

The Confessor's Tongue for January 15, A. D. 2023

31st Sunday After Pentecost; Ven. Paul of Thebes & John the Hutdweller

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 Commandments of Christ

"If ye love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:15)

Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained. John 20:21-23

"Receive the Holy Spirit." This will never be the first of Christ's commands to come to mind, but it is the first command He gives to His apostles after His resurrection. That Christ issues this command indicates that a Christian should desire the Holy Spirit and that he must open his heart and receive Him. God does not force himself upon His creature but awaits his invitation. He is a gentleman in this regard. If the command "receive" is given, it implies that man may reject the Spirit.

Christ's breathing on them as He gives the command echoes the first creation of man. There God formed man out of the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life. Man did not choose to be made; rather, God called Him into being out of love and the desire to pour out upon him good things. In the second birth, the birth from above, which is necessary if a man is to enter the kingdom of God, man's will and choice are essential. Man has no power to effect this rebirth, but there will be no rebirth without his desire for it and his choice of it. Thus Christ addresses His disciples with the command: "Receive the Holy Spirit," for it is the Spirit who gives life, and it is only in the power of the Spirit that man may live the Christian life.

How does one apply this commandment? The first application is in initial conversion, when a man comes to believe in Christ, repents, and resolves to follow Him. He receives the Holy Spirit at Holy Chrismation after Baptism, and the Spirit takes up His abode in the newly-illuminated Christian. One cannot be born from above without this reception. But this is not all. Having received the Holy Spirit initially, the Christian continues to receive Him by working with Him. He receives His presence by acknowledging it and cultivating his awareness of it. He receives the Holy Spirit by learning to hear His voice and allowing himself to be directed by Him. He receives the Spirit by not quenching Him through self-will or grieving Him through sin. He receives the Spirit by growing in communion with Him and not remaining a stranger to Him.

Chrysostom exhorts Christians to a twofold application of the command. First, they are to do all they can to have the Holy Spirit with themselves and, second, they are to "treat with much honor those into whose hands its operation hath been committed." This former requires an active spiritual life of

repentance, confession, prayer, participation in the Mysteries, humility, and the cultivation of obedience to God. Aware of the presence of the Spirit within, the Christian aims to make his body and whole being a worthy, holy temple and dwelling place for the Spirit. He removes the things in his life that hinder or grieve the Spirit and deaden his own sensitivity to Him. The latter involves treating the priesthood with respect, those to whom Christ entrusted the power to loose and remit sins. He warns the faithful against judging priests, pointing out that people bow to appointed civil authorities, even if the person in authority is of inferior birth or worth. "Is there then such fear when man appoints, but when God appointeth do we despise him who is appointed, and abuse him, and besmirch him with ten thousand reproaches, and though forbidden to judge our brethren, do we sharpen our tongue against our priests? And how can this deserve excuse, when we see not the beam in our own eye, but are bitterly over-cautious about the mote in another's? Knowest thou not that by so judging thou makes thine own judgment the harder?" Hence, the faithful are to treat bishops, priest, and deacons with respect, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit given them by the laying on of hands to serve Christ's flock.

We may understand this better from an incident in the life of St. Silouan of Athos. A young man asked him, "Why are there so few good spiritual fathers?" He responded, "There are no good spiritual fathers because there are no good submissives", in other words, no good spiritual children who will willingly lay down their self will in faith and obedience. Elder Sophrony, St. Silouan's spiritual child, taught his spiritual children that the son begets his father—by his faith, humility, and obedience, by which he recognizes and receives the gift of the Holy Spirit in his father. Elder Sophrony taught his spiritual children: "Do not come to me unless you pray to God first." In coming to our spiritual father, we pray "God, illumine my father to speak to me that which I need to hear, and grant me the humility to receive that word and the strength to obey it."

"Receive the Holy Spirit." The Spirit works to convict us of sin, to teach us the truth, to bear witness to Christ, to lead us on the path and guide us to do God's will, and to sanctify us and bring us to perfection. St. Silouan once asked a renowned monk, Fr. Stratonikos, who felt he was missing something and came to the saint seeking, "How do the perfect speak?" Fr. Stratonikos was not able to answer. St. Silouan answered for him: "The perfect do not say anything of themselves, they just say what the Spirit gives them." Imagine no longer speaking out of fear, or pride, or vainglory, or insecurity, or boredom. Imagine being a mouth for God, speaking only what is good, true, and edifying at the right time, guided by

the Holy Spirit. This is a lofty plane of being to which few attain in the life, but all of us, by embracing the command "receive the Holy Spirit", may make much progress towards this perfection in the life. Grant it, O Lord! *Fr. Justin Frederick CT 200607*

