

The Confessor's Tongue for February 5, A. D. 2023

34th Sunday After Pentecost; Publican & Pharisee, Martyr Agatha

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.

February 5: St. Agatha

Born in Palermo, Sicily (according to others, in Catania), St. Agatha confessed the Christian faith from her young years. She was distinguished by beauty, virtuous life and wealth bequeathed her after the death of her parents. During the Decius persecution, by an order of the governor of the country Quintian, who heard much about the beauty and wealth of Agatha, she was arrested and led to the governor in the city of Catania. This governor at first tried with caresses and admonitions to convert St. Agatha from the Christian faith. When she remained immovable, she was subjected to various cruel tortures. They hanged her from a tree, beat her with iron rods, planed her chest with iron claws and, finally, cut off her breasts. Later while in prison the prisoner was wonderfully healed by the Apostle Peter who was shown to her and, adorned "in the glory of faith and piety, venerability and virginity and diligence in suffering", in peace gave her soul to the Lord Godin 251. Soon a church was constructed over her relics. *In Greek, agatha is an adjective which means "good".*

Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee

On this day we commemorate the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, which occurs in the Holy Gospel according to Luke.

With God's blessing, we enter this day into the period of the *Triodion*.

The three festal Sundays, the Publican and the Pharisee, the Prodigal Son, and the Last Judgment, were intended by the Holy Fathers to be a period of preparatory training and exhortation so that we might equip ourselves for the spiritual contests of the Fast by forsaking our habitual foul practices.

First of all, they present to us the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, calling the following week the "Week of Proclamation" because it heralds the approach of the Fast. It is like those who are going off to war: they learn from their generals when the war will occur so that they can clean and polish their swords, taking care of everything and thus removing every obstacle to defeating the enemy. Likewise, the divine Fathers also sound the bugle in advance, calling us to the coming Lenten battle against the demons so that we might purge our souls of any passion or ailment that has possessed us over the past year.

We must properly arm ourselves for the contests of Great Lent. The principal weapons for the maintenance of virtue are repentance and humility, and the greatest obstacles are arrogance and pride. The Holy Fathers have set forth the present trustworthy parable from the divine Gospel, exhorting us through the Pharisee to banish the passions of arrogance and presumption and through

the Publican to strive to acquire the opposites of these passion, humility and repentance.

This parable demonstrates that no one should become prideful, even if he commits acts of kindness and righteousness, but one should always be humble and beg God's favor with all his soul. Even if he has fallen into the worst evils, he should never lose hope or courage, as he is never far from salvation.

So that we can learn to avoid the pride of the Pharisee by following our own self-imposed and self-directed fasting – instead of the moderate and time-tested fasting traditions of the Church – the following week is fast-free.

St. John Chrysostom on Fasting

"And yet, if faith be requisite," one may say, "what need of fasting?" Because, together with our faith, that also brings no small power. For it both implants much strictness, and of a man makes one an angel, and fights against the incorporeal powers: yet not by itself, but prayer too is needed, and prayer must come first....He that fasts is light, and winged, and prays with wakefulness, and quenches his wicked lusts, and propitiates God, and humbles his soul when lifted up. Therefore even the apostles were almost always fasting. He that prays with fasting hath his wings double, and lighter than the very wings....But if thy body be too weak to fast continually, still it is not too weak for prayer, nor without vigor for contempt of the belly. For although thou canst not fast, ye canst thou avoid luxurious living; and even this is no little thing, nor far removed from fasting, but even this is enough to pluck down the devil's madness. For indeed nothing is so welcome to that evil spirit, as luxury and drunkenness; since it is both fountain and parent of all our evils....*In preparing for the Great Fast, we need to be reminded as to why we fast.*

The Commandments of Christ

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

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. Matthew 10:34-36

Jesus's commands relate not only to actions but also to thought. Several times He tells His listeners what to think or believe, and what not to think. Modern man bristles when told what to think or what not to think, thinking such instructions impinge on his freedom. But Christ desiring eternal well-being for man and knowing that the primary theatre of battle in spiritual life is the thoughts does not hesitate to guide

His disciples away from thoughts that will do only harm towards thoughts that will engender good.

