

The Confessor's Tongue for March 2, A. D. 2014

Forgiveness Sunday; Exile of Adam and Eve from the Paradise of Bliss

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.

A Homily on Forgiveness

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann

As once more we are about to enter the Great Lent, I would like to remind us—myself first of all, and all of you my fathers, brothers, and sisters—of the verse that we just sang, one of the stichera, and that verse says: "Let us begin Lent, the Fast, with joy."

Only yesterday we were commemorating Adam crying, lamenting at the gates of Paradise, and now every second line of the Triodion and the liturgical books of Great Lent will speak of repentance, acknowledging what dark and helpless lives we live, in which we sometimes are immersed. And yet, no one will prove to me that the general tonality of Great Lent is not that of a tremendous joy! Not what we call "joy" in this world – not just something entertaining, interesting, or amusing – but the deepest definition of joy, that joy of which Christ says: "no one will take away from you" (Jn. 16:22). Why joy? What is that joy?

So many people under various influences have come to think of Lent as a kind of self-inflicted inconvenience. Very often in Lent we hear these conversations: "What do you give up for Lent?" – it goes from candy to, I don't know what. There is the idea that if we suffer enough, if we feel the hunger enough, if we try by all kinds of strong or light ascetical tools, mainly to "suffer" and be "tortured," so to speak, it would help us to "pay" for our absolution. But this is not our Orthodox faith. Lent is not a punishment. Lent is not a kind of painful medicine that helps only inasmuch as it is painful.

LENT IS A GIFT! Lent is a gift from God to us, a gift which is admirable, marvelous, one that we desire. Now a gift of what? I would say that it is a gift of the essential – that which is essential and yet which suffers most in our life because we are living lives of confusion and fragmentation, lives which constantly conceal from us the eternal, the glorious, the divine meaning of life and take away from us that which should "push" and, thus, correct and fill our life with joy. And this essential is thanksgiving: the acceptance from God of that wonderful life, as St. Peter says, "...created out of nothing...", created exclusively by the love of God, for there is no other reason for us to exist; loved by Him even before we were born, we were taken into His marvelous light. Now we live and we forget. When was the last time I thought about it? But I do not forget so many little things and affairs that transform my whole life into empty noise, into a kind of traveling without knowing where.

Lent returns to me, gives back to me, this essential – the essential layer of life. Essential because it is coming from God; essential because it is revealing God. The essential time, because time again

is a great, great area of sin. Because time is the time of what? Of priorities. And how often our priorities are not at all as they should be. Yet in Lent, waiting, listening, singing ... you will see, little by little that time – broken, deviated, taking us to death and nowhere else, without any meaning. You will see that time again becomes expectation, becomes something precious. You wouldn't take one minute of it away from its purpose of pleasing God, of accepting from Him His life and returning that life to Him together with our gratitude, our wisdom, our joy, our fulfillment.

After this essential time comes the essential relationship that we have with everything in the world, a relationship which is expressed so well in our liturgical texts by the word reverence. So often, everything becomes for us an object of "utilizing," something which is "for grabs," something which "belongs" to me and to which I have a "right." Everything should be as Communion in my hands. This is the reverence of which I speak. It is the discovery that God, as Pasternak once said, was "...a great God of details," and that nothing in this world is outside of that divine reverence. God is reverent, but we so often are not.

So, we have the essential time, the essential relationship with matter filled with reverence, and last, but not least, the rediscovery of the essential link among ourselves: the rediscovery that we belong to each other, the rediscovery, that no one has entered my life or your life without the will of God. And with that rediscovery, there is everywhere an appeal, an offering to do something for God: to help, to comfort, to transform, to take with you, with each one of you, that brother and sister of Christ. This is that essential relationship.

Essential time, essential matter, essential thought: all that is so different from what the world offers us. In the world everything is accidental. If you don't know how to "kill" time, our society is absolutely ingenious in helping you to do that. We kill time, we kill reverence, we transform communications, relationships, words, divine words into jokes and blasphemies, and sometimes just pure nonsense. There is this thirst and hunger for nothing, but external success.

Don't we understand, don't we understand, brothers and sisters what power is given to us in the form of Lent. Lenten Spring! Lenten beginning! Lenten resurrection! And all this is given to us free. Come, listen to that prayer. Make it yours! Don't even try to think on your own; just join, just enter and rejoice! And that joy will start killing those old and painful and boring sins... And with that you will have that great joy which the angels heard, which the disciples experienced when they returned to Jerusalem after Christ's Ascension. It is that joy

which was left with them that we nobly adopted. It is first of all the joy of knowing, the joy of having something in me which, whether I want it or not, will start transforming life in me and around me.

