

WEEKLY MEDITATION

The Sunday of Orthodoxy

Imagine the Orthodox Church without icons. Can you? Indeed, icons are so central to the Orthodox Church that without them, we wouldn't be properly Orthodox. Icons are not mere paintings with aesthetic value; our theology is deeply interwoven with the icons. Man was created to be the icon (image) of God. Of course, we fell from that lofty calling. But God, in His great mercy, sent His Son to become a man (the Incarnation) and to restore the fallen icon of God in man. Thus, our calling as Christians is to live according to the image and likeness of God, to become ever more transfigured, to return to what we were created to be, and redeemed to be in Christ – to be the icons of God.

Yet, in the eighth and ninth centuries A.D., there were those who wanted the Church without icons. These people were known as the iconoclasts (icon-smashers). But the body of the Orthodox faithful would not give in without a fight, and many were martyred in the defense of the holy icons. We can see that an attack on icons wasn't just an attack on icons, but on the very essence of the faith. It was an attack on the incarnation, on the deification of man, on the sanctification of matter – for all of these find their expression in icons. It was also an attack on the veneration of Mary and the saints. It was a heresy, an attack on the catholicity (fullness) of the faith. The iconoclasts wanted a stripped-down faith, a church with bare walls, a return to the simple faith (they would argue); and yet in reality they were attempting to destroy the faith!

How appropriate it is that the "Triumph of Orthodoxy" that we celebrate today remembers specifically the "Triumph of the Holy Icons" which occurred in 843 A.D. For truly, the victory of the icons is the victory of the Orthodox faith, of which they are the best expression. The blood of the martyrs bore its fruit. Thus, on the Sunday of Orthodoxy we celebrate the victory of light over darkness, the victory of all those who were martyred for the true faith, the victory of the true ('orthodox') faith over all false 'faiths' (heresies). Really, we celebrate the victory of Christ, the victory we too share if we abide in Christ and keep the faith!

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