

The Confessor's Tongue for February 8, A. D. 2015

Sunday of the Prodigal Son: Postfeast of the Meeting, Great Martyr Theodore the General
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 Sayings of St. Anthony the Great

Abba Anthony said to Abba Poemen, "This is the great work of a man: always to take the blame for his own sins before God and to expect temptation to his last breath."
Saying 4 in *The Sayings of Desert Fathers*

Commentary: Why is taking the blame for one's own sins a "great work"? The work is great, for the obstacles to doing the work are great.

First, man often does not see his sins. He cannot take the blame for what he cannot see! And it is no small thing for man to see his sins. To see his sins, man needs light, he needs Christ, the Light of the world. Only in the light of Christ can a man realize what he was made to be (according to the image and likeness of God) and wherein he falls short of the glory of the divine image. Without the light of Christ, man will never see his wretchedness and nakedness, nor will he see what he destined to be. Remaining blinded in the dark, he will strive to make himself after some image and likeness that he creates for himself rather than after the image and likeness of God.

In the light of Christ, man's deceitful heart is exposed. Despite the testimony of his God-given conscience, man lies to himself about his actions and intentions, justifying himself while condemning others. To overcome this self-deception is one reason the Holy Spirit is given—to convict men of their sins. Most men see themselves as 'basically good and decent', especially when they compare themselves selectively to others—but that is a delusion the Holy Spirit works to overcome. Man deludes himself into thinking he is basically good, healthy, and 'normal'. The Holy Spirit shows him just how desperately ill he is—not to plunge him into despair, but to enable him to see his malady so that he may seek healing from the Great Physician who became man to heal man.

Having overcome his blindness to see himself and sick and sinful, man must then admit his sin and fault. This requires humility. Either a man must humble himself, or God will humble him through the vicissitudes of life to put him in a state where he may begin to see and admit his fault before God. Only by humility may he overcome the powerful temptation to blame others for his sins or to make excuses for his faults. Parents, circumstances, spouse, friends, children, etc., may have made it easier for us to sin, may have provoked us, but in the end we have to own our sins without blaming others. No matter how unjustly someone else acts first, a man is always accountable before God for how he responds. This goes against our penchant for self-justification, which goes back to Adam blaming the woman, and Eve blaming the serpent. Indeed, Abba Dorotheos of Gaza teaches that the first half of humility is blaming ourselves for our sins, i.e., taking responsibility for

them before God. (The second half of humility is giving God the glory for all that is good in our life rather than taking the credit for ourselves.)

To see his own sins and to acknowledge them as his own without making excuses, blaming others, or comparing himself to others rather than to Christ is a great work to accomplish, one which requires much grace. That a man has this awareness in some measure is a sign of God's grace at work in him for which he should be thankful, for his salvation cannot be accomplished without it.

If taking the blame for his own sins is a great work, so is expecting temptation to one's last breath.

Man often comes to Christ expecting blessing, comfort, and ease, even health and wealth. In exchange for serving God, He wants payment here and now in terms of a comfortable, happy life. God makes everything better, right? Indeed, the Gospel is often presented in this way with Christ as the essential ingredient to a better life on earth. Just have Christ, and you'll have a better marriage, better children, better finances, more fun.

But St. James in his epistle speaks of "*when* ye fall into divers temptations" not "*if*." Thus, we must expect temptation, trials, tribulations, and persecution as part of being a Christian rather than being deluded by our desire for peace and pleasure. That delusion is dangerous, for many possessed by it have suffered the shipwreck of their faith when trials have come upon them contrary to their expectations.

Moreover, not only will the Christian have diverse trials and temptations, he must rejoice in them! St. James writes, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. . . . Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him (James 1:2-4, 12)." Likewise, St. Paul instructs us: "And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us (Romans 5:3-5)."

Surely this is a great work: a Christian not only accepts without complaining but also rejoices in and gives thanks for temptations and trials as an essential part of the Christian life which God uses to perfect his faith! St. Isaac the Syrian says, "When you find unchanging peace on your way, then fear; because you are far from the right path by which the righteous go with suffering feet." Again, he says, "Temptation is good for everyone.... An undisciplined son will not enter into possession of the riches of his father's

house because he will not be able to use his wealth profitably. For this reason God first gives troubles and trials, and then gives grace. Glory to the Lord who by irksome treatment gives the pleasure of health! There is no one who does not suffer during his training, and there is no one who does not find the time difficult when he is given to drink the poison of temptations." May God grant us all success in this great work of man! *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Feb. 8: Holy Greatmartyr Theodore the General

