

# The Confessor's Tongue for February 9, A. D. 2014

Sunday of the Publican & Pharisee; Leavetaking of the Meeting in the Temple

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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## February 9: Martyr Nicephorus

He was born in Antioch, Syria about the middle of the Third Century. St. Nicephorus up to the time of his sufferings had a great friendship with the priest Sapphirus; but they quarreled about something or other and began to hate each other. Nicephorus soon repented and made an effort to reconcile with Sapphirus; but Sapphirus did not want to hear about reconciliation. Then a severe persecution of Christians began. Sapphirus was among the first to be seized for torture for confessing Christ and after undergoing torture was led out for execution. When Sapphirus was led to the place of execution, Nicephorus asked him to be reconciled with him before he died. But Sapphirus in pride, holding on to his anger, rejected this request. Thus it came about that when he knelt before the executioner with his head on the block, his pride and hardheartedness deprived him of God's grace, and he renounced Christ to save his earthly life, he who had been steadfast under torture until this last moment. Then Nicephorus confessed himself a Christian and asked to be beheaded instead of the apostate Sapphirus.

## Preparation for Great Lent

We have now entered the preparatory period for Great Lent. Zacchaeus Sunday (last week) each year marks the last Sunday counted from Pentecost before the Lenten Triodion is opened. Zacchaeus teaches us to desire Christ and what effort we must make if we are to expect to meet Christ.

The three Sundays prior to Forgiveness Sunday are preparatory to Great Lent. *The Triodion*, the liturgical book that contains the services pertaining to the fast, is opened for the first time for the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee, the first of the three preparatory Sundays, which begins the "Week of Proclamation" in the Church. The next is the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, and the last is the Sunday of the Last Judgment, also known as Meatfare, as it is the last day that meat is permitted to be eaten until Pascha.

Great Lent itself begins three weeks after the opening of the Triodion, halfway through the Vespers (at the Prokeimenon) of Forgiveness Sunday (Cheesefare, March 2). At that point, the vestments of the church and clergy are changed to the dark lenten colors, and the lenten melodies to the litanies are sung. Fasting begins in full force (at midnight).

The Church does not ask us to change immediately from our normal routine to the intense ascetical effort of the Great Fast; rather, She helps us make the transition gradually. The week after the Publican and Pharisee is a fast-free week. The week after the Prodigal Son has the usual Wednesday and Friday fasts, and the week after Meatfare (Last

Judgment) is observed with a special fast from meat only. Moreover, the services for Wednesday and Friday of that week are Lenten: no Divine Liturgy is permitted, the lenten tones are used, and lenten forms observed—a warm-up for what is to come.

To get the most spiritual benefit out of the Great Fast, we need to give some thoughtful prayer to the matter of how we shall keep the Fast, particularly in the following areas: private prayer, corporate prayer and worship at the Church services, almsgiving, fasting, and spiritual reading. We should also consider how we may cut back on busy schedules to make time to cultivate repentance and offer ourselves wholeheartedly to God without being hindered by needless distractions.

We cannot expect to keep the Fast with great benefit in most cases if we only attend the Sunday Liturgy. Plenty of opportunity is given to pray with the Church in the spirit of the Fast's "bright sadness." All the faithful are encouraged to take advantage of the weekday services.

Plan now: everyone if at all possible must attend Forgiveness Vespers (March 2); everyone should attend at least one or two of the four evenings of the Great Canon of St. Andrew (a different part each night) the first week of the Fast (March 3-6) to get the Fast started in the right spirit. Everyone is urged to attend Saturday evening Vigils (or at least the Matins portion, 5:45-7:00 p.m.) where the hymns expounding the meaning of day are sung. Everyone is encouraged to attend at least a couple weekday Presanctified Liturgies during the course of the Fast (if not weekly!) as well as a weekday Matins or Vespers now and again. It goes without saying that we should set aside as much of Holy Week (April 13-19) as possible to attend in the incomparably beautiful services before Pascha.

A Christian should be reading the Scriptures regularly as a matter of course, but the Fast is a time to increase this. As a minimum, we should read a chapter from the Gospels and two chapters from the rest of the New Testament each day (followed at Optina Monastery), which will take us through the whole New Testament in ninety days. A more rigorous program to take you through the whole NT during the forty days of Lent is available on the candle stand. In addition, choose a spiritual (Orthodox) book that will nourish your soul, aid you in the spiritual struggle, and move you to seek God during the Fast. Your priest will recommend one to you if you do not know what to read.

