

Icons are now such a natural and integral part of our lives that it would be impossible for us to imagine a life without them. The Savior gave us His first icon when he wiped his face with a towel, implanting His image on it. This cloth became known as the Icon Not Made by Hands. The first icon of the Mother of God was written (icons are written, not painted) by Apostle Luke. When he showed it to Her, she blessed it saying that Her grace and strength will abide in it. Apostle Luke also wrote several others which have been preserved to this day and are great workers of miracles. As the young Christian Church matured, the presence of icons grew more and more prevalent. But yet, there was a period of time lasting over a hundred years when the veneration of icons, or even just possessing them, was a crime punishable by death. These were the years of the heresy called iconoclasm.

Iconoclasm appeared in the beginning of the eighth century when the imperial government authorities usurped the control of church life which correctly belongs to the Church hierarchy. The first iconoclast Byzantine emperor, Leo III, wanting to win favor with the Moslems who considered the veneration of icons to be sacrilegious, ordered in the year 730 that icons be removed from churches and burned. A violent persecution of all the people who would not obey the imperial edicts (banning icons and ordering their destruction) was continued by his successors. The Seventh Ecumenical Council was called in the year 787 and reaffirmed the veneration of icons. Despite the decision of the council, the persecution was continued by the new emperor and ended only in 842 through the heroic efforts of the empress, Theodora. The fathers of the Church council, called by the empress to reinstate the veneration of icons, announced the cessation of the persecution, proclaimed the Triumph of Orthodoxy, and stipulated that this victory should always be celebrated on the first Sunday of every Great Lent.

This holiday has been faithfully kept in Orthodox churches. It is especially and dramatically remembered in Russian Orthodox cathedrals. During the special molebin following the liturgy, the protodeacon triumphantly announces the correct, salvific beliefs and teachings of the Orthodox Church. All of the heretical teachings which have plagued or continue to plague the Church are identified and condemned, as a caution to faithful. All the people now deceased who during their life greatly labored for the glory and benefit of the church are remembered in prayer, followed by a prayer of support to those who are currently laboring. This service asks God to open the minds and hearts of all who have gone astray to enable them through repentance to return to God's house before they are lost for eternity.

I invite all of you to share in this holiday with me to gloriously celebrate in our cathedral the triumph of our Orthodox faith. It is always a comfort to remember this holiday as we

live in a world that is not friendly to the Orthodox Church. We need to be firm in our beliefs, as even today forms of iconoclasm can be found in the most unexpected places. I remember walking through the streets of Moscow and being accosted by a so-called Christian (Baptist) woman because I was wearing around my neck an "idol," my priest's cross. May God keep and protect us in the safety of His bosom, our Orthodox faith.

With Love in Christ,
Archpriest Serge Kotar