

The Confessor's Tongue for April 22, A. D. 2018

Sunday of the Holy Myrrhbearers

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.

What Is Secularism?

At our Diocesan Assembly in 2004, Archbishop Dmitri of blessed memory spoke about our task of proclaiming Jesus Christ in an evil time based on the Gospel reading of the day: "For this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3). Indeed, the Church has always labored in evil times, but now in our so-called "Post-Christian era", our task is even more difficult. Secularism is rampant, threatening to uproot living faith from the hearts of men. His Eminence defined "secularism" in a most perceptive way: "the treating of this world as an end in itself." To counteract it, we must deepen our faith and our bond of love with one another.

What does it mean to treat the world as an end in itself? It means essentially that we allow our goals, our vision, our aspirations to be limited to this life. We may believe in God and go to church, but the focus of our life is getting education, getting a good job, buying a house, getting better cars, enjoying good food, having fun, having pleasure in relationships, seeing the next movie, getting the next video game, storing up funds for retirement, etc. Our thinking about things is defined by the conventional wisdom we acquire in school and in the media (if it can truly be called wisdom at all).

"Treating the world as an end in itself" is what we do when we live to eat rather than eating to live. We can make a god of food and the pleasure we derive from of eating, and many do. "Treating the world as an end in itself" is what we do when we center our lives around pleasure, whether it be sex, entertainment, food, power to control others, or the acquisition of stuff. St. Paul describes this as "worshipping the creature rather than the Creator."

If God is a part of this secular world view, it is merely as an addition to somehow make it better, to enrich life. Christian faith is an ingredient to add to life to make better marriages, better children, better luck, and divine protection and blessing on the lives that we create for ourselves as we seek fulfillment in this world. Many seek to use God in this way, but this is not the life Christ came to give us.

In contrast with a secular outlook that treats the world as an end in itself, the Orthodox Christian clearly sees Christ and His Kingdom as his true end, and this world and all it contains at best as a means to that end and at worst a deadly obstacle.

To overcome our attachment to the world as an end in itself, Christ commands us to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness; He promises that if we do this, He will give us all the things we need to sustain our lives in this world that most people spend their whole lives and energy pursuing.

To overcome secularism, we are called to live in the Church, to live pious 'churchly' lives; the Russians

use the term *tserkovny* to describe this, but the English 'churchly' doesn't quite have the same full, positive connotation. To be *tserkovny* means that we let the Church, where we participate in the Kingdom of God already, be the center of our lives. We live from Pascha to Pascha, from Sunday to Sunday; we always consider the Church calendar when planning vacations and activities. We delight to come to the house of the Lord to present ourselves before Him and sing His praises.

To overcome secularism, we are called to fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. Fasting teaches us that man does not live by physical bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. It frees us from making a god of our stomach and from living to eat. It restores to us a proper relationship with food which man misused when he fell. It helps provide the means by which all of us may give alms. Thus it frees us from the notion that material things alone suffice to satisfy our deep hunger.

Almsgiving helps fulfill the command of Christ to love one another as He has loved us. Love requires practical action to meet the needs of those God puts in our lives. Love will not allow a brother to go hungry, or thirsty, or unsheltered or unclothed. The practice of almsgiving effectively limits our over-consumption that so often leads to enslaving debt. Recognizing our obligation to our brother, we will choose not to live extravagantly or carelessly.

Fasting and Almsgiving work to make our prayer more effective. Prayer to the living God in the name of Jesus Christ is an action by which we demonstrate daily that we do not believe that this world is our end. By it we look beyond the creation to the Creator who made us for Himself. Our effective prayer unites us with God, our true end.

If we are to be Christians, if we are to be true disciples of Christ, we cannot allow ourselves to treat this world as an end in itself, even if everyone else around us seems to be doing so. As we continue to celebrate the saving Pascha of Christ with joy, may we continue to work with him effectively to uproot the secularism in ourselves and gives ourselves more fully to Him, our true God.

St. Basil the Great On Envy

Envy is a most deadly disease of the soul, and it fills our land. Politicians encourage it and exploit it, and much of our political discourse is motivated and driven by it. Pervasive as it is, it is critical for us to discern it and to root it out of ourselves.

St. Basil's Homily *Concerning Envy* is an excellent place to begin active consideration of this debilitating passion.

