

The Confessor's Tongue for March 20, A. D. 2016

Sunday of Orthodox

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.

On the Spiritual Meaning of Clean Week

St. John of Kronstadt

I congratulate myself and many of you on the ineffable mercy of God, on the spiritual renewal received through the struggle of preparation, prayer, fasting, and repentance, especially through partaking of the most pure and life-creating Mysteries of the Body and Blood of the Lord. In this short time we were able to ascertain in ourselves the benefit of fasting and prayer, not to mention the benefit of preparation, Confession, and Communion—if, it goes without saying, we sincerely used this time for our salvation and sincerely fulfilled the conditions of fasting and preparation for Communion; if we refrained from excess of food and drink, sincerely prayed, humbled ourselves before God and our neighbors, if we were merciful, if we recognized the latitude of our iniquities and transgressions and deeply regretted them, having a firm intention not to repeat them, and, finally, sincerely acknowledged them and received absolution and remission of them, and were vouchsafed to taste the life-creating Food. But have we all received actual benefit from the past week? Have our hearts become closer to God, to the most pure Mother of Life, to the Church, to our Holy Guardian Angel, and to the Saints of God?

From the Synaxarion

The Prayer of St. Ephrem

*O Lord and Master of my life,
the spirit of idleness, of despondency,
of love of power, and of idle words, grant me not.*

A distinctive feature of Great Lent is the use of the prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian during weekday services (Sunday evening through Friday evening). Many use it as part of their daily prayer at home. Unknown to most, this prayer may also be used liturgically during the lesser fasts. Given its prominence during our fasting, let us consider what it is we request in this prayer.

In this first portion of the prayer, we ask to not be granted four things. Some translations ask God to “take from me” these sinful things, but the same word “grant” or “give” in both Russian and Greek is used here as it is in the second part of the prayer where we request the virtuous spirit. It should not be understood that God gives us this vicious spirit. No, it is already within us; but we ask Him not to leave us in its power that we not be dominated by these sinful passions which are common to man.

We would be delivered, first, from “the spirit of idleness.” The Greek word *argia* means “sloth, apathy, idleness, indolence, laziness, lassitude, torpor, inertia, a total and perhaps even demonic lack of capacity to act, to live, to be productive, or take personal responsibility for the direction of one’s body or soul.

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Argia persuades us to turn our mind away from God, to avoid praying, to skip Church, not to tithe or give alms, and to do other things in place of reading the Bible or the Fathers.” The word in Russian is *prazdnost*.

We would be delivered, second, from “despondency”, a translation of the Greek *pereirgia*, which denotes an idle curiosity, being perturbed, being without peace of mind, impertinence, insolence, presumption, arrogance, audacity, a spirit of meddling, futile questioning, being a busybody, interfering in the affairs of others. *Pereirgia* becomes *unynia* in Slavonic, which means despondency, depression, or faintheartedness. Idle curiosity can be the cause of despair or despondency. *Pereirgia* persuades us to be always on the lookout for some new spiritual experience or knowledge as if what we have been given is insufficient; it motivates one to acquire more information about spiritual things without thereby becoming more humble or pious. One commentator makes this note about the cause of the difference between the Greek and Slavonic versions: “It must be granted that Greeks are hopelessly lazy and curious, while Russians are famously gloomy.”

We would be delivered, third, from “love of power.” The Greek word *philarchia* indicates a love of rule, the desire to be in charge, to control others, and have one’s own way, the belief that no can do it better than I. How many of our troubles come from insisting on getting our own way! This passion can enslave us, making us and others miserable. The Russian word is *lyubonachaliya*, love of being first, or of occupying the first place.

We would be delivered, fourth, from “idle words”. *Argologia* [*prazdnostoviya*] means empty words, idle talk, gossip, chatter, sitting around running the mouth for no reason other than to hear oneself speak and impress others. It is speech that has no ultimate purpose beyond *philarchia*, being in charge, in control, being the center of attention and being recognized. What competition ensues when several people dominated by *argologia* are together! Even spiritual conversations can become idle talk if we speak to display our knowledge or impress others. *When there are many words, sin is unavoidable*, as Solomon tells us in the Proverbs. I dare say this also includes the idle chatter to self we carry about in our heads.

*But the spirit of continence
of humility, of patience, and of love
do Thou grant unto me Thy servant.*

Having asked for deliverance from the spirit of idleness, despondency, love of power, and idle words in the first part of the Prayer of St. Ephrem, in the second part we ask to be given a virtuous spirit to replace the prior vicious one.

