

# The Confessor's Tongue for March 19, A. D. 2023

Third Sunday of Lent: Veneration of the Precious Cross

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." (John 14:15)

*Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. Matthew 7:13-14*

In my youth, I had as my slogan, "The majority is always wrong." Though the zeal with which I held it was grounded in pride, there were objective reasons for holding the view. In my maturity, I have dismissed the zealous, prideful dogmatism of my youthful view, but I still find the slogan accurate and a helpful guide. For after all, this claim is grounded in the words of Christ about the two ways—the narrow way and the broad way.

Christ tells us that there are two ways: a narrow way leading to life, and a broad way leading to destruction. The broad way is easy, and many follow it. The narrow way is difficult, and few follow it. This is reality. It may not be avoided by wishful thinking. It is simply the way things are. The majority are simply wrong in their choice of path in life.

For our eternal well-being, Christ commands us to enter the narrow gate and to take the difficult way. Christ Himself is both the Door and the Way. Following Him is difficult, because it causes us to die to ourselves. It is difficult because it leads us to move contrary to the easy flow of life in the world. It is narrow because it excludes all other supposed saviors and gods. Christ alone is the Way to the Father. Christ alone is the full revelation of the Truth about the Father. Christ is the only Deliverer from sin, death, and the devil. He is the unique Godman who unites God and man in Himself and extends the benefits of that union to all who follow Him.

The majority is wrong because they deny the truth about Christ. The majority is wrong because they suppose there are other paths to bliss. They are wrong in thinking Truth is relative. They are wrong in living in service to their sinful passions on the easy path to destruction.

These words of Christ should also inoculate us against the bandwagon fallacy. Just because others are doing it does not make it right. On the contrary, the fact that so many people are doing it means that what they are doing is most likely wrong. By the Scriptures and the lives of the saints, we may discover what is truly good and right; the words and actions of the majority will not lead us to truth.

The Christian struggles against the flow of life in the world. He is ever swimming against the current. The Wisdom of Solomon has the unrighteous saying about the righteous: "He is grievous unto us even to behold: for his life is not like other men's, his ways are of another fashion." For a true Christian, this is

unavoidably true. He is particularly aware of this difference from the world during the seasons of fasting. May God grant us discernment and strength to stay on the narrow path with Christ against the world's flow.

## Strategic Planning

Father Archimandrite Moses of Optina never liked to make long-range plans for the future. Sometimes the workers would ask him for instructions for a job that was still in the planning stages when they still had not finished the one they were working on. But the Elder would never agree to discuss anything ahead of time and would tell them to come back when the time came or when they had finished their job. He would say, "As for tomorrow, let God's will be done." Everything was accomplished peacefully because he never tried to fit the circumstances to his own preconceptions, but instead adapted his ideas to fit the circumstances, since he discerned God's will in the latter.

## Letter 6: The Image of a True Priest

*St. Justin of Chelije*

Dear Father: Joy to you from the Lord! Joy in every sorrow, in every misfortune, in every death for His sake. For in this sad world there is no true joy outside of Him. How many times, without any doubt, has He, the All-merciful One, descended into my very hell and expelled me from my most terrible death, from my dying. He has probably done this for you many times. And He has poured wonderful joy over my soul and yours. So always and everywhere in the human world, He manages to help us and comes to us with His Divine truth, Divine righteousness, Divine joy. And then who is richer than we! Truly, with the most holy apostle, we always "have nothing but we possess everything." Undoubtedly, we possess everything if we have the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, in this small and narrow world we always have good will: with it we are in torments, in adversities, in persecutions, in sufferings, and in all deaths, for above all this and in all this the wonderful and good Lord walks from my heart to your heart and comes into the heart of every sufferer. Whoever has eyes to see, always sees; whoever has ears to hear, always hears. There is no such sorrow of mine, no such illness, no such death that the loving Lord would not mercifully take upon Himself. It's the same with you. You should have felt that.

