

The Confessor's Tongue for May 24, 2009

Sixth Sunday of Pascha: the Blind Man Christ is Risen! Indeed, He is risen!

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.

The Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ

The Great Feast of the Ascension is commemorated on the fortieth day after Pascha, which always falls on a Thursday. It has a post-feast of nine days, concluding on the Friday before Pentecost.

The Ascension marks the end of our Lord's earthly work and his triumphal return to Heaven.

On a deeper level, the Ascension marks the first entrance of human nature into God's Kingdom in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, matter of great rejoicing to the Church. Christ's glorification in the Ascension is also our glorification, for it is the elevation of human nature. Man's nature now shares Divine honor as Christ our brother enters Heaven in human form. The Feast leads us to consider seriously our true home in God's plan of salvation. Too often we think of the Kingdom of God as an afterlife, a postscript to our existence in this world. In reality, our true home is not on this fallen planet, but in the perfect and eternal Heavenly Kingdom. As St. Paul writes to the Colossians:

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. (*Colossians 3:1-4*)

Our life is hidden with Christ in God in heaven. It is there and there alone where God desires us to live in common union with Him to its fullest. If we indeed have the vocation to become saints, to share in the Divine nature, we must be prepared to inhabit the abode God has prepared for us, which was first experienced in the flesh by our Lord Jesus Christ after His Ascension. Our Lord has prepared the way for us to participate fully in God's Divine plan for our salvation. Let us glorify Him for establishing us as heirs to the Heavenly Kingdom and prepare ourselves in holiness to become worthy citizens of it.

St. John Chrysostom proclaims in his homily on the Feast, "Today, the human race is completely reconciled with God. The ancient battle and enmity have disappeared. We, who were unworthy to live even on earth, are now lifted up to Heaven. Today, we become heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven, we, who do not even deserve earth, we ascend to heaven and inherit the throne of the King and Lord. Human nature, against which the cherubim guarded paradise, is now raised up above all the cherubim."

Just before His Ascension, Jesus bade His Disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the descent of the Holy Spirit. Thus the time of the Feast of Ascension is a time of anticipation and preparation for the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. As a sign of

this anticipation of Pentecost, we continue not to say the prayer "O Heavenly King..." until Pentecost.

Ascension is preceded on Wednesday by the Leavetaking of Pascha, which marks the end of the forty-day Paschal season. With the leavetaking of Pascha, we cease saying the Paschal greeting and the Paschal troparion.

During the nine days of the Ascension, we say or sing the troparion and kontakion of the Feast at meals and during our usual morning and evening prayers. We say (or sing) the troparion once in place of "O Heavenly King" as well.

Ascension, Troparion, tone 4

Thou hast ascended in glory, O Christ our God, / granting joy to Thy disciples by the promise of the Holy Spirit. / Through the blessing they were assured / that Thou art the Son of God, / the Redeemer of the world.

Ascension, Kontakion, tone 6

When Thou didst fulfill the dispensation for our sake / and unite earth to heaven; / Thou didst ascend in glory, O Christ our God, / not being parted from those who love Thee, / but remaining with them and crying: / I am with you and no one will be against you!

Praying Service on the Prayer Rope

A custom exists in the Church particularly among Athonic 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. 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."

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

We can also use the prayer rope to pray for others. Simply say, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on N." (*name of person*) as many times as desired. One can effectively lift others up to the Lord in intercession in this way.

A Sincere Confession of an Orthodox Christian

Bless me, O Lord and Savior, to confess to Thee not only with words, but also with bitter tears, and there is much to weep for...

My faith in Thee vacillates, O Lord! Thoughts of skepticism and disbelief push themselves in to my soul much more often than they ever have.

Why? Of course, the spirit of the times is to blame, and people that I meet are to blame, but even more to blame am I myself, because I do not struggle with disbelief, because I do not pray to Thee for aid.

I am still more to blame if I am a temptation for someone else, by deed or word or just by cold silence when people speak of the faith. I have sinned in this, O Lord: forgive and have mercy, and grant me faith.

My love for other people, even my relatives, is diminishing. Their continual requests for help and their forgetfulness of how much I have already done for them causes mutual hard feelings. But I am more guilty than they are: guilty because although I have the means to help them, I help them only grudgingly; guilty because I help them not for pure, Christian motivations, but out of pride and a desire for gratitude and praise. Forgive me, Oh Lord, soften my heart and teach me to look not at how people treat me, but at how I treat other people. And if they treat in a hostile way, inspire me, Oh Lord, to pay them back with love and goodness and pray for them.

