

The Holy Fathers of the 7th Council

Titus 3:8-15

Luke 8:5-15

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

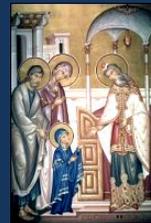
On this Sunday the Church celebrates the Holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council and asks us to reflect upon that Council and also the whole concept we Orthodox have of what we constantly refer to as “the Holy Fathers”.

This Council of the Church—the last general universal Council of Holy Orthodoxy--was held in the year 787 and dealt with the whole controversy surrounding the use of sacred images or icons. This is an important Council for us to know about because in the West, at the time of the Protestant Reformation, images in churches were severely criticized and in many cases destroyed and forbidden.

To this day most Protestant churches are very bereft and bare of sacred imagery other than the Cross, and some do not even have a Cross. Mormons even see the Cross as an emblem of shame and do not make use of it in their churches and temples, nor do they wear a cross. Even some very modern Catholic Churches—perhaps in order not to offend Protestants?—have gone in the direction of stripping themselves of sacred art of all kinds.

But in Orthodoxy we continue to preserve and cherish our rich tradition of iconography and other forms of sacred art, seeing these as both theologically and spiritually necessary and also an essential component of ancient Christian civilization. We have in English the saying “less is more.” But when it comes to sacred art, “more is more.”

For 120 years, beginning in the year 726, icons were forbidden in the Church and pious people kept them hidden in their homes. The “iconoclasts” or “icon-smashers” believed that any art



depicting God and the saints was idolatry. In this they were influenced both by Judaism and Islam.

Just prior to the iconoclast outbreak, the Muslim Caliph Yazid I had ordered the destruction of all icons within his own region. He was the Caliph of the Umayyad Dynasty and ruled in the 680s. (“Caliph” is the title of the political successors to Mohammad—not religious leaders. The Umayyad Dynasty ruled the area around present day Damascus, in Syria.) So this little influence is another “gift” we Christians received from our “peace-loving” and tolerant Muslim brethren!

Modern day iconoclasts—mostly among Protestants—do not realize that they are reflecting this dark chapter in Christian history. As the saying goes, “he who does not know history is condemned to repeat it.”

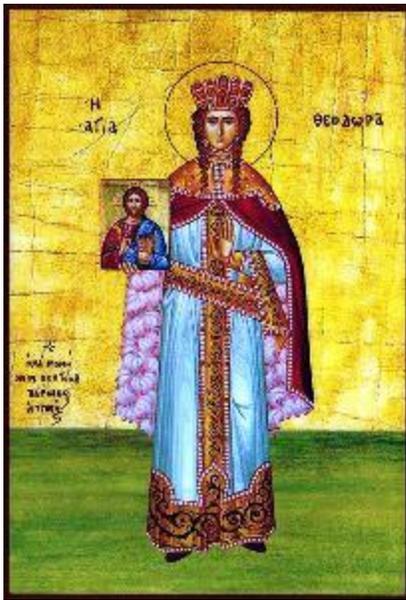
These people, the iconoclasts—and they had official support from the Emperor at that time, Leo III--had failed to understand the Church’s own theology about Christ’s human nature, our understanding of created matter, and the meaning of redemption and salvation in terms of all creation, and not just the redemption of mankind.

There were even many martyrs among those who defended the veneration of icons. Monks and nuns were among the most prominent defenders of holy iconography, providing vigorous public dissent and defense of this theological art form and also providing a whole host of martyrs in their attempts to defend divine art in the Church against the anti-Christian influences of Judaism and Islam.

It wasn’t until the year 843 that the pious Empress St. Theodora was able to finally extinguish this violent hatred of holy images, influenced by the writings of St. John of Damascus. Theodora was the wife of Emperor Theophilus the Iconoclast but she did not share in the heresy of her husband and secretly venerated the holy icons. After the death of her husband, she governed the realm since for her son, Michael, who was a minor.



She called the Council we are commemorating today, and established the annual of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, on the first Sunday of the Great Fast. When her son Michael came of age, St. Theodora retired and spent eight years in the monastery of St. Euphrosyne, where she devoted herself to ascetic struggles and reading the Holy Fathers.



A copy of the Gospels, written in her own hand still exists. She died in the year 867 and in 1460, the Turks allowed her relics to be returned to the Orthodox in Kephallonia.

As I said, St. Theodora was influenced by St. John of Damascus, who had written, in response to the Muslim slanders that Orthodox Christians were idolaters:

Concerning the charge of idolatry: Icons are not idols but symbols, therefore when an Orthodox venerates an icon, he is not guilty of idolatry. He is not worshipping the symbol, but merely venerating it. Such veneration is not directed toward wood, or paint or stone, but towards the person depicted. Therefore relative honor is shown

to material objects, but worship is due to God alone. We do not make obeisance to the nature of wood, but we revere and do obeisance to Him who was crucified on the Cross... When the two beams of the Cross are joined together I adore the figure because of Christ who was crucified on the Cross, but if the beams are separated, I throw them away and burn them.

