

# The Confessor's Tongue for August 7, A. D. 2022

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost; Martyr Dometius of Persian; St. Pimen the Faster  
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.

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## **The Commandments of Christ**

"If ye love Me, keep My commandments."

*And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name....* Matthew 6:5-8

Here Christ instructs his disciples in prayer, both negatively and positively, how not to pray and how to pray. They are not to pray like the hypocrite with the motive of being seen by others. Rather, they are to pray in secret so that God may reward them for your prayer. They are not to use vain repetition in prayer (not all repetition is vain). They are to pray the prayer "Our Father" (and use it as a model for prayer). Here Christ gives His disciples and us pointed instructions on how to pray.

First, pray. He expects us to pray, for He says "when you pray" not "if you pray." As St. Paul commands us to "pray without ceasing," we readily understand that prayer is an integral, constant part of Christian life. We pray not because God needs it but because we need it. Prayerlessness is spiritual weakness, suffocation, and death; prayerfulness is life in the Spirit and power. We must recognize that we do not know how to pray as we ought and that we need to learn, a process that accompanies us through life. Jesus's disciples asked Him to teach them; so can we.

Second, pray secretly. If it is to be worthy of a reward from God, prayer needs to be in secret, not before the eyes of others. There are those who pray in order to impress others with their piety and devotion, but who, if no one is watching, would never bother. Christ is not speaking here against corporate worship or prayer, but against private prayer done for public show. That show, or being seen by others need not be visual; it can consist of simply mentioning the extent of one's prayer in conversation to impress another. One could pray secretly for a month without anyone seeing motivated by the subtle, half-conscious thought of being able to tell someone about it or the hope that one's practice will become known.

It is not always possible, however, to pray "in secret". In a small home, the icon corner may well be a public area. It may not be possible for each member of the family to pray entirely alone. Yet the family praying together prays secretly as a family, and the

members of a family, even if not praying entirely alone out of the eyes of other members of the family, are praying secretly when they come before God in the home out of public sight. On a deeper level, though, every Christian is called to cultivate the desert in his heart, that quiet place free from distraction where he may encounter the Lord face to face. In the secret place of the heart, a Christian may pray secretly even in the midst of a crowd. The essential point here is one's motivation: does one pray out of vainglory, to impress others, or not?

Third, pray for the right reasons. God is not stingy or hard of hearing. He is not reluctant to give so as need be in need of honeyed words to persuade Him. He is not so busy with others that we have to clamor for His attention. He is not impressed by many words. The pagans thought that by using many words the gods would hear them and respond, and could even be obligated to respond, much like the prophets of Baal asking their god to send fire on their sacrifice during their showdown with Elijah (I Kings 18). True prayer, however, is not a magic formula: say the right words the right number of times and get the desired result. The challenge for us is to learn to ask for the right things for the right reasons with faith in the true God. Thus, one misuses the Jesus Prayer thinking that saying it thousands of times will impress God and get one what one wants. One prays it properly when it is said to keep oneself constantly aware of God and one's need for Him. One prays it to open one's heart to the Lord and to stand before Him there in that secret place face to face.

A word about "vain repetition is in order." The concept is conveyed by one verb, *battologesete*. It means "to babble or talk foolishly". The emphasis is not so much on the notion of repetition as on the content of the prayer. This word is variously translated in English: the King James along with Young's Literal, the World English Bible, the Darby Bible, the ASV have "vain repetition"; the NIV has "do not keep babbling like pagans", the ESV "do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do", the HCSB "don't babble like the idolaters," and the Douay-Rheims "speak not much as the heathens". The Church teaches us in prayer not to babble or speak foolishly and that repetition in itself is not necessarily vain or empty. In the prayers the Church puts in our mouth, every word is carefully chosen in wisdom for speaking fitly to the living God who is and has revealed Himself in Christ. These prayers, even when long, keep us from babbling foolishly and from speaking blasphemies against God while instructing us in how and what to ask.

Fourth, pray the prayer Christ gave. Yes, the Lord's Prayer is a model of prayer, a school of prayer, which, when unpacked, gives expansive scope to prayer beyond the literal words. But, first and

foremost, it is a prayer to be prayed while it teaches us the right things to ask for the right reasons with faith in the right God. Thus, the Church in her daily services uses the prayer sixteen times (twenty-two during Great Lent). A Christian in his private prayers will at least say it morning and evening and before each meal. It is difficult to conceive of spiritual progress or success in prayer without using this prayer the Lord gave and applying its deep teaching.

May we apply Christ's commands concerning prayer to our own prayer and reap the rewards of obedience to our Lord.

