

CONCERNING THE VENERATION OF ICONS

—by Saint Nektarios of Pentapolis—

The Orthodox Church received the practice of venerating icons from Apostolic tradition; thus, it depicts the image of the Savior, the Mother of God, the Holy Apostles, and all the Saints who pleased God and who God glorified, and it teaches that they are to be venerated.

The veneration of holy icons is not in opposition to the second commandment of the Law that states: **“You shall not make for yourself an idol (carved image) or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Dt. 5:8).**

This commandment forbids the construction and veneration of idols of false gods who are fabricated either in accordance to human imagination or in the likeness of creatures found in the sky, on the earth, or in the sea.

They who deify and worship nature through the use of idols transgress this commandment. They who worship Mammon, they who deify material objects (which bestow to them pleasures and comforts) and who offer all their noble sentiments and their entire heart to matter as a sacrifice also transgress this commandment. They who erect and passionately worship idols within their hearts, they who reject the love of God and instead offer worship to the idols within their hearts similarly transgress this commandment. They who attribute godly qualities to nature; they who deify themselves, who trust in their own might, and who hope in their wealth; they who are egotistical and prideful, all such people likewise transgress this commandment.

The veneration of the icon of the revealed God, of the Mother of God, of the Apostles, and of the Saints is not at all opposed to the spirit of the second commandment. For this commandment expressly forbids the worship of idols and the worship of the creation—not the veneration of icons of the true God and of the Saints whom He glorified.

The Orthodox Church, out of love, respect, gratitude, and devotion to the Savior and Redeemer of the human race depicts His face in order to express and satisfy the sacred feelings that inundate the hearts of the faithful, and in

order to elevate man's mind through the icon to the prototype. The icon of the Savior Jesus Christ is not an idol of a false god, a god that has been created with human hands. It is not a statue that has been deified, it is not a depiction of the creation, or of a particular creature found in the sky, on the earth, or in the sea. Rather, it is an icon of the very God Jehovah Who gave the Law, which states

We do not offer worship to the icon itself, nor do we honor it as God. We offer it an honorary worship, which we direct to the prototype.

An idol distances the person who worships it from the true God. Conversely, an icon of the Savior, of the Mother of God, and of all the Saints, not only does not distance us from the only true God but rather leads us toward Him. Icons remind us of His divine compassion and economy; they remind us of His saving Passion, His Crucifixion, His Resurrection, His Ascension into the heavens, and of His entire Incarnation for our salvation; and they incite us to emulate the virtues of the Saints.

Therefore, since icons do not distance the faithful worshippers from the Lord but actually lead them toward the only true God, and since they are not images of false gods, or images of creatures that lead to the worship of nature, but sacred icons of the revealed God, the Mother of God, and of the Saints who have been glorified by God, they are not in the least opposed to the second commandment, nor can they be deemed as something forbidden for the faithful.

The commandment that forbids the worship of creation and nature seeks to fixate man's entire soul, heart, and mind upon the only true God. We the faithful who depict the icon of the Savior Christ (and of all the Saints who have pleased Him throughout the centuries) do not distance ourselves from Him; on the contrary, we love and worship Him with all the power of our soul, heart, and mind, and we hope only in Him, and we believe in Him alone. Therefore, the veneration of sacred icons is not opposed to the spirit of this commandment—it is actually in complete agreement with it, since it elevates our spirit toward the only true God. Hence, it is permissible to venerate sacred icons.