

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

23rd Sunday after Pentecost; Great Martyrs Katherine, Mercurius

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 Commandments of Christ

"If ye love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:15)

Moreover, when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head and was thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. Matthew 6:16-18

This command may be paraphrased thus: do not fast like the hypocrites who fast so that others notice their fasting, but when you fast, keep up your usual appearance so as not to signal your fasting to them and so that your heavenly Father may reward you eternally rather than men temporarily by their praise.

Like the previous commandment concerning prayer, this command about our external appearance serves to purify our fasting so that it is spiritually profitable and not a mere show designed to impress others and feed our egos. Indeed, these commands relating to the three pillars of spiritual life—almsgiving, prayer, and fasting—reveal man's pronounced tendency to do the right thing for the wrong reason or the wrong audience. Our prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are to be directed towards God as their object, not towards others to gain their attention and praise.

Though on the surface, our Orthodox practice of all fasting on the same days and seasons seems to go against Christ's command (it is far from secret among ourselves that we all are fasting!), in fact, it helps remove the wrong motivation of doing it to impress others. We are all fasting, so the fact we are doing so impresses no one. Of course, we can seek to call attention to ourselves as to the strictness of our practice or dramatic spiritual experiences it may bring us, but fasting together helps diminish any wrong motives. If we are tempted to take pride in our ascetical accomplishments and spiritual experiences during our seasons of fasting, we may humble ourselves by assuming there is someone near us who quietly surpasses us in God's eyes without us knowing it, or we may read the life of a saint and his asceticism to bring our high thoughts back to earth.

There is a story about a man who lived in asceticism near a village. He became renowned for his fasting and abstinence and his ability to go for days without food, sometimes eating only once in the week. Then he came to live in the Egyptian desert among many experienced ascetics. Much to his surprise, he found it very difficult to fast for even one day past noon! He inquired of one of the old men as to why this was so. The old man told him that in his previous location, while fasting bodily, he had been nourished by the praises of others who admired his feats. But here in the desert, where strict fasting was

commonplace, he had no such 'food' to sustain him. In other words, his fasting had been motivated by a desire for the praise and admiration of others. As a result of seeking glory from men, although laboring long in fasting, he had not received spiritual benefit, for he had violated Christ's commandment to 'not appear unto men to fast'. A man motivated by another man's praise, even small scraps of praise, can accomplish great feats even to the giving up of all his possessions and martyrdom, but take away from him the praise of man and his deeds will wither.

Christ by His commandments makes it clear that we are not to pray, fast, or give alms to receive recognition from man but to seek God's approval in secret. Doing the right thing for the wrong motivation will not profit us spiritually. Was it not for the praise of others that Ananias and Sapphira conspired to lie about their gift to the Church? Can we not see now dangerous it is to do the right thing to be seen by others rather than for Christ's sake? Can we perceive the imperishable profit in doing things secretly for Christ's sake and the vain passing gain of doing things for the praise of man? *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Chrysostom on Anger

Homily xiv on Ephesians

St. Paul says, "Be angry and sin not." It were good indeed, never to be angry. Yet if ever any one should fall into passion, still let him not fall into so great a degree. "For let not the sun," saith he, "go down upon your wrath." Wouldest thou have thy fill of anger? One hour, or two, or three, is enough for thee; let not the sun depart, and leave you both at enmity. It was of God's goodness that he rose; let him not depart, having shone on unworthy men. . . .

For this purpose it is that God has armed us with anger, not that we should thrust the sword against our own bodies, but that we should baptize the whole blade in the devil's breast. There bury the sword up to the hilt; yea, if thou wilt, hilt and all, and never draw it out again

And St. Paul adds, "Neither give place to the devil."

So then to be at war with one another is "to give place to the devil"; for, whereas we had need to be all in close array, and to make our stand against him, we have relaxed our enmity against him, and are giving the signal for turning against each other; for never has the devil such *place* as in our enmities. Numberless are the evils thence produced. And as stones in a building, so long as they are closely fitted together and leave no interstice, will stand firm, while if there is but a single needle's pass through, or a crevice no broader than a