### The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 26

*The brethren came to Abba Anthony and laid before him a passage from Leviticus. The old man went out into the desert, secretly followed by Abba Ammonas, who knew that this was his custom. Abba Anthony went a long way off and stood there praying, crying in a loud voice, "God, send Moses, to make me understand this saying." Then there came a voice speaking with him. Abba Ammonas said that although he heard the voice speaking with him, he could not understand what it said.*

Saying 26 Sayings of the Desert Fathers

*Commentary:* How many of us even think of prayer when we are confronted by a difficulty in Scripture, let alone other studies? If we are educated, we dig out the commentaries, the Greek and Hebrew dictionaries and lexicons, and other study aids and we immerse ourselves in intellectual study. But is every truth discoverable in this fashion? Suppose that when Pharaoh had asked Joseph to interpret his dreams, Joseph had sat down with all the ancient commentators and learned monographs on the art of interpreting dreams to arrive at some conclusion. Instead, acknowledging that the interpretation of dreams belongs to God, he sought illumination from God. So, too, did Daniel, when he faced with not only interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream but also reminding the king, who had forgotten it, what it was.

Now of course, any spiritual charlatan could claim that he used this method as while presenting his own peculiar teaching as God's truth. Yet do we not need to recognize more fully that God the Logos or Word ultimately gives all things their meaning, and their meaning is found only in relation to him who made them for a reason. Modern man with his scientific method has entirely left God out of his search for knowledge. But should not those who believe in God turn to Him as the Giver of knowledge and ask Him to illumine their hearts and minds as they seek knowledge of the truth? Our books and methods are useful; but on their own, they will not bring us to the Truth. Every time we study, every time we seek knowledge, let us ask God who fully knows all things to illumine us and to direct our efforts unto fruitfulness. It is His world we study; He delights in revealing the truth of things to those who seek and ask.

### 7 August: St. Theodora of Sihla

Saint Theodora of Sihla, who is one of the greatest of Romania's women ascetics, was born in the village of Vânători in Neamts County in the first half of the seventeenth century, and was one of the two daughters of Stephen Joldea and his wife.

In her youth, Saint Theodora experienced a great trial in her family. Her sister, Marghiolitsa, died in a tragic way. This event deeply affected the saint. At this time, the thought of abandoning the world blossomed in her heart. She wished to do penance for her parents, for her sister, and for herself. Her grieving parents, however, did not agree with her decision, because now Theodora was their only child. They pleaded with her, and, at the proper time, they married her to a young man who was working in their vicinity, and who went frequently to venerate the holy sites. After entering into a lawful marriage, they lived together in her husband's house.

Since Saint Theodora and her husband did not have any children, they both decided to enter monasteries in the Buzau valley. Her husband went to the Skete of Poiana Mărului, where he was tonsured with the name Eleutherios. He was also found worthy of ordination to the holy priesthood. Saint Theodora also received the monastic tonsure in the Skete of Poiana Mărului. In just a few short years, she advanced in obedience, prayer, and asceticism, acquiring the grace of unceasing prayer of the heart. She also had to endure many temptations from the Enemy.

When the Buzau valley was invaded by the Turks, Saint Theodora fled to the mountains with her Spiritual Mother, Schema-nun Paisia. They lived for several years in fasting, vigil and prayer, enduring cold, hunger, and other trials from the devil. When her Spiritual Mother fell asleep in the Lord (sometime between 1670 - 1675), Saint Theodora was led by God to the mountains of Neamț. After venerating the wonderworking Neamts Icon of the Mother of God (June 26) at the monastery, she was told to seek the advice of Hieromonk Barsanuphios of Sihăstria Skete. Seeing her desire for the eremetical life, and recognizing her great virtues, he gave her Holy Communion and assigned Hieromonk Paul as her Father Confessor and spiritual guide.

Father Barsanuphios advised Mother Theodora to go and live alone in the wilderness for a year. "If, by the grace of Christ, you are able to endure the difficulties and trials of the wilderness, then remain there until you die. If you cannot endure, however, then go to a women's monastery, and struggle there in humility for the salvation of your soul."

Father Paul searched in vain for an abandoned hermitage where the saint might live. Then they met an old hermit living beneath the cliffs of Sihla. This clairvoyant Elder greeted them and said, "Mother Theodora, remain in my cell, because I am moving to another hermitage."

