

The Confessor's Tongue for February 2, A. D. 2016

34th Sunday after Pentecost; New Martyrs & Confessors of Russia; Unmercenarys Cyrus & John
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.

7 February: St. Parthenius

The son of a Deacon, Parthenius in his youth was engaged in fishing and, "from a young age carrying God in himself", he sold the fish and distributed the money to the poor. Having learned about his good works, the local bishop educated him and then ordained him a presbyter. Soon, for his god-fearing life, St. Parthenius was elected bishop of Lampsacus. Having accepted the episcopate in the reign of the Emperor Constantine, the Venerable Parthenius zealously abolished paganism, destroyed pagan temples and built holy churches. He was blessed with the gift of wonder working and died in very old age (in the fourth century). His body was buried close to the cathedral church in the city of Lampsacus (in Mizia, near the sea of Marmara).

7 February: Venerable Luke of Hellas

The son of the poor Greek land owners, the Venerable Luke in his youth was known for an unusual spirit of godliness and abstinence: he was meek, silent, and ate only dry food and certainly obeyed his parents. He helped the poor in everything he was able to, and quite often gave back to them his last bit of food, while remaining hungry. But after the death of his father, St. Luke secretly left his mother for Athens and there was tonsured a monk. But from there he soon, at the suggestion of the Lord, came back to his orphaned mother, and lived with her in complete humility and obedience for four months. This time he asked her blessing for his ascetical efforts in monasticism before leaving his parental home, intending to lead a life of a hermit. St. Luke struggled ascetically in various seaside places of Attica. The last place of his ascetical efforts was on Mount Stira, in Hellas. St. Luke died in or about 946. His relics are in a secluded place. The Venerable One during his life had the gift of farsightedness and prophecy from God, and after death flowed wonderful healings, "cleansing lepers, strengthening the infirm, healing the lame together with the blind".

Prayer: Highest Activity of the Human Mind

St. Ignatius Brianchaninov

The soul of prayer is attention. Just as the body is dead without the soul, prayer without attention is dead. The spoken prayer turns into empty words without attention and the one who prays is counted amongst those who *take the Lord's name in vain*.

Pronounce the words of the prayer unhurriedly; do not allow the mind to wander about but enclose it in the words of the prayer. This path is narrow and sorrowful for a mind which is used to drifting freely about the world, this path leads to attention. Whoever tastes the great blessing of attention will

love to constrict the mind on the path which leads to holy attention.

Attention is the initial gift of divine grace which is sent down to the one who labours and patiently endures in the *podvig* (ascetic struggle) of prayer.

One's own efforts towards attention should precede the attention bestowed by God—the former should be the active evidence of a sincere desire to receive the latter. One's own attention is gripped by thoughts and dreams and is shaken by them; attention bestowed by God is steadfast.

Renounce distraction of thoughts in prayer, despise daydreaming, dispel cares by the power of faith, strike fear of God into your heart and duly you will become habituated to attention.

The praying mind must be in a completely sincere state. A dream, however fetching and enticing it may be, is the frivolous creation of one's own mind and takes the mind out of the state of divine truth and leads it into a state of self-delusion and deception, hence it is cast aside in prayer.

During prayer, your mind should be free of images and you should thus preserve it carefully, dispelling all images which spring up through the power of the imagination, for the mind in prayer stands before God who is unseen, Who cannot be represented in any material way. If the mind allows images in prayer, they become an impenetrable curtain, a wall between the mind and God. "Those who see nothing in their prayers, see God," said venerable Meletius the Confessor.

If the image of Christ appears to you during your prayer either tangibly or makes itself manifest in your mind, or the image of an angel or any saint—in short, whatever image it is, do not take this appearance for a real one at all and pay no attention to it whatsoever, do not enter into conversation with it. Otherwise, you will be certain to become subject to delusion and to the most powerful spiritual injury, as has happened to many people. Man is incapable of communing with holy spirits until he is renewed by the Holy Spirit. As he still finds himself in the realm of fallen spirits, in their captivity and under their enslavement, he is only capable of seeing them and they often appear to him, having noted high self-regard and delusion within him, in the guise of angels of light or in the guise of Christ Himself to destroy his soul.

The holy Church uses holy icons to stir up devout remembrances and feelings and not at all to stir up daydreaming. When you stand before the icon of the Saviour, stand as if you were before the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who is everywhere present in His divinity as well as present in His icon; when you stand before the icon of the Mother of God, stand as if you were before the Most-Holy Virgin Herself — but keep your mind free of images: there is the greatest difference between being in the presence of Lord,

standing before the Lord and visualizing the Lord. The feeling of the Lord's presence brings a salutary fear over the soul, imbues it with a salutary feeling of reverence, but visualizing the Lord and His saints imparts a sort of materiality to the mind and leads it into false, proud self-regard and leads the soul into a false state, the state of delusion.

