

The Confessor's Tongue for September 12, A. D. 2021

Leavetaking of the Nativity of the Theotokos

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.

September 14: Exaltation of the Cross

On the 14th of September, the Church celebrates the Great Feast of the Exaltation (Elevation) of the Precious Cross. The Feast is the only one of the Great Feasts that does not commemorate some occasion in the life of either Christ or His mother. The day is a strict fast day.

The Feast commemorates two events: the finding of the Cross by St. Helen, mother of the Emperor Constantine, and the return of the Cross and its elevation before the faithful in 629, fifteen years after it was taken from Jerusalem by Persian invaders.

But more than this, the Feast calls us to celebrate Christ's glory and victory won on the Cross. Christ's agonizing death on the Cross was victory over Satan and sin, and the death of death. Thus we find the Cross indeed to be "precious" and "life-creating" for us. Christ's life-giving death on the Cross transformed it from a feared symbol of Roman public execution of criminals to the symbol of Christ's great love for mankind and of His victory over evil and the evil one. Hence we glory in the Cross of Christ, as St. Paul writes: "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

At Vigil, there is a special ceremony of venerating the Cross. During the Praises of Matins, the priest vests fully. During the Great Doxology, he censes around the altar table three times. When the "Holy God" at the end of the Doxology is sung, he bears the Cross out of the altar to before the Royal Doors, and then deposits it on an analogion in the midst of the nave. Everyone sings "Before Thy Cross we bow down in veneration, O Master, and Thy holy Resurrection, we glorify" three times, doing a full prostration each time. Then as special hymns to the cross are sung, each person comes to venerate the cross, prostrating twice, kissing the cross, and prostrating again. Having venerated the Cross, each person comes to be anointed with the blessed festal oil and to receive blessed Lita bread dipped in blessed wine.

The Church also honors Christ's Cross on August 1st, the Third Sunday of Great Lent, and every Friday (and Wednesday).

We celebrate the Feast through its Leave-taking, September 21. We may replace our usual prayers at meals with the Troparion (before) and the Kontakion (after), and use them in our daily prayers as well. All the faithful should participate in the services celebrating this Great Feast of the Church.

Troparion tone 1

O Lord, save Thy people / and bless Thine inheritance. / Grant victory to Orthodox Christians / over the enemy; / and by Thy Cross / preserve Thine estate.

Kontakion, tone 4

As Thou wast voluntarily crucified for our sake, / so grant mercy, O Christ God, to those who are called by Thy name; / make all Orthodox Christians glad by Thy power, / granting them victories over the enemy, / by bestowing on them the invincible trophy, Thy weapon of peace.

From Elder Epiphanius (+1989)

The particular characteristic of Orthodoxy is asceticism and the communion of worship.

Divine Communion is medicine. Not a reward.

The Church saves; she is not saved.

Let us not have trust in ourselves, if we wish to be saved.

If you wish to make progress in spiritual life, do not keep secrets from your Elder [or confessor]!

The Veneration of Mary the Theotokos

Archbishop Dmitri (+2011)

Because of recent discussions about the Catholic Church's considering defining a new dogma concerning the Virgin Mary [which it has since chosen not to do] it might be of interest to Christians of other Churches to have some explanation of the Orthodox Church's position concerning her.

The Orthodox Church honors and venerates the Virgin Mary as "more honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious without compare than the Seraphim..." Her name is mentioned in every service, and her intercession before the throne of God is asked. She is given the title of "Theotokos" (Greek for "Birth-giver-of-God"), as well as "Mother of God". She has a definite role in Orthodox Christianity, and can in no way be considered an instrument which, once used, was laid aside and forgotten.

Objections to the veneration of the Theotokos are based primarily on what is called "a lack of scriptural evidence to support such a practice." While it is true that the Church depends heavily on her Tradition other than Holy Scripture (Ecumenical Councils, liturgical books, and the writings of the Fathers) for details and the precise definition of the nature of the veneration of the Virgin Mary, there are several passages of the New Testament that really form the basis for our practice.

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to announce to the Virgin the birth of the Savior: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women." (Luke 1:28) This angelic salutation forms a part of the hymn of the Church most frequently sung in her honor. Could we be wrong in repeating the words of the very messenger of God? Elizabeth, the Virgin's cousin, considered it an honor for the

Mother of her Lord to visit her. "And whence is this to me that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43) Is there any real difference between saying "Mother of God" and "Mother of the Lord"? Surely, God is the Lord! (Psalm 118:27) In the course of her visit to Elizabeth, the Blessed Virgin spoke the words that form the principal hymn sung in her honor at the Matins service.

