

The Confessor's Tongue for August 18, A. D. 2019

9th Sunday after Pentecost; Martyrs Florus and Laurus; St. John of Rila

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.

August 18: St. John of Rila

In 865, more than 100 years before St. Viadimir accepted Christianity and the subsequent conversion of Kievan Rus', the saintly King Boris I of the neighboring Bulgarian state embraced the Orthodox faith together with his people. Through the apostolic labors of the renowned missionary brothers, Sts. Cyril and Methodius, Christianity became firmly rooted among these western Slavs and began to bring forth fruit.

From this inaugural period of Bulgaria's Orthodox history, the most highly esteemed saint is unquestionably the wonderworker St. John of Rila, born shortly before the repose of St. Methodius in 885. His significance for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church may be compared to that of St. Sergius for Russia. Like the Saint of Radonezh, St. John has been accorded, over the centuries, the great love and devotion of his people. And not only Bulgarians, but Greeks and Russians came to know and venerate him; he was the patron saint of one of Russia's greatest luminaries, St. John of Kronstadt, who is also commemorated on October 19. Although the Rila Monastery was closed and turned into a tourist attraction by the atheist communists, it has since been reopened, is home to some sixty monks, and is still regarded as the most sacred shrine of Bulgaria, drawing many pilgrims who come to venerate the incorrupt relics and entreat the prayers of this great wonder-worker and spiritual hero of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

St. John was born in a village by the name of Skrino, near the ancient city of Sredets (now Sofia). His parents, of Bulgarian ancestry, were God-fearing people, and from an early age the Saint was disposed towards a life of piety and good deeds. Some lazy villagers mocked his godly behavior, but the boy learned to disregard their taunts.

Still in his youth, the Saint distributed his possessions among the poor and went to a monastery where he became a monk. After mastering the virtues of obedience and humility, he was graced with a divine vision whereby he was led to an uninhabited mountain. There he built a small hut for himself. Dressed only in a leather coat and sustaining himself on wild plants, he spent his time in fasting, prayer, vigil and other ascetic labors, preserving a golden silence which is, in the words of St. Isaac the Syrian, the mystery of the future age.

The Saint's nephew, a child by the name of Luke, fled secretly from his parents and came to his uncle, desiring to follow his manner of life. The boy's father, discovering his son's whereabouts and incited by the devil, went to the holy man and scolded him furiously, calling him an evil deceiver and accusing him of stealing his son. He grabbed the boy out of the wilderness and dragged him back into the world. Foreseeing that Luke would later most certainly fall into the trap of the devil, the Saint prayed to God: Lord Jesus Christ, see the sorrow of my heart and "show me a token for good" (Ps. 85:17), for Thou hast said: "*Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven*" (Matt. 19:14). And what happened? After father and son had gone but a short distance—O Lord, Thy divine Providence!—a snake bit the child and he died a quick and untroubled death. His father, acknowledging his mistake, returned to the Saint in repentance, while the Saint glorified God, knowing that by the temporary death

of his body the child's soul had been saved from a future and eternal death.

The demons could no longer bear the Saint's ascetic labors. They appeared one night in the form of robbers, beat him up and chased him away from his place. Entering deeper into the wilderness of the Rila mountain; the Saint made his dwelling there in the hollow of a big tree. By God's providence the wilderness grew peas with which the holy hermit nourished himself for long time. Once, some shepherds who had enjoyed the Saint's hospitality stole some of the peas and went their way. But when they stopped to eat, they found the pods empty. Ashamed of their misdeed, the shepherds returned to the holy hermit and asked his forgiveness.

On another occasion there came to the Saint a man possessed. When he was still a stadium's distance away (about 220 yards), he fell to the ground, writhing and crying: "Fire burns me, I cannot go any further!" His companions begged the holy man to say a prayer for him. The Saint did so, and the man was loosed from his tormentors.

Seeking to avoid human glory, the Saint penetrated still further into the mountain, to an unknown and nearly inaccessible place where he settled in a cave under a high rock. The demons, continuing their harassment, threw him down, but the Saint climbed onto his rock once again and finally, with God's help, the demons disappeared. From then on an angel of God brought him food every day, fulfilling the written word: "Man did eat the bread of angels" (Ps. 77:28).

It was while the Saint was living in this cave that there came to Sredets the pious Bulgarian king Peter. Having heard about the man of God, the king sent nine hunters into the Rila wilderness to seek him out. It took five days for them to discover his whereabouts. Receiving the Saint's blessing, they told him of the king's desire to see him and: to have the pleasure of meeting with him. As the men were hungry, the Saint offered them a loaf of bread brought by the angel. Even after all nine were fully satisfied, half of the loaf still remained. Struck by this miracle, the hunters returned to the king and told him what they had experienced. The king decided to go to the mountain himself to see the Saint. But the place was steep and craggy, and he was unable to reach it. Only from afar did he see the high rock with the cave where the Saint abode. A second time the king sent an invitation to the Saint, but the latter was reluctant to abandon his silence. He only lauded the king's piety and promised that they would see each other in the kingdom of God, provided they brought fruits worthy of repentance (Luke 3:8). Saddened that his plea had not succeeded, the king departed for his city. Later he sent the Saint a gift of gold and fruit and wrote him the following letter:

"To my venerable Father John, wilderness dweller of Rila, from King Peter:

"Having heard about the God-loving nature of your Holiness and of your angelic life, I desired to see your Reverence, hoping to receive great benefit from converse with you. The vainglory of this world, with its pleasures and riches, drowns us in the waves of the sea and, darkened by agitations and worries, we cannot direct ourselves toward the light of true repentance. We therefore desired to

partake of some enlightenment from Your Reverence, Holy Father. But I was deprived even of that grace on account of my many sins. I beg you, therefore, send me some consolation and a message to cool the burning heat of my sorrow, for you know, honorable Father, how the stormy turmoil of temptations and agitations possesses the hearts of kings!"

