

ST JOHN DAMASCENE

ON

HOLY IMAGES

(πρὸς τοὺς διαβάλλοντας τὰς ἁγίας εἰκόνας)

FOLLOWED BY

THREE SERMONS ON THE ASSUMPTION

(κοίμησις)

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL GREEK

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

A TREATISE on Images will not be out of place in a public, which is confusing the making of images with the making of idols. A great Christian of the eighth century found himself called upon to face an imperial Iconoclast. He would willingly have remained silent, but he would not bury his talent of eloquence. He brought it forth and witnessed to the teaching of the Church in language which present 'exciting scenes' in Anglican churches brings home in the most forcible way. Our English image breakers are in the camp of Leo the Isaurian, who in the eighth century waged war against holy images, on the plausible pretext that they withdrew honour from God. The seventh General Council condemned his assault, and it determined the different kinds of worship, using the Greek terms of *latreia* and *douleia*. The special champion of holy Images is St John Damascene, whose treatise is now

published for the first time in English. Every article in the creed has its special defender. St John Damascene proclaims the Communion of Saints and the honour of God through His chosen and favoured servants. No part of Catholic belief is a vain word, nor can the true children of the Church say with their lips what they do not hold in their hearts. I believe in the Communion of Saints follows upon I believe in God, so that the enemies of the Saints are the enemies of God. This is the doctrine which St John Damascene traces back to the eternal ages before time was, in the divine *ἐκων* of the Father in the Person of the Son. God, the Son, is the Image by essence, and then He becomes a visible image or form in time, clothed in flesh and blood, showing us by His own example that our worship of God is through corporeal things. Again and again the Saint repeats that as we must not make an image of the Invisible God, so neither must we refuse to look upon the Son, His Image, first in eternity, and then Incarnate.

What are the consequences of rejecting divinely appointed images? Hopeless and heart-destroying doubt caused by the undue

exaltation of humanity : in other words, creature, instead of divine, worship. We are so constituted that images we must have : our minds cannot reach God's throne without the help of corporeal things. Agnosticism has said it. We cannot love what we do not know, and is not God unknowable? Halting formularies say it when they point to matter, which God has glorified, as inglorious. And halting formularies lead to halting souls, and to the proclamation of the strange device that religious truth is of no consequence so long as men lead good lives.

The sermons on the Assumption were preached by the Saint in or about A.D. 727. According to Alban Butler, he had special reasons for honouring the Mother of God. By her intercession he regained the use of his strong right hand. It was a practical demonstration of Catholic teaching, We reach God most surely through those who love Him best, and thus the Protestant phrase, which expresses a purely Catholic thought 'straight to God,' is exemplified in the Communion of Saints. St John's language about the *θεοτοκῆ* will astonish those who stigmatise the love of her as a 'Roman corruption.' The crowning

triumph of the Assumption follows justly on the divine maternity. Her body was all pure, because her all holy (*παναγία*) soul made it the resting-place of our Lord. The Mother is so identified with the Son that her life is part of His. The tomb is not for her, and thus the writer of the eighth century bears full testimony to Catholic tradition.

All believers are at one in wishing to reach God ; the question is one of detail. Which is the shortest road? St John Damascene speaks with the Church when he says it is through the glorification of matter in the Person of the Eternal Word. Either give matter its proper place, or take away matter which the Lord Himself has exalted, and we are no longer composite beings, but spirits ill at ease in a material world. Take away the King's army, and you uncrown the King Himself. Forget His Mother, and with her the connecting link between earth and heaven. Then we may be heathens once more, groping after the unknown God, and our latter state will be more appalling than the heathendom of old, before the light had appeared to illumine earth's dark places.

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