On Watchfulness and Holiness *St. Hesychios the Priest*

1. Watchfulness is a spiritual method which, if sedulously practiced over a long period, completely frees us: with God's help from impassioned thoughts, impassioned words and evil actions. It leads, in so far as this is possible, to a sure knowledge of the inapprehensible God, and helps us to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries. It enables us to fulfill every divine commandment in the Old and New Testaments and bestows upon us every blessing of the age to come. It is, in the true sense, purity of heart, a state blessed by Christ when He says: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' (Matt. 5:8); and one which, because of its spiritual nobility and beauty - or, rather, because of our negligence - is now extremely rare among monks. Because this is its nature, watchfulness is to be bought only at a great price. But once established in us, it guides us to a true and holy way of life. It teaches us how to activate the three aspects of our soul correctly, and how to keep a firm guard over the senses. It promotes the daily growth of the four principal virtues, and is the basis of our contemplation.

2. The great lawgiver Moses - or, rather, the Holy Spirit - indicates the pure, comprehensive and ennobling character of this virtue, and teaches us how to acquire and perfect it, when he says: 'Be attentive to yourself, lest there arise in your heart a secret thing which is an iniquity' (Deut. 15:9. LXX). Here the phrase 'a secret thing' refers to the first appearance of an evil thought. This the Fathers call a provocation introduced into the heart by the devil. As soon as this thought appears in our intellect, our own thoughts chase after it and enter into impassioned intercourse with it.

3. Watchfulness is a way embracing every virtue, every commandment. It is the heart's stillness and, when free from mental images, it is the guarding of the intellect.

4. Just as a man blind from birth does not see the sun's light, so one who fails to pursue watchfulness does not see the rich radiance of divine grace. He cannot free himself from evil thoughts, words and actions, and because of these thoughts and actions he will not be able freely to pass the lords of hell when he dies.

5. Attentiveness is the heart's stillness, unbroken by any thought. In this stillness the heart breathes and invokes, endlessly and without ceasing, only Jesus Christ who is the Son of God and Himself God. It confesses Him who alone has power to forgive our sins, and with His aid it courageously faces its enemies. Through this invocation enfolded continually in Christ, who secretly divines all hearts, the soul does everything it can to keep its sweetness and its inner struggle hidden from men, so that the devil, coming upon it surreptitiously, does not lead it into evil and destroy its precious work.

6. Watchfulness is a continual fixing and halting of thought at the entrance to the heart. In this way predatory and murderous thoughts are marked down as they approach and what they say and do is noted; and we can see in what specious and delusive form the demons are trying

to deceive the intellect. If we are conscientious in this, we can gain much experience and knowledge of spiritual warfare.

What To Do During Sleeplessness at Night *From "How to Live a Holy Life"*

If you cannot fall asleep for a long time after you go to bed, then, after lying down, try to imagine the Lord Jesus Christ in His sufferings on the cross and pray to Him in your heart about everything that comes into your heart: pray that the Lord God may deliver you and your family from all sins, from every evil will, and from every sinful impurity, from deadly plague, from hunger, from lightning and storms, from sudden death, and especially from eternal death.

Pray that the Lord God may bring all sinners to heartfelt repentance and correction, that He may give to His Church faithful pastors who will zealously care for its purity, firmness, and glory; that He may subdue the enemies of His Church and persuade everyone of its purity and holiness, and that He may dispose everyone to sincere acceptance of its truth and principles.

Or try to imagine yourself at your death and think something like this: "If I were to die right now, what would become of me...? Now I lie in bed and find it annoying that I have not been able to fall asleep; but how hard will it be to lie in hell if I go there because of my sins. In hell there is never any sleep, not even for a moment."

When you happen to wake up in the night, always turn your thoughts immediately to the Lord God, taking care lest some foolish thought enter your heart, signing yourself with the sign of the Cross.

If you still do not sleep, it is better to get out of bed, stand before the holy icons, and read psalms with full attention, make full prostrations, or do prostrations with the Jesus Prayer until you are tired and peace enters your soul and you can go to bed.

Housekeeping

To leave things at church for a fellow parishioner to pick up seems a good idea, but all too often those things do not get picked up quickly which creates a clutter and means the priest becomes the *de facto* caretaker of those goods: cards, gifts, books—you name it. For example, someone left a gift on Nativity for someone—it is still here, unclaimed. If the priest remembers, he will connect the gift with the intended recipient today. We shall not say you may not do this—the convenience is undeniable—but if you do, please let the recipient know, and if you are a recipient, please find and take what is left for you promptly.

Upcoming Events 2023

20 January, Friday, 7:00 p.m.: Festal Vigil for St. Maximus
21 January, Saturday, 9:00 a.m.: Divine Liturgy with Bishop Gerasim for our patronal feast, festal meal to follow.
26 February: Forgiveness Sunday
27 February Beginning of Clean Week
9-15 April Holy Week

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!