

# The Confessor's Tongue for March 27, A. D. 2022

Sunday of the Veneration of the Holy Cross; St. Matrona

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 II

*Abba Anthony said, "He who wishes to live in solitude in the desert is delivered from three conflicts: hearing, speech, and sight; there is only one conflict left for him, and that is with fornication."*

*Saying II in The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

*Commentary:* To live in the desert [a remote place] away from the world delivers one from three things that readily bring temptation and sin: hearing, speech, and sight.

Living in the world, we are constantly bombarded with noise: radio, television, music, news, the conversation of others. Our ability to hear is a portal to our soul. What we hear enters our minds and affects us, both for good or for ill, readily stirring up our passions and leading us into sin of various sorts, or encouraging us and inspiring us to do good. Particularly seductive are songs, whether for entertainment or advertising, which insinuate themselves into our minds and repeat there for hours on end, capturing the capacity of the mind for ceaseless prayer and displacing it with something banal or poisonous. The desert provides an escape from all this noise.

Managing our own speech presents a grave challenge to us. In Proverbs it is said (10:19), "Where there are many words, sin is unavoidable." Talking too much robs us of God's grace, even when the conversation is not inherently sinful. One can even speak too much about spiritual things! Hence at every Vespers we ask God "set a watch, O Lord, upon my mouth and a gate of enclosure about my lips," and St. James tells us that the person who can control his tongue is a perfect man, who can control his whole body. The perfect, as St. Silouan describes, speak only as the Holy Spirit moves them. Living around people tempts us to speak far more than we need to as Christians who are called to wait upon the Lord and to be still and know that He is God. The desert provides a remedy to this.

How often sight leads us into temptation! Whether it is images in the media or just the physical forms of those around us, what we take into our souls through our eyes often leads us to lust, anger, greed, envy, and even hatred. We see someone's beauty and are wounded by it through lust or envy; we see a person who has wronged us and anger arises in our hearts along with bitter memories; we see a person's possessions and desire the same for ourselves, or wonder why he should have them when we do not. Moreover, the eye is never satisfied with new images; it is ever hungry for more if we indulge it, as we well know from surfing the web. We may be going about our business only to be suddenly struck unawares with the sight of something and find our thoughts stimulated and quickly led into temptation. The

desert frees one from this conflict—assuming one does not bring the internet there with him!

Yet the desert does not free us from ourselves, from our thoughts or from bodily needs. Thoughts from fantasies or memories are ever at hand. Bodily need presses us. We have to eat and drink; eating too much, indulgence in the pleasure of food, living to eat, and so forth stimulates sexual desire and temptation. Indulging one form of bodily pleasure to the full stimulates the desire for others. This battle has to be fought wherever we may live, that our body with its needs lives in submission to our spirit which we have submitted to Christ.

Most of us will not and cannot flee to the desert to live, at least not permanently. But as Christians living in a fallen world in a wicked and perverse generation, we must cultivate the desert in our hearts, not allowing our senses to be constantly bombarded by the world's messages and not allowing our tongues to wag as a form of idle entertainment or out of vainglory. We may remove unnecessary external stimulation so that we may be collected, at peace, and focused on Christ Jesus without the world's vain and harmful distractions constantly pulling us away. We have enough to contend with what is already in our hearts, let alone the world's constant additions thereto. A very effective way to cultivate the desert in our hearts is keeping vigil—either staying up past our normal time for bed or rising from sleep in the middle of the night or early in the morning. In the quiet dark while the world sleeps, we may pray, read the Psalter, read the Scriptures, and practice the Jesus prayer, tuning our souls to the Holy Spirit. In this way, one may dwell in the desert while still living in the world.  
*Fr. Justin*

## The All-Night Vigil: Evening Litany

After the prayer "Vouchsafe", the Deacon, back in his place before the royal doors, intones the Evening Litany, also known as the Litany of Supplication. Normally each service of the Church ends with a prayer or litany of supplication. At Vespers, this is the Evening Litany, and at Matins, it is called the Morning Litany. This litany is known at once from its first petition, "Let us complete our evening/morning prayer unto the Lord." It is also distinguished by the response of the people, "Grant this, O Lord," making a more daring request of the Lord than the more penitential and usual response, "Lord, have mercy." The Evening Litany, with its response "Grant this, O Lord," makes request for some things we have not yet asked during the Vigil.

It begins with the last petition of the Great and Little Litanies: "Help us, save us, have mercy on us, and keep us, O God, by Thy grace," and the usual response, "Lord, have mercy." Thus it starts where the other litanies leave off.

The petitions are all personal, pertaining to each believer. Here are no prayers for hierarchs or government officials, but for the spiritual welfare of us, the faithful. We pray in the first person plural "we," as Christ taught us to

pray, for we are connected by Baptism in one Body to one another and we cannot find salvation for ourselves if we care not for the salvation of others. We pray for our own essential spiritual needs which are the needs of all Orthodox Christians.