CONTINENCE

We request first “the spirit of continence.” The Greek word *sophrosyne* means “sobriety, chastity, continence, discretion, moderation, sanity, self-control, prudence, temperance, control over physical, especially sexual, impulses leading to self-restraint, moderation, right-mindedness, whole-mindedness, or abstinence. Once Jesus has cast the Legion of demons from him the Gerasene Demoniac, he is found sitting at Christ’s feed “in his right mind”, a stark contrast from his condition of being tormented by the demons. In like fashion, the host of passions trouble and torment us if we lack *sophrosyne*. By this virtue, we are enabled to deal with bodily desires correctly, with discretion, in due measure, and not to excess or for misuse. The Russian word “*tselomudriye*” literally means “whole-mindedness”.

HUMILITY

Second, we request “the spirit of humility.” The Greek word, *tapeinophrysne* comprises the words *tapeinos*, or humility, and *phrosyne*, the mind as it deliberately chooses. So this humility is a posture deliberately chosen; it is a submission to what is right and true and a willingness to accept and follow God’s will rather than our own. Humility is critical to spiritual progress, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, and He will lift you up.” To have God, we must bow the knee to Him and humble ourselves. No spiritual progress will be made without it. St. Nikon of Optina writes, “Without humility, you cannot be saved. Whatever structure of virtues you might build, it will collapse without humility.”

Some more thoughts from the Optina elders on humility:

“In reading the teaching of the holy fathers, do not soar aloft, but, seeing your weakness, descend to the depths of humility. It alone can save us, and without it all of our works and virtues will bring no benefit.” *St. Macarius*

“Humility consists in not judging and not reproaching anyone, and having simple clothing and furniture in your [home].” *St. Ambrose*

“Humility consists in yielding to others and considering yourself worse than all. This way will be much more peaceful.” *St. Ambrose*

“He who yields obtains more.” “Humble yourself, and all your affairs will proceed.” *St. Ambrose*

“Everything is all right if we reproach and humble ourselves. However, many are trying to climb up to heaven, piling ascetical struggles on themselves, but they do not want to humble themselves. Humble yourself, humble yourself!” *St. Barsanuphius*

“All evil proceeds from pride, but all good is obtained with humility. This is a great virtue—humility! And like a precious stone, it is rarely found, but especially in the present disastrous time.” *St. Macarius*

“One can acquire humility by means of obedience. The person who submits his will to his spiritual

guide overcomes pride and acquires humility.” *St. Barsanuphius*

“It is essential to humble oneself. Without humility, virtue, and in general nothing, will bring any kind of benefit.” *St. Barsanuphius*

“Why is there no peace in our bones, in our soul, and in our heart? Because of our sins! Because we are not at all instructed in humility, because we very much love to argue and prove that we know more than others, because we do not stop conversing with our thoughts, which along with sorrows continually torment us.” *St. Anthony*

“Let the following be for you signs of humility or pride: the latter scorns everyone, reproaches them, and sees darkness in them, while the former sees only his own faults and does not dare to judge anyone.” *St. Macarius*

“Truly lamentable is that person who does not have humility. He who is not able to humble himself will later on be humbled by other people. And he whom other people cannot humble, God will humble.” *St. Anthony*

“The Lord arranges everything for our spiritual benefit. For how could we be humbled if we continually felt spiritual consolation? So the Lord withdraws from us so that we see our infirmity and spiritual nakedness.” *St. Joseph*

“Do not be despondent because you are not living as you should, but humble yourself, and the Lord will look more favorably on your humility than on struggle which are great but not humble.” *St. Anatoly*

PATIENCE

Third, we request “the spirit of patience.” The Greek word *hypomene* means to ‘stand or remain under’. It is staying put and abiding and enduring rather than running to escape. This patience arises out of humility and submission to God’s providence and will. The prophet Isaiah encourages us to patience when he declares: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isa 40).

Some words on patience from the Optina Elders help us better understand what it is and why it is important.

“The one most reliable means for salvation—endure everything that God will send: the good and the bad.” *St. Anatoly*

“From Holy Scripture, we see that sorrows bring people closer to salvation, if a person does not become fainthearted and does not despair, but arms himself with patience, along with humility and devotion to the will of God.” *St. Ambrose*

“Patience is continuous good humor.” *St. Nikon*

“Have spiritual peace and have patience—with yourself and with others. Patience, according to St. Gregory of Sinai, is ‘stillness even within a storm.’” *St. Ambrose*

“It has been determined by God that every person

has some kind of cross in this life, i.e., a spiritual sorrow which he must bear undisturbedly, for there is not any benefit from faintheartedness and impatience. And since many are the tribulations of the righteous people in this life, then how more must we sinners endure." *St. Anthony*

