

# The Confessor's Tongue for December 9, A. D. 2018

28<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost: Conception of the Theotokos by St. Anna

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.

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## Dec 9: Conception of the Theotokos

Saint Joachim and Anna who lived in Nazareth in Galilee "in the whole piety of the Mosaic law", up to their very old age had no children. On one great feast the righteous Joachim, according to the custom of the law, gave gifts and offerings to God in the temple in Jerusalem. The high priest Issachar who accepted the offerings of the numerous throngs of people, and did not want to accept the gifts from Joachim, telling him: "It is not right to accept gifts from you as from a true Israelite; for you are childless; because of some kind of heavy sins you have not received the blessing of God."

Struck by the speech of the High Priest, as though by the awesome verdict of the judgment of God Himself, the righteous man had no time even to withdraw from the altar, as a new heavier insult struck his hearing. One of the Israelites bringing his gifts, pushed him away, said: "depart from here, did you not hear that you are unworthy to bring gifts to God together with us, because you have not left offspring for Israel." With deep humility Joachim accepted this accusation as if it were from the mouth of the very God with deep sadness left the temple, with a painful heart he recognized himself unworthy not only to remain in the sight of the house of God, but also to return to his own house, and he withdrew to the desert, where he grazed his cattle. In fasting and repentance, in tears and prayer he spent forty days, imploring the Lord to forgive him all his sins, to remove his dishonor in Israel, to bless him in old age by the birth of a child.

The inexpressible sadness of heart struck the righteous Anna also, when she heard about the disgrace of her spouse before the altar of God by the numerous throngs of the sons of Israel on the day of the great feast of the Lord. She herself was judged by all for the guilt, the sin of all Israelite wives, unworthy to even see the light of God because she was deprived of God's blessing. Having confined herself to her room, in fasting and repentance, in tears and in sighing she cried out to the Lord day and night, imploring Him not for her sake, but for the sake of the piety of her righteous spouse, to relive them from the curse of childlessness and to bless the fruit of her womb. Being alone in the garden under the shade of the laurel tree, Saint Anna saw a bird's nest, about which the mother flew feeding her nestlings. Everything in nature, Saint Anna thought, gives birth, everything is by the blessings of God – the birds of the sky, the animals of the forest and the very earth in growing various fruits, but she alone is deprived of happiness and the blessings of God. Even more fervently Saint Anna began to pray to the Lord and the Lord heard her tearful prayer. She heard (the voice of the angel proclaimed to her: "God has

granted you the desire of your prayer." "Thou," the Angel announced to her, "wilt conceive and give birth to the Most Blessed Daughter, before whom all with knees to the ground will bless and who will be the salvation of the world; her name will be Mary." Pleased by the heavenly annunciation, Saint Anna quickly sped to Jerusalem to pour out before the Lord, in His sacred temple her feelings of thanksgiving and the joy that filled her heart.

At the same time the heavenly messenger was revealed to the crying and praying Joachim in the desert with the same joyful annunciation, and with the confirmation of his words commanded him to go to Jerusalem, where he returned to his wife. Before the doors of the temple of God the rejoicing spouses met, with one voice glorified and thanked over and again the Lord God, who saw their humility; with one voice have promised before the Lord to devote to Him their promised children. Soon, after returning to their home, the pious spouses were even happier with the fulfillment of the divine promise: Saint Anna conceives in her womb and "begins to grow the divine rod, who will sprout the mysterious flower of Christ, the Creator of all." "Come joyful day," exclaims the Holy Church in its hymns for this day, "all the orders and ages of mankind, with the angelic choirs let us celebrate the glorious conception of the Theotokos: the patriarchs – the Mother of all kings, the prophets – the One Whom you prophesied, the forefathers – the One Whom from us is the Mother of God, the elders – the ancestors of God, the ancestors of God – the Maiden of God, the virgins – the Ever Virgin One, the faithful – the roots of faith, the priests – the all dedicated temple of God, the saints of all people – the wine of your assemblies, the angelic hosts – gave birth to the Master of all creation and the Savior of our souls."

## The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 5

*Abba Anthony said, "Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter into the kingdom of Heaven." He even added, "Without temptation, no one can be saved."*

*Saying 5 in The Sayings of Desert Fathers*

*Commentary:* We don't usually think of temptation as something that assists us on the path of salvation. How can it be? Why do we need temptation and trials to be saved?

The word 'temptation', *peirasmos*, refers both to a temptation or enticement to sin and to tests and trials, which may tempt us to sin by complaining, doubting, grumbling against God, growing angry, taking matters into our own hands.

