



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC LETTER

DUODECIMUM SAECULUM

OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF

JOHN PAUL II

TO THE EPISCOPATE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 1200th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE SECOND COUNCIL OF NICAIA

December 4, 1987

Venerable Brothers, Greetings and the Apostolic Blessing!

1. The Twelfth Centenary of the Second Council of Nicaea (787) was the object of many ecclesial and academic celebrations in which the Holy See itself took part.(1) The event was also commemorated by the publication of an Encyclical from His Holiness the Patriarch of Constantinople and of the Holy Synod,(2) an initiative which underlines the theological importance and the ecumenical significance of the seventh and last Council fully recognized by both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. The doctrine defined by this Council concerning the lawfulness of the veneration of icons also merits special attention, not only for the wealth of its spiritual implications, but also for the demands that it imposes on the whole of sacred art.

The importance given by Nicaea II to the argument of tradition, and more specifically the unwritten tradition, constitutes for us Catholics as well as for our Orthodox brethren an invitation to travel again together the road of the undivided Church, and to re-examine in her light the differences between us that the centuries of separation have accentuated, in order to rediscover that for which Jesus prayed to the Father (cf. John 17, 11; 20-21), full communion in visible unity.

2. In giving an account of the Council of Nicaea II to Pope Hadrian I, the moderator of the Council, Saint Taraise, wrote: "having all taken our places we took Christ as (our) head. In fact, the Holy Gospel was placed on a throne, inviting all those present to judge according to justice." (3) Putting Christ in evidence as the president of the conciliar assembly, which was meeting in his name and under his authority, was an eloquent gesture to affirm that the unity of the Church can only be achieved in obedience to its one Lord.

3. The rulers Irene and Constantine VI, who convoked the Council, had invited my predecessor Hadrian I in his capacity as "the real first pontiff who presides in the place and on the seat of the Saint and very venerable Apostle Peter." (4) Hadrian I was represented by the archpriest of the Roman Church and the head of the Greek monastery of Saint Saba in Rome. To ensure the universal representation of the Church, the presence of the Eastern Patriarchs was also required. (5) Since their territories were already under Muslim domination, the Patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch sent a joint letter to Taraise, and the Patriarch of Jerusalem sent a synodal letter; both of these were read at the Council. (6) It was accepted 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. (7) In this process, the role of the Church of Rome was recognized as irreplaceable. (8) Thus Nicaea II approved the explanation of the deacon John according to which the iconoclast meeting of Hieria of 754 was not legitimate because "neither the Pope of Rome nor the bishops who surround him had collaborated in it, either through their legates or by an encyclical letter, according to the law of the synods," and that the Patriarchs of the East ... and the bishops who are with them had not given their consent to it." (9) Besides, the Fathers of Nicaea declared that they "followed, received and accepted" the letter sent by Hadrian to the emperors, (10) as well as the one addressed to the Patriarch. Both were read in Latin and in their Greek translation, and all were invited to give their individual approval. (11)

II.

4. In the papal legates the Council greeted the "Church of the Holy Apostle Peter" (12) and of the "Apostolic See," (13) according to the Roman formula; (14) and the Patriarch Taraise, writing to my predecessor in the name of the Council, recognized in him the one "who has inherited the chair of the divine Apostle Peter," and who, "vested with the supreme priesthood, presides legitimately, by the will of God, over the religious hierarchy." (15)

One of the decisive moments when the Council pronounced in favor of re-establishing the cult of images seems to have been when they unanimously accepted the proposal of the Roman legates to have a venerable icon brought to the meeting so that Fathers could pay homage of it. (16)

The last Ecumenical Council recognized by both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches is a remarkable example of collaboration between the See of Rome and a conciliar assembly. It was set in the perspective of patristic ecclesiology of communion, founded on tradition, which the

Second Vatican Ecumenical Council has justly highlighted.

5. Nicaea II solemnly affirmed the existence of "written and unwritten ecclesiastical tradition,"(17) as the normative reference for the faith and discipline of the Church. The Fathers affirmed that they wished to "conserve intact all the traditions of the Church which were entrusted (to them), whether written or not. One of these consist precisely in the painting of icons, in conformity to the letter of apostolic preaching."(18) Against the iconoclast current which had also appealed to Scripture and the Tradition of the Fathers, especially in the pseudosynod of Hieria in 754, Nicaea II sanctioned the lawfulness of the veneration of images, confirming "the divinely inspired teachings of the holy Fathers and the tradition of the Catholic Church."(19)

The Fathers of Nicaea II understood "ecclesiastical tradition" as that of the six previous ecumenical Councils and that of the orthodox Fathers whose teaching was commonly accepted in the Church. Thus the Council defined as being of the faith this essential truth according to which the Christian message is "tradition," *paradosis*. As the Church developed in time and space, her understanding of the tradition which she carries has also known stages of development, the study of which constitutes an obligatory itinerary for ecumenical dialogue and all authentic theological reflection.

