to heresy. Our Lord Himself, in His vociferous condemnation of the Pharisees and false teachers of His day, especially as recorded in His "Woe to you" homily recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel (ch. 23) has established the standard of our response to heresy. St. Paul followed this up by proclaiming anathema all those who preach a "false Jesus" and a "different Gospel" (which is really no Gospel at all- Gal. 1, 2 Cor. 1), and indeed all who do not love our Lord Jesus Christ. These censures were not lapses in the character of our Divine Savior or His chief Apostle Paul. They were instead acts of love: love for God and man. In a relativistic and permissive culture anathema is difficult to understand or accept. In order to believe in the propriety of anathema one must believe in truth.

We know what the results of permissiveness is when dealing with crime in society. Our culture is awash in violence: civil and domestic because of the thoroughgoing permissiveness in the home and state. As a result our society is rising up and calling upon our representatives to be “tough on crime” and for families to show “tough love”. Yet, at the same time, we have not only tolerated the worst form of violence but have actually turned it into a virtue. The worst form of violence is not domestic abuse. It is not even abortion (although that probably comes in second). *The worst form of violence is heresy!* We pray in Matins for this Sunday saying, “Deliver thy people from the violence of impiety, and kindle them with zeal for Orthodoxy”. Heresy is the greatest form of violence because it attacks and ruins the entire man: body and soul. Heresy leads to the death of the soul and to perdition where the body will languish and suffer for eternity. Heresy also always leads to civil violence. One need only think of the iconoclasts and their slaughter of the faithful, or the Latin crusades, or the Protestant insurrection. The Church is not like so many contemporary politicians, who so often change their tunes that the populace has no idea what they really believe! The Church is quite clear and plain. Anathema to heresy! Anathema to the heretics! Many years to the right-believing! We Orthodox need an Orthodox world-view on heresy. Love demands nothing less. Speaking the truth in love about heresy, according to St. Paul’s admonition, is what this Sunday of Orthodoxy is all about, and is the loving means by which the faithful will be preserved from false teachers and those bound by deceptive heresies will be delivered from their deception.

Orthodox Faith and Pious Life leads to salvation: We celebrate this feast at the end of Clean Week, at the end of a week in which we have most vigorously begun the fast and given attention to our souls and good deeds. This placement of the feast makes clear a sacred union of Orthodox faith and life. What is necessary for salvation is not only a life of good deeds but Orthodox faith. Spiritual sloth does not save, and heresy does not save. Right belief expressed in good deeds, that is, faith working through love (Gal. 5:6), is the path to salvation. Many Years! Χρόνια πολλά! To all who so believe and strive!