

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

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost: Sunday of the Holy Forefathers

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.

## Second Sunday Before Nativity

The Sunday that falls between December 11-17 is known as the Sunday of the Holy Forefathers. These are the ancestors of Christ according to the flesh, who lived before the Law and under the Law, especially the Patriarch Abraham, to whom God said, "In thy seed shall all of the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3, 22:18). We also remember the Prophet Daniel and the Three Holy Youths. Daniel is also remembered December 17.

## Orthodox Saturday Evenings

For the committed Orthodox Christian, Saturday evening is a time of preparation for partaking of the Eucharist on Sunday morning, and the central part of the preparation is attendance at the All-Night Vigil.

Committing oneself to regular Vigil attendance can be a challenge: Americans think of Sunday morning as time for church, and Saturday evening as time to party; Saturday is a day to rest after the work week, or a day to do work around the house and yard; the Vigil is two hours, longer than we think we can spend; we have small children whom we think cannot make it through the service, and so on. To our minds, the challenges are many.

Yet the Church's expectation remains that we attend the Saturday evening service, at least in part, to prepare reverently for the Eucharist. Here at St. Maximus, we typically have about 50 souls at Saturday Vigil, but 120 to 130 at Sunday Liturgy. This means that only roughly half of communicants on Sunday morning have fulfilled the Church's expectation of attending Vigil as part of their preparation for Holy Communion. What are we to do?

Many people overcome the challenge by ignoring Saturday evening altogether. This is the easy solution that ultimately is not a solution. Like planting vegetables in soil deficient in nutrients, the plant grows but rarely bears fruit. So too, the willful neglect of Saturday evening Vigil will stunt spiritual growth and prevent us from receiving all that God would impart to us at the Liturgy. So what are we to do? Come to Vigil. Here are some suggestions to help.

1. Set aside Saturday evenings on your calendar and simply make the commitment to come to Vigil.
2. If the full Vigil is too much for you now, come for 45 minutes or an hour of it each week. Come for Vespers one week (5-5:45) and Matins another week (5:45-7:10). Come late, leave early, but come!
3. Come to Vigil the night you make your monthly confession. Then build to alternating weeks.
4. If you have small children, alternate weeks with your spouse, or bring everyone for a part of the service. Children who are in church more frequently typically end up acting better in church than those who come less frequently.

5. Keep Vigil at home, turning off media, praying for an extended period, reading the Scriptures, etc. One simple way would be to keep Vigil on the prayer rope with the Jesus Prayer: 600 knots for Vespers, 1500 knots for Matins.

6. Those who do not like to drive in the dark may still come at 5:00 for Vespers and catch the first thirty minutes or even all of Vespers before having to leave before dark.

7. There are other options, but we should not let omitting the Vigil entirely from our lives be one.

## On the Jesus Prayer

*Fr. Justin Frederick*

Those who hunger to know God and experience His presence rather than just knowing about Him can have recourse to the Jesus Prayer, a tried and true, long-practised means of achieving intimate communion with God. Metropolitan Jonah spoke about this with the priests a pastoral conference for the Diocese of the South in 2009.

The goal of the Jesus Prayer is communion with God, constant awareness or consciousness of God's presence, and union with Him. This experience of God brings peace and great joy, for through it we come to know God and that He is with us and within us and not just somewhere 'out there.'

The Jesus Prayer invokes the name above all names, the only name by which we may be saved. It confesses Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God and calls upon Him to have mercy on us.

This request for mercy is not simply a request that we not be punished. It is that, but that is the smallest part of it. The request for mercy is really asking that God give to us all the good things of which sin has deprived us. It is to say, "Though I am unworthy of Thy riches, Thy grace, Thy favor, grant it to me anyway in Thy love and goodness." God is merciful in this way, constantly offering to us that which we do not deserve, have not earned, and cannot claim by right.

The Jesus Prayer is used by many Orthodox Christians throughout the day as they work to remember God. It also and even more importantly should be used for times of concentrated prayer.

Metropolitan Jonah recommends that newcomers to the Jesus Prayer begin with 300 Jesus Prayers in the morning and 300 at night. One counts them on a prayer rope, which allows one to fulfill the given amount without being distracted by counting. The prayer rope also serves as a focal point and an aid to concentration.

We may stand or sit for the Jesus Prayer. It is good for beginners to pray it audibly, which helps reduce distracting thoughts. It may be prayed slowly, or quickly (praying it more quickly also gives less space in the mind for stray thoughts).