I have also sinned in that I think very, very little about my sins. Not only at ordinary times of the year, but even when I am preparing for Communion I do not remember them, I do not try to call them to mind for confession. General phrases come to mind: "Nothing special, I am sinful like everyone. Oh Lord, it is as if I did not know that in Thy eyes both every "idle word" and even the sinful desire in my heart is a sin. And how many of these words and desires pile up within me in just one day, not to mention in a whole year! Thou alone, Lord, knowest them; grant me to see my transgressions, have mercy on me, and save me.

Further: I acknowledge as my constant sin the lack of almost any struggle with evil. As soon as any occasion or provocation appears, I plunge headlong into the pit of sin, and then, just as soon as I have fallen, I ask myself: what have I done? A fruitless question, because it does not help me to become better. And if at this point I feel sorrow, it proceeds from my self-esteem having suffered, and not from the realization that I have offended Thee, Oh Lord. I neglect struggling not only with gross evil, but even with the most frivolous and harmful habit. I do not know how to master myself and I do not even try. I have sinned; forgive me!

Furthermore, the sin of irritability, which predominates in me, is not withdrawing from me in the least. When I hear a sharp word, I do not reply with good-natured silence but behave like a heathen: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. And hostility flares up for trifles and lasts for days and weeks. I do

not think of conciliation, but try to get revenge when an opportunity presents itself. I have sinned times without number, Oh Lord. Have mercy, forgive me, and calm my heart!

Besides these most grievous sins, my whole life is a chain of sins: I do not value the time that Thou hast given for gaining eternal salvation. I very often stand irreverently, pray mechanically, judge others while they are praying, but do not look after myself. At home I sometimes pray with great reluctance and absent-mindedness, so that often I do not hear my own prayer, and sometimes I simply omit it. Such are my attitudes towards Thee, Oh Lord, and I can say nothing else but "forgive and have mercy!"

In my relations with people I sin with all my senses; I sin with my tongue by pronouncing false, foul, reproachful, or suggestive words; I sin with my eyes; I sin with my mind and heart by judging others and I am contentious often and for long periods of time; I sin not only against my soul, but against my body as well, by immoderately consuming food and drink. Accept, Oh Lover of Mankind, my repentance, that I might approach Thy holy and life-giving Mysteries in peace, for the remission of sins, for the correction of this temporary life, and for the inheritance of eternal life. Amen.

"I am not worthy to ask forgiveness, Oh Lord!" So the great teacher of penitence, Saint Ephraim the Syrian, once exclaimed of himself. "How can we resist the attack of sin? How can we deny entry to the passions?" Saint Basil the Great asked Saint Ephraim, who answered "Only by shedding tears."

What can I, the consummate and incorrigible sinner, say to thee now, O Lord? Through the prayers of our holy fathers, Ephraim and Basil, grant me, Oh Lord, repentance, and words, and tears. Help me to spew out of myself, like deadly poison, my evil deeds, idle words, and wicked thoughts.

If I have forgotten to tell anything, Thou knowest know all and will remind me; for I do not want to conceal anything. Thou comandest command me, "tell your iniquities before thou seekest justification. But I say: "My sins are multiplied, Oh Lord, and they multiply incessantly. They have no limit. I know and I remember that even an impure thought is an abomination in Thy sight, but I not only think, but also do, things that grieve Thee.

I know that I am doing evil, but I do not refrain from it... Thus, my repentance has not yet even begun, and the end is not in sight for my evil carelessness about sin.

There is truly no limit to my foul thoughts, bursts of self-esteem, vainglory, pride, gossip, resentment, and vengefulness. I quarrel often, and I become angry, cruel, envious, lazy, and blindly stubborn. Although I am of no importance, I think very highly of myself. I do not want to honor those worthy of honor, but at the same time I demand undeserved deference for myself.

I lie ceaselessly, but I get angry at liars.

I judge those who speak evil or who are thieves, but I myself am a thief and an evil-sayer.

I defile myself by lustful thoughts and stimuli, but sternly judge others for immodestly.

I cannot bear being joked about, but I myself love to taunt others, respecting neither persons nor places, even doing it in church.

I consider as an enemy anyone who tells the truth about me.

I do not want to put myself out by doing a good turn, but I get angry if someone does not do me a good turn.

I coldly refuse a neighbor in need, but when I myself am in need, I tiresomely appeal to him.

I do not like to visit the sick, but if I am sick, I expect everyone to care for me without my asking.

Lord, send down in to the depths of my soul a ray of heavenly light, that I might see my sins.

My confession is almost always limited to only a superficial naming of some sins.

