

The Confessor's Tongue for December 7, 2008

25th Sunday After Pentecost: St. Ambrose of Milan

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.

December 7: St. Ambrose of Milan

The son of the Roman prefect of Gaul (born in 333 or about 340), he received a brilliant secular education in Rome. Gifted with brilliant talents and possessing an unusual gift of eloquence, he chose for himself a career as a lawyer. He entered into civil service and soon achieved the rank of prefect (deputy) of Liguria. Having arrived in Mediolanum on the occasion of the election of bishop, St. Ambrose was himself elected (in the year 374) bishop of Mediolanum, by special indication from above. During the time of the procession into the temple for the election of the new archpastor, heated arguments arose between the Orthodox and the Arians. Ambrose, as the prefect, with all the power of his eloquence convinced the people to come to order. A child's voice suddenly gave out: "Ambrose is bishop"! And both the Orthodox and the Arians, all being in the church, unanimously proclaimed: "Ambrose is bishop"! Ambrose, understanding himself unworthy of this dignity, used all means to evade this election, but was forced to undertake the hierarchical service. Not being baptized at that time but only prepared for baptism, he, after the statement of his election by the emperor, was baptized by the Orthodox bishop. In seven days he passed through the church degrees, and on the eighth, December 7, 374, he was consecrated the Archbishop of Mediolanum (Milan). Having taken his cathedra, he distributed gold and silver to the poor, and dedicated his real estate to the Church and all was given over to the performance of his high duties. He performed the divine services daily and all the time remaining from the management of the church, he devoted day and night to studying the Holy Scriptures and the works of the Greek fathers and writers. Having made the Holy Scriptures and the truths of the faith his own in mind and heart, St. Ambrose began with great fervor to preach to the people, not leaving one Sunday or one feast without teaching and in every instance taking that opportunity, and sometimes more than once a day he ascended the cathedra. His word was comprehensible and pleasant, his voice was quiet, and consequently in the temple, a surprising quietness reigned during his sermon. Also he was especially zealous in preparing the catechumens in the truths of the faith and their preparation for holy baptism. He applied great care to the improvement of the church clergy and set himself as an example of how to connect a strict ascetic life to the duties of a servant of the church. The holy bishop "was a man of great abstinence, long vigils and works. Daily he mortified his flesh with fasting which he interrupted only on Saturdays and Sundays and on the feasts of the most famous martyrs. He offered prayers day and night and did not avoid the labor of writing books in his own hand if he were not kept from this by bodily illness". Being strict with himself, he was good, gracious and

accessible to all. "He rejoiced with the rejoicing and cried with the crying. If anyone fell he confessed his sins to him. He so cried, that he raised you to tears". With varying affability and compassion, he helped the poor and consoled the unfortunate. As a zealous advocate of Orthodoxy, he led a continuous struggle against heretics and his special merit consists in the eradication of the Arian heresy in Italy. Dying paganism tried to return life to itself, but St. Ambrose subverted all its plans and its adherents. Political upheavals, civil wars and abuse of authority forced him to necessarily accept his important participation in the affairs of state, and in these cases he displayed surprising magnanimity, common sense and firmness. He died on April 4, 397. His relics are in Mediolanum. St. Ambrose wrote many dogmatic and moral compositions. As a witness to his hierarchical care of the clergy is his treatise "Concerning the Duties of the Clergy" where he gives them advice, and manuals of a mainly practical character supported with examples from the lives of the Old and New Testament righteous ones. Among the many of his hymns is the especially well known church hymn: "Let us praise Thee as God" [the *Te Deum*], composed on the occasion of the victory of Orthodoxy over Arianism. *S. V. Bulgakov, Handbook for Church Servers, 2 ed., 1274 pp. (Kharkov, 1900) pp 0447-9 Translated by Archpriest Eugene D. Tarris © 23 December 2004. All rights reserved.*

ON SINFUL FALLS

Our falls into anger and other movements of the passions demonstrate to us our underlying spiritual pride, and they humble us against our will; if we strive to eradicate this root, the branches will fall off by themselves.

Much experience is needed before we truly realize our infirmity and are humbled, and this is acquired not quickly but with much time. Our falls themselves bridle our arrogance and humble us against our will. But before God it is better to be a sinner with repentance than a righteous man with pride.

Falling and rising, repenting and being humbled is better than not falling, not repenting, and not being humbled; from the battle we learn skill.

St. Macarius of Optina

On the Need for True Theology and Virtuous Living Together

Fr. Justin Frederick

In his Fourth Catechetical Lecture, delivered in the fourth century to those who were soon to be illumined through Holy Baptism, St. Cyril of Jerusalem discusses the two fundamental needs of authentic Christian life.