6. From Saint Paul we learn that, for the first Christian generation, the *paradosis* is the proclamation of the event of Christ and its actual meaning, which effects salvation through the action of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 15, 3-8; 11, 2). The tradition of the Lord's words and actions, without being exhausted (cf. Luke 1, 1; John 20, 30; 21, 25) was gathered in the four Gospels. This founding tradition is "apostolic" tradition (cf. Thess. 2, 14-15; Jude 17; 2 Peter 3, 2). It concerns not only the "deposit" of the "true doctrine" (cf. 2 Tim. 1, 6-12; Tit. 1, 9), but also the norms of behavior and the rules for community life (cf. 1 Thess, 4, 1-7; 1 Cor, 4, 17; 7, 17; 11, 16; 14, 33). The Church reads Scripture in the light of the "rule of faith,"(20) that is, of her living faith that has remained faithful to the teaching of the Apostles. What the Church has always believed and practiced, she justly considers as "apostolic tradition." Saint Augustine says: "An observance kept by the whole Church and always maintained without having been instituted by the Councils, is regarded in all justice as nothing else than a tradition that emanates from the authority of the Apostles."(21)

In fact, the stand taken by the Fathers in the great theological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries of the growing importance of the synodal institution at the regional and universal levels have gradually made of tradition the "tradition of the Fathers," or the "ecclesiastical tradition," conceived as the homogeneous development of apostolic tradition. Thus Saint Basil the Great appeals to the unwritten traditions" which are the "traditions of the Fathers"(22) on which to base his Trinitarian theology, and he stresses the double origin of the Church's doctrine, "from the written teaching as well as from apostolic tradition."(23)

The Council of Nicaea II which aptly quotes Saint Basil on the question of the theology of images(24) also invokes the authority of the great orthodox doctors such as Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Cyril of Alexandria and Saint Gregory Nazianzen. Saint John Damascene also revealed the importance for the faith of "unwritten traditions," that is, not contained in Scripture, when he states: "If somebody were to bring a Gospel other than that which the Catholic Church received from the holy Apostles, the Fathers and the Councils, and which she has kept to our day, do not listen to him."(25)

7. Closer to us, the Second Vatican Council has put in full light the importance of the "tradition that comes from the Apostles." "In fact, Sacred Scripture is the Word of God in that, under the inspiration of the Divine Spirit, it is put in writing; as for Holy Tradition, it carries the Word of God, entrusted by the Lord Christ and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and fully transmitted to their successors."(26) "The Tradition received from the Apostles includes everything that contributes to the holiness of life and increase in faith of the People of God."(27) With Sacred Scripture, "holy Tradition constitutes a sole sacred deposit of the word of God entrusted to the Church." The authentic interpretation of the "word of God, written or transmitted, has been entrusted to the one living magisterium of the Church whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ."(28) It is in equal fidelity to the common treasure of tradition which goes back to the Apostles that the Churches today are trying to examine carefully the reasons for their differences and how to overcome them.

III.

8. The terrible "quarrel over images" that tore the Byzantine Empire apart under the Isaurian emperors Leo III and Constantine V, between 730 and 780, and again under Leo V, from 814 to 843, is explained mainly by the theological debate which was originally at stake.

Without ignoring the danger of an ever possible resurgence of the idolatrous practices of paganism, the Church permitted that the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the martyrs and the saints should be represented in pictorial form or in sculpture to sustain the prayer and devotion of the faithful. It was clear to everyone, according to Saint Basil's formula recalled at Nicaea II, that "the honor rendered to the icon reaches the prototype."(29) In the West, Pope Saint Gregory the Great had insisted on the didactic aspect of the paintings in the churches, which were useful for the illiterate "to read on the walls what they were incapable of reading in books," and stressed that this contemplation should lead to the adoration of the "one and omnipotent Holy Trinity."(30) It is in that context that there developed, particularly in Rome in the eighth century, the cult of images of the saints which gave rise to an admirable artistic production.

In breaking with the authentic tradition of the Church, the iconoclast movement considered the veneration of images as a return to idolatry. Not without contradiction or ambiguity, they forbade representations of Christ and religious images in general but continued to allow profane images, in

particular those of the Emperor with the signs of reverence that were attached to them. The basis of the iconoclast argument was of a Christological nature. How was it possible to depict Christ, who unites in his person, without confusing or separating them, the divine nature and the human Nature? To represent his unfathomable divinity would be impossible; to represent him in his humanity would only be to divide him, to separate the divinity and humanity in him. To choose one or the other of these options would lead to the opposed Christological heresies of Monophysitism and Nestorianism. For, in trying to represent Christ in his divinity, one would necessarily have to absorb his humanity; in showing only a human picture, one would hide the fact that he is also God.

