



## Orthodoxy

by John Behr

...Rather than talking about the historical or external aspects of the Churches who have identified themselves as Orthodox, "Orthodoxy" in the first sense of the term, it is primarily with the latter sense of the word, 'Orthodoxy' as 'right belief', that I am going to be concerned tonight -- for it is this which the Orthodox Churches claim for themselves, though I will explore it, and some of the key and differentiating themes within the Eastern understanding of Orthodoxy, by looking at various historical developments as seen from the perspective of the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

The classical picture, as it was presented for instance by the book of Acts, and Eusebius the Church Historian in the fourth century, of an originally pure orthodoxy, manifest in exemplary Christian communities, from which various heresies developed and split off, has become increasingly difficult to maintain -- especially since the work of Walter Bauer: *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (1934) -- and rightly so. The earliest Christian writings that we have, the letters of Paul, are addressed to Churches which are already falling away from the Gospel which he had delivered to them. However, whereas Bauer concluded that orthodoxy itself only appeared at the end of the second century, emerging victorious out of a conflict with other traditions, I would argue that the reality is there from the beginning -- it is the Gospel which was delivered by Paul and the other apostles -- but that it has never been perfectly manifest or realized within any community.

It is a mistake to look back to a lost golden age of theological or ecclesial purity -- whether in the apostolic times as narrated in the book of Acts, or the early Church, as recorded by Eusebius, or the age of the Fathers or the Church Councils, or the Empire of Byzantium. Christians are strangers in this world -- in any society of this world. As the Second Century Letter to Diognetus writes, concerning Christians:

They dwell in their own fatherlands, but as if sojourners in them; they share all things as citizens, and suffer all things as strangers. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is a foreign country.

And this is inevitably so: our citizenship is in heaven, as the Apostle Paul puts it, and it is from there (ex hoi) that we wait for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil 3.20). It is a mistake to look for this as something realized in the past, and since lost -- a mistake to which Eastern Christians especially are tempted as they have been subjected to foreign or atheistic powers, and forced to dwell in other lands.

Nevertheless, the Gospel was delivered. Debates certainly raged about the correct interpretation of this Gospel -- but it was nevertheless delivered once for all. In the debates about what was the orthodox position, the issue of what is authoritative for this position was paramount. And in this question of authority, two particular and inseparable aspects were fundamental: the canon of Scripture and the correct interpretation of that Scripture -- expressed most clearly in the rule [canon] of faith/truth.

The earliest Christians, of course, already possessed a collection of writings which they considered

authoritative -- the Scriptures -- the Jewish writings (what became known as the OT); and it was in accordance with these Scriptures, says Paul, that the Christ died and was raised on the third day (1 Cor 15). The Gospel, as it was originally delivered, seems to have been a particular, Christocentric, reading of what was later described as the "Old Testament." As St Irenaeus put it, at the end of the second century:

If anyone reads the Scriptures [that is, the "Old Testament"] in this way, he will find in them the Word concerning Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling. For Christ is the 'treasure which was hidden in the field' (Mt 13:44), that is, in this world -- for 'the field is the world' (Mt 13:38) -- [a treasure] hidden in the Scriptures, for He was indicated by means of types and parables, which could not be understood by men prior to the consummation of those things which had been predicted, that is, the advent of Christ. ... And for this reason, when at the present time the Law is read to the Jews, it is like a fable; for they do not possess the explanation (*tên exêgêsin*) of all things which pertain to the human advent of the Son of God, but when it is read by Christians, it is a treasure, hid in a field, but brought to light by the Cross of Christ (Against the Heresies, 4.26.1).

The Word concerning Christ, the Gospel, is a treasure hid in Scripture, brought to light by the Cross. It is the Gospel, Scripture read in a particular fashion, through the prism of the Cross of Christ, that is salvific -- if the Law itself were salvific, then Christ would have died in vain, as Paul points out (Gal 2:21).

