

# The Confessor's Tongue for August 9, 2009

9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost; St. Herman of Alaska

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

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## August 15: The Dormition of the Theotokos

This feast, celebrated on August 15, is the last Great Feast of the liturgical year, which ends on August 31. The Dormition refers to the "falling asleep" or death of the Theotokos.

According to the ancient tradition of the Church, when it came time for the Theotokos to pass from this life to the Kingdom, and angel appeared to her three days before her death to inform her of this passage. The Virgin made preparations for her death, ascending the Mount of Olives to pray and give thanks to the Lord. Meanwhile, the Holy Apostles were miraculously carried away from where each had been to the house of the Theotokos. There, they prayed with her, and she committed her soul to her Son and God. The Apostles laid her body to rest in a tomb in the valley of Cedron near Gethsemane. By God's providence, Thomas arrived late, on the third day after her death. He was grieved that he had missed Mary's last moments, and so he wanted to see her one last time and venerate her body. The other Apostles took him to the tomb and had it opened. Inside, they discovered her body missing and the empty grave clothes. In this way, they realized she had already partaken of the Resurrection.

The focus of the Dormition Feast is the glorification of the Holy Theotokos in death and her participation the Christ's Resurrection before the day of the general resurrection. This shows her to have reached man's goal of perfect life in union with God. The feast is also eschatological in that it points to the victory over death that every faithful believer will gain.

In commemorating the Theotokos' repose or death, Dormition is akin to the feast of any other saint. It differs, however, in that it affirms her bodily resurrection and her participation in the life of the age to come. Though affirmed in the hymnology and by many of the Fathers, this belief in Mary's "assumption" is not dogma in the Orthodox Church, though by papal decree in 1950, it is dogma for Roman Catholics.

We celebrate the Dormition for 8 days, from August 15 through the Leave-taking August 23. We add the festal troparion and kontakion to our regular prayers, in place of our usual prayers before and after meals, and when setting out to travel.

It is customary to bless herbs and flowers on this feast.

### Dormition Troparion, tone 1

In giving birth, thou didst preserve thy virginity, / in falling asleep thou didst not forsake the world, O Theotokos. / Thou wast translated to life, O thou who art the Mother of Life, / and by thy prayers thou dost deliver our souls from death.

## Dormition, Kontakion, tone 2

Neither the tomb nor death could hold the Theotokos, / who is constant in prayer and our firm hope in her intercessions. / For being the Mother of Life, she was translated to life / by the One who dwelt in her virginal womb.

## Death & the Orthodox Christian

*Fr. Justin Frederick*

A Christian ending to our lives begins well before death: in fact, our whole life is spent (if spent wisely) in preparation for death. This is why we pray at every service that we may have "a Christian ending to our life..."

What does such an end look like, and what should be done for us after death in the Church?

First, we must keep short accounts with God. Regular Confession and Communion are a necessity as life draws to a close. Often, when serious sickness comes or major surgery looms, people are reluctant to call for the priest, afraid that it will send 'the wrong message' to the ill person that he is dying. In fact, he is dying—each of us is—but calling for the priest is not a matter of last resort. Rather it is sensible care and precaution whenever there is serious illness, major surgery, or heightened likelihood of death. We must get over these fears and call the priest! Confession and Communion before major surgery, during serious illness, and even before a trip is simply good, sound, preventative spiritual practice. We make this little extra effort in order to be prepared for an unexpected death. Holy Unction, too, should be requested for serious illness as part of the treatment.

As death draws nigh, the priest should be kept informed. The dying person should make regular Confessions and receive Holy Communion—at least once a month or even more frequently. This should not be viewed as an inconvenience to the priest; this is an important part of his ministry. If you can't come to the church, the church will come to you either in the hospital or at home. Very often the priest is frustrated in his efforts to minister at this critical time by family members or even the person himself because they don't understand the importance of this ministry.

When death appears imminent, the priest should be called. If there is time, He may pray with or over the person and be beside him when death comes. The priest is enjoined 'without fail' to read the office for the moment of the parting of the soul from the body, or at very least, one of the prayers therefrom.

If death comes unexpectedly and unattended by medical personnel, you must call the local police, but the priest, too, should be called immediately. He will provide comfort to you at the scene of death and will pray for the soul of the departed. A first pannikhida

for the departed is to be served at the place of death before the body is removed. He can also give you guidance in your bereaved state as to how to proceed with the multiple decisions that will be thrust upon you.

