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# A CROWN OF BEAUTY IN THE HAND OF THE LORD

## Patriarch Photios on the Restoration of Hagia Sophia

**T**he following excerpts from this marvelous homily by Patriarch Photios of Constantinople came twenty years after the final defeat of iconoclasm by the 847 council called by Empress Theodora and Patriarch Methodius. The widespread desecration of churches took decades to recover from, and nowhere were the defaced and stripped walls more apparent than in Hagia Sophia. In 867, Patriarch Photios spoke at the unveiling of the monumental apse mosaic of the Mother of God, donated by St. Theodora's son, Emperor Michael III and her grandson, Basil I, a wondrous presence that still adorns Christendom's most majestic church.

*The patriarch's homily on the ravages of iconoclasm apply equally to our era's troubled norms of church building. If we understand, as St. Photios did, that our architecture reflects our theology, we also may desire to glory in something more true and lasting.*

*Opposite: Ninth-century apse mosaic of the Virgin and Child. Church of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul).*

PHOTO COURTESY RABE!

...The cause of the celebration whereby today's feast is conspicuously adorned is the following: splendid piety erecting trophies against belief hostile to Christ; impiety lying low, stripped of her very last hopes; and the ungodly ideas of those half-barbarous and bastard clans that had crept into the Roman government (an insult and a disgrace to the emperors) being exposed to everyone as an object of hatred and aversion.

Yea, and as for us, beloved pair of pious Emperors, shining forth from the purple, connected with the dearest names of father and son, and not allowing the name to belie the relationship, but striving to set also, an example of superhuman love whose preoccupation is Orthodoxy rather than pride in the imperial diadem. It is in these things that the deed before our eyes rouses us to take pride.

With such a welcome does their presentation of the Virgin's form cheer us, inviting us to draw not from a bowl of wine, but from a fair spectacle by which the rational part of our soul, being watered through our bodily eyes and given eyesight in its growth toward the divine love of Orthodoxy, puts forth in the way of fruit the most exact vision of truth.

Thus, even in her images does the Virgin's grace delight, comfort and strengthen us! A virgin mother carrying in her pure arms, for the common salvation of our kind, the Creator reclining as an infant – that great and ineffable mystery of the Dispensation! A virgin mother, with a virgin's and a mother's gaze, dividing in indivisible form her temperament between both capacities, yet belittling neither by its incompleteness.

With such exactitude has the art of painting, which is a reflection of inspiration from above, set up a lifelike imitation. For, as it were, she fondly turns her eyes on her begotten Child in the affection of her heart, yet assumes a detached and imperturbable expression at the passionless and wondrous nature of her offspring, and gazes accordingly. You might even think her capable of speaking, if one were to ask her, "How didst thou give birth and remainest a virgin?"

To such an extent have the lips been made flesh by the colours, that they appear merely to be pressed together and stilled as in the mysteries, yet their silence is not at all inert neither is the fairness of her form derived from them, but rather is it the real archetype. Do you see of what beauty the face of the Church was bereft? Of what splendour was it deprived? Over what grace did gloomy dejection prevail?...

For those men, after stripping the Church, Christ's bride, of her own ornaments, and wantonly inflicting bitter wounds on her, wherewith her face was scarred, sought in their insolence to submerge her in deep oblivion, naked as she was, so to speak, and unsightly, and afflicted with those many wounds....

Still bearing on her body the scars of those wounds, in reproof of their Isaurian and godless belief, and wiping them off, and in their stead putting on the splendour of her own glory, she now regains the ancient dignity of her comeliness, and sheds the rude mockery of those who have insulted her, pitying their truly absurd madness. If one called this day the beginning and day of Orthodoxy... one would not be far wrong. For though the time is short since the pride of the iconoclastic heresy has been reduced to ashes, and true religion has spread its light to the ends of the world, fired like a beacon by imperial and divine command, this too is our ornament; for it is the achievement of the same God-loving reign.

And so, as the eye of the universe, this celebrated and sacred church, looked sad with its visual mysteries scraped off, as it were (for it had not yet received the privilege of pictorial restoration), it shed but faint rays from its face to visitors, and in this respect the countenance of Orthodoxy appeared gloomy. Now, casting off this sadness also, and beautifying herself with all her own conspicuous ornaments, and displaying her rich dowry, gladly and joyously she hearkens to the Bridegroom's voice, Who cries out saying, "All fair is my companion, and there is no spot in her. Fair is my companion."

For, having mingled the bloom of colours with religious truth, and by means of both having in holy manner fashioned unto herself a holy beauty, and bearing, so to speak, a complete and perfect image of piety, [this church] is seen not only to be fair in beauty surpassing the sons of men, but elevated to an inexpressible fairness of dignity beyond any comparison. All fair is my companion. She has escaped the blows, has been freed of her wounds, has wiped off all blemish, has cast down her detractors into Hell, has raised up those who sang her praises. And there is no spot in her. She has overcome the blemishes wherewith a foul foreign hand had aimed and spotted her whole body. She has wiped off all those stains, and taking up again her former bridal raiment, she has put it on....

What could be more agreeable than this day? What could be more explicit than this feast to give expression to gladness and joy? This is another shaft being driven today right through the heart of Death, not as the Saviour is engulfed by the tomb of mortality for the common resurrection of our kind,

but as the image of the Mother rises up from the very depths of oblivion, and raises along with herself the likenesses of the saints. Christ came to us in the flesh, and was borne in the arms of His Mother. This is seen and confirmed and proclaimed in pictures, the teaching made manifest by means of personal eyewitness, and impelling the spectators to unhesitating assent. ....

But before our eyes stands motionless the Virgin carrying the Creator in her arms as an infant, depicted in painting as she is in writings and visions, an interceder for our salvation and a teacher of reverence to God, a grace of the eyes and a grace of the mind, carried by which the divine love in us is uplifted to the intelligible beauty of truth. ✦

These edited excerpts are from: "Homily 17: Of the Same Most-Blessed Photios, Patriarch of Constantinople, Homily Delivered from the Ambo of the Great Church, on Holy Saturday, in the Presence of the Christ-Loving Emperors, when the Form of the Theotokos had been Depicted and Uncovered." (Courtesy of: Cyril Mango (trans.), *The Homilies of Photios Patriarch of Constantinople: English Translation, Introduction and Commentary*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958.)

