

Today is the first Sunday of the Great Fast, and the feast of the Sunday of Orthodoxy. This feast commemorates the triumph of the Church over a heresy known as iconoclasm. The iconoclasts held that the veneration of images, including statues, was idolatry. The word *iconoclast* means “image breaker”, and this is literally what the iconoclasts went about doing. Those who defended the holy icons included common believers, but also great theologians, especially St. John Damascene. Popes, patriarchs and bishops also combated iconoclasm.¹ Many people endured persecution and even martyrdom because of it.

Iconoclasm was officially condemned in 787 by the Seventh Ecumenical Council. It was not until the death of the last iconoclast emperor, however, that icons could be fully restored. And so, it was on March 11th in 843, which happened to be the first Sunday of the Great Fast, that Empress Theodora, and a Church Synod in

Constantinople, led a procession of the holy icons through the streets of the capital city. The procession ended at Hagia Sofia, the great Church of Holy Wisdom. There the icons were restored. The Synod also declared that an anniversary of the restoration of the icons was to be observed. They named the new feast *The Sunday of Orthodoxy*.² Orthodoxy literally means right worship or belief—the true faith. So, what was the iconoclast controversy all about and why was the vindication of icons so important?

In the book of Exodus, the second commandment 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 images and bowing down before them?

¹ Adrian Fortescue, *The Greek Fathers* (London; St Louis, MO: Catholic Truth Society; B. Herder, 1908), 215.

² Fortescue, 219.

While Moses was receiving the commandments 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 prohibit the making and use of images?

Shortly after Moses received this commandment, God directed him to make two cherubim of gold and place them on the Mercy Seat, on top of the Ark of the Covenant. From the Mercy Seat, between these two images of angels, God spoke to His people (Ex. 25: 17-22). In telling Moses to make these graven images of angels, would it not seem that God is 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 this bronze serpent, a graven image, God worked healings.

The Ark of the Covenant itself, ornamented and covered in gold, and topped with angels, may also be considered an 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 and power.

In the OT, then, God does not prohibit the use of images themselves. The NT also does not prohibit graven images. In the

Gospel of John, for example, Christ identifies the 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 commandment regarding the use of images, then, is not a total prohibition. If we read the commandment now, in 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). The graven image in this context represents other gods. But there were other contexts in which God commanded the making and use of images—the cherubim, the bronze serpent, and the ark of the covenant (CCC 2130). There is yet another context, however, which is the most important of them all, and it concerns us.

God is absolutely transcendent--- 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).

In Christ Jesus, however, we now saw a form (cf. CCC 2129).

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)

The Word of God truly took on our nature and dwelt among us (John 1:14). His human nature is visible. And it expresses the divine person of the Son of God. “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.³

The incarnation of the Word of God was not imaginary, but real. The icon points 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. Thus, the seventh ecumenical council affirmed the veneration of images of Christ, but also the Mother of God, the angels, and all the saints (CCC 2131).

How, then, are we to properly use icons? Basil the Great says, “Whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it.”⁴ 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 can lead us to contemplate transcendent, heavenly realities. They

³ De image. 1, 16: PG 96:1245–1248.

can communicate the miraculous; they sometimes weep and they cure the sick. Icons are mediators, instruments that unite us to invisible realities. 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 itself.

On this Sunday of Orthodoxy, the Sunday of right worship and belief, 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 in your home you invite Christ, the Theotokos and the angles and saints to dwell with you. Let us, then, celebrate the Holy Icon as a sign that Christ is among us and ever shall be!

⁴ 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 67.⁴