The feeling of God's presence is such a high state! It is by this that the mind is kept from conversing with extraneous thoughts which vilify prayer; it is by this that man's nothingness is strongly felt and that a special vigilance over oneself is made manifest, preserving man from even the slightest sins. The feeling of God's presence is attained by attentive prayer. Reverently standing before holy icons greatly enables one to obtain this.

The words of the prayer, enlivened by attention, penetrate deep into the soul, wound and pierce, so to speak, the heart and imbue it with tenderness. The words of a prayer said in distraction seem only to touch the surface of the soul, making no impression on it at all.

Attention and tenderness of heart are recognised as the gift of the Holy Spirit. Only the Spirit can make the rushing waves of the mind cease, said Saint John Climacus. Another venerable father said "When we have tenderness of heart, then God is with us", (Hieromonk Seraphim of Sarov).

The one who has attained constant attention and tenderness of heart in his prayers has attained the state of those blessings which are called *poverty of spirit and mourning* in the Gospel. He has already broken many of the chains of the passions and has already scented the aroma of spiritual freedom, he already bears the foundation of salvation in his core. Do not abandon the constrictions of true prayer and you will obtain holy peace, the mysterious sabbath: for no earthly tasks are done on the sabbath, the battle and *podvig* recede; in holy dispassion, without distraction, the soul stands before God in pure prayer and is at peace in Him through faith in His eternal goodness and by devotion to His all-holy will.

Attainment in prayer is first made manifest in the one who is an ascetic of prayer through the particular action of attention: it unexpectedly envelops the mind from time to time, encloses it in the words of the prayer. Then attention becomes far more constant and lengthier: the mind seems to latch onto the words of the prayer and is carried off by them towards union with the heart. Finally, tenderness of heart is suddenly added to attention, making man into a temple of prayer, into God's temple.

Offer up to God prayers which are quiet and humble and not passionate or fiery. When you become the mysterious priest of prayer, you will go up into God's tabernacle and from there you will fill the censer of prayer with holy fire. It is forbidden to offer up to All-Holy God the unclean fire—the blind and material inflaming of the blood.

The holy fire of prayer which is bestowed from God's tabernacle is holy love, poured out upon true

Christians by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). The one who strives to combine prayer with the fire of the blood imagines, in his delusion, deceived by his self-regard, that he does service to God, when he actually rouses His anger.

Do not seek enjoyment in prayer: this is not at all natural for the sinner. The desire of the sinner to feel enjoyment is indeed delusion. Seek for your dead and hardened heart to come alive, so that it is opened up to feel its own sinfulness, its fall and unworthiness, so that it can see them and admit them with self-abandonment. Then the true fruit of prayer will be found in you—true repentance. You will groan before God and cry out to Him through prayer from the wretched state of the soul which has suddenly revealed itself to you; you will cry out as if from a dungeon, from the grave, from hell.

Repentance produces prayer and this daughter produces it two-fold.

Enjoyment in prayer is only the lot of the holy saints of God, who have been renewed by the Holy Spirit. The one who is distracted by the impulses of the blood, distracted by vainglory and sensuality and fabricates his own enjoyment, is in woeful delusion. The soul which is darkened by living according to the flesh, the soul deceived and deceiving itself by its pride is very capable of such fabrications.

The feelings produced by prayer and repentance are a lightening of the conscience in the world of the soul, reconciliation with one's neighbour and the circumstances of life, mercy and compassion for humanity, refraining from the passions, coldness towards the world, obedience to God, strength in the struggle against sinful thoughts and distractions. Be content with these feelings, which do contain the savour of the hope of salvation. Don't seek high spiritual states and delights in prayer prematurely. They are actually not at all as they appear to our imagination: the action of the Holy Spirit, from Whom the high states of prayer come, is inscrutable for the mind of flesh.

Learn to pray with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength. You might ask: what does this mean? You cannot find out in any other way than through experience. Try to constantly be occupied with attentive prayer: attentive prayer will grant you the answer to this question through holy experience.

The *podvig* of prayer appears onerous, boring and dry to a mind which is habituated to only being occupied with corruptible objects. The ability to pray is obtained with difficulty; when this ability is obtained then it becomes the source of constant spiritual consolation.

Prayer, as has been said above, is the mother of the virtues — obtain this mother, then! Her children will proceed from thence into the house of your soul and will make it into God's shrine.

Offer up prayer to God before you begin any undertaking; draw God's blessing onto your undertakings through this and judge your actions by

this: the thought of prayer causes us to refrain from actions which are against God's commandments.

