

The Confessor's Tongue for December 18, A. D. 2022

27th Sunday After Pentecost; Sunday Before Nativity, St. Sebastian

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.

December 18-24: Sunday of the Holy Fathers

In the services of this week are glorified the Old Testament saints, from whose human family came our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore in the Gospel appointed for this Sunday is read the "genealogy" of Jesus Christ. Together with these on this Sunday, as well as on the Sunday of the Forefathers, are commemorated all those living in faith and all the Old Testament saints who have come to the Savior, who are listed in the Epistle reading for this Sunday.

In the church hymns for this day the Holy Church primarily sings "of the beginning fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", "together with the Three Youths, who quench the fiery flames with the dew of the Spirit" and "the physical images of the hidden mysteries of God revealed to the world", and the prophet Daniel, who, "foretold the birth of the Christ from a virgin" and "foresaw that the cruel world would be counted among those with deep spiritual peace by the coming of Christ, having sometimes stopped the mouths of lions in the pit".

The Forefeast of Nativity

As one of the Great Feasts, the Nativity of our Lord in the Flesh (Christmas) is not celebrated just one day. A fast of forty days precedes, allowing those who make good use of it to cleanse their souls and spiritual eyes that they may perceive more deeply the nature of Christ's Incarnation celebrated in the fast. Beginning December 20, the Church drops the use of the Octoechos in the daily services, and replaces those hymns with hymns of the Forefeast. For example, in the first hymn of the Forefeast, we sing:

O ye people, let us celebrate the forefeast of the nativity of Christ, and lifting our thoughts up to Bethlehem, let us elevate ourselves in mind; and with the eyes of our souls let us gaze upon the Virgin, who cometh to give birth in the cave to our Lord and God. Joseph, beholding the magnitude of His miracles, supposed that he beheld a man wrapped as a babe in swaddling-bands, but perceived from the testimony of things that He was the true God, who bestoweth great mercy on our souls.

In this hymn the Church calls the faithful to contemplate and perceive the mystery of the virgin birth with the eyes of the soul. In this way, the Church prepares to celebrate the Feast, reflecting on it in depth in the five-day Forefeast.

The Feast is celebrated with joy and splendor the evening of the 24th and the morning of the 25th, but the Church has not finished with it. She then observes the Afterfeast, lasting from December 26 through December 31, when the Leavetaking is observed. In this period, hymns of the Nativity are sung daily along with hymns for the saint of the day,

just as during the Forefeast. Thus, on the 28th, we sing contemplatively:

Seeing the pre-eternal God incarnate from her as a babe, holding Him in her arms and kissing Him often, full of joy, the most immaculate one declared to Him: "O God Most High, invisible King, how is it that I see Thee, but cannot understand the mystery of Thy boundless poverty? For this least and strangest of caves containeth Thee Who wast born therein without violating my virginity, but preserving my womb as it was before birthgiving, and granting great mercy unto all."

Here the Virgin Mary is portrayed contemplating the mystery of the uncontainable God being contained in her womb and in the cave.

To heighten the celebration of this Great Feast, the whole period from December 25 through January 4 is kept without fasting. The Church feasts with joy and thanksgiving while being careful to avoid gluttony, drunkenness, and dissipation.

The mystery and glory of the eternal Son of God's birth in the flesh of the Virgin is not something we can even begin to take in in just one day. We need time to contemplate it, to savor it, to experience it. We need to contemplate it, for the Incarnation of the Son of God stands at the center of history as its most important event. God's coming in the flesh, uniting Himself forever to the human race in the person of the Godman Jesus Christ changes everything for mankind. While spiritual blindness and ingratitude will deprive us of this contemplation, we must overcome them and enter the wonder of the mystery that we may return thanks to God, offer Him due praise, and surrender ourselves to Him more deeply.

The services of the Forefeast and the Afterfeast assist us greatly in this endeavor.

The Commandments of Christ

"If ye love Me, keep My commandments."

Ye have heard that it hath been said, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy.' But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you, that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven. . . Matthew 5:43-44

The Christian through Jesus Christ is given the inestimable privilege of calling the eternal God, his Creator, "Father", and the power to become a child of God not in name alone but in character. And what is God's character? Christ tells us of His Father "He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust" (Matt 5:45). The Apostle Paul adds "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners,

Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). In other words, God indiscriminately loves man made in His image, each one alike, and Christ commands us to do likewise. The Christian may not limit himself to loving his friends and relatives but must extend his love to his enemies if he is to take on the character of his heavenly Father.

