

The Confessor's Tongue for December 29, A. D. 2019

28th Sunday after Pentecost; Sunday after Nativity: Holy Innocents

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 All-Night Vigil

As we undertake to serve an All-Night Vigil to start off the Year of our Lord 2020 this week, it may be useful to review just what the Vigil is, what its main component parts are, why it is served, and what good it does us.

As we know, the Church's celebration of Sunday, the Lord's Day, the day of Resurrection, begins each week on Saturday evening with the celebration of what is called the "All-night Vigil." In the Church's mind, this service is an essential part of her worship of God and her members' preparation to partake of Christ's Body and Blood.

The All-Night Vigil comprises the daily services of Great Vespers, Matins, and First Hour. It is appointed for the evening before each Great Feast and every Sunday (which is, in effect, a Little Pascha). The feasts of certain saints also call for a Vigil. It is called "all-night" because in ancient times in Palestine where it first developed, it began at sunset and continued through the night until dawn. Later, as the service spread through the Church, out of condescension to the weakness of the faithful, it was abbreviated to begin late in the evening (but before midnight) and to last until morning. Now in normal parish use, it is abbreviated still further, beginning earlier in the evening and lasting but two or three hours. In our parish, it typically lasts two to two and a quarter hours.

Sunday for Christians is the day of the Lord's Resurrection, the day of the Eucharist, and the day of the Lord's Kingdom (the 8th day). The Sunday services communicate these themes. Since the Liturgical day begins at sunset, each Sunday has its Vespers and Matins before the Divine Liturgy. These services prepare us for the Liturgy. Indeed, the Liturgy may not be served with Vespers or Matins having been served, or at least read privately by the clergy.

Though we may be tempted to think of the "All-Night" Vigil in terms of the quantity of time spent in the service, the primary concept of time contained in the term "vigil" is qualitative. In ancient times, "vigil" referred to time spent on guard duty, or 'keeping watch'. In the Church, it means time spent in attentive preparation and 'waiting on God'. Spiritual life needs time for development. No one can achieve results in one's spiritual life without time. Modern man's spiritual life is in a state of collapse because of his impatience to achieve results. Vigil takes time seriously. It relates all time to history, specifically to the history of salvation. When God became man, the Kingdom of God appeared in the time of this world. Vigil becomes the time of the proclamation of that kingdom. Vigil takes us back to the beginning of time and prepares us for the end of time, when all things will be fulfilled in the fullness of Christ's kingdom.

Moreover, Christ instructed His disciples to "watch and pray" so that, though they did not know the hour of His return, they might be ready for it. To keep vigil in the historical and ascetic sense is to deprive oneself of a measure of usual sleep to keep watch, waiting in readiness for the coming of the Son of Man at midnight, training oneself to live life in expectation of Christ's coming: first, in the Holy Mysteries at Every Liturgy, and second, in glory to judge the world and inaugurate His Kingdom. To this day in places like Mount Athos, the Vigil is served through the night (for up to eight hours and even longer), preserving the ascetical effort and eschatological anticipation of the service.

In parish practice, the two to three-hour service still represents a significant ascetical effort for us, as we stand in readiness, waiting on the Lord and contemplating in the hymns and psalms all that He has done for us, especially His Incarnation, Death on the Cross, and Resurrection. Having stood through the Vigil, our bodies tell us clearly that we have been in church keeping watch, focused on the 'one thing needful' for our lives. Inconvenient and demanding it may be, but it also offers indispensable training in waiting on the Lord and making Him our priority above all else in life.

On New Year's Eve, Little Vespers at 5:00 p.m. serves as a placeholder for the daily sunset service. The All-Night Vigil will begin at 10:00 with Little Compline and the singing of the Akathist to the Theotokos. That will be followed by a complete Great Vespers with Litia. Close to Midnight, Matins will begin and will be served without abbreviation. Following it will be the First Hour and the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil. All should be completed by 5:00 a.m.

Those wishing to commune should come having read their prayers of preparation already. The Eucharistic fast will begin with Compline at 10:00 p.m. The Vigil provides the faithful with a means of starting the New Year on the right foot, in the right spirit, in the right place: in Church before the Lord, in holy prayer and worship, standing and ready.

The Commandments of Christ

"If ye love Me, keep My commandments."

