

The Confessor's Tongue for December 17, A. D. 2017

Twenty-eighth Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Forefathers

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.

Nativity of Our Lord

The celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus in the flesh involves a whole complex of services. It begins with the fast of forty days preceding it. During the fast at important feasts such as St. Nicholas and others, we hear sung the irmoi of the Nativity canon at the end of each ode of the canon at Matins, heralding the coming Feast. The formal Forefeast starts December 20. At that time, we stop singing hymns from the *Octoechos* and sing in their usual place at Vespers, Matins, and Liturgy hymns of the Forefeast from the *Menaion*, hymns which speak of the coming feast and what it means.

Normally on the eve of Nativity, the Royal Hours are read. These are the usual canonical Hours (First, Third, Sixth, and Ninth), but with a difference. Two of the three usual Psalms at each hour are replaced with different Psalms more relevant to the Feast. An epistle and gospel reading are added to each Hour along with hymns of the Feast. Instead of forty minutes as one would normally expect, the service lasts about an hour and a half, offering a concentrated celebration. This year, because Nativity falls on a Monday and it would not be appropriate to serve the Royal Hours on the eve, Sunday, or on Saturday, they are moved back to Friday.

In Greek practice the Vigil for the Feast when it falls on Monday or Sunday consists of Great Vespers and Matins. When Nativity falls on other days, however, Vespers is served as part of a Vespereal Liturgy on the eve of the Feast with the Liturgy of St. Basil, and Great Compline is served as the first part of the Vigil with its characteristic "God is with us"—a most appropriate text for Christ's Nativity. In the Slavic practice, when there is no Vespereal Liturgy (like this year), when Nativity falls on Sunday or Monday, the Vigil still consists of Great Compline and Matins while Vespers, with its characteristic Old Testament readings about the coming of Christ, is served right after Liturgy (St. Seraphim Cathedral is serving it thus this year.)

Why is the Vespereal Liturgy of the Eve not served if the Eve of Nativity falls on Saturday or Sunday? A Vespereal Liturgy implies fasting all day. Yet Saturday (the Sabbath) and Sunday (the day of Resurrection) are not days on which the Church fasts in that way, so a regular liturgy is served in the morning rather than a Vespereal Liturgy in the evening after a day of fasting.

Hence, this year we have services of the Forefeast this coming week starting with Vespers on Tuesday. The Royal Hours will be served Friday morning. The Liturgy St. John on Sunday morning will replace the usual Vespereal Liturgy of the Eve. Vigil with Great Vespers will be served Sunday evening, and, Monday morning on the Feast itself will be celebrated the Liturgy of St. Basil. It is moderately complex, but

works well to enable us to contemplate and celebrate the magnificent gift the birth of Jesus Christ in the flesh is to the human race. We do well to take time from the common activities of life to contemplate and celebrate at the services Christ's taking flesh "for us men and for our salvation."

Questions at Christmas

St. John of Kronstadt

You are preparing yourselves to meet the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, you must ask yourselves: Have you preserved the spiritual birth from God which we each received in Baptism? Are you always heedful of your Divine sonship and the sacred treasure of the Spirit which you acquired in Baptism? Have you grown closer to God through faith and love, like His beloved children? Have you loved on another as befits children of God? Have you despised evil and all-destructive sin? Have you loved truth and every virtue? Have you loved immortal and eternal life prepared in a land which will not pass away and to which we are called by Him who now has come to our corrupt earth? These are questions which we must ask ourselves now and decide; not only with our minds, but above all, with our hearts and our very deeds.

Liturgical Practices

Liturgical practice in the Orthodox Church differs from place to place. Some is due to a difference in customs native to particular peoples. Part is due to choices individual priests make in trying to apply the *Typicon* to their parish. Over time, distortions of best practices can develop.

Our priest has been reviewing our own practices with a few others of late and has identified a few things to change. The changes will not be huge. Many will not notice them.

The biggest change on Sunday will be that the "amens" at the consecration of the gifts will no longer be sung by the choir. They properly belong to the deacon. When there is no deacon, they belong to the priest. We shall return to the practice we had in the beginning of the consecration being done quietly in the altar while the choir and people sing "We hymn Thee, we bless Thee, we give thanks unto Thee." If the Liturgy takes place on any day but Sunday or a Feast of the Lord, the people make a prostration at the end of the hymn (some start prostrating with the exclamation "Thine own of Thine own, we offer unto Thee on behalf or all and for all" and stay down until the end of the hymn). On Sunday, a bow to the waist is called for. We hope that in the near future, we shall have a deacon or two assigned to serve here.

