Homily for the Sunday of Orthodoxy Vespers
Sunday, March 9, 2025

Today, on this glorious Sunday of Orthodoxy, we gather to celebrate the triumph of truth and the restoration of the holy icons in the life of the Church. This day commemorates a pivotal moment in our history, when the Church, led by the Holy Spirit, boldly proclaimed its unwavering commitment to the true faith. It is a day of both historical significance and spiritual reflection, as we remember the restoration of the icons and reaffirm our commitment to the doctrines and teachings handed down by Christ and the Apostles.

The Sunday of Orthodoxy is celebrated on the first Sunday of Great Lent and marks the end of the period of Iconoclasm—a time when the holy icons were suppressed, and many Orthodox Catholic Christians were persecuted for their veneration of sacred images. This struggle between those who defended the use of icons and those who sought to destroy them was not just a dispute over art or religious practice but was deeply intertwined with the defense of the very essence of our faith.

The Church had always maintained that icons are not merely objects of veneration but are means of communication between heaven and earth. They are windows through which we behold the mysteries of our salvation. The use of icons is not idolatry, as some of the iconoclasts claimed, but is a reflection of the Incarnation itself. God became man, and through His humanity, we can now depict the divine.

It was in the 8th and 9th centuries, during the reigns of several Byzantine emperors, that the controversy over icons reached its height. The iconoclastic movement, which sought to rid the Church of sacred images, resulted in the destruction of countless icons, persecution of the faithful, and great suffering. The iconoclasts, led by the Emperor Leo III and his successors, believed that the veneration of icons was akin to idolatry and that it violated the commandment against graven images.

However, the defenders of the icons, led by saints like St. John of Damascus and St. Theodore the Studite, stood firm in their belief that the icons were a true reflection of the Christian faith. They argued that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, God becoming visible in the flesh, sanctified the use of sacred images. Through icons, we do not worship the image itself, but we venerate the person it represents.

The triumph of Orthodoxy is not merely a victory over a theological dispute but a victory over the forces that sought to separate the Church from its true identity. In 843, the Empress Theodora, following the death of her husband, Emperor Theophilus, restored the icons to the Church. This restoration was not just an act of political power but an expression of the will of the Church, which, through the Ecumenical Councils, had declared the proper understanding of the faith.

In 787, at the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the Church definitively condemned the iconoclasts and affirmed the legitimate use of icons. The Council's decree declared: "We define with all

certainty and precision that, just as we revere the image of the precious and life-giving cross, so also we should revere the images of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, and of the immaculate Mother of God, and of the other saints." This teaching reflects the Church's deep understanding of the role of the Incarnation in the history of salvation and its implications for the way we encounter the divine.

The Sunday of Orthodoxy is not merely a celebration of a historical event; it is also a profound spiritual reflection on our faith. The restoration of the icons is a sign of the Church's commitment to preserving the truth, to standing firm in the face of heresy, and to safeguarding the integrity of the Gospel message. In defending the icons, the Church was defending the very heart of our salvation—the reality of God becoming man.

Icons serve as a reminder that our faith is not an abstract, distant concept but is rooted in history, in the flesh-and-blood reality of Christ's life on earth. When we venerate an icon, we are not merely honoring a painting or sculpture; we are participating in the mystery of Christ's Incarnation. The icon draws us into the very presence of the one it represents. It helps us to understand that the divine and the human are not separate but are united in the person of Jesus Christ.

Icons also teach us that the Church is not just an earthly institution but a living witness to the heavenly reality. Through the icons, we are reminded that we are part of the communion of saints, that we are surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1). The icons connect us with the saints, the angels, and with Christ Himself, who is the true image of the Father.

As we celebrate the Sunday of Orthodoxy, we are reminded of our responsibility to defend the faith as those who came before us did. Just as the defenders of the icons stood firm in the face of persecution and heresy, so too are we called to stand firm in our faith, to preserve the truth handed down by the Apostles, and to live according to the teachings of the Church.

In today's world, the battle for the faith is not fought in the same way as it was in the days of the Iconoclast controversy. However, we are still called to defend the truth against the forces of secularism, relativism, and modernism that seek to distort and dilute the Gospel message. We must be vigilant, not only in defending the teachings of the Church but in living them out with humility, love, and devotion.

On this day, as we commemorate the triumph of Orthodoxy, let us renew our commitment to Christ, to His Church, and to the truth of the Gospel. May the holy icons, which remind us of the Incarnation and the communion of saints, inspire us to live lives of holiness and devotion. And may we, like those who fought for the icons, stand firm in the faith, guarding the truth with love and courage, so that we too may become icons of Christ in the world, reflecting His light to all who encounter us.

Amen.

+Archbishop Stephen