This last essential is the essential return to each other: this is where we begin tonight. This is what we are doing right now. For if we would think of the real sins we have committed, we would say that one of the most important is exactly the style and tonality which we maintain with each other: our complaining and criticizing. I don't think that there are cases of great and destructive hatred or assassination, or something similar. It is just that we exist as if we are completely out of each other's life, out of each other's interests, out of each other's love. Without having repaired this relationship, there is no possibility of entering into Lent. Sin – whether we call it "original" sin or "primordial" sin – has broken the unity of life in this world, it has broken time, and time has become that fragmented current which takes us into old age and death. It has broken our social relations, it has broken families. Everything is diabolos – divided and destroyed. But Christ has come into the world and said: "... and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself" (Jn. 12:32).

It is impossible to go to Christ without taking with me the essential. It is not the abandonment of everything as we go to Christ; it is finding in Him the power of that resurrection: of unity, of love, of trust, of joy, of all that which, even if it occupies some place in our life, is at the same time so minuscule. It is tragic to think that from churches, from seminaries, what comes to heaven are complaints ... being tired, always something not going right... You know, sitting in my office from time to time, I am admiring people for inventing new "tragedies" every half hour.

But we are Christ's and Christ is God's. And if we had – because we know – just a little bit of that which would bring us together, we would replace all my little offenses with even a little amount of that joy. That is the forgiveness we want and ask God to give us. Because if there is a strict commandment in the Gospel, it is that commandment: "if you forgive ... your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive ... neither will your Father forgive ..." (Mt. 6:14-15). So, of course it is a necessity. But the NOW of that, I repeat it once more, is to be horrified by the fragmentation of our own existence, by the pettiness in our relationships, by the destruction of words, and by the abandoning of this reverence.

Now we have to forgive each other whether or not we have any explicit sins or crimes against each other. That reconciliation is another epiphany of the Church as the Kingdom of God. We are saved because we are in the Body of Christ. We are saved because we accept from Christ the world and the essential order. And finally, we accept Christ when we accept each other. Everything else is a lie and hypocrisy.

So, fathers, brothers, sisters: let us forgive one another. Let us not think about why. There is enough to think about. Let us do it. Right now, in a kind of deep breath, say: "Lord, help us to forgive. Lord, renew all these relationships." What a chance is given here for love to triumph! – for unity to reflect the Divine unity, and for everything essential to return as life itself. What a chance! Is the answer we give today yes or no? Are we going to that forgiveness? Are we gladly accepting it? Or is it something which we do just because it is on the calendar – today, you follow, forgiveness; tomorrow, let's do...? No! this is the crucial moment. This is the beginning of Lent. This is our spring "repair" because reconciliation is the powerful renewal of the ruin.

So, please, for the sake of Christ: let us forgive each other. The first thing I am asking all of you, my spiritual family, is to forgive me. Imagine how many temptations of laziness, of avoiding too much, and so on and so forth. What a constant defense of my own interests, health, or this or that... I know that I don't even have an ounce of this self-giving, self-sacrifice which is truly a true repentance, the true renewal of love.

Please forgive me and pray for me, so that what I am preaching I could first of all somehow, be it only a little bit, integrate and incarnate in my life.

Father Alexander Schmemmann (Delivered on Forgiveness Sunday, March 20, 1983, at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary Chapel, before the Rite of Forgiveness. Transcribed from tape recording and edited. Published with the approval of Juliana Schmemmann in the St. Vladimir's Theological Foundation Newsletter.)

To Encourage Fasting

St. Gregory Palamas

The asceticism of the Fast promises us much benefit, but our adversary works to deprive us of the good in various ways. First, he seeks to discourage us with thoughts of how difficult it is and to stop us from starting. Second, after we've begun, he induces us to think there is no reward for those who labor, that we might give up the effort. Third, he deflects us from doing good for God's sake and praise to doing good for the sake of the praise of men, which spoils our good work. Lastly, if we succeed in the Fast, avoiding these other pitfalls, he tempts us through prideful thoughts in which we take credit for our success, which also spoils our work.

The invisible serpent, the originator of evil, is inventive, versatile, and extremely skillful in contriving wickedness. He has means to hinder our good purposes and actions as soon as they begin. But if he fails to prevent them initially, he sets up other devices by which he can render them useless once they are underway. If he is unable to make them worthless when they are half way to completion, he knows other tricks and ways to invalidate them even once they are finished, and makes them a source not of reward but of harm to all but the most careful.