The Apostle James tells us how Christians are to respond to temptations: "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let

have patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." The Christian suffering temptations can and must rejoice in them because he understands they are a sign that God loves him, has hope for his transformation, and is not finished with him yet. God loves us too much to leave us in our sinful, enfeebled state. He desires to raise us out of the mire of sin and fill us with His life and power. He accomplishes this in part through trials and temptations.

Thus, we are to accept temptations joyfully, knowing that God uses them to perfect us. Moreover, we know from St. Paul that God does not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear, always makes of way of escape for us, and that His grace is sufficient for us to patiently endure whatever He permits us to face. Consider the following words from the Desert Fathers on the subject:

'Abba Poemen said of Abba John the Dwarf that he had prayed God to take his passions away from him so he might be free from care. He went and told an old man this: "I find myself in peace, without an enemy." The old man said to him, "Go, beseech God to stir up warfare so that you may regain the affliction and humility that you used to have, for it is by warfare that the soul makes progress." So he besought God, and when warfare came, he no longer prayed that it might be taken away, but said, "Lord, give me strength for the fight."

We must give thanks for the temptations and trials, knowing that God is using them to strengthen our faith and prepare us for His Kingdom. But some are in the habit of grumbling, cursing, complaining, and getting angry in the face of trials and temptations. This reveals a lack of faith in God's promises and a fixation on getting one's own way in life for one's own ends rather than submitting to God's will for salvation. Here is where the cross taken up at baptism goes to work, to crucify our old man with his passions and desires that the new man made after the image of Christ may be formed in his place. By embracing trials with faith and thanksgiving, we take up our cross and cooperate with God (instead of resisting Him) in His work of conforming us to Christ.

The following words of Abba Poeman should comfort and aid us in temptation: Abba Poemen was asked for whom the saying "Do not be anxious about tomorrow" (Matt 6:34) is suitable. The old man said, "It is said for the man who is tempted and has not much strength, so that he should not be worried, saying to himself, 'How long must I suffer this temptation?' He should rather say every day to himself, 'Today.'"

Looking at temptations in the long term overwhelms us and leads us to despair, especially when we have succumbed to those temptations and sinned again and again. Rather we must learn to see only today's struggle, for today is the only time in which we live, and the only time God gives grace and bread. Today and every day we ask for "our daily bread" which includes the grace we need for today's

battles. Yesterday is past, and we can do nothing to change it. Regardless of what happened yesterday, today we have the power to make a beginning of good, as St. Arsenius the Great always prayed: "Lord, even though I've done nothing good before Thee, grant by Thy grace that I may make a beginning of good." Tomorrow has yet to come, and Christ told us not to worry about it. God does not give us grace today to bear tomorrow's struggle (or next year's) ahead of time; He gives grace only for today when we actually need it. Worrying about tomorrow and allowing our mind be filled with 'what ifs' is a recipe for spiritual defeat.

Whatever our struggle, if we face it only 'today', day by day, and each day seek to make a beginning of good, we shall have success against the necessary temptations and trials sent to us to test and refine our faith.

As a final encouragement, St. James says, "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried [or proved], he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him." Only the fire of temptation and trial reveals the quality of our faith, proves that it is genuine and strong. The Patriarchs Job and Abraham passed through the fire of temptation to have their faith revealed as pure. The Apostles did, the Saints did, and every Christian must. But having passed through it and having our faith refined by it and proven to be pure and true, we receive the crown of life from the Lord. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

### **Testament of Vladimir Monomakh to His Sons**

*An Orthodox prince instructs his sons how to live after him before his death in A.D. 1125.*

I, wretched man that I am, named Vasillii at my baptism by my pious and glorious grandsire Iaroslav, but commonly known by my Russian name Vladimir, and surnamed Monomakh by my beloved father and mother and for the sake of Christian people, for I was many times saved from all distress through his mercy and through the prayers of my father.

As I sat upon my sledge, I meditated in my heart and praised God, who has led me, a sinner, even to this day. Let not my sons or anyone else which happens to read this brief discourse laugh at its contents. But rather let anyone of my sons who takes my words to heart and is not disposed to laziness conduct himself according to my counsel. First, for the sake of God and your own souls, retain the fear of God in your hearts, and give alms generously for such liberality is the root of all good. If this document displeases anyone let him not be angry, but rather let him believe that, in my old age, I talked nonsense as I sat upon my sledge. For emissaries from my kinsmen met me on the Volga with the message, "Join with us quickly, that we may expel the sons of Rostislav, and seize their possessions. If you do not join us, we shall act for our own advantage, and you may conduct

yourself as you deem best." I replied, "At the risk of your wrath, I cannot go with you or break my oath."

