

The Confessor's Tongue for March 8, A. D. 2015

2nd Sunday of Lent; St. Gregory Palamas, St. Theophylact of Nicomedia

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 Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 8

Abba Anthony said, "Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God."

Saying 8 in The Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Commentary: Man has a propensity for getting caught up in the form of something without attaining the substance. Indeed, St. Paul warns us about those who "have a form of godliness", who outwardly look pious in some ways, but who "deny the power thereof," who have not entered into the essence and experienced its power, who confess Christ with their lips, but have not come to know Him in the depths of their heart. It is possible to use the right forms, have the right externals, and the right dogma, and still have one's heart far from God and His transforming power.

For this reason St. Seraphim of Sarov instructs us that the goal of the spiritual life is acquisition of the Holy Spirit, a filling that overflows and guides our whole life. The external forms of spiritual life are not the end but the means to acquire this.

Discernment is a spiritual gift that enables the possessor to see to the heart of things, to know their true nature. Those lacking it, unless they have wise guidance from another person, can easily confuse form with substance. Consider the many who will say on the day of judgment "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? and in Thy name cast out devils? and in Thy name done many wonderful works?" to whom Jesus will respond, "I never knew you, depart from Me ye that work iniquity." This is a tragic case. They thought they were serving God but, lacking discernment, they actually were serving themselves, doing their "own thing."

Monastics are susceptible to this temptation along with the rest of us. "I eat once a week. I have no possessions but the rags on my back. I sleep but two hours in twenty-four. I do 3000 prostrations and read through the Psalter and Gospels each day while standing." Such confuse the strictness of their ascetic practice with true knowledge of God; they may, in fact, do these things because they take pleasure in their own strictness, or the reputation it wins them in the eyes of men. They take pleasure in comparing themselves to their neighbor and finding themselves stricter. They readily fall prey to judging their weaker brethren. All their self-directed ascetic activity, in fact, makes them worse.

Thus, in the Church, a moderate asceticism that curbs the body's passions so that the body may be subject to the spirit without doing harm to the body or giving ready grounds for pride is recommended. And our activity should always be guided by someone

other than ourselves, for "He who chooses himself as his spiritual guide has chosen a fool."

A particular area where Christians must acquire discernment is in the area of their thoughts. All sin begins with a thought that flits into the mind. Often that thought appears innocent on the surface. It is discernment that penetrates the thought's seeming innocence to perceive the spiritual danger it will bring if accepted or acted upon. Discernment then works together with spiritual alertness and watchfulness. Watchfulness catches the thoughts as they enter the mind; discernment reveals them for what they are. Is this a good thought? Is it from God? Will it produce good fruit? Or is this a temptation? a deception from the demons? Without watchfulness and discernment in his thoughts, a person will be the plaything of the demons as they take pleasure in sowing tempting thoughts in his head and watching him fall into sin, and sin separates man from God—not that God is not there, but that man's awareness of God and ability to receive grace is diminished. Because of its vital role in the warfare with thoughts, the monks have prized the gift of discernment of thoughts above all others.

Our goal in Christian life is to come to know and love God with all our heart and to love one another as Christ has loved us. This is only possible through the grace of God filling us and transforming us. Proper ascetic practice brings us closer to this goal, while a deluded practice brings us into pride and vainglory.

Fr. Justin Frederick

On the Participation of the Faithful in the Eucharist

Document approved at the Hierarchal Consultation of the Russian Orthodox Church, February 2-3, 2015 in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow

The Eucharist is the main Sacrament of the Church, instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ on the eve of his saving Passion, death upon the Cross, and resurrection. To participate in the Eucharist and to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ is commanded by our Savior who through his disciples said to all Christians: "Take, eat: this is My Body," and "Drink of it, all of you: for this is My Blood of the New Testament" (Matt 26:26--28). The Church herself is the Body of Christ and, therefore, the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ visibly manifests the mystical nature of the Church, building up the ecclesial community.

