

The Confessor's Tongue for January 16, A. D. 2022

31st Sunday After Pentecost; Holy New Martyrs & Confessors 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.

The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 3

Someone asked Abba Anthony, "What must one do in order to please God?" The old man replied, "Pay attention to what I tell you: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes; whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures; in whatever place you live, do not easily leave it. Keep these precepts and you will be saved."
Antony Saying 3 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

Commentary: These three words are not quite what one might expect as an answer to such a question. So what is their significance?

"Always have God before your eyes." We are to live in such a way that we always remember God, always think of Him present and observing us in all that we do. This is not so easy. It is easy to confess faith in Christ and then live great portions of our life as 'practical atheists', thinking not of God, asking not His help and blessing on all that we do, seeking not to know Him and please Him in all, carelessly falling repeatedly into sin. But He is our Creator who is "everywhere present" and who fills all things. In Him we live, and move, and have our being. Without Him, we can do nothing. Keeping God always before our eyes, doing all the we do for the sake of Christ, and giving thanks to God always for all things keeps us from sin and keeps our lives focused on their true end and sanctifies all that we do. If we achieve this, we shall have made significant progress toward the fullness of life in Christ. St. Justin of Chelije puts it this way: "For someone to believe in Christ entails his waiting on Christ, and only on Christ, with every event of his life." There is no area of life which is exclusively man's to the exclusion of Christ, no area of which Christ as Lord and King does not say, "Mine." When we say 'mine' and shut God out as irrelevant, we do not have Him before our eyes.

"Do everything according to the testimony of the holy Scripture." In holy Scripture, inspired by the Holy Spirit, we find God's will for us revealed. If we are truly His children, we shall seek to do His will. But how can we do it if we don't know it, or are indifferent to it? As St. John Chrysostom says, "This is the cause of all evils, the not knowing the Scriptures." How many sins and mistakes we would avoid, how much unnecessary suffering would not be ours if only we would "take heed to our ways according to His word." Hence at every Vespers and Matins we pray, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, teach me Thy statutes; blessed art Thou, O Master, make me to understand Thy statutes; blessed art Thou, O Holy One, enlighten me with Thy statutes. We cannot do what we do not know; to do rightly, we must understand; and in the keeping of Christ's commandments, we gain enlightenment. In this we demonstrate our love for God: "If you love Me, keep

My commandments." The Christian who neglects holy Scripture puts himself in the position of going into the daily spiritual battle without guidance and unarmed—not a recipe for victory.

"In whatever place you live, do not easily leave it." A whole book could be written on the spiritual harm in moving from place to place frequently and without good reason. Consider the man who attends a local parish for a time while he enjoys it and the people, and then begins to feel dissatisfaction with it. "The priest doesn't affirm me enough, and the people irritate me and don't understand me," he says. "I need to find another parish with a better priest and people who will understand me and not annoy me." He then leaves his parish to go to another. All too often, a pattern of such behavior develops. Notice that, in his mind, all the problems lie outside of him. It is the priest or it is the people, never himself. But moving to a new parish when things get difficult or unpleasant delivers him from ever having to take a hard look at himself. God sets in a parish to build into His temple made of living stones—us. But that requires fitting us in with others. We don't always fit at first, so God 'bashes' us against others to knock off our rough edges. (We don't think much about how our shortcomings and rough edges affect others, only about how theirs affect us!) As Fr. Hopko liked to say, "We go to church so that we may be lacerated by the Word and bashed by the Holy Spirit." God accomplishes most of that bashing and lacerating through the priest and people. We shall never grow into a mature man in Christ if we do not subject ourselves to this process. Nature itself clearly shows that a plant often transplanted will never grow to its full potential or fruitfulness. So, to put this word another way: bloom where God has planted you if you wish to please God—unless He gives you a compelling reason to go elsewhere. *Fr. Justin*

The All-Night Vigil: The Opening Censing & Psalm

Once the *trezvon* bell has been rung to mark the beginning of the Vigil, the curtain and Royal Doors are opened, and the illumination of the church is increased. The Vigil begins in silence, silence and the sound of censing. These represent to us the initial movement of the Spirit of God over the void at the very beginning of the world. Thus the Vigil takes us back to the beginning of time, to the creation of the world before man's rebellion.

The Priest and Deacon both carry candles as the Priest censes the altar table, the sanctuary, the iconostasis, the whole church, and the faithful gathered in the church. The Priest wears his phelonion (the largest and outermost garment worn by the Priest). When the phelonion is worn, it is a

sign that that particular part of the service is of the new creation.

