

**Pastoral reflection, March 2025, Fr John, Triumph of Orthodoxy** – Our journey through Great Lent to Pascha: For the first Sunday in Lent, the Church offers us the Triumph of Orthodoxy, our commemoration of the veneration of icons in our churches and spiritual life that was confirmed at the Seventh Ecumenical Council. What do icons teach us about our Lenten journey? They help us to see whom we actually seek, Christ and the Trinity, and whom we ourselves seek to become through our Lenten journey: living icons of Christ. Jim Forest wrote that icons bear witness to the recovery of wholeness and the transformation that occurs to those who have acquired the Holy Spirit. This is grounded in loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and body: Icons bear witness to God's healing of everything that tears apart our fellowship with God, with others, and ourselves.

What is the sign of this healing? If you notice, the saints are always painted with a lightness and transparency. Why? Because the aim of repentance is to work with the Trinity to get rid of everything within us that blots out the presence of Christ within us (e.g., the Eucharistic gifts), that is, everything within us that leads to death rather than to life. This is precisely the healing we seek in our Lenten journey so that like the saints we can say, "It is not I who lives, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2:20.)

Christ tells us that we cannot expect to follow him in faith if we are not willing to take up our own crosses. At first glance, it might seem that our icons minimize or even deny the reality of suffering. Crucifixion was brutally painful and intentionally designed to be humiliating. The icons of the Crucifixion do not focus on (or, "realistically dramatize") the brutal circumstances of Christ's suffering. So too with all of the icons of our martyrs. Why? Because the icons portray "God's point of view." God does not minimize or deny human suffering. Rather, even though Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise and subject to suffering and death, God promised that death—permanent separation from Him— would not have the last word. Rather than focus on suffering, our icons of the Crucifixion and all of our icons of martyrs reflect God's promise that nothing can separate us from his love except our own refusal of that love. Our faith is centered in our trust that God, the Trinity, has kept his promise. And this is the Triumph of Orthodoxy – for Christ himself is the truth of God's promise. Our journey of Great Lent is to know and experience more fully God's truth and, like the saints, bear witness to that truth in the world in our entire lives.

Having been created to be living icons of Christ, Lent is that time when we especially focus on working with the Holy Spirit through prayer, worship, and fasting to clean ourselves by getting rid of all the spiritual gunk – our sinfulness— that obscures the likeness of Christ within us and prevents us from bearing God's truth, Christ himself, in our lives. What is central to this task: fulfilling the spiritual virtues of humility, repentance, and forgiveness and compassion— loving others as Christ loves us. I wish you a most blessed journey through Great Lent and Holy Week to the Pascha of our Lord.

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