He came from the city Euchaita (in Asia Minor) and was a general (Stratelates) in the city of Heraclea, near the Black Sea. By his pious life and his meek demeanor he attracted the hearts of the townspeople and many pagans to him, who seeing his good moral life accepted the Christian faith. When word of this reached Licinius, the co-ruler with Constantine, he came to Heraclea and tried to force Theodore to bow to idols. When St. Theodore stood firm, the angry governor ordered the confessor of Christ to submit to severe torture. St. Theodore was dragged on the ground, beaten by iron rods, had his body pierced with sharp iron spikes, was burnt with fire and, finally, was crucified on a cross and had his eyes plucked out. At night an angel appeared to the martyr, took him down from the cross and completely healed him. In the morning the servant of Licinius, who was sent to throw the body of St. Theodore into the sea and saw him completely whole believed in Christ. A lot of other pagans seeing the miracle of God also believed. Having found out about this, Licinius ordered St. Theodore to be beheaded. St. Theodore died in 319. The eyewitness, his servant the scribe Varus, described his sufferings.

Liturgical Notice: The Litia on Saturdays

A part of the Resurrectional Vigil that we have not traditionally done is the Litia. Starting next week, it will be added to Vespers. As the Fast calls us to increase and improve our prayers, we shall respond by restoring this omitted portion of the Vigil, at least for the Lenten season.

At Vigils following the Evening Litany and before the Aposticha is the "Litia," also written "Lity." The word comes from the Greek and means "prayer" or "entreaty".

The Litia begins with the choir singing special stichera (verses) in honor of the feast or saint. (For Sundays, the hymns will be in honor of our patron, St. Maximus, with a glory verse and theotokion from the *Triodion* expressing the theme of the week.) As they sing, the clergy and servers process out the North Door to the narthex of the temple (the Royal Doors remain shut). There is a special reason for the location of this part of the service. The nave of the temple represents the Church in the world, but the narthex represents those not yet united to the Church. A pre-revolutionary Russian liturgist writes, "In the Litia, the Church steps out of its blessed milieu and, with the goal of mission to the world, into

the external world or into the narthex, the part of the church which abuts this world, the part which is open to all, including those not yet part of the Church or excluded from Her. From this stems the universal character of Litia prayers, embracing all people." In some times and places, the Litia is even celebrated outside the temple. Properly, all the faithful would process with the clergy to the narthex or outside, but due to the lack of space in most modern narthexes, this is rarely done—only the clergy leave the nave.

When the choir finishes the stichera for the Litia, the Deacon intones a special litany of five longer-than-usual petitions, beginning with the long prayer, "O God, Save Thy People." In this first petition, we ask that God would look upon His world with mercy and compassion, exalt the horn (a Scriptural symbol of power and strength) of Orthodox Christians, and send down upon them His rich mercies through the petitions of the Theotokos and a long list of saints. This reminds us that the Church consists of those of all times and places, not just those who happen to be alive now. Moreover, we call upon those who have successfully completed their earthly course to pray for us.

In the remaining four petitions, we pray for hierarchs, the whole Church and the local Church, the departed, and civil authorities. We pray to be preserved from "wrath, famine pestilence, earthquake, flood, fire, the sword, foreign invasion, and from civil war, and from sudden death..." and we pray that God will hear us sinners and have mercy on us.

"Lord, have mercy" is sung many times after each of these petitions (originally 40, 50, and 30 times for the first three petitions, now customarily reduced to 12 times, and 3 times for the remaining petitions). After the priest's exclamation, he offers a prayer to Christ through the intercessions of the Theotokos and a long list of saints (sometimes omitted): "...make our prayer acceptable, grant us forgiveness of our trespasses, shelter us under the shelter of thy wings, drive away from us every enemy and adversary, give peace to our life, O Lord. Have mercy on us and on Thy world and save our souls, for Thou art good and lovest man." (*Taken from the commentary on the All-Night Vigil on our website, <http://www.stmaximus.org/liturgical-worship-vigil.html>*)

A full Litia also includes an offering and blessing of five special litia loaves along with wheat, wine, and oil. We shall not do that part on Saturdays but will reserve it for Great Feasts and Vigil-class saints.

Upcoming Events 2015

- 22 February: Forgiveness Sunday. Forgiveness Vespers, 6:00 p.m., with Beth Marie's Ice Cream to follow. Plan to attend.
- 23-28 February: Clean Week, first week of the Great Fast, Great Canon of St. Andrew.
- 12 April: Holy Pascha, Feast of Feasts

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!