

The Confessor's Tongue for March 31, A. D. 2013

Second Sunday of Lent; St. Gregory Palamas

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.

Present-Day Martyrdom

Modern culture does not regard anything that involves denying oneself as virtuous. The ultimate act of self denial is martyrdom—sacrificing one's life for another person, a cause, a belief, or for one's country. We cannot offer anyone or any cause more than our life.

The Church calendar is full of commemorations of martyrs. The Church was literally built upon the blood of the martyrs, both those of the early centuries as well as those who died for Christ under Ottoman and communist rules. Presently, there are few places where this kind of martyrdom is carried out, but our lives as Orthodox Christians are to be lives of martyrdom in other ways.

The Church recognizes [or blesses] two ways, two paths, to the Kingdom of Heaven: monasticism and marriage. Both of these are a form of martyrdom. Monastic martyrdom is reflected in the black habit which the monks and nuns wear, symbolizing being "dead" to the things of this world, forsaking the pleasures of married life and having children, and absolute obedience to the superior. Husbands and wives are to sacrifice everything for the sake of the other.

This "martyrdom" for both monastics and those who are married is reflected in the Epistle readings for the rite of monastic tonsure and also for the marriage service. While they are different readings, they are both taken from St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians.

The Epistle for monastic tonsure, taken from chapter six, refers to the monastic "arming" him/herself for battle. Interestingly, this is the same Epistle that is read on the feasts of women martyrs. A battle lies ahead. *For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places* (Eph 6:12).

The Epistle for the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony refers to the obedience of the wife and that the husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the Church and *died* for it. A martyrdom of will and a martyrdom of life! In fact, at the marriage service, the bride and groom are led around the table which holds the Holy Gospel while "O holy martyrs, who have fought the good fight and received your crowns..." is sung. This is not coincidental.

All of us are called to a life of martyrdom. This living martyrdom for both monastic and the wedded—not having possessions, obedience, giving in to the desires of a spouse, etc.—is just the beginning. The Church gives us specific days and seasons in which we deny ourselves even more through fasting, extra prostrations, forsaking forms of entertainment, longer vigils. All this is in accordance with St. Paul

who said *I treat my body hard and bring it into subjection* (I Cor. 9:27).

The soul is superior to the body, for it is immortal. In the Lord's Prayer, our Savior Jesus Christ teaches us first to seek what is eternal: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done" and only after that to ask from God that which is the most basic element to our earthly existence: "Give us this day our daily bread."

We have inverted the order of things for which we yearn. Simple bread is not enough—we want the most, the best, the highest quality of food, housing, transportation, entertainment, and all our other transitory, earthly things. Where is the yearning for eternity? We do love the longer lenten services, but how long are they compared to the time wasted in front of a computer screen daily?

Do we "treat our bodies hard" as St. Paul says? Perhaps a bit more during Great Lent, but we are called to treat our egos harder. We can "die" a thousand times a day for Christ—and He will bless us for it—if we accept the hardships, the insults, being overlooked or underappreciated, all without complaining.

The martyrs endured unimaginable tortures for the sake of Christ, and never, not in one single martyric account, do we read that they complained, whined, griped, whimpered, accused others, or felt that they suffered unjustly. No. They accepted insults and fleshly tortures in the same way that our Lord did—willingly and without complaint.

We call ourselves "Christians" which one spiritual father defines as "little christs". Do we behave in that way? No one wants to hear us always complaining or whining. Think about it: the people you want to be near the most are those who do not always complain, but rather are more positive. It is so easy to notice that others "gripe and complain all the time," but we need to recognize it in ourselves.

This griping, complaining, whining, and negativity is a sin. One thing that is heard in monastic settings is older monastics saying to younger ones, "Don't gripe!" Why? Because this sinful griping shows and voices our ingratitude to God for all He has bestowed upon us. How can we imitate the martyrs; how can we imitate the Lord Himself, who suffered tortures, insults, and death, if we cannot accept the least slight against us? We complain about the weather, our jobs, our friends or coworkers, politics, drivers on the road, bills, and everything else imaginable, instead of being thankful: thankful for the warmth and sunlight and moisture; thankful for the ability to work; thankful for friends and family; thankful for freedom; thankful for having means of transportation; thankful for goods and services that enable us to live from day to day.

Yes, hardships befall all of us. Some we bring upon ourselves; some the Lord allows us to suffer to make us stronger spiritually; and some are temptations which the devil assails us with as he sees us striving toward Christ. But the devil does not hear our confessions, nor does he know our thoughts. How then does he always manage to strike us where we are most vulnerable? How? He hears it from our own mouths when we complain. Then he not only rejoices at our ingratitude to God, but he strikes us there even more!

