

The Confessor's Tongue for March 30, A. D. 2014

Fourth Sunday of Lent: St. John of the Ladder

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.

The Kursk Root Icon

The foundation for the iconographic type, or composition, of the Icon of the Mother of God "of the Sign" are the words of Prophet Isaiah: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

In the 13th century, the Kursk region, as well as the rest of Russia at the time, was subjected to terrible decimation by the Tatar invasion. The city of Kursk was completely destroyed and grew into a wild, overgrown forest, populated by wild animals. The residents of the city of Ryl'sk, 90 versts (60 miles), who had somehow been spared from a Tatar invasion, would go there to hunt. And it happened that in 1295, on the feast day of the Nativity of the Mother of God, a small troupe of hunters from Ryl'sk arrived at the Tuskor River, 27 versts (18 miles) from Kursk, to hunt. One of them, a pious and honorable man, seeking prey in the woods, found a small icon lying face down at the root of a tree. He had barely lifted the icon from the ground to inspect it, when a strong wellspring of pure water burst forth from the very spot where the icon lay. The icon turned out to be of the Mother of God "of the Sign" type. The hunter realized that this was no ordinary icon. He summoned his fellow hunters, and together they cut down timber and erected a small chapel where they placed the newly-found icon. The people of Ryl'sk, learning of the icon, began to visit it for veneration, and many miracles occurred as a result.

Prince Vasily Shemyak of Ryl'sk, having heard about this Icon, ordered that it be brought to his city, which was done with great ceremony: the entire city emerged to greet the miraculous Icon as it approached amidst a procession of the cross. Prince Vasily himself, however, declined to participate in the ceremony—and was struck blind. But after his earnest repentance and prayer before the Icon, he was granted sight again. In gratitude for this miracle, he built a church dedicated to the Nativity of the Mother of God in Ryl'sk, where the icon was then placed, and where every year, on that feast day, the Icon is celebrated.

But the icon did not stay in Ryl'sk for long. Three times it miraculously disappeared from Ryl'sk, and it would be found again and again at the site where the hunter found it. The people of Ryl'sk then understood that it was the will of the Mother of God that Her icon should remain at the site of its discovery, and they left it there permanently.

In 1383, the Kursk region was once again subjected to looting by the Tatars. A band of them, coming across the chapel, took the attending priest prisoner and decided to burn the chapel down. But no matter what they tried, the chapel would not ignite. The superstitious Tatars then seized the priest

and accused him of sorcery. The priest refuted their charge and pointed to the Icon inside the chapel. The livid Tatars seized the holy image, hacked it into two and threw the pieces away, then burned down the chapel. Fr Bogoliub was then taken away as a slave.

But the priest stood fast to his Orthodox Christian faith even as a slave: despite the pressure the applied on him to adopt their religion, he remained unbowed, and lay all his hopes on God and His Most-Pure Mother. This hope was not futile: once, as he was tending to a flock of sheep, he sang a prayer to the Mother of God. A group of emissaries of the Muscovite prince, passing by on their way to see the khan, heard the singing and, learning that this slave was a Russian priest, they ransomed him out of slavery. Fr Bogoliub then returned to his homeland and settled once more where the chapel had once stood. Soon thereafter he found the two pieces of the miracle-working Icon, and as he placed them together, they immediately, miraculously grew together.

In 1597, by order of Tsar Feodor Ioannovich, the Icon was brought to Moscow and surrounded by depictions of the Lord Sabaoth and the Old Testament prophets who had foretold the selection, labors and service of the Most-Blessed Virgin Mary. In 1603, Pseudo-Dimitry I took the Icon from Kursk to his camp at Putivl', then to Moscow, where it was kept in the royal palace.

In 1615, by a special request by the people of Kursk, Tsar Mikhail Feodorovich commanded that the miracle-working Icon be returned from Moscow to Kursk and placed in the Kursk Cathedral. Tsarina Irina Feodorovna adorned the Icon with a bejeweled riza, after which it was returned to its chapel. That same year, with the help of the Tsar, a church dedicated to the Nativity of the Most-Holy Mother of God was erected on the site of the chapel, and a monastery founded there, while a second church was built over the original spring dedicated to the Life-Bearing Wellspring. The new monastery became known as the Root Hermitage in honor of the appearance of the Icon at the root of a tree. Since 1618, the Icon spent most of each year in Kursk, and would be brought to the Root Hermitage for a brief time.

