

“The *Triumph* of Orthodoxy? Not Yet!”

A Homily for Sunday of Orthodoxy Pan-Orthodox Vespers

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In ancient Rome, military conquerors entered the imperial city in a spectacular triumphal procession preceded, in order, by musicians, enemy treasures and armaments on carts, and captured prisoners in chains.

The conqueror himself rode in a chariot pulled by magnificent horses. A slave, the *auriga* in Latin, stood behind the military hero, holding a golden laurel wreath over the hero’s head, and whispering into his ear, “Remember, thou art but a man.”

What a downer! Leave it to the pragmatic Romans to keep their soldier-champions from thinking they were gods, even at the greatest moment of their lives!

Today, we Orthodox Christians celebrate the “Triumph of Orthodoxy.” On this night all over North America there are triumphal processions, including right here in Watervliet, New York, a few minutes ago. Now, our procession was hardly spectacular:

- No captured treasures, although we priests carried the divine treasures we call icons;
- No slaves in chains, but *we* are servants—willing “slaves,” if you will—of the greatest conqueror of all time, our Lord Jesus Christ, who trampled upon death through His death and resurrection;
- No chariot—in fact, we were on foot, like the Lord Himself in His earthly ministry and His original Apostles and disciples.

Our triumph, however, though moderate and reserved, is no poor cousin to ancient Rome’s.

We celebrate today the unlikely outcome of a great convulsion in the Orthodox Byzantine Empire from 726 AD to 842 AD—more than a hundred years of religious

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civil war with many *new* martyrs and confessors for Christ at the hands of ostensibly Christian emperors.

Our modern enlightened society may scoff and dismiss that titanic struggle as a foolish fight over mere paintings or images. But the true Orthodox knew then, as we Orthodox know today, that the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ is no minor matter; nor is the divine gift of holy images of the Lord's divinized humanity and the His holiness reflected in the saints and *their* icons.

What we Orthodox celebrate today, why we process in triumph, is the second and final end of the "iconoclastic controversy," when, in 843 AD, the Empress Theodora, as regent for son, proclaimed the first Sunday in Great Lent as the Sunday of the Triumph of Orthodoxy itself—to be marked by public processions with the holy icons.

Today and tonight we Orthodox Christians proclaim the victorious faith of the Apostles, the faith of the Church Fathers, the faith of the Orthodox, which divine truth has revealed, which has dissolved falsehood, which has established and maintains the universe!

That's quite a "triumph," indeed!

But I wish, tonight, to turn our attention also the *present* era.

Are *we* still so victorious in this year of our Lord 2018, right here in the United States of America? Or have *new* iconoclasts arisen among us, who seek to *deface*, even *destroy*, Jesus Christ's true image in everything and everyone around them?

The "new iconoclasts" would, if they had their way, destroy ***Christ the Jew!***

Anti-Semitism, one of the world's oldest prejudices, is on the rise in Europe, certainly in Muslim countries, and even here in America.

Those who hate Jews and all things Jewish find our Incarnate Lord's "Jewishness" rather inconvenient; they would ignore or even obliterate any trace of such Jewish ancestry from Jesus Christ, His Holy Mother, His apostles.

More subtle expressions of that virulent iconoclasm would have us reject the Old Testament as outdated, the Law and Covenant of God with Moses as irrelevant, the prophetic and personal moral teachings as antiquated, or the Jews themselves as either unworthy of or exempt from the evangelistic mission of the Church to preach

and model Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to *everyone*, without exception, “to the ends of the earth.”

The “new iconoclasts would, if they had their way, destroy ***Christ the man***, incarnate as a male.

Radical feminists and others who simply cannot abide the male Jesus pretend that the Divine Logos and Son of God could have chosen to incarnate as “Julia” or “Christa”—as a female—since the male-female distinction means nothing, and the Son of God’s male human nature is merely, in their perverse view, a historical concession to “sexism,” “patriarchy,” “gender normativity,” or some other so-called prejudice or bigotry . . . when the *really* virulent iconoclasm is their own animus against the male of the human creation, against all things masculine in gender, including God as Father and God the Son.

Even those divinely-revealed names for persons of the Holy Trinity have been obliterated in liberal Protestant denominations; why, I’ve personally witnessed the invocation of a pseudo-Trinity of “Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier” in Roman Catholic convent in northern Virginia!

