

The Confessor's Tongue for November 8, A. D. 2020

22nd Sunday after Pentecost; Archangel Michael

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.

Preparing for the Nativity Fast

The Nativity Fast, the 40-day period of preparation for the Nativity of our Lord, begins next Sunday, November 15 and lasts until the Liturgy the morning of the Nativity of Our Lord, December 25. The Fast is a time of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving given to us by the Holy Spirit in the Church for our spiritual benefit: for repentance, healing, cleansing, growth, and, ultimately—for knowing Christ more intimately and being filled afresh with His Spirit. The Fast is a time to lay aside the lesser things choking our life in Christ to pursue greater things and recalibrate our spiritual life.

The Fast is a wholistic effort of the whole man consisting of three main elements: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Now, before the Fast is upon us, is the time to prepare for our own fasting so that we establish a rule for our own effort in the fast before it is upon us. The Nativity Fast can be difficult as the surrounding world gives itself over to merriment in the time leading up the Nativity, and then, when we are celebrating the twelve days of Christmas, the world has already grown weary of festive excess and turned away from the feast. So we do well to plan ahead. If you have not done this before, or want to make substantial changes in your practice, or have any questions at all, please consult with your priest or confessor.

Prayer: During the Fast, we seek to advance our prayer life, keeping our rule of prayer more strictly, more attentively, and adding to it if we can. An easy way to increase it is to add Psalms and prostrations or the Jesus Prayer as part of our formal rule. We may use the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem if we desire. We might try doing the Optina 500 (on the website). For some, the effort may be to overcome sloth and inconsistency in prayer by setting particular times to fulfill their rule and then striving to keep it with God's help. We should strive to develop a more constant awareness of God throughout the day by the use of the Jesus Prayer, prayers of the Hours at nine, noon, and three, or other such short prayers. Prayer also includes the corporate prayer of the Church in her services. We should attend services more frequently, as the services provide support for our overall efforts. Choosing a spiritual book to read that will warm the heart and inspire the will to seek God more diligently can help prayer immensely.

Almsgiving: Almsgiving gives our prayer wings. It is an act of love to give up some of the resources God has given us to benefit others who are in need. We offer several outlets for almsgiving: the almsbox, which allows us to help in the name of Christ those who come to our door, but also is used to help brethren within the church who find themselves in need. We also have our own modest food pantry to

which you may donate canned goods. Traditionally, we have also chosen a local charity or two to support and during the fast collected the items they need. One may give directly to the needy or to worthy charities such as International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) on one's own. The important thing is that we give alms, which is giving for those in need above and beyond our normal tithes and offerings.

Fasting: In many people's mind, this is what is meant by the Fast, but this is but one part. We abstain from meat, dairy products, fish, wine, and olive oil (see wall calendar for when fish, wine, and oil are permitted) and marital relations (see priest if you have questions) so that we can give ourselves to prayer and have extra means for almsgiving. We eat less: when we get up from the table, we still have "room" in our stomachs. The money we save by eating less and more simply we give as alms (above and beyond our usual tithes and offerings); here fasting has its practical social benefit. We also seek to minimize influences in our lives that draw us away from Christ or cause our hearts to grow cold or indifferent to Him. Hence, for the season we may cut back on or cut out altogether TV, movies, secular music, parties, and other entertainment and replace it with prayer, Church services, works of mercy, and spiritual reading. This is a good time to unplug ourselves from as much electronic media as we can and concentrate on personal face-to-face relations with friends and especially family members.

Each person is strongly encouraged to choose a spiritual book for daily reading during the Fast in addition to our daily reading of Scripture, etc. These include works such as Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, John Cassian's *Conferences*, anything by St. Theophan the Recluse, *Unseen Warfare*, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, St. John of Kronstadt's *My Life in Christ*, St. Maximus 400 *Chapters on Love*, Metropliton Hierotheos Vlachos' works, and those of St. Porphyrios and St. Paisios. Various lives of saints such as the Optina Elders, St. Seraphim, St. Silouan, St. Nectarios, St. Elizabeth of the New Martyr, St. Matrona of Moscow, etc. It is wise to consult with your priest or confessor if you are not sure what to read.

All regular communicants must make a Confession during the Fast. Those who do not commune regularly should use the Fast to prepare for Confession and Communion. We cannot expect to have spiritual health if we do not make the spiritual and physical effort involved to commune at least a three or four times a year.