We pray aware that Christ is present; the Kingdom of God is within us, and each of us is a temple of the Holy Spirit. We have to enter the temple of our hearts and stand before the living God who meets us there. But many thoughts and our passions and sins hinder that meeting with God, as does any repressed, hidden spiritual junk in our lives. As we pray the prayer with attention and desire to know the living God, this junk will be exposed, loosened, and have to be flushed out of our system.

Hence, it is vitally important for us who embark on this path to realize that this will happen. We must be prepared to bring all thoughts, feelings, and sinful memories, all our anger and hurt, to Confession, no less than once a month; twice a month might even be more beneficial for us. We may have to confess old junk a number of times before it passes from us. We must never trust ourselves in this, as we can easily be deluded. Hence we make frequent use of Confession and do not rely on our own understanding. We especially need to be careful of any sort of 'experiences' we think we may be having and submit them to our confessor as well. This is for our protection so we do not fall into delusion.

We are created to know God, to experience Him, to be fully conscious of Him. This is not something just for a few saints, but is for all of us who desire it. As the process of purification progresses, we shall begin to taste of the sweetness of God's presence. When we enter into His presence, when our communion begins, we stop saying the prayer "Be still and know that I am God," say the Scriptures, and this we must do. As St. Seraphim puts it, "When the Holy Spirit comes, stop saying 'come, Holy Spirit.'" As we enter this place of quiet communion in God's presence, we may begin to discern His will and hear His voice, which is only possible when we are still and our thoughts are quiet. At this point, we leave saying prayers behind and enter into prayer. A high level of this communion with God is called 'pure prayer.'

It is that we may be still and know Him to be God that we are encouraged to cut excess noise out of our lives during Great Lent. We can scarcely experience this state when our minds rush to and fro and are caught up and entangled in all manner of thoughts and images.

One more point is to be made: this meeting of God in the heart is dispassionate rather than emotional, and we have to learn to discern the difference. This is not an emotional or psychological experience, but a spiritual one at the fundamental level of our being. It may take us time to reach it, as we are accustomed to living on the psychological and emotional level.

I strongly urge those who have a desire to know God more intimately to incorporate the Jesus Prayer into their daily prayers during the upcoming Fast. If you have questions, by all means ask your priest. There is much more that can be said about this, and there are good resources available to help you too. Two good books with which to start are *On the Prayer*

*of Jesus* by Bishop St. Ignatius Brianchaninov and *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain* by Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos.

### **On Obedience to the Church**

*St. Nicholas of Zicha*

Why must one obey the Church and not some man whose thinking is opposed to the Church, eminent or intellectually gifted though that man may be? Because the Church was founded by the Lord Jesus Christ and is guided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God. Also because "the Church" signifies the community of the saints, an orchard of choice, fruit-bearing trees. If a man remains opposed to the community of the saints, that means that he is unholy. Why, therefore, listen to him? "The Church is an enclosure," says the wise Chrysostom. "If you are within, the wolf cannot enter, but if you stray outside, the wild beasts will seize you. Do not wander from the Church; there is nothing mightier than the Church. She is your hope and your salvation. She is higher than the heavens, firmer than rock, wider than the world; she never grows old, but is forever renewing her youth."

### **Questions at Christmas**

*St. John of Kronstadt*

You are preparing yourselves to meet the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, you must ask yourselves: Have you preserved the spiritual birth from God which we each received in Baptism? Are you always heedful of your Divine sonship and the sacred treasure of the Spirit which you acquired in Baptism? Have you grown closer to God through faith and love, like His beloved children? Have you loved one another as befits children of God? Have you despised evil and all-destructive sin? Have you loved truth and every virtue? Have you loved immortal and eternal life prepared in a land which will not pass away and to which we are called by Him who now has come to our corrupt earth? These are questions which we must ask ourselves now and decide; not only with our minds, but above all, with our hearts and our very deeds.

### **Upcoming Events 2021**

- 14 December, Tuesday: Holy Unction, 6:30 p.m.
- 24 December, Friday, Nativity Eve services (8:00 a.m., noon, & 6:00 p.m.) and Baptisms (10:00 a.m.)
- 25 December, Saturday, Nativity of our Lord, Divine Liturgy 8:00 a.m.
- 26 December, Sunday, Ordination of Deacon Maximus to the priesthood, St. Seraphim's Cathedral, 9:30 a.m.
- 31 December, 10:00 p.m. All-Night Vigil

**GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!**