

The Confessor's Tongue for May 31, A. D. 2015

Eighth Sunday of Pascha: Holy Pentecost; Holy Trinity

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 Feast of Pentecost

This feast is called *Trinity Day*, because the appearance of the Holy Spirit has revealed to the people in a very clear light how necessary the mystery of the Holy Trinity was for them. On this day in its prayers and hymns, the Church honors and praises all three Persons of the Holy Trinity, who participated in the descent of the Holy Spirit: God the Father, who sent the Holy Spirit, God the Son Jesus Christ, who entreats the Father to send the Holy Spirit, and God the Holy Spirit, who descended appearing as fiery tongues.

This feast was named *Pentecost* because an event in the Old Testament called the feast of Pentecost was commemorated on this day, a feast associated with the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, fifty days after the first Passover and the Exodus from Egypt. Hence this feast necessarily comes fifty days after the Christian Pascha. The descent of the Holy Spirit on the believers in Christ was the crowning of the redemption and salvation of man by God. The fullness of the gifts of the Spirit of God descended on the apostles, and they became the first fruits of the redemptive work of Christ. Together with these revelations, the Church of Christ began on earth.

The day of Pentecost was the day when the Old Covenant made on Mt. Sinai and which ruled the people through the written law was replaced by the New Testament law, where the people are led by the Spirit of God, the spirit of adoption and freedom (Rom. 8). Thus, as the Pascha of Christ abolished the Old Testament Pascha, the New Testament Pentecost replaces the Old Testament Pentecost. The event, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles, and the beneficial fruits of this great event are praised in the hymns of the church for the day of Pentecost. "Today", sings the Holy Church, "wondrous things were done before the face of all peoples in the city of David, when the Holy Spirit came down as fiery tongues", upon the disciples of Christ. Now "the Spirit of salvation purifies the hearts of the apostles". Now, "the apostles are clothed with the power from on high by Christ, for the Comforter revives them". Now, the Holy Spirit "revealed the unlettered to be orators", the fishermen, "bridling the mouths of sophists in abundance with a word, and raising from the deep night unnumbered people". "The Essence is known in three persons, according to the true, Unapproachable, Unoriginate One, when "the light has shone, the grace of the Spirit". "When the power of the Divine Spirit came down, it divinely united in one harmony the voice divided of old (i.e. the language of the people) of those who had wickedly agreed together, as to believers it gave understanding of knowledge of the Trinity, in which we have been established".

Now "the Holy Spirit falls on all, makes

prophecies flow, perfects priests, teaches the unlettered wisdom, reveals fishermen to be theologians, welds together the whole institution of the Church". "That which was proclaimed of old in the Law and Prophets has been fulfilled. For today the grace of the Divine Spirit has been poured out on all believers". "Now the Comforter Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, for beginning with the choir of the Apostles, He has unfolded their grace through participation to the faithful". "The strength which has come down today is the good Spirit, the Spirit of the Wisdom of God. The Spirit proceeding from the Father and is made manifest to us faithful through the Son, giving holiness freely to those in whom He dwells, in which He is perceived by nature".... In the words of St. Gregory the Theologian: "The Holy Spirit always was, and is, and will be; neither beginning nor coming to an end, but always ranked and numbered with the Father and the Son". "He is the life and creator of life; He is the light and the bestower of light; He is the pouring out of goodness and source of goodness". "Through Whom the Father is known and the Son (John 16:14) is glorified, and by all is known". "He is the Spirit of wisdom, understanding". "He is God and deifier". "He distributes the gifts" (1 Cor. 12:11), "crowns the prophets, apostles and martyrs". . . .

The sending down of the Holy Spirit to earth is so great a gift that it includes everything within it for the Christian. Without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit we would not even receive the clear knowledge of the actions of the Son of God Himself on earth. Without the co-activity of the Holy Spirit the preaching of the Gospel would not have spread so quickly in the world, due to the many obstacles, insurmountable for the ordinary power of man. Without the life-creating Holy Spirit even the faithful in the name of Jesus Christ would be dead spiritually. We have the word of God because the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets and the apostles. By the appearance of God, the Church is openly accessible to all the cursed on the earth, and the Holy Spirit was acquired by the sinful race of man. Everyone entering into this holy society receives rebirth into the new spiritual life, because the Holy Spirit, once having been poured out, permanently remains in the Church of Christ.

All this, finally, inspires in the Christian the care that the sacred celebration of the present day not be contradicted by a sinful life. That each of us, asking for ourselves the renewal and multiplication of the grace of the Spirit of God and being made worthy of His graceful visitation in prayer and in the mysteries, continue to observe ourselves as temples of the Holy Spirit, not offending His holy magnificence. . . .

