

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

Second Sunday of Lent: St. Gregory Palamas

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.

The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 19

The brethren came to Abba Anthony and said to him, 'Speak a word; how are we to be saved?' The old man said to them, 'You have heard the Scriptures. That should teach you how.' But they said, 'We want to hear from you too, Father.' Then the old man said to them, 'The Gospel says, "If anyone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also." They said, 'We cannot do that.' The old man said, 'If you cannot offer the other cheek, at least allow one cheek to be struck.' 'We cannot do that either,' they said. So he said, 'If you are not able to do that, do not return evil for evil,' and they said, 'We cannot do that either.' Then the old man said to his disciple, 'Prepare a little brew of corn for these invalids. If you cannot do this, or that, what can I do for you? What you need is prayers.'

Saying 19 in *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

Commentary: "Give me a word" was a common request among the monks in the Egyptian desert put to a monk who stood out for his wisdom and experience. To make such a request profitably, a monk had to approach the elder with faith that God would speak through the elder and a willingness to do what he said. Anthony on at least one occasion refused to give a word to one who asked because he knew the one asking had no intention of doing what he said but desired only, out of vainglory, to repeat Anthony's words to others.

Anthony answers the brothers by pointing them to the Holy Scriptures, which they have heard in church, as a guide to salvation. Indeed the Scriptures are given to us for this purpose, that we may know God and His will for us, which is expressed generally in His commandments. The Scripture and the Church are the first place to apply when seeking to know how to be saved, and if one cannot be bothered with making use of these readily-available sources of help, one probably should not presume to ask an elder for a specific, personal word.

When the brethren express a desire to hear something from Anthony in addition to what they have heard in the Scriptures, he responds by giving them a scripture, a well-known command of Christ from the Sermon on the Mount: turn the other cheek when struck on the first (Matthew 5:39). By giving one of Christ's commands in the Gospel, Anthony is able to determine how far advanced they are and what sort of answer to give them.

As it turns out, far from needing a word more specific than what Christ commands in the Scriptures, the brethren are not even doing what is clearly commanded. "We cannot do that," they say honestly. Anthony, seeking to find their level of practice, gives them the same command at half strength: "At least allow one cheek to be slapped" if you cannot turn the other. They cannot do that

either, so he reduces the strength of the command still more: at least "do not return evil for evil." They profess they cannot carry out the command at the most elementary level of not taking revenge. Hereby Anthony perceives them to be spiritual invalids and feeds them with physical food saying, "What can I do for you?"

Christ, through His commands in the Gospel, calls man to participate in divine life. The commandments in their fullness are daunting. (For example, who of us can love all men as Christ has loved us? St. Maximus, recognizing the difficulty of loving as Christ does, says, if you can't do that, at least, as a start, do not hate anyone.) As a good physician applying the remedy to a fatal sickness, St. Anthony, as did Christ, seeks to meet the brethren at their level and give them the command in a form they can carry out in their present condition and which will lead them to higher levels of obedience as they keep it. From not taking revenge, they will progress to allowing one cheek to be slapped and then to actually turning the other cheek. Hereby we see the Christian life as a path that begins in the dark of the fallen, sinful world but shines brighter and brighter until the full day of the glory of the Kingdom. God meets us where we are in our infirmities and gently leads us where we need to go.

Yet these brothers claim to be unable to take even that first step. Invalids they truly are, if they cannot refrain from taking revenge when insulted or wronged! Unable to minister to them on a spiritual level, Anthony shows love to them by providing food for their bellies, thereby showing them he does not reject nor despise them. Only by "prayers"—their own prayers for themselves and for their enemies (those striking them), and the prayers of more experienced brothers—by beseeching God to give them grace to do what they have no strength or desire to do themselves—could they hope to escape their extreme weakness and begin to keep Christ's commands at an elementary level.

Christ's commands in the Gospel mark the path of salvation for all of us; they show us what it is to be a Christian; they set the faith we claim into action; they cleanse and purify our thoughts and actions. If we are not yet up to turning the other cheek to be slapped, allowing the one to be slapped, or not taking revenge on the slapper, at the very least we can pray for our enemies and ourselves and ask more experienced brethren to pray for us in our infirmity.

Fr. Justin Frederick

From the Priest: Confession

Four weeks remain before Holy Week. If you have not been to Confession since the beginning of the Fast, or if your regular time for confession will fall

due before Pascha, you should plan on coming to Confession before Holy Week.

If you have not been to Communion in months, you should make a concerted effort to prepare to make a good Confession that you might prepare to receive Communion at Pascha, if not before.

