

Today is the Sunday of the Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council. This Council confronted the Iconoclast heresy. The word iconoclast literally means, “icon breakers”. Around the year 720, there arose a controversy over the use of religious images and statuary. It’s not totally clear how or from where the controversy erupted, but those who used images and statues were accused of being idol worshipers. Some think that the problem arose due to the influence of Moslems on Christians, particularly, on Emperor Leo III, who became a militant enforcer of iconoclasm. The emperor ordered the destruction of all images and engaged in very severe persecutions of those who used them. For example, monks supported the use of icons and so he destroyed their monasteries, put some to death, and tortured or banished others who refused to comply. Even after Leo III died, his son carried on the same policy against the use of religious images.

This went on for about 70 years until the 7th ecumenical council in 787, which is the Council that we celebrate today. But years prior to that, Leo’s son summoned a would-be 7th Ecumenical Council in 754. At that gathering, there were 340 bishops who were servile to the emperor, and as such, agreed to his iconoclast demands. The ancient Sees of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, however, all refused to participate because they knew that this meeting was going to be manipulated by the emperor. It was much like what we would call today a, “kangaroo court”. But even after the true 7th Ecumenical Council in 787, which definitively condemned iconoclasm, the controversy did not end so easily. In less than 30 years after the Council, the whole problem erupted once again, and believers were fiercely persecuted and images destroyed. The problem was that there remained a significant number of the “iconoclast party”, particularly, among the

military of the empire. In time, however, things began to settle down. By 824, there were only isolated cases of iconoclasm in the West. Thus, the Church endured the iconoclast controversy for about 100 years. The whole affair was very long, complicated, destructive and violent. It was caused, essentially, by the government's interference in the Church. If you would like more of the details of the history of the iconoclast heresy, I have posted a link on our parish web site. Go to *Liturgy* and then click on *Homilies*. You will also find links there that defend icons and explain their proper use.

Now, the purpose of sharing all of this with you isn't to give a lecture on Church history, but to raise some very important question that have to do with our faith and our spiritual life. Why were the iconoclasts wrong and the Fathers of the Council right? Moreover, why are icons so important that those who used them would endure persecution, torture,

destruction of property, banishment and death? Why were the defenders of icons so adamant in defending them at all costs? Were they confused and misguided? Had they fallen into idolatry as their persecutors had claimed? Have we fallen into idolatry in our spiritual life because we pray with icons?

I grew up in a highly anti-Catholic part of our country. It was not uncommon for us to be accused of all sorts of things, including idol worship. We not only worshipped graven images, but we also worshipped Mary. Catholics were accused of giving to objects and to human persons, such as Mary and the saints, the adoration, the kind of worship that was for God alone. Even today, some mistakenly believe this about Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Just a few months ago, I had a conversation about this with someone who had come out to the parish to do some repairs. Where are folks getting this?

On what do they base their thinking? In the book of Exodus, it says:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, 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 serve them (Ex 20:4–5).

Are we violating one of the ten commandments by making icons and bowing down before them?

While Moses was receiving this commandment on Mount Horeb, the people grew impatient waiting for him, so they pressed Aaron into making a golden calf for them to worship (Ex. 32:15–35).

Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him (v.23).

Moses said of them, “This people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold” (v.31). Doesn’t it

make sense, then, that God would have a commandment prohibiting the making and use of graven images?

After giving Moses this commandment, however, God, just a few chapters later in Exodus, told him to make two cherubim of gold and place them on each end of the Mercy Seat. The Mercy Seat was on top of the Ark of the Covenant. Above the Ark, between these two graven images of angels, God said that He would be present and speak to His people (Ex. 25:17-22). In directing Moses to make these graven images of angels, is God breaking His own commandment?

In the book of Numbers, the Hebrews became tired of wandering in the desert, so they spoke against God and Moses. God sent fiery serpents among them; Moses appealed for mercy; and the Lord, again, told him to make a graven image.