Yet the Gospel remains intimately linked to the Scriptures -- Christ is the Word of God disseminated in Scripture. It is interesting that those who appealed most to the apostolic writings during the course of the second century -- such as Marcion and Gnostics such as Ptolemy -- failed to appreciate the relationship between these Scriptures and the Gospel -- usually heightening the contrast between the two, claiming that they were about two different Gods. It was only by the end of the second century, with St Irenaeus, that the continued preaching/kerygma of the Gospel came to be crystallized as a rule of truth, and that the writings of the apostles themselves came to be recognized as possessing Scriptural authority. As Irenaeus wrote:

We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith. ...

These have all declared to us that there is one God, Creator of heaven and earth, announced by the Law and Prophets; and one Christ the Son of God (Against the Heresies, 3.1.1-2).

The reason I am dwelling on this, is because it helps to understand the Orthodox Church's insistence on Scripture and Tradition, and the place of creedal formula within this. The Gospel which is the foundation of the Church, has, according to Irenaeus, been preserved intact within the Church, as the tradition of the apostles. It has been maintained through a succession of bishops teaching and preaching the same Gospel -- he continues a little later:

It is within the power of all, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted as bishops in the Churches, and to demonstrate the succession of these men to our own times (Against the Heresies, 3.3.1).

It is not that the bishops, instituted by the apostles (who are not thought of as the first bishops, as they would be by Cyprian), automatically preserved the tradition of the apostles -- the Gospel which the apostles delivered -- but that they are bishops of the Church only to the extent that they do so, for the Church is founded upon the Gospel.

More important is the fact that the content of tradition is nothing other than that which is also preserved in a written form, as Scripture -- they are not two different sources. Tradition is not the accumulation of various customs, nor does it provide us with access to knowledge necessary for salvation that is not also contained in Scripture. It is the Gnostics, according to Irenaeus, who appeal to tradition for teachings not contained in Scripture.

The community founded upon the apostolic Gospel, the Church, is also the community which has recognized certain writings as apostolic and as authoritative Scripture (and will eventually speak of a canon of Scripture). As there were many writings laying claim to apostolic status, the claim to apostolicity, however, was not itself enough to justify the recognition of a particular writing as Scripture. What was essential was the conformity of the writing to the apostolic Gospel which founded the Church, which has been preserved intact, and which had since come to be phrased in terms of a rule/canon of truth/faith. This also means that the apostolic writings are accepted as Scripture within a community that lays claim to the correct interpretation of these writings. Tradition is, as Florovsky put it commenting on Irenaeus, Scripture rightly understood [1]. In Irenaeus' vivid image, those who interpret Scripture in a manner which does not conform to the rule of truth are like those who, seeing a beautiful mosaic of a king, dismantle the stones and reassemble them to form the picture of a dog, claiming that this was the original intention of the writer (*Against the Heresies*, 1.8).

It is not that what is claimed to be the picture of a king can be arbitrarily imposed upon Scripture -- Scripture is fixed -- it is "the ground and pillar of our faith," as Irenaeus puts it, modifying Paul's words, about the Church, to Timothy (1 Tim 3:15; although as Bart Ehrman has noted, parts of the text were modified during the course of the second century to produce a more 'orthodox' text). Scripture is that to which one must continually return, to be sure of the ground on which we stand.

If tradition is essentially the right interpretation of Scripture, then it cannot change -- and this means, it can neither grow nor develop. A tradition with a potential for growth ultimately undermines the Gospel itself -- it leaves open the possibility for further revelation, and therefore the Gospel would no longer be sure and certain. If our faith is one and the same as that of the apostles, then, as Irenaeus claimed, it is equally immune from improvement by articulate or speculative thinkers as well as from diminution by inarticulate believers (*Against the Heresies*, 1.10.2). We must take seriously the famous saying of St. Vincent of Lérins: "We must hold what has been believed everywhere, always and by all" (*Commonitorium*, 2).