He says, "The method of godliness consists of these two things, pious doctrines, and virtuous practice." By pious doctrines, St. Cyril means true theology, speaking about, confessing, and believing in God accurately as He has revealed Himself to us to be. By virtuous practice, he means a Christian way of life, one which is in conformity to God's revealed will for man as expressed in His commandments.

If either is lacking in a man, he gains no ultimate benefit. As St. Cyril puts it, "For what profit is it, to know well the doctrines concerning God, and yet to be a vile fornicator?" In other words, if our theology is correct, that is, what we confess and believe about God is true and accurate, yet we practice sin, we do not profit—and we dishonor by our sinful lives Christ God whose name we bear.

St. Cyril goes on: "And again, what profit is it, to be nobly temperate, yet an impious blasphemer?" We can be very virtuous people and live a perfectly moral life, but if our theology is wrong, we are, in fact, impious blasphemers, for we speak and believe wrongly about the true God, rejecting His self-revelation and, in effect, slandering Him and telling lies about Him, thus misrepresenting Him to ourselves and the world. The god we claim to serve, in such a case, is actually no god at all but only the figment of our deluded imagination. True Theology is essential for us to purify our distorted notions of God so that we may come to know Him as He has revealed Himself to be, as He truly is, not as we might wish Him to be.

Both right doctrine and right living are necessary for a truly Christian life. St. Cyril says, "A most precious possession, therefore, is the knowledge of doctrines: also there is need of a wakeful soul, since there are many *that make spoil through philosophy and vain deceit* (Col 2:8). He goes on to warn how other religious and philosophical groups of his day sought to lead one astray from sound teaching and correct living.

St. Cyril's warnings are as relevant to us now as they were to his catechumens in the fourth century. We live immersed in corrosive religious relativism. The acid of false notions of tolerance would eat away all claims of true doctrine and a correct way of life. People may tell us, "I'm glad your Orthodox Christian faith works for you, but it's not for me" or "It may be true for you, but it isn't true for me, and it certainly isn't true for good Muslims, Jews, and Hindus...". Our generation views our confession that "We have seen the true Light, we have found the true faith" as an arrogant and intolerant claim and considers a life lived in accordance with that true Light as extreme.

Since Absolute Truth is generally denied today, all that we are permitted is relative truths: "It's truth for me," replaces "It is the Truth." That there is any Absolute Good for man in his behavior has been rejected as well. The notion of virtue, or living in accordance with God's design and will for man, has been discarded and replaced with man's moral

autonomy to choose right and wrong for himself. For if there is no true God who has designed us for our true life to be found in Him, virtue loses its meaning and its goal. Virtue is then left to be defined by the autonomous individual in accordance with his preferences or to be discarded altogether as a concept that has outlived its usefulness.

Our land is full of Christian groups, all of which, to one degree or another, have departed from true doctrine of the true God and from correct living according to His will. Some are so far gone as to have given up even their claim to possess the Truth or to live correctly in accordance with God's revealed will. The acid of the age has fatally eroded any conviction they once had, depriving them of both fundamentals of Christianity and leaving them bereft of light in a dark world. Others still believe that they possess the truth about God and that they teach a correct way of life, but these all have demonstrably departed from the Apostolic Faith taught by St. Cyril, the Apostles, and the Fathers.

The Orthodox Church distinguishes herself from every other Christian group and every other religion in our land by continuing to uphold true Theology and virtuous practice taught by the Apostles and Fathers according to God's revelation and passed down to us. We Orthodox Christians cannot rest complacent and proud in our possession of the fullness of the Faith but must be sober-minded and vigilant both to hold to and walk in the True Faith, that we not be led astray by the spirit of our age, either in our doctrine or in how we live as Christians.

It is for this reason so many of our hymns and prayers are theological in nature, putting before us daily who this God is who has revealed Himself to us in Christ, so that we may hymn and pray to the true God Who Is rather than some product of our own corrupt imaginations. We particularly sing these hymns at the Saturday evening Vigil, which is one reason why regular attendance at the Vigil is so important for our preservation and growth in the Faith. It is for this reason that all of us are corporately called to days and seasons of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and repentance that we may move ahead in the struggle to conform our lives to the image of Christ and live in accordance with His will as revealed in His commandments.