When I had dismissed the emissaries, in my sorrow I took up the Psalter, when I opened it this passage struck my eye: "Why art thou cast down, soul? Why dost thou disquiet me?" etc. (*Ps. xliii, 5.*) I collected these precious words and arranged them in order and copied them. If the last passage does not please you, then accept the first. "Why art thou sorrowful, soul? Why dost thou disquiet me? Hope in God, for I will confess to him

It was thus that Basil, after gathering together young men who were pure in heart and untainted in body, inculcated in them a brief and a meek conversation and the word of God in right measure. He taught them to eat and to drink without unseemly noise; to be silent in the presence of the aged; to listen with profit to the wise; to humble themselves before their elders; to live in charity with their equals and their inferiors; to speak without guile, to understand much; not to be immoderate in their language, nor to insult others in their conversation; not to laugh excessively; to respect the aged; to refrain from converse with shameless women; to cast their eyes downward and their souls upward; and to walk and not to leap. He taught them to respect all established authorities which are honoured of all men. If one of you can render a service to another, let him expect his recompense from God, and he shall thus enjoy eternal blessing. Oh sovereign Mother of God! Take away pride and presumption from my poor heart, lest I be exalted in this empty life by the vanity of this world. Let the faithful learn to strive with pious effort. According to the word of the Gospel, learn to govern your eyes, to curb your tongue, to moderate your temper, to subdue your body, to restrain your wrath; and to cherish pure thoughts, exerting yourself in good works for the Lord's sake. When robbed, avenge not; when hated or persecuted, endure; when affronted, pray. Destroy sin, render justice to the orphan, protect the widow. "Come let us reason together, saith the Lord; if your sins be as scarlet, I will make them white as snow. (*Is. i, 18.*)

First of all, go to church; let not the rising sun find you in your bed.

The dayspring of fasting shall shine forth, and likewise the light of repentance. Let us purify ourselves, my brethren, from every corporal and spiritual blemish, and, as we call upon our Creator, let us say, "Glory to thee, lover of mankind!" In truth, my children, understand how merciful, yea, how supremely merciful is God, the lover of mankind. Being of human stock, we are so sinful and mortal that, when anyone does us evil, we desire to destroy and to shed his blood speedily. But our Lord, the ruler of life and death, suffers our sins to be higher than our heads, and yet he loves us all our lives as a father

loves his son whom he chastens and then summons once more to embrace.

Thus our Lord has promised us the victory over our enemies through three means of conquering and overcoming them: repentance, tears, and almsgiving. My children, the commandment of God to conquer your sins by these three means is not severe. But I implore you for God's sake, be not lazy, nor forget these three means. For they are not difficult of attainment. Not through solitude nor an ascetic life, nor by such fasting as other good men endure, but through easy efforts may you thus obtain the mercy of God.

As you read these words, my sons, praise God who has shown us his mercy and admonished you through the medium of my poor wit. Give heed to me, and accept a half of my instruction if you are not disposed to adopt it all. When God softens your hearts, shed tears for your sins, and pray, "As thou hast taken pity upon the adulteress, the robber and the publican, have pity also upon us sinners," and utter these words both in the church and before you retire to rest. If it is in any way possible, fail not one single night to kneel to the ground three times, in the case that you cannot do so more often. Forget not nor be remiss in this observance, for by his nightly worship and hymn man conquers the devil, and by this means expiates what sins he has committed during the day. When you are riding forth upon your horse, if you have no special subject of conversation with a companion and cannot utter some other prayer, then exclaim without ceasing, "Kyrie eleison!" within yourselves. This is the best prayer of all, and infinitely better than thinking evil thoughts. Above all things, forget not the poor, but support them to the extent of your means. Give to the orphan, protect the widow, and permit the mighty to destroy no man. Take not the life of the just or the unjust, nor permit him to be killed. Destroy no Christian soul even though he be guilty of murder.

When you speak either good or evil, swear not by the name of God, nor cross yourselves, for that is unnecessary. Whenever you kiss the Cross to confirm an oath made to your brethren or to any other man, first test your heart as to whether you can abide by your word, then kiss the Cross, and after once having given your oath, abide by it, lest you destroy your souls by its violation. Receive with affection the blessing of bishops, priests, and priors, and shun them not, but rather, according to your means, love and help them, that you may receive from them their intercession in the presence of God. Above all things, admit no pride in your hearts and minds, but say, "We are but mortal; today we live and tomorrow we shall be in the grave. All that thou hast given us is not ours, but thine, and thou hast but lent it to us for a few days." Hoard not the treasures of earth, for therein lies great sin. Honour the ancient as your father, and the youth as your brother.