"We must thank the Lord for everything, the labor which He imposes on us to teach us patience, which ennoble the soul and is more beneficial for us than comfort. Evidently, this is pleasing to the Lord. Sorrows cannot befall us except through God's permission—for the sake of our sins. And these very sorrows protect us from other temptations." *St. Moses*

"With childlike submission we must endure both the pleasant and the unpleasant and give glory for everything to God who is good, i.e., when any sorrow or sickness comes, we say 'Glory to Thee, O Lord!' If the sorrows and illnesses increase, again we say: 'Glory to Thee, O Lord!' When the unhappy sorrows and illnesses have worsened and lead to the grave, again: 'Glory to Thee, O Lord!'" *St. Anthony*

"You must be patient not only with the sorrows which befall you, but also with yourself." *St. Nikon*

An oft-quoted verse on patience is "In your patience, possess ye your souls" (Luke 21:19).

LOVE

Fourth, we ask for "the spirit of love," or *agape*. This is the love of God for man revealed in God's becoming man and going to the cross to save the fallen creature, a love that is all-merciful and is incapable of taking offense, a love that seeks what is best for the other. This is the love that empowers one to lay down one's life for one's friend. It is love that fulfills all other commandments. Authentic love is the goal of Christian life. To have love is to have all one needs. If one lacks love, no other gift, power, attainment or work can compensate.

"The feeling of love of the Lord corresponds to how much we fulfill His commandments." *St. Nikon*

"Love of God is expressed most of all by keeping the commandments of God." *St. Nikon*

"If one relies on the will of God—everything good, and even what is unpleasant, everything leads to the salvation of our soul, and in this is revealed great wisdom and profundity. For those that love God, all things lead to good." *St. Nikon*

"You must love every man, seeing in him the image of God, disregarding his vices. You must not dismiss people with coldness." *St. Nikon*

"Love covers everything. And if someone does good to his neighbor through the inclination of his heart, and not out of duty, then the devil cannot interfere; but when it is done out of a sense of duty, then he tries to interfere with one or the other.

"If you will receive people for the sake of God, then be assured that all will be well with you." *St. Ambrose*

"Above all, strive to love your neighbor, for in his love consists love for God." *St. Macarius*

"Love, of course, is above everything. If you find that you have no love, but desire to have it, then perform works of love, although at first without love. The Lord will see your desire and our striving and will put love in your heart. But mainly, when you notice that you have sinned against love, immediately confess it to your elder. This can happen sometimes from a foolish heart, and sometimes from the enemy. You yourself cannot discern this, but when you confess, the enemy will go away." *St. Ambrose*

Yea O Lord and King, grant unto me to perceive mine own offenses and not to judge my brother; for blessed art Thou unto ages of ages. Amen

The final sentence of the prayer reveals the focus of the Great Fast—to perceive my own offenses (and debts too). I must see what is amiss in my soul as God sees it and not as I imagine it. He is the Great Physician who accurately diagnoses my true condition. I cannot get well if I do not realize I am seriously ill and need to take the prescribed medicine. He is the just Judge who knows the true quality of not only my every action but also my every thought and intention. I cannot repent of sins I do not see. Thus, I ask God to show me my true condition that I may repent and be motivated to undergo His healing therapy. The Fathers of the Church say that to see ourselves as we really are is the greatest of all miracles, greater even than raising someone from the dead. They also say that the only moment we are ever infallible is when we confess our sins before God, for confession (*exomologesis*) means "to speak out the same words," that is, to agree with God about my true condition. Consequently we pray for the ability to see ourselves as we truly are—as ailing sinners—so we may make an accurate, contrite Confession. When we begin to see our true condition clearly and realize how much we stand in need of change, we gain humility and become receptive to grace—grace that will heal us, sanctify us, and deify us.

In the first part of the prayer, we ask to be preserved from the mind of the Evil One, in the second, to be filled with the mind of Christ. Now we pray to see ourselves as we truly are (part of putting on the mind of Christ who sees our reality), "and not to judge my brother." Man's self-chosen remedy for his sin and shortcomings is quickly to deflect his attention from himself by looking for the sins of others and judging them. Instead of blaming himself for his faults, he blames others and becomes blind to his own condition, as Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent instead of each taking responsibility for his own presumption, gluttony, and disobedience. If blaming and judging others blinds me to my sin, seeing myself as a sinner leads naturally to not judging others. On what basis do I judge another when I clearly see my own sins? How can I even notice the sins of others with my own right before my eyes?

Some words from the Optina Elders will help us understand these matters better.

