

The Confessor's Tongue for May 28, A. D. 2017

Seventh Sunday of Pascha: Fathers of the First Council in Nicaea

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.

Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council

Devoting this Sunday to the memory of the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council, the Holy Church sings:

Let us, the pious assembly of true believers, celebrate today in prayerful memory the God-bearing Fathers from every part of the world who assembled in the brilliant city of the Nicaea. For these pious wise ones put down the godless teachings of the terrible Arius, and expelled him from the unity of the Catholic Church, and clearly taught everyone to profess their faith in the consubstantial and coeternal Son of God, existing before the ages, expressing this clearly in the symbol of faith.

The heresy of Arius was one of the most destructive heresies. It denied the divinity of the Son of God, i.e. that main doctrine of Christianity on which all our faith and the whole Church of Christ is founded, which makes it the unique basis for all hope of our salvation. The Holy Fathers at the First Ecumenical Council laid down the Orthodox teaching in opposition to Arius' error, establishing it universally. And the Holy Church glorifies these same Holy Fathers of Nicaea on the Sunday after the Ascension because the most glorious Ascension of the Lord serves as clear proof of the inseparable connection of the two natures in Jesus Christ, the divine and the human.

The Commandments of Christ

"If ye love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:15)

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:17-20

Most of Christ's commands concern what we do or say, but this one addresses our thinking. It makes sense when we realize that every sin begins with a thought—a lie. By giving this command governing certain thoughts, Christ seeks to protect us for serious sins that result from accepting the thought.

"Don't think that I came to destroy or abolish the law or the prophets." Why does Christ give us this command about what we think? Why is it important for us not to think this?

Throughout the history of the Church going back to the New Testament itself, there have been those who have fallen into heresy by not observing this

command of Christ.

Marcion was a Christian from Pontus on the Black Sea, a wealthy shipowner whose father was a bishop. He came to Rome in 140, gave a large gift to the Church there, and became an active member. But in 144, he was excommunicated for his teachings, and his money was returned. What happened? Marcion despised the Old Testament and its Jewishness. He felt there was an irreconcilable conflict between the God of the Old Testament Law and the God of love of the New Testament. He felt that only St. Paul understood this contrast between law and grace. Hence, he developed his own canon, disposing of the entire Old Testament, all the epistles except ten of Paul's, and all the Gospels but Luke's, which he edited to rid it of Jewish references. He died in 160, but his heretical teaching spread widely and troubled the Church for some time to come.

Marcion failed to keep Christ's command that we not think He came to abolish the law or the prophets. Many others have made this same mistake.

Thus even today there are Christians who do not read the Old Testament and will consider nothing unless it is explicitly written in the New.

Yet it is the same God who gave us both. Indeed, the one, holy, catholic Church is built on the foundation not only of the Apostles but also the Prophets. Both testaments are necessary to the Church; both are received by her as Spirit-inspired Scripture. Both are useful for teaching, reproof, and instruction in the Faith.

There are other Christians who emphasize the message of the grace, mercy, and love of God but neglect the commandments (as though we could know how to love God and neighbor without them). These people like the idea of a warm and cozy love offered by a non-condemning God, but do not want to be bound by commandments that cramp them.

In the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Christ does not destroy the law but strengthens and deepens it, for He came to instruct us in and give us power to fulfill a higher standard of righteousness than that of the Scribes and Pharisees!

The ritual law of the Old Testament is not abolished, but is fulfilled in Christ, our great High Priest who has accomplished with His once-for-all sacrifice what millions of animal sacrifices offered by the sons of Aaron could not accomplish. They were given as a type and shadow of the fullness to come, and once the fulfillment came, they were abolished in dramatic fashion: they ceased for good with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in A.D. 70.

St. Augustine speaks to this in his work "Against Faustus the Manichaen":

Those first sacraments, which were observed and celebrated in obedience to the law, were by way of

prior announcement of Christ who was to come. And when Christ, by his coming, had fulfilled them, they were taken away, and they were taken away because they were fulfilled; for He came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it. And no that justice of faith has been revealed and the yoke of slavery, which had suitably been given to a hard and carnal people, has been taken away from the sons of God called to liberty, other sacraments have been instituted, greater in strength, more beneficial in their use, easier of performance, and fewer in number.”

