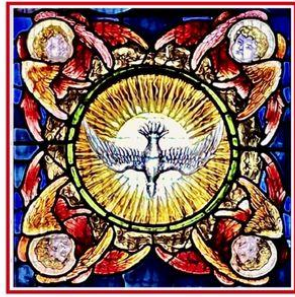


CATECHETICAL CLASSES



THE BASICS OF THE ORTHODOX FAITH

CHRIST THE SAVIOR ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL

Icons and Holy Images: Worship, Veneration and Idolatry

The veneration of icons and holy images is a deeply rooted tradition in Orthodox Christianity, reflecting the Church's theology, spirituality, and liturgical practices. To understand the role of icons, it's essential to distinguish between worship, veneration, and idolatry. To do this we will explore the biblical foundation, teachings of the Church Fathers, and doctrinal decisions of the Ecumenical Councils.

Biblical Foundation

The Bible provides guidance on the use of images in worship, prohibiting idolatry while allowing the creation of images for sacred purposes. The prohibition against idolatry is clearly stated in the Ten Commandments:

***"You shall not make for yourself a carved image—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 nor serve them."* - Exodus 20:4-5**

This commandment forbids the creation of idols for worship. However, it does not prohibit the use of images altogether, since God also commands the making of sacred images in certain contexts:

"And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work, you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at one end, and the other cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim at the two ends of it of one piece with the mercy seat." - Exodus 25:18-22

In this passage, God instructs the creation of cherubic images for the Ark of the Covenant, demonstrating that images can be used in worship when they serve to honor God and not as objects of worship themselves.

The Teachings of the Church Fathers

The Church Fathers provide substantial guidance on the proper use and veneration of icons, drawing clear distinctions between veneration (proskynesis) and worship (latreia).

St. John of Damascus:

A central figure in the defense of icons during the Iconoclastic Controversy, St. John of Damascus expressed a clear theological justification for their use:

"I do not worship matter, I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter, who worked out my salvation through matter."

- St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*

John of Damascus emphasizes that the veneration of icons is not about worshipping the material image but honoring the prototype it represents. He also highlights the Incarnation, where God took on material form, thus sanctifying matter.

St. Basil the Great:

St. Basil supported the veneration of icons, linking it to the honor given to the persons they represent:

"The honor paid to the image passes to the prototype."

- St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*

This quote underscores that venerating an icon is a way of showing respect to the holy person or event depicted.

St. Theodore the Studite:

Another faithful defender of icons, St. Theodore explained:

"An image is one thing, what is depicted is another. The image is not the thing itself; it is only an image of it."

- St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*

Theodore's teaching clarifies that veneration given to an icon passes to the one depicted, not the material icon itself.

Theological Distinctions

The Orthodox Church strongly believes and teaches that **there is a clear difference between worship and veneration.**

Worship (Latreia):

Worship is due to God alone. It involves adoration, reverence, and the acknowledgment of divine sovereignty. Worship is an act of the highest honor and submission, reserved exclusively for the Holy Trinity.

"Now I, John, saw and heard these things. And when I heard and saw, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel who showed me these things. Then he said to me, 'See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.'" - Revelation 22:8-9

Veneration (Proskynesis):

Veneration is a form of deep respect and honor given to saints, holy objects, and icons. It acknowledges the holy presence or significance associated with these representations without attributing divinity to them. The veneration of icons passes to the prototype they represent, such as Christ, the Theotokos (Mother of God), or the saints.

"By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff." - Hebrews 11:21

καὶ προσεκύνησεν ἐπὶ τὸ ἄκρον τῆς ῥάβδου αὐτοῦ

The Seventh Ecumenical Council established "greetings and respected proskynesis" for icons in 787.

This verse shows an act of veneration, not worship, as Jacob showed respect while leaning on his staff, a symbol of his journey and faith.

Idolatry

Idolatry is the worship of idols or images as gods. It involves attributing divine attributes or powers to created objects and is strictly forbidden in Christianity. Idolatry distorts true worship by directing it towards false gods.

"Those who make an image, all of them are useless, and their precious things shall not profit; they are their own witnesses; they neither see nor know, that they may be ashamed. Who would form a god or mold an image that profits him nothing?" - Isaiah 44:9-10

The Seventh Ecumenical Council (Second Council of Nicaea, 787 AD)

The Second Council of Nicaea played a key role in resolving the Iconoclastic Controversy and clarifying the Church's stance on icons:

"We define with all certitude and accuracy that... the venerable and holy images... are to be exposed to view, even as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross... for the more frequently they are seen in representational art, the more those who behold them are lifted up to the memory and longing for those depicted."

- Second Council of Nicaea, 787 AD

The Council affirmed the veneration of icons, distinguishing them from idolatrous worship, and stated that honor given to the image passes to its prototype.