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you. Matthew 7:6

The faith we hold is both "most holy" and "precious" (Jude 20, 2 Peter 1:1) and is to be treated as such. Holy things are those set aside for special, not common, use, and in this case, are things set aside or consecrated for the Lord. Pearls are precious things, for they are not so easy to find and good ones are rare, beautiful, and highly prized. Here 'pearls' suggest

wisdom and knowledge of the deeper things of God that can be learned only by searching them out with labor in purity of heart and having God respond to the search by opening Himself to the seeker.

In ancient times, dogs were not household pets, but were unclean wild animals, ravenous scavengers, and a threat to man's livestock and even to man himself. Swine were unclean animals not to be eaten or even touched by Jews. To give something holy to a dog is to despise the holy thing and to give a pearl to a pig who cannot appreciate it is folly and a waste. In this command, dogs and swine refer to certain types of men, men who have not set their hearts to seek God and have not yielded themselves to Him, who live unclean lives dedicated to the pursuit of base pleasures. They are unbelievers who resist or attack the things of God.

The holy things and precious things of our faith are not to be given to fools, to mockers, to scoffers, to unclean men who are not seeking truth. If we do, they will only treat our holy things with disdain and perhaps attack us further because we have not fed their carnal desires. And even if someone sincerely seeks the Truth, there are things that cannot be profitably conveyed to him until he has had the cleansing bath of baptism, which renders clean him who formerly was unclean.

Christ's command first implies that we need to know the difference between what is holy—set aside for God—and what is for common use. A normal husband and wife do not hide their marriage from the world, but they do not talk to others of their intimate relations, for that is for them and for them alone. So it is in the Church, the household of God, the Bride of the Lamb. Some things belong to the public witness of the Faith to the world. Other things, holy things, belong to the inner life of the Church accessible only to those initiated by Baptism and practicing their faith.

Hence at the Divine Liturgy right before Communion, the priest declares "The Holy Things are for the Holy", and we declare to God in a prayer before Holy Communion that we "will not speak of Thy Mysteries to Thine enemies". This bears witness to the holiness of Communion, which is referred to as "Holy Things". Only the faithful who are living in repentance and who have prepared themselves may partake of them.

The basic principle is this: not everything contained in our faith is for common consumption, to be talked over publicly or put in advertisements. We have to discern what a particular person needs or is ready to hear and not reveal all our spiritual riches to just anyone willing to listen—as King Hezekiah foolishly did when he revealed all the treasures of his house to the messengers from Babylon. A man who doubts that Jesus Christ is God is in no wise capable of hearing with profit details of the Eucharist, relics, the Theotokos, and the like. It is no use to argue with him about them, and it exposes the holy things of

God to ridicule and misunderstanding and ourselves to avoidable unpleasantness.

St. Theophan on Wandering Thoughts

Thoughts wander when one is reading spiritual works and during prayer. What should one do? No one is free from this. There is no sin in it, only vexation. Having wandering thoughts becomes a sin when one willingly allows flightiness of mind. But if thoughts scatter involuntarily, what fault can there be? There is fault, though, when one notices thoughts wandering and, taking no action, one wanders along with them. When we catch our thoughts wandering off, we must bring them back to their proper place at once.

St. John Cassian on the Struggle with Thoughts

Germanos then asked: 'How does it happen that even against our will many ideas and wicked thoughts trouble us, entering by stealth and undetected to steal our attention? Not only are we unable to prevent them from entering, but it is extremely difficult even to recognize them. Is it possible for the mind to be completely free of them and not be troubled by them at all?'

Abba Moses replied: 'It is impossible for the mind not to be troubled by these thoughts. But if we exert ourselves it is within our power either to accept them and give them our attention, or to expel them. Their coming is not within our power to control, but their expulsion is. The amending of our mind is also within the power of our choice and effort. When we meditate wisely and: continually on the law of God, study psalms and canticles, engage in fasting and vigils, and always bear in mind what is to come — the kingdom of heaven, the Gehenna of fire and all God's works — our wicked thoughts diminish and find no place. But when we devote our time to worldly concerns and to matters of the flesh, to pointless and useless conversation, then these base thoughts multiply in us. Just as it is impossible to stop a watermill from turning, although the miller has power to choose between grinding either wheat or tares, so it is impossible to stop our mind, which is ever-moving, from having thoughts, although it is within our power to feed it either with spiritual meditation or with worldly concerns.

Note well the dates below to avoid planning vacations and travel during them.

Upcoming Events 2019

31 December – 1 January: All-Night Vigil for St. Basil,
10:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m.
21 January Feast of St. Maximus
1 March: Forgiveness Vespers
2-7 March: Clean Week
12-18 April: Holy Week
19 April: Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!