Oh my God, my conscience gave Thee a promise to start a better life, but I broke the promise and live as before. Unless I have turned over a new leaf, I am ashamed to appear before a mere human with whom I have often not been true to my word.

How could I stand before Thee, my God, without shame and self-reproach, when so many times before Thy Throne, before the angels and saints, I have given promises and have not fulfilled them. How base I am! How criminal! To Thee, Oh Lord, is truth, and to me are shameful faces" (*Book of Daniel*). Only Thy boundless goodness can endure me. Thou dost not destroy the sinner; do not destroy the penitent.

Teach me how to bring to mind and count the sins of my past life, the sins of an empty-headed youth, the sins of proud manhood, the sins of day and of night, sins against Thee, my Lord and Savior. How can I count them in the few minutes in which I stand in this Holy Place? I remember, Lord, that thou didst heed the few words of the publican and the thief. I know that thou mercifully greetest even a readiness to repent, and I pray to Thee with all my soul, "My Lord, accept as my repentance the daily confession of sins that the sacred book contains. I have many more sins than it lists, and I have no way to make amends for them. I offer now only a striving for thee and a desire for the good, but I have no strength to reform.

Oh Lord and Lover and Mankind! Thou dost not drive away the sinner who comes to Thee, beseeching Thee for forgiveness. Before he even comes to the door of Thy mercy, thou hast already opened it for him; before he falls down before Thee, thou hast already stretched out Thy hand to him; before he confesses his sins, thou hast granted him forgiveness. Grant it to me who repents, grant it according to Thy great mercy; forgive all the bad things that I have done, said, and thought.

And while granting forgiveness, send me also, Oh Lord, the strength, so that I might be able henceforth to live according to Thy will and not to offend Thee.

Help me, and I will be saved; help me by granting me to receive Thy holy Mysteries and that I may receive them worthily, declare to me by the lips of Thy priest, declare by Thy Holy Spirit, the grace of pardon and forgiveness, which can not be heard by the ear, but are heard in a deeply-moved heart and in peace of conscience. Amen.

Translated by Seraphim F. Englehardt from a leaflet published on Mount Athos

The God-Man: The Foundation of the Truth of Orthodoxy

St. Justin of Chelije

All the truths of Orthodoxy emerge from one truth and converge on one truth, infinite and eternal. That truth is the God-man Christ. If you experience any truth of Orthodoxy to its limit, you will inevitably discover that its kernel is the God-man Christ. In fact, all the truths of Orthodoxy are nothing other than different aspects of the one Truth — the God-man Christ.

Orthodoxy is Orthodoxy by reason of the God-man, and not by reason of anything else or anyone else. Hence another name for Orthodoxy is God-manhood. In it nothing exists through man or by man, but everything comes from the God-man and exists through the God-man. This means that man experiences and finds out about the fundamental eternal truth of life and the world only with the help of the God-man, in the God-man. And it means something else: man learns the complete truth about man, about the purpose and meaning of his existence only through the God-man. Outside of Him a man turns into an apparition, into a scarecrow, into nonsense. Instead of a man you find the dregs of a man, the fragments of a man, the scraps of a man. Therefore, true manhood lies only in God-manhood; and no other manhood exists under heaven.

Why is the God-man the fundamental truth of Orthodoxy? Because He answered all the questions that torture and torment the human spirit: the question of life and death, the question of good and evil, the question of earth and heaven, the question of truth and falsehood, the question of love and hate, the question of justice and injustice. In brief: the question of man and God.

Why is the God-man the fundamental truth of Orthodoxy? Because He proved in the most obvious way by His own earthly life that He is the incarnate, humanized, and personified eternal Truth, eternal Justice, eternal Love, eternal Joy, eternal Power: Total-Truth, Total-Justice, Total-Love, Total-Joy, Total-Power.

He brought down all the divine perfections from heaven to earth. And He did not just bring them down, but also taught them to us and gave us grace-filled power to transform them into our life, into our thoughts, into our feelings, into our deeds. Hence, our calling is to incarnate them in ourselves and in the world around us.

Consider the best of the best people in the human race. In all of them it is the God-man that is best, most important and most eternal. For He is the holiness of the Saints, the martyrdom of the Martyrs, the righteousness of the Righteous, the apostleship of the Apostles, the goodness of the Good, the mercy of the Merciful, the love of the Loving. Why is the God-man each and every aspect of Orthodoxy? Because He, as One of the Holy Trinity, the incarnate Son of God, is distinct as God, as Comforter, as Defender, as Teacher, and as Savior. Only in Him, in the all-merciful Lord Jesus, does man, tormented by earthly tragedies, find the God who can truly give meaning to suffering, the Comforter who can truly give comfort in every misfortune and sorrow, the Defender who can truly defend from every evil, the Savior who can truly save from death and sin, the Teacher who can truly teach eternal Truth and Justice.

