



The First Sunday of Lent - Sunday Of Orthodoxy

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On this day, the first Sunday of Great Lent, we celebrate the restoration of the holy and venerable icons by the ever-memorable rulers of Constantinople, the Emperor Michael and his mother, the Empress Theodora, during the patriarchate of St. Methodius the Confessor.

It was with God's permission that when St. Germanos (comm. May 12) had taken up the rudder of the Church, Leo the Isaurian (717-41) seized the scepter of the empire after having been a mule driver and manual laborer. The Patriarch was summoned immediately to hear the Emperor say, "In my opinion, Bishop, the holy images [icons] are no different from idols; therefore, I command that they be removed from among us as soon as possible. If it should be the case that they are the true forms of the saints, however, then at least see that they be hung up high so that we, who are stained by sin, may not soil them with our kisses."

The Patriarch sought to turn the Emperor away from such hatred, saying, "God forbid, Emperor, that you should rage against the holy images, for we hear that some have nicknamed you the "One Who Plasters Over." And he replied, "But I say this myself, that I was called this from childhood!" Thus when the Patriarch could not be persuaded to agree, the emperor sent him into exile and replaced him with Anastasius, who shared the imperial opinions, and so it was that the battle against the holy images broke out.

When Leo's evil life came suddenly to an end, his like-minded whelp, Constantine Copronymous (741-75)...succeeded not only to be seated on the imperial throne, but even more to rage against the holy images. [Finally] Constantine (780-97) and then Irene (797-802) inherited the imperial throne. They were guided by the most holy Patriarch Tarasius to convoke the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787), and so the holy Church of Christ received the holy images back again.

[Later, when Theophilus (829-42) took the throne, he began a persecution against those who venerated the holy icons]. Now this Theophilus both persecuted many of the holy fathers with monstrous punishments and tortures for the sake of the holy images and insisted that his cause was just. It is said, though, that once, while he was proceeding through the crowds in Constantinople, he looked for someone of the same opinion and was unable to find such a one for many days.

After he had ruled as emperor for twelve years, he fell ill.... The Augusta Theodora, who had been greatly distressed by this development, had just fallen asleep when she saw in a dream the immaculate Mother of God embracing the Babe Who is older than eternity, encircled by rows of angels who were whipping and cursing her husband, Theophilus. Just as sleep departed from her, Theophilus recovered enough to cry out, "Whoe is me, the wretched one! I am being scourged because of the holy images!" At once the empress placed upon him the icon of the Mother of God and prayed to her with tears....His whole condition eased, and he fell to sleep, though not before confessing that it is good to honor and venerate the holy icons. The empress removed the venerable and holy images from her storage chest in order to kiss them and honor them with all her heart and to prepare Theophilus for his death. Shortly after he departed this life Theodora recalled all those who had been exiled or imprisoned and ordered that they be allowed to live in safety. She also deposed John the Grammarian from the patriarchal throne....He was replaced by the confessor of Christ, Methodius, who had previously suffered greatly



and had even lived sequestered in a tomb.

[Theodora begged Methodius and several holy ascetics to intercede for her husband]. Although at first they were taken aback, they accepted because they had seen her faith. Then the saintly Methodius gathered all the clergy and people, including the bishops, in the Great Church of God (Hagia Sophia)...Together they celebrated an all-night intercession to God for the sake of Theophilus...and they repeated this throughout the whole first week of the Fast....At dawn on that Friday, the Empress Theodora fell asleep and had a dream. [She saw Theophilus being led bound and with his hands tied behind his back surrounded by men with instruments of torture. Then she saw a Man with a glorious countenance sitting in front of an icon of Christ. When she pleaded with Him for her husband He said, "Great is your faith, woman! Know then that, for the sake of your tears and your faith, and for the sake of the intercessions and petitions of My servants and My priests, I grant forgiveness to Theophilus your husband." At the same time a list of heretics, which the Patriarch Methodius had written down and placed under the Altar, changed so that the former Emperor's name no longer appeared.].

When the Empress was informed of this, she was exceedingly glad. Therefore, on the first Sunday of Great Lent, March 11, 843, she ordered the Patriarch to assemble in the Church all the people with candles and the holy images and precious crosses, so that the holy icons might be restored, and so that this latest miracle might be made known to all. Once more the holy icons were set in place in the Great Church by certain chosen holy men....From that time forward, the venerable confessors ordained that this holy feast should take place annually to insure that we do not tumble again into the same iniquity.

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