

The Confessor's Tongue for December 30, A. D. 2018

Sunday After Nativity, the 31st after Pentecost; Martyrs Anysia, Zoticus

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.

On Correcting the Faults of Others

If you wish to correct the faults of anyone, do not think of trying to do so solely by your own means: you would only do harm by your vices, for instance, by pride and the irritability arising from it; *but cast thy burden upon the Lord*, and pray with all your heart that God Himself will enlighten the mind and heart of that man. If he sees that your prayer breathes love, and that it really comes from the depths of your heart, he will undoubtedly fulfill it, and you will soon see, from the change that has taken place in him for whom you prayed, that it is the work of the most high God. *St. John of Kronstadt*

The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 8

Abba Anthony said, "Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God." Saying 8 in The Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Commentary: Man has a propensity for getting caught up in the form of something without attaining the substance. Indeed, St. Paul warns us about those who "have a form of godliness", who outwardly look pious in some ways, but who "deny the power thereof," who have not entered into the essence and experienced its power, who confess Christ with their lips, but have not come to know Him in the depths of their heart. It is possible to use the right forms, have the right externals, and the right dogma, and still have one's heart far from God and His transforming power.

For this reason St. Seraphim of Sarov instructs us that the goal of the spiritual life is acquisition of the Holy Spirit, a filling that overflows and guides our whole life. The external forms of spiritual life are not the end but the means to acquire this.

Discernment is a spiritual gift that enables the possessor to see to the heart of things, to know their true nature. Those lacking it, unless they have wise guidance from another person, can easily confuse form with substance. Consider the many who will say on the day of judgment "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? and in Thy name cast out devils? and in Thy name done many wonderful works?", to whom Jesus will respond, "I never knew you, depart from Me ye that work iniquity." This is a tragic case. They thought they were serving God but, lacking discernment, they actually were serving themselves, doing their "own thing."

Monks and nuns are susceptible to this temptation along with the rest of us. "I eat once a week. I have no possessions but the rags on my back. I sleep but two hours in twenty-four. I do 3000 prostrations and read through the Psalter and Gospels each day while standing." Such confuse the strictness of their ascetic practice with true knowledge of God; they may, in fact, do these things because they take pleasure in their own strictness, or the reputation it

wins them in the eyes of men. They take pleasure in comparing themselves to their neighbor and finding themselves stricter. They readily fall prey to judging their weaker brethren. All their self-directed ascetic activity, in fact, makes them worse.

Thus, in the Church, a moderate asceticism that curbs the body's passions so that the body may be subject to the spirit without doing harm to the body or giving ready grounds for pride is recommended. And our activity should always be guided by someone other than ourselves, for "He who chooses himself as his spiritual guide has chosen a fool."

A particular area where Christians must acquire discernment is in the area of their thoughts. All sin begins with a thought that flits into the mind. Often that thought appears innocent on the surface. It is discernment that penetrates the thought's seeming innocence to perceive the spiritual danger it will bring if accepted or acted upon. Discernment then works together with spiritual alertness and watchfulness. Watchfulness catches the thoughts as they enter the mind; discernment reveals them for what they are. Is this a good thought? Is it from God? Will it produce good fruit? Or is this a temptation? a deception from the demons? Without watchfulness and discernment in his thoughts, a person will be the plaything of the demons as they take pleasure in sowing tempting thoughts in his head and watching him fall into sin, and sin separates man from God—not that God is not there, but that man's awareness of God and ability to receive grace is diminished. Because of its vital role in the warfare with thoughts, the monks have prized the gift of discernment of thoughts above all others.

Our goal in Christian life is to come to know and love God with all our heart and to love one another as Christ has loved us. This is only possible through the grace of God filling us and transforming us. Proper ascetic practice with discernment brings us closer to this goal, while a deluded practice brings us into pride and vainglory. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

On Prayer for Others

Pray ye without ceasing in behalf of other men. For there is in them hope of repentance that they may attain to God. See, then, that they be instructed by your works, if in no other way. Be ye meek in response to their wrath, humble in opposition to their boasting; to their blasphemies return your prayers; in contrast to their error, be ye steadfast in the faith; and for their cruelty, manifest your gentleness. While we take care not to imitate their conduct, let us be found their brethren in all true kindness; and let us seek to be followers of the Lord, that so no plant of the devil may be found in you, but ye may remain in all holiness and sobriety in Jesus Christ, both with respect to the flesh and spirit.

St Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians 10

January 1: Circumcision of Christ

On the eighth day after His Nativity, our Lord Jesus Christ was circumcised in accordance with the Old Testament Law. All male infants underwent circumcision as a sign of God's Covenant with the holy Forefather Abraham and his descendants [Genesis 17:10-14, Leviticus 12:3].

