

March 4, 2012

# Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young  
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, we have now completed the very important First Week of Great Lent, and we have survived! Now we come to the first Sunday of the Fast, called the Sunday of Orthodoxy, and great and important day.

The historical background and reason for this Sunday is already well known: this day commemorates the victory of the Church's teaching about sacred images over the iconoclasts, as clearly and carefully defined by the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which provided the theological and Scriptural justification for icons for use both in churches and in our homes.

This means that icons are not "optional devotional extras" or nice decorations, as some might be tempted to think, but a vital part of Orthodox Christianity and a natural consequence of Christ's Incarnation here in our world. Although icons are not in themselves sacraments, they do have a special "sacramental" character because of the person or event represented on them. We are of course already completely familiar with icons and frescoes in our churches, but no Orthodox home would really be without an icon corner or wall, where the family gathers for prayers, either.

"Icons are venerated by burning lamps and candles in front of them, by the use of incense and by kissing. But there is a clear doctrinal distinction between the veneration paid to icons and the worship due to God. The former is not only relative, it is in fact paid to the person represented by the icon. This distinction safeguards the veneration of icons from any charge of idolatry." (GOA website for the Sunday of Orthodoxy)

A great deal of our Faith does indeed involve looking back in time, in history, as we are doing this morning. After all, Christianity is completely rooted in and founded upon the historical appearance in the flesh of the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, two thousand years ago—He who died a most terrible death on the Cross and then rose again. In a sense, we can say that His life and resurrection were the very first "triumph" of Christianity.

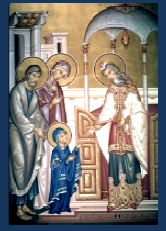
But then, after He ascended into heaven and the Christian Faith began to be preached throughout the known world, there were many who appeared who tried to change the faith, introducing innovations, errors, and even outright heresies. Also, terrible persecution against the Church broke out and for some centuries there were many martyrs—bishops, priests, and laity.

Eventually the persecutions came to an end and Christianity was free to grow and increase in holiness and numbers. But the attempts on the part of heretics did not cease, simply because the devil constantly tries to attack and destroy the Church, which is the only sure Ark of Salvation. We all know something about the heretics Arius and Nestorius (at least we should know their names!), but among those trying to introduce error into the fabric of the Faith were the iconoclasts, the haters of images. And we know how the Holy Spirit, inspiring the Church, once again triumphed over this.

It has been observed by many others that on this Sunday we not only commemorate the triumph of icons more than a thousand years ago, but we also remember two other events, one in the present and one in the future.

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But not all “triumphs” belong to the past. If that were true, then Orthodoxy today would be a dead Faith. Yet, within recent and living memory, we have seen a new triumph of Orthodoxy in the former Soviet Union, when the Orthodox Church rose from the ashes of the horrific fires of the Soviet Empire and, today, is one of the healthiest and most vigorous and even aggressive of Orthodox Churches in the world.

And then, every time the Church inspires someone to want to repent and grow and change and strive for holiness—in this there is still another “triumph” in the present.

But what about the future?

Even still, today we have those who wish to innovate, to be “creative” and “relevant” in Orthodoxy and change the Church, to somehow water down our holy Faith and introduce modern and even sometimes secular ideas and end up destroying the “faith given once and for all to the saints.” (Jude 1:3) But this is an area in which Orthodoxy must also be victorious, triumphant. But it hasn’t happened yet, and it won’t happen without our active participation.

Orthodoxy in the West—in the “diaspora”, as we say; that is, outside the boundaries of the traditional old world Orthodox countries and cultures, such as Greece, Russia, and so forth--Orthodox Christianity in Europe, the Americas, and the Orient is small in numbers and relative poor by comparison with old world Orthodoxy. But the Church in the early centuries was also poor, small in numbers, and without worldly power. Yet the Lord has called us, few and poor as we are, living in the 21st century, to study and know our Faith and be able to give a witness and a defense just as surely as the Church Fathers and saints of old whom He summoned to defend the Faith and cast out errors. So this is the triumph of Orthodoxy that is still to come.