hair, this destroys and ruins all; so it is it with the devil. So long, indeed, as we are closely set and compacted together, he cannot introduce on of his wiles; but when he causes us to relax a little, he rushes in like a torrent. In every case, he needs only a beginning, and this is the thing which it is difficult to accomplish; but this done, he makes room on all sides for himself. For henceforth he opens the ear to slanders, and they who speak lies are the more trusted: they have enmity which plays the advocate, not truth which judges justly. And as, where friendship is, even those evils which are true appear false, so where there is enmity, even the false appear true. There is a different mind, a different tribunal, which does not hear fairly, but with great bias and partiality. As, in a balance, if lead is cast into the scale, it will drag down the whole; so is it also here, only that the weight of enmity is far heavier than any lead. Wherefore, let us, I beseech you, do all we can to extinguish our enmities before the going down of the sun. For I you fail to master it on the very first day, both on the following, and oftentimes even for a year, you will be protracting it, and the enmity will thenceforward augment itself, and require nothing to aid it.

For by causing us to suspect that words spoken in one sense were meant in another, and gestures also, and everything, it infuriates and exasperates us, and makes us more distempered than madmen, not enduring either to utter a name, or to hear it, but saying everything invective and abuse. How then are we to allay this passion? How shall we extinguish the flame? By reflecting on our own sins, and how much we have to answer for to God; by reflecting that we are wreaking vengeance, not on an enemy, but on ourselves; by reflecting that we are delighting the devil, that we are strengthening our enemy our real enemy, and that for him we are doing wrong to our own members. Wouldest thou be revengeful and be at enmity? Be at enmity, but so with the devil, and not with a member of thine own. For this purpose it is that God has armed us with anger, not that we should thrust the sword against our own bodies, but that we should baptize the whole blade in the devil's breast. There bury the sword up to the hilt; yea, if thou wilt, hilt and all, and never draw it out again. But add yet another and another. And this actually comes to pass when we are merciful to those of our own spiritual family and peaceably disposed one towards another. Perish money, perish glory and reputation; mine own member is dearer to me than they all. Thus let us say to ourselves; let us not do violence to our own nature to gain wealth, to obtain glory.

From St. Moses of Optina (+1862)

"We must bear one another's spiritual infirmities cheerfully, without bitterness. After all, if someone is physically ill, not only are we not offended with him, but we even help him in any way we can. That is how we must treat spiritual illnesses also."

Abbot Moses counselled everyone to keep what

he called St. Dorotheos's rule for being at peace: "Do not want things to turn out as you would like, but want whatever happens. That way you will be at peace with everyone.... One who does not have his own will always gets his way. Since he has no desire of his own, no matter what happens with him, he is content—and so it turns out that he always fulfills his desires, for he does not want things to turn out as he wishes, but as they do turn out."

The Mind, the Heart, the Thoughts

Fr. Meletios Webber

From Fr. Meletios' book Bread & Water, Wine & Oil The first part offers an excellent, clear explanation of the difference between the mind and the heart, their proper relationship, and the disordered relationship between the two which usually prevails in us due to sin and the fall, and which is the cause of all our problems. Fr. Justin

What the Mind Does

Since most modern people are accustomed to using their minds rather than their hearts to make sense of the world, it may be valuable to consider in greater detail how the mind works in practice.

The needs and desires of the mind are limitless. So are its fears. However, it needs to be said right at the beginning that the mind is not evil in itself. On the contrary, the mind is a beautiful and necessary part of human existence, and like everything else in the created universe, it was fashioned by God. The ability to use the mind is crucial in almost everything we do, even though we have not really begun to understand how it works. Obviously, the mind has an important connection with the brain, but in some senses the mind also seems to work throughout the body, affecting every cell, perhaps every atom of our existence, as it functions. Apart from anything else, the working of the mind underlines the immensely important relationship of cooperation between who we feel ourselves to be, as people, and our bodies. So long as we are alive, consciousness without the cooperation of our bodies seems to be, quite literally, unthinkable.

There are occasions, for example, when we are driving, when it is obviously essential to have the ability to think, since we must constantly be making comparisons: measuring distances, judging how much gasoline to use, deciding when we need to apply the brakes in order to stop at a certain point, and so on. Analysis, from the most simple to the most complex, is achieved by the mind. At such time, the mind is like a very sophisticated computer, as good or bad as any other computer, depending on the skill of the user and the quality of the data it is dealing with.