The moral law of the Old Testament is also not abolished, but is strengthened and spiritualized by Christ's law of love. He himself demonstrates this in Matthew 5. Not only is murder forbidden, but the anger that leads us to disparage a brother and which can lead to murder. Not only is adultery forbidden, but lustful looks and thoughts. Not only are we to keep our sworn oaths, but also our simply given word, displacing the need for oaths at all. Not only are we to love our neighbor, but also our enemy. Thus, instead of rejecting the Law of the Old Covenant, we are to understand and live its deeper meaning in Christ.

The Prayer of an Orthodox Christian

What level did the saints reach?

“There is a loftier prayer of the perfect, a certain rapture of mind, a complete detachment from everything felt with the senses, when through unutterable groanings of the spirit man becomes closer to God, who sees the heart open like a book and expressing its will through innumerable images.” (St. Nilus of Sinai, *Philokalia*)

In this form of prayer, which is impossible for the mind alone to attain, one's whole being enters into blessed and ceaseless repentance.

Does Holy Scripture provide any examples of oral prayer addressing God with the heart and mind together?

The Savior Himself, entering His great moment of trial as He and the disciples were heading to the Garden of Gethsemane, gave us an example of prayer aloud: *And when thy had sung a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives* (Matt 26:30). The Lord gave thanks to God the Father in the hearing of all when He had raised Lazarus (John 11:41-42). Likewise, St. Anna, the mother of the prophet Samuel, prayed with her lips: *Now Anna, she spake in her heart; only her lips moved; then Eli answered and said, Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of Him... I Kings 1:13-18. By Him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name* (Hebrews 13:15).

How do we learn to pray with our lips, and then with our mind?

1. If our childhood habits have been forgotten, then it is possible to learn to pray aloud (that is, step onto the first level of prayer) by using a prayerbook and paying close attention to the standard Church prayers. “The church wisely established hymns and various troparia on account of the weakness of our mind, so that we, although foolish, might be attracted by the sweetness of the singing and thus praise God even against our will” (St. Peter of Damascus). The Church accepted hymns and troparia so that we would

be humbled and rise to excellent thoughts as if upon a ladder.

2. Christ's teaching demands that our faith and our way of living be inseparable. For this reason, every Christian, in order to live in constant prayer, must have a daily order of prayer; that is, to establish under the guidance of a spiritual father a prayer rule. As St. Augustine said, “Once we were cleansed by baptism; but every day by prayer.”

3. “Every established prayer, be it for home or church use, merely imparts to prayer an outer form; the soul or essence of prayer, however, is born by every person within, in the mind and heart. Our entire cycle of church prayers, as well as every prayer designed for home use, is filled with invocations to God...it is impossible to argue with the fact that mental prayer is necessary for all Christians; and if it is necessary, then no one can say that it is impossible, for God does not force us to do the impossible. That it is difficult—certainly. But then everything worth doing is difficult; and all the more so should prayer be, since it is the source of everything good in our lives...(St. Theophan the Recluse, *Letters to Various Persons*, Letter 66).

The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force (Matt. 11:12).

What is the practical significance of a prayer rule?

“A prayer rule is an arrangement of several prayers written by holy and God-inspired Fathers, which are adapted to a specific time and circumstances” (St. Ignatius Brianchaninov).

“The purpose of a rule is to increase the number of prayerful thoughts and feelings...and so that they be correct, holy, and perfectly pleasing to God.” “The soul, left to her own devices, would not be able to follow the correct path of prayer. She would become distorted: either through daydreaming, or through illusions of lofty visions, inspired by vainglory.”

“Thus, the soul, filled and nurtured by prayerful thoughts and feelings selected from a ready-made prayerbook, begins of its own accord to live these thoughts and feelings” (St. Theophan).

How long should a prayer rule be?

The rule of prayer is for the person, not the person for the rule. When determining a rule, it is necessary to adapt it to, and not exceed, the individual's strength. A rule is meant to further spiritual advancement, and not to serve as an excuse for self-opinion. “It is better to alter parts of a rule, or even invent an entirely new one, lest prayer become a mere ritual” (St. Theophan).

“I prefer a brief rule that is continually performed to a long rule that is quickly abandoned: (St. Matoes, *Alphabetical Patericon of Scetis*).

“In the day of His judgment, God will not condemn us for leaving off psalms or abandoning prayers, but for allowing demons to enter us because we ceased our rule” (St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 71).

Upcoming Events 2017

- 31 May Vigil for St. Justin of Chelije, first time in English
- 4 June Pentecost, Youth Craft Sale
- 9 June No Fast Friday youth game night
- 10 June, 3:00 p.m. Sidorenko Baptism
- 12 - 28 June Apostles' Fast

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!