Decisions about death and burial are best made long before the fact, long before you think you might face death. This is especially important for those whose families are not Orthodox who do not know or may not respect Orthodox funeral customs and for converts who may not know what should be done. When death comes to a loved one, it is a great relief to have already decided where he will be buried, in what casket, using what funeral home. Having an up-to-date will is also important. Having attended to these matters ahead of time will make it easier to grieve and pray with minimal distraction and to focus on other family members and friends rather than being caught up in a rush of decisions made in difficult circumstances.

An Orthodox Christian should insist on burial, not cremation. Although the latter option is attractive because it is cheaper, yet it represents an unacceptable desecration of the body. The body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit and is deified along with the soul. It participates in our salvation. If the process of deification is far progressed in someone at death, his body may well become a holy relic, uncorrupted, shot through with the grace of God, a tangible testimony to the transforming power of God. The task of the Church is make such relics! Thus services may not be served over cremated remains. Even in Japan, where the State requires cremation and the Church submits to the law, the service is served over the body in the Church first. The Church views the burial of the body like the planting of a seed from which new life will spring forth. Cremation was a pagan custom and can reflect a view of the body as being a prison for the soul to escape or even a denial of life after death altogether.

Burial is normally done from the church. The body may be brought to the church for a service and viewing and kept there all night for the family and faithful to keep watch over accompanied by the reading of the Psalter, or this may be done in the home. The deceased is brought into the church, facing the altar. The casket is always open, unless there is a compelling reason to keep it closed such as excessive disfigurement from a violent death.

This practice may seem macabre to some; others may worry about how children may be affected by viewing a body. Yet Orthodox Christians do not fear death, knowing that Christ has trampled down death by death. We weep in pain over our loss, in sorrow over the tragedy of death, which God never intended for us, in repentance over our own sins which keep us from being ready for death. But we look death in the face with confident expectation of the resurrection, and we make the time to face it for the sake of our love for our departed brother, to pray for his soul as it faces the particular judgment. For children as for all

of us, this allows a sense of closure and helps vaccinate them against an unhealthy fear of death. Why, indeed, should we fear a dead body? And why should we flinch to plant a last kiss on a cold, dead brow?

There are many customs and practices and combinations of services for the departed.

The full complement of services, besides the offices at the parting of the soul from the body and the first pannikhida at the home, includes formally receiving the body into the church on the afternoon before the day of burial with the signing of the processional Holy God, incense, and then the brief Litia Service (also called a Trisagion) for the departed. The Vigil Service for the departed is served in the evening. It is a special form of Matins designed for this purpose. Often this service is called the "Burial Service." When the formal service concludes, the Psalter is read over the deceased (in the case of a Priest, the Gospel is read) in the church until morning. The family of the deceased should use this time, in part, to prepare themselves for Confession in the morning and then Communion at the Divine Liturgy for the Departed. Then the rite of Procession accompanies the body out of the church to the cemetery, where the brief burial rite is performed.

This order of burial is not obligatory, may not always be desirable, and sometimes is not possible. This cycle cannot be observed overnight from Saturday to Sunday or on Feast days. Moreover, the Divine Liturgy is not celebrated during the weekdays of Great Lent. Variations include what we did this past week: a Pannikhida (the general memorial service for the departed) in the evening, and the "Burial Service" in the morning before burial. Sometimes the evening Pannikhida is served in conjunction with visitation at a funeral home with the body being brought to the church in the morning for the Burial Service.

It also should be noted that the services vary if they fall during Bright Week, if they are for a young child before the age of 7, for an baptized infant, or for a priest. During his funeral, though the casket is open, the priest's face is covered with a cloth.

Regardless of when the funeral and burial take place, it is customary to have a pannikhida served for the departed on the third, ninth, and fortieth days after death (counting the day of death as the first day) and then annually on the day of repose.

To be buried from the church presumes that one is an active member in the parish (or a parish) who died in communion with the Church. The unbaptized are not buried from the Church, nor are the baptized who have neglected their faith and so are not in communion. "Persons who have not been in communion with the Church, especially if they have deliberately chosen this way of life, [are] not buried through a service in the Church. Their way of life is respected in their death" (Fr. Paul Lazor). Priests do have the obligation to bury anyone needing it, but this is done respectfully but simply with the singing

of "Holy God" only. Likewise, while the Church prays for the whole world and all the departed, she only prays publicly by name for those whom she knew to be united to herself in Holy Baptism and Communion. Thus Pannikhidas are not served for non-Orthodox Christians (who often don't believe in prayers for the dead anyway) or non-Christians, though we are free in our private prayers to pray for them.

