

# The Confessor's Tongue for February 24, A. D. 2019

Sunday of the Prodigal Son; 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Findings of the Head of St. John the Baptist  
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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## **The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 16**

*A brother said to Abba Anthony, 'Pray for me.' The old man said to him, 'I will have no mercy upon you, nor will God have any, if you yourself do not make an effort and if you do not pray to God.'*

Saying 16 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

*Commentary:* To be a Christian requires that we desire God, that we actively seek Him, that we pray, we give, we keep Christ's commandments, we serve others. Indeed, the great commands to love God and love neighbor call us to action rather than to a passive feeling of warmth towards to the objects of our love.

Some people, however, for whatever reason, will ask others to do for them what they will not do for themselves, as in this case. The monk seeks the prayers of the recognized holy man, thinking that having Anthony's prayers will be more effective than his own and save him. Yet Anthony discerns that the monk is seeking an easy way out and exhorts him to make the needed effort on his own behalf.

Some Christians might seek the same: sending their names to be commemorated at monasteries, asking for special prayer services for their living and dead, and going to see holy elders. But no number of requests for prayer by holy elders will ultimately benefit us if we do not make our own effort to pray and keep Christ's commandments.

Prayer is something every Christian must practice. It is a particular demonic delusion that leads us to think we can leave the prayer for our souls to others. A monk named Nikita in the Kiev Caves Monastery long ago found this out the hard way. Young and willful, he sought to live as a recluse against the advice of his abbot who warned him of his inexperience and the dangers of being deluded by demons. In his pride, Nikita insisted he would not be deceived, and he got the blessing of the monastery's elders to live as a recluse. Soon after he started living alone, his cave was filled with a sweet fragrance and he heard a voice joining him in prayer. He assumed it was an angel, and he prayed that God would reveal Himself to him, face to face. The voice told him an angel would be sent to him to whom he must be obedient in everything. Soon a demon appeared in the guise of an angel. The demon told the young monk that he would pray for him, freeing the monk to study the Old Testament. In his inexperience, he obeyed. He soon knew the Old Testament by heart (but could not even open the New Testament) and began prophesying inspired by the demon. Laymen came to hear him. The elders realized he was in a state of delusion and delivered him. Once the demon was driven off, Nikita forgot the Old Testament, couldn't remember ever having read, and, indeed, had forgotten how to read. Later, after his repentance, he

became bishop of Novgorod, was later canonized, and is known today as St. Nikita the Recluse (as he had no beard, he is depicted as beardless in his icon).

The prayers of others help strengthen our feeble efforts, and at some dark times of life, we may even be carried by the prayers of others, as the four friends bore the paralytic man on his bed to Christ. But the prayers of others, no matter how holy and powerful they may be, can never be a substitute for our own prayer. If the four friends carrying the paralytic symbolize the power of intercessory prayer to bear the spiritually paralyzed to Christ and to do for them what they cannot do for themselves, once healed, those formerly paralyzed by sin are then responsible to come to Christ on their own.

Our desire for God, expressed in our feeble efforts to pray and do His will, attracts God's grace to enable us to do and be what we cannot do and be by our own strength. If we have insufficient desire even to make a weak, inadequate effort, neither God nor a holy man can help us, for such help would mean God was compelling us against our will. Christ has accomplished man's salvation through the economy of His becoming man. Our participation in that salvation made available through Him depends on our desire and our will. As St. Maximus puts it, "The mystery of salvation belongs to those who choose it, not to those who are compelled by force." God's love for us means He allows us to choose our eternal destiny, even though our wrong choices grieve Him. Such is the mystery of God's love for us.

## **Preparation for Lent**

Today, the Sunday of the Prodigal Son is the second of four pre-lenten Sundays, which calls us to ready ourselves for the contest of the Fast.

To get the most spiritual benefit out of the Great Fast, we need to give some thoughtful prayer to the matter of how we shall keep the Fast, particularly in the following areas: private prayer, corporate prayer and worship at the Church services, almsgiving, fasting, spiritual reading, and works of mercy. We should also consider how we can cut back on busy schedules to make time to cultivate repentance and offer ourselves wholeheartedly to God without being hindered by needless distractions.

We cannot expect to keep the Fast with great benefit in most cases if we only attend the Sunday Liturgy. Plenty of opportunity is given to pray with the Church in the Church in the spirit of the Fast's "bright sadness." All the faithful are encouraged to take advantage of the weekday services.

