

February 2011

A.D.:Anno Domini

A Church history supplement for adult Catholics

This Month's Focus: A.D. 700-800



Diocesan Mission Statement

"We the Catholic faithful of the Diocese of Scranton, in union with our Holy Father, the Pope, are called through baptism to share in the mission which Jesus Christ has entrusted to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Priests, deacons, religious and laity, under the leadership of our Bishop, cooperate to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the teaching of the Church to celebrate the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, for the salvation of all, and to witness by grace to the Kingdom of God so as to promote a culture of life, justice and peace."

Key Events: A.D. 700-800

716: St. Boniface begins his evangelization mission to Germany. He famously cut down a tree the pagan tribes had dedicated to the god Thor. The people were amazed when nothing happened to him. As a result, many people converted to Christianity. Boniface's success among the Germanic tribes was unrivaled (all previous missionary attempts had failed).

726: Emperor Leo III issues an edict condemning the use of icons and ordering their destruction. Pope St. Gregory II, Patriarch St. Germanus I of Constantinople and virtually all bishops and monks immediately condemn the

emperor's edict and refuse to comply. In response Leo launched a persecution which led to the death of countless monks and nuns.

726-730: St. John of Damascus composes a number of treatises outlining orthodox Catholic belief on the use of icons. He carefully shows that it is acceptable to depict Christ in artwork because He Himself chose to come in the flesh and be seen by men and women. Icons, therefore, are a representation of Jesus that are useful in prayer, mediation, and liturgical worship (though they are not worshipped themselves—that would be idolatry). St. John is

considered the last of the fathers of the Church.

732: Charles Martel leads his army to victory at the Battle of Poitiers, which stopped the Muslim advancement across Europe.

769: Charlemagne becomes Emperor.

787: The second council of Nicaea, the seventh ecumenical council, is convened. It reaffirms the legitimate use of icons, distinguishing between venerating (honoring) and adoring (worshipping) an image. Veneration is acceptable, but adoration is a sin against God.

Key Concept: Icon

An icon is a flat, two-dimensional picture of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or one of the saints which is meant to be used as an aid for acts of Christian piety (prayer, meditation, etc.). They started to become especially numerous in the East in the 5th century.

The creation of an icon is an act of prayer. An icon is "written" not painted. A true icon is made

on wood, created with tempera paint, and incorporates gold leaf.

We know that some people were using icons improperly (worshipping them instead of using them as a tool for prayer) by the time Leo III issued his edict condemning their use and ordering their destruction. His motivation, however, was more political than spiritual. He wished to unite

the empire, but knew that Muslims and Jews were less likely to become Christian as long as icons were a staple of Christian piety (Islam and Judaism condemn representations of the divine).

In the face of imperial iconoclasm, St. John of Damascus explained the proper role of icons in the Christian life, basing his reflections on the Incarnation.

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St. John's spiritual director only gave him permission to continue writing hymns after he had a vision of Mary telling him to do so.

"...we fall down and worship not the material but that which is imaged."



Emperor Leo III believed destroying icons would unify an empire made up of Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

Get to Know: St. John of Damascus (A.D. 655-750)

St. John of Damascus was born at a time when Damascus was under Muslim control. His father worked for the caliphs of Damascus, but practiced the Catholic faith which he passed on to his son (ancient biographers mention that John's father used all his wealth to ransom Christian slaves in the Middle East). John himself eventually inherited his father's role as chief financial officer for the caliphs.

In A.D. 716 John left his position with the government to become a monk at the monastery of St. Sabas. Ordained a priest, John made a name for himself as a gifted theologian (studying Aristotle five

centuries before St. Thomas Aquinas) and composer of hymns.

Not long after John entered the monastery, the Iconoclast heresy—erupted in full force. The Iconoclasts denounced the use of images in Christian piety and sought to coerce the destruction of icons. John wrote three treatises against the Iconoclasts which solidified his reputation as a theologian. The emperors opposed him strongly, but were unable to do anything to him since he lived in a Muslim land.

In addition to his writings against the Iconoclasts, John's greatest

work is *On the Orthodox Faith*, which is a summary of the teachings of the Eastern fathers of the Church. In it he outlines Christian belief in such things as the Trinity, the Incarnation of Jesus, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the Assumption and Immaculate Conception of Mary. John's hymns have been enjoyed by Christians for centuries, yet his spiritual director considered them a distraction to his spiritual life. Once he even forced John to pick up refuse on the monastery grounds as penance for them. The majority of scholars consider John the last of the Church Fathers.

In Their Own Words: St. John of Damascus *On the Orthodox Faith*

"But besides this who can make an imitation of the invisible, incorporeal, unincircumscribed, 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 honor 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 valor and to glorify God. For as we said, the honor that is given to the best of fellow-servants is a proof of good-will towards our common Lady, and the honor rendered to the image passes over to the prototype.