

The Confessor's Tongue for February 7, A. D. 2021

35th Sunday after Pentecost; New Martyrs, Confessors, Passion-Bearers of Russia
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.

New Martyrs & Confessors of Russia

On the first Sunday falling on or after February 7, the Russian Orthodox Church celebrates the Synaxis of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of the Russian Church (starting in 2000, this feast has traditionally been celebrated on the Sunday after February, 7). Today, there are more than 1700 names in the Synaxis who suffered and died for their faith under the atheist Bolsheviks.

From Vespers for the Feast

O wondrous army of new athletes of Russia! Who is able to glorify you worthily? Truly blessed is the land which hath been watered by your blood; and its cities and villages are mystically hallowed, having received your precious relics, often without hymnody of the Church or honorable burial. Yet pray, O ye saints, for the land of Russia and for all who honor you!

Historical Notes for St. Maximus

February 3, 2002 First Divine Liturgy in current altar.
February 7, 2003 First adult baptism

The Commandments of Christ

"If you love Me, you will keep my commandments."

Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. Matthew 5:11-12

Lest we should think the Christian life is about worldly comfort, success, and respect in this life, Christ warns us not only to expect persecution (John 15:20), but commands us to rejoice in it. What a command! "Rejoice when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake!" Christ by this command overturns the world's values, which hold persecution to be misfortune.

Persecution entails injustice or wrong done to someone because of their identity as a Christian. It is discrimination in the bad sense of that word. It means to harass or punish in a manner designed to injure, grieve, or afflict. To revile someone is to launch a scurrilous, abusive attack prompted by anger or hatred. The men launching these attacks are lying—they speak falsely and act on a false premises. If a Christian has done wrong, then he suffers justly for his wrongdoing. But if he has done nothing wrong, then he is blessed for suffering wrong.

But what persecution do we undergo in our time? In regard to persecution, we readily think of the martyrs, both the old martyrs under the Romans and the new martyrs of more recent time under the Turks and the Communists, who certainly endured persecution. From the Apostles on down to the

present, true Christians have rejoiced to suffer the loss of their lives for the sake of Christ, considering themselves fortunate to be counted worthy to share in Christ's sufferings.

Yet persecution need not mean the shedding of blood and loss of life. St. Paul informs St. Timothy, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." How many of us have been mocked or attacked by family members because we have become Orthodox? This is persecution for righteousness' sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice. How many of us have been teased at school because we dress modestly, because we won't allow our virginity to be violated, or because we won't cheat on tests? This is persecution for righteousness' sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice. How many times have we incurred the displeasure of others at work, lost favor with the boss, or even been fired because we refused to be party to dishonest business practices? This is persecution for righteousness' sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice. Every time we choose to tell the truth rather than resort to the convenient lie and are abused for it, every time we refuse to get drunk or do drugs with pressuring friends despite their mockery, every time we pray and make the sign of the cross in public despite the possible displeasure of others, every time we seek to do what is right in God's eyes and are laughed at or threatened for our stand, we are being persecuted for righteousness' sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice.

The Christians bears witness to the truth of Christ by his words and actions. Those in the darkness of sin hate the light the Christian brings and lash out against it and the bearer. The Christian must understand and accept this reality. He also must know the words of Solomon: "Like a trampled spring and a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked" (Proverbs 25:26). Much evil is done in the world when the righteous fail to speak out against evil. When he goes along with it to get along or is simply silent, the righteous may avoid persecution, but he becomes like a dirtied well from which no one can drink. When he bears witness to the truth by word and example, he remains a pure spring, though his fidelity to the truth and to his Master invites persecution.

Do we rejoice in whatever persecution come to us? Or are we fearful and lament and complain to God? God sees those who are His, those who will stand up to do what is right despite the world's opposition, and He will bless them not only in this life but promises them a great reward in heaven. A great reward awaits those who endure the 'momentary light affliction' living as a Christian in this world. The affliction, the persecution is real, and we must expect it. But Christ is with us in it, and the reward He

promises us for enduring is cause for rejoicing.

How To Attain Undistracted Prayer

St. Theophan the Recluse

You write that you cannot manage your thoughts at all, they constantly wander off, your prayer is not going as you would like it, and you scarcely think about God as you go about your daily affairs and deal with other people.