The God-man is each and every aspect of Orthodoxy, for He infinitely magnifies man. He elevates him to God; He makes him a god by grace. And He did this without reckoning man less than God, but filled man with all divine perfections. The God-man has glorified man as no other has. He has given him life eternal, Truth eternal, Love eternal, Justice eternal, Joy eternal, Goodness eternal, Blessedness eternal. Man has become divine majesty through the God-man.

While the God-man is the fundamental truth of Orthodoxy, the fundamental truth of every heterodoxy is man, or fragments of his being — reason, the will, the senses, the soul, the body, expertise. Integral man does not exist in heterodoxy; the whole man is divided into atoms, into particles. And it is all for the glory of man's greatness. But just as art for the sake of art is nonsense, so also is it nonsense to say man for the sake of man. That path leads to a most pitiful pandemonium, where man is the supreme idol — and nowhere is there a more pitiful idol than he.

The first truth of Orthodoxy is that man does not exist for the sake of man, but for the sake of God or, more fully, for the sake of the God-man. Therefore, we stay with the God-man in the name of man. In Him alone is an understanding of man's being possible; in Him alone is a justification for man's existence possible. All the mysteries of heaven and earth are attained in this truth, all the values of all the worlds that man can contemplate, all the joys of all the perfections that man can attain.

Indirectly and directly, the God-man is everything in Orthodoxy, and thus man is in Him, but in heterodoxy there is merely man. In its very essence, Orthodoxy is nothing other than the Personality of the God-man Christ extended across all ages, extended as the Church. Orthodoxy has its own seal and sign by which it distinguishes itself. It is the radiant Person of the God-man Jesus.

Everything that does not have that Person is not Orthodox. Everything that does not have the God-man's Justice, Truth, Love, and Eternity is not

Orthodox. Everything that wants to carry out the God-man's Gospel in this world through the methods of this world and through the methods of the kingdoms of this world is not Orthodox, but implies enslavement to the third temptation of the devil.

To be Orthodox means to have the God-man constantly in your soul, to live in Him, think in Him, feel in Him, act in Him. In other words, to be Orthodox means to be a Christ-bearer and a Spirit-bearer. A man attains this when, in the body of Christ — the Church, his whole being is filled with the God-man Christ from top to bottom. For this reason the Orthodox man is hidden with Christ in God.

The God-man is the axis of all worlds, from the world of the atom to the world of the cherubim. Whatever being breaks off from that axis, tumbles into terror, into tortures, into agony. Lucifer broke off — and became Satan; angels broke off — and became demons; man broke off in large part — and became inhuman (non-man).

Anything created that breaks off from it inevitably plunges into chaos and grief. And when a people, as a group, deny the God-man, their history turns into a journey through hell and its horrors.

The God-man is not just the fundamental truth of Orthodoxy, but the power and omnipotence of Orthodoxy as well; for He alone saves man from death, sin, and the devil. No man whatsoever, nor even mankind as a whole ever could, can, or will be able to do that. The outcome of man's struggle with death, sin, and the devil is always defeat, unless he is led by the God-man. Only through the God-man Christ can man conquer death, sin, and the devil.

Hence, the purpose of man is: to fill himself with the God-man, in His body — the Orthodox Church; to be transfigured in Him through grace-filled feats; to become omnipotent. Even while he walks prayerfully through the gloomy earthly anthill in the body, in his soul he lives above, where Christ Sits at the right hand of God, for his life is constantly stretched out between earth and heaven by prayers, like a rainbow that connects the summit of heaven with the abyss of earth.

To become immortal in Him by the power of the Holy Spirit, to become God, to become the God-man — this is the purpose, the true purpose of the whole human race. It is also the joy, the only joy in this world of boundless sorrow and toxic bitterness.

Orthodoxy is Orthodoxy through the God-man. And we Orthodox, by confessing the God-man, indirectly confess the Christ-image of man, the divine origin of man, the divine exaltation of man, and thus also the divine value and sacredness of the human personality. In fact, the struggle for the God-man is the struggle for man. Not the humanists, but the people of the Orthodox faith and life of the God-man are struggling for true man, man in the image of God and the image of Christ.

Upcoming Events 2009

16-19 August, men's retreat at Holy Archangels Monastery.