From an Orthodox perspective, there simply is, therefore, no such thing as dogmatic development. What there is, of course, is ever new, more detailed and comprehensive explanations elaborated in defense of one and the same faith -- responding, each time, to a particular context, a particular controversy etc. But it is one and the same faith that has been believed from the beginning -- the continuity of the correct interpretation of Scripture. And for this reason, the Councils, as Fr. John Meyendorff pointed out [2], never formally endorsed any aspect of theology as dogma which is not a direct (and correct) interpretation of the history of God described in Scripture: only those aspects were defined as dogma which pertain directly to the Gospel...

One other aspect pertaining to the early Church must be noted -- for it indicates a significant difference between Eastern and Western understandings of the Church -- and this is the establishment and role of the episcopacy. The Apostles were essentially itinerant -- 'Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel' (1 Cor 1.17) -- they are universal witnesses to Christ, founding Churches. Having established Churches, the Apostles entrusted these Churches to various delegates -- in the NT we hear of *epískopoi* (overseers), *presby'teroi* (elders) and *proistámenei* (presidents) -- all in the plural, indicating a certain collegiality in the government of the early Church. During the course of the second century, however, the local churches come to be presided over by one person -- the *episkopos* as bishop -- what is known as the monarchical episcopacy. It was probably the practical necessity for one person to preside over the Eucharist, celebrated when the Church gathered together, that led to this arrangement, rather than any radical revolution.

What is particularly important is that it is the local church that comes together to celebrate the Eucharist. Despite all the apparent temporal and geographical limitations of a local community, as the Eucharist can only be celebrated in this fashion, by a local church, so also only such a community can truly be 'catholic.'

This is made clear in the writings of St Ignatius of Antioch: he is one of the earliest witnesses to the monarchical episcopacy, the Church gathered around the bishop, the college of presbyters and the deacons; and he is also the first to use the term "catholic" of the Church:

Let no one do any of the things pertaining to the Church without the bishop. Let that be considered a certain Eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop or by one whom he appoints. Wherever the bishop appears, let the congregation be present, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church (Smyrn 8.2).

The expression, 'the Catholic Church,' applies to the local church gathered in the unity of faith under one bishop celebrating one Eucharist. As such, the term 'catholic' does not denote a geographical universality, in the sense of the union of all local churches under one center, as parts of a universal whole. It is not so much an extensive property, as an intensive quality, a 'fullness' or 'completeness'; and it is this precisely because it is the whole undivided body of Christ Himself that is present, when, in the unity of faith, the Eucharist is celebrated, making His Body, the Church: "wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church". Jesus Christ Himself is the only one who makes the local eucharistic gathering to be truly a Catholic Church.

However this must not be taken as an assertion of the superiority of the local church over the universal -- to do so would be to deprive both of catholicity. Rather the two imply each other: the catholicity of the local Church is dependent upon its communion with other Churches. While each local Church is, in this way, catholic, each nevertheless remains unique and distinct, with her own particular characteristics (paralleling the Trinity). The interdependence of each local church, each being a unique manifestation of the same One, Catholic and Apostolic Church, shows itself in the practice which developed early on of bishops from surrounding areas gathering to consecrate a bishop for his community, and later, in the practice of bishops, as the heads of their Churches, assembling together in a Council, to arrive at a common mind -- 'the authority of all, not a highest authority over all.' [3]

The particularity of each local Church enables Ignatius, Irenaeus and others, to grant a certain priority to the Church of Rome -- Ignatius describes her as 'presiding in love' (prokathêménê tê agápê -- Rom pref.); Irenaeus refers to Rome's ancient and illustrious foundation by the apostles Peter and Paul (AH 3.3.2), but he points out that all the other Churches have been founded either by the apostles themselves, or upon their Gospel -- if Rome was conceded any priority, it was based upon the territorial importance of Rome within the Empire, an importance which enabled Constantinople, as the New Rome, to claim second place at the Council of Constantinople in 381 (canon 3) -- either way, the priority does not confer any authority upon the bishop of Rome greater than that of the other bishops.

