

Q. *Every year on the First Sunday of Great Lent, we celebrate the “Triumph of Orthodoxy” which seems to have something to do with Icons being taken out of Churches and then put back. The whole idea of Icons is confusing to me. Some of my Protestant friends say that they are “Idols”; some Orthodox books seem to indicate that they are visual aids or teaching devices. Our priest says that they are a Holy Mystery and are “Windows into Heaven”. What is the real meaning of Icons? Why were they taken out of the Churches at one time? Why were they put back? Are they really necessary and, if not, why do we have so many of them since they seem to bother many non-Orthodox people?*

A. Well, these are all good questions. The Church’s teaching about Holy Icons is very important and can seem somewhat complicated. I will attempt, here, to give you the basic answers and suggest that you read more or talk with your Parish Priest for a more detained study of the matter.

We know that in the Old Testament the people of Israel were commanded not to make any “Graven image” of any creature to bow down before or to worship. We are told how the people of the Exodus were tempted to make a visible Egyptian type god; a golden calf, when they thought that Moses was not going to return from the mountaintop. We know that they were severely punished for this unfaithfulness. We are also aware of how the Holy Prophets ridiculed those who carved an idol of wood and then bowed down to it, saying, “This is my god who made me”. We are certainly aware that one of the chief reasons for God’s anger against His People had to do with their “Limping with two opinions” about the idols. So, how is it that the People of the New Israel felt that they not only could but should make and keep images for their devotion and worship?

First, we must understand that the Old Testament prohibition was clearly not against all images or even against all statues in as much as God Himself commanded the Israelites to make images of the Cherubim and Seraphim for the Tabernacle and the Temple. What was forbidden was any attempt to depict God or any false god in material form. Simply stated, God had not shown himself to human beings in any physical form but had only appeared in types and shadows. Moses had beheld His Uncreated Energies but could not behold His Face. For this reason, any attempt to imagine or represent what God had chosen not to reveal to people was, certainly, a grievous offence.

However, we understand that the Incarnation of Our Lord was, precisely, the act of the Incomprehensible God becoming visible and touchable to human beings. He is “The invisible God in visible form”. “In Him, the Fullness of the Godhead was pleased to dwell bodily.” “God, who at various times and in diverse manners spoke to our fathers by the Prophets” has, in Him, spoken unto us, “Face to face”.

Now, in as much as the Eternal Son has appeared in time and in the flesh, the prohibition against trying to describe God in material form is superseded by the command to preach and proclaim the Gospel of the Incarnation to every creature. To this end, far from being the fantastic imaginings of humans as to the appearance of the Divine, Holy Icons are pictorial proclamations that “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His Glory: Glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father.”

The two groups of early heretics who eschewed Holy Icons were the Manicheans and similar Gnostic and Neo-Platonic groups who denied that the Word had, indeed, become flesh. Regarding Jesus’ humanity as an illusion or His body as detached from His Divinity, these heterodox would not reverence a fallen and disposable body, which was either illusory or temporarily borrowed.

The other ancient Iconophobes were the Arians and, later, the Nestorians, who denied that the Incarnation was the taking of flesh by one of the Eternal and Uncreated Trinity. The Arians taught that Christ is an “Emanation” or expression of the Eternal Father, of similar nature but not the same Nature. For this reason, the face of Christ would not, in fact, be the face of the Eternal God. The Nestorians seem to have felt that Christ is not only possessed of two natures but is, some how, two distinct persons: one of whom was born of The Virgin and the other “divine person” who, some how showed up after Christ’s birth. Of course, I simplify, but, suffice it to say that these, still extant, heretics refuse to call Our Lady “Theotokos” or “Birthgiver of God”, using the title “Christotokos” or “Christ bearer”, implying that the Messiah but not The True God abode in her womb.

Many of these heretics later became Muslims and, in fact, Saint John of Damascus, who seems to have understood Islam as well or better than any of The Fathers, and who wrote in defense of the Holy Icons, posits that, in its early days, Islam was little more than a variant of Nestorianism.

The Iconoclast convulsion to which you refer and whose repudiation we celebrate on the First Sunday of Lent, seems to have affected none of the Orthodox Churches except that of Constantinople and the former Arian Church of the Gauls. It was initiated, in part, by an emperor from Assyria, the hotbed of Nestorianism, and appears to have been an effort to appease the Muslims who took the positions that all images of any kind are idols and violate the commandments of Allah. The Church dealt with this error by declaring that Holy Icons are not idols but vehicles for the Human Soul to enter into contact with the Divine. “The honor offered to the Antitype or Icon is not a veneration of wood and pigment but passes through the Image to the Divine reality which it represents.”

Now, as you point out, some Orthodox publications seem to minimize this spiritual dimension of Holy Icons and to imply that they are mere teaching aids. Sometimes we will read that they exist so that our minds, contemplating their subjects, can learn to “Imitate the pious acts of the Holy Ones depicted in them”. While there is, clearly, a didactic dimension to the Holy Images, it doesn’t take much to figure out that this idea came from the Latinized school of Kievan scholasticism which attempted to counter Uniate aggression with quasi-Romish intellectual

prattle. It just serves to remind us of the need to stand by the Holy Tradition and not to attempt to outdo the Fathers in contending with error.

Now, for one more issue which you do not directly address. How is it that we not only venerate Icons of Our Lord but also of His Holy Mother, of the Bodiless Powers and of those Saints that have glorified Christ by their lives and deaths in every generation? The answer to this is found in the themes of the Second Sunday of Great Lent: the Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas. It is on this Sunday that the Church speaks to us, of the Uncreated Light of Christ, which Illumines and Deifies the Saints. That circle around the countenance of the Holy Saints, which the Western Church turned into an insipid “Halo” is nothing less than the representation of the Light of Christ, the Uncreated Energy of God, causing and showing the Theosis of the Holy Saints. So, considering the words of Holy Apostle Paul that “It is no longer I who live but Jesus Christ Who lives in me,” we understand that every true Orthodox Icon of a Saint is an Icon of Christ who indwells, sanctifies, and deifies that Saint. It is, perhaps, because the Latin Church never really accepted the Uncreated Energies of God, The Doctrine of Theosis, nor any of the other Patristic Teachings which St. Gregory so simply, brilliantly, and faithfully collected and taught, that the Romans and their Protestant offspring never really came to terms with the Orthodox veneration of the Holy Icons.