

The Confessor's Tongue for December 20, A. D. 2015

29th Sunday after Pentecost; Sunday of the Holy Ancestors; St. Ignatius, John of Kronstadt
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 Sunday Before Nativity

In the services of this week, the Church glorifies the Old Testament saints from whose human family came our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore in the Gospel appointed for this Sunday is read the "genealogy" of Jesus Christ. Together with these on this Sunday, as well as on the Sunday of the Forefathers (see Dec. 11), are commemorated all those living in faith and all the Old Testament saints who have come to the Savior, who are listed in the Epistle reading for this Sunday.

Questions at Christmas

St. John of Kronstadt

You are preparing yourselves to meet the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, you must ask yourselves: Have you preserved the spiritual birth from God which we each received in Baptism? Are you always heedful of your Divine sonship and the sacred treasure of the Spirit which you acquired in Baptism? Have you grown closer to God through faith and love, like His beloved children? Have you loved on another as befits children of God? Have you despised evil and all-destructive sin? Have you loved truth and every virtue? Have you loved immortal and eternal life prepared in a land which will not pass away and to which we are called by Him who now has come to our corrupt earth? These are questions which we must ask ourselves now and decide; not only with our minds, but above all, with our hearts and our very deeds.

The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 35

Abba Anthony said, "Whoever hammers a lump of iron, first decides what he is going to make of it, a scythe, a sword, or an axe. Even so, we ought to make up our minds what kind of virtue we want to forge, or we labor in vain.

Saying 35 Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Commentary: In forging a metal object, the smith must know ahead of time what he is making. Not only does he need to know how to form it, but also how hot to heat the metal, what type of metal to use, and how to quench the hot metal to achieve the desired quality of hardness. The process a good sword requires will not work for a hammer or a chisel.

St. Anthony likens the acquisition of the virtues to this process. If we take a general approach to forging a virtue, for example, just going to Church, praying, reading, fasting, receiving the Holy Mysteries, and so forth but without any more precise focus, we may not succeed in gaining any of the virtues. What are the virtues? True knowledge of God, humility, generosity, chastity, self-control, meekness, temperance, diligence, joy, faith, hope, and love are among them. Providing needed focus, St. Justin of Chelye recommends that each day we seek to put aside one sin and put on one virtue. St.

Theophan the Recluse advises us to discern what our controlling passion is and to fight against it by putting on the virtue that opposes it, and having prevailed in this struggle, we shall much more readily prevail over our other vices and acquire the other virtues.

In a letter, St. Theophan describes the importance of focus in spiritual warfare:

Do not imagine you can wage war against the whole horde of passions—you will not be able to cope—but arm yourself each time against that passion warring against you. If pride tries to conquer, do battle with pride; if anger, do battle with anger; if envy, do battle with envy. Whatever enemy is before you, smite that enemy and direct all your martial strength and all your attention against it. If you set out to chase other foes, then this one will attack from the flank or rear and the victory will be lost.

Hasten to separate yourself from the enemy and oppose yourself to him and him to yourself. In spiritual battle, it is not as it is in physical [perceptible to senses] battle where the enemy stands visibly against you. In spiritual battle, you and your enemy are both in one soul and one heart. All our trouble stems from the fact that we do not know how to separate ourselves from the enemy and disunite ourselves from him; we think that the passionate movements disturbing us is, in fact, us—our nature—and we hurry to satisfy it. But this is not our nature and not us, but our enemy. This error is the source of all our falls into sin and wrong actions. If only at the first moments of an attack we succeeded in separating the passion from ourselves, then we would aim not to satisfy it but to stand against it.

Having separated the passion troubling you from yourself and having acknowledged it to be your enemy, begin to war against it, to fight it, taking up one weapon after another until the passion flees or hides from you or until the soul finds peace. Fast, pray, read, meditate, be alone, visit your spiritual father, go to church, make prostrations at home—in a word, make use of every useful weapon that you have in order to overcome the foe. Sometimes the passion hides itself at once, sometimes it struggles long—our task is not to weaken but to endure in bearing up under the weight of the martial podvig until the soul has regained complete peace.

