

The Confessor's Tongue for December 24, A. D. 2017

Twenty-ninth Sunday after Pentecost: Nativity Eve

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 Sunday Before Nativity

In the services of this week, the Church glorifies the Old Testament saints from whose human family came our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore in the Gospel appointed for this Sunday is read the "genealogy" of Jesus Christ. Together with these on this Sunday, as well as on the Sunday of the Forefathers (see Dec. 11), are commemorated all those living in faith and all the Old Testament saints who have come to the Savior, who are listed in the Epistle reading for this Sunday.

December 25: Nativity of Our Lord in the Flesh

This week we celebrate the Great Feast of the Nativity of our Lord. We do well to keep the Feast by attending the services celebrating it: Vigil tonight and the Feastday Liturgy Monday morning.

We celebrate the Feast by greeting each other with the greeting, "Christ is born!" and the response, "Glorify Him!" We do not fast again until January 5, the Eve of Theophany. We sing the troparion (before) and kontakion (after) of the Feast in place of our usual prayers before and after meals through the Leavetaking December 31.

Nativity, Troparion, tone 4

Thy Nativity, O Christ our God / hath shone upon the world the light of wisdom. / For by it, those who worshipped the stars / were taught by a star to adore Thee, / the Sun of Righteousness, / and to know Thee, the Orient from on high. // O Lord, glory to Thee!

Nativity, Kontakion, tone 3

Today the Virgin giveth birth to the Transcendent One, / and the earth offereth a cave to the Unapproachable One! / Angels with Shepherds glorify Him! / The wise men journey with the star: // since for our sake the eternal God was born as a little child!

Patriarch Pavle (+2009) of Serbia on Nativity

And precisely today — here and now, for the two thousandth time — we celebrate and remember the event that divides history in two; the event so significant that we count the years from it, and now complete the second millennium. Two thousand years have passed since that night when history's greatest miracle took place in that cave near Bethlehem, when the Son of God Himself came and put on flesh and became like one of us and 'dwelt among us' [John 1:14]. . . . From that night on, all human life and the history of every nation comes down to only one dilemma — to one simple question: Are you for or against Christ? One simple question, but a question so crucial that our entire life, and the future of our people, hinges upon it. That question overshadows and defines every historical period of the past twenty centuries.

For or against Him? Earlier periods that were, at least for the most part, 'for Christ', brought forth fruit that stands as an example and a starting point for

all times. That fruit is called Christian culture. It represents an attempt to Christianize every segment of personal, social and national life, so that nothing remains outside or apart from Christ. We call it an attempt, since nothing in history is absolute and final. But the value is truly in the deeply Christian attempt, since a basic characteristic of Christianity is its all-inclusiveness — that Christ be all in all. . . .

What is man, and what is he worth? The twentieth century said that man is nothing, but this feast today tells us, just as that day two thousand years ago told us, that man is sacred. And that applies not only to his spirit or his soul, but also to his body. The whole of man, body and soul together, is an inviolable shrine of incalculable and eternal worth. Today's feast tells us this: the day on which the Bodiless becomes embodied and on which the Son of God becomes the Son of man. This precisely is what is radically new in our faith. That the soul is holy is suggested by other religions, but that the body is equally sacred is found nowhere else. During the whole first eight centuries of Christianity, which were characterized by struggles against heresies, the Church unyieldingly defended this truth: that the whole of man, both body and soul, is holy. And that applies to every human being, regardless of his religion or nationality. Every murder, every disrespect for human personality and freedom, is sin, even more so when it is justified on ideological or nationalistic grounds. (*From a homily given in 1999*)

Changes for a New Year

Christ's incarnation and birth into our world means, among other things, that every day we have the possibility of making "a beginning of good", but there can a particular emotional power in using the New Year to make changes for the good: a new year, a new beginning. The knowledge that we need to change, that we should not continue as we are, motivates the custom of making New Year's resolutions. While this expresses a good intention towards a real need, it all too often accomplishes little. This need not be.

Christ calls us to new life in Him in which we become conformed to His image and take on His character, His goodness. Comparing ourselves to Him and discerning how short we fall of that goal can be so overwhelming and discouraging that we don't know what to do, how to do it, or where to start. To try to change everything at once will be to change nothing. So there we are stuck: everything must change, but we can't change everything at once, and because we can't, we end up drifting, changing nothing.

"It's the job that's never started as takes longest to finish". We must take up our cross to die to ourselves and follow Christ—today, not tomorrow. "Getting started is half finished." So many things never get done because we don't begin them. Let us make that beginning of good today, and we'll be well on our way of getting there.

Major change to our life begins with small but strategic changes. A small number of modest but strategic changes empower us to gain traction against the intractable problem of changing ourselves to be conformed to Christ.

Writing New Year's resolutions cast as attainable goals that will make us more like Christ can be an effective means to this end.

