

Concerning Images

By St. John of Damascus

But since some find fault with us for worshipping and honouring the image of our Saviour and that of our Lady, and those, too, of the rest of the saints and servants of Christ, let them remember that in the beginning God created man after His own image . On what grounds, then, do we shew reverence to each other unless because we are made after God's image? For as Basil, that much-versed expounder of divine things, says, the honour given to the image passes over to the prototype . Now a prototype is that which is imaged, from which the derivative is obtained. Why was it that the Mosaic people honoured on all hands the tabernacle which bore an image and type of heavenly things, or rather of the whole creation? God indeed said to Moses, Look that thou make them after their pattern which was shewed thee in the mount . The Cherubim, too, which o'ershadow the mercy seat, are they not the work of men's hands ? What, further, is the celebrated temple at Jerusalem? Is it not hand-made and fashioned by the skill of men ?

Moreover the divine Scripture blames those who worship graven images, but also those who sacrifice to demons. The Greeks sacrificed and the Jews also sacrificed: but the Greeks to demons and the Jews to God. And the sacrifice of the Greeks was rejected and condemned, but the sacrifice of the just was very acceptable to God. For Noah sacrificed, and God smelled a sweet savour, receiving the fragrance of the right choice and good-will towards Him. And so the graven images of the Greeks, since they were images of deities, were rejected and forbidden.

But besides this who can make an imitation of the invisible, incorporeal, uncircumscribed, formless God? Therefore to give form to the Deity is the height of folly and impiety. And hence it is that in the Old Testament the use of images was not common. But after God in His bowels of pity became in truth man for our salvation, not as He was seen by Abraham in the semblance of a man, nor as He was seen by the prophets, but in being truly man, and after He lived upon the earth and dwelt among men , worked miracles, suffered, was crucified, rose again and was taken back to 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 alive at that time in order that though we saw not, we may still, hearing and believing, obtain the blessing of the Lord. But seeing that not every one has a knowledge of letters nor time for reading, the Fathers gave their sanction to depicting these events on images as being acts of great heroism, in order that they should form a concise memorial of them. Often, doubtless, when we have not the Lord's passion in mind and see the image of Christ's crucifixion, His saving passion is brought back to remembrance, and we fall down and worship not the material but that which is imaged: just as we do not worship the material of which the Gospels are made, nor 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 just the same also in the case of the Mother of the Lord. For the honour which we give to her is referred to Him Who was made of her incarnate. And similarly also the brave acts of holy men stir us up to be brave and to emulate and imitate their valour and to glorify God. For as we said, the honour that is given to the best

of fellow-servants is a proof of good-will towards our common Lady, and the honour rendered to the image passes over to the prototype . But this is an unwritten tradition , just as is also the worshipping towards the East and the worship of the Cross, and very many other similar things.

A certain tale , too, is told , how that when Augarus was king over the city of the Edessenens, he sent a portrait painter to paint a likeness of the Lord, and when the painter could not paint because of the brightness that shone from His countenance, the Lord Himself put a garment over His own divine and life-giving face and impressed on it an image of Himself and sent this to Augarus, to satisfy thus his desire. Moreover that the Apostles handed down much that was unwritten, Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, tells us in these words: Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which ye have been taught of us, whether by word or by epistle . And to the Corinthians he writes, Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the traditions as I have delivered them to you .”