Father Paul left the nun on Mount Sihla, blessing her before he returned to the Sihăstria Skete. Saint

Theodora lived in that cell for thirty years, glorifying God. Strengthened with power from on high, she vanquished all the attacks of the Enemy through patience and humility. She never left the mountain, and never saw another person except for Father Paul, who visited her from time to time to bring her the Spotless Mysteries of Christ and the supplies she needed in order to survive.

Saint Theodora made such progress in asceticism that she was able to keep vigil all night long with her arms lifted up toward heaven. When the morning sun touched her face, she would eat some herbs and other vegetation to break her fast. She drank the rain water which she collected from a channel cut into the cliff, which is still known as Saint Theodora's spring. After Father Paul's repose, she remained solely in God's care.

When Turks attacked the villages and monasteries around Neamts, the woods became filled with people from nearby villages and refugees from the monasteries. Some nuns discovered Saint Theodora's cell and she told them, "Remain here in my cell, for I have another place of refuge." Then she moved into a nearby cave, living there completely alone. At night she would rest a little on the flagstones, which still can be seen to this day. An army of Turks discovered the cave, and were about to kill the saint. Lifting up her hands, she cried out, "O Lord, deliver me from the hands of these murderers." The wall of the cave opened up, and she was able to escape into the woods.

As Saint Theodora grew old, she was completely forgotten and there was no one to care for her. Placing all her hope in God, she continued her spiritual struggles, and reached great heights of perfection. When she prayed her mind was raised up to Heaven, and her body was lifted up off the ground. Like the great saints of earlier times, her face shone with a radiant light, and a flame came forth from her mouth when she prayed.

Eventually her clothes became mere rags, and when her food ran out, she was fed by birds just as the Prophet Elias (July 20) was. The bread that they brought to her came from the Sihăstria Skete. Seeing the birds come to the Skete and then fly away with pieces of bread in their beaks, the Hegumen sent two monks to follow them, thinking that some ascetic was living there and that God was providing food for him. Night fell as they walked toward Sihla, and they lost their way in the woods. They decided to wait for daylight, and so they began to pray. One of them climbed a tree and looked for a place where someone might be living. Suddenly, they saw a bright light rising up into the sky, and went to investigate. As they approached, they saw a woman shining with light and levitating above the ground while she prayed.

Sensing their presence, Saint Theodora said, "Brethren, do not be afraid, for I am a humble handmaiden of Christ. Throw me something to wear, for I am naked." The monks were amazed when she addressed them by name. Then she prayed: "I thank

Thee, O Lord, that Thou hast heard me." She said to the monks, "Brothers, I have lived for many years in these parts, and, behold, it has been forty days since I prayed for God to send me a Confessor to come and impart unto me the Holy Mysteries of our Lord Jesus Christ, because it is almost time for me to depart from this life. So, please, go straight to the Skete and ask Father Hegumen to send Father Anthony and Hierodeacon Laurence to me tomorrow morning with Holy Communion."

They asked her how they could find their way to the Skete at night, for they did not know the way. She said that they would be guided to the Skete by a light which would go before them.

The next day at dawn, Father Anthony went to Sihla with the deacon and two other monks. When they found Saint Theodora, she was praying by a fir tree in front of her cave. She made a Confession of her entire life to Father Anthony, and then she received the Holy Mysteries of Christ and gave her soul to God. Her last words were, "Glory to God for all things." The monks buried Saint Theodora in her cave with great reverence sometime during the first decade of the eighteenth century.

News of her death spread quickly, and people came from all over to venerate her tomb. Her holy relics remained incorrupt, and many miracles took place before them. Some kissed the relics; others touched the reliquary, while others washed in her spring. All who entreated Saint Theodora's intercession received healing and consolation.

Saint Theodore's former husband, Hieromonk Eleutherios, heard that she had been living at Sihla, and decided to go there. He found her cave shortly after her death and burial. Grieving for his beloved wife, Eleutherios did not return to his monastery, but made a small cell for himself below the cliffs of Sihla. He remained close to her cave, fasting, praying, and serving the Divine Liturgy. He lived there for about ten years before his blessed repose. He was buried in the hermits' cemetery and the Skete of Saint John the Baptist was built over his grave.

Saint Theodora's relics were taken to the Kiev Caves Monastery between 1828 and 1834. There she is known as Saint Theodora of the Carpathians. Our Venerable Mother Theodora was glorified by the Romanian Orthodox Church on June 20, 1992.

The inscription of Saint Theodora's scroll reads: "Life is blessed for those in the wilderness as they fly upon the wings of Divine love" (Sunday Matins, Hymn of Degrees, first Antiphon).