If you have been communing on an 'expired' Confession (six weeks or more since your last Confession, you should stop communing and prepare yourself for Confession.

For all: please try to make your confessions before Holy Week if at all possible. Your priest will hear your confession during Holy Week if necessary, he will be much happier if you plan ahead to take care of what is routine before the last minute. Thank you! *Fr. Justin*

The Prayer of St. Ephrem, Part II

*But the spirit of continence
of humility, of patience, and of love
do Thou grant unto me Thy servant.*

Having asked for deliverance from the spirit of idleness, despondency, love of power, and idle words in the first part of the Prayer of St. Ephrem, in the second part we ask to be given a virtuous spirit to replace the prior vicious one.

CONTINENCE

We request first "the spirit of continence." The Greek word *sophrosyne* means "sobriety, chastity, continence, discretion, moderation, sanity, self-control, prudence, temperance, control over physical, especially sexual, impulses leading to self-restraint, moderation, right-mindedness, whole-mindedness, or abstinence. The Gerasene Demoniac, once Jesus has cast out the Legion of demons from him, is found sitting at Christ's feet "in his right mind", a stark contrast from his condition of being tormented by the demons. In like fashion, the host of passions trouble and torment us if we lack *sophrosyne*. By this virtue, we are enabled to deal with bodily desires correctly, with discretion, in due measure and not to excess or for misuse. The Russian word "*tselomudriye*" literally means "whole-mindedness". Bombarded with all the stimuli of the world and the thoughts generated thereby, our minds get dissipated and scattered, unable to focus on what is necessary and important. We ask for our scattered, dissipated minds to be made whole.

HUMILITY

Second, we request "the spirit of humility." The Greek word, *tapeinophrosyne* comprises the words *tapeinos*, or humility, and *phrosyne*, the mind as it deliberately chooses. So this humility is a posture deliberately chosen; it is a submission to what is right and true and a willingness to accept and follow God's will rather than our own. Humility is critical to spiritual progress, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, and He will lift you up." To

have God, we must bow the knee to Him and humble ourselves. No spiritual progress will be made without it. St. Nikon of Optina writes, "Without humility, you cannot be saved. Whatever structure of virtues you might build, it will collapse without humility."

Some more thoughts from the Optina elders on humility:

"In reading the teaching of the holy fathers, do not soar aloft, but, seeing your weakness, descend to the depths of humility. It alone can save us, and without it all of our works and virtues will bring no benefit." *St. Macarius*

"Humility consists in not judging and not reproaching anyone, and having simple clothing and furniture in your [home]." *St. Ambrose*

"Humility consists in yielding to others and considering yourself worse than all. This way will be much more peaceful." *St. Ambrose*

"He who yields obtains more." "Humble yourself, and all your affairs will proceed." *St. Ambrose*

"Everything is all right if we reproach and humble ourselves. However, many are trying to climb up to heaven, piling ascetical struggles on themselves, but they do not want to humble themselves. Humble yourself, humble yourself!" *St. Barsanuphius*

"All evil proceeds from pride, but all good is obtained with humility. This is a great virtue—humility! And like a precious stone, it is rarely found, but especially in the present disastrous time." *St. Macarius*

"One can acquire humility by means of obedience. The person who submits his will to his spiritual guide overcomes pride and acquires humility." *St. Barsanuphius*

"It is essential to humble oneself. Without humility, virtue, and in general nothing, will bring any kind of benefit." *St. Barsanuphius*

"Why is there no peace in our bones, in our soul, and in our heart? Because of our sins! Because we are not at all instructed in humility, because we very much love to argue and prove that we know more than others, because we do not stop conversing with our thoughts, which along with sorrows continually torment us." *St. Anthony*

"Let the following be for you signs of humility or pride: the latter scorns everyone, reproaches them, and sees darkness in them, while the former sees only his own faults and does not dare to judge anyone." *St. Macarius*

"Truly lamentable is that person who does not have humility. He who is not able to humble himself will later on be humbled by other people. And he whom other people cannot humble, God will humble." *St. Anthony*

"The Lord arranges everything for our spiritual benefit. For how could we be humbled if we continually felt spiritual consolation? So the Lord withdraws from us so that we see our infirmity and spiritual nakedness." *St. Joseph*

"Do not be despondent because you are not living as you should, but humble yourself, and the Lord will

look more favorably on your humility than on struggle which are great but not humble." *St. Anatoly*

PATIENCE

Third, we request "the spirit of patience." The Greek word *hypomene* means to 'stand or remain under'. It is staying put and abiding and enduring rather than running to escape. This patience arises out of humility and submission to God's providence and will. The prophet Isaiah encourages us to patience when he declares: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isa 40).

