

## VENERATION VS. ADORATION: NICAEA II- DEFENDING RELIGIOUS IMAGES

The last of the early ecumenical councils marked a turning point in Church history. **Nicaea II** in 787 A.D. was the **last council** recognized both by east and west, prior to the painful severing of communion between the Orthodox churches and Rome. Its focus—both then and now— is timely and represents a key moment in which the Holy Spirit guided the Church during turbulent times. The dispute centered upon the use of **images**. Due in large part (though not exclusively) to the rise of Islam, the **role of sacred images** in worship was contentious. Describing it as “ecumenical,” a Byzantine emperor called a council in 754, **banning** the use of images in worship. Since none of the five patriarchs attended (especially the pope!), it was dismissed rather easily as a fraud. Still, Emperor Constantine V **enforced his edict** and persecuted many monks who employed icons in public prayer.

Its fundamental question: “What degree of reverence ought to be afforded to images of Christ (e.g., mosaics, the crucifix) and the saints?” While this was largely an “eastern” dispute, its **tentacles spread** rapidly and if the Church was to remain united, a **coherent answer** needed to be given, one that was theologically sound and compelling. Those opposed to images were called *iconoclasts*, literally “image breakers,” and they based their position on a reading of the Old Testament, citing **Exodus 20:4** (and Deuteronomy 5:8) which reads: “You shall not make for yourself an idol or a likeness of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below.” Furthermore, they spoke to the desire to evangelize the Muslims, for whom images were a stumbling block. The iconoclasts were far from empty handed in their rationale; their concerns were taken seriously.

When Emperor Leo IV died in 780, **Empress Irene** (his widow) became the central protagonist in this controversy. Serving as **regent** for the nine-year-old new Emperor Constantine VI, Irene summoned the Council by imperial edict and secured papal support for it. She appealed to the pope’s capacity as “the real first pontiff who presides in the place and on the seat of the Saint and very venerable Apostle Peter.” (Mansi XII, 985) Though her deceased husband had been an iconoclast, **Irene favored** using images in public worship. [As an aside, when her son reached the age of maturity and should have assumed full leadership, there was a tremendous falling out between the two that did not end well for either of them—I’ll **spare you** the gory details.] Scheduled to begin in 786, the soldiers loyal to the memory of Constantine V interrupted it. After some missteps, on **24 September 787**, 263 bishops embraced the theology contained in a letter of **Pope Hadrian I**, read aloud to the assembly.

Those who **defended** the use of images in worship were far from empty handed in their spirited defense. Nicaea II contains some of the **finest** theological and liturgical **distinctions** in the history of the Church and its teaching is every bit as relevant today. The papal legates were the first to sign the documents, showing the support of the Bishop of Rome. Nicaea II made important distinctions among the **degrees of veneration** offered to Mary, the saints and to images. It decreed that “venerable and holy images, done in color, mosaics and all other appropriate materials, of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ as well as those of Mary Immaculate, the Holy *Theotokos*, the honorable angels and all holy and pious people are to be exposed in the holy churches of God, on sacred vessels and vestments, on the walls and on the floors, in the houses and in the streets.” It reaffirmed the **doctrinal distinction** between veneration and adoration. Misunderstandings with today’s Evangelicals highlight the relevance of this teaching.

It elaborated: “We decree with full precision and care that, like the figure of the honored and life-

giving cross, the revered and holy images, whether painted or made of mosaic or other suitable material, are to be exposed in the holy churches of God, on sacred instruments and vestments, on walls and panels, in houses and by public ways.” It argued that the “more frequently they are seen in representational art, the more are those who see them drawn to remember and long for those who serve as models, and to pay those images the tribute of salutation and respectful veneration.” That is key, for when we **gaze upon** the stations of the cross and statues of saints, etc., we are calling to mind that person or those events, not worshipping them! The Council decreed that venerating images is “not the full adoration...which is properly paid only to the divine nature,” **clarifying** once for all that “he who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in that image.” Boom- mic drop!

On the 12th centenary (1987) of Nicaea II, St. John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Duodecimum Saeculum* noted “that the decisions of an Ecumenical Council were valid only if the Bishop of Rome had offered his collaboration and if the Eastern Patriarchs had given their agreement.” (4 Dec. 1987, para. #3) In this way, “the role of the Church of Rome was recognized as irreplaceable.” We must always guard **against idolatry** and some **excesses** of Christians (consuming paint chips from icons!) were cringeworthy. But to dismiss images is to call into question the reality of the **incarnation**. As Pope Hadrian I beautifully wrote: “By means of a visible face, our spirit will be carried by a spiritual attraction towards the invisible majesty of the divinity through the contemplation of the image where is represented the flesh that the Son of God deigned to take for our salvation.”

- Today’s **Divine Mercy** program begins at 2:00 p.m. In contentious times, this devotion offers solace to our community and our Church.
- Admittedly, architecture is often a matter of personal taste. While famed Spanish architect **Antonio Gaudi** is not everyone’s cup of tea, I find his work as amazing as it is unique. Based off his design that originally was to grace the magnificent **La Sagrada Familia** Basilica of Barcelona, a new Marian chapel is planned in Chile. Though unfinished, La Sagrada was dedicated by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010. Plans call for its completion by the 100th anniversary of his death in 2026. Gaudi’s cause for canonization was opened in 2003.
- The Vatican is feeling the **financial crunch**. In a cost cutting move, salaries were slashed by 10% (for Cardinals) and 3% for priest and religious. **Lay** employee salaries are **not affected**. But it demonstrates both the pandemic’s effect on usual sources of income as well as many people’s concerns about Vatican financial management with respect to Peter’s Pence funds.
- As we achieve greater **normalcy** in the management of the pandemic, I thank you for your **tremendous patience**. Respectful of established guidelines and weighing that against the legitimate needs of the faithful to meet and gather together for worship and fellowship, we will move forward in hope.
- Most people tuning into a baseball game prefer that the league **steer clear** of politics. Other channels cover politics 24/7. Major League Baseball’s decision to **move** the 2021 All-Star game from Atlanta– especially since Braves great **Hank Aaron** is to be remembered– is baffling. State’s voting laws are complex, varied and detailed.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector