

## A STUDY OF “THE SAINTS THROUGH THE CENTURIES”

By Richard Thornton

### SAINT JOHN OF DAMASCUS (675-749) – EIGHTH CENTURY

Doctor of the Church and the last of the Greek Fathers. Saint John was born in Damascus, Syria, which was under Islamic domination, and succeeded his Father as an adviser to the Caliph (the spiritual and civil head of the Muslim state).

In 719, Saint John felt compelled to resign his position because of his Christian faith. He entered a monastery near Jerusalem where he became a Monk and soon after was ordained a Priest. In the Monastery he committed and concentrated his energies on prayer, study, and writing. He authored 150 works on theology, religious education, philosophy, and hagiography( the study of the lives of the Saints).

Saint John had numerous outstanding writings. “Fount of Wisdom”, on philosophy and the orthodox faith, “De Fide Orthdora”, a comprehensive presentation of the Greek Fathers on the main Christian doctrines, and “Sacra Pasallela”, a compilation of the scriptural and patristic texts on Christian morals.

His writings, especially his “DeFide Orthdora”, is one of the most notable theological works of history, and has had great influence on the theologians of both East and West. Only a few of his sermons survive, most notably his homilies on the Dormition of Mary, one of the clearest early witness to the Assumption of Mary, declared a dogma of the Church by Pope Pius XII in 1950.

Of all the controversies in the early Church perhaps the most violent was that of the eighth-century “iconoclasts”. They won their name, which means “icon-smashers”, for their destructive raids on Churches throughout the Christian East.

These were the times when Christians raged against each other over whether physical representations of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints constituted idolatry. The iconoclasts were against images and ruthlessly destroyed them wherever they appeared. They believed that praying before images was idolatry and was a violation of the first commandment. Catholic tradition was against them – as Saints Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and many others had defended the practice.

In 726, the Emperor Leo III committed the unthinkable act of outlawing religious images in the Eastern Empire. The Catholic Church of Bishops of the East reacted swiftly, by excommunicating the Emperor and all iconoclasts.

Saint John went on to make a now-classic distinction that may be his greatest contribution to theology and the Church. He explained the difference between “latria”, which is adoration or worship due only to God, and “proskinesis”, which is honor or veneration given to creatures. A Christian offers “latria” in prayers to God and in liturgy; he offers “proskinesis” to his parents, to civil authorities, to the flag, to the saints and angels, and to the images and relics of Christ.

Saint John’s argument prevailed, but not in his life time. He died around 749, and the fury of iconoclasm continued through another half-century, till the reign of the Empress Irene, who restored the practice of venerating icons. The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 confirmed the practice, using John’s explanations.