



**Orthodox Church of the
Entrance of the Theotokos
into the Temple**

306 W. Main Street Emmitsburg,
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***Icons Not Made With Hands
March 24, 2024***

First Sunday in Lent. The Triumph of Orthodoxy. Entrance Church.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

Throughout the course of the year we come to church hearing on multiple Sundays that we are commemorating the holy fathers of this or that ecumenical council. Orthodox theology is based foundationally on the discussions, controversies, canons and decrees of 7 Ecumenical Councils that took place in the Christian Roman Empire between the 4th and 8th centuries. They were all different, but they all nevertheless dealt with the same basic issue: "Who is Jesus of Nazareth? How are we to properly understand Him? What are the ramifications of what we say about Him? What may we as leaders and laity within His Church preach and teach about Him?"

Typically, these Councils were convened for the Church to deal with disputes within. Some of them were quite serious. The first council of Nicaea, for example, dealt with the misteaching of an errant Egyptian priest and ascetic named Arius whose followers did not accept the full divinity of our Lord. The Councils that followed each dealt with further ramifications of these

errors: Constantinople 1 finishing the Creed which we all confess each Sunday; Ephesus reacting to another misteaching of a Patriarch by the name of Nestorius who said we may not call Mary the Theotokos; the Church realized that the term Theotokos was not so much a term of honor for the Mother of God, but rather for her Son: Jesus is God, therefore we may honor Him by calling His mother Theotokos. Chalcedon, the fourth council, specified the importance of realizing that our Lord did in fact have two natures, divine and human, which were manifested in His one person. And so on.

Each Council had its own controversy; and each Council set up decrees and canons of proper behavior. All of them in some way dealt with the issue of Who Jesus Is, how He is to be properly worshipped, what the Church may and must say about Him, and how He is to be represented. The final Council, the second of Nicaea, was held in 787 AD and likewise dealt with the issue of Who Jesus Is. If Jesus is both fully divine and human, then, the Church argued, He may and should be depicted in Holy Icons. Icons are a form of theological or “abstract” art, more like sermons than paintings. The Fathers of the Council strongly stated that we do so with full knowledge that we worship only the God to Whom the icons point; we do not worship the icons themselves. We venerate icons, but only direct our worship to God Himself. This is what the decree of the Council clearly states, and we will all recite that decree, called the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*, today as we make our procession with the icons outside.

But I think it is at least as important to raise the question as to how we, in our time and place, in our lives here and now, can most effectively present these truths to the people of our time. Yes, we have the Church and we have the sophisticated Theology of the Church. We have the Holy Icons, our solemn Liturgy, our practices and daily disciplines. But so many people around us know nothing of these things. They go about their lives oblivious of these truths, seldomly thinking about God and His Will and His revelation, seeking only to acquire and to get and to consume and to be comfortable in life and to have what they want for the moment. How are we to bring Christ to them?

Brothers and Sisters: There is only one way. And this has really not changed at all in the time since the very day on which Christ gathered His disciples together as we heard in our Gospel lesson today. One of the first to be called was St. Nathaniel, a man whom Jesus Himself called one “in whom is no guile.” We can only bring Christ to others by virtue of what they see in us. It is not the perfection of our great theology, or the majesty of our worship, or the fear of reprisal that will bring people to Christ. It is our consistent Christ-like behavior that will bring them to the Lord. We can preach until we are blue in the face; we can spend all our efforts arguing, teaching and even cajoling. But none of that will work, unless we can show others what truly matters. And others will only see what truly matters if we act in a consistent humble and loving way toward all others. This they will not forget, and this they will notice even though we may never know that they see it.

You and I, brothers and sisters, must be icons ourselves – icons not made with hands. We must be Christ to our neighbor, we must be the Good Samaritan to the stranger on the road; we must be the one who reaches out to the person rejected by others. This is the only way. And

ultimately, this is the message of the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

To Jesus Christ be all honor and glory forever! Amen!

Fr. Elias

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