These struggles, these attacks from the devil, are temporal if we constantly give thanks to the Lord *for He is good, for His mercy endureth forever* (Psm 135:1). If we can change our attitudes and accept all which comes upon us—however difficult or unbearable it may seem—we may find that those trials were a path for our salvation. The martyrs knew that their bodily sufferings would end in physical death, and they endured. That physical death was the doorway to eternal life. Their love for God was so great that many of them did not even feel the tortures, for we read in the accounts of their martyrdoms that they “suffered as though not in the body.”

Love, which is the greatest of the virtues, overcomes all things. Love for Christ, longing for Him, willing to sacrifice all for Him, overcomes even physical or emotional suffering.

AS we find ourselves in the holy time of the Great Fast, let us extend our lenten efforts to die daily, willingly for Christ, *without* complaining. We can answer rebukes with kind remarks or gratitude; we can compliment someone whom we normally try to avoid; when we open our mouths to complain, let us instead utter encouraging or loving remarks. St. James tells us clearly that *the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity; so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell* (James 3:6).

If we fix our eyes on Christ, we will hold our tongues. The martyrs were aware that the Lord is everywhere present. We declare it every time we say the beginning prayer “O Heavenly King...” but we need to be more aware of this great reality by giving thanks instead of complaining, by bowing our heads to hardships and insults, giving thanks to the Lord always, for this is what plants in us a pure heart.

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Second Sunday of Fast: St. Gregory Palamas

The Orthodox teaching about fasting as a means for the beneficial inner light is revealed with special power in the commemoration on this Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica and Wonderworker (see Nov. 14). St. Gregory is known as the one who exposed the heresy of Barlaam, the Calabrian monk, who rejected the Orthodox teaching about the blessed light, which illuminates the internal

person sometimes openly visible (as for example on Tabor and Sinai), and who did not admit the possibility to achieve this inner light through both prayer and fasting and other individual efforts. At the Council in Constantinople called in 1341 concerning this heresy, Barlaam, his disciple Akindynos, and their other accomplices were condemned for this false teaching. And for the rest of his life, St. Gregory zealously struggled for Orthodoxy, “not once”, but “many times many” through his inspired speeches and writings denying the teachings and compositions of the evil followers of Akindynos and Barlaam. For this ascetic effort for the benefit of the Holy Church, and also for the confession and witness for the faith and Christ's flock, for the sanctity of the strict ascetic life and the deep edification for all ascetics through his works, St. Gregory is also glorified in the service on this day by the Holy Church. Thus the Holy Church, celebrating on the previous Sunday the triumph of Orthodoxy over all heresies, on the present Sunday celebrates the victory of Orthodox ascetic teachings over all false doctrines opposing it. *Bulgakov*

The Third Week of the Fast

In this week the Holy Church, as well as in the past weeks, inspires us with the necessity to offer “to Christ our God”; “gifts that are pleasing”, “a pure fast and abstinence from evil”, abstention from “anger, wrath and every sin”, “tears and prayer, to works of compassion, and to a contrite way of life, to upright thoughts and a pure way of life”. In particular the Holy Church, calling us to avoid food, as “the begetter of passions”, and to love fasting as “the mother of virtues”, in detail it opens, “if it is good, if it is great, if it is grace given by God”, it is a fast. “Let us love the fast”, sings the Holy Church, “it makes the stubborn passions of the soul to wither, and gives us strength to do the works of God; it makes our mind ascend to heaven, and gains for us the forgiveness of our sins”. “By fasting Elisha gave back to the Shunnamite her child alive”, “Daniel in the den tamed the wild beasts with the muzzle of abstinence: let us also subdue the passions by fasting”, “for this strengthens the body, and illuminates the mind and heart”. Together with this during all the days of this week the Holy Church prays to the Lord that He grant us to see His cross. “With our flesh cleansed by abstinence,” cries the Holy Church, “and our souls enlightened by prayer, O Lord, grant us to look upon Thy holy and honorable cross” “and to reverence it uncondemned with fear and love”, “to kiss it with undefiled lips”, “in Psalms and songs let us celebrate the light”, “in our illumination”. In such a way it follows that the third week is essentially a sort of Forefast to the cross of the Lord. *Bulgakov Handbook*

Upcoming Events 2012-2013

28 April – 4 May: Great and Holy Week

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!