The Saint received the king's gifts and his epistle, and sent the following answer:

"To the pious autocrat of the Bulgarian Scepter, King Peter, from poor John:

"To accept all the gifts of your Majesty is not beneficial to me, Therefore I retain only the fruit, praising your love. The gold must be needed for your kingdom; it is of great harm to monks and altogether unsuitable for ascetics for, even if they should have it, of what use is it to them?"

"O King, if you want to inherit the heavenly kingdom, be meek and easily accessible to your subjects, having these royal virtues, namely, compassion and mercy! Through them your purple robe and crown of royal dignity will glitter even more brightly. May all who enter and depart your Majesty's palace be joyful. Avoid injustice and extortion. Keep death in mind as an inseparable companion, and let sighs and tears be as your beloved children. Be obedient to your Mother the Church of Christ, and honor her Patriarchs. And so the King of kings, when He sees your humility, shall give thee of those good things which He has prepared in the heavenly kingdom for those who love Him!"

The king, receiving this epistle from the Saint, kissed it and read it repeatedly, enjoying it like some treasure and finding therein great consolation.

There came to the Saint in Rila many brothers, begging him to accept them in their desire to follow his divine way of life. With the increase of these disciples, a church was built and a monastery. Through his prayers the Saint guided many along the saving path to Christ and healed many who were sick or possessed.

Having foreseen the end of his life, the ever-memorable Father partook of the Holy Mysteries, then blessed his disciples and surrendered his soul into the hands of God on August 18, in the year 916. The monks buried him there in his cave.

Later, a sweet fragrance began to issue from the Saint's grave. Thirty years after his repose his disciples opened the grave and found his relics glorified with divine grace: they were incorrupt and full of fragrance. Afterwards, the Saint appeared to his disciples and directed them to send his relics to Sredets. There, many miracles took place which inspired the governor Hrelyu, who venerated the Saint, to build a large monastery dedicated to the Nativity of the Theotokos.

When the Hungarian king occupied Sredets, he took the relics and transferred them to his city of Estergom. The bishop of that city insulted the Saint, claiming that he could not find him listed in the ancient codices. He was punished for his irreverence by becoming mute. Later the bishop repented. With humility he approached the Saint's relics and his tongue was loosened. The king, on seeing this miracle, embellished the reliquary with silver and gold and returned it with honor to Sredets. After the pious Bulgarian king Ivan Asen I had venerated the holy relics, he wrote to the archbishop who came together with the entire clergy of the monastery. They transferred the relics to the royal capital of Tirnovo where a church was soon built in honor of St. John. A feast was later established on October 19, commemorating this transfer which occurred in 1238.

When the Moslem Hagarenes captured the city of Tirnovo late in the 11th century, the holy relics were transferred back to Rila Monastery. There they are located to this day, issuing unspeakably sweet fragrance and healing those who approach them with faith in the intercession of this God-bearing and wonder-working saint of Bulgaria.

<http://www.bulgarianchurchdc.org/patron.aspx>

On Reading the Works of Heretics

St. Ignatius Brianchaninov; The Field

Keep your mind and heart from false teaching. Do not even speak about Christianity with people who have been infected with false thoughts; do not read books on Christianity that were written by heretics.

The Holy Spirit accompanies all Truth. He *is* the Spirit of Truth. the devil accompanies and acts together with every lie. He is false and the father of lies.

He who reads the books of a heretic immediately communes with an evil, dark spirit of falsehood. This should not seem strange or incredible to you—this is the unanimous opinion of the Holy Fathers.

If your mind and heart are still a blank slate, let Truth and the Spirit inscribe on them the commandments of God and His spiritual teaching. If you have allowed the tablets of your soul to be carved and written over with various opinions and impressions without ever wisely and carefully discerning who the writer was and what he was writing about, then sponge away things written by false teachers, purify your soul through repentance and reject of all that is contrary to God. . . .

Only those religious books that are written by the Holy Fathers of the universal Orthodox Church are acceptable to read. The Orthodox Church requires this of her children.

If you think otherwise, or find this command of the Church less authoritative than your own opinions or the opinions of others who agree with you, then you are no longer a child of the Church, but a critic of the Church.

Do you call me a one-sided, unenlightened rigorist? Leave me my one-sidedness and all my other deficiencies. I would rather be a deficient, unenlightened child of the Orthodox Church than an apparently perfect man who would dare to instruct the Church, who would allow himself to disobey the Church, to separate from it. My words will be pleasant to the true children of the Orthodox Church.

These true children know that whoever wants to acquire heavenly wisdom must first leave behind his own earthly wisdom, no matter how great it is, and to recognize its true nature—it is an attack on God.

Earthly wisdom is war against God. It does not and cannot submit to the Law of God. From the very beginning this was the case, and so it will remain until the end, when "the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up," including earthly, carnal wisdom.

The Holy Church allows the books of heretics to be read only by those whose thoughts and hearts have been healed and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, for such persons can always distinguish between true good and evil which pretends to be good and wears a mask of good. . . .

Upcoming Events 2019

1 September: Church New Year

13 October: Octoberfest

10 November: Parish Thanksgiving Meal

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!