Some words on patience from the Optina Elders help us better understand what it is and why it is important.

"You must gain your salvation in patience. Patience is essential. In other words—the cross is essential." *St. Nikon*

"The one most reliable means for salvation—endure everything that God will send: the good and the bad." *St. Anatoly*

"From Holy Scripture, we see that sorrows bring people closer to salvation, if a person does not become fainthearted and does not despair, but arms himself with patience, along with humility and devotion to the will of God." *St. Ambrose*

"Patience is continuous good humor." *St. Nikon*

"Have spiritual peace and have patience—with yourself and with others. Patience, according to St. Gregory of Sinai, is 'stillness even within a storm.'" *St. Ambrose*

"It has been determined by God that every person has some kind of cross in this life, i.e., a spiritual sorrow which he must bear undisturbedly, for there is not any benefit from faintheartedness and impatience. And since many are the tribulations of the righteous people in this life, then how more must we sinners endure." *St. Anthony*

"We must thank the Lord for everything, the labor which He imposes on us to teach us patience, which ennobles the soul and is more beneficial for us than comfort. Evidently, this is pleasing to the Lord. Sorrows cannot befall us except through God's permission—for the sake of our sins. And these very sorrows protect us from other temptations." *St. Moses*

"With childlike submission we must endure both the pleasant and the unpleasant and give glory for everything to God who is good, i.e., when any sorrow or sickness comes, we say 'Glory to Thee, O Lord!' If the sorrows and illnesses increase, again we say: 'Glory to Thee, O Lord!' When the unhappy sorrows and illnesses have worsened and lead to the grave, again: 'Glory to Thee, O Lord!'" *St. Anthony*

"You must be patient not only with the sorrows which befall you, but also with yourself." *St. Nikon*

An oft-quoted verse on patience is "In your patience, possess ye your souls" (Luke 21:19).

LOVE

Fourth, we ask for "the spirit of love," or *agape*.

This is perfect love, the selfless love of God, a love that is all-merciful and is incapable of taking offense, that loves everyone no matter what, that forgives our debtors as we ask our debts to be forgiven, love that is never shaken no matter how others act. This is the love that empowers one to lay down one's life for one's friend. Love is the summation of all the commandments: love for God and love for man. Authentic love is the goal of Christian life. If we have love, we have all we need. If we lack love, no other gift, power, attainment or work can compensate for the lack.

"The feeling of love of the Lord corresponds to how much we fulfill His commandments." *St. Nikon*

"Love of God is expressed most of all by keeping the commandments of God." *St. Nikon*

"When giving all of yourself to God, you must not worry about rags and attach your heart to them." *St. Anthony*

"If one relies on the will of God—everything good, and even what is unpleasant, everything leads to the salvation of our soul, and in this is revealed great wisdom and profundity. For those that love God, all things lead to good." *St. Nikon*

"You must love every man, seeing in him the image of God, disregarding his vices. You must not dismiss people with coldness." *St. Nikon*

"Love covers everything. And if someone does good to his neighbor through the inclination of his heart, and not out of duty, then the devil cannot interfere; but when it is done out of a sense of duty, then he tries to interfere with one or the other." *St. Ambrose*

"If you will receive people for the sake of God, then be assured that all will be well with you." *St. Ambrose*

"Above all, strive to love your neighbor, for in his love consists love for God." *St. Macarius*

"Love, of course, is above everything. If you find that you have no love, but desire to have it, then perform works of love, although at first without love. The Lord will see your desire and our striving and will put love in your heart. But mainly, when you notice that you have sinned against love, immediately confess it to your elder. This can happen sometimes from a foolish heart, and sometimes from the enemy. You yourself cannot discern this, but when you confess, the enemy will go away." *St. Ambrose*

To be concluded next week.

The Annunciation of the Theotokos

"Today is the beginning of our salvation and the revelation of the mystery which is from before the ages: the Son of God becometh the Son of the Virgin" (Troparion of Annunciation). Thus, with a song of praise, our Church greets the Great Feast of the Annunciation of the Most Holy Mother of God, calling it the beginning of our salvation. And justifiably, for this feast is one of the most important feasts of our Church Year.

St. Athanasios the Great (+373) in his sermon the Annunciation, calls this feast the first in the list of feasts, for it begins the work of salvation of the human race. The basis for this feast is the joyful annunciation recorded in St. Luke 1:26-38. the Annunciation is the first in a whole series of great mysteries in the life of Jesus Christ and his Most Holy Mother.