Abba Poemen was asked for whom this saying is suitable, 'Do not be anxious about tomorrow.' (Mt. 6.34) The old man said, 'It is said for the man who is tempted and has not much strength, so that he should not be worried, saying to himself, "How long just I suffer this temptation?" He should rather say to himself, "Today."' *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Poemen 126

Orthodoxy: Mere Christianity

Metropolitan Jonah

Our Western culture, especially in America, has come to conceive Christianity as the most simple fundamentalism, without ritual, without sacred art, with very little intellectual or spiritual content. It is no wonder that the great bulk of well-educated young people have rejected it. Simplistic Christianity, the reduction of Christianity to a man and his Bible, going to listen to a sermon and sing some hymns on Sunday morning, and being "nice" is simply not satisfying. The more elaborate forms, both doctrinally and liturgically, of Western Christianity, high church Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, are being equally infected with this reductionism: under the overwhelming tide of post-enlightenment individualism, they have accepted compromises in both the moral and theological realms.

Essential Christian, Scriptural morality has been cast out, while hedonism, greed, and the gratification of the passions have become the basic values of our culture. The most essential Christian doctrines of the Resurrection of Christ, the Incarnation, and the very divinity of Christ are not only questioned, but are even excised from the confessions of some Protestant groups. The very substance of what is left of a sacramental consciousness is being lost. While external forms may remain arguably somewhat intact, the inner spiritual and intellectual vision bears little resemblance to the apostolic faith given once and for all to the Church, and which has been taught everywhere by all at all times. We are often left with nostalgically and aesthetically pleasing cultural forms, with little or no spiritual content.

THE ORTHODOX SELLOUT TO THE WORLD

The Orthodox Church has fared little better in Western culture. It has condemned itself to cultural isolation by maintaining phyletist ethnic isolation from not only other Orthodox communities but from the mainline American culture itself (and thereby compromising not only its Orthodoxy but its Catholicity as well — though we are not allowed to admit that!) Perhaps this very isolation has protected it to some degree from this mortal combat with Western culture. That time is over.

Materialism threatened to destroy the Orthodox Church in its ancestral homelands, under the form of Communism. Now materialist individualism in the West undermines the essential conceptual framework of Orthodox Christians, in the relentless onslaught of consumerism and its corrupting values propagated through the media. Orthodoxy is so often reduced to a caricature: a person and 'our faith' (regardless of content), some nostalgic cultural rituals on Sundays, fulfilled by their social functions of bringing the community together. It is neatly compartmentalized, and has little or no impact on the rest of life, or even on one's basic belief system.

The basic values of many Orthodox Americans are those of typical American society, not of Orthodox Christianity: wealth, power, money,

influence, owning the latest, the best, the most expensive home, clothes, care, computer, or whatever. Family and community are subordinated to these goals, and, should they get in the way, they are dispensable. We must ask ourselves: is the divorce rate significantly lower in the Orthodox community than elsewhere? The abortion rate?

THE LOSS OF THE ORTHODOX MIND

This is, of course, nothing but "the world" in Scriptural terms, and it is no different than it has ever been. What is different, though, is the degree to which it has undermined the essential Christian ethos—the Orthodox *phronema*—and placed the Orthodox Church in North America in the same position as, say, the Episcopal or Methodist Church, though with a more baroque ritual system and far quainter cultural customs. Values essential to the Orthodox faith, such as hierarchy, asceticism, self-denial, and the integrity of church and family structure, have been thrown out (they are certainly politically incorrect!) and replaced with individualistic egalitarianism, hedonism, and "democracy".

Even the Mother Churches of the Old World have capitulated to the demands of their sub-pubescent daughter churches and archdioceses, who insist on getting their own way. From liturgical matters, moral questions regarding the use of *economia* in clergy discipline, to the ability of the wealthy to oust an enthroned archbishop, we have a sellout of Orthodox Christianity to the world. (Of course, we must remember how many times even Constantinople sold itself out to the Papacy and became uniate, for the sake of a crusade that never came to save it from the Turks: Lyons in 1274, Florence in 1438...).

Converts and other zealots for Orthodoxy are not immune from this temptation. While the sellout to the world may be a temptation "from the left", so the capitulation to vainglorious self-satisfaction and sectarianism is a sellout "to the right". How easily we can become obsessed with the preservation of external forms, in all their glorious traditional integrity, as a kind of guarantee of our Orthodoxy. We argue about liturgical rubrics, language, chant, iconographic style, or some "issue" of calendar, ecumenism, or adherence to one or another model of "canonical" ecclesiastical unity in America.

All this is vain, having the form of religion but denying its power, having an appearance of piety. Rather, it is simply a justification for vainglorious hypocritical judgmentalism. How easy it is to become preoccupied with external "religious" issues instead of confronting God in our hearts and permitting Him to confront us. Most of these issues are simply distractions from authentic spiritual life, destructive to the unity of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. There may indeed be legitimate questions, but they must be subordinated to the one thing needful, the pursuit of our common salvation in communion with one another in the One Church.