St. Basil defines envy with perceptive simplicity: "Envy is pain caused by our neighbor's prosperity." He goes on:

Hence, an envious man is never without cause for grief and despondency. If his neighbor's land is fertile, if his house abounds with all the good of the life, if he, its master, enjoys continual gladness of heart—all these things aggravate the sickness and add to the pain of the envious man. He is exactly like a person who, stripped of his clothing, is being pierced with wounds from all quarters. Is anyone brave and vigorous? This is a blow to the envious man. Is

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someone handsomer than he? Another blow. Does so-and-so possess superior mental endowment? Is he looked up to and emulated because of his wisdom and eloquence? Is someone else rich and eager to lavish his wealth in alms to the poor and charitable contributions, and does he receive great praise from the beneficiaries of his charity? All these blessings are like so many blows and wounds piercing the envious man to his heart's core. The worst feature of this malady, however, is that its victim cannot reveal it to anyone, but he hangs his head and is mute. He is troubled and he laments and is utterly undone by this vice. When he is questioned about his state, he is ashamed to make known his condition and say: 'I am envious and bitter and the good fortune of my friend distresses me. I am grieving over my brother's joy and I cannot endure the sight of others' blessings. The happiness of my neighbors I make my own misfortune.' This would be the way if he were willing to tell the truth. But, not choosing to reveal these sentiments, he confines in the depths of his soul this disease which is gnawing at his vitals and consuming them”

Envious persons are skilled in making what is praiseworthy seem despicable by means of unflattering distortions and in slandering virtue through the vice that is neighbor to it. The courageous man they call reckless; the temperate man, callous; the just man, severe; the clever man, cunning. A person of lavish tastes they term vulgar and one who is bountiful they name a profligate; on the other hand, the thrifty man is called niggardly. In general, all forms of virtue the invariable supply with a name taken over from its opposite vice. . . .

To show a sick man the seriousness of his malady with a view to inculcating a proper concern for his condition is not useless, but to abandon him at this point and not guide toward health is tantamount to giving the sick man over entirely to his infirmity. What, then, is to be done? . . . First, by not regarding the goods of this world—human prosperity, renown, which fades like a flower, health of body—as either great or admirable. We do not define our highest good in terms of these transitory things, but we are called to share in possessions that are real and eternal. Thus, the rich man is not enviable merely because of his wealth, nor the ruler because of the grandeur of his exalted position, nor the strong man because of his physical vigor, nor yet the learned man because of

his great power of eloquence. These are instruments for practicing virtue to those who use them well. They do not contain any intrinsic good. The man who makes bad use of them, therefore, is to be pitied as being like a person who voluntarily wounds himself with the sword, which he had been given as a means of defense against his enemies. But the man who administers his possessions well and according to right reason, who acts as a steward of the goods received from God and does not amass wealth for his own private enjoyment, he is justly accorded praise and affection because of his charity to his brethren and the benevolence of his character. Again, a man may excel in mental acuteness and may win esteem for his eloquence in discoursing about God and his interpretation of His sacred words, Be not envious of such a one nor ever wish that an interpreter of the Sacred Scripture would hold his peace because, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, he wins some favor and praise thereby from his hearers. The benefit is yours and through your brother the gift of doctrine is sent to you, if only you are willing to accept it. . . .

To sum up, if, aided by your reason, your thinking is elevated above human considerations and is intent upon that which is truly noble and praiseworthy, you will not means regard perishable earthly goods as objects for covetousness or envy. It is impossible, indeed, that envy should ever be present in a person so disposed, for he is not obsessed with the craving for worldly goods in the mistaken belief that they have great value. At all events, if you are desirous of glory and wish to outshine the crowd and if, for this reason, you cannot bear to hold second place, turn your aspirations, as one would change the course of a stream, toward the acquisition of virtue. Free yourself entirely from the desire for any kind of earthly riches or for the esteem to be gained from possessing worldly goods. Ownership of these things is not under your control. But, be just and temperate, wise and brave and patient in the sufferings you endure in the name of piety. In this way you will win salvation for yourself and, the greater your good deeds, the greater will be the glory manifested in you. Virtue is within our power and can be acquired by one who labors earnestly for it. A large fortune, physical vigor or beauty, or a high rank of dignity are not at our command. But if virtue is a greater and more lasting good and is universally acknowledged as preferable, virtue is what we should strive to acquire. It cannot be present in the soul, however, unless the soul is free from vice, especially envy....

Upcoming Events 2018

16 May: Leavetaking of Pascha
17 May: Ascension
27 May: Pentecost
28 May: Memorial Day Picnic

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!