

The Confessor's Tongue for November 11, A. D. 2018

24th Sunday After Pentecost: Martyrs Menas, Vincent, Victor, Stephanida

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.

11 November: Martyr Stephanida

Saint Stephanida witnessed the martyrdom of the Holy Martyr Victor at Damascus, a soldier during the reign of the emperor Marcus Aurelius the Philosopher (161-180). He was tortured, but he came through all the torments unharmed. By the power of prayer he was victorious over a sorcerer, who from that point gave up give sorcery and became a Christian.

Through Saint Victor's prayers, blind soldiers suddenly received their sight. Witnessing the miracle worked by the Lord through Saint Victor, Stephanida, the young Christian wife of one of the torturers, openly glorified Christ, for which she was condemned to a cruel death. She was tied to two palm trees bent to the ground, which when released, sprung back and tore her apart. She was fifteen years old.

The martyrs suffered in the second century at Damascus, where their venerable relics were buried.

The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 2

When Abba Anthony thought about the depth of the judgments of God, he asked, 'Lord, how is it that some die when they are young, while others drag to extreme old age? Why are there those who are poor and those who are rich? Why do wicked men prosper, and why are the just in need?' He heard a voice answering him, 'Anthony, keep your attention on yourself; these things are according to the judgment of God, and it is not to your advantage to know anything about them.'

Anthony Saying 2 in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

Questions of this sort often trouble us in this life, either concerning ourselves or others. Why does a good, all-powerful God allow innocent children to die young? Why tidal waves? wars? earthquakes? famines? Why is the world such a mess? Some people dwell on such questions and lose their faith in God, or murmur and complain against Him.

Jesus was asked such a question. When a tower in Siloam fell and killed eighteen people, Jesus responded, "Think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:4-5).

With this answer, Christ challenges a prevalent notion, that good people are rewarded in this life and evil people are punished. Such a thought would lead one to judge that those on whom the tower fell were more evil than others, and God had judged them accordingly. Jesus denies this, and from this we should learn that God's judgments are inscrutable. Why does He allow one person to live to ripe old age and to die peacefully in sleep, while permitting another to die young in a car accident, another to suffer horribly from cancer, or thousands to die suddenly in a terrorist attack or earthquake? We cannot say why, though we can say God's judgments are just. In this

world, though, there is usually no connection clear to us between good and reward, evil and punishment. Often, the good suffer greatly while the wicked live in apparent peace.

Christ accordingly warns us, that we, too, will likewise (suddenly, unexpectedly) perish unless we repent. Because of our sins, we are all under condemnation of death. There is no "innocent" on the face of the earth past the age of accountability. When we speak of "innocent" victims, we mean "innocent" so far as we know before the law of the land that they die not having been convicted of any crime. But before God, no flesh is innocent, no flesh will be justified. All are guilty, all stand in jeopardy of death, and all need to repent. We have no guarantees that death will not find us before what we consider to be "our time" or before we are prepared for it.

We love to ask "why?", even to the point of subjecting God to our judgment. But as Anthony was told, so must we: it is most often not to our advantage to know why. We walk by faith, not by sight, and our faith is in the God who loves mankind so much that He became man and humbled Himself to an unjust, humiliating death at the hands of His rebellious people. We live by our faith in the Crucified One who demonstrates God's implacable love for man and His burning desire to save man. We may not understand the particular sufferings of the race of man, but we know God loves us and is not indifferent to our suffering and will save us through them.

But if God's judgments are beyond us, what we may readily understand is the condition of our own soul. Rather than interrogating God as to why the world is so unfair, we ought rather to interrogate ourselves as to why, in consideration of all that God has made available to us in Christ, we fail to live worthy of our high calling. Why do we act unjustly towards God? Addressing this "why" will profit us when the other "whys" only distract us from what is essential for us. This matter lies in our power to amend, and to this we must attend.

Preparation for Holy Communion

Every week before Holy Communion, we hear that only Orthodox Christians who have prepared themselves with prayer, fasting, and a recent confession should draw near to the chalice. Each Orthodox Christian must give careful attention to proper preparation to receive the Holy Mysteries, not to fulfill some external obligation but well to prepare his soul to discern Christ in the Mysteries and receive them to his healing and salvation and not unto judgment or condemnation.