In 1676, the Icon was taken to the Don River to bless the Don Cossacks. In 1684, Tsars John and Peter Alexeevich sent a copy of the holy Icon to Kursk with the order that this copy accompany Orthodox warriors into battle. In 1687, the Icon was sent to the Great Army. In 1689, copies of the Icon were given to the armies heading for the Crimean Campaign. In 1812, a copy of the holy Icon was sent to General Kutuzov's army. There have been many copies of the Kursk-Root Icon, some of which have also been glorified for working miracles.

Since 1806, by Royal decree, the miracle-working Icon was to be kept at Kursk-Root Hermitage from the Friday of the 9th week after Pascha until September 12. During that period every year, the Icon would be brought from Kursk to the Kursk-Root Hermitage and then back with a solemn procession of the cross which traveled the entire way, totaling 27 versts (18 miles).

Several horrifying events are connected with the miracle-working Icon in pre-Revolutionary Russia, for instance, the explosion of a hellish bomb inside Kursk Cathedral, the aim of which was to destroy the holy image. The church was destroyed, yet the Icon remained whole. This terrible episode was explained years later in Frankfurt, Germany, where the Icon was brought. The priest accompanying the Icon, we learn from the book by Archbishop Seraphim (Ivanov, +1987) of Chicago and Detroit, *Odigitrija ruskogo zarubezhija* [The Hodigitria of the Russian Diaspora], was taken aside by an old man, who said to him: "I was a cohort of [the terrorist] Ufimtsev in the attempt to blow up the Icon. I was a young man, and didn't believe in God. I wanted to test whether God exists: if He does, He wouldn't allow such a great holy icon to be destroyed. Afterwards, I began to fervently believe in God, and to this day I bitterly repent in my terrible act." The old man prostrated himself before the Icon and left the church.

Now a few words about Archbishop Feofan of Kursk and Oboyan'sk, who brought the Icon abroad, and thanks to whom this holy image was saved from desecration by the Bolsheviks.

Vladyka Feofan (Gavrilov) was born on December 26, 1872, in the Orlov Diocese to a clerical family. In 1893, he graduated from Orel Seminary, and in 1897, ordained to the priesthood. In 1902, he enrolled in Kiev Theological Academy, where he was tonsured a monk. Finishing the Academy in 1906 with a Master's degree, Fr Feofan was appointed Deputy Inspector of Bezhetsk Theology School. In 1908, he was appointed Inspector of Volhyn' Seminary, and in 1910, became the Rector of Vitebsk Seminary. In December 1913, he was consecrated to the episcopacy in the Cathedral of the Mother of God of the Sign in Kursk as Bishop of Ryl'sk, Vicar Bishop of Kursk and Oboyan'. The new bishop loved to serve in Kazan Cathedral in Kursk, the cornerstone of which had been blessed by St Ioasaf of Belgorod in 1752. Servant of God Isidor, the father of St Seraphim of Sarov, helped build this church. On the 9th Friday after Pascha of 1767, in the Mashnin courtyard (the family of the future saint), which was located near the church, the young Prokhor was miraculously cured by the Kursk Icon. It is interesting to note that in the lower church of the Kazan Cathedral, dedicated to St Sergius of Radonezh, there is a lifetime portrait of St Seraphim sent by Hegumen Nifont of Sarov Hermitage to his brother Alexei, with news of the repose of the miracle-worker.

