

SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY - 2018

For over 1000 yrs. the Orthodox have celebrated the first Sunday of Great Lent as The Triumph of Orthodoxy, or just simply, The Sunday of Orthodoxy. When this celebration was first instituted in 878 AD. it marked the defeat of the iconoclastic movement within the Church and strongly affirmed the legitimacy of icon veneration as an important aspect of living and expressing the Orthodox Faith.

Over time the scope of this celebration was expanded to include the whole body of Orthodox teaching; that which is called by the Orthodox, The Faith, Holy Tradition or just Orthodoxy. The authority and truth of this Faith is derived from the conviction that it is the Holy Spirit, Himself, that teaches His Church "all things" and that this teaching is most perfectly expressed and resides in the combination or harmony of the Holy Scriptures, the writings of the Holy Fathers, the Creed, the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils, the structure and content of the Divine Services and in the Holy Icons. Met Kallistos Ware has written that; "These things are not to be separated and contrasted, for it is the same Holy Spirit that speaks through them all, and together they make up a single whole, each part being understood in the light of the rest."

In the ancient world, and still today, "Triumph" is a term used to describe a victory parade.

The liturgical particulars of today's celebration include a formal Procession with the Icons followed by a Confession of The Faith that reads, in part; "As the Prophets beheld, as the Apostles taught, as the Church received, as the Teachers declared...This is the Faith of the Orthodox. This is the Faith that holds up the World." Here in the Syracuse area, the clergy and the faithful from all the local communities gather at St. Sophia's Greek Orthodox Church on Sunday evening for the first of our Lenten Vesper services and, as a sign of our unity as Orthodox Christians.

Another feature of this celebration, usually done only in Cathedrals by the Bishop, was the reading of an official document, called the "Synodikon", which would anathematize, by name, all of the leaders or founders of heretical groups. In our more tolerant age this practice is sometimes ignored, but our dear St. John of San Francisco was quite adamant about continuing it. Tolerance, taken too far, becomes acceptance. I'm not too keen on liturgical cursing (though I must admit to having been tempted a few times), but it is quite right and necessary that the Church should affirm its objection to teaching that distorts, diminishes or seeks to destroy the Faith, and it should do so in strong, unambiguous terms. Especially in our American, secularized culture, all Orthodox Christians need to be vigilant.

We live in a very different social, political, intellectual and even moral world or culture than did the people of the early Church. Things like anathematizing heretics seem intolerant to us. Our problem today, however, is more that of too much tolerance rather than of too little. Or perhaps it might be better said, a problem of a distorted understanding of what tolerance really means. Real tolerance, which is a virtue, is hard, like all virtues are. Tolerance involves enduring the existence of beliefs or behaviors that one believes to be wrong - not just different, but wrong. When it comes to Religious tolerance the same thing applies. Tolerance does not mean acceptance. Orthodox tolerance of non-orthodox beliefs or practices of those "outside" of the Church community must not be seen as acceptance of those same beliefs or practices. If that does not sit well with our Heterodox neighbors, so be it.

Our celebration today is therefor, not just reveling in past glories, but a reminder that it is necessary to regularly "weed out" the gardens of our Faith so as not to profane the word "orthodox" by allowing false teaching to take root in us. Participating in the "Triumph of Orthodoxy" is a good way to begin. I would urge everyone to make a special effort to join the clergy and faithful of the Syracuse area at St. Sophia's this evening. This celebration of the Icons will be even more splendid because of the stunning new iconography -and it's only half done. I hope to see most, if not all of you there so that we may continue to celebrate and share the joy of our common Faith - the Faith that holds up the world.