Plan now: everyone if at all possible must attend Forgiveness Vespers (March 10); everyone should attend at least one or two of the four evenings of the Great Canon of St. Andrew (a different part each

night) the first week of the Fast (March 11-14) to get the Fast started in the right spirit. Everyone is urged to attend Saturday evening Vigils (or at least the Matins portion, 6:00-7:15 p.m.) where the hymns expounding the meaning of day are sung. Everyone is encouraged to attend at least a couple weekday Presanctified Liturgies during the course of the Fast as well as a weekday Matins or Vespers now and again. It goes without saying that we should set aside as much of Holy Week (April 21-27) as possible to attend in the incomparably beautiful services before Pascha.

Besides the Scriptures (which we should be reading as a matter of course), choose a spiritual (Orthodox) book that will nourish your soul, aid you in the spiritual struggle, and move you to seek God during the Fast. Your priest will recommend one to you if you do not know what to read.

Consider how and when you will pray: what prayers? what psalms? what time of day? with how many prostrations? We should aim to increase both the quality and quantity of our prayer.

Consider your almsgiving. The logic of the Fast is to eat less and more cheaply so that what you save may be given to the poor. This means that everyone can give alms. How may we approximate this? How shall we give, and where? We should aim to increase our almsgiving during the Fast. It goes without saying that we should be faithfully offering the first part of our income (a tithe or tenth) in gratitude to God as part of our worship. If we have been disobedient out of fear, lack of faith, willfulness, or greed, the Fast is the time for us to repent and change our ways.

It is time for us now to begin considering the specifics of how we shall keep the Fast, so that when it comes, we shall be ready. The Church gives us the next two weeks to plan and prepare.

Remember the goal of all this: to know Christ, to see Him as He is in His incarnation, passion, and resurrection, and to be filled with a greater measure of His Spirit, to become God's children in character and not only in name.

Please consult your priest or confessor if you have any questions about the Fast.

### What to Read During Lent

Here we offer to you the recommendations of essential spiritual reading for Orthodox Christians. We all should read regularly throughout the year, but during the Great Fast, we make room to read more than usual. The following recommendations for reading by two experienced churchmen represent classic, essential works that should become familiar to us all.

In 2012, Fr. Hopko made a recommendation of essential reading to some of the clergy of the Diocese of the South.

First, the Holy Scriptures must be the first source to which we turn. As St. John Chrysostom says, the cause of all our evils is our not knowing [and doing!]

the Scriptures. A simple program of reading each day one chapter from the Gospels and two chapters from the rest of the New Testament will get us through the whole NT in 90 days. Think how much better off your mind, your thoughts, your soul would be would you faithfully do just this four times a year!

Second, the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. This classic work may be read a page or two at a time, and when we finish, we may start it again. This should be part of every serious Orthodox Christian's personal library and in regular use. Fr. Hopko contends that the 38 sayings of St. Antony the Great, with which the book opens, contain everything we need for practical spiritual living. I agree, which is why we have offered twice now over the years commentary on those sayings of Antony.

Third, St. Ignatius Branchaninov's work *The Arena*, although addressed to nineteenth century Russian monks is essential for us too. It begins by emphasizing the centrality to all Christians of Christ's commands in the Gospel (another reason to read the Gospels daily!) and offers much other instruction in how to live an authentic Christian life in a world which offers many frauds and fakes.

Fourth, he recommends C.S. Lewis' book *The Abolition of Man* to help us understand our current societal and cultural malaise and how we got here. Knowing that will assist us in finding a way out.

This past week at the pastoral conference of the Diocese of the South, we were privileged to hear Hieromonk Chrysostomos of Koutloumousiou Monastery, Mt. Athos. A monk since 1986, he has also earned a Ph.D. and written at least three books, only the third of which has been translated into English: *The One and the Three. Nature, Person and Triadic Monarchy in the Greek and Irish Patristic Tradition* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015). He recommended the following books as basic, foundational spiritual reading for everyone.

After Scripture, the first book is the classic *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. After than, he recommends the lives and writings of St. Silouan of Athos, St. Paisios, St. Porphyrios, Elder Amelianos of Simona Petra Monastery, and St. Dorotheos of Gaza. The works of all these men are readily accessible to us who live in the world and offer us essential instruction in our life in Christ and how to work with the grace given to us at baptism. He encourages us to read them but not to let ourselves think we understand it fully when we read. Rather, we should seek to go deeper—asking questions to understand more deeply and to do more faithfully.

