

The Confessor's Tongue for December 9, A. D. 2012

27th Sunday after Pentecost: Conception of the Most Holy Theotokos by St. Anna
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.

Dec 9: Conception of the Theotokos

Saint Joachim and Anna who lived in Nazareth in Galilee "in the whole piety of the Mosaic law", up to their very old age had no children. On one great feast the righteous Joachim, according to the custom of the law, gave gifts and offerings to God in the temple in Jerusalem. The high priest Issachar who accepted the offerings of the numerous throngs of people, and did not want to accept the gifts from Joachim, telling him: "It is not right to accept gifts from you as from a true Israelite; for you are childless; because of some kind of heavy sins you have not received the blessing of God."

Struck by the speech of the High Priest, as though by the awesome verdict of the judgment of God Himself, the righteous man had no time even to withdraw from the altar, as a new heavier insult struck his hearing. One of the Israelites bringing his gifts, pushed him away, said: "depart from here, did you not hear that you are unworthy to bring gifts to God together with us, because you have not left offspring for Israel." With deep humility Joachim accepted this accusation as if it were from the mouth of the very God with deep sadness left the temple, with a painful heart he recognized himself unworthy not only to remain in the sight of the house of God, but also to return to his own house, and he withdrew to the desert, where he grazed his cattle. In fasting and repentance, in tears and prayer he spent 40 days, imploring the Lord to forgive him all his sins, to remove his dishonor in Israel, to bless him in old age by the birth of a child.

The inexpressible sadness of heart struck the righteous Anna also, when she heard about the disgrace of her spouse before the altar of God by the numerous throngs of the sons of Israel on the day of the great feast of the Lord. She herself was judged by all for the guilt, the sin of all Israelite wives, unworthy to even see the light of God because she was deprived of God's blessing. Having confined herself to her room, in fasting and repentance, in tears and in sighing she cried out to the Lord day and night, imploring Him not for her sake, but for the sake of the piety of her righteous spouse, to relieve them from the curse of childlessness and to bless the fruit of her womb. Being alone in the garden under the shade of the laurel tree, Saint Anna saw a bird's nest, about which the mother flew feeding her nestlings. Everything in nature, Saint Anna thought, gives birth, everything is by the blessings of God – the birds of the sky, the animals of the forest and the very earth in growing various fruits, but she alone is deprived of happiness and the blessings of God. Even more fervently Saint Anna began to pray to the Lord and the Lord heard her tearful prayer. She heard (the voice of the angel proclaimed to her: "God has

granted you the desire of your prayer." "Thou," the Angel announced to her, "wilt conceive and give birth to the Most Blessed Daughter, before whom all with knees to the ground will bless and who will be the salvation of the world; her name will be Mary." Pleased by the heavenly annunciation, Saint Anna quickly sped to Jerusalem to pour out before the Lord, in His sacred temple her feelings of thanksgiving and the joy that filled her heart.

At the same time the heavenly messenger was revealed to the crying and praying Joachim in the desert with the same joyful annunciation, and with the confirmation of his words commanded him to go to Jerusalem, where he returned to his wife. Before the doors of the temple of God the rejoicing spouses met, with one voice glorified and thanked over and again the Lord God, who saw their humility; with one voice have promised before the Lord to devote to Him their promised children. Soon, after returning to their home, the pious spouses were even happier with the fulfillment of the divine promise: Saint Anna conceives in her womb and "begins to grow the divine rod, who will sprout the mysterious flower of Christ, the Creator of all." "Come joyful day, exclaims the Holy Church in its hymns for this day, all the orders and ages of mankind, with the angelic choirs let us celebrate the glorious conception of the Theotokos: the patriarchs – the Mother of all kings, the prophets – the One Whom you prophesied, the forefathers – the One Whom from us is the Mother of God, the elders – the ancestors of God, the ancestors of God – the Maiden of God, the virgins – the Ever Virgin One, the faithful – the roots of faith, the priests – the all dedicated temple of God, the saints of all people – the wine of your assemblies, the angelic hosts – gave birth to the Master of all creation and the Savior of our souls.

Confession in the Fast

The Nativity Fast is given to us to remove the clutter from our lives that displaces Christ and make room for Him in our hearts that we may receive Him in greater measure. An important means of doing this is preparing ourselves for Holy Confession. If we have not been to Confession since the Fast began, or have not gone for a long time, we should make the effort to prepare ourselves and make a good Confession so that we may be cleansed and illumined by Holy Communion.

From St. Theophan the Recluse

Prayer is the test of everything; prayer is also the source of everything; prayer is the driving force of everything; prayer is also the director of everything. If prayer is right, everything is right. For prayer will not allow anything to go wrong.

Every prayer must come from the heart, and any other prayer is no prayer at all. Prayerbook prayers, your own prayers, and very short prayers, all must issue forth from the heart to God, seen before you. And still more must this be so with the Jesus Prayer.

The principal thing is to stand with the mind in the heart before God, and to go on standing before Him unceasingly day and night, until the end of life.

You must never regard any spiritual work as firmly established, and this is especially true of prayer; but always pray as if beginning for the first time.

Questions & Answers on a Rule of Prayer

How do we learn to pray with our lips, and then with our mind?

1. If our childhood habits have been forgotten (or never established), then it is possible to learn to pray aloud (that is, step onto the first level of prayer) by using a prayerbook and paying close attention to the standard Church prayers. "The Church wisely established hymns and various troparia on account of the weakness of our mind, so that we, although foolish, might be attracted by the sweetness of the singing and thus praise God even against our will" (St. Peter of Damascus). The Church accepted hymns and troparia so that we would be humbled and rise to excellent thoughts as if upon a ladder.

2. Christ's teaching demands that our faith and our way of living be inseparable. For this reason, every Christian, or order to live in constant prayer, must have a daily order of prayer; that is, to establish under the guidance of a spiritual father a prayer rule. As St. Augustine said, "Once we were cleansed by Baptism; but every day by prayer."

What is the practical significance of a prayer rule?

"A prayer rule is an arrangement of several prayers written by the holy and God-inspired Fathers, which are adapted to a specific time and circumstances" (St. Ignatius Brianchaninov).

"The purpose of a rule is to increase the number of prayerful thoughts and feelings...and so that they be correct, holy, and perfectly pleasing to God" (*Ibid.*).

"The soul, left to her own devices, would not be able to follow the correct path of prayer. She would become distorted: either through daydreaming, or through illusions of lofty visions, inspired by vainglory" (*Ibid.*).

"The soul, filled and nurtured by prayerful thoughts and feelings selected from a ready-made prayerbook, begins of its own accord to live these thoughts and feelings" (St. Theophan the Recluse).

How long should a prayer rule be?

The rule is for the person, not the person for the rule. When determining a rule, it is necessary to adapt it to, and not exceed, the individual's strength. A rule is meant to further spiritual advancement, and

not to serve as an excuse for self-opinion. "It is better to alter parts of a rule, or even invent an entirely new one, lest prayer become a mere ritual" (St. Theophan).

"I prefer a brief rule that is continually performed to a long rule that is quickly abandoned" (St. Matoes).

"In the day of judgement, God will not condemn us for leaving off psalms or abandoning prayers, but for allowing the demons to enter us because we ceased our rule" (St. Isaac the Syrian).

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. In 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 2012

9 December: Mission Council Meeting
13 December: Feast of St. Herman of Alaska
20 December: Holy Unction Service, 7:00 p.m., for the healing of soul and body, 7:00 p.m. To receive the anointing, one must be Orthodox and have made a Confession since the Nativity Fast began.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!