

The Confessor's Tongue for July 19, A. D. 2020

6th Sunday after Pentecost; St. Seraphim of Sarov

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)

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men... Matthew 10:16.

Christ likens his followers to harmless sheep who are surrounded by fierce wolves—a dire situation in which to be! But Christ's sheep are rational sheep, not dumb, and Christ gives them a command as to how they are to conduct themselves in their unfavorable position: "Be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves."

The Christian is to be harmless. He seeks the good for each person. He knows that his enemy are the demons, not the people whom the demons have enthralled. He is guided in his relations to others by God's commandments. He does not murder, does not abuse with words, does not use others for sexual gratification, does not take other people's goods by theft, deception, extortion, or law, does not harm others by slander, gossip, or false accusation, and is thankful for what God has given him and does not envy others for what they have been given. The Christian does not live by the maxims of the world, "Might makes right" or "Survival of the fittest." He does no harm to others as the dove is harmless. Living this way, he does not provoke others by threatening harm to them.

Yet the Christian lives in the midst of wolves who are more than ready to do him harm, to take advantage of him, to exploit him. Hence Christ commands him to be "wise as a serpent". Wherein lies the serpent's wisdom? The Fathers primarily find it in the care the snake takes for its head. While it takes blows on the rest of its body, it protects its head, its most important part. So too, the Christian preserves his soul and conscience even at the expense of his body and possessions. As the snake squeezes through a narrow hole to help shed its old skin, so the Christian chooses the narrow way to put off the old man.

The snake is a master of concealment. It lies still, hidden from the sight of its predators and prey. It knows that unneeded movement reveals its presence to its enemies, and so it lies still or moves slowly with caution. When a snake moves into a new environment, it quietly explores the territory to find places of refuge and where it may find food and to identify where predators lurk. Only when it knows the territory well does it begin living a more active life. This sort of wisdom is reflected in military planning and reconnaissance, or in the common advice given to seminarians that, once they are ordained and given a parish, that they live and minister there for a year before trying to make any significant changes.

The word translated here as "wise" is not *sofos*, related to *sofia*, or "wisdom", but *fronimos*, which means "prudent, sensible, shrewd, wise, thoughtful." The five virgins who took extra oil to await the bridegroom were prudent. Prudent and wise is the man who builds his house on the rock and not on sand. Shrewd and prudent was the unjust steward who, upon learning he was being let go, called in his master's debtors and reduced their debts so that they would help him when he lost his position. The master on learning what the steward had done commended him for his shrewdness. Jesus comments, "For the children of this world are in their generation wiser [shrewder, more prudent] than the children of light." In this context, Jesus goes on to command his disciples to "make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations." This is wise and prudent; this is being wise as a serpent.

Being wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove enables the Christian to live among the wolves without suffering spiritual harm. May God grant this harmlessness and prudence to us. *Fr. Justin*

Owe No One Anything But Love

St. Porphyrios

When someone injures us in whatever way, whether with slanders or with insults, we should think of him as our brother who has been taken hold of by the enemy. He has fallen victim to the enemy. Accordingly, we need to have compassion for him and entreat God to have mercy both on us and on him, and God will help both. If, however, we are filled with anger against him, then the enemy will jump from him to us and make a mockery of us both. A person who condemns others does not love Christ. Our egotism is at fault. This is where condemnation of others stems from. Let me give you a little example.

Let's suppose someone is all alone in the desert. Suddenly he hears a voice crying out in distress in the distance. He follows the sound and is confronted by a horrendous sight: a tiger has grabbed hold of a man and is savaging him with its claws. The man is desperately shouting for help. In a few minutes, he will be torn to pieces. What can the person do to help? Can he run to his side? How? It's impossible. Can he shout for help? Who will hear him? There is no one within earshot. Should he perhaps pick up a stone and throw it at the man to finish him off? "Certainly not," we would say. But that's is exactly what can happen if we don't realize that the other person who is acting badly towards us had been taken hold of by a tiger, the devil. We fail to realize that when we react to such a person without love, it is as if we are throwing stones at his wounds and, accordingly, we are doing him great harm and the

'tiger' leaps onto us and we do the same as him and worse. What kind of love do we have then for our neighbor and, even more importantly, for God?