When the Archbishop of Kursk retired in 1917, Bishop Feofan was unanimously chosen by the clergy and flock to be their ruling bishop. As Bishop of Kursk, Vladyka Feofan and his spiritual children endured the theft of the Kursk Icon from the Cathedral in 1918. It happened as follows:

On Wednesday of the 6th week of Great Lent, pre-sanctified Liturgy was celebrated by Hieromonk Germogen (Zolenko, who died as an archimandrite in the Holy Land in 1958). Returning to the church for great compline, he saw Hieromonk Pitirim at the Cathedral entrance along with the monastery's *ogarochnik*, a novice responsible for the collection of candle stubs, who had discovered the theft of the miracle-working Icon, the Holy Lamb (the Gifts prepared for pre-sanctified Liturgy) and the gold tabernacle. The alarmed monastic brethren immediately reported this to Vladyka Feofan, who sent a telegram to the head of the Moscow criminal investigation department. The local atheists were not questioned, and the blame was laid at the feet of the monks themselves, including Vladyka Feofan, who were all placed under house arrest. So the monks of Znamensky Monastery, having lost their most prized holy icon, were faced to greet Pascha with some sorrow. But the Resurrected Christ brought consolation to the brethren, for on the Thursday after St Thomas Sunday, a homeless man found the Icon, but without the valuable riza, near Theodosius' well. This well, tradition had it, was dug out by the Hegumen of the Kievo-Pechersky Lavra himself, St Theodosius, on whose very feast day the Icon was found. It is therefore noteworthy that the miracle-worker of the Kiev monastery seems to have participated in interceding for his fellow countrymen. Learning of the finding of the Icon, Bishop Feofan ordered that all the bells be rung, and set out on a procession of the cross with all the monks to the site where the miraculous Icon was found.

Soon after Kursk was seized by the Volunteer (White) Army in September 1919, they found two gold icon-holders from the Kursk Icon in the offices of the Cheka (Bolshevik secret police). The rejoicing, grateful people of Kursk began a constant stream of prayers before the Icon, knowing that it would soon leave their city. Vladyka Feofan, fearing the desecration of the Icon by the advancing godless forces, left Kursk on November 18, 1919, carrying in his hands the miracle-working Icon. In 1920, the Icon was finally brought out of its homeland by Vladyka Feofan.

In 1925, by decision of the Synod of Bishops Abroad, and with the consent of the keeper of the Icon, Archbishop Feofan, the Hodigitria of the Diaspora was taken to the Russian Holy Trinity Church in Belgrade. After the Germans occupied Yugoslavia, Archbishop Feofan took the Icon to Hopovo Monastery. Soon afterwards, Archbishop Feofan was left Croatia for Belgrade, where he lived in great need until the end of his life, in 1943.

It is noteworthy that it was before this very icon that the great St John (Maximovich) of Shanghai and San Francisco the Miracle-worker, died in 1966.

Prayer of the Fifth Kathisma

O God righteous and praised, O God great and mighty, O God Who transcendest time, Hearken unto the entreaty of a sinful man at this hour! Hearken unto me, O Thou Who hast promised to hearken unto them that call upon Thee in truth, and do not loathe me whose lips are unclean and who am held fast in sin, O Thou hope of all the ends of the earth, and of them that wander afar off. Lay hold of shield and buckler, and come to my help; draw forth Thy sword, and stop the way against them that persecute me; fend off the unclean spirits from the face of my mindless folly, and may there be divorced from my thought the spirit of hatred and remembrance of evil, the spirit of jealousy and falsehood, the spirit of fear and despondency, the spirit of pride and of every evil; and may every burning and movement of my flesh brought about by the activity of the Devil be extinguished, and may my soul and my body and spirit be enlightened by the light of the divine knowledge of Thee; that through the multitude of Thy compassions I may attain unto the unity of the faith, unto perfect humanity, unto the measure of my years, and with the angels and all Thy saints I shall glorify Thy most honorable and majestic Name, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; now, and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

St. John of the Ladder

Venerable John appeared on Mount Sinai when he was 16 years old. His contemporary biographers did not even know the place of his birth. Some consider him to be the son of Ven. Xenophon (see Jan. 26). The young ascetic began the asceticism of his salvation, when he completely devoted himself to obedience, which for him was really "a grave for the will", "suspension of any judgment, from every temptation of judgment". When he was 20 years old, he was tonsured a monk. After the death of Elder Martyrius, under whose direction he practiced asceticism for 19 years, St. John departed to the desert of Thola and began to carry out a life in strict fasting, prayer, solitude and silence.