“Having received help or having improved for the better, beware of thoughts that praise you but condemn others. This is a trap of the enemy, beckoning you to arrogance and taking away all the fruits of virtue.” *St. Macarius*

“You should be attentive to your inner life so as not to notice what is happening around you. Then you will not judge.” *St. Ambrose*

“Before God, a repentant sinner is more beloved than a conceited righteous person. And therefore beware of judging!” *St. Anatoly*

“As soon as condemnation comes into your head, immediately say with attention: ‘Lord, grant me to see my own sins and not condemn my brother.’” *St. Nektary*

“The beam in the eye is pride. The Pharisee had all the virtues, but he was proud; the Publican, however, had humility and was better.” *St. Ambrose*

“You must firmly remember this spiritual law of life: if you condemn someone for something or are disturbed by something in another person, you will experience the very same thing. You will do that which you condemned someone else for doing, or you will suffer from the same infirmity.” *St. Nikon*

“The main thing that is required of every person—do not judge anyone. It seems simple, but begin to fulfill it, and it seems difficult. The enemy violently attacks a person and suggests to him thoughts of judging. The Lord says, ‘Forgive,’ while the enemy suggests, ‘Take vengeance on the offender. He’s reviling you, you revile him.’ You should not listen to the enemy, but must struggle against him.

“Do not start examining the deeds of people, do not judge, do not say: ‘Why is it this way? What is this for?’ It is better to say to yourself, ‘What does their work have to do with me? I will not answer for them at the Dread Judgment of God.’ Divert every thought of yours from judging the deeds of people, and pray fervently to the Lord that He help you in this, because without the help of God we can do nothing good, as the Lord Himself said: *without Me ye can do nothing* (John 15:5).” *St. Ambrose*

“Never condemn anyone. Greet everyone with a good disposition, whoever he may be, with the hope of finding in him only good, seeing before you the image of God.” *St. Nikon*

“Some people are prone to the sin of condemnation due to habit, others from remembering wrongs, others from envy and hatred, but for the most part, we are prone to this sin due to conceit and haughtiness. In spite of our incorrigibility and sinfulness, it still seems to us that we are better than many others. If we desire to be corrected of this sin of condemnation, we must in every way force ourselves to be humble before God and man and implore God for help in this.” *St. Ambrose*

“We cannot know ourselves other than through association with our neighbors, receiving from them reproaches and vexation as a cure for our spiritual wounds, while reproaching ourselves for impatience,

but not them; instead, we must thank them, for through them we came to know our spiritual infirmity, by God’s Providence. And having serenity, by God’s grace, be careful not to be carried away with a high opinion of yourself, so that you again do not suffer: the enemies do not sleep, they only fear humility.” *St. Macarius*

“If we happen to be reproached or scorned by someone, we must instruct our heart to say, ‘We’re worse than they are,’—not only with the tongue but with a heartfelt pledge.” *St. Macarius*

“When the devil points out to you the faults and weaknesses of others and urges you to judge them, then you say to yourself: ‘I am worse than everyone else, I deserve eternal torments. Lord have mercy on me.’ And even if you say this without feeling, you still need to say it.” *St. Barsanuphius*

“How do you reproach yourself? Very simply. The conscience immediately speaks out, it immediately censures us, and we have only to agree that we acted wrongly and humbly turn to God with a prayer for forgiveness. Even if only for a minute, you must absolutely reproach yourself in this way. Our job is to reproach ourselves, even if it is just for a brief time, and the rest is up to God.” *St. Barsanuphius*

Fr. Justin with credit to Rick Joines for initial research. First published in 2009.

A Prayer for the First Sunday of Lent

We give thanks unto Thee, O Lord Jesus Christ, that Thou hast brought us this present time of fasting unto salvation, so as to heal the great wounds of our souls in a short span, seeking to lift from us the burden of our many sins; and we pray Thee, O All-Good One: drive far from us all Pharisaic hypocrisy in our fasting, and root out from us Judaic gloom; make us not arrogant in our abstinence; keep us from doing that which is forbidden, and from an idle tongue and mind. Fill us with the brightness and truth which Thou hast commanded; give us strength to fight off the passions, and make us mighty in the war against sin. By alienation from passions, prepare us to follow Thee, Who hast shewn us victory over the devil through fasting, so that we may become partakers of Thy death and Resurrection, and be nourished by Thine eternal sweetness, which Thou hast made ready for them that hunger and thirst for Thy righteousness. Strengthen Thy community by fasting and by faith in Thee, and grant strength against the onslaught of enemies. For Thou art the God of mercies, and to Thee belongeth glory, together with the Father and Thine All-Holy, and Good, and Life-creating Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Upcoming Events 2015-16

25 March Holy Annunciation

24-30 April: Holy Week

1 May Holy Pascha, Picnic, Egg Hunt

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!