The spiritual life of an Orthodox Christian is inconceivable without the communion of the Holy Mysteries. Receiving the Holy Gifts, the faithful are sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit and are united with Christ our Savior and with each other, making one Body of Christ.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist requires special preparation. In the Church, the time itself – be it the span of a human life or the entire history of mankind – is an expectation and preparation for the encounter with Christ, while the entire rhythm of liturgical life is an expectation and preparation for the Divine Liturgy and, accordingly, for communion, for which sake the Liturgy is celebrated [in the first place].

I.

The practice of communion and the preparation for communion has changed and taken different forms throughout the history of the Church.

Already in the apostolic period, the tradition was established in the Church to celebrate the eucharist every Sunday (and, if possible, even more often, e.g. on the days of martyrs' commemorations), so that Christians might remain in unending communion with Christ and with each other (see, e.g. 1 Cor 10:16–17; Acts 2:46; Acts 20:7). All members of the local community took part in the weekly eucharist and received communion, while the refusal to take part in the eucharistic communion without solid grounds was subject to condemnation:

“All the faithful who come in and hear the Scriptures, but do not stay for the prayers and the Holy Communion, are to be excommunicated, as causing disorder in the Church” (Apostolic canon 9).

The early Christian practice of communion at every Divine Liturgy remains an ideal even for the present time, as part of the Tradition of the Church.

At the same time, the growth in membership of the Church in the third and especially the fourth centuries led to some changes that entailed changes in liturgical life. As the number of the martyrs' commemorations and feast days increased, eucharistic liturgies began to be celebrated more frequently – however, the presence at these assemblies for every Christian was considered to be merely desirable, but not mandatory. The Church has countered this tendency with the following canonical regulation:

“All who enter the church of God and hear the Holy Scriptures, but do not communicate with the people in prayers, or who turn away, by reason of some disorder, from the holy partaking of the Eucharist, are to be cast out of the Church, until, after they shall have made confession, and having brought forth the fruits of penance, and made earnest entreaty, they shall have obtained forgiveness” (canon 2, Council of Antioch).

Nevertheless, the sublime ideal of constant readiness for the reception of Holy Mysteries became hard to attain for many Christians. For this reason, already in the writings of the Holy Fathers of the fourth century we find evidence for the co-existence of different customs with regard to the regularity of communion. Thus, St Basil the Great refers to the communion four times a week as normative:

“And to receive communion every day and to partake of the holy Body and Blood of Christ is good and beneficial, for [Christ] himself clearly says: ‘He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood, has eternal life.’ ...

We receive communion four times every week: on Sunday, on Wednesday, on Friday, and on Saturday, and on other days, if there happens to be a memorial of a Saint” (Letter 93 [89]).

But less than half a century later, St John Chrysostom remarks that some, including monastics, started receiving communion only once or twice a year:

“Many partake of this sacrifice once in the whole year, others twice; others many times. Our word then is to all; not to those only who are here, but to those also who are settled in the desert. For they partake once in the year, and often indeed at intervals of two years. What then? Which shall we approve? Those [who receive] once [in the year]? Those who [receive] many times? Those who [receive] few times? Neither those [who receive] once, nor those [who receive] often, nor those [who receive] seldom, but those [who come] with a pure conscience, from a pure heart, with an irreproachable life. Let such draw near continually; but those who are not such, not even once” (Homilies on the Hebrews 17.7).

In the fourth century, the rule concerning the mandatory eucharistic fast, which emerged already in the pre-Nicene period, was definitively established, mandating a complete abstinence from food and drink on the day of communion until the reception of Christ's Holy Mysteries: “May the holy sacrament of the altar be celebrated by the people who have not eaten” (canon 41/50 of the Council of Carthage, reaffirmed by canon 29 of the Council in Trullo). However, already in the late fourth – the beginning of the fifth century some Christians started to associate communion not only with the observance of eucharistic abstinence before the Liturgy, but with the time of Great Lent in general, as attested by St John Chrysostom. The saintly bishop himself, however, was urging his flock for a more frequent communion:

