

The Confessor's Tongue for January 28, A. D. 2018

Publican & Pharisee; New Martyrs of Russia

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.

Why People Fall Away from Christ

Three times, the New Testament mentions a Christian named Demas. Demas was a fellow-worker with Paul, Luke, and others. Paul conveys greetings from him along with Luke to the Colossians at the end of his epistle to them. At the end of Philemon, he mentions Demas as a fellow-laborer who sends greetings to Philemon. But later, at the end of Second Timothy, Paul urges Timothy to come to see him soon, for all his coworkers except Luke have gone to other places and Demas has abandoned Paul. Paul gives the reason for the abandonment: Demas loved the present world and went to the city of Thessalonica to realize that love. Demas's loving the present world rather than the world to come led him to leave Paul and seek his own pleasure elsewhere.

Given this tragic case, we may better appreciate the words of St. John the Theologian: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."

The world the Christian is not to love is not the creation of God with all its beauty, but the things John lists: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, the pride of life. These things constitute the fallen order of human life, driving it and explaining fallen human action. To love these things—the body and what makes it feel good, material goods, money, and the power money brings, the vainglory that says "look and me" and the pride that declares "I am better than you" and despises others—to pursue these things is not to love God, for these things are not of God but are a corruption of the man He made in His image.

Demas's love for the world and the "goods" it offered led him to leave the narrow way, betray Christ, and abandon the Apostle Paul to go to a place where he could live in self-indulgence. His case is tragic, but it mirrors what happens to many who undertake to follow Christ but give up. St. Nikolai of Zicha offers two reasons for Christians falling away: inadequate knowledge of the Faith and sin, i.e., love for the world. Often, these two causes work together. Given Demas's position as a co-worker with Paul, it seems unlikely that he had a poor knowledge of the Faith, which leaves his falling away attributable to the reason Paul gives: he loved the world, or, as St. Nikolai expresses it—sin.

The Great Fast now drawing nigh is given to us to examine ourselves: do we love this present world, or do we love God? If we find ourselves with love for the world, the Fast gives us occasion to confess our sin and repent and seek to grow in love for God. May

none of us be found in the number of those who fall away do to poor knowledge of the faith or to love of the world and the sin that entails.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit

Perceive these three: the Lord who commands, the Word who creates, and the Spirit who strengthens. What kind of strengthening is it? Perfection in holiness, which expresses itself in an unyielding, unchangeable commitment to goodness. Such holiness is impossible without the Spirit. The angelic powers are not by their own nature holy; otherwise there would be no difference between them and the Holy Spirit. Rather, they are sanctified by the Holy Spirit in proportion to their excellence. When we consider a branding-iron, we also immediately remember that the fire is required to heat it, yet we would not claim that the iron and the fire are the same substance. The angels are a similar case; they are essentially aerial spirits, composed of immaterial fire, as it is written, "He makes His angels spirits, and His ministers a flaming fire." They exist in space, and when they are seen by those who are worthy, they assume an appropriate physical form. Holiness is not part of their essence; it is accomplished in them through communion with the Spirit. They keep their rank by persevering in goodness, by feely choosing to never abandon serving Him, who is good by nature.

"Perverse Thoughts Separate Men from God"

St. Paisios of Athos

There is no magical therapy that will automatically cure someone whose mind has gone astray due to his constant preoccupation with his false thinking; there are, however, certain steps to follow in order to recover:

First, and most important, is to realize the state of his own wretchedness.

After he realizes it, the second step is to repent, go to Confession, and never listen again to the voice of his own thoughts; instead, he must follow the voice of his spiritual father.

Thirdly, after he becomes aware of his miserable state of being, he should constantly ask God for His mercy through the Jesus Prayer, so Christ will help him, and His divine grace will return inside him.

One can only be cured and saved through humbleness, the only miraculous therapy I know of; only humility can save us.

Man is changeable; on the one hand, he clings to his good thoughts, and on the other, to his negative and devious ones. He does what he likes whenever he likes, for he has a free and independent will. The same thing applies to divine grace and illusion. Since man is

constantly changing, divine grace and illusion come and go respectively.

