

# The Confessor's Tongue for June 5, A. D. 2016

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pascha; Blind Man; St. Dorotheus of Gaza

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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## Recovering A Full Theological Vision of the Ascension

Hierodeacon Herman

*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.—John 12:32*

Ascension Day is possibly the most forgotten of the great feasts of the Lord. Why? In part because, unlike all the other feasts of the same rank, it can never fall on a Saturday or Sunday. Forty days after Pascha is always a Thursday, and midweek services during the Paschal season are not very popular.

Not only is this feast neglected, though, it is often mischaracterized as one of *emptiness*, a feast of absence and waiting. It is sometimes described, even in sermons and articles, as an “in-between” feast, an awkward nine days in which, while we must sadly give up the triumphant hymns of Pascha, still we are not yet granted the verdant warmth of the Holy Spirit. It's seen as a corridor joining two spacious and beautiful halls, but itself containing little that is noteworthy, aside from the virtues of patience and hope.

To be sure, this is a feast of patience and hope. The hymns in the *Pentecostarion* bear witness to this, as do the parting words of the Lord to his disciples: “Stay in Jerusalem until you are clothed with power from on high” (Lk. 24:49). Yet according to the Scriptures, they returned to Jerusalem “with great joy” (*ibid.*, v. 52). Theirs was not the sorrow of abandoned children but the joy of those who knew their master to be exalted and glorified, who saw the resurrection take on a greater fullness than it had had during the forty days since Christ's arising.

Enlightened by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Apostles came to see the Ascension as the key that opens up the mystery of our salvation. They preached and wrote about it constantly. But in the Church today it is referred to rarely if ever throughout the year. We will take the Apostles as our guides as we endeavor to enrich our somewhat meager conception of this great act of redemption.

### I

“...He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father.” The Ascension is not only a feast commemorating a past event, it is also a dogma which all the baptized are duty-bound to profess. This is made explicit in the Creed, and in that text it is coupled with an earlier phrase: “He came down from heaven ... and became man.” As God, he descended from heaven and took on human nature, and as Man, he ascended to his Father and sat down next to him. The Psalmist sings of this in prophecy: “Coming forth as a bridegroom out of his chamber, he rejoiceth as a giant to run his course. His going forth is from the uttermost part of heaven, and his circuit even unto the end of it again” (Ps. 18:6–7). St. Paul speaks of the

same “circuit”: “In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions of the earth? He who descended is the same who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things” (Eph. 4:9–10).

It is no exaggeration to say that the feasts of Annunciation and Christmas have their exact counterpart and, indeed, their fulfillment in the Ascension. Christ united himself to our nature in order to raise us up to God. The Word became flesh and made his home among men, but through the Ascension, “the head of our human race is at home, where only God is at home.” And he ascended, not to abandon the earth—much less his flesh—but to fill all things with himself.

The eternal Word of God took on our human substance in order to become the “firstborn of many brethren,” in whom we are all adopted as children of God (*cf.* Rom. 8:16, 8:29). As the first-born, in obedience to the Law, forty days after his birth from the Holy Virgin the infant Jesus was presented at the earthly Temple of his Father, where two turtledoves were sacrificed in his stead (Lk. 2:24). Likewise, forty days after his Resurrection, having given himself over to death, Christ, the “firstborn from the dead,” offered himself and all his sufferings before the throne of his Father in heaven, so that, “as the head of the body, he might in all things have the preeminence” (*cf.* Col. 1:18).

### II

We thus see in the Ascension the ultimate goal of the Incarnation, the completion of the work begun at Christmas. But we can say more: it is the fulfillment of *Holy Friday* as well. The Ascension to heaven is the final priestly act of the sacrifice made upon the Cross.

But is not the *Resurrection* the perfect fulfillment of the Cross? Yes, in at least one sense: the Resurrection shows that by submitting to humiliation, Christ was raised to incorruptible glory; that by submitting to the judgment of sinful men, Christ was vindicated as “the only Sinless One;” that by submitting to death, Christ won the victory over death. This description of the Cross as *kenosis*—the divine self-emptying that paradoxically results in exaltation—is a central motif in the Orthodox approach to the Cross and the Resurrection. However, the theological vision of the Apostles and Fathers is not exhausted by this theme alone. The Cross is first of all the perfect sacrifice made on our behalf to God the Father: the Guiltless One suffering for the guilty, and so reconciling them to God. In the words of St. Gregory Palamas:

Christ overturned the devil through suffering and his flesh which he offered as a sacrifice to the Father, as a pure and altogether holy victim—how great is his gift!—and reconciled God to our human race ... Since

he gave his blood, which was sinless and therefore guiltless, as a ransom for us who were liable to punishment because of our sins, he redeemed us from our guilt.

