

The Confessor's Tongue for April 17, A. D. 2016

Fifth Sunday of Lent: St. Mary of Egypt

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.

On the Interpretation of Holy Scripture

from St. John Cassian, Conference 8

In this conference with Abba Serenus about the demonic powers, Cassian records the following words of Serenus on the interpretation of inspired holy Scripture. They well express the Church's multifaceted approach to the written Word of God. Particularly of interest is the reason given as to why some things in Scripture are difficult to understand and the multiple levels of possible interpretation.

The authority of Holy Scripture has said some things so lucidly and clearly for our instruction, even to those of limited intelligence, that not only are they not veiled in the obscurity of a hidden meaning but they do not even need to be explained, and they offer intelligibility and meaning at first glance.

Some others, however, are so covered over and obscured by mystery that in examining and understanding them there lies open before us an immense field of toil and concern. It is clear that God has arranged matters thus for several reasons: first, lest if the divine sacraments had not veil of spiritual understanding covering them, they would be equally intelligible and comprehensible to everyone, to both the faithful and the profane, and thus there would be no distinction between the lazy and the zealous as regards virtue and prudence; then, so that even among those of the household of the faith the slothfulness of the lazy might be reproached and the ardor and effort of the zealous might be proved, inasmuch as vast areas to be understood lie before them.

Therefore, Holy Scripture is very aptly compared to an abundant and fertile field which, although it brings forth and produces many things that do not need to be cooked in order to serve as food for human beings, it brings forth other things that would be unsuited or harmful for human use if their raw bitterness were not gotten rid of and if they did not become tender and digestible through cooking. But some are naturally so good either way that their uncooked rawness is not unpleasant or offensive, although cooking makes them more healthful. Many, also, are only useful as food for irrational beasts of burden and animals and wild beasts and birds but are of no benefit as food for human beings; even if they remain in their raw state without ever being cooked, they are healthful for animals.

This arrangement, we see, is found clearly in the most fertile paradise of the spiritual Scriptures, in which certain things shine forth so clearly and luminously on the literal level that, since they do not need a more sublime interpretation, they feed and nourish the listeners abundantly by the mere sound of the letter, as in this example: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God is one Lord." And: "You shall love the

Lord your God from your whole heart, and from your whole soul, and from your whole strength."

But if certain other things were not made digestible through an allegorical interpretation and made tender by a probing spiritual fire, they would in no way become healthful food for the inner man without a degree of corruption, and in eating them there would be more harm than good, as in this example: "Let your loins be girt and your lamps burning." And: "Whoever does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me." Some of the strictest monks, having indeed "a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge," understood this literally. They made themselves wooden crosses and carried them constantly on their shoulders, evoking not edification but rather derision in all who saw them.

But some things are so suitably and properly taken either way—that is both historically and allegorically—that either interpretation provides vital support to the soul, as in this example: "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, offer him your other as well." And: "When they persecute you in one city, flee to another." And: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me."

It also produces "grass for the cattle," and with this fodder all the fields of Scripture are filled. That is to say, it produces a simple and unadorned historical narrative, by which simpler folk and those who are less capable of perfect and integral reasoning—about whom it is said: "Lord, you will save both man and beast"—are made more vigorous and strong, according to their position and capacity, just for the labor and effort of their daily life.

Concerning these last things, then, for which a clear interpretation has been offered, we, too, can confidently pursue our own understanding and boldly give our opinion. But those things which the divine Spirit has reserved for our meditation and exercise and which He has concealed in Holy Scripture, wishing them to be understood by signs and conjectures, must be gone over so slowly and carefully that any assertion or confirmation in their regard is up to the person who disputes them or accepts them. For sometimes, when differing opinions are put forth about the same matter, both can be judged as reasonable and can be accepted either absolutely or qualifiedly without detriment to the faith—that is, so that neither is completely believed or utterly rejected, and so that the second opinion does not necessarily derogate from the first when neither of them is found to oppose the faith.

Such is the case of Elijah's coming in the person of John [the Baptists], and that he is to be the precursor of the Lord's coming again; and with the abomination of desolation which stood in the holy

place and which was that likeness of Jupiter which we read was placed in the Temple at Jerusalem, and that it is to stand again in the Church with the coming of the Antichrist, and all those other things that follow in the Gospel and that are understood to have been fulfilled before the captivity of Jerusalem and as going to be fulfilled before the end of this world. Of these, neither statement is opposed to the other, nor does the first understanding annul the second.