"Who is my enemy?" one might ask. Our enemies are not only those who have set themselves against us, who hate us, who try to harm us, but also those with whom we are angry, who have offended us, who have not treated us as we would like, who make life difficult for us, whom we are disinclined to like, those whom we would never choose as friends. In short, it is anyone whom we wish 'would just go away.' And we are to love them! This love is not in essence a warm feeling we somehow concoct towards them like a person who receives a hideous gift forces himself to find words of thanks to offer the giver. Rather, as Christ says, it consists in choosing to do good to one who does us wrong: instead of returning curse for curse, we return a blessing; instead of returning hatred with the same, we do good to the one who hates us; instead of seeking the damnation of those who abuse and persecute us, we pray for them. Love of enemy consists in such discrete actions in response to enmity.

Evil is not effectively overcome by evil. As St. Paul commands the Romans, "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21). We are to overcome any evil they may do to us by doing good to them in return. Though returning violence for violence and hate for hate may produce an armed truce, true victory comes when the enemy's enmity is disarmed and through our doing good he is won over as a friend. This is the victory Christ came to achieve in each person at enmity with God.

Moreover, to use evil means, to curse, to hate, to take revenge, to do harm in response to enmity is to be defeated by evil. It enslaves us to hatred, to bitterness, to anger—in short, to sin—and it does harm to our souls. Thus Christ gives the command not only to accomplish reconciliation and friendship with an enemy but also to keep our hearts free from enslaving passion.

By showing love to our enemies in this way, we become children of our heavenly Father, for He is love and shows love to all, whether they receive it gratefully or scornfully reject it. As a further incentive to embark upon this path, consider the teaching of a desert father who insisted that if you want your prayers answered speedily, pray fervently for your enemies before you pray for yourself, and your request will be quickly met.

St. Silouan of Athos (+1938) considered love for enemies to be the criterion of whether or not a man has true faith and true communion with God and a sign of the real action of grace in his life (*St. Silouan the Athonite*, p. 114). He would often say, "The Holy Spirit is love, and He gives the soul strength to love her enemies. And he who does not love his enemies

does not know God." This work of loving enemies is beyond our natural strength. But if we are willing to obey the command and ask Christ for strength to do it, He will give it.

May God grant us much grace to love our enemies and so become like our Father in heaven. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Stewardship: Tipping & Tithing

Now it came to pass on a day at noon that the writer of this piece was a guest of a certain rich man. And the lunch was enjoyed at a popular restaurant. And the waiters were very efficient. And the food was good. Now when the end of the meal was at hand, the waiter brought unto the host the check. And the host examined it, frowned a bit, but made no comment.

But as we arose to depart, I observed that he laid some coins under the edge of his plate. I know not what denomination the coins were, although the waiter, who stood nearby, smiled happily, which, being interpreted, means that the tip was satisfactory.

Now this parable enters not into the merits or demerits of tipping. But as I meditated on the coins that become tips throughout our nation, I began to think of tips and tithes. For the proverbial tip should be at least a tenth of the check (preferably 15% or more), lest the waiter turn against you.

And as I continued to think on these things, it came unto me that few people who go to church treat God as well as they honor their waiter. For they give unto the waiter a tithe or more, but unto God they give whatsoever they think will get them by, if at all. Truly, does man fear the waiter more than he fears God? And does he love God less than he loves the waiter? Or does the waiter do more for him than God? Truly a man and his money are past understanding! *A 20th Century Christian in Where Moth and Rust Do Not Consume: An Anthology on Christian Giving*, by Rev. Anthony Coniaris

Beatitudes

St. Ephrem the Syrian

1. Blessed the one who has become wholly free in the Lord from all the earthly things of this vain life and loved God alone, the good and compassionate.
9. Blessed the one who has hated evil-doing that is full of shame and presented himself as a living sacrifice, well-pleasing to the Lord.
10. Blessed the one who always keeps the memory of God in himself, he will be wholly like an Angel from heaven upon earth, ministering to the Lord with fear and love.

Upcoming Events 2022

25 December Nativity of our Lord in the Flesh, Divine Liturgy at 8:00 a.m.
1 January Feast of St. Basil, New Year's Eve Vigil at 7:00 p.m.

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!