

The Confessor's Tongue for November 12, A. D. 2017

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost: St. John the Merciful

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.

November 12: St. John the Merciful

Born on the island of Cyprus, son of a prince, he devoted his whole life to prayer and virtue and for his piety he was chosen to be the patriarch. In this post St. John even more cared for the poor, the suffering and the captives, not leaving anyone without bountiful grants. St. John gave alms to everyone who asked. Once among the poor gathering for a handout there were well-dressed girls who approached and asked the hierarch whether they should give alms in the same way. St. John answered: "if you are servants of Christ, give as Christ has enjoined, not looking at the person for we do not give of our own but of Christ's". One rich noblewoman, who visited the hierarch and saw on his bed a thin coverlet, sent him a silk one, costing 36 gold coins (zlatnitsa). The hierarch respected her zeal and put on the coverlet presented to him, but in that same night he woke up, and repented and said: "Woe to you, the condemned! You are covered with an expensive blanket, and the brothers in Christ, the poor, freeze in the cold. Let this costly gift cover some of the poor". In the morning he sent to sell the coverlet and gave the money to the needy. The noblewoman again gave him a coverlet, but the hierarch did not want to take advantage of the gift and turned the noblewoman's attachment to him into a means of philanthropy.

So that no one from the needy would be set aside, St. John on Wednesday and Friday sat all day at the church gate so that all having business with him would not be forbidden to come to him. When they expressed surprise at his patience, the hierarch answered: "If I always have access to my Lord Jesus Christ, in prayer I talk to Him and I ask Him everything that I want: how I can forbid my neighbor to come to me?" And it is true that no urgent business could force St. John to postpone acts of mercy. One widow approached him when he went to church. Accompanying him she listened to his advice after the service. But the hierarch answered: "But would God listen to me if I do not want to listen to her?" Then he analyzed the situation and satisfied the widow.

Being "meek, the good compassionate one was also gentle". St. John once for the defense of poor people was deeply offended by one secular leader and on the same day, before sunset, sent a message to his offender: "soon the sun will set: let us reconcile". The leader was so touched with these words, that he not only reconciled with the peace loving hierarch, but also promised to flee from conflicts with anyone in his life. During an attack of the Persians in Egypt, St. John left for the island of Cyprus where he died in 620. His relics repose in city of Presburg, Hungary.

*Manual for Church Servers, 2nd ed., 1274 pp. (Kharkov, 1900)
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Preparing for the Nativity Fast

The Nativity Fast, the 40-day period of preparation for the Nativity of our Lord, begins Wednesday, November 15 and lasts until the Liturgy the morning of the Nativity of Our Lord, December 25. The Fast is a time of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving given to us by the Holy Spirit in the Church for our spiritual benefit: for repentance, healing, cleansing, growth, and, ultimately—for knowing Christ more intimately and being filled afresh with His Spirit. The Fast is a time to lay aside lesser things so often choking our lives to pursue greater things and recalibrate our spiritual life.

The Fast is a wholistic effort of the whole man consisting of three main elements: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Now, before the Fast is upon us, is the time to prepare for our own fasting so that we know how we shall be fasting ahead of time. The Nativity Fast can be difficult for us as the surrounding world parties in the time leading up the Nativity, and then, when we are celebrating the twelve days of Christmas, the world has already turned away from the Feast, wearied already by its excesses. So we do well to plan ahead. If you have not done this before, or want to make substantial changes in your practice, or have any questions at all, please consult with your confessor.

Prayer: During the Fast, we seek to advance our prayer life, keeping our rule of prayer more strictly and adding to it if we can. Easy ways to increase are to add Psalms, prostrations, and ropes of the Jesus Prayer. Prostrations should be a normal part of our spiritual life except on Sundays and Great Feasts of the Lord. Adding to our normal number is a natural way to increase our prayer during a fast. Some monks will double their usual prostrations. The Psalter is the original prayer book of the church and is set up to be used as such. We may do as little as adding one Psalm a day, say after Psalm 50 in the morning, or recite a stasis or full kathisma. Using the Psalter in this way provides daily variety to our usual prayers. Saying a set number of Jesus Prayers, counted on a prayer rope and given our full attention, is a natural part of a rule of prayer. During fasting seasons, the number of such prayers may be increased. We may use the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem if we desire. We should strive to develop a more constant awareness of God throughout the day by using of the Jesus Prayer as we go about our business or other such short prayers, such as the Short Office of the Hours for Home Use available from your priest. Prayer also includes the corporate prayer of the Church in her services. We should attend services more frequently, as the services provide support for our overall efforts.