"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden, for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed." (Luke 1: 47-48)

Elizabeth had already been "filled with the Holy Spirit", precisely that she might cry out: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." (Luke 1:41, 42) This honor given the Theotokos by her cousin is exactly what all generations of the Church do when they call her blessed. Finally, when Jesus saw His mother and the disciple John standing by the cross, He entrusted him with her care, but He also established a new spiritual relationship between them in saying to the disciple: "Behold thy Mother!" (John 19:27) What possible significance could this declaration of our Lord have except to make His Mother the Mother of all Christians? If she really had other children would she be in need of an outsider's home?

The Incarnation of God was foretold in the Old Testament. A race was chosen for a specific purpose: to produce a holy humanity from which God could take flesh. Mary is the one who, in the Lord's words, "heard the word of God and kept it." (Luke 11:28) Through her personal sinlessness she fulfilled all the hopes and prophecies of Israel. She figured greatly in the very prophecies, the most important of which is that of Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel." (Isaiah 7:14) The Church has always considered the following as prefigures or symbols of the role of the Theotokos in the Divine plan, and appoints them to be read on the eves of three of the feasts dedicated to her memory. The first is the story of Jacob's ladder, which refers to her being the means by which God chose to enter into the world physically. "He saw in his sleep a ladder standing upon the earth, and the top thereof touching heaven, the angels also of God ascending and descending by it". (Genesis 28:12) Then from the Prophecy of Ezekiel are the words concerning her perpetual virginity: "And the Lord said unto me: This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall pass through it; because the Lord God of Israel hath entered in by it, and it shall be shut." (Ezekiel 44:2) The same is true of the burning bush seen by Moses: Mary contained in her womb the God-man, Jesus Christ, the God who is a consuming fire, and was not consumed.

The consequences of denying the Theotokos a part in the life of Christians are more serious than one may think in view of all its implications. Orthodox

theology insists upon the two perfect natures of our Lord Jesus Christ; He was perfect God and perfect Man. The Virgin Mary communicated the humanity of the Incarnate God. The redemption of the human race was possible through the union of God and man in Christ. De-emphasis of the sinlessness of Christ's Mother, insistence upon her having other children by Joseph (which cannot be demonstrated by the New Testament), and failure to remember her part in the history of the salvation of mankind have contributed to a general misunderstanding in some churches of the Incarnation in all its fullness and power. Very closely related to the above-mentioned things is the denial of the virgin birth of Christ, a rather popular feature of present-day liberal theology. After the virgin birth, the next basic teaching under attack is the divinity of Christ, and His resurrection, and with that, the Holy Trinity Itself.

The Virgin Mary in the Orthodox view is not regarded as a mediatrix or co-redemptress. She is an intercessor for us, and the content of prayer addressed to her is a request for her intercession. The Orthodox concept of the Church is the basic reason for the invocation of the Theotokos and all the saints. The Militant Church on earth and the Victorious Church in heaven are intimately bound together in love. If it is proper for one sinner to ask another sinner to pray for him, how much more fitting it must be to ask the saints already glorified and near the throne of God to pray for us. Surely, they know something of what goes on here, for else how could there be rejoicing in heaven over the conversion of one sinner? (Luke 15:10) The saints in heaven are equals of the angels (Luke 20:36), who are used by God in the accomplishment of His purpose (Acts 12:7)

There is scriptural evidence to support the traditional Orthodox attitude toward the Virgin Mary and the saints. The other equally valid parts of Tradition also afford abundant evidence of its soundness and importance.

Elder Epiphanius on Not Worrying

The Elder, despite the fact that he followed in detail the various political or national events, the disturbances, threats of war, etc. and his opinion was clear on everything, did not worry deep down, but used to say:

"All these things which are going on now, as well as all subsequent things, God will come with His broom and sweep them away in a manner known to Him. So, don't worry. Let us comment ourselves, and each other, and all our lives unto Christ our God."

This last thing he considered, as he used to say, "the philosophy of life." The confesseees who entered the confessional as well as his visitors to his plain apartment, used to see it in calligraphy and placed high in a prominent place.

Upcoming Events 2021

14 September, Elevation of the Cross
18 September, Baptism of Nina Werner
19 September, Sunday: Annual Meeting
3 October, Sunday: 20-year Anniversary Celebration
at St. Maximus and the Big White Barn in Decatur.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!