We pray that the specific time of day we are entering will be sinless: "That the whole evening may be perfect, holy, peaceful, and sinless..." Our struggle with sin is ongoing, and how rare are the hours when we do not fall short of God's glory in some way! But we never cease to seek that victory over sin. Notice that we ask for sinlessness only for the immediate future, for the next few hours. If one can go one hour without sin, one can go two; if two, one can go four, and so on. If we look to far into the future, the thought of how hard it is to guard constantly against sin will overwhelm us. We rather ask strength only for this day in which we are living. When tomorrow has become today, only then we shall concern ourselves with tomorrow's struggle.

We ask of the Lord "an angel of peace, a faithful guide and guardian of our souls and bodies." This petition reminds us that we are not alone in our spiritual struggles, but the angels of God also render us assistance, particularly our guardian angel, who always works for our salvation and deliverance and sees all we do. We need to cooperate with the angels rather than resist them by evil deeds and words.

We ask "pardon and forgiveness of our sins and offenses." Until now in the litanies, we have not asked this so specifically, so concretely for ourselves. The Augmented Litany requests "pardon and forgiveness of the sins of the servants of God, [insert names], the brethren of this holy temple," but we have not asked it for ourselves until now. As we are not saved alone, we ask it for "us", the Church gathered locally.

The next petition reads, "All things good and useful for our souls, and peace for the world, let us ask of the Lord." God alone knows what is best for us. Here, we ask that He will give us only what will benefit our souls, and not simply every request we might make. When we pray for specific things, we sometimes request something that will be harmful to us unbeknownst to us. The petition thus teaches us to seek only that which will be of spiritual benefit, in accordance with God's will for us. We also request peace for the world in the petition. This could be taken to mean the cessation of war and the prevailing of peaceful times in which to work out our salvation, but to take it only so seems out of place with the other petitions. Rather, the prophet Isaiah says, "The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose water casts up mire and dirt. There is no peace," saith my God, "to the wicked" (Isaiah 57:20-21). As we pray for our spiritual good, we do not forget the world, those yet outside the Church, and we pray for their peace, which comes only from Christ.

The Evening Litany concludes with a petition for "a Christian ending to our life, painless, unashamed, peaceful, and a good defence before the fearful judgment seat of Christ..." As Christians, we cannot only begin well in our spiritual lives, but must finish well, and this petition seeks that we may endure faithfully to the end with nothing to be ashamed of in the hour of death and nothing to fear before Christ's judgment. Baptism does us little good if we fall away before the end. Moreover, we are reminded that death will come to each of us and will usher us in to judgment. Each of us will give an account of his life before Christ—a sobering thought. Thus we pray that in the end we shall not stand condemned before Christ as unprofitable servants.

At the end of each litany, we remember the Theotokos and all the saints and "commend ourselves, and each other, and all our life unto Christ our God." Some Christian groups will have periodic calls to "rededication," in which the people are called to renew their faith and commitment to Christ. In Orthodox worship, that opportunity is given at the end of each litany. We offer ourselves body and soul to Christ as living sacrifices, entrusting ourselves to His care and protection.

The exclamation for the Evening Litany differs slightly from that of the Augmented Litany before it: "For Thou art a good God who lovest man..." God is not only merciful but is also good. As He is good, He works only good on our behalf, though because our definition of "good" is usually skewed, we sometimes struggle to see the good in the difficult situations that come to us. Our good God only gives good gifts (James 1:17; Matt 7:7-11), and because He is good, we may dare to commend ourselves to His care and ask of Him "what is good and useful for our souls."

After the exclamation of the Evening Litany, the Priest faces the people and blesses them, "Peace be to all," and then turns back to the east and says "Let us bow our heads unto the Lord." As the choir sings "to Thee, O Lord," the priest mystically prays for those who have bowed their heads: "...Unto Thee, the fearful Judge who lovest man, have Thy servants bowed their heads and subjected their necks, awaiting not help from man, but expecting Thy mercy and looking for Thy salvation. Keep them at all times, both during this present evening and during the approaching night, from every enemy, from every adverse operation of the Devil, and from vain thoughts and from evil imaginations." Rather than being stiff-necked resisters of God as ancient Israel, the faithful are called to bow their heads and subject their necks unto Christ, submitting to Him as King rather than being ruled by their own self-will, and on the basis of that submission to the rightful ruler, they can expect His mercy and protection.

Herein is part of the blessing of being in attendance at any service: the priest prays mystically for those present, interceding for the faithful present (and those absent for a worthy reason). Though these prayers are often not read aloud, the faithful should know that at every service, the priest offers prayer on their behalf. *Fr. Justin*

#### **From St. John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ***

All sorrows, sicknesses, torments, deprivations, are allowed by God in order to drive out the enticement of sin, and to implant true virtue in the heart, that we may learn by experience the falsehood, insolence, tyranny, and deadliness of sin, and may be inspired with a loathing for it; also that we may learn by experience the truth of meekness, wisdom, of gently ruling the hearts of men, and of the life-giving properties of virtue. Therefore, I will bear all afflictions courageously, with gratitude to the Lord, the Physician of our souls, our Most-loving Savior.

#### **Upcoming Events 2021**

- 24 March: Vigil for Annunciation, 7:00 p.m.
- 25 March: Vesperal Divine Liturgy for Annunciation 6 p.m.
- 18-23 April Great & Holy Week
- 24 April Holy Pascha, the Feast of Feasts

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