Your priest is aware that not all of us prepare as carefully or attentively as we should. It is a temptation to come to treat holy things as common

due to familiarity and habit, but we should not presume to come to the chalice if we are not prepared. We should never come out of sense of peer pressure: since others are going, so should I. While we may aspire all to commune at every Liturgy we attend, it is normal at any given Liturgy for a number in attendance not to partake. As you saw in last week's *Confessor's Tongue*, just to be present at the Liturgy is to be prayed for powerfully even without receiving Holy Communion.

The normal minimum for receiving Holy Communion at a given Liturgy is the following:

1. Recent Confession in the past month.
2. Keeping the fast days in the preceding week.
3. Keeping the Eucharist fast from midnight until the reception of Holy Communion, which means no eating or drinking in that time.
4. Reading the rule of preparation for Holy Communion attentively and with compunction.
5. Attendance at Vespers or Vigil the night before.

Concerning the points listed above in greater detail:

1. The best practice is to stop communing after a month has passed since our last confession until we can make a good confession (with preparation, not on the fly!). Missing a week or two of communing will not harm you, but it should motivate you to keep current on confession.

2 The Russian practice is to fast for three days before receiving Holy Communion. Pious Greeks fast the day before receiving as do monks and nuns (which means no fish, wine or oil the day before). If one is a frequent communicant, we do not regularly prescribe extra fasting, but only that we keep the fasts already given us.

3. Yes, this means no water and no coffee. It also means no marital relations the evening before or the morning of Holy Communion. Yes, the Eucharistic fast applies to children. From age three, we should begin to train our children in this, and by age seven they should be keeping the Eucharistic Fast. Exceptions are made for particular medical cases only with the blessing of a spiritual father. We may not give ourselves a dispensation from this fast.

4. Here we need to be more attentive. The hurried reading of a few prayers in the car on the way to church is not a sound practice. We should normally read the basic rule at home either the night before or the morning of the Liturgy. This includes the opening prayers, the three Psalms, the pre-communion canon, and the ten prayers or so. Doing anything less than this should be discussed with your confessor. From age seven, a child should be instructed to read the prayers of preparation before Holy Communion "the content and length of which is determined by the parents in accordance with the child's age, as well as his spiritual and intellectual development."

5. Attendance at at least a portion of the Vigil on Saturday night should be a normal part of our

preparation for Divine Liturgy and Holy Communion on Sunday. Habitually not to come to service the night before is a harmful mistake.

When we come to Holy Communion, we come to Christ. We receive him. We dare not approach the chalice cavalierly, carelessly, or unprepared. It is because of the greatness and holiness of the gift that we take time to prepare so that we may worthily receive it and most fully benefit from it.

The task of the priest is to care for the souls entrusted to him as a shepherd cares for his flock. Most of us probably already do most of this. A few of us may be significantly negligent. All of us can grow in this. May God help us to prepare better than we do that we may receive more of the grace He would give us. As always, if do not understand something or have questions about how it applies to you, please talk to your priest.

November 11: Great Martyr Menas

The Holy Great Martyr Menas of Egypt, an Egyptian by birth, was a military officer and served in the Kotyaeion region of Phrygia under the centurion Firmilian during the reign of the emperors Diocletian (284-305) and Maximian (305-311). When the emperors began the fiercest persecution against Christians in history, the saint refused to serve these persecutors. He removed his soldier's belt (a sign of military rank) and withdrew to a mountain, where he lived an ascetic life of fasting and prayer.

Once he happened to arrive in the city during a pagan festival. At the climax of the games the saint's accusing voice rang out, preaching faith in Christ, the Savior of the world. At his trial before the prefect Pyrrhus, the saint bravely confessed his faith, saying that he had come to denounce the impious. The prefect was angered, and had Menas arrested.

Pyrrhus offered to restore the saint's former rank if he would offer sacrifice to the pagan gods. When he refused, he was put to cruel tortures, then he was beheaded. This occurred in the year 304. Christians gathered up the martyr's relics by night and hid them until the end of the persecution. Later, they were brought to Egypt and placed in a church dedicated to Saint Menas southwest of Alexandria.

The saint received grace from God to work miracles, and to help those in need. Saint Menas is noted for healing various illnesses, delivering people from possession by demons, and as a protector, especially during times of war. We also ask his help in finding lost objects.

Upcoming Events 2018

- 11 November: Parish Thanksgiving Meal, 3:30
- 15 November: Nativity Fast Begins
- 21 November: Feast of the Entry of Theotokos into the Temple. Divine Liturgy 9:00 a.m., Vigil at 7:00 the night before.
- 2 December: Children's Craft Fair

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!