



SESSION 19: ICONOCLASM & THE 7TH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL – CONTENT

1. Developments within the Church (Constantinople): As Constantinople was now the only unoccupied see in the Empire, it began to develop its own ecclesiastical structure, as a synthesis of others. Liturgies of Sts. John Chrysostom and Basil the Great replaced the Alexandrian Liturgy of St. Mark and the Antiochian Liturgy of St. James, including a synthesis of the cycle of services and feasts. This became known as the ‘Byzantine rite’ that is used today. As we noted in the last session, there was a growing emphasis on the Holy Virgin, and feasts to her became more prominent. There was a flowering of kontakia and stichera – the legacy of St. Romanos the Melodist. The Great Canon of St. Andrew came into routine use as a focus on repentance. And the emphasis on icons and Christian mosaics continued. But there were also distortions. Anastasius of Sinai wrote, “Many think that he sufficiently reveres his baptism who, entering the church, kisses all the icons without paying any attention to the Liturgy and the divine service.” And there are records of taking icons as godparents, scraping paint from icons to add to Eucharistic wine, and placing the Sacraments on icons so as to receive it from a saint.
2. After Justinian II held the Trullan Council (692), he began grandiose expansion of the imperial palace and funded it with taxation. Thus he was deposed in 695 and his nose was cut off to signify he was Emperor no longer. He went to the Bulgarians, with whom he laid siege to Constantinople, crawling up an aqueduct pipe into the city and taking it. Thus began his second period as Emperor Justinian Rhinometos. It was a reign of terror lasting until Leo the Isaurian became Emperor and ended the Heraculean dynasty.
3. In 717 the Syrian Leo entered Constantinople. Within months a muslim army of 120,000 men and 1,800 ships attacked, surrounding Constantinople. After constant harrassment, a harsh winter, starvation and sickness, the muslim army withdrew in 718. In 720 Leo appointed his son, Constantine V, as co-emperor. They accomplished restoration of the Empire, on a much smaller scale.
4. In 726 Leo published an edict condemning the use of icons. At his command soldiers took down an icon of Christ from the Chalcedonian Gate in Constantinople. Riot ensued and several were killed. Many in the East objected and the West rejected the edict.

5. This rejection of icons and their veneration (and the cult of saints) is called iconoclasm. It included the rejection of panel paintings, mosaics, frescos and images on sacred vessels and vestments as well as icons. Iconoclasts held that icons were not a part of Apostolic Tradition. Rome was a part of the Empire and expected to observe Leo's iconoclastic edict. They did not, and this led to a weakening of the West's political allegiance to the East. There were no iconoclastic persecutions in the West. What was iconoclasm's cause? Historians have speculated three reasons: 1) the influence of Islam, particularly through Leo's Syrian (i.e. muslim domination) origin, 2) a revolt by secular culture, inspired by emperors, to liberate art from the Church, and 3) a new outburst of Hellenistic spirituality disdaining anything artificial or material. I believe it was simply power – the desire of the Isaurian emperors to subjugate the Church to the state. There were Church leaders who rejected this (i.e. iconophiles), including Leontius of Neapolis, decisions of the Trullan Council itself, and those who saw the veneration of icons as a long Tradition extending back to Apostolic times [see Readings].
6. Another who rejected iconoclasm was St. John of Damascus (~676-749). Born in Damascus to the prominent Christian Mansour family who were responsible for the Emperor's taxation, John received muslim and Greek education and excelled in music, astronomy, geometry and theology. He became an official in the muslim caliph's government, and in response to Leo's edict wrote three treatises defending Holy images and attacking the Emperor. In response Leo forged documents alleging John's plan to attack Damascus and sent them to the caliph. The caliph cut off John's right hand. John asked for the hand, prayed in front of an icon of the Theotokos, and it was restored. He immediately went to a monastery near Jerusalem and was ordained a priest in 735.
7. In 730 Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople rejected iconoclasm and was deposed. Pope Gregory II (731-741) condemned iconoclasm and said that anyone profaning sacred images would be excommunicated. Leo tried to get rid of Gregory but could not. So he confiscated Roman church property in Southern Italy and Sicily and removed the Balkan churches from papal jurisdiction.
8. In 740 Leo died and Constantine V continued iconoclasm, calling a synod of 338 bishops that ratified it, saying that in depicting Christ His two natures are separated, only the human nature being depicted – thus venerating icons was Nestorianism. Only monks resisted, and they were persecuted. Incidentally, Constantine V was nicknamed "Copronymus" (i.e. dung-named) because as an infant he had relieved himself in the baptismal font.
9. In 775 Constantine V died; his successor died in 780, leaving his 10 year old son, Constantine VI as successor under the guardianship of his mother Empress Irene. Irene, an Arab convert to Christianity, was an iconophile and supportive of monasticism. She called an ecumenical council in Constantinople in 786 that was broken up at sword point by palace guards faithful to the memory of Constantine V. She had them transferred to the front in Asia Minor.
10. Irene then called the 7th Ecumenical Council in Nicea in 787, with no royalty present. The bishops were influenced by the writings of St. John of Damascus [see Readings], and decided that the faith expressed in the 7 Ecumenical Councils and by the Holy Fathers was the foundation of Orthodoxy. Although it was supposed to be the end of iconoclasm, it was not.
11. In 790 Constantine VI, now 25, was declared Emperor. He was cruel, immoral, and became increasingly unpopular. On August 15 of 797 Constantine VI was blinded in the imperial palace, by order of his mother, Irene.

12. In 800 Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne (Charles The Great) as Emperor of the Roman Empire. In 802 Charlemagne offered to marry Irene to unite East and West. This was thwarted by revolution in the East and Irene was deposed. Irene died and iconoclasm revived with zeal among government and military circles. Veneration of icons was blamed for wars, invasions and revolts.
13. In 815 Emperor Leo the Armenian demanded that the Patriarch of Constantinople raise all icons to above human height so they could not be venerated. He refused, was deposed and exiled. On that Palm Sunday thousands of monks processed through Constantinople carrying icons. They were tortured and drowned. Iconoclastic persecution continued under emperors Michael III (820-829) and Theophilus (829-842). After Theophilus' death Empress Theodora stopped persecutions and in 843 Methodius, an iconophile, became Patriarch.
14. In 893, on the first Sunday of Lent, icons were reinstated in Hagia Sophia, and a great feast – the Triumph of Orthodoxy – was held, continuing to today when we process around our churches carrying icons. Despite persecution, monasticism had grown to over 100,000 monks in Byzantium. This prompted a revolt against monasticism by Isaurian emperors who wanted to subjugate the Church to the State. Monasticism prevailed, destroying iconoclasm and the attempt to do away with the independence of the Church.