This is straight away forbidden. You must put a fair amount of labor into this so that the thoughts may be settled to even a small degree. You expected that all you had to do was begin, and everything would fall into place. It never happens that way. Even the success you began noticing should be considered as out of place. Indeed, this has happened previously, but you experienced little grief over it; now you not only notice the disorder of your thoughts, but you are disturbed by it and express the desire to cope with them, as if that were possible. Resolve to continue stirring up this anxiety, and intensify your effort in correcting this fault.

I have already written that steadfastness and continuity of labor over oneself is an essential condition for success in the spiritual life. Lasting pacification of the thoughts is a gift from God, but this gift is not given without intensifying one's personal labors. While you will not achieve anything just by your own labor, God will not give you anything if you do not labor with all your might. This is the fundamental law. You have St. Macarius the Great's *Homilies*. Try to read the nineteenth homily, which tells who the Christian must force himself in every good thing. It is written that "It is necessary to force oneself even in prayer, if one does not have spiritual prayer," and that "In this case, God, seeing that a man is calling with effort and restraining himself (that is, his thoughts) against the will of the heart, grants him true prayer," that is, undistracted, collected, absorbed, when the mind stands continually with God during prayer, it does not want to leave Him afterward, for this is attended by such sweetness that once it has been tasted, it does not want to taste anything else.

I have reminded you more than once just what kind of labor must be performed here: You must not allow the thoughts to wander voluntarily, but when they stray involuntarily, you must immediately turn them back, reproaching yourself, regretting and grieving over your weakness. St. John Climacus speaks about this, saying, "It takes effort to enclose the mind in the words of the prayer."

Thus, as I wrote last time, when you have memorized your prayers, things may go better. Best of all would be to go to church where the prayerful spirit is quickly manifested, because everything there is directed toward that end; but for you this is inconvenient. At least you labor at home to acquire prayer without distraction and spend as much of your other time as you can with God. When memorizing prayers, do not forget to grasp each word and feel it;

then, at actual prayer time these words will engross your attending and kindle prayerful feeling.

There is something else for you to do. Do not stand at prayer immediately after household chores, conversations, or errands; instead, make some preparation for it, trying to collect your thoughts ahead of time and direct them toward standing worthily before God. Rouse within yourself the need for prayer at this particular time, because there may not be another time. Do not forget also to renew the consciousness of your spiritual needs and for the most immediate real need of all—the settling of your thoughts in prayer with the desire of finding satisfaction for them, namely in God. When there is this consciousness and the feeling for such needs in the heart, the heart itself will not allow your thoughts to wander off to something else, but will compel you to implore the Lord concerning them. Above all, you will feel more keenly your complete helplessness: without God, you are completely lost. If misfortune threatens someone, and if he is standing before a person who can save him from it with a single not of his head, is he going to stand there looking around? No, he is going to fall on his knees before him and implore him. That is how you should be at prayer, when you go to it with a feeling of total misfortune and the consciousness that there is no one who can deliver you from it except the One God.

There is to be found in all of us a great little sin. It is this; We undertake almost anything else, no matter how trivial it is, with some sort of preparation, but we set about prayer on the spur of the moment, and hurry to get through it as quickly as possible, as if it were just something to do in passing, something extra, and not the most important thing of all. How then can we expect to collect our thoughts and feelings in prayer? It is done haphazardly, in a disorderly manner. No, you must resolve to refuse yourself this sin, and in no way should you allow yourself to be frivolous with regard to prayer. Persuade yourself that such an attitude toward prayer is an offense, the most serious criminal offense. Consider prayer as your first priority in life, and keep it in your heart as such. Then set about it as your primary task, not as something that is by-the-way.

Labor. God will be a help to you. But see that you do as you have been told to do. Once you begin doing this, you will soon see the fruit of it. Strive to feel the sweetness of true prayer. When you feel it, then it will entice you toward prayer and inspire you to complete and attentive prayer. May the Lord bless you! From *The Spiritual Life and How To Be Attuned to It*, chapter 48.

Upcoming Events 2021

7 March: Meatfare Sunday
14 March: Forgiveness Sunday
15-20 March: Clean Week
26-30 April: Great & Holy Week
2 May: Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!