And what are these modern errors or heresies?

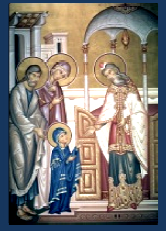
First of all we have to be aware that many Orthodox in the Western world are heavily influenced by and even assimilated into the culture in which they live, which is no longer Christian. Western cultures are extremely materialistic, encouraging individuals to be self-centered and narcissistic. This message is loudly delivered, over and over and over by our news and entertainment media—films, TV, music, novels, and so forth, and we are inundated with it. Much of this contemporary message is also just plain filth, but we have grown so accustomed to the cesspool around us that we hardly even notice it all around us any more. Yet this has had a slowly degenerating influence on how we think, behave, dress, and so forth.

But one of the greatest errors of all in our time is the idea that all churches and religions are basically the same—even, for some, Christians and pagans may be equated!--; it’s the false idea that if you are what is called a “good” or a “nice” person, that’s what matters most. But for real Christians, there is something else that matters, *and that is what the Lord Jesus Christ has taught us in Scripture*, and which has been faithfully and fully preserved and passed down by His Holy Church.

Of course it is absolutely true that Christ taught us how to live, how to behave—towards our own minds and bodies and also towards other people--; He also commanded us to be loving and forgiving. *But this is not all that He taught* and bound us to believe! He also revealed that the true God is a Trinity of Three Persons in One: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that He Himself is one of that Trinity, God the Son. In other words, *Jesus is*

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*true God.* And as true God He therefore has complete authority over us, body and soul. Since this is not what many others in our world believe—including, believe it or not, many who call themselves Christians—then how can we be the “same” as they, or they the same as we?

For example, He also commanded and clearly instructed His followers to be baptized and eat His flesh and drink His blood—that is, receive Him in Holy Communion—but many people do not accept this teaching at all, again including some who consider themselves to be “good Christians.” In addition, Christ also gave the power to forgive sins to His Church—that is to the Apostles and to their successors, the bishops and priests of His Church. Yet how many, even among the Orthodox, do not avail themselves of this vital sacrament, and carry their sins, like the Ghost of Marley (in Dicken’s “Christmas Carol”) like huge chains around them, weighing them down to the earth?

And let us not forget that Christ clearly commanded us to obey His Church when He said: “He who hears *you* hears *Me!*” (Luke 10:16). This, then applies to all of the moral and theological teachings of the Church, which we are bound to hear and follow, to the best of our ability, without argumentation or dissembling. “He who hears *you* hears *Me!*”

In addition, the Lord commanded fasting, almsgiving, and prayer—*real* prayer, and He taught us how to do this, too. Our Holy Church has worked all of this out for us in long ago time-tested ways that have led our forefathers and mothers in the Faith to purification of sin and sanctification of soul. Yet many do not fast, give alms to the poor, or know how to pray, if they even pray at all. I could go on.

But the point is that our Orthodoxy is very weak and it is getting weaker with each generation. This very weakness is itself a very great error growing in the Church, and it is something to be ashamed of. It is developing today into monstrous proportions. It is of self-satisfied people like us, then, that Scripture speaks when the Lord says: “So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit thee out of my mouth.” (Revelation 3:16)

These, brothers and sisters, are among the serious errors that the Lord expects us to identify and cast out from our midst, so that once again there may be a true “triumph of Orthodoxy”.

The “triumph of Orthodoxy” in the past, the present, and the future, is all implied by today’s Sunday of Orthodoxy. Let us not be content to rest in a remembrance of our past glorious past history. Let us be attentive to the on-going work of grace in the *present*, in devout and faithful souls, and let us also work for the triumph of the Faith in the near *future*, lest we be called to judgment for our lukewarmness!

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.