

The Confessor's Tongue for January 17, A. D. 2020

32nd Sunday after Pentecost; St. Anthony the Great

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.

On the Benefits of Good Fellowship

St. Paisios (+1994)

– Geronda, I am troubled when you say we will go through difficult years.

– You must love one another, be at peace with one another, train yourselves spiritually, be brave, remain united as one body and fear nothing. God will help. Cultivate love, the spiritual kind. Love one another like a mother loves her child. You should have a sense of brotherhood and a spirit of sacrifice. Soon we will go through difficult days...

– Geronda, how does it help people to have ties of spiritual friendship?

– Nowadays, even if spiritual people do not want to be bonded together, they will be forced to do so by the devil through his abundant evil, the devil actually brings about a great good for the people today. For example, suppose that a believing father wants to have a tutor for his children. He will be obliged to find a good and believing teacher to provide this service in his household. A teacher, who is a believer but has not yet been assigned to a school, wants to tutor children and will want to find a good family to feel secure. A tradesman, who lives spiritually, be he a painter or electrician or builder, will look to find work in a good family to feel at ease and to avoid the troubles he would otherwise encounter in a worldly setting. By the same token, a Christian family man will seek to bring into his house a good tradesman who is also a believer. Thus, each will be looking to find another spiritual person with whom he can cooperate. Gradually, spiritual people will come to know one another through the various trades and professions.

In the end, the devil with his evil work actually does some good, without wanting to, by separating the sheep from the goats. The sheep and goats will be separated *and there shall become one flock, one shepherd*. You see, in the past, the villages had a shepherd, and each of the villagers would give him their sheep or goats, one five, another ten, and he would pasture the sheep and the goats together, because back then the goats were tame and did not butt the sheep with their horns. Now the goats have gone wild and are savagely butting Christ's sheep. The sheep, in turn, are seeking a good shepherd and a flock made up of sheep only. For the world has now become fit only for those who live in sin. For this reason, people will separate themselves—the sheep will be separated from the goats. Those who want to live a spiritual life will eventually find that they are not able to do it in this world; they will be searching to find people like themselves, people of God. They'll want to have a Spiritual Father to guide them and they will distance themselves all the more from sin. And this good is now being achieved by the devil and his evil ways,

without him wanting to. So, now we see in the cities and the villages, too, some people running to nightclubs and entertainment centres while others are going to Church for vigils, for supplication prayers, for spiritual gathers, and these people are united among themselves.

In difficult times, a strong fellowship is formed among people. During the war, we lived as soldiers for two years in the platoon and were closer than brothers, because we shared the difficulties and the dangers. We were so close-knit that we called each other "brother". They were people of the world, with worldly mentalities, and yet they did not want to be separated from each other. They had not read the Gospel, nor any spiritual books. They only had a simple worldly education, in the good sense; but they also had the most important thing of all: love, a sense of brotherhood, a spirit of fellowship with one another...

Now we are fighting the devil. So, try to become more brotherly and to have a brotherly fellowship. That's how we will all be able to walk together on the steep path of ascent toward sweet Golgotha. *From Spiritual Awakening, chapter 3.*

The Commandments of Christ

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

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. Matt 10:34

Several times in the Gospels, Jesus give commands regarding what His disciples should think or not think. He tells them not to think He came to destroy the Law and the Prophets but rather to fulfill them (Mt 5:17). He also says, "Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust." He warns them that the Son of man will come at a hour "ye think not" (Mt. 24:44), a subtle way of saying "do not think you know when I am coming." In the command before us, He commands His disciples not to think that he came to send peace on earth, but a sword.

Through this command, Jesus would spare His disciples from falling prey to delusions about what following Him would entail. He does not offer a sales pitch that only speaks of the good and omits the bad. He frankly tells His followers what they can expect from following Him, both the good and the bad. This way, when bad inevitably comes, they will be prepared and not caught by surprise and shaken in their faith.