Almsgiving: Almsgiving helps give our prayer wings. It is an act of love to give up some of the resources God has given us to benefit others who are

in need. We offer several outlets for almsgiving: the almsbox and our own "food pantry" for those in need, and the collections of items needed by the local Woman to Woman, Interfaith Ministries, and Loreto House. One may also give to the needy or to worthy charities such as International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) on one's own. The important thing is that we give alms, which is giving for those in need above and beyond our normal tithes and offerings.

Fasting: In many people's mind, this is what is meant by the Fast, but this is but one part. We abstain from meat, dairy products, fish, wine, and olive oil (see wall calendar for when fish, wine, and oil are permitted) and marital relations (see priest if you have questions) so that we can give ourselves to prayer and have extra means for almsgiving. We eat less and less frequently. When we do eat, we get up from the table still having "room" in our stomachs (not stuffed or weighed down). The money we save by eating less and more simply we give as alms (above and beyond our usual tithes and offerings); here fasting has its practical social benefit. We also seek to minimize influences in our lives that draw us away from Christ or cause our hearts to grow cold or indifferent to Him. Hence, for the season we may cut back on or cut out altogether TV, movies, social media, secular music, parties, and other entertainment and replace it with prayer, Church services, works of mercy, and spiritual reading. This is a good time to unplug ourselves from as much electronic media as we can and concentrate on personal face to face relations with friends and especially family members.

Each person is strongly encouraged to choose a spiritual book for daily reading during the Fast in addition to our daily reading of Scripture, etc. These include works such as Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, John Cassian's *Conferences*, anything by St. Theophan the Recluse, *Unseen Warfare*, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, St. John of Kronstadt's *My Life in Christ*, St. Maximus 400 *Chapters on Love*, Father Arseny, various lives of saints such as the Optina Elders, St. Seraphim, St. Silouan, St. Nectarios, St. Elizabeth of Moscow, anything by or about St. Paisios or St. Porphyrios of Athos, etc. It is wise to consult with your priest or confessor if you are not sure what to read. Put our Library and Bookstore to good use!

All regular communicants must make a Confession during the Fast. Those who do not commune regularly should use the Fast to prepare for Confession and Communion. We cannot expect to have spiritual health if we do not make the spiritual and physical effort involved to commune at least a three or four times a year.

If we seek to commune regularly, we must make at least a monthly Confession. Frequent Communion is a privilege which assumes that we are examining ourselves in confession regularly, keeping fast days, and trying to live an active Christian life throughout the week. If we won't, don't or can't do this, we should commune less frequently and carefully prepare

for it each time by a Confession along with prayer and fasting. If you have any questions about how to keep the fast in your particular circumstances, please consult your Confessor or Priest.

Parish Development: Where We Stand

Since the first services at St. Maximus, the July 28-29, 2001, the parish has grown at least a little every year but one, but this year has seen unprecedented growth. Last year we averaged 91 people present for the Sunday Divine Liturgy; this year, we are averaging 107.6, but it has spiked the past few months: July 112, August 102, September 120, October 131. Vigil attendance has averaged a record 41 this year. We all feel the growth on Sundays—from the fullness of the church, to coffee hour, to parking—and thank God for it. We also more than ever perceive the need to accomplish a primary goal of this mission: to build a traditional, permanent temple.

We first hit 100 on a Sunday in June of 2011 and again in July of that year, while averaging 74 on Sunday for the year. We hit triple figures twice the next year (averaging 82), four times in 2013 (averaging 86), twice in 2014 (falling back to 82), then six times in 2015 (avg. 88), eleven times in 2016 (avg 91). This year, we have hit 100 twenty-five times including the last nine weeks in a row, setting a Pascha record of 144 and a regular Sunday record of 142.

We have long planned to build. In September 2006, after Archbishop Dmitri visited, he sent us a letter calling on us to start thinking and planning to build. In 2007, after some abortive attempts, we hired Orthodox architect Andrew Gould to design a church for us. His initial design, which we received in the fall of 2007, was beautiful and inspiring.

Initial specifications for the church were that it was to be built to last until Christ returned, no sheetrock, 1260 to 1440 square feet in the nave to allow for 140 to 160 people at 9 square feet per person. (In our present space, if we include our narthex, we can hold only about 90 people at 9 square feet a person.) After hitting some bumps, we decided in 2010 to scale back our plans and build something more modest and affordable. In the meantime, we incorporated space on both sides of the nave to give us 200 square feet more and built a hall. In 2013, Andrew Gould prepared the conceptual plans that now hang on our bulletin board. We had planned to go ahead with that building behind our present one. But then our council, lacking enthusiasm for that, pressed to acquire the lot down the street or look into building in front before settling for building behind. Fr. Gerasim has also encouraged us not to limit ourselves to our current lot. That is where we stand.

More to come next week.

Upcoming Events 2017

12 November: Parish Thanksgiving Meal 4:00 p.m.
14 November: Chili Dinner at the Rectory
15 November: Nativity Fast Begins

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!