

The Confessor's Tongue for December 16, A. D. 2018

29th Sunday After Pentecost: Holy Forefathers, Prophet Haggai

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.

December 11: Sunday of the Forfathers

The Sunday of the Holy Forefathers occurs between the 11th and the 17th of December. This Sunday commemorates all the ancestors of the people of God, the holy patriarchs living up to the law, given on Sinai, and under the law, - from Adam to Joseph the Betrothed; together with them are commemorated «those who preached Christ» the holy prophets - from Samuel to Zechariah and to John the Baptist, and all the Old Testament righteous men, who were righteous in the faith in the coming of the Messiah. Especially in the service for this day are praised "the pious youths" Ananias, Azarias, and Misael, who "in faith were thrown into the fiery furnace" and "who in the middle of the flames were cooled by the dew of the Spirit and who walked about rejoicing, are mystically a prototype of the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ" from the Virgin, who after giving birth remained a virgin. With these holy youths are commemorated also "the righteous Daniel and the wonderful prophets", who, clearly revealing the divine second coming, saw Christ, "coming to all nations as Judge", and who, "your mind illumined by divine radiance", "that clearly the Virgin would give birth represented in mystical images".

"Today as we celebrate the Forefathers' memory", the holy Church exclaims: "let us offer praise to the fathers, who shone forth before and during the law, with righteous minds they served the Lord and Master who shone forth from the Virgin, now they delight in the unending light." "Let us offer songs of praise to the prophets of God". "Let us honor the holy youths, for they quenched the flaming furnace, together with the prophet Daniel, and all the righteous ones who shone forth before the law, together with those who served the Master under the law." By accomplishing "now the honor of the memory of the forefathers", the holy Church edifies us, that we, in the expectation of the great and light-bearing day of the Nativity of Christ, is reflected by the faith and life of the holy Forefathers and, through them, has prepared ourselves, by their example, to the worthy meeting of the Lord Who came from Heaven, who has adorned their soul with virtues beforehand to be ready for the great and light-bearing day of the Nativity of our Savior worthily to meet Him with the lamp of faith and with the oil of charitable deeds, with the firm hope of life everlasting, with the light of both the joyful face of cleanliness and purity.

On this day, the holy Church appoints the Gospel reading about those invited to a lord's supper but then at the last minute declined to come, warning us, that we can be distracted from worthily meeting the Lord by permitting the predominance of flesh over spirit, the attachment to the terrestrial, the blinding by gleam of worldly goods, the predilection for vanity,

the unwillingness to deny one's self-love and pride everyday, the enslavement to passions and covetousness. The Epistle reading directly commands us to destroy our earthly members: fornication, impurity, passion, evil lust and cupidity, to lay aside anger, evil, blaspheming, slander, lies, and in general to take off the old man and put on the new in the image of the Creator (Col. 3:4-11).

V. Bulgakov, Handbook for Church Servers. Translated by Archpriest Eugene D. Tarris © All rights reserved.

The Mystery of Holy Unction

Fr. Thomas Hopko

Christ came to the world to "bear the infirmities" of men. One of the signs of his divine messiahship was to heal the sick. The power of healing remains in the Church since Christ himself remains in the Church through the Holy Spirit.

The sacrament of the unction of the sick is the Church's specific prayer for healing. If the faith of the believers is strong enough, and if it is the will of God, there is every reason to believe that the Lord can heal those who are diseased.

The sacrament of anointing is a "sobornal" sacrament in the traditional Orthodox practice. This means that as many of the faithful as possible are gathered to participate in the prayers. The rite itself calls for seven priests, seven readings from the epistles and gospels, seven prayers and seven anointings with oil specifically blessed for the service. Although it is not always possible to perform the sacrament in this way, the normal procedure is still to gather together as many priests and people as possible.

The express purpose of the sacrament of holy unction is healing and forgiveness. Since it is not always the will of God that there should be physical healing, the prayer of Christ that God's will be done always remains as the proper context of the sacrament. In addition, it is the clear intention of the sacrament that through the anointing of the sick body the sufferings of the person should be sanctified and united to the sufferings of Christ. In this way, the wounds of the flesh are consecrated, and strength is given that the suffering of the diseased person may not be unto the death of his soul, but for eternal salvation in the resurrection and life of the Kingdom of God.

It is indeed the case that death inevitably comes to man. All must die, even those who in this life are given a reprieve through healing in order to have more time on the earth. Thus, the healing of the sick is not itself a final goal, but is merely "instrumental" in that it is given by God as a sign of his mercy and as a grace for the further opportunity of man to live for him and for others in the life of this world.