He shunned all kinds of special ascetic effort. He ate everything that was irreproachably permitted according to the monastic vow, but ate the smallest quantity; he only slept enough so that by vigilance he would not disturb the property of mind; he prayed for a long time before going to sleep. He devoted much time reading salutary books.

But if in his external life Ven. John acted cautiously in everything, avoiding extreme measures dangerous for the soul, then in his internal spiritual life he, "burning with divine love", did not want to know limits. He was especially deeply penetrated by

the feeling of repentance and shed abundant tears, being distressed about his sins.

Generally all his life was continual prayer and unexampled love for God. After 40 years of asceticism he became the hegumen of the Mount Sinai monastery, but within four years he again left it for solitude and peacefully departed to the Lord about the year 563, at the age of 80 years.

Greatest of the ascetics in piety, Ven. John not only reached height of spiritual perfection, but he also left for others a direction for their spiritual life, having written the salutary composition, the *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, where he presented 30 steps of spiritual ascent from perfection to perfection. In the "Ladder" is described the struggle of the pious ascetic against such vices and passions (sins of gluttony, fornication, love of money, pride, vanity, anger and so forth), which equally apply both to the monk and the layman. Together with these the "Ladder" directs the formation of virtues obligatory for all Christians (for ex. meekness, chastity, patience, humility, prayer and so forth). Representing a way of gradual ascent to moral perfection, the "Ladder" is a faithful and reliable direction for a spiritual life of zealotry in piety and the salvation of soul. S. V. Bulgakov, *Handbook for Church Servers*, 2nd ed., 1274 pp. (Khar'kov, 1900), pp 0125b-0127. Translated by Archpriest Eugene D. Tarris © March 3, 2008. All rights reserved.

From St. John of the Ladder

Let us who are weak and passionate have the courage to offer our infirmity and natural weakness to Christ with unhesitating faith, and confess it to Him; and we shall be certain to obtain His help, even beyond our worth, if only we continually plunge to the depth of humility. *Step 1.8*

Exile means that we leave forever everything in our own country that prevents us from reaching the goal of piety. Exile means modest manners, wisdom which remains unknown, prudence not recognized as such by most, a hidden life, an invisible intention, unseen meditation, desire for humiliation, longing for hardship, constant determination to love God, abundance of love, renunciation of vainglory, depth of silence. *Step 3.1*

Exile is separation from everything in order to keep the mind inseparable from God. *Step 3.3*

In hastening to solitude and exile, do not wait for world-loving souls, because the thief comes unexpectedly. In trying to save the careless and indolent along with themselves, many perish with them, because in course of time the soul's fire goes out. As soon as the flame is burning within you, run; for you do not know when it will go out and leave you in darkness. Not all of us are required to save others. The divine Apostle says: 'Everyone of us shall give account of himself to God.' And again he says: 'Thou therefore that teachest another, dost thou not teach thyself?' This is like saying: I do not know whether we must all teach others; but we must most certainly teach ourselves. *Step 3.4*

Run from places of sin as from the plague. For when fruit is not present, we have no frequent desire to eat it. *Step 3.9*

He whose will and desire in conversation is to establish his own opinion, even though what he says is true, should recognize that he is sick with the devil's disease [pride]. And if he behaves like this only in conversation with his equals, then perhaps the rebuke of his superiors may heal him. But if he acts this way even with those who are greater and wiser than he, then his malady is humanly incurable. *Step 4.48*

He who is not submissive in speech, clearly will not be so in act either. For he who is unfaithful in little is unfaithful in much, and is intractable. He labors in vain, and he will get nothing from holy obedience but his own doom. *Step 4.49*