The one who turns to God in prayer before any word or action, for instruction, assistance and blessing, carries out his way of life as if under God's gaze and under His guidance. This ability is beneficial; nothing is swifter than the mind, said Barsanuphius the Great, nothing is more beneficial than to raise the mind to God when you encounter any need. (Answer 216).

In the difficult circumstances of life, offer your prayers to God more frequently. It is better to resort to prayers than to the empty notions of weak human reason which mostly cannot come to pass. It is better to lean on faith and on the almighty God through prayer than on one's feeble reason through untrustworthy notions and assumptions.

Do not be mindless in your requests, so as not to anger God by your thoughtlessness: the one who asks for something negligible from the King of Heaven thus dishonours Him. The Israelites, when they had ignored God's miracles enacted for them in the desert, asked for fulfillment of the desires of the belly, *but while their meat was yet in their mouths, the wrath of God came upon them* (Psalm 78:30-31).

Offer up to God requests which measure up to His greatness. Solomon asked Him for wisdom and received it, as well as many other blessings, because he asked wisely. Elisha asked Him for the two-fold grace of the Holy Spirit, before his great teacher, and his request was accepted.

The one who seeks corruptible earthly blessings in his prayer rouses the indignation of Heaven's King against himself. The angels and archangels-His courtiers-behold you during your prayer, they see what you are requesting from God. They are surprised and rejoice when they see an earthly creature leave the earth behind and make a request to receive something heavenly, but they mourn for the one who ignores the heavenly and asks for earth and decay.

We are commanded to be children in malice, but not in understanding (1 Corinthians 14:20).

During prayer, the reason of this world, which is verbose and conceited, is cast off; this does not mean that feeble-mindedness is applied or required.

Perfected reason is required, spiritual reason, filled with humility and simplicity, which is often expressed in prayer not through words, but by prayerful silence which surpasses words. Prayerful silence then envelops the mind, when suddenly new, spiritual understanding appears to it which is inexpressible in the words of this world and age, when an especially vivid feeling of God being present arises. Before the inscrutable greatness of the Divine Being, His feeble creature, man, falls silent.

Vain repetitions (Matthew 6, 7-8), condemned by the Lord in the prayers of pagans, consist in multiple requests for temporal blessings, which fill the prayers of pagans, as well as the eloquent manner in which they are made, as if rhetorical flourishes, material sonority and the power of the word can act on God in

the same way that they act on the hearing and nerves of people of flesh. In condemning this verbosity the Lord did not at all condemn prolonged prayers, as it seemed to some heretics: for He Himself blessed prolonged prayer by being in prayer at length. And continued all night in prayer to God (Luke 6:12) as the Gospel recounts of the Lord.

The lengthiness of the prayers of God's saints is not due to verbosity, but to their abundant spiritual feelings, which are manifest in them during prayer. Time, so to speak, is destroyed by the abundance and strength of these feelings, hence it is transformed into eternity for the saints of God.

When the one who prays achieves attainment in his holy podvig, then the variety of thoughts in the psalms and other words of prayer does not correspond to his disposition. The prayer of the tax collector and other very brief prayers give a more satisfactory expression of the inexpressible, expansive desire of the heart and God's saints have often spent many hours, days and years in such prayer without feeling any need of variety of thoughts for their powerful, concentrated prayer.

Prayers composed by heretics are immensely similar to the prayers of pagans: there is verbosity in them, the earthly beauty of the word, the inflaming of the blood, a lack of repentance, striving for the wedding-feast of the Son of God from the pagan temple of the passions itself and delusion. They are alien to the Holy Spirit-the deadly infection of the dark spirit wafts from them- the spirit of the evil one, the spirit of lies and destruction.

How great the activity of prayer is! The holy apostles refused to serve their neighbours in their fleshly needs, in order to pray and to serve the word. It is not reason, they said, that we should leave the word of God and serve tables... We will...give ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word, (Acts 6:2-4) meaning in conversation with God through prayer and in conversation about God with their neighbours, proclaiming the Triune God and the Word of God made man to them.

The activity of prayer is the highest activity of the human mind; the state of purity, estranged from distraction, which is granted to the mind by prayer, is its highest natural state; the mind's rapture in God, of which the primary cause is pure prayer, is a supernatural state.