The Eucharist

Then Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.' John 6:53

And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.'

Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, 'This is My blood... Mark 14:23-24

Instituted by Christ for His Church, the Holy Eucharist is not a peripheral or optional part of our Faith. It is not an ancient rite maintained for sake of nostalgia. It is not a simple remembrance of what Christ has done for us, nor is it a mere symbol of Christian unity as we all partake of one loaf and one cup.

Christ's own words do not allow us to treat the Eucharist with such indifference or condescension. According to Christ, if we do not eat His flesh and drink His blood, we have no life in us. Oh, we may be physically alive, but as St. Justin of Chelije has expressed it, man without Christ is but a walking corpse who has an appearance of life but not the essence. Though there are other sources of grace, this is the unique source of Christ's Body and Blood which impart life to us. The early Church understood the uniqueness of the Eucharist by referring to it as the "medicine of immortality."

Christ identifies His Body and Blood with the bread and wine He blessed and then offered to His disciples before His crucifixion, commanding them to "do this in remembrance of Me."

The Eucharist and our partaking is the heart of our relationship with Christ. With it we have life, without it we lack His life. Excommunication is to be cut off from the life of Christ. We excommunicate ourselves when we neglect the Eucharist, when we do not bother to prepare ourselves to partake, or when we simply do not come at all. If we absent ourselves for three consecutive weeks without a good cause, we have excommunicated ourselves according to an ancient canon. We also excommunicate ourselves by committing serious sin, which prevents us from receiving Holy Communion until we have effected a good repentance. To go to Confession and to hear that you may not partake of the Mysteries for a time is not the arbitrary action of the priest to punish you but is a simple declaration of the reality you have already embraced by choosing sin. In declaring your condition to you, the consequences of your actions,

the priest serves as God's messenger to call you to repentance, cleansing, and restoration to fellowship in the Mysteries. Being severed from the Eucharist by choice or by sin is to be cut off from life; it is to abide in spiritual death.

The Eucharist is communal in nature. We gather together to celebrate it, and it cannot be celebrated by the priest alone. It is not something we can do privately in our homes; it is not something we can have without direct connection to the Church. There is no substitute in Bible reading, prayer, or good works or anything else for the Eucharist. Hence we cannot be Christians under normal circumstances without attending Church!

The Eucharist is festal in nature. It is a 'giving of thanks' as we remember all that God in Christ through the Spirit has done for us and continues to do. It is taking time away from the demands of life in this world to remember and honor the One who made us and restores us to life through the sacrifice of His Body and Blood. It is due to the festal nature of the Divine Liturgy that it is not celebrated on weekdays of Great Lent and the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts at which the Gifts are not consecrated, only distributed, is served in its place.

Great is the good gift offered to us in the Eucharist, and great is our error and fault when we disdain it as something optional for spiritual life or when we are too lazy to attend the Liturgy regularly, or when do not make the effort to prepare ourselves regularly through Confession, Prayer, and Fasting to partake. Here is the medicine to what ails us, if we will come with faith and love to partake of our Master's good gifts. With this understanding of the Eucharist, how can we allow ourselves to be content with partaking infrequently? And how shall we answer Christ as to why we neglected the provision He made for us at great cost to Himself? *Fr. Justin Frederick*

On Knowing One's Weakness & the Coming of Prayer with Joy

St. Isaac the Syrian, From Homily 8

Blessed is the man who knows his own weakness, because this knowledge becomes to him the foundation, the root, and the beginning of all goodness. For whenever a man learns and truly perceives his own weakness, at that moment he contracts his soul on every side from the laxity that dims knowledge, and he treasures up watchfulness in himself. But no one can perceive his own infirmity if he is not allowed to be tempted a little, either by things that oppress his body, or his soul. For then, comparing his own weakness with God's help, he will straightway understand the greatness of the latter [God's help].