It must be said that we are not alone in this work. We are told "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." We have to want the work, desire the change, start the work, take the first step, but as Christ said, "Without Me, ye can do nothing." He took the initiative for us in becoming man and dying and rising for us to open the path of salvation. We have to respond to His initiative by taking action ("follow Me", "take up your cross"). We respond, crying out to Him in humility to enable us to do what is needed, what He asks. He quickly meets our feeble response to His initiative with His powerful grace.

In setting goals for change, we look at a few small steps that will enable us to respond to Christ's initiative and will set us on a different trajectory in life which will bring us closer to Him. We take the needed step and look to Him for grace to continue.

We need not despise small steps of change. A small change carried out, a slight modification of our vector of travel, over time will take us far from the destination of our erroneous path.

So what steps should we take in 2018? To pray? To worship? To give? To fast? To love God by keeping His commandments? To love our wives as Christ loves the Church? To honor and submit to our husbands? To honor and obey our parents? To love our enemies and our neighbors? To bring glory to Christ at work? at school?

The following ten points come from a writer named Michael Hyatt. He explains well how to set effective goals—goals that we actually carry out.

Here are the top ten most common mistakes I see people make when it comes to goal-setting:

1. They don't write them down. Unless a goal is written, it is merely an aspiration—lifeless and devoid of power. Once you commit it to writing, you set something in motion. You clarify what you want and begin focusing on how to attain it.
2. They create too many. An old Chinese proverb says, "Man who chases two rabbits catches neither." While you probably need more than a single goal, you need to stay focused on a manageable number of them. I recommend no more than 7-10.
3. They only set them for one area of their life. Most people are accustomed to the idea of setting career goals. But life is far more than your job. If you are going to be happy and fulfilled, you need goals in each of the major areas of life—spiritual, physical, marital, relational, etc.
4. They don't make them specific. Most goals—even written ones—suffer from being too vague. "I want to write a book" or "I want a better marriage" are too general. *Which* book do you want to write? *How* do you want to improve your marriage?
5. They don't make them measurable. The only way to know if you have achieved a goal is to quantify it. "Lose 25 pounds" is much better than "lose weight." "Earn 10% more than I did last year" is better than "earn more money." When in doubt, assign a number or a percentage.
6. They don't assign a due date. So often the important gets sacrificed on the altar of the urgent. A deadline is one way to create urgency and force yourself to pay attention to what's important. Without a deadline, there's little pressure to get it done. It's easy to procrastinate.

7. They don't keep them visible. How many times have you written down a set of goals and never looked at them again? I've done it plenty of times. That's why you need a plan to keep them visible, whether that means reviewing them daily, weekly, or at some other regular interval.

8. They don't stretch out of their comfort zone. Safe goals are boring goals. Unless we set our goals outside our comfort zone, we won't find them compelling enough to actually follow through and achieve them. They shouldn't be unrealistic, but they should be challenging.

9. They don't make them personally compelling. When you pursue a meaningful goal, it is exhilarating. Accomplishing it, even more so. But the "messy middle" is where most of us get stuck. This is why we need to write down a set of motivations for each goal identifying *why* it is important and *what* is at stake.

10. They don't identify the next action. You don't need an elaborate action plan for each goal. (Often this can just be a fancy way of procrastinating.) But you do need to identify the next action, so you can initiate and maintain momentum.

Here are some sample goals.

1. I want and need to read the Bible. Instead of saying "I resolve to read it more this year", write, "I'll read one chapter of the gospels and two from the rest of the New Testament each day in the morning before I turn on the computer or look at my phone. That way I'll finish the NT four times this year. If I get behind, I'll spend time Saturday evening after Vigil or on Sunday catching.
2. Instead of saying, "I resolve to increase my giving" write, "When I receive my paycheck, the first check I write shall be to the Church and it will be no less than 10% of my paycheck for that period." If you are one who no longer writes checks, set up an automatic, electric payment the fulfills your intent.
3. Instead of saying, "I resolve to pray more", be more specific. If you don't pray much in the morning, set a goal to get to bed by a specific time so that you can wake up at a time with sufficient sleep that you'll have time to pray before work or school. God will bless such a resolution. Plan to pray before checking computer or phone.
4. Instead of saying, "I resolve to attend church more frequently," write, "I will attend Divine Liturgy every Sunday, at least half of Vigil every Saturday, and Wednesday evening Vespers and the class before it."
5. Husbands and wives: think about small but significant ways you could improve your relationship and deepen your love and respect. Men: "When my wife asks me to do something that she needs done, whenever possible, I'll do it right away rather than tempting her to nag me." This sets an example of obedience to your children, too, by the way. Women: "I'll consult my husband before making any purchase over \$50" or "I will defer to him the final decision about family matters by saying, 'You know what I think, but do what you think is best for our family'—and then support his decision without complaint

Upcoming Events 2017

- 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!