9. The dilemma posed by the iconoclasts involved much more than the question of the possibility of Christian art; it called into question the whole Christian vision of the reality of the Incarnation and therefore the relationships of God and the world, grace and nature, in short, the specific character of the "new covenant" that God made with humanity in Jesus Christ. The defenders of images saw it well: according to the Patriarch of Constantinople, Saint Germain, an illustrious victim of the iconoclast heresy, it is "the divine economy according to the flesh"(31) that was being questioned. For, to see represented the human face of the Son of God, "image of the invisible God," (Col. 1, 15), is to see the Word made flesh (cf. John 1, 14), the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (cf. John 1, 29). Therefore art can represent the form, the effigy of God's human face and lead the one who contemplates it to the ineffable mystery of God made man for our salvation. Thus Pope Hadrian could write: "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. May we thus adore and praise him together while glorifying in spirit this same Redeemer for, as it is written, 'God is Spirit,' and that is why we spiritually adore his divinity."(32)

Hence, Nicaea II solemnly reaffirmed the traditional distinction between "the true adoration (latreia)" which "according to our faith is rendered to the unique divine nature" and "and the prostration of honor (timetike proskynesis) "which is attributed to icons, for "he who prostrates before the icon does so before the person (hypostasis) who is represented therein."(33)

Therefore the iconography of Christ involves the whole faith in the reality of the Incarnation and its inexhaustible meaning for the Church and the world. If the Church practices it, it is because she is convinced that the God revealed in Jesus Christ has truly redeemed and sanctified the flesh and the whole sensible world, that is man with his five senses, to allow him to be ever renewed in the image of his creator (cf. Col. 3, 10).

IV.

10. Nicaea II sanctioned the tradition according to which "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." (34) The doctrine of this Council has nourished the art of the Church in the West as much as in the East, inspiring works of sublime beauty and depth.

In particular, the Greek and Slav Churches, basing themselves on the works of the iconodulous theologians Saints Nicephorous of Constantinople and Theodore Studite, considered the veneration of icons as an integral part of the liturgy, like the celebration of the Word. Just as the reading of material books allows the hearing of the living word of the Lord, so also the showing of the painted icon allows those who contemplate it to accede to the mystery of salvation by the sense of sight, "What on the one hand is represented by ink and paper is represented on the other hand in the icon, thanks to the various colors and other materials." (35)

In the West, the Church of Rome distinguished herself by the unbroken continuity of her action in favor of images, (36) especially at the critical moment between 825 and 843, when both the Byzantine and Frankish Empires were hostile to Nicaea II. At the Council of Trent the Catholic Church reaffirmed the traditional doctrine against a new form of iconoclasm that was then manifesting itself. More recently, Vatican II recalled with sobriety the permanent attitude of the Church regarding images (37) and sacred art in general. (38)

11. Over the past several decades we have observed a resurgence of interest in the theology and spirituality of Oriental icons, a sign of the growing need for a spiritual language of authentically Christian art. In this regard, I can only invite my brothers in the episcopate to "maintain firmly the practice of proposing to the faithful the veneration of sacred images in the churches" (39) and to do everything so that more works of truly ecclesial quality may be produced. The believer of today, like the one yesterday, must be helped in his prayer and spiritual life by seeing works that attempt to express the mystery and never hide it. That is why today, as in the past, faith is the necessary inspiration of Church art.

Art for art's sake, which only refers to the author, without establishing a relationship with the divine world, does not have its place in the Christian concept of the icon. No matter what style is adopted, all sacred art must express the faith and hope of the Church. The tradition of the icon shows that the artist must be conscious of fulfilling a mission of service to the Church.

Authentic Christian art is that which, through sensible perception, gives the intuition that the Lord is present in his Church, that the events of salvation history give meaning and orientation to our life, that the glory that is promised us already transforms our existence. Sacred art must tend to offer us a visual synthesis of all dimensions of our faith. Church art must aim at speaking the language of the Incarnation and, with the elements of matter, express the One who "deigned to dwell in matter and bring about our salvation through matter" according to Saint John Damascene's beautiful expression. (40)

The rediscovery of the Christian icon will also help in raising the awareness of the urgency of reacting against the depersonalizing and at times degrading effects of the many images that condition our lives in advertisements and the media, for it is an image that turns towards us the look of Another invisible one and gives us access to the reality of the eschatological world.