To summarize what we have said: Make arrangements in advance. Keep short accounts with God by having regular Confession and Communion. Be quick to call a priest when someone is seriously ill or may be dying so the person has a chance to make what will possibly be his last Confession and Communion while still lucid and conscious. Have the prayers for the departing of the soul from the body read as well as the first pannikhida before the body is taken. Do not cremate. Have a service in Church the evening before burial and either Liturgy or the so-called 'Burial Service' the morning of burial. Have a Pannikhida served on the third, ninth, and fortieth days after death and on the anniversary thereafter. And remember the departed in both your private prayers and your commemoration book, which is submitted to the priest before a Liturgy for him to commemorate the names therein at the Proskomide.

One thing we as a parish must work towards is acquiring a 5-10 acres somewhere in the county where we may have our own cemetery. We need people with this vision to help find and purchase a piece of property that we can use for this purpose.

### **Elder Epiphanius (+1989) of Greece on Tithing**

We must give charity to receive charity. To give above our tithe (10% of our income) for those who suffer, so that our righteousness (our virtue) can exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees who gave one-tenth, and so that we can enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:20).

Your money, children, place in the Bank of Heaven.

"Give a tenth of our income to the poor," the Elder often repeated to a certain wealthy person.

The man would sometimes justify himself and, at other times, gave some crumbs. Once, he disappeared for quite a while. One afternoon, the Elder saw him again.

"Where were you? I lost you for so long!"

"Don't ask! I am ashamed to tell you."

"Speak freely!"

"Here. Every so often, you were telling me about the tithe... And I also said: All right, aren't there other Spiritual Fathers? Truly. So I decided to change Spiritual Fathers. All that time when by. My wife got sick. The doctors scared us. We went abroad and squandered many times more than I would have given for the tithe. Now I realize this. God taught me in action!"

"So be careful," said the Elder. "Henceforth keep this command of God."

A certain man gave alms every month. Once, however, he did not give and he told the Elder:

"Father, I did not give charity this month, because the plumbing in my house broke and I spent it there."

"With this deed of yours, it's as if you stole from the poor," answered the Elder. "We should not spend the tithe for our personal needs. The tithe belongs to God for the poor."

Once, conversing with a spiritual child of his, he urged him not to neglect to give his tithe to the poor. The man retorted that he was building a new house, had many expenses, and he had calculated even the smallest expenditure. And although the Elder stressed to him that God would provide for him from elsewhere, he was not persuaded. After quite a while, he visited the Elder and announced with affliction that all the wood of his parquet floor had become wormy in a very short period of time. And the Elder replied charmingly:

"That's what whoever does not give charity suffers! You give one tenth, and God saves you from a hundred-fold expense."

### **St. Herman of Alaska (+1837)**

Monk Herman came from a merchant class family in the town of Serpukhov in the Moscow diocese. From his very young years he had shown a great zeal for living a pious way of life, and became a monk sixteen years after his birth. At first he entered the Holy Trinity Sergius Hermitage, located on a Finnish bay on the Peterchoff road about twelve miles from Petersburg.

At St. Sergius Hermitage, incidentally, a carbuncle appeared on the right side of Father Herman's neck, under his beard. The pain was horrible. The swelling grew rapidly and disfigured his whole face; it was very difficult for him to swallow and there was an intolerable smell. In such a dangerous condition, expecting to die, Father Herman did not turn to an earthly physician, but, locking himself in his cell, with warm prayer and tears he turned to the Icon of the Heavenly Queen, begging her intercession for his healing. He prayed the whole night, then with a wet towel he wiped the face of the Immaculate Theotokos, and tied the towel around the swelling on his neck. Continuing with tearful prayer until, in exhaustion, he fell asleep on the floor and dreamed that he was healed by the Most Holy Virgin. In the morning he awakened and stood up and, to his great amazement, he found himself completely healed. The swelling had dispersed without breaking, leaving only a small lump as a little reminder of the miracle. The doctors who were told about this healing did not believe, insisting that the carbuncle must have been cut out, or had broken by itself. But the words of the physicians were the words of the weakness and inexperience of man

in the face of the grace of God overcoming the order of nature. Such incidents humble man's mind under the mighty hand of God's mercy!

