



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

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What the Holy Icons Reveal
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

As the prophets beheld, as the Apostles have taught,...as the Church has received... as the teachers have dogmatized,...as the Universe has agreed,... as Grace has shown forth,...as Truth has revealed,...as falsehood has been dissolved,...as Wisdom has presented,...as Christ Awarded,...thus we declare,...thus we assert,...thus we preach Christ our true God, and honor as Saints in words, in writings, in thoughts, in sacrifices, in churches, in Holy Icons; on the one hand worshipping and reverencing Christ as God and Lord; and on the other hand honoring as true servants of the same Lord of all and accordingly offering them veneration.

This short excerpt from the Synodicon of Orthodoxy will be recited in church after the Divine Liturgy on Sunday, the First Sunday in Lent. It is a small snippet of a much longer document that established once and for all the doctrine of the Holy Orthodox Faith concerning the Holy Icons. Proclaimed at the Seventh Ecumenical Council after a long dispute within the Church about the appropriateness of venerating the Holy Icons, it states simply and clearly the distinction

between “veneration” of the icons and “worship” of the One True God to Whom the icons point and about Whom the icons teach. Thus, we often say that icons are not so much “painted” as they are “written;” in other words, they are sermons in color, visual images of theological truths.

The Church has had a rich history of doctrinal disputes, the most important of which have dealt with what theologians call “Christology,” or in other words, teachings about the Lord, Jesus Christ. In the earliest years of Church History there were those who taught that Jesus Christ was somehow less than the manifestation of God Himself in human flesh. Among those who fell in this misteaching was Arius, a priest from Egypt who had assembled a large following. Nestorius some years later insisted on referring to our Lord’s mother as “Christotokos,” bearer of Christ, rather than as “Theotokos,” bearer of God. The Church insisted that she is rightly to be called “Theotokos,” not so much to honor her, but rather to honor the Lord and to clearly proclaim that the One Whom she bore in the flesh is in fact God Incarnate. Thus, we neither follow the teachings of Arius nor Nestorius, but rather insist that Jesus of Nazareth was none other than God Himself Incarnate.

Many years later another teaching became popular in various parts of the Roman Empire, in the eighth and ninth centuries. That teaching, led at first by one of the emperors himself, was that it was somehow impious to venerate the icons, because such veneration might actually be a form of “idolatry.” The Church took some time to counter this misteaching, but eventually strongly opposed it in the Synodicon of Orthodoxy, which was the official statement of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Since the One born of the Virgin was indeed God Incarnate, of “one essence with the Father,” as we confess in the creed; and, since He is simultaneously both God and man, i.e. one unique Person (hypostasis) with two distinct natures and wills, divine and human, it is indeed not only permissible to “write” the holy icons, but also to “venerate” them. Since the Lord is both true God and true man, he can be depicted and represented. Thus, we “venerate” the icons but “worship” the God to Whom they point and Whom they reveal.

These disputes may sometimes seem too esoteric for us to really care about today, in this age of digital computers, self-driving cars, COVID and political unrest. However, they, like every dogma the Church articulates, have important ramifications. If Christ is merely a very good man, then why would we place our faith in him? But if He is truly “God of God, very God of very God, begotten, not made,” then He is the source and foundation and hope of our very being. Conversely, if He is truly God, but not truly man, then He simply “appears” to be human, never actually pouring Himself out for the Life of the World, but only like some materialized ghost, hovering above us, never really participating in our lives, our history; never actually demonstrating by word and by example in His life how we ourselves may cooperate with the Living God for Life Abundant.

Many people think of Christ in either of these two extremes: not quite God, and not quite man. The Sunday of Orthodoxy reminds us very clearly that Christ is both God and man! We may depict Him in the Holy Icons and through our veneration of them, pour out our faith, our love and our worship not to the wood and paint, but to the One to Whom the wood and paint: the

Living God, the One Who entered our human history as a true man and true God Incarnate, Who comforted the distressed, healed the sick, raised the dead, gave Himself up for the Life of the World, and rose again from the dead, the first fruits of those who have already fallen asleep. This is our faith, and we will give praise to Him in the Divine Liturgy and thereafter join together in the recitation of the important words of the Synodicon of Orthodoxy.

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