12. Beloved brothers, In recalling the pertinence of the teaching of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, it seems that we are sent back to our primordial task of evangelization. The growing secularization of society shows that that it is becoming largely estranged from spiritual values, from the mystery of our salvation in Jesus Christ, from the reality of the world to come. Our most authentic tradition, which we share with our Orthodox brethren, teaches us that the language of beauty placed at the service of faith is capable of reaching people's hearts and making them know from within the One whom we dare to represent in images, Jesus Christ, Son of God made man, "the same yesterday, today and forever" (Heb. 13, 8).

To all I cordially impart the Apostolic Blessing.

Given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, December 4, 1987, memorial of Saint John Damascene, priest and doctor of the Church, in the tenth year of my pontificate.

IOANNES PAULUS PP.II

NOTES

1. Especially by the letter of October 8, 1987, from the Cardinal Secretary of State to the President of the *International Society for the History of Councils*, on the occasion of the Istanbul Symposium (*L'Osservatore Romano*, October 12-13, 1987).

2. *Epi te 1200e epeteio apo tes suykleseos tes en Nikaia hagian z' oikoumenikes Sunodou* 787-1987), Phanar, September 14, 1987.

3. J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima Collectio* (= Mansi) XIII, 459C.

4. Mansi XII, 985.

5. Cf. Mansi XII, 1007. 1086 and *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (=MGH), *Epistolae V* (*Epistolae Karolini Aevi*, t. 3), p. 29, 30-33.

6. Cf. Mansi XII, 1127-1135 and 1135-1145.

7. So said the priest John, representing the Eastern Patriarchs, Mansi XII, 990A and XIII, 4A.

8. Cf. Mansi XII, 1134.
9. Cf. Mansi XIII, 208-209.
10. Cf. Mansi XII, 1085.
11. Mansi XII, 1085-1111.
12. Mansi XII, 994, 1041, 1114; XIII, 157, 204, 366.
13. Mansi XII, 1086.
14. Cf. Letter of Hadrian I to Charlemagne, in: MGH, *Epistulae III*, (*Epistulae Merowingici et Karolini Aevi*, t. 1), p. 587, 5.
15. Mansi XIII, 463BC.
16. Mansi XIII, 200.
17. Cf. 4th anathema, in: Mansi XIII, 400.
18. Horos, in: Mansi XIII, 377BC.
19. Ibid., 377BC.
20. Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1, 10, 1; 22, 1; in *Sources Chretiennes* (=SCh) 264, p. 154-158; 308-310; Tertullian, *De Praescriptione* 13, 16, in: *Corpus Christianorum*, series Latina (=CChL) I, pp. 197-198; Origen, *Peri Archon* Praef. 4-10, in: SCh 252, pp. 80-89.
21. *De baptismo* IV 24, 31, in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (=CSEL) 51, p. 259.
22. *On the Holy Spirit* VII 16, 21, 32; IX 22, 3; XXIX 71, 6; XXX 79, 15, in: SCh 17bis, pp. 298, 300, 322, 500, 528.
23. Ibid., XXVII 66, 1-3, pp. 478-480.
24. Cf. Horos, in Mansi XIII, 378E.
25. *Discourses on images* III, 3, in: PG 94, 1320-1321; or B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. III (*Contra imaginum calumniatores orationes tres*), "Patristische Studien" 17, Berlin-New York, 1975, III, pp. 72-73.

26. Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 9.
27. Ibid., 8.
28. Ibid., 10.
29. *On the Holy Spirit* XVIII, 45, 19, in: SCh 17bis, p. 496; Nicaea II, Horos, in: Mansi XIII 377E.
30. Letters of Saint Gregory the Great to the Bishop Serenus of Marseille, in: MGH, *Gregorii I Papae registrum Epistularum*, II, 1, lib. IX, 208, p. 195. and II, 2, lib. XI, 10, pp. 270-271; or in: CChL 140A, lib. IX, 209, p. 768 and lib. XI, 10, pp. 874-875.
31. According to Theophane, *Chronographia* ad annum 6221, ed. C. de Boor, I, Leipzig, 1883, p. 404; or PG 108, 821C.
32. Letter of Hadrian I to the Emperors, in: Mansi XII, 1062AB.
33. Horos, in: Mansi XIII, 377E.
34. Ibid., 377D.
35. Theodore Studite, *Antirrheticus*, 1, 10, in: PG 99, 339D.
36. Cf. Letter of Hadrian to Charlemagne, in MGH, *Epistulae* V (Epistulae Karolini Aevi, t. III), pp. 5-57; or PL 98, 1248-1292.
37. Cf. Constitutions *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 111, 1; 125; 128; *Lumen Gentium*, 51; 67; *Gaudium et Spes*, 62, 4-5; and also *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 1255 and 1276.
38. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 122-124.
39. Ibid., 125.
40. *Discourse on images*, I 16, in: PG 94, 1246A; or ed. Kotter, I 16, p. 89.