“Tell me, I beseech you, when after a year you partake of the Communion, do you think that the Forty Days are sufficient for you for the purifying of the sins of all that time? And again, when a week has passed, do you give yourself up to the former things? Tell me now, if when you have been well for forty days after a long illness, you should again give yourself up to the food which caused the sickness, have you not lost your former labor too? For if natural things are changed, much more those which depend on choice. ... You assign forty days for the health of the soul, or perhaps not even forty, and do you expect to propitiate God? ... These things I say, not as forbidding you to approach once a year, but as wishing you to draw near continually” (Homilies on Hebrews 17.7).

By the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Byzantium, among monastics, the tradition was established to receive communion only when it was preceded by a discipline of preparation that included fasting, the examination of one's conscience before the spiritual father of the monastery, and the reading before communion of a special prayer rule which emerged and began to develop in that period. Pious

laypeople began to take their direction from this same tradition, because monastic spirituality in Orthodoxy was always perceived as an ideal. In its strictest form this tradition is represented, e.g., in the directives of the Russian Typicon (chapter 32) which, in contrast with the Greek Typicon, mentions a mandatory seven-days fast before communion.

In 1699 an article titled "Note of Instruction" (*Uchitel'noe izvestie*) was included as an appendix to the Russian *Sluzhebnyk* (Priest's Service Book). This article contains, among other things, a directive concerning a mandatory term of preparation for holy communion: whoever desires, may partake during the four long fasting periods, while outside of these fasts, one must fast for seven days – this period, however, can be reduced:

"If they desire to approach the holy communion outside of the four usual fasts, let them fast for seven days beforehand, remaining constant in prayers at church and at home – this is for those who are not in need; when in need, let them fast only for three days or for one day."

In practice, an extremely stringent approach toward preparation for holy communion, which had its positive spiritual aspects, led also to the fact that some Christians were abstaining from communion for a long time, citing their need for worthy preparation. The norm, contained in the *Spiritual Regulation* (1721), mandating that all Christians in the Russian Empire must receive communion at least once a year, was precisely directed against this practice of rare communion:

"Every Christian must receive the Holy Eucharist frequently, but at least once a year. For this is our most eloquent thanksgiving to God for such salvation accomplished for us by the death of the Savior... For this reason, if any Christian is shown to abstain long from holy communion, by this he shows himself to be not in the Body of Christ, that is, he is not a communicant of the Church."

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pious people sought to receive communion at least during every one of the lengthy fasting periods. Many saints of that time, among them St Theophan the Recluse and Righteous John of Kronstadt, called the people to approach the Holy Mysteries even more frequently. As St Theophan said, "a measure [to commune] once or twice a month – is the most measured," even though "one can say nothing disapproving" regarding a more frequent communion. Every faithful may be guided by these words of this Saint:

"Try to receive communion of the Holy Mysteries more frequently, as your spiritual father will permit. But try always to approach with due preparation and, moreover, with fear and trembling, lest, by getting accustomed, you start approaching with indifference."

The confessing struggle of the Church during the years of persecution in the twentieth century motivated many clergymen and laity to revisit the practice of infrequent communion that existed

previously. In particular, on May 13, 1931 the Provisional Patriarchal Synod stated in its resolution: "[Be it resolved that] the desire that an Orthodox Christian receives communion as often as possible, and those more advanced among them – even every Sunday, may be deemed acceptable."

At the present time, many Orthodox Christians receive communion much more frequently than the majority of Christians in pre-revolutionary Russia. The practice of frequent communion, however, cannot be automatically expanded unto all the faithful without exception, for the frequency of communion is directly dependent upon a person's spiritual and moral state, so that the faithful, to use Chrysostom's words, may approach the communion of the Holy Mysteries "with a pure conscience, as much as it is possible for us" (*Against the Jews* 3.4).

II.