To hold a false, untrue thought does not benefit a man. Untrue thoughts set false expectations and lead man into unworthy actions. All sin begins with a provocative thought; hence it is imperative for man desiring to avoid sin to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

Christ forbids one false thought in this command: "Think not that I came to send peace on earth." To some, this command seems to contradict other passages of Scripture. Christ is called "Prince of Peace." The angels at His birth announce "peace, goodwill towards men." He tells his disciples "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth..." and "these things I have spoken unto you, that in Me ye might have peace" (Luke 2:14, John 14:27, 16:33). Did not Christ come to bring peace, and do we not ask for "the peace from above" and the "peace of the whole world" at every Orthodox service? How can Christ command us not to think he came to send peace on earth?

Christ gives us this command because He wants us to think what is true, not false. Thinking truly enables us to live in reality and not delusion. It allows us to set true expectations for life and not false ones. Christ wants us to know the truth about life in Him, and the truth is that faith in Him will set His disciples apart from other men who will persecute them. Here He insists that He has not come to bring peace, but a sword. Men will be separated from friends and even family because of their faith in Christ, which others will find repugnant. If a man who sets out to follow Christ does not realize this, if he thinks that somehow faith in Christ will give him an easy, comfortable life and will cause others to like him, he may be scandalized and fall away from Christ when he discovers his expectation was not true. Christ never advertises the Gospel the way modern salesmen advertise their wares: He simply tells the truth, even when it is not pleasant.

How do we reconcile this command not to think Christ came to bring peace with other words of Christ and the prophets that portray Him as one who gives peace? Christ indeed comes to bring peace, to provide the way for man to be at peace with God and with himself. Before Christ, essentially all mankind was at enmity with God. Christ changes that profoundly. Once man is at peace with God, he can be at peace with himself. He also have the basis for peace with others who acknowledge Christ. As St. Paul says, "As much as depends on you, live at peace with all men." Christ is the basis for true peace, but He tells us not to think or expect that He sends peace on earth. The apostle insinuates and Christ explicitly states that Christians will not be at peace with all men, not because the Christian is unwilling to be at peace, not because Christ has not made peace possible, but because men who still serve Satan, the god of this world, will be incited by the evil one to attack Christians and resist the Gospel. All too often,

the Christian's foes will be his own relatives for whom his loyalty to Christ appears as disloyalty to them and an alien imposition on family life.

Hence, Christ gives this command so that we may have realistic expectations for life in Him on earth and not be shocked or scandalized when we find people, even the dear members of our family, opposed to us on account of our Savior.

Hatred in Christian Life

Hatred is not something we commonly associate with Christian life. We have heard so often that God is love and Christians are to love all that the very thought that hatred has a place in Christian life strikes us as strange. Can a Christian hate?

In fact, the question is reversed: can one be a Christian and not hate? For after all, we are Christians, called to become like our heavenly Father, who is said in the Scripture to hate many things. God hates pride, evil, a perverse mouth, false ways, lying, vain and wicked thoughts, hands that shed innocent blood, feet that run to mischief, a false witness, one who sows discord among brethren, covetousness and all dishonest gain, and bribes—to name the objects of God's hatred specifically mentioned in the Scriptures. Are we not to be come like God?

King Solomon said that there is "a time to love, and a time to hate" (Ecclesiastes 3:8). St. Paul provides a more pointed command: "Abhor that which is evil cleave to what is good (Romans 12:9). Origen comments on this verse:

Perhaps it seems odd to find hatred listed among the virtues, but it is put here of necessity by the apostle. Nobody doubts that the soul has feelings of hatred in it; however, it is praiseworthy to hate evil and to hate sin. For unless a person hates evil he cannot love, nor can he retain the virtues. For example, if someone intends to preserve chastity, he cannot keep it safe unless he hates and despises immodesty.

Seen in this light, we perceive that hatred is a corollary of love. Love of the Good for man implies hatred for all that deprives us of Good—namely evil. And what is evil but a corruption of the Good accomplished by the choice of a free will to depart from God's will and the natural order of what He has made? To love the Good and to hate the evil are two sides of the same orientation.

It is often said that there is too much hatred in the world. In light of what has been said, we must reconsider that claim. Indeed, there is too much hate—but of the wrong kind. There is too much hatred of good and love of evil; not enough hatred of evil and love of good." *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Upcoming Events 2023

26 February: Forgiveness Sunday
27 February Beginning of Clean Week
4 March: Retreat at Nativity Monastery with Fr. Stephen Freeman: The Humility of Christ
9-15 April Holy Week

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!