If we seek to commune regularly, we must make at least a monthly Confession. Frequent Communion is a privilege which assumes that we are examining ourselves in confession regularly, keeping fast days, and trying to live an active Christian life throughout

the week. If we won't, don't or can't do this, we should commune less frequently and carefully prepare for it each time by a Confession along with prayer and fasting. If you have any questions about how to keep the fast in your particular circumstances, please consult your Confessor or Priest.

Sayings of the Desert Fathers

1. Abba Matoes said, 'I prefer a light and steady activity, to one that is painful at the beginning but is soon broken off.'
2. He also said, 'The nearer a man draws to God, the more he sees himself a sinner. It was when Isaiah the prophet saw God, that he declared himself "a man of unclean lips."'
3. He also said, 'When I was young, I would say to myself: perhaps one day I shall do something good; but now that I am old, I see that there is nothing good about me.'
4. He also said, 'Satan does not know by what passion the soul can be overcome. He sows, but without knowing if he will respond, sometimes thoughts of fornication, sometimes thoughts of slander, and similarly for the other passions. He supplies nourishment to the passion which he sees the soul is slipping towards.'
5. A brother went to Abba Matoes and said to him, 'How is it that the monks of Scetis did more than the Scriptures required in loving their enemies more than themselves?' Abba Matoes said to him, 'As for me, I have not yet managed to love those who love me as I love myself.'
6. A brother questioned Abba Matoes, 'What ought I do do when a brother comes to see me and it is a fast day, or in the morning? This worries me.' The old man said to him, 'If you don't fuss about it and simply eat with the brother, that is all right, but if you are not expecting anyone and you eat, that is your own will.'
10. Abba Matoes said that three old men went to aAbba Paphnutius, he who is called Cephalus, to ask a word of him. The old man said to them, 'What do you want me to say to you? A spiritual word, or a bodily word?' They said, 'A spiritual word.' The old man said to them, 'God, and choose trials rather than quietness, dishonor rather than glory, and to give rather than to receive.'
11. A brother questioned Abba Matoes saying, 'Give me a word.' He said to him, 'God, and pray God to put compunction in your heart and give you humility; be aware of your faults; do not judge others but put yourself below everyone; do not be friendly with a boy nor with a heretical friend; put freedom of speech far from you; control your tongue and your belly; drink only a small quantity of wine, and if someone speaks about some topic, do not argue with him, but, if he is right, say "Yes"; if he is wrong, say, "You know what you are saying," and do not argue with him about what he has said. That is humility.'

12. A brother said to Abba Matoes, 'Gibe me a word.' he said to him, 'Restrain the spirit of controversy in yourself in everything, and weep, have compunction, for the time is drawing near.'

The Commandments of Christ

"If ye love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:15)
Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have. Luke 8:18

Hearing is one of the five bodily senses, the most powerful after sight. Noise from the world around us enters our ears constantly, and our brains work to identify the noises and tell us how to respond to them. Though hearing works constantly, we typically give it little thought.

With the command to "take heed how ye hear", Jesus asserts the important of hearing and the attention we should give it. The command in Luke follows Jesus's telling of the Parable of the Sower and the Soils and His explanation of it to His disciples. Having given them the interpretation of this foundational parable of the Kingdom, He delivers this command: "be careful how you hear."

Hearing gives us a chance to receive and retain something of value: knowledge, direction, a warning. Or we may hear something of value but let it come in one ear and go out the other, as we say. If we are careless hearers, we will think we have something just because we have heard it and it is, therefore, not new to us, but we shall not truly possess anything of substance if we have not heard it carefully and retain it.

How do we hear carefully and retain something valuable from our hearing? Christ gives an indication how just three verses later when He says, "My mother and my brethren are these which hear the word of God, and do it" (v. 21). In his epistle, St. James urges Christians to be "doers of the word and not merely hearers who delude themselves." "Take heed how ye hear", then, means we should hear what Christ says, take it to heart, and act upon it. Only to hear it and keep a memory of it without doing anything about it is not to hear carefully. Such a person will think he has something, because he knows about it in his head, but he does not have anything substantial, because he does not act upon it.

When a bishop asked St. Moses of Optina why it was hard to retain what he read in St. John of the Ladder's work *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the elder answered, "That sort of literature requires that we do it in order to know it and not just read it." Hearing and reading much without applying it only serves to feed pride. Take heed how your hear!

Upcoming Events 2020

- 8 November: Parish Thanksgiving meal
- 15 November: Nativity Fast Begins
- 21 November: Feast of Entrance of Theotokos into the Temple

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!