It is also worth noting that despite emphasizing adherence to the bishop, as the head of the ecclesial community, Ignatius emphasizes no less the adherence of each and all to the true faith -- he writes his letters to the community (not to the bishop), and urges his readers to "be deaf when any one speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ" (Trall 9). If the bishop stands as the center of the Church, it is because he upholds and secures the true teaching concerning Jesus Christ -- and this is the condition both of his being the bishop and of our obedience to him. These two aspects are made clear in Ignatius' letter to the Ephesians:

Everyone whom the master of the house sends to do his work, we ought to receive as him who sent him. Therefore it is clear that we must regard the bishop as the Lord Himself. Indeed, Onesimus [their bishop] himself greatly praises your good order in God, for you all live according to the truth, and no heresy dwells among you: rather, you do not even listen to anyone unless they speak

concerning Jesus Christ in truth (Eph 6).

While we are to receive the bishop, in so far as he teaches the truth, as the Lord Himself, we are also responsible for holding firmly to our faith concerning Jesus Christ.

So far I have spoken primarily about the foundation and structure of the Church, from an Orthodox perspective -- the relationship between Scripture and Tradition; the episcopacy and the councils; referring mainly to the second century. I would now like to turn to some of the later debates concerning the faith itself -- beginning with the Trinitarian and Christological controversies -- not for the Trinitarian theology or Christology itself, but to look at some of the issues which they involved from the perspective of the Greek Fathers. Before turning to some of the issues that were discussed in these controversies and resolved in Conciliar definitions, it is worth remembering, as Bishop Kallistos Ware points out that: "The bishops, when they drew up definitions at the councils, did not imagine that they had explained the mystery; they merely sought to exclude certain false ways of thinking about it. To prevent people from deviating into error and heresy, they drew a fence around the mystery; that was all." [4] The definitions are boundaries, rather than exact expositions -- and the more precise they get, the more reserved they get -- this is especially the case in the definition of Chalcedon, which stated that God and man were united in the one Jesus Christ, "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation" -- all negative, or apophatic, statements.

It is also important to remember that, no matter how abstract the discussions were, they were always concerned with maintaining the truth about the Gospel, and its message of salvation -- that through the death of God on the Cross, we are delivered from sin and death. The characteristic paradigm within which the East tended to think out the message of salvation was in terms of sharing or participating, an image which goes back to Paul: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, though He was rich, yet for your sake became poor, so that by His poverty, you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). Christ shared our state, so that we might also share His state. This is also a theme, found in a slightly different form, in the Gospel of John -- in terms of the vision of, and participation in, the glory and unity of God -- themes that are particularly important in late Byzantine theology:

The glory which Thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and Thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that Thou hast sent me and hast loved them as Thou hast loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which Thou hast given me in Thy love for me before the foundation of the world (Jn 17:22-24).

On this basis, of the interchange and communion between God and man, the Greek Fathers, following the words of Scripture cited by Christ "I said you are gods" (Ps 82:6, Jn 10:37), spoke of salvation and redemption primarily in terms of deification (théôsis). Human beings are called to become, by grace, what God is by nature. This is summed up neatly by St Athanasius, in the fourth century: "God became man so that we might be made god" (DI 54).

Because of this emphasis, the union of God and man in Christ, and through Christ for all those adopted in Him, is not seen simply as a remedy made necessary by the fall. It is, according to St Maximus the Confessor, the very purpose and meaning of creation itself. It is:

the blessed end, on account of which all things were constituted. This is the foreknown divine purpose of the beginning of beings ... on account of which all things are, but itself on account of nothing. ... God the Word became man ... reveals in Himself the end on account of which the things that are made ... received beginning in being. For on account of Christ, that is, the mystery of Christ, all the ages, and the things in the ages, take in Christ their beginning and end of being [5].