However, it seemed obvious to our spiritual teachers, just as it seems obvious in the modern world, that there is something broken about the way the mind works, particularly in those situations where the mind seems to have a life of its own. Unlike a computer, the mind does not have an "off" switch. When we are not actually using it, it carries on under

its own power, behaving as if it were in charge and issuing a constant stream of comments and challenges, almost all of which are of a negative character. As we have seen, the Fathers call this activity *logismoi*, and although these thoughts are not evil of themselves (most of them start as simple speculations of the “what if” variety), the spiritual experts maintain that all sin has its roots in this stream of thoughts.

The stream of thoughts is negative because the mind dwells in a land of unrelenting desire and boundless fear, and it attempts to influence us to experience thee two areas as our rightful home. Almost anyone who has ever lain awake at four in the morning listening to the workings of the mind knows what this feels like. Some people actually hear an almost constant stream of conversation going on in their heads throughout the day, encouraging them to want and need, to be afraid, to feel alienated and alone. Many people experience the mind as a commentary. Still others, though denying that they can actually hear anything, will quickly agree that it is a very difficult thing to keep the mind quiet. Any attempt at counting from one to ten without having an intervening thought (including those inevitable ones like “gosh, I’m able to count without having a thought”) will reveal just how difficult it is.

It is not until we learn to quiet our thoughts that there is even the possibility of learning to use our hearts. Apart from anything else, the mind uses noise constantly to reassure itself of its own existence. The language of the heart, on the other hand, is silence. Here I am not referring to an empty silence, one that is simply waiting for something to happen. Rather I refer to the overflowing silence, the silence that is the heart’s means of communication, a full and profound experience of being, and a deep awareness of God.

The Present Moment

One noticeable way the mind works is that it rejects the here and now. This combines an undercurrent of negativity or dissatisfaction with a sense that the reality of God’s world is not good enough. Indeed, the motto of the mind, if it had one, might very well be, “Anywhere but here; any moment but now.” It lives in an environment of constant complaint and discomfort.

When the mind looks at the present moment, it sees nothing, or at least nothing worth considering. The present moment has not shape or form, so there is nothing to measure. Since defining things through labelling and measuring is the main task of the mind, when it comes to something formless, it simply ignores it. The mind prefers to work in the past or future, since these dimensions are both actually constructs of the mind’s own workings, and thus the mind controls them. The present moment, however, is completely outside its control and therefore ignored.

The mind is the guarding of memories and fantasies, the past and the future respectively.

Memories and fantasies come in two (and only two) varieties: good and bad. This means that all desires (related to keeping good memories and creating good fantasies) and all fears (related to avoiding bad memories and bad fantasies) come within the jurisdiction of the mind.

Unfortunately for the mind, the present moment is the only moment that is, in any real sense. Moreover, in spiritual terms, the present moment is the only possible occasion in which we can meet God (or anyone else).

The mind attempts to be almost completely absent from the present moment—this is actually what we experience when we lie awake early in the morning. All anxiety, all fear, all disturbance come from memory or from anticipation, from the past or from the future, but not from the present. The present rarely (perhaps never) poses a problem; it just presents a situation.

In our society, it is not uncommon to meet people who carry huge burdens of pain around with them, all of which exists either in the past (as unhappy memories) or in the future (as anxiety). Society in general and their minds in particular do not announce to them that carrying this burden is actually an optional activity. We are not our thoughts. The pain such people feel is real enough, but actually exists only in their thought processes and absolutely nowhere else. It certainly does not exist in the present moment, the only part of their life that is “real” in all its dimensions. The present moment has many special qualities, but it is almost always full of joy. However, this joy, which is available to anyone and everyone, is for many people, completely obliterated by the pain of the past or the future, urged on by the mind.

The movement of emotion further clouds the way the mind works as our bodies react to thoughts the mind is producing. Whether felt physically as a tightening in the chest, a knot in the solar plexus, or stomach pains, or just vaguely experienced as a sort of cloud, emotions get our attention quickly. Unfortunately, they tend to be rather vapid, easily manipulated, rapidly changing, and often undifferentiated. On being asked, many people know that they have a lot of feelings—they just don’t know which ones.

We actually like to have our emotions manipulated. If this were not so, the cinema industry would go out of business very quickly. We watch movies in order to have our emotions engaged and then manipulated. This we experience as entertainment, but it cannot be said to be a very profound experience. The same is true of reading and listening to music (of all sorts, from classical to hard rock)—even “serious” entertainment is a shallow experience compared with being present in the heart. Ultimately, all entertainment is a distraction, offered as a sacrifice of reality to appease an ever-hungry mind. In its turn, the mind is constantly striving to lessen the importance of the present moment by seeking out distraction. When we feed that process,

we are encouraging that which is most destructive within us.