Consider how and when you will pray: what prayers? what psalms (perhaps you will add something from the Psalter to your prayers each day)? what time of day? with how many prostrations? how many ropes of the Jesus Prayer?

Consider your almsgiving. The logic of the Fast is to eat less and more cheaply so that what you save may be given to the poor. How may we approximate this? How shall we give, and where?

It is time for us now to consider the specifics of how we shall keep the Fast. The Church gives us the next three weeks to plan and prepare.

Remember the goal of all this is to know Christ, to see Him as He is, and to be filled with a greater measure of His Spirit, to become God's children in character and not only in name.

Please consult your priest or father-confessor if you have any questions about the Fast.

An old man said, "He who loses gold or silver can find more to replace it, but he who loses time cannot find more. *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

### **How To Become A Temple of the Holy Spirit** *Message of Elder Zacharias Pre-Lenten Retreat 2008*

*What follows is a summary of Elder Zacharias's talk generated from Fr. Justin's notes. His talk will be available in audio and video from North Texas Orthodox Missions (NTOM).*

Christ became man for us, so we men must become God-like by grace for Him. We are called to be a "temple of the Holy Spirit", but we are also warned not to receive the grace of God in vain.

Many means of grace are given to us in the Christian life. We shall examine three essential ones: the Divine Liturgy, the Name of Christ, and God's Word.

The Word of God is powerful. Christ's words are the Father's words: they cannot be separated one from another. God's words transmit the energy of the Trinity to us when we accept them. As we accept them and act upon them (keep Christ's commandments), we are gradually re-generated. To accept Christ's words is to partake of the energy of the Kingdom of God. "The Word of God is the incorruptible seed of grace sown in the heart of man to regenerate man." Just as we eat physical food three times a day, so we must hasten to eat of the spiritual table laid out for us in God's Word.

The Name of Christ is another powerful means of grace by which we become the temple of the Holy Spirit. As St. Paul said, "There is no other name in heaven or in earth by which we must be saved." The name of Jesus has great power and grace, for this name was given to Him by revelation: the Archangel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary what to call him, and said "He shall be called 'Jesus', for He shall save His people from their sins." It is also written that "whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." In the Jesus Prayer, we confess the Trinity in the first half "Lord Jesus Christ son of God" and in the second half we confess our need "have mercy on me the sinner." In response to Solomon's prayer, God

hallowed the temple he had built by putting His name on it. In the New Testament, all is made new. There is no more temple made with human hands, but the one who calls on the name of the Lord enters into His living presence. In doing this, we gradually accumulate divine energy and God's temple is built in us. One must persevere in calling on the name of the Lord.

Third, the Divine Liturgy is given to us as a most powerful means of grace. In it we receive the very body and blood of Christ, our true food and drink. Jesus said that one cannot have life without eating this food; thus man is spiritually dead without it. He who eats of it will live no longer for himself but for the Lord, and to be pleasing to God, he will live according to the commandments.

At Baptism, we made an agreement with God to be dead unto sin and alive unto God. At the Divine Liturgy, we make an exchange of our little life for God's limitless life. How is this? The priest offers bread and wine to God on behalf of the faithful, indeed, in behalf of the whole world. He and those present fill those gifts with their faith, humility, repentance, and desire for God. The priest elevates the gifts, offering them to God with the words "Thine own of Thine own, we offer unto Thee on behalf of all and for all." All things are God's. The wheat and grapes from which the bread and wine were made are gifts from God. [Even we ourselves—our very life and existence—are a gift God has given us.] We take of what God has given us and offer it back to God, including ourselves as living sacrifices. We do this because Christ commanded it: "This do in remembrance of Me."

Thus man offers his little life to God in the Liturgy, and God reciprocates by giving His limitless life back to man, filling the gifts offered with His Holy Spirit. Just before Communion, the priest proclaims "the holy things are for the holy!" Through the priest, Christ speaks to us these words as if to say, "You have filled the gifts with yourself in offering them to Me, now I will fill them with My holy self for you."

As we come to understand this dynamic process, we shall be more attentive at the Divine Liturgy and come better prepared to make this exchange of our life for God's life as complete as possible. When we properly participate in the Divine Liturgy, the words we joyously sing at the end, "We have seen the true Light, we have received the heavenly Spirit, we have found the true faith, worshipping the undivided Trinity, who hath saved us" will resound in our ears and hearts.

#### **Upcoming Events 2014**

17-20 February Diocese of the South Pastoral Conference at St. Maximus

2 March Forgiveness Sunday, Vespers, 6:00 p.m.

Everyone should plan on attending this service.

20 April Great and Holy Pascha

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