

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

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost: St. Mary Magdalene; Hieromartyr Phocas

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 All-Night Vigil: The Great Censing the Opening Psalm, & the Great Litany

Once the *trezvon* bell has been rung to mark the beginning of the Vigil, the curtain and Royal Doors are opened, and the illumination of the church is increased. The Vigil begins in silence, silence and the sound of censing. These represent to us the initial movement of the Spirit of God over the void at the very beginning of the world. Thus the Vigil takes us back to the beginning of time, to the creation of the world before man's rebellion.

The Priest and Deacon both carry candles as the Priest censes the altar table, the sanctuary, the iconostasis, the whole church, and the faithful gathered in the church. The Priest wears his phelonion (the largest and outermost garment worn by the Priest). When the phelonion is worn, it is a sign that that particular part of the service is of the new creation.

The deacon breaks the silence with the exclamation, "Arise, master, bless!" This exclamation is the invitation from God to the only creature who stands upright—man. We pray to God in the distinctive way in which He created us—erect on two feet. We stand in the presence of God our Creator who brought us from nothingness and non-existence into the world He made for us. Man's response to his Creator is to acknowledge Him as God and to give thanks to Him for his very being and for all the good things the Creator has given him. Yet as St. Paul indicates in the first chapter of Romans, man failed to acknowledge God as God and to give Him thanks. Rather, he sought to be god without God, to displace his Creator; and all the evils of the world flow from this basic failure to worship and thank God. Christ has come to call man back to his original vocation, to succeed where Adam failed.

Tracing the sign of the cross with the raised censer before the altar table, the Priest exclaims, "Glory to the Holy, Consubstantial, Life-Creating, and Undivided Trinity..." Thus we praise the One true God in Three Persons who created the world. Immediately, clergy sing the call to worship, "Come let us worship God our King..." Man, having been newly created, arisen from nothingness, is immediately invited to live by worshipping His Creator in humble dependence upon Him. Man was created to glorify and worship God!

The choir and people begin singing Psalm 103, the psalm of creation, which always begins Vespers. The psalm is sung rather than read at Vigil due to the festive nature of the service. (Commonly it is sung in an abbreviated form, but we at St. Maximus do sing it completely on particularly festive occasions when we wish to serve the Vigil more fully). The Priest and Deacon continue censing the church during the

singing. All the while, the church is brightly illuminated and the Royal Doors are open, representing the light and glory of creation and man's destiny to live in Paradise with the way to God open. The censing of both the icons and the gathered faithful shows there is no separation between the faithful in Heaven and those on earth: all are gathered in God's presence and afforded equal honor according to the indelible image of God in each and the degree to which each acquires the likeness of God.

At the end of the censing, the Royal Doors are closed and the lights dimmed dramatically. When the Royal Doors are closed during a service, they signify the Church as fast or preparation for the kingdom, for the closed doors indicate the separation of the people living in the fallen world from the Kingdom, which is represented in the architecture of the church by the altar or sanctuary. When the Royal Doors are opened, they signify the Church as feast or fulfillment of the Kingdom. The Vigil is conducted on both these levels: the Church on the level of fallen creation in exile, aliens passing through the world on pilgrimage towards the Kingdom, and the Church restored to the level of the Kingdom.

Once the doors are closed, the priest removes his phelonion and exits the North Deacon's Door (on left facing the iconostasis) to stand bareheaded in humility before the now closed Royal Doors to pray silently on behalf of himself and the people the seven 'Prayers of Light' much as Adam may have cried out to God before the closed gates of Paradise. Once the singing of the Psalm has ended, the deacon will exit and intone the Great Litany.

After the singing of the opening Psalm, the Royal Doors are closed and the lights dimmed, reflecting man's fall into sin and the closing of Paradise to man.

The Deacon (or Priest) comes before the closed Royal Doors to intone the Great Litany. He faces east, representing fallen Adam who cries out to God in his distress after being expelled from Paradise. All litanies are said facing east with the Deacon (or Priest) leading the people (but still as one of the people) in offering prayer to God. The Church gathered in worship is not a closed circle contemplating itself, but looks beyond herself to God. From earliest times, the Church has prayed to the east for at least three reasons: 1. that is the direction of the rising sun, and Christ is the Sun of righteousness who brings light to a dark world; 2. Paradise, or Eden, was situated in the east, and man looks to regain what he lost; 3. Christ's return in glory will be "as lightening flashes from the east to the west" and so to look east in prayer is to look for Christ's return.