It is in Christ and Him alone, that the world has its meaning, the initial cause of its coming-into-

being and the end towards which it is directed.

If salvation and deification are to be possible, then Christ must be both fully God and fully human: only God Himself can save, yet if we are to benefit from His work of salvation, if we are to participate in what He has done for us, then it must be as a human being that God works our salvation -- "Man would not have been deified if he were joined to a creature, or if the Son were not true God" (CA 2.70). The first point was established in the Trinitarian debates of the fourth century, and the second point in the Christological debates which followed it.

Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria in the early fourth century, argued that as the Son is the Son of the Father, He must therefore be later than the Father, and so not Himself God, but rather a creature -- the first and highest of all creatures, through whom the Father created all things. It was in reaction to this that Councils meet at Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381), to affirm that the Son is truly God, -- God from God.

Against Arius, Athanasius drew a clear distinction between creating, an act effected by God's will, and begetting, which pertains to the very being of God. The Father, he insisted, did not first exist by Himself, and then produce or beget a Son; rather, He eternally begets the Son from His own nature: for God, to be is to be Father, and this implies the Son -- Father and Son are coeternal. Being begotten from the Father in this way, the Son is consubstantial with the Father: He is as truly God as is God the Father.

The same point was also made, later in the fourth century, with regard to the Holy Spirit, and for the same reason: if the Spirit is going to be active in our salvation and deification, then the Spirit must also be fully divine. As St Gregory of Nazianzus put it: "If He is of the same rank as myself (ie. created), how can He make me god, or join me with the Godhead" (Or 31.4). It is by receiving the Spirit of God, in Christ, that, sharing in His Spirit, we can also call on God as Father.

Having established the divinity of the Son, the theological burden was then to explain how one and the Same Jesus Christ can be both God and man. There were two main errors in this protracted controversy. Firstly, Nestorianism, which held that, as God is changeless and impassible, that is, not subject to being affected by anything, the Son cannot be born or suffer, let alone die. As such, it maintained that the Son united Himself to the man born from Mary, and that it was this man who was crucified and died. So according to this teaching, Jesus Christ is not God Himself become man, but a man joined to God, a man indwelt by God to an exceptional degree. The other great temptation, monophysitism, led in the other direction. In its extreme form it argued that, as Christ is indeed one, there cannot be a duality of natures in Him. Rather, Christ is from two natures, but the human nature, in its union with God, is swallowed up, 'absorbed' in God like a drop of wine in an ocean of water -- there remains only one nature. I emphasize that this is the extreme form of monophysitism, for those Oriental Churches, commonly and misleadingly known as 'monophysite,' who did not accept the definition provided by the Council of Chalcedon (451), would equally repudiate such a teaching -- they hold to a more sophisticated position, that in Christ the two natures are combined into a single 'incarnate' or composite nature.

Both errors agree on one point: that one and the same person cannot be both God and man. The Nestorians argued that as there is both divinity and humanity, there is a real duality in Christ. The monophysites argued that if Christ is one, and as He is God, he cannot be man. In neither of these two alternatives is there a real union between God and man. Nestorianism was condemned at the Council of Ephesus (431), which affirmed that the Son does not merely unite Himself to a man, Jesus of Nazareth, but rather that He becomes that man. While the Son and Word of God remains what He eternally is with God, by becoming man He undergoes all that is proper to human beings, beginning with His birth from a woman. God is literally born of a woman, and for this reason, the Council proclaimed the Virgin Mary as Theotokos -- the one who gives birth to God. This term is certainly an expression of pious devotion to Mary, and the Byzantines turned their poetic talents to praising her who is 'more honourable than the Seraphim and beyond compare more glorious than the Cherubim,' whose womb is 'more spacious than the heavens' for in it heaven and earth were

joined in one. But, as I pointed out earlier, the dogmatic significance of this term pertains to Christ, the One to whom she gave birth, rather than Mary herself. As St John of Damascus put it, three centuries later: "We call the holy Mary Theotokos, for this name expresses the entire mystery of the Incarnation" (On the Orthodox Faith, 3.12).

