

CONCERNING THE VENERATION OF ICONS

—by Saint John of Damascus—

There are certain people who blame us for venerating and honoring the icons of Christ our Savior, the Mother of God, and the Saints and servants of Christ. Let them hear how God, in the beginning, created man according to His image: **“So God made man; in the image of God He made him” (Gn. 1:27)**. Why do we show respect to each other by bowing before each other? Is it not because we are created in the image of God? As the divine and God-bearing Saint Basil states, **“the honor offered to an icon ascends to the prototype.”** The prototype is the object being depicted, from which the image is derived. Why did the Jewish people worship by standing around the tabernacle? Was it not an icon and typology of the things in heaven, or, more precisely, of the entire creation? For God said to Moses, **“See that you make all things according to the image shown to you on the mountain” (Ex. 25:40)**. Were not the Cherubim that overshadowed the sacrificial altar the work of the hands of men? What about the renowned temple in Jerusalem? Was it not constructed by human hands and built with human craftsmanship?

The Holy Scriptures specifically censure them who worship the idols and who sacrifice to the demons. The Gentiles offered sacrifices; the Jews also offered sacrifices. However, the Gentiles sacrificed to the demons; the Jews, to God. Thus, the sacrifice of the Gentiles was blameworthy and rejected by God, whereas the sacrifice of the righteous was accepted by God. Noah offered a sacrifice, and **“God smelled a sweet aroma” (Gn. 8:21)**; that is, God accepted Noah’s good-natured intention and expression of gratitude to Him.

Since the statues made by the Gentiles were depictions of demons, they are forbidden and spurned. Additionally, it is not possible for anyone to create an image of the invisible, bodiless, indescribable, and formless God. It is indeed completely absurd and impious to try to depict the Godhead, and this is why it was not possible to use icons during the Old Testament period. When, however, God, in His extreme compassion, became man on behalf of our salvation, He did not appear as He did to Abraham in *the form* of a man, or as He had

appeared to the other Prophets, but He truly became man in essence. He dwelled upon the earth and interacted with humans, He performed miracles, He suffered, He was crucified, He resurrected, and He ascended into Heaven. All these things took place in reality. He was seen by humans, and these events were recorded for the instruction of those of us who were not present at the time —so that not having seen but having heard and believed we may be counted worthy of the Lord’s blessing: **“Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn. 20:29)**. And because not everyone knows how to read, nor do most people spend time reading, the holy Fathers decided to have these truths expressed as a concise message through icons.

Oftentimes we do not have the Passion of our Lord in mind; however, upon seeing the icon of Christ’s Crucifixion we are immediately reminded of the Savior’s Passion and we proceed to bow down and worship—not the matter, but that which is being depicted; just as we do not venerate the materials themselves that comprise the Gospel or the Cross but that which these materials are representing. What is the difference between a Cross that does not have the Lord’s image depicted upon it and a Cross that does? The same holds true for the Mother of God. The honor rendered to her ascends to Him Who became incarnate through her. Similarly, the accomplishments of the Saints incite us toward bravery, zeal, and imitation of their virtues, unto the glory of God. As we have already stated, honor rendered to loyal coworkers is an indication of fondness for the common master. Similarly, **honor rendered to an icon ascends to the prototype**. This is an unwritten tradition, just as facing east when praying, venerating the Cross, and many other similar practices.

It is evident that the Holy Apostles entrusted many things to us not in writing, just as Saint Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles states in his epistle to the Thessalonians: **“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you have been taught, either by our word or epistle” (2Th. 2:15)**; and in his epistle to the Corinthians: **“Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and that you keep the traditions just as I have delivered them to you” (1Co. 11:2)**.