This list of books should not be taken as exclusive of other worthy books. But in the multitude of books now available, these are of particularly great value. Your priest concurs with them, disputing nothing. To this list, he would add the *Conferences* of St. John Cassian, *400 Chapters on Love* by St. Maximus, *The Spiritual Life and How to Be Attuned to It* by St. Theophan the Recluse, the Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian (one of the all-time popular works on the

spiritual life) and the lives of the Elders of Optina (at least nine volumes are available).

### Hymns of Repentance from the Octoechos Sunday Vespers, tone 6

Grant unto me tears of repentance and a contrite mind, O Savior, to wash away the filth of my soul that I have sorely soiled by doing wrong at every hour. That I may obtain what I ask I have Thy Mother who prays, I have the choirs of angels, and Thy love for mankind.

Come, show thy sorrow for the many sins thou hast committed in life, and beseech with sighs and tears the multitude of hosts on high to grant thee time to repent, lest thou be cast like the barren fig tree, full of passion into the fire of Gehenna.

I have not fulfilled upon earth a single one of Thy commandments. How then shall I appear before Thee, O my Christ, when Thou shalt sit upon the throne to receive accounts and to pass judgment on all the things I have done wittingly or unwittingly. Therefore I call upon Thee, save my prodigal self, by the prayers of Thy servants.

### The Four Senses of Scripture in Cassian

The simplest way to begin to understand the four senses of Scripture is a Latin poem from Nicholas of Lyra:

The letter teaches events,  
Allegory what you should believe,  
Tropology what you should do,  
Anagogy where you should aim.

St. John Cassian in his Fourteenth Conference discusses these four senses and uses the term "Jerusalem" in Scripture to illustrate them.

But to return to the explanation of the knowledge from which our discourse took its rise. Thus, as we said above, *practical* knowledge is distributed among many subjects and interests, but *theoretical* is divided into two parts, i.e., the historical interpretation and the spiritual sense. Whence also Solomon when he had summed up the manifold grace of the Church, added: for all who are with her are clothed with double garments. But of spiritual knowledge there are three kinds, tropological, allegorical, anagogical, of which we read as follows in Proverbs: "But do you describe these things to yourself in three ways according to the largeness of your heart" (Prov 22:20 LXX).

And so the *history* embraces the knowledge of things past and visible, as it is repeated in this way by the Apostle: "For it is written that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondwoman, the other by a free: but he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh, but he who was of the free was by promise." But to the *allegory* belongs what follows, for what actually happened is said to have

prefigured the form of some mystery: "For these," says he, "are the two covenants, the one from Mount Sinai, which genders into bondage, which is Hagar. For Sinai is a mountain in Arabia, which is compared to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children."

But the *anagogical* sense rises from spiritual mysteries even to still more sublime and sacred secrets of heaven, and is subjoined by the Apostle in these words: "But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us. For it is written, Rejoice, you barren that bear not, break forth and cry, you that travail not, for many are the children of the desolate more than of her that has an husband" (Gal 4:22-27).

The *tropological* sense is the moral explanation which has to do with improvement of life and practical teaching, as if we were to understand by these two covenants practical and theoretical instruction, or at any rate as if we were to want to take Jerusalem or Zion as the soul of man, according to this: "Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem: praise your God, O Zion."

And so these four previously mentioned figures coalesce, if we desire, in one subject, so that one and the same Jerusalem can be taken in four senses: historically as the city of the Jews; allegorically as Church of Christ, anagogically as the heavenly city of God which is the mother of us all, tropologically, as the soul of man, which is frequently subject to praise or blame from the Lord under this title. Of these four kinds of interpretation the blessed Apostle speaks as follows: "But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation or by knowledge or by prophecy or by doctrine?" (I Cor. 14:6)

For *revelation* belongs to *allegory* whereby what is concealed under the historical narrative is revealed in its spiritual sense and interpretation, as for instance if we tried to expound how "all our fathers were under the cloud and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and how they all ate the same spiritual meat and drank the same spiritual drink from the rock that followed them. But the rock was Christ." (I Cor. 10:1-4) And this explanation where there is a comparison of the figure of the body and blood of Christ which we receive daily, contains the *allegorical* sense.