Be not lax in the discipline of your homes, but rather attend to all matters yourselves. Rely not upon

your steward or your servant, lest they who visit ridicule your house or your table. When you set out to war, be not inactive, depend not upon your captains, nor waste your time in drinking, eating or sleeping. Set the sentries yourselves, and take your rest only after you have posted them at night at every important point about your troops; take your rest, but arise early. Do not put off your accoutrements without a quick glance about you, for a man may thus perish suddenly through his carelessness. Guard against lying, drunkenness and vice, for therein perish soul and body. When journeying anywhere by road through your domain, do not permit your followers or another's company to visit violence upon the villages or upon the dwellings, lest men revile you. Wherever you go, as often as you halt, give the beggar to eat and to drink. Furthermore, honour the stranger, if not with a gift, at least with food and drink, whencesoever he comes to you, be he simple, or noble, or an emissary. For travellers give a man a universal reputation as generous or niggardly.

Visit the sick, and accompany the dead, for we are all but mortal. Pass no man without a greeting; give him a kindly word. Love your wives, but grant them no power over you. This is the end of all things: to hold the fear of God above all else. If you forget all my admonition, read this counsel frequently. Then I shall be without disgrace, and you shall profit thereby.

Forget not what useful knowledge you possess, and acquire that with which you are not acquainted, even as my father, though he remained at home in his own country, still understood five languages. For by this means honour is acquired in other lands. Laziness is the mother of all evil; what a man knows, he forgets, and what he does not know he does not learn. In the practice of good works, you cannot neglect any item of good conduct.

First of all, go to church; let not the rising sun find you in your bed. For this was my father's habit, and it is likewise the custom of all good and perfect men. After rendering praise to God at Matins, as you look upon the rising sun, refer praise to God with gladness once again, saying, "Thou hast lightened my eyes, oh Christ my God, thou hast given me thy bright light. Grant me increase, oh Lord, in the years to come, so that, as I repent my sins and order my life righteously, I may thus continue to praise God." Then sit and deliberate with your retainers, or render justice to the people, or ride out for hunting or for pleasure, or else lie down to sleep. Sleep is established by God for noontday repose, since birds and beasts and men then rest from labours.

### St. Porphyrios on Prayer

We shouldn't blackmail God with our prayers. We shouldn't ask God to release us from something, from illness, for example, or to solve our problems, but we should ask for strength and support from Him to bear what we have to bear. Just as He knocks discretely at the door of our soul, so we should ask discretely for what we desire, and, if the Lord does

not respond, we should cease to ask. When God does not give us something that we ask for insistently, then He has His reasons. God, too, has His 'secrets'. Since we believe in His good providence, since we believe that He knows everything about our lives and that He always desires what is good, why should we not trust Him? Let us pray naturally and gently, without forcing ourself and without passion. We know that past, present, and future are all known, 'open and laid bare' before God. As Saint Paul says, 'Before Him, no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to His eyes.' We should not insist; such persistence does harm instead of good. We shouldn't continue relentlessly in order to acquire what we want; rather, we should leave things to the will of God. Because the more we pursue something, the more it runs away from us. So what is required is patience, faith, and composure. And if we forget it, the Lord never forgets; and if it is for our good, He will give us what we require, when we require it.

In our prayer, we should ask only for the salvation of our soul. Didn't the Lord say, 'Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you?' Easily, without the slightest difficulty. Christ can give us what we want. And remember the secret. The secret is not to think about asking for the specific thing at all. The secret is to ask for your union with Christ with utter selflessness, without saying 'give me this' or 'give me that'. It suffices to say, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' God has not need to be informed by us about our various needs. He knows them all incomparably better than we do, and He gives us His love. What is important is for us to respond to this love with prayer and with the keeping of His commandments. We should ask for the will of God to be done. That is what is in our best interest and the safest thing for us and for those for whom we pray. Christ will give us everything abundantly. When there is even a trace of egotism, nothing happens.

The person who belongs to Christ turns everything into prayer. He makes both difficulties and tribulations into prayer.

Learn to love prayer, familiar converse with the Lord. What counts above all is love, passionate love for the Lord, for Christ the Bridegroom....Prayer is made only with the Holy Spirit. It [the Holy Spirit teaches the soul how to pray.

### Upcoming Events 2018

- 13 December: 9:00 a.m. Liturgy for Feast of St. Herman, Vigil on the Eve at 7:00 p.m.
- 18 December: 7:00 p.m. Holy Unction
- 22 December: 10:00 a.m. Baptisms
- 25 December: Nativity of Our Lord
- 31 December: 10:00 p.m. All-Night Vigil for St. Basil and the New Year
- 21 January: Feast of St. Maximus

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!