There is some kind of sadness in your letter, which, as if in thin streams, is filled with despair. And despair? This is the greatest enemy of man on earth. For it is the strongest: it is quite easy for it to overthrow the human soul into death. And when the soul in a person dies, then why does he need the

whole world, the whole universe? Then the whole universe turns into stinking pus and a man in torment becomes a twin to the devil and his angels. No! There is no place for despair for a Christian on earth, because when the Lord descended into this world and then by the Church remained in fully in it, how then can you give way to despair in your soul? After all, the whole Lord is here, next to us, in the midst of us! Just cry out to Him and, look – you are already all in His arms. And then who can take you out of His hand – what enemy, what man, what devil, what hell? Yes, no force, no force of evil can separate us from His love. To them we are always stronger than any evil, any sin, any hell, any demon and all of them combined. The whole wisdom of a Christian consists in the following: to hold on unceasingly to the Lord Jesus Christ, to hold on by prayer, to hold on by fasting, to hold on by alms, to hold on by love, to hold on by meekness, to hold on by humility, to hold on by patience, to hold on by repentance, to hold on by Holy Communion, to hold on by holy confession – by all this to hold on to Him, God and the Lord unchangeable, irreplaceable by nothing and by no one – by every Holy Sacrament and every holy act pleasing to God. And then what? – Then over all deaths, over all torments, you will always triumph with joy: the joy of faith, the joy of salvation. . .

Neither bad priests nor bad bishops can seduce a true priest. He always looks above them, always looks at the holy priests and holy bishops: he looks at holy Chrysostom, holy Sava, holy Deacon Avvakum and a myriad of other saints. And he reaches out to them with all his soul, is inspired by them, guided by them. And they? All of them still live in the Church, as they did yesterday, as they did a thousand years ago. All the holy apostles are alive, all the holy martyrs are alive, all the holy fathers and holy confessors are alive, and they will daily concelebrate at the holy liturgy with us, unworthy priests of God. Are we not then stronger than every death, every evil, every sin? And can we have an excuse for despair if we are in the priestly rank? After all, the angelic ministry is not higher than the priestly ministry! The priest is endowed with divine authority over heaven and hell, over death and life, over immortality and eternity. And you, my dear, act as if you suddenly doubted it and drooped in spirit. Oh, my grief! After all, no one in the human race has what the priest of Christ has. The main thing is, by faith, prayer and love, fall down to the Wonderful Lord, the Sweetest Lord, and all deaths will flee from you, and even more so despair and his offspring.

Your father Justin, entrusting himself to your holy prayers, wishes you every good from the Lord. *Letter to a Priest, 13 February 1956.*

### Why Strive?

*St. Symeon the New Theologian*

[The Apostle Paul] proclaims, “Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one

will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). Why did he say, “Strive”? Because it is not possible for us to become holy and to be saints in an hour! We must therefore progress from modest beginnings toward holiness and purity. Even were we to spend a thousand years in this life, we should never perfectly attain to it. Rather, we must always struggle for it every day, as if mere beginners. This again Paul has shown us by saying, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect” (Philippians 3:12). *Discourse 5*

### On Ritual Observances

*St. Theophan the Recluse*

The holy apostles at their council abolished all the ritual observances of the Old Testament and freed Christians from that yoke, which had burdened their fathers and grandfathers.

For this cause, some clever folk lodge a question: “Why do we [Orthodox] have so many diverse, complicated ritual observances?” Then, not knowing who to answer this, they come to the rash conclusion that this is a return to Judaism.

But you know when the apostles set this law, they had in mind only the service of the Old Testament and not all in general, and when they wrote a letter to the church in Antioch, they mentioned only that they were not laying on the members the same yoke of the law which lay upon the Jews and not that they were forbidding the institution of ritual observances in the spirit of the new faith. As thought demands words, and intention—deeds, so the spirit of faith demands external ceremony. This ritual observance began to be conducted from the first days after the descent of the Holy Spirit, who laid the foundations of the Church of God. In its main and essential characteristics, it was founded by the Apostles themselves: from them was the form of the accomplishment of the mysteries, from them the prayer meetings and their order, from them the beginning of ecclesial ritual, from them the command to set aside places and times for divine service, from them fasts and prayers at home, from them the *podvigs* of general abstinence and the various forms of pious Christian habit. Those who desire it may find directives for all this in the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles. From this comes the conclusion: the holy apostles abolished one ceremony and established another. How is it possible to see Judaism in this?

Faith cannot be left bare. It is repugnant to our nature and to the nature of the faith itself. Can anyone really complain that our spiritual faith is excessively burdened with external ceremonies? Take a look, and you will see that it is not excessive. Indeed, is it not needed in every situation to have but one ceremony? This is what we have. Every ceremony on the one hand satisfies the needs of the believing heart and, on the other, exists in full harmony with the spirit of faith. If one looks at our church ceremonies in their totality, then it appears they are many; but lay them out according to the diverse needs

of believers, and you will see that they are very few and are all very simple.