Do not be deceived, son and obedient servant of the Lord, by the spirit of conceit, so that you confess your own sins to your master as if they were another person's. You cannot escape shame except by shame. It is often the habit of demons to persuade us either not to confess, or to do so as if we were confessing another person's sins, or to lay the blame for our sin on others. Lay bare, lay bare your wound to the physician and, without being ashamed, say: "It is my wound, Father, it is my plague, caused by my own negligence, and not by anything else. No one is to blame for this, no man, no spirit, no body, nothing but my own carelessness. *Step 4.62*

Greater than baptism itself is the fountain of tears after baptism, even though it is somewhat audacious to say so. For baptism is the washing away of evils that were in us before, but sins committed after baptism are washed away by tears. As baptism is received in infancy, we have all defiled it, but we cleanse it anew with tears. And if God in His love for mankind had not given us tears, those being saved would be few indeed and hard to find. *Step 7.6*

If nothing goes so well with humility as mourning, certainly nothing is so opposed to it as laughter. *St 7.8*

The beginning of freedom from anger is silence of the lips when the heart is agitated; the middle is silence of thoughts when there is a mere disturbance of soul; and the end is an imperturbable calm under the breath of unclean winds. *Step 8.4*

If the Holy Spirit is peace of soul, as He is said to be and as He is in reality, and if anger is disturbance of heart, as it actually is and as it is said to be, then nothing so prevents His presence in us as anger. *8.14*

Do not regard the feelings of a person who speaks to you about his neighbor disparagingly, but rather say to him: "Stop, brother! I fall into graver sins every day, so how can I criticize him?" In this way you will achieve two things: you will heal yourself and your neighbor with one plaster. This is one of the shortest ways to forgiveness of sins; I mean, not to judge. 'Judge not, and ye shall not be judged.' *Step 10.7*

Do not condemn, even if you see with your eyes, for they are often deceived. *Step 10.17*

He who has become aware of his sins has controlled his tongue, but a talkative person has not yet come to know himself as he should. *Step 11.4*

He who is anxious about his departure [from life], cuts down words; and he who had obtained spiritual mourning, shuns talkativeness like fire. *Step 11.9*

A man in obedience does not know despondency [accidie], having achieved spiritual things by means of sensory things. *Step 13.3*

He who mourns over himself does not know despondency [accidie]. *Step 13.14*

Satiety in food is the father of fornication; but affliction of the stomach is an agent of purity. *Step 14.5*

He who fondles a lion often tames it, but he who coddles the body makes it still wilder. *Step 14.6*

With beginners, falls [from chastity] usually occur by reason of luxury; with intermediates, because of haughtiness as well as from the same cause which leads to the fall of the beginners; and with those approaching perfection, solely from judging their neighbors. *Step 15.20*

Do not expect to overthrow the demon of fornication with refutations and pleadings. For with nature on his side, he has the best of the argument. *Step 15.24*

I have seen pride lead to humility. And I remembered him who said: Who hath known the mind of the Lord? The pit and offspring of conceit is a fall; but a fall is often an occasion of humility for those who are willing to use it to their advantage. *Step 15.38*

He who wants to cover come the demon of fornication with gluttony and surfeiting is like a man who puts out a fire with oil. *Step 15.39*

A vigilant eye makes the mind pure; but much sleep hardens the soul. *Step 20.3*

Long sleep produces forgetfulness, but vigil purifies the memory. *Step 20.9*

Long sleep is an unjust comrade; it robs the lazy of half their life, and even more. *Step 20.11*

The inexperienced monk [and Christian] is wide awake in friendly conversation; but his eyes become heavy when the hour of prayer is upon him. *Step 20.12*

Fear is a rehearsing of danger beforehand; or gain, fear is a trembling sensation of the heart, alarmed and troubled by unknown misfortunes. Fear is a loss of assurance. *Step 21.3*

A vainglorious person is a believing idolater; he apparently honors God, but he wants to please not God but men. *Step 22.6*

God often hides from our eyes even those perfections that we have obtained. But he who praises us or, rather, misleads us, opens our eyes by his praise, and as soon as our eyes are opened, our treasure vanishes. *Step 22.10*

Upcoming Events 2014

13-19 April: Holy Week
20 April Great and Holy Pascha, Picnic
30 June—4 July St. Peter the Aleut Youth Camp

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!