In the case where a person is obviously in the final moments of his earthly life, the Church has special prayers for the "separation of soul and body." Thus, it

is clear that the sacrament of holy unction is for the sick-both the physically and mentally sick-and is not reserved for the moment of death. The sacrament of unction is not the "last rites" as is sometimes thought; the ritual of the anointing itself in no way indicates that it should be administered merely in "extreme" cases. Holy unction is the sacrament of the spiritual, physical, and mental healing of a sick person whatever the nature or the gravity of the illness may be.

In accordance with our local parish custom, we shall offer the Mystery of Unction for the healing of soul and body here at St. Maximus on Tuesday, December 18 at 7:00 p.m. Unction is open to Orthodox Christians who are in communion with the Church and have had a recent Confession.

The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 6

Abba Pambo asked Abba Anthony, "What ought I to do?" and the old man said to him, 'Do not trust in your own righteousness, do not worry about the past, but control your tongue and your stomach.'

Saying 6 in *The Sayings of Desert Fathers*

Commentary: The unspoken, assumed goal in the question is "What should I do to be saved? to make progress in the spiritual life? to enter into union with Christ who through the incarnation entered into union with me?"

Trusting in one's own righteousness is a pitfall of those who have made some progress, and it is deadly to spiritual life. A man comes to trust in his moral goodness ("I'm not like those sinners"), in his generosity ("I tithe every month"), his faithful prayer ("I read all the morning and evening prayers every day"), his fasting ("I don't break the fast like some"), etc. It leads to comparing himself with others, considering himself better than others, to pride, vainglory, and judging of others. We must keep our eyes on Christ and the saints so we don't think that we have achieved some great righteousness in comparison with others around us. 'A haughty spirit goes before a fall', and judging others deprives us of God's grace. If there is any good in us, it is by Christ's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit in us, not of ourselves. Understanding that we have received the virtues and gifts that we have, we shall not glory in them as though we had not received them, that is, as though they were the product of our own efforts.

Memory of the past can overshadow our present life, either by bringing us to despair over old failures or to vaunt in past success. The past is gone. The future is not yet. We have only the present moment in which to live. There we live day-by-day trusting in God for everything. St. Paul says that he forgets what is behind and reaches for what is ahead to win the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Assuming we have thoroughly repented of our past sins and confessed them, we should not dwell on them or let the enemy bring us into despair over them. Instead, we keep our eyes on Christ who delivers us from the past and gives us a beginning of good.

Two things difficult to control must be brought into submission to Christ: our tongues and our stomachs. The Apostle James says that if a man can control his tongue, he is perfect, able to control the whole body as well. Our tongues are to be used to glory God and give thanks to Him, and to speak truth to edify and build up one another, as well as to enable us to carry out the necessary daily business of living. We readily use the tongue for amusement, for building ourselves up, for tearing others down, for criticizing, cursing, blaming, judging. How much evil is brought into being in our world through the careless use of our tongues! How much harm we do to others merely to gratify our own egos or to advance our selfish interests! We lead others into sin when we criticize, judge, and gossip about others. The Spirit is grieved and quenched in us and God's grace is lost through the misuse of the tongue.

"All man's labor is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled," says Solomon (Ecclesiastes 6:7). Our need to eat drives us to work. But we can let our need for food become all-consuming and make satisfying the needs of our belly and body the goal of our life, whether consciously or, what is more likely, unconsciously. St. Paul writes about those who "are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things" (Philippians 3:18-19). We make a god of our belly by living to eat and to satisfy the desire of the body for pleasure and comfort beyond what it truly needs. Man properly ordered is governed by his mind illumined by the light of Christ; the illumined mind guides both the will and emotions of the soul and the body. In disordered man, the desires of the body dictate to the will and mind, and man is governed by his god, the belly.

Though it is common for Christians monks to be accused of being obsessed with sexual matters, in fact, their greater concern was food: how to eat what is necessary to take care of the body so it can be a good servant, but not so much that the body usurps its place as servant of the soul and comes to subject the soul to its pleasures. Indeed, as we make progress in our life in Christ, we become increasingly aware that sexual intemperance has its root in intemperance of the tongue and belly. St. John Cassian in his *Conferences* goes so far as to assert that because Jesus conquered Satan's temptation to misuse food, He was not subsequently tempted sexually.

Controlling the tongue and belly will take us far on the path of salvation; allowing them free reign will keep us from making progress and will lead us to destruction. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Upcoming Events 2018

18 December: Tuesday, 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

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!