First of all, he points out how laborious and difficult virtue is to accomplish. In this way, he fills us with laziness and despair, as though we were attempting difficult and impossible things and were

therefore incapable of putting our intentions into action. Then he engenders disbelief in the rewards which God has promised to those who struggle.

But we, brethren, should rise above this trap by our soul's courage, eagerness, and faith. We should bear in mind the fact that just as the earth cannot yield worthwhile fruit without labour, so the soul cannot acquire anything which pleases God or leads to salvation without spiritual struggles. But while it is possible to find earth which is unsuitable for cultivation, every human soul is naturally suited to virtue. As we are all unavoidably condemned, however, by the judgment given against our forefather, to live by labour and toil, let us turn necessity into honour and willingly offer to God what is ours not by our own will. Let us give up transitory things in exchange for things that endure, and receive what is beneficial in exchange for what is harmful, transforming short-lived toil into a means to gain eternal ease. If we labour here for the sake of virtue, we shall certainly attain to the rest promised in the age to come. He who promised is trustworthy and is at hand to help all who readily take on the struggle for virtue. If He who can do all things gives us His help, is anything impossible to achieve?

When we remember this and apply ourselves to virtuous actions, the evil one, knowing that nothing can be good unless it is done in a good way, strives to persuade us not to accomplish any good work with the object of pleasing God or of winning His approval, but to look for other people's approval. By this means he can deprive us of our reward from God and of all spiritual and heavenly honours. Let us frustrate these efforts of his by considering the great recompense stored up for those who live as God pleases, and how insignificant other people's approval is. Not only is it not worth mentioning in comparison with the great and holy glory to come, but it is also insufficient reason to neglect and waste our flesh.

Even after suffering this defeat, the originator of evil undermined us with pride, the last and worst abyss. He suggests conceited thoughts and persuades us to boast as though we had managed to be virtuous through our own ability and intelligence. But let us remember what the Truth says, "Without Me, ye can do nothing," and fend off all the evil one's schemes. Let us do good works in a good way, with appropriate humility. If someone has a jar of precious perfume, whether he pours it out onto dung, or pours dung into the jar, he ruins and destroys the perfume. Be aware that, in the same way, whether someone rejects and discards virtue by his inaction, or mixes evil with his virtuous actions, he equally ruins and destroys virtue.

I am speaking to your charity on this subject in this present season of fasting, so that we may observe it together for our own sake unalloyed with anything evil. Fasting was of no benefit to that Pharisee in the Gospel, even though he always fasted two days a week, because he had adulterated it with pride and

condemnation of his neighbour. Not that this means fasting is unprofitable. Moses, Elijah, and the Lord Himself showed how beneficial it is for those who fast properly in a way pleasing to God.

Moses fasted for many days. Awaken your minds, I entreat you, and lift them up at this opportune time, in company with Moses when he went up the mountain towards God. In this way may you start off afresh on your ascent and be lifted up together with Christ, who did not merely go up a mountain but up to heaven, taking us with Him. Moses fasted for forty days on the mountain and, according to the Scriptures, he saw God, not darkly, but face to face. He talked to Him as someone would speak to his friend. He learnt from God and taught everyone about Him....After fasting on the mountain, Moses received tablets, the work of God, and later received again, on a second set of tablets, the Law written by the finger of God. He instructed the whole nation in the Law and by his work he hinted at and showed a glimpse of Christ's future ministry. As Moses appeared as the liberator and savior of Abraham's race, so later Christ did the same for the whole human race.

Elijah, when he, too, had fasted forty days, saw the Lord on the mountain, not in fire, as the elders of Israel had earlier, but passing beyond the fiery vision by his God-pleasing fast, he saw the Lord in the sound of a light passing breeze. He had approached more closely to our Lord's words, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth".... From this vision while fasting Elijah also received power to anoint a prophet in his stead and bestow upon him a double portion of the grace he possessed and to mount up above the earth in mid-air. This pointed clearly towards Christ's Ascension from earth to heaven, which was to happen later.

While Christ Himself was fasting in the wilderness, He defeated our tempter by force and took away his power against mankind. Having at last put down his tyranny, he set our nature free and handed him over for sport to all those willing to live according to His Gospel. In this way He fulfilled the words of the prophets and by His works inscribed grace and truth upon the symbolic events which took place in ancient times.

You see the benefits of fasting, and how it has made us worthy of so many great gifts? Even from its opposite, unlimited eating and self-indulgence, it is possible to see the advantage of fasting. For the last two weeks our city was given over to gluttony and lack of self-restraint, and straight away we had troubles, shouting, fights, disturbances, shameless songs, and obscene laughter. But this week, when the fast came, it made everything more honourable. It took us away from frivolity's expensive cares, stopped us toiling for the sake of our useless stomachs, set us instead to works of repentance, and persuaded us not to labour for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to eternal life....

