

*Somewhat later, under Leo's son and successor, Constantine V (741-775 C.E.):*

The tyrant [Constantine V] scraped down the venerable church of the all-pure Mother of God at the Blachernae (in Constantinople), whose walls had previously been decorated with pictures of God's coming down to us, and going on to His various miracles as far as His Ascension and the Descent of the Holy Spirit. Having thus suppressed all Christ's mysteries, he converted the church into a storehouse of fruit and an aviary: for he covered it with mosaics (representing) all kinds of birds and beasts, and certain swirls of ivy leaves (enclosing) cranes, crows and peacocks, thus making the church, if I may say so, altogether unadorned. (*Life of Saint Stephen the Younger*) [MANGO 1972: 152]

*It was Constantine V who in 754 convened a council to make the prohibition of images part of the official teaching of the Church. This is part of its Definition of Faith on that occasion.*

We have considered it proper to demonstrate in detail by the present Definition the error of those who make and reverence images. . . . How senseless is the notion that the painter, who from sordid love of gain pursues the unattainable, namely to fashion with his impure hands things that are believed by the heart and confessed by the mouth. This man makes an image and calls it Christ. Now the name "Christ" means both God and man. Hence he has either included, according to his vain fancy, the uncircumscribable Godhead in the circumscription of created flesh, or he has confused that unconfusable union . . . and in so doing has applied two blasphemies to the Godhead, namely through the circumscription and the confusion. So also, he who reveres images is guilty of the same blasphemies.

*The same argument does not pertain to images of the Virgin and the saints, it might be argued. The Council replies:*

How indeed do they dare depict through the gross art of the pagans the all-praised Mother of God who was overshadowed by the plenitude of divinity, through whom an unapproachable light did shine for us, who is higher than the heaven and holier than the cherubim? Or the saints who will reign with Christ, and sit beside Him to judge the world, and share in His glory . . . are they not ashamed to depict them through pagan art? For it is not lawful for Christians who believe in the resurrection to adopt the customs of demon-worshipping Gentiles, and to insult by means of inglorious and dead matter the saints who will be adorned with much glory.

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*The Definition concludes:*

Let no man dare to pursue henceforth this impious and unholy practice. Anyone who presumes from now on to manufacture an icon, or to worship it, or to set it up in a church or a private house, or to hide it, if he is a bishop or a presbyter or deacon, he shall be deposed; if he is a monk or a layman, he shall be anathematized and deemed guilty under imperial law as a foe of God's commands and an enemy of the doctrines of the Fathers. (*Definition of Faith of the Council of 754*) [MANGO 1972: 166–168]

*Among those who rallied to the defense of the veneration of images was John of Damascus, scion of a Christian family that had long served in the Muslim civil service in Damascus. John followed another course, however; he retired to a monastery near Jerusalem, where he wrote tirelessly in defense of Christian orthodoxy. For him that included the veneration of images of Jesus, his mother, and the saints.*

Since some find fault with us for showing reverence and honoring the image of our Savior and that of our Lady, and also of the rest of the saints and servants of Christ, let them hear that from the beginning God made man after His own image. On what other grounds, then, do we show reverence to each other than that we are made after God's image? For as Basil, that most learned expounder of things divine, says, "The honor given to the image passes over to the prototype." Now a prototype is that which is imaged, from which the form is derived. Why was it that Moses' people showed reverence round about the tabernacle which bore an image and type of heavenly things, or rather the whole of creation? God indeed said to Moses, "See that you make all things after the pattern that We showed you on the mountain" (Exod. 33:10). The cherubim also, which overshadowed the seat of mercy, are they not the work of men's hands? What is the renowned Temple at Jerusalem? Is it not made by hands and fashioned by the skill of men?