But the *knowledge*, which is in the same way mentioned by the Apostle, is *tropological*, as by it we can by a careful study see of all things that have to do with practical discernment whether they are useful and good, as in this case, when we are told to judge of our own selves "whether it is fitting for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered." (I Cor 11:13) And this system, as has

been said, contains the *moral meaning*.

So *prophecy* which the Apostle puts in the third place, alludes to the *anagogical* sense by which the words are applied to things future and invisible, as here: "But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those that sleep: that you be not sorry as others also who have no hope. For if we believe that Christ died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. For this we say to you by the word of God, that we which are alive at the coming of the Lord shall not prevent those that sleep in Christ, for the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first." (I Thess. 4:12-15) In which kind of exhortation the figure of *anagoge* is brought forward.

But *doctrine* unfolds the simple course of *historical* exposition, under which is contained no more secret sense, but what is declared by the very words: as in this passage: "For I delivered unto you first of all what I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again on the third day, and that he was seen of Cephas"; (I Cor. 15:3-5) and: "God sent His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law"; (Gal. 4:4-5) or this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord the God is one Lord" (Deut 6:4).

Consider Cassian's example of Jerusalem: it means the literal city, but it also means by allegory the Church of Christ, by anagogy the heavenly city of God, and by tropology it is the soul of the human being. So when the Psalmist writes (Psalm 121:6), "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee," which Jerusalem is meant? The physical Jerusalem, at that time the capital of Israel and place of the one temple of God? The new Israel, the Church of Christ? The heavenly city, the New Jerusalem to come down from heaven? Or is it the soul of the human being? For what are we to pray to secure the blessing? A flat, distorted reading helps create and sustain a grotesque foreign policy harmful to the interests of our country and that of others. A true reading opens a whole new world to us.

### Sunday of the Prodigal Son

On this Sunday Gospel parable read in the Church calls to repentance those bound by sinful habits, those who cannot and do not want to be freed from sin. It presents the disastrous condition of man who has withdrawn himself from God. It provides consolation and encouragement of those who, being depressed by the consciousness of the weight of their sins, fall into hopelessness and despair. It presents an image of repentance of the depraved son and the inexhaustible mercy of the Heavenly Father, Who

accepts all sinners who repent. The deeply edifying Gospel Parable of the Prodigal Son with special clarity shows to what an awful degree the flesh prevails over the spirit, and to what sensuality the soul can reach contrary to its highest aspirations, and to what an unfathomable abyss of sin a man may be thrown into when he submits to self-will, takes a great interest in carnal desires, overthrows in himself the good yoke of the law of God, and submits to an unrestrained will in sensual pleasures. The true joy of life consists only in the beneficial union with God. The distance from this union serves as the source of all possible troubles and humiliations.

These troubles, however, are not continual for that sinner, who has not yet completely deadened his conscience, who has not reached complete despair in the persistence and hardness in his sins, and finally has not fallen under the authority of the devil. The love of the Heavenly Father does not leave him. Even when he wanders on the path of vice, thinks not about returning under his father's roof, slumbers in the embrace of vanity and of earthly sweetness, not noticing the abysses under him which his passions attract—even then, the grace of God does not cease to call upon him: that voice of love and mercy, that by fear of foreboding and threats, through the mouths of the holy prophets and apostles, touching and softening the heart by its many diverse benefactions, that by striking with tribulations and calamities, that awaking his conscience by especially significant events and meetings, that shaking all his being by such occurrences in life which involuntarily awakens his conscience, that sobers his mind, that strikes his heart with the fear of God, fear of judgment and of torture. The Lord Jesus Christ, according to his own promise, stands before the doors of his heart and knocks, that he opens the door to Him and receives Him into the room of his soul. And here the sinner wakes up from his spiritual slumber and from there comes to the idea that his unique rest is in God.

To strengthen us all in this saving idea in order to wake all of us from the spiritual drowsiness in which all of us are more or less immersed during the usual course of our life, in our habitual pleasures and entertainments, in our many anxious cares of everyday life, in our thoughtlessly breaking the commandments of God and carelessly continuing in our sinful ways, not suspecting that this path can result in our death, the Holy Church also changes the chants for this day into one continuous repentant prayer of our souls crying out to the Lord.... From: *S. V. Bulgakov, Handbook for Church Servers*. Translated by Archpriest Eugene D. Tarris © 2002

#### Upcoming Events 2018

2 March: Children's Bake Sale  
10 March: Forgiveness Vespers, 6:00 p.m.  
11 March: Great Lent begins.  
28 April: Great & Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!