And again, whenever he looks over the multitude of his devisings, and his wakefulness, his abstinence, the sheltering, and the hedging about of his soul by which he hopes to find assurance for her, and yet sees that he has not obtained it, or again, if his heart has

no calm because of his fear and trembling: then at that moment let him understand, and let him know that this fear of his heart shows and reflects that he is altogether in need of some other help. For the heart testifies inwardly, and reflects the lack of something by the fear which strikes and wrestles within it. And because of this, it is confounded, since it is not able to abide in a state of surety; for God's help, he says, is the help that saves. When a man knows that he is in need of Divine help, he makes many prayers. And by as much as he multiplies them, his heart is humbled, for there is no man who will not be humbled when he is making supplication and entreaty. 'A heart that is broken and humbled, God will not despise.' Therefore, as long as the heart is not humbled, it cannot cease from wandering; for humility collects [gathers, concentrates] the heart.

But when a man becomes humble, at once mercy encircles him, and then his heart is aware of Divine help, because it finds a certain power and assurance moving in itself. And when a man perceives the coming of Divine help, and that it is this which aids him, then at once his heart is filled with faith, and he understands from this that prayer is the refuge of help, a source of salvation, a treasury of assurance, a haven that rescues from the tempest, a light to those who are in darkness . . . [etc.] From this time forward, he revels in the prayer of faith, his heart glistens with clear assurances, and does not continue in its former blindness and the mere speech of the tongue. When he thus perceives these things, he will acquire prayer in his soul like some treasures. And from his great gladness, the form of prayer is turned into shouts of thanksgiving. This is the very thing pronounced by one who has defined the form proper to each of our actions: 'Prayer is joy that sends up thanksgiving.' Here he speaks of the prayer that is achieved through the knowledge of God, that is, prayer that has been sent from God. For at that moment, a man does not pray with labor and weariness (as is the rest of his prayer, which is prayed before the experiencing of this grace), and because his heart is full of joy and wonder, it continually wells up gratitude while he silently bows the knees....

Participation in Orthodox Worship

Sometimes people in the Church think that to "really get something out of the service" they need to be doing something official: singing in the choir, reading, serving in the altar, etc. In some places, the Lord's Prayer and perhaps even others are recited by the whole congregation instead of being read by the reader as appointed by the *Typicon* in order to give the people an additional "way to be involved". In the Roman Catholic Church and many Protestant Churches, this drive to create more roles for lay participation in worship has been taken to a harmful extreme.

This understanding of participation is, however, a mistaken one.

We must realize that the ideal participation for which we should strive is not that of having some official "role" in the Divine Services, as though those who have such a role are participating and those who do not are mere spectators. The most important participation is attending the services and offering undistracted attention to God, uniting our prayers with the common prayer of the Church and seeking to "commend ourselves, each other, and all our life unto Christ our God." The ideal is to be able to attend the services and have nothing else to do but to focus undistractedly on God, to stand before Him, to pray, to sing, and to offer ourselves to Him.

Anyone who reads, who sings in the choir, who serves in the altar, or who serves as clergy can attest that the demands of that service often distract one from what is most important. The reader thinks about what he has to do next and how to get it right. The choir concentrates on singing the right notes and coming in at the right times. The servers concentrate on when to open doors, bring the censer to the priest, or get their candles for an entrance. And the clergy, having overall responsibility for the service, have to consider not only what they need to do next but also what others are doing.

Yes, it is possible for those who serve in these ways to pray and worship, but it can be very difficult. To serve in these capacities is truly service: those who serve sacrifice some of their own attention make the service happen. God blesses and rewards this service, of course, and those who are called to serve should do so. But we must realize that participation of the people is not enhanced by giving as many as possible some official role in the Divine Services. The goal rather should be to keep to a minimum the people serving in these ways so that a maximum number are freed to concentrate on participating in the most important ways.

Concerning Spiritual Reading

St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite (+1809)

If you *continually* read spiritual books with eagerness and diligence, know that this continuous eagerness and diligence will open your mind and make it receptive to spiritual meanings. And what you did not understand the first time you will easily understand when you read it two or three times. For God, seeing your continuous diligence, will illumine your mind to understand what is difficult.

Ten Things for Holy Week

Rev. Theophan Whitfield

(1) Go to as many services as you can. We offer a large number. Usually, at least two each day. And if you can't go to every service, set aside time to read prayerfully through those you cannot attend. It is through worship that we return and unite ourselves to Christ. The services of Holy Week are not just memory exercises. Holy Week is a single unbroken Liturgy that over ten days invites us to participate in

the saving love of Jesus Christ, not to just remember some events from long ago. The love which Jesus shows is real, it is now, and we are invited through worship to receive it.