The late Fr. Matthew Baker notes that in much Orthodox theology of the twentieth century, “understanding of traditional atonement language has been obscured by confessional polemics and by the influence of modern existentialism, with its antinomian tendencies.” Recovering a full theology of the Ascension requires a corrective, because so much depends on Christ’s fulfillment of the Old Testament priesthood and sacrifices.

In the Old Covenant, the high priest entered once a year into the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle (later, the Temple), to offer the blood of a bullock and a goat (*cf.* Leviticus 16). He offered only the *blood*: the rest of the sacrifice was burnt outside the camp (Lev. 16:27; *cf.* Heb. 13:13). These actions prefigured and prepared for the perfect High Priesthood of Christ. Sacrificed outside the city walls of Jerusalem, his priestly work was not completed until he entered “into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb. 9:24), “taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (*ibid.*, v. 12). Christ’s Ascension to heaven is thus the completion of his priestly office begun on the Cross. Bringing his own lifeblood—the human blood he took from his Mother, the daughter of Adam and Eve—he made the offering of human life which Adam failed to make in Eden. Mankind is saved not simply by the shedding of Christ’s Blood on Calvary, but by the presentation of that Blood in intercession for us before the Throne of God. “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:5–6).

The Apostle’s emphasis here on Christ’s Manhood and on his priestly mediation on behalf of men before the Father are accents not stressed in much Eastern theology and hymnography in the aftermath of the Arian heresy, given the pressing need to safeguard the Orthodox teaching of Christ’s perfect Divinity and consubstantiality with the Father. But these themes were never entirely lost, since they are eminently Scriptural and Patristic, and rediscovering them is key to our full understanding of the Ascension.

### III

Christ is both Priest and Victim. He offers the sacrifice, and he is the sacrifice. “Entering into heaven itself,” Jesus’s Blood speaks “more graciously than that of Abel” (Heb. 12:24). As Priest, he carries the sacrificial Blood with him not in a vessel, but in his own resurrected and glorified Body, the wounds in his hands and feet and side shining in splendid testimony to his having drained the cup of death. “Who is this that comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, he that is glorious in his apparel?” In these

words from the second reading appointed for Ascension Vespers, Isaiah speaks in prophecy of the Angels’ wonder when they see their Master return to heaven, not only bearing human flesh, but bearing also the marks of his Passion. He answers them: “I speak of righteousness and saving judgment. I am full of trodden grape, I have trodden the wine press utterly alone, and from the peoples no one was with me” (Is. 63:1–3).

St. John the Theologian, in his vision on Patmos, saw “a Lamb, as though it had been slain,” standing at the throne (*cf.* Rev. 5:6). This selfsame Lamb is present on the altars of our churches, “as on a cherubic throne,” because the Divine Eucharist makes present, in particular places on earth, the mystery of the one Priesthood of Christ and his perpetual mediation for us in heaven. By calling the Liturgy a sacrifice, we do not mean that the one, unique, and perfect sacrifice of the Cross could be repeated (*cf.* Heb. 10:10–18), but that in the Liturgy our offerings of bread and wine—of our lives and livelihoods—are united to that one perfect Sacrifice, which is made present to us. In this way Christ unites us to himself, as the body to the head, and presents us to his Father, who, in him, has become our Father as well.

With Christ and in Christ, then, the Divine Liturgy brings us sinners before the throne of God. The Church, writes Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, “ascends to heaven, where the Eucharist is celebrated.” And this is so because “Christ has ascended to heaven, and his altar is ‘sacred and spiritual.’”

It is the table at which Christ gathers us, and it is the sacrificial table that unites the high priest and the sacrifice. It is the throne of the King and Lord. It is heaven, that kingdom in which “God is all in all.” ... And therefore the [little] entrance, the drawing near to the altar, is always an *ascent*.

Here Fr Schmemmann is drawing on ancient mystagogy surrounding the little entrance. St. Maximus the Confessor, commenting on the bishop’s “entrance into the sanctuary and ascent to the priestly throne,” calls this a figure of Christ’s “ascension into heaven and return to the heavenly throne.” And in the following century, St. Germanus of Constantinople expands this image: the bishop’s ascent to the throne at the high place signifies Christ’s completion of the economy of salvation, and his sitting down while still wearing the woolen omophorion—the symbol of Christ’s taking on human nature as a shepherd takes a sheep upon his shoulders—shows that Christ sat down on the Throne of the Godhead retaining his human nature.

