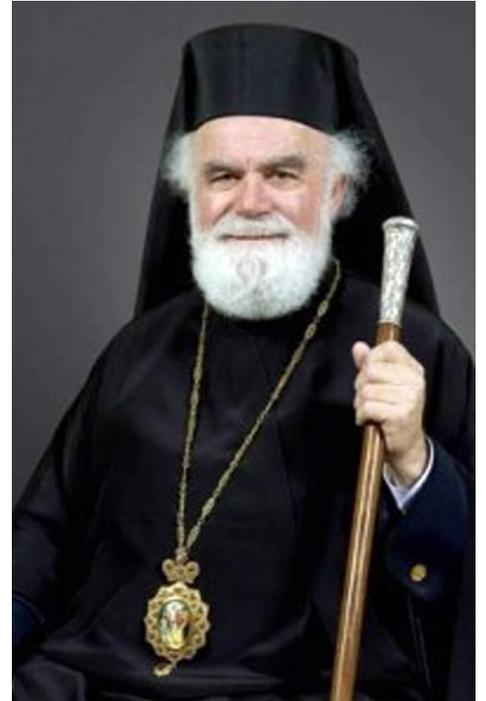


My Beloved Ones,

I greet you with love and joy, praying that God will bless you and your families always, bestowing upon you good health, wisdom, peace and abundant joy! As we come to the end of the first week of Great Lent, we approach the Sunday of Orthodoxy. I would like to draw your attention to the uniqueness of this celebration, for it not a Saint's Feast Day, or even one of the celebrations of our Lord or the Virgin Mary. The Sunday of Orthodoxy commemorates a historical event that took place in the Ninth Century, during a time when the Church was greatly divided because of ideological differences.

These differences, brought forth by the Devil, split the Church into two camps: those who mistakenly believed that icons were a form of pagan idolatry; and those who understood that they were not meant to worship the wood, but instead venerate the person depicted. For instance, we are neither meant to worship the icon, nor the persons of St. Spyridon, St. Nektarios, nor even a modern saint like St. Porphyrios. Instead, we look at the icon and are meant to think about their understanding of the Holy Spirit, and all they did for the Church, and for us.



As you can imagine however, such a disagreement devolved into fighting and arguments—even wars for fought over what became known as the Iconoclastic conflict. Of course, the ruling Emperors were involved, and these Iconoclastic Emperors went so far as to destroy icons, and persecute and punish those who used them.

Thank God then, that in those days, monasticism flourished. Furthermore, unlike in today's society of remote monasteries in mountains and deserts, there were many monasteries in Constantinople, one of which was the monastery of Studios. This monastery proved to be some of the greatest defenders of icons including Theodore the Studite.

There was another Theodora who proved to be a great icon defender. As the wife of the Iconoclast Emperor, she had to keep her icons in fearful secrecy. (One day, as she was praying before a diptych icon of Christ and the Panagia, her maid accidentally entered, and wondered what she was doing. The Empress closed the icon and said that this was her *ninia* or *koukles*. These icons, affectionately called *Ninia tis Theodora*, are kept to this day in the monastery of Vatopedi, where I served as young man.)

When Theodora's husband died, her son Michael was not old enough to take the throne, and so she reigned as regent. It is by her authority that in the year 843 that the veneration of icons was restored. The Church Fathers, understanding this to be a significant event, place this commemoration during the first Sunday of Great Lent. On this day, we even read the portion of minutes of the Council, where we use heavy words like *anathema*, which expelled the iconoclasts and other heretics. Most beautiful however, is our procession of the icons around the church, which commemorates that day of freedom, which brought peace to our church. And indeed, as Orthodox Christians, peace is a virtue we must cultivate in our hearts in order to better relate to our God, and to one another.

**+ALEXIOS**

Metropolitan of Atlanta