

The Confessor's Tongue for March 29, A. D. 2015

5th Sunday of Lent; St. Mary of Egypt; St. Diodochos, Hiermartyrs Mark & Cyril
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 11

Abba Anthony said, "He who wishes to live in solitude in the desert is delivered from three conflicts: hearing, speech, and sight; there is only one conflict left for him, and that is with fornication."

Saying 11 in The Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Commentary: To live in the desert [a remote place] away from the world delivers one from three things that readily bring temptation and sin: hearing, speech, and sight.

Living in the world, we are constantly bombarded with noise: radio, television, music, news, the conversation of others. Our ability to hear is a portal to our soul. What we hear enters our minds and affects us, both for good or for ill, readily stirring up our passions and leading us into sin of various sorts, or encouraging us and inspiring us to do good. Particularly seductive are songs, whether for entertainment or advertising, which insinuate themselves into our minds and repeat there for hours on end, using the capacity of the mind for ceaseless prayer while displacing prayer. The desert provides an escape from all this noise.

Managing our own speech presents a grave challenge to us. In Proverbs it is said (10:19), "Where there are many words, sin is unavoidable." Talking too much robs us of God's grace, even when the conversation is not inherently sinful. One can even speak too much about spiritual things! Hence at every Vespers we ask God "set a watch, O Lord, upon my mouth and a gate of enclosure about my lips," and St. James tells us that the person who can control his tongue is a perfect man, who can control his whole body. The perfect, as St. Silouan describes, speak only as the Holy Spirit moves them. Living around people tempts us to speak far more than we need to as Christians who are called to wait upon the Lord and to be still and know that He is God. The desert provides a remedy to this.

How often sight leads us into temptation! Whether it is images in the media or just the physical forms of those around us, what we take into our souls through our eyes often leads us to lust, anger, greed, envy, and even hatred. We see someone's beauty and are wounded by it; we see a person who has wronged us and anger arises in our hearts along with bitter memories; we see a person's possessions and desire the same for ourselves, or wonder why he should have them when we can't. Moreover, the eye is never satisfied with new images; it is ever hungry for more if we indulge it, as we well know from surfing the web. We may be going about our business only to be suddenly struck unawares with the sight of something and find our thoughts stimulated and quickly led into temptation. The desert frees one from this conflict—

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assuming one does not bring the internet there with him!

Yet the desert does not free us from ourselves, from our thoughts or from bodily needs. Thoughts from fantasies or memories are ever at hand. Bodily need presses us. We have to eat and drink; eating too much, indulgence in the pleasure of food, living to eat, and so forth stimulates sexual desire and temptation. Indulging one form of bodily pleasure to the full stimulates the desire for others. This battle has to be fought wherever we may live, that our body with its needs lives in submission to our spirit which we have submitted to Christ.

Most of us will not and cannot flee to the desert to live, at least not permanently. But as Christians living in a fallen world in a wicked and perverse generation, we must cultivate the desert in our hearts, not allowing our senses to be constantly bombarded by the world's messages and not allowing our tongues to wag as a form of idle entertainment or out of vainglory. We may remove unnecessary external stimulation so that we may be collected, at peace, and focused on Christ Jesus without the world's vain and harmful distractions constantly pulling us away. We have enough to contend with what is already in our hearts, let alone the world's constant additions thereto. A very effective way to cultivate the desert in our hearts is keeping vigil—either staying up past our normal time for bed or rising from sleep in the middle of the night or early in the morning. In the quiet dark while the world sleeps, we may pray, read the Psalter, read the Scriptures, and practice the Jesus prayer, tuning our souls to the Holy Spirit. In this way, one may dwell in the desert while still living in the world.

Fr. Justin Frederick

From the Priest: Confession

One week remains before Holy Week. If you have not been to Confession since the beginning of the Fast, or if your regular time for confession will fall due before Pascha, you should plan on coming to Confession before Holy Week.

From St. Diodochos of Photike

4. All men are made in God's image; but to be in His likeness is granted only to those who through great love have brought their own freedom into subjection to God. For only when we do not belong to ourselves do we become like Him who through love has reconciled us to Himself. No one achieves this unless he persuades his soul not to be distracted by the false glitter of this life.

5. Free will is the power of a deiform soul to direct itself by deliberate choice towards whatever it decides. Let us make sure that our soul directs itself deliberately only towards what is good, so that we

always consume our remembrance of evil with good thoughts.