Father Herman lived at St. Sergius Hermitage for some five or six years. Then he moved to Valaam monastery, which is situated on the archipelago of the majestic islands amid the waters of Ladoga Lake. With his whole soul he came to love Valaam monastery, its unforgettable Abbot, the great Elder Nazarius, and all its brethren. He called his deserted Spruce Island, the place of his dwelling in America, "New Valaam." And, as is apparent, he was always in contact with his spiritual homeland. As late as 1823, thirty years into his stay in America, he wrote letters to Father Nazarius' successor, Abbot Innocent.

In the second half of the last century the Russinas discovered the Aleutian islands, a chain of islands that stretch from the eastern border of Kamchatka to the western shore of Northern America. It was found there was a holy need for the evangelical enlightenment of the native inhabitants there. Metropolitan Gabriel, with the blessings of the Synod, entrusted Elder Nazarius with the holy task of selecting capable men from the Valaam brethren. Ten men were chosen, and one of their number was Father Herman. In 1794 the chosen men left Valaam Monastery for their appointed destination. The evangelizers quickly spread the evangelical light with holy zeal among these newest sons of Russia. Several thousands of people accepted Christianity. A school was founded to educate the newly baptized children. A church was built where the missionaries lived. But by the unfathomable ways of God the general success of the mission was not long standing. After five years of greatly profitable activity the head of the mission and his whole entourage were drowned. (The head of the mission was Archimandrite Ioasaph, who had been raised to the rank of a bishop). Before him, the zealous Hieromonk Juvenaly had been granted the crown of martyrdom. The others, one after another, left the mission. Finally, only Father Herman remained. Grace was given to him to labor longer than all his brothers in enlightening the Aleuts.

We mentioned before that the place where Father Herman lived in America was Spruce Island, called by him "New Valaam." This island is separated from Kodiak Island by a strait that is two miles wide. Spruce Island in itself is not large and is all covered with forest. A small river runs from the middle of the island and empties into the sea. Father Herman chose this picturesque island by himself as a place for his seclusion. He dug a cave in the ground there with his hands and spent his first whole summer in it. By winter's onset the Russian American Company built a cell for him near his cave. He lived in this cell until his death, and asked that the cave be his grave on repose. Not far from the cell there was constructed a wooden chapel and a little wooden house for his school and for visitors. This was the place of great ascetic labors by Father Herman over the next four decades of his life. In the garden, he himself dug the

beds, planted potatoes, cabbage and other vegetables. He had a basket, to carry sea cabbage (kelp) from the shore in order to fertilize the earth; it was so big that people said it would be hard for one man to lift it by himself. Father Herman, however, to the amazement of all, would carry it loaded with kelp, without any outside help, for long distances. One winter's night his disciple, Gerasim, accidentally saw him in the woods and walking barefoot with such a huge log that it would hardly be possible for four men to carry. Thus labored the Elder. All he did to provide food, clothing, and books for his orphans, was filled with immeasurable toil.

His clothing was the same winter and summer. His bed was a medium-sized bench, covered with deerskins whose fur had worn out with time. For his pillow he had two bricks which were hidden under the deerskins and were thus not noticeable to visitors. The Elder ate very little. When visiting as a guest, he would barely taste the food set before him and would go without dinner. In his cell, a very small portion of fish and some vegetables made up his meals.

Perhaps the best known saying of St. Herman's was given to his fellow Russians. In a conversation with a group of sailors, he quizzed them on their love of God. When they all glibly claimed to love God, he responded: 'And I, a sinner, have tried to love God for more than forty years, and I cannot say that I perfectly love Him,' But he later added, 'at least let us make a vow to ourselves, that from this day, from this hour, from this very moment, we shall strive above all else to love God and to fulfill His Holy Will!'

His letters reflect a man of patience, simplicity and love. "Our sins do not in the least hinder our Christianity... Sin, to one who loves God, is nothing other than an arrow from the enemy in battle. "The vain desires of this world separate us from our homeland; love of them and habit clothe our soul as if in a hideous garment. We who travel on the journey of this life and call on God to help us, ought to divest ourselves of this garment and clothe ourselves in new desires, in a new love of the age to come, and thereby receive knowledge of how near or how far we are from our heavenly homeland.

O venerable Father Herman, pray to God for us!

#### Upcoming Events 2009

1-14 August, Dormition Fast  
12 August, Summer Feast of St. Maximus, Liturgy  
9:30 a.m.  
15 August, Feast of the Holy Dormition  
16-19 August, Men's Retreat at Monastery  
23 August, 3 p.m. Women's Tea at Louise Newcomb's  
7 September, Labor Day Picnic  
4 October, Annual Parish Meeting

**GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!**