The Archangel's message of the Incarnation of the Son of God was the good news that fallen man had awaited for thousands of years. The fullness of time has come, the Virgin who can bear God in her womb is ready and willing, and God now becomes man to accomplish our salvation, to unite man with Himself through His Son.

At this feast, which almost always occurs during the Great Fast, an irresistible force hits an immovable object. The Great Fast is so strict that it does not permit the festive Divine Liturgy to be served on weekdays, only on Saturdays and Sundays. Instead during the week of the Fast, we commune at the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts, partaking of Mysteries consecrated at Liturgy the previous Sunday. That way we may be nourished by the Eucharist in our contest but not break the fast. Yet a Great Feast is always festive and requires a Divine Liturgy to keep it. How, then, may the feast be kept without breaking the Fast? The Liturgy of the Feast Day is served, but only at the end of the day after keeping the fast all day. Then the Liturgy of St. John, appended to the first half of Vespers in what we call a Vespertal Liturgy is served. Thus, after keeping fast during the day, we break it at the end of the day to keep the feast, which is celebrated with consumption of fish, wine, and oil.

In this way, both imperatives are observed: keeping the fast and celebrating the feast.

The Feast has a forefeast of one day, and an afterfeast of one day.

St. Athanasius, From Festal Letter 3

Again, my beloved brethren, the day of the feast draws near to us, which, above all others, should be devoted to prayer, which the law commands to be observed, and which it would be an unholy thing for us to pass over in silence. . . .

For what else is the feast, but the service of the soul? And what is that service, but prolonged prayer to God, and unceasing thanksgiving? . . . He too that received the one talent, and bound it up in a napkin, and hid it in the earth, was in consequence cast out for unthankfulness, hearing the words, 'Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not sowed; thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and on my return, I should have received mine own. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it to him that hath ten talents.' For, of course, when he was required to deliver up to his lord that which belonged to him, he should have acknowledged the kindness of him who gave it, and the value of that which was given. For he who gave was not a hard man,

had he been so, he would not have given even in the first instance; neither was that which was given unprofitable and vain, for then he had not found fault. But both he who gave was good, and that which was given was capable of bearing fruit. As therefore 'he who withholdeth corn in seed-time is cursed,' according to the divine proverb, so he who neglects grace, and hides it without culture, is properly cast out as a wicked and unthankful person. On this account, he praises those who increased [their talents], saying, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful in a little, I will place thee over much; enter into the joy of thy Lord.'

This was right and reasonable; for, as the Scripture declares, they had gained as much as they had received. Now, my beloved, our will ought to keep pace with the grace of God, and not fall short; lest while our will remains idle, the grace given us should begin to depart, and the enemy finding us empty and naked, should enter [into us], as was the case with him spoken of in the Gospel, from whom the devil went out; 'for having gone through dry places, he took seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and returning and finding the house empty, he dwelt there, and the last state of that man was worse than the first.' For the departure from virtue gives place for the entrance of the unclean spirit. There is, moreover, the apostolic injunction, that the grace given us should not be unprofitable; for those things which he wrote particularly to his disciple, he enforces on us through him, saying, 'Neglect not the gift that is in thee. For he who tilleth his land shall be satisfied with bread; but the paths of the slothful are strewn with thorns;' so that the Spirit forewarns a man not to fall into them, saying, 'Break up your fallow ground, sow not among thorns.' For when a man despises the grace given him; and forthwith falls into the cares of the world, he delivers himself over to his lusts; and thus in the time of persecution he is offended, and becomes altogether unfruitful. Now the prophet points out the end of such negligence, saying, 'Cursed is he who doeth the work of the Lord carelessly.' For a servant of the Lord should be diligent and careful, yea, moreover, burning like a flame, so that when, by an ardent spirit, he has destroyed all carnal sin, he may be able to draw near to God who, according to the expression of the saints, is called 'a consuming fire.' . . .

Upcoming Events 2019

- 25 March: Annunciation 5:30 p.m. Vespertal Liturgy
- 30 March: "The Judge on Trial: The Scandalous Narrative of Holy Week" with Dr. Jeannie Constantinou at Holy Trinity Orthodox, Dallas, 9:30 - 4:30.
- 6 April: 8:30—3:00 Lenten Retreat at Nativity Monastery with Abbot Sergius & wonderworking icon of St. Anna.
- 13 April, Saturday at Vigil: Fr. Michael Oleska
- 28 April: Great & Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!