*The veneration that the Christians pay to their images is different from that given by the pagans to idols: witness the fact that God permitted the sacrifices of the Jews but banned those of the Greeks.*

The divine Scriptures, however, blame those who show reverence to graven images, but also those who sacrifice to demons. The Greeks sacrificed and the Jews also sacrificed; but the Greeks to demons; the Jews, however, to God. And the sacrifice of the Greeks was rejected and condemned, but the sacrifice of the just was acceptable to God. For Noah sacrificed, and God smelled a sweet savor of a good purpose, receiving also the fragrance the right choice and goodwill toward Him. And so the

graven images of the Greeks, since they were the images of demon deities, were rejected and forbidden. But besides this, who can make an imitation of the invisible, incorporeal, uncircumscribed and formless God? Therefore to give form to the Deity is the height of folly and iniquity. And therefore in the Old Testament the use of images was repressed.

*What has changed from the biblical circumstances is the enfleshing of God in the person of Jesus Christ.*

But after God, in the depths of His mercy, became for our salvation in truth man, not as He was seen by Abraham in the semblance of man, or by the Prophets, but He became in truth man, according to substance, and after He lived upon earth and dwelt among men, worked miracles, suffered and was crucified, He rose again and was received up into heaven; since all these things actually took place and were seen by men, they were written for the remembrance and instruction of us who were not present at that time in order that, though we saw not, we may still, hearing and believing, obtain the blessing of the Lord.

*John passes to a new argument, the educational value of images, which serve the same purpose for the illiterate as books do for the educated.*

But since all have not a knowledge of letters or time for reading, it appeared good to the Fathers, that these events, as acts of heroism, should be depicted on images to be a brief memorial of them. Often, doubtless, when we have not the Lord's Passion in mind and see the image of Christ's crucifixion, we remember the Passion and fall down and show reverence not to the material but to that which is imaged; just as we do not show reverence for the material of the Gospel, or to the material of the cross, but that which these typify. For wherein does the cross that typifies the Lord differ from a cross that does not do so? It is the same also in the case of the Mother of God. For the honor which is given her is referred to Him who was incarnate of her. And similarly also the brave acts of holy men stir us to bravery and to emulation and imitation of their valor and to the glory of God.

*Finally, there is an appeal to the unwritten tradition of the Church, with a considerable debt to Basil's On the Holy Spirit.*

The honor rendered the image passes over to the prototype. But this is an unwritten tradition, just as is also the demonstration of reverence toward the East and to the cross and very many similar things. Moreover, that the Apostles handed down much that was unwritten, Paul the Apostle of the Gentiles writes: "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the

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traditions which you have been taught by us, whether by word or by letters" (2 Thess. 2:14). And to the Corinthians he writes, "Now I praise you, brethren, that you remembered me in all things and keep the traditions as I have delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 2:2). (John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 4.16)

*The issue of image worship was apparently settled by the seventh ecumenical council, that held in Nicea in 787 C.E. It rejected the policy of Leo III and the theology of Constantine V. This is the pertinent part of its Confession of Faith.*

To make our confession short, we keep unchanged all the ecclesiastical traditions handed down to us, written or unwritten, and of these one is the making of pictorial representations, agreeable to the history of the preaching of the Gospel, a tradition useful in many respects, but especially in this, that so the incarnation of the Word is shown forth as real and not merely fantastic, for these have mutual indications, and without doubt also have mutual significations.

We, therefore, following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired authority of our holy Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church for, as we all know, the Holy Spirit dwells in her, define with all certitude and accuracy, that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic, as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God, and on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on hangings and in tablets both in houses and by the wayside, to wit, the figure of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, of our spotless lady, the Mother of God, and of all pious people. For by so much the more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much the more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honorable reverence (*proskynesis*), not indeed the true worship (*latreia*) which pertains to the divine nature alone; but to these, as to the figure of the precious and life-giving cross, and to the book of the Gospels and to other holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honor which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who shows reverence to the image shows reverence to the subject represented in it. (Acts of II Nicea, *Confession of Faith*) [MANGO 1972: 166-168]

*This was by no means the end of the controversy over images, neither in the Eastern Church, where it first arose and was to arise again shortly after this council, nor in the Western, where the Roman Church's veneration of images became part of the agenda of the reformers.*