As if that were not weird enough, consider the blasphemous “Trinity” of Sallie McFague, radical feminist Protestant theologian for many years at Vanderbilt University. In her book, *Models of God*, published way back in 1987, she advocated for this substitution for the revealed Holy Trinity—are you ready?—“Mother, Lover, Friend”! The Holy Spirit in that concoction, a mere metaphor for “the breath of life,” was supposed to be the “friend” of “humankind”: no family relation, just a neighbor or a pal!

The “new iconoclasts” would, if they had their way, destroy ***Christ the Bridegroom***, whom the Apostle Paul, in the 5th chapter of his magnificent Epistle to the Ephesians, describes as “married” to His bride, the Church—even as *one man* may unite with *one woman* in Holy Matrimony.

That traditional form of marriage, that divine purpose, which the Orthodox bishops in America collectively reaffirmed in August 2003 as “necessarily monogamous and heterosexual,” a union “that can only involve a relationship based on gender complementarity”: *that* traditional marriage, the same Orthodox bishops warned prophetically, “is increasingly questioned, challenged, or denied, even within some faith communities, as social and political pressures work to normalize, legalize, and even sanctify same-sex unions.”

That was in 2003, fifteen years ago. Behold, my friends, how deep we have sunk into private and public perversion as a society since then . . . and weep!

The “new iconoclasts” would, if they had their way, continue to destroy ***Christ the preborn child***—the least of His brethren, the most innocent, most vulnerable, most defenseless of *all* human beings, one of whom the Son of God Himself became when He was conceived in the womb of the Theotokos by the power of the Holy Spirit, and who each one of us, too, once was, known by God the Father, as the Liturgy of St. Basil states so eloquently, “even from his mother’s womb.”

And not only Christ the preborn child *in utero*, but also those *partially* born, those whom some medical doctors have induced to be almost born in the breech, with their heads still in the womb, only to be destroyed in a *ghastly* procedure that I dare *not* describe here this evening from sheer decency, lest it *sicken* everyone one of us!

The “new iconoclasts” would, if they had their way, destroy ***Christ the Son of God***, Immanuel, “God with us.”

Just as the God-haters in previous generations have dreamed of obliterating every *trace* of the divine presence and to empty our human consciousness of the holy, gracious, loving Creator, so the new militant secularists, who have already succeeded in prohibiting daily prayer and Bible reading in our public schools, and who have denuded our public square of virtually any hint of the true Almighty God over us all: they would *love* to degrade the divinity of Jesus Christ, reduce Him to a mere human being, a mortal, a prophet and wise teacher perhaps, but certainly *not* divine, *not* God among us, *not* a living, incarnate expression and fulfillment of God’s commandments, plans, and expectations of us. No . . . a merely *human* Jesus, perhaps with human faults and sins, who simply invites us to be *like* him, but has no real authority among us, no claims upon us, no judgment over us.

That, my friends, is the ultimate iconoclasm, which strips Jesus Christ of His divinity, and all of us of any genuine, meaningful hope of salvation.

Fellow Orthodox Christians, the “new iconoclasts” are gaining in number, in strength, in influence . . . even within our Holy Orthodox Church!

Today we have little to celebrate in our own country. Our triumph here is far from complete. In fact, it hasn’t even begun! Metropolitan Philip (Saliba) of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese was fond of saying decades ago that Orthodoxy was “America’s best kept secret.” Alas, it still is!

How many Americans today know who we Orthodox are or *what* we are? How often have you heard someone ask, “Eastern Orthodox—is that a Protestant denomination?” Or, “Eastern Orthodox—do you believe in the pope?” I still remember, when I was new in the faith in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and would identify my religion as “Orthodox,” some folks remarking, “But you don’t *look* Jewish!”

After more than two centuries on this continent, we Orthodox have very little to show for our rather feeble attempts at evangelism and humanitarian service to our needy neighbors. We have much work to do before fulfilling our duty to be our Lord’s witnesses here in the United States of America, as well as “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” [Acts 1:8].

As long as we remember the wise words of the *auriga* slave to the Roman conqueror, as long as we remember that *we* are merely Orthodox Christian men and women, not gods, . . . let us witness on behalf of our divinely revealed faith and life, let us *take the fight* prophetically to the “new iconoclasts” in

- the churches and wedding chapels
- the news media and popular culture
- the schools and universities
- the hospitals and medical clinics
- the halls of Congress, the state legislatures, the courts, the White House, and the voting booths
- *everywhere* . . . in this still great land . . .

. . . until God the Holy Trinity, by His grace and loving-kindness, grants us the *ultimate* triumph. Amen!