### **The Path to Confession**

*This is an excerpt from a book written to help children prepare for Confession but which also holds much benefit for adults who peruse it.*

#### **Disbelief and Spiritual Ignorance**

I believe that there is no one on earth so unhappy as the man who, not knowing and not wanting to know God and His commandments, rejects the saving

gift of grace by his own free will. This unwise soul will surely fall into the hands of evil spirits who will lock it up in a prison of dark ignorance, never to know the living God. Disbelief and ignorance always go hand in hand....

Many have sinned by not having read the Gospel, by not having learned about Church life, and by not yet having come to love our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ with their whole heart. Reverently making the sign of the Cross from the depths of our hearts, let us turn to God in repentance.

*Forgive us, Merciful Lord!*

Others, having received the sacrament of Holy Baptism, having made vows of belief and faithfulness to the Redeemer, have not lived up to them. They don't honor the Lord's Day (Sunday), they don't go to church on feast days, nor to Confession or Holy Communion . . . they've become like unbelievers, dooming their souls to spiritual starvation and contaminating their hearts with passions and vice.

*Forgive us, Merciful Lord!*

Not all of us have formed the habit of beginning and ending the day with the morning and evening prayers passed down by the Church. Others pray in an offhand and hast manner and by doing so offend the goodness and all-embracing mercy of God. There are even wretched Christians who do not pray at all, who don't know the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father") or the Archangel's greeting to the Mother of God ("Rejoice, O virgin Theotokos...")

*Forgive us, Merciful Lord.*

Even among Christians who know the value of prayer, there are those who pay no attention to the Lord's decree that *"the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence and the violent take it by force."* This means that by wholehearted daily prayer and the use of our will for good we can enter, with God's help, into the Heavenly Kingdom. These Christians think it is somehow dishonest to pray when they "don't feel like it." This is not only a spiritual error but a sign of self-pity and indulgence.

*Forgive us, Merciful Lord!*

Others are simply lazy. They put off the habit of regular prayer until "tomorrow," but tomorrow never comes and the days and years given to them for repentance slip by unnoticed.

*Forgive us, Merciful Lord!*

Quite widespread is the sin of not observing the fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, when our Lord was betrayed by Judas and crucified on Golgotha. On these days, out of reverence for His redeeming suffering, Christians abstain from meat and dairy products according to the decree of the Lord Himself, *"Can the children of the bridegroom fast, as long as the bridegroom is with them? . . . But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast..."*

*Forgive us, Merciful Lord!*

Perhaps some of us who are older have succumbed to an evil spirit and, in a perilous state of spiritual blindness, said to ourselves, "I don't believe

in God. God doesn't exist." Or maybe someone has tempted other children with these awful words, infecting them with the disease of unbelief, or has mocked the Church and her sacraments, or the clergy, or has read book poisoned by the venom of atheism.

*Forgive us, Merciful Lord!*

Truly the sin of ignorance and hardened unbelief begins with losing interest in church services and the sacraments, with a light-minded attitude toward the truths of the faith, and ends in blasphemy.

*Forgive us, Merciful Lord!*

This wretched sin can be overcome by repentance, diligent attendance of church services, going to Confession and receiving Holy Communion, reading traditional Orthodox books (such as the lives of the saints) and heartfelt prayer.

### **Fr. Epiphanius Theodoropoulos (+1989)**

#### **A Petition for Prayer**

When you would tell Fr. Epiphanius: "Father, matters on such-and-such a problem have reached an impasse. I am now at the limits of my endurance," he would answer: "Prayer, my child, much prayer! God can either lift your cross, or give you strength to carry it unto the end. And don't forget. The impasse of men is par excellence the field of God's action. It is the opportunity of God."

"Do you consider it easy for me to pray in the state in which I am now?" a spiritual child of his once retorted. He received the answer: "Pray also to be able to pray!"

#### **Never Neglect Prayer**

A working couple once asked him, "Elder, when at night we return very tired to our home, we don't have the desire for prayer."

"How do you have the desire to eat? Just as you don't neglect food, no matter how tired you are, all the more so—and even more so—you should never neglect the food of the soul: communicating with God.

"Don't ever neglect prayer. At the table, in the morning, in the evening, at night. Especially, don't neglect Compline [typically used for evening prayer among Greeks for any reason, no matter how occupied and tired you are. It is a matter of self-sacrifice and mainly of love. When a certain person, beloved of you, calls you up very late at night, how is it that despite your tiredness, you hook yourselves to the receiver and furthermore, sometimes one and two hours, without being impatient, but, on the contrary, you rejoice?"

#### **Upcoming Events 2022**

1-14 August: Dormition Fast

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