It may be some will still say, "Why are they locked in immovable form? In the time of the Apostles much was done spontaneously: the spirit searched and either prayer or song or a word of edification was born, but now all is prepared ahead of

As thought demands words, and intention—deeds, so the spirit of faith demands external ceremony.

time, and how!" Well, is not all this the same? Then the spirit searched and gave prayer, but now, understand, how you should with already established prayer enter into this very same spirit. The matter is in the spirit. If someone remains in the mere words of prayer and external actions, he departs from the apostolic ceremony, and he who each time in the external ceremony will enter into the spirit, beings to do the same things done in apostolic times. To leave the whole external ritual to the arbitrariness of movements of spirit of well-known persons or of every believer scarcely anyone will consider reasonable. Is it not better to submit to an existing order, praying to the Lord, and let Him order all in His Church as pleases His holy will? The goal of the Church's ritual is the building up of the spirit and how much of what is holy is built up in our grand rite! It turns out ritual does not distract from the purpose but rather enables its attainment. Have reason and all will be well. *translated by Fr. Justin Frederick*

### On Faults Often Considered Trifling

*St. Symeon the New Theologian*

There will be those who, like myself, have been insubordinate and disobedient toward God's commandments who vainly calculate and say, "But I have not committed fornication! Swearing is nothing. I have not committed adultery! But what sin is it to have stolen a penny or a piece of bread?" And again, "I should attain bliss, if I do not commit the foul and sacrilegious vice of homosexuality. But what sin is there in being insulting or jealous, in being flippant or frivolous?" Then again there are those who in their folly think highly of themselves for being pure from the practice of sins of the flesh, and think that they are like angels of God, but take no account of the virtues and passions of the soul. They have nothing but contempt for all the rest of the Lord's commandments and do not force themselves to fulfill them. They refuse to do anything that is strenuous or to undergo any suffering for a commandment of God, and live carelessly.

What benefit, brethren, is there from abstaining from fornication and other impure acts of the body and yet seek after glory and strive for money? The one corrupts the body, and the other corrupts the soul. Moreover, glory from men and love for it makes us to be unbelievers, according to the word of the Lord when He says, "How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that

comes from the only God?" What good is it to be innocent of homosexual acts, but to waste away with envy, hatred, and jealousy toward your neighbor? Hatred toward one's brother makes him who feels it into a murderer, for the apostle says, "anyone who hates his brother is a murderer." According to the sacred canons, a sodomite and a murderer are subject to the same penalty, and if they fail to repent they will be subject to eternal condemnation.

### The Life of Faith

"Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." *Romans 14:23*  
"For we walk by faith, not by sight." *2 Corinthians 5:7*  
"But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, 'The just shall live by faith.'" *Galatians 3:11*  
(Citing *Habakkuk 2:4*)

Life in Christ's body the Church is a life of faith. The "Christian life" and the "Christian faith" mean essentially the same thing, though the former may be used to emphasize the way Christians live and the latter to indicate what they believe. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God made man who died on the cross and rose from the dead to save the race of man from sin, death, and the devil. That belief in Christ produces a way of life distinct from all other ways of life, and the essential quality of that way of life is that its motion is directed by faith in God rather than by man's physical sight. So thoroughly is faith to pervade the life of the Christian that St. Paul is able to declare that "whatsoever is not of faith is sin," and "the just shall live by faith," for we "walk by faith, not by sight."

Hence, Christians come to church in faith that Jesus Christ is the unique Godman uniting God and man in His own Person. They come to remember who God is and what He has done for them. They come to remember who they are in Christ and what they are called to become. They come to return thanks to Him as their Savior from sin, death, and the devil and the One who has given them grace to become adopted children of God. They come to present themselves before their rightful King and to bow before Him in worship. They come to be fed by their Good Shepherd, who has laid down His life for His sheep. They come to receive Christ's Body and Blood, their true food and drink, without which they have no life in them.

All this Christians do in faith. That faith tells them of the superiority of the Creator over the Creature, of the soul over the body, and of the life to come over life in this world. That faith confesses that God is good, loves man made in His image, and wants only good for him. It insists that God wishes to heal man so that man may enter God's kingdom and not be shut out. The Christian comes before God believing all this. He offers himself as a living sacrifice and places himself in God's hands without reservation, commending himself, others, and all his live unto Christ. Knowing of his desperate need for forgiveness, He comes to the Savior, for cleansing. Knowing the sickness of his soul, he comes to the

Great Physician for healing, trusting that God will prescribe and impart to him the necessary medicine.