Does it seem unreasonable to attend Church so much in a single week? Of course it does! But Christ's love for us is extreme and intense. And so we return that love during Holy Week in a way that is beyond reason!

(2) Intensify your fasting. Each person is called to fast as he or she is able. Some are able to fast more, some less. During Holy week, each of us should increase the intensity of the fast. Think about how you have followed the fast up to this point. During Holy Week, continue what you do, and then do a little bit more. . . .

(3) Create silence. Disconnect entirely from your cell phone, email, internet usage and especially social media. (If any of this is needed for work or school, designate a window of usage of no more than a few hours.) Do not watch TV, or listen to the radio. Cancel all lessons, sports, and social activities. It's only for one week. The world will still be there after Pascha. When we create silence in this way, we give ourselves the space and opportunity to be drawn by Christ more deeply into His words and actions during Holy Week. We remove some of the man-made barriers that separate us from "drinking from his cup" (Mark 10:38). And if we do not create silence, then the noise of this world will easily overwhelm the "still small voice" through which the Holy Spirit speaks (1 Kings 19:12). . . .

(4) Create prayer. Turn on some church music. In particular, listen to the hymns of Holy Week. And learn something about each hymn you hear: On what day do we sing this hymn? During which service? What is the place and purpose of this hymn? The hymns of Passion Week create holy echoes that help to connect our worship with the rest of daily life. Singing "Behold the Bridegroom" at the services which begin Holy Week is good, but hearing and singing the same hymn while driving, walking, or cleaning the house is even better. Doing so, we allow the prayer of the Church to become the prayer of everyday life.

(5) Be still. Set aside time each day to sit quietly in front of an icon of Christ, about 20-30 minutes. Light a candle, say a short prayer, and then simply wait in silence for the Lord to speak a word, or to bestow a deeper sense of His presence. Being silent is a way of saying to God, "I am here. And I wait on no other than You. Visit me in my smallness." Stillness during Holy Week is a good practice for the experience of Great and Holy Friday and Saturday. The most eloquent word ever spoken is the silence of our dead Savior while hanging on the cross, and while lying in the tomb. His silence says everything. The stillness of His death is the great action that redeems and sanctifies all the world. His silence on the cross

shouts down hell. His stillness in the tomb explodes the realm of the dead and bestows life on all. When we practice stillness and silence during Holy Week, we are preparing to unite our silence to Christ's. We are preparing to die with our Savior ... so that we too might be raised to new life!

(6) Always be with Christ (as Fr +Tom Hopko reminds us). Occupy your mind as often as you can with a short prayer. If you do not already have the habit of praying the Jesus Prayer, Holy Week is a great time to begin: "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." This prayer increases our awareness of the nearness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It reminds us that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. Christ is always with us, and through continual prayer, we work to do the same — to always be with our Lord who loves and strengthens us.

(7) Read a Gospel. Set aside time each day to read several chapters from either Matthew, Mark, or Luke. (We save John for after Pascha!) And remember that in the Gospels, we do not find words about Christ, we find words from Christ. Each verse of Holy Scripture is a word spoken directly to you by the raised and glorified Lord. Each word is a word for now, each word is a new word that you have never received before. Enjoy the gift! Jesus wants to give it to you!

(8) Seek forgiveness and healing. Chances are, each of us has at least a small handful of relationships in need of healing. During Holy Week, work for that healing. . . .

(9) Call someone who is sick or lonely. Visit them if you can. Share yourself with someone who needs you. Our parishes, and our neighborhoods, are filled with people who are dying of loneliness and isolation. Extend yourself and give them the gift of human presence. . . .

(10) Think about Bright Week and beyond! With Pascha comes the true light that enlightens the whole world and each person in it. As we unite ourselves to Christ, the radiance of the Resurrection changes everything. The week after Pascha is truly a Bright Week — the Resurrection colors all with brilliance and beauty. Nothing should ever be the same. . . . pravomir.com

Upcoming Events 2015-16

17 April: Pan-Orthodox Vespers at St. Seraphim's
with Bishop Alexander
24-30 April: Holy Week
30 April 10:00 a.m. Skelton Baptism
1 May Holy Pascha, 3:00 p.m. Picnic, Egg Hunt
28 May Baptism of Estefania Dean 2:30 p.m.
11 June, Saturday, Installation of Bishop Alexander

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!