

The Confessor's Tongue for March 25, A. D. 2012

Fourth Sunday of Lent: St. John of the Ladder; Annunciation

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 Annunciation of the Theotokos

"Today is the beginning of our salvation and the revelation of the mystery which is from before the ages: the Son of God becometh the Son of the Virgin" (Troparion of Annunciation). Thus, with a song of praise, our Church greets the Great Feast of the Annunciation of the Most Holy Mother of God, calling it the beginning of our salvation. And justifiably, for this feast is one of the most important feasts of our Church Year.

St. Athanasios the Great (+373) in his sermon the Annunciation, calls this feast the first in the list of feasts, for it begins the work of salvation of the human race. The basis for this feast is the joyful annunciation recorded in St. Luke 1:26-38. the Annunciation is the first in a whole series of great mysteries in the life of Jesus Christ and his Most Holy Mother.

The Archangel's message of the Incarnation of the Son of God was the good news that fallen man had awaited for thousands of years. The fullness of time has come, the Virgin who can bear God in her womb is ready and willing, and God now becomes man to accomplish our salvation, to unite man with Himself through His Son.

Annunciation & Greek Independence

For the Greeks, March 25th, besides being the Great Feast of the Annunciation, also marks an anniversary of great importance: the commemoration of the liberation of the Greek nation from a four hundred-year Turkish slavery. Bishop Germanos raised in the Peloponnese the flag of liberation on the day of the Annunciation—the one day above all that marks the beginning of man's salvation—thus connecting it with the beginning of a hard a long struggle for national independence. Hence, the joy of both feasts bears a deep and personal relevance for the Greek Orthodox. Because of the greatness of the joy associated with the Feast, fish is always permitting even in the midst of the strictness of fasting in Great Lent.

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 [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 honourable 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 Saviour: "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 Saviour. 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.

From the Triodion

With God's help we have rounded the turning-post of the Fast. Let us run the remainder of the course with all our strength and win a victor's crown.

Monday Matins Canon of the Fifth Week

The holy Fast feeds our hearts, ripening within us thoughts acceptable to God, and causing the deep abyss of our passions to dry up; and with the rain of compunction, it cleanses those who in faith offer praise to the Almighty. *Monday Matins Canon*

Strengthened in spirit by fasting, Elisha once raised up the child of the Shunammite. We have been killed by the pleasures of passion; through the life-giving Fast, O ye faithful, let us regain life once more.

Monday Matins Canon of the Fifth Week

O Word of God, Thou hast given us the time of the Fast, that we may turn again and live, and in now way perish. Grant that all of us may please Thee, O Christ, and serve Thee with fervent compunction, like the wise and holy harlot: for because of the sweet-smelling ointment and the warm tears which she shed, she received forgiveness of her sins. *Monday Vespers of the Fifth Week*

Like the man who fell among thieves and was wounded, I have also fallen through my sins, and my soul has been wounded. To whom shall I fly for healing, but to Thee, Physician of souls and bodies? Pour out upon me Thy great mercy, O God. *Monday Vespers of the Fifth Week*

Fleeing from the icy cold of self-indulgence, let us all warm ourselves with the light of abstinence and the Holy Spirit. *Tuesday Matins Canon of the Fifth Week*

Let us make our own pure fasting, prayer, tears, meditation on holy things, and every other virtue; and let us bring them now as an offering to God our Master. *Tuesday Matins Canon of the Fifth Week*

Cleansed through fasting, let us draw near to the mountain of the virtues, and let us clearly hear what God will say within us; for He will speak to us of peace and illumination and the healing of our broken souls. *Tuesday Matins Canon of the Fifth Week*

Upcoming Events 2012

28 March: Complete Great Canon Wed evening.
8 April Palm Sunday
15 April Pascha, the Feast of Feasts; Pascal Picnic
20 April Bright Friday Liturgy with Metropolitan Jonah

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!