With regard to monophysitism, the Council which met at Chalcedon (451), insisted that the one Christ is not only from two natures, but that He remains in two natures -- He is both God and man, consubstantial with God and consubstantial with us -- "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." Whilst Chalcedon defined the boundaries of acceptable theology, it did not specify how this could be understood, and so in the following centuries theologians struggled to explain this paradoxical assertion. The initial supporters of Chalcedon tended to be of a Nestorianizing persuasion (heightening the so-called monophysites' dissatisfaction with the Council): wanting to maintain the impassibility of God, they still refused to accept that God had indeed suffered and died. Yet the solution was to hand within the Chalcedonian definition, as later theologians realized: the one Son of God, Jesus Christ, whilst remaining impassible in His divine nature, nevertheless does genuinely suffer, die, and rise again, in His human nature; and as Jesus Christ is Himself the Son of God, true God, it is God Himself who is crucified, and so works our salvation.

This affirmation is brought out well by the hymnography of the Orthodox Church, especially that for Holy Friday. For instance:

Today, He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the Cross.  
He who clothes Himself in light as in a garment stood naked at the judgement.  
He who is the King of the angels is arrayed in a crown of thorns.  
He who wraps the heavens in clouds is wrapped in the purple of mockery. [6]

It is also worth noting the emphasis, in this hymn, on "today" -- characteristic of Byzantine hymnography -- today, the One who hung the earth upon the water is hung on the Cross. Liturgical celebrations of historical events are not understood simply as the commemoration of events that happened in the distant past, which we now simply remember. Rather, if our celebration of the act by which Christ has saved the whole human race -- from its beginning to its end -- if this it is to be more than a simple memorial, we must also participate in that salvific activity of God: this activity (*energeia*) must be present to us as well.

But the key affirmation of this hymn is that the suffering of Christ on the Cross is the suffering of God Himself. The Christ who is the King of the Universe, the Pantokrator or Almighty, is the crucified One.

Following the lines of the Gospel of John, where the moment of lifting up on the Cross is the moment of exaltation (cf Jn 3:13-14; 12:27-36), Byzantine iconography often replaces the words nailed to the cross, "The King of the Jews" with the words "The King of Glory"; and similarly it inscribes Christ's halo with a cross, even when He is depicted as a child with His mother, or as walking in Eden with Adam and Eve.

In its paradoxical manner, this hymn further emphasises that the One on the Cross is the One by whom all things are created. Although born only recently from the Virgin, He was operative in creation, He appeared to Abraham, spoke with Moses from the burning bush, led His people through the Red Sea and the wilderness, and appeared to the Prophets, chastising His people and preparing them for His coming.

He is the One disseminated, in this way, in Scripture in its types and prophecies -- the treasure buried in a field -- the Word of God brought to light by the Cross, to use Irenaeus' imagery we saw earlier.

After further controversy, in the seventh century, concerning the real human existence of Christ -- St Maximus and Sixth Council (681) insisting that Christ possessed a genuine human will and energy

-- the Christological controversy itself continued, in the East, in the controversy about icons, perhaps the most striking aspect for anyone who enters an Orthodox Church for the first time. The Christological dimensions of iconography were never really recognized in the West -- they tended to see icons solely as 'books for the illiterate'; indeed, the Seventh Council was, for a time, repudiated in the west -- partly due to a faulty translation of the acts of the Seventh Council, and a consequent misunderstanding of the issues, as well as a growing sense of independence in the West.

The Greek word eikôn simply means image, likeness or portrait. Those who rejected the practice of depicting Christ in an icon (whether from origenist motives, a faulty Christology, or from the influence of Islamic culture), these iconoclasts argued that as God Himself is invisible and infinite, He cannot be depicted, and as the divine is inseparably united to the human in Christ, one cannot claim to depict the human nature of Christ in distinction from the divine nature.