After this ritual, the Divine Infant was given the name Jesus, as the Archangel Gabriel declared on the day of the Annunciation to the Most Holy Theotokos [Luke 1:31-33, 2:21]. The Fathers of the Church explain that the Lord, the Creator of the Law, underwent circumcision in order to give people an example of how faithfully the divine ordinances ought to be fulfilled. The Lord was circumcised so that later no one would doubt that He had truly assumed human flesh, and that His Incarnation was not merely an illusion, as certain heretics had taught.

In the New Testament, the ritual of circumcision gave way to the Mystery of Baptism, which it prefigured [Colossians 2:11-12]. Accounts of the Feast of the Circumcision of the Lord continue in the Eastern Church right up through the fourth century. The Canon of the Feast was written by Saint Stephen of the Saint Sava Monastery.

In addition to circumcision, which the Lord accepted as a sign of God's Covenant with mankind, He also received the Name Jesus [Savior] on the eighth day after His Nativity as an indication of His service, the work of the salvation of the world [Matthew 1:21; Mark 9:38-39, 16:17; Luke 10:17; Acts 3:6, 16; Philippians 2:9-10]. These two events -- the Lord's Circumcision and Naming -- remind Christians that they have entered into a New Covenant with God and "are circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ" [Colossians 2:11]. The very name "Christian" is a sign of mankind's entrance into a New Covenant with God. *oca.org*

On Obedience to the Church

St. Nicholas of Zicha

Why must one obey the Church and not some man whose thinking is opposed to the Church, eminent or intellectually gifted though that man may be? Because the Church was founded by the Lord Jesus Christ and is guided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God. Also because "the Church" signifies the community of the saints, an orchard of choice, fruit-bearing trees. If a man remains opposed to the community of the saints, that means that he is unholy. Why, therefore, listen to him? "The Church is an enclosure," says the wise Chrysostom. "If you are within, the wolf cannot enter, but if you stray outside, the wild beasts will seize you. Do not wander from the Church; there is nothing mightier than the Church. She is your hope and your salvation. She is higher than the heavens, firmer than rock, wider than the world; she never grows old, but is forever renewing her youth."

The Prayer of an Orthodox Christian

How do we learn to pray with our lips, and then with our mind?

1. If our childhood habits have been forgotten, then it is possible to learn to pray aloud (that is, step onto the first level of prayer) by using a prayerbook and paying close attention to the standard Church prayers. "The church wisely established hymns and various troparia on account of the weakness of our mind, so that we, although foolish, might be attracted by the sweetness of the singing and thus praise God even against our will" (St. Peter of Damascus). The Church accepted hymns and troparia so that we would be humbled and rise to excellent thoughts as if upon a ladder.

2. Christ's teaching demands that our faith and our way of living be inseparable. For this reason, every Christian, in order to live in constant prayer, must have a daily order of prayer; that is, to establish under the guidance of a spiritual father a prayer rule. As St. Augustine said, "Once we were cleansed by baptism; but every day by prayer."

3. "Every established prayer, be it for home or church use, merely imparts to prayer an outer form; the soul or essence of prayer, however, is born by every person within, in the mind and heart. Our entire cycle of church prayers, as well as every prayer designed for home use, is filled with invocations to God...it is impossible to argue with the fact that mental prayer is necessary for all Christians; and if it is necessary, then no one can say that it is impossible, for God does not force us to do the impossible. That it is difficult—certainly. But then everything worth doing is difficult; and all the more so should prayer be, since it is the source of everything good in our lives...(St. Theophan the Recluse, *Letters to Various Persons*, Letter 66).

The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force (Matt. 11:12).

What is the practical significance of a prayer rule?

"A prayer rule is an arrangement of several prayers written by holy and God-inspired Fathers, which are adapted to a specific time and circumstances" (St. Ignatius Brianchaninov).

"The purpose of a rule is to increase the number of prayerful thoughts and feelings...and so that they be correct, holy, and perfectly pleasing to God." "The soul, left to her own devices, would not be able to follow the correct path of prayer. She would become distorted: either through daydreaming, or through illusions of lofty visions, inspired by vainglory."

"Thus, the soul, filled and nurtured by prayerful thoughts and feelings selected from a ready-made prayerbook, begins of its own accord to live these thoughts and feelings" (St. Theophan).

How long should a prayer rule be?

The rule of prayer is for the person, not the person for the rule. When determining a rule, it is necessary to adapt it to, and not exceed, the individual's strength. A rule is meant to further spiritual advancement, and not to serve as an excuse for self-opinion. "It is better to alter parts of a rule, or even invent an entirely new one, lest prayer become a mere ritual" (St. Theophan).

"I prefer a brief rule that is continually performed to a long rule that is quickly abandoned: (St. Matoes, *Alphabetical Patericon of Scetis*).

"In the day of His judgment, God will not condemn us for leaving off psalms or abandoning prayers, but for allowing demons to enter us because we ceased our rule" (St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 71).

Upcoming Events 2018

31 December: 10:00 p.m. All-Night Vigil for St. Basil and the New Year
6 January: Theophany and Great Blessing of Water
21 January: Feast of St. Maximus, Mark Tarpley speaking on the reconciliation of male and female in Christ.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!