If one lives in the world of his pride, that is the world of his own thoughts, he is filled with illusions and he is in danger. He must not listen to his thoughts, which try to push him left and right in order to destroy him; on one hand, they convince him that he is virtuous, nice, a real striver, talented, almost a saint, and on the other, that he is a failure and there is no hope for him to be saved. His thoughts will either create inside him the false belief that he is perfect and thus awaken his pride, or that he is a hopeless loser and fill him with despair. He must ignore both positive and negative thoughts, and always confess them to his spiritual father, and obey whatever he tells him. He should only trust him and not his own thoughts; furthermore, he must believe that he is nothing but a striving soul and constantly ask for God's mercy in his prayer in order for his mind to be cleansed.

As long as he thinks humbly of himself, God's grace remains within him and protects him. When he moves away from his humble thoughts and starts being preoccupied with what the patriarch or the bishop or the abbot or monks do or say, then God's grace starts retreating.

Therefore, the most important thing for us to look after is to preserve the sense of humbleness in our lives, and thus allow for divine grace to permanently remain within us.

We once asked Father Paisios: "Father, you constantly tell us to have positive thinking. We would like you to give us some advice on how to deal with the following problem.

"Often, people come to us to tell us that some priests charge a lot of money for performing the Holy Sacraments; they say that they smoke, or hang around coffee shops; they even say that some priests are involved in immoral acts, and, in general, make strong accusations against them and present evidence to justify them. What answers can we give to people who accuse the clergy?"

The Elder started by telling us, "I know from experience that in this life people are divided into two categories. A third category does not exist. The first one resembles the fly. The main characteristic of the fly is that it is attracted by filth. For example, when a fly is found in a garden full of flowers with beautiful fragrances, it will ignore them and will go sit on top of some filth found on the ground. It will start messing around with it and feel comfortable with the bad smell. If the fly could talk, and you asked it to show you a rose in the garden, it would answer: 'I don't even know what a rose looks like. I only know where to find garbage, toilets, and filth.' There are some people who resemble the fly. People belonging to this category have learned to think negatively, and always look for the bad things in life, ignoring and refusing the presence of good.

"The other category is like the bee, whose main characteristic is to always look for something sweet

and nice to sit on. When a bee is found in a room full of filth and there is a small piece of sweet in a corner, it will ignore the filth and will go to sit on top of the sweet. Now, if we ask the bee to show us where the garbage is, it will answer: 'I don't know. I can only tell you where to find flowers, sweets, honey, and sugar'; it only knows the good things in life and is ignorant of all evil. This is the second category of people who have a positive thinking, and see only the good side of things. They always try to cover up the evil in order to protect their fellow men; on the contrary, people in the first category try to expose the evil and bring it to the surface.

"When someone comes to me and starts accusing other people, and puts me in a difficult situation, I tell him the above example. Then, I ask him to decide to which category he wishes to belong, so he may find people of the same kind to socialize with.

Elder Paisios was constantly stressing the importance of pious thinking in spiritual life. He used to say that a single positive thought equals a vigil on Mount Athos. Once, he told us the following incident.

"One day someone came to see me, but as I was busy, I told him to wait in the chapel. Later on, when he left the chapel to come into my guestroom, I did not notice that he had forgotten to take his cigarettes and had left them on the chapel's seat. Meanwhile, another guest arrived; he also went into the chapel to wait, until I was free to see him. When I called him in, he asked me,

'Elder, do you smoke?'

'No,' I said. 'Why are you asking?'

'I saw a pack of cigarettes in the chapel, that's why.'

'The person who was there before you must have forgotten them, but I did not notice it.'

After he left, a child came to visit me for the first time. He knocked on the door, and I immediately asked him what he wanted:

'I wish to see Elder Paisios. Is he here?'

'I'm afraid he is not,' I replied. 'He went to Karyes to buy cigarettes.'

The child answered innocently: 'It does not matter, Father. I will wait for him to come back.'

You see the difference between the two ways of thinking. The first person, who found the cigarettes in the chapel, had negative and suspicious thoughts, whereas the child, even then I told him that Elder Paisios went to buy cigarettes, reacted in the opposite way. He simply said he would wait, without asking if the Elder smokes or what he needs the cigarettes for.

Upcoming Events 2018

2 February: Meeting of the Lord in the Temple
18 February: Forgiveness Sunday, Forgiveness Vespers at 6:00 p.m. with ice cream at Beth Marie's following. Plan now to keep the evening clear.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!