A Short Homily on Forgiveness

St. Mark the Ascetic

He who seeks forgiveness of his sins loves humility, but if he condemns another he seals his own wickedness. So, when you first become involved in something evil, do not say, 'It will not overpower me.' For to the extent that you are involved, you have already been overpowered by it. Again, if you do not want to suffer evil, do not inflict it, since the suffering of it inevitably follows its infliction. 'For whatsoever a man soweth, that also shall he reap (Galatians 6:7).

It is a great virtue to accept patiently whatever comes, and, as the Lord enjoins, to love a neighbor who hates you. Indeed, it is better to pray devoutly for your neighbor than to rebuke him every time he sins.' Now, the sign of sincere love is to forgive wrongs done to us. It was with such love that the Lord loved the world. Remember that we cannot with all our heart forgive someone who does us wrong unless we possess real knowledge. For this knowledge shows us that we deserve all we experience.

When harmed, insulted, or persecuted by someone, do not think of the present but wait for the future, and you will find he has brought you much good, not only in this life but also in the life to come. So, accept present afflictions for the sake of future blessings; then you will never weaken in your struggle. But again, pray that temptation may not come to you; but when it comes, accept it as your due and not undeserved. For he who suffers wrong and does not demand any reparation from the man who wronged him, trust in Christ to make good the loss; and he is rewarded a hundredfold in this world and inherits eternal life. As for the sinner, he cannot escape retribution except through repentance appropriate to his offense.

'Crazy John', the Early Years

Crazy John lived in a tiny, humble apartment that he had inherited from his mother, one of the twenty apartments that comprised the condominium building. He worked at the neighborhood bakery and began work at daybreak. From that bakery where he worked, he would fill two bags of bread and bread rolls every day and would rush to distribute them to the elderly men, women, and students in his neighborhood. "Here you are—I thought I might give Apostoly the baker, so that you will commemorate him in your prayers," he would say. The truth was that Crazy John would use up a large part of his wages to provide bread to the poor of his neighborhood. He would tell Mr. Apostoly that he was only helping out some sick friends and that he was being paid for his trouble.

But how did he know who the poor in his neighborhood were? As a little boy, he had made it a habit to indiscriminately ring the doorbells, not only in his own condominium, but also in neighboring apartment buildings. He would introduce himself to

everyone and would ask them if they needed anything that he could help them with: "And how did you wake up this morning? Has any problem come up that I can be of assistance to you? How are your children?"

At first, some snubbed him. Others, obviously annoyed by his unexpected presence, slammed their door in his face, refusing to speak to him. But there were others who actually waited for Crazy John to come so that they could hear a kind word from him. Eventually, he came to know all of them; he came to know their peculiarities, but also the basic elements of their characters.

In the evenings, Crazy John would retire to his humble home and pray. He liked to recite the books of Psalms, claiming to someone who asked him why that "They were intended to drive away the little critters (demons) from the neighborhood." He used to read it so loudly, that a newly-arrived tenant who didn't know him that well called the police, complaining about him disturbing the peace! Also, on a daily basis, the fool would cense all the apartments, beginning from the top floor and working down. He would even go out to the backyards and cense there also. And when someone was sick, he would visit him and—after censing him and making the sign of the cross over him—he would read haltingly, with his limited education, the words of the Epistle of James. "Pray for one another, that you may be healed," he would tell him. He would urge him to go to Confession and receive Communion "to get well by the greatest of doctors, our Christ."

Quite often, after coming home from the bakery, he would grab a broom and sweep the entire apartment building "to keep it clean," as he used to say.

He enjoyed intervening with a smile between those who quarreled publicly in cafes about political parties (in older times, there used to be heated arguments over political parties). "Ah, you guys," he used to tell them, "why do you count on and pin your hopes on tin cans and cymbals? Instead of quarrelling, you should be praying to God to send us a David for king. He could solve problems because his knees had bled from prolonged supplications and prayers. But what do your wise guys do? Their supplications are only for commission, and they become one with corruption. They take you for idiots, and they mock you."

"Get lost, Crazy John," they would reply, and, to avoid him altogether, they would send him off on an errand. But he would always say, "Don't pin your hopes on the rulers. Have your hopes only in God."

from Crazy John: A Saintly Fool for Christ vol. 1, Athens, 2010.

Upcoming Events 2014

2 March Forgiveness Sunday, Vespers, 6:00 p.m. Everyone should plan on attending this service.
20 April Great and Holy Pascha, Picnic

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!