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His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America Homily on the Sunday of the Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council



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October 11, 2020

Saint Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church

Bristol, Connecticut

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am delighted to be with you today, on this Sunday of the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. This last of the Ecumenical Councils, held in the year 787, was the council that affirmed the dignity, grace, and dogmatic validity of the Holy Icons. And somehow it seems fitting, that this last of the Ecumenical Councils took place in Nicaea, where the First Council was convened over four hundred years earlier.

In the intervening centuries, we have now arrived at a point where we often take the holy icons for granted. We expect to see them when we enter our Churches. Can you imagine going to a Church that was stripped of icons? You would say to yourself, "I must have taken a wrong turn!"

But there was a time in the history of our Orthodox Faith – a very difficult time when the worth and validity of the holy icons were challenged by secular powers. They induced many clergy and laity alike, to abandon the holy icons. There were persecutions – even unto death – of those whose faith clung to the affirmation of the faith that the holy icons teach. I do not believe we can imagine this today.

Some historians have said that this was due to pressure from the new religion of that age: Islam, which has a very strong teaching against images. Some believe that it was a misunderstanding of the Second Commandment of Judaism that states:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them....[*]

But let us be clear about the difference between an idol and an icon, both of which are images. An idol has no corresponding reality in the heavenly realm. But an icon partakes in the spiritual reality of what is represented in it. This difference is foundational to our Holy Orthodox Faith.

The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council put it this way:

Therefore, it is proper to accord to icons a fervent and reverent veneration, not, however, the true adoration which, according to our faith, belongs to God alone – for the honor accorded to the icon passes over to its prototype, and whoever venerates the icon venerates in it, the reality of what is there represented.[†]

For, my beloved sisters and brothers, the icons are much more than visual narratives that can teach the unlettered the Faith. They are much more than adornments of our Churches. They are much more than a stylized art form of the high Byzantine and Hellenic culture.

They are not inanimate objects, simply made of color and form. They are ἔμψυχες – literally “ensouled,” “animate,” “living” objects of devotion and piety. And they are so because, as the definition of the Holy Fathers that we celebrate today states: “the honor accorded to the icon passes over to its prototype, and whoever venerates the icon venerates in it, the reality of what is there represented.”

Please pause for a moment and consider this last phrase: “the reality of what is there represented.” What this means for us, is that when we venerate an icon of the Panagia, we are, by grace and the energy of God, venerating her in reality. When we kiss the icon of Saint Demetrios, your heavenly patron, we honor him personally.

The grace of the icon is given to us through the operation of the Holy Spirit, Who is always present with us, and brings to us, through the Holy Icons, the “Great Cloud of Witnesses” as the Scripture says.[*]

My beloved Christians, let us, with the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council whom we celebrate today, embrace with love the Holy Icons, venerate them with faith, and hold them in the dignity and honor which they deserve.

For they are truly the presence of the Divine in our lives, bearing witness to how our lives can be transfigured, and how we can also become living icons of God, showing forth the virtues of faith, hope and above all love. Amen.

[*] Exodus 20:4,5 (LXX).

[†] Definition of the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

[‡] Hebrews 12:1.

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