

# The Confessor's Tongue for March 27, A. D. 2016

Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas

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.

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## On Being Troubled By Thoughts

St. John Cassian

It is, indeed, impossible for the mind not to be troubled by thoughts, but accepting them or rejecting them is possible for everyone who makes an effort. It is true that their origin does not in every respect depend on us, but it is equally true that their refusal or acceptance does depend on us. By saying that it is impossible for the mind not to be attacked by thoughts, however, we do not mean that all of this must be attributed to an invasion and to those spirits which try to impose them on us. Otherwise there would be no free will in a person, nor would the effort expended in our own correction be of any help to us. But it is, I say, largely up to us whether the character of our thoughts improves and whether either holy and spiritual thoughts or earthly and carnal ones increase in our hearts. Therefore we practice the frequent reading of and constant meditation on Scripture, so that we may be open to a spiritual point of view. For this reason we frequently chant the psalms, so that we may continually grow in compunction. For this reason we are diligent in vigils, fasting, and praying, so that the mind which has been stretched to its limits may not taste earthly things but contemplate heavenly ones. When these things cease because negligence has crept in again, then, it is inevitable that the mind, by the accumulated filth of the vices, will soon turn in a carnal direction and fall.

This activity of the heart is not inappropriately compared to millstones, which the swift rush of the waters turns with a violent revolving motion. As long as the waters' force keeps them spinning, they are utter incapable of stopping their work, but it is in the power of the one who supervises to decide whether to grind wheat or barley or dandelion. Indeed, only that will be ground which has been accepted by the person entrusted with the responsibility for the work.

In the same way, the mind cannot be free from agitating thoughts during the trials of the present life, since it is spinning around in the torrents of the trials that overwhelm it from all sides. But whether these will be either refused or admitted into itself will be the result of its own zeal and diligence. For I, as we have said, we constantly return to meditating on Holy Scripture and raise our awareness to the recollection of spiritual realities and to the desire for perfection and the hope of future blessedness, it is inevitable that the spiritual thoughts which have arisen from this will cause the mind to dwell on the things that we have been meditating on. But if we are overcome by laziness and negligence and let ourselves be taken up with wicked behavior and silly conversations, or if we get involved in worldly concerns and unnecessary preoccupations, the result will be as if a kind of weed had sprung up which will m pose harmful labor on our

heart. And, according to the words of the Lord, the Savior, wherever the treasure of our works and intentions is, there also will necessarily abide our heart.

Above all we should know what the three sources of our thoughts are: they come from God, from the devil, and from ourselves. They are from God when he deigns to visit us by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, which raises us up to a higher level of progress; and when we have made little gain or have acted lazily and been overcome and he chastens us with a most salutary compunction; and when he opens to us the heavenly sacraments and changes our chosen orientation to better acts and to a better will . . . .

And from the devil a whole series of thoughts is born, when he attempts to subvert us both by delight in wickedness and by hidden snares, fraudulently passing of evil things for good with the most subtle finesse and transforming himself for us into an angel of light. . . .

The also come from us, however, when we spontaneously remember things that we are doing or have done or have heard. . . .

We should, then, be continually aware of this threefold distinction and with a wise discretion examine all the thoughts that emerge in our heart, first tracing their origins and causes and their authors, so that, in accordance with the status of whoever is suggesting them, we may be able to consider how we should approach them.

*From the First Conference*

## The Veneration of Mary the Theotokos

Archbishop Dmitri (from *The Dawn*)

Because of recent discussions about the Catholic Church's considering defining a new dogma concerning the Virgin Mary [ten years hence, which it has since chosen not to do] it might be of interest to Christians of other Churches to have some explanation of the Orthodox Church's position concerning her.

The Orthodox Church honors and venerates the Virgin Mary as "more honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious without compare than the Seraphim..." Her name is mentioned in every service, and her intercession before the throne of God is asked. She is given the title of "Theotokos" (Greek for "Birth-giver-of-God), as well as "Mother of God". She has a definite role in Orthodox Christianity, and can in no way be considered an instrument which, once used, was laid aside and forgotten.

Objections to the veneration of the Theotokos are based primarily on what is called "a lack of scriptural evidence to support such a practice." While it is true that the Church depends heavily on her Tradition other than Holy Scripture (Ecumenical

Councils, liturgical books, and the writings of the Fathers) for details and the precise definition of the nature of the veneration of the Virgin Mary, there are several passages of the New Testament that really form the basis for our practice.

