

The Confessor's Tongue for November 29, A. D. 2015

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost; Martyr Parman, Venerable Acacius
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 32

*Abba Anthony said, "I no longer fear God, but I love Him. For love casts out fear." (1 John 4:18)
Saying 32 Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

Commentary: Fearing God is not a popular topic for discussion or reflection in an age which proclaims "God loves you and accepts you just the way you are." The Scriptures declare that "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Prov 9:10). Thus, if we desire true wisdom and knowledge, we must have a fear of God.

What is the fear of God? "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil: pride, arrogance, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate" (Prov 8:13). (A forward mouth is a perverse mouth, to be willfully contrary and intractable.) To fear God is both to hate evil and to turn away from it (repent): "Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the Lord, and depart from evil" (Prov 3:7). It also implies a desire for knowledge, an acknowledgment of one's lack of knowledge, and a humility to learn: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov 1:7).

If we truly believe in God, we will necessarily fear Him. To fear God recognizes that we shall one day stand before Him and answer for all our actions and words and that He will reward each man according to his deeds. To fear God is to recognize that He does not change and He keeps His word. To fear God is to know Him as the thrice-holy consuming fire in whose presence all that is base and corrupt is consumed like gas vapor ignited by a spark. Perceiving Him as He is reveals to us the necessity to hate evil and turn away from it if we desire God.

It is possible to fear God in an unhealthy way contrary to faith. We worry what He may ask of us, what He may do to us, how He may spoil the fun we want to have. And because we are afraid for what we think we shall lose if we follow God, we hold back from committing ourselves fully. When our faith is young and weak, these thoughts are not unusual. But as we taste and see that the Lord is good, we come to realize that fears of this sort are groundless.

Wisdom in man begins with the recognition of God as righteous judge, a keeper of promises, and a thrice holy consuming fire and the fear that results in our confronting this God as living reality. This is why the wicked have no fear of God; so entangled are they in their passionate desires that they do not see God clearly and so they have no concern about judgment to restrain their evil desires and deeds. They do not believe He will do what He says if they even care to hear his words. They murmur against Him and judge Him to justify themselves. They love evil and embrace it rather than hating it and turning from it.

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And because they have no fear of God, they lack even the beginning of wisdom and true knowledge.

Now, to consider Anthony's words in this context of the fear of God: it is proper and natural to come to God first out of fear of judgment and eternity with the devil. In fact, most, if not all, people begin here. Fear death, God's judgment, and the fires of hell, they repent. But over time, the Christian realizes that God promises rewards to those who serve Him and that serving Him is a rational thing to do as it is a "good deal": work temporarily for an eternal reward. While the Christian still fears God and his judgment, he increasingly is motivated to serve Him out of desire for reward, for our long-term benefit. This is rational and right.

But it should not stop there. As the Christian becomes more intimately acquainted with God, he tastes and sees that the Lord is good and grows to love Him for Himself. He sees with deepening clarity God's goodness, His mercy, His love, His faithfulness, His wisdom, and His beauty, and he delights to serve Him, to please Him, and do His will. Being close to Him and basking in His glory is enough for him; it satisfies him. In this state of true love for God, fear is driven away and the desire for reward pales in comparison with one's desire for God Himself. St. Maximus expresses it this way: "Fear of hell causes beginners to shun evil. Desire to be rewarded with divine blessings confers on those who are advancing a readiness to practice the virtues. But the mystery of love transcends all created beings and makes the intellect blind to all that is sequent to God. Only upon those who have become blind to all that is sequent to Him does the Lord bestow wisdom, showing them what is more divine." *Chapters on Theology, 2.9 Fr. Justin Frederick*

Reclaiming the Nativity Fast

Now that Thanksgiving has passed, it is time to seize upon the Nativity Fast with zeal to reap the benefits God would give us through it as we prepare to celebrate the feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, December 25. The Fast is a time of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving given to us by the Holy Spirit in the Church for our spiritual benefit: for repentance, healing, cleansing, growth, and, ultimately—for knowing Christ more intimately and being filled afresh with His Spirit. The Fast is a time to lay aside the lesser things choking our lives to pursue greater things and recalibrate our spiritual life. The Fast is a wholistic effort of the whole man consisting of three main elements: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to cleanse the soul and open the spiritual eyes to perceive God and the incarnation of His Son more clearly.