The constant preoccupation with external issues

is no less a sellout to the world that ecumenism, the calendar, or liturgical renovationism. These not only distract us from the one thing needful—the salvation of our souls—but they compromise the integrity of the Orthodox Faith in its very essence, by making membership in the Church contingent on membership in the right faction. This is simply protestantism, regardless of what the rituals look like. The Orthodox Church is transformed into an exotic, esoteric sectarianism, constituted not by embracing the Catholic Faith through holy illumination and the Mysteries, but by loyalty to an exclusive club, one's jurisdiction.

The Gospel gets lost in the endless polemics, and we treat each other in a shameful manner that makes a mockery of Jesus Christ and Christianity. We pride ourselves in doctrinal, liturgical, and moral integrity, but do we really believe it? If we did, there would not be such divisions among us, and we would not judge and condemn one another.

THE PRIMACY OF THE GOSPEL IN OUR LIVES

The Gospel of Jesus Christ must be primary in the Orthodox pursuit of spiritual life. We must constantly ask ourselves if we truly believe the Gospel, if we truly believe in Jesus Christ and the salvation to which He has called us, communion through Him with the Father in the Holy Spirit. Is our faith manifest in our actions? Do we follow the commandments of the Lord to deny ourselves and take up the cross, to seek first the Kingdom of God above all things? Do we live as Christians and treat one another as Christians?

The essence of the Orthodox Christian Faith is that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God, who was crucified and rose from the dead. It is precisely this Faith that is under attack and denied by the world. It presents an ultimate challenge to the world. Not only is the Faith rationally incomprehensible; but the consequences of confessing that Faith for one's daily life are staggering. We can no longer go on living in the same way if we affirm that truth. So, it is much easier to pay it lip service, preferably in a language we don't understand, and affirm our Orthodox identity as part of our greater cultural heritage. We may do this, but if that is as far as it goes, we will go to hell.

As Orthodox Christians, we must affirm, with the Holy Fathers and the Holy Scriptures, that without this confession of Jesus Christ as Son of God there is no Christianity. That confession must not only be with our mouth, but with the entirety of our life in every aspect of every relationship. And we must affirm, with the holy martyrs and monks and saints, that that confession costs us everything, and that we can no longer live in the same way as before. Our confession of Jesus Christ as Son of God is not only with our mind, but must be lived out by our actions. We may not personally be called to die as a martyr, leave all our possessions for the sake of Christ, or become a eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom of God; only to those who can receive such a word is it

required. But each and every one is commanded by Christ to deny himself, take up his cross daily, and to follow Jesus regardless of the cost. What is required is a denial of our own will, our selfishness, our passions, and a voluntary self-offering in complete surrender to Christ.

CONCRETE IMPLICATIONS FOR US

Concretely, this means that we must not surrender ourselves to the world and its values; materialism, consumerism, the desire for wealth and power. More important still, we must deny ourselves the temptation to judge and condemn one another, much less rend the seamless garment of Christ by factionalism and disputes. It means to submit ourselves as an act of self-denial in obedience to our superiors in Christ, as hard as this may be.

Only within this ascetic worldview does the life and structure of the Church, and the very confession of Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Son of God make any sense, because it is how He lived. "He did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant." We must deny the world and its values: the constant gratification of our passions, and especially our pride, vainglory, and self-righteousness. This is the ascetic task of every Christian, married or monastic, because it is the Way of Jesus, the Orthodox way.

Orthodoxy is mere Christianity: simple, evangelical, whole, beautiful, integral, with all the riches of grace, and centuries of saints. There is nothing superfluous, nothing left out. If we are truly Orthodox, then it will be a whole way of life, shaped by the Gospel, filled with grace, and manifest concretely in human relationships; in a communion of love, unity of mind and heart, patience, understanding, and bearing one another's burdens, and charity towards our neighbors. If we fall short of this, we must blame no one but ourselves and repent.

It is this constant repentance, turning back to Christ, denying ourselves, and crucifying ourselves to the world and its values, by which we live as Orthodox Christians. It makes Orthodoxy not only the form of religion but the power of God to transform the world one soul at a time.

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Upcoming Events 2008

- 12-13 December: All-Night Vigil & Liturgy for St. Herman of Alaska.
- 16 December, Tuesday, 7:30 p.m. Holy Unction
- 24 December Nativity Eve: 8:00 a.m. Royal Hours, noon Vespers, 5:30 p.m. Vigil, 7:30 p.m. Holy Supper
- 25 December Nativity of Our Lord: 8:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy
- 27 December – January 2: Winter Service Retreat at St. George's, Pharr, TX.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!