The requirements for preparation before holy communion are determined for each member of the faithful by the definitions and regulations of the Church, which are applied by each spiritual father, taking into consideration the frequency with which the person receives the Holy Mysteries, his spiritual, moral, and physical state, the external circumstances of his life, such as his occupation or whether he is overburdened by taking care for those close to him.

A person's spiritual father is a priest, to whom a Christian regularly confesses, who is familiar with the circumstances of his life and his spiritual state. The faithful may go to confession to other priests if it is impossible for them to confess to their own spiritual father. If a faithful Christian does not have a spiritual father, he should address the questions relating to the reception of communion to the priests of the church where he desires to receive.

Both the spiritual father – who is guided by ecclesiastical definitions and regulations and, based on them, gives direction to a Christian – and the communicant as well need to understand that the goal of preparation does not lie in an external fulfillment of formal prerequisites, but in the acquisition of a penitent state of soul, the forgiveness of offenses, reconciliation with one's neighbors, and, finally, attaining union with Christ in the Holy Mysteries. Fasting and prayer are means to assist the person preparing for communion to acquire this inner state.

Remembering the words of our Savior, who denounced those who impose upon the people heavy burdens hard to bear (see Matt 23:4), spiritual fathers need to understand that unjustified strictness, as well as excessive leniency, can impede a person's union with our Savior Christ and can harm him spiritually. The preparation of monastics for their participation in the Sacrament of the Eucharist is performed in accordance with the Statute on Monasteries and Monasticism, as well as following the statutes of specific monasteries. *To Be Continued Next Week*

From *The Diary of a Russian Priest*

I bid a sad farewell to the end of Lent. In Lent, how much good is accomplished with greater ease, how much evil loses its power and fades away, what joy there is in observing those who pray, fast, approach the holy Chalice with devotion! However frequent the disappointments and vexations during Confession, however great the number of lazy, indifferent souls, blinded by sins and passions—there are yet many who possess a keenly sensitive conscience, who are merciless towards themselves, who love God and thirst for purification. Every confession is also a lesson and a spiritual gain for the priest who hearts it.

St. John Chrysostom on Prayer and Fasting

See, at any rate, how many blessings spring from prayer and fasting. For he that is praying as he ought, and fasting, hath not many wants, cannot be covetous; he that is not covetous, will also be more disposed for almsgiving. He that fasts is light, and winged, and prays with wakefulness, and quenches his wicked lusts, and propitiates God, and humbles his soul when lifted up. Therefore even the Apostles were almost always fasting. He that prays when fasting hath his wings double, and lighter than the very winds. For neither doth he gape, nor stretch himself, nor grow torpid in prayer, as is the case with most men, but is more vehement than fire, and rises above the earth. Wherefore also such a one is most especially a hater and an enemy to the evil spirits. For nothing is mightier than a man who prays sincerely....

But if thy body be too weak to fast continually, still it is not too weak for prayer, nor without vigor for contempt of the belly. For although thou canst not fast, yet canst thou avoid luxurious living; and even this is no little thing, nor far removed from fasting, but even this is enough to pluck down the devil's madness. For indeed nothing is so welcome to that evil spirit as luxury and drunkenness; since it is both fountain and parent of all our evils.

Homily 57 on the Gospel of Matthew

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 Forefeast to the cross of the Lord. *From S. V. Bulgakov*

Confessions During the Fast

All the faithful who desire to commune at Pascha and beyond should make a Confession during the course of the Fast. Your priest requests that you make every effort to come for Confession *before* Holy Week. Please don't wait to the last minute! Four weeks yet remain until Holy Week, so there is plenty of time to prepare and make one's Confession.

Sunday of Gregory Palamas

The Orthodox teaching about fasting as a means for the beneficial inner light is opened with special power in the commemoration on this Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica and Wonderworker. 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 during the subsequent time 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. 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.

Upcoming Events 2015

8 March: Pan-Orthodox Vespers at St. Maximus with Hieromonk Gerasim speaking.
12 April: Holy Pascha, Feast of Feasts, Picnic

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!