In 787 A.D. the Seventh Council of the Church published the following:

Venerating icons, having them in churches and homes, is what the Church teaches. They are "open books to remind us of God." Those who lack the time or learning to study theology need only to enter a church to see the mysteries of the Christian religion unfolded before them.

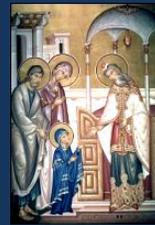
And concerning the doctrinal significance of icons, the Fathers of this Council wrote:

Icons are necessary and essential because they protect the full and proper doctrine of the Incarnation. While God cannot be represented in His eternal nature, He can be depicted simply

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because He "became human and took flesh." Of Him who took a material body, material images can be made. In so taking a material body, God proved that matter can be redeemed. He deified matter, making it spirit-bearing, and so if flesh can be a medium for the Spirit, so can wood or paint, although in a different fashion.

Brothers and sisters, in our extremely vulgar and even often pornographic world today, where indecency and outright filth greet us on television, in films, magazines (even at the check out stand in grocery stores!), on billboards, in books, and even in the immodest way in which both men and women dress today, our love for the sacred in art, and our desire to protect the purity of the human body, is more important than ever.

We simply cannot surround ourselves with enough images of the holy in our homes, in our places of work (if we are allowed to at least have an icon), and I have even known Orthodox Christians who have set up modest but very nice shrines dedicated to various saints on their own property.

The Evil One hates these images because they remind us of the Incarnation of Christ and His work of redemption for us. Therefore *we* must love them and surround ourselves with them, for the saints tell us that a demon is reluctant to enter any room where an icon is. He gnashes his teeth when he sees them.

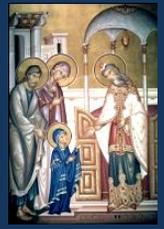
Now, who are the Holy Fathers and why should they matter to us? Isn't it enough, as our Protestant friends tell us, just to have the Bible?

Well, the historical fact is that Church Fathers were important from the very beginning, from the first century onward, and during the great age of the Church Councils (the 4th through the 8th centuries) the proclamations or decrees of those Councils always began with this phrase: "Following the Holy Fathers..." This is part of any history book you care to examine, not just the Orthodox histories.

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We call these Fathers “holy” because they were known for their personal holiness and the great virtue of their lives, teaching the Faith, explaining Holy Scripture, and giving a witness to this by their lives and writings. No Father of the Church was ever “self-appointed” or “self-called”. He was chosen by God and *revealed* to the consciousness of the whole Church—sometimes in his own lifetime, sometimes after--as one who spoke truthfully about divine things, faithfully handing down what had always been believed, adding nothing, changing nothing, and taking nothing away.

Many people think that Christ's Church somehow "died out", losing its original purity or, as even many Protestants believe, that it apostatized during the first century after Christ, as if such a thing were really possible considering Christ's promise to be with His Church "even unto the end of the ages" (Matt. 25:20). The witness of the Holy Fathers, as well as the countless martyrs, proves that the early Church did not deviate from Christ or die out. There is absolutely no historical evidence to demonstrate such an assertion.

In his Epistle to the Philippians, St. Paul mentions a "true yoke-fellow" and "fellow-laborer" named "Clement" (Phil.4:3). You might be surprised to learn that history also knows this man; in fact one of his letters is preserved in manuscript form in the British Museum! He is known as St. Clement the Roman. He was martyred in 97 or 98, shortly after the end of Emperor Domitian's persecution of the Christian Church. His letter is a wonderful witness concerning the existence of Church Fathers and Apostolic Succession in the early Church:

"The Apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ...Having therefore received a charge...they went forth with the glad tidings.... Then, preaching everywhere in country and town, they appointed their first-fruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons unto all those that should believe.... They appointed these persons and then also provided a continuance, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministration."

Concerning the need to be obedient to the successors of the Apostles, these earliest Holy Fathers,

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St. Clement adds: *"But if certain persons should be disobedient unto the words spoken by Him through us, let them understand that they will entangle themselves in no small transgression and danger."*

Thus we see that the whole concept of Holy Fathers of Church existed from the very beginning of Christianity and has been preserved in the Orthodox Church. In fact, it has been preserved to this very day, for the age of the Fathers never "came to an end", as some scholars ignorantly claim.

There have been Church Fathers in every age, every century, including even in our own time, and it is vital for us to know about them, read their writings, study them, and emulate them, especially those who have come immediately before us. This "line" of teachers in the Church is a kind of golden chain, a continuum that reaches from our generation all the way back to Jesus Christ and the Apostles themselves. It is one of the ways in which Orthodox Christians are distinguished from other kinds of Christians: we hold to and join ourselves to this golden chain, knowing that it unites us in faith to the Communion of the Saints, and therefore to our Savior and Redeemer, Christ, Himself.

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