We should feel the malice of the other person as an illness which is tormenting him and which he is unable to shake off. And so we should regard our brethren with sympathy and behave with courtesy toward them, repeating in our hearts with simplicity the prayer "Lord Jesus Christ," so that the grace of God may strengthen our soul and so that we don't pass judgement on anyone. We should regard all people as saints. We all carry within us the same 'old self'. Our neighbor, whoever he is, is 'flesh of our flesh'; he is our brother and, according to Saint Paul, we "owe no one anything, except to love one another." We can never pass judgment on other, for "no one ever hated his own flesh."

When someone has a vice, we should try to bombard him with rays of love and compassion so that he may be cured and freed. These things are achieved only through the grace of God. Think that this person is suffering more than you. IN a coenobitic monastery, when someone is at fault, we should not tell him that he is to blame. We must adopt an attitude of care, respect, and prayer. We must endeavour not to do anything harmful. When we endure insults from our brother, it counts as martyrdom. And it is something we should endure with joy.

A Christian is gracious. We should prefer to be wronged. If love enters us, we forget the wrongs we have been done. This is where the secret lies. When the evil comes from afar, you cannot avoid it. The great art, however, is to show disdain for it. With the grace of God, even though you see it, it will not affect you, because you will be full of grace.

In the realm of the Spirit of God, all things are different. Here one justifies all things in the behavior of others. Everything! What have we said? "Christ sends rain on the just and on the unjust." I say that you are to blame, even if you tell me that he or she is the one at fault. In the final analysis, you are to blame in some respect, and you will discover in what respect you are at fault when I tell you that you are to blame. You should acquire this sense of discrimination in your life. Inquire more deeply into everything, and don't regard things superficially. If we don't go to Christ, if we don't endure patiently when we suffer unjustly, we will be tormented continually. The secret is to deal with situations in a spiritual way. St. Symeon the New Theologian writes in a similar vein:

We need to regard all of the faithful as one and think that each one of them is Christ. We need to have such love for each individual that we are ready to sacrifice our very life for him. Because we ought never to say or think that any person is evil, but rather to regard all as good. And if you see a brother troubled by passions, do not hate him. Hate rather the passions that are assailing him. And if you see that he is being tormented by desires and habits from former sins, have even greater compassion on him, lest you also fall into

temptation, since you are made of matter that easily turns from good to evil. Love for your brother prepares you to love God more. Accordingly, the secret of love for God is love for your brother. Because if you don't love your brother whom you see, how can you possibly love God whom you don't see? "He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"

Let's have love, meekness, and peace, In that way, we help our brother when he is possessed by evil. Our example radiates mystically, and not only when the person is present, but also when he is not. Let us strive to radiate our good will. Even when we say something about a person whose way of life does not meet with our approval, the person is aware of it and we repel him. Whereas, if we are compassionate and forgive him, then we influence him—just as evil influences him—even if he does not see us.

We shouldn't be enraged by people who blaspheme or who speak and act against God and the Church. Such rage is harmful. We may hate the words and the malice behind them, but we must not hate the person who spoke them nor become enraged against him. Rather we should pray for him. A Christian has love and graciousness and should behave accordingly.

Just as a hermit, who is seen by no one, benefits the world because the mystical waves of his prayers influence people and transmit the Holy Spirit into the world, so you, too, should scatter your love, without expecting anything in return—with love, patience, and a smile...

Love needs to be sincere. And only the love of God is sincere love. To a person whom we find tiresome and troublesome, love needs to be offered in a subtle manner without the person being aware that we are striving to love him. It shouldn't be given much outward expression, because then the person will react. Silence saves us from all evils. Restraint of the tongue is a great thing. In a mystical way, silence radiates out to our neighbor. Let me tell you a story.

A nun who was very concerned the life in her monastery should be perfectly ordered came to her spiritual father in exasperation and said:

"Sister so-and-so is disrupting the whole monastery with her problems and her character. We simply can't endure her."

Her elder replied:

"You are worse than she is."

To begin with, the nun was taken aback and protested, but after her elder explained things to her, she understood what he meant and was very pleased. What her elder said was, "The evil spirit that takes hold of the other nun and causes her to behave badly takes hold of you too, even though you think you are in a better state, and it makes a mockery of you both. The other nun gets into the state she does without wishing to, but you, with your overreaction and lack of love, do exactly the same. In that way, you do no good to your sister and you yourself are harmed.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!