15. When a man begins to perceive the love of God in all its richness, he begins also to love his neighbor with spiritual perception. This is the love of which all the scriptures speak. Friendship after the flesh is very easily destroyed on some slight pretext, since it is not held firm by spiritual perception. But when a person is spiritually awakened, even if something irritates him, the bond of love is not dissolved; rekindling himself with the warmth of the love of God, he quickly recovers himself and with great joy seeks his neighbor's love, even though he has been gravely wronged or insulted by him. For the sweetness of God completely consumes the bitterness of the quarrel.

27. Very few men can accurately recognize all their own faults; indeed, only those can do this whose intellect is never torn away from the remembrance of God. Our bodily eyes, when healthy, can see everything, even gnats and mosquitoes flying about in the air; but when they are clouded by some discharge, they see large objects only indistinctly and small things not at all. Similarly if the soul, through attentiveness, reduces the blindness caused by the love of this world, it will consider its slightest faults to be very grave and will continually shed tears with deep thankfulness. For it is written, 'The righteous shall give thanks unto Thy name' (Ps. 140:13). But if the soul persists in its worldly disposition, even though it commits a murder or some other act deserving severe punishment, it takes little notice; and it is quite unable to discern its other faults, often considering them to be signs of progress, and in its wretchedness it is not ashamed to defend them heatedly.

44. It is in no way contrary to the principles of true knowledge to eat and drink from all that is set before you, giving thanks to God; for 'everything is very good' (cf. Gen. 1:31). But gladly to abstain from eating too pleasurably or too much shows greater discrimination and understanding. However, we shall not gladly detach ourselves from the pleasures of this life unless we have fully and consciously tasted the sweetness of God.

57. He who dwells continually within his own heart is detached from the attractions of this world, for he lives in the Spirit and cannot know the desires of the flesh. Such a man henceforward walks up and down within the fortress of the virtues which keep guard at all the gates of his purity. The assaults of the demons are now ineffective against him, even though the arrows of sensual desire reach as far as the doorways of his senses.

68. Our intellect often finds it hard to endure praying because of the straightness and concentration which this involves; but it joyfully turns to theology because of the broad and unhampered scope of divine speculation. Therefore, so as to keep the intellect from expressing itself too much in words or exalting itself unduly in its joy, we should spend most of our

time in prayer, in singing psalms and reading the Holy Scriptures, yet without neglecting the speculations of wise men whose faith has been revealed in their writings. In this way we shall prevent the intellect from confusing its own utterances with the utterances of grace, and stop it from being led astray by self-esteem and dispersed through over-elation and loquacity. In the time of contemplation we must keep the intellect free of all fantasy and image, and so ensure that with almost all our thoughts we shed tears. When it is at peace in times of stillness, and above all when it is gladdened by the sweetness of prayer, not only does it escape the faults we have mentioned, but it is more and more renewed in its swift and effortless understanding of divine truth, and with great humility it advances in its knowledge of discrimination. There is, moreover, a prayer which is above even the broadest scope of speculation; but this prayer is granted only to those who fully and consciously perceive the plenitude of God's grace within them.

90. If we fervently desire holiness, the Holy Spirit at the outset gives the soul a full and conscious taste of God's sweetness, so that the intellect will know exactly of what the final reward of the spiritual life consists. But later He often conceals this precious and life-creating gift. He does this so that, even if we acquire all the other virtues, we should still regard ourselves as nothing because we have not acquired divine love in a lasting form. It is at this stage that the demon of hate troubles the soul of the spiritual contestant more and more, leading him to accuse of hatred even those who love him, and defiling with hatred even the kiss of affection. The soul suffers all the more because it still preserves the memory of divine love; yet, since it is below the highest level of the spiritual life, it cannot experience this love actively. It is therefore necessary to work upon the soul forcefully for a while, so that we may come to taste divine love fully and consciously; for no one can acquire the perfection of love while still in the flesh except those saints who suffer to the point of martyrdom, and confess their faith despite all persecution. Whoever has reached this state is completely transformed, and does not easily feel desire even for material sustenance. For what desire will someone nourished by divine love feel for such things? It is for this reason that St Paul proclaims to us the future joy of the saints when he says: 'For the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14:17), which are the fruits of perfect love. Those who have advanced to perfection are able to taste this love continually, but no one can experience it completely until 'what is mortal in us is swallowed up by life'.

Upcoming Events 2015

5 April: Palm Sunday

12 April: Holy Pascha, Feast of Feasts, Picnic

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!