The Christian comes to church to do something radically out of step with his contemporaries: to submit himself to the King of Kings and declare his fealty to Him. The Christian knows Satan's tyranny and that only the Truth, Jesus Christ, can make him free. Modern secular man recoils from this. He considers himself to have no king but himself (though, in fact, he is ruled pitilessly by Caesar and Satan). While the Christian lays his life at his Master's feet in worship, willing to lose his life for Christ's sake that he may find his true life in Christ, the modern secular man in stubborn pride tenaciously clings to his material life and will surrender nothing in this world for the sake of the age to come—for he does not even believe in that age. The modern secular man considers the Christian to be enslaved to superstition and ideas long outmoded and so cannot comprehend the life of the man who lives in Christ. The modern secular man walks not by faith, but by sight, which allows him only to perceive the material world. He fears and hates anything that endangers his physical life or threatens his worldly pleasures. He desires safety for his life and comforts.

The Christian comes to worship God in faith. He takes the risk of leaving his home to gather with others, of coming into the dangerous presence of the thrice-holy God, the consuming Fire, and of surrendering his life to Him unconditionally. He comes in faith in God's Providence—that God will give him what he truly needs, what will benefit his whole being for eternity, what will help him reach his eternal destiny. The challenge for modern man is that achieving those eternal ends often conflicts with achieving ends of material well-being in this world. Worship demands his time and attention, taking him away from earthly ends and entertainments. Almsgiving reduces his capital. Fasting keeps him from pleasant food and drink and other pleasures. Pursuit of the Kingdom of God calls him to lose his life in the world that he may find his true life in Christ. Blinded by sin and pleasure, he does not see the eternal goal.

In faith, the Christian comes to worship God and to receive from Him the medicine of immortality to heal his soul. He believes that medicine essential for him in accordance with Christ's own words—"If you do not eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you"—and embraces whatever risk attends receiving it. It is a risk to come to church, a risk to stand before the Holy God, a risk to receive the burning coal of His Body and Blood in his mouth. He does not believe that the Holy Mysteries, the Holy Icons, the priest's hand that he kisses, or the Holy Cross will make him ill—unless he eats and drinks unworthily, not discerning Christ's Body and Blood. Worthily received, the Holy Mysteries impart grace and life that can be held nowhere else. Here is life in place of death. Nothing is more important to the Christian than this. "For what shall it profit a man, if

he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Christ asks (Mark 8:36). Christ declares, contrary to the perception of modern secular man, that "it is the spirit that quickeneth [makes alive]; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63).

Spiritual health supersedes physical health for the Christian. The body will die no matter what he does, but soul can be renewed only in Christ. Desiring eternal well-being in Christ's kingdom, the Christian takes the medicine Christ, the Great Physician, prescribes. Sometimes, that medicine for the soul is bodily illness. Sometimes, the eternal health of the soul requires the temporal sickness of the body. The Christian comes to Christ in prayer and worship daily to lay his life before Him. Believing that everything in his life is by God's providence and not by chance, he receives even physical illness, however it may come to him, as a gift from God for his good and a means of grace. For if the Great Physician prescribes physical illness to him in order to heal his soul, even if it should come at church, he will humbly and gratefully accept it, even though he may wish there were some other way.

In faith, the Christian daily commends himself, others, and all his life to Christ. This means he lays his life in Christ's hands and gives Christ permission to do what He knows to be best for him. This faith allows the Christian to receive all the vicissitudes of life, all joys and sorrows, health and sickness, gain and loss with thanksgiving, seeing in it God's provision for His salvation. The Christian must learn to walk by faith in this way, for whatever is not of faith is sin. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

### St. Paisios on Thoughts

Thoughts are like airplanes flying in the air. If you ignore them, there is no problem. If you pay attention to them, you create an airport inside you and permit them to land!

Once, a young man visited the Elder for advice. Being simple-hearted, however, he couldn't restrain from listening to negative thoughts. These thoughts were acting as an obstacle to every good work he was trying to accomplish. Father Paisios, due to his discretion, realized that his negative thoughts were the cause of his problem, and told him the following:

There was a man who used to say: "If I get married and have children, and my children are boys and there is a war, they will have to join the army and, finally, they will get killed. So, there is no reason for me to get married."

The, the Elder turns to him and says:

"Isn't that a silly thought?"

"Yes," the young man replied.

The Elder went on: "Be careful, because you are doing the same thing. Bear in mind that you will never achieve anything good, if you think and act this way."

### Upcoming Events 2023

25 March Annunciation

9-15 April Holy Week

16 April Great & Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!