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to announce to the Virgin the birth of the Savior: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women." (Luke 1:28) This angelic salutation forms a part of the hymn of the Church most frequently sung in her honor. Could we be wrong in repeating the words of the very messenger of God? Elizabeth, the Virgin's cousin, considered it an honor for the Mother of her Lord to visit her. "And whence is this to me that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43) Is there any real difference between saying "Mother of God" and "Mother of the Lord"? Surely, God is the Lord! (Psalm 118:27) In the course of her visit to Elizabeth, the Blessed Virgin spoke the words that form the principal hymn sung in her honor at the Matins service.

"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden, for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed." (Luke 1: 47-48)

Elizabeth had already been "filled with the Holy Spirit", precisely that she might cry out: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." (Luke 1:41, 42) This honor given the Theotokos by her cousin is exactly what all generations of the Church do when they call her blessed. Finally, when Jesus saw His mother and the disciple John standing by the cross, He entrusted him with her care, but He also established a new spiritual relationship between them in saying to the disciple: "Behold thy Mother!" (John 19:27) What possible significance could this declaration of our Lord have except to make His Mother the Mother of all Christians? If she really had other children would she be in need of an outsider's home?

The Incarnation of God was foretold in the Old Testament. A race was chosen for a specific purpose: to produce a holy humanity from which God could take flesh. Mary is the one who, in the Lord's words, "heard the word of God and kept it." (Luke 11:28) Through her personal sinlessness she fulfilled all the hopes and prophecies of Israel. She figured greatly in the very prophecies, the most important of which is that of Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel." (Isaiah 7:14) The Church has always considered the following as prefigures or symbols of the role of the Theotokos in the Divine plan, and appoints them to be read on the eves of three of the feasts dedicated to her memory. The first is the story of Jacob's ladder, which refers to her being the means by which God chose to enter into the world physically. "He saw in his sleep a ladder standing upon the earth, and the top thereof touching heaven, the angels also of God ascending and descending by it". (Genesis 28:12) Then

from the Prophecy of Ezekiel are the words concerning her perpetual virginity: "And the Lord said unto me: This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall pass through it; because the Lord God of Israel hath entered in by it, and it shall be shut." (Ezekiel 44:2) The same is true of the burning bush seen by Moses: Mary contained in her womb the God-man, Jesus Christ, the God who is a consuming fire, and was not consumed.

The consequences of denying the Theotokos a part in the life of Christians are more serious than one may think in view of all its implications. Orthodox theology insists upon the two perfect natures of our Lord Jesus Christ; He was perfect God and perfect Man. The Virgin Mary communicated the humanity of the Incarnate God. The redemption of the human race was possible through the union of God and man in Christ. De-emphasis of the sinlessness of Christ's Mother, insistence upon her having other children by Joseph (which cannot be demonstrated by the New Testament), and failure to remember her part in the history of the salvation of mankind have contributed to a general misunderstanding in some churches of the Incarnation in all its fullness and power. Very closely related to the above-mentioned things is the denial of the virgin birth of Christ, a rather popular feature of present-day liberal theology. After the virgin birth, the next basic teaching under attack is the divinity of Christ, and His resurrection, and with that, the Holy Trinity Itself.

The Virgin Mary in the Orthodox view is not regarded as a mediatrix or co-redemptress. She is an intercessor for us, and the content of prayer addressed to her is a request for her intercession. The Orthodox concept of the Church is the basic reason for the invocation of the Theotokos and all the saints. The Militant Church on earth and the Victorious Church in heaven are intimately bound together in love. If it is proper for one sinner to ask another sinner to pray for him, how much more fitting it must be to ask the saints already glorified and near the throne of God to pray for us. Surely, they know something of what goes on here, for else how could there be rejoicing in heaven over the conversion of one sinner? (Luke 15:10) The saints in heaven are equals of the angels (Luke 20:36), who are used by God in the accomplishment of His purpose (Acts 12:7)

There is scriptural evidence to support the traditional Orthodox attitude toward the Virgin Mary and the saints. The other equally valid parts of Tradition also afford abundant evidence of its soundness and importance.

#### **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!**