Those who defended the icons, went straight to the Christological heart of the matter: while the divine nature is certainly invisible and infinite, nevertheless God became man, He became visible and perceptible, without ceasing to be God. As St John of Damascus put it:

How can the invisible be depicted? ... How can a form be given for the formless? How does one paint the bodiless? ... It is obvious that when you contemplate God becoming man, then you may depict Him clothed in human form. When the invisible One becomes visible to the flesh, you may then draw His likeness (On the Divine Images, I.8).

The icon is not a picture of a mere man, but is a picture of God Himself -- it depends upon the Incarnation. The icon is a "confession of faith against doceticism," [7] it is a confirmation and expression of the right reading of Scripture. And this is also expressed as an affirmation of the material world, part of which God became, and which He uses to work our salvation. As John continues:

In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honouring the matter through which my salvation was wrought. ... Although the body of God is God, having become, without change, by union in person, that which anoints it, it still remains what it was, flesh ensouled with a rational and intellectual soul, made, not uncreated (I.16).

An icon is a confession of faith, both in the reality of the incarnation -- that God has indeed become man -- and also that man has remained man in this union with God. The icon is also a witness to the possibility of deification. To reject these icons, therefore, is to reject the whole economy of God. Therefore, the Seventh Council asserted not only the possibility of icons, but their necessity:

We declare that, next to the sign of the precious and life-giving cross, venerable and holy icons -- made of colours, pebbles or any other material that is fit -- may be set in the holy churches of God, on holy utensils and vestments, on walls and boards, in houses and in streets. These may be icons of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, or of our pure Lady, the holy Theotokos, or of honourable angels, or of any saint or holy man. For the more these are kept in view through their iconographic representation, the more those who look at them are lifted up to remember and have an earnest desire for the prototypes. [8]

It is important, however, to remember that icons are only symbols. The veneration paid to icons is directed towards the one depicted, rather than the depiction itself. Leontius of Neapolis made this point almost a century before the first outbreak of iconoclasm:

We do not make obeisance to the nature of the wood, but we revere and do obeisance to

Him who was crucified on the Cross. ... When the two beams of the Cross are joined together, I adore the figure because of Christ who was crucified on the Cross, but if the beams are separated, I through them away and burn them. [9]

Just as John of Damascus emphasized the honour that is due to the matter in which Christ worked our salvation, but strictly differentiated this from the worship due to God alone, so also the Seventh Council specifies:

[We declare] that one may render to them the veneration of honour: not the true worship of our faith, which is due only to the divine nature, but the same kind of veneration as is offered to the form of the precious and life-giving Cross, to the holy gospels, and to the other holy dedicated items. [10]

Alongside the icon of Christ, the Seventh Council also refers to icons of the Theotokos, the angels and the saints. It indicates that these function as reminders, pictorial representations of figures and events from the Gospel. However there is more to the inclusion of the Theotokos and the saints as suitable subjects for iconographic representations. As their lives display the virtue and charity of God Himself, they are worth reflecting upon, but more importantly, in their "deified" humanity, we see Christ who lives in them and they in He: they are living icons of Christ. This is a theme which goes all the way back to the martyrologies of the second century. For instance:

Blandina, hung on a stake, was offered as food for the wild beasts that were led in. She, by being seen hanging in the form of a cross, by her vigorous prayer, caused great zeal in the contestants, as, in their struggle, they beheld with their outward eyes, through the sister, Him who was crucified for them, that He might persuade those who believe in Him that everyone who suffers for the glory of Christ has for ever communion with the living God. the small and weak and despised woman had put on the great and invincible athlete, Christ, routing the adversary in many bouts, and, through the struggle, being crowned with the crown of incorruptibility. [11]

Blandina became an image, a living icon, of Christ for those who were suffering alongside her. It is in Blandina's weakness that the strength of God is victorious, and through her martyrdom that incorruptibility is bestowed upon her, in an eternal communion with the living God.