When the bishop or priest enters the sanctuary at the Divine Liturgy, he is acting in his role as head of the community, because he is an icon of Christ. Where the Head is, there also is the Body. In ascending from the Mount of Olives into heaven, Christ, who is for all eternity consubstantial with the Father and the Holy Spirit, also remains consubstantial with the race of men. He retains his

human nature and thus could say to his disciples: "I go to prepare a place for you" (Jn 14:3). In the Liturgy, and ultimately in the Age to Come, we are given a way to approach God with boldness, "a new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh" (Heb. 10:20). Remaining disciples of the ascended Christ thus involves a challenge: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col. 3:1-2). So it is our task to "lift up our hearts" not only during the Liturgy but throughout our daily lives.

#### IV

This is challenging, among other reasons, because in this life we are not yet able to see perfectly. We know that Christ is the *Way* to the fullness of life, but the *destination* has not been fully revealed. Christ, by his flesh, has made a way into the Holy of Holies, but "the cloud received him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). And thus also in our churches, the altar is veiled, the sanctuary is hidden. But the iconostasis at the same time reveals, allowing us to perceive more deeply than we could without it.

Without the cloud, what might the disciples have seen? Would they have seen their Master become smaller and smaller, like an airplane, and then finally disappear? The cloud showed them something greater, though harder to understand: the Throne to which Christ was exalted is not a place relative to our location in space. We moderns might suppose that the Apostles and Fathers couldn't have understood this, never having peered into vast galaxies without seeing anywhere the Throne of God.

But this question—where is heaven?—preexists modern space exploration by centuries. "We do not hold that the right hand of the Father is an actual place," wrote St. John Damascene in the seventh century. "For how could he that is uncircumscribed have a right hand limited by place?" Yet at the same time the Church insists that Christ remained and remains fully human. Saint Damascene again: "His ascent from earth to heaven, and again, his descent from heaven to earth, are manifestations of the energies of his circumscribed body." Here, then, is a difficulty which the mind of man simply cannot resolve. As Douglas Farrow puts it: "in going to this place which is not a place, Jesus ... remains who and what he is, a specific human creature to whom God affords time and space and whose bodily return we await."

Christ's human body, now hidden from our physical eyes for a time, will be revealed again in majesty when he comes again as Judge. The angels made this clear to the Apostles as they stood gazing up into the sky that first Ascension Day (cf. Acts 1:11). When he returns, still bearing the marks of his Passion, those who loved darkness rather than light "shall look on him whom they pierced," and shall mourn (cf. Zech. 12:10). The Second Coming, followed

by the Universal Resurrection of every human being, the Judgment, and the inauguration of the Age to Come—this will be the final triumph of Christ's salvific work, in which not only the heavens are sanctified by Christ, but the earth also, and the entire cosmos, is to be transformed, renewed, and glorified (cf. Rom. 8:22, Rev. 21:1).

In the meantime, though, Christ remains with us "even unto the end of the age," in a hidden, mystical manner, through the Church and the Eucharist. In this life of pilgrimage, Christ strengthens us by his abiding Presence with us in the Church, as the Tent of Meeting accompanied the Israelites in the desert, and he feeds us with true Manna from heaven: his living and deified Flesh and Blood.

#### V

It is the Holy Spirit, hovering over his creation, who brings all this to pass. The Holy Spirit reveals to us Christ's abiding presence even after his Ascension from us. As Christ promised:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13-14)

In passing from Ascension to Pentecost, then, we move not from emptiness to fullness but rather to a deeper understanding of the fullness that was already there. That is, the Holy Spirit is sent to *reveal Christ*. On the Day of Pentecost itself, St. Peter preached about Christ and about his exaltation to the right hand of the Father (cf. Acts 2:33-35). The Holy Spirit reveals that Christ now reigns in glory, that he "ever liveth to make intercession for us" (Heb. 7:25), and that he is preparing a place for us. We see the work of the Spirit very clearly during the brutal stoning of St. Stephen the Protomartyr: "Full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God'" (Acts 7:55-56).

Above all, it is the Holy Spirit who works in us the adoption of sons, crying out in our hearts, "Abba, Father!" (Rom. 8:15). Anointed by the Gift of the Holy Spirit, we are made strong and readied for spiritual battle, as we grow "unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," (Eph. 4:13). And so it is the Holy Spirit who prepares us to be co-enthroned with Christ on the throne of God. "To him who conquers will I grant to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Rev. 3:21).