Warring against a particular passion most often means obedience to a particular command of Christ that counteracts the passion and develops the corresponding virtue. For example, avarice and love of money are counteracted by almsgiving. Obedience to Christ's command "Give to them that ask thee, and from them that would borrow from thee turn thou not away." cuts the sinful passion away and develops the virtue of generosity. If you struggle with lust, prayer, keeping vigil, fasting, and physical labor are prescribed to teach you to guard your eyes and your stomach and to acquire self-control. You overcome sloth and produce diligence by regulating sleep, not lying in bed overlong, applying the

commands to “redeem the time” and “watch and pray”, and seeking to do all to the glory of God for the sake of Christ. If pride is your controlling passion, you seek to acquire the virtue of humility by serving others, putting others first, doing the dirty jobs no one else wants to do. “Whoever wishes to be first among you, let him be the servant of all,” as Christ has said, and “If you are invited to a feast, take the lowest place.” “He who exalteth himself will be abased, but he that humbleth himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11, 18:14). Humility leads to the spiritual heights. If you struggle with anger, hatred, remembrance of wrong, and unforgiveness, seek to put on love by obeying Christ’s command to not return evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good by doing good to those who harm you, blessing those who curse you, and praying for those who persecute you and whom you experience as enemies.

Thus the soldier for Christ wages intelligent, effective warfare to overcome the passions and put on the virtues. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

From Patriarch Pavle of Serbia on Nativity

And precisely today — here and now, for the two thousandth time — we celebrate and remember the event that divides history in two; the event so significant that we count the years from it, and now complete the second millennium. Two thousand years have passed since that night when history's greatest miracle took place in that cave near Bethlehem, when the Son of God Himself came and put on flesh and became like one of us and 'dwelt among us' [John 1:14]. He is none other than the eternal and uncreated Son, the Word or Logos of God, through Whom all things were made. Since that night, nothing in human life and history is as it was before. The 'Sun of Righteousness' [Malachi 4:2] was born to us, and all the depths of human fallenness and struggle against God have been filled by His warmth and light. From that night on, all human life and the history of every nation comes down to only one dilemma — to one simple question: Are you for or against Christ? One simple question, but a question so crucial that our entire life, and the future of our people, hinges upon it. That question overshadows and defines every historical period of the past twenty centuries.

For or against Him? Earlier periods that were, at least for the most part, 'for Christ', brought forth fruit that stands as an example and a starting point for all times. That fruit is called Christian culture. It represents an attempt to Christianize every segment of personal, social and national life, so that nothing remains outside or apart from Christ. We call it an attempt, since nothing in history is absolute and final. But the value is truly in the deeply Christian attempt, since a basic characteristic of Christianity is its all-inclusiveness — that Christ be all in all. . . .

What is man, and what is he worth? The twentieth century said that man is nothing, but this feast today tells us, just as that day two thousand

years ago told us, that man is sacred. And that applies not only to his spirit or his soul, but also to his body. The whole of man, body and soul together, is an inviolable shrine of incalculable and eternal worth. Today's feast tells us this: the day on which the Bodiless becomes embodied and on which the Son of God becomes the Son of man. This precisely is what is radically new in our faith. That the soul is holy is suggested by other religions, but that the body is equally sacred is found nowhere else. During the whole first eight centuries of Christianity, which were characterized by struggles against heresies, the Church unyieldingly defended this truth: that the whole of man, both body and soul, is holy. And that applies to every human being, regardless of his religion or nationality. Every murder, every disrespect for human personality and freedom, is sin, even more so when it is justified on ideological or nationalistic grounds. (*From a homily given in 1999*)

Questions for the New Year

We now celebrate the Feast of Christ's birth and coming into our dark world to bring us light. “Christ is born!” we cry. “God is with us!” The reality of God's joining Himself to the human race forever in the person of Jesus Christ is worth celebrating. It changes everything for us and the whole human race.

But how has this truth changed us since last Nativity? Have we grown in grace and in the knowledge of God this past year? Have we driven sin from more of the territory of our hearts like the Hebrews were to drive the Canaanites from the Promised Land, or have we allowed it to dwell peacefully within us and even increase?

The New Year will be upon us in a week. In the light of Nativity and in the midst of the joy of the Feast, take some time to plan spiritually for the new year, to set some spiritual goals, to set in order what has fallen into disorder in your life, to respond more fully to the truth that Christ is born and God is with us. What steps can you take this year to make sure that you really do seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, so that all the other things you need may be added to you in accordance with Christ's promise? How can you improve and increase your prayer? Your presence at services? Your fasting? Your giving? Your service to your spouse, your family, your employer, your parish, and your town? How can you build yourselves up in your most holy faith through reading, contemplating, and living the Holy Scriptures? How can you be inspired by reading the lives of the saints, or instructed in the spiritual life by reading the spiritual literature of the Church?

We must give more earnest heed to these things which we have heard, lest at any time we let them slip away from us and we slip away from Christ. Take some time over the next week to plan prayerfully for your new year in Christ. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Upcoming Events 2015-16

26 December Feast Day at Nativity 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!