The Nativity Fast can be difficult for us as the surrounding world parties in the time leading up the

Nativity, and then, when we are celebrating the twelve days of Christmas, the world has already turned away from the Feast and goes on a diet, weary already from its excesses. It is worth the effort, however, to apply ourselves seriously to the Fast with God's help.

Prayer: During the Fast, we seek to advance our prayer life, keeping our rule of prayer more strictly and adding to it if we can. An easy way to increase it is to add Psalms and prostrations or some prayer ropes of the Jesus Prayer as part of our rule. We may use the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem if we desire. We should strive to develop a more constant awareness of God throughout the day by the use of the Jesus Prayer or other such short prayers. Prayer also includes the corporate prayer of the Church in her services. We should attend services more frequently, as the services provide support for our overall efforts. Daily services will be available each week, and Holy Unction for the healing of soul and body will be served December 17.

Almsgiving: Almsgiving helps give our prayer wings. It is an act of love to give up some of the resources God has given us to benefit others who are in need. We offer several outlets for almsgiving: the almsbox and our own food pantry for those in need. One may also give to the needy or to worthy charities such as International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) on one's own. The important thing is that we give alms, which is giving for those in need above and beyond our normal tithes and offerings.

Fasting: In many people's mind, this is what is meant by the Fast, but this is but one part. We abstain from meat, dairy products, fish, wine, and olive oil (see wall calendar for when fish, wine, and oil are permitted) and marital relations so that we can give ourselves to prayer and have extra means for almsgiving. We eat less: when we get up from the table, we still have "room" in our stomachs. The money we save by eating less and more simply we give as alms (above and beyond our usual tithes and offerings). We also seek to minimize influences in our lives that draw us away from Christ or cause our hearts to grow cold or indifferent to Him. Hence, we may cut back on or cut out altogether television, movies, internet, secular music, parties, and other entertainment and replace it with prayer, Church services, works of mercy, and spiritual reading.

Each person is strongly encouraged to choose a spiritual work for daily reading during the Fast in addition to our daily reading of Scripture, etc. It is wise to consult with your priest or confessor to make sure you do not choose something too advanced.

All regular communicants must make a Confession during the Fast. Those who do not commune regularly should use the Fast to prepare for Confession and Communion. We cannot expect to have spiritual health or to be taken seriously as Orthodox Christians if we do not make the spiritual and physical effort involved to commune at least a couple times a year (Nativity and Pascha).

If we seek to commune regularly, we must make *at least* a monthly Confession. Frequent Communion is a privilege which assumes that we confess regularly, keep the fasts, and are actively living a Christian life throughout the week. If we don't or can't do this, we should commune less frequently and carefully prepare for it each time by a Confession along with prayer and fasting.

If you have any questions about how to keep the fast in your particular circumstances, please consult your Confessor or Priest.

"Perverse Thoughts Separate Men from God" Part One

From Elder Paisios in "Elder Paisios of the Holy Mt."

Elder Paisios always urged us to think positively. Our positive thinking, however, should not be our ultimate aim; eventually our soul must be cleansed from our positive thoughts as well, and be left bare having as its sole vestment divine grace granted to us through Holy Baptism. "This is our aim," he used to say, "to totally submit our mind to the grace of God. The rest is taken care of by His grace.

In the beginning, we should willingly try to develop positive thoughts, which will gradually lead us to the perfect good, God, to whom belongs every glory, honor, and worship; on the contrary, to us belongs only the humility of our conceited attitude.

"We must always be careful and constantly question the nature of our thoughts. When someone is preoccupied and trusts his own way of thinking, he becomes vulnerable to the devil, who is capable of transforming us into sly persons, even when we are honest by nature.

The older fathers never trusted their own thoughts. Even for minor problems to which they had to give answers, they prayed to God, or fasted, as a way to "force" divine grace to reveal the answer according to God's will; and after they got the "information," they gave the answer.

In our days, when someone has a serious problem and asks for advice, we tend to interrupt him and provide an answer without letting him finish his question first. In this case, we do not only not seek the assistance of divine grace, but we also misuse our logic, which was granted to us by God. We are ruled by our own thoughts and unhesitatingly rely on them, very often having to face the disastrous results of our acts.

Upcoming Events 2015-16

6 December Feast of St. Nicholas
17 December Thursday, 7:00 p.m. Holy Unction
26 December Feast Day at Nativity of our Lord Monastery
31 December All-Night Vigil for St. Basil
20-21 January Visit of Bishop Maxim for the Feast of St. Maximus

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!