At the end of Vespers and Matins, we have been singing, "Establish, O God, the Holy Orthodox Faith

and Orthodox Christians." The "and" is incorrect; it should be "of". We shall correct this.

At the end of the dismissal, it is common for the choir to sing "amen". This is actually not called for by our service books. We've gone back and forth on this issue a couple times in the history of the parish, but we shall return to not singing Amen at the dismissal.

On weekdays, you will see the royal doors used as is specified by the rubrics. The modern tendency has been to have them open more than prescribed. On Sundays, we shall close them at the start of the Litany right after the sermon—a little earlier than we have been closing them.

Antidoron, the blessed remnants of the prosphoron loaf from which the Lamb (from which we commune) has been cut, is properly distributed to Orthodox Christians who did not receive Holy Communion during the singing of Psalm 33. We have reinstated this practice during weekday Liturgies but not on Sundays at this time.

The Nativity Fast

Fr. Vladimir Berzonsky

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone. You have made their gladness greater, you have made their joy increase;" (ISAIAH 9:1)

I understand the significance of the pre-Easter lent, but why do we keep a Lenten season for Christmas, since it's such a joyous occasion?" The woman who made the comment spoke sincerely and her reasoning was correct. What she misunderstood was the purpose of Lenten fasting and spiritual preparation.

To so many of our people, fasting and prayers are expressions of sorrow for a rupture in Divine-human relationships, such as was the murder of Jesus Christ.

Primarily, lent is a time for our concentrated preparing for the Kingdom of God's manifestation within us. By freeing ourselves from the things of this world we can better live and experience the Spirit of God dwelling in our souls. It is a time of pilgrimage—a spiritual journey to our true native land which the Lord has prepared for us.

Now it is advent, the time of His coming. Christ is on the way to my world, my city, my house and to me. How will He find it: what will He think of us; will He be pleased?

Ostensibly we are preparing for Christmas. External trappings, translucent, illuminated neon and plastic bubbles pronounce greetings to anybody, and receive about as much notice as the recently discarded cardboard announcements of political candidates. Reluctant consumers dutifully divest the glutted department stores of what everybody knows nobody needs or wants, because it's XMAS. Liquor store registers and corner Santa's hand bells jingle in cacophony. Does this please Him? Is all this a worthy greeting for Him? Nobody thinks so, and nobody planned it this way; yet it appears we're locked in a

social mechanism we hadn't chosen to enter.

We ought to become serious about freeing ourselves of all the material objects that are idols for so many, promising a happiness they are incapable of fulfilling; if we know that advent is just a time for learning to do without, then capitalist Xmas is a travesty of Christ's coming. It is in fact the very opposite of self-denial and spiritual preparation for communion with God in Christ. We sense His displeasure. Underneath the tinsel peeks out a sad, selfish and troubled world.

Can it be He'll find even a few who await His coming with hope and longing? Are there those who, while knowing themselves responsible for the world as it is, yet trust in His promise of another life and prepare themselves for it, while at the same time doing all in their capability to give content and a dimension of true values to this present world?

There were such in every age of the past, and God sought them out from their society: Abraham in Chaldea, Lot in Sodom, Moses in Midian, Elijah at the Cherith wadi and young Mary in Nazareth. While there are such remaining in the world, God's covenant with mankind is not abrogated. To fulfill advent, then, would be to make ourselves like them; a difficult task, but not impossible, for "With God, all things are possible."

Q&A: How to Kiss the Cross

Question: How does one properly venerate the cross the priest holds at the end of Divine Liturgy?

Answer: The Cross is brought out for veneration at the end of Divine Liturgy. We venerate it by crossing ourselves, bowing, kissing the cross, and kissing the priest's hand. When we kiss the cross, piety moves us to kiss Christ's feet, not other parts of His body. We do not omit to kiss the priest's hand, who serves as a living icon of Christ, who makes Christ's one high priesthood present in the parish, and whose hand touches the Holy Things. In venerating the Cross in this way, we show respect for Christ who was crucified upon it for our salvation and for His priesthood made manifest in the local parish by the duly-ordained priest. Parents should instruct their children in how to venerate the Cross properly, seeing to it that they themselves set a good example. The priest has noticed a wide variety of practice among those coming to venerate the cross at the end of Liturgy.

Upcoming Events 2017

- 17 December Craft Sale
- 19 December: Holy Unction
- 24 December: Vigil for Nativity, 5:00 p.m.
- 25 December: Nativity Divine Liturgy 8:00 a.m.
- 30 December: Patronal Feast at Nativity Monastery.
- 31 December: All-Night Vigil for St. Basil, Circumcision of Christ, and the New Year, 10:00 p.m.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!