"Whoever wishes to become a dweller in Christ and be filled with the Holy Spirit, for the offering of

spiritual fruits", as St. Macarius the Egyptian teaches, "he should first of all firmly believe in the Lord, entirely converted to the requirements of His commandments, and renounce the world so that his mind would not be engaged in anything visible. He should also remain in continual prayer and with faith in the good will of the Lord always to await His visitation and help, and then to force himself to every good deed and to every commandment of the Lord".

From Bulgakov, Handbook for Church Servers, translated by Archbishop Eugene D. Tarris. Copyright © 1999-2006.

The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 19

The brethren came to Abba Anthony and said to him, 'Speak a word; how are we to be saved?' The old man said to them, 'You have heard the Scriptures. That should teach you how.' But they said, 'We want to hear from you too, Father.' Then the old man said to them, 'The Gospel says, "If anyone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also." They said, 'We cannot do that.' The old man said, 'If you cannot offer the other cheek, at least allow one cheek to be struck.' 'We cannot do that either,' they said. So he said, 'If you are not able to do that, do not return evil for evil,' and they said, 'We cannot do that either.' Then the old man said to his disciple, 'Prepare a little brew of corn for these invalids. If you cannot do this, or that, what can I do for you? What you need is prayers.' Saying 19 in Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Commentary: "Give me a word" was a common request among the monks in the Egyptian desert put to a monk who stood out for his wisdom and experience. To make such a request profitably, a monk had to approach the elder with faith that God would speak through the elder and a willingness to do what he said. Anthony on at least one occasion refused to give a word to one who asked because he knew the one asking had no intention of doing what he said but desired only, out of vainglory, to repeat Anthony's words to others.

Anthony answers the brothers by pointing them to the Holy Scriptures, which they have heard in church, as a guide to salvation. Indeed the Scriptures are given to us for this purpose, that we may know God and His will for us, which is expressed generally in His commandments. The Scripture and the Church are the first place to apply when seeking to know how to be saved, and if one cannot be bothered with making use of these readily-available sources of help, one probably should not presume to ask an elder for a specific, personal word.

When the brethren express a desire to hear something from Anthony in addition to what they have heard in the Scriptures, he responds by giving them a scripture, a well-known command of Christ from the Sermon on the Mount: turn the other cheek when struck on the first (Matthew 5:39). By giving one of Christ's commands in the Gospel, Anthony is able to determine how far advanced they are and what sort of answer to give them.

As it turns out, far from needing a word more specific than what Christ commands in the

Scriptures, the brethren are not even doing what is clearly commanded. "We cannot do that," they say honestly. Anthony, seeking to find their level of practice, gives them the same command at half strength: "At least allow one cheek to be slapped" if you can't turn the other. They can't do that either, so he reduces the strength of the command still more: at least "do not return evil for evil." They profess they cannot carry out the command at the most elementary level of not taking revenge. Hereby Anthony perceives them to be spiritual invalids and feeds them with physical food saying, "What can I do for you?"

Christ, through His commands in the Gospel, calls man to participate in divine life. The commandments in their fullness are daunting. (For example, who of us can love all men as Christ has loved us? St. Maximus, recognizing the difficulty of loving as Christ does, says, if you can't do that, at least, as a start, do not hate anyone.) As a good physician applying the remedy to a fatal sickness, St. Anthony, as did Christ, seeks to meet the brethren at their level and give them the command in a form they can carry out in their present condition and which will lead them to higher levels of obedience as they keep it. From not taking revenge, they will progress to allowing one cheek to be slapped and then to actually turning the other cheek. Hereby we see the Christian life as a path that begins in the dark of the fallen, sinful world but shines brighter and brighter until the full day of the glory of the Kingdom. God meets us where we are in our infirmities and gently leads us where we need to go.

Yet these brothers claim to be unable to take even that first step. Invalids they truly are, if they cannot refrain from taking revenge when insulted or wronged! Unable to minister to them on a spiritual level, Anthony shows love to them by providing food for their bellies, thereby showing them he does not reject nor despise them. Only by "prayers"—their own prayers for themselves and for their enemies (those striking them), and the prayers of more experienced brothers—by beseeching God to give them grace to do what they have no strength or desire to do themselves—could they hope to escape their extreme weakness and begin to keep Christ's commands at an elementary level.

Christ's commands in the Gospel mark the path of salvation for all of us; they show us what it is to be a Christian; they set the faith we claim into action; they cleanse and purify our thoughts and actions. If we are not yet up to turning the other cheek to be slapped, allowing the one to be slapped, or not taking revenge on the slapper, at the very least we can pray for our enemies and ourselves and ask more experienced brethren to pray for us in our infirmity.

Upcoming Events 2015

8-28 June Apostles' Fast

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!