The deacon breaks the silence with the exclamation, "Arise, master, bless!" This exclamation is the invitation from God to the only creature who stands upright—man. We pray to God in the distinctive way in which He created us—erect on two feet. We stand in the presence of God our Creator who brought us from nothingness and non-existence into the world He made for us. Man's response to his Creator is to acknowledge Him as God and to give thanks to Him for his very being and for all the good things the Creator has given him. Yet as St. Paul indicates in the first chapter of Romans, man failed to acknowledge God as God and to give Him thanks. Rather, he sought to be god without God, to displace his Creator; and all the evils of the world flow from this basic failure to worship and thank God. Christ has come to call man back to his original vocation, to succeed where Adam failed.

Tracing the sign of the cross with the raised censer before the altar table, the Priest exclaims, "Glory to the Holy, Consubstantial, Life-Creating, and Undivided Trinity..." Thus we praise the One true God in Three Persons who created the world. Immediately, clergy sing the call to worship, "Come let us worship God our King..." Man, having been newly created, arisen from nothingness, is immediately invited to live by worshipping His Creator in humble dependence upon Him. Man was created to glorify and worship God!

The choir and people begin singing Psalm 103, the psalm of creation, which always begins Vespers. The psalm is sung rather than read at Vigil due to the festive nature of the service. (Commonly it is sung in an abbreviated form, but we at St. Maximus do sing it completely on particularly festive occasions when we wish to serve the Vigil more fully). The Priest and Deacon continue censuring the church during the singing. All the while, the church is brightly illuminated and the Royal Doors are open, representing the light and glory of creation and man's destiny to live in Paradise with the way to God open. The censuring of both the icons and the gathered faithful shows there is no separation between the faithful in Heaven and those on earth: all are gathered in God's presence and afforded equal honor according to the indelible image of God in each and the degree to which each acquires the likeness of God.

At the end of the censuring, the Royal Doors are closed and the lights dimmed dramatically. When the Royal Doors are closed during a service, they signify the Church as fast or preparation for the kingdom, for the closed doors indicate the separation of the people living in the fallen world from the Kingdom, which is represented in the architecture of the church by the altar or sanctuary. When the Royal Doors are opened, they signify the Church as feast or fulfillment of the Kingdom. The Vigil is conducted on both these levels: the Church on the level of fallen creation in exile, aliens passing through the world on

pilgrimage towards the Kingdom, and the Church restored to the level of the Kingdom.

Once the doors are closed, the priest removes his phelonion and exits the North Deacon's Door (on left facing the iconostasis) to stand bareheaded in humility before the now closed Royal Doors to pray silently on behalf of himself and the people the seven 'Prayers of Light' much as Adam may have cried out to God before the closed gates of Paradise. Once the singing of the Psalm has ended, the deacon will exit and intone the Great Litany.

Translations: On the Singing of Many Years

In the Church, we invoke this blessing of "many years" on people at significant times: at marriages, at ordinations, on namedays and birthdays, at the end of moliebens.

The priest or deacon intones the following: "Grant, O Lord, a prosperous and peaceful life; health, salvation, and furtherance in all good things, unto thy servant(s) N., and preserve him/her/them for many years."

In Russian (Church Slavonic) the people's response echoes the end of what the priest has just intoned: "Many years, many years, many years." To do this literally doesn't sing well in English to the Russian melody, which we use. "Many years" has all of three syllables; "mnogoye lyeto" in Russian has five. Thus to make it sing better, more of the words that are intoned by the priest or deacon are echoed in our English setting: "God grant him/her/them many years."

Yet, in the most American common way of singing 'many years', in adding additional words to fit the music, we have distorted our echo of the priest. The priest intones the words addressed to God as a prayer: "Grant O Lord...unto Thy servant, and preserve him for many years." For some reason, in the common English version, when the people, who should be echoing the priest, instead sing "God grant *you* many years." This, however, is no longer an echo of the original prayer directed to God, but has been transformed into a wish directed to the person.

Moreover, a proper echoing of the priest's prayer in English "God grant him many years" can naturally be sung even when the person being honored or prayed for is not present. It does not work well to sing "God grant *you* many years" when the person being honored is not there.

Upcoming Scheduling Considerations

Forgiveness Vespers, Clean Week, Holy Week, Bright Week are times to try to spend as much in church as we can. Great Lent in general is a time to avoid unnecessary travel, vacations, etc.

Upcoming Events 2021

2 February: Great Feast: Entrance of Lord into the Temple
26-27 February: Archbishop Alexander visits
6 March Forgiveness Sunday
7-12 March Clean Week
17 April Palm Sunday
17-23 April Great & Holy Week
24 April Pascha
24-30 April Bright Week

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!