Only the holy saints of God arise to this supernatural state who, having been renewed by the Holy Spirit, having taken off the old Adam and been clothed in the New and able with the open face of the soul to behold the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image...from glory to glory by the action of the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Corinthians 3:18). They receive most of their Divine revelations during the exercise of prayer, as this is a time when the soul is especially prepared, especially purified and inclined to communication with God. Thus, the holy apostle Peter saw a special sheet descending from heaven during prayer (Acts 10:11). Thus, an angel

appeared to Cornelius the Centurion during prayer (Acts 10: 3). Thus, the apostle Paul was praying in the temple at Jerusalem when the Lord appeared to him and ordered him to leave Jerusalem immediately. Depart, for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles, He said to him (Acts 22 17:21). *Translated by Nicola Dockray pravmir.com*

Don't Worry Brother: God Is Closer
St. Nikolai of Zicha

You have done well for repenting right away. God has left repentance for salvation. If that was not the case, not even the Apostles would have been saved, far less other people. You have sinned with the tongue, repented with the heart. You said an evil word against your neighbor. As if you threw a spark into dry straw. The whole village heard it and made a mockery of it. The neighbor was bitter and sued you. You paid a lot, and became more miserable. You are bitter with yourself. It is not so hard for you that the court has punished you, but it is hard that your offended neighbor keeps punishing you. He does not wish to speak with you anymore. He keeps quiet and turns away from you. What should you do?

Leave it to God and time. Pray to the all-seeing Creator that He would give some goodwill to your neighbor. Use every opportunity to say a good word about your neighbor, and wait. God, a good word and time will do their job. And one day, you will again go to church together with your pacified neighbor.

And as the lesson for the future, remember the words of the Savior, I say to you that in the day of the tenable judgment, people will give account for every empty word they uttered. Does this say to you that each vicious and false word strikes against the order of the universe and offends the Creator? A good or bad word that we say about a person, even if said in the greatest secrecy, is felt by the whole universe and by the Creator of feelings. Or how could we keep our words unknown from Him to whom even our thoughts are all known! Ancient Greeks said that the spear of their hero Achilles could wound with one side and heal with the other. We do not know about Achilles' spear, but we do know for sure that this is true for the human tongue. Wounds are caused by the tongue and are also healed by the tongue. With it we bless God and curse men. (Jas. 3: 9)

In one of our villages, this terrible event took place. A mother had an only son, a student in school. The mother was mad at the son and in her anger she said these senseless words, "If I were to never see you again, I'd be happy!" The child was so distraught by these words that he took a gun and shot himself. Beside himself, he left a student's writing board on which he wrote, "Here mother, I remove myself forever from before your face, just to make you happy!" O, the miserable happiness of the mother! After that happened, the mother sat by the fireplace every night, putting out the fire with her tears until she was eventually found dead one morning, wasted, by the cold fireplace.

Do you see what a senseless word does? But I will not leave you without an example of what a sensible word can do. During the war, a soldier who was easily frightened was sent into patrol. Everyone knew how easily scared he was. Everyone laughed when they heard that the commander was sending him out. Only one soldier did not laugh. He came up to his friend to encourage him. But the scared soldier said, "I will surely die. The enemy is very close." The friend answered, "Don't worry brother, God is closer!" These words rang out in the scared soldier's soul like a big bell. And they kept ringing until the end of the war. And that frightened soldier came back from the war decorated with medals for courage. That good word transformed and strengthened him so much – "don't worry, God is closer."

Peace and health to you from God!

Why Some Christians Fall Away
St. Nikolai of Zicha (+1956)

Why do some people, well-educated, baptized as Christians, fall away from Christianity into philosophy or learned theories, alleging them to be something truer than Christianity? For two main reasons: either from an utterly superficial knowledge of Christianity, or from sin. A superficial knowledge of Christ rejects Him, and sin flees from Christ like a felon from judgment. Superficial and guilty Christians have often become as bitter enemies of Christianity as are pagans. To the superficial and the guilty it is more comfortable to bathe in the shallow pool of human thought than in the dangerous depths of Christ. Those who sincerely set themselves to follow Christ are constantly invited by Christ to a greater and greater depth, as He once said to the Apostle Peter, "Launch out into the deep." St. Mark the Ascetic writes that one understands the Law of God insofar as one fulfills His commandments. 'Ignorance urges man to speak against that which is helpful, and insolence breeds vice.'

From St. Gregory Palamas on Illness

There are times when illness is better for sinners than good health, because it helps them towards salvation and blunts their inborn evil impulses. Inasmuch as it repays the debt of sin by means of suffering, it makes them able to receive healing of their souls in the first instance, then healing of their bodies. This happens most of all when the sick person, understanding that the affliction is a remedy from God, bears it courageously, falls down before God with faith, and asks for forgiveness, through whatever works he can manage. *Homily 10 on Mark 2:1-12*

Upcoming Events 2015-16

8-11 February: Fr. Justin gone at Pastoral Conference.
22-26 February: Fr. Justin gone, continuing education.
14-19 March: Clean Week: Plan now to set aside as much of this week as possible for prayer.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!