We associate Christ with peace. "Peace on earth, good will to men," sing the angels at His birth. "For the peace of the whole world" we pray at every service, and we repeatedly hear his blessing "peace be to all." One of Christ's titles is "Prince of Peace." So strong are these and other associations of Christ with peace that we may struggle to credit Christ's own

word that He came not to send peace on earth but a sword. So what is He saying?

Indeed, true peace within a person and in the world among people is possible only through Christ, and He comes to bring us this peace. Yet until the end of all things, in this world, Christ and faith in Christ will create conflict, not because Christians seek conflict with others, but because others are not willing to live at peace with those following a different way of life.

Christians seek to live at peace with others. "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men," writes St. Paul to the Romans (12:18). He writes to the Corinthians that a believing wife should stay with her unbelieving husband and not to use her faith as an excuse to leave him, if he is willing to live with her. This works for his good and the good of the children. But, if he insists on leaving her due to her faith, she is free from obligation to him.

What is the sword of which Christ speaks? Blessed Theophylact in his commentary on this passage writes: "Harmony is not always a good thing, while separation sometimes is. The sword, then, is the word of faith which severs our bond to our families and relatives when they hinder our piety towards God. For He does not tell us simply to separate ourselves from them, but only when they will not come with us, and especially when they hinder us in our faith." So as long as our families are willing to live at peace with us despite our faith in Christ, we are to live at peace with them. Only when they seek to hinder the practice of our faith does the sword of faith sever the bonds which bind us to them.

Strong loyalty to family has been a primary value in most human cultures until recently. When Christ the Godman appears to call men to repentance and to follow Him, His presence and message challenge unquestioning loyalty to family, or to the state, or to any other human authority. For the Christian, loyalty and obedience to Christ supersedes all others. It does not negate them—so long as the other loyalties do not conflict with the primarily one. Hence Christians were able to serve in the Roman army under pagan emperors so long as he did not ask them to worship idols. But when he dared to make that demand, the Christians refused to break their loyalty to Christ for the sake of obedience to the emperor.

Christ puts it starkly when He says, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). He is not calling people to hate their families; but the love and loyalty of his followers for Him must prevail against every other love and loyalty when they come into conflict.

If we look at the context of this command, we may see this all very clearly.

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law

against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it. (Mt. 10:34ff)

Again, in Luke, Christ elaborates on the matter.

Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division: For from henceforth there shall be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother; the mother in law against her daughter in law, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. (Luke 12:51-53)

Let it be clear: Christ is not commanding division or separation. He commands us not to think that these things should not and will not happen. They will. The Christian's loyalty to Christ will bring Him into conflict with those in the world who do not acknowledge Christ as King and Lord. Some in the world will tolerate the Christian; some will not, even to the point of persecuting and killing Christians, for the "sword" to which Christ refers may also indicate martyrdom. Christ was led as a "lamb to the slaughter"; so too, his disciples: "For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter" (Romans 8:36; Psalm 43:22). Whatever may be, thanks to Christ's command, we shall not be surprised or dismayed.

From St. Barsanuphius of Optina

Even perfect people have passions—there are no totally passionless people. Passionlessness exists in full measure only beyond the grave. But with the perfect, the passions have come to a standstill, since they are not given a chance. Each man, no matter how exalted a life he has led, no matter how many grace-filled gifts he has been vouchsafed, must remember and never forget that he, too, is a passionate man.

Blessed and most blessed are those who have set out on the right path. But how does one hold to this path? After all, the enemy attacks from all sides. By fulfilling the Gospel commandments and by doing the Jesus Prayer. If someone has offended you, endure it. The enemy teaches you to take revenge, but Christ says from on high, 'Forgive.' 'I don't want to obey Thee, Lord, it's too hard for me.' And a man says things to someone else that later horrify him. The Jesus Prayer teaches us meekness, mildness, and patience. Grant us, O Lord, if we are unable to love our enemies, at least to forgive them.

Upcoming Events 2021

21 January: St. Maximus
14 March: Forgiveness Sunday
15-20 March: Great Week
26-30 April: Great & Holy Week
2 May: Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!