In particular, emotion is of little importance in establishing or developing our contact with God, and yet almost everyone alive is tempted to use emotion in just that way. Unfortunately, this makes the presence of God noting more important than a feeling, on a level with being happy or sad. Moreover, if our concept of worship is simply one of distraction—if our conscious contact with God is not radically different from our experience in a theater or an auditorium—then the mind has won a decisive battle. God is then exiled to the past or the future, where He is totally powerless—He is completely at the mercy of the human mind which imprisons Him there.

Since the mind concerns itself with the future and the past, it follows that the mind is also dependent on time. According to the best and brightest, this “fourth dimension” is something of a mystery in itself and cannot be described in any way that is altogether satisfactory. However, within time one thing is certain: everything that exists now has come into being at some point in the past, and everything that exist now is going to cease to exist at some point in the future. This places the mind in a very uncomfortable position: within the dimension in which it chooses to operate, its own destruction is inevitable. For the mind, fear of death, of total destruction, is a constant companion. *pp. 15-21*

St. Nicholas of Zicha On Happiness *From Prayers by the Lake*

Are there days gone by, O man, to which you would wish to return? They all attracted you like silk, and now remain behind you like a cobweb. Like honey they greeted you, like stench you bade them farewell. All were totally filled with illusion and sin.

See how all the pools of water in the moonlight resemble mirrors; and how all the days that were lit up with you levity resemble mirrors. But as you stepped from one day to the next, the false mirrors cracked like thin ice, and you waded through the water and mud.

Can a day that has a morning and an evening as doorways be a day?

O luminous Lord, my soul is burdened with illusions and longs for one day—for the day without doorways, the day from which my soul has departed and sunk into the shifting shadows—for Your day, which I used to call my day, when I was one with You.

Is there any happiness gone by, O man, to which you would wish to return? Of two morsels of the same sweetness, the second is the more trite. You would turn your head away in boredom from yesterday's happiness, if it were set out on today's table.

Moments of happiness are given to you only in order to leave you longing for true happiness in the bosom of the every-happy Lord; and ages of

unhappiness are given to you, to waken you out of the drowsy dream of illusions.

O Lord, Lord, my only happiness, will You provide shelter for Your injured pilgrim?

O Lord, my ageless youth, my eyes shall bathe in You and shine more radiantly than the sun.

You carefully collect the tears of the righteous, and with them You rejuvenate worlds.

On Sufferings and Temptations *St. Ignaty Brianchaninov*

The way of God from the beginning of time and from the creation of the human race has been the way of the cross and death. How did you get your idea that everything is just the opposite? You must realize that you are outside the way of God, that your are far from Him, that you do not wish to walk in the steps of the Saints, but want to make some special way for yourself and travel by it without sufferings. The way of God is a daily cross. No one has climbed to heaven by living a life of pleasure.

The innocent and all-holy Lord...has provided suffering as the way of salvation for all His followers... At the same time, He infuses into the sufferings of His servants from His own sufferings unspeakable spiritual consolation in proof positive of the truth of salvation, and of the truth of the way of suffering which leads to salvation. The innocent and all-holy Lord spent His earthly life in sufferings; still more should the guilty suffer, fully aware that they deserve to suffer. They should rejoice that by means of brief sufferings they are delivered from eternal sufferings and join the ranks of the followers and friends of the God-man. He who refuses sufferings and does not consider that he deserves them, does not acknowledge his fall and perdition. He who has used his earthly life merely for earthly success, foolishly mistakes this briefest spell for eternity and regards eternity as non-existent—and he prepares himself for eternal misery! *From The Arena*

St. Symeon the New Theologian

[The Apostle Paul] proclaims, “Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). Why did he say, “Strive”? Because it is not possible for us to become holy and to be saints in an hour! We must therefore progress from modest beginnings toward holiness and purity. Even were we to spend a thousand years in this life, we should never perfectly attain to it. Rather, we must always struggle for it every day, as if mere beginners. This again Paul has shown us by saying, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect” (Philippians 3:12). *Discourse 5*

Upcoming Events 2019

28 November: Thanksgiving Day Liturgy

25 December: Nativity of our Lord

28 December: Pilgrimage to Nativity Monastery

31 December – 1 January: All-Night Vigil for St. Basil

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!