Because of the Ascension, we know that Christ will reign "until he has put all his enemies under his feet." "Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

And God shall be all in all.

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### What is Discernment?

Generally speaking, discernment is, and is recognized as, a sure understanding of the divine will on all occasions, in every place and in all matters; and it is only found in those who are pure in heart, and in body, and in speech. *St. John of the Ladder, quoted in Brianchaninov, The Arena, p. 59*

### On Giving Advice

We will observe that the Fathers forbid us to give advice to our neighbor of our own accord, without our neighbor's asking us to do so. The voluntary giving of advice is a sign that we regard ourselves as possessed of spiritual knowledge and worth, which is a clear sign of pride and self-deception. This does not refer to superiors and authorities [e.g. priests, bishops, parents, etc.] who are obliged at all times and whenever necessary, even without being asked, to teach the brethren entrusted to their care. *St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, The Arena, p. 53.*

### On Renunciation of Will

The essence of the [Christian] life consists in healing our impaired will, uniting it to the will of God, and sanctifying it by this union. Our will, in its fallen state, is hostile to the will of God. On account of its blindness and its hostility to God it is constantly endeavoring to oppose the will of God. When its efforts are unsuccessful, it leads a person to irritability, discontent, confusion, sorrow, despondency, *accidie*, grumbling, blasphemy, and despair. In the renunciation of one's own will to follow the will of God consists the self-renunciation commanded by the Savior, which is an indispensable condition of salvation and Christian perfection. In fact, this is so indispensable that unless this condition is satisfied, salvation is impossible, and Christian perfection is even more impossible. 'In His will is life', said the Prophet [David, Psalm 29:6]. *St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, The Arena, p. 54*

### Praying Services on the Prayer Rope

A custom exists in the Church particularly among Athonite monks of praying services on a prayer rope (*chotki/komboskini*) when one cannot attend services in the church. This custom can be of use to us. For example, if the church is too far for us to travel to more than once a week and we don't have the books needed to read the service at home, we can pray with the Church at Vigil in preparation for the Sunday Liturgy or for a Feast on the prayer rope (2100 or strictly, 2350 knots). If illness, or the care of children hinders our attendance, we may still pray with the Church before God.

We pray with attentive awareness that we stand in the presence of God and lift the prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" or, if we prefer, the longer version: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner."

Here is a schedule commonly used:

1 kathisma of the Psalter	300 knots
1 stasis of the Psalter	100 knots
Midnight Service (Nocturnes)	600 knots
Matins	1500 knots
Hours (per Hour)	250 knots
Vespers	600 knots
Small Compline	400 knots
Great Compline	700 knots

### From Elder Barsanuphius of Optina

In its aspiration for the New Jerusalem, the city of the Lord, the soul at times finds consolation in music. I the world, I loved serious music, like Beethoven and Schubert. I once went to a concert. A friend of mine met me and asked: "Where are you coming from, and why are you so happy and exultant?"

"I've been to a concert. What marvellous music! What delight it leads to soul to!"

"Well, there are even higher delights, different ones. If you would only go off in that direction, it would lead you into another realm, to the realm of the delight of prayer."

And he was not lying to me. I loved to attend church, especially the All-night Vigil in our Resurrection Cathedral. I loved the semi-darkness, the gentle twinkling light of the lampadas. It was exceptionally nice to pray there.

And here you are, going to the Vigil now; pray there. Try to pray properly; try to enter into and be immersed within yourselves. You know, in each person there exists a world of unspeakable beauty, in which are hidden many pure delights and ineffable joys. Go within yourself and they will be revealed to you. However, don't expect only delights from prayer; don't despair when you don't feel any joys. In fact, it even happens that you stand and stand in church and its as if you don't have a heart inside you, but a chunk of wood, and an unplaneable one at that. Well, what of it? Thank the Lord for the chunk of wood. It means that this was what was needed. You see, another soul, having experienced lofty delights, might get a swelled head. A condition like "stony insensibility" humbles him down. We can't demand prayerful bliss from God. From us is demanded prayerful labor, but joys are sent by God when it's pleasing to God and to our benefit. And so, let us pray to Him and rely in everything on His holy will!

### Upcoming Events 2016

9 June Holy Ascension  
11 June, Saturday, Installation of Bishop Alexander  
19 June Pentecost  
30-31 July, 15-Year Anniversary

**GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!**