Apostolic Exhortation
on the
Veneration of Icons

To the Beloved Faithful of the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church and All People of Good Will:

The grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

With joy and reverence, we come together today, on this Sunday of Orthodoxy in the year of Our Lord, Two Thousand and twenty-Five, as one body, the Holy Orthodox Catholic Church, to reflect upon and celebrate the veneration of sacred icons, which hold a central place in our spiritual life. This beautiful practice, rooted in the tradition of the Church, brings us into intimate communion with God, with the saints, and with the heavenly realm.

Icons are not mere decorations; they are portals through which we encounter the divine, reminders of the eternal truths of our faith, and means of grace that lead us to the Heavenly Kingdom. Let us, therefore, turn our hearts and minds to the understanding of the veneration of icons as taught by the Holy Fathers, as defended in the sacred Councils, and as lived in the worshiping life of the Church.

The veneration of icons begins with the fundamental truth of our Holy Orthodox Faith: the Incarnation of the Son of God. In the person of Jesus Christ, God became flesh, taking on human nature to redeem it. This mystery of the Word made flesh transforms the created world, sanctifying it. In His divine and human union, Christ showed us that matter is not inherently evil but can be made holy through the presence of the Divine.

Icons are a natural and necessary expression of this reality. The Incarnation reveals that the divine can be made visible, and the invisible God can be seen through the visible form of Jesus Christ. As St. John of Damascus famously taught, "The invisible God was made visible in the flesh," and it is in this context that we understand the place of icons in the life of the Church. The veneration of icons is, therefore, not only a recognition of the holiness of the individuals depicted, but a profound affirmation of the goodness and sanctity of the material world, transformed by the power of the Incarnation.

It is essential to make a clear distinction between veneration and worship. In the Orthodox Catholic Faith, we worship God alone—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity - Who is the source of all that is holy and good. Worship, in its fullest sense, is reserved for God alone, as He alone is the Creator and Sustainer of all.

Veneration, on the other hand, is the honor we show to the saints, the holy angels, and the images of Christ. The saints are those who, by God's grace, have attained to holiness and are now in communion with God in heaven. Their lives are reflections of the divine light, and through their intercessions, we are drawn closer to the Heavenly Father. When we venerate an icon, we do not

worship the image itself, but honor the holy person depicted in it. The icon serves as a window into the spiritual world, a means of connecting with the divine reality it represents.

St. Theodore the Studite, one of the great defenders of the veneration of icons, reminds us that the icon is not an object of idolatry but a means by which we honor the saint it depicts. He said, "We do not worship the matter itself, but we honor the form and the likeness of the saint." Icons are not the object of worship but are vehicles that bring us into the presence of God and His saints, offering us a glimpse of the heavenly kingdom.

An icon is not simply a picture; it is a window into heaven. As St. Gregory Palamas taught, the icon is a "sacrament" of the visible, an image that allows us to behold the invisible. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, the matter of the icon becomes sanctified and reveals to us the spiritual truths that it depicts.

When we gaze upon an icon, we are invited into the divine mystery. It is not an idle gaze but a prayerful one, a gaze that transcends the material and touches the eternal. Through the icon, we encounter not just the image before us, but the reality it represents—whether it is the face of Christ, the Mother of God, or the communion of saints. The icon leads us into communion with the heavenly realm, making the invisible visible, and the distant near.

This is why the icon is so integral to the life of the Orthodox Catholic Church. It is present in our worship, in our homes, in our prayer, and in our lives. It is through the icon that we are drawn closer to the saints and ultimately to God Himself. In the words of St. John of Damascus, "The icon is a book in which we read the story of salvation."

Icons serve as bridges that span the gap between the human and the divine. They do not stand as static images but as dynamic realities that lead us to Christ. Through the veneration of the icon, we are drawn into the presence of the holy person it depicts, whether it be Christ, the Mother of God, or the saints.

In veneration, we enter into a relationship of prayer and communion. When we honor an icon, we honor the person it represents, asking for their intercession before God, just as we ask the saints who have gone before us to pray for us. In this way, the icon serves not only as a means of remembrance but as a means of communion and prayer. The act of venerating an icon is, in essence, an act of communion with the heavenly saints and with Christ Himself.

In this sacred practice, let us always remember that we worship Christ alone and the Holy Trinity alone. Icons are not the object of worship but instruments by which we are led into deeper communion with God and His saints. They are a testimony to the reality of the Incarnation, the sanctification of the material world, and the communion of the faithful in the Body of Christ.

This understanding of icons was powerfully defended by the Church Fathers, particularly St. Gregory Palamas and St. John of Damascus, who stood boldly and firmly against the iconoclasts—the heretics who sought to destroy the sacred images. The iconoclasts claimed that veneration of icons was a form of idolatry, failing to recognize that the veneration of an icon is a recognition of the person portrayed, not the material representation itself. St. John of Damascus, in his profound theological writings, explained that the icon is a "window" through which we

encounter the reality of the person it represents. He wrote: "I do not venerate the matter, but I venerate the Creator of the matter."

St. Gregory Palamas eloquently defended the veneration of icons, emphasizing that through the sacred images, we are reminded of the divine reality they represent. He reminded us that the matter of the icon is not only not condemned but sanctified by the presence of the divine. He argued that the incarnate Word, who became flesh in Jesus Christ, sanctified the material world, and thus, we can rightly venerate and honor the images of Christ and the saints.

Icons, then, are not mere representations, they are an invitation. They beckon us to look beyond the surface and to encounter the divine through the tangible. Each icon is a bridge to the eternal, a means of grace by which we are drawn closer to the mystery of the Incarnation. In this light, the veneration of icons is not an archaic practice or a mere tradition of the Church, but a living, breathing testament to the ongoing work of salvation.

The saints who are depicted in icons are not far removed from us. Through their images, they remain forever present, interceding for us and guiding us on the path of holiness. They remind us that the heavenly realm is not distant, but it touches our lives in a real and profound way. The icon, as a "window into heaven," invites us to look up, to lift our hearts and minds to the heavenly kingdom, and to know that Christ, our Savior, is with us, now and always.

Let us approach the icons with reverence, knowing that in venerating them, we are drawn into the great mystery of salvation. Let us honor the saints, not only in our prayers but also in the way we live our lives—following their example and striving to become partakers of the divine nature, as they were.

May the grace of the Holy Spirit guide us in our veneration of icons, and may the prayers of the saints continue to intercede for us, leading us closer to Christ, our Savior, to whom be glory, honor, and worship, now and always, and unto the ages of ages.

Amen.