Make a fiery serpent, and set it up as a sign; and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live. So, Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it up as a sign; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live (Num. 21:8–9).

Through the use of this bronze serpent, a graven image, God worked miraculous healings. Furthermore, in the Gospel of John, Christ identifies this bronze serpent with His crucifixion.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (Jn 3:14–15).

The Ark of the Covenant itself, ornamented and covered in gold, and topped with angels, may also be considered a graven image. Moses and Joshua bowed down before the Ark, as did the elders of Israel (Joshua 7:6). And when King David was bringing the Ark to Jerusalem, there was an Israelite named Uzzah who was driving the cart on which the Ark was placed. The Oxen pulling the cart stumbled. Uzzah

reached out to steady the Ark, but because he touched it, he died (2 Sa 6:6–7). Through the Ark, the people experienced God’s awesome presence, communications and power.

The commandment regarding the use of graven images, then, cannot possibly mean that images themselves are idolatry and thus prohibited. But how do we resolve this apparent contradiction? If we read this commandment in its context with the preceding passage, the meaning is clear.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourselves a graven image...you shall not bow down to them or serve them” (Ex. 20:3).

Graven images, in this context, are about other gods and not simply images themselves. In other words, the commandment prohibits the making of idols, not simply graven images. It is what the Israelite’s did in the making of the golden calf at the foot of Mount Horeb. How, then, should

we understand images, such as the icons in our church? How should we use them?

God is absolutely transcendent--- totally other and beyond everything He has made. In this respect, He cannot be represented in any form. The book of Deuteronomy explains:

Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making graven images for yourselves... (*Dt.* 4:15–16).

They were not to make images of God because they saw no form. In Christ Jesus, however, we see a form. The Apostle John writes:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it (1 John 1:1-3).

¹ De imag. 1, 16: PG 96:1245–1248.

The Word of God truly took on our nature and dwelt among us (John 1:14). His human nature is visible. And it expresses and communicates the divine Person of the Son of God. St Paul, in his letter to the Colossians says that “[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God”. The Greek word here, for image, is icon. “Since the Word became flesh in assuming a true humanity, [...] the human face of Jesus can be portrayed...” (CCC 476).

St. John Damascene explains:

Previously God, who has neither a body nor a face, absolutely could not be represented by an image. But now that he has made himself visible in the flesh and has lived with men, I can make an image of what I have seen of God ... and contemplate the glory of the Lord, his face unveiled.¹

The incarnation of the Word of God was not figurative, but real. He truly assumed a human nature. Icons of Jesus point to this truth. Iconoclasm, however, is a rejection of the Incarnate

Word, a rejection that God appeared to us, was visible to us, in true human form, in the flesh. Thus, the 7th Ecumenical Council affirmed the veneration of images of Christ, but also the Mother of God, the angels, and all the saints.

How, then, are we to properly use icons? Our Father, St. Basil the Great says, “Whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it.”² What we do with the icon, such as bowing to it, incensing it, or kissing it, by way of our intention, passes on to the subject of the icon. It works the other way around too. God uses the icon to make Himself present to our senses, to our minds and hearts. Icons lead us to contemplate transcendent, heavenly realities. They are, as some like to say, “windows into heaven”. And they sometimes communicate the miraculous; they sometimes

weep and they cure the sick. Icons are mediators, instruments that unite us to invisible realities. Make no mistake about it. *This is biblical*. Think of the bronze serpent and those who were healed by looking at it. The use of icons should not be underestimated, but their benefit to us depends entirely on God’s grace and our faith, not the icon in itself.

On this Sunday of the Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council, let us renew our faith in Jesus Christ, and our love for Him, and our love for the Theotokos and all the saints, through our devout use of Holy Icons. By having them, and using them in our homes, we invite Christ, the Theotokos and the angels and saints to dwell with us, to be present to us, and be a part of lives.

² St. Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 18, 45: PG 32, 149C; Council of Nicaea II: DS 601; cf. Council of Trent: DS 1821–1825; Vatican Council II: SC 126; LG 67.²