The Great Litany is the beginning of the official prayer of the Church and begins all Her services. In this litany, the Church offers prayer on behalf of the whole world in a descending hierarchy of values,

beginning with what is most important. When the Great Litany is taken in a service, the Augmented Litany must also be taken (with the thricefold "Lord, have mercy"). In the former, the Church prays universally for the world, but in the latter, She prays for the particular place in which She gathers and for the particular people of that place.

The following analysis of the petitions is primarily (but not exclusively) that of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann.

"In peace let us pray to the Lord." The prayer of the Church is a new prayer, made possible by the peace of Christ which passes all understanding. He is our peace (Ephesians 2:14) with God, with others, and with ourselves, and we pray therefore in Him, in the wonderful certitude that our prayer is being accepted by God because of Him.

"For the peace from above and for the salvation of our souls..." The world cannot give that peace; it is a gift from above (John 14:27). To receive it is our first and most important goal together with the salvation of our souls. Before we pray for anything else, we must pray for the 'number one object' of every Christian: eternal salvation.

"For the peace of the whole world, for the good estate of the holy Churches of God, and for the union of all men..." We pray that the peace of Christ might be granted everywhere, that the Church might fulfill Her mission of preaching Christ and making Him present throughout the world, and that all men might be united in Christ to His Body, the Church. Christ provides the only basis for human unity; He is the only power capable of overcoming the barriers that separate man from his fellow man.

"For this holy house, and for those who with faith, reverence and fear of God enter herein..." We pray for our particular parish, which must manifest Christ and His Kingdom to the surrounding community, that we may worship in the proper spirit of faith, reverence, and fear of God.

"For our [bishop], the honorable presbytery [priests], the diaconate in Christ, and for all the clergy and the people..." We pray for those to whom God has entrusted the care of His Church, to guide and edify Her, especially the diocesan bishop. They bear a heavy responsibility and need our frequent prayers. We also pray for all the people who are part of the Body and also bear responsibility for its welfare.

"For this God-protected land, its president, all civil authorities, and for those who serve in the armed forces..." Christians are both citizens of Heaven and responsible members of civil society on earth. We are loyal to the State and established authorities, but only so far as this loyalty is compatible with our ultimate loyalty to Christ. We must bear witness to Christ within our society and pray that it may receive guidance from the Lord. Whether we like or agree with those in power, they need our prayers simply because they do have power and must use it wisely.

"For this city, for every city and country, and for those who in faith dwell therein..." Christ teaches us

that we "are the salt of the earth." We have a spiritual responsibility for the place we live, and we also join with all Christians everywhere in praying for their civil communities and for the faithful living in them.

"For favorable weather, for an abundance of the fruits of the earth, and for peaceful times..." The prayer of the Church embraces the whole natural world. We ask God to provide for us what we require for life, and that we may live in peace rather than anarchy or unrest. We recognize our dependence on God for these good things, though modern man tends to take them for granted.

"For travellers by land, by sea, and by air, for the sick and the suffering; for captives, and for their salvation..." The Church remembers all who are in danger and difficulties, praying for their salvation and protection. We reach out in love to those suffering everywhere to fulfill Christ's commandment of love. "Captives" in former times referred especially to Christians who had been seized by Muslim raiders and sold into slavery.

"For our deliverance from all tribulation, wrath, danger, and necessity..." These things have the potential to overwhelm our faith and life, so we intercede that we be delivered from the harm they threaten. 'Necessity' is an extreme situation where the lack of basic necessities of life may lead us into sin in order to get them.

"Help us, save us, have mercy on us, and keep us, O God, by Thy grace." The final supplication hearkens to Christ's words, "Without Me, ye can do nothing." Faith reveals to us our total dependence on God's grace, mercy, and help in all things.

"Remembering our all-holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorious Lady Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary with all the Saints, let us commend ourselves, and each other, and all our life unto Christ our God." By remembering the Theotokos and all the Saints, we affirm our unity with the Church in Heaven as we entrust ourselves, each other, and all our life to God's loving care and providence rather than depending on our own wisdom and efforts.

In the Great Litany, we unite in offering the prayer of Christ's Church for the world. The priest or deacon bids us to pray for these things, and as each matter is set before us, we ask God to "have mercy". Our attentive participation is needed; we must unite our heart to these petitions and bring them to God that we may be truly praying and not merely mouthing words.

Upcoming Events 2018

23-27 July: OCA All-American Council in St. Louis
28 July: 17-year anniversary of parish founding
1-14 August: Dormition Fast
30 September: Annual Meeting

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!