Such descriptions, of the union between the martyr, and later the ascetic, and Christ, who achieves the victory over the adversary in them, occur frequently in the ascetic literature of the East. It is emphasised in the description of the archetypal ascetic, St Antony. According to Athanasius:

Working with Antony was the Lord, who bore flesh for us, and gave to the body the victory over the devil, so that each of those who truly struggle can say, it is "not I but the grace of God which is in me" (1 Cor 15.10; VA 5).

Antony's ascetic victories are not his own achievement, but those of God working in him -- and this is made possible by the fact of the Incarnation.

This assimilation between the believer and Christ, turning the believer into a living icon for those who also trust in Christ, indicates that the revelation of God in Christ is not simply a matter of delivering statements about God, which we could not have known otherwise; rather, this revelation of God in His Word, Jesus Christ, is capable of making us partakers of God Himself. To see in the foolishness of the apostles' preaching, in Christ crucified, what they saw -- the Power and Glory of God -- is already to partake of this Power and Glory. It was this theme that dominated later Byzantine theology: the vision of the invisible God in the divine light of Christ -- the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, revealed in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6) -- and the participation in, through contemplation of, that light. A vision which results in the most intimate union possible. This is most vividly described in the hymns of St Symeon the New Theologian. In reflecting upon the

union with God brought about by partaking of the Eucharist, Symeon develops a highly literal interpretation of 1 Cor 6:15: 'Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ.' For Symeon, this literally means that Christ is completely identified with each of our bodily members, whilst we are also His members and form His Body.

We become members of Christ -- and Christ becomes our members, Christ becomes my hand, Christ, my foot, of my miserable self, and I, wretched one, am Christ's hand, Christ's foot! I move my hand, and my hand is the whole Christ since, do not forget it, God is indivisible in His divinity; I move my foot, and behold it shines like That one!  
Do not say that I blaspheme, but welcome such things, and adore Christ who makes you such! Since, if you so wish you will become a member of Him, and similarly all our members individually will become members of Christ and Christ our members, and all which is dishonourable in us He will make honourable by adorning it with His divine beauty and His divine glory, and living with God at the same time, we shall become gods, no longer seeing the shamefulfulness of our body at all, but made completely like Christ in our whole body, each member of our body will be the whole Christ; because, becoming many members, He remains unique and indivisible, and each part is He, the whole Christ (Hymn 15: 141-171)

Symeon goes on to use such graphic language, that the 18th century edition of Symeon's works edited out parts of this hymn on the grounds that they were too shocking. But I hope it conveys something of the totally Christ-centred vision of the theology of the Orthodox Church: based on the Gospel that those adopted in the Crucified Christ, are called to share fully in His stature as sons of God -- gods by the grace of God. And I hope that I have also managed to convey how it is that the Orthodox Church sees herself being founded totally upon the Gospel, and some of the decisive historical events and controversies that have been shaped by the attempt to understand and apply this Gospel.

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NOTES:

1. 'The function of Tradition in the Early Church', Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View, 75.
2. Living Tradition (SVS Press, 1978), ch. 1, 'The Meaning of Tradition,' 18.
3. J. Erickson, 'The Local Churches and Catholicity: An Orthodox Perspective,' The Jurist 52 (1992): 496.
4. The Orthodox Church (Penguin, 1997), 20.
5. Ad Thal 60 (PG 90.621ab), cited in E. Perl, "'... that man might become God': Central themes in Byzantine Theology", in L. Safran, ed., Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium (Penn State Univ., 1998), 40.
6. The Lenten Triodion, trans. Mother Mary and K. Ware (London, 1978), 587.
7. J. Meyendorff, Christ in Christian Tradition (SVS Press, 1975), 178.

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